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Within a year after the discovery of gold at Pierce, September 30, 1860, mining commenced at Newsome and Elk City on the South Fork of the Clearwater and in Florence Basin high above the Salmon about forty miles southwest of Elk City. All of these newer mines eventually were included in Idaho County. When Idaho County was established, the mines at Florence--known as the Salmon River mines--had exceptional promise. The slightly earlier Elk City discoveries were eclipsed when the great Salmon River excitement began less than two months after rich finds at Florence, August 19. Fabulous reports of initial production that fall insured that Florence would be the scene of the major gold rush of the western United States in 1862. So the Washington Territorial legislature provided two new counties in anticipation of an abrupt rise in population in the Clearwater and Salmon River mines. In addition to Shoshone County, then almost a year old, Nez Perce and Idaho counties were created December 20, 1861. The newer Clearwater mines around Elk City were assigned with Lewiston to Nez Perce; the rich Salmon River placers made up almost the entire populated part of the original Idaho County. At that time, Idaho County had a truly substantial area, with the Florence mines right on the northern boundary almost at the northwest corner. The only other community to speak of in Idaho County at that time was Franklin, also a new town founded in 1860 right next to the southern boundary more than 320 airline miles from the county seat at Florence, and a great deal farther away by any practical route for travel. Fortunately, no one realized that Franklin was in Idaho County at that time, although the Washington legislature knew perfectly well that Idaho County included much of the wilderness which subsequently became western Wyoming. With all of later Idaho from the Salmon watershed south, and the upper Bitterroot (south of present Darby) of later Montana as well, Idaho County was almost the same size as the original Shoshone County from which it received its area--and pretty close to the same size (with much, but not all, of the same territory) as the present state of Idaho. Idaho County originally bordered on Oregon, Nevada, Utah, Nebraska, and Dakota. Except for people around Florence, Franklin, and a few widely scattered whites, Idaho County was inhabited only by Indians when it was established.

Named for a steamboat launched on the Columbia, June 9, 1860, to operate between the Cascades and the Dalles, Idaho County brought a new geographical name into the Pacific Northwest. "Idaho" had been suggested early in 1860 as a name for a Rocky Mountain mining territory around Denver: at the last minute that territory was renamed Colorado, because Idaho was not an Indian word--although neither was Colorado, for that matter. In the meantime, the steamboat had been named by a friend of the Colorado sponsors for their proposed territory, and in 1862, not long after Idaho County was created, the placers there became known as the Idaho mines. Expansion of Idaho County's mining districts with the discovery of Warren's across the Salmon from Florence, July 22, 1862 and,

more important, of Boise Basin, August 2, 1862, meant that something was going to have to be done to provide a new mining territory out of at least some part of eastern Washington. Just before that happened, an act of January 12, 1863, detached the greater part of Idaho County in order to form Boise County, although Idaho County retained places as far south as the later towns of Payette and Horseshoe Bend. Then on March 4, 1863, the Idaho mines (together with some other mines and some vast unpopulated areas) were set apart as the new territory of Idaho.

Originally more than half of present Idaho County was part of Nez Perce County, but gradually the county shifted northward. When the Idaho territorial legislature established new county boundaries, February 4, 1864, all of Idaho County south of later Cascade and Midvale went to Boise County. Then in 1869, the eastern part was split off in order to form Lemhi County for Leesburg and Salmon. Camas Prairie and all of the Clearwater region still were in Nez Perce, and when the census of 1870 was taken, Idaho County had a smaller area than it has today. The towns now in Idaho County either did not exist in 1870 or were in Nez Perce County then. In 1873, Idaho County lost a lot more land to Ada, Boise, and Lemhi, and became about the smallest county in Idaho in area. The Little Salmon, South Fork of the Salmon, Chamberlain Creek, and the Salmon River breaks below the Middle Fork were about all that was left. Two years later, Idaho County came back with all the upper Clearwater and part of Camas Prairie from Nez Perce, thus beginning to assume its present shape. This boundary revision, for practical purposes, established a new county by dividing Nez Perce and tacking what then was left in Idaho County on to the new county. (The remnant left in Idaho County before this expansion into Camas Prairie still is sparsely settled, and had a population of less than 1,200 in 1960). Some other adjustments came later, especially after a mix-up over the eastern boundary unintentionally extended Lemhi County to include the Bitterroot range all the way north to Lolo Pass in 1887. Not until Valley County was established February 26, 1917, did Idaho County get its final boundaries. Even after giving up a large section of the mostly uninhabited Salmon River mountains at that time, Idaho County remained the largest in area in the state.

Changes in county seat came with these major boundary shifts. Florence declined rapidly after 1862, and was supplanted by Warren's as county seat, June 1, 1869. Then when the county expanded onto Camas Prairie, Mount Idaho replaced Warrens, June 14, 1872. Finally Grangeville, which had grown up near Mount Idaho, emerged the winner in a referendum, November 4, 1902. By that time the county had gained in population from almost 3,000 in 1890 to over 9,000. With 12,384 inhabitants in 1910, and 13,542 in 1960, Idaho County has not fluctuated very greatly in population since then.

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