



IDAHO STATE
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IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY REFERENCE SERIES

EARLY SHOSHONE COUNTY

Number 339

Shoshone County certainly was one of the really large counties in the United States when, in anticipation of the Clearwater gold rush, the Washington legislature decided that local government ought to be provided for the new mining camps. Created by act of January 9, 1861, Shoshone County included all of Washington south and east of the future site of Lewiston, which after May 13, 1861, grew rapidly into an important mining supply center. This was a large domain. Washington at that time included all of later Idaho plus most of the part of Wyoming and all of Montana west of the Continental Divide. Shoshone County thus took in most of future Idaho as well as part of what was to become Montana, and enough of later Wyoming to make an area about equal to that of the state of Idaho now. Yet the only town in all that vast tract was the new Mormon community of Franklin, which had been established April 14, 1860, in Cache Valley about 20 miles north of Logan, Utah. No one had thought that the only white residents of Shoshone County were the Cache Valley Mormons; but the original Shoshone County boundary left Pierce, the county seat (along with all the intended white inhabitants), in Spokane County, Washington. Except for the miners around Pierce, Spokane County also lacked white settlement of any consequence. But with the gold rush, Lewiston, Elk City, Newsome, and Florence sprang up within a year. Thousands of miners came in, and the Washington election, July 8, 1861, Shoshone County cast the largest vote in the territory--even though the voters (mostly around Pierce) did not live in the county. That mistake was corrected by new legislation, December 20, 1861, establishing Nez Perce and Idaho counties for the newer mines and moving Shoshone County northward to include Pierce and the mines that were supposed to have made up Shoshone County in the first place.

With new boundaries that barely overlapped the old ones at all, Shoshone County became relatively small, including almost all of present-day Clearwater County plus a little of later Shoshone. (An unfortunate boundary definition, which located the head of Lolo Creek--which was actually at Hemlock Butte--at Lolo Pass, left a 44-mile gap in the southern boundary of Shoshone County that went unnoticed and uncorrected until after Idaho became a state.) But when the Idaho legislature defined county boundaries for the new territory, February 4, 1864, Shoshone County was extended northward to include all the rest of present Shoshone County. Then with the decline of milling around Pierce, Shoshone County had a hard time maintaining a government at all. With only a few voters until 1882, Shoshone County had mostly Indians and Chinese for population. Then the Coeur d'Alene gold rush, stimulated by promoters of the Northern Pacific early in 1884, brought in thousands of miners again. Pierce proved to be a distant and difficult place to reach from the Coeur d'Alene mines, and on July 1, 1885, the county seat was transferred from Pierce to Murray.

Lead-silver-zinc discoveries in the Coeur d'Alene region in 1884 laid the foundations

for Idaho's largest mining empire. Responsible for more than 80 per cent of Idaho's metal production, these mines passed \$4,000,000 in 1984, and are noted as one of the greatest silver producing areas in the world. In belated recognition of the shift of population and importance from the gold camps around Murray to the lead-silver mines around Wallace, the county seat was removed to

Wallace by a referendum on November 8, 1898. This still left the Pierce and Orofino area isolated from the Coeur d'Alene region, and finally--after legislation to establish Clearwater County failed in the courts--the voters, in what originally was intended to be Shoshone County, chose on November 8, 1904, to have their part of the county annexed to Nez Perce County. Shoshone County thus was left with its present boundaries.

Publications--450 N. 4th Street, Boise, ID 83702--208-334-3428