

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

NORMAN B. WILLEY
MARCH 25, 1838 - OCTOBER 20, 1921

Number 400

September 1993

A native of Guilford, New York, who came West to become a California miner in 1858, Norman B. Willey moved on to Warrens, an important north Idaho gold camp, in 1864. There he eventually became superintendent of a lode mine. During his extended activity there, he embarked upon a political career. Commencing with a favorable resolution of a tie vote in 1866, he became Idaho County superintendent of schools, but lost reelection in 1868. Elected to Idaho's legislative assembly in 1872, he went on to serve as council president in 1879.

But he failed, after his initial legislative session, in a bid to become county treasurer in 1874, and missed out again in 1888 in his effort for another legislative council term. Before 1890, he won a little more often than he lost. That was quite an achievement considering that he was one of only several voters in all of North Idaho who sometimes opposed a practically unanimous effort to return North Idaho to Washington. During his two legislative terms, however, he became a friend of Milton Kelly--a former Idaho legislator and supreme court justice who had become a prominent newspaper editor and publisher. Willey became an *Idaho Statesman* correspondent as well as mine superintendent, and gained a wide audience for his reports.

A complex set of sectional and factional rivalries resulted in an unanticipated opportunity for Willey to advance politically when Idaho achieved state admission in 1890. North Idaho leaders demanded a United States senator when that opportunity arose. They got a governor instead. Governor George L. Shoup had aspirations to become a United States senator, with Idaho's congressional delegate who wanted to join that select body. Shoup agreed to become a candidate to continue as state governor so long as he could be assured that his service would last only until late in 1890 when he might advance to a senate career. To help pacify North Idaho, which had two competing senate candidates, Shoup arranged to have Willey elected lieutenant governor in order to take over as governor at that time. All of that came off right on schedule as soon as Idaho's severely divided legislature could be persuaded to elect plenty of senators. Dubois and Shoup had a combine that could not gain a legislative majority unless they could retain a North Idaho candidate--W. H. Clagett--in their combine. Clagett refused to

accept anything less than a full six-year senate term. Dubois demanded that one also, but Shoup had agreed to risk a short term. When Clagett declined to back down, another North Idaho candidate representing an anti-Dubois Republican faction switched sides and allowed Dubois to accept a full six-year term. That way, William J. McConnell joined Shoup to become Idaho's initial United States senators. With that transaction completed, Willey succeeded Shoup as governor.

Complications regarding Dubois' senate election marred Willey's administration as governor. Clagett assembled a new combine of Democratic and dissident Republican legislative members that elected yet a fourth United States senator--one more than actually was needed. Willey went along with that arrangement to oust Dubois. But settling that conflict, a majority of United States senators rejected Clagett, a prominent North Idaho mining attorney, and accepted Dubois. That left Willey as a governor who was willing to continue in office after 1892, but who would be dumped to give McConnell--who had joined Idaho's major Republican faction--an opportunity to become governor after a few months of senate service. Clagett went on to become a prominent Populist leader in 1892, while Willey found an opening as a mine superintendent in California.

Because his service as governor commenced in 1890, Willey's term exceeded that of nine other Idaho governors, and some important events came during his executive career. He did not contribute much of a program himself, and by his veto of important irrigation district legislation that he complained did not assist unsuccessful canal companies, he managed to help defer agricultural expansion. He felt far more comfortable in intervening into an 1892 Coeur d'Alene mining war that continued until after 1900. When a mill near Wallace was dynamited during a clash there July 11, 1892, Willey was prepared, as an experienced mine superintendent, to help company managers in a battle against their miners. Conflict between a local miners' union and company officials had gone on for months during a suspension of operations when rising freight rates and smelter costs combined with lower silver prices made production unprofitable. Company efforts to reopen with lower wage rates led to trouble and eventually to martial law, July 13, that lasted four months. Represented by J. F. Curtis in that battle zone, Willey was committed to a campaign that featured incarceration of some 600 miners who were detained in two notorious Coeur d'Alene bull pens, prison camps, with a population that reached as many as 350 at its height. Idaho National Guard personnel managed that enterprise for two weeks, although Willey worked to terminate their participation as soon as possible because he lacked state funds to finance that operation. He preferred to have United States Army forces handle that problem, but President Benjamin Harrison refused to engage in long term intervention. A volunteer local militia soon had to

take over. Eventually, after long litigation, federal court review concluded that almost all of Curtis' prisoners were detained by mistake, and Willey, though he defended his administration of martial law for four months, regarded that kind of state involvement in local law enforcement as beyond his resources.

In many less spectacular ways, though, his administration gained importance for developing state governmental institutions that replaced territorial management. Most of that transition had to be worked out by legislative leaders who tended to follow standard practices of that time. Election reforms, including official secret ballots that became popular nationally after serious scandals in 1888, were introduced, and administrative agencies, designed to operate economically, were established. That kind of program fitted in well with Willey's approach, so when he retired to return to mining, he had a sense of accomplishment. He eventually wound up in a poorhouse near Topeka, Kansas, where he finally got a modest Idaho appropriation as an informal sort of old age pension.

(This information has not been edited.)

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