

This month's theme:  
School in Idaho Territory



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The Newsletter of the Idaho State Historical Society's Junior Historian Program

# PROSPECTOR

January, 2008



## School Days

Most of the time, when you read history books you learn the stories of adults. Have you ever been curious what kids' lives were like in the past? Take school for example. If you were a child in the 1860's what would your school day be like? It probably won't surprise you to find out that school was a very different experience for children living in Idaho Territory.

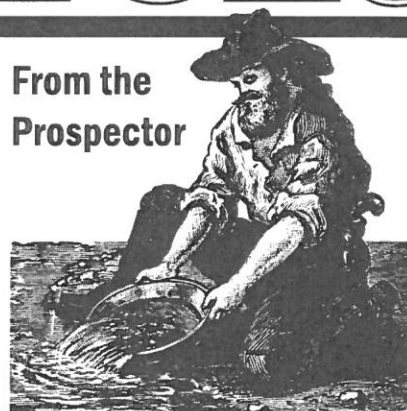
Of course, there is no need for a school without children to learn or without a teacher to teach. It wasn't until the discov-

ery of gold and the flood of miners that followed in the 1860's that people even started thinking about schools. Miners moved around a lot and usually didn't bring their wives or children with them. But along with the miners came a bunch of other people who opened businesses, built homes and then began thinking about ways to educate their children. It all happened pretty quickly so you can see that education was a big deal for the early Idaho settlers.

There were a few schools already up and running at this time.

*Continued on next page*

## From the Prospector



### Howdy Prospectors!

It's hard to believe the school year is more than half way over. It seems like only yesterday, I was shopping for school supplies with my mule. Sometimes, when I get to thinking like this, I try to imagine what school was like in Idaho's past. Did the kids one hundred years ago have recess? Did they have homework every night? What were the schools like back then? Did the students take a yellow wagon instead of a bus to class each day? I think this would be the perfect month to answer a few of those questions. Sit back, relax, and enjoy the story of Idaho's first schools.

*Lucky Noah*

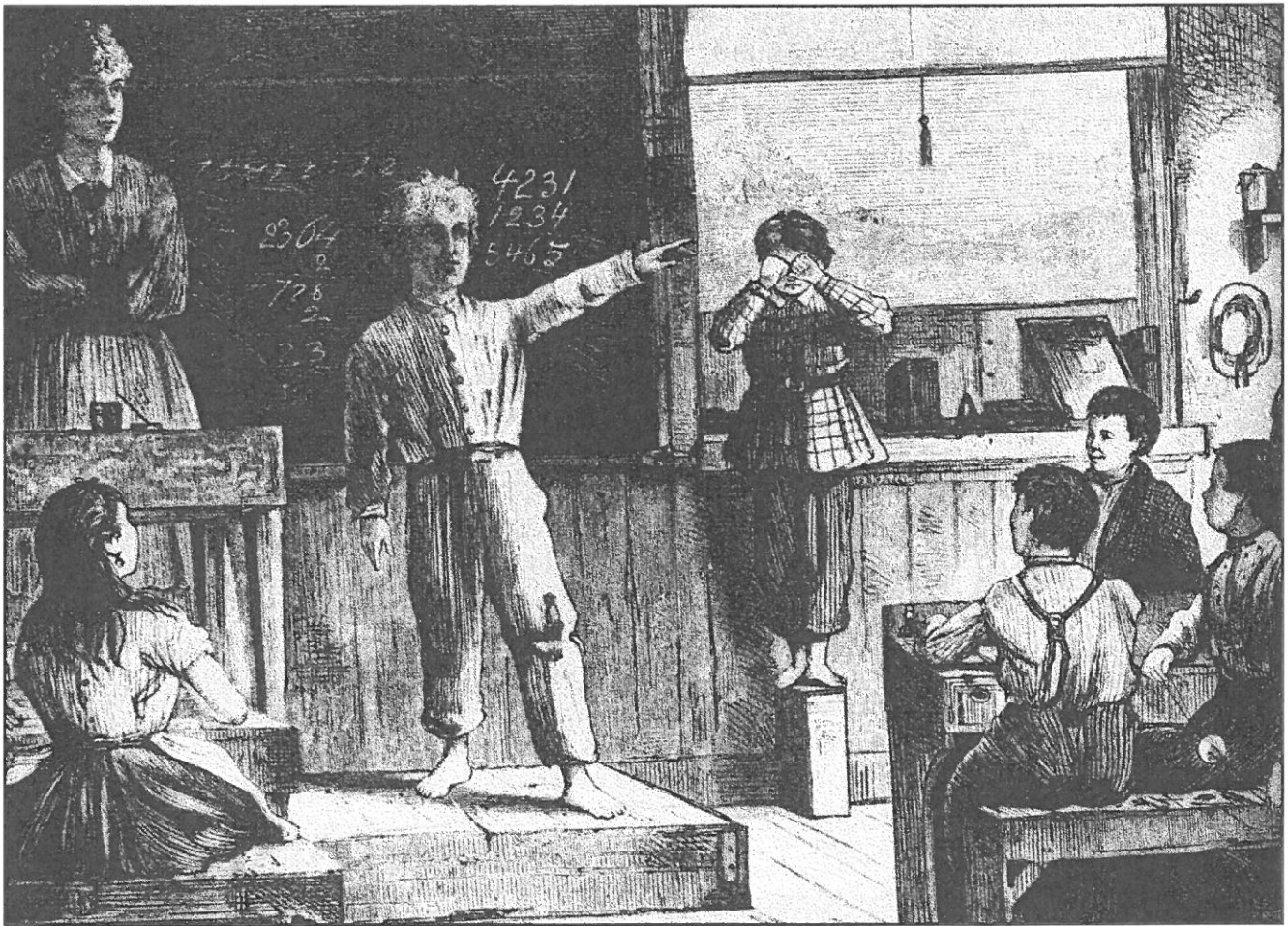
They were schools built by settlers, like the Mormons from Utah, who settled in the Lemhi Valley and a few years later in what now is Florence, Idaho. Known as mission schools, they were used mainly for the education of local Native American children. Teachers at these schools encouraged the children to read and write the English language and taught them some religious history. Like many of the early settlements in Idaho Territory that disrupted the lives of Native Americans these schools were accepted by some Indians and disliked by others.

Classes for children other than the Native Americans first took

place in Franklin, Idaho. Franklin also happens to be the first permanent settlement in the Idaho Territory and is still going strong. Hannah Cornish taught seven young students the basics in math, science and language in her own house. Since the parents had to pay a fee for their child to attend it was called a subscription school. These days, public schools rely on money from taxpayers who live in the school district. But in 1860 there were no school districts or taxes. In fact, Idaho wasn't even a state yet. In the fall of 1860 the settlers built a real schoolhouse for the children. It had one large room with a fireplace,

a dirt floor and a door made from split timbers. Since it was one of the only large buildings at the time it also served as a church and a theater. During rainstorms the roof would leak so the teacher would let her students go home early. I suppose the children looked forward to rainy days.

Several schools just like the one in Franklin opened over the next few years. Some lasted a while and others closed after only a handful of classes because there wasn't enough money. In 1864, Idaho's Territorial Legislature passed a law saying that Idaho Territory should create a common public school system. This



might not have happened if not for the governor of the Idaho Territory at that time, a man named William B. Daniels. He thought that educating children was as important as the gold that brought their parents to Idaho. The first public school to open after the law passed was in Florence, Idaho. Mrs. Statira Robinson, the wife of a pioneer gold miner, taught a class of six students. She was a trained musician, so her students probably received the first public music lessons in Idaho. A lack of money would remain a big problem since the territorial government didn't really collect taxes, which meant that teachers didn't always get paid and schools would close for weeks or months at a time. Miners and other settlers kept coming though, and within a couple years 1,239 students were attending 12 schools.

Wherever there was a large mining settlement, a school popped up. Some of these didn't last long. If a gold or silver strike ran out, the miners and other townspeople quickly left the area and the school had to close. Eventually though, other industries like farming and ranching brought people to the area and towns became more permanent. Town by town new schools were built until every child in Idaho had access to education.

As you might have guessed, there were many differences between the early schoolhouses of the Idaho Territory and the schools of today. For instance, nowadays most schools separate children according to age. Each grade level



has its own room, teacher, books, and lesson to learn. This was not always the case. Early schools were often no larger than one room. Kids of different ages all sat together in the same class. Can you imagine sitting at your desk with a first grader on one side and a high school student on the other?

The way that children got to and from school also was very different. Today most children in grade school can take a bus to school, ride a bike, or have a parent drop them off in the family car.

None of these modes of transportation existed in the 1860's. Children had to walk or maybe ride a pony, which sounds kind of fun, unless the ground was covered with three feet of snow. Officials in charge of building schools tried to space them fairly close together so that no student would have to walk more than three miles to get to school. Still, it takes a little while to walk three miles.

Bad weather, farming chores and other things often kept many children from making it to school everyday. State lawmakers who realized the importance of education wanted to be sure that all children went to school. To accomplish this they passed the Compulsory Education Act of 1887 which stated that all children from ages 8-14 had to go to school for at least 8 weeks out of each twelve-week term. Once Idaho became a state in 1890 the legislature created school districts and establishing tax laws to fund the creation of

new schools. In addition, the legislature tried to provide transportation and other helpful programs to make it easier for parents to get their children to school safely and on time.

As you can see, school has changed quite a bit since Idaho's beginnings. Next time you find yourself complaining about school think of the long walks, leaky roofs, and hard benches the pioneer children had to endure

*by Glenn Newkirk*





**Find 8 differences between the two historic photographs**



# **Solution**

1. The top center windows have different panes of glass.
2. One of the twin girls moves her hands.
3. The door to the shed changes its design.
4. The boy on the far left end disappears.
5. One of the circle decorations on the building changes.
6. The awning above the teacher changes size.
7. The shirt of the boy in the middle changes color.
8. The roof on the far left side disappears.



## Next Month's Activities

**W**ell, we've told you all we know about education in early Idaho, now it's your turn. This month you can pick from one of the activities listed below or make up your own historic schools project and send it to our Prospector Headquarters. We'll take some of your best work and print it in next month's magazine. Remember to include your name, the town and school where you are from, and the name of your Prospector Club. We can't wait to see what you come up with!

**Every School has a Story:** There are hundreds of schools around our great state and each one has its own unique story. What do you know about the history of your school? Do a little research and tell the rest of the Prospectors what makes your school special. Is your school the oldest one in town or the newest? Is it all on one floor or does it have several? What's the best thing out on the playground? Report

back to us and we'll print your school's story in our next issue.

**The Long Walk:** A hundred years ago there were no cars or buses to take kids to school. If children were lucky they could ride a horse or travel by wagon, but most kids had

from school.

**School of the Future:** In this month's issue we told you how school was one hundred years in the past. Did you ever wonder what it is going to be like 100 years in the future? Jump into a time machine

and give us a report on the future of education. What does a school look like in 2107? Have teachers been replaced by robots? Has paper been replaced by computer screens? Draw a picture and write a short paragraph describing what you see.



to walk to school. Imagine it's 1908 and you live in a small house five miles from the nearest school. Do you have to cross a mountain or a river to get to class? Do wild animals cause you trouble? What's it like to walk in the middle of winter? Write a pretend diary entry about your most difficult day going to and

Send in your work by February 22nd to:  
Prospector Club/Lucky Noah  
Idaho State Historical Museum  
610 North Julia Davis Drive  
Boise, ID 83702  
Or email it to us at  
kzwolfer@ishs.state.id.us