

BOISE BASIN HISTORICAL SUMMARY

It was with the 1862 gold rush to Boise Basin that the development of the State of Idaho began. The Basin story is a fascination one, well deserving of its place in history. This brief summary only highlights key points of the area's history.

The rush was on. Originally, people traveled by steamer up the Columbia River to Umatilla, departing from Umatilla by stage lines, and finally journeying by pack-train to the Boise Basin. Difficult winters and shortages of food made life treacherous. One year a food riot occurred because the spring supplies from Walla Walla had not arrived. The Basin's population swelled to 25,000. The mining proved extensive and the gold was evenly distributed through out the Basin. Many claimed it was the "best mining district we ever saw". The mining laws were considered fair and liberal. On February 4, 1864 Boise County was established. This same year wagon roads brought the wagon trains, hauled by four, six, eight, or even twelve horses or mules. The saw mill ran continuously with rough lumber building up cities like magic.

In 1863 Idaho City had grown to 6000 people and had 250 places of business. Idaho City assumed the notoriety as being the best mining camp in the Basin and the general rendezvous of miners, speculators, and gamblers. There was plenty of amusement. Streets were thronged with wagons, horses, mule, and cattle. Idaho City also was favored by its never failing water supply.

The basin attracted families as it offered special appeal to those seeking homes. More children and women were in evidence here than in most other mining camps. Two early schools were in operations well as a lending library. The Basin also believed in and appreciated good government.

The height of the boom lasted from 1863 to 1866. By 1867 many sold out to Chinese miners who were able, through industrious work, to make the mines pay; the 1870 Census lists 1700 Chinese. The rich gold fields were considered "panned out" as most readily worked streams had been worked. Another major factor in the decline was the high loss caused by destructive fires. Fires hit Idaho City in 1865, 1867, 1868 and 1871.

Mining techniques changed from sluicing to hydraulics, carving out vast hillsides. Quartz mining prospered in the 1870s with a number of stamp mills in operation. Dredge mining began in 1898 and continued till the 1950's. Unfortunately, much of the lower lying land in the Basin has been disfigured by dredging. Also, camps like Buena Vista located across Elk Creek from Idaho City disappeared through dredging. Fires have also continued their rampage, wiping out Quartzberg in 1931.

Any holiday was a time of special festivity in the Basin. Fourth of July was celebrated with picnics and parades characterized by flags, mottos, banners, and bands. Saint Patrick's Day brought supper and speeches, especially in Pioneer City which was chiefly Irish and referred to as New Dublin. Christmas programs were also festive events.

(Excerpts from Boise Basin Visitor & Tourism Development Plan)

[top](#)

FABULOUS GOLD COUNTRY

Inspired by an Indian's story of gold that could be scooped up by the handful; a party of prospectors led by George Grimes discovered the fabulously rich area known for the past Century as the Boise Basin in 1862. Located on Grimes Pass is the monument of George Grimes.

Gold was there. So were hardships, heartache and tragedy. Grimes was killed within days of the discovery. The first miners staked large and extensive claims and their first settlement became known as "Hog-em", later changed to Pioneer City and now Pioneerville.

Rivalry between the miners was common, and when a party of prospectors ventured over the divide onto Elk Creek and discovered even richer gold deposits, they kept their find a secret by telling a tale of being chased by huge bears. The gulch they discovered, near the end of Idaho City's Main Street even today carries the name of "Bear Run"

The \$5,000 in gold which these first miners carried out to civilization started one of the greatest gold rushes the world has ever seen....the richest strike in America. It is estimated that more than \$250,000,000 was taken from this area in the two decades following its discovery....greater than the California 49er and of the Klondike in Alaska. It is reported that Gold from the Boise Basin helped to strengthen the Union treasury during the most crucial days of the Civil War, perhaps preserving the United States.

Thousands upon thousands of miners rushed pell-mell into the Boise Basin. Towns sprang up everywhere. There were Beaver, Banner, Granite, Forrest and Summit cities.... Buena Vista, Eureka, Pomona and Boston.....Pioneerville, Placerville, Centerville and Quartsbury, Clarksville, Graham and Idaho City. Some have vanished completely with even their exact location in doubt....many lie in decaying ruin while others are struggling to preserve the way of life that make the Boise Basin famous.

But of all the communities, Idaho City was said to have been the bawdiest and lustiest of the Boise Basin's offspring. A rip-roaring mining town, it became the hub of territorial commerce and almost overnight became the largest metropolis in the Idaho Territory, boasting a population in excess of ten thousand for more than two decades.

Idaho City was the birthplace of the "Vigilante" movement that later swept like wildfire throughout the west. Here it is said the Rev. Charles Kingsley, whose home still stands on Wall Street, instigated the self-styled law of the "Vigilantes" that brought a semblance of law and order to the West.

Two major fires have swept the town. In 1865 and again in 1867, fire destroyed over 300 buildings with losses estimated at over a million dollars. However, some of the best examples of early day brick work and wooden architecture still exist in Idaho City. Many buildings erected in the 1860's and costing between \$15,000 and \$30,000 are still standing.

Idaho City was one of the leading cities between Denver and the Pacific Coast, attracting such top entertainment as the Dan Rice Circus (world's largest at the time) and the nation's top stage and opera stars who played at the community's five theaters.

Life was not all culture in the Basin's early days. Other entertainment attracted a rougher element as attested by one account which appeared in the Idaho World in "Several parties were found in the streets on Tuesday morning. Some with fractured skulls; some with bunged eyes and swollen faces, indicating very clearly that there had been a muss somewhere during the night. Blood was freely sprinkled about the town on woodpiles and sidewalks. As the puddles of blood were distributed over a large district, it was impossible to locate the fight."

(Excerpts from Idaho city historical foundation welcome, visitor's pamphlet)

[top](#)

GOLD RUSH DAYS OF IDAHO CITY

Gold was the principle factor in the establishment of many present day towns including Idaho City, Idaho also known as the Boise Basin. During the Civil War the Basin was the scene of the richest gold rush in American history. It is said to have produced more gold than all of Alaska.

An Indian's story of the yellow metal led a party of prospectors into the Boise Basin in the summer of 1862. George Grimes, Moses Splawn and ten other miners were the first to come into the area. Shortly after their arrival, Grimes was killed by Indians. The remainder of the party returned to Walls to get reinforcements against other Indian attacks and to obtain winter provisions. Later that same year Captain Bledsoe took a party into Placerville. A few days later Captain Jeff Standifer set up a camp at Idaho City.

J. Marian More (sometimes spelled Moore) was one of the early miners who came to the Boise Basin. He became very wealthy from his prospecting, owning several mines around Idaho City. Soon he began buying mines in the Silver City area. More was involved in a mine dispute in Silver City which resulted in several killings. Finally, a meeting was held, differences settled, and papers were signed to seal the bargains. As More was preparing to return to Idaho City, he was shot and killed. His body was taken to Idaho City for burial in Boot Hill. Hundreds of people turned out for the largest Masonic funeral ever held in that area.

There was a rapid influx of people into the Boise Basin country following the discovery of gold on Grimes Creek. The majority of people were miners and prospectors whose main interest was to acquire the mineral wealth from the streams and soils of the area. Merchants, packers, lawyers, ranchers, and preachers also moved into the Basin.

Idaho City was first called Bannock or West Bannock. There was a town in Montana also called Bannock, so the Idaho legislature changed the name of the Idaho town to Idaho City. By the middle of September, 1863, Idaho City had a population of 6,267 (360 women, 224 children). At that time it was the largest city in the Northwest. Placerville previously had been the most populous. Boise City had a population of nearly 1,000.

With the rush to the Basin mines, there was a great need for materials to build houses and business establishments. Freight charges were high as there were no wagon roads made until the late summer of 1864. Lumber was in great demand with sawyers sometimes working night and day. B. L. Warriner owned one of the first sawmills, located on Grimes Creek in 1862. This was a very crude affair, resembling the present day buzz saw. Power was supplied by an old steam engine or mill stream. Lumber was sold at \$100 to \$200 per thousand board feet.

There were different methods used to take the yellow metal from the creek beds and gulches in Boise Basin. The first type was placer mining or panning. The tools a miner needed were a pick, shovel, and pan. The pan was a sheet of iron or tin, which looked like a bread pan, and was often used for this purpose. Placer mining was a rather simple operation. First, the prospector would scoop up a pan of pebbles from the bed of a stream and fill the pan with water. By shaking the pan and getting rid of some of the water and pebbles, he eventually removed everything from the pan except the gold; which had sunk to the bottom, since it was heavier than the rest. Little flakes of gold dust, called colors, could be uncovered, and sometimes lumps or nuggets were found. The rocker was also used to placer for gold. It resembled a baby's cradle with the footboard knocked out. Instead of slats, there was a piece of sheet iron punched full of holes. The rocker was put next to the stream, and one man threw shovelfuls of dirt on the iron sheet while another man poured water over it and rocked the machine back and forth. The heavy gold fell through the holes and lodged behind cleats fastened to the bottom of the rocker.

Sluice boxes were even more effective in mining. Several boxes, ten to twelve feet long and a foot wide were made and set end to end. Dirt was dumped in to the boxes, then strong currents of water from the ditch were run through them. Again the gold sank and was held by cleats.

Gold Hill, just north of Idaho City, was mined hydraulically. This method is similar to sluice box mining. The miner shot powerful streams of water at the hillside until it caved in. Then the dirt was run through a string of sluice boxes. Miners worked around the clock at the Gold Hill Mines, with huge bonfires built around the area to see by. Wages were \$6.00 a day and \$7.00 a night.

The richest claim in the Idaho City area in 1863 was owned by seven men. It contained 2,000 square feet and ran to the edge of town. Bedrock averaged one dollar per pan and as high as \$9.25. Mining was done right in town. Lawsuits were numerous when houses began collapsing after being undermined. Montgomery Street panned at \$16.00 a pan.

Idaho City had two hundred merchants in 1864 and was still growing. Two new theaters were finished for the pleasure of the miners. Gambling, billiards, drinking and dancing were favorite pastimes. Most miners wore flannel shirts, a slouched hat, a large bandanna tied around their necks, pantaloons tucked into heavy hobnailed boots, and six-shooters on their hips.

In the winter of 1865, Idaho City was snowed in with seven feet of snow. Pack trains were unable to reach the town for several weeks. A bread famine occurred and flour prices went to fifty cents a pound, but none was available in the town. The few men who had flour stashed away were in danger of being mobbed. In April, the first pack train arrived with provisions. There was a mad rush to buy flour and other supplies. Days later another pack train arrived and soon flour prices were down to twenty-five cents a pound.

In a report by J. A. Chittenden, Superintendent of Public Instruction, dated December 1, 1865, there were four schools in Boise County with six hundred and two students between the ages of four and twenty-one.

In 1863, Father A. Z. Poulin, Silver City, built the first Catholic Church in Idaho proper at Idaho City. The church and the convent next door were saved from the fire in 1865 by men who carried wet sacks onto the roof. The buildings were burned in the 1867 fire, however, and the present building was built shortly thereafter.

The most loved preacher of early times was Bishop Daniel S. Tuttle. He was a missionary Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church for Montana, Utah, and Idaho. In 1866, he began his work in Idaho, holding services wherever he could find a place. It was not uncommon to see gold dust, as well as coins and greenbacks, in the collection plate.

The second paper published in the Idaho Territory was a nonpartisan paper. The paper was started in 1863. It was later sold and the new owner changed the name from the Boise News to the Idaho World. The paper was published every Saturday evening and sold for fifty cents a copy. Papers from California arrived two weeks after publication and sold anywhere from one dollar to two dollars and fifty cents a copy.

On the night of May 18, 1865, disaster struck Idaho City. A fire started about nine that evening near the center of town. The fire is believed to have started in the upper story of a dance hall. Since everything was made of pine and full of pitch, the fire moved swiftly. The fire lasted about three hours and lit up the sky for miles around. Only a few businesses were left untouched by the flames and smoke. Many men who had been considered wealthy were left penniless in a very short time. Some merchants had underground cellars which enabled them to salvage a few items. Miners from all over the Basin came running into town when they saw the sky lighted by the fire. Looters took what they could carry from stores before they were engulfed in flames. Some people saw nothing wrong with this since no one was hurt. They thought it was better to let someone use what they could rather than let everything go up in smoke, and they surely could not sort things out to the rightful owners later. One merchant, Mr. Craft, who had been holding several citizens' gold bags for safe keeping, kept a cool head when he was the fire. He engaged George Dwight to take all the gold away from the town until the next day. Shortly after George had gone, the depositors approached Mr. Craft, demanding their money. Mr. Craft told them that all of the gold was safe and that it would be available the next day. George meanwhile, had carried the one hundred pounds of gold bags to a hill and sat down to watch the fire. The next day he returned the bags to Mr. Craft, who distributed them to the rightful owners.

Everyone went to work to rebuild the town, and by July, 1865, it was nearly completed. May, 1867 another fire swept through the town but was not as disastrous as the first.

Stealing horses, robbing stages, and killing were common around the Boise Basin as bands of desperadoes came into the gold camps. Vigilante Committees were formed who tried criminals in secret, and later arrested them. Their punishment was usually hanging. Protection of law could not be offered from far away Olympia, Washington, so Idaho Territory was separated. The Governor of Washington assigned William Noble, Frank More, and John C. Smith as commissioners of Boise County and instructed them to establish the County seat at Idaho City in 1863. The first county officers besides the commissioners were Sheriff, Sumner Pinkham; Probate Judge Daniel McLaughlin; Auditor, W. R. Underwood; Treasurer, Charles Vajin; and Assessor George Goodman.

A famous political battle occurred in Idaho City in June, 1870. Congressman E. E. Holbrook and a gambler named Douglas met about eight one evening at the corner of Wall and Main Street. Angry words were passed between them, and then both men drew their guns. Eleven shots were fired. Holbrook was taken to his law office with several bullet holes in his abdomen. The next morning he was dead. Douglas vanished in the dark of night. There were discrepancies in the account of who fired the first shot, but everyone agreed that the firing continued until both guns were empty.

Old Mose Kempner was a raw hider from the Banner Mine. He seemed to have funds, but was often broke, and his notes of hand floated about. Being once sued, a trial was held in the old courthouse, and Mose's note was shown around, passing from hand to hand and finally into the hands of Mose himself, who promptly shoved it in his mouth, chewed it up with his wad of cut plug, and spat it down between the boards in the courtroom floor. The note being lost, the debt went unproved. Mose escaped judgment, and for twenty years maintained absolute silence, confessing only in his old age his clandestine mastication in the judicial presence.

The present courthouse was first used for businesses. The iron folding doors were made in San Francisco and shipped up the Columbia River then carried by ox and horse teams into Idaho City. It was, no doubt a difficult and expensive task. Each door weighed half a ton. The doors were used for fire protection more than against thieves. The original courthouse was two blocks from the present one. It was made of rough lumber with gaping holes in the floor.

The courthouse was a popular place in the old days and had many interesting cases. The desk that is now in the courtroom could tell many tales. In the drawer, written in pencil and still legible, is this inscription by Judge Stewart, "George H. Stewart, District Judge, sentenced Herman St. Clair to be hung at this desk November 20, 1897." With the signatures, "J. A. Lippincott, Sheriff and C. B. Mosher, Deputy." Herman St. Clair was found guilty of murder, in the first degree, of John Decker. The murder was committed on October 21, 1897. St. Clair was first sentenced to be hung by the neck until dead on January 14, 1898, between the hours of nine a.m. and three p.m. However, he received a stay of execution from the Supreme Court. He tried to escape from the Idaho City jail on April 27, 1898, but was unsuccessful. He was finally hung on June 24, 1898.

Four thousand Chinamen were in the Idaho Territory from 1869 to 1875. They were employed mostly as laundrymen, cooks, house servants, gardeners, and miners. They were good workers and always paid their

debts. The white men cheated, tormented, and took advantage of the Chinese whenever possible. One Chinaman in Idaho City was a skilled goldsmith. He made beautiful finger rings and was noted for his engraving. The Chinese miners banded together to work harder for their profits, but they were happy to make two or three dollars a day. Pon Yam was a prominent Chinese businessman. His store building is located on the corner of Montgomery Street and Commercial Street. Pon Yam had a wife and sons in Canton, a pretty black-haired girl in Idaho City, and owned a two or three karat diamond, the largest diamond in the gold camp. The Chinese never fought with the white man, but they had many disagreements with their countrymen.

The Chinese saved their money so their remains could be sent back to China when they died. Some Chinese were not wealthy enough to have their remains sent back to the homeland; therefore, they were left in Boot Hill. Chinese funerals were gala affairs. Large crowds of people would walk to the cemetery, dropping colored paper and chanting occasionally.

The Chinese Joss House or Temple was an interesting place. During feast days the doors were always left open for those who came to worship or make an offering. On days of worship, each Chinese company would parade through the streets of Idaho City to the Joss House with gongs and cymbals clanging. Some of the companies carried banners, and others carried Chinese food delicacies. A roast pig, which was carried on a long pole between two men, was the main offering. These offerings were spread before the Joss with much ceremony and bowing. When the ceremony was over, the companies would march back to their place of business or residence. These events along with Chinese New Year celebration, Chinese Mason Day and many others were colorful events for the white citizen to watch.

Building a new community in the nineteenth century was a task full of hardships and disappointments. It took a great deal of courage and determination to withstand all the trials of life one hundred years ago. These pioneers are to be long remembered for their help in developing the Boise Basin Area.

[top](#)

HISTORIC IDAHO CITY

In 1864 it was a nine hour stage coach ride from Idaho City to Boise City. The uphill trip coming back took an hour longer, and there were no guarantees at all after the snow fell.

The first gold in the Boise Basin was discovered near Centerville on August 2, 1862. Soon settlements had sprung up all through the Boise Basin, in December of 1862 Bannock City was founded.

Bannock City was located in the most rugged, remote region of Washington Territory which was comprised of modern Washington, Idaho, and western Montana. In March of 1863 President Lincoln established Idaho Territory, and in 1864 Bannock City was renamed Idaho City. As many as 20,000 miners came to Idaho City, making it the largest city between St. Louis and San Francisco. The first fire swept through the town on May 18, 1865 and destroyed 80% of the town in two hours. Idaho City was quickly rebuilt. Exactly two years and a day later fire struck again, but this time residents were ready and more buildings were saved. Some of those buildings still stand today.