

Frequently Asked Questions

Old Idaho Penitentiary

VISITING:

When are you open?

The Old Idaho Penitentiary is open year-round seven days a week. We are a closed most state holidays (including New Years Day, Presidents Day, Columbus Day, Veterans Day, Thanksgiving Day, and Christmas Day). Please check our website or call to confirm.

Regular Hours:

Noon – 5:00 p.m.

(Last Admission, 4:15 p.m.)

Special Summer Hours: Memorial Day – Labor Day

10:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.

(Last Admission, 4:15 p.m.)

Who operates the Old Idaho Penitentiary?

The Idaho State Historical Society operates the Old Idaho Penitentiary and is an extraordinary system of cultural and historic resources comprised of the Idaho State Historical Museum, State Archives, State Historic Preservation Office, and Historic Sites Program. We seek to inspire, enrich and engage all Idahoans by leading the state in preserving, sharing, and using history and cultural resources relevant to today to inform and influence the future.

Why can't I go into all the buildings inside the walls?

Some buildings at the Old Idaho Penitentiary are off-limits to the public due to the following reasons: 1) Safety concerns due to structural instability and deterioration, 2) Attempts to preserve the building, and 3) Storage of Historical Society equipment.

Why can't I go into all the buildings outside the walls?

The Warden's House, the Bishops' House, the Guard House, the Trusty's Dorm and the Barns are owned by the Idaho State Historical Society but leased to different companies and organizations as offices, classrooms, & event centers. Other outbuildings are unsafe for visitors.

Are there any ghosts?

Several paranormal groups including a team from the Travel Channel program "Ghost Adventures" have conducted investigations at the site. While there is no conclusive evidence to suggest there are ghosts at this site, many visitors have seen and heard things they cannot explain. Some, including "Ghost Adventures," have captured strange/unexplainable images on their cameras, still others claim to hear voices or be physically touched. Most sense a "heaviness" or "strange feelings" when visiting the site, specifically in Siberia (solitary confinement cells) and the Gallows Room in Maximum Security. We continue to leave it to the individual to decide for themselves whether this is a "haunted" site or not.

Note: Only Raymond Snowden was executed in the Gallows Room.

VISITING:

Do you have any special events?

We have several signature events, including...

- **January**
 - “Make Hunger History” (Half-off admission when you bring in 2 canned food items)
 - “Escaping Hunger Celebrity Lock-Up” (Celebrities are locked up as they try to collect as many food and cash donations as possible while competing in prison-themed games)
- **February**
 - “Romancing the Pen” (2 for 1 Admission on Valentine’s Day, open late, special exhibit about “love” stories of former inmates)
- **March**
 - “Necessary to Isolate: Idaho’s Imprisoned Women” (Month-long exhibit about 10 different female inmates from every corner of Idaho)
- **April**
 - “Annual ‘Caged Inspiration’ Poetry Contest” (Poems of 200 words or less submitted in Child, Teen, Adult categories. Special prizes include private tours, gift shop prizes and much more)
- **August**
 - “Bars and Ballads” Music Event (Local musicians play after hours while visitors can enjoy snacks, beverages and tours through the site)
- **October**
 - Annual “FRIGHTENED FELONS Halloween Event” (Held on the last Friday and Saturday of October every year. Special exhibits, games, scavenger hunts, self-guided tours, and much more)
- **November**
 - Friday “NIGHT TOURS” (First 3 Fridays in November open after hours for flashlight tours. Guided and/or self-guided tours)
- **December**
 - “Pardon Me, It’s Christmas” Exhibit (Special month-long exhibit explores inmates who were given special pardons for Christmas. Also highlights special Christmas programs at the Penitentiary)
- **Throughout the Year...**
 - Friday the 13th Tours – The Old Pen is open after hours for any and every Friday the 13th. Check www.history.idaho.gov for future dates
 - Paranormal Investigations – A group of volunteers known as the International Paranormal Reporting Group does periodic paranormal investigations at the Old Pen. Check www.history.idaho.gov for future dates

HISTORY:

Did any famous inmates stay here?

Many inmates were notorious in their time period but have since been forgotten. A few are well known in Idaho or the West, but perhaps not nationally. Harry Orchard received the most sensational and international press in his time. The following are just a few “infamous” inmates:

Henry “Bob” Meeks was believed to be a member of Butch Cassidy’s gang which robbed a bank in Montpelier, Idaho. He was shot in the leg during an escape attempt, officials caught him, and doctors amputated his leg. He later climbed to the top of a cell house (with only one leg), jumped off, survived, and was sent to the asylum at Blackfoot.

Harry Orchard confessed to killing more than 17 people. Convicted in Canyon County for the murder of Frank Steunenberg (former governor of Idaho), Orchard claimed to be a hired assassin for the Western Federation of Miners. He testified against William “Big Bill” Haywood, in what many refer to as the “Trial of the Century,” which featured Clarence Darrow for the defense. Ethel Barrymore, of the famous Barrymore acting family, visited Orchard at the penitentiary during the trial.

Orchard eventually became a prison trusty. He started the shoe shop and a successful poultry farm at the penitentiary. He converted to the Seventh Day Adventist Church while incarcerated, oddly enough with the help of Steunenberg’s widow, and was baptized in the old plunge bath beneath the Dining Hall. Orchard eventually built and resided in a small cottage outside the prison walls. In 1954, at 88 years old, he died in the prison hospital.

“Diamondfield” Jack Davis got his nickname when he went west to Silver City, Idaho on the rumor of a diamond strike. After the failed prospecting attempt Davis began working for a cattle company to keep sheep off cattle ranges. When two shepherders were killed in the area where he was working, Davis became the prime suspect for the killings. Sentenced to hang on June 4, 1897, two other men confessed and he was reprieved. In February 1899, Davis was transferred to the Idaho State Penitentiary where he stayed until December of that year. Davis was then transferred back to a cell in the Cassia County jail.

After Davis had exhausted his appeals another execution date was scheduled for July 3, 1901. By that time public opinion shifted in Jack's favor mostly due to the confessions of James Bower and Jeff Gray and also to the easing of tension between sheep and cattle herders. The Board of Pardons extended the execution date to the July 17, much to the outrage of state prosecutor and future Idaho Senator William Borah. Three hours before Davis' scheduled execution, word arrived to the Cassia County sheriff that his sentence had been changed to life imprisonment. Davis was moved back to the Idaho State Penitentiary in Boise, Idaho until he was finally pardoned on December 17, 1902 by Idaho Gov. Frank W. Hunt.

Who built the prison?

Prisoners assisted in the construction of almost all the buildings on site. Most of the buildings are made of sandstone quarried by inmates in the Foothills above the prison.

HISTORY:

How many years was the prison in operation?

This was an operating penitentiary for 101 years, from 1872 to 1973.

How many executions occurred at the Old Pen?

A total of ten men were executed at this site:

Tambiago – June 28, 1878, 1:00 p.m., Near Territorial Prison
Edward Rice – November 30, 1901, Northeast Corner (Rose Garden)
James Connors – December 16, 1904, 6:15 a.m., Northeast Corner (Rose Garden)
William Henry Hicks “Fred” Bond – August 10, 1906, 6:11 a.m., Northeast Corner (Rose Garden)
Fred Seward – May 7, 1909, 8:09 a.m., Northeast Corner (Rose Garden)
Noah Arnold – December 19, 1924, 12:20 a.m., Northeast Corner (Rose Garden)
John Jurko – July 9, 1926, 12:14 a.m., Northeast Corner (Rose Garden)
Ernest Walrath – April 13, 1951, 12:11 a.m., Near #2 Yard Gate
Troy Powell – April 13, 1951, 12:40 a.m., Near #2 Yard Gate
Raymond Snowden – October 18, 1957, 12:05 a.m., Gallows Room

Were there any riots?

Yes. There were 5 major riots and several other smaller disturbances:

1935 – 16 inmates began throwing dishes and overturning tables in the Dining Hall, reason unknown. Guards used “knockout gas” to control the prisoners and sent them to solitary confinement.

1952 – Began in Multi-Purpose Building after “ringleaders” placed in solitary confinement, supposedly Warden Clapp claimed they would not be sent there. Lasted five hours, tear gas used to disperse inmates.

1966 – Non-violent peaceful sit-in involved 300 convicts and lasted only a day. Started in protest of the closure of the Commissary after counterfeit commissary coins found.

1971 – Scorching temperatures and years of antiquated systems failing, including claims of dead rats in the water system triggered the riot. Inmates burned down the bakery in #2 Yard and the Social Services Building (old hospital) in the Main Yard. Three men stabbed for various reasons. One, Bill Butler, died and was found rolled up into a gym mat in the Multi-Purpose Building.

1973 – The new prison south of Boise had been open a short time when inmate Larry Trujillo returned to the Idaho State Penitentiary infirmary. When they attempted to return him to the new site the disturbance began over his claims of maltreatment from guards. The Chapel and Dining Hall were destroyed. Later a report revealed Trujillo’s suffered from self-inflicted wounds.

HISTORY:

Were there any escapes?

There were over 500 escape attempts, of which at least 90 were successful. While officials eventually apprehended most escaped inmates, some remained at-large.

What was daily life like for the inmates?

Daily life varied for the inmates over the years due to administration changes and shifting penal philosophies. In the early territorial days, inmates were in their individual cells twenty-one hours a day with enforced silence at all times. They were allowed out into the yard for three hours each day to work or play. Some inmates played organized games like quoits (a variation of ring toss somewhat like horseshoes), or worked at chipping stone or chopping wood to make gifts for loved ones or for sale, others simply relaxed. Inmates shaved once a week and bathed once a week in the summer, and twice a month in the winter. This system of corrections was known as the Pennsylvania System which focused on silence and solitude to encourage penitence about their crime.

Over the years, the Pennsylvania System was replaced with the more popular Auburn System. This system required inmates to work during waking hours and participate in communal dining and bathing. The Auburn System was designed to rehabilitate inmates and offset the cost of incarceration. Inmates at the Old Idaho Penitentiary quarried stone, built cell houses, and worked in prison industries (cannery, license plate factory, blacksmith shop, farm, etc.). In 1966, Warden Lou Clapp abolished the silence rule and inmates were then allowed to talk openly in their cells and the dining hall. Recreational games became commonplace. Inmates played baseball, football, tennis, horseshoes, basketball, lifted weights, and even boxed competitively.

The typical daily routine for most inmates in 1964:

7:30 a.m.: Prisoners leave cells.

8:00 a.m.: Breakfast.

8:30 a.m.: Work starts in prison industries, school or work programs.

11:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.: Lunch.

2:30 p.m.: Work ends. Prisoners have free time to play games, shower, or work on hobbies.

4:30 p.m.: Most inmates return to their cells, some are out on cleanup duty.

9:00 a.m.: Lights out.

How many people died here?

There are over 110 recorded deaths at the Old Idaho Penitentiary during its years of operation. Those include all ten executions, as well as death by various diseases, suicides, murder, and in escape attempts.

Where is the prison cemetery?

This gated cemetery is located near the Idaho Botanical Gardens at the base of the Boise Foothills. You must obtain permission from the Idaho Botanical Gardens before entering the cemetery (IBG fees may apply).

HISTORY:

Where can I learn more about individual inmates or the history of the site (buildings, guards, wardens, photos)?

The Idaho State Archives houses all inmate records from the Idaho State Penitentiary and is conveniently located at 2205 Old Penitentiary Road near the site. Records can include mug shots, "Description of Convict", pardon/parole papers, punishment notes, etc. The Idaho State Archives also has historic images of the site from individual buildings, cell houses, guards, inmates, and much more. In addition, there are hundreds of oral histories from guards, inmates, wardens and family members associated with the penitentiary. You can also use historic newspapers to learn more about sensational trials, crime sprees, daring escapes, notorious criminals and more. Call 208-334-3356 for research requests and learn more about the Idaho State Archives at www.history.idaho.gov.

Where were women held?

When the first female inmates arrived there were not adequate separate facilities. Before 1905, female inmates stayed in areas formally used as office space and common areas, officials strictly forbade interaction between genders. Finally, in 1905, female inmates moved into the Warden's former residence after male inmates erected a stone wall around it. In 1920, construction was completed on the formal Women's Ward dormitory.

Why did the prison close?

The prison closed after 101 years of operation. It was antiquated and archaic in every sense. Outdated water systems caused sickness and daily unsanitary conditions. Outdated and non-existent heating and cooling systems made Boise's extreme weather conditions unbearable. As Idaho's population grew so did its crime rate resulting in a prison population near, and sometimes exceeding, capacity most of the time. Boise also grew substantially and the capitol city nestled right up next to the once distant prison. In short, the rising prison population, growth of the state/city, and higher standards in corrections made the move completely necessary.

What happened to the old stone archway entrance that used to be on Warm Springs Avenue?

Erected in 1902 the grand archway ushered in inmates, guards, wardens and visitors. Over time the arch proved to be too small for larger vehicles needed to bring supplies and goods to the prison grounds. The archway was permanently removed in the 1960s.

MISCELLANEOUS:

What is the Old Idaho Penitentiary Historic District?

The OIPHD is comprised of several different organizations in the area formerly occupied by the Department of Corrections when the Idaho State Penitentiary was in operation. District tenants include:

Idaho State Historical Society

Department of Corrections

Department of Agriculture

Idaho Botanical Garden

Friends of the Bishops' House

Preservation Idaho/National Trust for Historic Preservation

College of Western Idaho

Department of Health and Welfare – Laboratories Bureau

Boise Warm Springs Water District

Idaho Museum of Mining and Geology

Idaho Arts Commission

Where is the operating prison now?

The “new” prison is located near Kuna, ID approximately 15 miles south of Boise.