

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

LUMBER IN THE BOISE REGION

Number 173

Sawmills came to the Boise region during the gold rush. Mining, whether placer or lode, required lumber right from the beginning. Early placer miners could whipsaw enough lumber to build sluice boxes, but long flumes required a less-cumbersome source of supply. Mine timbers, necessary in places for tunnels and stopes, and lumber for mill buildings brought a substantial forest products demand after lode mining diversified the local economy. A still greater lumber market grew up in mining towns--Idaho City, Placerville, Centerville, Pioneerville, Rocky Bar, Atlanta, Banner, and Quartzburg, particularly--and service communities (primarily Boise) which owed their establishment and development to mining.

Sawmills, constructed in response to this early demand, wherever possible, naturally were installed close to the mines they served. Practically all the Boise mines were found in the forested slopes above the valley, so favorable locations could be used in the early days. Boise had more of a problem, but early sawmills on Boise Ridge (and some on Shaffer Creek on the Payette) could provide lumber reasonably close to market.

Commercial lumbering, with more than a modest regional market, could not develop in the Boise forests until after rail transportation provided an outlet. Even then, possibilities for large-scale early expansion certainly had severe limits. Shipment to metropolitan centers close to the northwest coast (such as Portland or Seattle) made no sense at all: much larger forests and a major lumber industry there excluded any such possibility. But intermountain and Mississippi Valley markets might emerge sometime in the twentieth century. At least such a prospect seemed reasonable not long after Idaho became a state and the Boise Valley economy advanced past an initial frontier era.

Much of the national lumber market in the latter part of the nineteenth century was served from the Great Lakes area. But large commercial operators there saw that by the turn of the century, that entire region would be cut out. So they proposed to turn next to the southern states. Then when they had finished there (perhaps in the next quarter century), they expected to move to North Idaho. (Shipping distance from North Idaho gave that area an advantage over the more remote Pacific Coast for entrance into the National market.) By 1900, large timber land

acquisitions were progressing in North Idaho, and the Boise region came in as sort of an appendage to that development.

In anticipation of commercial interest in Boise forest lands, real estate dealers went to work right after 1900 in a flourishing timber entry business. They had a considerable problem, though. Under the timber statute, designed as an inappropriate imitation of land laws for helping individuals acquire family-sized farms, each entry had to be filed for the benefit of only one person. In theory, individual lumbermen, each with his own 640-acre family-sized forest, would harvest and process his own lumber in his family-sized sawmill. Timber matures somewhat less quickly than grain or potato crops. But apparently each individual timber entry was supposed to last the family a generation or so, after which the next generation might go to work on a new stand. Nothing like that was remotely feasible. Even the most retarded family, with the slowest possible family sawmill, would have got through harvesting one stand of timber before another matured. And sawmill families--in contrast to farm families--would have had most of a generation of starvation waiting for new trees to grow. Resourceful and imaginative attorneys finally figured out a way to consolidate a lot of these individual, family-sized timber claims in order to provide a basis for a commercial Boise forest products industry.

In the meantime, prior to establishment of Boise National Forest (which got something like its present boundaries in 1906), a substantial number of Boise forest timber lands were entered by hopeful investors.

Shortly after leaving office as governor of Idaho at the end of the nineteenth century, Frank Steunenberg took on the project of interesting Wisconsin and Minnesota lumbermen in Boise forest lands. His efforts lead to organization of the Barber Lumber Company in the summer of 1902. With extensive holdings (25,000 acres) of Boise Basin and Crooked River timber lands, this company prepared to bring commercial lumbering to the Boise region. A sawmill, dam, and mill pond was installed at Barber in 1906. At first the Barber company tried log drives down the Boise River to supply this new mill. But log drives did not work well. And in any case, the operation had to shut down the next year while attorneys for the Barber interests worked out problems of land title that took until 1912 to straighten out. Originally W. E. Borah served as an attorney for the Barber Company, and complication over title to the Boise Basin and Crooked River timber lands grew out of a Republican factional struggle associated with Borah's nomination for the United States Senate in 1906. Borah won the election, but some of his adversaries tried to embarrass him by bringing criminal charges in the Barber timber land entries. Borah easily secured vindication, but his Barber clients had to spend another couple of years disposing of the rest of the litigation incidental to this political battle. By 1912, the company had \$1,600,000 invested in the Barber

operation, but no prospect of any return. And Arrowrock Dam had cut off river access to the north fork of Crooked River logging area. Merger of the Barber Lumber Company with a similar Payette River enterprise on December 24, 1913, brought additional capital and new management to the Barber operation. Some 12,000 additional acres of Barber timberland had been obtained, and a large, additional Boise Payette mill was built at Emmett.

To supply the Barber mill, a \$1,037,499 Intermountain Railway was built on up Boise River, More's Creek, and Grimes Creek to Centerville in 1915. This line came as an extension from a U.S. Reclamation Service railway to Arrowrock, and the Boise project had power arrangements as well as transportation connections with the Barber enterprise.

When the Barber mill finally came into production, the marketing situation proved to be less favorable than had been anticipated in 1900. Completion of the Panama Canal had given Pacific Coast lumbermen a freight rate advantage to all the east coast markets. This new ocean route stopped Idaho lumber marketing beyond Cleveland, in fact. Then even the most energetic timbermen found that they could not cut out southern forests the way they had cleared the Great Lakes area. Southern forests had a fast enough growth rate that they remained a permanent segment of the national lumber economy. Boise-Payette and the other Idaho lumber companies had to confine their sales efforts to the midwest and intermountain area, with Boise forest products concentrating mainly in the latter. By 1922, a system of 72 Boise-Payette intermountain retail lumber yards made the company solvent. These yards, in fact, covered manufacturing losses until 1929. But with net profits of less than one percent from 1924 to 1929, and \$600,000 net losses from 1930 to 1932, Boise-Payette finally decided upon a policy of severe retrenchment. Their Emmett mill closed entirely from 1931 to 1934, and their Barber mill did not run much of that time. Finally, in 1934, the Barber mill was dismantled and the Intermountain Railway was abandoned the next year. (The grade up More's Creek then became a highway grade for the state highway between Boise and Idaho City.) At that point, Boise-Payette managed to return to profitable operations. But these came primarily in other parts of southern Idaho. Their Boise timberlands, located in rough country in which logging trucks could not operate before 1934, had stands too scattered and too expensive to process when the national market was depressed.

For a time, Boise-Payette handled logging operations through contractors. Heavy production during World War II exhausted most of the company lands, though, and by 1949 the company was about ready to abandon logging and milling altogether. An expanded retail lumber yard system in the intermountain west continued to provide the company most of its profit.

Then in 1949, company reorganization (with new management and new arrangements with the Forest Service) brought back the

production phase of Boise-Payette operations. Tree farms and improved forest management practices helped. A long series of mergers, particularly after 1957 when the company became Boise-Cascade, made the revived enterprise the largest lumber corporation in Idaho. With integrated operations and diversified plants (including pulp and paper mills, paper products, and new brands), the company's net worth rose from \$7,830,000 in 1935 to \$45,431,000 in 1959--two years after consolidation with the Cascade Company of Yakima. That was only a beginning. By 19__ , this figure had risen to \$_____. But, except for corporate headquarters in Boise and some operating plants in the Valley (including re-entry at Barber), most of this total reflected values of an international operation of great magnitude.