

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

OWYHEE COUNTY

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When Owyhee County was established, December 31, 1863, all of the territory south of Snake River and west of the Continental Divide formed part of this new political unit. (A great part of original Owyhee County was in present Wyoming.) Then with the creation of Oneida County, January 22, 1864, Owyhee wound up with an area that included later Cassia and Twin Falls, but not much else. With a population of 640 early in the fall of 1863, and 1,735 in the fall of 1864, this new mining area had a bright future. (Fifty women and 110 children had come to Owyhee County by 1864: in 1863 the census taker had not found any women and children at all.) Scarcely anyone, aside from Indians, lived outside the mining region along Jordan Creek next to the western edge of the new county. But the Owyhee mines--originally thought to be gold, but proven to be primarily silver by 1864--held exceptional promise. In 1866, when most of Idaho's early mining districts had passed through their initial boom, Owyhee was continuing to produce on a major scale, with the fabulous Poorman lode (along with a number of other exceptionally rich War Eagle Mountain properties) an outstanding bonanza among early western silver mines.

In 1867 the county seat was moved a short distance from Ruby City to Silver City, which had a superior location in relation to some of the early mills near Jordan Creek. By 1868, the county's original weekly newspaper--The Owyhee Avalanche--faced competition from the Owyhee Semi-Weekly Tidal Wave, with Silver City the only town in Idaho that still could boast two newspapers. But the community could not support that many very long and in 1870 they had to be consolidated, with the weekly Avalanche and Tidal Wave emerging as an unlikely, yet successful, survivor of that journalistic competition. After a while the Tidal Wave disappeared from the paper's title, but the Owyhee Avalanche went on to become Idaho's earliest daily, August 31, 1875, when telegraph service reached the community. Failure of the Bank of California soon led to a shut down of lode mining on War Eagle Mountain, and in 1880, population of the county was down to 1,426 (compared with an 1870 figure that had almost matched 1864), with many of the inhabitants living out on ranches.

Large herds of cattle had come to Owyhee County by 1868-1869, although much of this cattle empire had been detached in 1879 to form Cassia County. (At that time, Owyhee gained approximately its present level. With cattle towns and some Snake River farms, the county total rose to more than 2,000. In 1900 mining had reached a high level, and Silver City had almost a thousand population, with Delamar not far behind. After 1912 most of the mines were closed down, but growth of agriculture brought the population from 3,804 in 1900 to 4,044 in 1910. From then on, Owyhee depended largely on farming and ranching, although Silver City

remained the county seat until after an election in 1934 provided for relocation to Murphy. With an area close to the size of Massachusetts, Owyhee County retains vast rangelands with most of the towns and farms strung out along Snake River. With a rapid increase in the price of silver, though, large scale mining was resumed at Delamar in 1975, and Owyhee is beginning to regain its mining prominence after six decades of mineral inactivity.