

FULL PAGE

looking back

Continued from page 154

on the north and east by the Snake River, the famous Silver City mining area lies in the Owyhee Mountains in the north of the county. The famous Dry Route of the Oregon Trail cut through Owyhee County, becoming the first real road in the region, and it was used as a trail for the immigrants for more than thirty-years.

After gold was discovered, the boom brought in thousands of miners searching for their piece of the treasure. Like most gold rush towns of the period, some found gold, but most found failure. However, successful or not, they all came hungry, and beef in this isolated region was almost non-existent.

The first large herd of cattle finally reached the new territory of Idaho and entered the county through the Bruneau Valley in the fall of 1869. It wasn't easy going for the vaqueros and cowboys of the day. For nearly a year, a handful of men from Owyhee County struggled through the unpredictable weather and imposing western geography to drive the herd of 1,400 head up from the Brazos area of Texas. Most were Durham cattle, with a few Longhorns mixed in. These would become the seed stock of the new Idaho cattle industry; and the hungry miners and citizens of this remote outpost couldn't wait for their first steak.

In a few years, Owyhee County had an estimated 100,000 cattle and many ran free, much like their early Longhorn counterparts in Texas. As the mining boom began to wind down to its inevitable bust, ranching and farming was emerging as the next big industry. In a few years, the region became

prosperous as the cattle and sheep industry boomed; tens of thousands of animals were fattened up on nearly unlimited grass and driven to the nearest railhead in the fall.

Even with the success of the livestock industry, the life in Owyhee County was difficult, its extreme isolation making day to day life a lonely struggle for most of its residents. Ranches were often so large, and so far from civilization that people seldom left because the travel was too difficult.

Agriculture in general remained a tough life until 1864, when congress passed the Carey Act, also known as the Federal Desert Land Act. It allowed private entrepreneurs to build irrigation systems on federal land and sell the water to ranches and farms. The soil of the Owyhee region is great for agriculture and will grow nearly anything; but it needs more water than is produced naturally.

With the water came the next big boom – farming the dry lands of Owyhee County. Today, most of the farm land of Southern Idaho is heavily

irrigated and produces millions of bushels of potatoes, corn, beets and wheat, as well as crops like alfalfa.

Owyhee County is still one of the largest in the U.S. and one of the most remote. The corner of Idaho, Oregon and Nevada, and the Great Basin region remain a place for those that like wide open spaces, and peace and quiet. And, if you are serious about finding the real Wild West, take a drive down Interstate 80, then turn north, somewhere around the famous old cowtown of Elko, Nevada, and drive for a couple of hours.

If the empty Nevada landscape doesn't already look a little like the Wild West to you, cross through the Duck Valley Indian Reservation and into Owyhee County, Idaho. Today, the region has a population of 11,500 people scattered across 7,676 square miles for an average of 1.4 people per square mile. Working buckaroos saddle up every day in this big chunk of country; they drag calves to the fire and gather cows in the fall. They're all out there, somewhere in the wide open spaces of the Owyhee. **WR**

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If you want to get away from pretty much everything, take a trip down the 346 mile-long Owyhee River.

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The Wild Owyhee

The term 'Wild West' has been used in conversation, in the movies and in writing of all kinds for at least a hundred years. At times, everything west of the Mississippi River has been called the Wild West; from the flatlands of the Midwest to the shores of the Pacific. After a hundred-and-fifty-years of western expansion, what we think of as wild has gradually been tamed into cities, towns, farms, ranches and people - lots and lots of people.

Often, people who live in the East and in the big cities are heard bemoaning the loss of the wide open spaces of the old days. They love talking about the fact that the Wild West and all the real cowboys are all gone; and how they would have loved to live a hundred-years-ago so they could have been part of that life.

Their facts are partly right. The West may not be as wild as it was back then, and maybe there aren't as many wide open spaces as there once was; but they're out there if you want to look

for them. If you really want to see some of those places you heard about or read about while growing up, you may be required to get a ways off of the pavement.

On March 4, 1863, President Lincoln signed the Idaho Territory into law. It broke up the politically disputed Washington and Oregon Territories and initially made the Idaho territory large enough to include most of present-day Wyoming, Montana and Idaho. The first county in the new territory was called *Owyhee County* and

was situated in the extreme southeast corner of the new boundaries with the Oregon and Nevada territories.

The new county had been called the Owyhee since it was explored by the early trappers of the Montreal-based Northwest Company. The name came from three Hawaiian natives that joined the trapping expedition of 1819. The natives of the islands had been dubbed *Owyhee's* by Captain Cook after he first set foot on the Sandwich Islands in 1778, and the name stuck. When the three natives mysteriously disappeared exploring a fork of the Snake River, the rest of the expedition named the region the Owyhee for the missing trappers - and the name stuck again.

At the northern most edge of the Great Basin, the Owyhee country consists of rolling sage prairies, deep canyons and mountains, and is cut through by the Owyhee River. Bordered

Continued on page 153

FULL PAGE