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## **Man Made Paradise: The Boise Water Project**

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# Man Made Paradise: The Boise Water Project

## Abstract

The development and economic growth of the Boise Valley was made possible by the efforts of private citizens and the Bureau of Reclamation that culminated in the creation of the Boise Water Project.

Prior to the creation of the Boise Project, the area known as the Boise Valley could be an unforgiving unyielding landscape. Availability of water was scarce, making the development of the land nearly impossible unless a person was fortunate enough to live along a waterway. However, being located near water did not always mean success. The very nature of water can have negative consequences. In the spring of the year, the Boise River (main source of water in the Boise Valley) frequently flooded people who lived along its banks; later in the year, the flow of the water would decrease exponentially leaving those further down the river without enough water to sustain their crops. The only sure thing the Boise Valley yielded was an abundance of jackrabbits and sagebrush.

If a person was able to settle near a water source, they not only had to deal with natural hardships but manmade hardships as well. Early settlers built laterals, canals, and primitive irrigation structures that were often built incorrectly. These structures would leak, break, and sometimes just not work. Claims on the existing water were not clearly supervised and at one point more water was appropriated to the land than the Boise River could actually supply. Land speculators were able to purchase large sections of land which allowed them to charge exorbitant prices for the water and the land. It was not unusual for people to be desperate enough to steal water, which often led to violence. Private industries, often times connected to land speculation, would announce their intention to build or would start building grandiose water projects. The prospects of irrigation prompted the purchase of land. The grandiose water projects were ultimately abandoned because they were too expensive to finish or were so poorly built that they broke down, leaving the land owners high and dry.

By drawing from a wealth of primary resources, I intend to tell the story of how the development of the Boise Valley was made possible by the Boise Water Project. The history of the Boise Project is not just important to Idaho but also to the rest of the nation by providing a better understanding of the vast possibilities and consequences of irrigation and agriculture in the United States.

## Keywords

Carry Act, Boise Valley, irrigation, primary documents

## Disciplines

United States History

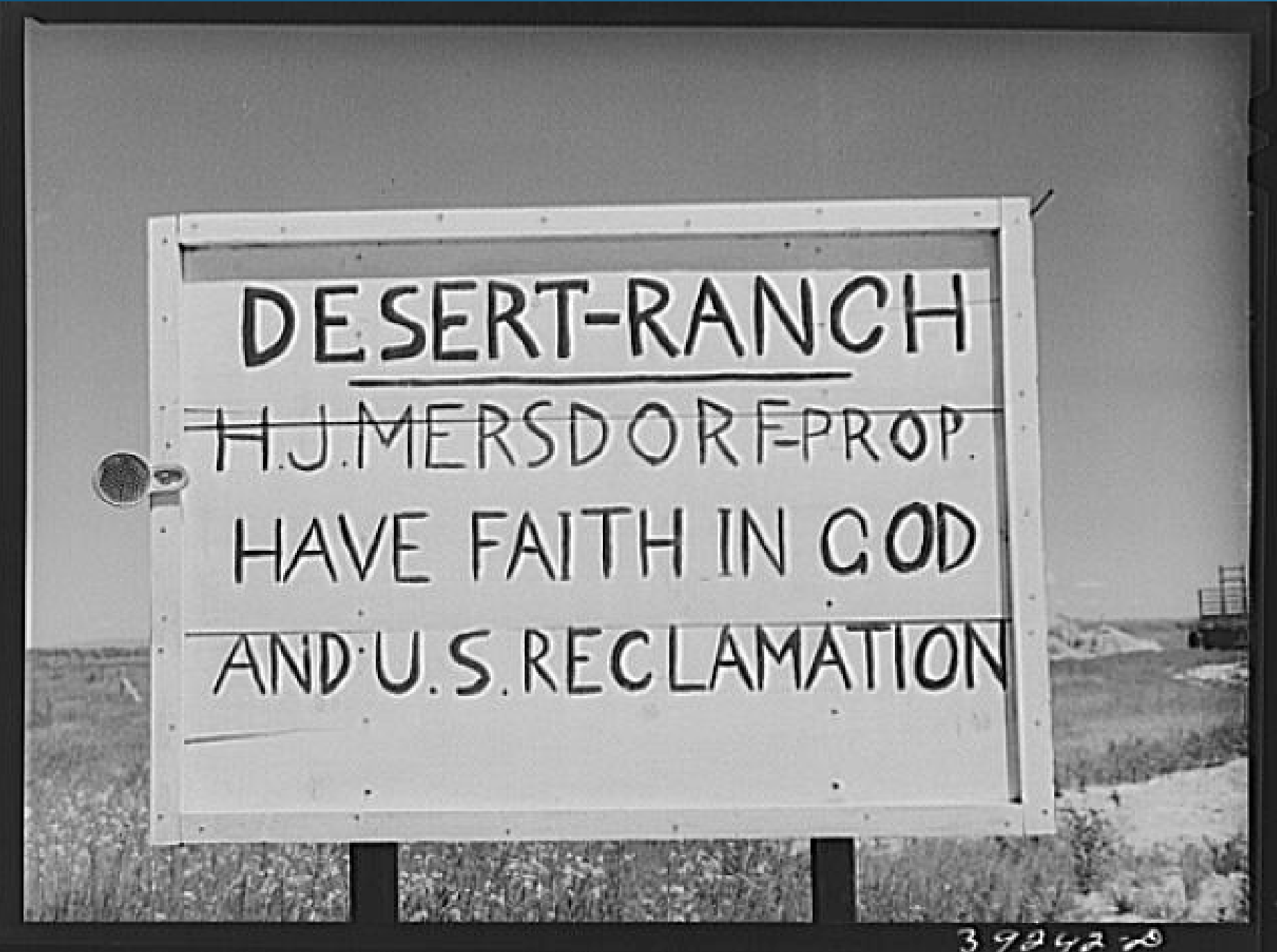
# Man Made paradise: The Boise Water Project

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**Abstract** –The Boise Valley area now a lush, thriving economic region, once had a harsh unforgiving landscape that was only transformed by the introduction of water. The development and economic growth of the Boise Valley was made possible by the efforts of private citizens and the Bureau of Reclamation that culminated in the creation of the Boise Water Project.

**The Boise Project**, stemmed from the Carrey Act passed on August 18, 1894. The purpose of the Act was to facilitate states in reclaiming arid areas within the United States by allowing them to enter into contracts with private construction companies to build irrigation systems. D.W. Ross spoke before the Committee on Irrigation of Arid Lands in the House of Representatives about the Boise Project and on March 27<sup>th</sup>, 1905, the Boise Project was authorized and became the largest single irrigation project in Idaho. The first three parts of the Boise Project consisted of the Deer Flat Reservoir near Nampa, the New York Canal and Diversion Dam near the city of Boise with the Arrowrock Dam and Reservoir being added to the project in 1911 and completed in 1915.



2: Sign on Ranch in Canyon County, Idaho. Library of Congress

**Results** - Research into historical documents published in The Idaho Statesman and from the Bureau of Land Reclamation revealed that the Boise Project’s creation can be attributed to three contributing factors.

### Gold Mining

Owyhee County, became densely populated following the discovery of gold in the 1860’s. This put greater emphasis on agricultural development which necessitated irrigation.

“The Boise Valley must be the storehouse and kitchen garden for all these...”<sup>1</sup> camps.

1. "news," Idaho Statesman, August 2, 1864

### Private Industry

Prior to the existence of the Boise Project, the Boise Valley depended upon the irrigation schemes of private individuals and companies such as William B. Morris who built the Ridenbaugh Canal.

Private industry also attracted land speculation. Failed water projects often left land owners high and dry.

### Reclamation Act of 1902

Shortly after Roosevelt signed the Act, Reclamation Engineers did surveys of the Canals in the Boise Valley and found most had structural issues.

Engineers also completed a large portion of mapping geographical locations for possible water projects

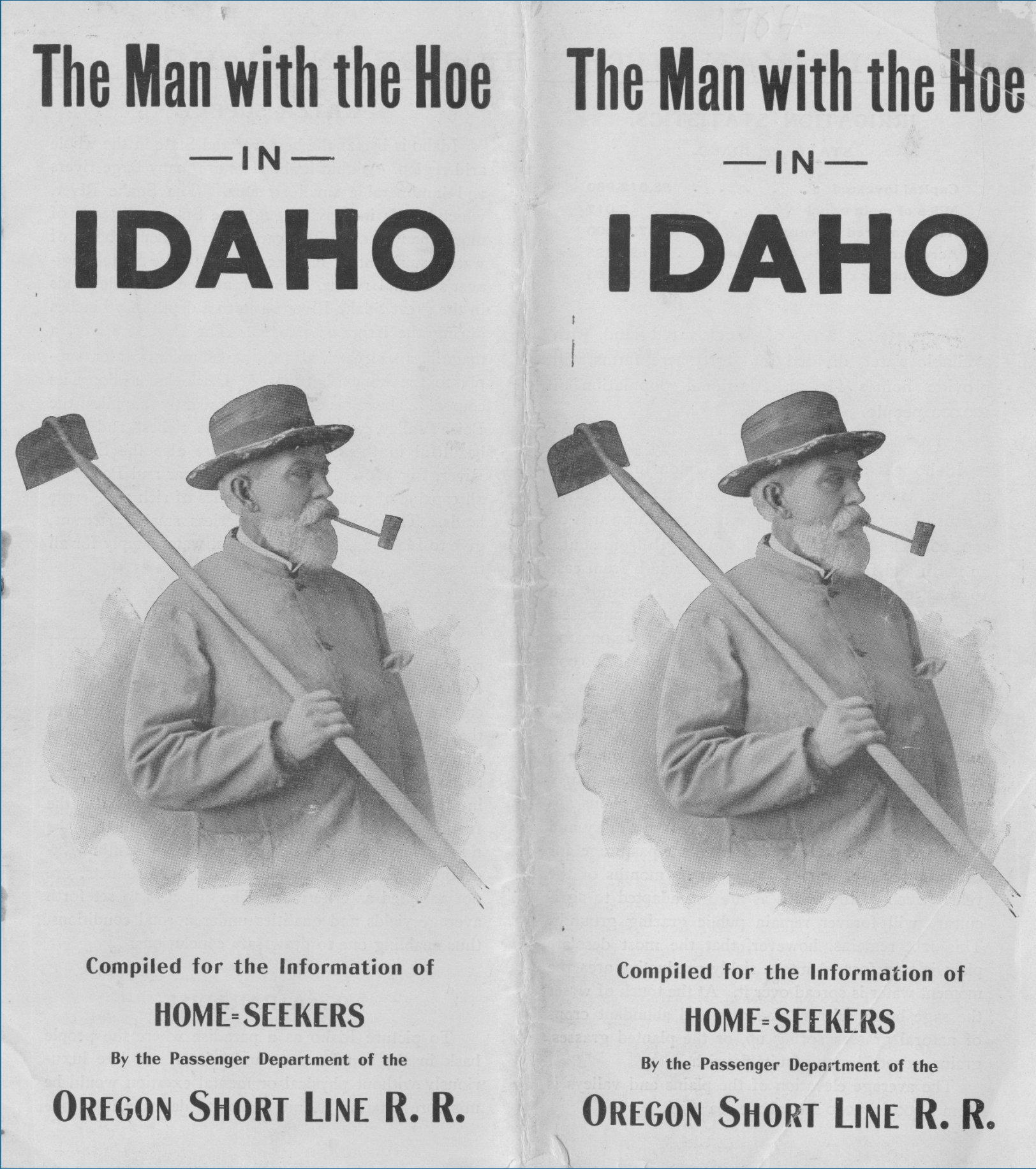


Figure 1: Cover of a pamphlet, 1901 Oregon short Line R.R. .

### Discussion

Telling the story of the Boise Valley through irrigation and the establishment of the Boise Project helps illustrate the effect that irrigation has had on the Boise Valley, and in the west. It is not a new story and it has been told many times, but that is because it is important. Understanding the effect we have on the land and natural resources will make for smarter growth decisions.

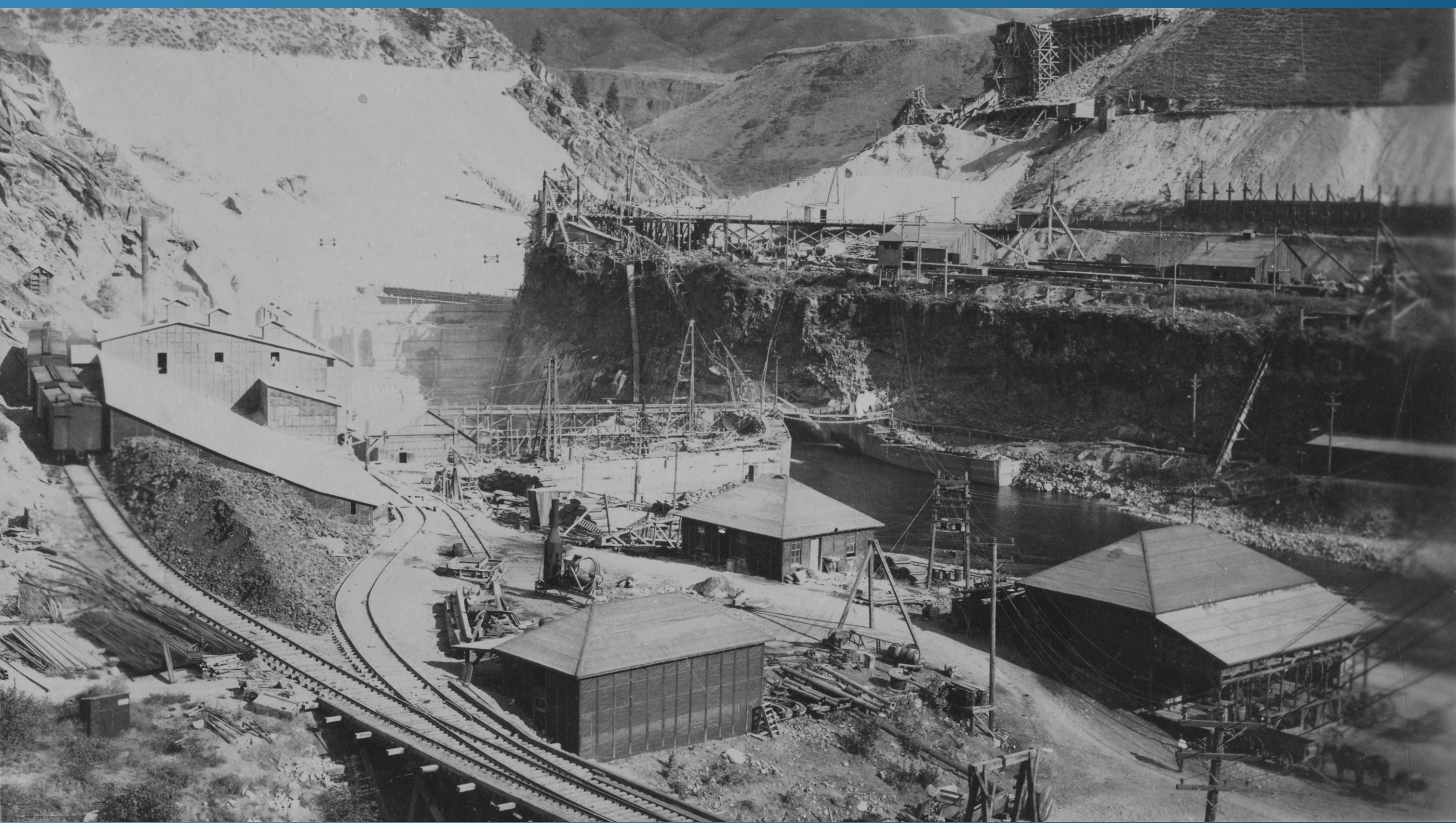


Figure 3: Photo of the construction of Arrowrock Dam. Albertsons Library Special Collections

### Research Methodology

- Assembled a fundamental understanding of the growth of the Boise Valley through primary source documents such as: engineering reports and Bureau of Reclamation documents about the Boise Project/Boise Valley, which assisted in finding other sources.
- Used primary documents from the Idaho Archives- Letters in Governor Hunts Paper’s 1901-1902 and Boise State Special Collections, promotional pamphlet from 1919
- Used the Idaho Statesman Historical Archive Database, contains articles from July 1864-December, 1942. Narrowing down search terms and dates resulted in fewer articles (most of the time) that made it easier to go through one at a time

### References

- Figure 1:** Passenger Department of Oregon Short Line R.R. *The Man with the The Hoe in Idaho*. Chicago: Poole Bros, 1901. McCain Collection for Western lie. Boise State University Albertsons Library Special Collections.
- Figure 2:** Sign on Ranch in Canyon County, Idaho. Water for this ranch will be furnished by the Black Canyon Project, Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division Washington, DC 20540 <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.pri>
- Figure 3:** Albert E. Nelson Photographs, Mss167. Albertsons Library Special Collections (photographer unknown)

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