It was a relief to see the distance widening between us and those volcanic strata. It was a desolate, dismal scenery... Not a shrub, bird, nor insect seemed to live near it. Great must have been the relief of the volcano, powerful the emetic, that poured forth such a mass of black vomit.

— Julius Merril

Trail journal, 1864

CONFRONTING THE DESERT

TRAVELERS PASSING THROUGH southern Idaho are amazed by the varied terrain. High mountain valleys gradually give way to irrigated fields of potatoes and grain. Where the Snake River flows into south-central Idaho, there is a vivid appearance of agricultural prosperity. Field after field receives periodic dousing from mobile sprinkler
systems. Canals parallel the river as it makes its inverted arc through Idaho. Many farmers still flood their land by opening a headgate and allowing the water to penetrate the rows of dry beans, wheat, corn, alfalfa or potatoes.

This fertile land bears little resemblance to the sagebrush plateau that dominated southern Idaho before settlement and irrigation. Even today, large tracts of sagebrush and bunchgrass remain. Where there is no water, there is little life.

While seminomadic tribes found ways to exploit the desert, the desolation repelled the first waves of Euro-American civilization. Early explorers and trappers, chiefly concerned with survival, dismissed the barren plateau. The first homesteaders preferred the green valleys of Oregon and California. Not until the discovery of gold in the 1860s did farmers regard the desert as land to be valued for growing crops to feed thousands of hungry miners. And not until the Mormons settled the plain did Idahoans recognize the enormous potential of ditch irrigation.

As ranching and farming took root, demand for water increased. Water developers and land speculators brought in federal money for some of the nation’s most massive dams. This development, for the most part, is of 20th-century vintage, and it is one of the West’s most remarkable stories of human adaptation and interaction with a once barren land.

FIRST ENCOUNTERS

Culturally and geographically, there are at least two Idaho — a northern “plateau” region, where Lewis and Clark met the Nez Perce, and a southern “plains” region, bounded roughly by the Salmon River, Hells Canyon and the Wyoming Rockies. The largest group
Fur-trade frontier, 1810–1835. Donald MacKenzie and Wilson Price Hunt led the 1811 Snake River expedition that pioneered the migrant road from the Missouri to the Columbia basin. Abandoning their canoes in canyons above Twin Falls, the explorers followed the Snake and Columbia to Astoria, Oregon, a walk of more than 800 miles. MacKenzie and Hunt were among the first white men to pass through the Shoshone trade centers in the Weiser area and near future Fort Hall.

Goods such as these — hatchets, pipes, gloves and other garments trimmed with trade beads — were exchanged for furs at frontier rendezvous.

Shoshone war club, about 1860s

of people living on the plains were the Snake River Shoshones, excellent equestrians who ranged far to the south. Among the Shoshone people were nomadic bands of Northern Paiutes, whom the white people called Bannocks.

Some Shoshone bands were known chiefly by their diets. There were salmon eaters who followed the migrating fish to Shoshone Falls, and buffalo eaters, sheep eaters and other salmon eaters who fished the wooded streams near Weiser. Another band of Weiser-area Shoshones, known as mountain sheep eaters, were skilled trappers and furriers who hunted in Hells Canyon and began an active trade with the Nez Perce to the north. They made high-quality buckskin. To the east, where the once mobile Shoshones now farm on a small reservation near Fort Hall, a large clan of buffalo eaters ventured into central Idaho and perhaps as far south into the Rockies as Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Numbering about 1,000 by the mid-1800s, they wintered and intermarried with members of the Bannock tribe. Sadly, their strategic location doomed them to conflict with the whites heading north from Utah. Although the Fort Hall Shoshones were efficient hunters, they were slow to acquire rifles and thus the tribe was seldom a match for heavily armed parties of whites.

The first Euro-Americans to encounter these tribes were the groups of adventurers from the United States and Canada who competed with Russians and others for control of the Pacific Northwest. One of the first explorers in the area was Andrew Henry, who crossed into eastern Idaho from Montana with some of Manuel Lisa’s Missouri Fur Company trappers in the spring of 1810. The trappers made camp on what came to be called Henry’s Fork of the Snake River; but unimpressed after a harsh winter at high elevation, they left the following spring.

Meanwhile, adventurer John Jacob Astor had sent Wilson Price Hunt and 65 trappers into the Rocky Mountains. Astor had sent others around the tip of South America, and the two expeditions were to meet at the mouth of the Columbia River. The overland Astorians spent nearly four months or more scrambling from the Tetons to the Columbia River. Hunt’s
main goal was to survive, but he had been ordered to investigate an overland route and locate potential post sites. The Snake River fascinated him. Near the Idaho-Wyoming border, Hunt named it Canoe River in the hope that the wide, quick-moving water would quickly carry the explorers to their destination. It was “light green ... its banks covered with small cottonwoods.” As Hunt advanced, “the river grew lovelier and wider.” But Hunt and his men were deceived by the initial promise of the Canoe River. From Idaho Falls to American Falls to Caldron Linn and then from Twin Falls on to Shoshone Falls, they struggled with the forbidding environment. As the river sliced through the lava rock, it grew “constricted, full of rapids and bordered with precipitous rocks.” There were delays, lost supplies and postponed fords. At least four trappers died.

Ironically, Washington Irving, the man who recounted this experience, never crossed the plain. Yet his descriptions in Astoria left the nation with vivid impressions. Writing from the Hunt party journals, he used phrases like “burnt and barren prairies,” “barren rocky country,” a “wide sunburnt landscape,” a “dismal desert,” “cheerless wastes and vast desert tracts.” Irving’s interpretation reinforced the popular perception of a wasteland along the Snake from the Rockies to the Cascades.

In 1813 a small group of Astor’s fur-hunters, including Robert Stuart, returned to the East by way of the Snake, the Portneuf and the Bear rivers. Twenty-five years later this passage approximated the main overland route. Stuart’s story, published by Irving and St. Louis newspapers, reported fish, beaver streams, varieties of game and rugged terrain. Stuart complained about “the detested shrubs” such as “sage, wormwood and saltwood” that covered “a parched soil, of salt, dust and gravel.” Yet he marveled at the Snake River with its “terrific appearance,” abundance of fish and thriving beaver population.

These early expeditions opened an era of intense rivalry between British and American trappers. Two British enterprises, the North West Company and Hudson Bay Company, competed with Americans moving into the Snake River country. Donald MacKenzie, one of the original overland Astorians, went to work for the rival North West Company after Astor’s fur scheme collapsed. Weighing nearly 300 pounds, MacKenzie threw himself into a venture that would lead him to travel throughout the plain. From 1818 to 1821, MacKenzie led British expeditions from the Columbia up the Snake and into the canyon lands of the high desert. His trappers, who found extremely fertile country, ultimately would beat a path across the plain that became part of the Oregon Trail. The Snake region, said MacKenzie, was “altogether ... a delightful country.”

International events accelerated the near extinction of the Snake country beaver, whose high quality pelts were prized throughout the world for hats. The United States and Great Britain, unable to
settle on a boundary line in the Northwest, agreed in 1818 to joint occupation for 10 years. Americans called it the Oregon country. British trappers hoped to drive the Americans out by removing every beaver pelt. Perhaps, they reasoned, a beaver wasteland would force the Americans to shift their attention to California and the southern Rockies. Hudson Bay Company trappers Peter Skene Ogden, Alexander Ross, John Work and others traveled up the Snake River annually, living off the land, trapping as far south as the Great Salt Lake and California.

Ultimately the British extermination policy was only a partial success. The beaver population was decimated, creating a fur desert. But the devastation failed to deter American trappers. Jim Bridger, Osborne Russel, Warren Angus Ferris, Thomas Fitzpatrick and other adventurous Yankees crossed into the Snake River country from the upper Missouri basin during the height of the fur-trading era.

Highly romanticized figures, these American trappers epitomized the robust wanderlust of the young republic — but their legacy was grim. Some killed Indians freely. While the Indian warriors were not afraid to strike back at small bands of frontiersmen, the Shoshone learned to avoid head-on military confrontations with the well-organized Hudson Bay expeditions.

Jedediah S. Smith, a native of New York state, enjoyed better relations with the Indians than most. One of the great frontier explorers, he was a deeply religious man who always carried a Bible. In 1824 Smith joined some lost Iroquois trappers and guided them back to Alexander Ross' party of Hudson Bay trappers in central Idaho. Although Smith continued to wander, he, like other American trappers, preferred the mountainous forests.

By the late 1820s most of the beaver had been taken from the canyons and many Americans had retreated to the Wyoming highlands. The British remained on the plain, appearing to control the Snake River-Oregon country. The presence of trappers, not surprisingly, had a dramatic effect on the tribes. American and British trappers brought firearms, iron utensils, liquor and blankets — trade goods that transformed Indian life. Trappers also introduced terrible diseases. Measles, smallpox, cholera and other afflictions decimated entire western tribes, although the desert tribes were spared the worst of these epidemics. Near Bear River, however, a missionary reported a sickly clan of Bannocks ravaged by smallpox.

The trappers had another severe impact on the tribes of the eastern plain: the destruction of the immense buffalo herds. Although as late as 1833 American fur trader Benjamin L.E. Bonneville reported "immense herds" of buffalo near future Pocatello, the days were numbered for the great beasts. As the herds declined, so did the fortunes of the tribes that depended on them for survival.
Exploring the Snake. The “discovery” of the Snake River country was the process through which explorers, trappers and topographers redefined the land; from left to right: “King of the Northwest” Donald MacKenzie (1783–1851); mulatto trapper James P. Beckwourth (1798–1867?); and U.S. topographical engineer John C. Frémont (1813–1890).

Map of the Territory of Oregon (1844). The Democratic Ohio Statesman published this black map as a protest to the Henry Clay–John Quincy Adams compromise that honored British claims to the disputed Northwest.
The 1830s, a decade of revived American interest in the Oregon country, saw a shift in the fortunes of white traders and settlers on the Snake River Plain. One adventurous agent of change was Nathaniel Wyeth, a Boston ice merchant. In 1832 Wyeth took a caravan of trade goods to American trappers at Pierre's Hole rendezvous in Idaho's Teton Valley. By the time the shipment arrived, Wyeth had been cheated and beat out by a rival, the famous mountain man Thomas Fitzpatrick. The rendezvous exploded into a horrendous battle among trappers, Flathead, Blackfeet, Shoshone, Bannock and Nez Perce Indians. At least 21 men were killed.

Laden with supplies but without buyers, Wyeth proceeded on through south-central Idaho, down the Snake and eventually to the mouth of the Columbia. His main contribution to Idaho history was the construction of Fort Hall, overlooking the Snake River near the present-day site of Shoshone-Bannock tribal headquarters outside Pocatello. Completed in August 1834, Fort Hall was the first permanent American outpost in the wild region beyond the Continental Divide. Meanwhile the Hudson Bay Company, responding to American advances, built the Fort Boise trading post on the Snake at the mouth of the Boise River.

Wyeth helped Americans reassess the value of the Snake River country. A keen observer of geological features, he wrote about the basin's "strong volcanic appearance" and its "streams [that] occupy what appear to be but cracks of an overheated surface." Wyeth saw a future for agriculture. The basin, he said, was a potential oasis with rich soil. But excessive cold and lack of rainfall prevented the plants from "assuming a fertile character." Outmaneuvered by the British, Wyeth returned to Boston, and in 1837 he sold Fort Hall to his rival, the Hudson Bay Company.

Benjamin Bonneville, a captain on leave from the U.S. Army, also reached the Snake River country in 1832. Bonneville was the first to drive wagons with oxen into the basin, but the trip was painful and slow. Although the fur-trading venture he embarked on was a financial failure, Bonneville became famous through the publication of his Adventures, narrated by Washington Irving in 1836. Here the plain was "sandy and volcanic," "incapable
of cultivation,” and having had numerous “volcanic convulsions.” Near Fort Hall, the lower Fortneuf was “rent and split with deep chasms and gullies, some of which were partly filled with lava.” As far as Bonneville and Irving were concerned, the whole region “must ever remain an irreclaimable wilderness.” Facing up to the harsh realities of climate and the decreasing price of beaver, Bonneville returned to his career in the regular army.

The golden era of the Snake River fur trade, which had lasted less than 50 years, came to an end. As fashion changed and silk hats replaced beaver, trappers left the mountains. Some served as guides for two new kinds of migrants: missionaries and land promoters. American trappers, the British could handle; evangelical ministers and speculators, they could not.

Missionary interest began in the 1830s with Jason and Daniel Lee, New England Methodists who traveled with Wyeth. Sent west by the Methodist Missionary Society, the Lees, however, preferred the well-watered green Willamette Valley of Oregon to the Snake River country.

The first women to cross the continent by wagon were members of another expedition. Narcissa Prentiss Whitman and Eliza Hart Spalding accompanied their husbands, Aug. 23rd On the moove again at 7 A.m. 6 miles to Steep Creek crossing thence to Sink creek 6 mies at 11 Am and stoped for noon one mule about tuckered, p.m. mooved on 12 miles further to some worm springs the water is quite brackish and not fit for use but we use it rather than move.”

— Oregon Trail Diary

In 1887 Miss Amelia J. Frost came to Fort Hall to establish the first Presbyterian mission. Her work among the Shoshone continued until 1907 when her fragile health forced her to return east. The photograph at right captures Frost with her first group of schoolgirls.
Dr. Marcus Whitman and the preacher Henry H. Spalding, on a famous expedition outfitted in 1836 by the American Board of Foreign Missions.

It was a difficult and miserable journey. Reaching Fort Hall in the heat of summer, the early missionaries suffered under dreary conditions. Narcissa Whitman wrote: “Heat excessive. Truly I thought the Heavens over us were brass, and the earth iron under our feet.” Elsewhere the party was “so swarmed with musquitoes [sic] as to be scarcely able to see.” As they traveled across the plain, she noted “a species of wormwood called sage of a pale green, offensive to both sight and smell,” but she also observed that “the country is barren and would be a sandy desert were it not for the sage.” The pace of the journey was unforgiving. Twice during their journey across the plain, at Fort Hall and Fort Boise, they washed their clothes and relaxed.

These women, however, were bolstered by their missionary zeal. They had faith in the significance of what they had undertaken. Of her plight, Eliza Spalding wrote: “I have often spoken of the fatigue and hardship I have experienced on this journey, I have experienced many, many mercies which ought to dissolve my heart in thankfulness & cause me to forget the inconveniences I endured on the journey.”

Like the Whitmans and the Spaldings, many of the 50,000 migrants who would cross southern Idaho in the next 25 years reached Idaho at the height of the summer heat. By August the lush grasslands had become a brown and blistering desert. “We got along tolerably well until after we passed Fort Hall,” wrote one pioneer. To the west of the fort, the “grass was very carce [sic] nearly all the way down Snake River. Cattle began to give out and a great many died ... I was taken sick with the mountain fever ... our provisions gave out and we had like to have starved to death ... we had to kill our work cattle for beef poor as they were and eat them.” Almost every journal confirmed that bleak assessment.

Another traveler remembered that when “the Snake River was reached and in fact before, the heat again became oppressive, the dust stifling and thirst at times almost
maddening. In some places we could see the water of the Snake, but could not reach it as the river ran in the inaccessible depths of the canyon.” As the years progressed, grass became more scarce along the trail and many oxen and cattle perished. “One of our oxen died day before yesterday,” a woman recorded, “and one of John’s today. He has lost two, Fred one and Davie Love one.” Two weeks later, she said that three more had died.

One bizarre account of the Oregon Trail was that of the religious mystic William Keil. Keil traveled with the body of his 19-year-old son preserved in alcohol in a lead-lined casket. Terrified by the lava, he claimed that the “seventh prince of all destruction” inhabited the desert. It was the devil’s landscape: “hideous world, fearful roads, all grass poisoned, every day one to three head of cattle dying, a killing heat, nothing to see but the marks of death and destruction, the whole road marked by the graves and the bones of dead men.”

Others, however, could appreciate the scenic splendor of the volcanic crescent. While the plain’s eastern region was viewed as barren, the migrants became more enthusiastic as they moved northwest from the Bear River to the Portneuf, the Blackfoot and the Snake. That landscape was viewed more favorably. In 1849 James A. Pritchard noted that “the valley continues handsome and fertile” and “we came to a small creek and in one mile thereafter we found a splendid spring of water, that gushes from the base of the mountain. The grass continues fine, the mountain sides are covered with a stinted seeder [cedar].”

Once the pioneers left Fort Hall and began moving westward toward the verdant landscape of Washington and Oregon, the environment changed dramatically. As the trail approached Fort Hall, the migrants first saw the Snake. One traveler called it a “clear and beautiful stream of water. It courses over a pebbly bottom. Its width is about one hundred and fifty yards. It abounds in fish of different varieties, which are readily taken from the hook.” Moving on, migrants saw the magnificent American Falls, then Salmon Falls, Thousand Springs and Three Island Crossing. Shoshone Falls and Twin Falls, two of the most breathtaking sites, were north of the great migration. Not until the era of the U.S. government surveys would the nation come to appreciate the natural wonders beyond the Oregon Trail.

To enjoy the desert leg of the journey, one traveler wrote, “a man must be able to endure heat like a Salamander, . . . dust like a toad, and labor like a jackass”; detail from Albert Bierstadt’s Oregon Trail (1869); left, toddler shoes, found along the trail.
One of the first government explorers to rethink the prevailing attitudes about the intermountain region was John C. Frémont, a handsome captain in the U.S. Corps of Topographical Engineers. With orders to survey the route between the Platte and Sweetwater rivers in 1842, Frémont extended the expedition through the South Pass of the Rockies. The following year he set off for the Pacific with 40 men, among them a German cartographer, a free black from Missouri, two Delaware Indians and legendary guides Kit Carson and Thomas Fitzpatrick. The 1843 expedition made its way from Independence, Missouri, to Wyoming and Utah and along the Oregon Trail through Idaho from Fort Hall to Fort Boise and then on to Fort Vancouver and California.

Back in St. Louis, Frémont published stirring accounts of his exploits (polished considerably by his wife and editor, Jessie Benton Frémont, the daughter of Missouri senator Thomas H. Benton). Captain Frémont’s reports convinced many that the journey west was both feasible and practical. Stressing the beauty of the Snake River country, he overlooked the forbidding character of the lava desert. He noted “dark rocks” along “green and wooded watercourses, sunk in chasms.” In spring, he imagined, “the contrasted effect must make them beautiful.” Praising the area around Fort Hall and Fort Boise, he felt that the posts were near fertile and productive soil. However, like so many others, Frémont believed that the land between the forts was fairly worthless. “Beyond this place [Fort Hall] there does not occur, for a distance of nearly 300 miles to the westward, a fertile spot of ground sufficiently large to produce the necessary quantity of grain, or pasture enough to allow even a temporary repose to the emigrants.” Yet the captain was quick to add a positive note: the tall grass was “nutritious” forage. Wheat might grow in the sage-covered soil. Thus Frémont, an outspoken expansionist, was one of the first to predict that human enterprise would transform the arid crescent. He would prove to be quite right.

Frémont’s era was a time of territorial conquest and great ambition that Americans called “Manifest Destiny.” In 1846, on the eve of the Mexican War, President James Polk’s administration signed a treaty with Britain that ceded the Oregon country—the future states of Oregon, Washington and Idaho—to the United States. Oregon became a state in 1859. Idaho, torn away from Washington Territory and encompassing future Montana and most of Wyoming, achieved territorial status in 1863. Territorial reorganization brought a new, more vigorous wave of government exploration—boundary surveys, road and railroad surveys, fort-building expeditions, punitive campaigns against the Shoshone and quasi-scientific ventures. West Point-educated U.S. topographical engineers made a great show of science, but their knowledge of the Snake River country was secondhand and quite superficial. Many army reports were thinly disguised appeals for federal aid for a Pacific
railroad from the Great Lakes to Seattle. Focusing on northern routes, they stressed Idaho’s beauty. Common soldiers sent to fight Indians in the Idaho desert were less optimistic. Of the 1,121 infantry and cavalrymen who fought the Shoshone at Bear River in 1863, about one-fifth, 238 men, deserted the frontier army before serving out their four-year enlistment.

With the reorganization of the topographical corps during the Civil War, the government shifted resources from military exploration to civilian expeditions. In 1868 civilian scientist Clarence King visited the Snake River with a party of the U. S. Geological Survey of the 40th Parallel. Drawn by reports of heavy coal (it was black lava), he camped at Shoshone Falls, watching it through the night.

Intervals of light and blank darkness hurriedly followed each other. Tall cliffs, ramparts of lava, the rugged outlines of islands huddled together over the cataract’s brink, faintly luminous foam breaking over black rapids, the swift, white leap of the river and a ghostly, formless mist through which the canyon walls and far reach of the lower river were veiled and unveiled again and again.

The Snake River Plain, once thought by migrants to be a barren and unforgiving land, was now becoming an exotic frontier, a basin of natural wonders. Ferdinand V. Hayden, a Smithsonian geologist and geographer with a flair for self-promotion, was another scientist who came to appreciate the plain. A native of Massachusetts who grew up in New York, Hayden spent 11 years surveying, studying and analyzing the West.

Scientific explorers like Hayden and King form an important bridge from the past to the future. They were the first to value the land apart from geopolitical considerations. It was no longer a territory to get past or merely an area to be acquired. "There seems to be no want of fertility in the soil of our western plains," Hayden insisted, "and when the two most
important conditions are favorable, climate and moisture, or water for the purpose of irrigation, then agriculture will be a success."

Thus Army exploration and the precision of science altered the popular perception of the Snake River country. Government explorers were quick to see the fantastic promise of irrigated agriculture. As they mapped and studied the Idaho desert, they were aware of another significant fact: white settlers were very close behind.

THE MISSION AND THE MINES

Despite the expansionist tone of the government surveys, most Oregon-bound pioneers still dismissed the Snake River country as dreary and inhospitable. In the 1850s and 1860s the impact of two events changed that popular perception: Mormon settlement and the rush for silver and gold.

Followers of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, commonly called Latter-day Saints or Mormons, had trekked west from Illinois to Utah in 1847, fleeing religious persecution. The first Mormon expeditions to reach Idaho were part of a grander plan. Mormon leader Brigham Young hoped to pacify, baptize and Christianize native tribes from the Rockies to California. According to Mormon theology, the native Americans are a chosen people, one of the tribes of Israel, who deserve the blessings of Christianity. More important than the conversion of Native Americans, however, was the establishment of Mormon control over large tracts of land. In 1855 Thomas S. Smith led 27 missionaries on a 380-mile journey north through the Snake country, then part of Oregon Territory. On the Lemhi River, near the fork of the Salmon not far from where Meriwether Lewis had crossed into Idaho a half century before, Smith and his men built the Fort Lemhi mission.

Initially the mission prospered as the missionaries built a sawmill, gristmill and blacksmith shop and planted crops. Fort Lemhi ultimately took on the appearance of a permanent farming community, and relations between the mission and various groups of Indians were harmonious. More than 100 Indians were baptized, and later, young Mormon men were encouraged to marry Indian women to cement the friendship that had deepened.

Brigham Young inspected the site, and settlers flooded in from Utah — but a number of problems on the near horizon soon forced a Mormon retreat. Since 1849, when the California gold rush had diverted some of the western travel from the Oregon Trail, trouble had been brewing between Young, who was the territorial governor, and federal officials. Young used his religious and secular authority to circumvent the federal marshals; judges and officials did all they could to paint a gloomy picture of conditions in Utah. As Young scrimmaged with federal officials, President James Buchanan sent an army into the West to quell the so-called Mormon Rebellion.

Anti-Mormonism unsettled the Idaho mission. Other Americans in the area, mountaineers and traders, feared the territorial expansion of Mormonism. Indeed, Indian agents reported that the Mormons were offering ammunition to the Native Americans in order to fight the federal army. Rumors and threats circulated among Mormons and non-Mormons alike. At the center of their fears were the Native Americans. Of course, the Indians were told that the Mormons were after their land, that Mormons only converted them to make them peaceful. The mountaineers, who realized that the Army needed supplies and would pay cash to get them, persuaded the Indians to raid the mission.

In 1857 the clash came to a head when the missionaries entertained a band of Nez Perce. The visitors made off with 60 Shoshone horses. Local tribes, fearing an alliance
between the Nez Perce and the Mormons, protested outside the mission, demanding concessions and grain. In late February 1857 two missionaries were killed when Bannock and Shoshone warriors took most of the settlers' cattle. Outnumbered, the mission sent for help, and soon Brigham Young called the men back to Utah. The Mormons had learned a lesson. With water the land could be conquered and the soil would produce, but the Snake River Indians were not about to sit on their hands.

The Mormon "war" and the breakup of the Lemhi mission only delayed colonization. In 1860 a party of 16 colonists founded a Mormon community just north of the Utah border at Franklin, Idaho. They built a fort, a store, log cabins, two mills and ditches for irrigation. As Mormon settlement spread through Shoshone country, cattle crowded out elk and bison and atrocities were exchanged between the settlers and the Indians. Soon several bands of Shoshone were in open revolt. When the Franklin settlers called for protection in January 1863, Col. Patrick E. Connor and about 200 of his California Volunteers responded with terrible force. At dawn on January 29, the U.S. troops raided a Shoshone camp, methodically shooting into the crowd. About 400 Shoshone men, women and children were slaughtered in the bloodiest massacre on record in the history of the Northwest frontier.

To the west, a gold rush was putting new pressure on area tribes. With the discovery of gold on August 2, 1862, at Grimes Creek near Idaho City, thousands of miners poured into
the mountains, and homesteaders along the Boise River cleared land to supply the mines. Some of these first pioneers were pro-Dixie Confederates from Missouri — refugees of the Civil War. On July 4, 1863, Maj. Pickney Lugenbeel established a fort on a hill overlooking the crossroads between Idaho City and the rutted Oregon Trail. Three days later a few farmers met with Lugenbeel to lay out a town, the future city of Boise.

Soon the Boise Valley was not only a marketing center; it was an agricultural powerhouse — Idaho's largest producer of wheat, oats, hay and cattle. Boise City became the new territorial capital, with a prosperous Main Street, waterwheels and ditch irrigation. By the 1870s the capital was the plain's largest city, with about 1,000 residents.

The natives of the Boise Valley did not share the wealth. Dispossessed by farming and ranching, their winter encampments disrupted by placer mining in the Snake River canyon, the Boise-area Indians avoided contact with whites. When U.S. Indian agents worked out a series of treaties with Chief Pocatello and other Shoshone leaders in 1863, the Indians living in the Boise and Bruneau areas were excluded, their rights transferred to other tribes. At last on April 16, 1866, territorial governor Caleb Lyon signed a treaty that promised a Bruneau Canyon reservation. The treaty never made it through Congress. While the natives living in the Boise area all but abandoned the valley, small bands of Northern Paiutes raided farms in the Owyhee-Malheur area near the Idaho-Oregon line. In response, whites demanded punitive expeditions that made little distinction between peaceful and militant tribes. Campaigning mostly in the winters of 1866 and 1867, federal troops out of Fort Boise combed the Snake River canyon, driving some Bannocks and others deep into the Oregon desert. Some Boise and Bruneau clans found refuge in the foothills; others were relocated by the government. In 1869 about 1,150 Shoshone and 150 Bannocks abandoned their ancient homeland for reservation life at Fort Hall.

Although isolated skirmishes continued, the pitched battles ended after a small band of rebellious Bannocks returned to the Fort Hall reservation in 1878. Settlers were now free to homestead, harness the rivers and tip the balance of nature that once sustained Indian lands.

**IRRIGATION AND SETTLEMENT**

Idaho irrigation began with Henry H. Spalding, who in 1838 dug a ditch from the Clearwater River to his dying garden. Thirty years later, while Boise settlers were experimenting with ditches and waterwheels in dry Ada County, Mormon pioneers spread irrigation to the Lemhi, Cache, Bear Lake and Malad valleys. Each region found its own way to finance these projects. In the Boise Valley, for example, irrigators relied on private investors, many from the East. On the eastern plain the Mormons joined church-sponsored community irrigation ventures. The Great-Feeder Dam near Rexburg, a Mormon project
completed in 1895, fed one of the world's largest and most successful networks of gravity canals. Aridity forced Idaho irrigators to radically revise the Anglo-American tradition of water allocation. Heretofore, the English common law doctrine of riparian rights was the standard in 19th-century America, even in the arid West. Riparian rights held that landholders whose lands were adjacent to a stream were entitled to as much water as they desired. In arid climates this meant that only lands next to waterways could be successfully developed. But miners and Mormon irrigators immediately saw the need to transport water far from the river, and thus the Snake River pioneers endorsed the water-rights doctrine of prior appropriation. The earliest water users had the strongest legal claim.

In 1890 the state constitution, claiming the state's water belonged to the citizens of Idaho, said that applications for water had to be made through the state. A series of court cases strengthened the doctrine of prior appropriation. State law also set priorities for Idaho water usage, with domestic needs first, followed by agriculture and manufacturing. A farmer or a manufacturer who wasted water was guilty of a misdemeanor. Since so much of early irrigation in southeastern Idaho began prior to the formulation of Idaho law, numerous legal tangles ensued. Wisely, the state encouraged the creation of irrigation districts, a western innovation that enabled landowners to organize, assess taxes and float bonds for dams and canals.

In 1899 a group of midwestern Swedes organized an early irrigation district at the New Sweden colony west of Idaho Falls. Caldwell-area irrigators created a district in 1901, and by 1916 there were 30 such organizations. While the districts had the power to mediate some local conflicts, a history of passionate fights in and out of the courtroom still sprung from disputes over water. In the eyes of many farmers, especially during dry years, water thievery was a grave crime.

As Idahoans competed for water, the farmers of the Boise Valley looked as far as New York and London for the money to build canals. In 1882 a group of New York and East Coast investors organized the Idaho Mining and Irrigation Company, a Boise canal company. Soon mining engineer Arthur D. Foote planned an enormous project that Boisians called the New York Canal. Seventeen feet deep and 27 feet wide, it would run 75 miles and feed more than 5,000 miles of lateral ditches. Foote projected that nearly a half million acres of arid land could be brought under cultivation.

Like many engineers unfamiliar with steep canyons and desert conditions, Foote far underestimated the challenge. Construction stalled and two Philadelphia investors tried to rescue the venture with a smaller link to the Nampa area, the Phyllis Canal. When the Idaho Central Railway offered to take over construction, the new owners refused to sell. Eventually the New York investors reestab-
"DREAMERS WE ARE"

In 1883, while still abed after the birth of her second child, Mary Hallock Foote received a letter from her engineer husband Arthur De Wint Foote. He was in Idaho inspecting new silver mines for prospective investors, and Mary was anticipating news of his return to their family in New York’s Hudson River Valley. Instead, she read of his astonishing plans to design and build a huge irrigation canal and diversion dam in southwestern Idaho. That idea, now known as the New York Canal, left Mary cold.

After years of traveling through the West and Mexico with her husband on his mining projects, Mary was no stranger to hardships, but the canal project meant banishment to "darkest Idaho." Idaho, she said, was "thousands of acres of desert empty of history."

But Mary relented. Arriving in Boise in 1884, Mary, a novelist, kept the family afloat as an essayist and illustrator for *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*. An instant celebrity, she entered the polite, backwater society of "well-meaning" yet "dowdy and dull provincial ladies [who] kept making courtesy calls."

Still Mary had a novelist’s eye for the land — its hypnotic blankness, its powerful beauty. During lean and frustrating years in the Boise River canyon, a time when her marriage struggled and Arthur’s water scheme seemed to be failing, Mary was still able to love the land for what it was. "I foresee [sic] the time," the writer confessed to a friend, "when I shall long for [the West] and be homesick for the waste of moonlight, the silence, the night wind and the river! There is nothing that will ever quite take its place! Dreamers we are, dreamers we always will be, and what is folly and vain imaginings to some people is the stuff our daily lives are made of. And there are thousands like us! If there never had been there would be no great West."

Arthur Foote’s sketch for the proposed Pocatello Canal, 1893.

Opening ceremony, New York Canal, 1900.
lished control, and with the help of Denver builder W.C. Bradbury, water reached Nampa in 1891. Three years later nearly $400,000 — over half of it Bradbury's own money — had been poured into the main canal. Still, 14 critical miles remained unfinished and bankruptcy loomed. In 1894 Bradbury hired future senator William E. Borah, one of Idaho's great legal minds. Borah arranged for an Ada County sheriff's sale and managed to obtain both the New York and Phyllis canals for a rock-bottom price, about $184,000.

By the time the New York Canal opened in 1900, Foote, Bradbury and the rest of the early developers were out of the picture. Two competing groups finished the canal's construction. Ultimately Charles Fifer organized the New York Canal Company, which appropriated water to shareholders in proportion to the number of shares they owned. Assisted by federal funds authorized under the 1902 Reclamation Act, a canal system was finally completed. The finished product was a strange canal. Broad in places and narrow in others, it brought water to 38,000 acres by 1906. Eventually the U.S. Reclamation Service enlarged the canal and built a diversion dam.

The lesson of the New York Canal was that community enterprise and private effort were seldom enough. Large-scale reclamation depended on outside investors, engineering vision and, increasingly, state and federal aid.

Agriculture on the Snake River Plain also depended on an efficient railroad network. Railroads first reached southern Idaho when the Mormons of Cache Valley brought the Utah Northern to Franklin in 1874. The Utah Northern, which reached Garrison, Montana, by 1882, cut through the heart of the Fort Hall reservation. Also in 1882, Union Pacific's Oregon Short Line came to Idaho. When company officials decided to connect their transcontinental line to the Northwest, they proposed a line from Granger, Wyoming, across Idaho to Oregon where it would connect with the Oregon Railway and Navigation.

**NAMES ON THE LAND**

**Bannock Country, Massacre Rocks, Spud Butte, Railroad Canyon** — the place names of the Snake River country are clues to its vibrant past.

The frontier era survives in names of Indian leaders (Pocatello, Targhee Creek), trappers (Payette, Portneuf) and federal explorers (Fremont County, Hayden Peak). Walters Ferry and Three Island Crossing recall the Oregon Trail.

The boom years of early statehood are well represented in the names of railroad officials (Drummond, Burley) and irrigation tycoons (Kimberly, Buhl).

Caldwell takes its name from a Kansas senator who speculated in western lands.

Place names are also ethnic references (Danish Flat, Geneva), racial slurs (Nigger Creek, Jap Creek), battle sites (Battle Creek, Soldier Mountains), flora and fauna (Camas County, Salmon Falls), and include a thousand interesting stories. Malad River was named by Donald MacKenzie after his trappers feasted on beaver and became ill *(malade* meaning "sick" in French). Owyhee, a 19th-century spelling for Hawaii, referred to South Pacific islanders who disappeared while trapping the southwestern Snake River country during the winter of 1819.
ALFALFA.
TWIN FALLS, IDAHO.
Company. Initially the suggested route ran parallel to the Oregon Trail. However, railroads did not need frequent access to the river, so the rail bed was built north of the canyon.

The railroad raised money through its aggressive subsidiary, the Idaho and Oregon Land Improvement Company. Company directors such as Pittsburgh financier Andrew Mellon and Kansas senator Alexander Caldwell profited from advance notice of station sites. The land company surveyed town sites, but without a guaranteed water supply farmers were reluctant to settle.
Turning from land sales to mining, the Oregon Short Line made quick profits when a branch line was built from Shoshone to the Wood River gold rush at Hailey. Tracks were laid quickly, and by February 1884 the line stretched into Oregon. It spanned the mighty Snake four times and originally bypassed the territorial capital in Boise because of the downhill grade into the city. Including the spur to Hailey, the Union Pacific constructed more than 500 miles of track on or adjacent to the Snake River Plain. The Union Pacific's Short Line was a communication revolution for Utah, Oregon and southern Idaho. In 1884

**EARLY PUBLICISTS MARKET THE PLAIN**

The Old West of Will Bill Hickok and Crazy Horse became the New West of agriculture and empire in the guidebooks and color brochures of publicists like Robert “Pard” Strahorn, a land agent for the Oregon Short Line. Strahorn knew just how to package his product. In 1883 after subdividing a tract of alkali desert near the future town site of Caldwell, Strahorn had his men decorate the acreage with pine trees from the mountains. The trees soon fried in the desert — but not before a carload of investors had purchased the alkali lots.

“You can’t put your finger on a god-darned lie,” said a reader of a Strahorn guidebook. “But I’m telling you that feller has the damndest way of tellin’ the truth of any man who ever writ a book.”

Strahorn opened the door for realtors, bankers and community boosters who sold the sage and greasewood desert as the most healthful of climates, the most fertile of soils. Boise’s chamber of commerce hailed the “imperial city” as a crossroads destined to be “the greatest inland commercial center of the West.” Buhl, said a booster, had the region’s best churches and schools. “No land can boast of a stauncher class of citizenship,” said the Commercial Club of Jerome.
a passenger could board a train in Omaha on Monday and arrive in Portland the following Friday. It had taken Lewis and Clark more than 18 months to make a similar trip 80 years before. The Oregon-bound wagon trains had hoped to make the same trip in four months.

Shortly after the line was completed, the Edward H. Harriman family traveled to Shoshone and explored the surrounding area, looking for ways to increase interest in Idaho. Here was the seed of what would become Sun Valley, the world-famous ski resort founded by Averell Harriman in the 1930s.

Numerous other small railroad feeder lines were constructed throughout Idaho. When the Utah and Northern temporarily merged with the Oregon Short Line, Pocatello became the “Gate City” to the West Coast and Montana. Now a railroad community, Pocatello would become a center for non-Mormons in an area heavily populated by Latter-day Saints. Bumper crops in 1919 brought Mexican field hands to the Pocatello area, and by 1920 366 blacks, many of them railroad workers, lived in the city.

Railroads allowed agriculture to spread and opened the Snake River Plain to more profitable homesteading. Under federal homestead laws, farmers or ranchers could, for a nominal fee, gain title to public land if they were willing to live on their tract for five years and make improvements. But most of the laws limited the homestead to 160 acres (320 acres for a husband and wife). Sen. William Borah summed up the homesteaders’ challenge: “The government bets 160 acres against the entry fee of $14 that the settler can’t live on the land for five years without starving to death.” Even when the Desert Land Act of 1877 expanded the homestead to 640 acres, the law required successful irrigation within three years. That expense was well beyond the common farmer. Thus, federal homesteading did not bring large populations to desert climates, but public land programs did pave the way for some surprising developments.

One creative approach was the 1894 Carey Act, a program based on the notion that reclamation and private enterprise could profit with some help from the states. Proposed by Wyoming senator Joseph Carey, the act provided up to 1 million acres of federal land to any western state that would be willing to supervise the acres. The land could be sold in parcels as small as 40 acres, but at least that many acres had
Union Pacific Railroad promotional literature sold Idaho as a desert oasis. From 1907 to 1911, William Bittle Wells, chief publicist for the U.P.’s Bureau of Community Publicity, flooded the Northwest with promotional literature — pamphlets, postal folders, magazine articles and color brochures. Small-town promotional pamphlets were brightly decorated with ornate borders and classical motifs.
Grids and futuristic innovations helped town builders tame the desert. Arc-shaped New Plymouth, top, a utopian colony, drew money and inspiration from the 1894 National Irrigation Congress. Oakley, middle, typified the wide streets and rectangular symmetry of Cassia County’s early Mormon settlements. Twin Falls, bottom, was platted in 1903 by the reclamation corporation that invested in Milner Dam.

to be brought under irrigation. The settler could obtain a patent on the land once it was irrigated. Later amendments allowed the state to place a lien on the land to protect private capital. Investors now had 10 years to complete an irrigation project. Construction companies sold water rights to the individual farmer, and the state sold the land for 50 cents an acre — half down, the rest upon final proof of improvement. When the irrigation system was completed, the irrigators would operate the system. The state worked with entrepreneurs to plan and supervise the disposal of Carey Act lands. Most states were unable to take advantage of the Carey Act, but Idaho did, and the Twin Falls project became the national showcase of successful desert reclamation.

The Twin Falls project began to transform arid south-central Idaho into the productive farming regions of Cassia, Gooding, Jerome, Lincoln, Minidoka and Twin Falls counties — the Magic Valley. Frank Riblett, a pioneer surveyor, saw the promise of this valley; so did engineer John Hayes and farmer John Hansen, but these visionaries lacked capital. Even though some farmers filed appropriation notices and surveyed their canal lines, the lean 1890s were poor years to ask for money.

It remained for land developer Ira B. Perrine, a gifted promoter from Indiana, to take up the work of the early surveyors. In 1900 Perrine persuaded Stanley Milner of Salt Lake City to invest $30,000 in an irrigation survey. After some initial financial setbacks, Perrine and Milner won the support of Witcher Jones, a mining broker and financier. Perrine also earned the trust of a Pennsylvania steel millionaire named Frank H. Buhl. Impressed by the Magic Valley after a tour with Perrine, Buhl returned to the East; aided by associate Peter Kimberly, Buhl’s new Twin Falls Land and Water Company began issuing bonds.

In 1903 the Twin Falls company promised to develop more than 244,000 acres under Carey Act provisions. If the state sold the land and the company sold the water, both would profit. The terrain, after all, was not especially rugged. An impressive diversion dam named for Milner was completed in 1904. It fed a canal 10 feet deep and 80 feet wide. Perrine’s dogged persistence proved to be vital: it took the sight of water flowing through the canal to sell the land. Buhl, Kimberly and their general manager, Walter Filer, had almost pulled out their support after the initial land sale attracted only about a dozen people. But by the end of 1905, Twin Falls was an agriculture boom town.

Buhl was not interested when Perrine asked him to finance a project north of the Snake, so Perrine convinced the Kuhn family of Pittsburgh to join him in a northside development. However, significant problems were to come. The land north of the river was too porous for a storage reservoir, and although the large tract was ultimately sold with access to Milner Dam, the promoters sold more land than they could supply with water. Kuhn money also financed a troubled Carey Act project on Salmon Falls Creek southwest of Twin Falls. Again, the project was oversold and the developers were never able to deliver sufficient water.
In 1913 a bad situation turned worse when the collapse of irrigation schemes in Colorado and elsewhere sent banks into a panic. Although the Kuhn projects were solvent, the financial crisis touched off a recession, and the vast Kuhn empire — land, railroads, coal mines and banks — was hurt nationwide. The northside project was completed only after Perrine and canal manager Russell E. Shepherd persuaded the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation to increase the supply of water to the Magic Valley by building a dam across an outlet of Jackson Lake.

Although hundreds of thousands of Idaho acres were brought under irrigated cultivation through provisions of the Carey Act, not all projects enjoyed the enormous success of the Twin Falls venture. The state had to involve itself in troubled Carey Act projects near King Hill below Twin Falls, the one on Salmon Falls Creek and the Big Lost River project near Arco. Idaho Gov. Moses Alexander, a German-born immigrant, was the moving force behind irrigation reform during the First World War. Alexander, the first elected Jewish governor in the United States, cut the size of some irrigation districts and expanded others with water from federal projects. He also proposed that the state pay court costs for any settler who sued a construction company that failed to deliver water. These and other innovations help Idahoans revive Carey Act projects at a time when the West was pressuring Congress to build dams to flood the desert.

**GOVERNMENT AND WATER**

Federal reclamation changed the politics of the Snake River country as the water altered the land. President Theodore Roosevelt, with his stewardship theory of government, was attracted to proposals for large-scale federal projects. In 1902 Roosevelt joined Nevada senator Francis Newlands in pushing for the National Reclamation Act, or Newlands Act, a law that helped to fund dams and canals through the sale of western lands. The act created a regional bureau of the Interior Department, the Reclamation Service. Renamed the Bureau of Reclamation in 1923, the agency had a tremendous impact on southern Idaho. Reclamation engineers pioneered high-dam construction at Minidoka, American Falls and Palisades. From 1915 to 1934, the bureau’s dam at Arrowrock on the Boise River was the tallest in the world. By the 1960s a string of federal projects from Jackson Lake to the Owyhee River made the upper Snake and its tributaries one of the West’s most developed river basins. The federal government also used Idaho as a testing ground for rural electrification programs. Today, hydropower remains one of Idaho’s chief exports.

One of the earliest and most ambitious federal reclamation projects was the Minidoka Dam. Located on the Snake between Burley and American Falls, about 35 miles upstream from Milner Dam, the Minidoka project began in 1904 and was completed in 1906. A gravity canal irrigated land north of the dam while the south side relied on a series of pumping stations. By 1913 when the power plant opened, the Reclamation Service had invested more than $6 million. The successful Minidoka project spurred the rise of irrigation districts and politically savvy water-user associations that lobbied for additional projects. Congress in 1914 won grassroots support by allowing local districts to collect user
From clearing fields to selling crops, a woman’s work on a pioneer farm was whatever had to be done. Women cooked, made textiles and managed finances, and because the Idaho homestead often included several tillable plots, the farm wife was frequently responsible for her own herds and crops. Women, said historian Richard B. Roeder, were “the economic linchpins” of the family homestead, the key to a venture’s success.

During the early years of Ada County, from 1869 to 1890, at least 25 women filed for independent homesteads while many others claimed land jointly with their spouses. At age 20 Elizabeth Onwiler was one of the original pioneers of the Meridian area. Permeal J. French of Boise and Hailey, a future university dean, homesteaded and farmed in the 1890s to supplement her meager income as a rural schoolteacher.

Women raised cash on the farm by selling butter, eggs, wool and other products. They also herded turkeys. In the Caldwell area, where women were organizing poultry cooperatives as early as 1910, homesteaders used turkeys to launch the hugely successful Idaho-Oregon Turkey Growers Association, a marketing organization. The association, made up mostly of women, shipped carloads of dressed turkeys as far as Florida and Maine. By 1926 southern Idaho turkey ranching was a $1.5 million business.

Pioneer women also found ways to ranch cattle and sheep — even if it meant dressing like a man. Little Jo Monaghan, a Snake River wrangler, kept her sex a secret to the grave. Short and stocky with a high squeaky voice, Little Jo came west...
with the Idaho gold rush and soon earned regional fame as an excellent horseman. In Owyhee County, where homesteaders herded Texas cattle as early as 1869, ranchers like Jean Heazle began wearing trousers for purely practical reasons — skirts were awkward, even dangerous.

While most ranch women retained their traditional roles as cooks and caretakers, some were the brains of large operations. In the 1920s Anna Joyce managed a big herd at Sinker Creek near Murphy. Idaho’s “Horse Queen,” Kitty Wilkins of Glenns Ferry, was a fearless rider who broke wild mustang’s and ran one of the state’s largest horse ranches.

Quilt panels, Weiser, about 1915.

Cowboy Jo, 1904.

Turkey tender, about 1910.
One of the first to run sheep on the north side of the Snake River in the Minidoka desert was Scottish immigrant James Laidlaw, who arrived in Idaho in 1891. He built the first roads in the area.

Laidlaw brought the first bands of sheep into the Carey area in 1895. The dry climate and range conditions — grass, wildflowers and weeds — proved very favorable for raising sheep. Laidlaw quickly became one of the state's most prominent sheep producers and at one time ran nearly 30,000 sheep in central Idaho. His home range was the hills north of Carey extending into the present Muldoon region.

Known as the "sheep king" of Blaine County, he began working with Rambouillet and Lincoln crosses to develop the rugged Panama breed, a larger, good meat- and wool-producing, but durable and range-hardy sheep adapted to Idaho's high altitude and mountainous terrain. One of the most useful attributes of the breed, especially in the rugged, open range lands of southern Idaho, is its tendency to flock together, discouraging predators. Each winter, the Panamas made an 85-mile trek from the Laidlaw Ranch at Muldoon to their lambing sheds northeast of Rupert. The Panamas, one of only two recognized sheep breeds developed in the United States by private breeders, received its name after being introduced to sheep producers for the first time at the 1915 Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco.

The Laidlaw family, for some years with partner Robert Brockie, another Scot, continued to raise the Panamas, selling them throughout the United States and South America. In 1951 a Panama registry was formed. Laidlaw was actively engaged in the sheep industry until his death in 1950. After his widow died in 1958, their sons owned and managed the ranch. A portion of Laidlaw's ranch at Muldoon is still owned by his descendants.
the mind-boggling task of deciding who would get what — the process known as water adjudication. Vicious, occasionally violent, disputes arose when downstream irrigators accused upstream farmers of holding back water.

The severe drought of 1919 brought these disputes to a head. Crops valued at $15 million were lost, and the Snake dried to a trickle at Blackfoot. In this atmosphere of crisis the Idaho Reclamation Association was born. Organized in Pocatello in 1919, the reclamation association brought together many local groups, and in 1923, the composite organization elected a powerful governing board, the so-called Committee of Nine. Then in 1924, upper-basin farmers went on to fuse local groups into the world’s largest irrigation district, District 36, a working example of irrigation democracy.

Meanwhile the Committee of Nine fostered an atmosphere of enlightened cooperation. It convinced farmers that the normal flow of the Snake River had been overextended by the continual opening of new projects. The committee then hired a Colorado engineer, F.T. Meeker, to study water storage. Meeker said Minidoka and Jackson Lake reservoirs were inadequate for the present needs, let alone the future demands. More reservoirs would guarantee water year-round. The accuracy of Meeker’s report, the success of the Committee of Nine and a spirit of cooperation were demonstrated during the drought of 1924 when farmers with prior rights in the upper basin donated water to irrigators near Twin Falls, allowing crops to mature in the Magic Valley.

One of the next likely dam sites was American Falls, a location with several major obstacles. More than just a construction matter, a dam at the site required that the entire town of American Falls be relocated, land had to be purchased from the Shoshone-Bannock Fort Hall Reservation, three miles of Union Pacific track had to be rebuilt and a million-dollar arrangement had to be made with Idaho Power. Idaho Power, a local company which played a significant role in rural electrification, ran a generator at the base of the falls. Albert B. Fall, the new secretary of the interior appointed by President Warren G. Harding, visited American Falls in 1921. After learning that Minidoka irrigators were behind in their government payments, Fall backed away from federal funding for the American Falls dam. He could not see the sense in expanding the federal role even if the Reclamation Service did want to build a dam.

While the American Falls project was in limbo, the Idaho congressional delegation, led by Sen. William Borah, lobbied the Interior Department. Borah promised that the state would work with the irrigators and Idaho Power and outlined the concept of the single irrigation district. In 1923 Fall promised funds,
but the farmers would have to raise part of the money. They did and the $8 million, 25-mile reservoir was filled in 1927. The project impounded 2 million acre-feet of water and irrigated about 1 million acres, guaranteeing, for a time, a steady supply of water to the Magic Valley.

Although the American Falls project brought greater security to farmers downstream, irrigators in the upper valley still lobbied for more storage capacity. The row crops of the eastern plain — beans, sugar beets and potatoes — needed water late in the summer. But no irrigation system could regulate the erratic snowfall that fed Idaho’s water supply. Boom years gave way to falling prices, drought and the Great Depression: Snake River farmers lost more than $7 million in 1935 alone.

Idahoans in Congress continued to lobby for water. By 1959 the Bureau of Reclamation completed a huge dam and reservoir at Palisades just west of the Wyoming border. A multipurpose facility, it stored water for reclamation, hydropower, recreation and flood control. Soon power companies were locking horns with irrigators and conservationists over a series of dams on the lower Snake in Hells Canyon. The battle for Hells Canyon forced Idaho Power to subordinate its water rights to farmers in the upper basin. The agreement set the stage for years of litigation and a new era of conflict between irrigators, industrialists, federal water agencies and environmental groups.

In the 1960s these same interests battled again over the Teton Dam. The Teton River flows into the Snake north of Idaho Falls. Opponents claimed that the site was geologically unstable and therefore unfit for a dam, but Congress authorized the project in 1962. After a decade of loud debate, the Bureau of Reclamation began construction in the early 1970s. On June 6, 1976, the nearly completed dam collapsed. A great wall of water swept through the valley, killing 11 people and flooding the communities of Wilford, Sugar City, Salem, Hibbard and Rexburg. The torrent destroyed headgates, canals, farm buildings, hundreds of businesses and thousands of homes — causing at least $1 billion in damage. In all probability, the Teton Dam will not be rebuilt, but some Idaho farmers still hope to revive the project.
THE ETHNIC LANDSCAPE

From the success of Minidoka to the disaster of Teton Dam, the checkered history of big water projects transformed agriculture and the face of the land. Reclamation also radically altered the state's culture, bringing growth and ethnic diversification. Chinese-Americans, once Idaho's most populous Asian minority, were among those influenced by changes in agriculture. The Chinese-Americans made the slow transition from mining and domestic employment to farming on land rejected by others. In early 20th-century Boise, for example, a group of Chinese farmers lived on Government Island and planted large vegetable gardens along a strip of flood-prone land.

When federal restrictions cut off Chinese immigration, many Japanese families from Hawaii and Japan filled the demand for field hands and backbreaking railroad work. By 1907, Japanese crews in Idaho Falls and Blackfoot were harvesting sugar beets for about 50 cents a ton. Idaho's Japanese, unlike the Japanese-Americans closer to the Pacific, were not forced into federal relocation centers during World War II, but there was wartime hysteria and blatant discrimination. Some anti-Japanese laws remained into the 1950s.

Many ethnic European groups moved into the Snake River country, adding their own rich traditions to the cultural mix. Greeks immigrated to Pocatello. Malad had a Welsh settlement. Slavs joined Mexicans and blacks in the Union Pacific's Snake River rail yards, and a group of Czechs homesteaded near Buhl. German immigrants were some of early Boise's most prominent citizens. A Jewish community was established in Boise as early as 1869, and in 1882 there were so many Italians in Shoshone that people called it "Naples."

The Snake River Plain also would become home to a large population of Euskaldunak people, or Basques, from northern Spain and southern France. First-generation Basques

Mexican-American migrants work a Sunnyslope apple harvest. More than 100,000 migrant and seasonal workers, many of them Hispanics from Texas, are indispensable to the state's agricultural economy.
Basque-American weight lifter with granite ball, 1980s. Southwestern Idaho has one of the largest concentrations of Basques outside France and Spain.
found employment on Idaho’s rangelands — the men working chiefly as sheep herders, the women often staying in town. Many members of the second generation left ranching to become construction workers, shopkeepers, hotel owners and stockbrokers. Boise had a Basque neighborhood known for its boarding houses and hotels. By 1922, when federal quotas reduced immigration, there were perhaps 3,000 Basques in the Snake River country.

Today one of the plain’s fastest-growing ethnic groups is Mexican-American. Since the era of the gold rush there were Mexicans in Idaho working as cowboys, miners and field hands. The 1920 census listed 1,125 Idaho residents of Mexican birth. During World War II the state began tapping federal funds to import migrant labor to southern Idaho under the bracero program. Mexican braceros supplemented a large agricultural work force of schoolchildren, housewives, Indians, about 1,000 Jamaicans, German prisoners of war and more than 2,000 Japanese-American “evacuees” from Camp Minidoka, a bleak relocation center. Inferior pay, inadequate housing and contract violations forced the Mexican government to cancel the bracero program in 1945. A year later striking Mexican farmworkers shut down four migrant camps near Nampa. Although conditions remained deplorable, food processing revived postwar agriculture, and the demand for seasonal workers continued to rise. The 1960 census indicated that there were 3,341 Mexican-Americans in Idaho, but some migrant workers were not included in the official count. The 1990 census listed more than 20,000 Hispanics in and around the farming centers of Nampa, Caldwell and Weiser. In 1991 the Idaho Migrant Council estimated more than 58,000 Hispanics living year-round in the Snake River country.

Thus the remarkable Snake River Plain is a culture of contrast and change. Waves of immigration have transformed southern Idaho as deeply as water and agriculture have remade arid terrain. Now an agribusiness center, a hydropower factory and a tourist destination, the plain is no longer the raw frontier; yet enduring disputes over nature’s resources suggest a residue of frontier determination, and our society’s need to subdue the Idaho desert recalls a history of conquest and big water projects — a page from our turbulent past.