A History of Idaho

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Introduction

To understand the story of Idaho, one must first begin with its name, which, fittingly for a state of such rugged and often misunderstood character, was born of a

fabrication. In the great rush to name the newly organizing territories of the American West in the 1860s, a mining lobbyist and dilettante named George M. Willing proposed "Idaho" for the territory that would eventually become Colorado. He claimed it was a Shoshone term meaning "Gem of the Mountains" or "Light on the Mountains." It was a romantic and evocative name, perfectly suited to the grand landscapes of the West, and Congress was on the verge of accepting it. Just in time, however, it was discovered that Willing had simply invented the word. The name was scrapped for Colorado, but the fiction had already taken root. A steamboat on the Columbia River was christened *Idaho*, and miners heading to the goldfields of the Clearwater River began to speak of the "Idaho mines." By the time a new territory was carved from parts of Washington and Dakota territories in 1863, the made-up name had stuck, forever tethering the state's identity to a myth.

And yet, as with many myths, there was a kernel of truth waiting to be discovered. The nickname that grew from this invented word, the "Gem State," turned out to be profoundly accurate. Idaho's mountains are a treasure chest of geology, producing some 72 different types of precious and semi-precious stones, including the rare star garnet, found in significant quantities only in Idaho and India. More than 240 different minerals have been cataloged within its borders. This mineral wealth, from gold and silver to lead and zinc, would become a driving force in the state's creation and a source of its most violent conflicts. The history of Idaho is, in many ways, a story of extraction—of pulling immense riches from an unyielding earth, and the profound consequences of that endeavor.

The land itself is the first and most essential character in Idaho's story. It is a place of dramatic, often brutal, contrasts. The state is defined by the colossal spine of the Rocky Mountains, which walls off the northern panhandle from the vast, crescent-shaped expanse of the Snake River Plain to the south. This plain, a sweeping sagebrush steppe born of ancient volcanic activity, arcs across the southern portion of the state, providing the fertile, mineral-rich soil that would one day make Idaho world-famous for its potatoes. This is the Idaho of popular imagination, a seemingly endless agricultural basin. But to the north and in the state's vast center lies a different world, a wilderness of staggering scale and remoteness.

Here, the mountains are relentless. Great ranges like the Salmon River Mountains and the Clearwater Mountains contain the largest contiguous wilderness area in the lower 48 states: the Frank Church–River of No Return Wilderness. Encompassing nearly 2.4 million acres, it is a landscape of deep canyons, wild rivers, and impenetrable forests. Its name is a testament to its character. The Main Salmon River, which carves a gorge deeper in places than the Grand Canyon, was dubbed the "River of No Return" because its current was so swift that early boaters could travel down it, but never back up. On the state's western border, the Snake River carves Hells Canyon, the deepest river gorge in North America, plunging nearly 8,000 feet from the peaks of the Seven Devils Mountains to the river below. This geography has been a formidable barrier,

isolating communities, shaping economies, and preserving a wildness that has become one of Idaho's defining features.

Into this formidable landscape came its people, arriving in waves of exploration, exploitation, and settlement. The first peoples have been here for at least 14,000 years, their origins stretching back into the deep past of the continent. Tribes such as the Nez Perce, Coeur d'Alene, and Kutenai in the north, and the Shoshone, Bannock, and Northern Paiute in the south, developed cultures intricately woven into the land's harsh rhythms. They were here to witness the land's slow changes, and they would be here to witness the cataclysmic speed of the changes brought by others.

The first Europeans to enter this world were fur trappers in the early 19th century, followed by missionaries and then the great westward migration along the Oregon Trail, a 500-mile ordeal that cut across the southern plain. For the tens of thousands of emigrants, Idaho was a formidable obstacle, a gantlet of desert heat and dangerous river crossings, particularly the treacherous ford of the Snake River at Three Island Crossing. But it was the cry of "gold" in the 1860s that truly broke the state open. The Idaho Gold Rush brought a flood of prospectors, creating rough-and-tumble boomtowns like Idaho City and Silver City, and sparking the conflicts with Indigenous tribes that would define much of the late 19th century. The mining boom established the economic and political foundations of the Idaho Territory, created in 1863, and set it on a turbulent path toward statehood.

This path was also shaped profoundly by another group seeking a different kind of treasure: religious freedom. Beginning in the 1850s and expanding significantly after, Mormon pioneers, dispatched by Brigham Young, established colonies in the fertile valleys of southeastern Idaho. They brought with them a unique communal discipline and a remarkable talent for transforming arid land through irrigation. Their settlements, like the town of Franklin, established in 1860, were the first permanent agricultural communities in the state. The industriousness of the Mormon settlers would be instrumental in building Idaho's agricultural base, but their practice of polygamy and their tendency to vote as a bloc would make them a target of intense political persecution, a central and bitter struggle in the fight for statehood.

This book traces the chronological and thematic story of how these disparate elements—a dramatic and demanding geography, its ancient peoples, and the successive waves of newcomers—coalesced into the state we know today. It is a history marked by paradox. It is the story of a state whose economy was built on the extraction of its natural resources—furs, gold, silver, timber, and water—and yet which is now home to one of the world's great protected wilderness areas. It is the story of a place known for its staunch political conservatism, but which was also the scene of some of the most violent and radical labor uprisings in American history, particularly in the silver mines of the Coeur d'Alene district.

We will follow the journey from the geological forces that shaped the land to the arrival of its first inhabitants. We will travel with Lewis and Clark, ride with the fur trappers, and trudge alongside the pioneers on the Oregon Trail. We will witness the mad rush for gold, the creation of a territorial government, and the tragic and heroic resistance of the Nez Perce people in their fight to preserve their homeland. The narrative will then explore the contentious road to becoming the 43rd state in 1890, and the subsequent booms in mining, timber, and agriculture that defined its economy for a century.

The story continues into the 20th and 21st centuries, examining Idaho's role in the World Wars, the Great Depression, and the Cold War. It will delve into the career of Senator Frank Church, a towering figure in American politics and environmental preservation, whose name now graces the wilderness he fought to protect. We will also explore the cultural and economic shifts that have reshaped modern Idaho, from the glamour of Sun Valley to the surprising rise of a high-tech corridor in Boise, and the demographic changes that continue to redefine the state's identity.

Idaho's story is the American story, distilled and amplified. It is a narrative of grand ambitions and bitter disappointments, of relentless exploitation and a growing reverence for the wild, of fierce independence and the slow, hard work of building a community. It is a history that is far more complex, more turbulent, and more fascinating than its simple, invented name might suggest. Welcome to the Gem State.

CHAPTER ONE: The Land Before Time: Idaho's Geological Formation

Before there was Idaho, there was fire, ice, and incomprehensibly vast stretches of time. The story of the state’s dramatic landscape is a tale of continents in collision, of a land torn apart and rebuilt, and of deluges on a scale that defies the modern imagination. To travel through Idaho is to witness the results of these monumental forces, from the ancient, crystalline core of its mountains to the fresh, black lava flows of the Snake River Plain. The state’s very bones were forged in a series of violent and spectacular geological acts that unfolded over more than two and a half billion years.

The oldest rocks in Idaho, found in small, scattered exposures, are remnants of the Precambrian basement of North America. In places like the Pioneer Mountains and along the Montana border in Fremont County, metamorphic rocks like gneiss and schist offer a window into a time more than 2.5 billion years ago, when the continent was still assembling. Later, during the Proterozoic Eon, much of what would become Idaho was submerged under a shallow sea. For hundreds of millions of years,

sediments washed into this basin, layer upon layer, eventually forming the thick sequences of sedimentary rock known as the Belt Supergroup in the north and the Brigham Quartzite in the south. These rocks, some of which contain fossilized evidence of ancient algae called stromatolites, are the deep foundation upon which the future state would be built.

The defining feature of central Idaho, the geologic backbone of the state, would not begin to form until much later, during the age of dinosaurs. Beginning roughly 100 million years ago, in the Cretaceous Period, the tectonic plate underlying the Pacific Ocean, known as the Farallon Plate, began to slide beneath the westward-moving North American Plate. At that time, Idaho’s western border was essentially the coastline of the continent. As the oceanic plate dove deep into the Earth's mantle, intense heat and pressure caused it to melt. This molten material, or magma, being less dense than the surrounding rock, began to rise in massive blobs called plutons.

These plutons did not erupt onto the surface as volcanoes. Instead, they slowly cooled and crystallized between four and ten miles below the ground, coalescing into a single, enormous mass of granitic rock. This process created the Idaho Batholith, a colossal formation covering some 25,000 square miles of central Idaho. The batholith is actually composed of two distinct sections, or lobes: the older and larger Atlanta Lobe in the south and the slightly younger Bitterroot Lobe to the north. For tens of millions of years, this granite behemoth remained hidden. It was only through immense geological uplift and subsequent erosion that the overlying layers of rock were stripped away, exposing the familiar salt-and-pepper granite that now forms the core of Idaho’s rugged central mountains. This process of weathering has sculpted the batholith's exposed rock into the rounded, dome-like shapes characteristic of areas like the City of Rocks.

While the batholith was cooling deep underground, another period of intense volcanic activity began to shape the land. Around 52 million years ago, during the Eocene Epoch, a series of eruptions known as the Challis Volcanic event spread across a vast area of central Idaho. This was not a single volcano, but a widespread volcanic field that erupted lavas, domes, and explosive ash flows. The Challis volcanism was part of a larger magmatic flare-up that affected much of the Pacific Northwest and was linked to complex tectonic shifts in the subducting oceanic plate. This activity was concentrated along a series of faults known as the Trans-Challis fault system, which created pathways for magma to reach the surface. The legacy of this fiery period is not only the varied volcanic rocks scattered across the state but also the significant deposits of gold, silver, and other valuable minerals that formed in the superheated waters associated with the volcanism.

The next great chapter in Idaho’s geological story involves a feature that dominates the southern third of the state: the Snake River Plain. This vast, arc-shaped depression was not carved by the river that now flows through it, but was instead branded into

the continent by a stationary plume of hot magma rising from deep within the Earth's mantle—the same "hotspot" that currently fuels the geysers and volcanic activity of Yellowstone National Park.

Beginning about 17 million years ago, the North American continent began to drift southwestward over this hotspot. The intense heat from the mantle plume caused the overlying crust to melt, leading to a series of cataclysmic volcanic eruptions. As the continental plate moved, the hotspot effectively "burned" a track across southern Idaho. The eruptions were explosive and on an immense scale, producing massive calderas and laying down thick layers of rhyolite and ash. The youngest of these volcanic centers are now in the Yellowstone area, while the rocks get progressively older to the west, tracing the path of the continent's journey over the stationary plume.

The formation of the Eastern and Western Snake River Plains involved slightly different processes. The Eastern Plain is primarily a topographic depression caused by the heating and subsequent cooling and sinking of the crust directly over the hotspot's track. The Western Plain, however, is a graben—a large block of land that dropped down between parallel faults, creating a deep rift valley. This rifting began around 12 million years ago and was triggered by the same crustal extension related to the hotspot's passage. Over millions of years, this western valley was filled with thousands of feet of sediment deposited by a massive lake, known to geologists as Lake Idaho. Volcanic activity continued during this time, with basalt lava flows sometimes pouring into the ancient lake.

While fire was building up the south, the forces of extension were stretching the crust apart elsewhere. In the southeastern part of the state, Idaho overlaps with the Basin and Range Province, a vast region of the American West characterized by alternating north-south trending mountain ranges and flat valleys. This distinctive topography is the result of the Earth's crust being pulled apart, or extended, causing large blocks of land to tilt and drop down along faults, forming the valleys (basins), while the adjacent blocks were lifted up to create the mountains (ranges). This process, which began in earnest around 17 million years ago and continues today, is responsible for the landscape of places like the Lost River Range and the Lemhi Valley.

As the Pleistocene Epoch, or the Ice Age, began about 2.6 million years ago, a new and powerful force of geologic change arrived: massive continental glaciers. While the great ice sheets did not cover all of Idaho, a lobe of the Cordilleran Ice Sheet repeatedly advanced into the northern panhandle. This ice created alpine glaciers that scoured and sharpened the peaks of the Rocky Mountains, carving out the U-shaped valleys and jagged arêtes seen today.

The most dramatic impact of this glaciation came from the water it trapped and then catastrophically released. On multiple occasions between about 15,000 and 13,000

years ago, a finger of the ice sheet crept across the Clark Fork River valley, forming a massive ice dam more than 2,000 feet high. Behind this dam, the water backed up to form Glacial Lake Missoula, an immense body of water that stretched for hundreds of miles across western Montana and contained more water than Lake Erie and Lake Ontario combined.

Periodically, the immense pressure of the lake water would cause the ice dam to fail. The resulting outburst floods were of a magnitude that is difficult to comprehend. A towering wall of water, ice, and debris would thunder across the Idaho panhandle and eastern Washington at speeds up to 65 miles per hour, with a flow rate ten times greater than all the rivers of the world combined. These repeated Missoula Floods scoured the landscape, stripping away soil, carving deep canyons known as coulees, and depositing vast gravel bars.

To the south, a different, but equally spectacular, flood event reshaped the Snake River Plain. About 17,400 years ago, Lake Bonneville, a massive ice-age lake that covered much of modern-day Utah, reached its highest level. The lake, which was far larger than the Great Salt Lake that remains today, eventually overtopped a natural dam of loose material at Red Rock Pass in southeastern Idaho.

The breach triggered a single, cataclysmic flood. In a torrent that may have lasted for weeks, a volume of water equivalent to 1,200 cubic miles poured out of Lake Bonneville and roared down the Portneuf River valley into the Snake River. The Bonneville Flood was a violent, erosive force. It scoured the Snake River Canyon to a depth of 600 feet, stripped away surface materials to create scablands, and transported house-sized boulders, now known as melon gravel, across the plain. This immense flood is responsible for carving some of Idaho's most iconic features, including Shoshone Falls and the many alcoves and dry falls found along the Snake River Canyon.

The final great carving event took place on Idaho's western border. Hells Canyon, the deepest river gorge in North America, is the product of millions of years of patient work by the Snake River, cutting down through layers of ancient volcanic rock and the uplifted landmasses of the Seven Devils and Wallowa Mountains. The story of its rock layers begins with ancient island volcanoes in the Pacific Ocean that were later accreted, or added, to the North American continent. These were then covered by massive floods of Columbia River Basalt lava around 17 million years ago. The river began its work about 6 million years ago, but the process was greatly accelerated by the draining of the ancient Lake Idaho and later by the torrent of the Bonneville Flood, which poured through the canyon, deepening and widening the immense chasm we see today.

From the slow cooling of the Idaho Batholith to the instantaneous cataclysm of the Bonneville Flood, the forces that shaped Idaho were both patient and violent. They

built mountains and then tore them down, laid down vast plains of fire, and scoured them with continental-scale deluges. Every range, canyon, and plain in the state is a testament to this deep and tumultuous history, a physical record of the planetary forces that created the land long before any human ever set foot upon it.
