A History of Idaho

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Introduction

Idaho’s story is written into its rivers and mountain ranges, preserved in its sagebrush plains, rolling farmland, and pine-covered hills. Often recognized for its potatoes and scenic wilderness, Idaho’s deeper history is a rich tapestry woven from the experiences of Indigenous nations, bold explorers, resourceful pioneers, miners, laborers, and innovators. This book seeks to illuminate the dynamic past of Idaho, revealing how geography, resourcefulness, conflict, and adaptation have shaped the state into what it is today.

For over fourteen thousand years, people have made their homes in the valleys and high plains of Idaho. The diverse Indigenous communities—Nez Perce, Coeur d’Alene, Kootenai, Shoshone-Bannock, and Shoshone-Paiute among them—developed unique ways of life, deeply rooted in an understanding of the land. Their traditions and place names still echo across Idaho’s landscapes, reminding us of both continuity and change. The arrival of Euro-American explorers, and later fur traders, settlers, and missionaries, drastically altered life for Idaho’s first peoples and set the region on a new historical trajectory.

The 19th century brought intense transformation, as incoming waves of gold seekers, pioneers, and entrepreneurs carved out new communities and economies in Idaho’s challenging terrain. Territorial status, and later statehood in 1890, marked periods of dramatic social and political change. Displacement of Native peoples, boom-and-bust cycles in mining, and the rise of agriculture and the timber industry were often intertwined with conflict, innovation, and profound adaptation by Idahoans of all backgrounds.

As the centuries turned, new challenges and opportunities took root. Idaho became a crossroads of technological progress, labor struggle, and migration. The completion of the railroad, expansion of irrigation, volatile labor disputes, and global events such as the World Wars left indelible marks on the Gem State. Each era reshaped Idaho’s identity—from a rugged mining territory to a state distinct for its agricultural abundance, and eventually, to a home for research, industry, and a growing, diverse population.

Today, Idaho stands at the intersection of tradition and change. While many still work the land and forests, technological and economic evolution has brought new opportunities and challenges. The state’s distinct regions retain their character, shaped by centuries of adaptation, resilience, and sometimes, conflict. The ongoing dialogue between environment, community, and economy continues to define Idaho as it moves further into the twenty-first century.

Through these pages, readers will trace the arc of Idaho’s history: from its ancient human stories and enduring natural wonders, through the trials of settlement, extraction, and growth, up to its continuing evolution in a rapidly changing world. In doing so, we come to understand not just the milestones and events, but also the spirit of the people who have made Idaho their home—past, present, and future.

CHAPTER ONE: Ancient Landscapes and the Coming of People

Long before written records, before the arrival of any humans, the land that would one day be known as Idaho was a place of immense geological drama and transformation. Its story is etched in stone, a narrative of fiery volcanic eruptions, the slow grind of glaciers, the carving power of water, and the relentless forces of tectonic plates colliding over millions of years. This ancient sculpting created the foundation for the diverse and often rugged landscapes we see today, from the high desert plains of the south to the jagged peaks and deep valleys of the north. The rocks themselves speak of a deep past, with some formations dating back more than two billion years. This immense timescale is almost impossible for the human mind to fully grasp, but understanding it is key to appreciating the long history of this land.

Much of southern Idaho's distinctive topography, particularly the Snake River Plain, is a product of extensive volcanic activity. This activity is linked to the passage of the North American continent over the Yellowstone hotspot. Over millions of years, as the plate moved, a trail of volcanic eruptions was left behind, creating vast layers of basaltic lava flows that blanket the landscape. These eruptions weren't always gentle; early explosive rhyolite volcanism was followed by these widespread basalt flows. In southwestern Idaho, this volcanism, combined with the pulling apart of the Earth's crust, formed the Western Snake River Plain, a large depression that was, for a time, filled by an immense body of water known as Lake Idaho. This ancient lake deposited thick layers of sediment across the plain.

Further north, the landscape tells a different but equally dramatic geological tale. The central and northern parts of Idaho are dominated by towering mountains, a result of tectonic forces and the emplacement of massive bodies of granite known as batholiths. The Idaho Batholith, a composite mass of granitic rocks covering a vast area, forms the backbone of west-central Idaho. These granitic rocks cooled slowly beneath the Earth's surface before being exposed by uplift and erosion over eons. This collision of tectonic plates created intense friction, melting the continental crust and forming the magma that cooled to create these formidable mountain ranges.

The Ice Age, or the Pleistocene epoch, which spanned from about 2.6 million to roughly 11,700 years ago, played a significant role in shaping Idaho's more recent landscapes. During this period, the climate was cooler and wetter than today. Continental glaciers advanced from Canada, their immense weight and movement carving and sculpting the northern parts of the state. In the mountains, valley glaciers ground their way through the terrain, leaving behind characteristic U-shaped valleys,

sharp peaks, and cirques. Evidence of this glacial activity is still visible in the form of moraines, sculpted bedrock, and numerous alpine lakes.

A particularly dramatic consequence of the Ice Age in northern Idaho was the formation and catastrophic release of Glacial Lake Missoula. An immense ice dam, part of the Cordilleran ice sheet, blocked the Clark Fork River in Montana. Behind this dam, a vast inland lake, larger than present-day Lake Erie and Lake Ontario combined, formed, stretching across much of western Montana. Periodically, this ice dam would fail, unleashing unimaginable volumes of water in cataclysmic floods that surged across northern Idaho and into eastern Washington.

These incredible floods, known as the Missoula Floods, were some of the largest known in Earth's geological history. They moved at tremendous speeds, carving the landscape, eroding bedrock, and depositing massive boulders and sediments across the region. The effects of these floods are most dramatically seen in the channeled scablands of eastern Washington, but they also left their mark on northern Idaho, contributing to the formation of lakes and shaping valleys. The scale of these events is almost incomprehensible, a testament to the powerful forces of nature that have shaped this land over millennia.

As the last glacial period began to wane, roughly 14,000 to 15,000 years ago, the climate continued to change, becoming warmer and drier. The immense ice sheets and glaciers retreated, leaving behind a reshaped landscape. The megafauna that had roamed the Ice Age world, such as woolly mammoths, dire wolves, and giant ground sloths, began to disappear, though some lingered for a time. The changing environment led to shifts in vegetation, with sagebrush becoming more prevalent in the southern areas. It was into this dynamic and evolving landscape that the first humans arrived.

The question of when and how humans first arrived in North America has long been a subject of scientific inquiry and debate. For many years, the prevailing theory, known as "Clovis First," suggested that the earliest widespread culture in North America was the Clovis culture, identified by distinctive fluted projectile points dating back about 13,000 years. This theory proposed that people crossed a land bridge from Asia into Alaska and then moved south through an ice-free corridor that opened up in the North American ice sheets.

However, archaeological discoveries in recent decades have challenged and revised this long-held view. Evidence from sites across the Americas, including several in Idaho and the surrounding region, suggests a much earlier human presence, predating the opening of the ice-free corridor. These findings point towards the possibility, or even likelihood, of people migrating along the Pacific coastline and then moving inland via river systems. The rugged coastlines may have offered a more viable route during periods when the interior was still blocked by ice.

Idaho holds significant archaeological sites that provide crucial evidence for this earlier timeline of human migration into the Americas. One such site is Cooper's Ferry in western Idaho, located along the Salmon River. Excavations at Cooper's Ferry have yielded stone tools and animal bone fragments that have been radiocarbon dated to between 14,000 and 16,000 years old, and potentially as old as 16,600 years. These dates are significantly older than the widely accepted age for the opening of the ice-free corridor, suggesting that people were present in the region well before that route became available.

The artifacts found at Cooper's Ferry include stemmed projectile points, hearth pits, animal bones (including those of extinct horses), and charcoal. The discovery of these stemmed points, which are unfluted, is particularly noteworthy as they predate the distinctive fluted Clovis points, indicating a different technological tradition among these earlier inhabitants. Similar unfluted, stemmed points have been found at other early sites in the Intermountain West, part of what is now known as the Western Stemmed Tradition, which overlaps with and predates the Clovis culture in some areas.

Another important archaeological site in Idaho is Wilson Butte Cave, located on the volcanic Snake River Plain near Twin Falls in southern Idaho. Excavations here in the late 1950s and subsequent investigations revealed evidence of human activity dating back as far as 10,000 to 15,000 years ago. While some of the earliest dating from Wilson Butte Cave has been debated, it remains a significant site for understanding the antiquity of human presence in the Snake River Plain and North America.

Wilson Butte Cave, a large domed chamber formed by ancient lava flows, would have provided a natural shelter for early people as they moved across the landscape. The artifacts found there, including projectile points, suggest that these early inhabitants utilized the cave as a base, perhaps for hunting bison and other game in the surrounding area. The layers of deposits within the cave have also provided valuable information about the past environments and climate fluctuations in southern Idaho since the last major glacial advances.

Beyond Idaho's borders but within the broader region, the Marmes Rockshelter site near the confluence of the Snake and Palouse Rivers in southeastern Washington also provides critical evidence of early human habitation in the Pacific Northwest. Excavations at Marmes Rockshelter, though tragically cut short by the flooding caused by the construction of the Lower Monumental Dam, revealed a long record of human occupation dating back over 11,000 years. While not strictly within Idaho, the findings at Marmes contribute to the regional understanding of the movements and lives of the earliest people in the Columbia River Basin.

These archaeological sites, particularly Cooper's Ferry and Wilson Butte Cave, offer

compelling evidence that humans were present in the Idaho region much earlier than previously thought, possibly as part of a coastal migration route into the Americas. The discovery of artifacts like the stemmed points at Cooper's Ferry challenges older models and highlights the complexity of early human movements across the continent. The people who arrived in this ancient landscape faced a world vastly different from today, shaped by recent glaciation and populated by now-extinct animals.

Their lives would have been intrinsically tied to the rhythms of the natural world. They were hunter-gatherers, moving across the landscape in search of food and resources. The changing seasons dictated their movements and activities. In a post-Ice Age world, they would have adapted to the varying environments offered by Idaho's diverse geography, from the river valleys to the emerging forests and plains. Their survival depended on a deep understanding of the land, its plants, and its animals.

The tools they left behind, simple stone points, scrapers, and other implements, speak to their ingenuity and skill in utilizing the available resources. They fashioned what they needed from stone, bone, and plant materials. While direct evidence of their dwellings is scarce due to the passage of time, sites like Wilson Butte Cave suggest they utilized natural shelters when available. Their social structures and beliefs remain largely a mystery, pieced together through the scant material record they left behind.

The landscape itself was a fundamental part of their existence. The rivers provided water and sustenance, likely serving as crucial travel routes. The mountains offered different resources and challenges, perhaps providing seasonal hunting grounds or materials for tools. The plains and valleys, with their varied vegetation, would have supported the game they hunted and the plants they gathered. Their understanding of these environments would have been profound, a knowledge passed down through generations.

The earliest inhabitants of what is now Idaho were pioneers in the truest sense, adapting to a new and often challenging world. They navigated a post-glacial landscape, learned to hunt the animals that remained, and discovered the edible plants the land offered. Their presence, though leaving a faint archaeological trace compared to later periods, marks the beginning of the long human story in Idaho, a story that would continue to unfold and be shaped by the unique character of this land.

Their arrival and adaptation set the stage for the diverse Indigenous cultures that would later flourish in the region. While these earliest groups are distinct from the historical tribes of Idaho, they represent the deep roots of human connection to this land. The ancient landscapes, sculpted by fire and ice, provided the backdrop for these initial chapters of human history, laying the groundwork for the rich and complex story that was to follow.

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