

We used an expression in the town I grew up in which characterized our geographical location – a gulch in some high mountains rising out of the desert in a sparsely populated corner of the West. When we were going out of town we would say we were going to the “Outside.” And if we saw a stranger in town we would say that he or she must be someone from the “Outside.” Prisoners use the same expression and we likewise felt cut off from the rest of the world, prisoners of heavy snow in winter and the rough nature of our roads in all seasons. That word also described what we saw from the summits of our mountains whose seven and eight thousand foot altitudes provided an eagle’s eye-view of the country around us. Looking north and east we saw a vast panorama spread out like a relief map with steep mountains giving way to bare foothills and these to lava buttes along a winding river. Beyond there was another river with miniaturized towns along it and at night these patches of urban life twinkled with lights like reflected stars. Beyond the second river another range of mountains rose against the skyline. This awesome view of the Snake River Plain, the Boise Valley, and the Boise Mountains of Idaho was a sharp contrast to the narrow gulch we lived in where the sun was late reaching us of a morning and set all too soon over the opposite wall of mountain.

Looking south and west from the summits we saw the vast spaces of three states – Idaho, Oregon, and Nevada. Some accounts of the wonders of the view add California to the list but that may be stretching the limits of vision a bit. The deserts cut by pencil-line roads, the green valleys along creek beds, the many-forked Owyhee River, black lava formations, and the high mountains of eastern Oregon and northern Nevada make this view as wonderful as the other.

Our town was in a gorge cut by Jordan Creek in the Owyhee Mountains of southwestern Idaho. We called it “Silver,” short for Silver City. The townsite was not the kind that would attract the eye of a city planner unless he was looking for a real challenge, for

the steep sides of the gulch and the huge protruding rocks left few spots to build on. But this was the best of three sites tried along the creek for town building in the early days. Two earlier ones, Ruby City and Booneville, did not survive long enough to become ghost towns; their buildings were dismantled or in some cases simply moved intact up the creek to become part of Silver. The first settlements grew out of the rush of placer miners to the area. Silver was closer to the rich quartz lodes, the source of the nuggets washed down the creek, and the discovery of their great wealth turned the excitement away from the creek and up to the mountain tops surrounding the town. After three years of life, Ruby City gave up the county seat to Silver in 1866 and many of its buildings were moved up the creek where some of them still stand.

These mountains are the outstanding feature of Owyhee County. The name "Owyhee," first given to the river that winds through the county and on into Oregon, is a variant spelling of Hawaii, the native home of three unlucky men who disappeared while trapping with a Canadian party along the stream in 1818. The county is the second largest in Idaho, and for its size the most sparsely populated. It had a population of 6,422 in 1970, which may have been about the size of Silver at its peak. By 1980 it had experienced a real boom for this part of the country by gaining 819 new residents. With its 7,841 square miles of land it provides close to one square mile per person. If such a size seems like plenty of elbow room it is nothing compared to the size of the original "County of Owyhee" as described by the Territorial Legislature of 1863. They gave it "all the territory South of the Snake River and West of the Rocky Mountains." This vast domain stretched across southern Idaho and on into Wyoming.

It is hard to believe that these mountains which stand out so sharply against the skyline within plain sight of the Oregon Trail were so long ignored, or at least so rarely mentioned by travelers. Peter Skene Ogden, the hardy Canadian trapper who left no stream

untried in his search for beaver, penetrated the county along the Bruneau River in 1826-27. His opinion of the lowlands drained by the river which in those days was like most of southern Idaho – a vast sea of “wormwood” or sagebrush – was not kindly. “We certainly travelled over a barren country today,” he writes in his Journal. “Not even a bird or a track of an animal to be seen. 1 beaver this day.” The next entry was even more bitter. “I verily believe,” he writes. “A more wretched country Christian Indian or Brute ever travelled over or ever will...”

If he had followed the route of the present road from Murphy, Idaho, which is now the county seat and the home of around fifty people, into the mountains, he would have found decidedly less wretched conditions about halfway along the twenty-three mile trip where the climate and topography change from desert to mountain in a matter of feet. This road winds up and down over treeless sagebrush hills, making seemingly aimless hairpin turns into one gully after another while the mountains ahead remain blue and distant. Finally it winds down a steep grade into the bed of a creek. The road goes up from here along another small creek called Sinker – a name which plays a part in the history and mythology of the region. The odor of sage and alkali dust and the high-pitched hum of insects accompanies you as you follow the little creek until the cottonwood trees begin to give way to junipers and mountain mahogany whose spicy fragrance rifts in on the sudden cool breath of mountain air. As you turn away from the little creek, you have a glimpse of War Eagle Mountain on your left, massive and close. Your car may have told you that you have been climbing steadily since you left the creek bed and it may not be good news that you are about to begin the long climb to the summit. Modern cars sometimes overheat on this road, but not like they did in the early part of the century when drivers sometimes had to back down after stalling and add water to boiling radiators. The road turns and climbs into the heart of the mountains whose steep sides drop down into gulches beyond the reach of the eye. Rocks are huge, and among them the pointed alpine fir

and gently rustling aspen and a profusion of wild flowers add color and variety to the slopes. A turn in the road leads into the sudden dense shade of firs. Snow lies a long time in this spot keeping the road closed after the rest of it is bare. Out of the shade you come into the dazzling light of barren New York Summit and looking back from it you can see the whole "Outside." The scene is not so wonderful today as it was fifty years ago when on a clear day you could see the capitol building and the railroad station in Boise seventy miles away. Now the polluted air from too many cars hangs like a shroud over Boise Valley. If you turn and look the other way you see the mine-scarred back of Florida Mountain, the scene of the second boom which brought the town new prosperity in the '80s, '90s and early 20th century just as War Eagle brought its first boom in the '60s and '70s. The town is hidden until you reach the bottom of the summit close to the banks of Jordan Creek. Silver will come into view as you take the road to the left. If you took the road to the right you would come to the spot five miles down the creek where gold was first discovered in 1863 and where the life of this whole region began.