

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

SILVER MINING IN IDAHO

Number 160

December 1964

A century of silver mining since 1863 has made Idaho into the nation's leading silver state. In the hundred years from 1864 through 1964, a total production of about 786 million ounces has been attained. Figured at varying prices realized over the years as the metal was recovered and sold, Idaho's silver production amounted to a total value of 613 million dollars. At the 1964 price level--which practically equals the \$1.29 per ounce mint price--Idaho's silver is valued at about 1 billion, fifteen million dollars. Approximately 686 million ounces in production totals (over 885 million at 1964 prices) of this came from the Coeur d'Alene district, which has produced more than three times as much silver as has the celebrated Comstock in Nevada. Four of the nation's largest silver mines are now in the Coeur d'Alene area, which in total production has surpassed all other silver regions in the United States.

Lode mines which assayed high in silver were discovered March 7, 1863, near Rocky Bar, and several months later near Silver City. These early assays ran high in gold also, and the Rocky Bar properties proved to be primarily gold. Those near Silver City, however, turned out to be mainly silver, as did the mines discovered June 6, 1864, at Banner. Still another early mining camp with significant silver values was Atlanta, where gold placers found in the fall of 1864 were traces in part to the great Atlanta lode which showed promise for silver as well as for gold.

Of these regions, the Owyhee mines around Silver City proved to be the most important. In the initial decade of Idaho's silver, the War Eagle mines of Owyhee had exceptionally rich surface values. Ore from the Poorman, in particular, astonished just about everyone who saw it. Samples from the Poorman were displayed in Congress, and received a special gold medal when exhibited at the Paris International Exposition early in 1867. Owyhee, as a result of such promotion, gained an enviable reputation as standing second only to the Comstock Lode--a Nevada silver discovery only about four years older than Owyhee--among the major silver regions of the West.

Fortunately for silver miners at Silver City, Rocky Bar, and Atlanta, the Washoe process--worked out on the Comstock Lode for the recovery of silver in gold and silver ores--could be used to advantage. A number of important early silver producers on War

Eagle Mountain above Silver City had a significant part in Idaho mining until the failure of the Bank of California, August 26, 1875, led to an abrupt shutdown. Silver City still had its major, low-grade (but higher total) production reserved for the future, after railway transportation became available nearby in 1884. The rich early War Eagle producers, though, never amounted to much after 1875.

A shift from easier worked gold-silver ores to the more difficult lead-silver ores got underway over the western states around 1880, and Idaho was no exception. Improvements in rail transportation and development of successful smelting methods in Colorado account in large measure for this shift. Silver City, with its gold-silver ores, came back into production with the help of railroads. But that region was destined to be eclipsed by the Wood River lead-silver mines, where a rush occurred in 1880. Finally, after Noah Kellogg came across the Bunker Hill and Sullivan, September 10, 1885, the Coeur d'Alene lead-silver region grew up to account for by far the greatest part of Idaho's silver recovery. Other districts contributed also in later years, but Coeur d'Alene, and to a much lesser extent, Wood River, dominated. For about a decade after 1880, Wood River, with earlier discoveries and earlier railway service, was ahead.

Some of the larger Wood River producers, moreover, continued to be important down through 1959. Except for occasional economic setbacks that resulted from national hard times--particularly during the few years after 1929--the Coeur d'Alene region continued to pour out lead, silver, and zinc. With rising silver prices resulting from increasing markets which have been clearing out national silver reserves over the past decade or two, the future for Coeur d'Alene silver production is bright indeed. In the foreseeable future, Idaho is unlikely to have a rival for the position of leading silver-producing state.