

Names of Idaho Counties

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WHAT WE KNOW of the earliest place names in Idaho comes from the records of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1805.¹ The explorers encountered small, scattered groups of Indians who had been pushed westward by the white man and weakened by tribal wars. From these Indians, they learned and recorded many tribal names for topographical features and trail markers; none commemorated great battle scenes or historic events. The penchant for name-giving however, was as strong in the white explorers as in the Indians. To Clark goes the credit for the first English place name of a major feature in Idaho, *Clearwater River*, which he translated in 1805 from Nez Perce *Koos-koos-kia* "water-water-clear" — *Clearwater* was later given to the county drained by the river.²

From that date until the last county was created in 1919, British-American influence dominated the area in politics and commerce,

¹ O. D. Wheeler, historian, traveled over the Lewis and Clark Trail in 1904, comparing it with the diaries of the Lewis and Clark Expedition and noting changes found. He quotes copiously from the diaries and includes some photostats of pertinent pages; he also points out errors made by the explorers resulting from misinterpretation of their Indian informants. Both the photostatic excerpts and Wheeler's commentaries pertaining to the Idaho portion of the Trail have been examined. O. D. Wheeler, *Trail of Lewis and Clark, 1804—1806*, 2 vols. (New York, 1904), *passim*.

² "Major feature" is referred to here, for there are records of at least two other instances of the assignment of names, *Hungry* and *Colt-killed Creeks* (both have been renamed), before this instance.

Lewis and Clark recorded *Koos-koos-kia* "Kooskooskee." Wheeler cites evidence that the explorers possibly misunderstood the word as being the name of the stream, when it was only descriptive of the waters of the stream. His information comes from Silas B. Smith, grandson of Chief Cómowool, Clatsop Tribe; Smith, an educated and intelligent man, has this to say about Indian name-giving: "I wish to state this proposition, which cannot be overthrown, that the Indians of the Northwest country, extending as far back as the Rocky Mountains, never name a river *as a river*; they name localities. . . . they may say this water leads to such a place . . . but never name a stream." Wheeler, II, pp. 19 and 224.

and therefore in nomenclature as well. The British-American fur traders who streamed in and out of the area for the 50 years after 1805 brought French trappers and traders with them, hence the French place names that dot the Idaho map from Lake Pend Oreille to Boise.³ Then came the miners, mostly American. Spanish interest in the area ended in 1819, but some indirect Spanish influence on place names continued until 1900.

The names of the existing 44 counties of Idaho come from the four language groups that played a part in the early history of the state. Twenty-nine come from English, nine from Indian dialects, five from French, and one from Spanish.

ENGLISH: *Ada, Adams, Bear Lake, Bingham, Blaine, Bonner, Bonneville, Boundary, Cassia, Clark, Clearwater, Custer, Elmore, Franklin, Fremont, Gem, Gooding, Jefferson, Jerome, Lemhi, Lewis, Lincoln, Madison, Owyhee, Payette, Power, Twin Falls, Valley, Washington.*

INDIAN: (Shoshoni) *Bannock, Idaho, Minidoka, Shoshone*; (Nez Perce) *Latah*; (Coeur d'Alene) *Benewah*; (Kutenai) *Kootenai*; (Chinook) *Camas*; (Iroquois) *Oneida*.

FRENCH: *Boise, Butte, Caribou, Nez Perce, Teton.*

SPANISH: *Canyon.*

This division might well be questioned, since there has been so much modification, commingling between the source languages. Some of the names designated as English, for example, are so classed because they derive from the names of English-speaking people, regardless of the ultimate origin of the names themselves. *Clearwater*, as already noted, is a translation of a Nez Perce word; *Owyhee* is a phonetic spelling of *Hawaii*; and *Lemhi*, which suggests Hebrew origin but for which no etymology has been found, makes its first appearance in an English-language publication, *The Book of Mormon*. *Nez Perce* is a Canadian-French name for Indians of the Shahaptan family who called themselves *Chopunnish*; it is classified French, though it might well be considered Indian as it commemorates the tribe whose own name gave way to the French. The Indian names come from six language divisions. Furthermore, the

³ Cram's Superior Map of Idaho, based on U.S. Land Survey, shows the following place names of French origin in this area: *Pend Oreille, Caribou, Chatcolet, St. Maries, Santa, Desmet, Nez Perce, Bruneau, and Boise.*

Iroquois word *Oneida* is a toponym of Oneida, New York, which in turn was a name of an Iroquois tribe; and *Idaho*, which is thought by Rees and Bancroft to be of Shoshoni origin and is so classed here, has been in such dispute that one hardly knows whether to call it an Anglicized Indian word or a coined word.⁴

The patterns of place-naming of the counties show little variety. Sixty percent of the names commemorate either individuals or Indian tribes. Thirty-three percent derive from descriptive features – topographical, natural, and man-made. And the few remaining names are almost equally divided between toponyms and local incidents.

White persons of national and local importance account for 20 of the 44 county names. (Indian names will be discussed separately.) Five presidents are represented: Washington, Lincoln, Adams, Jefferson, and Madison. Blaine County honors American statesman James G. Blaine. Only one county, Gooding, bears the name of a state governor, though Governor Bunn (1885) was privileged to name Bingham County for his friend Congressman Bingham, of Pennsylvania. Lewis, Bonneville, and Fremont counties bear the names of early explorers Captain Merriwether Lewis and Captain B. L. E. Bonneville, and pathfinder John C. Fremont respectively; and Custer County, that of General George A. Custer.

Early settlers and developers account for the names of six counties: Bonner, Caribou, Clark, Franklin, Jerome, and Payette. E. L. Bonner established the first ferry across Kootenai River, and the settlement that grew up near the ferry is to this day known as *Bonnors Ferry*. “Caribou” Fairchild, nicknamed “Caribou” by Canadian-French when he was a prospector in the Caribou fields of

⁴ John E. Rees, *Idaho: Chronology, Nomenclature, and Bibliography* (Chicago 1919), pp. 46–51; H. H. Bancroft, *History of Washington, Idaho, and Montana* (San Francisco, 1890), pp. 399–400; John P. Harrington (Bureau of American Ethnology), “Origin of Our State Names,” *Journal of the Washington Academy of Sciences*, Vol. 34, No. 8 (August 15, 1944). These authorities attribute the word *Idaho* to *Shoshoni* origin, but they interpret the word variously as “Gem of the Mountains,” “Light on the Mountains,” “Sunrise Mountain,” and “Riverite.” Both Rees and Bancroft knew *Shoshoni*, and Harrington consulted adepts in the *Shoshoni* language; I have therefore accepted their classification. Others dispute the *Shoshoni* origin, but they did not know the language. For the most complete bibliography on this subject, see Erl. H. Ellis, “That Word ‘Idaho’,” *Studies in Humanities*, No. 2 (University of Denver Press, 1951).

British Columbia, was important in the development of the silver mines in North Idaho. Sam Clark was an early settler; whether the fact that he bore the same name as the explorer affected the choice of his name for Clark County is not recorded, but I strongly suspect that it did. Franklin D. Richards, a Mormon who led the first permanent colony of settlers into Idaho (1860), gave rise to the name *Franklin County*. Jerome County honors Jerome Kuhn, one of the promoters of the Twin Falls North Side Irrigation Project, which sparked development of the area. The Hudson Bay Company placed Francis Payette in charge of old Fort Boise during its existence, and Payette County, created in 1917, was named in his honor. Ada County is named after the first white child born in Boise City, Ada Riggs, daughter of the Honorable H. C. Riggs. In somewhat the same manner in which *Ada* symbolizes the birth of a white community, *Lemhi* symbolizes the birth of a Mormon community (*Lemhi* is a character in *The Book of Mormon*).

Donald McKenzie, leader of the Snake River Expedition sent out by the Hudson Bay Company in 1818, named Bear Lake because of the great number of black bears in that area; and the name was transferred to the county in which the lake is located.⁵ *Cassia* derives from the cassia plant growing plentifully along Cassia Creek, also named by Hudson Bay trappers. In a similar manner *Twin Falls*, *Clearwater*, *Canyon*, *Teton*, and *Valley* are named for their most distinctive features. All of these except *Valley* might be called "shift" names, for they are transfers from the names of topographical features. *Clearwater* County is named for *Clearwater* River; *Butte*, for *Big Butte*, the largest of three buttes serving as a landmark to early immigrants traveling the Oregon Trail; *Teton*, for *Teton Peaks* in Eastern Wyoming, which overlook the county; and *Canyon* County, for the *SNAKE RIVER CANYON*, which forms a natural boundary on the southwest. *Valley* derives its name from the very beautiful valley forming the most important portion of the county.

Non-topographical descriptive titles are to be seen in the nomenclature of *Boundary*, *Elmore*, and *Power* counties. *Boundary* County joins the boundary lines between the United States and Canada. *Elmore* is named for the *IDA ELMORE QUARTZ MINE*, one of the greatest gold-producing mines of the 1860's; this is the only

⁵ See Rees, pp. 54-55, and *Idaho Encyclopedia*, compiled by Vardis Fisher (Caldwell, Idaho, 1938), p. 221.

county name known certainly to be derived from the precious minerals that gave fame to the state during this period. And Power County is named for the American Falls Canal and Power Company, which drew settlers to the area after 1908. The last county, Gem, is now an agricultural "gem," though it was the gold rush that attracted its first settlers. The name *Gem* is said by local residents to be a clipped form of the popular state epithet, "Gem of the Mountains."⁶

Local incidents evoked the "shift" names of Boise and Owyhee Counties. In 1834, French-Canadian trappers, when they came upon a wooded area along a stream after many days' travel through sagebrush and dust in the heat of summer, exclaimed, "Les bois! Les bois! Voyez les bois!" The Boise River is still often called "Wooded River" and the town, "City of Trees." Owyhee County receives its name from an incident of 1819. Donald McKenzie, Hudson Bay trapper, outfitted three Owyhees to trap the stream draining the southeastern part of Idaho. Indians found and murdered the men and their bones were found on the banks of the stream; hence the river and the area came to be called *Owyhee*.⁷

Counties bearing Indian names follow two patterns: those derived from names of tribes or chieftains, and those from descriptive words. The Bannack, Kootenai, Coeur d'Alene, Nez Perce, and Shoshone tribes continued to hold tribal councils, gather camas roots, fish, and hunt in Idaho long after statehood was achieved; and some of these tribes still follow their ancient tribal customs to some degree despite the supposedly civilizing effects of reservation life. All of the tribes listed above except Coeur d'Alene gave rise to names of counties.

The meaning of the names has some interest for the etymologist. The Bannack tribe belongs to the Shoshonean family and derives its name from two Shoshoni words meaning "hair" and "backward motion," from the manner in which the tribe wore a tuft of hair thrown back from the forehead. The name of the county, however, is *Bannock*, rather than *Bannack*. *Kootenai* means "water people," for these Indians lived, virtually, in the water. The *Nez Perce*

⁶ *Idaho: American Guide Series* (New York, 1950), p. 281, and Rees, p. 67. The contour of Gem County resembles that of the state and may have influenced this choice.

⁷ Rees, pp. 68 and 99.

Indians were so called by French-Canadian trappers, one source says because of the custom of piercing their noses; however, this tribe did not practice nose piercing. It is more likely that the correct translation of *Nez Perce* is "pressed nose," as the nose of the Nez Perce is naturally flattened, or compressed. The primitive sign of this tribe, made by seizing the cartilage of the nose between the thumb and index finger of the right hand, lends credence to the latter translation.⁸ Benewah County is named for an old Coeur d'Alene chief. *Oneida*, as explained earlier, comes ultimately from the name of an Iroquois tribe and was brought to Idaho by permanent settlers from New York.

Idaho, *Latah*, *Minidoka*, and *Camas* come from descriptive Indian words. *Idaho* has been interpreted as an Indian expression meaning "light on the mountain," though Rees says that the county was named after the Steamboat *Idaho*, which plied the Columbia River throughout the 1860's.⁹ *Latah* is an acronym of two Nez Perce words: *lakah* "place of the pines" and *tah-ol* "pestle." In tribal days the Nez Perce found a stone in present Benewah County out of which they made pestles for grinding and pulverizing camas roots; pines grew plentifully there. *Minidoka*, Shoshoni for "broad expanse," is especially appropriate, for the county occupies the broadest part of the Snake River plains. And Camas County bears the Chinook name for the edible root found over much of the state, but especially plentiful in this area.

Further examination of the county names in relation to the chronology of their assignment reveals a significant change in the place name patterns, as well as the sophistication of the name-choosing body.¹⁰ This change reflects both a growing pride in statehood and a diminishing influence of Indian nomenclature.

Idaho Territory was established by congressional act in 1863 with four counties: Shoshone, Nez Perce, Idaho, and Ada. The first three of these names are either of Indian origin or name an Indian

⁸ *Nez Perce* is discussed under Indian names primarily because it honors the tribe that gave up its own name for the French designation; it reflects Indian influence. For an explanation of its meaning, see Rees, p. 95.

⁹ Rees, p. 48.

¹⁰ See the following references for the dates and accounts for establishing Idaho counties: *Idaho Encyclopedia*, pp. 210–346; and *The Idaho Almanac*, published by the Idaho Department of Commerce and Development (Boise, Idaho, 1963).

tribe; they were assigned by Washington Territorial Legislature and retained by the newly created Idaho Territory. From 1863–67, Idaho Territorial Legislature established five new counties. Two (Kootenai and Oneida) are of Indian origin, and two (Boise and Owyhee) derive from local incident.

The period from 1867–1890, when Idaho achieved statehood, saw new influences on nomenclature. Problems with the Indians had been fairly well settled, and the gold rush had ushered in a new breed of transients and settlers. With the increased population, establishment of 12 new counties became mandatory, for the seats of government were too far apart. Only one of these, Latah, is of Indian origin; but six are namesakes of famous statesmen and pathfinders – Washington, Lincoln, Bingham, Blaine, Fremont, and Custer; three are descriptive – Bear Lake, Cassia, and Elmore; and one is from *The Book of Mormon*.

Though it was under the administration of Lincoln that the Idaho Territory was established, his name was to be proposed several times before he was to be honored with a namesake. *Lincoln* was proposed in 1879 for the county established as Washington, but the proposal was defeated because the legislators felt that no other president should be honored before the first. Then mindful of the great contribution made by early pathfinders, they named Fremont County after John C. Fremont, who headed a government expedition in 1843–50 to survey routes to the West. Again in 1881, the name *Lincoln* lost to *Custer*, for Custer's last stand and his death at the Battle of Little Big Horn were fresh in the minds of Idaho settlers. Governor Bunn might have chosen *Lincoln* for the name of another county in 1885, when the Territorial Legislature gave him the privilege; however, he chose *Bingham* instead. The same session saw the creation of Blaine County, named after the American statesman the Honorable James G. Blaine. Then 13 days later, when division of Blaine County seemed advisable, Lincoln finally came into his own, for the new county was named in his honor, 22 years after he had exerted considerable influence in establishing the Idaho Territory.

Thus the period of 1867–1890 marks a time of recognition of statesmen, pathfinders, and generals important to the development of the area, and the initiation of names descriptive of certain natural and developmental features. In the next ten years are seen only

two addition to the existing counties, one descriptive (Canyon) and the other Indian (Bannock).

The number of names derived from people of importance to the development of the state rises sharply in the period between 1900 and 1919. Bonner, Caribou, Clark, Jerome, and Franklin reflect local importance; Lewis, Bonneville, Payette, Benewah, and Gooding, state and regional; and Adams, Madison, and Jefferson, national. It seems that Jefferson, who was responsible for acquiring the area for the United States in the first place, was even more flagrantly neglected than was Lincoln, for he was not given a namesake until 1913.

Descriptive titles also assume a new importance during this period. Twin Falls, Clearwater, Teton, Butte, and Valley are topographic names; Boundary, geographical; Gem, a clipped toponym; and Power, Camas, and Minidoka, descriptive. The last two and Bannock and Benewah are the only county names derived from Indian sources after Idaho achieved statehood.

It is obvious that English influence on the nomenclature of Idaho counties has increased in proportion to the growing importance of English-speaking people to the development of the state. In like manner, the influence of French and Indian has decreased, and that of Spanish (indirect by any explanation, the one name being a transfer of a Spanish generic term from the Southwest) disappears altogether. Moreover, the patterns of English-derived names show somewhat more variety than do those from other languages. Spanish, French, and Indian names are either descriptive or commemorative of individuals or tribes, with some influence from local incident. English names, on the other hand, are commemorative of people of local, regional, national, and religious significance; descriptive of topographical, geographical, and man-made features, and of flora and fauna; plus some local incident and one coined word.

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