

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

ELIAS DAVIDSON PIERCE AND THE FOUNDING OF PIERCE

Number 8

Reissued August 1966

E. D. Pierce (1824-1897) was no ordinary prospector. Instead of searching for gold in country that was reasonably accessible, he became obsessed with the opening of a new mining region in the forbidden lands of the Nez Perce Indians. The obstructions to entering the Clearwater country held him back eight years, but finally in 1860 he broke through the Nez Perce barrier. Although he never did much mining in the new districts that resulted from the gold rush which followed his 1860 discoveries, he did have the satisfaction of setting off a mining excitement that soon led to establishment of Idaho Territory--and of Montana as well, for that matter. Pierce seems to have been more interested in fathering a new mining empire than in making a fortune for himself.

A native of Northern Ireland, Pierce came to Virginia in 1839 and to Indiana in 1844. He became an attorney, but soon left Indiana to serve in the Mexican War, after which he joined the forty-niners in the California gold rush. In California, he traveled about as an itinerant trader, although by 1852 he served in the state legislature. That same year, he joined a former Hudson's Bay Company trapper in a trading expedition to the distant Nez Perce Indians, and spent the winter at Lewis and Clark's historic Canoe Camp Site [Ref. Series No. 1] on the Clearwater with a prominent Nez Perce named Wislanaeqa. Satisfied that he was on the border of a great gold region, he tried to arrange a prospecting tour. His efforts, however, got nowhere until after Indian hostilities to the north came to an end in 1858. At last he was able to smuggle a prospecting outfit into Wislanaeqa's camp: on February 20, 1860, he went out panning in the North Fork of the Clearwater with Wislanaeqa and found gold. Dropping his disguise as a trader, he undertook to interest the Indians in allowing the whites to develop the Nez Perce mines.

Indian opposition to exploitation of these Nez Perce mines almost defeated Pierce in his great ambition to prospect the Clearwater region. Most of the settlers around Walla Walla (Pierce's base for operation) were convinced that any trespass of miners on the Nez Perce Reservation would provoke war--and since there were more Indians than whites, they opposed the enterprise.

Although Pierce advertised for prospectors over the Northwest

and California, the party he led from Walla Walla, August 12, 1860, numbered only twelve men, and they had to sneak across the reservation (from which they were excluded by law and by treaty) by a difficult, untraveled route on which they had to spend six weeks to make a one-week trip. The discouraged band finally reached Canal Gulch, September 30, and discovered some very promising placers on Oro Fino Creek during a week's successful prospecting. From then on, nothing could stop the Clearwater gold rush. A second party came in to found the town of Pierce, December 3, 1860, and to prepare for the next mining season.

Hopeful miners rushed to Pierce long before winter snow and high water of the late, wet spring of 1861 disappeared so that mining on any large scale could commence--and by June there were several thousand unemployed gold hunters around Pierce. Many of them were able to work there when the season at last got underway; others went out to discover other rich placers at Elk City and Florence that summer. The district around Pierce itself expanded rapidly, and during the summer a still larger community--Oro Fino City--sprang up two miles away near some rich strikes on Rhodes' Creek. Shoshone County (which had just been established for the Nez Perce miners) grew suddenly into the leading county of Washington Territory by the time that the congressional election was held, July 8, 1861; and Pierce, the county seat, proved to be a permanent community. Oro Fino City lasted only briefly.

Several million dollars in gold eventually came out of the Pierce area. Although the more easily worked deposits were worked out in a few seasons, hundreds of Chinese came in to continue mining in Idaho's oldest camp for years after most of the whites had left. Pierce himself had never been much of a miner, and although he had returned to Pierce with a sawmill in the spring of 1861, he soon left to try to scout out another major gold region. His later searches turned out to be nearly fruitless, and his claim to fame rests upon his drive and perseverance which led to Idaho's original major gold discovery.