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A Brief History of Idaho's Gold Mining

When some people think of Idaho, they only think of it being famous for its potatoes. Gold mining was a big deal in Idaho in the later 1800's and helped shape Idaho into the state it is today.

Gold was first discovered in Idaho in 1860 near Pierce. From 1860–1866, Idaho produced 2.5 million ounces or 19% of all gold in the United States. That's a lot of gold!

In 1860, only about 10,000 people lived in Idaho. By 1890, the end of the Gold Rush, 89,000 people lived there, many who had settled there to mine gold. The population nearly doubled every ten years, helping to create more towns and businesses in those towns, like general stores. For example, towns such as Lewiston and Boise were settled during those years.

Miners were mining gold to become rich very quickly or hit "pay dirt," an expression of that time. Most people, however, did not become rich. Some left the area, and many stayed in Idaho to farm or open other businesses in order to make a living. Towns began to spring up. To be a self-sustaining town, any mining town needed the types of things any town uses: general stores, schools, grocery stores, and eventually services such as hospitals, policemen, and firemen. These provided opportunities for those who couldn't find success with mining.

Today, gold is not the number one mineral mined in Idaho. As the gold deposits disappeared, people searched for other minerals. By the late 1800's, silver, lead, and zinc were discovered in the Coeur d'Alene area. Today, silver and phosphate are the two main minerals produced in Idaho. Almost 45 percent of all silver mined in the United States comes from Idaho.

Review: List two ways gold mining brought change to Idaho.
