

# Silver City

High in the Owyhee Mountains of southwestern Idaho sits a small town of graying buildings and old mining remains. Once a bustling mining town, it is now a summer cabin area undergoing significant restoration efforts. About 50 houses and other buildings remain today. Silver City is a two-hour drive from the Boise area.



## HISTORY

In May 1863, a party of 29 men led by Michael Jordan left Placerville to explore the Owyhee Mountains and search for the lost "blue bucket" gold. On May 18, the party discovered gold at a place along the creek about 6 miles below what was to become Booneville. News of the discovery quickly spread and miners rushed to the area.

The first settlement in the county was Booneville, but it was cramped between steep mountains and never flourished. Ruby City was founded a few miles upstream where there was room to build. By the summer of 1864, Ruby City had a population of 800 people. Silver City was founded another mile upstream and became the primary town in the area due to favorable terrain and close proximity to the major ore discoveries. The town of Fairview was located high on War Eagle Mountain until it burned completely in 1875.

The towns grew quickly as significant gold and silver veins were worked in the surrounding mountains. Millions of dollars of ore were shipped out via freight wagon trains. Thousands of people came to the area. Before long, Silver City boasted a population of 5000 people.

Just as quickly, the towns faded away as the ore gave out and financial support for the mines disappeared. By 1881, mining activity had subsided and the towns began to die. Some mining activity was started again in the 1900's and again in the 1950's. The DeLamar mine to the west of Silver City on Florida Mountain is still active today.



## Some interesting tidbits about the area include:

In the winter of 1867-1868, a dispute over boundaries led the owners of the Ida Elmore mine and the Golden Chariot mine to hire gunmen and fortify their mines. On the morning of March 25, 1868, the Golden Chariot miners broke through into the shaft of the Ida Elmore mine and began shooting. Two miners died before the U. S. Cavalry from Boise calmed the situation.

In 1884, a murdering horse thief named Fred Woodworth, alias Doc Chafee, was in the city jail awaiting trial. Also lodged in the jail was a Chinese man being held on petty theft charges. Not liking the idea of being housed with a Chinaman, Doc Chafee set his mattress on fire to attract the attention of the sheriff. Unfortunately, the sheriff was away from the jail at the time. The fire killed both prisoners.



The new courthouse and jail were built of stone on Washington Street. They served as the county seat until the 1930's when it was moved to Murphy.



There were said to be 18 houses of prostitution operating at one time in Silver City. The red light district stretched along Jordan Street in the vicinity of Long Gulch Creek.

Silver City had the first telegraph service in Idaho when a line was built north from Winnemucca, Nevada in 1874. The line was continued on to Boise in 1875.

The first daily newspaper in Idaho, The Owyhee Avalanche, was started in Silver City in 1874.

A railroad was built from the Boise Valley to Murphy to haul ore. Original plans to continue the railroad to Silver City were never completed as the gold and silver gave out. The railroad was used to haul cattle for a number of years but eventually the tracks were pulled up. The Guffey Bridge over the Snake River still remains and is part of Celebration Park.



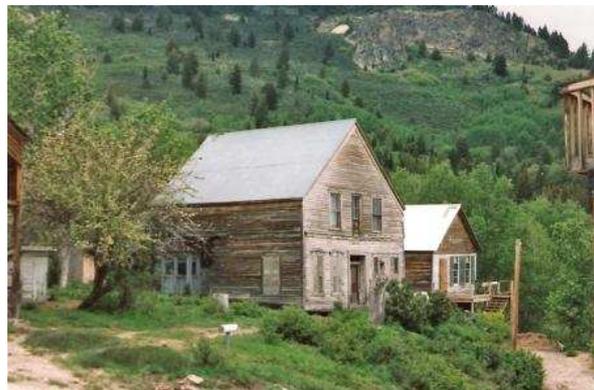
Swan Falls dam was built and electric power was provided to Silver City and the surrounding mines in 1901. Many years later, electric power was disconnected to the town.

A town water system was built which consists of a large tank on the hill west of town for storing water.

The Masonic Lodge straddles Jordan Creek. Early restroom facilities of the lodge simply dropped into the creek.



Some of the buildings have an upstairs door with no outside stairs visible. These doors were used to enter the buildings in the winter when the snow was many feet deep.



The town has three cemeteries. On the east side of the valley is the old pioneer and Chinese cemetery. The Chinese graves are depressions as the bodies were removed and returned to China. On the west side of Jordan Creek downstream from town is the protestant cemetery. Below it is the masonic cemetery.



The two small rock buildings along the road north of town are powder vaults. Gunpowder and explosives used in mining were stored here, away from the people of town in case of an accident.



Services are still held several times a year at Our Lady of Tears Catholic Church. It has an active support organization and has recently undergone major renovations and improvements such as new stained glass windows and new pews.



The Stoddard Mansion sits partway up the hill on the east side of town. It's ornate gingerbread trim made it one of the fanciest houses of it's day when it was built in 1872. The Stoddard Mansion was richly furnished and elaborately decorated. Each room had wall-to-wall carpeting and wallpaper on the walls and ceilings. In the late 1800's, Colonel Dewey built his house directly in front of the Stoddard Mansion, deliberately blocking their view of the city.



## WHAT THERE IS TO SEE TODAY

Nothing remains of many of the towns and mine sites of the area. Some have foundations, some have collapsed buildings. Tailings piles and tunnels mark many of the mine sites. The heavy winter snows have taken their tolls on the buildings of the area.

Silver City is the exception. Silver City is a reviving town of old buildings and history. There are about 50 buildings which are still standing, many of which are being restored and improved. The pictures above show some of these buildings. The old church and the schoolhouse have undergone major renovations in recent years and are now in excellent shape. It is a popular summer cabin area and a weekend destination for tourists and four-wheelers who ride the numerous old mining roads covering the mountains.

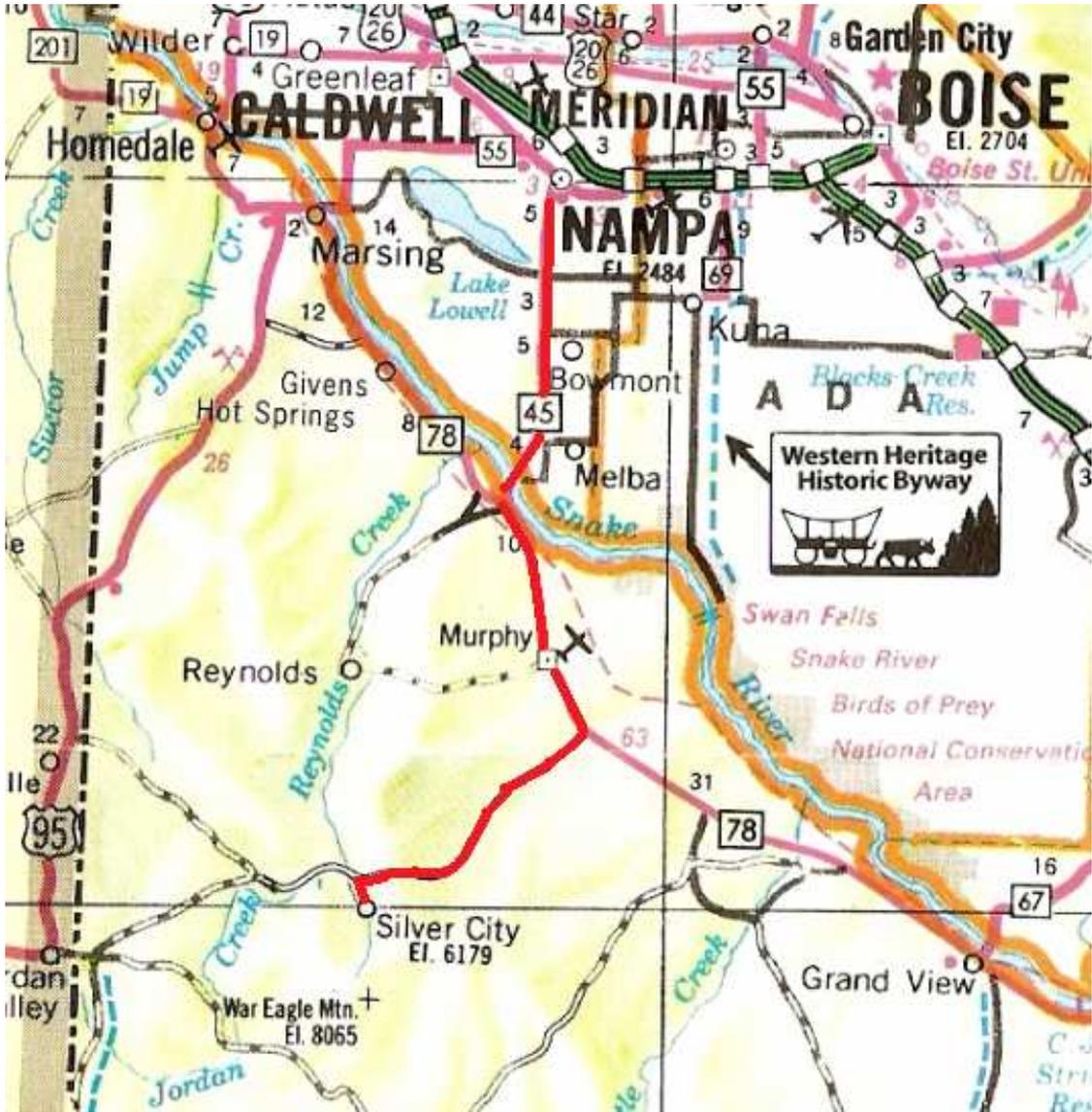
There are many cemeteries in the area dating back to the 1860's. These are available at Silver City, Ruby City, Fairview, Flint, De Lamar and Wagontown. Many have been fenced to keep cattle out and are maintained by groups such as the Owyhee County Historical Society.

## DIRECTIONS FROM BOISE AND NAMPA

Silver City is approximately 75 miles from Boise. It will require a two-hour drive, the first hour is on paved roads, the second hour is on a dirt road. Cars can be taken into Silver City but high clearance vehicles would be preferred. Four-wheel-drive is not required when the roads are dry.

- Go south on Highway 45 from Nampa.
- Cross the Snake River at Walters Ferry and turn left on Highway 78
- Go through Murphy. The Owyhee County Historical Museum is an excellent museum containing many displays, books, and a small gift shop. It is located one block south of the highway in Murphy.
- Turn right at Milepost 34.1. There are historical marker signs and a sign for Silver City at this intersection.
- Silver City is 20 miles from the highway. The first 7.4 miles are paved, the remaining distance is over a narrow, winding mountain dirt road. This road is usually snow-covered until it is plowed by the highway department for Memorial Day weekend.
- The road crosses the desert before descending and crossing Sinker Creek. The rock wall remains of an old stage station can be found on the east side of the crossing.
- The road then climbs the mountains and crests New York Summit before descending to the Jordan Creek valley floor. At the bottom is an intersection. Silver City is one mile to the left.
- There is an outhouse at the Ruby City intersection. Additional outhouses are available in Silver City on the south end of town by the creek and on the east side of town near the schoolhouse.

A section of the Idaho State Highway Map detailing the route to Silver City in red is shown on the next page.



Portion of Idaho State Highway Map

All materials and pictures from Jerry Eichhorst unless otherwise noted.

©2008