

## [Idaho History](#)

### **Early Owyhee County, like 19th century America, was a melting pot of nationalities**

“Owyhee County Chinese worked at many domestic chores including laundering.” Provided by Arthur Hart



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The 1870 U.S. Census for Owyhee County reminds us that it, like the nation, was a melting pot of people from all over the world. Had you visited there that year, you would have heard many languages being spoken. If you had asked one of the German speakers where he was born,

however, he was unlikely to say Germany, but would name one of the small kingdoms, grand duchies or principalities that made up the German states at that time – states that would band together in January 1871 to form a new German Empire under the leadership of Prussia.

Census takers in Owyhee County in 1870 recorded 116 German speakers, 46 of them from Prussia, followed by natives of Bavaria, 22; Baden, 10; Hanover, 8; Wurttemberg, 4; Saxony, 4; Hessen, 4; Bremen, 3; and Hamburg, 2.

Chinese probably outnumbered any other foreign-born nationality in the county in 1870, but since the census takers spoke little or no Chinese, the results were usually inaccurate and sometimes amusing. “Ah Topsy,” 35, was listed as a domestic in the household of two white miners, one of them from Ireland. “Ah Jim” kept house for two other miners. These are not their Chinese names, of course, but what they were called by whites. The “Ah” syllable preceding the names of most Chinese in the census probably means simply “that one is,” or “he is.”

Chinese men would have had to work for very low wages, probably little more than room and board — for which they would have done the cooking. Thirteen others were listed as “cook.” Fourteen were listed as “house servant” or “domestic,” and only six as “miner.”

A later compilation of that 1870 census by Idaho genealogists notes simply “all Chinese” at 15 different addresses, without listing individuals. An exception notes that Ah Kee, 18; Ah Lee, 22; Yen Hong, 24; Kopp Yet, 27; and Kong Hee, 29, all boarded with a married couple from Ireland named Peter and Mary Conners, two of the 140 Irish-born in the county. Other nationalities recorded were England, 93; Sweden, 16; Wales, 11; Scotland, 11; France, 10; Australia, 6; Holland, 6; Denmark, 5; Norway, 4; and Switzerland, 4. Most surprising, perhaps, was one person born in Palestine. Emuel Groeper, 28, was a miner, by far the occupation followed by most of the men in Owyhee County in 1870.

Mining in Owyhee County in those days was the major activity, and the census lists these precincts or districts: Wagon Town, Booneville, Silver City, Orofino, Reynolds Creek, Catherine Creek, Bruneau and Snake River.”

In the horse-powered world of 1870 it is not surprising to find listings for teamsters, stage drivers, saddle and harness makers, wheelwrights, plus a dozen blacksmiths whose work included shoeing horses and repairing wagons.

Women mentioned in the census of 1870 were nearly all wives and mothers, usually listed as “keeping house.” Female children were listed merely as “at home.” Elizabeth Orendorf, 33, was a milliner and dressmaker from Ohio. Jane Stewart, 48, kept a boarding house – assisted by her 17-year-old daughter Josephine – for 10 men who worked in a quartz mill.

No prostitutes are listed in the Owyhee County census for 1870, but we know from news reports of the time that there were several.

Some 200 soldiers were stationed at Camp Three Forks in the southwestern part of the county. It was a U.S. military post established on Sept. 26, 1866, during the Snake War, fought by the

Army against hostile Western Shoshone, Northern Paiute and Bannock Indians who lived along Snake River, and were called “Snakes” by white settlers.

The post was under the command of Captain and Brevet Colonel John J. Coppenger, a native of Ireland. His officers were 1st Lt. Lafayette Hammond from Pennsylvania, 2nd Lt. J. B. MeDermont from the District of Columbia, and Edward Colmanche, surgeon, USA, a native of France. The soldiers themselves had come from 10 different countries in search of the opportunities that made America unique among nations. Some of their descendants likely live in Idaho today.

Arthur Hart writes this column on Idaho history for the Idaho Statesman each Sunday. Email [histnart@gmail.com](mailto:histnart@gmail.com).

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