



**December 23, 2008**

## **Idaho History: Emmett is named for the son of an Irish patriot**

First in a series.

Boise attorney Thomas D. Cahalan was born in Ireland in 1841, at a time when Robert Emmett was remembered by all Irish patriots as the great martyr to the cause of Irish independence. Emmett led a failed uprising against the English in September, 1803, and was captured, tried, and hanged.

His eloquent farewell speech from the gallows ranks with American patriot Nathan Hale's "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country," delivered before his own execution by the English in 1775.

Emmett Lee Cahalan was born in Idaho in May 1869. His proud father named a new post office in lower Payette Valley "Emmettsville" after him. Soon after, the Cahalans moved to Boise, where Tom Cahalan had a successful law practice until his death in 1918. Emmett, the son, was a farmer. He lived until 1935.

The human history of the Emmett area goes back at least 12,000 years to an age when prehistoric hunters tracked down and killed animals that have now been extinct for at least 8,000 years, among them woolly mammoths, giant bison and saber-toothed cats.

American Indians in Idaho continued to hunt and gather food in the lower Payette Valley until the beginning of the 20th century.

The first whites to explore the area of present Emmett appeared in the 1820s, when Peter Skene Ogden, Alexander Ross and others led brigades of fur trappers along the Payette River.

In 1862, the first wagon train of settlers was led over Freezeout Hill into the valley by Tim Goodale on what became a northern alternate of the Oregon Trail. They forded the Payette River about where Emmett is today, and in 1864, Nathaniel Martin and Jonathon Smith established a ferry at that place.

The first settlement there was called Martinsville, but by 1876 the Idaho Statesman was publishing letters from correspondents at Emmettsville, proudly describing the progress the place was making.

As with most frontier communities, saloons were among the first businesses to open in Emmettsville.

The Statesman printed a letter from there in January 1882, reporting on the anti-saloon movement. "We have a Good Templar's Lodge in our midst. The present membership is 31. It has done a world of good already, and is liable to be of great good to the neighborhood. May it flourish forever!"

The 1880 federal census for the area lists only two saloon keepers. The vast majority of those counted in the valley that year were farmers, and it was apparent that Emmett's prosperity would depend on agriculture. There were seven men in the livestock business, including herders, three blacksmiths, a barber, a hotel keeper, a shoe maker, a carpenter, a druggist, a hostler and a school teacher.

The largest number of these people were born in the Midwest, followed by those from the East, the South and the West. There were 44 foreign-born people, of which 15 were Chinese, eight were Scandinavian, six were German, six were Irish and three were English.

In June 1883, the Statesman reported, "Several parties from the Payette Valley have been here during the week, and all are highly elated with the prospects of Emmettsville and surrounding country. The water has been secured and the preliminary surveys made for a couple of ditches which will take water from the Payette about four miles above the town, and convey it over the extensive fertile plains on each side of the river. To facilitate the flow of water, the Payette will be dammed at the point of emergence. The effect of this enterprise and other improvements going on will be to make Emmettsville a lovely inland town, and to build up a rich and prosperous settlement around it."

In 1884, it was estimated that the 18 buildings under construction would double the size of the town. Among the new additions were lodge halls for the Masons and the Odd Fellows.

A correspondent reported that "the beautiful and substantial bridge that spans the river at this point is a godsend to the traveling public as well as the settlers. The wisdom of the county commissioners in selecting this as the site for the bridge was shown this spring. While the Boise bridge was out, and the one at Caldwell almost impossible owing to the high water on each side, the bridge in our city was just as sure and steady as at any season of the year."

The next year, 1885, the town's name was changed from Emmettsville to Emmett.

Next week, I will share more of the town's history and how it became a county seat.

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**December 30, 2008**

## **Idaho History: Early Emmett residents encouraged to 'dig the ditch'**

Second in a series

Emmett was built near the site of a ford across the Payette River, which later was followed by a ferry and finally by a bridge.

It was on the main trail that gold seekers followed into Idaho City and other Boise Basin towns. Located in the heart of fertile farm land, it needed only irrigation to make it productive.

Cattle and sheep ranchers grazed their animals over several thousand acres. They settled their homes and ranches in the valley, close to Emmett, which was the supply center.

At the end of the spring roundup in June 1884 the cattle industry was thriving. One cattle buyer came to Emmett and bought 1,500 head for an average price of \$25 each.

He had purchased some local ranchers' entire herds and was looking for more.

The Oregon Short Line Railroad across southern Idaho was finished that season, but most cattle still were driven overland to Cheyenne, Wyo.; Omaha, Neb.; and Chicago. A flock of 7,000 sheep passed through Emmett that summer bound for Nebraska. They had been driven from Umatilla, Ore., and appeared to be in fine condition, according to a local observer.

When a representative of the Idaho Statesman visited Emmett in September 1887, he described the stagecoach ride from Boise as "pleasant," despite the fact that it took five hours.

"After delivering the U.S. Mail at the post office we were driven to the only hotel in town over which ye genial landlord, Mr. David Murray presides, assisted, especially at meal times, by his better half, Mrs. Murray, and their sweet daughter, who is always busy in trying to make guests happy.

"Emmett, as well as the surrounding country, is slowly but surely improving and being built up, and, had they a ditch of water taken out some five or six miles above town, which, by the way, is called the head of the valley, and run along the foot of the hills for a distance of ten miles, it would, if large enough to carry enough water to properly irrigate all of the land, make a regular boom for this place.

"It would prove a great blessing to many and a good investment for all concerned, if the citizens of the town and surrounding country would unite their strength and dig the ditch."

After enumerating Emmett's advantages, its principal businesses, and leading citizens, the writer returned to the theme of irrigation: "I will say that when the Payette Valley, on both sides of the Payette River, has been properly supplied with ditches from the river, it will prove to be the finest agricultural district that can be found in Idaho Territory."

Emmett was in Ada County when the Idaho Directory for 1889-1890 was published. The Idaho Legislature created Canyon County out of the western part of Ada County in March 1891, shifting Emmett's status as county seat to Caldwell.

In 1915, Gem County was formed with Emmett as the county seat, and two years later Payette County was created out of the western part of Gem County.

In 1889 Emmett had about 250 people, a Methodist and an Episcopal church, one saloon, one hotel, two sawmills and a sash-and-door factory. Annual log drives down the Payette fed raw material to the mills and the factory.

The years of important and coordinated irrigation ditch digging were just ahead, and would continue for another decade. In 1893, the Wilson Ditch was extended a dozen miles down the valley to Falk's Store and to several homestead claims in that area.

Falk's Store, a branch of the Falk Brothers' pioneer Boise department store, was a small settlement as well as a store, with a school and a few houses. It was once an important stopping point along the trail through the valley, but no trace of it remains today.

In January 1894, the survey for a canal system to cover 20,000 acres of land on the north side of the Payette River west of Emmett was begun.

The Statesman reported that "The plan is to form a stock company to be composed of actual settlers and users of water for irrigation purposes and to permit those who desire to do so to aid in the construction, either by work or by payment of cash, and to receive for the same a corresponding amount of stock in the company."

As elsewhere in the American West in those years, the farmers' cooperative movement got many worthy projects completed that would not have been possible before the U.S. Reclamation Act of 1902 was passed by Congress.

Next week I'll share some highlights of Emmett's 20th century history: the arrival of a railroad, the creation of a fruit farming empire, and a baseball team called the Emmett Prune Pickers.

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