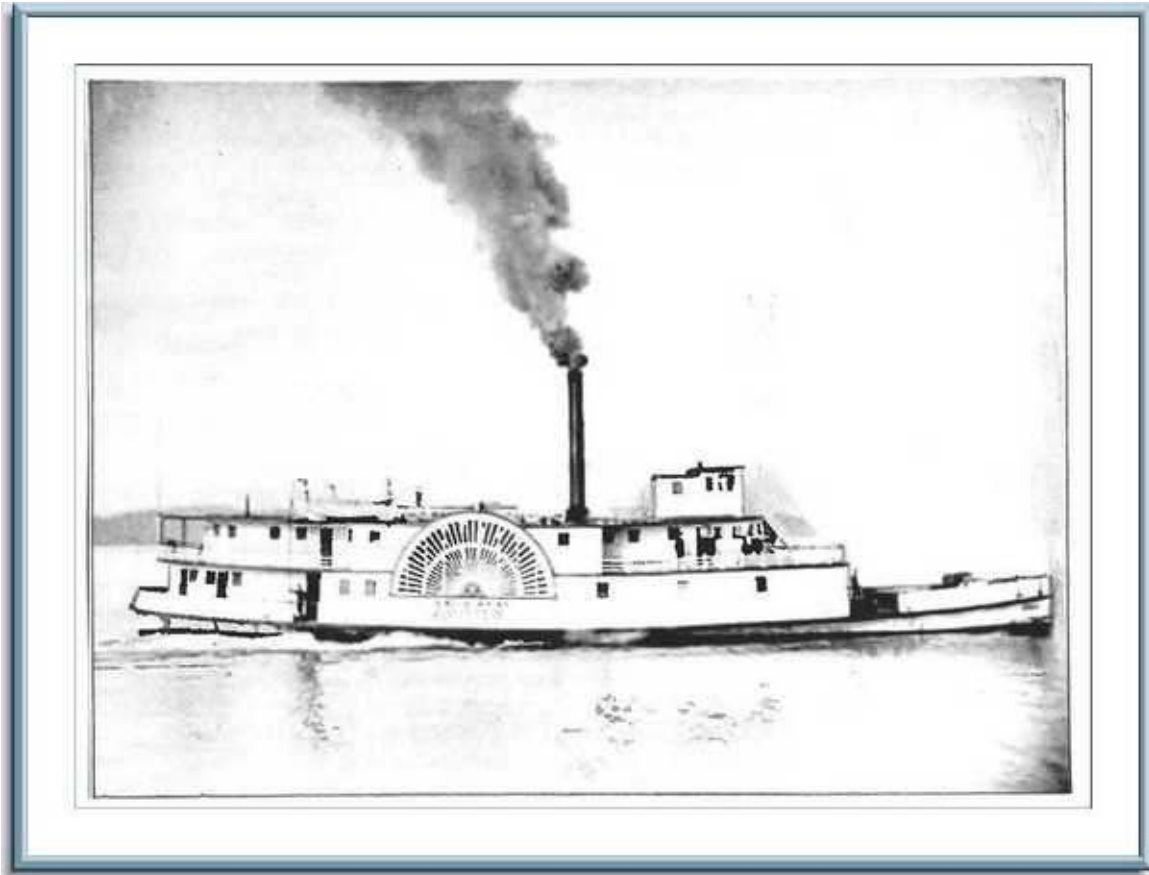


August 26, 2008

Idaho history: 'The greatest liar this country ever produced'



Provided by Idaho State Historical Society

The steamboat Idaho was active on the Columbia River before Joaquin Miller ever came to Idaho.

H.T. French, in his 1914 "History of Idaho," wrote: "Authorities do not agree as to the derivation and meaning of the word Idaho. The late Joaquin Miller, the 'Poet of the Sierras,' insistently proclaimed that on one of his visits to Idaho in the pioneer days he made a prospecting trip in company with Colonel Craig, whose name is prominent in connection with early mining operations in the state. In an account of this trip Miller has written as follows:

" 'For reasons sufficient to the old mountaineer we set out at night and climbed and crossed Craig's mountain by moonlight. As we approached the edge of Camas Prairie,

then a land almost unknown, but now made famous by the battlefields of Chief Joseph, we could see through the open pines a faint far light on the great black and white mountain beyond the valley. 'I-dah-ho' shouted our Indian guide in the lead, as he pointed to the break of dawn on the mountains before us. The exclamation, its significance, the occasion and all conspired to excite deep pleasure, for I had already written something on this name and its poetical import, and made a sort of glossary embracing eleven dialects. (It is) Strangely like 'Look there!' or 'Lo light!' is this exclamation, and precisely with that meaning.

" I do not know whether this Indian guide was Nez Perce, Shoshone, Cayuse or from one of the many other tribes that had met and melted into this half-civilized people first named. Neither can I say certainly at this remote date whether he applied the word I-dah-ho to the mountain as a permanent and established name, or used the word to appoint the approach of dawn; but I do know that this mountain that had become famous in a night and was now the objective point of ten thousand pilgrims, became at once known to the world as I-dah-ho.' "

It is typical of Miller that he made extravagant claims, none more so than that he had made "a sort of glossary embracing eleven dialects." This surely is fiction: He did not have the education to do anything of the sort.

We do know that the word "Idaho" was in use at least a year before Miller reached the Idaho mines and began creating his fanciful explanations of its meaning. A steamboat named Idaho was hauling men and supplies up the Columbia River en route to the Idaho mines in 1860, and the town of Idaho Springs, Colo., had been established.

Joaquin Miller, however, never let the facts stand in the way of a good story, and if nobody knew the facts, so much the better. It gave free range to his vivid imagination. Even his friend and supporter Ambrose Bierce, one of America's truly important writers, once called him "the greatest liar this country has ever produced."

By the 1880s. Miller's critics probably outnumbered his admirers, for the quality of his poetry did not live up to the celebrity he had achieved.

In October 1889, one of his detractors wrote: "When Joaquin Miller gets through claiming to have named, discovered or originated everything on the Pacific Coast, which time will probably be coincident with his death, there will be more attention paid to those who knew about these things when the romancing mock poet was in short pants."

As late as 1938, when the 14th Edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica was published, it quoted Joaquin Miller almost verbatim on the origin and meaning of the word Idaho. Once in print in a publication as prestigious as the Britannica, fiction like Joaquin Miller's is hard to correct.

So, what does the word Idaho really mean? Our late state historian Merle Wells, the first professional scholar to research the subject in depth, was fond of explaining that, "If you make up an Indian word, you can have it mean anything you want."

Wells traced the history of the first use of the word in 1860 to its application to the new Territory of Idaho in 1863. It is a tangled tale, too intricate to be quoted here, but you can search the Web for "the name Idaho," or you can pick up a copy at the Idaho History Center on Old Penitentiary Road.

We may never know for sure who actually coined the pseudo-Indian word, but it certainly was not the "Poet of the Sierras" Joaquin Miller.

Arthur Hart writes this column on Idaho history for the Idaho Statesman. Reach him by e-mail at life@idahostatesman.com.