

History of Alturas County

The Original County

In 1870, Alturas County was one of the largest counties in Idaho Territory and had been established February 4, 1864 at the first session of the Idaho Territorial Legislature. At that time it covered an area larger than the combined states of Maryland, New Jersey and Delaware. Yet, this important County in the early history of Idaho was destined to disappear completely from the records, with its official demise occurring in 1895.

The name "Alturas" is a Spanish word meaning "mountain summit", or more generally "height" or "loftiness." But it is thought that the idea of "mountainous heights" or "mountain summits" was behind the naming of this particular area "Alturas" considering that the Sawtooth Range was within the original Alturas County boundaries.

Until 1880 most of the settlement of this vast county was confined to the adjacent mining camps of Rocky Bar and Atlanta. Rocky Bar was the County seat from April 4, 1864 until July 6, 1882. Rocky Bar lies present Elmore County and is readily accessible by paved road. Most of the population of Alturas County in the early days was concentrated around Rocky Bar and Atlanta. Little is left of Rocky Bar, but Atlanta still retains quite a few buildings. Atlanta is located in present Elmore County but must be reached by winding mountain roads. After the mining rush of the early 1880's the population shifted to the Wood River area near Hailey and Bellevue and Hailey became the County seat. Today, records of Alturas county are preserved at Hailey, Idaho now the County seat of Blaine County.

In the early 1880's the process of breaking up Alturas County began and was bitterly contested in the succeeding sessions of the legislature until the final breakup in 1895. One of the first counties to be formed from Custer County in 1881 which obtained the major portion of its territory from Alturas County. In 1889, Elmore and Logan Counties were established from Alturas County. Bellevue, only 5 miles from Hailey, was the County Seat for Logan County. Two years later, in 1891, the State Legislature attempted to return the Bellevue area to Alturas County by replacing Alturas and Logan Counties with two new counties to be known as Alta and Lincoln Counties, but the Idaho Supreme Court decreed against this move. Then in 1895 the Legislature combined Alturas and Logan Counties temporarily into a county called "Blaine." Two weeks later Blaine County was divided into Blaine and Lincoln Counties with Hailey, the former County seat of Alturas County, now being the County seat for Blaine County and Shoshone being the County seat for Lincoln County. In effect, the name of Alturas County was changed to Blaine.

The following counties of present day Idaho are made up completely of territory once lying within the boundaries of Alturas County: Blaine, Butte, Camas, Elmore, Gooding, Jerome, Lincoln, and Minidoka. Of these counties, Blaine, Elmore and Lincoln were formed directly from Alturas County. Present day Clark, Custer and Jefferson Counties occupy territory that was mostly within the original Alturas County. Those with lesser yet still large portions originating in Alturas County are Bingham, Bonneville and Power Counties. Those with small portions coming from Alturas County are Boise, Fremont and Lemhi Counties. In a sense the original Alturas County was the mother of Idaho Counties.

The 1870 Census of Alturas County lists 689 individuals of whom 357 are Chinese. There were 240 dwellings, but only 63 were listed as family dwellings. Thus we can visualize how sparsely settled this County was at that time and before the mining rush that came ten years later.

