

**Historical Summary: Society and Economy
in Clark County, Idaho**

by
Aaron Harp

Cooperative Extension Rural Sociologist
Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology
University of Idaho

A. E. Extension Series No. 98-07
June 18, 1998

This Research funded by:

- ❖ *Clark County Commissioners*
- ❖ *Clark County Stock Growers*
- ❖ *U.S. Sheep Station ARS - USDA*
- ❖ *Forest Service, USDA*
- ❖ *Bureau of Land Management*
- ❖ *University of Idaho Cooperative Extension System*

Executive Summary

This report summarizes some of the local economic and social history of Clark County, Idaho. It reports on a small part of a larger research effort. A community survey, a limited social history, personal interviews and regional input/output (I/O) model for the county were used to frame the relationship between economy and society. The I/O model made use of enterprise and household data gathered through personal interviews. This data was incorporated into the model and linked to the social data to draw some core findings about how the county might best address its future. These core findings are:

- The county continues to rely primarily on agriculture for its social and economic bases. Historic links to agriculture remain strong, while activities such as mining and timber have been virtually eliminated in the county.
- Isolation and a lack of economic infrastructure hamper economic development efforts in the county. For example, significant recreation activities take place in Clark County, but the number and distribution of retail and service businesses that might capture dollars from those activities are very limited.
- Food and product processing in the agriculture sector have in significant impacts on the local economy. These businesses employ a large workforce relative to the total workforce in the county. In addition, they are greatly responsible for attracting and employing a growing Latino workforce in the Dubois area. This population change is affecting local school enrollments.
- Public land management policies continue to directly affect the social and economic well being of people in the county. Grazing, travel access, and recreational opportunities [both for local people and as a potential business opportunity] are tied directly to decisions made by agencies such as Idaho Fish and Game, the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management. The society and economy of Clark County are defined historically and as well as currently through their proximity to public lands.

This report provides a summary of some additional social and economic findings not reported elsewhere.

Introduction

"Clark County constitutes the northeastern fringe of southeastern Idaho. It likewise forms the border of a mountainous and desert country. This is still the holdout of the cowboy. It is a region of mud lakes, hot springs, ice caves, and volcanic craters" (Beal, 1942:197).



M. D. Beal described Clark County, Idaho over sixty five years ago. Its geographic position and natural landscape have not changed much since that time. This report summarizes how Clark County has fared since the 1920's. To carry out this assessment, the relationship between economic activities like cattle ranching and social life in Clark County are examined. Brief historic sketches are used to illustrate how the current social organization of the county is reflected in past economic and social developments. The social and economic history of Clark County can best be described

as a slow draining of the population into a few small areas and the contraction of economic activity into a few sectors with limited retail and service support in the county. Only with the expansion of irrigated agriculture over the last 25 years and its corresponding processing sectors has Clark County begun to see significant economic change.

This report has two general parts. First, the evolution of social organization in Clark County is discussed as a problem of population and economic activity. Second, the current economy is briefly discussed as it relates to this social history of the county.

Population and the Distribution of Economic Activity

Carved out of Fremont County in 1919, Clark County's population reached its peak sometime during the 1920s. The 1920 Census found 1,886 people in the county; the population has dropped every Census since then. Table 1 displays the population of the county relative to surrounding counties for Census years from 1920 to 1990. The 1990 population of Clark County was almost 60 percent lower than that of 1920. In the region, both Butte and Teton county populations were less in 1990 than in 1920. Table 2 indicates that Teton County population has increased rapidly since 1990 while Clark County is growing steadily for the first time since the 1970s.

In spite of this current growth, Clark County continues to be the least populated county in Idaho, with an estimated 1997 population of 837. This produces an extraordinarily low population density of 0.47/square mile. The distribution of this population in 1990 is displayed in Table 3. The city of Dubois accounts for the majority of the county population. The western half of the county accounts for most of the remaining population. The city of Spencer and the eastern half of the county remain sparsely populated. This population distribution reflects a seventy year trend in Clark County.

The initial population of Clark County was spread out over more than a half dozen small communities or populated areas such as Kilgore, Idmon, Spencer, Humphrey, Edie, Winsper, and Jacoby. This distribution of population reflected an economy built on ranching and farming, with sporadic mining and timber operations. Montana ranchers settled in the Medicine Lodge drainage in the 1880s to graze cattle. Sawmills operated in many of the canyons across the northern tier of Clark County from the 1870s through the 1950s, and a few were located in the towns of Spencer and Dubois (Stoddard, n.d.).

From the 1880s into the early 1900s, irrigation developed throughout much of Idaho, including Clark County. The growth of irrigation in the county can be seen in Table 4. Irrigated acres from Camas Creek and Medicine Lodge drainage increased dramatically from 1902 to 1919. According to Idaho Historical Records Survey (1940:6), "unusually heavy rainfall" in 1916 created a false impression that this area could sustain dry land grain farms: "For a short while this

area enjoyed a dry-farming prosperity, several bumper crops were harvested, and large elevators were established at Dubois." Attracted by the unusual rainfall and high grain prices due to World War I, farmers moved in and established dry farms and homes. This influx undoubtedly pushed the Clark County population to its peak in 1920. This brief agricultural boom fell apart in the early 1920's. To a great extent Clark County has never recovered either in terms of population or the diversity of its economy.

We can track this contraction with Census data from the 1920s and 1930s. The number of irrigated acres in 1902 and 1919 for the three main watershed in the county are presented in Table 4. Acres decreased around Beaver Creek, increased in Medicine Lodge, and exploded around Camas Creek. But, by 1930, the structure of agriculture had changed dramatically. Table 5 indicates that the number of farms fell to 124 in 1930 from 398 in 1920. The number of irrigated farms dropped to 88 from 99 for the same period. Farms with irrigation might survive the agricultural depression of the 1920s, but those without were unlikely to do so. Total farm acreage in Clark County fell by 50,000 acres from 1920 to 1930: by 1930, 71 percent of the remaining farms were irrigated. Irrigated acres peaked around 19,000 in 1920. But at the same time, the irrigation structure contracted. In Table 6, the number of diversions and miles of main ditch fell significantly from 1920 to 1930. Finally, the incidence of farm tenancy increased greatly during this period. Table 7 displays the percent of farms operated by someone other than the owner for 1920, 1925, and 1930. A small fraction of farmers were tenants in 1920. By 1930, this had increased to just over 20 percent.

The short grain boom was followed by a general agricultural depression. Many farmers left Clark County without waiting to patent their land (Idaho Historical Records Survey 1940). The population of the county fell by over 40 percent from 1920 to 1930 (see Table 8). With the exception of Birch Creek and Spencer, all county precincts experienced dramatic declines in population in the 1920s. Winsper and Jacoby all but disappeared. Rural schools closed as farm families left the county. The schools at Cottonwood, Midway, Winsper, Jacoby, as well as others, closed their doors during this period (Stoddard, 1995). To this day, Dubois is the only area that has a population even close to its 1920 population.

By the time World War II ended, the farm economy in Clark County had recovered somewhat. In Table 9 we can see that more land was in production, farm size had increased dramatically, cattle and sheep numbers were up, and tenancy had fallen below 10 percent. But the decline in population continued. The number of schools in Clark County was already dwindling by this time. The school at Humphrey closed after 1942, Medicine Lodge in 1948, Idmon in 1951. Schools in Spencer, Kilgore, Edie and Birch Creek held on into the 1950s and early 1960s. These developments during the 1920s and 1930s set the stage for the current economic and social situation of Clark County.

Current Economy and Social Organization

Clark County remains an agricultural and ranching community. The scale of agriculture remains large. Table 10 indicates that the average farm and ranch is still over 3,300 acres, down from about 3,800 in 1982. Agriculture in Clark County is divided up into two distinct production systems: irrigated farming and ranching.

The development of groundwater irrigation over the last 25 years has moved the agricultural base further into irrigated potatoes, hay, and wheat. In Table 11 we see that over half of the farms in Clark County are irrigated. These are also irrigating large acreage: about 70 percent of the farms irrigate over 260 acres, with many irrigating over 1,000 acres. A direct result of this development is that a fresh potato packing shed, a potato dehydration plant, and a hay compression facility provide the majority of non-farm jobs in Clark County. The development of the food processing industry has slowly increased the Latino population in Clark County. The percent of the county population that is Hispanic increase to 11.6% in 1996 from 10.4% in 1990 (Table 12). This has contributed to the population increase in the county and has impacted the enrollment in the school system.

The second major production system in Clark County is cow/calf ranch operations. Cattle and sheep numbers for the county are presented in Table 13. Cattle numbers peaked sometime in the 1980s, and have declined since. Sheep numbers have declined since 1982. These industries are deeply rooted in the Clark County community. Sheep once dominated the ranch economy, with Spencer serving as a railroad shipping terminal for large livestock operations.

Sheep numbers nationwide have fallen in recent years, and Clark County is no exception. Cattle numbers have fallen as well. One important caveat about how ranch operations function in the local economy is that many operators using both private and public grazing do not live in the county. They run cattle on forage in Clark County for part of the year, and then remove them to Fremont, Jefferson and other counties. This situation and the relationship between ranch operators and the public land agencies will determine the future of the industry.

Table 1: Clark and Surrounding Counties, Population 1920 to 1990.

COUNTY	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	Change 1920- 1990
STATE	431,681	445,031	524,873	588,637	667,191	713,015	944,127	1,011,904	134.4%
Bonneville	17,501	19,664	25,697	30,210	46,906	52,457	65,980	72,603	314.9%
Butte	2,940	1,934	1,877	2,722	3,498	2,925	3,342	2,916	-0.8%
Clark	1,886	1,122	1,005	918	915	741	798	758	-59.8%
Fremont	10,380	9,924	10,304	9,351	8,679	8,710	10,813	10,943	5.4%
Jefferson	9,441	9,171	10,762	10,495	11,672	11,740	15,304	16,615	76.0%
Madison	9,167	8,316	9,186	9,156	9,417	13,452	19,480	23,752	159.1%
Teton	3,921	3,573	3,601	3,204	2,639	2,351	2,897	3,460	-11.8%

Table 2: Clark and Surrounding Counties, Population Estimates, 1990 to 1997.

	1990 ¹	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	% Change 1990-1997
<i>STATE</i>	1,011,893	1,038,870	1,066,457	1,101,086	1,135,380	1,164,887	1,187,597	1,210,232	19.6%
Bonneville	72,604	75,017	77,128	78,277	79,153	79,478	79,477	80,294	10.6%
Butte	2,916	2,871	2,957	3,017	3,093	3,085	3,124	3,141	7.7%
Clark	758	772	820	815	840	829	820	837	10.4%
Fremont	10,941	11,187	11,263	11,627	11,585	11,599	11,583	11,818	8.0%
Jefferson	16,616	16,975	17,482	17,912	18,413	18,644	18,841	18,942	14.0%
Madison	23,754	23,567	23,952	23,878	23,634	23,696	23,443	23,508	-1.0%
Teton	3,460	3,610	3,912	4,098	4,420	4,850	5,146	5,310	53.5%

¹ 1990 Census of Population revised estimate.

Table 3: Clark County Census Places and Subdivisions, 1990.

	Persons	Families	Households
Dubois city	420	114	159
West Clark division (not in Dubois)	242	60	69
Spencer city	11	4	7
East Clark division (not in Spencer)	89	17	38

Table 4: Clark County Irrigated Acres, 1902 and 1919.

	1902	1919	Change
Camas Creek	4107	17490	325.9%
Beaver Creek	2330	1502	-35.5%
Medicine Lodge	3225	5019	55.6%

Source: 1920 Census of Population.

Table 5: Clark County Irrigated Farms, 1920 and 1930.

	1920	1930
All Farms	398	124
Irrigated Farms	99	88
<i>% Farms Irrigated</i>	24.9%	71.0%
Total Farm Acres	183,006	133,299
Irrigated Farm Acres	18,851	16,292
<i>% Acres Irrigated</i>	10.3%	12.2%

Source: Census of Agriculture, 1930.

Table 6: Clark County Irrigation Structure, 1920 and 1930.

	Camas Creek		Beaver Creek		Medicine Lodge	
	1920	1930	1920	1930	1920	1930
Diversions	81	37	27	9	62	35
Storage Dams	6	2	1	1	1	-
Main Ditch (miles)	165	90	23	17	61	10
Wells	-	15	-	-	-	-
Pump Plants	9	8	-	-	-	-

Source: Census of Agriculture, 1930.

Table 7: Clark County Farm Tenancy, 1920, 1925, and 1930.

Year	% Farmer Tenants
1920	1.8%
1925	10.0%
1930	20.2%

Source: Census of Agriculture, 1930.

Table 8: Clark County Population by Minor Civil Division, 1920 and 1930.

	1920	1930	Change 1920 to 1930
Birch Creek	26	55	111.5%
Dubois Precinct	739	378	-48.8%
Edie	53	41	-22.6%
Humphrey	161	59	-63.4%
Idmon ¹ & Kilgore	316	153	-51.6%
Jacoby	77	17	-77.9%
Medicine Lodge	224	150	-33.0%
Spencer	144	226	56.9%
Winsper	73	12	-83.6%
Other	73	31	-57.5%
Total	1,886	1,122	-40.5%

Source: 1930 Census of Population.

¹ Idmon was counted with Kilgore in the 1920 Census; they were summed for the 1930 totals.

Table 9: Clark County Farms, 1940 and 1945

	1940	1945	Change
All Farms	113	98	-13.3%
Proportion of Land in Farms	13.5%	20.2%	49.6%
Total Farm Acres	151,516	226,563	49.5%
Average Size (acres)	1,341	2,312	72.4%
Cattle & Calves	4,315	6,913	60.2%
Sheep	30,885	33,673	9.0%
Dairy Cows	542	472	-12.9%
Tenancy (%)	13.3%	9.2%	-30.8%

Source: Census of Agriculture, 1945.

Table 10: Clark County Farms, 1982, 1987, 1992.

	1982	1987	1992
All Farms	82	103	85
Total Farm Acres	314,380	362,514	286,711
Average Size (acres)	3,834	3,520	3,373
Estimated market value of average farm (\$)	\$ 1,343,268	\$ 1,514,476	\$ 1,075,882

Source: Census of Agriculture, 1982, 1987, 1992.

Table 11: Clark County Irrigated Farms, 1982, 1987, and 1992.

	1982	1987	1992
Farms (farms with irrigation), (number)	45	59	38
Irrigated land, (acres)	50,004	71,416	48,428
Irrigated 260-499 (farms)	6	3	4
Irrigated 500-999 (farms)	5	16	7
Irrigated 1,000-1,999 (farms)	12	13	8
Irrigated 2,000 acres + (farms)	17	24	13

Table 12: Estimated Clark County Hispanic Population, 1990 to 1996.

Year	Population	Hispanic	% Hispanic
1990	758 ¹	79	10.4%
1991	772	80	10.4%
1992	820	84	10.2%
1993	816	88	10.8%
1994	841	93	11.1%
1995	834	94	11.3%
1996	830	96	11.6%

Source: Administrative Records and Methodology Research Branch U.S. Bureau of the Census.
¹ 1990 Census of Population revised estimate.

Table 13: Clark County Cattle and Sheep Inventories, 1982, 1987, and 1992.

	1982	1987	1992	Change
Cattle and calves (farms)	63	73	54	-14.3%
Cattle and calves (number)	23411	26772	14822	-36.7%
Sheep and lambs (farms)	15	16	10	-33.3%
Sheep and lambs (number)	17800	14324	6650	-62.6%

Source: Census of Agriculture, 1982, 1987, 1992.

References

Idaho Historical Records Survey. 1940. "Inventory of the county archives of Idaho: No. 17 Clark County (Dubois)." Division of Professional and Service Projects, Works Progress Administration. Boise, Idaho, March.

Stoddard, Bonnie. 1995. "Clark County 3rd annual "All" schools reunion printout." Dubois, ID: Clark County Historical Society.

Stoddard, Bonnie. n.d. "Sawmills in Clark County." Clark County Historical Society.