

Historical Sketch
of
Power County

Taken from volume on Power County Inventory
Published by Historical Records Survey
W. P. A.



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CANADA

BOUNDARY

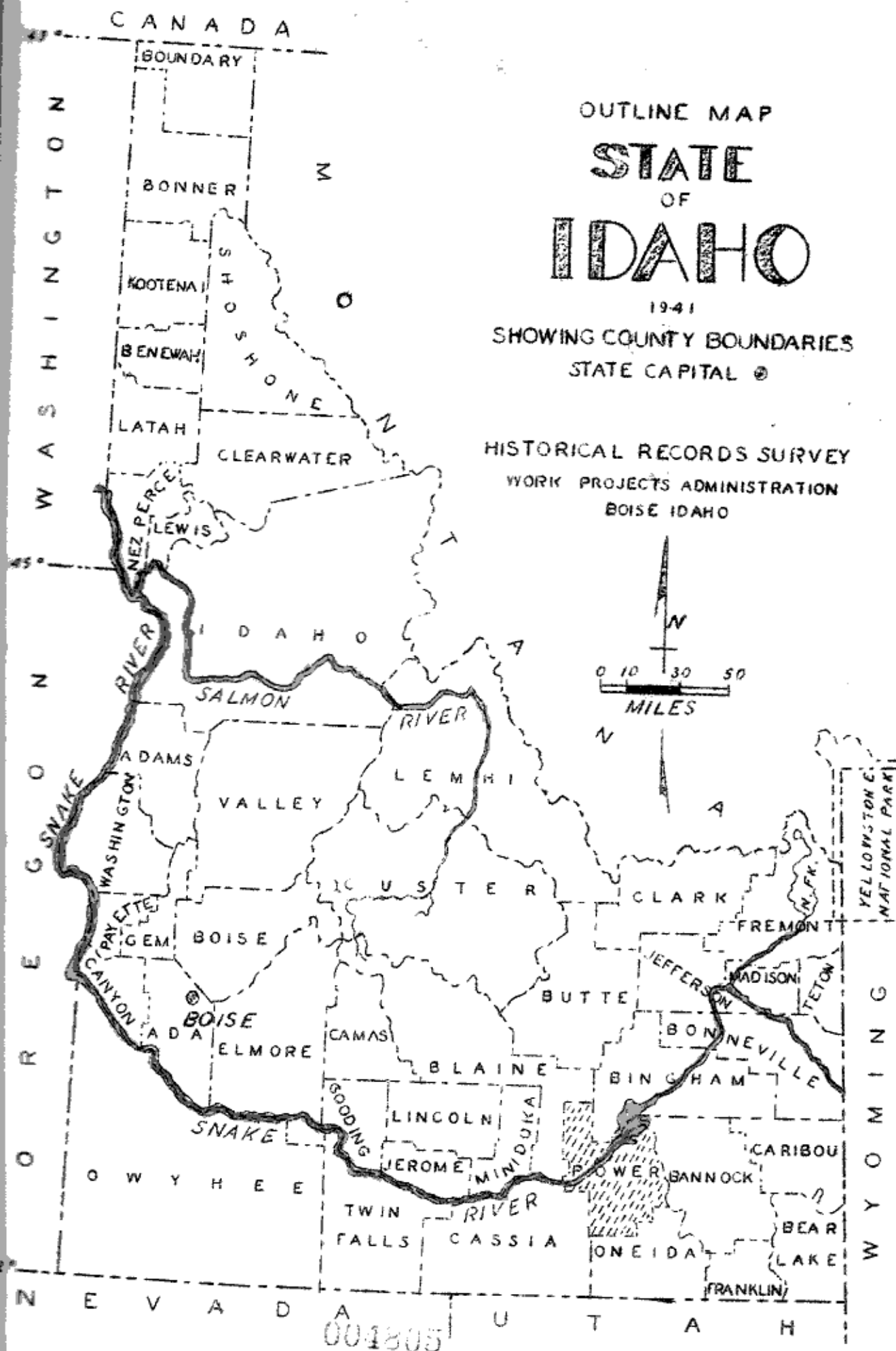
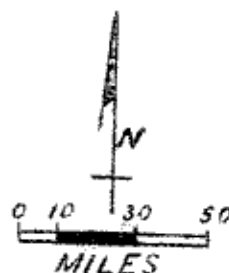
OUTLINE MAP

STATE OF IDAHO

1941

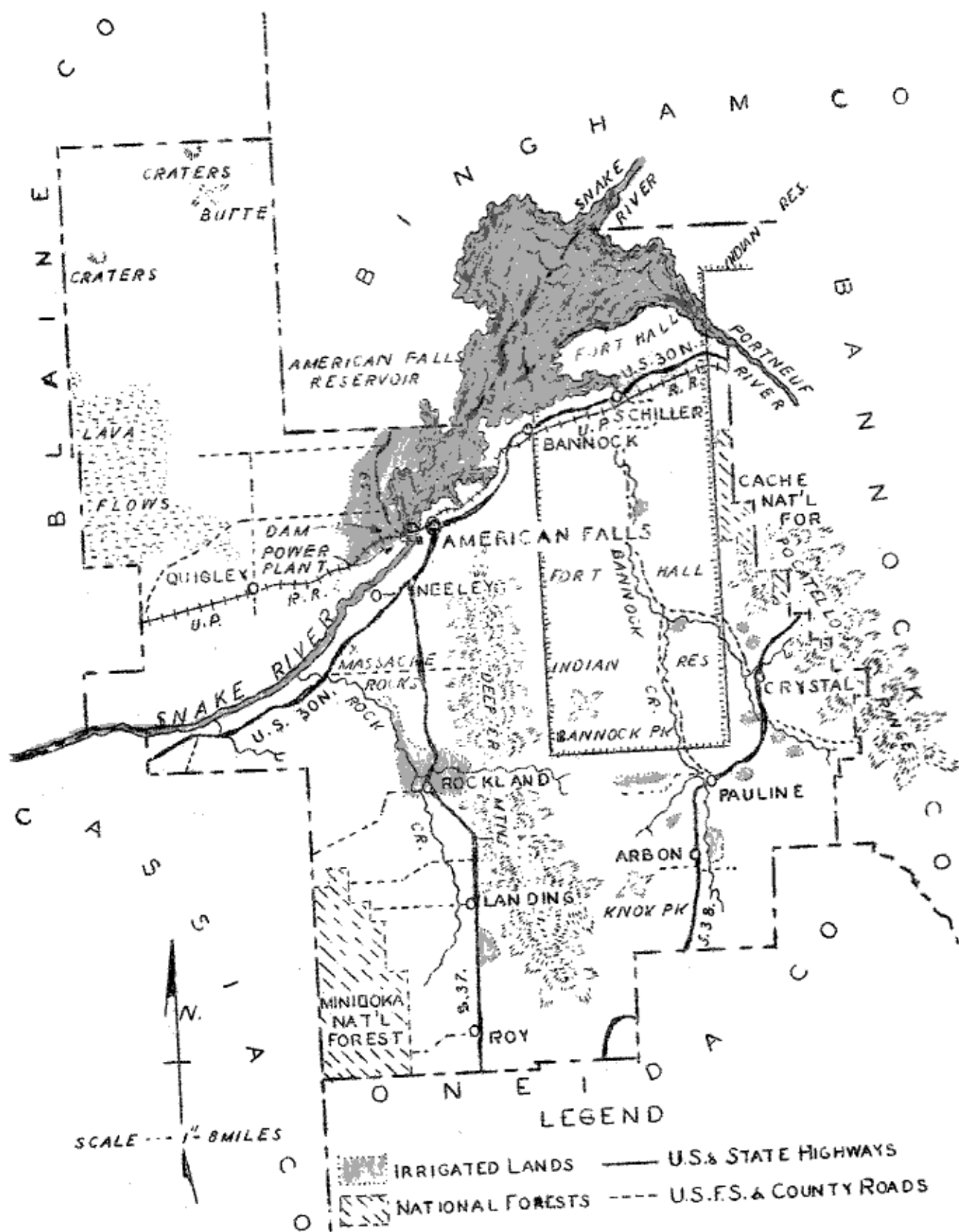
SHOWING COUNTY BOUNDARIES
STATE CAPITAL

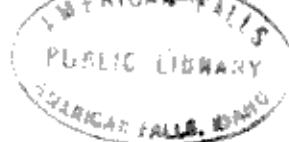
HISTORICAL RECORDS SURVEY
WORK PROJECTS ADMINISTRATION
BOISE IDAHO



MAP OF

1941





(First entry, p. 22)

1. HISTORICAL SKETCH OF POWER COUNTY

Power County was created by an act of the State Legislature in January 1913 and was approved and signed promptly by Governor John M. Haines. It was made up from portions of Bingham, Blaine, Cassia, and Oneida Counties and was attached to the Fifth Judicial District. (L.S.I. 1913, ch. 6, p. 30.) It was given the name Power County because of the hydro-electrical development at the American Falls in the Snake River.

The first white men to come into what is now Power County were those comprising an exploration party under the direction of Wilson Price Hunt. He was a young partner of John Jacob Astor, who had organized the Pacific Fur Company in order to share in the rich trapping and trading in the great northwest country. An expedition had been sent by ship around Cape Horn to establish headquarters on the Columbia River. Then an expedition with Hunt in charge started out from St. Louis in the fall of 1810 with the same objective and to explore the region beyond the Rocky Mountains and establish what trading posts might seem advisable. They followed the route of Lewis and Clark to a point where fear of hostile Indians caused them to divert their course into Wyoming and then on westward by a more southerly route. Leaving the Jackson Hole country in Wyoming and crossing the Teton Pass the party entered Idaho. They followed roughly the course of the Teton River to its junction with the North or Henry's Fork of the Snake River. Near what is now St. Anthony the French voyageurs accompanying the party insisted that the horses be abandoned at this point and that they proceed down the Snake River by boat. Accordingly dugout canoes were made and they continued their journey by water on the smooth but rapid stream, soon however encountering various rapids and falls where it was necessary to portage. Late in October 1811 the party camped at the falls, where now is located the town of American Falls, the county seat of Power County. In the late summer of 1834 Jason Lee, a methodist minister, passed through on his way to the "Oregon Country", preaching at the trading post of Fort Hall the first sermon west of the Rocky Mountains in the great northwest interior; old Fort Hall was some 18 miles up the Snake River from American Falls. Marcus Whitman and Henry Spalding and their wives, the latter being the first white women to come to Idaho, followed in August 1836 on their way to establish Indian missions near Walla Walla in what is now ~~western~~ Washington, and on Lapwai Creek in what is now northern Idaho. They had with them the first wheeled vehicle to come this way and are considered to have laid out the general course of the Oregon Trail. Between 1832 and 1846 Nathaniel J. Wyeth, Captain Benjamin Bonneville, and Colonel John C. Fremont passed through as they pushed on farther west. (C. J. Brosnam, History of the State of Idaho, New York 1926, pp. 41-61, 69-71; Byron Defenbach, Idaho, the Place and its People, 3 vols., New York 1933, vol. 1, pp. 136-140, 184-188, 197-198.)

Fremont in his diary reports being at American Falls on September 24, 1843 and referred to it by that name; the generally accepted belief is that it had been given its name by the Wilson Price Hunt party. By means of his chronometer and his observation of the planets he gave the latitude and longitude position of American Falls with remarkable accuracy considering his equipment. (John C. Fremont, Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains, Buffalo and Cleveland 1850, pp. 216-220.) During the decades of 1840 and

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1850 thousands of immigrants bound for the "Oregon Country" followed the Oregon Trail past American Falls, thence proceeding down the south side of the river. At that time none of the immigrants were stopping in what is now Idaho as there was nothing to stop for. The rich "gold diggings" were not discovered until the beginning of the 1860's and the extensive lumber industry was yet to come, while the great irrigation projects of the Snake River and its tributaries were still further in the future. About 10 miles down the river are the picturesque Massacre Rocks where in 1862 one of Idaho's tragic Indian massacres occurred and where the Sons and Daughters of Idaho have erected a marker.

From Granger, in southwestern Wyoming, where the Union Pacific Railroad swings southwest to Salt Lake City, Utah, the Oregon Short Line Railroad (O.S.L.R.R.) was built westward across southern Idaho to Huntington, Oregon. There it connected with the Oregon-Washington Railroad and Navigation Company (O.W.R.N.R.R.) and thus completed a direct rail route from Omaha, Nebraska to Portland, Oregon. The railroad reached the Idaho State line in 1882 and was completed to Huntington on the eastern edge of Oregon in 1884. Both the Oregon Short Line and the Oregon-Washington Railroad and Navigation Company were later incorporated into the Union Pacific System. American Falls was one of the temporary head-of-rail construction points from which the work was pushed toward the west, and a permanent station was established there.

In 1876 settlers had begun to move in from farther south and had established the settlement of Rockland on Rock Creek, where some irrigation was developed on a small scale and where also a good deal of dry-farm wheat raising was begun. In general the influx of settlers was slow until, after the turn of the century, the Aberdeen-Springfield irrigation project was organized on the west side of the Snake River under the provisions of the Carey Act, and intensive cultivation and diversified cropping of this land was begun; the lower end of the district extended into what is now Power County. During the World War and immediately thereafter there was a great demand for wheat; the price was high and, as it happened, the annual precipitation was unusually large. This resulted in a rush to take up any available dry-farm land and several hundred acres were filed upon. American Falls was the shipping point for wheat raised in this county and some parts of adjoining counties, and it became for a time probably the largest primary wheat shipping point on the Union Pacific Railway System. Even today Power County is one of the large producers of wheat, ranking in 1939 sixth in the State in amount produced and first in acreage devoted to wheat growing (Charts by R. C. Ross, Agricultural Statistician, Agricultural Marketing Service, U. S. Dept of Agriculture, Boise). The chief agricultural activities in Power County are wheat raising, stockraising, dairying and some more diversified farming.

Of interest in Power County is the location at American Falls of the largest of the considerable number of fish hatcheries in the State established and operated by the State Fish and Game Department. From this hatchery in 1939 were planted 1,250,000 rainbow trout and 122,000 cutthroat, a part of them being released in the county itself. (Eighteenth Biennial Report of the Fish and Game Department of the State of Idaho, 1939-40.) Of interest also are the hot mineral springs near American Falls, considered to

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have beneficial medicinal properties and called from the earliest days "Indian Springs" because of their frequent use by various bands of Indians.

Very definitely the most significant thing in Power County is the great American Falls Dam, built by the United States Reclamation Service, and the storage reservoir resulting from its construction. Idaho has many storage reservoirs to supplement the late season irrigation water from the Snake River and its various tributaries but American Falls is so much larger than the others as to be in a class by itself. This artificial lake is some 25 miles long and has a maximum width of 12 miles and covers an area of 56,200 acres. It stores 1,700,000 acre-feet of winter flow of the Snake River and delivers it later on when the direct flow of the river is inadequate to furnish water for all of the land in the various irrigation districts. It was not primarily to irrigate new bodies of dry land that this reservoir was planned but rather to furnish supplemental water to over half a million acres in some 20 irrigation districts which participated in the plan, this being as it were an insurance policy for an ample all-season water supply where direct flow of the river might be inadequate. Certain districts were to participate more heavily than others in the cost of the storage depending upon the priority and adequacy of their direct flow water rights. (Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation, Dams and Control Works, Washington, D. C. 1938, pp. 71-73.)

The American Falls Dam is almost exactly 1 mile long and is 87 feet above the foundation. It is because immediately above the dam the valley forms a natural saucer-like basin that so great a body of water can be impounded by this type of structure. In breaking down the total cost of this water storage project we find a peculiar situation. The cost of the dam itself constituted only an approximate one-third of the total, for the lands to be submerged by the reservoir had to be purchased, 2 miles of the Union Pacific Railroad had to be moved and a new bridge across the Snake River constructed, and the town of American Falls, which would otherwise be reposing on the bottom of the reservoir, had to be picked up and moved to higher ground; furthermore there were purchases, damages and easements to be taken care of in connection with prior hydraulic electric properties and rights. The dam was finally completed and the reservoir filled for the first time in 1927. (Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation, op. cit., pp. 71-73.)

Five hundred feet below the dam the Snake River goes over the American Falls. Hydro-electric power development began here in a small way in 1901 and has been gradually enlarged. In 1916 the newly organized Idaho Power Company bought out the several owners and has continued the further development and improvements of the site, there being now on the east bank a plant producing 26,000 kilowatts which is the largest of their 12 power plants which serve southern Idaho and eastern Oregon (Private Records of Idaho Power Company). The government purchased smaller plants on the west side and on the island and used its own power in the construction of the dam but produces none now; the dam itself produces no electric power.

Power County is irregular in shape, its greatest depth from north to south being about 52 miles, while its greatest width east to west is approximately 44 miles. In its northwest projection is a region of sage brush, lava

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flows, and craters. The Snake River flows from the northeast in a southwesterly direction across the county. Along the eastern boundary are the mountains of the Pocatello Range and a small strip of the Cache National Forest. In the east central part of the county is the southern extension of the Fort Hall Indian Reservation, with the upper portion extending into Bannock and Bingham Counties. The Deep Creek Mountains, entirely within the county, extend from the southern boundary north almost to American Falls. In the extreme southwest corner is a small section of the Minidoka National Forest. Bannock Creek runs northward through the Indian Reservation and flows into the Snake River as does Rock Creek, flowing north from the southeast corner of the county, and turning west into the river. The general elevation of the county, aside from hills and mountains is about 5,000 feet.

The area of Power County is 1,391 square miles and it ranks twenty-first among the counties of Idaho in size. The 1940 census shows the population of the county to be 3,965, ranking thirteenth among the counties. The population of American Falls, the county seat, is 1,439, which represents an increase of about 12 per cent over that shown in the census of 1930, while the county as a whole shows a similar percentage of decrease. The assessed valuation of the county in 1940 was \$7,442, 673, placing it sixteenth among the 44 counties of Idaho; public utilities - chiefly the Union Pacific Railroad and the Idaho Power Company - represent 56 per cent of this total.

Power County is bounded on the east by Bannock County, on the south by Oneida County, on the west by Cassia and Blaine Counties, and on the north by Bingham County. Roughly it lies between 42 degrees 21 minutes, and 43 degrees 6 minutes of north latitude and between 112 degrees 21 minutes, and 113 degrees 14 minutes of west longitude.

When Power County was created the Governor appointed officials to serve until the first general election. They were as follows: County commissioners, Andrew May, Walter S. Sparks, A. Winters; clerk of the district court, ex officio auditor and recorder, David Burrell; probate judge, L. B. Evans; sheriff, D. B. Jeffries; coroner, Harry R. Hager; prosecuting attorney, O. R. Baum; assessor, Paul Bulfinch; treasurer, Nettie Rice; superintendent of schools, E. W. Fifield; surveyor, Frank Moench. The first meeting of the county commissioners was held on February 17, 1913 and Andrew May was chosen as chairman of the board and on February 21 he administered the oath of office to the officers. (Commissioners' Minutes (and Transcriptions), vol. 1, p. 1, see entry 1.)

The present officers are: County commissioners, C. C. Thornhill, Robert I. Ewing, and T. H. Hill; clerk of the district court, ex officio auditor and recorder, H. C. Allen; probate judge, W. W. Howard; justices of the peace, Allen L. Peterson, Arthur A. West, C. A. Coon, John Thorne; sheriff, W. J. Hackmen; constables, W. E. Walton, C. B. Robinson; coroner, H. L. Davis; prosecuting attorney, W. C. Loofbourrow; assessor, O. W. Pollard; treasurer, Jennie M. Anderson; superintendent of schools, Violet B. Butler; surveyor, F. S. Schwarz; agricultural agent, Harold Ball. (Twenty-fifth Biennial Report, Secretary of State of Idaho, George H. Curtis, Secretary of State, 1939-40, pp. 76-87.)