The Bridge at Taylor Crossing

The History of Pedersen Sportsman Park

The History of Sportsman Park

The Snake River crossed the land long before humans inhabited the high desert of Eastern Idaho. Its course varied drastically through time, pushed about by enormous lava flows both to the east and to the west of its current course. Volcanic eruptions occurred frequently enough that little soil could accumulate and the desert wind blew what little there was into low mounds. It was a desolate place – a few junipers, sagebrush, and a rare tree. Cutting through the black basalt, the river formed a deep, forbidding gorge the travelers of the early 1800's called Black Rock Canyon. In the spring without the benefit of dams on the river, the canyon filled with water, and in the late fall in low water years, the water level dropped 50 to 60 or more feet exposing the gorge. In 1864, the island we now call Sportsman Park was part of the east bank of the river, separated from the bank by a wash that occasionally filled with water during high runoff years. There were no falls. Rather, the river cascaded down a series of rapids into the gorge that is today the west channel.

The Native Americans inhabiting this area were hunter-gatherers and fishermen. For more than 10,000 years, small bands roamed the land collecting berries, digging camas and other roots, catching salmon, and hunting buffalo. They found crossing the river to be difficult because of the swift current, the rocky nature of the land, and the varying depth of the water. One relatively easy place to cross was Flathead Crossing, about nine miles upstream from current day Idaho Falls. There the river was wide and shallow.

Snake River at high water, looking upstream from Taylor's Bridge. W.H. Jackson Spring 1871 from the files of the United States Geological Surveys.

During the 1800's, the U.S expanded westward. The need to cross the Snake River with wagons and

stock became a pressing problem. Flathead Crossing was still one of the best places to cross, but it was very dangerous in times of high water or in the winter over the ice. With the discovery of gold in Montana and central Idaho in the early 1860's, the number of travelers increased exponentially. It was time for a ferry. In 1863, Harry Rickards and William Hickman built a ferry at Flathead Crossing connecting the road from Salt Lake City through Soda Springs to the gold fields of the northwest. It was called the Eagle Rock Ferry in honor of a large rock with an eagle's nest which was located just downstream from the ferry.

Missourian Matt Taylor was one of the young “freighters” that carried goods to the gold fields from points south. He found that crossing the Snake River by ferry was a very slow process due to the sheer numbers of travelers trying to make the trip. Taylor decided to build a toll bridge at Black Rock Canyon, nine miles downstream, which would take advantage of the narrow river channel there, making for the shortest possible bridge span. The river offered a bonus as it entered the narrow canyon: the mosquito habitat decreased when the water speed increased.

Taylor built his first bridge just to the south of the current replica. The bridge opened in May 1865 and was washed out by high water in June 1866. Frustrated but not discouraged, Taylor rebuilt the bridge later that year on platforms placed on rock-filled cribs. In addition, Taylor, his brother-in-law, Robert Anderson, and their employees constructed a blacksmith shop, a barn to shelter people and animals, and a long building to house workers and serve meals. Those three buildings marked the beginning of Idaho Falls.

Taylor's Bridge around 1870. Note the cribs of rock which formed the piers. From the USGS files.

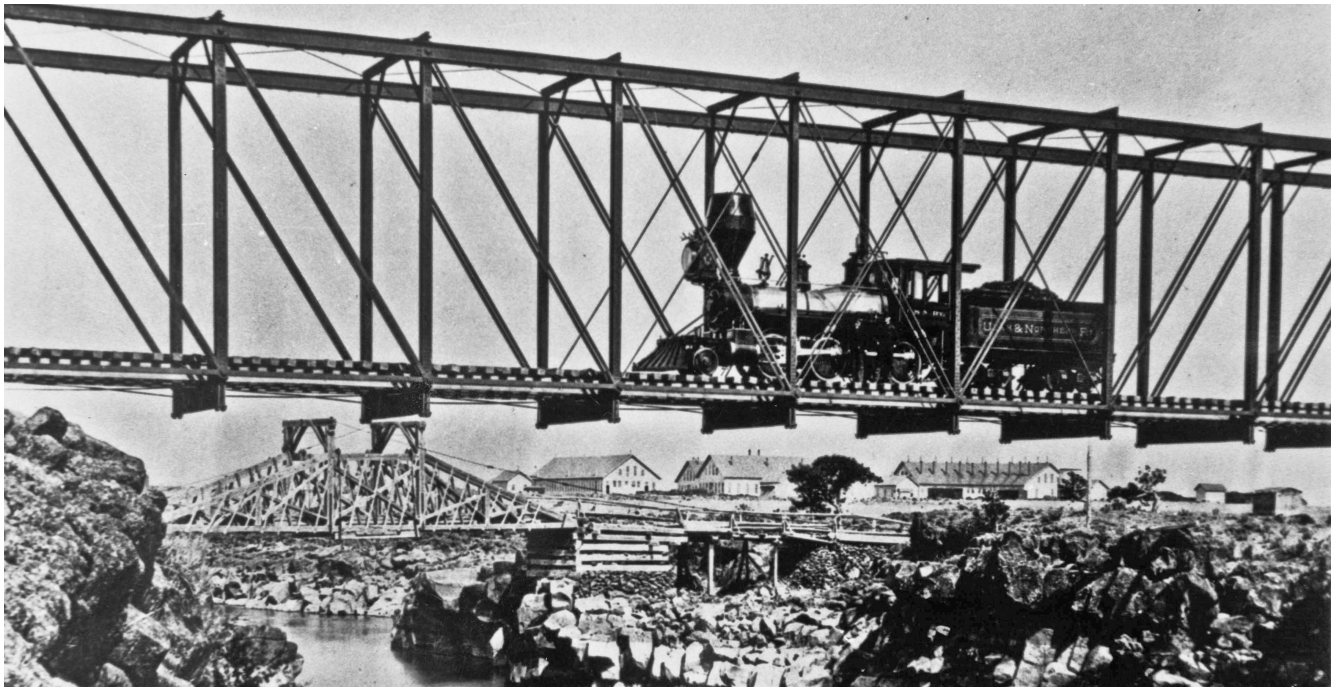
The bridge gates were locked at night. Often, before dawn in the summer, a mile long line of wagons had formed with travelers hoping for a good start on the day's journey. Taylor charged the same fees to cross the bridge that the earlier ferry charged: $4.00 for wagons and $0.50 for men and animals. The bridge proved extremely profitable: Taylor collected $30,000 a year in gold nuggets and gold dust, dollars, and gold certificates—nearly a million dollars in today's money!

In the 1860's, there were no settlers at Taylor's Crossing except the Taylor-Anderson family and whatever help they had. Travelers moved on to the gold fields of Idaho or Montana, or the agricultural areas of Oregon. No one saw any future in the dry, windy and desolate Snake River plain.

When miners made new gold strikes north of Salmon, Idaho, the number of miners crossing the toll bridge increased as did revenues. To secure the money and accommodate the travelers, Robert Anderson built a store with a bank, probably located near the current corner of Capital and Broadway. An advertisement in the Salt Lake *Daily Telegraph* said the Anderson Store carried "every article required by travelers: grain, bacon, flour, tea, coffee, sugar, clothing, and a fine selection of liquors and tobacco at reasonable rates." The bank vault replaced the nail keg that Taylor used earlier to hold his revenues.

During the 1870's, the Utah and Northern railroad pushed north, and by 1879, a railroad bridge crossed the river 50 yards to the south of Taylor's Bridge. The village, now called Eagle Rock after the original ferry, grew rapidly because the railroad located its repair shops there in 1882. Jobs were plentiful and profitable and by 1884 the population reached 1500. But the prosperity was short lived. The railroad company decided to relocate its shops to Pocatello in 1887, and by 1890, the population of Eagle Rock had fallen to fewer than 500 people.

Matt Taylor knew the arrival of the railroad would be the eventual demise of the toll bridge, so in 1872, he transferred ownership to the Andersons and moved back to Missouri. The Andersons reinforced and



The Railroad Bridge with Taylor's Bridge in the background taken around 1883. The railroad buildings in the background were moved to Pocatello in 1887. Notice the water level and the exposed rock and how the Taylor Bridge has been reinforced. The canyon below the water level is between 80 and 100 feet deep. Photo courtesy of the Museum of Idaho.

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strengthened the wooden bridge, but it slowly decayed. In the late 1880's, the Andersons applied to the county to have their toll lease extended, but the county had decided that a new bridge would be built as

part of a public highway. In 1889, the county condemned and dismantled the old Taylor Bridge.

Meanwhile, the county commissioned local contractor W.W. Keefer to build masonry piers for a new steel bridge next to the Taylor Bridge site. By 1890 Keefer had constructed the piers and a new bridge. Keefer's piers are still standing and form the base of the current Taylor Bridge replica.

Idaho Falls about 1900. Photo shows the "island" of Sportsman Park in the foreground. The Keefer Bridge is on the left, located where the current Taylor Bridge replica now stands. Notice how Broadway (in the background where three wagons are located) makes a jog to connect to the Keefer Bridge. The jog was corrected in 1907 when a new Broadway Bridge located in the current position was built. The railroad tracks ran right down Eagle Rock Street. The photo must have been taken from the old flour mill on the west bank. Photo courtesy of the Museum of Idaho.

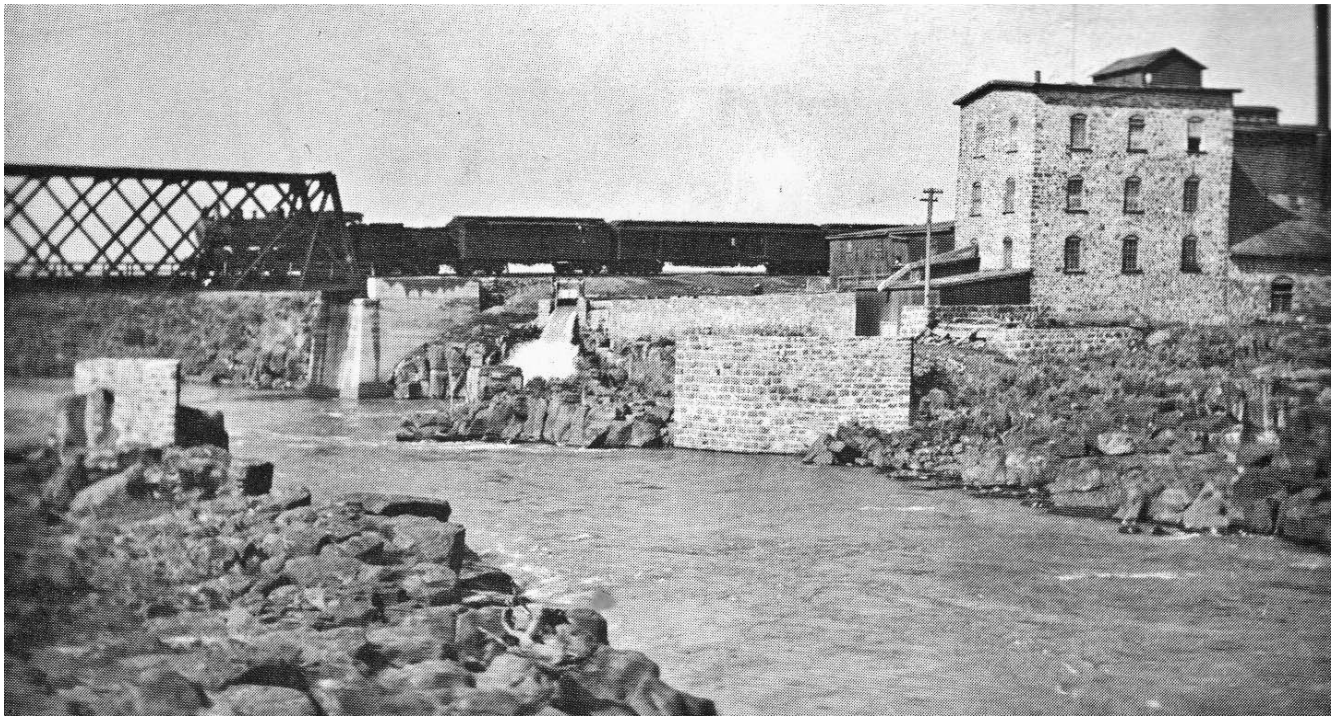
In the late 1800's, drunkenness, disorderly conduct, thievery, and worse were behaviors found in almost every western settlement. Eagle Rock needed a jail. Local legend says W.W. Keefer built the first jail very near the Taylor Bridge for $234, probably around 1880. For whatever reason—perhaps the jail wasn't big enough or secure enough—a new jail was built and the old jail became a "House of Ill Repute." In fact, the whole area became the village's red light district.

As Eagle Rock grew, a group of women, spearheaded by the wives of businessmen and entrepreneurs from the East, formed the Village Improvement Society (VIS). The VIS goal was to make the village of Eagle Rock more beautiful and livable. One of the first projects was to put boxes labeled "Trash" on the city streets. The City Council was encouraged to insist on public compliance and use. Perhaps the best known VIS activity was the beautification of Eagle Rock—the women planted trees and created parks, oases of green in the brown desert. They hoped to create an extensive park all along the Snake River. Soil was brought in and trees were planted wherever possible. For years the ladies of the VIS tried to clean up the red light district on the river. In 1904, they purchased the property on both sides of the river, including what is now Sportsman's Park, for one dollar and finally managed to evict the Ladies of the Night.

Here, the desert soil is exceptionally fertile, needing only water to grow bountiful crops. During the 1880's, men began the laborious task of digging canals with mules and slip scrapers to divert the river water into the desert. By 1890, the economy of the valley, which had been dependent on the railroad, began to revolve around farming. Warehouses, farm implement companies and other agricultural based industries appeared. In 1891, the village renamed itself "Idaho Falls" in hopes of attracting agriculture to the valley. (There were no falls, but it sounded good!) Idaho Falls became the center of one of the

most productive agricultural areas in the country.

The original Taylor toll lease was granted for twenty years. In 1884 the bridge was supposed to become a freeway. (Although like many others who had such leases, the Andersons just kept collecting tolls until the county forced them to stop.) When a toll was no longer charged to cross the river, the west bank opened up for farming and industry.



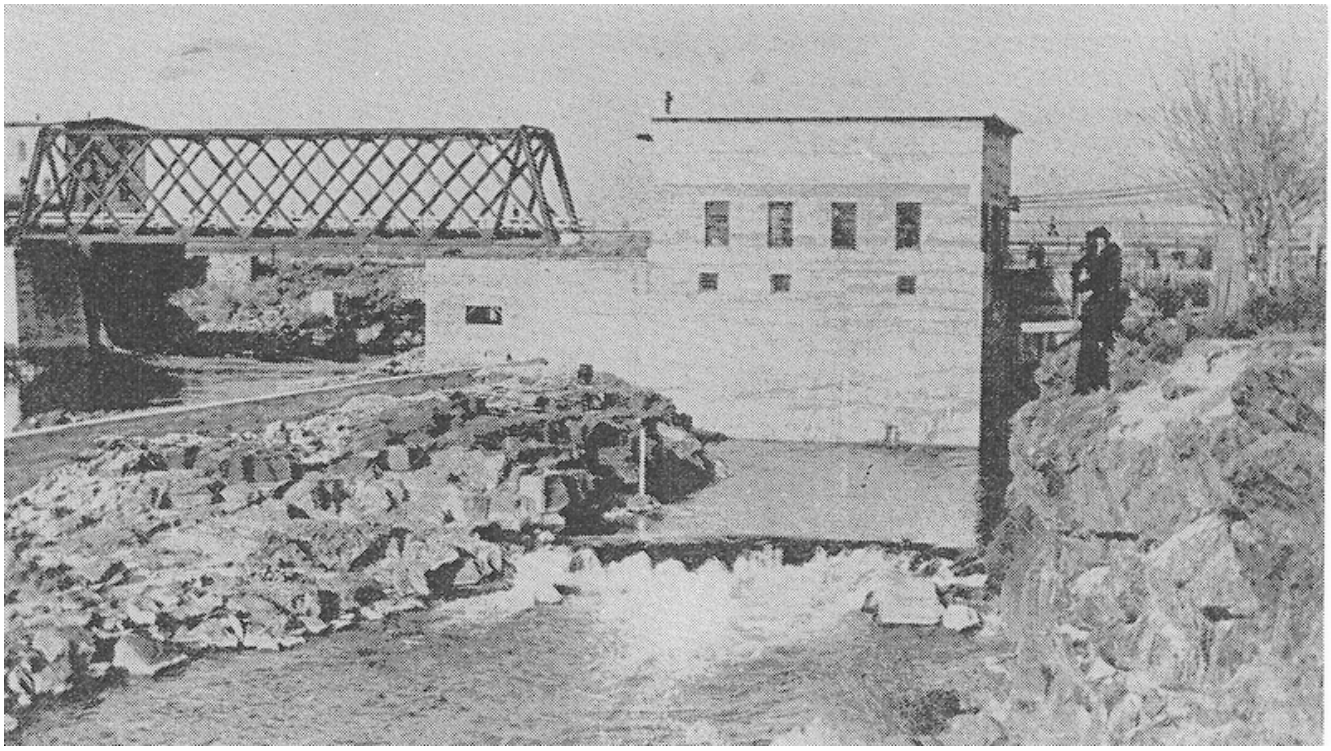
Burgess Edelman built this flour mill in 1889 by and sold it to “Gib” Wright in 1890 when Keefer's Bridge opened the west bank of the river to farming and development. The building burned in 1924 but part of the water spillway may be seen by crossing the Taylor Bridge replica and walking a few yards to the south. Note the Keefer piers in the photo, and the rocky character of the land. Photo courtesy of the Museum of Idaho.

During the 1890's, Idaho Falls’ businessmen began considering electrical power to provide electricity to the city for street lighting. Several men attempted small private operations but were unsuccessful. Mayor Joseph A. Clark campaigned hard for the bond issue that eventually authorized the city to build its own power plant and thereby became the first city in Idaho to own and operate its own electrical plant.

The first plant was built in 1900 at the “Crow Creek Slough” at Tenth and Boulevard. However, within a year, it became obvious that the plant couldn't keep up with the increasing demand for electricity. The city leaders expanded and updated the plant but by 1903, began looking for a new site for a larger plant. Voters twice turned down bonds to build a bigger plant. Finally, in 1910, a bond passed after the town council found a place on the river just south of the railroad bridge.

To provide water for the power plant, the city commissioned W. W. Keefer to build a diversion dam and work began in September 1911. The dam produced a fore bay where part of the river remained above the lower channel then flowed through the dry wash around the east side of Sportsman Park. The result was the creation of the island as we know it today. In addition, the dam created an artificial falls giving credence to the city's new name. After nine years of planning, the city finally had a new power plant

that could expand as electrical needs required.



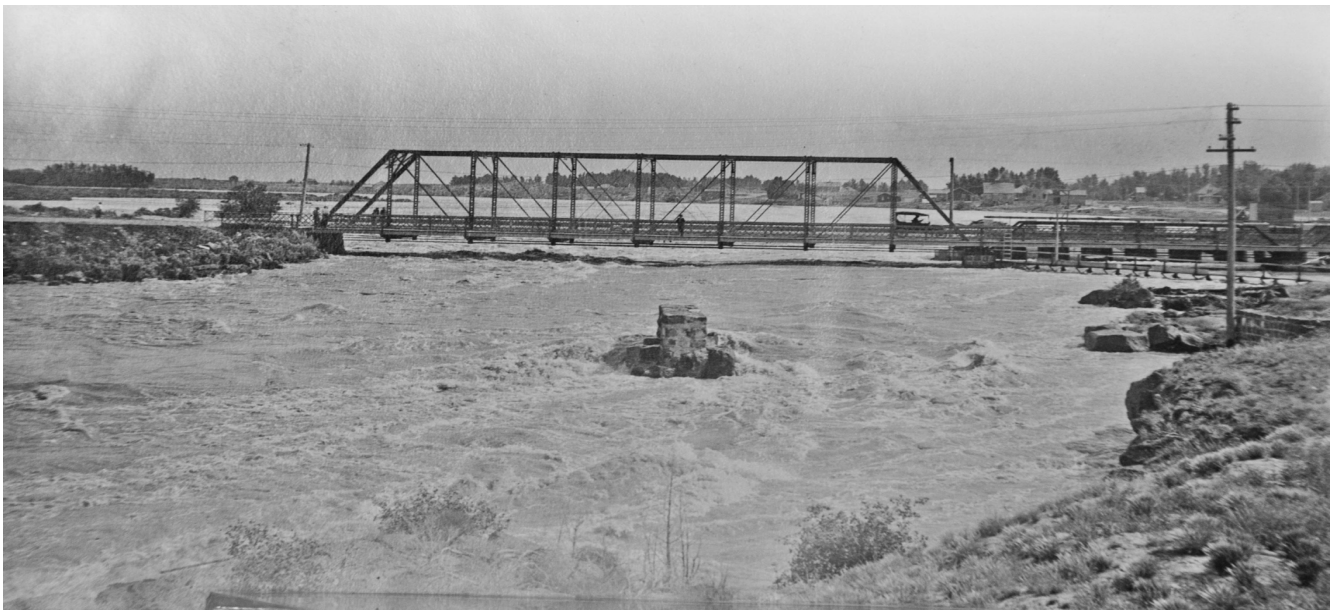
The first power plant on the river started producing electricity in 1912. Photo courtesy of Idaho Falls Electrical Department

Before 1880, Eastern Idaho was known as a sportsman's paradise – plentiful game and no limits to the catch or hunt. Fish and game were part of the normal food supply and the early settlers took what they could use or sell. After the coming of the railroad, special trains brought hunters from Salt Lake City for weekend sport. They took enormous amounts of game: sometimes the game was simply left in the mountains. By the early 1900's, the elk, antelope and deer herds were decimated. Deer in the area, for example, had dwindled to just one herd and that herd numbered only nine deer!

Idaho became a state in 1892 and almost immediately, the young state began thinking about conservation measures. Local groups became involved. In 1911, a group of Idaho Falls enthusiasts formed the Rod and Gun Club which evolved into the Sportsmen's Association in 1914. Spurred on by the vision of Danish immigrant, Peder Pedersen who had found his adopted country to be an almost unbelievable sportsman's paradise, the Association began to address the problems of declining fish and game numbers. After the VIS deeded the island to the city in 1923, the sportsmen built a fishery there. By 1937, the sportsmen were raising more than 30,000 fingerlings a year and using the fish to stock Eastern Idaho streams and rivers.

When the Sportsmen's Association took over the island, they continued the VIS plan to bring in soil and plant trees and flowers. All the soil was hauled in wheelbarrows across a swinging bridge, fondly remembered by many Idaho Falls natives. They created a beautiful park around their fishery, and by the summer of 1934, hundreds of people were visiting the island each day.

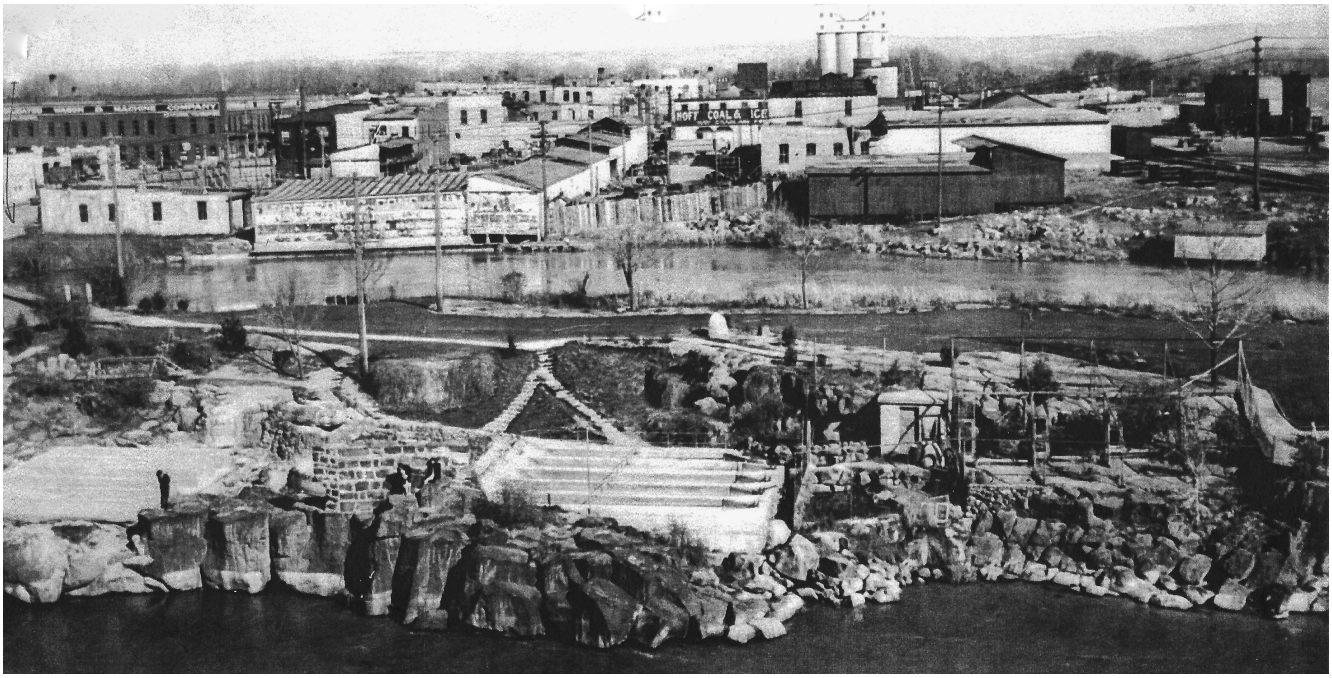
The island, circa 1920, taken from the railroad bridge embankment looking upstream. The bridge in the photo is the steel bridge that straightened Broadway. The piers from Keefer's first steel bridge are visible, one being at the base of the electrical pole. Imagine the amount of dirt that was carried in by wheelbarrow! Photo courtesy of the Museum of Idaho.



The river at flood stage. The two reservoirs on the upper Snake River at that time were inadequate to control the spring runoff and the river flooded almost every year. This photo was taken a few years after the previous photo as shown by the size of the trees in comparison with the buildings in the upper right of both pictures. Notice the car and pedestrians on the bridge. When the island floods, soil moves, is deposited or removed; trees and other debris can damage structures. Photo courtesy of the Museum of Idaho.

The island became home to the first Idaho Falls Zoo which consisted of four cages containing birds, badgers, an eagle and a bear. It lasted only a short time—the zookeeper of Tautphaus Park requested the animals be moved to the new larger zoo in Tautphaus Park in 1935. The cages on the island were then filled with colorful pheasants, ducks and other exotic birds, forming an aviary. Large trophy fish

were kept in ponds. The island was a popular place for family picnics.



Sportsman Park, circa 1940. Four zoo cages are visible on the right. Keefer's piers are located between the two sets of fish runs. This photo was probably taken from the California Packing Corp. building on the west bank which replaced the old mill after it burned. The upper walkway ran from the swinging bridge to the area behind the cages. Sections of the foundations of the walkway can still be seen under the bonsai tree next to the Kanji Stone on the upper level of the garden.
Photo courtesy of the Museum of Idaho.

Shortly before 1934, Company F of the 116th Engineering Division of the Idaho National Guard built this replica of the Taylor Bridge. Perhaps it was built as an exercise for the engineers, or perhaps it was built in connection with a celebration of an anniversary of the bridge or the Golden Jubilee of the *Post Register* Newspaper in 1934, a huge event. It is obvious

why Taylor's first bridge washed out by looking at the flood photo. The first concrete Broadway bridge is shown in the background. The unfinished fish runs in Sportsman Park are visible on the right. Photo courtesy of the Museum of Idaho.

About 1940, Peder and his son, S. Eddie Pedersen, built a lava rock building on the southwest end of the island where the current viewing platform is located. The building was intended to be used as a Information Center but after a few years, the sportsmen realized the building was too far back on the island to attract many visitors. They turned the building into a meeting house where they planned events such as the annual Sportsmen's Jamboree, an important conference that drew conservationists from local, state and even federal organizations. Eventually, the park became known as Pedersen Sportsman Park in honor of these two avid sportsmen, each of whom led the association as president for a total of 30 years.

The Pedersen building with Fred Keefer in the doorway. Fred, the son of W.W. Keefer, was a colorful figure in Idaho Falls until his death at age 96 in 1987. The building was hand built by the Pedersens. It was turned into a museum containing many examples of Fred and twin brother Frank's taxidermy. Abandoned about 1970, it became a haven for vagrants. The building burned in 1976 and was finally taken down during the renovation of Sportsman Park in 1991. Photo courtesy of the museum of Idaho.

The Sportsmen's Association continued their many conservation efforts, helping to form the Idaho Fish and Game Commission in 1938. The F&G Commission eventually reduced the need for the local conservation group—it persisted until about 1980 before dissolving.

During the 1980's, the Idaho Falls Rotary Club began making plans for the development of the entire riverfront into a greenbelt. In 1991 as part of the renovation, the Rotary Club built the current Taylor Bridge replica on the old Keefer piers and scheduled all of Sportsman Park for a face lift. They blasted out the rocks on the north end of the island and used some to reroute the water channels. They planted new plants and added another set of stairs. They built a Japanese memorial viewing platform on the site of the Pedersen club house, replaced the old swinging bridge with a new pedestrian

walkway, and added additional walkways and a flag plaza.

In 1997, several years after the Rotary Club project had been completed, a deep snow pack coupled with high spring temperatures and warm rains, created an enormous runoff and the park flooded once again. The lower level plantings were washed away; silt filled much of the area. The ruined lower level of the park was left to nature until 2011.

The photos above and below show some of the improvements accomplished by the Rotary Club during the 1991 renovation. The grassy area was created out of the rock field. The upper photo was taken about 1933. The beginnings of the new Taylor Bridge replica and the flag plaza can be seen in the lower photo. Photos courtesy of the IF Rotary

In 2011 another group composed of members of the Sister City Association, Bonneville County Master Gardeners, Upper Snake Master Naturalists, Upper Snake Native Plant Society, Arborists and local Garden Clubs decided to build a Japanese garden on the island to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of Idaho Falls' association with its Japanese sister city, Tokai Mura. The area already contained the beautiful stone lantern given to Idaho Falls by Tokai in the early 1980's so the group planned the garden around it. When the terrible earthquake and tsunami occurred in Japan in March 2011, the group decided the garden should also serve as a tribute to the memory of the victims of that tragedy.

With all of the improvements of the previous 100 years, the topography of the island with its rocks and water channels lent itself beautifully to the style of Japanese Garden referred to as “Hill and Pond.” A committee began looking for plants that resembled traditional Japanese garden plants, but which would survive and thrive in our desert climate. Other volunteers scavenged driftwood from the city's power plant and collected river rocks from another city maintenance area. Still others salvaged plants from a downtown renovation.

Work began in May 2011 with volunteers reconstructing the wooden steps, clearing brush and removing diseased trees. They removed thousands of plants that had run wild during the fifteen years of neglect; cleaned the waterways of debris; evaluated, removed or pruned existing trees and shrubs. However, a heavy snow year and rising water all through June made the volunteers leery of starting any construction or planting on the lower level until the water receded.

The regional water master proved that his office had learned a huge lesson from the floods of 1997. Although the snow pack and conditions in 2011 were similar to those of 1997, the water master was able to control the reservoir water releases and the island did not flood. By the first of July the water began to go down, and the volunteers were able to build the stepping stone path, the offset plank bridge and the gate, and to plant the shade garden.

Funding came from, and continues to come from, grants and donations, both public and private. Most of the plants came from the gardens of the volunteers. Local nurseries and garden stores also donated plants or needed items such as fertilizer.

All of the work was done by volunteers who logged over 1500 hours in the garden in 2011. The work was not easy—the pond overflow area required ten cubic yards of gravel to be carried by wheelbarrow to the island, then down the stairs. In 2012, completing the "Dragon's Path" through the old settling pond required twenty cubic yards of soil and eight cubic yards of gravel all brought to the island in the same manner. These projects made everyone appreciate the many, many loads of dirt that had been carried to the island over the years.

The work continued. When the waterways were turned on in early August, they leaked badly and the grassy area became a swamp. In addition, many of the lights needed repairs. These problems were addressed by the Parks and Recreation Department who repaired the waterways and the city's Electrical Department who repaired and redirected the lights. The police department increased surveillance of the island to reduce vandalism. Part time Parks and Recreation employees received training concerning the treatment of the new plants. Master Gardeners kept the plants pruned and tidy.

In 2012, another volunteer group, the Civitans, built a platform over the old fish hatchery. Local business groups helped in the effort by clearing brush and tree stumps from the hillside; raking and clearing the area of winter debris. The Sister City group constructed the bamboo hoop fence. A high school service organization cleared the path. Hotsy, a local cleaning service, removed years of graffiti and paint from the rocks and piers.

The Friendship Garden in early June 2012 as seen from the Marriott Hotel on the West Bank. Photo by Jim Seydel

Work will continue in 2013. The volunteers plan to address the upper level and add more plants, benches, and a strolling path. Currently the plans for 2013 are not finalized.

Researched and Compiled
by
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Note on the references:
The historical information comes from the following books, pamphlets, *The Idaho Register* and *Post Register* files, and from conversations with the listed persons.

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People:

12. Mrs. Blanche Keefer Redd, grandniece of W.W. Keefer.
13. Mr. Jim Schwartzenberger, manager of the Sportsmen's Game Bird Farm.
14. Mrs. Connie Pedersen Stoneberg, daughter of Mayor S. Eddie Pedersen and granddaughter of Peder Pedersen.
15. Mr. Mike Groth, Rotary Club President and Chief Advocate of the Greenbelt Project.