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Thousands of years ago, when huge lakes occupied much of Utah and Nevada and when local glaciers descended from Idaho's higher mountain ridges, people moved into Idaho's Snake River plains. They found a grassland occupied by exotic large animals, including North American elephants and camels as well as giant bison and sloth. A vast continental ice sheet penetrated into North Idaho from British Columbia and Montana. Fourteen thousand years or more ago, big-game hunters made a comfortable living. But the land gradually became a desert over more than a hundred centuries, and some peoples moved on, following big game that left for other places where survival was more practical. Others stayed and hunted the game that remained; but by 8,000 years ago they too had to move about more in search of a variety of products available seasonally in different areas they occupied.

Long before white explorers showed up, the Snake offered a convenient route of travel and cultural interchange for plains, basin, and plateau peoples who brought a variety of traits into a common meeting area. Fur hunters based in Montreal and St. Louis competed for beaver in that same region. The former went to great effort, relatively successful for Hudson's Bay Company purposes, to trap all available beaver so that Idaho would become a fur desert that would discourage St. Louis-based trappers from ranging any farther north and west into established British fur hunting reserves. Then a flood of emigrants came through on their way to western Oregon and California. Idaho continued to serve as a route for wagon traffic until mineral resources induced white miners to settle in Indian lands and displace native peoples who had long antecedents in a culturally significant area.

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