

“Just passin’ through”: A short history of the area around Arco, Idaho

The purpose of this document is to derive a short history of the area around Arco, Idaho, from earlier sources that are cited herein. The theme that emerges is that the area’s history is largely one of people and goods passing through in various ways for thousands of years, still doing so today, and hopefully doing so tomorrow.

People passing through early on

The human history of the region begins with Native Americans and among them the Shoshone (the “Snake” to trappers) who traveled through in their annual migrations.^{1,2} Those migrations began in the Shoshone wintering grounds near modern Pocatello and came northwest across the Snake Plain (“the Desert”), with the lower reaches of the Big Lost River as the first abundant source of water after the trip across the Desert.² After watering and hunting there, the Shoshone water-hopped to Champagne Creek, Silver Creek, and the Big Wood River on their way to the Camas Prairie.² In late summer, they moved on to the Boise River and then to the Snake River, catching abundant salmon below Shoshone Falls before following the Snake upriver to their wintering grounds.² Up the Lost River valleys rather than on the Snake plain, trappers in the 1820s reported encountering the Blackfoot, who similarly seem to have on the move rather than settled.^{14,15}

The first Euro-Americans to visit the Big Lost River Valley were fur trappers employed by two British companies, the North West Company and the Hudson’s Bay Company (the HBC). The first trapping group in the region was probably that led by Donald Mackenzie, who led a brigade of trappers up the Wood River and eastward over the upper reaches of the Big Lost River and into the Little Lost, wintered there in winter of 1819-1820, and then passed across the mouth of the Big Lost River on his way back west.^{16,20} His brigade included Thyery Goddin, an Iroquois scout who, at the front of the party, was first among them to see the river that he or the brigade named “Goddin’s River”, long before it was known as the Big Lost River. The second trapping party was probably that of Alexander Ross and Thyery Goddin, who in various stages traversed the entire Big Lost River Valley from Willow Creek Summit down to the Snake River Plain and then up to Summit Creek and over Trail Creek Pass in 1824.¹⁴⁻¹⁶ The third may have been that of Peter Skene Ogden, again with Goddin, which in 1825 went up the valley and then (like Ross’s party) went up Summit Creek and over Trail Creek Pass. Ogden returned in November 1827, when his party emerged from the Little Lost, made its way to the mouth of the Big Lost’s valley, and then hurriedly crossed the desert to the Snake River.¹⁷ A last HBC brigades was led up the Big Lost River Valley and into the Little Lost by William Work in 1830 and 1832; he found the beaver so eradicated by Ogden’s parties that he recommended that his employer, the HBC, abandon trapping in the region.¹⁸ Fifty years later, the HBC’s maps of the Lost Rivers region were the still the best depiction of the region’s rivers and mountain ranges. (Much more about the fur trade is reported in an essay on “Fur trappers in Idaho’s Lost Rivers region in the early 1800s”.)

The path westward of the Shoshone is much the same as the one taken by Euro-American migrants who sought to cross the area beginning in mid-1800s. John Jeffrey had in 1852 begun promoting a trail following the Shoshone pathway north across the Snake River Plain, apparently

to generate business for his ferry across the Snake at Blackfoot.³ His trail went from Blackfoot to the Big Southern Butte to the southern outflow of the Big Lost River, and onward to the later site of Martin to cross over what is today the northern margin of Craters of the Moon, bypassing the lava as best it could.³ Jeffrey presumably led at least one party over the trail, later called "Goodale's Cutoff", because the diary of one 1862 "emigrant", Nellie Slater, records that, four days' travel west of the Big Lost River, "Some of the boys found in the rocks a trunk which had been lost or hid in 1853."⁴

After Shoshone and Bannock attacks made the main route of the Oregon Trail along the Snake River less attractive in 1862, Tim Goodale led a large party of more than 300 wagons across Jeffrey's trail.³ On July 25, 1862, Nellie Slater wrote in her journal "Came 10 miles further to Lost creek. It is a beautiful stream and runs smooth and swift. The country around is very rocky and broken with high mountains". Her entry for the next day records that her father died in the night and was buried by the trail, probably very near the first site of Arco.⁴

If the area at the mouth of the Big Lost River Valley had first been on path of the Shoshone to the Camas Prairie and then on the path of the emigrants to Oregon, in 1879 it was on the path of miners (and others) to the gold rush on the Yankee Fork of the Salmon River.¹³ The result was a boom in stagecoach travel. The company of frontier entrepreneur Alexander Toponce began stage service to Challis by way of the Arco area in June, 1879, and later that year Toponce followed with service to Bellevue. He sold the lines to Gilmer, Salisbury and Company in 1882.¹¹ The Blackfoot, Bonanza, and Wood River Stage Company also provided service in the early 1880s.¹¹ By the late 1880s, the Idaho Stage Company with O. J. Salisbury as its president had its headquarters in Arco.¹¹

For stagecoach travel, stagecoach stations were essential, and both groundwater extracted from the north side of the Big Butte at Webb Spring and the flowing water of the Big Lost River dictated locations of stage stations. Among these were stations known as Powell's Station and simply the Big Butte Station.⁵ To the west was a station at Champagne Creek, and to the southeast was a station so lamentable, even for its time, that it was called "Root Hog Station".¹

If one envisions most of the transit of humans as travel to the west, there was also much transit of animals to the east. Thousands of head of livestock (both cattle and sheep) were driven east from Oregon to railheads in Wyoming, and just as the water of the Big Lost River was a boon to the horses and people going west, it sustained the herds of livestock moving east.^{6,7}

The theme of this section has been one of people passing through the lower reaches of the Big Lost River. None of them concluded that it would be a good place to settle. This is most strikingly the case of the emigrants on Goodale's Cutoff of the Oregon Trail: these people had been walking or, if lucky, riding in wagons over rocky roads for hundreds of miles, watching their companions die along a route called "the nation's longest graveyard", and they still had hundreds of miles to go to Oregon. Nonetheless, none of them looked up the valley of this "beautiful stream [that] runs smooth and swift" and decided to stay here.

The first two of the three towns of Arco

In response to the stagecoach station supporting Toponce's new stagecoach lines in 1879, the town of Arco ("Old Arco #1" in the usage of F.W. Dykes) was founded in that year on the Big Lost River south of the present site of Arco. C.A. Bottolfsen's 1926 account puts Old Arco #1

"five miles south of the present town"⁵, and F.W. Dykes more specifically puts it on the Big Lost River where the river crosses lava upstream from the Box Canyon.¹ A suspension bridge was built to facilitate crossing the river,⁷ and a cemetery soon developed near the town.¹ The town may have arisen when the stage line north from Big Butte Station to Wild Cat Point Station to Pass Creek Station and northward on up the valley was changed, with the latter two stations moved to the west side of the Big Lost River and thus to Junction and Antelope Stations.⁸ Junction was the station at which the Bellevue (or Big Wood) and Challis (Salmon) stagecoach routes joined or split, depending on the direction one was travelling.

Much was written before 2020 about the origin of Arco's name, and research by John Parsons in 2020 showed that almost all of it was wrong. For example, it was commonly alleged that the name of "Junction" was originally requested, but that the US Post Office instead assigned the name of "Arco". However, Mr. Parsons recovered the original request for a post office dated April 15, 1880, on which the proposed name was first entered as "Lost River" and then crossed out in favor of "Arco". Secondly, and more importantly, it was commonly alleged that the name "Arco" was assigned by the U.S. Post Office in honor of a visiting European nobleman who was a member of the family of the Counts of Arco, a town in modern northern Italy.⁵ The most ridiculous specific candidate among these noblemen was Georg Wilhelm Alexander Hans Graf von Arco, a pioneer in radio communication, who was born in 1869 and thus would only have been ten years old when the town was given its name. Mr. Parsons's research uncovered the autobiography of George Walter Goodhart (1842-1927), an early explorer and scout, which has multiple mentions of the ranch of Louis Arco and his wife, seemingly in the 1860s.⁹ In one case, Goodhart was on his way from southeastern Idaho to Boise when he forded the Snake and then "crossed the desert to Big Lost River . . . to Arco's ranch" where he encountered another traveller "who had come over to see Louis Arco".⁹ A reader can only conclude that the town of Arco was named after the area's earliest Euro-American settlers; it would have been an incredible coincidence for the U.S. Post Office to have independently arrived at such an unusual name. By 1881 "Arco" appeared in the list of Idaho post offices in the Official Register of the United States.¹²

If transit dictated the location of Old Arco #1, it also doomed it when the railroad from Shoshone to Ketchum was completed in the early 1880s, making the stage from Blackfoot to the Wood River country irrelevant (the contract lasted for the rest of the year, but the service was lessened from a six-horse stage to a two-horse stage before its complete elimination).⁵ Soon the town was moved to a new location (Dykes's "Old Arco #2") that was "about four miles southeast of Arco",⁵ or "about halfway between Old Arco and present-day Arco . . . 2 miles south of Arco"¹, perhaps on present County Road 2930W. This location presumably continued to serve the stagecoach from Blackfoot to Challis and Salmon. Traffic from the east almost certainly swelled during the gold-rush activity of the mid-1880s, with discoveries that led to the boom towns of Martin to the west on Lava Creek, Era in Champagne Creek, and Alder Creek, Cliff City, Carbonate, and Houston up the valley.⁵ One 1884 gazetteer even listed Arco as "a mining settlement"¹⁰, which was almost certainly incorrect but probably got the nature of the traffic through town right.

The coming of the railroad through Arco

Transit considerations doomed Old Arco #2 in 1901, when crews began to construct a railroad that passed just east of the town. This railroad was called the Salmon River Railroad, and it was built by the Oregon Short Line Railway, which was in turn a subsidiary of the Union Pacific. The new railroad branched off the rail line north from Pocatello to Montana, leaving that main line at Blackfoot. It threaded its way northwest between the Hell's Half Acre and Cerro Grande Lava Fields to the east and the Big Butte to the west, and then it went up the valley of the Big Lost River. It was inspired by the decision of John Mackay, a mining magnate, to mine copper from the White Knob Mountains above Mackay *and* by seemingly huge deposits of gold being discovered in 1901 at Thunder Mountain, a remote location northwest of Challis. Surveying for the line from Mackay to Challis began in 1902, but the Oregon Short Line lost interest as Thunder Mountain, like most gold rushes, subsided from euphoria to disappointment. The significance of Mackay's copper deposits faded in the subsequent few years, but the rails were on the ground to Mackay and remained so for more than half a century. The name "Salmon River Railroad" was dropped around 1910 as the UP conceded its loss of interest in getting to Challis, and the railway was designated the Mackay Branch of the Oregon Short Line and later of the UP.

The new railway laid down in 1901 was no more than a mile from Old Arco #2, but the town's move was swift and in fact preceded inauguration of rail service in the fall of 1901.⁵ The result was the present location of Arco, on the neck of land between the Big Lost River to the west and the southern tip of the Lost River Mountains to the east, perhaps on the site of the short-lived Wild Cat Point stage station of the 1870s.^{8,25}

The theme of this section and the previous one has, like the first, been one of people and goods passing through the lower reaches of the Big Lost River, and of a town that served their needs. That town responded twice by moving as the paths of travellers and goods changed. In the second case in 1901, it moved not because the railroad *came to Arco* but because the Salmon River Railroad *went through Arco* on its way to Mackay and (prospectively, so to speak) to Challis. As with the stagecoach routes, Arco was the place through which transportation passed, not the place to which people were trying to get. First, excitement about gold in the region southwest of Challis on the Yankee Fork brought the stagecoach route through Arco in 1879, and then excitement about gold in the region northwest of Challis at Thunder Mountain brought the railroad through Arco in 1901.

Arco's linkage to Challis is reflected in the names of Arco's streets, four of which were named for other towns. Three of the towns are or were relatively near: Era and Lost River (both now only memories) and Mackay. Only one street was named for a distant town. That distant town wasn't Hailey (then the county seat of Arco's county), it wasn't Boise (then and now the capital of Arco's state) and it wasn't Blackfoot (then the source of almost all of Arco's contact with the outside world). That single distant town was Challis.

Twentieth-Century Arco

The new Arco, farther from the Big Lost River than its two predecessors, was not a lush environment: an early (~1906?) photograph shows many buildings but no trees other than those in the distance along the river. A 1920 photograph shows a town with trees, but only below the

present canal at Hazel Street; up the hill was sagebrush. The town built a municipal electric plant in 1916²⁴, a remarkable step forward for a remote small town.

The new Arco was like its predecessors in depending on travellers, if more relaxed ones: its hotels ran advertisements to bring fisherman to the lush banks of the Big Lost River. A former Arco resident recalled "days from his youth when anglers would drive their Model T Fords across the desert from Idaho Falls, Blackfoot and Pocatello to fish in the Big Lost near Arco".²³ One 1917 report said of Arco "The finest trout fishing in the West is within easy reach. The Big Lost River, which runs through this valley, touches the edge of town and people from many states come here to enjoy the sport".²⁴ In those days, cottonwoods lined the river, and access to the river was not controversial.

The present Arco achieved greater stability than its two predecessors, in part because the routes of travel (a railroad and some developed roads) were more fixed than the paths of stagecoaches. The railroad was spiked to the ground, whereas the state and federal highway routes changed in both numerical designation and the roadbeds over which they passed, using early on what today are county roads. For example, state Route 13 (late state Route 22) came from the west via the Blizzard Mountain Road through Martin before construction of the modern roadbed of US 20 and 26. State Route 26, later designated state Route 27, went north from Arco on the old Lost River Highway that is today county roads, and its later counterpart Alternate US 93 did likewise before the modern roadbed of US 93 to Moore was built. State Route 20, later designated state Route 27 and then US 26, went southeast through the middle of Midway (later Atomic City) and onward to Taber before the modern roadbed of US 26 was built. In all cases, however, these roads converged in Arco, consistently funneling traffic (and commerce) through the center of town; the only (and ongoing) challenge was to keep traffic from bypassing Arco on county road 2400N.

The development of agriculture in the valley also encouraged at least some economic stability. The federal government, via the Carey Act of 1894, tried to enhance the development of agriculture in regions like the Big Lost River Valley by making available public land that could be claimed by settlers who paid in to newly-constructed irrigation systems. However, hopes for agricultural development exceeded expectations: the Big Lost River Land and Irrigation company proposed a huge scheme in what it called its Era Flat, Arco, and Powell tracts, and it began a dam above Mackay, but the company went bankrupt in 1909. Then the Big Lost River Irrigation Company took over the scheme and held a much-publicized drawing for land assignments in 1909, and a large population of settlers came to farm soon-to-be-irrigated land in the area (Powell, near the modern US 20/26 rest area, was briefly a tent city). However, the dam at Mackay was not built to its planned height and did not yield the flow of water anticipated, and the dam and canals for the huge Powell project were never put in operation, in part because the diverted water just sank into the desert. The Big Lost River Irrigation Company was in receivership by 1913 and eventually followed its predecessor into bankruptcy. The disappointed if not swindled homesteaders, many of whom had sold farms in the Midwest to come here, sadly moved on.^{21,1} The population of Butte County dropped by one third, from 2940 to 1934 persons, in the decade from 1920 to 1930, as the regional "water rush" akin to the Gold Rushes of the 1880s came to an end and the national agricultural depression of the 1920s (long before 1929) began.

Arco advanced with regard to state government, becoming an incorporated village in 1909²² at the height of the water rush. The same year saw publication of the first issue of the *Arco Advertiser*. Arco became a county seat in 1917 with the Legislature’s creation of Butte County (Arco had been in Alturas County until 1895, and then in eastern Blaine). In retrospect, one might wonder if the state would have supported the creation of Butte as a new county in 1917 if it had known that the county’s population would soon plummet.

The federal government came to the region’s rescue again in mid-century. This time it was not because land around Arco might support agriculture but because it was so useless (for example, the “choice agricultural land” of the huge Powell tract of the 1909 irrigation scheme is today part of the INL). The federal government began to play a major role when Arco became, at least in name, the home of the Arco Naval Proving Ground during World War II as ships’ guns were tested in the desert southeast of Arco. After World War II, the landscape of the proving ground became that of the National Reactor Testing Station, and as a result Arco became the nation’s first town lit by nuclear power in 1955 (Obninsk in Russia may have been the world’s first such town in 1954). More importantly from an economic standpoint, as the National Reactor Testing Station became the Idaho National Engineering Laboratory, Arco incorporated as a city in 1951²², and its population as recorded by the decadal census peaked at around 1,600 people in 1960. Butte County’s population similarly hit its peak at about 3,500 people in 1960. However, with the lessening of federally-funded activity at the Idaho National Laboratory in the 1980s and 1990s (the Three Mile Island accident was in 1979), population has since dropped under 1,000 and was estimated at 849 people in 2016, a level last seen in the 1940s. Butte County’s population likewise has dropped to 1950s levels. Arco nonetheless remains the largest town between Shoshone, Bellevue, Challis, Dubois, Idaho Falls, Blackfoot, and Aberdeen, and thus for a radius of fifty to seventy-five miles.

Arco today

With the federal economic driver in decline and the valley’s agricultural capacity increasingly tapped by corporations based outside the valley¹⁹, Arco again depends heavily on travellers passing through, but not those on wagon trains, in stagecoaches, or on railways (passenger rail service ended in 1961, and the rails have long since been pulled up). Instead, transit takes the form of US Highways 20, 26, and 93. Arco’s dependence on travellers for its sustenance is reflected today in the town’s resistance to use of County Road 2400N as a cut-off²⁶ that would allow touristic and trucking traffic to bypass the town and its restaurants, its motels and campgrounds, and its gas stations. Sport-utility vehicles and camping trailers have replaced stagecoaches filled with travelers, but Arco is still at heart a Junction dependent on traffic to destinations far afield. That means that Arco is dependent on making people passing through feel welcome, either to stop for a meal, to visit for a day or two, or to move here and become contributing citizens.

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 3. Goodale's Cutoff: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goodale%27s_Cutoff.
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 6. History of Idaho Territory: Wallace W. Elliott and Company, 1884.
 7. Idaho State News, 1950, Crossroads of Idaho Now Atom Land.
 - 8 C.A. Bottolfsen, History of the Lost River Pioneers.
 9. George Walter Goodhart and Abraham C. Anderson, 1940, Trails of Early Idaho, Caxton Printers. The quotation provided is from p. 257. Louis Arco is also mentioned in the National Park Service's Teacher's Guide to Craters of the Moon with the line "about 1862 Louis Arco establishes a ranch and trading post at Arco". The hypothesized tie of the town's name to the name of the family of the Counts of Arco remains viable, if more distantly so: Louis Arco may well have been a descendant of that family.
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Bruce Railsback, Arco, 2019 (revised 2020)