

*It is not hard to imagine yourself standing here on the shores of ancient Lake Idaho.*

# The Big Picture



Extending across southwest Idaho between the Owyhee Mountains and the Boise Front is the broad valley of the western Snake River Plain. Evidence indicates that the Plain began as a continental rift about 12 million years ago. Here, the earth's crust was pulled apart, northeast to southwest, and was stretched thin like taffy.

As crustal extension progressed between 11 and 9 million years ago, the Owyhee Mountains and the Boise Front responded by rising to their present heights along faults bordering the rift. Now a valley, the Plain became a basin for Lake Idaho. Some 200 miles long and 35 miles wide, Lake Idaho drained south into Nevada.

Thousands of feet of sediment were deposited on the Lake's bottom over its 6.5 million years of existence, interrupted at times with layers of basalt and volcanic ash (tuffs) from eruptions of adjacent volcanoes.

Geologists think that 2 to 4 million years ago, water from melting glaciers caused Lake Idaho to overflow to the west. Captured by the Snake River, the waters drained out in a massive flood that gouged Hell's Canyon. The sediments left behind from Lake Idaho are known as the Chalk Hills and Glens Ferry Formations.

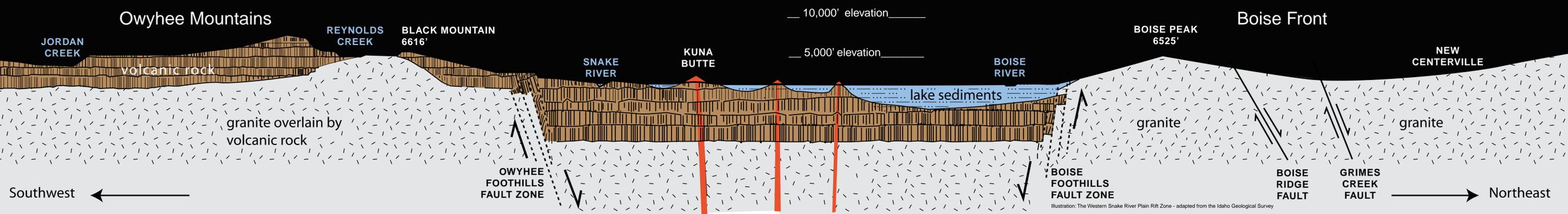


Illustration: The Western Snake River Plain Rift Zone - adapted from the Idaho Geological Survey