



CITY OF PRINEVILLE RAILWAY

AUSTIN JACOX/PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR EXCEPT AS NOTED

ROLLING THROUGH THE FERTILE farmlands of the Crooked River Valley, surrounded by towering rimrock cliffs, a short freight train returns to the city of Prineville as it has for more than a hundred years. Oregon's oldest continuously operating short line, and the country's oldest city-owned railroad, City of Prineville Railway has seen its ups and downs as the industry and economy have changed, but the railroad continues to meet local needs in a modern world.

Located in Oregon's high desert region east of the Cascade mountains, Prineville sits at an elevation of 2,900 feet. While Oregon is normally associated with lots of rain, Prineville gets on average only 12 inches of rain a year and eight inches of snow. By contrast, Portland, 125 miles to

the northwest, gets 43 inches of rain and three inches of snow. The resulting landscape varies from sparse sagebrush desert to dramatic volcanic rock formations, creating an interesting scenic backdrop for this local short line operation.

Timber Boom Times

Despite being Central Oregon's first settlement, Prineville was bypassed by Oregon Trunk (backed by James J. Hill and Great Northern) and Deschutes Railroad (backed by E.H. Harriman and Union Pacific) as the rail lines built south from the Columbia River toward Bend in the early 1900s. Once the joint Oregon Trunk opened in 1910, Prineville saw business move away to Bend and other communities served by the railroad.

Action was needed if the city was to survive.

Local businessmen founded Prineville & Eastern in 1911, and Metolius, Prineville & Eastern in 1912. While MP&E was able to raise some money and secure land for a right-of-way, both attempts failed by 1914. The city took matters into its own hands and chartered its own railroad in March 1916. The city engineer enlisted the assistance of Spokane, Portland & Seattle and UP engineers to plot the course of the railroad. Construction began in 1917, with grading completed by the end of the year. The city's own workers laid the rails, completing the job in August 1918, and the 18-mile railroad opened for business. Initially, the city had planned to sell the



railroad to a private owner once it was completed, but no buyers could be found, and thus the railroad was operated as a department of the city. During its early years, traffic on the line was limited to connecting with SP&S and UP passenger trains at Prineville Junction, less-than-carload freight for Prineville, and seasonal livestock traffic.

The Ochoco Mountains east of Prineville contained vast stands of Ponderosa pine owned by the U.S. Forest Service. When the pines were finally released to timber operations, the first small sawmills opened in Prineville as early as 1925. By 1938, the mills were

OPPOSITE: With Mount Jefferson as a backdrop, the whole City of Prineville roster is running light power to Prineville Junction on April 20, 2020, to pick up a large string of tank cars and return it to storage.

LEFT: City of Prineville 1551, an ex-Southern Pacific SW1500, leads a seven-car train around the curve east of the City of Prineville Railway bridge that crosses over Highway 26 on June 8, 2021.

BELOW: Returning from Prineville Junction with a string of tank cars for storage, the 989 works its way eastbound through a dip east of O'Neil on May 4, 2021.



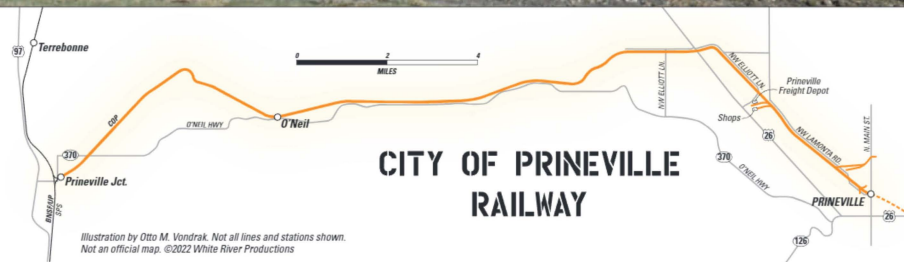
expanded and freight traffic began to boom. After years of decline, passenger service was discontinued in 1939, yet the railroad finally declared its first profits.

Freight increased greatly during World War II, but track and roadbed began to deteriorate from the heavy traffic, resulting in regular derailments. After the war, finances allowed the railroad to be completely rebuilt and upgraded. The first diesel locomotive arrived in 1950 to replace steam. From the 1950s on, the railroad was continuously busy, making enough profit that no property taxes were collected from residents through the 1960s and 1970s. By 1978,

RIGHT: On April 5, 2021, GP9 1837 is making a rare solo appearance as it hauls seven tank cars and one loaded centerbeam flat westbound below the signature rimrock cliffs.

BELOW: That same day, the 1837 is switching outbound tank cars at the Prineville Junction BNSF interchange at the north end of the wye.

BOTTOM: Both Geeps are hauling four tank cars back to Prineville on March 29, 2021.



the railroad was serving nine lumber mill operations.

During the 1980s, the railroad was handling about 2,500 cars a year, which led to another rebuilding of the railroad with heavier rail and new ballast. Ochoco Lumber Co., Crown Pacific, and Woodgrain Millworks were responsible for the majority of the traffic on the railroad at the time.

In 2001, the last two sawmills in Prineville closed, which led to a hard year for the railroad and the city of Prineville in general. In August, Ochoco Lumber closed, followed by the Crown Pacific

mill two months later. Together, the two sawmills generated about 2,400 of the railroad's 2,500 loads a year. The only remaining customer of any importance was Woodgrain Millworks, receiving inbound loads of lumber.

Traffic fell to an astounding low of 87 cars in 2004. The city contemplated abandoning and scrapping the railroad, and its future was in doubt.

Repurposing for Rebirth

Fortunately, being city-owned, COP was in a unique position to work with the city to boost the local economy by

developing facilities along the railroad to draw industry needing rail service. In 2004, the city traded property to acquire 33 acres of land from a closed sawmill. This land includes two large warehouse buildings, which are being used as a transloading and warehousing facility. This has led to several customers using the facility, including two manufacturers located more than 100 miles from Prineville.

In 2009, the first phase of a second, larger freight depot opened. Located three miles west of Prineville, the new 64,000-square-foot building features 180

Tourist Trains and More

A resident of the railroad that cannot be ignored is Mount Emily Lumber Company three-truck Shay 1. Owned by the Oregon Historical Society, the geared logging locomotive was on long-term lease to Cass Scenic Railroad in West Virginia. It was returned to Oregon in 1993, and Prineville became its home. It is used on occasional tourist runs and chartered photo freights.

In 1989, Rimrock Scenic Rail Tours began operating the *Crooked River Dinner Train* over the railroad. Hauled by City of Prineville Railway with its crews and locomotives, the train initially used cars leased from the Pacific Northwest Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society before purchasing its own ex-Milwaukee Road coaches converted to dining cars. The city took over the operation of the dinner train in 2004, but the economic hardships of 2008 led to decreased ridership, which ultimately led to the end of the operation. A private operator tried again in 2009, but lasted only one season before ending operations again. The city sold two of the coaches in 2011 to Mount Rainier Scenic Railroad; one still remains in Prineville.

RIGHT: The *Crooked River Dinner Train* arrives at Prineville Junction, and the crew is preparing to turn the train on the wye for the return to Prineville on August 13, 2006. OTTO M. VONDAK PHOTO

BELOW: Both Geeps lead a long string of cars, including ex-SP woodchip cars from long-term storage in Prineville, west through the high desert farms on March 29, 2021.



Current Operations

The railroad usually operates twice a week from Prineville to Prineville Junction and back, usually on Monday and Tuesday. When running to Prineville Junction, after performing any required switching in Prineville, trains are usually on the road between 9:00 and 10:00AM. The 18-mile run takes about an hour. After switching the junction, the train will return east to Prineville. Operations are truly as-needed, but seem to run regularly on Mondays and Tuesdays.

Switching in Prineville is done as needed during the week. The train crews are tasked with maintaining the track and right-of-way when not operating trains. In addition, extra trains are run as needed to move freight cars for storage to and from Prineville.

The railroad's original shops are located just west of Main Street, north of



downtown, on the north side of Lamonta Road. The railroad now keeps its power at the new freight depot west of town. The old wood enginehouse's sole occupant is Mount Emily Shay 1, locked up and not visible to the public and generally surrounded by stored freight cars.

Leaving Prineville, the railroad heads northwest from the shops. The first 2.7 miles are the industrial core of the railroad, with many abandoned lumber mills and the new city-owned freight depot. Lamonta Road closely follows the railroad from the old shops to the new freight depot, crossing from the south side of the tracks to the north side about a half-mile west of the shops.

The new, large freight depot is located at mile 2.7. At this point, Lamonta Road swings north away from the tracks, but a short detour west on Sunset Lane brings you to Elliott Road, which continues to



ABOVE: The 989 is switching the yard at the old Prineville shop on January 29, 2014. The orange ex-Lehigh Valley "Northeastern"-style caboose is now on display at the Bowman Museum in downtown Prineville. ROB JACOCK PHOTO

LEFT: On May 10, 2021, the 989 is switching the freight depot in Prineville. An added bonus for photography is the illuminated Gyraltie.

used for outbound cars, and the east yard is used for car storage and runaround moves.

The spur to the Prineville Junction tank car transload facility cuts across the north leg of the wye. Apparently, the railroad ordered a crossing kit with straight rails and, much like a model railroader would, had a very difficult time fitting it into the curved leg of the wye!

In Prineville, the railroad originally extended 1.2 miles east from the shops at Main Street to the Ochoco Lumber Co. mill east of town. This trackage was removed after the mill closed in 2001, and in 2021, the right-of-way was converted to a biking/walking trail.

Another short branch takes off from the main line west of the shops and climbs to reach two mills that were built on a plateau above the city. In 2021, this branch was being upgraded to handle traffic for the new KRAH Industries pipe plant.

The Retooled City of Prineville

Although once on the brink of death, City of Prineville Railway is now helping the community that owns it to grow and prosper. Not even the complete change in traffic base over that time was too much to overcome. While the heavy main line action on the Oregon Trunk is difficult to ignore, the laid-back City of Prineville Railway offers a welcome change of pace to the visiting railfan. ■

follow the railroad west.

At mile 4.5, the railroad climbs up and over U.S. Highway 26 on the quite famous bridge where many photographs of the railroad's trains have been taken. Elliott Road crosses U.S. 26 adjacent to the bridge and continues following the railroad for 0.6 miles before crossing at grade and turning south away from the tracks.

For the next 2.5 miles, the railroad is away from public access, bisecting private farmland, and crossing the Crooked River. To regain access to the railroad, continue south on Elliott Road from the grade crossing, then turn right on O'Neil Highway.

O'Neil Highway and the railroad come together just west of the Elliott Road intersection, then run parallel for almost six miles to the former townsite of O'Neil. Sometimes running adjacent to the highway, and sometimes up to a half-mile away, this section offers numerous and

diverse views of the railroad.

The railroad swings away from the highway at O'Neil as it climbs up out of the Crooked River valley; O'Neil Highway crosses the railroad once before reaching Prineville Junction. There is no public access to the railroad on the grade, and only two additional grade crossings on side streets off O'Neil Highway.

Prineville Junction is quite accessible, as the highway crosses the east end of the wye before swinging west and crossing the south leg of the wye and the BNSF Railway Oregon Trunk main line.

Prineville Junction features an unusual track arrangement. Nestled along BNSF's Prineville Junction siding, COP joins the BNSF siding in a wye. There are additional sidings to the north and the south along the BNSF siding, and a small two-track "yard" along COP to the east. The south siding is generally used for cars inbound to COP, the north is