



LEFT: Passing newly built C40-8s holding on a side track, F40PHs hustle Train 26 out of UP's Hinkle Yard on January 26, 1989. RYAN REED PHOTO

ABOVE: The morning of June 6, 1977, was a big day for Salt Lake City and Amtrak as the press run of the Seattle to Salt Lake City Pioneer arrived at the Union Pacific passenger station downtown. JAMES BELMONT PHOTO

BELOW LEFT: The Pioneer service logo was designed by J. Craig Thorpe.



## AMTRAK FOLLOWING THE OLD OREGON TRAIL

# Life of a Pioneer

RYAN REED/PHOTOS AS NOTED

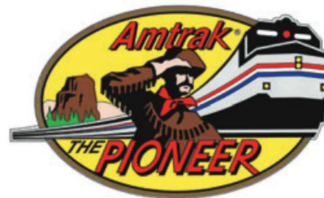
THEY SAID IT WAS LIKE SEEING a long-lost friend given up for dead. Union Pacific's *City of Portland* and *Portland Rose* streamliners were iconic symbols of southern Wyoming, Idaho, and northern Oregon. Unfortunately for local residents who knew the trains intimately, neither would make it into the new Amtrak system timetable on May 1, 1971. The grand Boise, Idaho, depot, the pride of the city with its early 20th-century architecture, stood silent, unnatural as that was. When Amtrak's *Pioneer*

rolled into town for the first time, a six-year-old wrong had been righted.

Getting a passenger train back was not an easy task though. Extensive lobbying by Idaho Governor Cecil Andrus and senators Frank Church and Jim McClure, along with other members of Idaho's congressional delegation, lasted for years. The efforts finally proved successful, although the new *Pioneer* would start out as a two-year experimental route and was definitely "on the bubble," as they say.

Between June 4 and 6, 1977, a pre-inaugural train for the press and locals ran south from Seattle on Burlington Northern tracks, then eastward from Portland, Ore., on UP's main line, stopping at each station along the route. Deep in the spectacular Columbia River Gorge, reflections of summer sun glistened from wind-blown, choppy waves to the sides of brand-new Amfleet coaches and back again. Something special was truly in the making.

At Pendleton, Ore., and within sight



of the Oregon Trail, the namesake for the new train, some 3,000 locals walked through the four Amfleet coaches and two Amdinnettes as a high school band played in sweltering 95-degree heat.

By late afternoon, the train was parked in La Grande, Ore., for the night. The small town at the eastern base of the Blue Mountains boasted a yard, engine facilities, and an ornate brick station. The journey so far had rolled more than 300 miles and over a mountain pass, taking some of the glint off the sides of the train and dirtying the windows.

With contractors unavailable to wash the two F40PHs and six cars, local high

school students came to the rescue with hoses, brushes, and buckets. Amtrak even paid the kids, money they later spent on summer camp. At Boise, Amtrak President Paul Reistrup spoke to the crowd, and as the train later stopped in Ogden, Utah, and Salt Lake City, local newspapers appealed to their readers to support the *Pioneer* by riding it often.

### The Pioneer Era Begins

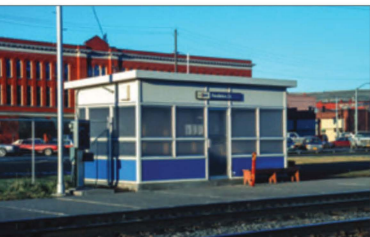
On June 7, 1977, trains 25 and 26 were added to the Amtrak system. The trains consisted of an F40PH, two Amfleet coaches and an Amdinette, operating on Union Pacific rails for 896 miles from Salt Lake City back to Portland. At Troutdale, Ore., the *Pioneer* was routed onto the Graham Line to East Portland and across the Steel Bridge over the Columbia River into Portland Union Station. From there, the *Pioneer* traveled an additional 183 miles north up Burlington Northern's busy main line to Seattle's King Street Station.

To support the train, Amtrak spent half a million dollars upgrading 13 stations along the line, as well as installing

small shelters (unflatteringly known as "Amshacks"). They were unmanned and poorly designed, and when the clear plastic windows faded to milky white, passengers could hardly see out of them.

In 1978, Amtrak spent an additional \$2.75 million to convert 25 steam-heated Budd 10-6 sleepers to head-end power, allowing the cars to operate with the new Amfleets. While the sleepers were originally upgraded to operate on the Washington, D.C.—Boston *Night Owl*, Washington—Chicago *James Whitcomb Riley*, Chicago—New Orleans *Panama Limited*, and the Washington—Montreal *Montrealer*, they found their way to the *Pioneer* as well. Similarly converted full baggage cars were added around the same time.

By the end of the 1970s, the *Pioneer* offered passengers checked baggage space and coach service; tray meals, sandwiches, snacks, and beverages in the Amdinette; and roomettes and bedrooms in the 10-6 sleeping car. Lacking, however, was a sorely needed vista-dome to enjoy the magnificent daytime scenery along the 160-mile-long Columbia River Gorge,



ABOVE: One of many prefabricated "Amshacks" along the *Pioneer* route stood at Pendleton, Ore., on January 25, 1989. They were disliked by passengers, especially those with disabilities. RYAN REED PHOTO

RIGHT: Train 26 departs Portland, Ore., on the morning of October 23, 1988. The old Portland Terminal yard is being dismantled, being prepared for development. Numerous condos can be found on the site today. GREG BROWN PHOTO

BELOW RIGHT: Amtrak's *Pioneer* screams through the famous red cliffs of Echo Canyon east of Salt Lake City on July 4, 1992. JAMES BELMONT PHOTO

in the Umatilla River Canyon, and over the Blue Mountains.

In the era before "schedule padding," a late-running *Pioneer* making its way across southern Idaho, with just three or four passenger cars, could really cut loose to make up time. Running just shy of 100 mph on the UP high iron was not unheard of. Engineers knew their railroad well and could squeeze every last mile per hour out of the track without being reckless.

#### Upgrades in the Eighties

Further upgrades were made to the *Pioneer* in 1981 when the long-awaited Superliner coaches replaced single-level Amfleet coaches. An ex-Santa Fe coach-dorm transition car was required, making a mishmash consist of a conventional baggage car, 10-6 conventional sleeper, Amdinette, ex-Santa Fe coach-dorm transition car, and two Superliner coaches. The baggage car was dropped when a Superliner coach-baggage car was added to the consist.

The westbound *Pioneer* arrived in Portland at 5:30PM, so if a passenger wanted to catch the Portland-Spokane *Empire Builder* Train 28 heading back east toward Pasco, Wash. (which departed Portland shortly before the *Pioneer* arrived), he or she would have to hop off the train at Hood River, Ore., and find some way across the Columbia River to Bingen/White Salmon, Wash., to catch the eastbound *Empire Builder* coming back the other way. A taxi was preferred, but hitchhiking was more likely.

On the other end of the *Pioneer's* route,



a direct connection at Ogden with the *San Francisco Zephyr* (which bypassed Salt Lake City) provided passengers with a way on to Chicago via UP's Overland Route — by actually stepping off the *Pioneer* and across a station platform, possibly with a couple of armfuls of luggage, then onto the *San Francisco Zephyr*. Changing trains with a blizzard sweeping off the Rocky Mountains before sunrise could, however, be a downright dreadful experience!

Beginning on April 26, 1981, a through coach on the *Pioneer* was added to the *San Francisco Zephyr*, finally giving passengers direct travel to and from Chicago. Subsequently, a through sleeper was added on October 31, 1982. Around the same time, the *Pioneer* had gone full Superliner while still pulled by a single F40PH. The regular consist was a dining car, coach-baggage, coach, and sleeper.

For adventurous passengers, a Denver & Rio Grande Western bus met the *San Francisco Zephyr* and *Pioneer* at Ogden for a connection with D&RGW's famed *Rio Grande Zephyr* — but it came with a catch. If the Amtrak trains were running late, the bus driver would wait only a scant 15 minutes before giving up and driving off. If passengers missed the bus, they were on their own to get to the D&RGW station in Salt Lake City, but with the *Rio Grande Zephyr* departing just 45 minutes after the *Pioneer* was

TOP LEFT: Amtrak equipment idles away the afternoon in Salt Lake City on May 9, 1986. Two F40PH units and Superliner cars will depart for Seattle and Los Angeles on the *Pioneer* and *Desert Wind* trains (with cars added from the inbound *California Zephyr*) later that evening. JAMES BELMONT PHOTO

LEFT: The route through the Columbia River Gorge afforded passengers with some of the best scenic views in the Pacific Northwest. Rolling through Wyeth, Ore., on August 17, 1996, the westbound *Pioneer* is but 50 miles from Portland. RYAN REED PHOTO

BELOW: Running six hours late and well over 90 mph, a westbound *Pioneer* speeds out of Barnhart, Ore., on August 31, 1996, making up time in a hurry! RYAN REED PHOTO



scheduled to arrive in Ogden!

To the dismay of railfans across the country, D&RGW finally decided to join Amtrak and on April 24, 1983, when the *Rio Grande Zephyr* called it quits and ended one of the most cherished passenger trains of the 1970s. Amtrak's *San Francisco Zephyr* was rerouted onto D&RGW between Ogden and Salt Lake City on July 16, 1983, and renamed *California Zephyr*.

Superliners from the *Pioneer* and Los Angeles-Ogden *Desert Wind* (now truncated to Salt Lake City) were added to the *California Zephyr* at Salt Lake City for a combined train to and from Chicago. Ogden, for so long an important station along the *Zephyr* route, was finally given up on October 27, 1985, ending a two-and-a-half-year overlap with the *Pioneer*.

#### New Era Nineties

A striking change to the *Pioneer* took place on June 17, 1991. Before then, Superliners from the eastbound *Pioneer* and *Desert Wind* were added to the *California Zephyr* at Salt Lake City, creating a beast of a train with 13 or more cars powered by three F40PHs up front. Crossing the Continental Divide every day with such a long train proved to be a formidable challenge.

To alleviate the problem, the *Pioneer* would turn east at Ogden and travel on

**RIGHT:** Forced off the main line at Hinkle, Ore., due to an obstruction, Train 25 eases to a station stop on the wrong side of the depot in December 1994. No matter, it has long been closed.

**BELOW:** With a sad face painted on its nose, Amtrak 323 leads the final eastbound *Pioneer* as it curves through the Umatilla River Canyon, 203 miles into its swan song on May 10, 1997. RYAN REED PHOTOS

UP's Overland Route to Denver, just as the *San Francisco Zephyr* had done in years past. For the first time in *Pioneer's* history, the train would no longer serve Utah's capital. The *Desert Wind* would, however, continue its rendezvous with the *California Zephyr* in Salt Lake City just as before.

The downtown station in Cheyenne, Wyo., would be bypassed as well by the *Pioneer*. The train would stop at Borie, where it met a bus ready to take passengers 11 miles to downtown Cheyenne.

When an eastbound *Pioneer* arrived at the Denver station, its F40PH (or two) would be cut off the train. The Chicago-bound *California Zephyr* pulled in and eased to a stop, with the brake indicator lights on each Superliner changing from green to yellow as brakes were applied, followed by a soft squealing in the trucks. The sleeping car and coach off the *Pioneer* would be coupled to the back of the train. The lengthened *California Zephyr* then headed off for Chicago.

The 1990s were, however, proving to be



lean times for Amtrak. Congress' strangling budget was forcing service reductions across the board and on November 4, 1993, the *Pioneer's* service was reduced to tri-weekly operation. A consulting firm hired by Amtrak used mathematical models to predict that most passengers would continue to ride the *Pioneer*, along with other tri-weekly services, by simply altering their travel plans to days when it was operating.

At a time when gasoline cost a buck a gallon and driving across southern Wyoming on Interstate 80 or up through southern Idaho was less expensive than an Amtrak ticket, passengers simply took to the road on days the *Pioneer* did not operate. Amtrak's best-laid plans for the train, unfortunately, did not materialize as expected.

The tri-weekly *Pioneer* was afflicted with a 57 percent reduction in service over the daily operation. Likewise, it suffered a devastating drop in ridership as well. The consulting firm's mathematical model failure led Amtrak to restore daily



**ABOVE:** Superliners of Train 26 cut a rakish path through pastoral Gibbon, Ore., on August 31, 1996, at the western base of UP's main line over the Blue Mountains.



**LEFT:** A sad notice hangs in the Hinkle Amshack on May 10, 1997. RYAN REED PHOTOS

Santa Fe hi-level cars.

The deadline for state funding came and went on March 15, ending any hope that the *Pioneer* would survive (in any form). Union Pacific itself barely tolerated the train's first class priority across the Overland Route and on to Portland. Indeed, UP was all too happy to see the passenger train off its tracks.

May 10, 1997, would thus be the curtain call for Amtrak's 20-year-long odyssey along the Oregon Trail. As the final Train 26 made its last stops in The Dalles, La Grande, Boise, and Salt Lake City, no ol' time fiddlers' groups played on depot platforms, there were no speeches by an Amtrak president, there were no smiling crowds wearing paper Amtrak caps, and the high school band at Pendleton stayed home.

#### Pioneer Post-Mortem

The *Pioneer* was a rare western long-distance passenger train inaugurated after Amtrak was formed in 1971 and a valuable source of transportation for communities along the line when the train was operating daily. In the years since its demise, residents of southern Wyoming, Idaho, and Oregon have hoped to see service restored, especially in an era of expensive gasoline.

A 2009 study claimed it would take \$400 million to bring the train back although others have questioned the high cost. Airlines providing cheap fares between Seattle-Portland and Salt Lake City have not done any favors for restoration efforts either, even with security lines at airports reaching intolerable lengths.

Further complicating restoration efforts, the Union Pacific main line in southern Idaho actually bypasses the

state capital, Boise. A 45-mile cutoff track splits from the UP main line at Nampa to serve Boise, continuing on to Orchard where it reconnects with the main line. The "Boise cutoff" was home to UP's *City of Portland*, *Portland Rose*, and Amtrak's *Pioneer*.

In the years since the *Pioneer* ran its last mile, the cutoff from Nampa to Boise, running 19 miles, was sold to a short line operator. The longer 26-mile stretch from Boise to Orchard is out of service now, sitting derelict and unused but intact. The city of Boise for its part purchased the depot in hopes that one day passenger trains will again roll into town, possibly as local commuter service in the distant future.

Likewise, UP tracks at East Portland Junction were realigned in 2005, so it is no longer possible for a reinstated *Pioneer* to pass from the Columbia River Gorge to Union Station. A seesaw backup move would be required to get the train through. Adding a crossover between two tracks east of the Steel Bridge would be an easy — but costly — fix.

For people who knew the *Pioneer* intimately, the last run was like saying goodbye to a friend, not knowing if the wrong would ever be righted again like it had been in 1977. That very question was asked by numerous people along the line as the last eastbound *Pioneer* pulled into each one of its station stops on May 10, 1997.

The air brakes hissed as they released, barely audible over the F40PH painted with a sad face and the words *LAST PIONEER* applied to the nose. It eased forward and rolled out of view for the final time past an Amshack out of its prime. The train that was never meant to exist in the first place was gone. ☐