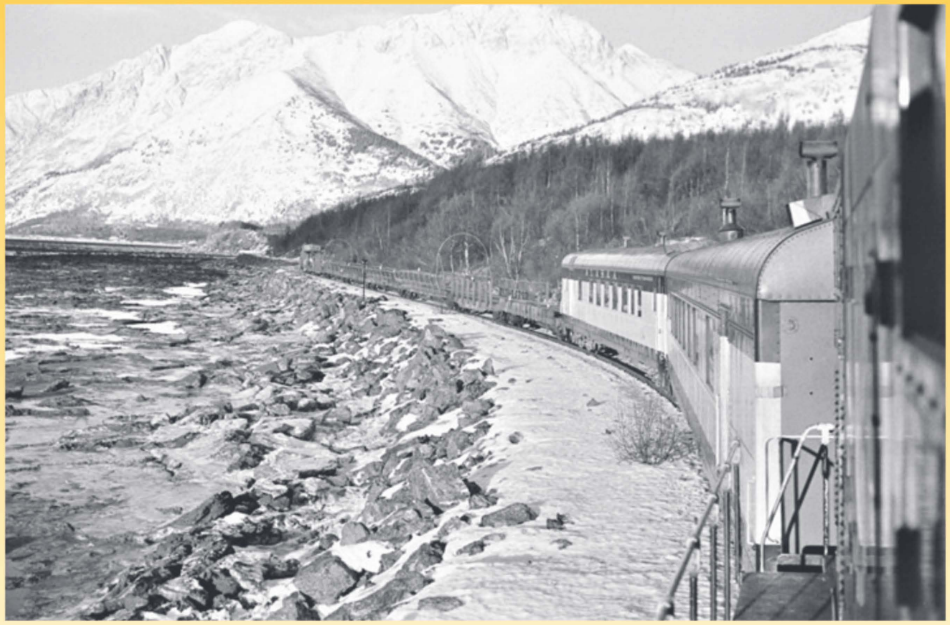
Alaska Railroad's Whittier Shuttle

A look back at America's first "auto train"

by Bill Anderson



FACING PAGE Alaska Railroad GP7 1826 (a former U.S. Army locomotive riding on AAR Type B trucks, as opposed to the usual Blomberg style) leads a Whittier Shuttle at Portage in January 1975. Coaches are for passengers not traveling with vehicles. *BILL ANDERSON*

ABOVE The first Shuttle run of the day follows the shore of Turnagain Arm en route from Anchorage to Portage, where vehicles will be loaded onto the train's customized flatcars for the 12-mile trip over the Whittier Sub. *BILL ANDERSON*

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the completion of Alaska Railroad's (ARR) Seward–Fairbanks 470-mile trunk line. On July 15, 1923, President Warren Harding drove a ceremonial golden spike at Nenana, although the actual contiguous route had been completed five months before, on February 10.

Once the Alaska Railroad legislation, the Act of 1914, was enacted, the federal government went into a planning process to determine the best route to reach Fairbanks. Seward, where a year-round ice-free ocean port existed, was selected as the southern terminus. However, there was also consideration for Passage Canal. To access Passage Canal would require drilling two long tunnels, one at 2½ miles, and was not compatible with the key goals to complete a railroad to Fairbanks. So, developing access to what would later be named Whittier was put on the shelf.

It is interesting that even without the more expensive route into the future port of Whittier, the amount appropriated in the Act of 1914, $35 million, was woefully insufficient for ARR's completion. The final tab was reported to be at least $56 million. Clearly, budget overruns involving government projects are not a more recent phenomenon.

Whittier becomes ARR's primary port

As the clouds of World War II were building, U.S. military interest in a defensible, all-year ice-free port to supply Alaska was also increasing. Thus, the plans from several decades earlier were dusted off, and in 1941 a $5.3-million appropriation directed the War Department to build the "Portage Cut-Off." In that process, the port location was named Whittier, after a nearby glacier named for the poet John Greenleaf Whittier. A military facility was also built to house personnel and transload supplies between ships and the railroad.

The benefits for Whittier vs. Seward were notable:

- A shorter rail distance, by 52 miles, to Anchorage and points north exchanged very rugged topography for a relatively flat right-of-way, thanks to the tunnels. In addition, the route from Seward included grades up to three percent, multiple sharp curves, many bridges, and snow sliding onto the track.
- A shorter water route from the west coast of the U.S. and Canada.
- Better protection from the threat of Japanese submarines and aircraft due to many overcast/bad weather days.

From a military perspective, Whittier was a defensible and relatively secure location. Construction began in November 1941, and it was operational in April 1943. Whittier became the transfer point for significant material and supplies to build, maintain, and provision other military facilities in the territory.

With the end of WWII, Whittier was shut down, and the remaining port operations were moved to Seward in 1946. However, a strike at the port of Seward that fall convinced the military to move back to Whittier, where plans advanced to make this a permanent facility. During the mid-1950s, the military completed a permanent garrison facility. This included a six-story concrete structure, the Buckner Building, containing apartments and support facilities for recreation and services. When completed in 1957, it was the largest building in Alaska, but was abandoned in 1966. Most of Whittier's current permanent residents live in the 14-story former Hodge Building (renamed Begich Towers in 1972) completed at the same time for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Whittier's use as a military facility soon diminished, and as the 1950s were ending these operations were closed. In 1960, the Alaska Railroad assumed control and proceeded to develop Whittier, via ships and barges, into its key junction with the Lower 48 states and Canada. The U.S. barge service began in 1962 and the latter (CN's Aquatrain) in 1964.

Good Friday 1964 will also be a date that lives in infamy for southern Alaska. On that day, the strongest earthquake ever recorded in North America, magnitude 9.2, had its epicenter about 60 miles from Whittier. Along with the earth movement, a 23-foot wave hit Whittier, killing 13 people and causing substantial property destruction.

Fortunately, the tunnels had minimal damage. Little more than three weeks after the earthquake, on April 20, 1964, rail service to Anchorage was re-established. Rail service out of Seward was not restored until six months later.

The Whittier Shuttle begins

Ask most knowledgeable rail historians when America's first "auto train" service began, and the likely answer will be December 1971. That was when the Auto-Train Corporation created a stir with its class-act operation between the Northeast and Florida.

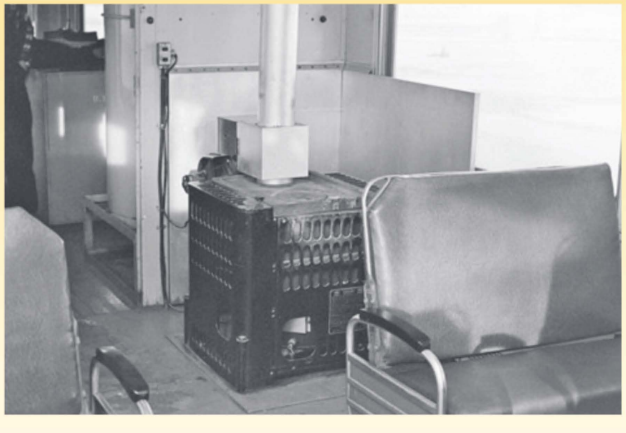
However, that response would be wrong by several years.

Four years after the Good Friday earthquake, a specialized but little-known auto train service was inaugurated as the 1968 summer season began. Little known, that is, except for those whose travels involved Whittier, Alaska.

As previously noted, Whittier was developed by the U.S. military due to its inaccessibility. While that was a useful factor for military purposes, it provided similar, although mostly undesirable, challenges for civilian purposes. In other words, there was still no practical access from the land side, except by the Alaska Railroad. While this trip could be accomplished by riding ARR's Anchorage–Whittier weekday mixed-train service, this was a limited choice, to say the least. Most concerning was that it did not carry passengers' vehicles (autos, campers, boats, and small trucks). These could get no closer to Whittier than Portage, on the west side of the two tunnels.

ABOVE ABOVE **ARR GP7 1834 switches "Lower 48" freight cars at Whittier in January 1975. Starting in the early 1960s, freight cars have been ferried aboard barges between Washington, British Columbia, and Whittier.** *BILL ANDERSON*

BELOW **Coaches used on the Shuttle had self-contained oil-fueled heaters for passenger comfort in cold weather, eliminating the need for the train's locomotive to be equipped with a steam generator.** *BILL ANDERSON*



As the 1960s moved along, so did the expansion of the Alaska Marine Highway System. This is now a 3,500-mile state-run ferry network stretching from Dutch Harbor in the western Aleutian Islands to Bellingham, Wash., connecting 34 Alaskan coastal towns and Prince Rupert, B.C.

In 1968, the Marine Highway added Whittier to its system, and concurrently ARR began the Whittier Shuttle. The Shuttle made it practical for vehicles and their occupants to connect with the Marine Highway by transporting them the 12 miles between Portage and Whittier. In turn, the Marine Highway vessels offered roll-on/roll off ("Ro-Ro") transportation via water to connect with the other ports in this system.

Any resemblance to *Auto-Train* in the Lower 48 (see *PTJ* 2023-2) was in basic function only. There was nothing close to the valet service to load and unload vehicles, nor the high-class facilities and services on board the Florida train.

Freight equipment, in the form of modified flatcars, provided the ride between Portage and Whittier. The modifications included safety railings along the car sides and, in winter, icicle-breaking devices to minimize the risk of damaging vehicles in the tunnels. Although the Whittier Shuttle provided coach accommodations for those without vehicles, drivers were not only required to do their own ramping and de-ramping but, along with any other occupants, to stay in their vehicles for the duration of the roughly half-hour train trip.

The requirement for occupants to stay in their vehicles was a practicality for both railroad operating purposes and for expediting the movement of vehicles and occupants. For example, to make three Portage–Whittier shuttles in a single day, turning the train after each trip had to be accomplished within the crew's 12 hours of service limit. The train crew went on and off duty in Anchorage, so they also had the running time to and from Portage to consider. From the 1980s, the Shuttle also carried tour buses, and if passengers were to leave the bus during the train trip, there would need to be additional facilities created along with the extended terminal time and liability. Be it ever so spartan, the Shuttle accomplished its basic mission.

The Shuttle in the mid-1970s

In September 1974, I took a "retirement" position (I was 29 at the time) as liaison officer for the Alaska Railroad, although headquartered with the Federal Railroad Administration in Washington, D.C. As a direct report to the Alaska Railroad general manager, I performed various projects at his direction. For one of those projects, this one in 1975, I was requested to come up to Anchorage to develop a cost analysis for a proposed gravel train operation. The bad news was

ABOVE **GP7 1826 on its Shuttle assignment at Whittier in January 1975. The Buckner Building (officially, the Composite Bachelor Housing Service and Recreation Center) looms in the background. This concrete structure was completed in the mid-1950s to house military personnel and various community services under one roof. It filled this role until 1966 and was subsequently abandoned – note the many broken windows in this view.** *BILL ANDERSON*

this was late January, when Alaska is a cold, bleak, mostly dark place.

The plan was to be way up north for only the week, however my project still needed more time as Friday came. So I suddenly had a weekend with limited options for "fun." The railroad's solution was to offer the experience of riding the Whittier Shuttle … in the locomotive cab! So, "bright" and early, I hiked down the hill to the ARR depot to await the Shuttle train.

Although the Shuttle had a published schedule, the timetable noted that it was "tentative" due to railroad operating reasons. On the day I rode, however, it left about on time at 9:20AM. Given that daylight appeared at about 9:00AM, the departure time was just right to see the sights from the GP7 cab.

The Shuttle train consist out of Anchorage was half a dozen auto flatcars, a caboose, and two U.S. Army surplus hospital cars. However, automobiles were not transported until the train reached Portage, 50 rail miles southeast of Anchorage and the junction with the 12-mile Whittier Subdivision. At Portage, vehicles used an end-loading "circus ramp" arrangement, with vehicle drivers providing self-parking on the flatcars.

The Whittier Shuttle operated that winter daily except Tuesday. In addition to the Anchorage–Whittier round trip, the train shuttled twice between Whittier and Portage before making the last departure from Whittier in the late afternoon. While in Whittier, the shuttle crew performed freight switching as needed, as well as necessary switching to make the Shuttle trips to Portage.

On that cold Sunday in mid-winter 1975, darkness settled in by the time the second Shuttle departed for Portage shortly after 3:20PM. The rest of the day was in darkness, and after one more Portage-to-Whittier trip, the Shuttle departed for Anchorage and arrived shortly after 8:00PM.

The Shuttle shuttles on

Over the next 2½ decades after my Sunday with the Whittier Shuttle, it continued in a similar frequency and operating pattern. As the years went on, the summer shuttles between Portage and Whittier increased on certain operating days. This was to accommodate the growing tourist traffic, primarily in conjunction with the Alaska Marine Highway System. On four or more shuttle days, there were two trains originating in Anchorage so train crews could cover the additional time required for the additional shuttles.

In its last two decades, the Shuttle's passenger equipment evolved from the modified Army hospital cars to include more recent acquisitions. In the 1980s, eight Budd-built coaches were acquired from Amtrak that had in turn been acquired when Southern Railway surrendered its *Southern Crescent* in 1979. In the 1990s, the next used rolling stock to find its way to the Shuttle trains were three ACF-built Southern Pacific gallery commuter cars acquired from Princess Cruises.

The state's population grew and the expanding tourism business produced more demand for transportation involving Whittier, but the traditional ARR service had limitations. Options developed by planners to expand access to Whittier included both highway and rail, and the final project involved both.

The key challenge for building a new highway all the way into Whittier was Maynard Mountain. This is the mountain that the U.S. Army tunneled under with a 2½-mile bore in the early 1940s.

The solution was to build a new highway east from the Portage area. While

this bypassed ARR's one-mile Portage Tunnel, it did require building a 500-foot tunnel to the south of the ARR right-of-way. The new road was extended across Bear Valley and up to the west portal of ARR's Whittier Tunnel under Maynard Mountain. As part of the road improvements, this tunnel would be converted into a combination rail and road facility.

The converted tunnel has a high-tech signaling system to control three types of movements. Trains have exclusive use when they run. Vehicle movement, however, is only in one direction at a time due to the relatively narrow width of the tunnel. Construction began in September 1998 and was finished less than two years later.

Whittier Tunnel was renamed the Anton Anderson Memorial Tunnel in honor of the U.S. Army engineer who headed the original tunnel's wartime construction. This, and the mile-long Portage Tunnel, were the enabling civil works that created the opportunity for a Whittier Shuttle. However, after 32 years of service, the Shuttle concept and its limitations fell short of the need for increased capacity and flexibility. With the opening of the roadway through the repurposed 2½-mile Anton Anderson Memorial Tunnel on June 7, 2000, America's first auto train lost its need to exist and ended.

Historical legacy

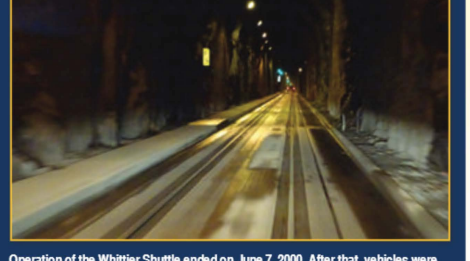
The post-WWII summer season Anchorage–Fairbanks trains — such as those named at various times the *AuRoRa*, *Vistaliner Aurora*, and *Denali Star* — usually gained the most attention, primarily due to their serving Mt. McKinley National Park (renamed Denali National Park from 2016). However, for many years leading up to the coordination with tour operators that caused ARR's ridership to accelerate, the Whittier Shuttle service had the heavier ridership. During this time until 1984, ridership on the Shuttle represented more than half of ARR's total passenger count.

In 1984, the Shuttle also transported nearly 20,000 vehicles. By comparison, the vehicle volume through the tunnel in 2019 was 1,400 percent higher. Clearly, this demonstrates that attempting to transport a magnitudes-higher volume would not be practical with a traditional Whittier Shuttle type service.

So, while America's first auto train, the Whittier Shuttle, is no longer operating, it clearly served a critical and successful purpose during its more than three-decade run. The good news is that there is still passenger service, albeit seasonal, between Anchorage and Whittier that provides the opportunity for even more scenery viewing than was possible with just the Whittier Shuttle. But on ARR's current train to Whittier, the *Glacier Discovery* route, you will need to leave your vehicle behind.

ABOVE The Whittier Shuttle switches at Anchorage prior to departing for Portage and Whittier on a cold January 1975 morning. The train's two baggage-coaches are rebuilt former U.S. Army hospital cars. *BILL ANDERSON*

LEFT Alaska Railroad wasn't the only provider of public transportation serving Whittier in 1975. *BILL ANDERSON*



Operation of the Whittier Shuttle ended on June 7, 2000. After that, vehicles were allowed to drive through the formerly rail-only tunnel. The Whittier portal and interior of the Anton Anderson Memorial Tunnel are shown in 2019. *BOTH, KEVIN J. HOLLAND*