

White Pass in Transition: New Equipment and New Challenges for this Scenic Narrow-Gauge Line

By Kevin J. Holland

When the three-foot-gauge White Pass & Yukon Railway — dating to 1898 and built to support the Klondike gold rush — was revived in 1988 after a six-year shutdown triggered by the collapse of its ore traffic, its new management placed their faith in passengers rather than freight for the line's future prosperity. That gamble was rewarded, as WP&Y's second act coincided with burgeoning growth in the Alaska cruise industry. Although small ships catering to locals and adventurous tourists had long sailed the scenic Inside Passage between Seattle or Vancouver and ports in the Alaskan Panhandle, the 1980s ushered in significant increases in both the size of these ships and the number of sailings in the relatively short Alaska season (typically from May to October). From that point on, WP&Y's fortunes were inextricably linked to the cruise ships that visited Skagway, Alaska's northernmost Panhandle port of call.



Following a 20-mile climb from sea level at Skagway, Alaska, one White Pass & Yukon train leaves the new Summit Loop on the Canadian side of the Alaska-British Columbia border, at a track elevation of 2,865 feet, while another (pictured) enters on June 18, 2022. As of 2022, brawny NRE diesels have replaced vintage shovel-nose units on most WP&Y trains.
-Kevin J. Holland

Previously running 110 miles between Skagway and Whitehorse, the capital of Canada's Yukon Territory, the reactivated WP&Y initially employed only 20.4 miles of the moribund main line, between the docks at Skagway and the Canadian border at the summit of White Pass. The 2,865-foot change in track elevation between those two points had always made for challenging operations, with grades approaching 4 percent, two tunnels, and several cliffhanging bridges along the way. As it happens, the White Pass summit (which marks the U.S.-Canada border, separating Alaska and British Columbia) isn't quite the highest track elevation on the railway; that's at Meadows, B.C. (2,924 feet), some four miles farther north.

Traffic growth through the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century saw WP&Y acquire a steady flow of new (but vintage-looking) coaches to keep up with demand, replacing worn-out cars and increasing overall capacity. For motive power, the revived railway picked up exactly where it left off, reactivating 11 stored Alco-GE shovel-noses and eight MLW DL-535 road-switcher diesels from its pre-shutdown roster. Numbered 90-100, the GE shovel-nose units, with Alco 6-251B prime movers, were built at Erie, Pa., between 1954 and 1966. Ordered to handle new ore traffic, seven DL-535s were built in Montreal in 1969. Two were destroyed in October of that year, before entering service, when WP&Y's Skagway roundhouse burned. Three more DL-535s arrived from MLW in 1971.

Even with growing tourist traffic, this was more power than the revived road's management felt was needed at the time, and five of the MLWs were sold to Sociedad Colombiana de Transport Ferroviario, Colombia's national railway, in 1992. With WP&Y's traffic continuing to grow, however, all five were repurchased and returned to Alaska in 1999. In the interval, WP&Y also took delivery of a single DL-535E, a wide-nosed variant of the earlier DL-535, in 1995. A four-unit order for this model had been completed by MLW successor Bombardier in 1982, but the railway's shutdown left them in storage in Quebec, with WP&Y 114 the only one to eventually make its way to Alaska.

Also revived in 1988 was WP&Y's 1950s green-and-yellow diesel livery, which had been replaced by blue and white, and then by solid blue, in the last years of the line's pre-shutdown operation by Federal Industries.

Steam even made a comeback on the reborn railway. Built for WP&Y by Baldwin in 1947, Mikado-type 2-8-2 engine 73 was the last steam locomotive acquired by WP&Y. Following its retirement in 1964 and more than a decade of static display at Bennett, B.C., in 1979 the engine was moved to Whitehorse for a restoration that was completed in 1982 — just in time for the railway's shutdown. Mikado 73 returned to prominence when WP&Y service resumed

in 1988. A two-year restoration was completed in 2014, and another in 2019 — the latter, unfortunately, just in time for the pandemic shutdown. A second original White Pass steam locomotive, 2-8-0 Consolidation-type 69, was repatriated by the railway in 2001. Built by Baldwin in 1908, it was restored and returned to operation for its centennial in the 2008 season. After being suspended during the pandemic, the railway announced that steam operations were expected to resume in 2023.

Following the revival of the route between Skagway and White Pass summit in May 1988, management's goal to reopen at least some of the main line's Canadian mileage to regularly scheduled service was achieved in increments, first to Fraser (in 1989) and Bennett (1992) in British Columbia, and then as far as Carcross in the Yukon in 2007.

In 2010, preliminary discussions began between the railway, governments, and industry stakeholders regarding the possible reopening of the remaining mileage all the way to Whitehorse, and resumption of freight traffic, including moving ore by rail, to the port at Skagway, but those efforts have not yet come to fruition.

New ownership

The popularity of WP&Y trips sold as shore excursions to cruise-ship passengers wasn't lost on the cruise lines, and a remarkable thing happened in August 2018. WP&Y was sold by TWC Enterprises, Inc., with the world's largest cruise line conglomerate, Carnival Corporation & PLC (stock symbol CCL), becoming a minority partner in Klondike Holdings, LLC, the new ownership group comprising majority partners Survey Point Holdings of Ketchikan, Alaska, and Carrix/Rail Management Services. Carrix became a WP&Y stakeholder by virtue of its 50-percent ownership of Survey Point Holdings.



WP&Y operates three cruise-ship docks in Skagway, with berths for up to four large ships, although this was reduced by half in August 2022 when rockslides led to closure of the twin-berth Railroad Dock. WP&Y's waterfront facilities in Skagway are built, maintained, and operated by the railway under terms of a 55-year municipal lease that expires in March 2023, and is not expected to be renewed in the railway's favor. As the 2022 cruise season ended, neither the rockslide nor lease situations had been resolved, with resultant uncertainty for the 2023 season.

-Kevin J. Holland

The \$290-million sale price included the entire railway (comprising three legal “paper” entities: Pacific & Arctic Railway & Navigation Co. [PARN]; British Columbia Yukon Railway Co.; and British Yukon Railway Co.), along with its port and retail operations in Skagway. Survey Point owner Robert Berto was appointed WP&Y president.

Toronto-based TWC, Canada's largest owner and operator of golf courses (under the "ClubLink" brand), had conducted an asset review in 2017 that led to its WP&Y holdings being offered for sale. Following the 2018 sale, the new owners infused considerable capital to upgrade the railway's physical plant and equipment, retaining WP&Y's local management to develop and implement those improvements.



The vintage appearance of WP&Y coach 308, Klondike River, belies the car's relative youth. It is one of six coaches built in Colorado by Bear Town Mechanical Design in 1998, as the first all-new cars delivered to the revived WP&Y. (The reactivated railway had built 11 cars in its own shops between 1992 and 1994, using existing National Steel Car flat cars, delivered in 1969, as frames.) Cunard's Queen Elizabeth, moored at Broadway Dock on June 18, 2022, illustrates the proximity of ships and trains in Skagway.

-Kevin J. Holland

While Carnival-branded ships are relatively uncommon in Alaskan waters, those flying other CCL component flags have fulfilled the investment's vision of a symbiotic relationship between the ships and the trains. Of CCL's nine semi-autonomous cruise-line subsidiaries, the most prominent Alaskan pedigree belongs to Holland America Line, through its 1973 acquisition of Westours (established in 1947 by Charles West). Princess Cruises is a close second among CCL subsidiaries serving today's Alaska market. CCL's British-based Cunard brand returned to Alaska in 2019 with limited sailings after a three-decade absence. CCL also operates Holland America Princess Alaska Tours, a land-based provider of lodging, bus, and rail tours (the latter in conjunction with Alaska Railroad) and the subsidiary through which CCL acquired its WP&Y (PARN) ownership stake.

Another change in WP&Y ownership was announced in November 2021, with Carrix (including subsidiary Rail Management Services and its WP&Y holdings) acquired by Blackstone Infrastructure Partners in a \$2.5-billion transaction. Survey Point remained WP&Y's managing partner, and Berto continued in his role as WP&Y president.

Tickets, please

To CCL's delight — and even with 2022's passenger counts being roughly 40 percent lower than 2019's total of one million cruise-based visitors — ships owned by competitors Royal Caribbean, Norwegian Cruise Line, Disney, Celebrity, and other lines also disgorge WP&Y passengers by the thousands at Skagway. For prospective WP&Y passengers not arriving by cruise ship, it's also possible to drive to Skagway, over the Klondike Highway from Whitehorse or, from Seattle, aboard vehicle ferries operated by the Alaska Marine Highway System. There's also a small commercial airstrip and seaplane base adjacent to town. Although it's not accessible by road, Juneau, the state capital, is only 81 miles away down the Lynn Canal, and its airport (JNU) is served by Alaska Airlines, American, and Delta from the Lower 48.



WP&Y's office, gift shop, and station at Skagway.
-Kevin J. Holland

Most cruise-ship passengers buy their WP&Y tickets as a shore excursion through their cruise line, in which case trains meet the ships at one of Skagway's three cruise-ship docks. Travelers purchasing tickets directly from the railway board and detrain at the WP&Y station at the south end of Skagway, just a few minutes' walk from the docks.



Having been turned on the Skagway Shops loop track, a train backs toward the end-of-track at Broadway Dock prior to a morning Summit departure. The three docks served by WP&Y are highlighted on the sign: from left to right, Ore Dock (purple), Broadway Dock (orange), and twin-berth Railroad Dock (red).

-Kevin J. Holland

For all of those riders, the WP&Y experience is memorable but it doesn't come cheap. The basic 2½-hour round trip from Skagway to the summit of White Pass will set you back between \$130 and just over \$150 (with half fares for children ages 3 to 12), depending on when you travel, and when and how you buy your tickets (from a cruise line or directly from the railway). A chair in one of the railway's two premium-service 14-seat parlor cars (when they operate) is more than double that, at an eye-watering \$335 per person (and only as a cruise-line booking). The basic fare includes a small guide booklet, a bottle of water, and use of a padded walkover bench seat (with generous pitch in a standard 2+2 layout), while the deluxe car offers fresh sandwiches,

canapés, pastries, and unlimited beer, wine, and soft drinks, all served by a dedicated attendant to passengers occupying individual leather-upholstered swivel armchairs.



A view inside the Skagway station waiting room.

-Kevin J. Holland

The deluxe car also guarantees end-of-train views from the rear platform, but, when they're not running, riders can opt to board the standard coach at the rear of the train for the same spectacular vantage point. All platforms are off-limits while the trains are within Skagway's municipal limits, but a crewmember will announce when access is open over the rest of each trip's mileage. Passengers are restricted, however, to their chosen car for the duration of their trip, and are prohibited from passing from car to car. Running commentary describing the train's progress and the route's history is provided over the P.A. system,

but there are no speakers on the cars' exterior platforms. If you're more interested in motive power than scenery, the forward platform of each train's first car is the place to be.

On some coaches, seats are arranged in facing groups of four, and each resulting "quad" is furnished with a cupholder-equipped wooden table. In colder weather, each coach is heated by its own kerosene stove. At least one car on each train contains an ADA-compliant wheelchair lift.

Along the line

The trip to Summit Loop begins in Skagway, with the main line skirting the east side of town at the foot of the Tongass Mountains. Soon after the WP&Y shops are passed at Mile 2, the Skagway River comes into view, and the track begins its steady climb from sea level. Denver, at Mile 5.8, is a local hiking base where a former WP&Y cabooses body can be rented as an overnight cabin from the U.S. Forest Service.



The cantilever bridge at Mile 18.6 was bypassed in a 1969 line relocation that also necessitated the railway's second tunnel. The original steel span

remains, but in increasingly poor condition, and its timber approaches
have collapsed.

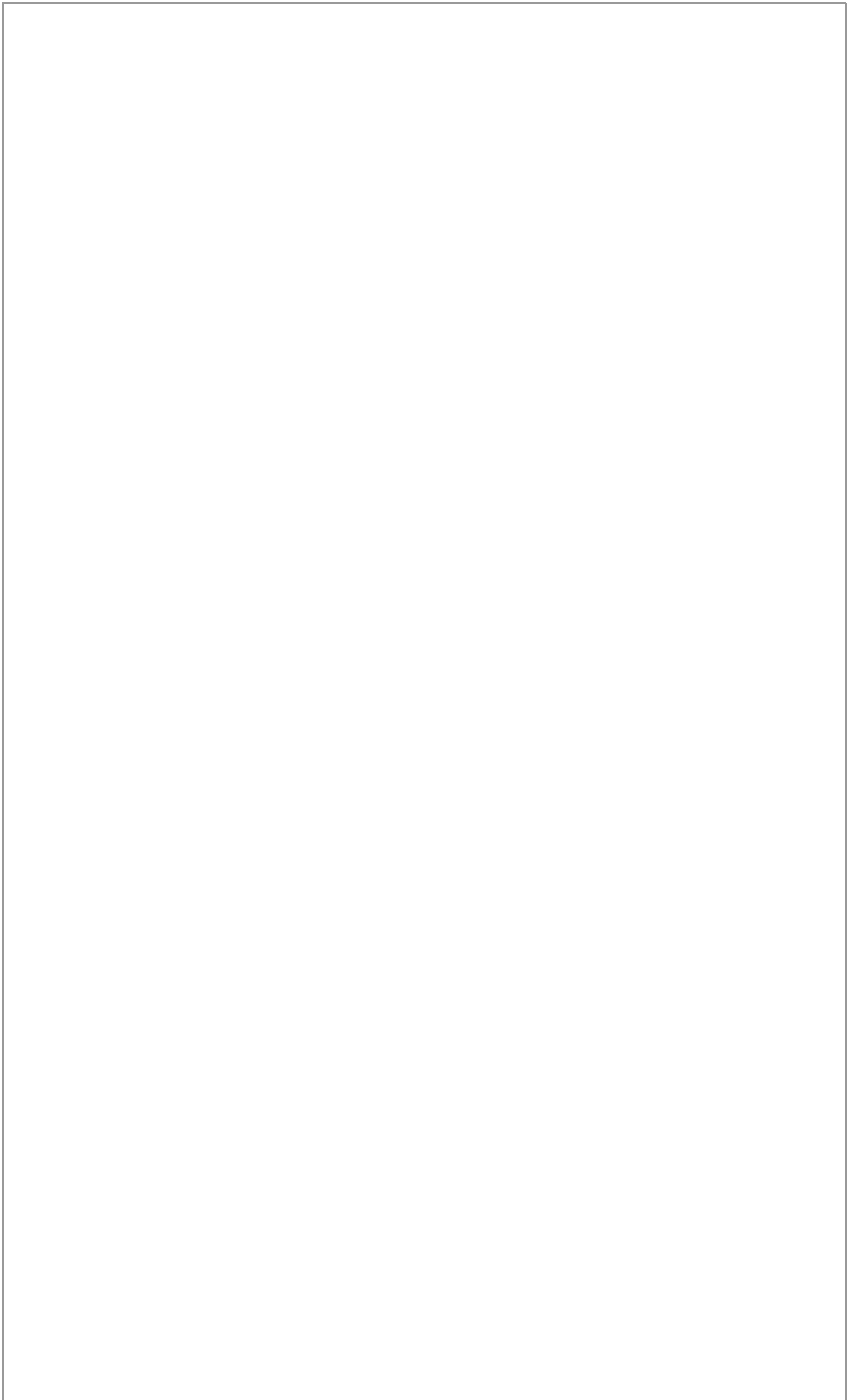
-Wouter H.G. Radstake, Courtesy WP&Y





A shipboard view from Broadway Dock, looking north on June 18, 2022. Broadway Street is one of Skagway's main thoroughfares, and WP&Y's original main line followed the street's alignment from the waterfront (since extended by infilling) until tracks were shifted during World War II to run east of downtown before rejoining the original right-of-way. Here, a departing Summit train curves away from Broadway Dock and passes in front of the railway's present depot and arch-windowed office building. The red-and-cream building at the corner of Broadway and 2nd Avenue (just beyond the rotary snowplow and caboose display) was built in 1900 as a WP&Y office annex, with the adjacent flat-roofed yellow structure erected the same year as the railway's headquarters. Both structures now house National Park Service offices and exhibits. The track at left serves WP&Y's Ore Dock, also used by cruise ships and slated for major renewal. Trains that do not meet ships use a track directly in front of the station that ends a short distance after crossing Broadway Street.

-Both, Kevin J. Holland



110.4

Whitehorse, Y.T.

67.5

Carcross, Y.T.

40.6

Bennett, B.C.

27.7

Fraser, B.C.

20.4

White Pass
Summit

Elevation: 2,865 ft
873 metres

WP&YR ROUTE

Yukon Territory
British Columbia

South
Klondike
Highway

British Columbia
Alaska

Lake Bennett

Chilkoot Trail





Bird's-eye-view map by artist J. Craig Thorpe vividly illustrates WP&Y's active mileage from Skagway to Carcross. This map predates completion in 2019 of the Summit Loop, located on the British Columbia side of the international boundary.

-Courtesy WP&Y

Bridges at Denver and Glacier (Mile 14) span forks of the Skagway River. Small waterfalls and culverts abound as the line climbs beside the river, with several cliffhanging bridges and looming rock formations attesting to the challenges of surveying and building the railway.



Another engineering highlight, the combination of timber trestle and tunnel portal at Mile 16 are viewed from the rear of a southbound train.

-Kevin J. Holland

One of WP&Y's most iconic vistas occurs at Mile 16, where, after hugging a cliff, northbound trains cross a wooden trestle and then immediately enter a bore through aptly named Tunnel Mountain.



Two shovel-nose diesels and a DL-535 are about to enter the tunnel at Mile 16 with a northbound train in 2015. As of the 2022 season, new NRE diesels had taken over most WP&Y assignments.

-Wouter H.G. Radstake, Courtesy WP&Y

This was the only tunnel on the railway until 1969, when a line relocation between Mile 17.5 and 19.3 required a short steel bridge and 675-foot tunnel to bypass a spectacular but fragile steel cantilever bridge (reputedly, the world's highest) that would not support the weight of ore trains that would soon be introduced.

White Pass Summit is the destination of most trains (and of all trips in 2021 and 2022). Following the climb from Skagway and entry into Canada, the landscape along the railway transforms to a broad, lake-dotted rocky upland through Fraser (Mile 27.7), Bennett (Mile 40.6), and Carcross (Mile 67.5). WP&Y trains hopefully will be able to resume cross-border service to those stations in 2023.

Summit Loop

Prior to 2019, WP&Y trains stopped at the summit, where the locomotives ran around the cars for the return to Skagway, and passengers were requested to switch sides in their car to ensure that everyone had comparable views over the course of the round trip. Both of these practices ended that year with the opening of the Summit Loop. Whitehorse-based Cobalt Construction Inc. was awarded the \$2.25-million contract for earthworks, blasting, and grading of the loop alignment, which incorporated a northward extension of the existing Summit siding. This work was completed over three months in late 2018, with track installation done by WP&Y crews in time for the 2019 season.



A northbound train crosses the bridge at Mile 18.7 behind one of WP&Y's new NRE diesels on June 18, 2022. This bridge and the short tunnel at Mile 18.8 were completed as part of a 1969 line relocation that bypassed the nearby steel cantilever bridge dating to 1901.

-Kevin J. Holland

When navigating the Loop counterclockwise, trains diverge from the main line at Divide, soon after they cross the international boundary, and circle back along the shore of Summit Lake before rejoining the original alignment and beginning the descent to Skagway. Clockwise Loop operation is also employed.



At Mile 17, track elevation 2,413 feet, Inspiration Point offers a vista back to Skagway, 15 miles away as the crow flies. A ship berthed at Broadway Dock is just visible beyond the lowest “V” of the distant mountains, while across the valley in the middle distance the path of the Klondike Highway can be seen.

-Kevin J. Holland

In concert with several new or extended sidings, use of the 1.3-mile (2.2-km) single-track Summit Loop has boosted WP&Y’s capacity and simplified operations.

Docks and rocks

Following two rockslides in August and September 2017 spawned by a large, unstable rock mass located some 600 feet above the north end of WP&Y’s Railroad Dock, protective measures including attenuator fencing, remote monitoring, a rock and talus catchment zone, and a steel pedestrian enclosure

made from repurposed shipping containers were installed by the railway at the north end of the dock's north berth.



The international boundary at White Pass Summit is marked by this stone obelisk near the south end of the siding. This view looks south from the Canadian side.

-Kevin J. Holland

On June 23, 2022, another section of the dock, and a cruise ship at the south berth, sustained damage from a smaller rockfall, with the dock's reinforced concrete deck punctured. Engineering consultants hired by the municipality determined that the collapse of the gradually shifting rock mass was inevitable and posed "significant risks to life and property."



At the beginning of its return trip to Skagway, coach 324 Porcupine River (built by Hamilton Manufacturing in 2001) brings up the rear of a 12-car train exiting Summit Loop on June 18, 2022. Located north of Seattle, the Hamilton shop has built every one of the 50 new WP&Y passenger cars delivered since 2000.

-Kevin J. Holland



A perch on the rear platform is not to be missed.

-Kevin J. Holland

In late July 2022, concerns over the possible imminent collapse of the rock mass prompted the railway and municipality to curtail the dock's access and

operations. The WP&Y track that extends along the northern half of the dock was disrupted by these rockfalls, and loading and unloading of WP&Y trains was moved off the dock. Visitor amenities at the dock's north end, including a WP&Y caboose body used as a gift shop, were also closed. The closure of the dock's north berth at the end of July (eliminating one of Skagway's four cruise-ship berths) resulted in a number of ships modifying their itineraries to skip previously scheduled visits to Skagway. This in turn had a direct negative impact on WP&Y traffic and revenue, as well as on the town's other tourist-oriented businesses. Two additional rockslides in the first week of August 2022 punctured one of the steel containers and prompted full closure of both Railroad Dock berths for the rest of the season, putting further pressure on the railway's revenue expectations for 2022, and adding uncertainty regarding the Railroad Dock's availability for the 2023 season.



Having proceeded approximately one mile (1.6 km) into British Columbia, this northbound Summit train is approaching Divide, where it will curve left,

away from the original main line, and enter the new Summit Loop.

-Kevin J. Holland

Despite the disruption to the Railroad Dock's cruise-ship activity (with some 30 previously scheduled Skagway ship visits canceled during the rest of the 2022 season), seven WP&Y shovel-nose diesels — declared surplus and for sale — were moved to the waterfront and parked on the dock, in the “clear” area between the two recent slide paths. They were present but undamaged during the rockfalls in early August.



A new NRE diesel approaches the main line switch at Divide as it leads a 12-car train around Summit Loop. This point, in British Columbia just beyond the international boundary, was the limit of WP&Y operations out of Skagway during the 2022 season, with Canadian government Covid restrictions making it impractical for the railway to offer service within

British Columbia and Yukon Territory to Fraser, Bennett, and Carcross.

-Courtesy WP&Y

Beyond the immediate concerns over the Railroad Dock's future, major changes are in store for Skagway's waterfront, and its ability to accommodate ever-larger ships carrying prospective WP&Y passengers.



With the Sawtooth Range rising in the distance, a southbound Summit train begins its return trip to Skagway. Even in late June, with air temperature in the upper 50s, the last of the previous winter's heavy snowpack has yet to disappear.

-Kevin J. Holland

WP&Y's 55-year lease of Skagway's three main docks and related waterfront expires in March 2023, but, rather than renew it, municipal management is

seeking new leaseholders. Under the terms of the lease, the railway currently pays the municipality \$130,000 in annual rent, based on a charge of 6 percent of the \$2.25-million fair-market appraisal of the land leased and improved by the railway. The lease terms included provision for an increase every five years in the amount paid by WP&Y to Skagway, but the six-fold increase requested by the municipality in 2018 (covering the lease’s final five years) put the two parties at loggerheads. The main point of contention was the municipality’s adoption of a property assessment methodology, with a significantly higher valuation, that the railway argued was in violation of the specific terms of the lease and all of its prior and mutually agreed five-year valuations. Since the lease’s inception in 1968, when WP&Y occupied just over three acres of waterfront land, the railway has created more than 20 acres of new waterfront land through tidal-flat dredging, and has improved these new “uplands” at its own expense with ongoing investments in pier and terminal infrastructure. Contrary to the terms of the lease (according to the railway), the municipality’s contention as of 2018 has been that all waterfront uplands occupied by WP&Y are subject to fair-market-value reassessment — and not just the original 3.32 acres as specified in the lease — with some of the municipal leadership arguing that the 2018 change in railway ownership was a logical juncture to reinterpret the lease agreement.



Coach 222, Lake Lindeman, is among the oldest White Pass & Yukon cars still in service on the line. Built in 1883 by Jackson & Sharp and acquired by WP&Y in 1901, it has carried its current name since 1945.

-Kevin J. Holland



One of 11 carbodies built by WP&Y and mounted on former flatcars, car 290, Yukon River, was completed in 1994. On June 18, 2022, it was parked at Skagway yard with an arch-roofed ex-Sumpter Valley coach.

-Kevin J. Holland

The lease stipulates that all improvements revert to the municipality, without compensation to WP&Y or sub-lessors, at the conclusion of the lease, although there is provision for the leaseholder(s) to remove certain improvements prior to expiry. In compliance with this provision, and with non-renewal of its lease a seeming certainty, in July 2022 WP&Y announced its intention to remove critical components of its Broadway and Ore docks at the end of the 2022 season, without which those docks could not handle cruise ships. This, of course, would impact the 2023 season.

Among prospective candidates to take over the lease in March 2023 was a cruise-line consortium of Royal Caribbean, Norwegian, and Disney, in what might be construed as a revenue-generating counterpoint to rival CCL's stake

in the railway itself. The municipality has also expressed willingness to operate the port facilities on its own behalf. Regardless of who takes over the waterfront lease, the uncertainty surrounding its renewal has cast a shadow over the 125-year relationship between WP&Y and Skagway.

Proceeding in parallel with the question of Skagway's post-2023 waterfront and harbor management is the redevelopment of WP&Y's Ore Dock, which is aimed both at accommodating more and larger cruise ships and providing facilities to handle a hoped-for revival of rail-served ore and container traffic.



Built by Pullman in 1893 as North Pacific Coast Railroad 26, WP&Y 252, Lake Muncho, migrated to Alaska in 1930 and acquired its name in 1951.
-Kevin J. Holland



Another veteran, coach 240, Lake Bennett, was built in 1884 by the St. Charles Car Co. for Arizona & New Mexico Railroad. It was acquired by WP&Y in 1925 and given its name 20 years later.

-Kevin J. Holland

Opened in 1969 to handle lead and zinc ore from Faro Mine in the Yukon, the Ore Dock last handled this traffic by rail in 1982, when a collapse of the base-metals market triggered the railway's six-year shutdown. In the realm of freight traffic, WP&Y was a mid-1950s containerization pioneer, even operating its own ships between Vancouver and Skagway. With enhanced "Ro-Ro" (roll-on, roll-off) facilities planned for the Ore Dock's redevelopment, however, WP&Y would face competition for containers that could move beyond Skagway by truck over the Klondike Highway. Although any resumption in rail-served Yukon ore traffic through Skagway reportedly is at least five years away, WP&Y appears well positioned to handle that business, given its recent physical plant upgrades and rejuvenated locomotive fleet.



Deluxe 14-seat club car 401, Michael J. Heney, built by Hamilton Manufacturing in 2014 as WP&Y 400, illustrates how WP&Y's 21st-century passenger cars emulate the appearance of their 19th-century elders. Heney (1864-1910) gained fame as the contractor who oversaw WP&Y's construction.

-Kevin J. Holland

Those recently announced plans to boost the Ore Dock's cruise-ship capacity involve a 500-foot-long, 50-foot-wide floating platform, to be built in the Seattle area and towed to Skagway for installation in time for the 2024 season, and have taken on new urgency in light of the Railroad Dock's restrictions and the broader lease-renewal issues. Longer-range planning includes a multi-use floating extension of the Alaska Marine Highway dock, which could also accommodate cruise ships.



The bare earth beyond Zuiderdam's bow is the debris path of recent rockslides that threaten the immediate future of WP&Y's Railroad Dock. This led to closure of the north berth (occupied here by Zuiderdam) in late July 2022 and of the entire dock following two more rockslides in the first week of August.

-Kevin J. Holland



While cruise ships deliver most WP&Y passengers to Skagway, some arrive aboard MV Matanuska, the state-owned Alaska Marine Highway System vehicle ferry launched in 1962 and one of two (with MV Columbia) currently assigned to the Bellingham, Wash.–Skagway route via Prince Rupert, B.C., and intermediate Panhandle ports. Moored at WP&Y's Railroad Dock in this June 18, 2022, view are white-hulled Grand Princess and Holland America's Zuiderdam. Princess Cruises' name originated in the mid-1960s when the fledgling company chartered Canadian Pacific's Princess Patricia, a steamship that sailed Alaskan waters for CP until 1978.

-Kevin J. Holland

If and when they are completed, these dock improvements will have a beneficial impact on the ability of Skagway and WP&Y to attract and accommodate their lifeblood shore-excursion business. But here again, uncertainty over the post-2023 waterfront lease status has clouded these prospects.

Looking ahead

For 35 years and counting, though, it's been WP&Y's passengers who have kept the railway, and many of Skagway's other businesses, a going concern during the necessarily short cruise-ship season.

Despite its outward appearance of antiquity, most of WP&Y's passenger car fleet is relatively new, with 50 cars custom-built for the railway over the past two decades. WP&Y's locomotive fleet has been almost entirely renewed as well, with six 3,000-hp E3000CC-DC units, powered by Electro-Motive Diesel 16-645E3B engines, delivered by NRE in 2020 to replace the remaining shovel-nose and DL-535 road-switcher units on most assignments. The first four NRE units, WP&Y 3001-3004, had been built in 2012 for Australia's Qube Holdings but never left the United States. The other two (3005-3006) were built new for WP&Y in 2020.

Without a diversified commercial base or military facilities, Skagway's economy was severely impacted by the coronavirus pandemic, with a U.S. federal cruise-ship "no-sail" order canceling the 2020 season, and only limited ship visits in 2021. A ban on cruise ships calling at Canadian ports during the pandemic was lifted for the 2022 season, allowing Vancouver to resume its importance as a departure point for Alaskan itineraries. Even with short-staffed ships sailing at limited capacity due to ongoing impacts of Covid, the 2022 season appeared to signal a return to better times in Skagway — until the rockslides threw the situation into new turmoil.

The Canadian government's lifting of most Covid-related border restrictions on October 1, 2022, opened the bureaucratic door for resumption of WP&Y service to Fraser, Bennett, and Carcross. With Skagway setting its sights on doubling its pre-pandemic one million yearly visitor count by 2030, WP&Y's passenger operations remain a linchpin of the community's economy, even as the railway addresses the dual challenges of rockslides and waterfront lease uncertainty.



The remaining four NRE units arrived in this black paint scheme, retaining traditional White Pass “speed lettering.”

-Both, Kevin J. Holland



NRE E3000CC-DC units 3001 and 3002 were delivered in WP&Y’s classic green-and-yellow livery.

Klondike classics

Kevin J. Holland



Approaching their 70th birthdays, WP&Y's first two diesels are shown here parked outside the road's Skagway Shops on June 18, 2022. Built between 1954 and 1966 by General Electric, and originally powered with Alco 6-251B engines, the iconic shovel-nosed fleet is familiar to generations of WP&Y passengers and fans. Their original green-and-yellow livery was revived in 1988. Ten members of the 11-unit fleet (90-99) were repowered with Cummins QSK45L engines between 2008 and 2013, altering their rooflines, boosting horsepower from under 1,000 to 1,450, and improving fuel efficiency and emissions. In July 2022, displaced by six new 3,000-hp NRE locomotives acquired in 2020, seven of the shovel-noses (92-97 and 99) were declared surplus and offered for sale, along with wide-nose DL-535E road switcher 114. Shovel-noses 90, 91, and 98 will remain on the WP&Y roster for special assignments, along with four 1,200-hp MLW DL-535 road switchers (104, 108-110), which retain their original Alco-design 6-251D engines. WP&Y sold its four other surviving DL-535s to Colorado's Durango & Silverton in 2020-21.

Kevin J. Holland is editor of PTJ, and author of White Pass & Yukon in Color (Morning Sun, 2016).