Inland Empire

DAVID HONAN/PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

WASHINGTON STATE IS LIKE A jeweler's display case of attractive railroad operations. Railfans travel from around the world to take in the towering cliffs of the Columbia River Gorge; Stevens Pass offers a winter wonderland to the adventurous soul; the Seattle–Tacoma metropolis is graced by highly trafficked mainlines set on the shores of Puget Sound. But tucked away in a dusty corner, often ignored by photographers hustling between the towering drama of Union Pacific's Joso Viaduct and BNSF's grinding double-track assault of Providence Hill, there sits an unpolished diamond that's one of my favorite places to visit — Watco's Palouse River & Coulee City (PCC) Railroad.

This unremarked gemstone may not seem like much at first glance, but a closer look reveals a rural railroad of deep character. Not only does the PCC continue to serve the agricultural communities of Whitman County its rails were built to connect, but in doing so the railroad passes through the Palouse region, home to some of the most appealing scenes the state has to offer.

This land of perpetually rolling hills features vibrant colors that transition from carpets of green in the spring to seas of gold in late summer. Acres of crops are often interspersed with swaths of the rich brown dirt that help make this one of the most productive agricultural regions in the U.S.; the Palouse is renowned for growing wheat, barley, lentils, and peas, and yield rates here can exceed twice those of Kansas' top counties. It's no wonder this agricultural bounty led to the Palouse being crossed by a spiderweb of railroads in the days before engineers paved highways and tamed wild rivers.

Mornings in the Palouse are well-known amongst photographers for the interplay of light and shadow upon the hills that characterize the region. On September 23, 2009, engineer Larry peers into his mirror as WAMX 5012 lifts a half-dozen loads out of St. John, Wash., on PCC's PV Sub. This scene is set in the branch's namesake Pleasant Valley, its slopes covered with golden stalks from the summer harvest and the green tint of winter wheat's first growth.

Early Inception and Expansion

The PCC connects to UP's Ayer Subdivision at Hooper Junction, located a little more than an hour northeast of Pasco and a bit less than two hours southwest of Spokane. The Hooper Subdivision runs 28 miles northeast to Winona, where it turns east and continues 25 miles farther to Colfax. At Winona, the Pleasant Valley Subdivision diverges and wanders northeast for 30 miles to reach the end of track at Thornton. Known collectively as the PV Hooper Branch, these lines are today owned by the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) and leased by Watco. The PCC has trackage rights over UP from Hooper Junction to the Columbia River port town of Wallula.

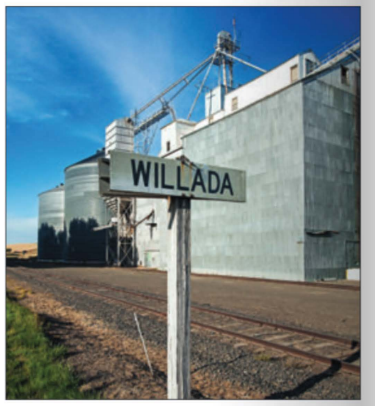
Rails reached the Palouse in the early 1880s. Union Pacific predecessor Oregon Railway & Navigation Company (OR&N) and the Northern Pacific negotiated an 1880 agreement essentially dividing the territory — the NP would not build south of the Snake River, and OR&N would not build to the north. The exception was a line OR&N had surveyed east from Connell on the NP to reach Colfax, which was built by OR&N subsidiary Columbia & Palouse Railroad in 1884 and extended to Moscow, Idaho, in 1885.

Through the mid-1880s, the OR&N established a network of lines connecting Wallula on the Columbia River east to Walla Walla, extending from there south to Pendleton, Ore., and north over the 3.3 percent ruling grade of Alto Pass to Riparia on the Snake River.

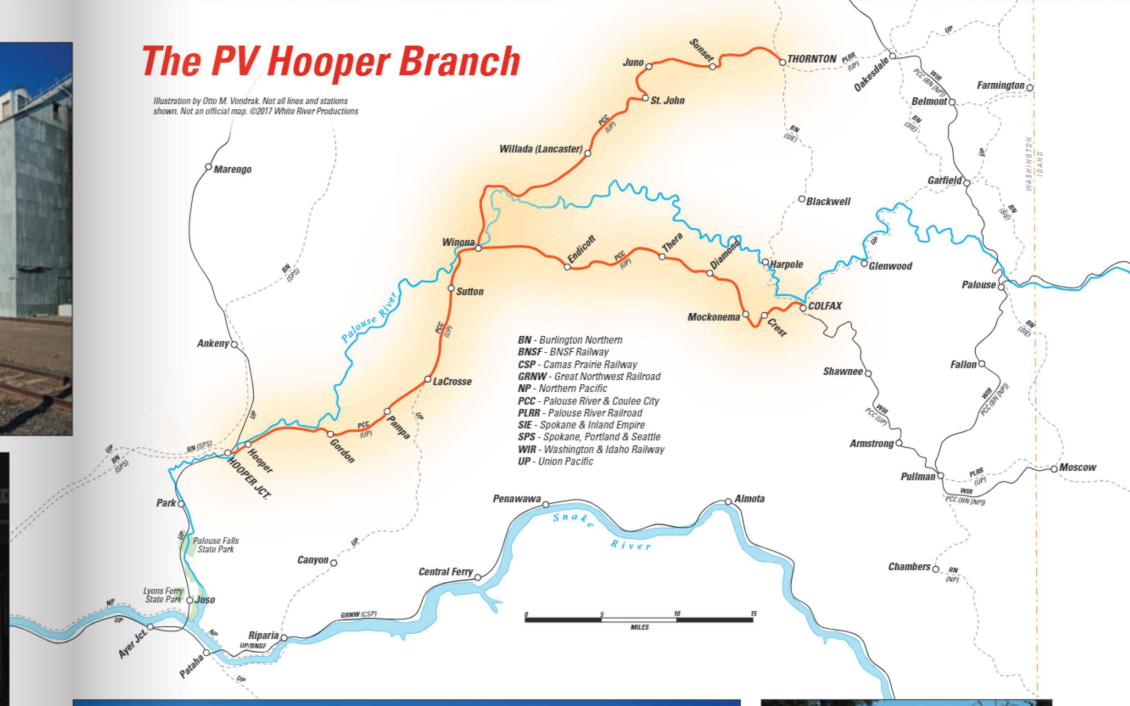
The Snake River agreement didn't last long; in 1886, NP-backed interests surveyed a route from Wallula to Pendleton, clearly in violation. Coupled with NP's February 1886 announcement that it would begin construction south from Spokane into the Palouse, the OR&N declared the agreement void and began aggressive expansion north of the Snake River. First, it built a bridge at Riparia and pushed north to connect with the Colfax line at LaCrosse. From Colfax, the OR&N extended its railhead northeast to Farmington on the Idaho border, then turned north toward Tekoa ("Tee-koh"), Fairfield and ultimately Spokane, which it reached in October 1889. From Tekoa, the OR&N built a branch northeast into Idaho to tap the riches of the Wallace silver mining district.

Colfax lies in a deep valley at the confluence of two forks of the Palouse River, and the original 1884 line descended from the plateau to the west on a 3.0 percent compensated grade. This profile required establishment of a helper district, which proved such an impediment to efficient operations that efforts began in 1887 to locate a less torturous route for westbound traffic.

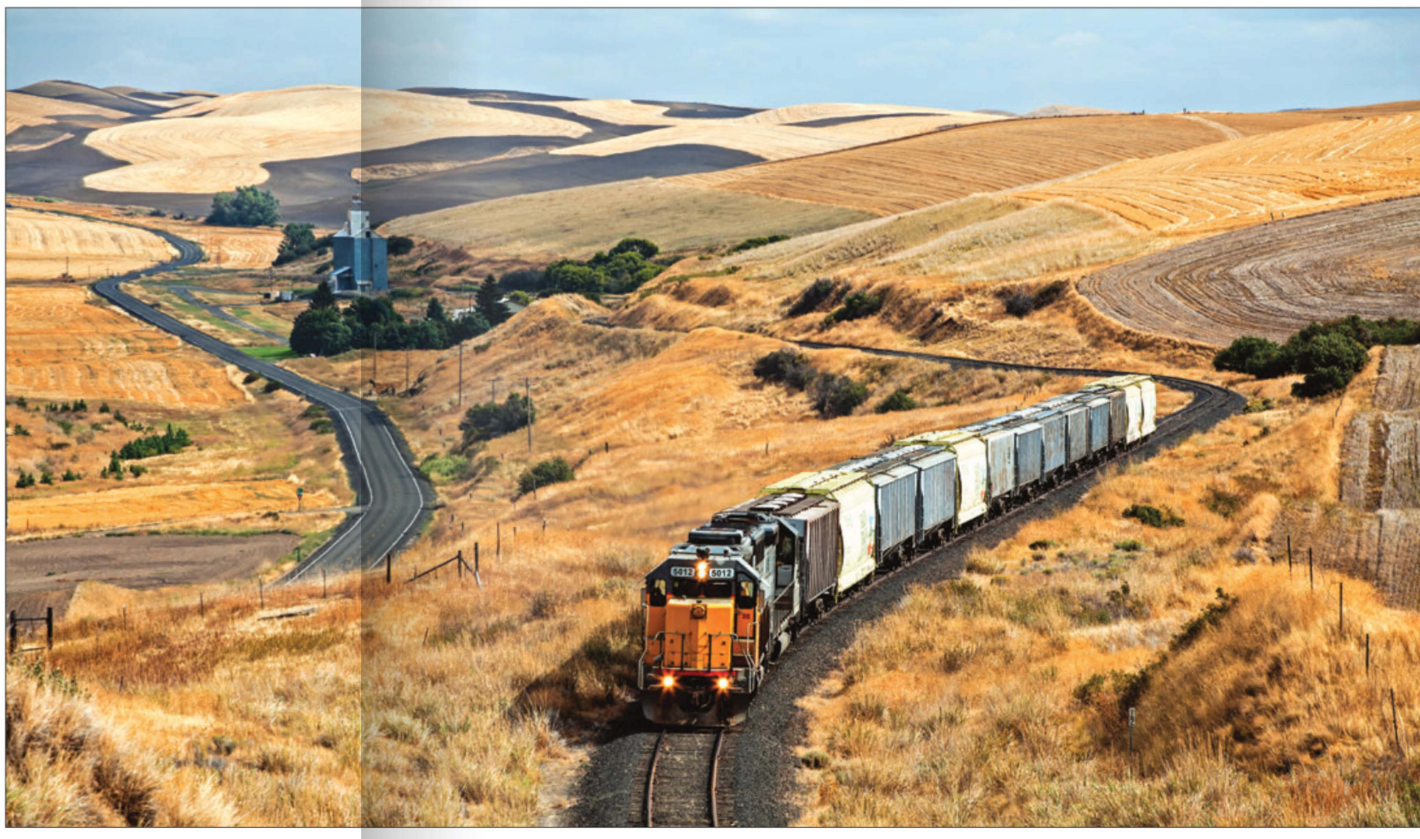
Further growth came when the Pleasant Valley Branch was completed in July 1889, leaving the original mainline



ABOVE RIGHT: A station sign marks Willada, with the substantial WhitGro elevator complex in the background. RIGHT: The elevator at Winona remains a hub of activity for local farmers shipping their wheat to market, and on August 21, 2011, conductor Joe pauses for a minute to chat with the operator. It's up to your imagination whether they're discussing the weather, a favored sports team, a mutual friend, or simply checking on the status of the harvest. All we know for sure is that Larry is up in the cab, wondering when the heck this show is going to get on the road -- he's been on duty since long before the sun rose, and he'd like to get home at a decent hour on this beautiful late-summer day. BELOW: Freshly-painted Watco units running on trackage rights over Union Pacific's Ayer Sub slice through the dramatic basalt cliffs of the Palouse River Canyon just downstream of Palouse Falls on September 20, 2015.



LEFT: Off to the races! Startled by the squeal of a brake application, a trio of horses gallops alongside a loaded grain train dropping down the grade into Sunset on August 24, 2011. Of note, the nearest horse is of the Appaloosa breed, which is native to the Palouse region as a result of the Nez Perce Tribe's centuries-old breeding program. ABOVE: WAMX 4046, a former Amtrak GP40, drags a lone covered hopper around the east wye at Winona on August 23, 2011.



TOP: Wispy clouds dot the sky as WAMX 5012 begins the climb from Sunset over the final hill to Thornton on August 23, 2011. RIGHT: WAMX 5012 slumbers on the elevator track at Thera on September 7, 2008. OPPOSITE: WAMX 5012 and 4043 are mere yards short of reaching the summit of the climb from Juno to the north rim of Pleasant Valley.

at Winona and running northeast to reconnect at Seltice, south of Tekoa.

The OR&N fell into receivership in 1894 and emerged in 1896 as the Oregon Railroad & Navigation Company. One of the first tasks for new leadership was to eliminate mainline operations over Alto Pass, and a water-level route along the Snake River from Wallula to Riparia was opened in December 1899. By the early 1900s UP had gained firm control of the railroad, and in 1910 consolidated all its northwestern subsidiaries into the Oregon–Washington Railroad & Navigation Company (OWR&N).

Concurrently, a new mainline was surveyed to bypass all of the curvy, hilly Palouse trackage and shave an incredible 54 miles off the Wallula–Spokane route. In 1914, the OWR&N opened a brilliantly engineered route that began climbing away from the Snake River shore at Ayer, crossed the river on the massive Joso Viaduct, sliced through the basalt cliffs of the Palouse River Canyon, and ran 75 miles northeast through the eastern Washington scablands to enter Spokane from the west. The 1899 and 1914 construction form the backbone of today's Ayer Subdivision, and would ultimately spell doom for much of the original Palouse trackage.

Contraction and Competition

Abandonments in the Palouse began in 1948 when the track on Alto Pass was removed, severing the original Pendleton–Spokane mainline. Local service to online communities south of the pass continued via the original line through Walla Walla, and service north of the pass was routed along the newer Ayer route. There was little change north of the Snake River until the late 1970s, when the Interstate Commerce Commission granted approval to abandon the west end of the 1884 line between Connell and Hooper Junction.

Railroad industry deregulation following passage of the Staggers Act in 1980 brought immediate changes. Most of the 1886 mainline from Riparia to LaCrosse was pulled up in November 1980, and in quick succession other branches south of the Snake were truncated. Shipment of agricultural products by truck to barge docks on the Columbia and Snake Rivers grew steadily in the 1980s, drawing a core revenue source away from the railroads.

Facing dwindling traffic and the burden of maintaining three routes from Spokane to Hooper Junction, in April 1991, UP abandoned both the original mainline from Colfax to Fairfield and the bypass from Thornton to Seltice. A year and a half later, more than a century of Union Pacific operation in the heart of the Palouse came to an end when the remaining trackage from Hooper Junction to Moscow and Winona to Thornton were sold to Watco's Blue Mountain Railroad.

The Modern Shortline Era

Watco's new lines were operated as the Palouse River Railroad until 2000, when the company purchased the former Northern Pacific CW and P&L Branches from Burlington Northern and consolidated the entire 300-mile eastern Washington system under the PCC banner. However, decades of deferred maintenance and declining traffic could not be overcome by Watco's streamlined operations, and the company found itself in possession of hundreds of miles of track that it could neither maintain effectively nor run profitably. The threat of abandonment loomed.

With the remaining Palouse rail infrastructure at risk of being lost for good, WSDOT entered the picture in the early 2000s. Analysis revealed that state-funded acquisition and rehabilitation of the rail lines would be economically justifiable compared to the alternative of upgrading state highways that were being torn apart by agricultural traffic.

The state purchased the PV Hooper Branch from Watco in 2004 and completed acquisition of the former NP lines in 2007. Contract operators were engaged to run the lines, with the PV Hooper continuing to be operated by Watco and the two NP branches leased by other interests.

These arrangements have since proven successful for the WSDOT operators. System-wide carloads have nearly doubled since 2007, and state-funded track improvements enabled private development of two new shuttle loading facilities on the former Northern Pacific branches.

Along the Line

The tiny town of Hooper sits in a coulee alongside the Palouse River, its skyline dominated by two grain elevators which no longer receive rail service. Across from town, the Ayer Sub runs along a shelf above the river, and high on the north slope of the coulee lies the abandoned Spokane, Portland & Seattle mainline. The Hooper Sub follows the south bank of the river east from Hooper, with few public access points available, before turning up the Willow Creek drainage.

A short distance east of Blaze the line crosses Willow Creek three times in quick succession on wood trestles. After ducking under the highway at Pampa, the track climbs a short grade into LaCrosse, where the wye connecting with the old mainline to Riparia is still in place. The first online customer, a Ritzville Warehouse Co. elevator, is located on the east leg.

The PCC crosses Union Flat before dropping downgrade to rejoin the Palouse River at Winona, where the Pleasant Valley Sub diverges to the north. Occasionally the WhitGro elevator here will ship a few carloads, and sidings along the PV are used for storage. East of Winona, PCC regularly serves a busy WhitGro elevator at Endicott, along with a smaller facility at Thera.

The last station on the line with active customers is Mockonema, next to the Whitman County Fairgrounds, where PCC serves a Pacific Northwest Farmer's Coop elevator and a McGregor Co. fertilizer plant. From there, the Hooper Sub climbs to the summit at Crest before dropping into Colfax on a 3.0 percent compensated grade carved into the bluff west of town. On rare occasions PCC will move storage cars into or out of town, but for the most part Colfax's rails lie dormant, and the line east of town was severed by a 2006 trestle fire.

OPPOSITE TOP: On October 5, 2007, a ragged GP40-2LW still wore its Canadian National paint job, clearly applied long, long ago. The eastbound train was passing through Endicott on the way to Mockonema. OPPOSITE: WAMX 5012 drags empties out of Pleasant Valley above St. John Golf Course on September 16, 2013. The house in front of the train is the same one visible on page 28.

TOP: With loads from Sunset, St. John and Willada in tow, WAMX 5012 and 4043 turn the corner off the 1889 Pleasant Valley bypass onto the 1884 Colfax mainline at Winona on August 31, 2010. Visible at the corner of the wye are foundations from the steam-era water tank that once fed thirsty locomotives. ABOVE: The old Spokane & Inland Empire wood covered bridge still stands at Harpole, spanning the Palouse River northwest of Colfax.

No trip to Colfax would be complete without visiting a a very unusual artifact of local railroad history. The Harpole Bridge, a covered wooden Howe truss, still stands over the Palouse River northwest of town and is the only example of its kind remaining in Washington. It was built in the early 1900s by the Spokane & Inland Empire Railroad Company (S&IE), which connected Colfax to Spokane with an electric interurban line. To see the bridge, follow Green Hollow Road north from town to Manning Road, then head west for a mile to view it from above a bend in the river. The bridge now serves as a driveway, so please be respectful of private property.

The PV Sub is without doubt the scenic highlight of the PCC. The railroad follows the Palouse River for a few miles north of Winona before turning up the valley of Downing Creek, with plenty of photo opportunities along the way. Eleven miles from Winona is Willada, which the post office confusingly calls Lancaster, where a large WhitGro elevator complex is a regular customer. After a few more miles of running up the center of the valley alongside Lancaster Road, the railroad's character abruptly changes.

Recall that this line was built to bypass the big grade at Colfax. While the OR&N's engineers did their best to follow watercourses, there's simply no way to travel any distance in the Palouse without crossing a ridge line, and in the next 15 miles the PV Sub goes up and over goes up and over three of them with ruling grades of 1.0 percent southbound and 1.6 percent northbound. The first offers entry to the line's namesake, Pleasant Valley, across which the railroad drapes like a giant horseshoe. At the apex of this shape sits the town of St. John, home to elevators operated by both WhitGro and Inland Empire Milling Co.

After climbing right back out of the Pleasant Valley, the railroad descends to Cottonwood Creek and follows it upstream to Sunset, location of another WhitGro elevator. Leaving Sunset, the track immediately begins climbing, gaining nearly 250 feet of elevation to

ABOVE: As the crew shoves empties into the elevator track at Willada, an 18-wheeler heads into town with a load of grain on August 23, 2011. RIGHT: North of Winona, the PV Sub follows the Palouse River closely for six miles. At the mouth of Big Cove Canyon, the line sweeps through a reverse curve between the river and Lancaster Road. WAMX 5012 and 4043 snake 31 cars through the countryside on September 16, 2013.

cross one last ridge and drop into the Thorn Creek drainage.

At the bottom of the hill lies Thornton and a former crossing with the other S&IE interurban line connecting Spokane, Palouse, and Moscow. The PV Sub today ends in Thornton at another Pacific Northwest Farmer's Coop elevator, but once continued east under U.S. Highway 195 to pass through Oakesdale on its way to rejoining the mainline at Seltice.

Railfanning the PV Hooper Branch

Watco operates the PV Hooper on an up-and-back cycle based out of Wallula on the Columbia River, where the company's Blue Mountain Railroad (BLMR) line from Walla Walla also connects. PCC crews report for duty early in the morning at Colfax, then drive to where the train is parked. Typically, the train will depart Wallula on Tuesday mornings and run up UP's Ayer Sub to Hooper Junction to join home rails. The crew can usually reach Winona before their hours of service expire, and a good trip over UP can allow extra time to continue further and spot industries.

Wednesday morning finds the crew working east or north of Winona to serve online industries. On Thursday morning, they collect cars from the industries, assemble the road train at Winona, and haul down to Hooper Junction. The cycle concludes on Friday morning with a southbound return over UP's high iron to Wallula. However, cautions Watco Vice President Ted Kadau, "We do have fluctuations in our schedule based upon such issues as grain harvest, maintenance and track work, and customer's needs," so days of operation can change.

The predominant traffic on the PCC is grain moving in 26-car blocks from online shippers to the Northwest Grain Growers barge dock at Wallula. A portion of the railcar fleet is owned by WSDOT and branded as the Washington Grain Train, providing a pool of cars dedicated to serving Palouse growers. From Wallula, the grain is barged downriver to deepwater docks at Portland and transferred to oceangoing ships for export. The PCC's only inbound loads move to the McGregor plant at Mockonema. Watco's Kadau details how non-grain traffic moves to and from the line: "The PCC interchanges with the UP at Hooper Junction, and with the UP and BNSF at Wallula. The PCC will stop when needed at Ayer Junction to exchange locomotives with the Great Northwest Railroad [GRNW, another Watco shortline] and to drop off railcars that need to be repaired or inspected at the GRNW's car repair facility in Lewiston, Idaho." Traffic to and from BLMR is also interchanged at Wallula.

The PCC relies on a collection of Geeps for its Palouse lines, ranging from a GP30 once known as "Barney" for its purple paint job to a GP50 with a nose-mounted bell that proclaims its Chicago & North Western heritage. Most of the fleet has been repainted in recent years into Watco's corporate black-and-yellow livery, but some legacy schemes remain on locomotives kept available for traffic surges. Trains rarely exceed 20 m.p.h. and roads are usually close to the tracks, so chasing is easy.

The PCC uses AAR channel 45 (160.785 MHz) on the PV Hooper. It's also helpful to listen to the Ayer Sub on AAR 42 (160.740 MHz). Track warrant control is still in effect for the 20 miles between Page and Ayer, so listening for UP Dispatcher 41 conversing with WAMX locomotives provides advance notice of PCC trackage-rights trains. GRNW trains operating between Riparia and Ayer also talk to DS 41.

Visiting the Palouse

Railfans venturing into the Palouse should bear in mind that this is a sparsely populated region with limited services. Gas stations are few and far between. Colfax, St. John, Dusty, and Washtucna are where I top off. There are no chain restaurants between Colfax and the major highways to the west and north. Most towns have local establishments, of course.

LEFT: On August 29, 2010, PCC 2353 sits at the head of a long string of loads at the end of the PV Sub in Thornton. Just behind the power is where the Spokane & Inland Empire interurban line to Moscow, Idaho, once crossed. BELOW LEFT: The classic UP-style station sign at Thornton, mounted on an ancient wood post, has in recent years been joined by a rather homely sign proclaiming the PV Sub's modern shortline operator.

The Pullman area has the most lodging opportunities, particularly for national chains, but I prefer the locally owned Siesta Motel in Colfax. Bear in mind that both Pullman and neighboring Moscow, Idaho, host major state college campuses, so nightly rates go through the roof when the football teams are playing. Saving money by pitching a tent is offset by the cost of traveling to and from the rail lines — I've never found a campground north of the Snake River.

Take a break from the endless parade of trains on the Funnel or Providence Hill, and pass on getting another shot of Joso Bridge. Those popular Class I mainline scenes aren't going anywhere. Instead, head east into the Palouse hills, get lost on some narrow roads, and marvel at scenery unlike anywhere else in the country. Head up to Steptoe Butte for sunrise or sunset and watch the shadows play across the lumpy terrain. Drag yourself out of bed at an absurdly unreasonable hour and be at the Colfax depot by 5:00 or so in the morning to wait for the crew to show up. Ask nicely and they may share some tips about that day's operating plan. Plot your course, hit the road, and enjoy this remnant of 19th century agricultural branchline railroading.

David Honan, a civil engineer and photographer, and his wife Cortney live in Snoqualmie, Wash. He thanks Watco's crews for their gracious hospitality, and credits Jeff Asay's book Union Pacific Northwest *for the historical details.*