



OREGON'S PINE FOREST LUMBER HAULER

Klamath Northern

BY ROBERT W. SCOTT/PHOTOS AS NOTED

As the sky turns from purple to orange, there is a chill in the winter morning air as conductor Tom Wood crunches along the ballast checking cars and performing an air test. It will be another half hour before the sun crests over the stands of pine trees in the central Oregon town of Gilchrist. The sweet smell of fresh lumber and wood chips hangs in the air. The sounds of a mill coming to life are evident, with the buzz of trucks, tractors, and loaders bustling about. The distant exhaust of steam reveals that the mill's boiler is up and running. This is just another day in

the woods and the first hours of work for a small but busy shortline railroad.

At just over ten miles in length, what the Klamath Northern Railway lacks in size and scope it more than makes up for in character and drive. Situated in central Oregon on the east side of the Cascade Mountain range, the railroad calls the small town of Gilchrist home. Founded by the Gilchrist family in 1938, Gilchrist was the last "company town" in Oregon, situated at the north end of Klamath County alongside the Little Deschutes River. The area is known for its endless stands of Lodgepole and Pon-

derosa pine trees. This is the arid and drier side of the Cascades, with much less rainfall than expected for the Pacific Northwest.

Set at an elevation above 4000 feet, the Klamath Plateau stretches from Bend, Ore., south to Klamath Falls and into northeastern California. The local populations of deer and coyote outnumber the people in many of the smaller towns. When the hot and dry summers are complete, this region settles in for a cold, long, and snowy winter.

The railroad was built in 1938 as the Gilchrist Timber Company, and

OPPOSITE: Klamath Northern No. 207 pauses briefly outside the engine house at the mill in Gilchrist, Ore., as seen between stacks of lumber awaiting shipment. ROBERT W. SCOTT ABOVE: Just into its trip with a loaded train, the KNOR slowly tracks its way along the line through the Deschutes National Forest towards the Union Pacific interchange. JOEL HAWTHORN

it provided an outlet for timber to be delivered from the mill at Gilchrist to the Southern Pacific interchange at aptly named Gilchrist Junction ten miles south. The name was changed to Klamath Northern Railroad Company in 1940, then Crown Pacific purchased the mill from the Gilchrist family in 1991, and the railroad was shut down. Operation resumed in 1993 and it was renamed Crown Pacific Railroad. The name change was brief, as the following year the line and the Klamath Northern Railway Company returned. After filing bankruptcy in 2003, Crown Pacific sold the mill and railway to Canadian-based International Forest Products (Interfor), which is the current owner and operator.

The Interfor mill is a state-of-the-art facility, but it also has a nostalgic feel in how it operates. Drawing water from the Gilchrist Mill Pond adjacent to the mill, boilers provide steam to the dry kilns. Fuel for the boilers, known as "hog fuel," is a combination of local bio-mass from area forests and by-products of the mill operations.

The mill currently can cut up to 50-inch diameter logs and can produce 124 different products from dimensional shop grade stock to radius edge decking. The newest product of the mill is called "Reserve Pine," which is used in high-end moulding and door and window frames. Pallet stock is also shipped by rail to manufacturers to build shipping pallets. Another byproduct of the mill is wood chips, which are hauled out by rail.

In 2014, the mill produced 352 center

beam flatcars of finished lumber and an average monthly car total of 120 cars of wood chips. The total shipped finished lumber stock was over 32 million board feet. This all traveled over the 10.6-mile railway.

Unusual Motive Power

During its 77 years of existence, the Klamath Northern has rostered only four engines. Starting in 1938, 2-6-2 steam locomotive No. 204, built by Baldwin in 1901, held the duties until it was scrapped in 1955. The tender still remains on property as a converted snow plow for winter duties. A new GE



BELOW: It's just about quitting time as the crew pulls No. 207 into the single-stall engine house at the end of the day's operations. The facility dates from the railroad's original construction in 1938. JOEL HAWTHORN

BOTTOM: The size of the Klamath Northern's sole locomotive can be appreciated as it crosses the Crescent Cut-Off road at Crescent, Ore., just outside the mill property. At about 45 feet long, the GE SL144 it is just about the length of an SW1500. ROB JACOX

OPPOSITE: On January 23, 2015, the train returns from the UP interchange as light power as it passes some cars stored at the siding called Cement. These cars are being stored until there is room for them at the mill. JOEL HAWTHORN



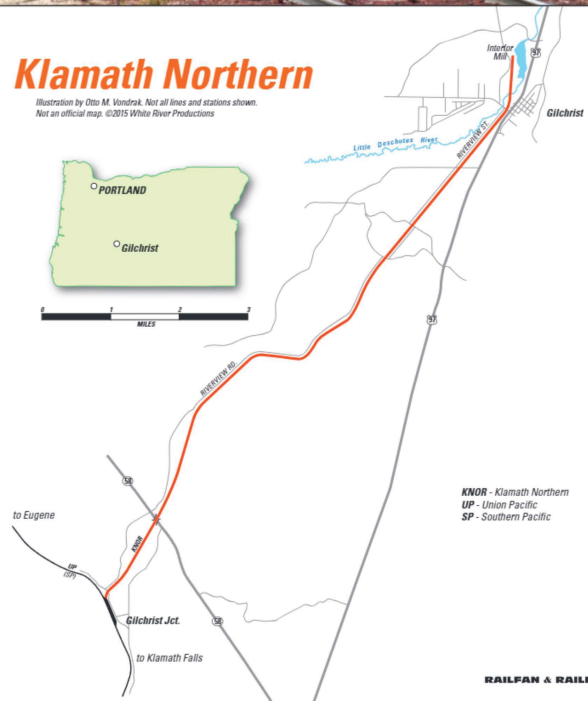
70-ton end-cab switcher, No. 205, was purchased in 1955 and used until it was sold to Modesto & Empire Traction in 1990. A second-hand Baldwin 40-ton switcher, No. 206, was in use from the 1970s through 1983 when it was given to the California State Railroad Museum in Sacramento where it is currently on display. In 1982 the railroad purchased a brand new General Electric 125-ton SL-144 center cab switcher, No. 207. Only 29 of this configuration were built by GE, all for various industrial customers around the country despite initially marketing the model as a "next generation" switcher for Class I railroads.

Under the GE center cab, the locomotive rides on over 100-year-old 60-to-90 pound rail. The second-hand rail for this line was brought to the site after initially being used by the Hammond Lumber Company in Mill City, Ore. Although speed on this line is limited to ten m.p.h., a train of ten loaded center beams and wood chip cars will tax the 1100-h.p. engine as it digs into the short but near 2 percent grades. In fact, there are two separate locations on the line where trains encounter these steep grades, which will slow the train to three miles per hour.

Over The Road
Railroad operations manager Michael

Klamath Northern

Illustration by Otto M. Vondrak. Not all lines and stations shown. Not an official map. ©2015 White River Productions





ABOVE LEFT: Conductor Tom Wood calls in car numbers to the shipping agent at the mill prior to departing the mill property.

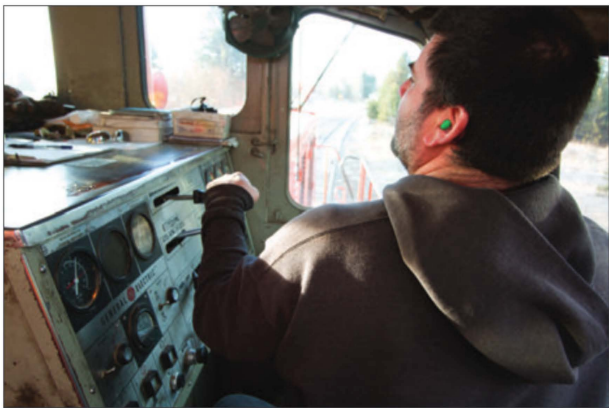
ABOVE RIGHT: Milepost 10 on the KNOR marks the entrance to the mill trackage at Gilchrist as the outbound train does its air test to depart for the junction.

RIGHT: Engineer Troy Terry carefully feathers the throttle of the GE to maintain track speed up the grade approaching Oregon Route 58. ROBERT W. SCOTT PHOTOS

Poncil says that the railroad is a mix of 60, 62, 68, 75, and 80-pound rail. "Some of the smallest rail is our 60-pound, located on a couple of the yard tracks at the mill that we use every day." The local ballast is affectionately referred by Poncil as "pummy-dirt" since it's a combination of volcanic pumice, cinders, and a dry fine dirt.

Back to today's train, the speed is quickly dropping from ten m.p.h. as we start up one of the short but steep grades. Engineer Troy Terry reacts to the wheel slip buzzer by feathering the throttle to maintain forward momentum. "This is where I earn my keep," smirks Troy. Today's ten-car train is heavily laden with six loaded center beam flatcars with 2x6s and 2x8s. Four wood chip cars are loaded to the tops from the mill and are destined to the paper mills in Longview, Wash.

While enroute to the interchange from the mill, conductor Tom Wood confirms the outbound railcars have been released to the Union Pacific, checking and rechecking his paperwork. Both men make up two-thirds of the entire operating crew of the Klamath Northern, with the third person being railroad operations manager Michael Poncil. All three are veterans of railroading and mill work. Troy hired out in 2004 work-



ing in the mill's dry kiln. He has worked on the railroad side since 2007, starting as a conductor, then becoming engineer certified in 2008.

Tom Wood is the newest member of the railroading team. He hired when the mill was under Crown Pacific ownership in 1999, where he worked as a certified lumber grader. He worked up to swing shift supervisor on the planer inside the mill before going to the railroad as a conductor in 2013. Riding along with Tom and Troy, it's easy to get a crash course on the nuances of timber grading and the process included in cutting, preparing, and dry kilning, all of the processes in making raw timber into the different products offered by the mill.

Mike Poncil is the veteran of the group. He started working on the railroad's seasonal section crew in the mid 1970s. In the early days, teenage children of mill and railroad workers were hired as sum-



mer help to maintain the railroad. "They would hand us spike mauls and wrenches and start from one end of the railroad and work towards the other, tightening joint bars, pounding spikes, checking gauge, and replacing ties as needed." For several years while in school, Mike progressed from summer section help to becoming the track foreman of summer hires in 1978. After college and working a time in California, he returned to the woods, first as a fire forester, then back into the mill as a planer operator, then working on loading rail cars. In 2005 he moved over to the railroad operations.

As with other small railroads, sometimes it requires the help of all people to work any assignment when needed. Mike recalls a time in the early days when the railroad was rebuilding one of its locomotives at the time, GE 70-tonner No. 205. "During the rebuild, I was elected to be the one that was to crawl inside the

crankcase to wipe it out after the pistons were pulled during the rebuild. I was elected because I was not only the youngest, but also the smallest," Poncil recalls.

With only three operating employees on the railroad, not only are they responsible for train operations but they also must act as a carman when putting the trains together. This involves more than air and brake tests, and includes measuring knuckle heights on cars to ensure they meet federal requirements. In addition, they are also the track maintainers, responsible for basic track inspections and minor railbed repairs, including changing out ties and fixing broken rails.

As our train ambles south towards the interchange, engineer Troy Terry talks about the remoteness of these areas. "It is pretty sparse out here. You may only see people out along the line during hunting season or mushroom picking season," explains Troy. There is only one paved crossing on the entire line, with the others being forest service dirt crossings and an overpass over Oregon Route 58.

Winter can be especially challenging for railroad operations. Poncil is happy that this past year's snow was limited. "Any snow or ice on the line and there is no amount of sand or feathering the throttle that can help out." This sometimes requires them to double the train to the interchange. "During heavy snow, we will stop prior to the Route 58 overpass in each direction and shovel snow from in front of the engine's plow so we don't drop snow down on the highway and cars when we go over the bridge," he explained. "This is time consuming but it is also the safe thing to do."

Current Operations

The railroad operates Monday through Friday with the crew on duty at 5:30 a.m. at Gilchrist. Union Pacific's Klamath Falls, Ore.-based LIM70 local provides Monday, Wednesday, and Friday interchange with the Klamath Northern at Gilchrist Junction. Since today's run is on a Friday, they will return to the mill with light power. Morning work to set over cars to be loaded will allow them to tie up immediately in the single-stall engine house at the mill. On busy days, there may be two trips made from the mill to the junction for interchange. Outbound loads also increase toward the end of each month as mill output goals are met.

Access to this railroad can be tricky depending on the time of year. Most access is on Forest Service roads that may not always be maintained in winter. During the summer the fine powder dirt will create huge dust clouds that will inevitably find a way into your vehicle and equipment. Summer also brings a high fire danger, so the railroad is required to carry fire tools and equipment, given its easement through Forest Service lands. The fine powder dirt can mire unsuspecting drivers into deep mud during the thaw months after winter or during the summer thunderstorms.

U.S. Route 97 is the best access to the town of Gilchrist, which is about 20 miles north of Chemult, Ore. Route 58 ducks under the railroad just prior to the interchange at Gilchrist Junction.

Unless the outbound train runs into issues, it can usually be seen crossing Router 58 and arriving at Gilchrist Junction between 9:00 and 10:00 a.m. About

an hour's worth of work blocking the cars for the UP and making any pick-ups has the train back northbound towards the mill soon after. There is one short siding called Cement between the mill and the junction used for extra car storage. The siding was named for the site where materials were offloaded during the construction of the nearby Wickiup Reservoir. Adjacent to the siding is the site of a former box company that has not been in use for years.

Returning light power, the train arrives back at the mill site. With all of their work complete and no second trip needed, Troy eases No. 207 into the single-stall engine house that dates back to 1938. He eases the engine to a stop, secures it, and shuts the motor down. Final tie-downs are made, and the two doors are swung shut. Another day is done hauling lumber and chips from the pine forests of central Oregon. Troy Terry and Tom Wood pack their grips out of the engine house. In just a few short hours there will be more lumber to haul and the crew will return to the one-stall enginehouse to stir No. 207 back to life.

To see the essence of railroading, one that ties the livelihood of a region to its export products, you don't have to go to the large Class I railroads. Look to Gilchrist, listen for the bell, horn, and burble of the small GE center cab switcher run by the dedicated railroaders of the Klamath Northern. ■

Originally from from Benicia, Calif., Robert W. Scott now resides in Rochester, Wash., where he is a fire chief for a regional fire authority.

BELOW: The KNOR's unusual GE center cab rests on the Interfor mill property awaiting its next assignment on a winter afternoon. ROBERT W. SCOTT

