



COMMENTARY ON RAILROADING AND RAILFANNING



A freight crosses Willow Creek Trestle at Madras, Ore., on August 14, 2006. OTTO M. VONDRAK PHOTO

What is It About the Oregon Trunk?

MY FRIEND SCOTT LOTHES shares his wonderful adventures on the Oregon Trunk this month on pages 50–61. The “OT” or “the Trunk,” as it is sometimes referred to, is a fascinating piece of western railroading. Built in the early part of the 20th century, it was one of the last large-scale lines built — at first as two competing lines, and later as a combined compromise route — that reached south from the Columbia River and into the high plains of central Oregon.

Where it was meant to go after Bend was never a certainty. One proposal had a line heading east into the high desert to Burns and then, via the Malheur River, to Idaho, the upper Snake River basin, and a connection with Chicago, Burlington & Quincy. This “Q” extension almost happened — right-of-way was secured and construction began, but was later halted and ownership of the line traded to Union Pacific, who completed the Burns to Idaho segment but never linked it up to the Trunk.

Another plan, favored by OT investor James J. Hill, was to extend south then west over the Cascades into the Rogue River Valley (then a monopoly of Southern Pacific), then out and down the coast to a connection with Northwestern Pacific (which until the 1920s was co-owned by the Santa Fe).

However, it was a different California connection that won out. During the 1920s, Great Northern launched an extension of the Trunk at Bend, headed south. Using a logging railroad, trackage rights won at court off SP, and a newly built line from Klamath Falls, GN reached California and a connection with Western Pacific at lonely, dusty Bieber in November 1931. Hill never saw it — he had been dead for 15 years by then — but his dream had finally come true. The connection, nicknamed the “Inside Gateway,” became an important corridor

for north-south freight, connecting GN and Santa Fe — by way of WP. The sleepy branch to nowhere had suddenly become an important main.

This Inside Gateway, and its Oregon Trunk segment, remained a colorful and important part of Northwest railroading for generations. It came to a close in 1982 when UP acquired WP, and with it, GN successor Burlington Northern lost its “friendly” connection to California. As a result of the UP-SP merger in 1996, successor BNSF secured a trackage rights concession over the old WP, restoring the Trunk, in some fashion, as a through route to California.

The OT is layered. Its landscape is literally layered from volcanic rock, eroded across ages by the water of the Deschutes River. Its history is layered in railroad politics, economics, and a furtive operational existence. And so, too, Scott’s many trips to the Trunk are a kind of layering, a long-term commitment to return, again and again, and get to know a place well, maybe become part of it.

But I’m also struck by another kind of layering — that of the many friendships that were involved in Scott’s multiple visits to the line. Places like the Trunk become touchstones that we share (like Otto Vondrak’s experiences in **MARKERS** on page 78). Maybe all the history and development of the Oregon Trunk — or any railway — is a pile of trivia and arcane knowledge, but it’s also one that, for whatever reason, those of us in the hobby tend to share with one another. Maybe, when we look at places on the map, or view them in person, all those layers of facts and dates and figures become a story, one that connects us, both to the places and to each other. 📍

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A LONELY RAILROAD IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

Oregon Trunk Chronicles

SCOTT LOTHES/PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

IT'S JUNE 2002, and I'm driving west in north-central Oregon on State Route 216 through the beige rolling fields of the Columbia-Deschutes Plateau. The afternoon sky is cloudless and so blue it's a shock to my eastern sensibilities. Mount Hood punctuates the western horizon, glistening in snow that will linger into August. I'm on a big western road trip after graduating from college, and I've just left the bustling main lines of the Columbia Gorge to explore a lonely railroad. I'd

read about the Oregon Trunk a year earlier in a two-part article by Greg Brown and Brian Rutherford in *CTC Board* magazine. Both authors extolled the line's remarkable scenery and lamented its infrequent trains, cautioning readers that long waits and frustration were common.

Where the sun-baked pavement began to pitch forward and plunge into the Deschutes Canyon, my radio scanner picked up the best possible transmission.

The dispatcher was setting up a meet at a siding called Oakbrook. I'd have just enough time to get to the top of Tunnel 2, a signature location where the tracks cross the river twice on dizzying deck girder bridges. Within the hour I'd photographed a train on each bridge in the warm sunlight of late afternoon, a BNSF mixed freight coming north and Union Pacific's Bend Local (abolished less than two years later) going south.

As I drove down the Bureau of Land Management's gravel access road, I remember thinking, "What's so hard about photographing the Oregon Trunk?"

After a pleasant night by the river at the Trout Creek campground, I spent almost the entire next day along the railroad... and saw no trains.

OPPOSITE: The Deschutes River sparkles in evening sunlight as a mixed freight heads north near Shearers Bridge on May 28, 2009.

ABOVE: The first sunlight of May 10, 2011, kisses 10,497-foot Mount Jefferson as searchlight signals stand at the south siding switch of Round Butte in Metolius.



ABOVE: The setting sun breaks under storm clouds retreating across the irrigated fields north of Culver as an Everett, Wash.–Barstow, Calif., train races south on May 11, 2011.

RIGHT: Once the Everett–Barstow had passed, the afternoon Bend Local, RNWE455, switched an elevator in Culver just before sunset on May 11, 2011.

OPPOSITE BELOW: An old barn between Metolius and Madras is slowly succumbing to the elements as the local heads north with five cars on May 9, 2011.



Background

The Oregon Trunk runs from the Columbia River at Wishram, Wash., up the Deschutes River to Bend, Ore. It's the consolidation of two railroads built in the last great competition between James J. Hill and E.H. Harriman in the early 20th century (a story well-told by Leon Speroff in his book *The Deschutes River Railroad War*).

The Oregon Trunk eventually became part of BNSF's north-south link between the Pacific Northwest and Southern California, known as the Inside Gateway. It's a hodgepodge of routes that includes three long stretches of Union Pacific trackage rights — some granted as a condition of UP's 1996 merger with Southern Pacific. UP's I-5 Corridor is the principal north-south line on the West Coast, and the Inside Gateway provides an alternative — albeit about 200 miles longer.

It's 152 miles from Wishram to Bend with a climb of nearly 3,500 feet. Much of that happens near the middle, up the 1.5 percent grade out of the canyon from South Junction to Madras, a helper district in the steam era. North of there, the tracks curve along the swift and cold Deschutes; to the south, trains run fast

across the irrigated fields of the high plateau, crossing two massive bridges, with the shimmering peaks of the Cascades standing always in the distance.

The railroad is single-track with sidings, many of them relatively short. Most of the tonnage moves south (distributed power is common); BNSF will run non-clearing southbounds, but northbounds have to fit the sidings. Until 2018, this was track warrant territory with automatic block signals and hand-thrown switches.

The oddity of a place name like South Junction and its nearby counterpart, North Junction — with no sign of any connecting lines — is a legacy of those two competing railroads. The stretch between them is so rugged that the competitors reluctantly agreed to share a single track. North Junction is where their lines came together, and South Junction is where they split back apart.

Consolidation came in two phases, completed in 1935. The Hill route comprises most of what remains, but the Harriman line was superior from South Junction to Metolius. To this day, Union Pacific owns those 24 miles and leases them to BNSF.

For most of the BNSF era, the primary trains have been two pairs of daily manifesters, one for Pasco in eastern Washington and another for western Washington, typically Vancouver or Everett. Their terminal on the other end is usually Barstow but can also be Bakersfield, Fresno, or Riverbank. There used to be two locals based out of Bend, a morning job that worked to Redmond and an afternoon job that went to Madras. In the past few years, they've been consolidated into one job, currently on duty at 6:00AM Monday through Friday. It can still go as far north as Madras but sometimes turns back at Redmond or Prineville Junction.

Further traffic includes unit trains

Oregon Trunk

Illustration by Otto M. Vondrak. Not all lines and stations shown. Not an official map. ©2024 White River Productions.



and barebare trains of empty intermodal equipment. While many days have no extra trains, I've occasionally seen as many as three in a day. Loaded unit trains going south include grain from BNSF-served elevators along its northern transcontinental route, canola meal out of Canada, and oil from the Bakken field. Unit trains often employ distributed power and are frequently too long for the sidings, with the empty cars sometimes returning north in two sections.

2008 and 2009: Tragic Adventures

After my initial visit in 2002, it took me more than five-and-a-half years to return, after my wife, Maureen, and I moved to Oregon. We arrived in Portland at the beginning of 2008, just in time for a massive slide to close Union Pacific's Cascade Line for four months. UP arranged to detour two or three pairs of trains a day over the Oregon Trunk, and on a sunny and mild February morning, I returned to Tunnel 2 to see them. That afternoon I caught the QPWRV, running from Portland & Western Railroad to Roseville, Calif., along with a BNSF train in each direction.

I slept in my car that night and kept shooting, catching three more trains that evening including UP's ZBRCL, at the time its hot intermodal train from Portland's Brooklyn Yard to Los Angeles. What perplexes me now, more than 16 years later, is that I left before dawn to spend the next day in the Columbia Gorge — and then made no effort to see more of the detours, which lasted until early May. This was the busiest the Oregon Trunk has ever been, and I still haven't forgiven myself for my lack of attention.

When I did come back, later that May, the detours had ended. Maureen joined me for a long weekend camping trip, and our friend Camron Settlemier met us for

part of it. On the first morning, I climbed the hillside above our campground to catch a southbound at dawn, but the light was tricky and the angle was not as interesting as I had hoped. Thinking I had heard something on the radio about an imminent meet with a northbound (reception in the canyon is spotty), I waited on the hill for a couple of hours, but it never came.

We finally saw that northbound at Sherars Falls hours later, as we were driving south around midday. All I could do was pull over for a grab shot of the tail end — and to shout some obscenities into the canyon walls. We saw no more trains the rest of that day nor for most of the next.

We relocated to a campground near Culver up on the plateau for better radio reception, and as afternoon turned toward evening near the end of day two, we heard the dispatcher arranging a meet at a siding just south of us. After photographing the southbound in the fields, we rolled the dice on a sunset shot of the northbound crossing Willow Creek Trestle at Madras. For once, the timing was perfect, redeeming what was otherwise my most frustrating trip to the Oregon Trunk.

We received another dose of frustration before leaving. Camron and I both went to bed with our scanners running, intent on getting up at any hour for a night shot. We were both surprised to wake to daylight the next morning. No trains had run all night, and it would be nearly midday before the next one. High, hazy clouds had rolled in by then, so we stayed at camp, enjoying a leisurely lunch while listening to the train whistle for the many rural crossings along the plateau. Driving back to Portland that Sunday afternoon, I could only hope for better luck next time.

The next time for me came four months later in September, when a trip to the Columbia Gorge gave me my first chance to photograph the Oregon Trunk bridge at Wishram. One evening at dusk, I drove up Old Moody Road along the rim on the Oregon side, bouncing over the washboard dirt surface to a high vantage point directly above the bridge. I-84 and Union Pacific's Portland Subdivision ran below me, while the lights of Wishram glowed from across the river on the Washington side. I slept in my car with the scanner running.

BNSF's main line along the north bank of the Columbia is the Fallbridge Subdivision, and Fallbridge was the name of Wishram until 1926. That name comes from the bridge that is still there, and from the falls that are not.

Until the gates of The Dalles dam closed on March 10, 1957, Cello Falls thundered over a staircase of ledges that dropped the Columbia 80 feet in half a



challenging. “In the fast deep water, in the half-light, the fishing would be tragic. In the swamp fishing was a tragic adventure. Nick did not want it.”

The next day, Marc and I went for a hike in the morning sun, undisturbed by the passing of any trains. Nine winding miles north of Tunnel 2, we picked our way up a canyon wall at a place called Beavertail, where the river and the railroad sweep through a pair of horseshoe

bends. We wanted to see whether we could climb all the way to the top and find a view of that scene. After going far enough to determine it was possible, we returned to our car and filed that away with the hope of coming back.

Life took us in other directions, and nearly two years would pass before I made it back to the Oregon Trunk. I’d think about it, though, that swift water calling like a siren in my dreams.



mile. While not very high among big waterfalls, in terms of flow volume, Celilo was the sixth-largest in the world. Salmon swimming upstream to spawn had to leap those falls, and their runs supported one of the longest continuously inhabited settlements in North America, spanning some 15,000 years.

“Celilo” appears in the languages of several tribes, and it means, roughly, “the echo of water falling over rocks,” but not even that echo remains. What I heard was the wind, the traffic on I-84, and the trains. One native interviewed by Oregon Public Broadcasting described Celilo as “20 times louder than a train if you lived right next to the tracks.” The trains are loud even from the rim. I can only imagine the sound of the falls. Even harder to imagine, if you’d grown up hearing them, is the sound of their silence.

There were two trains that night, both coming north, with one turning west for Vancouver a little before midnight and the other going east for Pasco at 2:15AM. When you’re sleeping restlessly in your car on the side of a dirt road hoping for night trains, there is no sweeter sound than a conductor toning up the dispatcher on the radio. It took me a little while to rouse myself from the driver’s seat, but once awake and outside, the gorge by starlight was incredible. Still, I was glad to see the first hint of dawn and head off into a new day in the gorge.

Nearly a year passed before I returned to the Trunk, this time for a camping trip with another good friend, Marc Entze, in May 2009. The trains were as bad as ever, but by now I was expecting that, and I was able to enjoy a lot more the experience of being there. Each day yielded a southbound in the high sun of early afternoon and not much else. We saw more snakes than trains by daylight — most of them utterly benign, but one big rattler crossed the gravel in front of our car, its long string of rattles turning lazily as it slithered.

On the second day, the afternoon southbound had to meet a northbound somewhere up the canyon, the only time we got a second train in daylight on that trip. Comparing distance to running times, we went looking for a spot where the sun would last as long as possible. It was close, but we got it.

If you’re wondering why I keep coming back to this lonely railroad to bake in the hot afternoons, watch out for snakes, and bang my head against the canyon walls in frustration, the scene that evening made a strong case. It’s for the way that cold, clear water sparkles in the low sun, for the play of light and shadow on the basalt, and for the hope — always small but never zero — that a train might appear in those magic moments.

I have long sought inspiration for and understanding of my photographic

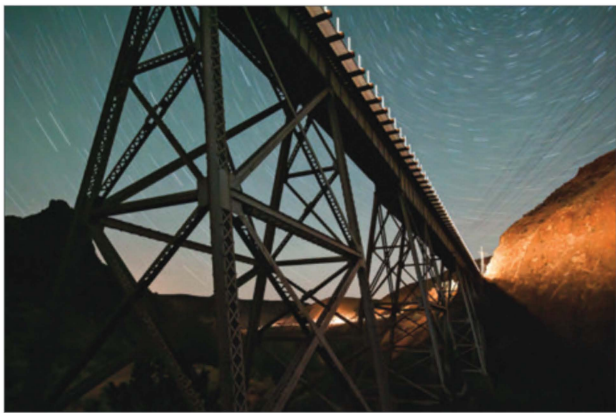
ABOVE: A 100-car unit train carrying canola meal crosses Cello Bridge over the Columbia River from Wishram, Wash., into Oregon on the evening of July 9, 2011, to begin its trek south on the Oregon Trunk. The train came out of Canada and has a mix of eight CN and BNSF locomotives, arranged 3x3x2.

OPPOSITE TOP: After a flurry of three trains late in the day of May 11, 2011, searchlight signals glow green in the fields south of Metolius as moonlight mixes with the blue glow of dusk.

OPPOSITE: Headlights from a Barstow-Pasco mixed freight illuminate the basalt cliffs at Wishram as the train waits for a signal to turn east off the Columbia River drawbridge a little before midnight on September 7, 2008.

pursuits in the pages of literature. Ernest Hemingway’s series of short stories featuring Nick Adams includes one called “Big Two-Hearted River,” and it gets at the pull I feel for places like the Deschutes Canyon. In the story, Nick has just come home from World War I and goes on a solo fishing trip. After a successful morning on the story’s titular stream, he comes to a place where the river flows into a swamp and decides to go no further that day. “He felt a reaction against deep wading with the water deepening up under his armpits, to hook big trout in places impossible to land them.” The fish were big and enticing; the swamp dark, mysterious, and





Spring 2011: Finding a Better Way

One especially nice January day, I headed into the Columbia Gorge with Kyle Weismann-Yee. Learning of two southbounds called out of Wishram for the Trunk, we set off to intercept them near Sherars Falls where the river flows over bedrock. The first looked great against the columnar basalt in the low winter sunlight, but the second never showed. Thankfully, we learned about its delay in time to make it back to the Columbia for sunset and dinner at a brewpub in Hood River where we toasted the day — and where I couldn't deny my reawakened longing for tragic adventures on the Oregon Trunk.

The rest of that winter and early spring was busy with work, but at the end of April, Maureen and I made a

TOP LEFT: Drone technology offered new perspectives when the author returned to the Oregon Trunk in 2024 following an 11-year absence. Here, a Vancouver, Wash.–Fresno, Calif., train crosses the Crooked River Bridge at Terrebonne late in the afternoon of March 18.

ABOVE: The heavens appear to spin above Trout Creek trestle just before midnight on June 28, 2011, as a Kansas City, Mo.–Pasco train eases down the 1.5 percent grade. The train was detouring from its usual route across BNSF's Northern Transcon due to flooding there.

OPPOSITE: The first half of an empty grain train out of Modesto, Calif., lights up Trout Creek Canyon in a 20-minute exposure from 3:00am on May 11, 2011. The glow on the low clouds comes from Warm Springs, 10 miles to the west.

weekend trip to the Trunk. I still hadn't seen its signature bridge over the Crooked River, and change seemed to be in the air. She'd finished her master's degree at Oregon State a year earlier and was about to wrap up a one-year appointment at Marylhurst University. We weren't yet sure where life would take us next, but we knew it might not be in Oregon.

On that trip, Bend launched a northbound around noon on both days — and not much else during daylight. I got my shot at Crooked River along with a few others, and Maureen and I both enjoyed exploring Madras, Terrebonne, and Smith Rocks State Park. Chasing the northbound on Sunday afternoon, I climbed partway up the side of Trout

Creek Canyon for a going-away shot on the trestle. Neither the light nor the angle were quite what I wanted, but I was already making plans to return.

Knowing we might leave Oregon soon, I had started to wrap up my freelance work to make more time for photography. I devoted most of the second week of May to the Trunk, leaving our Oregon City apartment early enough to arrive in the fields near Madras at sunrise that Monday morning. There were no trains, but I heard of a southbound leaving Wishram and found it at Maupin, where it had to set out a bad-ordered car in the little-used siding.

By the end of that day, I'd seen five trains — three road freights plus the local in each direction. That had been my best day by far on the Oregon Trunk, and

the local proved to be the key. In addition to being a worthy target in its own right, radio chatter between its conductor and the dispatcher kept me well-apprised of any other trains in the area. Nine years after my first visit to the Oregon Trunk, I'd finally figured out a better way to approach photographing it.

The next morning I explored Bend, missing a southbound but getting a better sense for why the railroads were built in the first place — and for how Oregon's primary community east of the Cascades has grown and evolved. The powerhouse for the once-sprawling Brooks-Scanlon Lumber Company sawmill still stands, testament to an industry that once cut a quarter of a billion board feet annually while employing some 2,000 people. Trains brought in most of the logs and

carried away much of the lumber, but the mill closed in 1994 after the forests were exhausted.

I found the original stone Oregon Trunk depot in good repair, although more than a mile from the tracks following its 1999 relocation for a new highway. It houses an art center today, while BNSF crews work out of a hip-roofed office on Railroad Street — decidedly modern and utilitarian but far more attractive than most contemporary railroad buildings.

Tempting as it was to chase the local again that afternoon, I had other photography plans in Trout Creek Canyon. There was a train coming from each direction, and I climbed to the top of a promontory to see them. The light was still pretty high for the northbound, but it was

looking decent when a Pasco-Barstow came up the grade a couple of hours later.

My main goal, though, was a night shot, so I'd lugged my camping gear up with me. I watched the light get better for the next three hours — there's almost a shadow-box effect just before the sun drops behind the distant ridge. But of course, there weren't any trains — just the local switching in Madras, 20 miles away. I pitched my tent, made dinner, and hoped the scanner would wake me from my restless sleep.

At 3:00 in the morning, I got my wish when the first half of an empty canola meal train dropped down the grade. The radio, such a welcome sound in the still night, told me that train had to meet a southbound somewhere down in the canyon — far enough away that a dawn appearance seemed likely. I set my alarm and tried to get a little more sleep.

Clouds had rolled in during the night,

but that train came grinding up the grade a little before 7:00AM as the sun found a thin spot in the heavy sky. It was a train I had desperately wanted to catch—a big grainer out of Montana with DPU's cut in two-thirds back, wrapping the curves all the way down to the river. By then I'd broken camp and packed everything except my camera, and after making my way back down to my car, I caught the grainer again at the Crooked River. There wouldn't be any more trains until that afternoon, so I went back to the official campground, re-pitched my tent, and slept like a rock for the next three hours.

That afternoon and evening yielded two more road freights and the local each way under increasingly dramatic skies. The next day, my last of this trip, was a slow one, with just the local and a single mixed freight north in the late afternoon. I stuck with the local until sunset and

then faced a two-and-a-half-hour drive home to Oregon City; those miles passed quickly in the afterglow of my best Oregon Trunk trip yet.

I was back the following week for two more days. After catching two northbounds near Gateway, I headed south for two reasons. First, I wanted to catch the local again, but more importantly, I had a phone interview that afternoon and needed a good place to take the call. I did that from the rest area at the Crooked River Bridge, watching the local roll north before the call ended.

That interview was for the executive director position at the Center for Railroad Photography & Art. It ran long, I felt good about it, and I still had time to catch both the local and a mixed freight coming south before sunset. Back at the rest area, I watched the searchlight signals glow green into the darkening sky, wondering how many more nights I



RIGHT: In the evening light of May 19, 2011, an Everett-Barstow train heads south near Metolius, passing one of the many irrigation canals that help make agricultural feasible in dry central Oregon.

BELOW: Afternoon clouds billow above Shearers Falls as a pair of DPU's shove an Everett-Barstow train up the Deschutes Canyon. The wooden platform at left belongs to the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, who use it for traditional dip-net fishing.

OPPOSITE TOP: A Barstow-Pasco train soars over Willow Creek Trestle at Madras in a drone view as the afternoon shadows grow long on March 17, 2024.



might call Oregon home. I spent that one in the car, too, catching two trains over the bridge — and only a few more winks of sleep.

Three weeks later, I came back with big plans. Marc and I had decided that if we were ever going to shoot that double horseshoe at Beavertail, this was the time. The view unfolded with each uphill step, but the clouds that were supposed to clear proved stubborn. We had two northbounds coming out of Bend but dashed hopes for glinting sunlight.

We pitched our tent on the flattest spot we could find, made dinner on our camp stove, and watched the shadow of the western canyon wall slowly engulf the entire scene. The wind howled that evening and was still blowing fiercely at 10:00PM when a southbound passed below us. I wanted a long exposure to show its headlights streaking through the two big curves, but I settled for a timelapse of short shots out of deference to the wind. It died down as the train passed, and Marc and I sat outside in the calm night, listening for a long time to the two sets of engines fade in and out as the train wound its way up the canyon.

I was extremely pleased to be up there, with one of my best friends, but photographically, I wanted more. In the night's darkest hour, the scanner rang out, pulling me back into the waking world. I made my way out of the tent and prepared my camera on the tripod I'd left in position. When the northbound's headlights traced the curves beneath me at 3:30AM, the first hint of blue dawn was adding color to the sky above and definition to the river below. Twenty minutes later, the shot wouldn't have worked.

There was another northbound an hour later, passing in the half-light that is neither night nor day. We just lay in our sleeping bags listening to it. We'd already had five trains — more than we had dared expect — but we still wanted one more. A southbound had been on duty at Wishram since 2:00AM, and we hoped it might fall down enough to pass us after sunrise. When the dispatcher ran the first northbound all the way in and held the second one at Lockit, we knew we might have a chance.

While the night had been clear, clouds returned with the new day, speckling the canyon with their shadows in the rising sun. When the southbound rounded the first curve at a quarter to eight, the scene was mostly dark. As the lead units swung around the curve closest to us, the sky broke open, and morning light rushed down the canyon wall in a warm wave.

Hiking up to our vantage point had taken two hours and covered more than 1,200 feet of elevation. We had no business seeing six trains in 15 hours, and the two best shots teetered on a knife edge between success and failure. It made up for a lot of those near misses.

The rest of the day was nearly an afterthought. Even catching a track geometry train near Gateway felt anticlimactic, but we'd recovered enough to savor a mixed freight each way under dramatic afternoon clouds later in the day. We spent a more restful night at a proper campground by the river, caught two more trains in the morning, and began heading home — Marc back to Walla Walla in eastern Washington, and me to Oregon City, although it wouldn't be home for much longer.

Summer 2011: Last Looks

I made one more trip on my own at the end of June. I'd neglected taking many river-level views in the Deschutes Canyon, and I remedied that with a few trains at Sherars Falls while admiring the fishing platforms still used by the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs. I caught the local once more — with a pair of Cascade Green Geeps, no less, and spent one more night camped out along the Deschutes River. And then I woke to the realization that I might be in my last day on the Oregon Trunk as a resident of the Northwest.

Driving north toward Maupin on U.S. 197, the blacktop rolled gently over the Columbia-Deschutes Plateau. The river and the railroad were a few miles to my left and 2,000 feet below me. To my right, the sun was just coming over the horizon, casting its golden hue across the endless sage. To the west, thick clouds rolled down off the Cascades, spreading immense shadows pierced by occasional slashes of brilliant light. For photography, it was a high-risk, high-reward kind of morning, a kind I've come to love. I'd photographed this railroad well in the past two months, and I was okay if I didn't get any more shots. What I wanted was to go for another hike and peer into the canyon one more time.

I parked in a small gravel lot at the trailhead for the Bureau of Land Management's Criterion Tract, purchased in 1995 from the Criterion Ranch after it shut down. "Trail" might be a generous term; what I followed was more of an overgrown Jeep track. The three-and-a-half-mile hike took more than an hour as the clouds kept scudding off to the east,



ABOVE: All seven locomotives and 88 cars of a Pasco-Borstow train stretch out along the Deschutes River just south of Dixon Siding on June 30, 2011, as morning sunlight breaks through a cloud-dappled sky.

RIGHT: A welded rail train crosses Willow Creek Trestle at sunset on May 18, 2008, in a moment of redemption to a three-day trip when no other trains appeared at opportune times.

OPPOSITE BELOW: Its work in Culver complete, the local throttles up to track speed to follow an Everett-Borstow train south under the sunset glow of May 11, 2011. The second half of an empty grain train waits in the next siding to head north through the night.



dissipating as they went but remaining thick above me.

I wasn't sure about a train. A friend had reported a southbound at Wishram, but that was at dawn, and I'd been away from the tracks long enough that I might have already missed it — or it might have still been sitting in Wishram.

The canyon appeared first in glimpses through ravines running down to the river. I left the trail to head for the rim, picking my way more carefully as cattle grazed on the hillsides. I would learn later that cattle kill more people in the U.S. annually than snakes do (roughly 20 and five, respectively), yet I walked happily along the trail past the cows and stepped warily through the field, probing ahead with my tripod, for fear of snakes.

Arriving safely at the rim, even in the

flat light beneath the cloud deck, the view took my breath away. Directly below me was Dixon, a siding at milepost 70. The canyon disappeared just to the north of it, but the view to the south seemed to go on forever. The tracks wind along the river, disappearing just before they reach North Junction, five miles away. The canyon walls are visible for another 15 miles, beyond South Junction to Trout Creek, where the railroad begins climbing out of the Deschutes. Punctuating the horizon are some of the westernmost peaks of the Ochoco Mountains, including 5,629-foot Grizzly Mountain. Situated between Prineville and Terrebonne,

it's more than 40 miles from me.

A radio transmission confirmed my hopes — the southbound was on its way and getting close. The clouds were still thick, but breaks were forming. Sunlight spilled through, hitting the land in splotches that enlivened its colors: the rich brown of the basalt cliffs, the beige of the hillsides with their sage highlights, the darker greens of the cottonwoods and brush along the river, its deep blue water, the navy blue shadows, and the pale and longing blue of the distant Ochocos.

I heard the train before I saw it, its front four engines churning up the 0.4 percent grade along the river, their

drones steadily rising above the low rush of the wind and water. Clouds obscured the sun as the train came into view, but in an encore to the morning with Marc three weeks earlier, the sky opened as the train passed. Sunlight flooded the canyon, its walls dappled by a few cloud shadows. Three more engines pushed on the rear, and I waited for the entire 88-car train to become visible in that mesmerizing view to the south before releasing the shutter.

The wind and water swallowed the train's sound long before it was completely out of sight. For the next 10 minutes, I watched it reappear and disappear around two distant curves. By the time the last engine vanished for the last time, the head end was crossing the river at North Junction. In another 10 miles, it would start the slow climb up the winding grade to Madras, and from there it would have a fast run to Bend where a new crew would take it farther south. I'd be well into my drive home by then, but the Oregon Trunk wasn't finished with me quite yet.

A week and a half later, I met up with Camron one last time before Maureen and I moved to Wisconsin. We'd planned to shoot the Weyerhaeuser logging line in Longview, Wash., but it didn't run, so we headed for the Columbia Gorge. We found a Canadian canola meal train heading east on the BNSF main line, bound for the Trunk. If the crew change at Wishram took long enough, but not too long, we just might catch it crossing the river.

We made it with time to spare, and it was a good train for the finale — 100 cars and eight locomotives, a mix of BNSF and CN power arranged 3x3x2. We watched as the entire train stretched

across the river and into two states, and then as the engines throttled up for the climb away from the Columbia. Ahead lay the Deschutes, its canyon already dark in the deep blue shadows of evening and a late-night arrival in Bend.

Author Rebecca Solnit has an essay called "The Blue of Distance." She writes, "The color of that distance is the color of an emotion, the color of solitude and of desire, the color of there seen from here, the color of where you are not. And the color of where you can never go."

Spring 2024: Return

There's a lot of blue distance between the Oregon Trunk and me now, but most years I get close to it in March when I attend Winterail in Corvallis, Ore. Memories of those past days on the Trunk were especially strong this year, and on Sunday after the show in dazzling spring sunlight, Camron and I packed his 2004 Ford Ranger and drove east over the Cascades on U.S. 20. We spent that afternoon and the next two days on the Trunk, when he had to go home to Albany and I flew to meetings in Denver on a direct flight out of the Redmond airport.

At a glance, much of the Trunk and central Oregon look much as I'd left them 13 years earlier. The scenery is as stunning as ever, perhaps even more in that clear light with the peaks blanketed in the pure white of two recent, late-season snowstorms. The Deschutes still flows swift, cold, and clear to the Columbia. The trains look much the same as before, too — with similar frequency and similar unpredictability.

The most noticeable difference to the railroad is its signaling. The searchlights are gone, replaced in 2018 with modern LED tri-lights as part of an upgrade to

centralized traffic control. Conductors no longer climb down out of their locomotive cabs to unlock switches and throw them by hand; now the dispatcher does that with a touchscreen at a console in Fort Worth, Texas. Dispatchers line trains on those touchscreens, too, with the new signals conveying authority for train movement. There are no more track warrants, and the radio is a lot quieter.

The new economy of outdoor recreation has spread from its earlier hubs in Bend and Maupin. Madras, 40 miles north of Bend, has grown by 30 percent since 2011, with new housing sprawling into the fields beyond downtown and more under construction. We cast a wary eye at many of these new developments while enjoying dinners at hip, new food truck courts that the growing population has enabled.

One evening after chasing a northbound down Trout Creek Canyon, we drove to the Deschutes and split up for a few minutes. I sat alone on the bank of the river, swallows darting overhead, frogs raising their voices from shoreline bushes, shadows rapidly climbing the canyon wall behind me. Though early in the season, a few groups were camping, and I wished we were, too. It's the same campground where I'd spent my first night on the Trunk, nearly 22 years earlier.

Even after so many days and so many trains, and even through the changes, that pull I felt then is still there now. The Oregon Trunk remains a lonely railroad in a rugged, remote, and beautiful land, full of incredible photographs in places where it's almost impossible to take them. Photographing trains on the Oregon Trunk is a tragic adventure, and I want more of it. 📷

