

# Portland & Western

## OREGON'S TIMBER-HAULING SURVIVOR



BY SCOTT LOTHES/PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

**W**HEN THE WIND IS RIGHT in western Oregon's Willamette Valley, you can hear locomotive horns for miles. South of Albany, along Union Pacific's former Southern Pacific main line, you can sometimes be in one town and hear a train blowing for crossings in the next town up or down the line. And every once in while, you might hear a train that's running on another railroad altogether.

A couple of times per day, the horns belong not to a long-haul UP freight or Amtrak passenger train, but to a local freight on the regional Portland & Western Railroad. From the UP main, head west across the fields on the sparsely traveled blacktop or gravel of rural county roads until you come to

another set of tracks. The train you're likely to find there will take you back to the basics of Oregon railroading — and back to the basics of railroading itself.

Trundling against a backdrop of the Cascade foothills and the valley's ever-changing sky is the P&W's American Turn — one or two orange geeps and a handful of boxcars, centerbeams, and covered hoppers. This is loose-car, branchline railroading at its fundamental best. The cars are just starting or about to end their journeys, and most come from the state's two primary industries — timber and agriculture.

Timber, especially, fueled western Oregon's once-sprawling network of branches. The timber business these days is down from its peak, but it's still

the bread-and-butter of P&W's balance sheet, and soul of the railroad's identity. You can still see the occasional big lumber drag heading south for California on the UP main, but if you want to understand where those cars come from, slow down, leave the mainline, and amble over to the P&W.

### About the Portland & Western

Class I railroading today is often described as a "B to Y" business. North America's big railroads have streamlined their networks to focus on the great efficiencies in the long midsection of the haul, often leaving the beginning and the end of the journey — the "A" and the "Z" — to other modes. Trucks often handle these parts of the trip, but a

**OPPOSITE:** As clouds roll across the foothills of the Cascades, Portland & Western's American Turn rolls north through the fields near Harrisburg, Ore., on February 17, 2009. **TOP:** Framed by the covered bridge at Harris, the Toledo Hauler heads west on the evening of June 29, 2008. **ABOVE:** The Harbor Turn nears Banks on the afternoon of June 17, 2011, as Oregon's iconic Mount Hood looms in the distance.



great number of shortline and regional railroads have learned to survive and even thrive on the "A to B" and "Y to Z" segments of the transportation business.

Oregon has several such railroads, and the biggest is the Portland & Western, a subsidiary of Genesee & Wyoming, Inc. The P&W operates more than 500 miles of former Southern Pacific and Burlington Northern lines in Oregon. Southern Pacific built its empire in Oregon with timber-hauling branches that wandered all over both sides of the Willamette Valley. As revenues slid and costs rose on many of those lines, SP spun off its Toledo and Westside branches — plus several shorter branchlines that came off the Westside line — to G&W's Willamette & Pacific in 1993. Two

years later, G&W formed the Portland & Western to take over SP's remaining branchlines in Oregon. Both operated as sister companies for the next five years, until G&W combined them under the Portland & Western banner in 2000.

The P&W acquired its first former Burlington Northern route in 1997, the Astoria Line from Portland to Astoria. The last major addition came in 2002, when P&W signed a long-term lease of BNSF Railway's other branchlines in Oregon, which included most of the former Oregon Electric Railway, an interurban line that connected Portland and Eugene.

**Power and Operations**  
Portland & Western's all-EMD

locomotive roster consists of about 40 units. Most are second-generation models, including 17 GP39-2s from the Santa Fe. There are two slug sets with GP40P-2 mothers that are normally assigned to the Toledo Hauler. P&W also has some first generation units, which typically work yard and local jobs out of Albany and Eugene. Most of the fleet wears G&W's orange-and-black color scheme, but about one-quarter of the roster has never been repainted.

Trains on the Portland & Western operate out of three primary hubs — Tigard (just southwest of Portland), Albany, and Eugene — although individual jobs go on and off duty all over the system. Let's look at the three major concentrations of activity.

### Tigard and the North

Tigard is home to the newest major facility on the railroad, a four-track yard opened in 2007 to free up space on the mainline for Westside Express Service (WES) commuter trains. WES began running between Wilsonville and Beaverton, including stops in Tualatin and Tigard, in 2008. State lottery funds from the Connect Oregon program paid for the majority of the yard.

Road jobs based out of Tigard include the OE Express, Harbor Turn, and 663/664. The OE Express gets its name from the Oregon Electric, since it runs primarily over the OE's former tracks. Currently a daytime job, the train makes a turn south from Tigard to Albany and back, Mondays through Fridays. The Harbor Turn is essentially

a continuation of the same train, making a turn north from Tigard to United Junction (Linnton) and back, Monday through Friday nights. The Harbor Turn runs via Hillsboro, Banks, and Cornelius Pass, crossing the spectacular wood trestle over Holcomb Creek. From time to time the railroad flips the day/night status of the OE Express and Harbor Turn.

The other major pair of trains out of

Tigard is the 663/664, whose numbers come from predecessor Burlington Northern. Together these trains make a round-trip between Albany and Vancouver, Wash., where they interchange with BNSF Railway. Currently the 664 job makes a night run, Mondays through Fridays, from Tigard to Albany and back over the OE District tracks. The 663 makes a daytime turn from Tigard to Vancouver



**RIGHT:** Chop-nose GP9R No. 1804 (originally built for Minneapolis & St. Louis in 1958) leads a short work train near Ashahr siding under a brilliant sky on March 3, 2009.

**BELOW:** The northbound American Turn glides over the rolling waters of the Willamette River between Junction City and Harrisburg on July 31, 2008. Built in 1910 by Waddell & Harrington, the vertical lift was used only briefly and the river has since changed course to flow under a fixed span.



**Portland & Western**

Illustration by Otto M. Vondrak. Not all lines and stations shown. Not an official map. ©2016 White River Productions

and back, crossing the Willamette River in Lake Oswego, then running on the Union Pacific main line from Brooklyn to East Portland, where it crosses the Willamette again via the one-of-a-kind dual-level Steel Bridge. After threading Portland Union Station and Lake Yard, the 663 runs over BNSF tracks, crossing the Willamette for a third time in North Portland and then crossing the Columbia River into Vancouver.

In years past, the 663 and 664 have utilized trackage rights to run via the Union Pacific mainline all the way between East Portland and Salem, bypassing Tigard altogether. The current pattern of two turn jobs based out of Tigard has held pretty steadily since 2011, but change is the only constant in the railroad business. The 663's daylight run through Portland, including four major river crossings and historic Union Station, makes it one of the most photogenic operations of the P&W, and not to be taken for granted.

The "Albina Flyer" (the name is tongue-in-cheek; this is very much a local freight) is also based out of Tigard and makes a night run to Union Pacific's Albina Yard and back. This job also handles local switching in the area, including Hillsboro and Forest Grove.

Besides the Tigard-based trains, a few other jobs provide service over the northern end of the P&W system. On the Astoria Line, the Linnton Switcher works between BNSF's Willbridge Yard and the many industries along the Columbia River around Linnton. It also swaps cars with the Harbor Turn at United Junction and runs as far as St. Helens. The Wauna Turn provides service on the Astoria Line beyond St. Helens as far as Wauna. Back on the OE District, the sporadic Rock Train hauls stone north out of a quarry at Reed Pit, just north of Salem. Salem itself is home to the Salem Switcher, which serves several industries around Oregon's capital.

### Albany

Albany's nickname is the "Hub City," and that comes directly from the many rail lines radiating out of it. The Portland & Western operates out of two different yards in Albany. Most visible is the former Southern Pacific yard, located next to the Amtrak station on the Union Pacific main line. This is also the location of the P&W's shop, where a small team



**LEFT:** The diesel doctors of Albany work on GP40P-2 no. 3002 (ex-Norfolk & Western 1382) and GP39-2 no. 2307 (ex-Santa Fe 3606) inside the railroad's two-bay shop on May 8, 2009.



**ABOVE:** Two orange GP39-2s lead the 663 job across the lower deck of Portland's landmark Steel Bridge as a MAX light rail train crosses above on the evening of July 8, 2011. Completed in 1912, the Steel Bridge is the second oldest vertical-lift bridge in North America and the only bridge in the world with two independent, telescoping lifts.

**RIGHT:** High-hood GP9 no. 1803 (ex-SP 5738) usually works in yard and local service, but on the evening of April 25, 2009, it's leading the westbound Toledo Hauler out of Albany while one of the GP40P-2 slug sets is in the shop for its 92-day inspection.

of diesel doctors maintains the railroad's motive power. Operations are readily visible from the Amtrak platform, the Pacific Boulevard (U.S. 20) overpass, and the Queen Avenue crossing. There's also the less-visible OE Yard, located on the Oregon Electric tracks on the north side of town. Switchers work in both yards, with SD7 no. 1501 being the regular power in the former SP yard.

The flagship train out of Toledo — and perhaps on the whole railroad — is the Toledo Hauler, which runs between Albany and the sprawling Georgia-Pacific kraft paper mill in Toledo. The Toledo Hauler currently runs six days per week, departing Albany late every evening except Sunday. The return trip



from Toledo is usually a daylight run, Tuesdays through Sundays. The typical locomotive consist is four to six units, usually including the railroad's two slug sets.

Though not based out of Albany, the Westsider comes down from McMinnville five nights per week to swap cars in the former SP yard, typically in the wee hours of Tuesday through Saturday

mornings. In the long days of spring and summer, the rising sun often greets the northbound train somewhere on its return trip. McMinnville is also home to the Willamina Job, which makes a turn to Willamina and back on weekday afternoons. The Hampton Lumber mill in Willamina is the primary customer.

Several other P&W jobs come to Albany from the south, and those will



be covered in the next section. Mainline traffic on the Union Pacific consists of six daily Amtrak trains and approximately eight to 12 freights. Additionally, the Albany & Eastern comes into town from its base in Lebanon on most weekdays.

#### Eugene

Eugene was once among the busiest yards on the entire Southern Pacific system, but these days Union Pacific's

former SP yard is pretty quiet. That's due in part to UP's consolidation of West Coast classification duties to Roseville, Calif., and also due to considerably weaker lumber markets. Portland & Western, however, operates several jobs out of its yard on the Oregon Electric District tracks along State Highway 99 in the northwest part of the city. In addition to day and night yard switchers, the Albany Hauler runs up the OE to Albany and back, Monday through Friday nights. It's the third of three legs in a Eugene-Linnton service that also includes the OE Express and Harbor Turn. Primary traffic is timber moving north from a reload in Eugene for export via the Columbia River.

On weekdays, the Albany Hauler's



**TOP LEFT:** The rising sun greets the face of the eastbound Toledo Hauler on the morning of February 19, 2010.

**LEFT:** Five orange-and-black units lead the eastbound Toledo Hauler along winding Nashville Road near the town of Nashville, deep in western Oregon's Coast Range, on March 31, 2009.

**BELOW:** The eastbound Toledo Hauler snakes past the tall trees of the Coast Range near Eddyville on December 29, 2009.



locomotives are split to power two dayshift jobs in Eugene. One is the Eugene Switcher, which works P&W-served industries throughout the city. The other is the American Turn, a local freight that works north on the OE District, primarily to serve the Cascade Pacific pulp mill in Halsey.

Finally, there's the Eugene Hauler, which operates over the Union Pacific main line with UP power and a P&W crew. The Eugene Hauler runs north out of the UP yard every day except Monday, typically in the evenings. After swapping cars in Albany, which usually includes a trip across the Willamette River to pick up cars left by the Toledo Hauler at Ashahr Siding, the train returns to Eugene. There, after picking up cars from the Central Oregon & Pacific

as well as the Coos Bay Rail Link, it becomes a southbound Union Pacific drag freight for Roseville.

#### Photography Strategies

While the P&W operates more than 20 different trains on most days, they're scattered over a 500-mile system, much of which sees just two movements per day. If you want to photograph moving trains, bring along some patience, a radio

scanner to listen for track warrants, and a good map and a good book to pass the inevitable times of waiting. Cell service can be spotty on some of the more remote parts of the system, especially the Toledo Branch.

The Toledo Branch is arguably the signature line of the P&W, and it's an impressive piece of railroad with sharp curves, steep grades, wood trestles, and verdant mountains. Loads move both



**RIGHT:** The eastbound Toledo Hauler curves along the misty Coast Range near Eddyville on March 31, 2011.

**BELOW:** Still lettered for P&W predecessor Willamette & Pacific and wearing Southern Pacific-inspired "black widow" colors, high-hood GP9 no. 1801 (ex-SP 5830) leads the northbound American Turn near Halsey on December 21, 2009. The 1801 normally works local and yard jobs in Eugene.



**ABOVE:** The American Turn rolls north across Cartney Drive behind two GP39-2s in the lush fields north of Harrisburg on February 17, 2010. At the time, the train was based out of Albany, running south in the morning and north in the afternoon. Now it is based out of Eugene, and that pattern is reversed.

**LEFT:** Against a backdrop of the Coast Range, three second-generation EMDs lead the northbound Westsider across a small wood trestle near Amity on December 2, 2009.



ways on the branch, with woodchips going west and paper coming east. One retired SP employee, who has walked most of the mountain routes of the former Southern Pacific empire, told me that, mile-for-mile, he found more broken knuckles on the Toledo Branch than anywhere else.

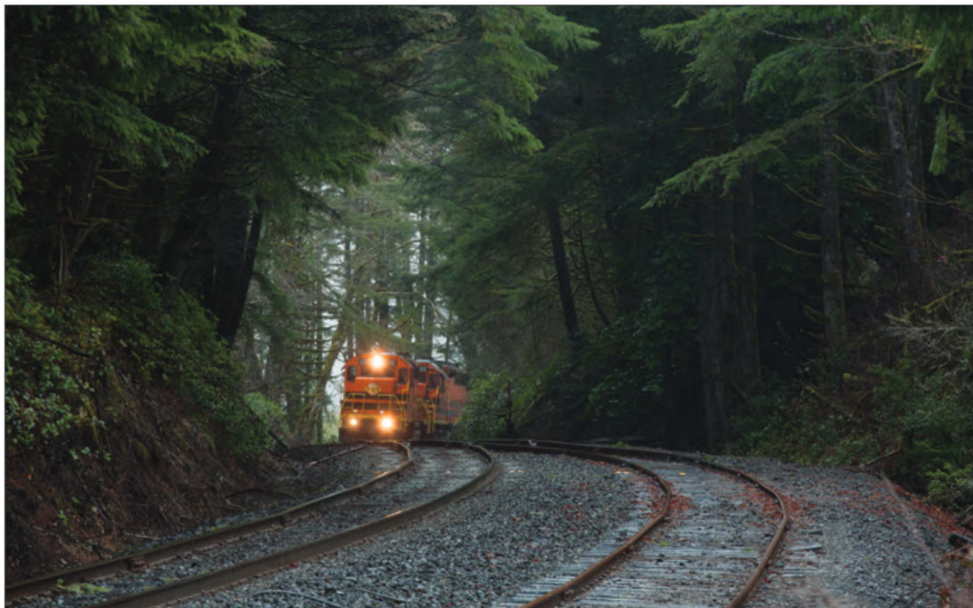
The Toledo Hauler usually has the biggest locomotive consist of any train on the system, and it's the only road train

with P&W power operating regularly on Sundays. The eastbound often leaves Toledo around dawn (listen on the radio for the crew to get a track warrant from the dispatcher), and the western end of the branch offers some of the best scenery, with several clearings allowing views along the Yaquina River. It's an easy chase that can yield many great photographs, and don't miss the covered road bridges next to the line at Chitwood

and Harris.

Rather than driving through the wee hours to find the Toledo Hauler, consider spending the preceding night in the ocean resort town of Newport. If you like beer, take a tour and have dinner at Rogue Ales & Spirits, one of the best known of Oregon's many outstanding craft breweries. There are many other excellent dinner options in Newport, as well as the Oregon Coast Aquarium and the spectacular Yaquina Bay Bridge on U.S. Route 101.

If you chase the Toledo Hauler all the way into Albany on a weekday, you might be able to catch the American Turn making its way back to Eugene on the Oregon Electric District. The stretch between Albany and Eugene is my favorite part of the OE, with two



ABOVE: The eastbound Toledo Hauler's power is pulling with all its might as the train approaches the top of the two percent grade up from Nashville at the aptly-named community of Summit on a misty March 31, 2011.

RIGHT: The eastbound Toledo Hauler passes the covered bridge at Chitwood on the rainy morning of March 31, 2011.



big bridges, wide open fields, and street running in Harrisburg and Junction City, plus multiple opportunities to witness a local freight train switching lineside industries. Following a round trip of the American Turn out of Eugene can make for a great day of photography in its own right, and you're never more than a few miles from mainline traffic on the Union Pacific.

The 663 job that works between Tigard and Vancouver is another excellent photography subject. The Willamette River Bridge between Lake Oswego and Milwaukie is a good place to wait for the train to come out of Tigard, which tends to happen after the morning WES commuter trains have run. Alternatively, you could spend the morning photographing those WES commuter runs until the 663 is ready

to depart. Just north of the Tualatin station, WES trains duck under the Westside Branch and cross the Tualatin River. The scanner can be a great help with the 663, since its crew will need to get permission from the Union Pacific dispatcher, the Steel Bridge tender, the Portland Terminal Company, the BNSF dispatcher, and the Vancouver yardmaster. Depending on Portland traffic, it's possible to chase the 663 and

get several shots.

Another good strategy for the 663 is to spend the day around Portland's downtown riverfront, which offers seemingly inexhaustible photography angles. This is a great area to explore on foot and by public transportation, since finding a parking place can often be a challenge. Besides the 663, you can see Union Pacific and BNSF freight trains, Amtrak Cascades and long-distance

passenger trains, and TriMet light rail vehicles operating next to Union Station and over the upper deck of the landmark Steel Bridge. Union Pacific's Lake Transfer runs daily between Albina Yard and Lake Yard, via the Steel Bridge and Union Station. Look for it to come out of Albina in the morning and return in the afternoon. The 663 often crosses the Steel Bridge around midday on its way to Vancouver, and in the late afternoon or early evening on the way back to Tigard.

Other daytime photography options on the P&W include the Wauna Turn on the Astoria Line, the Willamina Local, and the OE Express. The Wauna Turn usually goes all the way to Wauna only on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The Willamina Local operates on weekday afternoons out of Whiteson, just south of McMinnville, a vestige of the lumber branch operations that were once so common in the Pacific Northwest. The OE Express runs weekdays from Tigard to Albany and back, although I find this part of the OE more challenging to photograph than the line south of Albany.

#### Outlook

The global financial crisis of 2007-2008 hit Oregon and the P&W especially hard. Brought on largely by the housing

market, new-home construction plummeted, and demand for Oregon timber fell with it. P&W cut some jobs and reduced others. The Toledo Hauler had been a seven-days-a-week operation well back into the SP era, but service dropped to five days a week in 2009. Some of the business has come back, and as of early 2016 the train runs six out of seven days.

P&W management has worked to diversify the railroad's traffic base. Acquisition of the former Burlington Northern Astoria Line and Oregon Electric added considerable non-timber traffic to the P&W's mix. Still, this is a timber-hauling railroad in a timber-producing state, and timber (plus related industries like pulp and paper) will continue to play a primary role in the P&W's fortunes.

#### Love the Rain

The Portland & Western lies entirely in the wet part of Oregon, west of the Cascades, where annual rainfall frequently exceeds 100 inches. You can still find a lot of sunshine in the summer and early fall, but consider embracing the rain. The P&W's orange locomotives contrast beautifully with the lush green forests, especially in the rich saturation of western Oregon mist. The even light eliminates harsh shadows that can make sunny-day photography a challenge in the deep woods and valleys of the Toledo Branch.

Out in the Willamette Valley, between the Coast Range and the Cascades, the skies are always changing. Spring is my favorite time to photograph in the valley, when the wildflowers are blooming and the season's dynamic weather patterns are producing the most spectacular cloudscape. Waiting for the American Turn in a field south of Albany after a spring shower, stand perfectly still and listen to the land, soaking up the rain.

Railroading has changed greatly during its 150-year history in Oregon. Timber built much of the state's economy, but intermodal, automotive, and bulk commodities like wheat and potash comprise much of today's rail traffic. Yet forest products remain a substantial part of the state's economy, and the Portland & Western hauls quite a lot of them. Spend some time along the P&W — to better understand both the long history between railroads and timber in the Pacific Northwest, as well as how that relationship continues today. ☐

*Scott Lothes is president and executive director of the Center for Railroad Photography & Art ([www.railphoto-art.org](http://www.railphoto-art.org)) in Madison, Wis., where he lives with his wife, Maureen Muldoon. Scott and Maureen spent three-and-a-half years in Oregon, living in Portland and Corvallis from 2008 to 2011. He is grateful to the many fine railroad photographers of the Pacific Northwest for their encouragement and assistance.*



LEFT: "Shut Up and Love The Rain" graffiti on a former Southern Pacific wood chip car offers good advice for railroad photographers in western Oregon. BELOW: Just after sunrise on May 7, 2009, the eastbound Toledo Hauler crosses the Willamette River into Albany. At the time, the Hauler made most of its roundtrip in darkness, but with the current operating pattern, the eastbound run occurs almost entirely in daylight.

