



THREE GENERATIONS ON THE SISKIYOU LINE

BY STEVE JESSUP/PHOTOS AS NOTED

ALL IS QUIET AT CHUCK ROBERTS PARK on a perfect late-June morning. The baseball fields are wide open for anyone wishing to take some batting practice. But even the most avid young ballplayers in Talent, Ore., don't do America's favorite pastime at this hour. It's 9:00 a.m., and they're still at home crunching the last bites of their cereal.

Beyond the ballparks and across the street is Micro-Trains, perhaps the most popular N and Z scale model train manufacturer in the country and one of Talent's more notable business establishments. Trains have been going strong here for more than 25 years.

Talent has one other connection to

railroading. A baseball's toss from the third base line is a railroad track running north and south. It was once the Southern Pacific mainline, linking Oregon and the Pacific Northwest to California. But as early as 1926, it was demoted and no longer used as the primary route. For more than 90 years, this line has lived a legendary life as a second-class accommodation with only one thing for certain — uncertainty.

No one playing or watching a game at Chuck Roberts Park was ever distracted by a train in recent years. After April 2008, the line became inactive. It wasn't the first time, but it was the longest span, lasting seven-and-a-half

years. And while service was resuscitated following previous stages of dormancy, you had to believe this time around the end had truly arrived for a line that had been in existence a little more than 120 years.

That is, until November 2015. That deteriorating track was, and still is, in place for a reason; it's not done yet. Just above the sound of a lawn mower working across the street, a locomotive horn blows quickly for Rapp Road. Within seconds, a very short train passes the park. Two orange, black, and yellow rebuilt SD40s lead the freight. In just a few short miles, they will be giving it everything they've got on one of North

OPPOSITE: Central Oregon & Pacific GP38-3 2063 leads southbound Medford-Hornbrook Train 507 near Hilt, Calif., on September 29, 2016. The three-car freight is moving out of Oregon and into California as the units are positioned exactly on the border. **STEVE JESSUP PHOTO** **ABOVE:** The Weed Switcher works northbound out of Weed, Calif., on May 19, 2001. Mount Shasta makes for a perfect backdrop with late-day lighting. **CORP GP38-3 No. 3803** and additional trailing units put on the miles for parent company RailAmerica. **GREG BROWN PHOTO**



America's steepest railroad grades. The return trip is equally punishing.

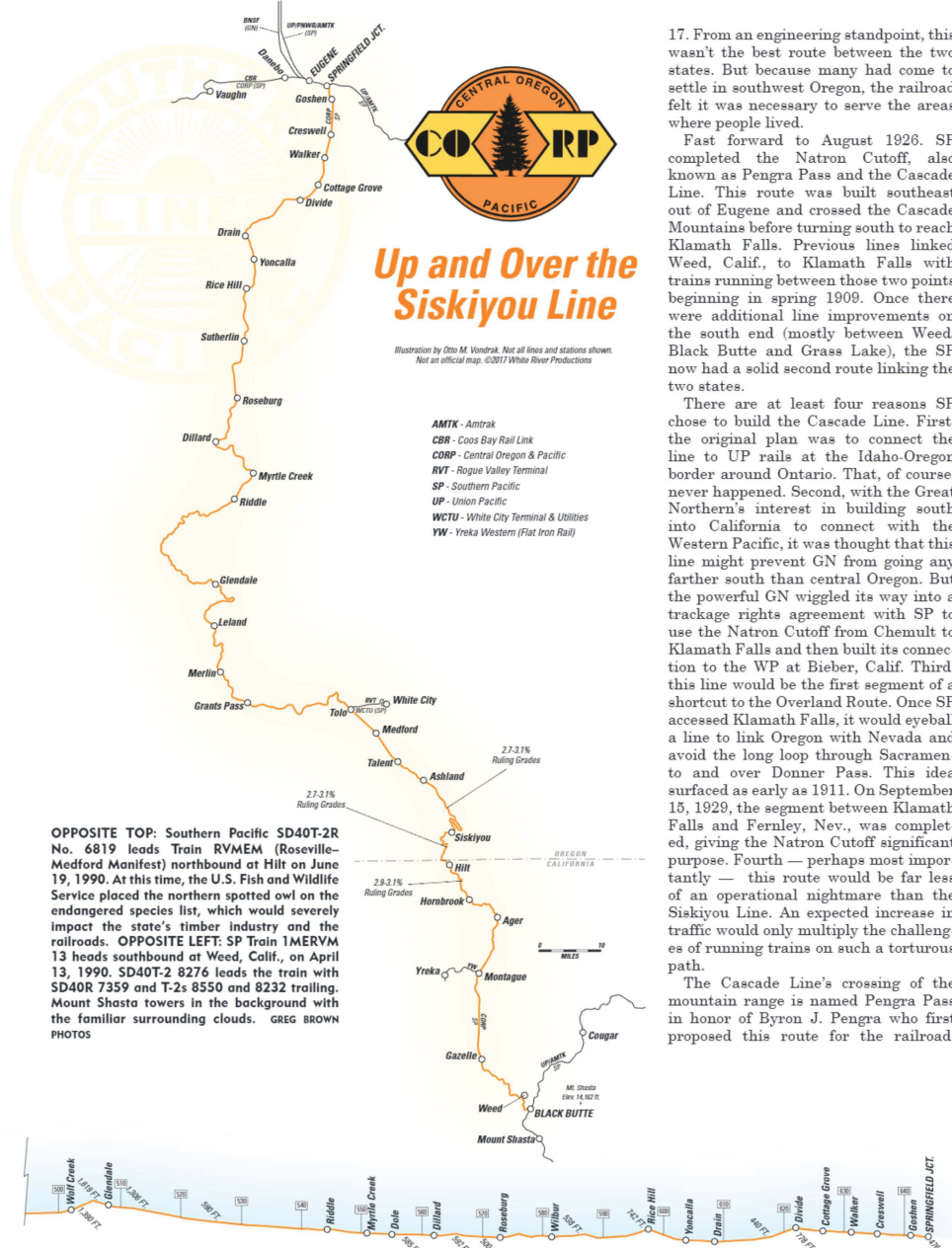
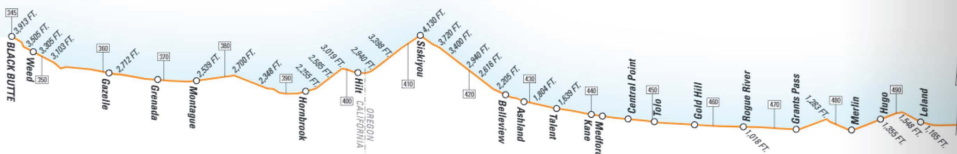
On this pleasant Monday morning, at least three souls have witnessed a weekday exercise that is a year-and-a-half old. The company performing this task is now the third generation carrier to ply this route. Who knows if this is the final chapter, but the story of how the Siskiyou Line continues to survive is truly remarkable.

The First Generation: Southern Pacific

The Siskiyou Line was birthed in December 1887 as a result of the Oregon & California building south from Portland and the California & Oregon building north out of the Sacramento Valley. The lines came together (under the control of Southern Pacific) atop the Siskiyou south of Ashland, Ore. Ashland is where the "golden spike" was driven by Charles Crocker on December



OPPOSITE TOP: Southern Pacific SD40T-2R No. 6819 leads Train RVMEM (Roseville-Medford Manifest) northbound at Hill on June 19, 1990. At this time, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service placed the northern spotted owl on the endangered species list, which would severely impact the state's timber industry and the railroads. **OPPOSITE LEFT:** SP Train 1MERVM 13 heads southbound at Weed, Calif., on April 13, 1990. SD40T-2 8276 leads the train with SD40R 7359 and T-2s 8550 and 8232 trailing. Mount Shosta towers in the background with the familiar surrounding clouds. **GREG BROWN PHOTOS**



Up and Over the Siskiyou Line

Illustration by Otto M. Vondrak. Not all lines and stations shown. Not an official map. ©2017 White River Productions

- AMTK - Amtrak
- CBR - Coos Bay Rail Link
- CORP - Central Oregon & Pacific
- RVT - Rogue Valley Terminal
- SP - Southern Pacific
- UP - Union Pacific
- WCTU - White City Terminal & Utilities
- YW - Yreka Western (Flat Iron Rail)

17. From an engineering standpoint, this wasn't the best route between the two states. But because many had come to settle in southwest Oregon, the railroad felt it was necessary to serve the areas where people lived.

Fast forward to August 1926. SP completed the Natron Cutoff, also known as Pengra Pass and the Cascade Line. This route was built southeast out of Eugene and crossed the Cascade Mountains before turning south to reach Klamath Falls. Previous lines linked Weed, Calif., to Klamath Falls with trains running between those two points beginning in spring 1909. Once there were additional line improvements on the south end (mostly between Weed/Black Butte and Grass Lake), the SP now had a solid second route linking the two states.

There are at least four reasons SP chose to build the Cascade Line. First, the original plan was to connect the line to UP rails at the Idaho-Oregon border around Ontario. That, of course, never happened. Second, with the Great Northern's interest in building south into California to connect with the Western Pacific, it was thought that this line might prevent GN from going any farther south than central Oregon. But the powerful GN wiggled its way into a trackage rights agreement with SP to use the Natron Cutoff from Chemult to Klamath Falls and then built its connection to the WP at Bieber, Calif. Third, this line would be the first segment of a shortcut to the Overland Route. Once SP accessed Klamath Falls, it would eyeball a line to link Oregon with Nevada and avoid the long loop through Sacramento and over Donner Pass. This idea surfaced as early as 1911. On September 15, 1929, the segment between Klamath Falls and Fernley, Nev., was completed, giving the Natron Cutoff significant purpose. Fourth — perhaps most importantly — this route would be far less of an operational nightmare than the Siskiyou Line. An expected increase in traffic would only multiply the challenges of running trains on such a torturous path.

The Cascade Line's crossing of the mountain range is named Pengra Pass in honor of Byron J. Pengra who first proposed this route for the railroad.

RIGHT: The Weed Switcher is seen at Montague, Calif., on December 27, 1997. CORP 1354 and two ex-BN GP40s power the train southward with a light snowfall in place two days after Christmas. **BELOW:** Just south of the Klamath River and the old location of Thrall, GP38 3825 leads the southbound freight between Hornbrook and Montague on May 22, 1999. Thrall was the name of the junction where the Klamath Lake Railroad split off the Siskiyou Line. GREG BROWN PHOTOS



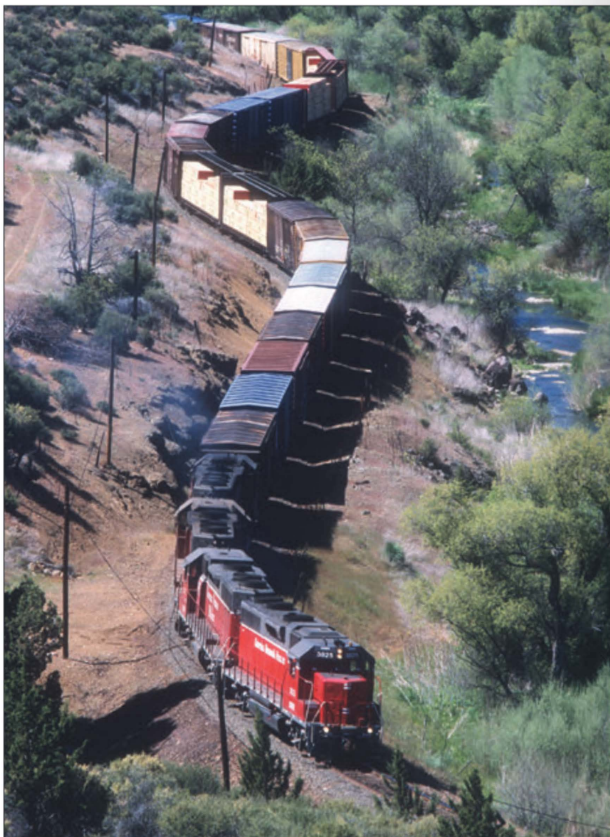
Pengra was the Surveyor General of Oregon from 1862 to 1865. In 1864, he organized the Central Oregon Military Wagon Road Company (based in Eugene), scouting this passage with William Odell. While Pengra never saw the completion of the rail line, he was remembered for charting Oregon's primary north-south route, which has more easily accommodated the transportation of heavy tonnage (mainly lumber and forest products) for 91 years.

But to the people and businesses of Douglas and Jackson Counties, so what? They had places to go and materials to ship, and the Siskiyou Line was their outlet despite the obstacles and drawbacks. Minus passenger service, which ended in the summer of 1955, that's pretty much the story today for the existing shippers who prefer the rail option versus trucking.

These two routes make for an interesting study from the standpoint of line profile and shipping. The trunk of the Siskiyou Line stretches from Springfield Junction (on the south side of Springfield and just east of Eugene) to Black Butte, a distance of 300.3 miles. The entire line is a roller coaster; Eugene and Springfield anchor the south end of the Willamette Valley, and from there all the way to the north end at Redding, Calif., the topography transitions to forested hills and mountains with numerous ups and downs. It is "pretty" to the eye and "pretty radical" on the high iron. The track profile of the line from an SP employee timetable (pages 50-51) illustrates the grades, distances between points, and elevation.

The climb out of Ashland to Siskiyou Summit has plenty of twists and turns. The line doubles back near a point called Steinman (also known as Dollarhide Curve), gaining altitude and nearly looping over itself at Tunnel 14 as it turns back toward the south. The mountain crossing is, and always has been, subject to winter hazards with rain and snow, not to mention the summer hazards of fire raging through dry timber areas.

Southern Pacific fought these obstacles from 1887 to the very end, eventually deciding that the battle to maintain the entire line and serve only a handful of customers amidst a decline in the timber industry wasn't worth the effort.



The disinterest in the Siskiyou Line started upon the completion of the Natron Cutoff. From Springfield Junction to Black Butte, the Cascade Line mileage adds up to 275.1 miles — 25 miles shorter than the Siskiyou Line. The grade is no steeper than 1.8 percent, even though the line reaches its highest point in elevation at 4,826 feet, almost 70 feet higher than Siskiyou Summit.

It's easy to see why most of the traffic was diverted off the Siskiyou route. Heavy trains with materials destined for points south of Black Butte or for points

east requiring the Overland Route were transported via the Cascade Line. The Siskiyou Line handled its own business using Black Butte and Eugene as the handoff points.

While some passenger trains moved to the Cascade Line starting in spring 1927, the Siskiyou Line held on as a passenger route until August 6, 1955. After that, it became freight-only, and the Southern Pacific continued to serve its on-line customers for nearly 40 years.

In general, loaded trains went south and the empty cars returned north for

reloading. Roseburg was the dividing line for loads channeled north or south. Anything from Roseburg north was hauled to Eugene, and anything south of Roseburg was sent to Black Butte.

With the timber industry being the staple of the region, generous shipments of lumber built growing communities in California and the Southwest. This traffic and other bits of freight kept the rails polished through the 1960s and 1970s but began to decline in the early 1980s with the recession. More bad news would follow. Southern Pacific had its financial woes and first tried to couple with Santa Fe — initiating a merger plan in 1980 and reviving the effort in December 1983. That plan failed with the ICC's decision handed down in 1984. Four years later, Rio Grande Industries purchased SP but kept the Southern Pacific road name intact.



LEFT: On the south end of Ashland at the location of Bellevue, SP SD9 No. 4313 works the Grants Pass Turn on January 16, 1988. Most of the snow falls at higher elevations farther south while Ashland averages a little less than ten inches a year. While the elevation is 2,205 feet a mile south of this spot, this scene is not too common. GREG BROWN PHOTO. **BELOW:** While CORP has relied mostly on four-axle power through the years, the company still finds use for a few six-axle units. Under RailAmerica, CORP brought back the once-familiar tunnel motors. Feeling right at home, newly painted SD40T-2 No. 4073 (ex-SP 8571) works at Glendale, Ore., on November 14, 2005. STEVE JESSUP PHOTO





TOP: Five days a week, CORP's Weed-Hornbrook train heads north to Hornbrook to meet the southbound and exchange cars. GP38-2s 2068 and 2067 lead Train 701 just south of Montague, Calif., on June 21, 2016. **ABOVE LEFT:** The former SP station at Roseburg, Ore., was once headquarters for Central Oregon & Pacific. It is now occupied by McMenamins Roseburg Station Pub & Brewery which awaits the lunch crowd on March 18, 2006. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Sadly, working semaphores are no longer a part of the Siskiyou Line. CORP managed to save one for display outside the Medford office, proudly posed on June 15, 2016. **STEVE JESSUP PHOTOS**

SP continued to slug it out on the Siskiyou Line until the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service dealt the timber industry its biggest blow. In June 1990, the agency put the northern spotted owl on the endangered species list. The move greatly curtailed timber harvesting, shut down numerous mills, and forced workers to find employment elsewhere. The main traffic source plunged to a few carloads, and what freight remained hardly justified the maintenance and usage of the entire line. SP had little choice but to unload the line, and in 1992, it closed operations over the Siskiyou. Limping along on a line minus the southern quarter, SP finally sold the line to RailTex on December 31,

1994. Southern Pacific's long and storied history here had come to an end.

The Next Generation: RailTex/RailAmerica

San Antonio-based RailTex took control of the Siskiyou Line and immediately recognized the necessary work to safely move freights. Track repair had been neglected, customer confidence was low, and RailTex had next to nothing in motive power.

To get started, the company had to address line maintenance, particularly on the south end where traffic was suspended. Part of the sales agreement required RailTex to reopen the mountain crossing from Ashland to Black Butte. The stipulation seemed a bit strange,

but somebody realized the value of this portion. It was the fastest, most economical way for south end customers to move their product.

In addition, RailTex had to tackle customer service issues by satisfying existing shippers, aggressively seeking new business, and winning back the lost. It would take good, reliable service to build and maintain a customer base, and how that could be done on such unstable trackage was cause for concern.

Throwing caution to the wind, RailTex's new Central Oregon & Pacific (CORP) wobbled, spluttered, and stumbled along with aging SP units (on lease) performing on rickety rails. Unfortunately there were too many bumps,

bruises, and spills, and if both the line and the new railroad were to survive, a substantial amount of money had to be invested in track work.

At the same time CORP crossed that bridge, Southern Pacific was about to become a fallen flag. Following the marriage of Burlington Northern and Santa Fe in 1995, the Union Pacific filed to pick up the ailing SP and realize its dream from a century earlier. The Surface Transportation Board approved the mega-merger, and the two became one under the UP flag on September 11, 1996. That meant a new interchange partner for CORP, and it would be UP locomotives seen on the Cascade Route transporting the forest products it collected from Oregon branches. In just a couple of years, the rail scene had changed dramatically.

It would take time and money for

CORP to improve its condition, and customers had to show patience. But over the course of a few years with new personnel in place, things began to roll. A key to getting off the ground was the transporting of logs into the region. With Oregon timber harvests stymied, logs coming up from Northern California (out of Weed) and down from Washington kept area mills going as they continued to ship out finished product. With Union Pacific working out a few kinks and the economy rebounding a bit, rail traffic in this region looked a little more normal.

Then in February 2000, the RailTex flag slid into the history books as RailAmerica became CORP's new parent company. The Jacksonville, Fla.-based company began in 1986, and its logo would quickly be displayed at CORP headquarters in Roseburg. Otherwise, things were the same visually as the

railroad's growing fleet of red locomotives began to dominate the scene.

For the next three years, it appeared that things were finally settling down as CORP dug in its heels and began evaluating moves to accommodate future growth. But then catastrophe hit. On November 17, 2003, vandals set fire to Tunnel 13 at Siskiyou Summit causing massive damage. The railroad initially thought traffic would be rolling again within a couple of months and estimated the cost of repairs around \$3 million. Monitoring the progress and re-evaluating the situation, CORP figured the line might reopen in six months even though repair costs were spiraling out of control.

By May 2004, the line was still closed with much work remaining. For the second time, operations over the Siskiyou ceased indefinitely, causing many to wonder if the route would ever see trains again. The question of abandonment was immediately discarded based on preliminary estimates. Once the railroad began repairs and moved closer to restoration, it would be too far to turn back.

After a 17-month closure, the line reopened in April 2005, complete with a ceremony at the north portal. The cost came in at over \$18 million, according to news reports at that time. CORP management admitted if it had known the cost would be that high, the road would have sought alternatives. Its interim practice of routing all traffic



LEFT: During the RailAmerica years, GP40 4001, slug 4165, and ex-SP 3815 wait for their next assignment at Roseburg, Ore., in August 2006. **BELOW:** Train 701 at Weed is just about ready to head north to Hornbrook on September 28, 2016. The train is running a little later than normal as GP38-2s 2068 and 2067 wait for the crew. **STEVE JESSUP PHOTOS**



from Medford north through Eugene and “around the horn” (same for north-bounds) was the logical solution, but the railroad had capacity concerns on the north end and would risk losing south end customers. CORP mentioned that drilling a new tunnel wasn’t completely off the table.

The railroad breathed a sigh of relief once the south end was mended, and CORP tried to get back to the business of hauling goods and making money. There were positive signs for a little while, but the storm clouds formed again in 2007. Housing and commercial development sharply declined, greatly reducing the number of carloads from all Oregon branchlines. Demand for product nosedived to where more mills would either lay off workers or shut down — a scene they were all too familiar with from the recent past.

By December 2007, the Great Recession had its grip on the nation. With

Oregon railroading (and particularly the Siskiyou Line) tied to the timber industry, the effects were severe. CORP’s parent company had just spent millions of dollars on a single tunnel plus line upgrades including track and roadbed repair and signaling. With so little traffic, how could the line become profitable?

And that’s just half the story. CORP operated another line in far worse health than the Siskiyou Route — the 134-mile Coos Bay Branch. In addition to poor track conditions, tunnels and bridges were in such bad shape that it was no longer safe to run a train on the line. Initial reports indicated ballpark figures of \$23 million or more to do the work — about a third of it on tunnels alone.

Lacking the resources to rehabilitate this branch to minimal operating standards, CORP closed the Coos Bay Branch on September 21, 2007, on fairly short notice. At the same time, the company

again took a hard look at operating expenses over the Siskiyou. Having opened the line just two-and-a-half years earlier, it was as if the company second-guessed its decision. CORP notified shippers in December 2007 it was cutting back service with the possibility of a line closure in the spring of 2008.

In January, the railroad went back to routing traffic through Eugene with one exception — any shipments that originated or terminated in Weed would cross the Siskiyou on a bi-weekly basis until April 15. After that, the section would close yet again.

On-line shippers were very upset, and a rallying cry ensued to protect both the Coos Bay and Siskiyou lines. The Coos-Siskiyou Shippers Coalition was formed, and this group would lead the economic and financial fight. Spearheading the coalition was Allen Ford, president of CORP’s largest shipper, Roseburg Forest Products.



LEFT: Medford-Hornbrook Train 507 is running south through Talent, Ore., on June 20, 2016. CORP-rebuilt SD40-2s 3499 and 3498 are passing Chuck Roberts Park and will be tackling 3 percent grades ahead over Siskiyou Summit. The units are former CN SD40s.

OPPOSITE BELOW: Weed-Hornbrook Train 701 has just received the two boxcars plus a water tank from the southbound. GP38-2 2068 will handle the light load back to Weed. BELOW: Due to timber harvest restrictions, logs from outside of Oregon were shipped into the state to keep mills alive. The Medford-Glendale train has log loads moving north at Gold Hill on November 14, 2005. These came online from Weed, Calif. STEVE JESSUP PHOTOS



Over on the coast, after supporters gathered to meet with state and local officials, the Port of Coos Bay filed an application with the STB to purchase the Coos Bay line while CORP filed for abandonment. By November 21, 2008, the STB handed down an order requiring CORP to sell the line. Then in March 2009, the purchase was finalized with a price tag of \$16.6 million, according to Port reports. Using state funds and grant money, the line was nursed back to health, and 111 miles of the route were reopened by October 2011. After more repair, the remaining 23 miles to Coquille opened in April 2013.

Meanwhile back at the Siskiyou Line, shippers still felt this route was the quickest, least expensive, and best way to move their products and that the railroad should do everything in its power to keep the outlet open. At the time, RailAmerica President John Giles was quoted in multiple publications saying, “Everything has become emotional out there.” To shippers, the line was essential to

their business. To the railroad, the line was an operating headache.

After April 15, 2008, the line fell silent. Only time would tell if another freight train would ply this route again. One year, then two, and then three years passed — the line had never been closed for this long. After four years, there was hope. Sixty-some individuals — business leaders and commissioners from six different counties — were about to realize that their determination and persistence had paid off.

On June 22, 2012, the Oregon Department of Transportation was awarded a federal Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) grant for \$7,089,192 (U.S. DOT figures) for the Siskiyou Summit Railroad Revitalization Project. That was the spark to get things rolling once again.

A month later came another stunning development — RailAmerica fell into the hands of Genesee & Wyoming. As for CORP’s parent companies, perhaps this third one would be the charm.



Local service is still very much a part of CORP operations. Train 201, the Merlin switch job, runs north from Medford to Merlin three days a week. CORP GP38-3 2062 has pulled loads from South Coast Lumber and has just spotted a tank car for Blue Star Gas (right) in Merlin on June 15, 2016. The train will head back to Medford but will pick up one boxcar at Grants Pass. STEVE JESSUP PHOTO

The Third Generation: GWI

In December 2012, the STB approved the sale of RailAmerica, and Genesee & Wyoming Industries assumed control. Perhaps it's no coincidence that the TIGER grant award and G&W's purchase happened about the same time. CORP had pledged a 25 percent match to the TIGER grant, and the now-reinforced pocketbooks of a mighty shortline/regional railroad company made giving up funds a lot less painful.

Two counties also pitched in for the summit revival. Douglas County contributed \$20,000 and Jackson County added \$10,000, giving the project a pot of nearly \$9 million. Cost estimates, depending on which report's figures are used, were listed between \$9.5 and \$13.3 million.

A second project, not related to the Siskiyou Summit rehabilitation but equally important, was to upgrade the line around Glendale. Tunnel clearances north of town in the Cow Creek Canyon needed attention to accommodate newer boxcars as some of the older boxcars were being taken out of service. This work would cost around \$5.7 million. The ConnectOregon IV grant, also awarded in 2012, provided the initial funding at \$4,560,000. As CORP continued its operations from Medford north, workers would toil away on the Glendale project (the more critical of the two at that time).

All the while, the railroad would round up a force to tackle the summit project. It didn't matter how much CORP had invested in line improvements in previous years — the line was now suffering from four years of neglect. This was going to take some time — how long, nobody knew for sure.

The focus, according to various reports, would be a 65-mile chunk that included

major work on Tunnel 14 (north of the storied Tunnel 13 at summit) and repairs to more than 20 trestles. Crews would replace as many as 42,000 ties and lay as much as 50,000 feet of linear rail. Needless to say, every inch of the right-of-way from Ashland to Weed would be inspected and repaired as necessary.

After three years of hard work, the south end link neared completion in October 2015. Then on November 10, CORP and local officials held a ceremony in Medford commemorating the reopening of the Siskiyou Line — not unlike the ceremony that took place in Ashland 128 years before, minus Charles Crocker and a golden spike.

Current Operations

That brings us to today. CORP is moving freight on the line from Springfield Junction to Weed/Black Butte — 300.3 miles. Operations appear much the same with some exceptions. For starters, the familiar orange, black, and yellow colors of Genesee & Wyoming (with CORP's letters and conifer logo in the circle) now parade in the region. The yard at Winchester alleviates much of the congestion and crossing tie-ups that often occurred in Roseburg. Those who witnessed SP action over the Siskiyou might be alarmed at the pint-size length of today's trains, but at least they're running. Semaphores are long gone — the last ones were removed about a decade ago. A non-operating semaphore stands in front of CORP's Medford office.

A peek at the south end shows a northbound running from Weed to Hornbrook (Train 701) and a southbound running from Medford to Hornbrook (Train 507) five days a week. The two exchange cars and head back to their base before

the day is out. Farther north, two more "haulers" exchange trains at Glendale — one running north out of Medford (Train 504) and the other moving south from the Roseburg/Dillard area (Train 503).

Other trains move loads north and empties south between Eugene and Roseburg, utilizing the newer yard at Winchester (just north of Roseburg) for staging. Locals work the numerous customers on-line with pickups and dropoffs. The road's more significant business can be found at Cottage Grove (Cottage Grove Lumber), Winchester (Douglas County Forest Products), Dillard (Roseburg Forest Products), Glendale (Swanson Group), Medford/White City (multiple companies), and Weed (Roseburg Forest Products). These locations would be good starting points to catch CORP in action.

Yet another lovely fall morning greets Rogue Valley residents. Folks in Ashland are on their way to work, children are on their way to school, and a few with no particular agenda are out walking their dogs alongside the railroad tracks.

"Is there a train that comes through here anytime?" a gentleman asks.

"Yeah, I think there's one that comes through sometime in the morning and back the other way in the afternoon," another man replies. "One time I heard a whistle around midnight. Seemed odd because I didn't think that's when they went through. But I know they got one going each direction."

In Ashland, Phoenix, and back in beautiful downtown Talent, residents are waking up to the sound of a train again. At the baseball diamonds at Chuck Roberts Park, you can hear the echo of Yogi Berra's famous phrase — "It ain't over till it's over." ■