

Transcontinental Railroad Comes to Baker County by Gary Dielman

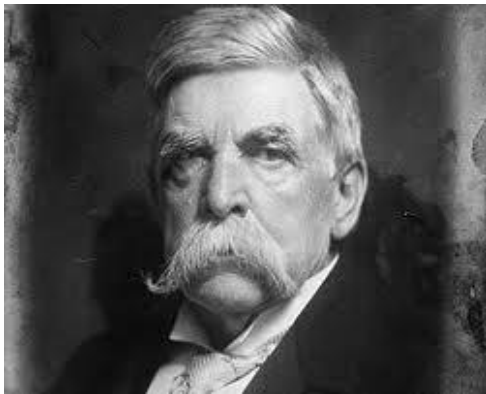
On November 10, 100 years ago, the last rails of America's newest transcontinental railroad were laid near the remote, new, little Eastern Oregon town of Huntington.

Two railroads linked lines to provide Oregon with a direct rail rout to Omaha and points east. They were the Oregon Railway and Navigation Co. (OR&NCo.) from the west, and the Oregon Short Line (OSL), a subsidiary of Union Pacific, from the east.

As significant as the event was for the commerce of the Northwest, it was celebrated with very little fanfare. Perhaps enthusiasm about transcontinental railroads had been dulled by the completion of the Northern Pacific in 1883 and the Santa Fe and Southern Pacific railroads in 1884. And the Cleveland-Blaine presidential election and women's suffrage ballot also may have detracted. (In Eastern Oregon, voters gave Cleveland the edge over Blaine by a narrow margin and said no by 2 to 1 to giving the vote to women.)

It was more than two weeks after the last rail laying that, on November 25, a small contingent arrived at Huntington from Portland. The group included E. C. Smeede, assistant chief engineer of Union Pacific, H. P. Rowe, assistant chief superintendent of OR&NCo., a few other dignitaries, and a couple of reporters.

Smeede was granted the honor of the first blow at the ceremonial last spike, followed by a turn for each person, including the newsmen. Then, after a short trip to the mouth of Burnt River to view the new, 740-foot steel trestle over Snake River, they boarded the train and returned to Portland.



Jay Gould



Grenville Dodge

Grenville Dodge, chief engineer of Union Pacific, first suggested a railroad through Oregon and southern Idaho in 1867. But it was not until 1879 that two rival railroad tycoons, Jay Gould of Union Pacific and Henry Villard of OR&NCo. made the first serious plans.

They could not agree on a cooperative endeavor, so each forged ahead on his own. Villard started at Celilo Falls and Gould at Granger, Wyoming. At first Villard was going to build a narrow gauge railroad along Columbia River with a branch line south

through Pendleton, La Grande and Baker City, but he soon changed his mind, so that his line would be compatible with Northern Pacific tracks in Washington.

Finally, in February 1883, when the OR&NCo. had laid track past Pendleton and the OSL was well on its way through southern Idaho, news came that Gould and Villard had hammered out a deal whereby each line would build to Snake River. This report turned out to be true. Other reports about decisions made in far-away New York City were nothing but rumor, however, they kept the local populace in a dither.

In August 1883 a Lewiston newspaper reported the OR&NCo. was progressing so slowly that the OSL had decided to go down Snake River to that city, bypassing Eastern Oregon. Not to be taken in, the *Reveille*, a Baker City newspaper, assured its readers, "No, Baker City is situated on the natural route and the road will come."

As late as February 1884 there was a rumor that track between Pendleton and Meachum was being taken up; and a San Francisco newspaper said Jay Gould was in favor of going down Snake River. The *Reveille* responded this time, "We know they can't get through that way. The gorge is impenetrable."

As construction approached, business opportunities abounded. In January 1883 the editor of the Union County Record urged the business community to get ready for the boom. "There will be a great demand for laborers and a cash market for the products of the country."

At the same time, reports were coming out of Idaho that the towns were so full of money that saloons were running out of whiskey and "stacks of greenbacks almost a foot high are to be seen on the poker tables."

In 1883, the *Reveille* told of the new town of Ontario being laid out just south of the mouth of Malheur River. "A large storeroom is now being erected and other buildings will go up as fast as lumber can be obtained. The organizers of the town are very liberal, donating lots for all those buildings, as well as a lot for each member of a family locating there."

Business was even great on top of the Blue Mountains, where in the spring of 1883 a merchant in Meachum contracted with OR&NCo. to supply gum boots and rice to 5,000 Chinese. New railroad headquarters were set up in the mountains at Five Points, as well as three camps between Oro Dell and the summit. Eighty scraper teams were at work with men hired daily. The blasting already could be heard in La Grande.

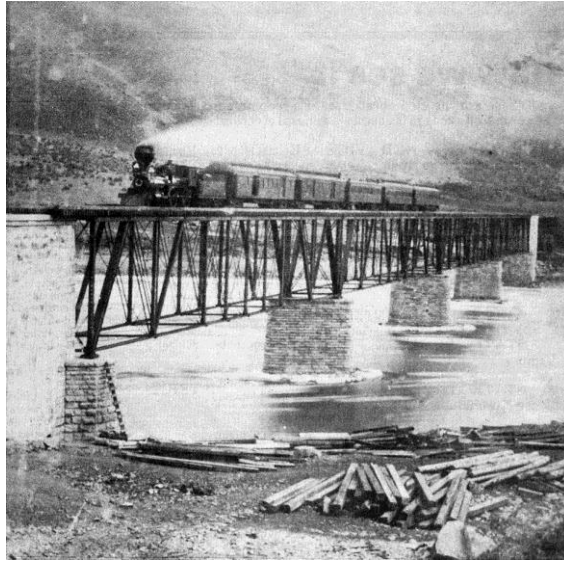
The railroad brought other changes such as the telegraph line, which kept pace with the laying of tracks. As the railroad and telegraph line crossed Payette River in December 1883, a correspondent from Ontario was aware of the impact when he observed, "You can imagine the changes we have in a short time."

During the same month, OR&NCo. began work on a spur line to connect Pendleton and Walla Walla. By February 1884 OSL had track laid to Olds' Ferry (Farewell Bend). Trains could go no further until the railroad bridge over Snake River was completed.

It was to be a 740-foot-long, 57-foot-high, deck-type bridge with rails laid on top of a truss rather than running through it. The two abutments and three channel piers were made of stone quarried at Birch Creek.

OSL also built four small wooden bridges up the two-mile stretch of Burnt River to Huntington. OR&NCo. also had its work cut out for it. As well as putting an 800-foot tunnel through a mountain in Burnt River Canyon, it built more than twenty bridges

across Burnt River between Huntington and Durkee. The construction was dangerous. In June 1884 three men were killed by a cave-in in a tunnel. A couple of months later near Weatherby, a teamster hauling bridge timbers was killed when his load rolled on a steep incline. He tripped in fleeing and the timbers hit his head, "making it into jelly," reported the *Reveille*.



*Train on First Trestle Over Snake River (1884).
Located South of the Confluence of Snake and Burnt Rivers.*

The trains themselves were dangerous to man and beast alike. At Wallula junction in September 1884 a tramp stealing a ride on the brake beam fell under the wheels of the train and was crushed.

The same month the *Reveille* reported the railroad company planned to build fences on both sides of the track through Baker Valley, "which will do away with the killing of cattle and horses by the train." The editor later could well attest to the necessity of fences, for on his first train ride to Huntington, he experienced a minor derailment caused by a cow on the tracks.

The railroad companies not only built track and bridges, but also depots, water towers, and other buildings. Local businessmen, seeing profit to be made at these new centers of activity, moved their businesses or built near the depots.

In the cases of Baker City and La Grande, the depots were built outside the then existing city limits. At Baker a huge well 34 feet deep and 12 feet in diameter was dug and a large windmill and tank constructed to provide water for locomotives and for fire.

In erecting the windmill, a portion toppled to the ground narrowly missing a carpenter. S. A. Heilner, founder of the clothing store that still bears his name, built a warehouse near the depot and took advantage of the water tank by running a pipe to his new structure for fire protection. Soon hotels and saloons were built across the street from the depot.

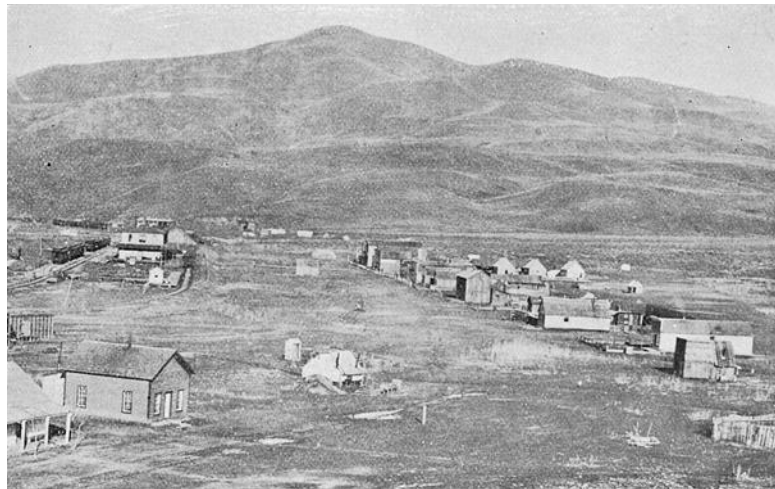
At La Grande, the arrival of the railroad on the outskirts of town on June 13, 1884, had an even more dramatic effect. Within a short time the whole business

community had moved from the hill down to the flat across the street from the depot and new roundhouse.

The same thing occurred at Huntington. A newspaperman visiting the town in December 1884 reported, "A new town is building up nearer the depot and we are informed that almost all buildings in the old town will eventually be removed to it." Since Huntington was the terminus for both railroad companies, it had two roundhouses and 14 miles of siding track, plus a huge 200-foot-long depot and 400-foot-long platform.

Other towns in Eastern Oregon experienced similar growth or popped up out of empty fields. A correspondent from North Powder wrote, "The (first) construction train arrived in the city last Saturday morning (August 11), and by night the track was completed to the bridge above town—about two miles." Several new buildings, mostly businesses, were under construction and Hughes & Co., the leading merchants of the town were "doing an excellent business."

On August 11, 1884, the editor of the *Reveille* took a buggy ride to the end of the track 12 miles north of Baker City. He visited with the crews of engines 29 and 39, which kept busy hauling ties and iron. "We found the engineers and officers to be a sociable and jolly crew and anxious to get to Baker City," he wrote. He learned that the OR&NCo. hired 75 men to lay track and paid them \$2.25 per day minus board costs of \$16.00 per month.



Huntington in 1886.

Business buildings, originally on hillside, moved to be near new depot at left.

The buggy trip gave rise to what may be the earliest mention of the town of Haines. Like Ontario, Haines sprang up as a direct result of the coming of the railroad.

The editor reported, "A new town has been laid out on Rock Creek, called Haines, after the proprietor and founder, Hon. I. D. Haines (a lawyer). We are informed that several business houses will be built there soon. The railroad company has laid a side track and will establish a depot. The location seems to be a good one and we see no reason why a lively little trading point might not be had at this new town."

Union, which the railroad reached on about June 28, 1884, also benefited from the railroad. In November 1884, as the last rails of the 800-mile railroad were being laid

near Huntington, the Union Scout reported, "The railroad company is erecting a new building at the Union depot, the finest one of its kind in the country." It was to be 30 feet wide, 80 feet in length and "furnished with all the modern appliances."

The Chinese, as well as the whites, took advantage of the boom times of the '80s, as they had during the gold rush days of the '60s. In 1883, as many as 5,000 Chinese were working for OR&NCo. in constructing the grade over the Blue Mountains north of La Grande. They did the pick and shovel and hauling work. The more prestigious jobs of laying rails went to whites.

The division of work was described in a newspaper report of June 1884. "Two thousand Chinamen are engaged with the construction now in Grande Ronde Valley. One thousand lay down the ties and another thousand follow along behind the train and fill in (with dirt between the ties). A large force of white men place and spike the rails. With the present force two miles of track can be laid in one day without any trouble whatever."

The railroad could not have been built as quickly nor as cheaply without the Chinese. But the few news articles that mentioned them seem to indicate they were not particularly welcome in Eastern Oregon.

In the summer of 1884, when the Chinese appeared in every-increasing numbers, the *Baker City Reveille* referred to "hordes of Chinamen" arriving daily. And in the fall, in reporting on the departure of 200 Chinese workers, it explained that, "These pests have been working for the railroad company in Burnt River Canyon."

But not all left. Some of the Chinese "flocked back" to Sumpter "to work for small pay" in the placer mines.

On August 15, 1884, the *Reveille* announced the imminent arrival of the railroad at Baker City. "The construction train will reach this city today or tomorrow. The whistle of the locomotive can now be heard in this city. Our people will welcome the advent of the iron horse."

The arrival of the first passenger train was awaited with even more anticipation. On August 29 the newspaper wrote, "It is not definitely known when the first passenger train will reach this city."

As track rapidly approached Baker City, construction progressed full steam ahead in Burnt River Canyon, where 2,000 Chinese worked night as well as day with the help of electric lights.

On Friday, September 5, the *Reveille* wrote that it was "reliably informed that the passenger train will arrive next Monday." But it showed up earlier than expected.

On Saturday, September 6, 1884, the first passenger train arrived in Baker City bringing 15 passengers from Portland. The event apparently was not attended by much celebration. To a *Portland Commercial Herald* report that there was "a big blow-out" in Baker City, the *Reveille* responded, "This is news to us."

However, the advent of passenger service was a novelty immediately taken advantage of. The very next day, "Quite a number of our citizens embraced the opportunity and took a ride to North Powder and return." The trip took one hour going, but "on the return the engine was let out a little faster, and the run was made in 40 minutes."

1984
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