

Working for the Railroad

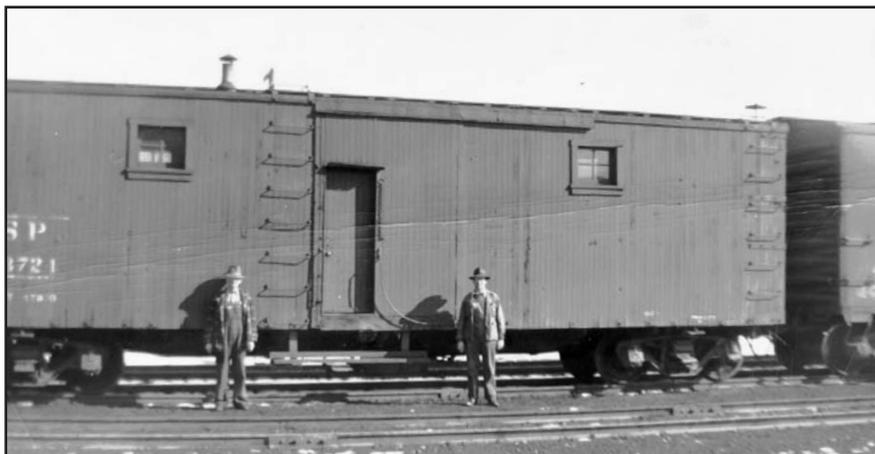


Photo Courtesy Marcia Jackson

Tales of Roseburg's Rich Rail Culture

As Told by Those Who Lived It

"The human element just isn't there any more. I mean, where you have a hundred-car train and an engineer and conductor sitting up there in the head end and a red light back on the end of the train . . . and every car is the same on so many of the trains . . . It's just a different situation . . . There were people on the railroad—interesting people—years ago. Now, they're just—oh, I don't know. I'm just an old foggie who's outlived his . . ." (Vere Perry, February 25, 1999)

"I put in 38-39 years. I first went to work in the round house, learned how to build fires. That's the steam days. I's in there just a short time. Then [in 1937], I went out a student fireman. You had to work and pay your own expenses. Oh yeah, 30 days. [This was during the Depression.] It was tough. I'd scrape enough to eat. Then they had little places where the engineer and firemen—we called 'em dog houses—where you'd go in and make out your reports and everything . . . Oh, they had kind of a pad on a deal [where] you could lay down, so—I couldn't afford a hotel. Oh, I managed. I enjoyed it—until we got diesel. I never did like 'em . . . I never enjoyed railroading after that." (Maynard Byrd, February 18, 1999)

"Before the days of [two-way] radios, we had three brakeman then . . . That was when you had to railroad. You don't have to railroad anymore." (Larry West, March 4, 1999)



The Southern Pacific railroad was once the beating heart of Roseburg. It was the city's leading employer and residents' most viable connection to the outside world. There was a proud tradition to work for the SP: fathers and sons, brothers and cousins all filled the company's ranks over the generations. And at first, the jobs were plentiful.

From the late 1800s, Roseburg served as a bustling Division Point on SP's main line between Portland and San Francisco—a very prominent route. This meant trains stopped here to refuel, water and change crews. A round house was built for engine repair and a turntable and several short tracks were installed for switching (coupling cars to make trains). Then in 1912, SP replaced an old wooden depot with the present handsome, Arts and Crafts-style structure, giving the city one of the finest passenger stations between Portland and the Bay area.

Today, the 1912 depot is about the only structure left of those glory days. In fact, Southern Pacific itself is no more. The longtime transportation mogul was swallowed up by the Union Pacific in the 1990s. What happened? The first, big blow came in 1926 when SP opened a new, more efficient route between Portland and San Francisco. The original route was retained but relegated to secondary status, leaving Roseburg and smaller communities along the line to wither on the vine. Passenger service dwindled to just two night trains daily until 1955, when passenger trains disappeared altogether.

Freight quickly emerged as the leading enterprise of SP's Roseburg operation, especially when World War II created a voracious appetite for lumber. Plywood, wood chips, and other lumber products kept the local switch yard hopping 24 hours a day well into the '70s. More and more, though, interstate trucking, air transport, and reverses in the lumber industry cut into Roseburg's rail activity. Finally, in the mid-1990s, SP pulled out of Roseburg. The Central Oregon & Pacific Railroad acquired some of the SP yard and track facilities, but its presence in Roseburg pales in comparison to the old days.

Leading up to this final nail in the coffin, a series of postwar technological "advances" also took their toll on Roseburg's railroad tradition. Diesel locomotives, radios, and other automated equipment became the darlings of rail companies because they made operations cheaper and more streamlined. They also effectively eliminated a way of life for many veteran railroaders. Suddenly, their skills and, in some instances, their entire positions were made obsolete.

And while Roseburg's railroading days are now a thing of the past in many respects, the flame still burns bright in the memories of those who once lived by the rails. Through their words, this bygone way of life remains vital, and the depot, once the most important hub in town, retains some of its past glory.

**Special thanks to the following people for sharing their memories: Joe Anderson (SP signal maintainer, 1948-91); Maynard Byrd (SP engineer, 1937-75); John Dunn (railroader aspirant and son of longtime SP switchman, Iggy Dunn); Marcia Jackson and Rosemary Sansom (daughters of Roseburg's train master of 20 years, Ted Bernard); Jerry Kent, Mary Hart and Gertrude Wingfield (relatives of Lucie Harris, proprietor of the railroaders' favorite eatery, the Harris Cafe); Vere Perry (SP engineer, 1941-80); Larry West (SP conductor, 1946-83); and Vera Wilson, June Walls and Russell Kaine (rail yard neighbors and relatives of a local railroad family). Thanks also to Tom Dill, Fred Reenstjerna, Chuck Lee, and Jena Mitchell for sharing their expertise in local history and Southern Pacific history.

ROMANCE OF THE RAILROAD

"You'd lay there at night . . . and hear 'em blowin' down an engine or hear the trains leave town. Oh, it'd just lull you to sleep. It'd really make a racket, and then pretty soon, they'd go around a spot where



you wouldn't hear it. Then, pretty soon, another curve, you'd hear it again. Oh! I loved that." (Vere Perry)

"I was always fascinated by the railroad, even when I was just a little kid. Don [Schneider, a childhood friend of Vere's who also went on to work for SP] and I hung around the depot and I remember, they used to run us out of the round house, more or less. They used to have an occasional passenger car just sitting there, in case there was maybe a lot of traffic from here, or they needed overflow or something like that. I know a time or two, Don and I were out there playing on that car. A clerk come out of the depot, 'Here kids! Get outta here!'" (Vere Perry)

On many occasions, Vere Perry and Maynard Byrd, SP engineers, ran trains through the remote and rugged wilderness south of Roseburg called Cow Creek Canyon. Both men remarked on the beauty and isolation of that area:

"One year out there [in the Cow Creek Canyon area], there was an invasion of bear. We were seeing bear all the time." (Maynard Byrd) In addition, Maynard recalls lots of beaver, deer, and there "used to be a herd of elk this side of Glendale. I seen my first cougar there . . . I was coming down by that big flag of stone, and there was a big cougar right in the middle of the [rail] road. Yeah, that was pretty primitive."

"I can remember when I was just a small kid or a kid in high school ridin' the trains. Old miners—people lived out there—lived in little shacks (at one time, there was quite a little bit of gold mined out there in the Cow Creek area, you know). The train would stop . . . Now, when I was working 'passenger', some of these guys were still alive, real old timers . . . The conductors would say, 'Well, drop so-and-so off at tunnel-section whatever.' So we knew ahead of time . . . It was interesting. There was life every place out there. Now, there's nothing . . . Of course, at that time, there was no roads through there, so the only way to get out through there was lead your own foot along the railroad track or take a train . . . Course, they've got roads out there every place now." (Vere Perry)

**“ It was interesting.
There was life
every place out
there.”
--Vere Perry**

RAILROADING WAS A FAMILY BUSINESS IN ROSEBURG

"My dad was a brakeman, my grandfather began as a section foreman then worked in the round house. My dad's brother was an engineer. My mom's brother was an engineer on the Shasta Division and her half brothers worked, I think, on the Northern Pacific out of Portland." (Vere Perry)

"My dad was a section foreman. I was [initially a fireman]. I had four brothers who were brakemen and conductors. The only thing we lacked was an engineer and we could've run a train." Maynard went on to become the first engineer in the family. (Maynard Byrd)

My grandfather, Jack Dent, ran the railway express office. My uncle, Fred Dent, was an engineer. My dad, Iggy Dunn, was a switch man in the rail yards in the post WWII period and when he retired in the '80s, he was part of Roseburg's last SP switching crew. Myself, I wanted more than anything else to work for the railroad, but I couldn't pass the vision test. (John Dunn)



Larry West was an exception. “In fact,” he said, “when I hired out on the railroad, my mother, my dad, and my wife was pretty much against it.” (Larry West)

Children even found a niche in the railroad business

“Us kids used to—they had a lot of passenger trains [in the mid-1920s]. We’d go to the grocery store and buy apples, polish ‘em all up, go down and sell [them to the passengers].” (Maynard Byrd)

As children during the ‘20s and ‘30s, Vera Wilson and her brother also peddled fruit to passengers milling around the depot. Although they knew they weren’t supposed to board the waiting trains, Vera’s brother often took the risk in hopes of finding more customers. Usually, he went away wealthier for it, especially during the Dry Years when his other product, pint bottles of bootleg whiskey which he kept stashed at the bottom of his fruit box, sold at a nice profit (Vera Wilson and Russell Kaine)

TRANSITIONS

Opening of the Natron Cutoff, SP’s new main line

“Oh, it made a big difference, you betcha,” exclaimed Maynard Byrd. After 1926, there were “very few jobs here to work,” he said. Wholesale numbers of families were forced to move when SP reduced its presence in Roseburg. Maynard’s dad, a section foreman, had enough seniority by 1926, that he could keep his position in town and he and his family didn’t have to be uprooted. Maynard recalled, though, that most others weren’t so fortunate. Many familiar faces disappeared from Maynard’s school classes.

The opening of the Natron Cutoff “really hurt Roseburg because so much of the shop forces around the round house, and all those people left, you know. Then, of course, right shortly after that, the Depression hit, and that really just decimated Roseburg for a long time.” (Vere Perry)

Steam versus diesel

“By the time I was promoted [from fireman to engineer] and running an engine, it was all diesel. As I say, they were a lot easier to operate in most ways than a steam engine—there was a skill more to that . . . A steam engine, to me, is the most human piece of equipment that man ever devised. Every one was different. One would ride rougher than heck, one would ride easy . . . One would steam good, maybe. And, maybe, one didn’t steam real well.” (Vere Perry)

The main thing on a steam engine was to keep the boiler pressure up--that was for the fireman--and to keep the water in the boiler, to keep the darn thing from blowing up.” (Vere Perry)

“I fired the last steam engine to run from Ashland to Roseburg in regular revenue service. That was [engine number] 3690 in 1955 . . . just an engineer and I. I’d just come back from my first Canadian trip and we caught a diesel to take down to Ashland and leave to replace this steam engine, and it was the last one to run between—in regular freight service— between Ashland and Roseburg.” (Vere Perry)

“You could do so much more with steam than you could with diesel. Well, for one thing, if it’s on a switch engine making up trains, I could switch three times as more cars in an eight-hour shift. Diesel’s too slow . . . Pull the throttle and it’ll grunt and groan, finally take off. Boy, the old steam engine, you’d crack the throttle and you’re gone.” (Maynard Byrd)

“ Boy, the old steam engine: you’d crack the throttle and you’re gone!”

--Maynard Byrd



Reason for the switch: it was cheaper. “These old steam engines, you burn a lot of that crude oil. Yeah, diesels was so much cheaper to run.” (Maynard Byrd)

At Roseburg, the transition from steam to diesel didn’t happen immediately. “Probably a year or so . . . We were a little later getting ‘em down here. They started ‘em on the main line.” (Maynard Byrd)

THE LAST GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY AND A COUPLE OF HOLD UPS

Today, it’s known as the country’s last train robbery. It happened near the California border, at Tunnel 13 just south of Ashland in 1923. The three D’Autremont brothers, they “didn’t know about explosives, so they blew up an express car—there was no money in it and everything burned [an incident borrowed for *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*] Four railroad guys were killed and the brothers went to the state pen. The train had originated in Portland and passed through Roseburg. The last brother died about 10 or 15 years ago. (Vere Perry)

Larry West heard an epilogue to the story from Sammy McConnell, an old conductor he served under as a brakeman. The conductor recounted that at least one of the D’Autremont brothers was haunted by his role in the explosion of the train and deaths of the four crew members. Larry recalled the old conductor’s tale; “He was brakin’ on this passenger out of Ashland or someplace . . . and he said, they had this guy sittin’ there in the chair car and they had him handcuffed, shackled and everything else. He said, pretty soon, that guy turned to me and told me to go up and tell that god damned engineer to turn the bell off. The fireman had forgot to stop his bell there and it was still just a ringing. [See] when [the D’Autremont brothers] blew that train up, as long as there was steam, that bell was ringing on that train. (Larry West)

**“ March 31, 1922:
Was stuck up at
Grants Pass by two
robbers. Lost a 45
dollar watch and
five cents in money.”**
--Entry made in
journal kept by Vere
Perry’s father, an SP
Flagman

In the spring of 1922, Oregon Jones had escaped from the state pen and railroaders were warned to be on the lookout for this dangerous fugitive. “Oregon Jones was supposed to be in this area, right back here. Well, Dad said, ‘I had to go.’ It was his job to flag behind the passenger trains. So, he went back there and pretty soon, he had a gun in his ribs. I guess he was kinda startled. ‘What’s goin’ on?’ ‘Shut your damn mouth’ [was the reply]. This guy got [my dad’s] railroad watch and a nickel—all that he had with him. So he bought a hand gun and carried that for years. I guess he figured that no SOB was going to get him again.” (Vere Perry)

The late Wash Hughes, the venerable SP conductor out of Roseburg, told Larry West of another hold up. Hughes was just a young man at the time of the robbery and was on board working as a brakeman. “We stopped down there, and [Wash] couldn’t figure out why we stopped,” West recalled Hughes saying. “So the conductor told [Wash] to go down and see. It was the middle of the night--so he was going down that way and, he said, I heard this voice tell me—it said, ‘Kid, go back!’ . . . He said, it didn’t really sink in. And he said, you know you’ve seen those pictures . . . where people get scared, how their hair will just stand on end. He said, I took a few more steps and this guy says, ‘Kid, I said get back!’ [Wash] said, I was looking right into the barrel of a gun—a pistol—that was about that big around, and he said, I had to



reach up and pull my hat down . . . and he said, I turned around and back I went.” (Larry West)

FREIGHT

Early on, cattle and sheep made up a major part of Southern Pacific freight. Cattle were not a Roseburg export, but train loads of them stopped at the corral erected at the south end of the rail yards. By law, the animals had to be rested and watered at regular intervals. “I remember when I was working in the round house, they’d come in, maybe have a car load of cattle to go out or something like that. They’d dehorn the cattle there [at the corral]. In fact I remember hearing those poor cows bawling down there while they’re doin’ that. Man, I’ll bet that hurt.” (Vere Perry)



Photo Courtesy Marcia Jackson

Longtime rails, Sammy McConnell (left) and Wash Hughes, had some hair-raising hold-up tales.

Sheep on the other hand came in droves from area ranches to be boarded at the Roseburg rail yards. Maynard Byrd grew up hearing the bleating sheep penned in the corral.

Once large-scale lumbering began at Roseburg during World War II, “probably three-quarters of your train would be lumber.” (Maynard Byrd)

Right after the war, lumber “was the main freight... we loaded quite a few telephone poles... and logs, quite a few logs... A little later, well, then they started making [wood] chips and that was a big deal. Roseburg Lumber... with their chips, their lumber, their plywood and their particle board, they could almost put out a train a day. (Larry West)

In the ‘40s and ‘50s, when Roseburg’s rail freight business—and especially plywood and other lumber products—was booming, SP retained three shifts of switchmen for around the clock service. (John Dunn)

Joe Anderson cited the remarkable fact that in the 1970s and ‘80s, the Roseburg Lumber Co. alone was the SP’s seventh-largest shipper.

The Circus and Carnivals

Kids from all over town always knew when the circus was coming to town. Marcia Jackson remembers she and her friends rushed to the rail yards to watch the exotic animals emerge from box cars. Vera Wilson said her father always negotiated with the animal trainers to get the elephant dung to use as fertilizer in the family garden.

“There used to be a big vacant place down pretty close to where we lived. They’d move in there—the carnival. So it was real close to [the Byrd house]. Us kids would go help ‘em in order to get free passes. Then we used to catch garter snake ‘cause they’d feed ‘em to their big snakes. This area where they [set up the tents and booths] was full of them damn garter snakes. We’d get a big sack of ‘em.” (Maynard Byrd)

“Kids from all over town rushed to the rail yards to watch the exotic animals emerge from box cars.”

--Marcia Jackson



“About 1950, when I was firin’ the steam helpers out of here, we were on duty about 20 hours. There were, I think four sections of this circus train that was supposed to show at Medford. And I think it was about the second section that had a derailment at about Creswell or some place. And by the time the delay was over, they had to eliminate completely the showing of the circus in Medford.” (Vere Perry)

Human Cargo

During World War II, Camp White was built as a military base just outside of Medford. Thousands of troops moved through there over the course of the war. The soldiers were transported to and from Camp White by rail. One of the engineers for the seemingly constant stream of troop trains at that time was Maynard Byrd. “They just quit hauling any freight [on] all the divisions--just shut down the freight trains so we got this troop movement. God, I worked on a lot of troop trains!” Maynard estimated that each troop train comprised of 15 to 25 cars and each car carried around 50 soldiers.

On more than one occasion, Maynard’s wartime human cargo was not American. “A couple times, I caught prisoner trains.” Camp White had a special facility for holding POWs. Maynard noticed a difference between the prisoners. The first POW train he ran carried Italian soldiers who had been captured in the European theatre and shipped back to the States. “They were happy as larks, you know. I guess they’re glad to get out of [the war] . . . Next train was Germans, and boy, they were just the opposite.”

HARD WORK AND LONG DAYS

Vere Perry’s grandfather began his railroad career working on the section, that is laboring with a work crew to repair and maintain a certain stretch of railroad track. “I can remember [my grandfather] telling me when I was a little kid that he would work . . . 10 or 12 hours on a section, which was pretty hard work. I think they were living at Drain. And then, he would . . . put a 50-pound sack of flour over his shoulder and walk two miles home, after he had worked on the railroad that long. I couldn’t do that.” (Vere Perry)

In the winter time, SP “cut half its force” in Roseburg. “When I first went to work for the railroad, I just worked a little while, you know, and I got cut off in the winter time . . . When business picked up, they’d call you back. Oh, in ‘37, ‘38, and ‘39, I didn’t work but very little [for the railroad]. In fact, I think in ‘39, I didn’t work but two weeks.” To make ends meet, Maynard and other laid-off rails did odd jobs. “I could always find something.” (Maynard Byrd)

“They didn’t have any ‘passenger’ by the time I was running. ‘Passenger’ was a lot easier because you only worked five or six hours . . . and your trip was over. Some freight trips, well, we used to work 16 hours lots of times on those long freight trips and they were pretty darn hard sometimes. They finally . . . cut it down to 14. Then, eventually to 12. Twelve hours wasn’t too bad, but, my gosh, I hadn’t been firin’ very long, when I would go to work—about 7 o’clock or 7:30 in the evening and work 15-16 hours of switch engine, seven days a week. Boy, I tell you [when you got off work] you didn’t do anything but just eat and sleep. And you weren’t very well rested. If you worked 16 hours, you had to have, by law, 10 hours off. But they’d [make you knock off] at 15 hours and 59 minutes, so you only had to have eight hours and one minute off.” (Vere Perry)

In the post-World War II period, Roseburg’s lumber exports escalated exponentially and freight traffic was enormous. Reflecting the demand on the local railroaders to meet this crush, Maynard Byrd



logged 259 straight days of 12- to 16-hour shifts running freight trains. “Needed an act of congress to get a day off. I got where my breathing was bad and, oh God, it was just so terrible, so I got the railroad doctor — the only way to get any time off was to get a doctor’s slip.” The doctor insisted Maynard take a 30-day leave of absence to recuperate.

On holidays, most Roseburg engineers “laid off”, but Maynard Byrd kept his name on the job board because, “I knew I’s gonna catch a passenger train--[Nos.] 329-330 between Roseburg and Ashland. They always run them . . . and that was just like staying at home . . . You just got a few cars. By God, you’re making money fast.” (Maynard Byrd)



Part of the fun and challenge that Maynard Byrd remembers about his passenger jobs between Roseburg and Ashland was to try and meet the time schedule. As set by SP’s timetable, stops at Grants Pass, Medford and the many other hamlets along the route, were intended to be 10-minute lay overs; however, it wasn’t uncommon for these stops to take twice the allotted time. In those instances, Maynard chuckles, “You had to scoot between the stations and try to make the time up. I could make up maybe 30-40 minutes . . . if I had a steam engine, but if you ever got away with one of them diesels, you’re just gonna be laid over.” (Maynard Byrd)

A Startling Vision

“I know one time we were switching cars here . . . Well, what happened, we stopped right about [a block south of the depot]. Looked up in the window there [across the street]. There’s a gal standing there—this was probably early evening—just as naked as a jay bird, standing there, letting you look her over, you know. Finally she turned . . . I said [to a switchman], ‘look over here’, so he looked there for a little bit. Pretty soon, she just walked over and climbed up on the bed, with her rear end lookin’ at you there.” (Vere Perry)

The Train Master’s Long Day

Marcia Jackson, daughter of train master Ted Bernard, recalled a frustrating day for her father. Thelma Greer was Ted’s buoyant, middle-aged secretary. Thelma liked ice cream cones and often picked one up as an afternoon snack at the Harris Cafe just down from the depot. One day, Thelma, dressed in a calf-length, blue polka-dot dress and one-inch strapped heels, went on a break down to the cafe for a cone. On the way back, she came through the rail yards and, cone in hand, hopped a ride on a switch engine’s “cow catcher”—something that was expressly forbidden. She spied her boss, Ted Bernard, standing near the depot with another man whom she didn’t recognize. With her typical playfulness, she jumped off the slow-moving engine as it

“ With her typical playfulness, she jumped off the slow moving engine as it approached the two men and stuck out the ice cream cone and said to Bernard, ‘Hey Boss, want a lick?’ ”



approached the two men and stuck out the ice cream cone and said to Bernard, “Hey boss, want a lick?” Bernard was more than a little embarrassed. His companion, a Southern Pacific official down from Portland, just watched wide-eyed.

To Ted’s chagrin, this wasn’t the end of it. Later in the day, the train master was showing the visiting SP official around the rail yards when a local woman who was a friend of the Bernard family raced through on Lane Street and stopped on the tracks (a railroad no-no) and hollered, “Ted Bernard you sonofabitch, how are you!” Marcia Jackson still remembers her dad coming home that night and saying to his wife, “the women of this town are out to get me!” (Marcia Jackson)



Photo Courtesy Marcia Jackson

On a better day, train master Ted Bernard (right) sits in the depot with a colleague, c. 1955.

KNIGHTS OF THE RAILS: HOBOS IN ROSEBURG

John Dunn recalled his father telling him that only in the rare instances when hobos were drunk or ornery would his dad take action against these illegal riders and order them out of the rail yards. Typically when Iggy Dunn, switch man in the post WWII-era, came across hobos on rail cars, he let them know which cars were headed north and south, so that when the switching was done, the knights of the rails knew which car would take them in the direction they wanted to go.

Maynard Byrd remembered hobos camped down by the river. During the Depression, the trains were “loaded with ‘em. Sometimes SP ‘Bulls’ [special company police] herded ‘em off.” (Maynard Byrd)

WRECKS

“I had quite an experience . . . when I was working a ‘helper’ out a Grants Pass, helping this freight train [by serving as an additional engine to help power a train up the steep grade]. We come around the corner and hit that bridge. Well, everything was fine—[until] probably about [a 30-foot distance] when this damn engine of mine starts acting up (it jumped the track). I thought I was gonna roll. The damnedest feeling I ever had. Anyway, I cut the air in and put ‘em in the emergency and stopped. Luckily, I never went off the track, but I don’t know how.” (Maynard Byrd)

“Boy I got into a dandy in Glendale . . . I was setting on the main line . . . That switch, where you throw a switch to put ‘em in the siding, always had trouble, that darn thing. . . They’d work on it, same thing would happen: derail. [On this particular day, the engineer in another train coming into the main line from a siding] come barrelin’ in there. I was right up, just as close as I could get to the clearin’ point. I think it was about—well, I remember it was the 14th car [out of the other train’s 90 or so], derailed . . . but the first 14 went by and then they started to pile up. And my God, I’m tellin’ you, they was flyin’ through the air. And here I set like a sitting duck. I had a fireman, and he got all excited. He come over there and got down behind my seat, see . . . Afterwards I told him [facetiously], I says, ‘one of them box cars come flying through here, I’d be a lot of protection to you.’ Well, anyway, I wanted to get out of there, but there was no where to go because these things were coming though the air and everything. Why, I



thought about running out on the running boards and all in front of the engine there, and maybe getting out, but hell, you couldn't do it. I thought, well, 'bout the time we get out there, then one of them's gonna side swipe that engine and just--so I--all you could do is just set there. I don't know how damn many cars--must have been 18 or 20--and they'd just hit the front end of [my] engine and that's all that saved our necks. None of 'em got high enough . . . Oh, they was coming end over end and every way . . . I'll never forget, one of my brothers was a brakeman on [my train]. As soon as it started, [he and other crew members working in the rear of the train] all ran up to the bank, practically up town. And as soon as the dust settled, why I could see 'em peeking up to see what happened, the engine's crew. That was quite a thrill!" Amazingly no one was hurt and the ensuing investigation by SP officials found that the engineer of the incoming train was not accountable. "The whole thing was the damn switch." (Maynard Byrd)

“I wanted to get out of there, but there was no where to go because these things were coming through the air.”
--Maynard Byrd

THE NIGHT CRAWLER

"Just like the guy said to me . . . 'Did you know,' he said, 'that this train is listed in the Bible?' I said 'no' . . . 'Yes sir,' he says. 'You can look it up,' he says. 'God blessed everything that would creep and crawl.'" (Larry West)

"Night Crawler" was the name given to the one passenger train that ran between Portland and Ashland via Roseburg from 1938 to 1955. It earned its moniker from the fact that it only came through during the late evenings and because it was a painfully slow trip since it stopped at virtually every cross roads along the line. Since it was late and dark, most passengers on the Night Crawler slept through much of the trip.

"I went to work at 3:00AM to go to Ashland, and then when you came back, I think it was 11-something PM . . . We used to haul the mail [so we] stopped at every place there was to stop." (Larry West)

Aside from the mail car, the night train generally included just one chair car, a diner, and a sleeper. No additional cars were necessary because of the limited ridership. By the time the southbound night crawler reached Roseburg, there were only about 20 passengers still on board, and this number dwindled quickly after leaving Roseburg. "Sometimes maybe two or three get off at Glendale. You might have half a dozen that would get off at Grants Pass. And then, by the time you got out of Medford, why, your passengers were all gone. I don't remember ever seeing any that went any further than Medford, actually." (Larry West)

In 1955, local residents set out to demonstrate just how slow the Night Crawler really was. On July 31, a race was set up from Eugene to Roseburg between Southern Pacific's iron horse and a modern-day pony express team. The prevailing belief was that the Night Crawler, running its normal, notoriously slow route, would finish behind a relay of horseback riders galloping along the tracks. Crowds lined the route and the train cars hadn't been so full in years. Over the 75-mile trip, horses were clocked at an impressive gait of 38 miles per hour. Still, it wasn't enough. The train pulled into the Roseburg station at 2:55am, nine minutes before the four-hoof brigade. The day after, *The Oregonian* reported "that more people in Douglas County will stay up to see a race than will ride the train." Prophetic words these were. A week later, on August 7, the Night Crawler made its last run. Its termination was attributed to poor ridership.



THE BLAST

“You know, that depot, that was a sturdy building to have withstood that tremendous blast.” (Vere Perry)

In 1959, a truck driver had intended to deliver a trailer-load of explosives to a building supply store in downtown Roseburg. Because the store had already closed for the night by the time he got there, the driver parked his rig alongside the place and found a hotel for the night. Tragedy struck when a fire broke out in the building supply store. It quickly spread and eventually ignited the contents of the truck, resulting in an explosion that could be heard 30 miles away. Thirteen people lost their lives, 12 blocks of the city’s commercial center were leveled, and a crater 20 feet deep and 52 feet wide was left. Miraculously, the SP depot survived, although buildings on three sides of it were destroyed.

“ He was blown across the office and the man’s eardrums were nearly ruptured by the pressure.”
--Joe Anderson

“The fire whistle blew . . . [then] the fire whistle blew again. That sounded pretty urgent that second time, you know. And just within a few seconds, this tremendous blast . . . The only thing I could think of was maybe an air raid or something like that. It was just tremendous—shook the windows and everything.” Walking down Lane Street toward the rail yard, Vere and a neighbor kid scouted out the blast site. “We were crunching along just like walking in snow, on just powdered glass.” (Vere Perry)

Vere Perry recalled one of the casualties of the blast—a flour mill across Sheridan Street from the depot. “It’s funny how a mill of that type—a flour mill . . . smells after it burns, you know. And that’s the thing we got there. These flies and that smell from [the burned out mill] . . . you just gagged before you went [into the depot] to do your work, you know.”

Wrenches, bolts, and nails from Garrison Building Supply, ground zero of the explosion, were found strewn all over the rail yard. (Joe Anderson)

The night of The Blast, the depot was fully staffed as usual. Jack Freed, the telegrapher was at his desk in the depot when the explosion occurred. He was blown across the office, but survived, although his eardrums were nearly ruptured by the pressure. (Joe Anderson)

Joe Anderson obtained his position as signal maintainer at Roseburg as a consequence of The Blast. Joe had been working in the Crescent Lake area. The man who had been Roseburg’s signal maintainer transferred out because of his distress over an automobile. The man had been meticulously restoring a classic old Packard, which he had parked at the depot. After The Blast, with his cherished car in ruins, he packed up and moved along.

WHEN THE WORK WAS DONE

Off duty railroaders weren’t a wild, rowdy bunch like loggers coming to town for a weekend romp tended to be. “You couldn’t get away with it,” Maynard Byrd said. “SP and the railroads in general were pretty strict.” Rule G of the SP employee handbook specified, “The use of intoxicants or narcotics by employes [sic] subject to duty is forbidden. Being under the influence of intoxicants or narcotics while on



duty, or their use or possession while on duty, is sufficient cause for dismissal.”

In other words, Maynard Byrd explained, the company wouldn't tolerate fuzzy-headed workers. A hangover-induced screw-up could potentially cost hundreds of lives. “You just don't make mistakes or else you're dead or canned.”

Card Playing

They used to play ‘Lou’ [a betting card game] at Crescent Lake, and I guess they'd go up there and lose their checks, while they were laying at Crescent Lake. There was nothing to do around there except get out and hike around the hills.” (Vere Perry)

“Switchmen had a lot of time in between trains, so they played cards—poker and ‘31.’ They weren't supposed to gamble. The train master knew they were playing, but he didn't hassle them too often. The train boys did change the game's location every once and while, though.” (John Dunn)

“Most generally after you got off duty, why, you go in there and play that damn game [three-card Lou] for maybe two or three hours, just playing in that room in the depot . Yeah, [Ted Bernard, the train master] kicked us out a time or two, but then he'd go home, so . . .” (Larry West)

I tell you, there was some pretty good-sized pots that changed hands around there . . . One guy from Eugene lost his entire pay check playing at Crescent Lake. He told his wife that luck wasn't with him that day. She didn't see the humor in that and called the superintendent. He put an end to the games for a time. ‘Course, that guy's name was mud.” (Larry West).

“The biggest argument I ever saw my parents have was over the money my dad lost playing cards.” (John Dunn)

Favorite Hangouts

The Past Time was the bar for railroaders. It stood on Cass Street just above the depot. “Yup! You could always find the rails in there . . . It'd been there for a long, long time. A guy named Sandy Sanders [managed the place].” (Larry West)

Lucie Harris and her 24-hour cafe was *the* eating place for railroaders for more than a quarter century. For years, Lucie came in during the graveyard hours to bake for the upcoming day. Typically she prepared 19 loaves of bread and around 25 pies, all of which would be consumed by day's end.

In the late 1940s, Lucie first started serving her home-style breakfasts, lunches and dinners at the old Roseburg Hotel's restaurant at the corner of Sheridan and Lane streets. Then around 1950, she opened her own place, called Harris Cafe, in an old Sheridan Street storefront opposite the depot. Lucie worked long hours and took very few days off serving her loyal clientele here until 1959 when The Blast destroyed her restaurant. Soon afterwards, she relocated again. Like her first two locations, the third was within a block of the depot. This time on Cass Street. While the rail men were her most common customers, families, school kids, and after-hour imbibers would all come in to Lucie's place. She finally laid down her rolling pin and spatula in 1972.

“All the rails ate with her . . . Where she moved, they moved . . . She was strictly for the rails, you know. When we would come in—any time from one o'clock in the morning until whatever—she gave



her cooks and her night shift . . . orders: when some rails come in, you get their orders and you put ‘em out, because they’ve got just a certain length of time to eat and they gotta go to work . . . And she made home-baked bread, and it was good!” (Larry West)

Lucie’s daughter, Gertrude Wingfield, revealed just how devoted her mother was to the railroaders. “She only closed on Christmas, but even then, she took food to her ‘steadies’.”

Photo Courtesy Marcia Jackson



Old rails chat it up at an SP picnic, c. 1957

EPILOGUE

When Ted Bernard, longtime train master at Roseburg, passed away, a burial service was held at Roseburg Memorial Cemetery, situated at the north end of town along the SP track. Joe Anderson remembered that some of Bernard’s former employees ran a locomotive out and paid their final respects by blasting the engine’s whistle at the end of the service. Bernard’s daughters recalled the gesture fondly and added that most non-railroad people at the service missed this very fitting tribute, being as they were so used to the sound of a train whistle around town.

