

# Railroad Man:



a conversation with  
**W.J. Gamble**  
W.I. & M. Ry. Co.



# Introduction

Walter J. Gamble

The Potlatch Lumber Company was capitalized in 1903 for \$3,000,000 as part of the vast Weyerhaeuser conglomerate of timber operations. The company quickly acquired land in the Palouse River drainage, as well as the mill and timber lands of the Palouse River Lumber Company in Palouse City. Many Palouse residents believed the lumber company would locate permanently in their town, but in 1905 construction began ten miles to the east on the largest white pine sawmill in the world at a place that would be called Potlatch. The lumber company constructed houses, schools, boarding houses, churches and business buildings around the mill and by 1910 the company town of Potlatch had a population of 2,000. The town remained in company control until the early 1950s when the buildings and homes were sold to private individuals.

The company soon realized it would need a railroad to haul timber to the mill and to transport lumber from it. Construction of the railroad began in Palouse in 1905 and was completed to Harvard, Idaho in that year. The next year work continued and the final stop on the line became Bovill, Idaho. The road was never completed over the Bitterroot Mountains into Montana—despite the fact that the name was always the Washington, Idaho and Montana Railroad. When the Milwaukee Road built a branch into Bovill, giving the W. I. & M. a connection with the East, there was no longer any need to build into Montana. The W. I. &

M. was sold to the Milwaukee Road in 1962, and was then purchased by Burlington Northern in 1980.

W.J. Gamble began working for the W. I. & M. in 1910 and became general manager in 1918, a position he held until he retired in 1951. In this conversation he recalls the origins and development of the W. I. & M. and his relationship with it.

In the 1970s many social historians came to realize the value of oral history as a research methodology. Oftentimes, the only way to learn about the lives of "common people" is to interview them, for these people seldom leave written records. In 1973 the Latah County Historical Society began an oral history project under the direction of Sam Schrager. Over the years, the collection became one of the largest in the Pacific Northwest, consisting of more than 600 hours of taped interviews with more than 200 Latah County old timers. Most of the collection has been transcribed, making it more accessible to researchers. It is housed in the University of Idaho Special Collections Library, with transcripts also available for use at the Historical Society Library.

In the mid-1970s the Latah County Historical Society produced a series of five booklets to be used in fourth grade classrooms based on conversations with five different Latah County pioneers. The booklets enjoyed great popularity not only with school children, but also with adults. This conversation with W.J. Gamble is our latest attempt to make a part of the oral

history collection available to the public in a printed format.

Mr. Gamble was interviewed by Sam Schrager on December 9, 1973 and again on June 6, 1975. The combined interviews consist of nearly three-and-one-half hours of taped conversation. With the exception of the italicized questions asked by Schrager, and a few words enclosed in brackets, the story that follows is told exactly in Gamble's words. Some editorial liberties have been taken in rearranging the material so that it makes a chronological narrative. Furthermore, much of Mr. Gamble's interview not specifically relating to the W. I. & M. was eliminated. A few explanatory endnotes have been added, and a brief bibliography is included for those who wish to read more about the Potlatch Lumber Company, the town of Potlatch, or the W. I. & M. Gamble's interview is available for listening at the University of Idaho Library, and the transcript is located there and at the Historical Society.

I would like to thank Sam Schrager, Director of the oral history project, Lillian Otness, head of the Society's oral history committee, Helen Zimet, W.J. Gamble's daughter, and Carol Young, the Society's Museum Administrator, for their assistance in editing the interview. Special thanks also go to Roger Slade of Rockwood, Mowrey, Slade and Black for volunteering his time to design this booklet.

Keith Petersen  
May 1981







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The timber owners were out here with their cruisers, oh, I imagine five, six, seven, eight years before any sawmills were built. They were picking up this timber at little or no price, and they accumulated thousands of acres of timber. And when they got ready to harvest the timber, then they realized they had to have a railroad come into their plant to haul the timber out.

To start with, the [Potlatch] Lumber Company set up their first mill in Palouse. They bought the old Codd property; a fellow by the name of Codd had a sawmill at Palouse.<sup>1</sup> Then we operated down there for a couple of years, and we used to drive the logs down the Palouse River. But it was not big enough for the kind of mill we wanted. We had a lumberyard there bigger than the town!

That's always been kind of a sore spot, too, that we didn't maintain the mill at Palouse. They gave us a right-of-way through the town for the rail-

road, you know, donated it. But they lost their sawmill, and that was quite a loss to a little town like Palouse. Palouse used to be quite a place. A matter of fact, it was a livelier place than Moscow in the early days.<sup>2</sup>

But they soon found out that they didn't have enough room down there for the size of plant they wanted to build, so they came up to Potlatch where land was cheap and they bought the whole site for the townsite and mill and storage and everything. There wasn't a thing there. All it was, trees and stumps, with the river meandering through the place. And when they decided to put the mill there, they figured how many employees they'd have to have. They were gonna bring most of those men to start with out from Cloquet and Chippewa Falls, all experienced men.<sup>3</sup> But they couldn't ask those men to come out here and spend money and build their own homes. So they decided to build a company town.

And their idea was that a company town, properly run, was better than the average town. Their idea was that their men should not be burdened with excessive rates, rentals, that you should have good schools for them, you should have a company store where they can buy things at a fair price. And they followed that procedure from the time the first house was built until they sold them.

Well, there was no railroad at that time. The Northern Pacific had built into Palouse, and the lumber company wanted the Northern Pacific to build from Palouse into the timber—in other words, where the W. I. & M. goes now. But they couldn't

make them see the value of a railroad into the timber. A big company makes big mistakes, and a little company makes little mistakes. And that was a big mistake on the part of the Northern Pacific. We couldn't induce them to build. So Bill Deary,<sup>4</sup> he was a rough, tough lumberjack, he said, "To hell with ya. We'll build our own."

So we built our own W. I. & M. We followed the drainage areas, which is the way most of the railroads are built. And we found out there was only one way to get to Potlatch—to follow the Palouse River. And we followed that to Harvard. Then we had to get into this other ownership up toward Bovill, Elk River<sup>5</sup> so we had to go over the divide into the Potlatch drainage area. And we followed that area into Bovill.

The intent was to build on into Montana. But about that time the Milwaukee [Road] started building west and the Milwaukee built down to Bovill. And then they induced them to build from Bovill down to Elk River. So that stopped the building of the W. I. & M. any further than it was. It was built and conceived as a lumber road.

I think they started [construction] in 1905. The sawmill started in 1907, and we had the railroad built as far as Harvard. And we were getting our timber out of the Harvard area. And we kept on building. We didn't build it; a railroad construction outfit built it for us. We paid 'em for it. There were temporary camps all along the whole building of the road. We had a camp at Potlatch to start with. The next one was at Harvard. The next one at Yale; the



next one at Deary. We set those camps up for maybe six months duration, or something of that kind. These construction crews had mostly Japanese to start with, and Chinese. They were the laboring people in the early days in the West, y'know.

They had brought a group of railroad builders in here to build it. The men that built it, they knew their stuff. But they were not operators, and when they had it all finished and built—here it is! Well, the company picked up—they thought they was picking up men who knew how to run it, but oh, some of 'em landed in jail and some were fined, and they couldn't stand that. So it was a case of gradually weeding out some of this stuff and planning anew for the railroad company.

*Would you tell me how you came to Potlatch? How it turned out you came here?*

Well, that's kinda funny. I had been working in Pennsylvania on different railroads. And I finally wound up with the Baltimore Locomotive Works in Philadelphia, and went along until about 1907. About 1907 was that depression. That was a bad one. There was no work, everything was shut down. They finally had to tell me that, well, you're all through.

Well, there was no place to go. There was no work any place. So I went home. My home was Williamsport, Pennsylvania, about 200 miles north of Philadelphia. And I was loafing around home, and my wife's father<sup>6</sup> called up one day, says, "I want to see ya." He was an agent and telegraph operaor. He says, "I've been transferred to a place called Waterville, Pennsylvania," he

says. He says, "I have to take the job because it's all there is open," he says, "and I don't want to move up there." It was up in the woods. He says, "If I get you a job as an assistant agent will you go up there?" He says, "Then I can go back and forth on the train. I won't have to move."

Well, gosh, it was something to eat for me, as far as that goes. I said, "Sure, I'll do anything." So, I went to Waterville. It was a part of railroading I had never been into before. So I stayed up there for about two years and learned about agency work and become a telegraph operator. Then the depression broke and I got uneasy. Picked up another fellow and I says, "Let's get the hell out of here."

"Where'll we go?"

"Go West!"

So we got on a train and started west. Went to St. Paul, Minnesota. And pretty soon we run out of money. At that time St. Paul and Minneapolis were booming as far as railroads were concerned. These roads were building west, you know, Great Northern and Northern Pacific, and it was pretty good. So I said, "I'm going down to the railroad to see if I get a job." So we went down and he says, "You fellas go in the telegraph office and take an examination if you want a job." So we went in, took the examination, and I went back to the hotel. He had given me a pass—to Havre, Montana. The other fellow says, "God, I didn't pass. I'm going home!"

Well, I divided up half my money with him, and he went one way and I went the other. And I didn't have much left. So I got on a train and came to Havre. And the fella says, "I'll

give you time to eat breakfast and you go down and get on the train, you go to Zurich." I never heard of the place before. Zurich is a little bit east of Havre.

I said, "All right." I says, "Will you give me 50 cents so I can get breakfast?" So he gave me 50 cents. I went down and got breakfast and got on the train. I got off in Zurich. And God, I got to looking around for a town, I didn't see any! And by the time I got through looking around, the first thing I know, there goes the train down the track. And there wasn't a damn thing there except a telegraph tower and a section house and a water tank. God, here I am, no money. I guess I better go to work. So I went into the telegraph office, and it was one of those hot jobs that you had to know your stuff. But it was a hell of a place to live, and they couldn't keep a good man there.

They didn't even have water there, because it's an alkali region. So the water train would come out from Havre once a week, and there was four barrels set along the track. They'd put water in those barrels for us to drink. I never will know why I didn't get sick. And back at that time they only paid you once a month. But they always hold up on the first month's pay to keep you on the job. So I had to work on that cussed job two months before I had a pay check. It was a heck of a place. I'll tell you, I was the best operator the Great Northern ever had. I'm telling ya, I was working to get out of there!

So one morning the dispatcher called me up and he says, "Say, where have you worked before?"

"Oh," I says, "I've worked all



over the east—New York Central, Pennsylvania Railroad.”

He says, “I got a job you might be interested in up at Shelby, Montana. It’s a pretty hot job,” he says, but he says, “I think you can handle it. Will you go up there?”

I says, “I sure will.” So I got to Shelby. That was a nice little town, although it was a rough place. It was a central spot for the gamblers and prostitutes and everything else you can think of. But fortunately I got along pretty good. I knew enough to keep my mouth shut and my eyes open.

And then I got to playing baseball. In those days there was no automobiles, you know, and every town had to provide their own entertainment. And baseball, every town had a town team, and it produced some pretty good men in the early days. But the heck of it is, like everything out in the West, they got to betting on it. When they got to betting, why then they commenced hiring players. I was a catcher; I was a pro, semi-pro. And I picked up a couple of pitchers, and we practiced, and we’d hire out on weekends. You get pretty good money out of it. So I was playing baseball all through Montana one summer, and I got tired up in Shelby, so I thought I’d better leave there, and I went down to Great Falls, and Helena, and Butte. I got jobs at all those places, but I didn’t like them and didn’t stay. And I finally got on the train one day, and I found I was out of money when I got to Spokane.

I was boarding in a house in town. And one Labor Day morning a woman come up and rapped on my door. She says,

“A man downstairs wants to see you.” And there was a fella by the name of Ricker; he was the auditor of this railroad over at Potlatch. You see, they had built that railroad at a cost of about four million dollars. And then they started operating it, and they found they didn’t have any men that knew anything about railroading—they were all lumbermen. They had something on their hands they didn’t know what to do with. It was built primarily to haul logs in, but they had to haul lumber out, and as these communities grew, it became a regular railroad.

This Ricker had to have a man in the auditor’s office that knew something about rates and collecting money on the freight that went out, you know, and ended up in the East or some place. And he had come to Spokane to get a man of that kind, and he’d went around to these different railroads, and I had been to them, too, looking for a job. Well, he told me he was gonna give me more money than I ever knew before. He says, “Come to Potlatch.”

“Why,” I says, “I never heard of the place!”

“Well,” he says, “I know you didn’t.” He says, “The biggest sawmill in the world is all is there. It’s a good place. It’s a company town. And by the way,” he says, “do you know anything about baseball?”

“Yeah . . .”

He says, “Well, we got four baseball teams in Potlatch. That’s not essential to this job, but it would help a lot.”

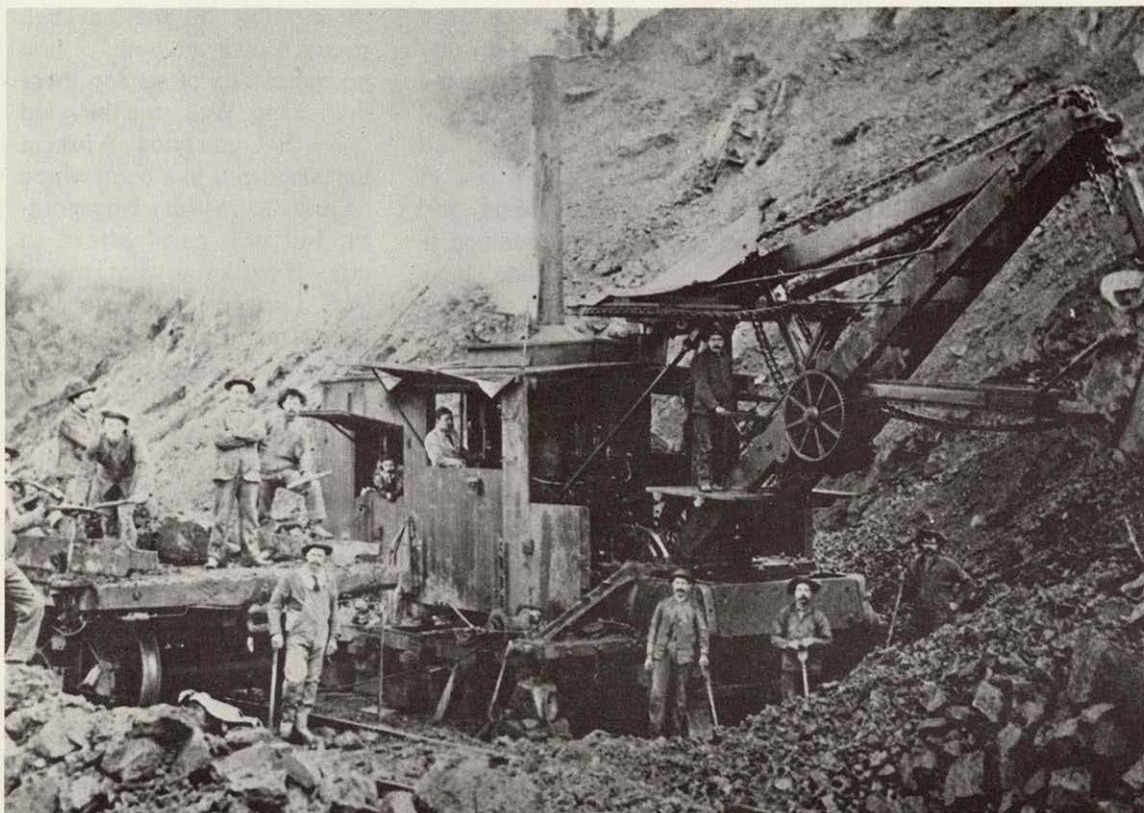
Well, anyhow, I made a deal with him, and I came down to Potlatch in 1910. I looked around and, my gosh! I thought, “Well, I’ll be here for

six months, ‘til the baseball season’s over anyhow.” I had no more idea of staying there than flying. Well, one thing led to another, you know. A fella in that stage gets to a point where he’d like to go with a bigger outfit, but you can’t afford to quit—if you know what I mean. Well, I was in that position. I’d just got married, and had a baby come along. I was involved. I had to have a job. About the time I was getting ready to make a move, why I’d get an advancement of some kind. I went to work in 1910 and quit in 1951.

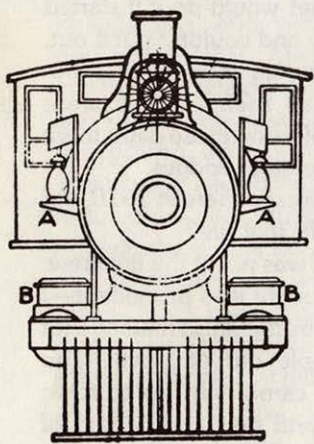
The population was rather sparse out here. Well, it was when I come out in 1910, that year of the big fire.<sup>7</sup> Just to show you how sparse it was, I came out on the Northern Pacific Railroad, and during the 1910 fire, when I came through, the fire was burning right up to the edge of the ties. All they did was just hew a trail out for this Northern Pacific Railroad, and there was timber right up to the tracks. Well, you can imagine what that would do if it started burning and couldn’t put it out. It’d burn all their bridges because all their bridges were made of wood those days; there were no steel bridges. *When you got here in 1910, did you fight that fire?*

No, I was not in the fire crew. Oh, I fought it to this extent—I was instrumental in hauling a lot of people out of Bovill. The woods came right up to town there, and they were afraid of getting burnt out. So we took a train in there with cars, and we took and brought all those people down to Potlatch, the whole darn caboodle, with all the clothes they had and everything





*Railroad construction near Deary.*



*The Potlatch depot.*



else. But they finally got it stopped. Wallace was not so fortunate—that thing burned up there. But as they skimmed off the cream, that is get the logs that were close to our railroads and our highways, as we got going back further and further for our timber, that fire hazard as far as towns were concerned was over with. There was nothing left to burn. So the present population don't know anything about those things, because there's not such a hazard now.

The W. I. & M. was an entirely separate corporation from the lumber company. There was no connection between 'em at all. Well, there was a connection in that the lumber company paid for the building of it and then took stock and bonds for their expenditure, so they owned the stock and bonds of the railroad company. But we had to operate under the rules of the Interstate Commerce Commission, the same as any other railroad. And of course, that was one of the things they finally had to find out. And the hard way. I'll cite one illustration. We had a superintendent to start with. He wanted to go farmin', and he bought a farm up around Harvard. And built a house and barns and everything else, and the Interstate Commerce Commission came in there one day and says, "What are you gonna do about this? The old man's shippin' stuff up there free." So, he was canned. Of course, I think perhaps in the early years, the first couple of years, there was a lot of that stuff done. "It's our railroad; we can do what we want with it."

But they soon found out they couldn't do that with the railroad.

They didn't know their stuff. For instance, we didn't have through rates with anybody. We'd haul lumber from Potlatch to Palouse, or Potlatch to Bovill, and turn it over to these other railroads. But that wasn't the scheme of things, and we finally got rates to apply from Potlatch, the same as they applied from any place else. Then we'd get part of the division of the haul on it, money. We had to work with the big roads, and in order to work with the big roads, you have to have somebody that knows what it's all about.

The first railroad that was friendly to us at all was finished about the same time we were. It was the old Inland Electric out of Spokane. They came to Moscow through Palouse. It was an electric line; it was run very cheap, but they picked up a lot of traffic to turn over to these railroads in Spokane. We started playing ball with them. They connected with us at Palouse. And through them we got the Canadian Pacific Railroad to put through rates into Potlatch. The Canadian Pacific was glad to get traffic in Spokane to take clear to St. Paul—long haul. So we got through rates.

Well, it wasn't very long after that until we got through rates with the Great Northern via this electric line, and then pretty soon the Northern Pacific come in. "Yeah, we'd like to get in on this, too." And the next thing we know, the Union Pacific, through this electric line, wanted to get in on it, transfer 'em at Garfield. Then, about the

same time, the Milwaukee built west. And that really put these other railroads on a spot, because right away they built a spur from St. Maries to Elk River. That was right after we got the Elk River mill finished, and they was going to get a lot of lumber out of Elk River. They could get it all out of there, and they wanted some of Potlatch, too.

So, we were all getting quite a mess about that time. And everybody was offering everybody else everything he could think of, but we couldn't go for that. We had five routes that we shipped our lumber. Not many outfits have that—Canadian Pacific, Great Northern, Northern Pacific, Union Pacific and Milwaukee. And after we got all unscrambled, we divided that thing up even—20 per cent each way—of the competitive traffic.

You've probably heard of these terrific car shortages we had? Well, we never had any car shortage at Potlatch, not to amount to anything. Not even during World War I, for several reasons. We had a product that they wanted pretty bad at that time—we were cutting spruce for airplanes, we were under government contract, and we got cars. And with five roads competing for traffic, they were looking at the future, you know. If they could furnish us cars when we needed 'em, they might get some favors when things were better.

We at one time were going to build into Moscow. A matter of fact, I used to have the maps—I don't think I have them anymore—"Moscow and Eastern," Potlatch to Moscow. We wanted to get a connection with

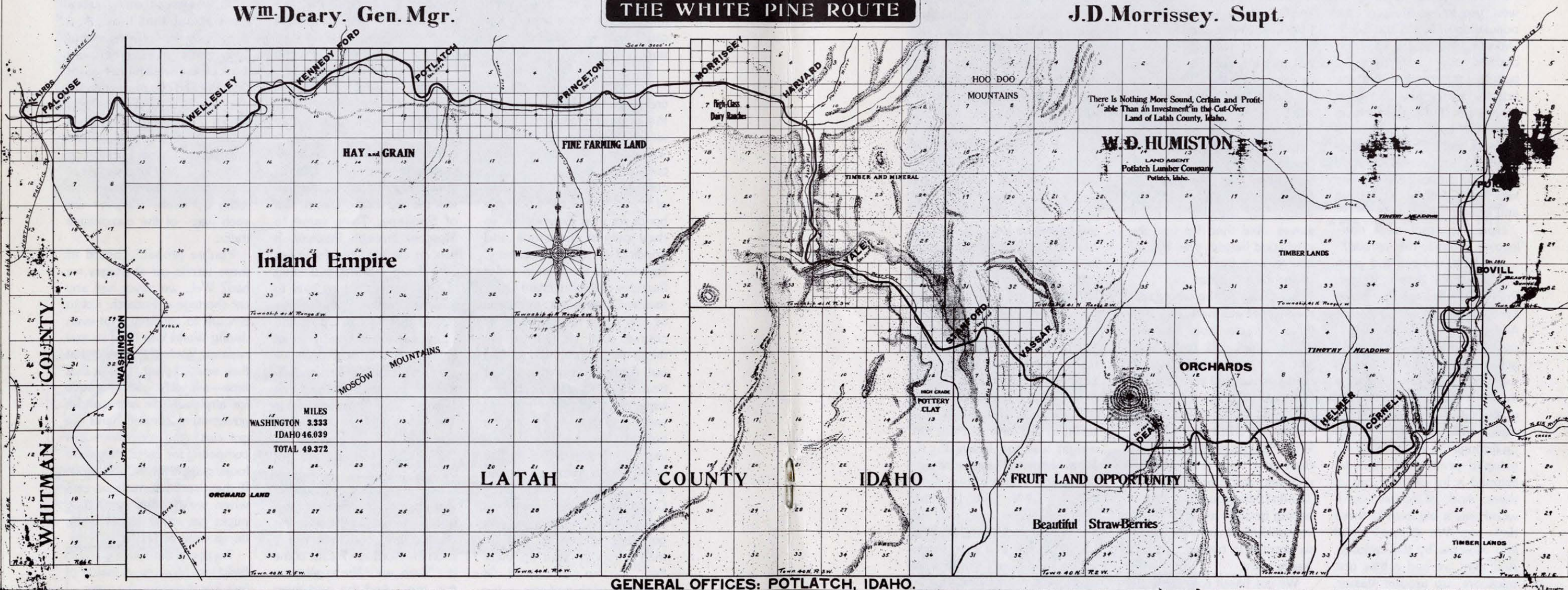


# WASHINGTON IDAHO & MONTANA RY.

**W<sup>m</sup>. Deary. Gen. Mgr.**

## THE WHITE PINE ROUTE

**J.D.Morrissey. Supt.**



**GENERAL OFFICES: POTLATCH, IDAHO.**



the Union Pacific; that's what we were looking for. And we had it all surveyed. But the Inland made it possible for us to get a connection through Garfield.

*Where did you find that most of the lumber went?*

When I first came here, most of our lumber went into building up North and South Dakota. That's when the Northern Pacific and Great Northern built west, you know. My gosh, the population of North and South Dakota was just leaps and bounds, you know, trying to populate that country. And the first few years they had good crops back there, and farmers made money. They built barns and silos and homes and everything. For two years after I came in, most of our stuff was shipped into North and South Dakota and eastern Montana.

*How important were non-logging goods to the railroad?*

We built and run the grain warehouse at Deary, Vassar, Princeton, Potlatch, Kennedy Ford, Wellesley and Palouse. And we run those warehouses ourselves because we couldn't get anybody to buy them. So we had to have them, because the land developed pretty fast up through those valleys. There wasn't heavy timber on lands up through the valleys; they developed pretty fast. And we shipped a lot of grain out of there. And, of course, cordwood was a big item in those days too. We shipped wood into Moscow by the carloads. And then we had a little ore, mica ore, up around Vassar, and a lot of poles, electric light poles, going into California from up around Bovill. And it got so they got quite a bit of

livestock to ship. And hay—by gosh, we shipped hay, well, shipped it clear over to this Carnation outfit over on the coast, you know, and that was alfalfa hay. And the timothy hay—we had to have a lot of timothy hay for our own consumption, because we had a lot of horses in the woods, and we had to feed those, and it took a lot of hay. The potatoes—we raised seed potatoes. See, these irrigated spuds, down around south Idaho, they're no good for seed. You have to get dryland potatoes for seed. So we raised dryland potatoes up here and shipped a lot of them down to south Idaho.

At one time, in that country between here and Colfax, we would ship 500 cars of wood a year. You can't believe that now, can you? Slabs of 16-inch wood, for burning in cook stoves. And then we had the cordwood besides that. But, of course, now trucks have come in and taken all that.

I re-ballasted the whole railroad while I was there. I brought in a contractor from Spokane and crushed rock for a year. And give the track a lift of so many inches and put new ballast under it. When it was built, they tried to get their rock for ballast as close as possible. Well, the closest they got was darn poor rock. It was a silica rock and didn't hold up at all. The first thing you know we was having trouble; we didn't have enough ballast under our rails if we wanted to operate fast and heavy trains.

We got basalt rock up there this side of Bovill. This stuff they got up at Yale that's—oh, gets it wet and pounding it into, under the ties, that'll disintegrate. And

the first thing you got is just kind of a soupy-like stuff. Same way with a big fill we had that went out. I went down into Palouse one day, and a section foreman called me up and said, "No trains today."

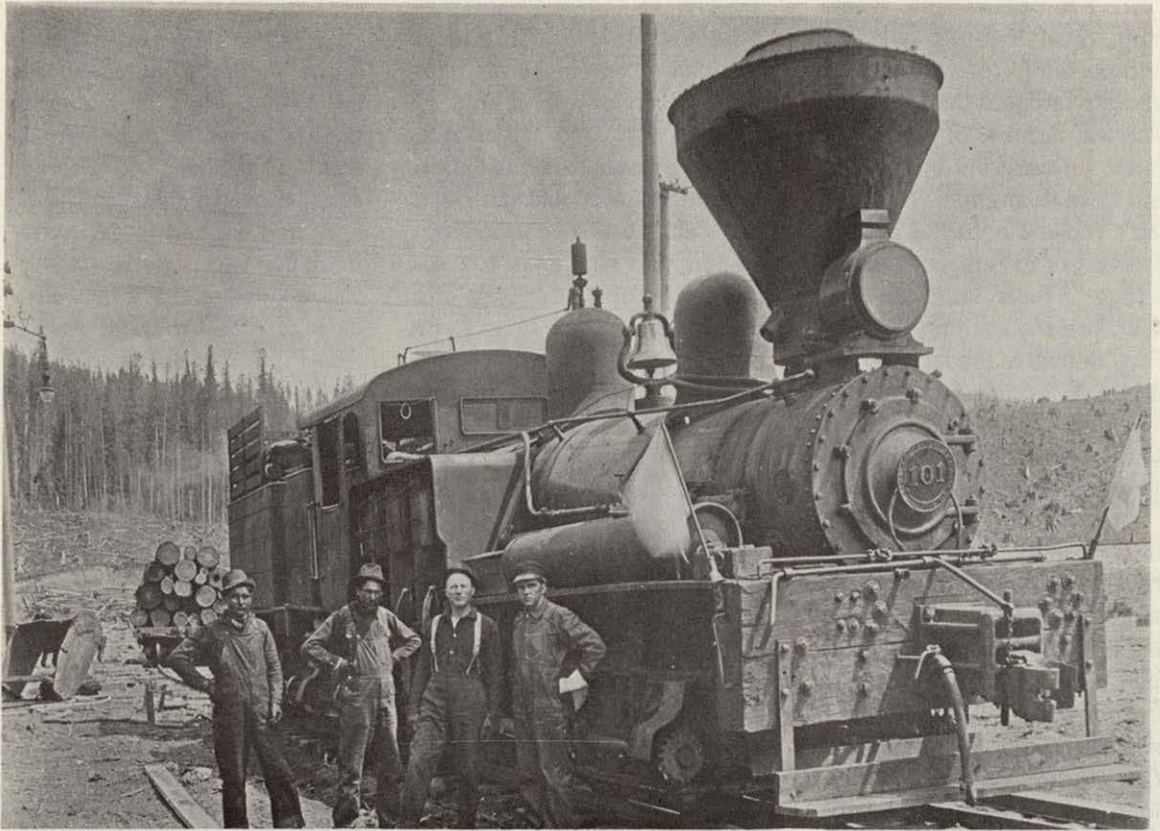
"Why?"

"Fill bridge number so-and-so slid out."

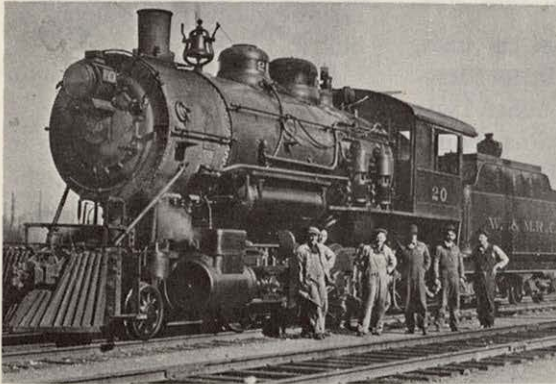
Well, before I was in charge we had a roadmaster; he was a civil engineer, too. And he decided that some of the bridges could be filled cheaper than renewed. And he talked the boss into it, and he filled 'em. There again he took his fill material as close as he could get it, y'know, and make it cheap. And he come into this silica again. And this was a bridge that was 80 feet high and 500 feet long. He filled it, and what happened, he had left the piling in the trestle and he filled it with dirt, and he put ballast on top of it, and he had a filled bridge. Fine, it looked good. Had a concrete culvert under it.

Over the years, as the snow fell and the rains came down to go on top of this thing, the ballast had let it through, let the water through. And this darn floor would hold that water like a pail. And it got to the point where it became saturated clear down to the base and the top weight was too heavy for it. What happened? Just went out. The whole damn works. Well, what to do! Ye gods! Had the sawmill to keep going and the woods department to keep going, so we put in a steam shovel and some dump cars and started filling with rock. It took two weeks to do it, but we did it, and the mill kept going. We didn't have to shut it down, because we had enough logs.





*A shay engine near Elk River, 1913.*



*Engine #20, 1917.*



*"The Longest Log Train in the World."*



*Engine #23 and crew on its last run.*



So, I re-ballasted the whole thing and rebuilt all the bridges—21 of them. A wooden bridge is only good for a certain number of years, you know, because the timber rots and loses its strength. And you can't replace a half a bridge; you've got to replace a whole bridge. These steel bridges now, there's nothing to that. They're built at the factory, and all you do is come down and set 'em down with a crane. But wooden bridge building was quite a science in the early days.

I rebuilt our bridges three times, I think, while I was up there. The big problem of rebuilding a bridge under operation is to keep it operating. You have to do certain things first, so that you can set a bridge on new pilings, and all that kind of thing. You preserve your specifications, so they don't change too much. You know what size timbers you have to have, and that's a steady file that you keep. Ties have to be of a certain size in order to run at a certain speed with a certain weight locomotive, and the same with your rail and all that kind of stuff. It's one of those things you have to know about, is all.

*Were you responsible for all the spur lines?*

No, no, just for the equipment, just for the locomotives. They built their own lines. There was not too much in the line of operation, mostly the maintenance more than anything else, because they were only in there a short time. They'd build a spur line up between two mountains, you know, and they'd log to the top of the mountain on both sides. Then they'd pull a line up, and put it down, up the other valley.

There was a couple of spurs that were in for quite awhile, four or five years, but most of them were only in for a short time, till they got that area logged out. And as a result, they built just a road that they could get over, that's all. It was a very slow operation, and very, very hazardous operation, because the tracks were in the mud in some places. And they couldn't afford to build a bridge across, and they devised methods to get across places like that. They had difficulties at certain times of the year when the weather was bad. It was entirely a different kind of railroading. But as far as the locomotives were concerned, that was our problem, to keep them in shape.

*The size of the trains is something I was wondering about. I saw a picture labeled "Longest Log Train in the World." What was the story on that particular train?*

Oh, that hundred car train, they just made that up for something to talk about. When I was operating, our trains would consist of about 60 cars. That was, in my opinion, a good operation. So you talk about a hundred cars—that was just a build up.

When we were changing air brakes on all our equipment, Purdue University was under contract and was making experiments for five years before they really solved the problem. And our problem in the early days—I'm talking about all railroads now—in the early days of railroading a train goes along, maybe 10 or 15 cars, had air brakes on it, works fine. And pretty soon the traffic got heavier, and they increased that to 20 cars to a train. And pretty

soon we got up to 100 cars to a train. When we got up there, we found we had trouble with our air. We couldn't get the same braking power on our rear of our train that we had in front. And it caused difficulty in operation, and we had to get somebody that was a specialist to devise air valves that could take care of that problem. And it took Purdue five years to do it. I don't think any one railroad would have been able to have done it. They knew what they wanted, but they were not equipped to make these experiments.

Later on Northern Pacific wanted to buy the W. I. & M. We were making money. And we could control our traffic better that way. The Northern Pacific would have bought it, traffic would have gone Northern Pacific. N. P. changed their minds a little too late. If they'd have been smart, they would've built it.

*How did it happen that you became general manager?*

I come down here to do a certain job; they come up to Spokane to get me and one thing led to another. The Interstate Commerce Commission come out and revalued all the railroads in the United States. And they had a crew of men, they sent 'em out and the railroad was supposed to furnish a certain number of men, too, and it took about six months to evaluate our railroad with all the details they wanted. And I got in on that, and finally I took the superintendent's job. And from then on I got to planning different things, and so they gave me the whole works. If it hadn't a been me, it'd of been somebody else because they had to



have somebody.

When I was in the East I had had so many different kinds of jobs in railroading, and for no particular reason I'd get tired of one place and go to another. I was an operator and a maintenance man both. That's the kind of a man you have to have on a shortline railroad for this reason: on a big railroad you'll find your heads have developed through certain channels. He might have been a traffic man or he might have been a mechanical man, but once they're in that line they usually stay in that groove. Whereas a shortline railroad has to have one person that has a lot of these experiences, because they can't hire a head for everything. And I was kind of lucky in a way that my work fit into what they needed here.

*What was your attitude as the general manager toward the people that worked for you?*

I never asked a man to do anything I couldn't do myself, I wouldn't do myself. I resolved I'd never criticize a man in front of other men. I had a crew of men that most of 'em never worked for anybody else in their life. I never had any trouble.

I think the big thing in being a supervisor of men is to know the job yourself. Men recognize that in a supervisor. If you don't know your job, why, some of the men on the job will be the first ones to find it out. And I never hesitated about taking advice from the men regardless of how lowly he was on the echelon. I learned somethin' everyday from somebody, you bet.

I was also vice president of the American Shortline Railroad Association. That took a

lot of time and traveling. What that is, well, there was 351 shortline railroads like this W. I. & M. All of them are owned by some big industry—the rubber industry, the steel works, or the Pullman people, or the mines, or other lumber companies, or what have you. They've all got a rich papa, so to speak. And most of them were prosperous, too, very much so. But as an individual, a shortline railroad don't have very much to say when they're talking to these big lines. But 351 of them combined into one organization, they do have a lot to say. So we belonged to that, and I eventually became vice president of it. That gave me a lot of experience, just a lot.

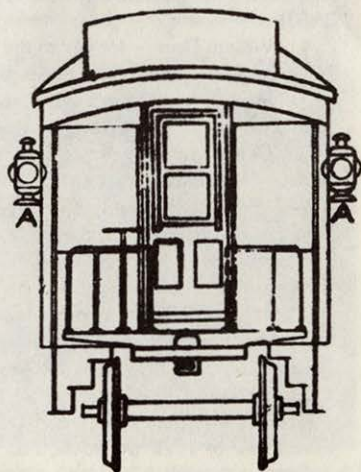
*Do you remember what Potlatch was like when you first came there, what it looked like to you, what the activity was like, what the feel of the place was?*

Well, it was pretty new then. There wasn't much entertainment. There were no automobiles and no good roads. We had to make our own entertainment. In the summertime we had four baseball teams. They were good ones, too. People took an interest in it. We conducted dances. We had an amusement hall. Oh, we had people come in and speak once in awhile, like, oh, political talks. Had Bill Borah<sup>8</sup> in a lot of times. And we divided the town up into departments, oh say, like the railroad, and the store, and the sawmill, and the lumberyard, and the planing mill. And each one of 'em was responsible for a dance once a week. Every Saturday night we had a dance, big dance. And each group would have to be

responsible for decorating the hall and furnishing and getting the music and all that kind of stuff. Those were the things we had to do ourself in order to keep the people entertained, and it was very successful. And we did that to keep the people happy and busy. And I think they were happy. I don't know if they would be now or not.

*What do you think the reason is they wound up selling the town to the people and ending the company town in Potlatch?*

Well, these sawmills were established to take care of a certain amount of standing timber. Now when Potlatch was set up, it was designed to operate for 50 years—had that much timber available, for 50 years. And that's the way it worked out. When the 50 years was up—why that's been a little while ago, of course, but they've been getting smaller and smaller all the time. Finally, they had to sell their town, and sell their railroad, and sell the store, sell everything, you know. One of these days, why it'll all be over, 'cause there'll be no timber to keep it going.





## end notes

1. In 1903 the Potlatch Lumber Company purchased the holdings of the Palouse River Lumber Company and in 1904 it purchased William Codd's Colfax, Washington sawmill and 7,040 acres of his timber lands along the Palouse and Potlatch Rivers. See *Spokane Spokesman-Review*, 30 March 1903; p. 4; and 13 September 1904, p. 5.

2. The residents of Palouse were most enthusiastic about the economic benefits the Potlatch Lumber Company would bring to their community. When the company asked for a railroad right-of-way, the *Spokane Spokesman-Review* recorded the response given at a local meeting: "We will give the right of way and depot grounds for the Potlatch Lumber Company's railroad" was the unanimous and rousing sentiment voiced by 300 business men at the special meeting of the Business Men's ball. The ball was crowded with men bubbling over with jubilant spirits at the thought of a railroad up the Palouse River" 10 March 1905, p. 14. No doubt many of the residents of the town were disappointed when the company chose to build a new mill and town at Potlatch rather than expand the existing mill at Palouse. The story, as recounted here by Gamble, is a part of Latah County oral tradition and was retold by several other people interviewed for the oral history project.

3. Frederick Weyerhaeuser united with other lumbermen in a timber conglomerate in the Midwest and by the 1890s his wealth rivaled that of John D. Rockefeller. In 1900 railroad magnate James J. Hill decided to retire \$8,000,000 worth of Northern Pacific Railway bonds by selling 900,000 acres of timber land in the Pacific Northwest. Weyerhaeuser's syndicate purchased all of the Northern Pacific property for six dollars an acre, with Weyerhaeuser himself providing a third of that price. A number of Weyerhaeuser subsidiaries were formed in the Northwest—including the Potlatch Lumber Company—and to the extent possible experienced men from Wisconsin and Minnesota were sent to the West to work in the mills. See Ralph Hidy, Frank Ernest Hill and Alan Nevins, *Timber and Men: The Weyerhaeuser Story* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963).

4. William Deary—for whom the town of Deary, Idaho is named—was the first general manager of the Potlatch Lumber Company.

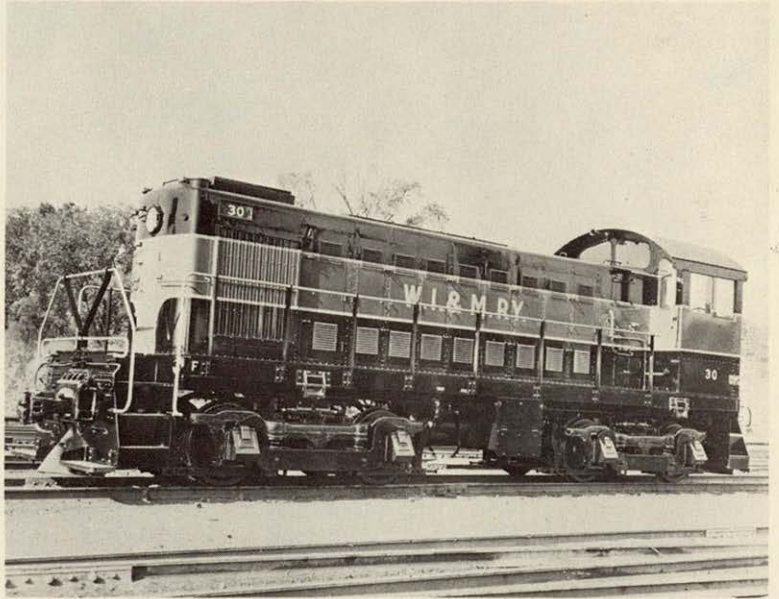
5. In addition to the mill at Potlatch, the lumber company built a large mill at Elk River, Idaho, and a transportation link was needed for that site as well.

6. Gamble here is referring to his future father-in-law. He was married after moving to Potlatch.

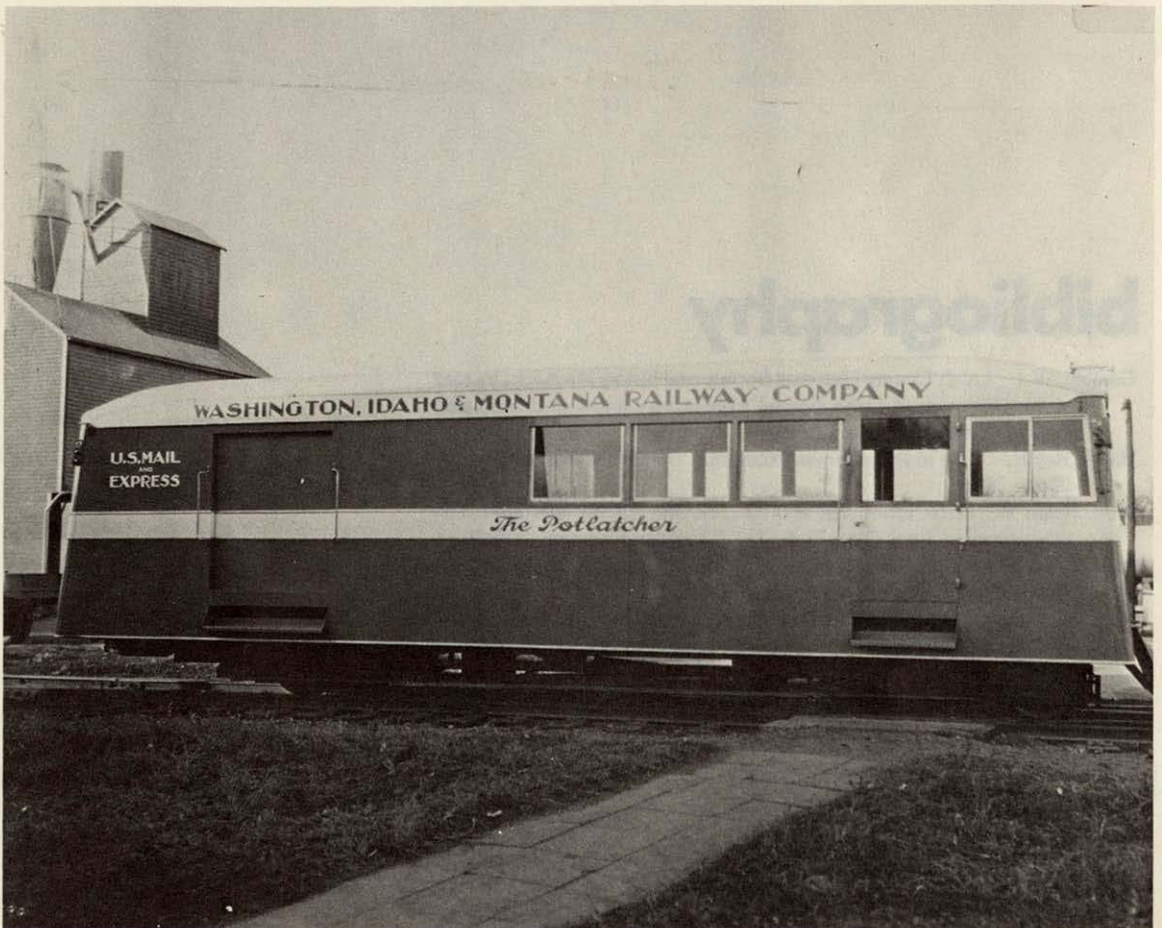
7. The Northwest suffered one of the worst droughts in its history in 1910. Forests were dry by early spring and the fire season was long. The first fires began in late April, and by June fires were burning in many areas in northern Idaho and western Montana. During the season, more than three million acres burned, culminating in the gigantic north Idaho fires of August 20 and 21 that spread clouds thousands of miles and have come to be called the "big burn." See Michael Lupinski, "The Year the West Burned," *American Forests*, April 1979; Julian Marshall, "The Idaho Fire of 1910," *The Pacific Northwesterner*, Summer 1963; and Stan Cohen and Don Miller, *The Big Burn: The Northwest's Forest Fire of 1910* (Missoula, Mt.: Pictorial Histories Publishing Company, 1978).

8. William E. Borah, United States Senator from Idaho, 1907-1940.





*Diesel engine #30, late 1950s.*



*"The Potlatch," a streamlined passenger, mail and express car, was made especially for the W. I. & M. It was in operation until 1955, at which time the government discontinued the railroad's mail contract and it became a concession stand for the Potlatch Clover 4-H.*





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## photo credits

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