

Mooberry Tells of First Plank Road from Portland and First Railroad

By Lester Mooberry, Hillsboro Argus on April 21, 1960



One thing the early farmers in Washington County needed a market for was their crops. The opening of the plank road from Portland out into the valley (Tualatin Valley) in 1851 gave them a greater chance to dispose of their commodities than they had before this time. Portland was not a large city and could not absorb everything, but Portland grew, the number of families grew and they had growing appetites that were satisfied on things grown here in the valley. Ships waited in the harbors for the grain and lumber to be brought to them.

Dairymen living within city limits or near it could dispose of their milk daily, but those living out in the valley had to work their milk into butter or cheese to dispose of it. Fresh vegetables were not so fresh after a long dusty ride into

Portland.

Farmers Find Market



Such things as lumber and grain or livestock that could be driven made their way over the hills and found a market with little loss.

Many of the articles found in stores in the settlements were brought out from Portland by freighters and even the farmers making a trip to the city found it profitable to return with a load instead of an empty wagon.

This was the situation until the coming of the plank railroad in the early (18)70's. How thrilled the people were to watch it inch its way up the valley. It was a long hard process of grading, ballasting, laying ties, and rails, cutting through clay banks and clearing timber from the right of way. It was a Sunday diversion for the people to walk along the track as far as it had been completed. Finally it reached the small settlement where Cornelius now stands.

Three Tracks Laid



Three tracks were laid through the center of town (of Cornelius). One was the main track that could be continued on up the valley and the other two were side tracks. Colonel T.R. Cornelius came in from his farm on the north plains and opened a store and built a warehouse beside the spur track (right side of picture). Soon a lumber yard followed and long piles of wood, some to be shipped to Portland and some for wood burning locomotives that appeared on the track. Those who wished to ship flour or feed had freight cars sidetracked for them.

Build Section House

A water tower close beside the railroad at the west end of town and across the tracks they built a section house where they kept the tools and hand car. At the east side of town was the turn-table where the engine was turned around and headed back to Portland. Before long there was a depot and a freight depot place about the center of town. The telegraph operator also was the station agent and the postmaster and all of this was located at the depot. Cornelius was named for Colonel T.R. Cornelius and the people there must have felt that someday their village might become a city.

Talbot in Charge



Tom Talbot had charge of the upkeep of the railroad, section boss they called him, and had a group of Chinese immigrants working for him. The Chinese lived in a shack that stood near the former Sholes property.

We were appalled when we read of the automobile wrecks, the train wrecks, and the plane wrecks. There is such a terrible loss of life. Yet in the 50 years in which the trains passed through the town there were only three deaths due to train accidents. One death was that of a little girl killed while playing on the turn-table, another was of a small boy

killed while playing beside a flat car and the third was an elderly man while driving across the tracks at the west end of town. There was also a train wreck between Forest Grove and Dilley that resulted in deaths and several injuries.

Sport to Swing On

There were several instances that might have resulted in some form of injury or death. The young men used to think it sport to swing onto the steps of the cars and ride down the track a short distance before jumping off. Several were badly bruised in trying it. Some of the school children who crossed the tracks on their way to school had a game which they called, "beating the train" in which they would dash across the tracks before the train was pulling into the station. One ten year old boy was struck and his head badly cut. When his older brother gathered him up, he cried, "The darn thing nearly killed me!"

A lady was visiting in the south part of town one summer afternoon and on her way home found a string of flat cars standing on the tracks barring her way. Rather than wait for them to pull out, she climbed up one side and was just ready to climb down the other when the train gave a sudden start seating her safely, but very hard onto the floor of the car. She used her feminine prerogative and began to scream. It was some time before her plight was discovered and the brakeman who scolded her soundly and then had the train back up to let her get off.

Model T Gets Close Call

Another lady can possibly recall when she drove the family's Model T Ford, with the family in it, too close to the track and the car steps got caught in the bumper and took them down the track beside the train. Luckily no one got hurt.

We were at Aunt Beck Goodin's home one day when a long freight train rumbled by. When we could hear each other speak, I asked Aunt Beck if she had ever seen a wreck on the line. She said there was one that she knew of and it happened right there on their place.

It must have been 1878 or 1879 when it happened. In those days they often attached a passenger coach to a freight train and carried passengers up or down the line. Aunt Beck didn't see the wreck or hear the crash as she and her sister Mrs. Mary Porter of Gaston, were in school. Her sister Ruth was at home and when she heard the crash she ran outside to see what had happened and saw a passenger car standing on the track in front of the house. She ran out to the car and asked a man sitting by the window if anyone was hurt. He raised the window and she repeated her question. "No, you fool, why should anyone be hurt?" She told him to stick his head out the window and see for himself. He did so and let out an exclamation that sent all of the passengers scrambling out of the car.

Up the track a short distance, freight cars were lying on their sides beside the track and others were tilted at an angle. I asked Aunt Beck what had caused the wreck and she said, "A fat cow caused that wreck."

It was customary for people who lived in town to turn their cows loose to pasture along the streets and roadsides. A big fat cow belonging to the McCourt family, who lived in Cornelius, pastured her way down the road and down the lane leading to the railroad. She was evidently standing on the track when the engine struck her and pushed her up the track some distance. The fat from her body greased the rails all the way and when the engineer tried to stop the train, the backward force of the engine and cars in front and forward push of the cars in the rear cause the cars in the center of the train to buckle and topple over on their sides, breaking open and spilling their contents all about.

She said there was grain, feed, sugar, coffee, flour, and all sorts of groceries spilled out, which people began to gather up right away. One old Chinese man brought a big kettle which he filled up with sugar and hid in a clump of willows beside the track. Some boys saw him do it and later took the kettle of sugar and later they had a taffy pull that night.

One of the cars held a race horse that was being shipped up the valley. The car was standing on a decided tilt and all that was keeping the horse from falling backward was his halter rope, which was tied to the end of the car.

The first thing the men did was to get the horse out safely. The horse was not injured, but quite likely had to “catch the next freight.”

For days the people came not only to see the wreckage but to search among the debris to see what they could find.

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