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Railroad Promotion of the Evergreen State

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Let me ask: "How far is an hour?" The question was probably never phrased quite that way in the 1880s and 1890s, but perceptive Washingtonians of the era were likely to think about questions of time and space as never before. That was because the new railroad technology shrank space and redefined time as never before.

In the fall of 1883 the nation's second transcontinental railroad was completed. It linked Puget Sound and the Mississippi Valley. Eighty years earlier, in the days of Lewis and Clark, a journey overland from St. Louis to the Columbia River country had been measured in months and even years. People at that time traveled at the same speed their ancestors had traveled for millennia—that is, as fast as a human, horse, or canoe could travel. In the 1840s a journey from Missouri to the Pacific Northwest by covered wagon still required four to six months.

Isolation was a fact of life in the far Northwest, or Oregon Country, in the 1840s. The region's isolation was so palpable to Euramerican settlers that on occasion it became emotionally oppressive and perhaps even psychologically debilitating for those accustomed to metropolitan lifestyles. We have the example of the Reverend Gustavus Hines, who arrived in the Oregon Country from the East Coast in 1840. Hines traveled by one of the fastest means possible at the time, departing New York City on October 9, 1839, sailing around Cape Horn of South America, and reaching the Columbia River on May 21st of the following year. His shipboard journey lasted almost eight months.

Three years later, on a lonely stretch of the Columbia near the Grand Dalles, Hines paused from his missionary labors long enough to write a lament for himself in his state of isolation. To the modern ear the following lengthy quotation may sound maudlin, but Hines's words reflect accurately the age in which they were written and thus help us appreciate the fact that questions of time and space were no trifling matter for pioneer Euramericans in the Oregon Country:

> *I thought of my beloved parents from whom I had not heard for years; of the tears they shed when last I saw them, of receiving the parting benediction, and of the anxiety they must still feel, if alive, for their wandering son. I thought of all my former associates, of brothers and sisters, and early school mates, and Christian friends, with whom I had taken sweet counsel, and walked to the house of God, and who, if they had not forgotten me, would ask, "Where is he? and what is his employment." I thought of everything of interest in my native land; of bustling cities, with wheels rattling and towns, with their splendid turnpikes and McAdamized roads; of railroad cars and steamboats; of temples erected to the God in heaven; the toll of chiming bells as they informed the waiting thousands that the time of worship had arrived; of crowded assemblies listening to the messengers of Jesus; and of saints rejoicing, and altars thronged with mourning*

> *penitents. Continuing these reflections until my mind experienced a kind of abstraction from the objects surrounding me, I fancied myself really amidst the scenes, the contemplation of which had produced this pleasing illusion, and starting up I found myself surrounded with the stillness of death, save the murmuring of the turbid waters of the Columbia that rolled beneath where I sat. Contrasting the land which had passed before my mental vision with that in which I felt myself a voluntary exile, I exclaimed, how changed the scene! This, thought I, is truly a land of darkness.*

The lengthy journey across the United States to the Oregon Country in the 1840s was indeed analogous with the "voluntary exile's"—an interesting choice of words—virtual death, and not just for the Reverend Hines and those who traveled by sailing ship around Cape Horn but also for the thousands of pioneers who left parents and friends "back east" and undertook the four- to six-month journey west along the Oregon Trail.

The 2,000-mile trek to Oregon was the longest overland journey American settlers attempted. Some accounts claim that 10 percent of the travelers perished along the way, mainly from disease and accident. "The world's longest graveyard" was one way to describe the Oregon Trail, with one body, on average, buried about every 80 yards. Swollen rivers, quicksand, rattlesnakes, and accidents occasionally claimed the life of an overlander; heavy wagon wheels or oxen hooves occasionally crushed children. However, the number one killer along the trail was disease. And if overlanders survived the daily hazards of the trail and reached Oregon, they still had to deal with the overwhelming sense of isolation engendered by that distance from home.

Suppose a young couple reached Oregon and wanted to send news of their safe arrival (or mere survival) back to their parents in the East. There was no mail service between the Oregon Country and the rest of the world throughout most of the 1840s. In fact, the nearest post office was in Weston, Missouri, 2,000 miles distant. On occasion, an eastbound traveler would carry letters to Weston and post them there. Incidentally, when the letter finally reached its destination several months later, the receiver paid the delivery cost, for there were no official postage stamps until the 1850s. A common complaint among pioneer settlers of the Pacific Northwest was poor mail service.

Federal officials finally contracted for mail delivery between the Atlantic and Pacific coasts in 1847. Letters headed west traveled by ship to Panama, across the isthmus, and then by ship up the Pacific Coast. In this way the first six sacks of mail reached Astoria's newly opened post office, the distribution point for Oregon (which at the time included future Washington). From Astoria mail traveled inland by canoe and horseback. Mail and other forms of communication within the sprawling region and with the East improved only gradually during the decade of the 1850s.

The opening of a 48-mile-long railroad across the Isthmus of Panama in 1855—together with connecting mail ships—radically reduced travel time between the opposite coasts of the United States to approximately 25 days. Later in the 1850s the first transcontinental stagecoach line opened between St. Louis and San Francisco.

At the decade's end, in mid-March 1859, Portland's few hundred residents learned for the first time that Oregon had become the 33rd state. President James Buchanan had signed the legislation a month earlier, on February 14, and the welcome news traveled across the continent in the fastest manner possible—by stagecoach from St. Louis, across the desert Southwest to San Francisco, and north from there aboard the steamship *Brother Jonathan*.

Communication links between East and West improved significantly the following year when Pony Express service began between St. Joseph, Missouri, and Sacramento, California, on April 3, 1860. It now took 10 days to deliver a letter between those two points. Mail by Pony Express cost five dollars an ounce, but the elapsed time was still ten days faster than the overland mail route through the desert Southwest. A transcontinental telegraph line was completed to California in October 1861, but news from the East still traveled from San Francisco north to Oregon and Washington no faster than a steamship or stagecoach.

Finally, on March 5, 1864, the first telegraph message from California (and points east) reached Portland; the *Oregonian* published a celebratory extra with news from New York only 20 hours old. Three days later the mayors of the two Portlands—Oregon and Maine—exchanged special telegraph messages. For the Pacific Northwest, an era of isolation had ended, but until a transcontinental railroad reached California five years later, it still took a month for people and freight to travel between the East Coast and Puget Sound.

Completion of a transcontinental railroad in 1869 further reduced travel time across the United States to approximately five days. Likewise, the stepped-up pace of railroad construction in Washington in the 1880s and '90s radically reduced the time it took to travel between once-distant communities within the territory and state. Plodding journeys that once required days and weeks were shortened to a matter of hours. "How far is an hour?" For most Washingtonians in the 1880s and '90s, the answer depended on where the newly built railroad lines ran.

In fact, it could be said that the future itself depended on where those rail lines ran. Well before the Northern Pacific's transcontinental line was completed in 1883, settlements on Puget Sound vied to be selected as the new railroad's Pacific terminus. The winning community knew its future would be bright. East of the Cascades, entirely new settlements arose in anticipation of the long-promised rail link. Spokane was one such example.

Even as Washingtonians contemplated the evolving meaning of distances measured in terms of weeks, days, and hours of travel, the railroads gave added emphasis to a heretofore little-used measure of time: the minute. The glory days of the stagecoach in the 1860s and '70s had not required timekeeping accurate to the minute, nor had the sailing vessels and steamships that connected Puget Sound to the rest of the United States and the world. For stagecoach travel, it was good enough to think of time in fairly flexible terms that seem strange to people today.

The June 17, 1866, issue of the *Idaho World* explained to readers how frontier communities reckoned the passing hours during the era dominated by steamboat and stagecoach transportation, when idiosyncratic and imprecise ¬timekeeping served as a metaphor for an age far simpler than the modern one defined by railroad travel:

> *The difference in time between Idaho City and New York is about two hours and forty minutes; between San Francisco and this place about thirty-five minutes. When it is 12 o'clock at Idaho City it is about twenty minutes to 3 o'clock in New York and twenty-five minutes past 11 o'clock in San Francisco.*

Safe railroad operations required time standards accurate to the minute. "About time" was not precise enough to ensure the safety of passengers aboard a speeding train. Unfortunately, as American railroad lines grew larger and more complex, timekeeping became an increasingly confusing matter. Official times observed in major cities often varied by several minutes. Railroads finally decided to take charge of the matter and adopted uniform time standards—the

four time zones we know today—and to implement those on a single day—the "day of two noons." In the Pacific Northwest this landmark day occurred in late 1883.

The steady tick-tock beat and mellow chiming of the depot clock became a defining sound of the new railroad era, an era that prized standardization and regularity. It was one of many such sounds. Bells rang aboard locomotives as they approached a station, and inside the ticket office a telegraph sounder clicked commands reduced to a staccato of dots and dashes. On the station platform, a uniformed conductor shouted "All Aboard" to any last-minute passengers before visually signaling an engineer to proceed. The dots and dashes made sense to a trained ear, and railroaders speaking to one another often used words that were part of a distinctive work lingo to distinguish themselves from less favored mortals.

W. Milnor Roberts, a Northern Pacific official, gave railroad sounds a distinctive new twist when he sought to describe diverse development activities in eastern Washington. Using language reminiscent of the Reverend Gustavus Hines contemplating his isolation on the Columbia River in 1843, Roberts's writing in 1878 recalled the scene in eastern Washington when he had first crossed it on horseback a decade earlier. At that time he found only one ranch along the road between Waitsburg and Lake Pend Oreille, and not a single settlement. Ten years later he saw "continuous fences" stretching 30 miles from Walla Walla to Dayton, and wheat fields extending as far as his eye could see. The road was "almost choked with two- and four-horse teams hauling through six inches of dust to Walla Walla to be shipped over Dr. [Dorsey] Baker's narrow gauge railroad" and then by the Oregon Steam Navigation Company's steamboat and rail portage system to Portland and Astoria.

Roberts recalled that during an earlier encampment on the Touchet River, "no sound of church bell or factory bell or stage coach horn with six prancing horses, as now, then reached our ears." He now wished that a telephone line connected Dayton, Washington, with Northern Pacific headquarters at 23 Fifth Avenue in New York "so that you might hear the difference in the sound of things at least." More commonly, people described development activity in terms of the changes they saw on all sides.

Railroads reshaped the landscape of Washington and the far Northwest in many different ways. First was the all-important matter of redefining spatial relationships in terms of how much farther people and freight could travel in an hour. It is a cliché to say that railroads shrank the world, but it is also very true. They also redefined long-standing spatial relationships in terms of gateway cities. For several decades, at least since Lewis and Clark set off in 1804, the city of St. Louis had taken a special and proprietary interest in the Oregon County. It was truly the gateway to the West, the port city from which steamboats beginning in the 1860s could travel up the Missouri River as far as Fort Benton, Montana. There was no better waterway leading west.

There is a good reason why one county in Washington and one in Oregon, as well as the community of Fort Benton, memorialize Thomas Hart Benton, United States senator from Missouri. For three decades Benton was a leading advocate on Capitol Hill for good transportation links ¬between St. Louis and the Columbia River region. This was to be the fabled "Passage to India." Yet, when the Pacific railroad was actually built, upstart Chicago—and not St. Louis—became the modern gateway to the West.

Railroads also transformed how people perceived the western landscape. When the Civil War Congress in 1864 sought to launch the Northern Pacific Railroad by granting it an enormous swath of federal land extending, in checkerboard fashion, from Minnesota to Puget Sound, the

land was not highly esteemed by most Americans. Philadelphia banker Jay Cooke devoted so much effort to making Northern Pacific land attractive to prospective investors that the Northern Tier became caricatured as "Jay Cooke's banana belt." After Cooke, legions of promoters continued the campaign to make Northern Tier lands appealing.

There was for many years an unfortunate tendency to treat railroad pamphlets as crude propaganda and, if collected, to treat them as ephemera hardly worthy of scholarly study. But the distinctive promotional pamphlets surely number in the hundreds, if not thousands, and some had print runs of 10,000 copies or more. Many of them ended up being distributed in remote parts of Europe in the local language. Boosters distributed others to farmers at county fairs in the Midwest. The brochures covered a seemingly boundless range of topics—from farming the Great Plains to hunting for fossils beneath the High Plains of Wyoming. Many railroad pamphlets promoted settlement while others promoted tourism. Both involved attempts to construct new, popular interpretations of the western landscape by making new destinations appear attractive and appealing. Part of the appeal was how dramatically railroads had changed the distance that could be covered in an hour.

Yet another significant set of railroad pamphlets devoted itself to the travel experience itself. That is, they directed passenger attention to the elegance of their accommodations or to various railroad safety measures put in place to ensure accident-free travel. Some travel pamphlets provided running commentary on the landscapes sweeping past the car windows. When trackside settlements were still new, every passing passenger was a potential resident or a settler on the surrounding farm and ranch land. Rail brochures recognized that fact.

Once again, this was an opportunity for railroad companies to interpret landscapes that possessed little meaning for most non-Native American observers and travelers. In some cases the railroads formally admitted that the land traversed by their tracks was not particularly appealing to settlers—as in the dry coulees of eastern Washington through which tracks of the Northern Pacific ran; instead, would-be settlers were directed to the agrarian paradise just over the horizon in the fertile Palouse country. Clever wordsmiths turned seemingly worthless land into either new Gardens of Eden or into freaks and oddities of nature (such as the geysers and mud pots of Yellowstone). These became America's answer to the imposing castles and cathedrals of Europe—the invented, "must-see" attractions for tourists of the West.

Railway officials reinforced the elitist perception that mountain scenery was universally appealing to travelers. The Milwaukee Road once hired Seattle commercial photographer Asahel Curtis to provide photographs for a new brochure it planned to issue—but not just any photographs. As much as possible, the railroad intended for its premier passenger train between Chicago and Puget Sound to cross the Great Plains at night and various mountain ranges by day. The expansive Great Plains, railroad executives clearly seemed to indicate, were much too dull, lifeless, and unappealing to the average traveler, while mountains must naturally command their attention. Great Northern Railway officials commissioned paintings of mountain landscapes in Montana and Washington, while the Santa Fe did likewise for high country in New Mexico and Arizona. Neither railroad hired artists to glorify the scenery of the Great Plains.

Nightfall created a problem for observers of passing scenery, but railroads on occasion added a spotlight to one of their nocturnal passenger trains to showcase the landscape. For a brief time in 1913 the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul equipped its "Fast Mail" across Wisconsin and Minnesota with a hefty marine searchlight that beamed "a stream of light" for a distance of three miles. "The searchlight is on the observation platform, and is in [the] charge of an

experienced operator. It can be swayed 90 degrees from right to left and 45 degrees upward. This road parallels the Mississippi River for over one hundred miles, and the illumination of the scenes along the river banks, the boats, passing trains, etc., will be an amusing feature of a trip on this train." Such experiments were never particularly successful.

It seems obvious that promotional pamphlets are as much an example of flexed corporate muscle as the familiar political and economic abuses attributed to railroad companies during the Gilded Age. Students of history are familiar with dimensions of railroad power in the late 19th and early 20th centuries: that was the heyday of rebates, special secret rates, and distribution of free travel passes to influential individuals. Through their clever words, coupled with visually arresting illustrations, railroad promotional pamphlets encouraged tourists and would-be settlers to perceive landscapes of the West in ways approved by the railroad companies.

Popular writer Stewart Holbrook recalled that the railroad booster pamphlets he had read as a young Bostonian in the early 1900s "somehow left the impression that one could have a decent living in Oregon and Washington simply by eating the gorgeous scenery." Indeed, railroad promotional brochures for Hood River, Oregon, and other Pacific Northwest orchard communities featured life-size representations of locally grown fruit on their covers, all in luscious color. The meaning was clear, and so too was that of a Milwaukee Road promotional brochure that featured on its front cover an illustration of a farmer plowing gold coins from the fertile soil of Montana.

"How far is an hour?" The juxtaposition of time and space is particularly appropriate to the way railroads redefined everyday life in Washington during the 1880s and ’90s. In fact, it might be argued that in Washington and other Northern Tier states, modern space as understood by people in these various locales is primarily a product of several decades of railroad promotional efforts in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

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