RAILROAD LOGGING AT KIRK

By Jack Bowden

Southern Pacific's California Northeastern Railroad reached Klamath Falls, Oregon in 1909 and within less than ten years several large lumber companies had become established and the area's infant timber industry had grown to such an extent that the city was considered the pine lumber capital of the world. During the nineteen-twenties and thirties, Klamath Falls had the distinction of being the second largest shipping point in the state of Oregon, it's volume exceeded only by that of Portland. More rail freight moved in and out of Klamath Falls, during this period, than any other station between Sacramento and Portland. Klamath pine lumber was known throughout the world for it's high quality, being light, strait grained and almost completely free of knots. It was especially well suited for the making of wooden boxes which were in such great demand up until the close of the second world war. For this reason a large proportion of the output of the local sawmills was converted to box shook. There were over 40 lumber mills cutting lumber in the Klamath Basin during those years, and at least a dozen of these also operated box factories. The box plant of the Ewauna Box Company, in Klamath Falls was the largest such plant in the entire world.

It took a lot of raw material to keep all those mills humming and most of the timber consumed during those early years was obtained from government timberlands on the Crater and Fremont National Forests and the Klamath Indian Reservation. Kirk, a station at the north end of the Southern Pacific's Klamath Falls Branch, was located in the very heart of this vast forestland and for twelve years, from 1917 until 1929, most of the output of the area's mills was manufactured from timber cut within a few miles of this station. Located on the Klamath
Indian Reservation, 40 miles north of Klamath Falls, the site had originally been known as Kirkford, named for a member of the Klamath Tribe who had a land allotment in the area and a nearby crossing of the Williamson River. When the Southern Pacific established its station there, in 1911, the name was shortened to Kirk, a name that the postal department also adopted when a post office was established, a few years later. Kirk itself was never a very large town, consisting of a hotel, two stores, a combination garage and filling station, and a school in addition to a number of dwellings. It served mainly as the transportation center for the area, both for passenger and freight, there being no less than seven lumber companies with camps in the surrounding area and logging railroads which converged on the Southern Pacific at or near Kirk.

To say that Kirk was a busy station would be an under-statement. Pelican Bay, Algoma, Lamm, Modoc and Shaw-Bertram Lumber Companies all had private logging railroads that interchanged traffic with the S.P. at Kirk, as did the Ewauna Box Co. at Lumberton, six miles to the south. In 1925, Shaw-Bertram also built a line out of Warko, two miles south of Kirk. Each year, during the logging season, which usually ran from March through November, these little lines would inundate the small yard at Kirk with cars piled high with the cinnamon colored ponderosa and sugar pine logs.

There was never enough track space at Kirk, and the large number of cars arriving there each day would have taxed the capabilities of a much larger facility. The only holding tracks the S. P. had at Kirk were two sidings and the main line. In addition to the three S. P. tracks, each of the logging lines had a short auxiliary track, next to their main line, and that was it. Adding to the congestion created by the movement of loaded and empty log cars, was the arrival and departure of the daily turn around passenger train from Klamath Falls which had to turn its train and engine for the return trip. The situation was further aggravated for several weeks, twice each year, by the arrival and departure of a number of special livestock trains bringing sheep and cattle in the spring to feed on the lush grasses of the nearby Klamath Marsh and returning in the fall to haul the animals back to California for winter grazing. These trains would tie up the yard for hours, loading or unloading their livestock at the holding corrals, watering and turning their engines and switching their trains for the return to Klamath Falls.

As if all this were not enough, when construction resumed on the Natron Cut off, in 1923, Kirk became the home terminal for several work trains, which came and went daily. This not only meant an increase in
activity, but it also signaled the loss of one of the three tracks, because the main line, which had previously been used for the storage of cars, now had to be kept clear. There were a number of mishaps during this time and an S. P. work train engineer lost his life in a collision with a log train. In addition to all of this there was also a sawmill, built by the government to provide building material and employment for the Indians and this too had to be switched. Someone said that there was a whistle a minute at Kirk in those years, and it was probably not that great an exaggeration.

The S. P. of course, maintained a considerable presence at Kirk in those days. The railroad station was housed in an ancient box car body, set down along side the track, with a warehouse nearby in which groceries and other L. C. L. shipments for the camps could be left, until picked up by the crews from the logging trains. Also, near the depot was a small shelter where passengers could wait for the passenger train, which had a roof to protect them from the rain and snow, but lacked walls to keep out the cold and mosquitoes. There was a bunkhouse, several dwellings for company employees a large stock corral and the usual assortment of small auxiliary shanties and tool houses. A list of the many railroad employees would include telegraphers, section men, engine watchmen, car repairmen and a pumper, not to mention train and enginemen.

Timing of the arrival and departure of the log cars, both loaded and empty was of the utmost importance, due to the shortage of switching room and the limited turn around time for the cars. The car supply was predicated on a 48-hour turn around time and a breakdown at any point along the line meant that a woods crew was going to show up for work, only to find that there were no empty cars to be loaded. An article which appeared in the Klamath Herald about this time, illustrates the point quite well:

"When the wind blows in Klamath Falls, the Modoc Lumber Co. logging crew at Calimus Camp, east of Kirk, cannot work. The wind blows out of the west, causing the logs to pile up around the Big Lakes unloading area, and loaded cars of logs cannot be unloaded. If the cars cannot be unloaded, the S.P. can't pull the empty cars. If the S.P. has no empty cars they cannot send them to Kirk, and if there are no empties at Kirk, the logger cannot take them to Calimus Camp. If there are no empty cars at camp, Modoc loading crews cannot work."

A typical "Kirk Logger," in 1924 would have been powered by a Consolidation type engine with a wooden
caboose with a slant sided cupola bringing up the rear. It would have departed from Klamath Falls, running as train No.232 at mid-morning, behind No.42, the **Klamath Falls-Kirk Passenger**, with about thirty or forty empty log cars, picking up additional cars en route, at Chelsea, Algoma, Modoc Point and Pine Ridge. On leaving Pine Ridge, the train would have attained it's maximum length and might contain as many as 100 cars, which would have made it necessary to either add a helper engine or double up the ten miles of 0.8% grade to Kirk. At Lumberton, six miles north of Pine Ridge, some of the empty cars would be set out for Ewauna Box Company's railroad after which the balance of the train would be taken into Kirk and distributed among the interchange tracks of the five logging railroads.

Although all of the companies loaded their logs on S.P. cars, all cars were not created equal, and each company was assigned a certain group of cars for it's exclusive use. A single numeral was stenciled on the side of each car to indicate the company to which it had been assigned. This was a great aid to crews switching the cars helping to insure that the cars ended up on the right industry track. Most of the logging railroads also hauled logs for other companies at times so it was not unusual to have more assigned car pools than railroads.

A considerable amount of switching was involved in making up the train at Kirk for the return trip to Klamath Falls,
assembling the cars from the five logging lines and switching out cars that were considered unsafely loaded and must be returned to the shipper for reloading. Once underway, the return trip to Klamath Falls would be much like the trip out, only in reverse, picking up more logs at Lumberton and then peddling loaded cars at the five intermediate stations and taking the balance of the train into Klamath Falls. An additional stop would be made at Warko to allow the trainmen to set up retainers for the descent to Pine Ridge. As the logging season progressed and log shipments began to exceed 100 cars per day a second Kirk Logger would be established. During the winter months activities at Kirk virtually ceased as the camps closed and the loggers moved back to town for the winter. The lumber companies would take advantage of the lull to do the annual maintenance on their mills and equipment and many of the little logging engines would be sent to town for overhaul and heavy repairs. The S. P. established a special rate of $1.06 cents per mile for the movement of these locomotives which applied either to an engine moving under it's own power or dead in a train. The turn around passenger train would be cut back to two or three trips per week, or perhaps reduced to a mixed train for a time and the Kirk Logger would be pulled off, altogether.

Early in February articles would begin to appear in the Klamath Falls newspapers speculating about the opening of the camps, as reporters snatched at every rumor making the rounds. When, at last, one of the companies officially set a date and announced the opening of the first camp, it was big news and would warrant a large block headline on page one of the paper. By the end of the 1929 season, all of the companies with the exception of Forest Lumber Co. (Formerly Modoc Lumber Co.) had closed down their operations at Kirk and moved on to new locations. Although logs would continue to move to Klamath County mills by rail, for the next sixty years, never again would so much logging activity be concentrated in such a small area. Forest Lumber Company held on until their mill at Pine Ridge burned in 1939 after which their trackage at Kirk was taken up.

Nothing remains of the town or railroad facilities at Kirk today. Even the passing track has been taken up, and most of the crewmen who rumble by on the Union Pacific and Burlington Northern trains are completely unaware of what was once, "Busy Kirk."

Mr. Bowden, a member of our historical society, retired from the SP Railroad after 43 years as a conductor. As a child he lived in Kirk and other railroad logging areas. He is the author and co-author of two books about railroading, to be released later this year.
Unidentified (possibly Algoma) logging camp near Kirk in the 1920 period.

Algoma's camp cookhouse near Kirk in 1924.

Scene at Kirk, Oregon, some twelve miles north of Chiloquin, during its boom days around the 1920 period. Shown are the Kirk Store (left) and Hotel Kirk. Nothing remains today.
KLAMATH COUNTY MUSEUM FOUNDATION

MEMORIALS 2000

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A. R. 'Bud' Cheyne
Richard 'Dick' Meeker
Winston H. Patterson

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Irene Currin
Jeane MacBeth
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Van and Gwen Best
Carole Childs (Crendorff)
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KLAMATH COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

ANNUAL REPORT
2000

Beginning balance 1 January 2000 $ 5,923.65

Income
Checkbook interest $ 63.71
Copies 104.52
Dues 896.00
Trumpeter 21.00
VKM dividends 68.79

Expenses
Copy machine contract 450.00
Oregon registration 10.00
Postage 33.00
Postal permit 100.00
Printing membership cards 40.95
Projects - Reader's Digest 41.90
Baldwin piano casters 168.00
Awning fund 200.00
TV set 300.00
Trumpeter 127.90

Ending balance 31 December 2000 5,604.92

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Science Saturdays

Radical Raptors
What are raptors? They are hawks, eagles, falcons, harriers, osprey, owls and even vultures.
Learn about the world of raptors and why raptors are important.
Build a collaborative nest and learn to draw your favorite bird of prey.
Grades 7-12.
February (Saturdays) 3, 10, 17, 24 $20 1-2 p.m.
March (Saturdays) 3, 10, 17, 24 $20 1-2 p.m.

"Hawk" is a general term used to describe the entire group of diurnal ("active by day") predatory birds. World wide there are approximately 270 species of carnivorous birds that comprise the order Falconiformes—the scientific name for hawk—all are classified as birds of prey, or

RAPTORS.

Mammals
Choose a mammal from our wildlife collection and create a wildlife fact journal with drawings. Build an imaginary futuristic mammal out of clay. Grades 4-6.
February (Saturdays) 3, 10, 17, 24 $20 11:30-12:30 p.m.
March (Saturdays) 3, 10, 17, 24 $20 11:30-12:30 p.m.

Wooly Mammoth

Bugs and Butterflies
Discover the world of insects and butterflies from the museum’s collections. See live bugs in action. Learn how to create a bug design through printmaking. Hand build out of clay your favorite bug. Grades 1-3.
February (Saturdays) 3, 10, 17, 24 $20 11:00-12:00 p.m.
March (Saturdays) 3, 10, 17, 24 $20 11:00-12:00 p.m.

Science Saturday Sign-Up

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Register early; classes will fill up fast!

Klamath County Museums

1451 Main Street
Klamath Falls, OR 97601
Phone: 541-883-4208
Fax: 541-883-5170
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Klamath County Historical Society

Editor's Page - Susan Rambo, Editor

Dues are due in January! If you look on your mailing label you will see an entry above your name. A date entered indicates you are paid through that year. Initials indicate you are receiving a complimentary issue or are a Life Member.

Paid up members are entitled to a 10% discount at our Museum Gift Shop. We have one of the best selections of local history books, T-shirts, caps, mugs, bookmarks, cards, videos, jewelry, Oregon foods, Victorian greeting cards, Klamath Falls' souvenirs, Christmas ornaments and local artist's commissioned works, just to name a few items. Think of the museum when doing your gift shopping!!

Be sure to call Anne Federhart, our Sunshine Lady, if you hear of anyone who is ill. Her number is 541-884-5475.

Meetings are held the 4th Thursday of the month — with some exceptions. See schedule or call 883-4208. We meet at the Klamath County Museum meeting room, 1451 Main St., Klamath Falls, Spring Street entrance.

Welcome new member: Ann Hawkins

Marianna Bridges, a retired teacher and member of our organization, presented our program in October. She had a wonderful slide show and narration about the Klamath Indians and their travels throughout the basin during the year. In November we held our Annual Meeting/Potluck. Election of officers was postponed until January, as the Nominating Committee was still working on a slate of nominees.

Thank you to all who submitted your Lava Bed experiences. They were great and will be printed in the March issue of the Trumpeter.

WANTED: A copy of Wigwam and Warpath by A.B. Meacham, copyright 1875. Call Susan Rambo at 541-882-8853.

2001 Meetings
January 25  2 p.m.
February 22  2 p.m.
March 22  2 p.m.
April 26  7:30 p.m.
May 24  7:30 p.m.

Membership Information

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Make your dues payable to:

KLAMATH COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

and mail to or drop off at:

Klamath County Museum, 1451 Main Street, Klamath Falls, OR 97601