The Tacoma Eastern Railroad— Linking Puget Sound and Mount Rainier National Park

By Michael Sullivan

THE CITY OF Tacoma was born, plain and simple, with the coming of the railroad. When the Northern Pacific railroad, chartered by Abraham Lincoln in 1864, selected an ending point on Pacific Coast saltwater, the city that flowered was Tacoma. Some 125 years ago the decision to bring a second transcontinental rail line to the Pacific Coast affected a relatively few people: a resident population of unsuspecting Native Americans, a handful of settlers and adventurers, and a few eager land speculators and opportunists living along Commencement Bay, perhaps 200 in all. The arrival of the railroad, along with its accompanying telegraph, completely redrew the landscape around the Puyallup River delta in less than a decade. Two hundred inhabitants became 5,000 city builders, and a few cedar log cabins along the shore became several rows of boom town façades and red brick buildings facing on wide graded streets. There were sidewalks, streetlights and a fledgling telephone system. The waterside camps and considerate culture of the Puyallup and Nisqually indians were overshadowed by civilized-activities of stumps being dynamited and crowds of people gathering for the daily arrival of steam locomotives pulling cars full of newcomers.

From 1883—the first year passengers could ride the train uninterrupted from Chicago to Tacoma—to 1890, the population of Tacoma grew from about 5,000 to more than 30,000. The titanic Tacoma Hotel overlooked the harbor, and from its porch travelers and writers like Mark Twain and Rudyard Kipling marveled at the speed with which a city under a volcano could be born. For all its explosive growth and buzzing activity, no observer (either traveling through or putting down roots) could overlook Tacoma's most distinguishing presence—the mountain.

The city, the railroad and the mountain summarized what most 19th-century visitors found at the south end of Puget Sound on Commencement Bay. Arriving by train or boat, Euro-American immigrants largely ignored the spiritual importance the native people attached to the dormant volcano, seeing instead the material opportunities of a modern city. But always there was the looming presence of the mountain

A MOUNTA

and the intangible connection it had with the people who lived under it.

A century earlier, in May 1792, the first documented European mapmaker to visit the harbor, George Vancouver, marveled at the mountain on a crystal clear day and named it after a British naval colleague, Rear Admiral Peter Rainier. Locally the name never seemed as potent as the perpetually snowcapped peak, and from the earliest days of cityhood Tacomans tended to refer directly to "the Mountain" rather than use its given cartographic name, Mount Rainier.

As the Northern Pacific railroad pumped people and vitality into the newborn city, talk of extending the rails to the mountain began almost immediately. The Northern Pacific was also an early advocate for creating a park that included Mount Rainier, and by 1890 an organized effort to do so was under way in both the new state of Washington and the nation's capital. In 1893 President Benjamin Harrison figuratively drew the first lines on a map, creating a Pacific Forest Reserve around the mountain. That same year Washington's Senator Watson Squire introduced the first proposal for a formal national park. Before the decade was out, in March 1899, the forest reserve was elevated to the status of Mount Rainier National Park.

The Tacoma Eastern did not survive World War I. It emerged from federal control during wartime as a branch of the Milwaukee Railroad (c.1920).

IN CALLING

Soon after completing the transcontinental tracks in 1883, the Northern Pacific built rail lines to the coalfields around Wilkeson and Carbonado. These served as both a source of needed fuel for the locomotives and a first step toward the densely forested foothills. The NP was already eyeing Mount Rainier as a tourist destination. Concurrent with the building of the Tacoma Hotel, the Northern Pacific began selling the dramatic, looming mountain as a "must see" feature for passengers going west. Beginning in 1884 they offered passenger service from Tacoma to Wilkeson. Interested parties could continue on by horseback to Paradise Valley and by hiking trails to the glaciers and snowfields on the mountain's flanks. Rail service was seasonal and limited, but it foretold what everyone could see in the future—a true train to the mountain.

The Train to Paradise

FIVE YEARS BEFORE the dedication of Mount Rainier National Park, Charles B. Wright, the man who more than any other selected and shaped the terminal city of the northern transcontinental railroad, held out one last tantalizing gift to the city of Tacoma. Nearly blind, weakened by advanced age, and speaking from Philadelphia like a distant oracle, Wright proposed building a railroad from the city to the high shoulder of Mount Rainier. In 1887 mill operators John Hart and his brother had built a small narrow-gauge line about three miles from the bay up the future Tacoma Eastern Gulch to their operation at 46th Street. They merged their interests with a local group of would-be railroad builders who added another six miles to the line and formally named it the Tacoma Eastern Railroad. The depression of 1893 crushed their under capitalized effort.

It took the words and force of Charles Wright to breathe real life into the enterprise of pushing railroad tracks and steam locomotives all the way from saltwater to the mountain. Wright assembled a veteran corps of railroad men who had worked for him when he was president of the Northern Pacific, including the legendary timberland engineer Virgil Bogue. It was Bogue who graded the NP over Stampede Pass in 1887 and then a year later outdid the tortuous route by punching the second longest tunnel in the Western Hemisphere two miles under and through the Cascades. Bogue had already been surveying the best route for the Tacoma Eastern line, together with Isaac Anderson and Edmund Rice.

The group effectively designed the Tacoma Eastern as it would eventually be built, but before their plans could be realized, the relentless effect of the national depression, plus petty political bickering over the related sale and operation of Tacoma's light and water systems stalled the project. Then in 1897, before he could see the rail line completed or the national park created, Charles Wright died. But his iron vision was not abandoned.

JUST MONTHS AFTER the park was dedicated in 1899, a 350-pound giant of a railroad man named John Bagley and a group of partners took over control of the Tacoma Eastern Railroad. The known partners, Edward Cookingham, William M. Ladd and A. Tilton, all were connected to the timber industry, and their strategy for financing the line had a decidedly commercial bent.

Freight contracts in hand and with operating lumber mills and considerable property of their own along the route, the partners pushed new trackage as far as Clover Creek (near Fredrickson) during the railroad's first year under their control. The Tacoma Eastern reached a huge mill at Kapowsin Lake the next year, and by 1902 it was five miles farther up the Ohop valley to the new brick kilns at Clay City. The track crews and famous Bagley blade graders passed LaGrande in mid 1903, and on the fourth of July the first train pulled into Eatonville.

Here the giant Young Cole Lumber mill produced 150,000 board feet a day and the Success Paint Company produced tons of earthy red paint. Eatonville was also the site of the first major bridges built along the Tacoma Eastern. In 1903

two 68-foot Howe truss spans were put in place just outside the town, one over Lynch Creek and a towering high bridge over the Big Mashel River. Two years later the bridge builders working on these spans would construct a monumental 120-foot through truss trestle over the Nisqually River at Park Junction. Even Virgil Bogue marveled.

Perhaps the toughest part to build was the stretch between Eatonville and Elbe, but on Independence Day 1904 the first steam locomotive passed through Alder and into the little town along the upper Nisqually. By the end of that year, the Tacoma Eastern had reached Ashford, the terminal gateway to the mountain. An extension from Park Junction South to Mineral Lake was finished in 1905, and the following year it was stretched 6.5 miles farther to a station named Tilton. In 1906 a spur track reached the coalfields at Ladd, another new station, giving two of Bagley's partners place-names in their honor.

The Golden Era

In 1907 THE ROAD construction years for the Tacoma Eastern were about over and the operation was proving as successful as Bagley had anticipated. The partners took out great profits while still extending the line almost three miles from Tilton to Glenavon and 15 miles from Fredrickson to McKenna, whose name boded a heretofore silent but growing interest in the line's future. E. W. McKenna, vice president of the Chicago, Milwaukee, & Saint Paul Railway, was an important but shadowy backer of the Tacoma Eastern.

In four years, punching the line from one mill site to the next like a string of beads, the logging road reached Ashford.

"The Trail of the Olympian," route map from a Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul promotional piece. Flowery, evocative language and colorful brochures proved an irresistible lure to more than 100,000 passengers visiting Mount Rainier by train each year in the 1920s.

The Tacoma Eastern put regular passenger service into operation using three coaches, a parlor car and an Alta Vista observation car.

By 1905 the Tacoma Eastern had built an impressive collection of rolling stock, with 13 steam engines, hundreds of flatcars, boxcars and stockcars all marked with the distinctive Tacoma Eastern moniker—T.E.R.R. Several of the engines and many of the flatcars were traceable to the prior inventory of the Chicago, Milwaukee & Saint Paul Railway.

In 1904 the Tacoma Eastern Railroad explored the possibilities of passenger service for the first time. It partnered with the Ferry Museum, which later merged into the Washington State Historical Society, to arrange summer excursions to the new national park via locomotive and stage.

The next year the Tacoma Eastern put regular passenger service into operation using three coaches, a parlor car and an Alta Vista observation car. More than 32,000 passengers bought tickets to the mountain that year. In the years that followed, the railroad built the rustic Longmire Lodge and for a time was the only practical way to reach the park, short of walking or riding a pack animal. A Tacoma Eastern timetable from 1905 shows the train departing from Tacoma at nine in the morning and reaching Ashford before noon. Six dollars took you to Paradise and back.

The rail line reached into ancient forests for the primary purpose of harvest. Dense Douglas fir and fragrant western red cedar stands created a barrier around the mountain. Natives approaching the peak took the darkness of the forests as a palpable warning. As awesome as the mountain itself, the
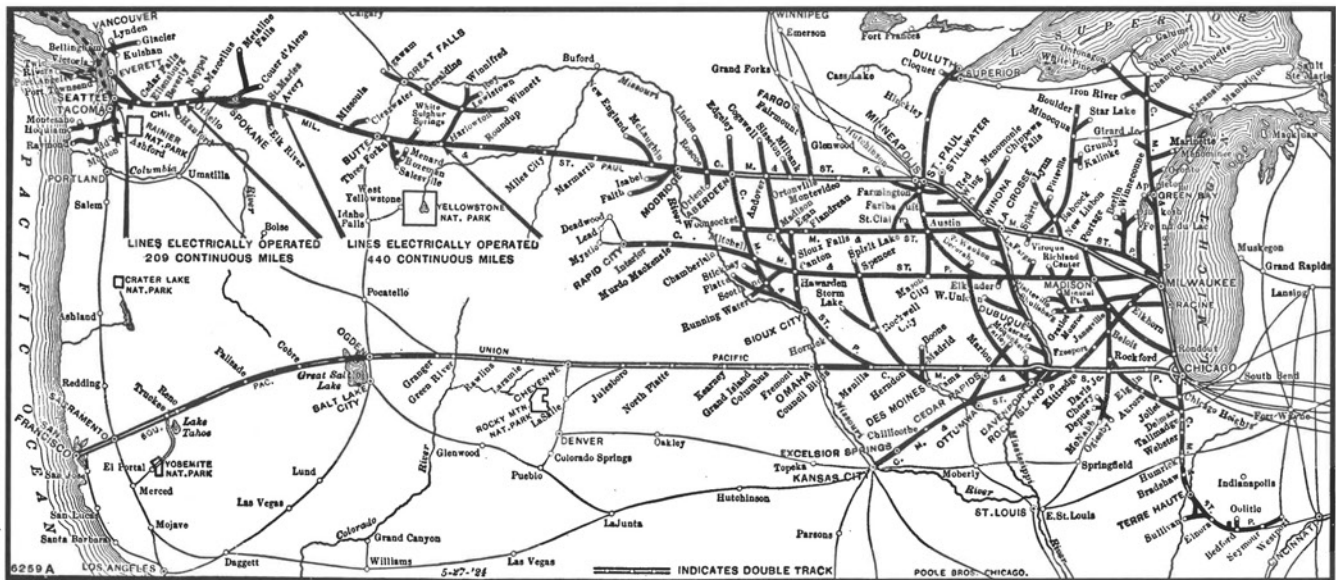
tangled deep mazes and soaring canopies of the ancient forests offered no encouragement to would-be mountaineers. Only the rivers led reluctantly through the thick growth to the mountain itself, and even their life-giving force seemed to wane as they reached the rock shoulders of the mountain. High in the creeks and rivers, salmon carcasses and gnarled plants marked a point beyond which life seemed foreign. It was the clear line mythology finds in nature and notes with stories of caution and mystery. The forests around Mount Rainier were an elite guard, protecting it since the last ice age. The plan for the Tacoma Eastern Railroad was not simply to cut a line through but to clear broad swaths where mills could be built and an organized harvest could begin.

Freight service remained the primary source of profit throughout the line's years of operation as the Tacoma Eastern. From 513,294 freight tons carried in 1905, the Tacoma Eastern carried almost 1.3 million tons in 1913. In the early days of 1905 freight was 78 percent raw logs, 11.3 percent cut lumber, 7 percent shingles and less than .4 percent coal. In 1913 raw logs were down to 70 percent, cut lumber up to 20 percent, coal up to 2.5 percent, and clay city bricks almost 2 percent.

The most remarkable growth figures for the railroad were in passenger service. In 1911 the Tacoma Eastern carried more than 100,000 people and by 1913 the number reached 120,065. Passenger revenue went from $30,886 in 1905 to $130,918 in 1913. Advertising and the connection with the four transcontinental lines that served Tacoma after 1909 helped establish the excursion/tourism value of the railroad. As the forests were cut and the mills began to drift farther from the rail line, the Tacoma Eastern continued to thrive. John Bagley's iron dream seemed as if it would run on forever, even as the pioneer railroader began to plan his retirement from the operation. The Bagley name was to stay with the Tacoma Eastern as the senior John paved the way for his son to become general manager. In 1914 John Bagley stepped down, and the golden age of the Tacoma Eastern came to an end.

Milwaukee Road

As early as 1901 it was speculated that John Bagley had been working financially with the renamed Chicago, Milwaukee, Saint Paul & Pacific Railroad, later the Milwaukee Road. In 1909 this latecomer transcontinental line reached Puget Sound at Tacoma and leased the entire Tacoma Eastern operation. The bigger railroad began promoting the Paradise Valley Route with lavish brochures and posters distributed all

Courtesy Michael Sullivan

over the world. Though the little railroad operated under its own banner until it was marshaled into the United States Railroad Administration during World War I, its blood was mixed irrevocably with that of the Milwaukee Road.

In 1910 with financial backing from the bigger partner, the Tacoma Eastern built the Cowlitz Valley Extension eight miles on to Morton in Lewis County. The last track laid for the line under the Tacoma Eastern banner was just over two miles from Tanwax Junction to Western Junction, completed in 1912 to connect with the Tidewater Lumber Company. During these years the railroad also improved its rolling stock and station facilities to fully accommodate passenger service. A new passenger depot was built at Kapowsin in 1910. A classic two-story depot was also built at Morton, and today it stands as the only Tacoma Eastern depot still on its original site. Yard facilities and a change of alignment at Salsich Junction were undertaken in 1912 to handle the Milwaukee Road's "Grays Harbor Line" over the McKenna branch. That same year the two Howe truss bridges at Eatonville were replaced with high timber trestles.

The Tacoma Eastern's main shops were situated at Bismark on the outskirts of the city, but in 1910 the Milwaukee Road merged these employees and operations with their

own on the Tacoma tide flats. The handsome Arts and Crafts style Tacoma Eastern passenger depot at 26th and A streets was sold to the Milwaukee Road, and thereafter the Tacoma Eastern paid rent in the building it shared with the larger transcontinental line. The Milwaukee Road train dispatchers and offices were installed in the upper floors of the old Tacoma Eastern depot until they moved to the Freighthouse building at 25th and D streets during World War II. The wood frame depot continued to serve passengers until it was replaced with a brick building near the Milwaukee Road roundhouse and tide flats yards in 1957.

The Tacoma Eastern Railroad lost its identity when it was mustered out of federal control on January 1, 1919, as a fully owned part of the Milwaukee Road. Although the colorful

With elegant new passenger cars, linen and silver service, the National Park Limited carried more than 100,000 people a year during the 1920s.

name of the Paradise Valley Route was a casualty of the war, the new National Park Limited, which ran from Seattle's Union Station to Ashford over the same tracks, became a legend in its own right.

With elegant new passenger cars, linen and silver service, and a romantic destination that loomed in the distance during virtually the entire journey, the National Park Limited carried more than 100,000 people a year during the 1920s. The round-trip fare stayed at about ten dollars throughout the 1920s, with a steam train to Ashford and a motor coach from there to Longmire, Nisqually Glacier, Narada Falls and finally Paradise Valley. In 1924 the Limited left Seattle at 7:30 in the morning scheduled to reach Ashford at 10:45. It returned to Seattle at 7:30 in the evening.

IN 1931, WITH THE Great Depression deepening, the Milwaukee Road still offered service from Seattle and Tacoma to Ashford. But with fewer visitors to the national park overall and increased competition from automobiles and buses, rail service was fading. For many it was still the only way to visit the mountain, but they were a discerning minority of the thousands of visitors to the park. The Milwaukee Road timetable stopped showing passenger service to Ashford and the mountain beyond in 1932. One day in 1935 the last of the original 13 steam engines to carry the markings of the Tacoma Eastern Railroad was cut into scrap iron. The cars were scattered and the depots closed.

Days turned into weeks between the freight and logging trains along the line as trucks and roads took over most of the timberland hauling. Rust and rot began to work on the rails and trestles. By World War II, the nation was concentrating on keeping the main rail routes maintained and operating. The tourist roads were neglected, and by 1964 the Milwaukee Road was bankrupt.

The old Tacoma Eastern line reverted back to its origins as a logging road, used by its new owner, the Weyerhaeuser Company, for hauling logs and lumber from the forests and managed tree farms around the west side of the mountain. By

Time Table, Effective July 1, '05
Subject to Change

SAT'DY ONLY	SUNDAY ONLY	EXCEPT SUNDAY	MILES	STATIONS	EXCEPT SUNDAY	SUNDAY ONLY	MOND'Y ONLY
P. M.	A. M.	A. M.		LVE. ARR.	P. M.	P. M.	A. M.
2 30	9 00	9 00	0	Tacoma	6 05	6 28	10 08
2 41	9 14	9 14	3	Bismarck	5 51	6 14	9 55
			4	Wilson			
	9 21	9 21	6	Midland	5 41	6 05	
			7	Allison	5 36	6 00	
			8	Johnson	5 31		
	9 25	9 25	10	Clover Creek	5 29	5 53	
	9 32	9 32	11	Anderson	5 26	5 50	
	9 34	9 34	12	Nelson	5 23	5 47	
	9 37	9 37	14	Kirby	5 21	5 45	
	9 42	9 42	15	Harding	5 18	5 42	
	9 44	9 44	17	Summit		5 36	
	9 50	9 50	19	Maze	5 10	5 34	
			20	Morgan Lake			
	9 58	9 58	21	Tanwax Junction	5 01	5 25	9 16
3 24	10 08	10 08	23	Kapowsin		5 08	
	10 22		25	Electron			
3 27	10 37	10 13	25	Lakehead	4 57	4 51	9 12
	10 40	10 17	26	Holz	4 53	4 48	
	10 50	10 28	29	Ohop	4 44	4 39	
3 44	11 05	10 39	33	Eatonville	4 35	4 30	8 55
			34	Success			
3 52	11 15	10 49	37	LaGrande	4 25	4 19	8 46
4 00	11 25	11 00	39	Nisqually Falls	4 15	4 10	8 37
4 07	11 40	11 10	41	Alder	4 07	3 55	8 30
4 23	12 01	11 30	47	Elbe	3 50	3 35	8 13
		11 36	49	Park Junction	3 44	3 29	
		11 41	51	Selle	3 40	3 25	
4 45	12 30	11 55	55	Ashford ARR. LVE.	3 30	3 15	7 50
P. M.	P. M.	A. M.			P. M.	P. M.	A. M.

Additional train service between Tacoma and Bismarck leaves Bismarck daily, 8:00 a. m., arrives Tacoma 8:15 a. m. Leaves Tacoma daily except Sunday 6:15 p. m., arrives Bismarck 6:30 p. m. Sunday—leaves Tacoma 6:38 p. m. arrives Bismarck 6:52 p.m.

Stage for Mesler's, Uhly's, and Longmire's Hot Springs connects during the season with all trains at Ashford.

Through Round Trip Rates, Tacoma to—

Mesler's... $5.50
Longmire's... 6.00

Stage line between Ashford and Longmire's is operated by Tacoma Carriage and Baggage Transfer Co., guaranteeing first-class service.

Pack animals can be obtained at Longmire's for the trip to Paradise Valley.
Stage for Mineral connects with trains at Elbe.

LEFT: *The 1905 Tacoma Eastern train schedule showed a travel time of just under three hours from Tacoma to Ashford.*

OPPOSITE PAGE: *At the Ashford station visitors to Mount Rainier National Park switched to buses or pack animals, c. 1912.*

the mid 1980s even that use was supplanted by trucks, and the line faced obsolescence once again. This time the City of Tacoma stepped in to acquire the line in 1989, partly by donation and partly by purchase, intending to revisit the possibility of a passenger train to the mountain.

Efforts to establish passenger train service from Tacoma to Mount Rainier National Park were sidetracked by the unexpected industrial growth at the Port of Tacoma's property at Fredrickson. Until very recently, the active sections of the Tacoma Eastern Railroad have been run as freight lines. The Mount Rainier Scenic Railway Company now runs steam locomotives in the area around Elbe, and regular passenger service between Tacoma and Mount Rainier remains ambiguously in the planning phase.

A Legacy Waiting

THE IRON RAILS and furtive corridor of the century-old Tacoma Eastern railroad still wind their way, unbroken from tidewater on Puget Sound to Ashford and the entrance to Mount Rainier National Park. Though passenger service has long since faded from the times in the early 1920s when 125,000 people would ride the *National Park Limited* from Seattle and Tacoma each year, more than memories and ghosts are connected with the rail line and its re-emerging promise.

Today, both freight and passengers pass over short sections of the Tacoma Eastern line and an array of interests seem to be converging in an effort to reestablish regular passenger service to Mount Rainier. As many of the large national parks in America struggle with creating alternative transportation systems to relieve the threatening pressures of motorized vehicles and overpopulation, Mount Rainier National Park reaches its 100th year with a potential solution in place.

The Tacoma Eastern Railroad right-of-way is entirely publicly owned by the City of Tacoma. Within the last several years $1.7 million has been spent on rehabilitation of the line, and along the section between Elbe and the park gateway a priceless collection of steam locomotives and vintage rolling stock carry hundreds of passenger each year. At a slow pace, trains can pass over the entire route, and for those who have taken the trip, it is simply the best way to approach the mountain.

The sections farthest from the national park, connecting Fredrickson with Tacoma and Chehalis, are routinely used for freight service by customers like Boeing. Above Fredrickson the Tacoma Eastern cuts directly and dramatically toward the mountain. It rolls along the shores of Kapowsin, Ohop and Alder lakes, crossing the Mashel River on a high radius trestle that simply takes your breath away. At passenger rail altitude, the visual experience is marked by the continual appearances of Mount Rainier, which seems to double in size after each obstructing ridge or timber grove.

CONNECTED WITH THE Puget Sound area's new commuter rail system, the Tacoma Eastern links the state's greatest concentration of people in Seattle with the state's greatest visitor attraction, Mount Rainier. As the other large national parks are discovering, managing transportation is becoming an important conservation tool as more and more vehicles blemish the park experience for everyone. Sport utility vehicles, RVs, four-wheel drive trucks and single occupant on-and off-road machines need to be balanced with a means of reaching the park and traveling within it that leave a softer touch on the land.

It may soon be possible to begin the Mount Rainier experience at a station in Seattle or Tacoma. A traveler could spend the morning learning about the science, nature and history of the region along a dedicated natural corridor with it own perspectives of the mountain and its own rich history and story. Though grass grows up through the tracks in places, the iron ribbon of the Tacoma Eastern Railroad waits to be opened like a forgotten gift, an heirloom handed down purposefully from one generation to the next until it is needed again.

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COLUMBIA

COVER: *From the original painting, "Tide of Empire; Friendly Cove, Nootka Sound, 22nd of September, 1792," by Hewitt Jackson, a contemporary Northwest marine historical painter whose renderings are as accurate and detailed as in-depth research can make them. From left to right, the sailing vessels pictured here include: HM Sloop-of-War Discovery; Fenis and St. Joseph, trader; Jackall, English trader; HM Armed Tender Chatham; HM Storeship Daedalus; in the distance, Activa, Spanish armed brig. See related story beginning on page 40. (Courtesy Oregon Historical Society, with permission of the artist.)*