

The Whitney Company - Trackside Series #28 -Lloyd M. Palmer, Chapter Historian

Earlier this summer, several others and I spent a couple of days exploring the abandoned railroad grades of The Whitney Company in the mountains a short distance north of Tillamook. How this came to pass, a brief history of the company and what we discovered will be the subject of the next two installments of the *Trackside Series*.



The Whitney Company had been associated with the lumber business in Massachusetts and New York since the early 1850's and when the timber had played out in that area they moved to Detroit. There they incorporated under the laws of the State of Michigan in early 1905 and continued to log around the Great Lake states. As their timber holding were once again being depleted they began acquiring new timberlands in Oregon and Washington.

In 1909 they opened up a camp along the lower Columbia River, at Blind Slough, Oregon, where they also built a railroad to accommodate their logging operations. They worked in this area for several years, all the time acquiring and consolidating their holdings in Tillamook County. They finally sold their Blind Slough operations to the Larkin-Green Logging Co. with the agreement that the new owners would pay Whitney a set price for the timber they removed.

As a result, in 1919 they moved their operations south to Tillamook and began the construction of a new logging railroad. Eventually it would extend up the Kilches River for a distance of just over eleven miles, beginning at a log dump near the mouth of the river on Tillamook Bay. They began construction of the log dump, a short distance south of Idaville, in June 1919. The plan was to deliver their logs to the Cummings-Moberly mill in Garibaldi that was being built by a group of southern investors. During the construction of that mill, the promoters ran into financial problems and The Whitney Co. decided to acquire and complete the project.

From the log dump, the line headed north, crossing the Southern Pacific's tracks about midway between the bay and the hamlet of Idaville. Between the log dump and the SP's line, they constructed a wye for turning the locomotives along with a shop and other facilities for the engines. Their main office was also established at the point that the logging line was to cross the Southern Pacific's tracks.

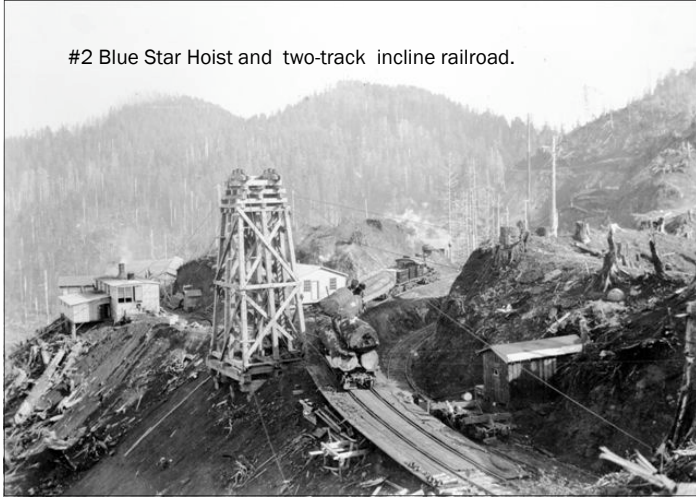
From Idaville the new line continued in a northeasterly direction across the flat valley bottom before crossing the Kilches River at Mile Post 2.4. From there it extended up the east side of the Kilches River, crossing Clear Creek and Little South Fork (Sam Downes Creek) on a couple of fairly large trestles. The first logging camp that was established was White Star at MP 8.3 and Red Star camp was later erected at the end of the line.

Even though the building of the line began in mid 1919 and crossed the Southern Pacific's Tillamook Branch, it wasn't until the following year that the new interchange showed up in the SP timetables. This was due to the fact that, even though The Whitney Co. had applied to the SP to gain permission of install the new crossing, SP was slow to act on the proposal. In fact, they never really did and finally, with their line almost completed and logging about to begin, The Whitney Co. took matters into their own hands. One afternoon, after the passenger train headed to Tillamook had passed, a crew of company men cut the SP rails, installed the crossing and had bolted everything back together before darkness had fallen. Problem solved! It is in Southern Pacific's Timetable No.98, dated November 14, 1920 that the notation "Kelches River Ry. Csg" first appears, at MP 851.3. For some unknown reason, they had decided to use the "Kelches" spelling rather than the much more common "Kilches" variation.



The first landing was established near White Star camp and by the fall of 1921 logs were finally being sent down the newly built railroad, dumped into Tillamook Bay and towed to the mill in Garibaldi. Short spurs were built off of the mainline to access each setting and a passing siding had been built between Clear Creek and Sam Downes Creek to allow for the passing of the loaded log trains and the empties being delivered back to the woods.

With the railroad being located up the valley of the Kilches River, this necessitated that the logs had to be skidded downhill to the landings. This is a tough way to have to log as it's not only much more dangerous, it results in a lot more hang-ups with the turns of logs. Logs come down the steep hillsides much faster and it's not uncommon for the rigging to go one side of a stump and the logs to go to the other side. When this happens, one of two things usually can happen. At worse, something breaks and at best, everything comes to an immediate halt until the hang-up can be eliminated.



#2 Blue Star Hoist and two-track incline railroad.

This problem plagued The Whitney Company to the point that they decided to build an incline to the top of the ridge so as to be able to log uphill and at the same time, reach some new stands of timber. As a result, they began the construction of their famous incline in late 1924, a short distance below White Star camp, at MP 8.0 on the mainline. The incline left the mainline on a double-tracked curve and immediately began climbing the steep hillside to the east. The double track extended about half way up the hill and allowed the loaded log cars being let down the slope to pass the empty disconnect cars going up. The difference in elevation between the mainline along the Kilches River and the top of the ridge was about 1400' and it was over half a mile long.

A new camp, this one named Blue Star, was perched on the ridge right at the top of the incline. With virtually no flat ground to work with, a massive amount of dirt had to be moved to accommodate the necessary camp buildings along with the required hoist tower and hoisting donkey shed. This also necessitated the laying of a bit of unique track work in order to be able to position the loaded log cars for lowering, at the top of the incline, while also providing a separate track to return the empties to the woods. (see photo #3 on page 4)

Extending outward from Blue Star, a new piece of logging railroad was built along the ridgeline in southeasterly direction. It hugged the eastern side of the ridge and eventually reached a distance of about a mile and a half before ending in a large saddle. In addition to this line, two short spurs were constructed, both about seven hundred feet long, to reach a couple of log landings. Logging operations at Blue Star began in early 1925 but were shut down by May of that year due to an economic downturn in the lumber markets. It wasn't until early 1927 that logging again resumed but again, they lasted for only a few months before being suspended for a second time.

Later that year The Whitney Co. was merged with the Hammond Lumber Co. holdings in the area and their holdings became part of the Hammond-Tillamook Lumber Co. Logging operations were once again started in the woods above the incline but lasted only for a short period of time before being shut down for the final time.

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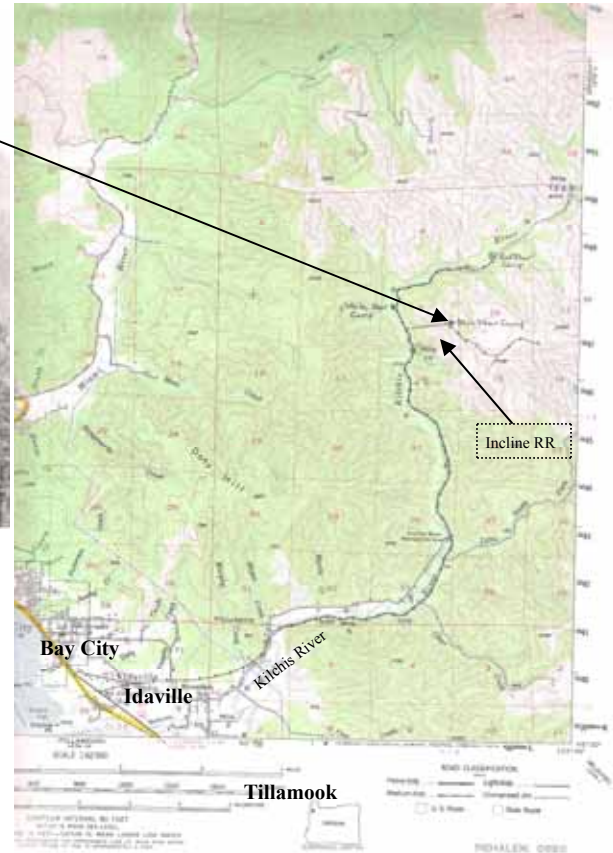
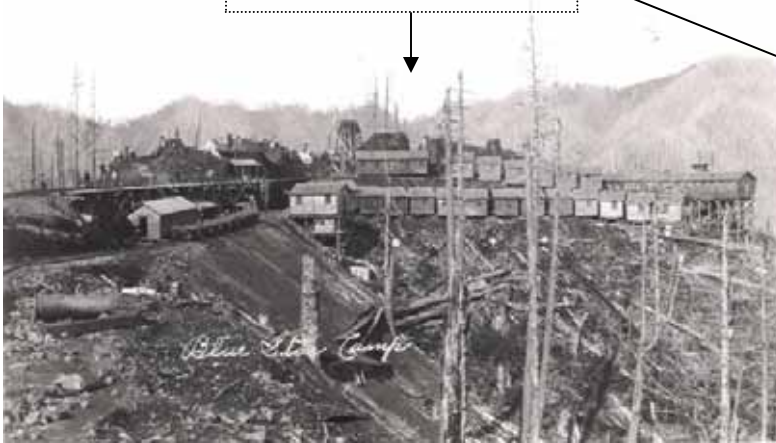
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Blue Star Logging Camp



All in all, the total time spent logging above the incline was less than a year. It seems like the company went to a lot of trouble and expense constructing the incline, building Blue Star camp and laying the woods line for what little logging took place up on the ridge. At any rate, it provided a colorful addition to the history of The Whitney Co.'s activities along the Kilches River.

At this point you might be asking yourself, what brought on this renewed interest in the operations of The Whitney Co. along the Kilches River? We have Gary Brooks, from Willamina, to thank for that. Gary is a master modeler that builds HO scale dioramas, his most recent one being the scene depicting Manary Logging Company's *Ark* that is currently on display in the YPRHS museum.

After finishing that project he was looking for a new subject to model and decided on The Whitney Company's Blue Star Camp that sat at the top of their incline. The finished product will rest on a 4 x 8 sheet of plywood and be about three feet tall at it highest point. It will depict the camp as well as a portion of the top of the incline, and will include their Climax, the Molly-O, being winched up the hill. I've seen some preliminary photos of his progress on the diorama and believe me it's going to be awesome when he's finished with it.

Gary started looking for photos that showed the scene and gathering information on Whitney's operations. He contacted me and tapped several other logging railroad historians and as a result, rekindled an interest in the company. We all met at the Northwest Logging Modeler's convention at Camp 18 last spring to put our heads together and decided that we needed to visit the site where Blue Star had been located and to hike the incline. That outing, and what we found, will be the subject of the next installment of the *Trackside Series* so stay tuned.

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On a nearby historical note. An earlier Ford Foundation Leadership Development Class is now on Phase I of the development of a Scenic Pull-Off at mile post 6.5 on the Yaquina River Road. The group is presently raising funds for Phase II, which will include seating and signage. The group has asked YPRHS for assistance as the signage could include representation of the historic rail line .