

Submerged History - Trackside Series - #19

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One aspect of railroad history that I really enjoy is the walking of abandoned railroad grades and photographing the remnants that can still be found. As a result, the subject for this, the nineteenth installment of *Trackside Series*, will be a recent trip into the Cascade Mountains east of Springfield to explore a segment of the original mainline of the Southern Pacific Railroad Co.

Over the last several years I've had the opportunity to travel Highway 58 between Springfield and Oakridge numerous times. When these trips have occurred in the late summer and early fall seasons, and the water level of Lookout Point Reservoir is low, I've noticed an old railroad grade along the north side of the river that's normally hidden under the surface of the lake. It's always been my intention to hike this old grade but I never could seem to make the

effort to get on the ground and do it.

That situation was finally remedied earlier last fall when a friend of mine, Scott Pirie, from Albany, and I spent a day hiking, exploring and photographing the portion of the line that had been exposed by the receding water level of the reservoir. Scott is a former locomotive engineer, having worked for Southern Pacific many years before going to work for and retiring from the Willamette & Pacific Railroad Co. His interest in SP and knowledge of a working railroad makes him the perfect partner for an outing of this nature.

Highway 58 extends up the south side of Lookout Point Reservoir and closely parallels the existing tracks of today's Union Pacific Railroad Co. This segment of Southern Pacific's relocated line was spiked down in the early 1950's when the construction of Lookout Point Dam and the rising waters of the reservoir would cover the original mainline. The earlier line had been located along the north side of Middle Fork Willamette River but the new grade was moved to the south side of the river during its relocation.

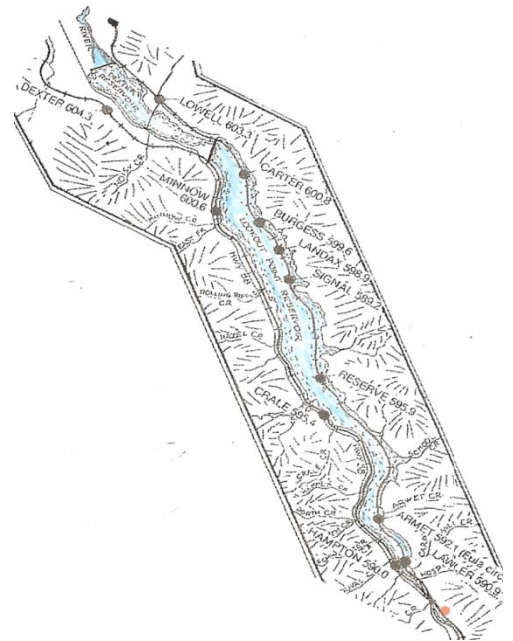
Let's take a quick look at the history of the original mainline before we head out onto the ground. Today's Cascade Line over Willamette Pass was constructed in several segments and over a fairly long period of time. For the most part it still follows the original alignment. However, the portion between today's Fall Creek Jct. at Mile Post (MP) 612 and Hampton, MP 590 was relocated and opened to traffic in 1952 with the completion of Lookout Point Dam.

The first portion of today's Cascade Line was constructed when the East Side Line of the Oregon & California RR was extended from Springfield to Natron in 1891, with the work being completed in September of that year. Then in 1905 Southern Pacific incorporated the Oregon Eastern Railway Co. for the purpose of extending the railroad further east into the Cascades. Finally, in 1910, construction began at Natron and the new extension was completed to Oakridge in May 1912. The final portion of the line was completed in 1926 when the segment between Oakridge and Kirk was built. With its completion the line through the Cascades became Southern Pacific's new mainline between California and the Pacific Northwest. As a result the line southward

from Eugene, through Roseburg, Grants Pass and Medford, and over the Siskiyou Mountains south of Ashland, was relegated to the status of the secondary route to California.

When Lookout Point Dam was completed the newly relocated line was opened for traffic. Heading up into the mountains, it left the original mainline at a point that became known as Fall Creek Jct., crossed the Middle Fork Willamette River on a new bridge, and climbed into the Cascades along the south bank of the river. Passing through the new stations of Dougren, Trent, Dexter, Minnow, Crale and Hampton it then crossed back to the north side of the river and rejoined the original line just above Hampton at MP 590.

For several years the portion of the original line that extended east from Fall Creek Jct. to Lowell continued to be used to switch local industries. However, over time it was gradually pulled back until today only a short segment still exists. The tracks lying east of Lowell were removed and the grade disappeared under the waters of



the new Lookout Point Reservoir. Also, along the original line the former sites of Carter, Burgess, Landax, Signal, Reserve, Armet and Lawler were put to rest in their watery graves.

Okay, let's get started. Scott and I headed east from Springfield with the idea of beginning at the upper end of the line. We didn't encounter any trains running on the UP line that we were paralleling so the trip up the river was uneventful. In the area of Hampton we were able to look across the exposed lake bottom and see the old grade we would soon be exploring. Arriving at the turnoff to West Fir, which is only a couple of miles west of Oakridge, we turned left and crossed the Middle Fork Willamette River. A short distance farther we entered the small hamlet of Hemlock, again turned left, and crossed the North Fork Willamette River in order to get to the road that skirts the north side of Lookout Point Reservoir.

Headed west from Hemlock, the paved road also follows the tracks of today's Union Pacific line. This portion of the line is on the original alignment constructed in 1910 and opened in 1912. It includes two tunnels that we stopped to explore. The first one we encountered was Tunnel 23 which today sits quite, having been bypassed



some years back. Both portals have been blockaded for safety purposes but are still easy to find as they're located adjacent to the road. It was interesting to discover that the date the tunnel was built, 1910, could still easily be read in the stone and concrete work over each portal.

Continuing west, the road turned to gravel as we crossed the tracks three times. About two and a half miles west of the first tunnel we encounter the second one, Tunnel 24. The railroad was slightly above the road, to the right, and a short hike up the steep embankment was needed to reach the tracks. This tunnel is still in use and it also had the 1910 date located over both tunnel entrances.

Having explored and photographed both tunnels, we again headed west on the gravel road, ready to get started on with the day's main objective, that of hiking the exposed portion of the original mainline.

Traveling only a short distance west from the second tunnel we reached the point that would normally be the upper end of the reservoir when it was full. However, today the area was high and dry as the lake's waterline was about three miles farther west. We parked the rig along the side of the gravel road and climbed down the bank to look for the old railroad grade.

After only a short period of time spent exploring the area we were able to determine the point where the existing tracks and the original line had connected. Today's MP 590 stands at the east end of the railroad bridge that the new line uses to cross back to the north side of the Middle Fork Willamette River. Located just a few hundred feet east of the mile post, along the north side of the tracks, we located a shallow cut that branched off to the right. This was the upper end of SP's original mainline that had been built in 1910.

Having located this point, we began our day's adventure.

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