

Show Notes:

Learn more about Sandpoint's historic depot, including some excellent photos:
<https://sandpoint.com/community/history-there-she-comes.php>

Vote here for your favorite movies for the upcoming Movies in the Park!
<http://bonnercountyhistory.org/mip>

Transcript for Episode 2: We Arrived By Rail

Today we're talking about railroads. Specifically, how the railroads helped build northern Idaho, and why the Sandpoint area in particular has become a popular destination for the railfan community. What is a railfan? Stay tuned and find out!

If you haven't ever seen it, North Idaho has breathtakingly beautiful but also very rugged terrain. Picture in your mind several mountain ranges, like the Cabinet Mountains, the Selkirks, and the Coeur d'Alenes. We also have numerous lakes and rivers, enticing to look at but daunting and even treacherous for those traveling on horseback or by wagon. Prior to the arrival of the railroads, population growth was modest at best, leaving most of North Idaho to the native tribes, trappers, explorers, and eventually gold-seekers who were hardy enough to tackle the challenging terrain.

But then, over a roughly twenty-five year span from 1882 to 1906, three major railroads converged in Bonner County, Idaho, changing its character forever. The arrival of the Northern Pacific in 1882, the Great Northern in 1892, and the Spokane International in 1906 set the stage for a period of unprecedented growth and turned sleepy little Sandpoint a major hub of rail activity in the Inland Northwest. Even the name itself--Sandpoint--refers to its original usefulness as a literal pit of sand on the shore of Lake Pend Oreille where trains could stop and load up on the sand needed to operate the steam engines.

With the railroads came jobs. All along the train line, workers of many nationalities toiled hard and raised families. A sizeable number of Chinese workers came to work on the Northern Pacific and settled mainly near Hope. The building of the Great Northern attracted numerous Italian families, who formed a

community near Priest River. Other workers were Irish, Scottish, German, Polish, Norwegian, Swedish, and many other nationalities. These workers laid and maintained track, repaired engines and cars, managed the depots, and performed numerous other jobs to keep the trains running. Other businesses sprang up around the railroads to serve both the workers and the travelers: shops, restaurants, hotels, and taverns. Many, many taverns.

In addition to the big transcontinental lines, smaller local railroads also played a role in the burgeoning economy of northern Idaho. In the nineteenth century logging had emerged as a principal industry as loggers from places like Maine, Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota migrated westward to harvest the vast forests of fir and pine, including major outfits like Weyerhaeuser and the sprawling Humbird Lumber Company. But cut timber had to be drawn out of the woods by horses, mules, or oxen, then floated down rivers to get to the mills and then on to market--a laborious and inefficient process. The situation was vastly improved when lumber companies built small proprietary railroads to carry timber out of the woods. Then these smaller tracks connected to the big transcontinental lines for transporting lumber to markets all over the continent. Over these shining rails, lumber was carried out and many needed products and supplies were carried in.

And so, of course, were the people. Some came to visit for a day or a week, creating the area's tourism industry that's still flourishing today. Others came to settle permanently, building up the population. In terms of passenger trains, for decades the Northern Pacific's *North Coast Limited* vied with the Great Northern's *Empire Builder* in providing the best or fastest passenger service between Seattle and Chicago. The Northern Pacific, aka "the Main Street of the Northwest," inaugurated the *North Coast Limited* in 1900. Dome cars were added in 1954. The Great Northern ran the *Oriental Limited* from 1905 to 1929, then replaced it that year with the *Empire Builder*. Both railroads offered Sandpoint excellent connections with the rest of the country.

From 1907-1914, even the upstart Spokane International was in on the game. Joining forces with the Soo Line of Canada, the SI's Soo-Spokane *Train de Lux*

managed a faster timetable to Chicago than even the Great Northern before being discontinued.

Speaking of passenger trains, did you know that today Sandpoint is the only Amtrak stop in Idaho? Amtrak still uses the name *Empire Builder* coined by the Great Northern. Twice a day -- or, more accurately, twice a night--Amtrak's Empire Builder stops at Sandpoint, once headed east toward Chicago and once headed west toward Seattle and Portland. Sandpoint's picturesque brown brick station, built in 1919, is cherished by locals as an historical landmark.

As I mentioned earlier, today Sandpoint is a popular destination for railfans-- those avid enthusiasts who love to watch and photograph trains, and will travel around the country and the world to study and observe them. With abundant train traffic set against a breathtaking backdrop of lakes and mountains, Bonner County naturally attracts these railfans, especially since it's a "funnel." In railroad language, a "funnel" is a place where a number of railroads converge. The confluence of major rail lines makes Sandpoint the largest funnel in the Northwest, with about fifty trains rumbling through day and night.

If you're a North Idaho local and you feel like you spend a lot of time sitting in your vehicle waiting for a train to pass at one of Bonner County's 148 railroad crossings, you're not mistaken. Plans and projects are continually underway to add more tracks, widen thoroughfares, and reduce congestion through the funnel, including a planned addition of a second BNSF railroad bridge over Lake Pend Oreille. Providing opportunities and bringing supplies from afar—from the humblest farm implement to the fanciest ladies' hat—railroads have made living in North Idaho possible, as well as enjoyable, for many generations. Maybe knowing a little of the railroad's colorful history and important role in developing our area will make you feel slightly more patient the next time you're stuck waiting for those blasted gates to go up.

If you're curious to learn even more about railroads, a great new exhibit has just opened at the Bonner County History Museum. *We Arrived By Rail* is a compelling display of historical photographs, documents, ephemera, and artifacts that together tell the story of railroads in the area, including many stories and fascinating facts we don't have time to share here on the podcast. Visit bonnercountyhistory.org or call 208-263-2344 for more info.

Also, if you're in the area this summer, don't miss the tremendously popular Movies in the Park, cosponsored by the Museum, Pine Street Dental, and Sandpoint Parks and Recreation. We'll be showing *Pirates of the Caribbean* on July 19 and *Night at the Museum* on August 30, 2019. Plus, if you happen to be listening to this before June 15, 2019, you get a chance to vote on the other two movies to be shown! Cast your vote today by visiting bonnercountyhistory.org/mip.