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## THE OLYMPIA NARROW GAUGE RAILROAD

For a period of five years, from 1869 to 1874, the most exciting public question in every town on the Eastern shore of Puget Sound was the location of the terminus and branch lines of the Northern Pacific Railroad which was then nearing completion.

Rivalry was intense for these favors as the town that first secured the terminus was assured of a commercial future. Olympia, as the capital of the state and the oldest town of importance on Puget Sound, was at first considered to have the best claim to the Northern Pacific terminus. Negotiations were almost completed when the death of the agent in whose name the terminal lands had been secured and the legal difficulties following his death halted all plans. Meanwhile the Northern Pacific officials, following their not too scrupulous plan of playing one town off against the others, had secured from Tacoma the promise of a larger grant of land than Olympia could possibly give. As a result, it was reasonably certain by the Fall of 1872 that Tacoma would become the terminus, and in July, 1873, the formal announcement was made.

With the announcement vanished the last vestiges of any hope that Olympia would be the commercial center of Western Washington. The Northern Pacific made no move to extend to Olympia their branch line which ran through Tenino. Without any rail connections Olympia was faced with commercial annihilation. The Sound commerce which it had held as the head of navigation was diverted to Tacoma. The crops of Lewis county, the richest country tributary to Olympia, were being routed to Portland on the Northern Pacific. Within a year the situation had become so serious that General Hazard Stevens declared in a circular letter that even the capital might be moved to a more accessible place. Popular feeling in Thurston County

was aggravated by resentment against the unfair dealings of the Northern Pacific and also because while the railroad running through Tenino was only fifteen miles away it was useless to Olympia. It was apparent that a railroad must be built to connect with this line at its nearest point, Tenino.

In 1870 a company headed by Governor Ferry and Marshall Blinn was organized. It was capitalized at \$400,000.00 and its purpose was to build the Tenino-Olympia line for the Northern Pacific. Congress was memorialized to open the Des Chutes Channel and to grant 1337 acres of land at Budd Inlet which were to be offered to the railroad. Congress failed to act on the petition and the subsequent failure of the Northern Pacific to carry out their promises automatically terminated the usefulness of the company.

In 1873 another company, the Olympia Railway and Mining Company, was organized largely through the efforts of Governor Solomon and Colonel Bee. As its name implies, its object was twofold: first, to build a railroad to Coal Bank near Tenino which would connect with the Northern Pacific, and, second, to develop the coal deposits of that district. The company was forced to seek public aid, and after a preliminary meeting and negotiations with prominent citizens a large public meeting was held on August 25th at Olympia. Every effort was made to have the meeting as representative as possible. Judge O. B. McFadden, the territorial delegate, was chairman and Elwood Evans secretary. This meeting represents the commencement of Olympia's effort to build rail communication for itself; a project which had important influence on the history of all Western Washington, as it, together with the Seattle and Walla Walla Railroad, was the first step to combat the control of the transcontinental railway. Conditions had reached a point where the Northern Pacific by extending or denying railway privileges could determine the fate of a community.

The proposition of the company was practically that the county should finance the road and provide terminal and settlement lands in return for which the company agreed to construct the road and to maintain passenger and freight depots at Olympia and Tumwater. This proposal was accepted almost unanimously and a bond issue of \$150,000.00, the amount requested by the company, was proposed. The lands asked for by the company were the same pieces that had been pledged to the

Northern Pacific several years previously. A committee of thirteen men was appointed to cooperate with the company. These men, all prominent in public affairs, were later the leaders of the Olympia Railroad Union.

Under the laws of the territory it was impossible for Thurston county to issue the bonds without a Congressional act amending the organic act. The result was that months passed by and the Railway and Mining Company was still held up because of the failure of Congress to act. Furthermore, a number of the men who had agreed to sell or donate their lands to the Northern Pacific refused to do so for the new company. By December, 1873, it became apparent that no early action by Congress could be expected. Hazard Stevens issued a call on December 23rd for money to make the preliminary survey in order to be ready for actual construction as soon as Congress took action. General Stevens summarized the situation. "When that company \* \* \* \* comes to build the road all the preliminary work will have been done. And should the company decline to build the road we will be prepared to make other arrangements."

The last sentence of his statement was the first announcement of the Narrow Gauge Railroad. By December 31st \$660.00 had been raised and on that day the organization known as the Olympia Railroad Union was organized, consisting of seventeen of the subscribers to the fund with Hazard Stevens as President, S. D. Howe, Vice President, and F. A. Hoffman, Secretary. On January 8th, 1879, the articles of incorporation were drawn up and a capitalization of \$200,000.00 announced. While there was still hope that the Olympia Railway and Mining Company would be able to construct its road, the Union was prepared to take its place. \$200,000.00 was an ambitious sum for a town of less than two thousand people to raise locally. It was the intention of the Union not to seek outside aid. It was provided, however, that the stock, in \$100.00 shares, could be bought with land, goods, articles of value, or even labor on the roadbed—an interesting insight into the pioneer financial condition of the territory. In the prospectus it was announced that the purpose of the Union was "to construct and operate a railroad from Olympia to intersect the Northern Pacific near Tenino". Public interest was soon aroused and in only a few weeks 1500 acres of land had been subscribed.

By the end of January it was evident that the company

would never build the road and Olympia was left to use its own resources if it wished the road. No company could undertake the construction of the railroad without a subsidy from the county which could not be issued except by an Act of Congress. The situation of Olympia in the farthest corner of an undeveloped territory with little or no surplus capital would have ended the project except for the determination of the citizens to carry it through. It is safe to assume that a town of equal size today, even with modern financial aids, could not survey and build a railroad. Olympia accepted the plan as entirely feasible and the Union began to consider actual construction work.

An engineer, T. B. Morris, had already prepared the surveys and estimates for grading with the money provided by the committee. An office was opened where these documents, together with railroad pamphlets and plans, were shown to the public.

Within a week the Railroad Union had launched a campaign to interest everyone in Thurston County in the railroad. It became the leading subject for discussion in Olympia. Lands and some money were pledged. Those who had neither lands nor money promised to work on the roadbed for a specified time. Several merchants subscribed to stock by giving provisions for the workmen and material for construction work. One man donated the use of his piledriver as his share. At a meeting held on March 7th the ladies agreed to send their Chinese servants to work on the road. It was announced on March 7th that 6200 acres of land, 100 town lots and \$7,000.00 in cash or provisions had been subscribed, a not inconsiderable amount for a campaign of a few weeks.

As soon as the first burst of enthusiasm had spent itself, the united sentiment of the town was divided by a somewhat pointless argument as to the width of the gauge. It was evident that Olympia could not afford with so little money to construct a standard roadbed. By a vote of the subscribers a three foot gauge was decided on. Another cause for disagreement was whether or not the County should aid the railroad. It was to serve all the County and because of the lack of private capital it seemed as if some public money would be needed. This was disagreeable to some prominent men who had little faith in the railroad as a financial matter.

Active work began on April 7th and the first few miles of grading were done by the business men of Olympia and farmers

from the county. Miss Mary O'Neil, an early resident of Olympia, describes in the following paragraphs the opening of the work:

"The road from Olympia across Bush Prairie was graded by citizens of the county turning out in a body and working on the right of way. On these field days all business was suspended. The people assembled early in the morning on Main Street and, headed by the band and Charley Granger's big mule with a cannon strapped on his back, marched out to the right of way, every man armed with a pick and shovel. Governor Ferry and other officials marched and worked with the others. The ladies always prepared a bountiful dinner at noon. Somedays there were perhaps 700 or 800 men at work and as much as a half mile of right of way was graded. Farmers with their teams, plows and scrapers came from all parts of the county and lent a hand." This is a scene from pioneer life that deserves to be remembered for its picturesqueness.

The beginning of construction gave an added impetus to the raising of funds. By April 11th \$45,000.00 worth of land had been exchanged for stock, in addition to \$2,400.00 in labor and \$6,850.00 in cash and materials. The total of \$54,250.00 assured a good beginning of the work.

After the grading had reached the point where the people of Olympia could not conveniently work, men were hired to continue the construction and they were paid largely in provisions. Their cash pay was provided by the fund from the sale of stock and contributions made by individual men. On May 1st it was announced that two months' work by fifty men would complete the important part of the grading and a renewed call for funds was issued. Almost every citizen had subscribed to the first fund and there was little free wealth in Olympia, so this time there was trouble in raising funds. The financial condition of the Union was shaky due to the lack of ready money to continue construction or to equip the road.

The pressing question was whether Congress would pass the bill to allow Thurston County to issue bonds for the completion of the road. Judge McFadden, the territorial delegate, managed by May 18th to secure the passage of the bill. The arrival of the telegram announcing the fact was a signal for a procession in honor of the occasion in which all the town took part. The bill set a maximum of \$200,000.00 for the bond issue. The company

was to bond itself for \$100,000.00 to maintain transportation for twenty-five years and the county was not to be responsible for the company's obligations. The bonds were not to be issued until the roadbed was completed and the company showed itself capable of constructing the road. The passage of this bill made possible the construction of local roadbeds in other parts. Hitherto Congress had refused to allow public funds to be used to aid private enterprise. Two previous Olympia bills had been rejected and the Seattle-Walla Walla Railroad had been denied the same privilege.

A large number of citizens who had taken no part in the work or financing of the road now began a campaign on the issue of public economy since the bond issue would eventually raise taxes unless the railroad was a financial success. The issuing of the bonds never was in real doubt as the people of Thurston County had gone too far to turn back. The authorization to issue the bonds was voted two to one on August 8th. In all 742 votes were cast giving some idea of the sparsity of population in Thurston County.

The most important part of the grading was completed in the season of 1874 before the funds of the Union were exhausted. After December, 1874, the newspapers make no mention of the road. The people of Olympia had reached their financial limit and nothing more could be expected from them. The roadbed stayed unfinished and while the Union still existed in name, its usefulness was ended. From time to time the County Commissioners went through the form of legalizing an extension of time for the issuing of the bonds. Eastern capital had been badly crippled in the panic of two years previously and there was little chance of finding a man in the territory wealthy enough to complete the project.

In June, 1877, through the efforts of the Union a Seattle man, Amos Bowman, was interested. Although he was unable to carry out his proposals, his appearance was the occasion for a new effort. The unfinished road had been a sore point in Olympia's pride. From a more practical standpoint, Olympia's population and trade were remaining stationary while Seattle and Tacoma had forged far ahead.

Mr. E. N. Ouimette, a member of the original company, after canvassing the business men of Olympia, considered it the opportune time to revive the Railroad Union. Through his efforts

a meeting was called on June 1st to form a new organization. The Thurston County Railroad Construction Company was organized, capitalized at \$250,000.00 in \$1.00 shares. \$5,150.00 in cash was subscribed the first day.

Negotiations were opened with the Railroad Union to transfer its assets to the new company in order that the bonds might be issued for the new company. After some discussion it was agreed that when \$15,000.00 in stock had been subscribed for the new company and \$2,500.00 actually in the treasurer's hands, the Union would transfer its rights. By July 6th \$15,810.00 had been subscribed and on July 20th the transfer had been made.

Volunteer labor was again called for and 150 men worked on the grading at Tumwater. From this date on the paragraphs in the papers of that period contain continual references to the steady progress of the grading and trestle work. By May 10th the bonds were ready for issue and on this date a steamer brought the spikes for the trestlework and ties. The locomotive and rails came in a week's time. The locomotive, of course, was shipped from the East while the rails were rerolled from the original Central Pacific rails at San Francisco. The cars were built by Ward and Mitchell at Tumwater. The instant the rails arrived they were hurried to the roadbed and sixty feet of track laid on which a small flat car was placed. The tracklaying was pushed so that on July 25th the date for completion was set on August 1st. Two trains a day were scheduled to leave Olympia. Appended to the announcement were the passenger and freight rates for the road. From Olympia to Tumwater the fare was 12½ cents; to Bush Station 50c; to Spurlock 75c; to Tenino \$1.00. Ordinary freight was \$1.00 a ton, bulky things such as hay \$2.00.

On August 1st the road was formally opened. The entire rolling stock of the road; the locomotive, one passenger car, one box car and three flat cars carried 350 Olympia people to Tenino, the running time being an hour and a half for fifteen miles. A prominent citizen opposed to the railroad rode in front of the train on his cayuse\* to demonstrate the uselessness of modern transportation. The road that Olympia had waited for so long was at last completed.

The later history of the road is of little interest. In August, 1881, the name of the company was changed to the Olympia and

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\*An unconscious imitation of the man who walked his horse in front of Stephenson's "Rocket."

Chehalis Valley Railroad. In 1887 it again changed hands and became a subsidiary of the Oregon Improvement Co. under the name of the Port Townsend Southern Railroad. In 1891 the road was widened to standard gauge and extended to deep water on the west side of Budd Inlet. In 1898 the Oregon Improvement Co. was reorganized under the name of the Pacific Coast Co. and the little road passed into the hands of the Northern Pacific—a curious cycle that the road built to combat the Northern Pacific should at last have been bought by that company.

The Northern Pacific discontinued the road from Plumb Station to Tumwater and later tore up the track. The roadbed is still visible along the Chehalis-Olympia highway.

The Olympia-Tenino Railroad, while it did not bring great commercial prosperity to Olympia, did save the city from sinking into decay. Also it gave Thurston County and the surrounding territory the desired railroad communication with the rest of the territory. Most important, however, it placed a period at the end of the paragraph of pioneer railroad building which included the Baker road and the Seattle and Walla Walla Railroad, and which was one of the greatest achievements of pioneer Washington. The Olympia and Tenino Railroad, while not the most important of these roads, deserves to be remembered as the most typical example of the pioneer initiative and self-reliance which made their construction possible.

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