

Albany to the Coast by Rail

by Sheila Evans

Recently my daughter and I traveled by rail from Albany to Toledo. Passengers are not the usual cargo. It's a freight line and behind our engines were thirty to forty (I never got a clear count) boxcars of chips bound for the Toledo paper mill. My daughter's husband works for Willamette Pacific, and he had arranged our guest passes.

We snake out of the Albany depot around 1 pm, air-horning and hissing and dinning through crossings. We peer into backyards and down into the Willamette River where a lone boater fights the current. We seem an alarming distance above the water; it's a Disneylandish straight plunge down with no guard rails. I tell myself the trestle is very strong and will hold us easily, those great square beams of heartwood. I have this feeling again and again as we cross streams and rivers of the Coast Range.

City streets and suburbs of Albany blend imperceptibly with those of Salem, then Corvallis. Stopping traffic elicits a mixed reaction. Train buffs lining sidewalks and porches wave and yank imaginary whistles. But inconvenienced motorists drum their steering wheels and wait for our length to pass with almost audible impatience. Smug in our perch, we see this from the cab of the middle engine. There are three of them, for the pull over the summit.

In Corvallis, the train passes within a block of the Court House. It's New England—the stately white clock tower points like a steeple into blue sky above green leafy trees. But streets are bordered with Victorians, not Colonials, now most of them converted to B&Bs. They feature intricate fish scale roofs and lacy gingerbread trims painted aqua or purple.

Soon the tracks skirt the green spread around O.S.U. We wave to joggers, cyclists. The football team is too busy to notice us; same with a road-side crowd around a fruit stand. Cantaloupes a dime a pound. I spend a nanosecond contemplating a leap

from the train to buy—our speed is slow—then sanity kicks in. Not at my age.

West of Corvallis is land of the hobby-ranch. Typical scenario: in the far corner of a spread, near tracks used only enough to keep dust off, stands the ranch house with swimming pool, amid acres of deck and grass, all of it fenced in for the kids and dogs. But I am privileged in my crow's nest, and like a voyeur I see within fencing, the toys strewn on the patio, the brick barbecue, the garden plot. On the horizon we're ringed around with rolling hills of green and brown studded with houses built on promontories, to catch the view. We are the view.

We're paralleling Highway 20, but I've never seen the business end of the lumber mill in Philomath as I see it now from the train. Mountains of logs, great swaths of splintered earth, yellow-jawed machinery. The muscle that powers, or used to power, the body of Oregon.

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Philomath itself: dusty cheerful streets full of kids who stop in their ballgames to give us a wave and a yell. Some yards are nicely landscaped with trimmed green lawns, beds of brilliant pansies, zinnias, snapdragons. But there's also an eclectic assortment of junk—bedsprings, old pickups, scrap lumber—weathering in the valley heat. A town of individuals, each decorating according to his own taste.

We enter the forest, not exactly primeval, but replete with traveling scenery. Carpets of ferns spread out under canopies of green that filter light into golden bars. Here and there stands a great fellow who escaped the saw, an admirable giant among saplings and stumps. Even stumps are sprouting new growth; this is land that wants to grow trees, does it well.

Later, at home, remembering the trip, I shuffle through mental snapshots. A lone brown and white goat lying in a field,

barely pausing in his rumination to look us over. A circle of buzzards rising heavily from their meal. A deer springing alongside the tracks, heart-stoppingly close to disaster. An outpost rancher hosing down reluctant llamas against the heat. A braided stream running fast and clear over rocks thirty feet below the trestle. A swamp of skunk cabbage above which wheel watchful hawks, tips of their wings spread like fingers in air currents.

And clear-cuts, like moonscapes. A clear-cut on the horizon at almost every turn, a knob of hill shorn its greenery, bare as a doorknob. We are making a mess in the woods. But all those stout trestles—they are built of wood. We live in a world of wood, and we're using it up. If our supply runs out, what are we to do? The School of Forestry back at OSU, surely they are working on answers.

For miles this train embedded in the forest has been on its own, but we rejoin our partner, Highway 20, on the coast side of the summit. We see its traffic across the way, across the backsides of Chitwood and Eddyville. Train fans again come out to wave and wish us well, and the engineer obliges with his own mill, end of the line. We rumble parallel to an estuary full of deer who've assembled for their evening of drink. They splash away from our noise, then stop to stare as we pass.

We're at the mill now, a startling structure next to that primordial swamp. I look back and am surprised that our boxcars of chips have disappeared. My son-in-law tells me that those same cars loaded with rolls of paper as big as Volkswagens will return to Albany that night.

It's 7 pm, our trip is over. A luxuriously slow trip spent viewing the Coast Range the way few people are privileged to do. I think that others would like it as well. Newspapers are full of the nightmare that is traffic on Highway 18 and Highway 20, of dire predictions of the load doubling in ten years. Why not go by train? If my gracious host Willamette Pacific attached a passenger car, would people buy tickets?

I think perhaps they would.

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