

RAILROAD: Sites take visitors back in time in Central Oregon

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places to lay the track.

Rattlesnake Canyon, adjacent to Highway 26 in Warm Springs, was the site of a major Oregon Trunk trestle as the line approached Willow Creek. Saw mills were established to provide the lumber for the wooden trestle, which crossed the mouth of the canyon. Although the trestle is gone, vestiges of the old railroad grade are still visible from Highway 26 on either side of the canyon mouth.

Rainbow Tunnel, located behind the Rainbow Store on Highway 26 in Warm Springs, is the sole remaining tunnel of the eleven that were built by the railroad and was in use from 1910 to 1923. Constructed with a curve in it, it was used for potato storage and mushroom growing, without success, after the tracks were removed. It has been the site of numerous fires set by people using the tunnel for camping and partying.

From Rainbow Tunnel, there is a one-lane access road along the old railroad grade on the south bank of the

Deschutes River that goes to Mecca, now a popular site for boaters and rafters to put into the river. When the Oregon Trunk Line followed the river, a depot, several houses, and a water tower were built in August 1911 at Mecca, so named because at this point the rail line finally started to get out of the steepest part of the Deschutes canyon.

The railroad also constructed a very steep and winding road, known as Mecca Grade, up south out of the canyon to Agency Plains, where the homesteads were located. The three-mile road, though very narrow, provided a way to get supplies and people between the railroad and the homesteads.

A bridge was built across the Deschutes at Mecca and a store, a post office, and another house were built. The post office was closed in 1924 when the Oregon Trunk abandoned the line. The Mecca Grade continued to be used until its closing by the county in 1939.

The Harriman Deschutes Railroad came from the north along the Deschutes River to a naturally eroded valley that provided a gateway to Central Oregon. William Blair was the first postmaster when the Gateway post office opened in March 1913. A railroad

station and stockyards made Gateway an important shipping point for horses, sheep, and cattle. There was a lumberyard, a school, and two hotels.

During the Korean War, soldiers came through Gateway on the train on their way to and from the war. In 1954 the passenger service stopped due to the popularity of the automobile, with residents driving to Madras to shop. Freight shipping by truck eventually spelled the end of freight rail service in Gateway. The post office closed in September 1956 with mail service moving to Madras. Noah Vibbert's grocery store closed in 1964; the name is still faintly visible on the side of the building.

While in Gateway, we happened to meet a fifth-generation Vibbert who owns 5,000 acres of land around Gateway, accumulated from both sides of his family. His Danish ancestors came to the area in 1878 and his seventh-generation grandchild lives in the area today.

Trout Creek was the last stop on the history tour. Today it is a campground for drift boats and a pick-up point for rafters from Mecca. In the railroad building days, it was here the two lines split again after using the same line



PHOTO BY SUE STAFFORD

The Vanora Cut was created by blasting through solid rock to lay railroad track. Although the track is gone, the cut remains as silent evidence of the railroad coming to Central Oregon in 1911.

from North Junction to South Junction, further north on the Deschutes.

The Deschutes Railroad track ran up Trout Creek into the Gateway area and on to Madras. The Oregon Trunk followed the Deschutes River to Willow Creek where it turned at Pelton and followed the creek into Madras. They continued on two separate lines to Culver. The remaining single track south of Culver was operated jointly

by the Hill-Harriman system, although it was built and owned by the Harriman interests, which is evident from the stone Harriman depots in Redmond and Bend.

A tour of the historic Central Oregon rail sites is a journey back in time to understand the important role the railroads played in the settlement and growth of the area. It also gives pause to consider the scope of the engineering feats it took to lay the track.



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