

Tiny 98-Mile Railroad Serves Bustling Log Operations In Northern California

By PEGGY WALSH

McCLOUD—"We like to haul logs," Flake Willis, president of the McCloud River Railroad, stated.

Three growling diesel engines eased slowly beneath us with 32 cars of freshly-cut logs and 27 empties strung behind. Willis explained the load represented 272,000 board feet of logs—enough to supply the McCloud Lumber Com-

pany Sawmill at McCloud for half a day.

The empty flats were being returned to the Southern Pacific Company junction at Mount Shasta. They had carried pipe for the Pacific Gas and Electric Company pipeline which will bring natural gas to California from Canada.

It was an unusual experience, interviewing a railroad president atop an old water tower. We were up there taking pictures of the logging train at Ditch Creek.

Willis, president and general manager of a railroad providing access to 1,500 square miles of heavily timbered mountains, is at home in the woods as well as in his attractively-appointed executive office in McCloud.

McCloud River Railroad is not a subsidiary of the McCloud Lumber Company, as some people believe. It is an independent shortline with its own stockholders and

board of directors. Forest products account for 90 per cent of its revenues and in addition to McCloud Lumber Company, it serves the Scott and Lorenz Lumber companies at Burney, the Cheney-Grant Lumber Company at Potosi and Cooper's Mill near Mount Shasta. In conjunction with Southern Pacific, it takes logs to Long Bell Division of International Paper Company at Weed.

A total of 66,351,000 board feet of logs and 175 million board feet of lumber have been hauled by the line in the first 10 months of 1960.

The log train rumbled on to the log pond siding in McCloud as we climbed from the old water tower. Back in the company automobile, we forded a stream, eased over high centers in the road, brushed by huge trees lining the road, passed an ancient bus used for transporting loggers and stopped at the Ditch Creek loading area.

Trucks are being used at Ditch Creek for short hauling from the falling areas. A crane tipped the huge logs from the rigs like jackstraws and before the dust settled the "jammer" went to work loading the log cars.

The McGiffort "jammer" is a monstrous contraption that straddles the railroad track, exhaling steam and smoke. It piles logs on up to five flat cars per hour. An average logging train contains 48 loaded cars. Each flat car holds 8,500 feet of timber.

Volume and distance are keys to practical use of rails in transporting forest products in southern Siskiyou and northeastern Shasta counties, Willis explained. Logging operations at Ditch Creek are 42 miles from McCloud and the longest haul, Burney Mountain to McCloud is 70 miles.

"There is no cheaper land transportation than the steel wheel

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Page 4



A LOGGING TRAIN sweeps into a McCloud River Railroad facility at Ditch Creek pulling a load shorn from groves of ponderosa pine somewhere between McCloud and Burney. — Photo by Peggy Walsh

on the steel rail," he continued. However, the touchy cost factor is getting the logs to the rails, loading them and unloading them. Costs are reduced wherever possible by building rail spurs right into the timbered areas and skidding logs directly to the rails.

Sidings skirt mill ponds to further lessen handling costs. Rail hauling is not hampered by weight limitations imposed on public road use, Willis added.

From Ditch Creek, we wound through pine and fir forest on a logging road until we reached a fairly level grade crossing. Here Willis jockeyed his automobile onto the rails, let down its especially-equipped rail wheels and locked them in place. Honking at crossings we clicked eastward at about 35 miles per hour.

"We are now en route to Burney," Willis said, "over the first major rail extension to be built by private capital in Northern California since the '20s."

Trackage of the McCloud River Railroad was increased by 50 per cent in 1955, when a 31-mile extension was built from Bear Flat to Burney. The key to this extension was the signing of a McCloud Lumber Company contract representing acquisition of 1½ billion board feet of timber in the Burney Basin area.

The new terminal provided new customers for the railroad. It gave Burney sawmills a rail connection for their finished products to the big market areas, direct

routes to the southern part of the state and to eastern markets.

Now in addition to the 98 miles of main line, the McCloud River Railroad maintains and operates 34 miles of Great Northern and Western Pacific lines and 22 miles of sawmill-owned trackage.

"We finished paying for our sixth and last diesel engine last spring," Willis volunteered, explaining the changeover from steam locomotives began in 1948.

"We maintain the 300 log cars, the work cars, cabooses and other equipment in modern shops at McCloud and communication to trains has been by radio since 1953."

The destinies of the McCloud River Railroad have been linked to forest products since its beginnings in 1897. First owned by the McCloud Lumber Company, it became an independent company in 1914.

At the new rustic station at Burney, Willis handled business matters with J. H. Carleton, station agent, and discussed industrial prospects with John Stranahan, economic consultant for Shasta County.

The upstairs offices of the new station have recently been leased to PG&E. Twenty eight acres of railroad land at Burney are in use as a PG&E supply depot for the 1,500-mile pipeline under construction. A total of 121 miles of pipe are to reach the depot via McCloud River tracks. This

(Continued on Page 5)

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FLAKE WILLIS, left, president of the "shortline" McCloud River Railroad Company, confers with station agent **J. H. Carleton**, center, and **John Stranahan**, Shasta County economic adviser, at Burney. — Photo by Peggy Walsh