

The Trainmaster

Oregon Pony
Special Issue

The Official Publication of the
Pacific Northwest Chapter
National Railway Historical Society
Portland, Oregon
www.pnwc-nhs.org



Legacy of the Oregon Pony



By Jeff Terry

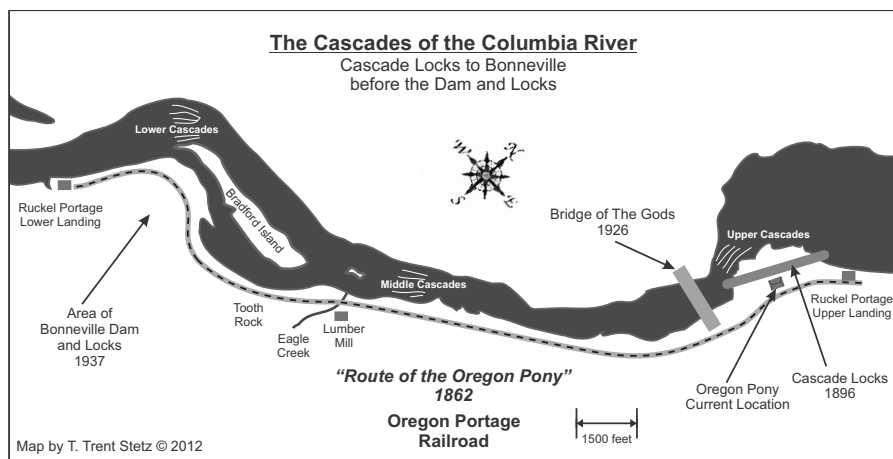
Overlooking the Columbia River Gorge in Cascade Locks, Oregon, not far from the busy main line of the Union Pacific Railroad, is a small glass-windowed building that contains one of the true pioneers of western transportation: the *Oregon Pony*. This tiny geared 0-4-0, one of the oldest preserved locomotives in the United States, was built during the first years of the Civil War and celebrated its 160th birthday in 2021. After a rocky career in which it survived a warehouse fire and nearly four decades of exposure to the elements, it is now fully restored as an icon of Oregon's early days, and is proudly displayed near the location where it was first put to work in the 1860s.



Left: All duded-up for a stint on display at the 1905 Lewis and Clark Exposition in Portland, the *Oregon Pony* was given a two-gallon overhaul by its San Francisco owner, David Hewes. In 1904, the locomotive had fallen victim to a warehouse fire and lost both its wood parts and paint. The cosmetic restoration was respectable, and certainly preserved the important features of the locomotive. (Labbe collection, Oso Publishing, Timber Times)

The cover photo and the photo below, probably taken in the Union Pacific Albina Yard about 1916, show some interesting changes to the Pony. The bell is obviously a replacement, taken from a "regular" steam locomotive. The date on the water tank has been changed from 1905 to 1909, possibly indicating that the locomotive was exhibited somewhere after the Exposition. Her overall condition is rough, and the missing door under the stack may be evidence that someone inspected the boiler. (Cover: Labbe collection, Oso Publishing, Timber Times. Left: OHS 1271045384)





To understand why the Oregon Pony was built, it is necessary to backtrack to the early 1850s. At that time, the settling of the American West was in full swing. Wagon trains full of settlers were crossing the country via the 2,000-mile-long Oregon Trail, lured by the promise of free land in the Oregon Territory. One major obstacle on their already hazardous journey was the final 100 miles from The Dalles to the Willamette Valley, which for most meant a raft trip over the Columbia River. (The other equally dangerous option was to take the treacherous Barlow toll road around Mount Hood.)

For those who chose to brave the Columbia, at two places along the river – at the Cascades and at Celilo Falls – the rapids were so rough that they could not be safely crossed, and at these locations the pioneers were forced to offload their belongings and portage around the rapids via rudimentary roads that often turned muddy in foul weather.

Traffic on the Columbia River increased dramatically in the mid-19th century after gold was discovered in the Oregon and Washington territories. Within a short time, steamboats were plying the Columbia ferrying miners, fortune seekers and immigrants upriver from Portland into Washington and Idaho, but as in the past, these boats were unable to safely navigate the treacherous rapids. Francis Chenoweth saw the increased traffic as an opportunity, and in 1851 he built a wooden-rail portage railroad (tramway) on the Washington side of the Columbia at the Lower Cascades rapids. The new railroad, 2.5 miles in length, was a marked improvement over the portage roads. It consisted of crude 4-wheel wooden cars pulled by mules and horses over wooden rails, but it made money and in 1853, Chenoweth sold the operation to the Bradford brothers.

In the mid-1850s, another entrepreneur, Joseph S. Ruckel, along with Harrison Olmstead, purchased the beginnings of a new portage road at the Lower Cascades on the Oregon side (south bank) of the Columbia to compete with the Bradford's tramway. Ruckel's road, between Bonneville

and Cascade, opened in 1856 and cut into the Bradfords' profits, as he had secured several government contracts to move freight between the steamboat landings; an attack on the Washington Portage by the local Yakima and Klickitat tribes shifted all traffic to the Oregon side of the river for a short time and made Ruckel's portage road very profitable.

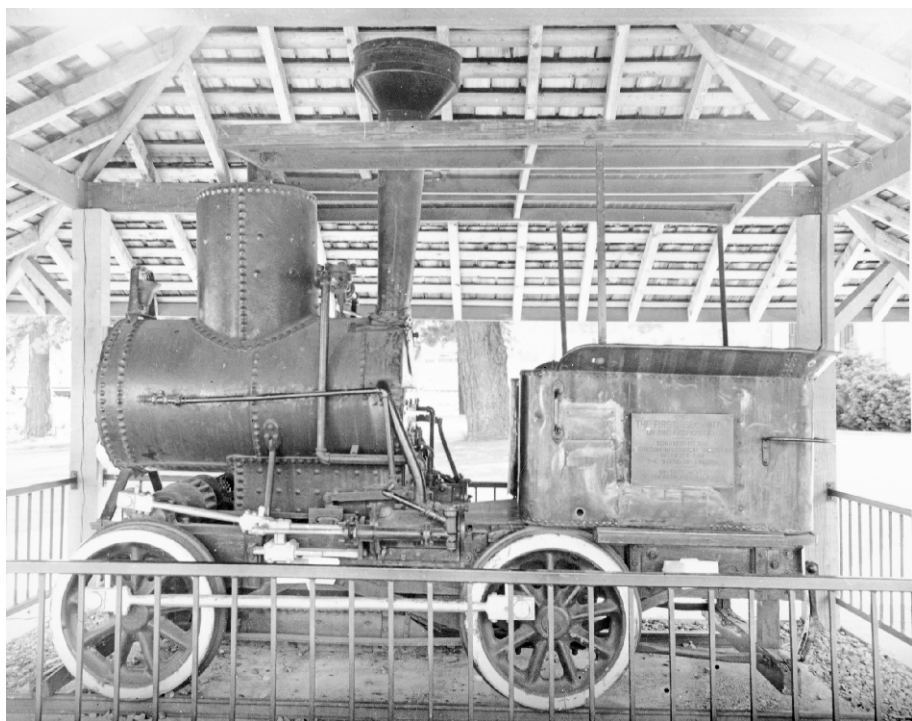
In order to stay competitive, in 1857 Ruckel began converting his road into a tramway. A sawmill was constructed at the mouth of Eagle Creek which was used to supply the thousands of board feet of oak and fir needed to construct the rail line. Fir, six inches square and covered on the top with strap iron, was used for rail and the center of the tracks, the area between the ties, was planked over to create a walking path along the 4.5 mile-route which sported many substantial bridges and trestles.

In late 1858, the project was finished and mules began pulling short trains consisting of four to six 4-wheel railroad cars alongside the rapids between the steamboat landings. Both freight and passengers were accommodated, and those that could not afford the fare were free to walk the right-of-way. All was not perfect, however. The Oregon Portage Railway was found to be susceptible to flooding and it was severely damaged less than a year after its opening. Hastily rebuilt, it continued in operation and managed to earn a tidy profit for its owners within a short time.

In 1859, a Portland businessman named John C. Ainsworth entered into a business arrangement with Ruckel, Olmstead, and the Bradfords to bring both of the rail portages at the Lower Cascades under the banner of the Union Transportation Company, which was later incorporated during 1860 as the Oregon Steam Navigation Company (OSN), the majority of its shareholders being steamboat owners and operators. Both portages would continue to be independently operated, though a set price for shipping passengers and freight was established and both portages received a share of the profits no matter which tramway was used. It was a harbinger of things to come, as within a few years the OSN would have a complete monopoly over all facets of transportation on the Columbia River.

In early 1861, the Bradfords announced plans to rebuild their tramway into a steam railroad, reconstructing it with iron rail and powering it with small steam locomotives. In turn, Ruckel announced similar plans for the Oregon Portage, but with one major difference: his railroad would likewise be a steam road, but it would use the existing wooden tracks and right-of-way.

In early 1861, Rukel placed an order with the Vulcan Iron Foundry of San Francisco for a small 4-wheel geared locomotive. The Vulcan Works (not to be confused with the locomotive builder of the same name at Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania) had much experience building mining machinery and assembling locomotives, but the 0-4-0 would be the first they had built completely from scratch. The price was \$4,000.



Between 1970 and 1980, the locomotive was displayed in a covered, but still open area at Cascade Locks. The tiny engine still bore the wear and tear of its many years outside Union Station in Portland. It was amazing, however, that most of the parts and pieces were still there. Having most of the parts extant aided greatly in the 1980 restoration. (Labbe collection, Oso Publishing, Timber Times)

Nicknamed the “*Pony*” and built to a gauge of five feet, the engine was an ungainly contraption. It was necessarily small and lightweight (only five tons) in order for the wooden strap rails to accommodate it. All machinery – the boiler, cylinders, water tank, and gears – were affixed to its compact, 13-foot-long frame. The boiler itself was of a Scotch-type design (return flue) and was fitted with a huge steam dome. Water and wood were carried in a small tank located on the rear of the platform and there was no cab to shelter the operator. Power was transmitted to its 34-inch drive wheels through a system of reduction gearing, driven by two 9” x 18” cylinders mounted on either side, horizontally, near the center of the frame. One unique aspect of the design was that when the engine was moving forward, the machinery was actually working in reverse.

Completed in early 1862, the engine departed San Francisco aboard the steamer *Pacific* in March. Accompanying it was Theodore Goffe, who had supervised its construction and assembly in San Francisco; he would later join the payroll of the OSN and become the locomotive's first engineer.

Upon the arrival of the *Pacific* at the Couch wharf in Portland, the new locomotive and several new flatcars were transferred onto a barge bound upriver. Arriving at Bonneville in early April, it was unloaded at the steamboat landing and Goffe spent the next few weeks setting it up for service. On April 24, 1862 (though some accounts say it was May 10), the *Pony* made a test run over the Oregon Portage Railway with Goffe at the controls. Aboard the engine for the first trip from Bonneville to Cascade were Ruckel and six of his investors. At one point during the journey, the 0-4-0 began to work water thorough its cylinders and everyone aboard was doused with sooty water, at which point they retired to a nearby steamboat to celebrate the occasion with food and drink, dirty but none the worse for wear.

For the next year, the little *Pony* provided faithful service over the Oregon Portage. A typical day saw the steamboats of the OSN, which had left Portland early in the morning, arriving at the Lower Landing (Bonneville) around noon. Freight and supplies were offloaded at the dock, then transferred to the Oregon Portage's little 4-wheel flatcars for the 4.5-mile trip upriver to the steamboat landing, at which point they were reloaded into waiting OSN steamers for the fifteen-mile trip up the Columbia to the next portage road, located at The Dalles. Passengers rode in the lines' one small coach or aboard the flatcars.

The *Pony* usually carried around 200 tons of freight each day over the railroad, most of which was heading upriver; the only downriver traffic was usually gold dust, shipped twice a week from the mines to the San Francisco mint. One interesting note is that a chief from a local Indian tribe was a frequent rider in its cab; he had ridden the engine on its first day in service and so enjoyed the experience that he quickly became a regular fixture on the footplate alongside engineer Goffe.

The OSN continued to maintain the Oregon Portage for the transfer of livestock. However, in April 1863, OSN President John Ainsworth sent word to the Oregon Portage to close down the railroad; his note instructed the superintendent to "Lay up *Pony* and pay off engineer." (The tracks, long dormant, were eventually rebuilt in the 1870s and later became part of the Oregon Railway & Navigation Company, now Union Pacific.)

It was initially thought that the 0-4-0 might be of some use on the OSN's newly-built portage railroad at The Dalles, so it was loaded aboard a steamship and sent there in May, 1863. However, after sitting unused for three years, the decision was made to sell the engine for \$2,000. Its purchaser, David Hewes, was the owner of the Steam Paddy Company of San Francisco, a contractor that specialized in street improvement work formerly done manually by Irish "Paddys." Earlier in 1866, Hewes had purchased a similar Vulcan Iron Foundry pony, the *Pluto*, which sported a vertical boiler and cylinders, and he was happy to add another to his roster. A

few years later, Hewes would make his mark on railroad history by supplying the famed golden spike used at Promontory in 1869.

In October 1866, the 0-4-0 was sent down the Columbia to Portland where it was loaded aboard the steamship *Montana* for the trip down the Pacific coast to California. Upon arrival in San Francisco, the *Pony* was modified with the addition of a canopy to shelter the engineer, and then put to work moving sand, filling and grading city streets, and preparing building sites for construction. After several years of service, records show that it was retired around 1873 and spent the next three decades stored in one of Hewes' warehouses.

In 1904, tragedy befell the *Pony* when the warehouse burned. The heat of the fire melted all of its brass bearings and consumed everything flammable, including its wooden timber frame, all gaskets and packing material, and even its canopy roof. The water tank was badly damaged, and many of its metal castings were disfigured and cracked by the heat. Reduced to a mass of charred metal, it appeared that the historic engine was finally destined for the scrap yard.

Thankfully, one of Hewes' employees, Henry Dosch, recognized the historical significance of the little locomotive and rallied for its preservation. The *Pony*, despite its diminutive size, had a substantial number of "firsts" credited to it: it was the first complete locomotive built on the West Coast; the first locomotive to operate on the first railroad in the Oregon Territory; the very first steam locomotive in the Pacific Northwest; and the first locomotive put into regular service west of the Mississippi River and north of the California state line. It deserved better than the cutting torch.

Dosch and others were able to convince Hewes to bankroll a cosmetic restoration of the engine, and during 1904 it was prepared for exhibit at the 1905 Lewis & Clark Exposition, which was held that year in Portland. It was a quick job: the engine's wood frame was replaced; its canopy rebuilt; and its damaged parts repaired to the point that it appeared mechanically complete. Upon closer examination, several flaws were revealed: its missing brass bearings weren't replaced and its boiler wasn't retubed. The "restoration" only served to create a display item and the 0-4-0 was far from being operational. Yet from all outwards appearances it looked serviceable, even sporting a new coat of black paint that nicely covered the scorched metal.

There was one final touch. For years the locomotive had been nicknamed the *Pony*, and Hewes now made it official by having the name *Oregon Pony* painted on the sides of its water tank.

At the close of the Exposition, the engine was donated by Hewes to the State of Oregon, and he also gave a brass plaque that was affixed to its boiler, proclaiming the *Oregon Pony* as "The First Oregon Locomotive." For many years it was cared for by the Union Pacific and stored within their Albina

roundhouse for its owner, the Oregon Historical Society. Around 1929, it was pulled from storage, repainted, and placed on exhibit in front of Portland's Union Station. While highly visible to the thousands of passengers that called at the station each day, the engine was also exposed to Portland's damp climate, which caused significant metal corrosion over the years.

A final move came on the eve of Amtrak in 1970, when the *Oregon Pony* left Portland for an open display shelter at Cascades Locks, near the right-of-way of the old Oregon Portage. As its 120th birthday approached, the *Oregon Pony* was in poor repair, having weathered badly during seventy years of exposure to the elements. Following a thorough study of its history and a survey of its condition, followed by several months of planning, a complete cosmetic restoration was undertaken by the Oregon Historical Society beginning in late 1980. The goal was to preserve as much of the original locomotive as possible. The contractor chosen for the restoration was Gales Creek enterprises, at that time the operator of the Oregon Trolley Park Museum in Glenwood, Oregon (since relocated to Brooks as part of the Oregon Electric Railway Museum at Powerland Heritage Park).

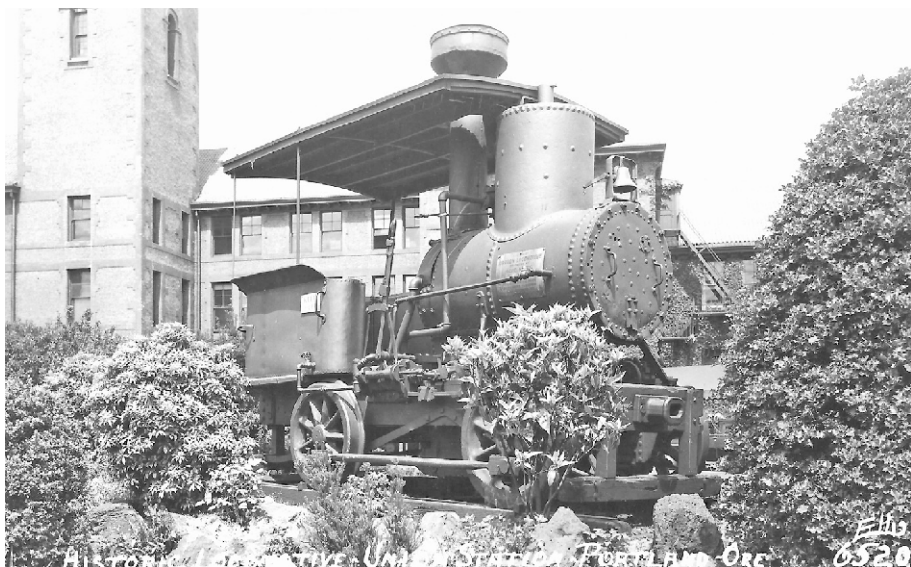
This time, unlike the 1904 job, the restoration was thorough and complete, though again it did not result in an operating artifact. The engine was completely disassembled, with all of its parts being repaired, primed, and painted as necessary. It was found that the wooden timber frame from



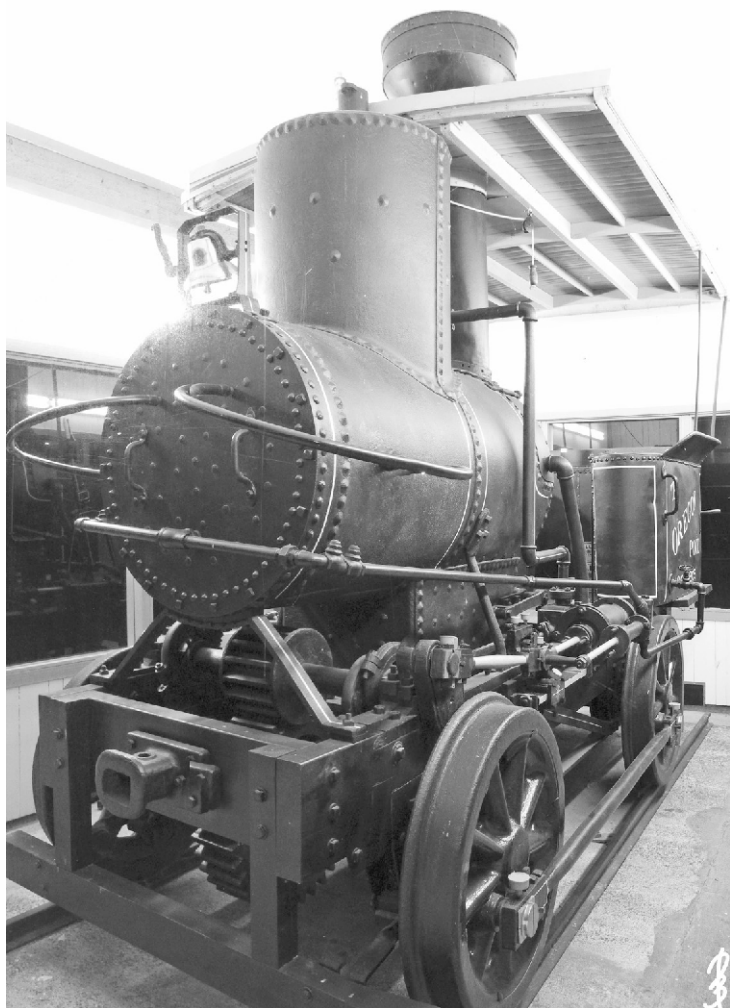
The uncovered, outdoor display at Union Station certainly didn't do the locomotive any favors. Even with an occasional coat of paint, the elements took their toll on the diminutive engine. It is more than a little amazing, however, that the *Pony* survived the scrap drives of two World Wars, particularly when it spent the 1940s perched in such a public arena. (postcard, Steve Kenney collection)



It was about the start of the Great Depression that the *Oregon Pony* left the Albina Yard for display at Union Station. She received a coat of paint and was placed on a short section of elevated track. Gone was the fancy paint scheme that adorned the tank during her Exposition days, replaced by a stenciled "Keep Off" sign. At least they put an explanation plaque in front of the loco. (Labbe collection, Oso Publishing, Timber Times)



Landscapers and locomotives rarely get along and the *Oregon Pony* was no exception. There seems to be an unwritten obligation for the vegetation folks to plant large bushes in front of or around every locomotive placed on display. Although partially obscured, the locomotive was still the subject of this postcard. (Ellis postcard, Steve Kenney collection)



1904 was severely rotted, so it was replaced along with the canopy. The boiler was sandblasted, but none of the original tubes were removed in order to preserve as much of the engine's "historic fabric" as possible. The water tank was found to be in very poor condition, and after years of accumulated rust and corrosion was removed and it was refurbished, with the restorers again preserving as much of the original material as possible. The long-missing brass bearings were replaced, and eventually the *Oregon Pony* was able to roll, slowly, with all of its original gears, pistons, and side rods moving. Using period photos as a guide, it was repainted and striped to match its appearance at the 1905 Lewis & Clark Exposition, then placed on display within a new climate-controlled and weatherproof building at Cascade Locks in August 1981. It still wears the plaque that Hewes affixed to its boiler in 1905.

Today the era of portage railroads is long past. A series of locks completed in 1896 was utilized to move river traffic through the Cascades. The rapids themselves and the right-of-way of the Oregon Portage Railroad are underwater as a result of Bonneville Dam, leaving the *Oregon Pony* as one of the last remaining artifacts of this brief but interesting chapter in early western transportation. Visitors to the area will find the 0-4-0 exhibited within the 23-acre Cascade Locks Marine Park, which is also home to the steamboat replica *Columbia Gorge* and the Cascades Locks Historical Museum.

Above left: Its outward appearance restored similar to what it was for the 1905 Exposition, the *Pony* is in excellent display condition at Cascade Locks.

Below left: Well- lighted after dark, the locomotive is resplendent in its polish regardless of the time of day, or season of the year. (Chris Fussell photos)

Right: The pier for the Bridge of the Gods has a mural which depicts the history of the Cascade Locks area. In a prominent position in the mural is the *Oregon Pony*. The locomotive resides only a short distance from the painting. (Arlen Sheldrake photo)





The locomotive is now housed in a fully climate-controlled structure with protection from both the elements and vandals. Given the historical importance of the artifact, and the time, money, and effort put into multiple restorations over the years, it is only fitting that the *Pony* is properly cared for and secured. A 160-year-old, West Coast built, steam locomotive can be found nowhere else. (Arlen Sheldrake photo)

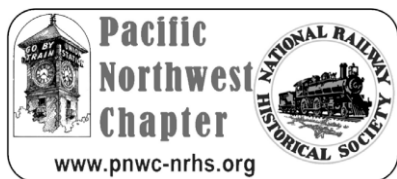
This article first appeared in *Railfan & Railroad Magazine* in 2009. Jeff Terry lives in Minnesota and is a columnist for *Railfan & Railroad Magazine*. He enjoys researching and writing about preserved old steam power and kindly provided permission for reprinting this article.

The *Oregon Pony* is displayed adjacent to the Cascade Locks Historical Museum which is located in one of the three original lock tender's houses built in 1905. The Museum is open May through October. See their website: www.cascadelocksmuseum.org for open days & hours and admission information. Donations are welcome. Since 1967, they have connected visitors to Cascade Locks with their community history.



PNWC – NRHS MISSION

To preserve and interpret Pacific Northwest railroad history and historical artifacts for the education and enjoyment of current and future generations.



Pacific Northwest Chapter,
National Railway Historical Society
Union Station, 800 NW 6th Avenue, Room 1
Portland, Oregon 97209-3794
503.226.6747 info@pnwc-nrhs.org
© 2009 Jeff Terry © 2012, 2022 PNWC-NRHS
(Version 4) April 2022