

## Rails, Lumber & South Hill

by Jerry Bates

**M**ost South Hill history we've written about, recorded, and researched over the years took place during and after the development of the transcontinental railroads. It wasn't until the late 1870s that the original South Hill pioneer families took root. Yes, we had the 1853 Hill crossing by the Longmire-Biles wagon train and the Puyallup Indians using the Hill as their favorite hunting grounds, but the Hill remained a quiet, dark forest until the second wave of westward migration, thanks to the Transcontinentals.

Besides moving people West, the railroads could move lumber East. As the Great Lakes forests were being depleted, a new market was being created for Northwest lumber. Lumber was the major export for the Puget Sound region prior to the railroads. Our seemingly never-ending forests of huge virgin Douglas fir had long left Puget Sound ports for customers all along the Pacific Rim of America and Asia. With railroads through the Cascades, another market would be added. Rails and lumber would transform the development of South Hill as well as the Pacific Northwest.

For the Puget Sound region, the most essential of the transcontinental railroads was the Northern Pacific. Tacoma, Washington, was designated its

terminus in 1873, yet many years would pass before the completion of a direct route to the Sound.

While the rest of the country was being linked East and West with the Central Pacific meeting the Union Pacific in 1869, the Northwest's Puget Sound area was the last to benefit with its own direct transcontinental route. It wasn't until 1883 that tracks finally met tidewater at Commencement Bay, linking Tacoma with St. Paul, Minnesota, the Great Lakes and Eastern railroad networks.



Jerry Bates © South Hill Historical Society

The route crossed the Cascades by way of the Columbia River Gorge to Portland, Oregon. From Portland a railroad spur went north to a train-ferry crossing the Columbia River to Kalama. After ferrying across the Columbia, the train would continue north following the Cowlitz River Corridor then turn northeast at about Tenino, crossing the prairie land and finally descend a steep grade down through Tacoma to the Bay. This historic section (the Prairie Line) bisected today's University of Washington at Tacoma campus.

However, getting to Tacoma by way of Portland was not the original dream of the railroad planners. The final "direct" route to the terminus would go over the Cascades by way of a tunnel dug at Stampede Pass. The route continued

across the western foothills linking with the existing rails from the Wilkeson-Carbonado coal fields, through the Orting Valley to Tacoma. This direct route was completed in 1888.

### **South Hill**

Beginning in the 1870s, South Hill's pioneer families start to appear. With most of the choice farmland such as the Puyallup Valley taken during earlier migrations, the Hill was mostly vacant dense forests of huge virgin growth Douglas fir and cedar. A few pioneer families established farms, the Mosolf, Kupfer and Muehler families among other claims leaving most all the land on the Hill unpopulated.

### **Building the Northern Pacific**

To encourage Railroad Companies to make the huge investment in transcontinental railroad routes across the United States, the government offered them free title to every other section of government land on both sides of the tracks up to an 80-mile swath. In the Pacific Northwest thousands of acres bordering a rail line would hold huge forests of valuable timber assets a great enticement to Eastern investors.

With the Stampede Pass completion and the new direct route to Tacoma, the Northern Pacific line now skirted South Hill. The line ran along the base of our eastern ridge area (today's Foothills Trail.) Railroad stations along the line were in Orting, Alderton and Puyallup as trains made their way to the terminus in Tacoma. Our proximity to the line meant every other section (one square mile, 640 acres) of government-owned land on South Hill became Northern Pacific property.

### **Weyerhaeuser**

As the 1900s began, Railroad magnate, James J. Hill, had taken control of the Northern Pacific Railroad. He was a close friend and neighbor of Great Lakes timber baron Friedrich Weyerhaeuser. Hill—eager to sell his government granted 44 million acres—much of it prime timberland, made a deal with his timber baron neighbor anxious to expand west. Weyerhaeuser and several associates boarded Hill's private car for Tacoma and visited the timberland. After six weeks waiting, the announcement was made on January 3, 1900—Weyerhaeuser would purchase 900,000 acres of Northern Pacific timberland in Washington for \$6 an acre from the Northern Pacific

Railway, along with sweet transport deals on shipping lumber East. The Weyerhaeuser Timber Company would dominate the lumber business in the Northwest. This had dramatic effect on South Hill, a checkerboard of former railroad land that was now mostly owned by the Weyerhaeuser Company. Our member Carl Vest counted the Weyerhaeuser owned sections listed on a 1915 map; at least a third of the land we call South Hill, at that date, was titled to Weyerhaeuser.

The Hill's dense forests would soon be gone. Once the lumber companies clear-cut the forest, acres of mostly barren stump land (many considered worthless) remained. However, it would become cheap land for hardscrabble small farmers. This ushered in a new era in South Hill's history that would last up through the 1950s. A period of small-scale farms with rabbits, poultry, berries, fruit trees and pastureland and humble homes often with large families, a few corner businesses and gas stations scattered about. Small local communities grew centered around schools with social life including dances, church, 4-H and Grange activities. Many residents had jobs working off the Hill for a livelihood.

Starting in the late 1960s and early 1970s a flood tide of commercial and residential growth transformed South Hill dramatically. The small farm quiet life on the Hill would slowly give way to suburbanization with ever increasing speed. Commercial activity along the Meridian corridor began to evolve. The growth was greatly expanded after the completion of State Route 512 in 1972, as people moved from Puyallup and the Tacoma area and surrounding communities, to live and raise families on South Hill. Initially the environment remained semi-rural with population of around 7,000 but not for long. Today unincorporated South Hill has a population of 64,708 as of the 2020 census—a population in Pierce County second only to Tacoma.

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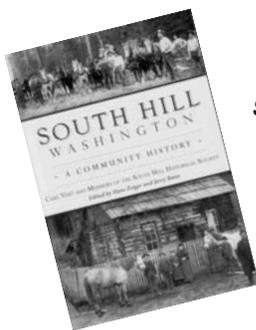
by Ben Peters

Please call, e-mail or write any change of address to me, Ben Peters, 253-845-7028, poppa-ben2002@yahoo.com, South Hill Historical Society, Box 73582, South Hill, WA 98374.

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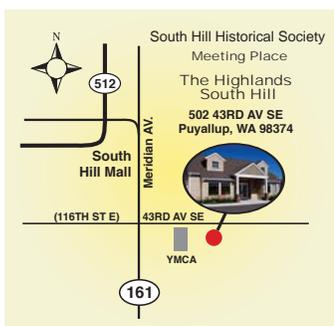


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All society meetings will be canceled until further notice due to the coronavirus pandemic.



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