



Boise: On The Main Line At Last

by Thornton Waite

When the Oregon Short Line built their line across southern Idaho in the early 1880s, Boise was the largest settlement between Salt Lake City and the West Coast. Despite this, the Oregon Short Line bypassed Boise in favor of a route to the south because of hills east of Boise. Several years passed before Boise, which was then the Territorial Capital of Idaho, had a rail connection with the Oregon Short Line. The first rail connection was finally provided by the Idaho Central Railway, which completed a spur line from Nampa in 1887.

Many more years passed before Boise was on the main line of the Oregon Short Line, the result of years of plans and hopes for a main line through the city. The Boise main

line was built principally to provide convenient passenger service to and from Boise, and when it opened, even the Union Pacific noted publicly that there was no particular economic benefit to the railroad as a result of the construction of the line; freight service was never very large on the line.

The large celebration held when the new main line and depot opened in 1925 marked the importance of this new addition to Boise. Thousands of people came from all over the state to take part in the festivities, and the railroad helped make the event a memorable one by placing special trains and locomotives on display and by giving speeches and ceremonies.

As the new Boise Main Line was built through Boise, a new railroad station — the largest one in the state of Idaho — was constructed at the same time. This depot building, still used by Amtrak and now owned by the City of Boise, is a landmark and an architectural delight. Recently renovated by Morrison Knudsen, the building is still standing and in use on the bench on the south side of Boise. Because railroad traffic was never very great at Boise and freight traffic was handled in the downtown business district, the depot was in a quiet residential area, an unusual circumstance for a large railroad depot.

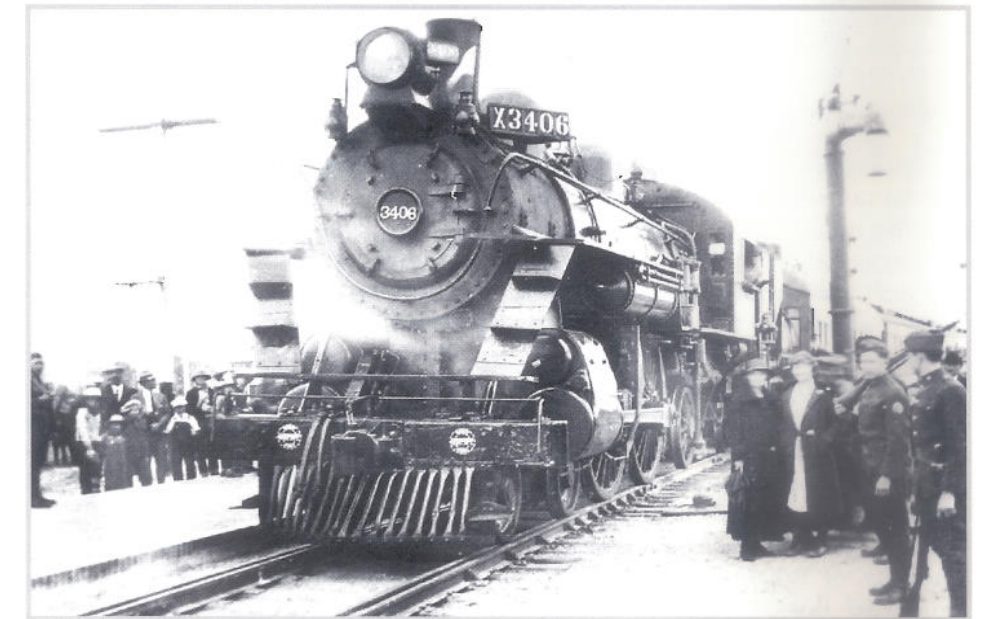
The depot and grounds, which were once quite elaborate, are still well-



(opposite page): Boise was proud of their depot, and many promotional photographs were taken of the building. Located on the bench on the east side of the city, the Platt Gardens provided an attractive landscape in the front of the building. (Union Pacific Museum)

(above): The Union Pacific helped make the opening of the depot a memorable event. They put their newest and largest locomotive on display, #3630, a 2-8-8-0 Mallet built in 1920 by the Brooks Division of ALCO. A group of kids and adults have climbed all over it to watch the events. Note that the indicator board has the year "1925" on it. (Idaho State Historical Society, #61-143.58)

(right): Union Pacific President Gray's special train was pulled by engine #3406, a 4-4-2 Atlantic built in 1904 by the Baldwin Locomotive Works. There was even a special honor guard to greet the train, with some of the guards on the right. (Idaho State University)



maintained, although not to the extent that they once were. Amtrak's "Pioneer" stopped at the depot each day that it runs although it is being dropped from the Amtrak schedule in November 1996. Although the freight tracks in downtown Boise have been removed, a victim to a large urban renewal project, the Boise Main Line continues to be used by the Union Pacific. In addition,

MK Rail, a subsidiary of Morrison Knudsen, also uses the tracks to test their new and rebuilt locomotives.

The history of the Boise Main Line — currently designated the Boise Cut-Off by the Union Pacific — and the well-known depot at Boise, are closely associated and intertwined. The depot and the line were built at the same time, at a relatively late

date, in the post-World War I era, a time when new railroad construction was unusual

THE FIRST BOISE RAILROAD
The first serious talk about building a railroad to western Idaho began when the construction of the Idaho, Salt Lake and Columbia River Railroad Company from Salt Lake City to Boise — the Territorial Capital —



The Boise depot, which was built in 1895, had a small park next to it, a common feature of the depots built in that era. The business district was located behind the depot, across the street. The trees were relatively new, since the area was desert country before it was settled, and extensive irrigation was required to grow any vegetation. (John Aguirre Collection)

1900, had a 20' x 40' frame depot to handle both passenger and freight along with a 756 square foot platform.

3. Beatty (M.P. 13.0), which had a 10' x 12' shelter shed, also built in 1911, and a sand platform.

4. Perkins (M.P. 17.0), which had a 10' x 12' shelter shed, built in 1911, along with a sand platform.

In March 1925, before the new depot and the Boise Main Line opened, the railroad listed the same five trains with an additional scheduled stop at Perkins between Beatty and Boise. The only manned stations were at Nampa, Boise, and Meridian. There was also a daily mixed train between Boise and McCall.

In addition to expanding their passenger service, the railroad also expanded their facilities. In 1916 the railroad had a one-story, wood-

framed freight station built in 1904, 46' x 213'. The freight office was 15' x 32', and there was a large freight platform. There was also a ten-ton pillar crane built in 1912, an ice house, 30' x 45', built in 1912, and a 150-ton Fairbanks Morse track scale built in 1914. There was a 20' x 30' yard office with a 12' x 15' lean-to built in 1912. The stockyards here and in Barber were built in 1907.

At the time, Boise had numerous other railroad facilities. The buildings included a section house built in 1896, a bunk house built in 1896, another bunk house built in 1906, and a third one built in 1914. There was a hand-car house built in 1901, a coal house built in 1915, and a cellar built in 1913. The steel water tank, 24' in diameter by 19.5' high, was on a 40-foot steel tower built on concrete foundations in 1907. There was also a water column, built in the same year,

and a 10" diameter by 500' deep well built in 1906. A 10' x 30' frame coal platform was built in 1907. Moreover, the four-stall engine house was constructed from brick in 1907 with 88' stalls. Outside lighting was added in 1915. The 65' steel turntable was built in 1907, and there was a small oil house built in the same year along with a two-story store house built in 1896. The one-story, 32' x 48' power house was built in 1907.

Meridian also had a hand car house built in 1907 and a 14-1/2' x 24-1/2' frame ice house built in 1911. There was a wood, semaphore train order signal at Meridian, while Boise and Nampa both had automatic block signals. The one in Nampa was installed in 1914, and the one in the Boise yard was installed in 1912.

On October 31, 1910, the Oregon Short Line absorbed the Boise City

Railway and Terminal Company. Although the Boise City Railroad & Terminal Company was a definite improvement over having no rail line, the Boise populace wanted the transcontinental trains to pass through their city. They felt they had the "national stigma of being known as the isolated capital of Idaho". They wrote:

"When they started out to bring new industries, new citizens, new pleasures, they have had to start out by apologizing for the stub, explaining how short it was, how little it affected getting in and out. That was a handicap."

The Boise City Railway & Terminal was built from Boise Junction to Vernon in 1893 (6.3 miles). The next 2.1 mile extension to Barber, where there was a large lumber mill, was completed in 1904-05. Connections were made there with the Inter-mountain Railway Company. On October 31, 1910, the BCR&T was officially purchased by the Oregon Short Line.

The facilities in Boise did not change significantly over the next few years until the new main line was constructed on the bench on the south side of Boise. With the new main line, the passenger facilities were no longer needed, but the freight facilities continued to be used.

THE BOISE MAIN LINE

As early as 1900, Edward Henry Harriman of the Union Pacific told the Boise populace that the main line would pass through their city if they raised \$250,000 for the right-of-way. Although the money was promptly raised, Harriman was reportedly prevented from starting the construction by his board of directors.

In 1920, the Boise Chamber of Commerce again began actively urging the Union Pacific to construct a new line through their city. On August 14, 1922, the Union Pacific signed an agreement with the Chamber of Commerce, committing the railroad to building a new line through Boise

if the city would aid in the project. The railroad announced plans to construct a new mainline between Boise and Orchard, located on the existing main line east of Boise, if the city of Boise would raise the \$350,000 for the right-of-way. This new section of track would provide a loop through Boise so that all transcontinental passenger trains could stop at Boise, eliminating the bothersome transfer at Nampa and providing improved train service to Boise. The city of Boise again promptly raised the specified money with a large community effort called "Drive Your Spike".

Since a new line was being constructed, the line was laid out on the south side of the city center, on the bench, to minimize the grades necessary to go over the hill to connect with the main line at Orchard. Consequently, there was a great amount of discussion related to this location.

The Union Pacific told the concerned parties that, although they had originally intended to develop a depot site in downtown Boise, a detailed survey proved that this plan was not feasible. Heavy grades would be encountered, necessitating the use of helper engines on all heavy passenger trains. Furthermore, it would also mean the line could never be used as an alternate route for through freight trains. The Boise people made the best of the situation and accepted the location of the new depot and rail line on the bench on the east side of town.

The new, 27.5 mile line, extending from Orchard to Perkins on the Nampa-Boise line, was part of a \$3.25 million construction project. Controversy grew over the land evaluation because landowners felt their land was worth more than the offering. In addition, in January, 1923, the trustees for the citizens refused to turn over the deed for the right-of-way since they were afraid the railroad would not use the land for railroad purposes. The issue was resolved in a special election.

The Utah Construction Company, who had performed much of the recent construction work for the Union Pacific, began work on the new line. The last spike on the new main line was driven on July 15, 1924, almost a year before the depot was completed.

The new line left the existing Oregon Short Line main line at Orchard at an elevation of 3,152 feet above sea level. It then climbed gradually to a maximum elevation of 3,267 feet above sea level before dropping down to the Boise depot, which had an elevation of 2,753 feet above sea level. It continued to drop gradually to Nampa, which had an elevation of 2,483 feet above sea level. The steepest grade was on the west side between Boise and Hillcrest where a 1% grade was encountered. The westbound trains only had a maximum grade of 0.40%.

A tunnel was built at the height of land, south of Shafer, to minimize the grades. The tunnel was at mile-post B439.7, and was 981 feet long and lined with timber. A wye was also built a short distance to the east of the depot. Interestingly enough, the tunnel was not at the height of land which was to the east of Black's Creek, but to the west of that location.

As the new line was being built, the existing line from Nampa to Boise was rebuilt with heavier rails. A new loop had been constructed at Nampa in conjunction with the new main line through Boise, extending from Main Line Junction — a short distance east of Nampa on the original main line — to Nampa Loop Junction on the new Boise line. This allowed the Boise trains to pass directly by the new Nampa station. A two-mile segment of the original Idaho Central line at Nampa became known as the Nampa Branch.

Another part of this project included the construction of a new depot at Nampa and a new track layout there for the routing of the main line pas-