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HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #254 - Side A

Subject: Rails to Trails with Hal Beamer

Place: KZZR Radio Station, Burns, Oregon

Date: December 19, 1988

Interviewer: Stan Swol

Release Form: Yes

STAN SWOL: Visiting with Hal Beamer, Burns District Ranger on the Malheur National Forest, who is coordinating or spearheading a plan to convert the old rail line between Burns and Seneca into a scenic trail system. Hal, first off, to start off the interview maybe you can summarize what the Rails to Trails plan is all about.

HAL BEAMER: Back early in the summer when we found out that the Oregon and Northwestern Railroad planned to abandon the rail line between Burns and Seneca, the Forest Service in partnership with the BLM got together to look at the prospects as to building, restoring that particular line or converting it into a trail type of project. The trail from Burns to Seneca is 47 miles in length, covers both federal ownership as well as private. There are approximately thirty trestles and one tunnel through its length. And we have been working with Oregon and Northwestern Railroad people, and found them to be quite cooperative in our dealings with them. And we're looking at the prospects of whether we can make such a conversion.

STAN: I think there are a lot of people out there, Hal, that are saying, boy that rail line, to see it go is really going to be tough. Because that rail line does have an extensive history. But for people

that have not been in the county for an extended period of time, that don't know the history of the rail line, do you have information about the history of that rail line?

HAL: The railroad was constructed in the --- based on a timber sale that the Forest Service sold back in the early 1920's, common referred to as the Bear Valley Timber Sale. This was a sale of approximately 890 million feet. And the idea was for a purchaser to come in, develop a railroad, extend the railroad from Crane into Burns, and then extend it from Burns to Seneca, and the same time to build a mill. The original buyer of the timber sale was a fellow by the name of Fred Herrick. And Herrick bought the sale on June 15th, 1923. He constructed the line from Crane into Burns, and then was in the process of extending the line on to Seneca. And the contract required that he have the line in service by October the 1st, 1927. For whatever reason, he defaulted on that part of the contract. The contract was returned to the government, and then in turn was sold to Edward Hines. Edward Hines bought out Fred Herrick's interest in the railroad going to Seneca, and then completed the line and placed it into service sometime in the early 1930's. At which time there were approximately 44 carloads of logs that were being transported from, north of town into the mill here at Hines.

STAN: So the rail line is currently owned by Oregon and Northwest Railroad, which has just awarded salvage rights to A & K Railroad Materials which has been salvaging the ties and rails. But the trestles and tunnels as I understand, are going to be staying in place. I guess another one of the questions I would have, or the public might have is, would the rail line have to be purchased if the Rails to Trails plan is to become a reality?

HAL: That portion where the railroad crosses federal ownership, now that's the Forest Service and the BLM, by an Act of 1893, the Secretary of Interior could grant rights of use across federal lands for the idea of developing the west. That particular act provides that if the railroad ceased to exist,

or if the railroad was never constructed initially, if those rights of way would return to the government. Oregon and Northwestern Railroad, which at the time by the way, was called the Malheur Railroad, acquired rights of way and easements across the private land segment. And totally, as I say, there is 47 miles. There is about 9 miles across the Forest Service, 9 miles across the BLM, but the remaining rights of way go through private ownership.

STAN: So basically it's going to have to be, the Rails to Trails project is going to have to be kind of a team effort, the Forest Service and the BLM working together as well. Do these two federal agencies work together very often?

HAL: Well, the BLM and the Forest Service share many common interests. And this is not the sole project that we have worked together on. But it is probably one of the more exciting ones. I know the BLM shares my vision in terms of looking at the prospects of such a trail. We look at it from the opportunity both to attend to the social, spiritual, and economic needs of Harney County, and we feel that it can be an important part of this particular county, and Grant County as well. Because a good portion of it also falls in Grant County.

STAN: Obviously it's a big undertaking, the Rails to Trails conversion project. Have there been other projects of conversion in the State of Oregon, Rails to Trails type of program?

HAL: There has not been a successful conversion of the railroad to a trail. Now this is based on information that I have from the Rails to Trails conservancy, which is a Washington, based organization that attempts to try to convert old abandoned railroads into footpaths, linear parks, trails, what have you. Most of the successful conversions nationwide have occurred in the Midwest and places east. At the turn of the century, Stan, there was probably a quarter million miles of railroad in this country. And we've been abandoning our railroads at the rate of around 4000 miles a year. So today, there is only about 145,000 miles of railroad left in the country. Which means there

is a number of abandoned rights of way that are either fallen into total disuse, or used for other purposes. Only --- around 2300, 2400 miles nationwide have been converted into trails or footpaths.

STAN: Well, I guess my next question Hal is; when and where in the world did you first get this idea?

HAL: The idea first came to me Stan, when I first, when I learned that the railroad was in fact planning on abandoning their road from Burns to Seneca. And I started asking myself the question, what do you do with an abandoned railroad? And of course the first thing that comes to mind, is to put it into some form of public use. And for this reason, the BLM and the Forest Service petitioned the Interstate Commerce Commission which rules on abandonment, and asked for a public use condition to attend to the public's interest. And they did grant that on October the 18th of this year, and gave us a 180 days to negotiate with the Oregon Northwest Railroad for land acquisition.

STAN: Okay, so that leads to my next question. Exactly how far along are we in this program?

HAL: I think we're right at the entryway to the project. This involves doing a very comprehensive feasibility study, engineering feasibility. As I understand it, the trestles are basically untreated materials. We need to look at how a trail of this type fits into the regional network. We need to look at opportunities for interpretation. We need to look at adjunct facilities such as campgrounds and access points. There is a lot of work to be done. The most important part of the job, Stan, is attending to the concerns and the issues that people will raise. This is an issue driven process. And our decisions will be based on the issues that we learn from the public. Both the advocates, as well as those who maybe at this point in time find themselves less than advocates for this particular project. Certainly the adjacent landowners whose property this railroad passes through would have a high degree of interest. If I owned property such as that, I would have an interest as well. We

need to do title searches and look at what kind of encumbrances may exist as far as the deeded rights of way. We know there are encumbrances, but we will need to search those out, get legal opinions, and the like.

STAN: Now some people are saying, well there goes more of my tax dollars. Exactly where does the funding for such a project come from?

HAL: About two weeks ago, I received some funds to put a person to work on this particular project. A fellow by the name of Jim Schaller who has worked here in the community for a number of years. This is the first time he's ever worked on a project of this magnitude or scope. But Jim has a presence in working with people, listening to what their concerns are. He has an excellent communicative skill, analytical skills. And we're going to move Jim up to the BLM office to work in concert with their resource people there, because it is a collective project. And so right now, we have monies, never adequate, but monies to at least to initiate the planning process. If we see down the road that there is a reality that this can be converted into a trail type of project, then we're going to be looking at advocacy converted into action, and look at support groups, partnerships, looking for the financing for such a project.

STAN: Okay, what about the public's help? Are you looking for the public's help, or do you want public involvement in this Rails to Trails project?

HAL: I have a strong vision of what it would be like to be successful. I mean I can picture the governor from the State of Oregon riding a buckboard to a tiny little pretty area for a dedication ceremony. But I have to constrain my own enthusiasm for such a project, recognizing full well that many people do not share that enthusiasm. I have to exercise some restraint to be sure that I'm listening to what the people have to say about this particular project.

STAN: That would --- I imagine that an attempt to get the public involved in earnest will begin

very shortly.

HAL: Of course, during the Christmas season, things are kind of up in the air, but we are going to be starting in, in early January. I might add that we are looking at having three public meetings coming up in the middle of January in and around the week of --- the third or fourth week there in January. We're looking at the dates of the 24th, 25th, and 26th, with meetings in Burns, Seneca, and John Day. In the meantime, they can either call me at the Forest Service office in Hines, or after the first of the year, I would ask that they may contact Jim Schaller who will be at the BLM office just west of town.

STAN: What about a timetable? Is there a schedule, or a timetable that must be in place for this Rails to Trails project that you have to follow?

HAL: Stan, the Interstate Commerce Commission when they rule favorably on the public use condition to give us opportunity to take a look at this particular project, gave us a 180 days to come up with a land acquisition plan, negotiated with the Oregon Northwest Railroad. A prerequisite though to a land acquisition plan is to do a public scoping, look at the economic feasibility, listen to the issues that people are talking about, develop an environmental statement, and then if things do appear favorable negotiate such an agreement. Now I'm a realist, and I do not believe that we can complete it within that specified time. I would imagine that we're probably at the earliest, are looking towards late summer before we would make a decision regarding going on with the idea of the Rails to Trails conversion. If on the other hand, it appears that it is not feasible that decision could come earlier.

STAN: Well, I guess the next question is, and some people are out there saying, Hal Beamer, what type of trail are we talking about?

HAL: The most common question that I'm asked is it going to be for snowmobiles, is it going to be

for ATV use, foot trails, horse trails, bike trails, exactly what? And I believe that the issues that are generated through the public involvement process will answer those questions. We --- hopefully we'll be able to accommodate as many mutually compatible uses as we can. Certainly we would also be looking at uses that are compatible with the concerns being raised by adjacent landowners.

STAN: Well Hal, do you want to hear from a lot of people? Do you want people to contact you, or Jim Schaller to talk about this plan of converting the rail line between Burns and Seneca into a trail system?

HAL: We would like to hear from those who also share the advocacy that I have for this particular project. And I also very much want to hear from the adjacent landowners. We hope to meet with as many as we can on a one to one basis, to adopt a listening ear, and see what they have to say about this particular project.

STAN: All right Hal, thank you very much for coming by to visit about the proposed Rails to Trails conversion. A conversion of the old rail line between Burns and Seneca into a scenic trail. Hal Beamer, Burns District Ranger on the Malheur National Forest. For KZZR, I'm Stan Swol.

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