



Straight track lies between the Umatilla River and a village of tule mat lodges at the turn of the 20th century.

Photo by Lee Moorhouse, courtesy of Tamástslikt Cultural Institute Library and Archives.

## The Railroad Created Problems and Progress

When the Oregon Railway and Navigation Company declared construction of the Pendleton to La Grande line in 1881, the route cut right through the Umatilla Indian Reservation. The resulting effect was both positive and negative in terms of environmental, cultural, and historical change.

The track itself changed the course of the Umatilla River as often straight track by impeding the river's natural flow. It also created hazards for people moving through the region on horseback en route to their traditional use areas.

While the advent of the railroad allowed for more and varied travel and freedom of movement (to go to school, fish at Celilo, or visit relatives), restrictions were also put in place for tribal members on travel and leaving the reservation.

The following oral history excerpts highlight the many experiences of tribal members with the coming of the railroad:

"You would have to have papers for everything to travel. Your [BIA] agent had to sign papers so you could go someplace. And you only had a certain amount of time to get over there and get back wherever you were going. You'd have to have that paper on you all that time. If you got stopped somewhere, government man can ask you or policeman and we'd have to show that paper saying we could be there. My grandfather used to tell us stories and they'd give him his paper work, and he couldn't lose it. He'd have to keep it on him."

"Right up at the steel bridge at Thornhollow they say it used to go down that bluff and around. But after they

straightened it out it's all different now. And then when the county came, they straightened it and cut all the trees down and straightened the river bed out."

"That's when the Indians rode free to town, [and] to Baker 'cause it was going through the reservation. Originally my dad said they'd let you off anywhere. And that's why they gave the Indians the parking lot in town, they could park there. Used to be a parking lot there by... where the carnivals are during Round-Up. That's what they used to call the Indian parking lot. They could park there for free."

"After the war, the railroad was built... up at Thornhollow too and they could ride the train free. The Bannock Indians, they came and all got off at Thornhollow then. And that's when they had the first war dance there, because they never used to war dance before that."

"We used to go down to Celilo where the salmon were and we would get salmon. [One tribal member] and his mother used to go down the train and they took different things and traded for others...they traded for salmon. They would take roots. Oh my, she used to dig roots, lots of roots."

"My mother used to tell me stories about when Union Pacific was good to the Indians. They used to come down here, the ones that wanted to go down to the mouth of the Umatilla River, they used to camp down there. And they used to come along the railroad tracks and have their bundles or bedding and whatever they had to take. The Indians used to load their stuff on there and go down on a train and the train would stop and let them unload."

"When the train used to go up, all the kids would line up along the river. And all the kids would 'choo, choo, choo, choo' (makes train sound). They'd be going up, then they'd pull the horn and all the kids would 'toot, toot, toot' (makes the sound of the horn on the train). But see, that was their entertainment."

"They used to cut the timber, bring it down the railroad and ship it out. [In] the winter time, we'd take horses and sleds and would sled it down to the railroad and unload it on the train. They took it up to Meacham up until about 1930. Probably two, three hundred cords of wood shipped out of Meacham every year. And at Gibbon, probably one hundred cords a year shipped out of Gibbon."

"Our grandmother used to get off the train up here at Cayuse, Thornhollow, right there. She used to catch a train going down to Celilo. [She would] get her dry fish, a gunny sack full. And bring it up and get off there."

"There's a story about my grandfather, when the train used to run along the river here. So he was a young boy when the train would come through, those steam trains. And he was on this side, taking care of horses, and everybody ran to see the train and that's when the White people started putting up fences. And he ran into that barbed wire fence and cut his neck really bad. And then he carried that mark on his neck until he passed away. And he would tell that story to my mom and them, and that's what my mom told to me about that time."

Excerpts compiled by CTUIR Cultural Resources Protection Program