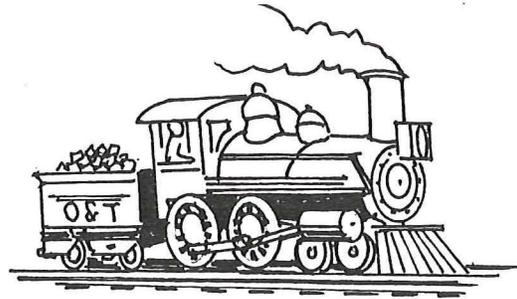


# BUILDING A RAILROAD

TOWN OF OLYMPIA,  
WASHINGTON TERRITORY

Tuesday, April 7, 1874

8:00 AM



*"Without railroad connections, Olympia cannot stand still. She cannot go forward even slowly. She must retrograde, and in a few years her dilapidated dwellings will become the fit abode for owls."*

Judge O. B. McFadden

On this spring morning, as the clock down at Columbia Hall strikes eight, large crowds of volunteers are gathered in the town square and everyone is talking excitedly about the day's events. Today is the official groundbreaking of the Olympia-Tenino Railroad, a fifteen mile stretch of narrow-gauge track that will link the capital of Washington Territory with the all-important Northern Pacific depot in Tenino. If the citizens are successful, before *too* long Olympia will have a rail connection with the markets of the Mississippi and all points east...and the owls will need to find somewhere else to roost.

Except for the bustling public square, the town appears almost empty. Shops have closed for the day, morning chores are left undone, and the cannon is booming a reminder to stragglers to *come out and do your part!* The ringing of the church bells and even the fire bell at Columbia Hall announce this important community event.

In the past two decades the townspeople have weathered an Indian War, a national Civil War, a major earthquake, an economic depression, and an attempt to relocate the capital south to Vancouver. They have dealt with deteriorating bridges across the east and west channels of the bay, and annoying mud flats that hinder ship arrivals. But nothing prepared them for the crushing blow that the Northern Pacific Railroad would bypass Olympia.

Everyone expected Olympia to be the terminus. After all, it *is* the capital and has always been the largest town in the territory, (although Walla Walla and Seattle just moved ahead). In preparation for the "iron horse," Olympians bought up 240 acres around Moxlie Creek, (Watershed Park), and donated it to the railroad. Northern Pacific officials assured town leaders that Olympia was their preference. But nobody counted on

the untimely death of an obscure railroad employee named Ira B. Thomas...

Ira was sent to Olympia by a branch of the Northern Pacific Railroad to purchase hundreds of acres on the eastside of Budd Inlet, for the train right-of-way to deep water. When he suddenly died of a heart attack in Olympia, all the land in his estate became tied up in the courts. The railroad company didn't want to wait months for Ira's will to get sorted out, and they knew land was cheap around the tiny village of Tacoma, so they started buying land around Commencement Bay and announced that Tacoma would be the new terminus. At that point, it seemed Olympia would be isolated from the lifeline it had dreamed about for decades.

Yet today it's clear that Olympians are not giving up. The challenge for the volunteer brigade is to ignore the fifteen miles of rugged, soggy, dense terrain ahead, pick up an axe or shovel, and begin. With the help of twenty horse and ox teams, workers plan to clear and grade about a mile of timber around Warren's Point, (below the future courthouse hill). Some volunteers have already hiked south to the Tumwater Bridge, crossed, and headed northwest to the work site. "Ike" Ellis, the newly-elected mayor, leads the group now on Main Street.

Starting next week, and until the project is done, Thursday will be "Railroad Day" in Olympia. Citizens can already envision a train depot at the west end of the Marshville Bridge, (4th Ave Bridge). They imagine the narrow-gauge track built on hundreds of pilings, creating an enormous railroad trestle along the western shore. The train will speed south through Tumwater, and out across the prairie to the junction at Tenino.

The four hundred volunteers here today represent a big turnout for this town of about 1,400. The men, and some of the women and older children, carry tools and are dressed in their oldest work clothes. The crowd is a diverse cross-section of society in Olympia, from the governor and supreme court justices to grocers, blacksmiths, saloon keepers, teachers, the fire department and even the Olympia baseball team.

General McKenny has graciously offered a town lot near Maple Park to anyone putting in a full month's labor on the project. Several young men have accepted the challenge. (One day, the General's daughter Margaret will become a town leader herself. See 1950 bio.)

The twelve member Olympia Cornet Band has been playing since early this morning. They plan to provide music all along the route to keep the worker's spirits up. The man with the bass drum is Nat Crosby, a Tumwater merchant. (Decades from now, his grandson will continue the family's musical ways, as the famous singing star Bing Crosby.)

Two men are discussing an article from last Saturday's Washington

Standard. They are John Miller Murphy, the newspaper editor, and Elisha P. Ferry, the governor of Washington Territory. John picked a competitive newspaper town, since at least four papers are currently published here.

Some of the women are walking past the Episcopal Church to the shoreline where rowboats await them. They carry large baskets of food baked and donated for the event. The boats will head south, to a makeshift cookhouse near the work site, where a hearty lunch will be prepared for the volunteer work force. Although the Marshville Bridge (aka Long Bridge) is finished, there is no wagon road along the western shore, so it's much faster to go by water.

Annie Hartsuck is tending one of the cook fires and serving coffee. It has been ten years since she came to town as part of the "Mercer Girls" expedition. This Thursday, she plans to carry a petition around to all the saloons, asking them not to sell liquor on Sundays. (More about Annie, the Mercer Girls and temperance on a later page.)

Two men are sitting at a table, taking stock subscriptions for the Olympia-Tenino Railroad. One is Hazard Stevens, the former governor's son, who is now the president of the Olympia Railroad Union. The other is George Barnes, a big railroad booster, and former mayor of the town. Four years ago, George opened the first brick bank in the territory. (He must have built it well, for it will be one of only two public buildings from this time that still stand in Downtown Olympia.)

Local citizens proudly pointed out in a recent directory that they had three of the five libraries in Washington Territory, and that the Territorial Library had grown to 6,500 volumes! Some of the library patrons such as Abbie Stuart, are discussing books they've read while they wait to volunteer. Abbie reminds everyone about the upcoming meeting of the Woman's Suffrage Association, which started three years ago when the famous leader Susan B. Anthony spoke in Olympia. Standing next to Abbie is Mary Olney Brown who has written a series of articles about women's rights for the newspapers.

On Main Street, members of the Squaxin Island Tribe are selling oysters plucked from the beds of the lower inlet. Standing nearby is Chief Kettel, who came into town early this morning with three Tribal members, to volunteer on the railroad brigade. The Chief's offer is met with gratitude, and will be reported in the next newspaper.

Another visitor to the town is a former resident named Annie Pixley. She has been performing on stages across the West, getting rave reviews for her singing and acting. Nearby is Rebecca Howard, Olympia's first successful businesswoman, who runs the ever-popular Pacific House on

Third and Main. In her no-nonsense but good-natured way, she announces to those around her that *it's time to finish up and get moving!*

The town is a much more inviting place than it was during the Indian War. Raised wooden sidewalks have replaced jagged stumps along the streets, and the citizens have planted maple trees on Main Street for shade. Instead of the grim-looking blockhouse and stockade, Columbia Hall now stands on Fourth Street. It houses Olympia's pride and joy, a hand pump fire engine called the "Columbia." Along with rooms for the fire department and for conducting town business, the hall boasts a skating rink for the community's enjoyment. Telegraph poles have brought news in a much more timely fashion ever since Olympia's first transmission from President Lincoln a decade ago. Flags fly in front of several businesses and wooden water pipes are laid underground.

There are now five churches, several restaurants and hotels, numerous livery stables and three doctor's offices in Olympia. A. B. Woodard serves as both the town's dentist *and* photographer. The police force consists of Sheriff William Billings and a night watchman. On Main Street, Dr. Waughop is building a large home and office with a brick foundation. New businesses like Talcott's Jewelry Store, Harris Drygoods and C. B. Mann's Drugstore will be part of the commercial center for decades to come. At the book store bordering the town square, you can buy stationary, school books and even musical instruments.

On 4th and Columbia, across from Wood's Brewery, Good Templar's Hall stands as the first plastered building in town. Five years ago, Secretary of State William Seward spoke from that hall, still showing signs of his wounds from the night of President Lincoln's assassination.

Out at Giddings Wharf, the old Olympia-built steamer Alida is getting ready to depart for Steilacoom, Tacoma and Seattle. The schooner William Meyer just brought up forty tons of merchandise to stock local stores, and the sternwheeler Zephyr is over at Percival's Dock near Second and Columbia, emptying its cargo into the warehouse. A tempermental drawbridge spans the distance between Sam Percival's Dock and his grand new home on the Westside. The four-horse stagecoach just left the Carlton Hotel with passengers and mail heading south for the wagon road to Chehalis. Two blocks from the Carlton, on the bay, citizens built a bath house with dressing rooms for swimmers, and also started a Boat Club.

On the Eastside, the land has been cleared, and the foundation will soon be laid for a beautiful new school which will eventually be called the Union Academy. When completed it will have two wings, a bell tower, and will accommodate a whopping 350 students! As with many educational

projects, Daniel Bigelow is again leading this effort while serving as School Superintendent. There are currently two school districts: Olympia with 245 students, and Swantown with 94. Recently, a number of charity balls have been held to raise funds for the school.

A few years ago, citizens decided to hoist up the two-story schoolhouse on Sixth and Franklin and position it to face east. Next year the inhabitants of the schoolhouse and courthouse plan to switch places. Students will move to the site at Washington and Union where the old courthouse will be rededicated as the Central School. (In 2005, the Central School buildings will still be standing at Union and Adams.)

The townspeople passed an ordinance recently saying cows can no longer graze freely in the streets, unless they are milk cows. Three years ago, they fenced the town square with a turnstile at every corner. The 380 voters in Olympia also chose to spend \$100 to erect a "liberty pole" in the square, which they claim is the biggest in the territory.

Five factories are operating and providing jobs in town these days. Two of them manufacture soap, one makes shoes, one is a foundry, and there is a sash and door factory over by the rebuilt Swantown Bridge.

Two years ago, beyond the boundaries of the Territorial Capital, Yellowstone Park was created, and Montgomery Ward opened its first mail order business in Chicago. Two years from now, the world will be changed forever by a revolutionary new form of communication: the telephone.

But in Olympia, old challenges continue, such as the mudflats that still beach ships at low tide. No hospital exists for the sick and injured, and half the citizens are denied the right to vote. Despite these problems, Edmund Sylvester believes in his town's future, and you can still find this pioneer playing checkers in the back of his store down on 4th and Main.

Next week, the Olympia Transcript will describe the first "Railroad Day" as follows, *"The day will long be remembered by all, as one of good will and uniting of purpose ...the feeling and earnestness of men, women and children, made it a scene never to be forgotten."*

Four years from now, when the Olympia-Tenino Railroad is completed, the Washington Standard will sum it up this way, *"When the (railroad) cars come to Long Bridge", is an expression now quite as ominous of good cheer ... as the old song, "When my ship comes in."*

But tonight, as the last axe falls silent, and the last dish is set to dry in the makeshift cookhouse, and all are back in their homes imagining the sound of a far off train whistle, the night watchman will make his rounds through the streets, and weary citizens will fall asleep, knowing that on this day, the town was in the hands of the volunteers.