Coeur d’ Alene’s Railway Tunnel

By Don Pischner

A concrete abutment located just off of the southeast corner of Garden Avenue and Government Way (near the front door of the “Hitching Post”) identifies the southeast portal of an abandoned railway tunnel. The tunnel remains today, in place and intact.

Actually, it was a subway, built as a concrete arch within a deeply excavated trench called the “Big Cut.” The structure is buried beneath the avenues’ intersection. Dumping of fill material closed off each of its ends in the mid-1950s.

This article tells the story of the earth removal and lakeshore fill – a railroad construction project in 1910. Nearly a mile in length, a trench, as deep as 35 feet, bisected the city. The “Big Cut” began at the intersection of Lincoln Way and Idaho Avenue, headed southeast (adjacent to Milwaukee Drive) to the intersection of Government Way and Garden Avenue (site of the tunnel); then dug south (along the west side of First Street) to Sherman Avenue. The removed and hauled dirt filled in the lake, extending the shoreline some
600 feet (site of the Coeur d’Alene Resort).

Throughout the era between 1910 and the mid-1950s the “Big Cut” scarred the landscape. The first train used this spur in July of 1913 a freight line only. The last train made the passage shortly before C.C. Mudge purchased 3.47 acres of the railroad property for $13,000 on March 24, 1953. One year later Mudge made “application for a permit to build an apartment house and commercial building on land north of Sherman Avenue and adjacent to First Street formerly owned by the Milwaukee RR. Co.”

Now filled and developed, the path of the “Big Cut” today is home to the site of the Spokesman-Review Bldg., the Kootenai County courthouse north parking lot, the County Plaza Offices, the Pioneer Title Company, the Coeur d’Alene North Condos, the new One-Lakeside Condos, and the Chamber of Commerce.

Locals – Richard Barclay, Jim Hawkins, Dick Shern, Pat Hurrell, Mike Hurrell, Archie McGregor, Sandy Emerson, Charlie Nipp, myself, and others – remember the place as a playground, a hideout, and an opportunity for mischief, much to the chagrin of our parents. Many copper pennies were smashed when laid on the rails ahead of the passing iron wheels. There were lots of rocks to throw, moving freight cars to hop, and for the very brave (perhaps none of those named above) jumping from the tunnel portal onto the top of a slow-moving train car for a short ride.

When Coeur d’Alene was a village, Sherman Avenue from the east terminated at Second Street. The entrance to the Hotel Idaho, constructed in 1905 (later named Desert Hotel; destroyed by fire in 1972), fronted the lake shoreline between First and Second Streets. Northwest Boulevard was still 15 years distant. When Fort Sherman was abandoned in 1905, a 200-foot wide diagonal parcel was set aside for railway use. Recognized in recent days as the “educational corridor,” this strip of land first held the trackage for the Spokane and Inland Empire electric rail line serving the steamboat docks at the southwest corner of the park.

By the early 1900s, two other rail lines entered the city down to the lake: Northern Pacific via Third Street and the Spokane International via Hubbard Avenue. Then a fourth railroad company sought to place track to gain access to the region’s abundant lumber freight market.

The Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul had completed its transcontinental connection to the west coast in 1909. In May of 1910, the Milwaukee began work at the Washington/Idaho state line (near today’s I-90 and Spokane River) on a branch line toward Coeur d’Alene. The Milwaukee named this branch line the Idaho Western Railroad, incorporated in Idaho in December 1909.

Matters moved rapidly as nearly all the necessary right-of-ways were purchased within one year’s time. Specific to the path of the “Big Cut,” Kootenai County record books reveal more than one hundred deed transactions, purchases, exchanges, and street and alley abandonments each naming the Idaho Western Railroad as a party to a multitude of property owners and the city. At least 36 deed transfers in the Forest Heights subdivision record where the railroad sliced through more than 75 residential lots, plus streets and alleys.

In addition, a dozen land parcels in the Reserve Block south of the tunnel (a subdivision strip of land between the east-line of the abandoned Ft. Sherman military reserve and First Street) were purchased by the railroad.

Beginning in May of 1910, a Seattle construction firm, Jones & Onsured, began working two 10 hour shifts per day. Their largest steam shovel would be used to excavate an estimated 150,000 cubic yards of dirt. Because of the large width and depth, the required excavation would be done in layers. Loaded into “dinkies” (small motorized carts), 1,000 cubic yards of dirt would be moved per day to construct the lake fill.

As a huge scar crossed the city, little reporting of the work progress is found. However, on the last day of June, one story tells of a loaded “dinkey” traveling down grade that came within a few feet of colliding...
with a freight train where it crossed the Inland Electric Line tracks at Sherman Avenue. It seems the signalman fell asleep.

The project was not without conflicts. Politics intervened namely, competitive struggles and even issues related to the Socialists Party being voted into local government power. Several land acquisitions were challenged in lengthy court proceedings. Value exchanges, street abandonment, and limited public access were major concerns of residents. City council meetings were lengthy and discussions often heated, “lively sessions.”

Proposing some resolve, the railroad offered to build a forty-foot wide dock at the base of First Street and deed it to the city. A number of taxpaying citizens protested as to the exchange “not getting value received in return. J.C. White spoke a few words saying that he thought that the city was ‘doing the right thing’, but W. T. Stoll of Spokane, owner of the Stoll Block thought just the opposite.”

Initially, no “Big Cut” crossings were planned. At city council meetings, Forest Heights folks demanded better. O.H. Shern and George F. Steele, “protested vigorously.” They along with others argued, “that if the streets in question were vacated it would be necessary to make round about tours in going from Forest Heights to the parks, electric dock, or in other words getting from the north part of the city to the south.” O.A. Armdt “protested.”

Later, city council minutes reveal that Claude Thomas and W.A. Thomas, “entered a stirring protest.” Each argued, “that the railway company asked for the vacation of seven streets and that it proposed to give but three crossings between Sherman Avenue and the city limit...entirely inadequate...not specified in the agreements.” They were supported by 27 citizens and letters by R.S. Parker, F.W. Reed, M.G. Whitney and others.
Finally, on August 8, 1910, the city did accept a “proposal of the Idaho Western Railroad Company in regard to the vacating of a number of streets by the city, in return for which it is to dedicate a street and build two bridges.” The street would become Milwaukee Drive from Idaho Avenue to ‘A’ Street. It included sidewalk and curb.

As for the two proposed bridges, a small wooden bridge was built to cross at the alley between Coeur d’Alene and Indiana Avenues. Of small size and poor quality, it only lasted a few years until being replaced at Wallace Avenue in 1929. With Roosevelt School on the First Street side and the county jail on the Government Way side this concrete arch replacement bridge with sidewalk and steel railings, provided a connection to Mullan Road then to River Avenue and continuing on State Highway #95. Mayor, at the time, George Natwick, expressed pride “that during his term of office the cornerstone for a new courthouse was laid, the Blackwell Bridge and Wallace Street Bridge [were] each built.”

The railroad’s second bridge proposal – a large elevated wooden bridge diagonal at the point where Garden Avenue and Government Way intersect – was “strongly rejected by citizens.” Protestors stood firm by demanding concrete versus wood and a level grade crossing. They won out.

An agreement was reached for a more permanent structure. Being as the trench was already dug, a concrete subway would be built at that spot and then back-filled with dirt.

Described by the Coeur d’Alene Press, December 12, 1910:

“The wall of the arch is nine feet at the base or pedestal and this extends four feet, where the wall becomes seven and a half wide. From there the walls are upward in a tapering four and a half feet wide to four inches at the top. Width of the space between the walls of the arch at the subfloor across the rails, is eighteen feet and eight inches and that width goes fifteen and one-half feet up before the walls commence end. The total height of the entrance of the arch is twenty-three feet. The main arch is 176 feet long. One-half inch reinforce rods and about 3,000 cubic yards of concrete used. Arch cost about $20,000... 65 men employed...”

The article concluded: “The structure will certainly be one of the most substantial arches in the country...”

The Hamilton House Moved For The Cut

by Deborah Mitchell

When the Milwaukee railroad wanted a freight route to the waterfront, they had to purchase the right-of-way across a significant amount of private property, some with homes already on them. One of the highest prices paid was for a large lot with a magnificent new home on it, built in 1908 for Coeur d’Alene’s second mayor, Boyd Hamilton, and his wife Alta Browne Hamilton.
The two-story, four-bedroom home with a library, bay windows and a large porch was the design of Spokane architect George Keith, who also designed nearby theaters, courthouses, and noteworthy homes, including the Levi and May Arkright Hutton House.

When Boyd Hamilton built this home, it was not at 627 Government Way on the corner of Foster facing east. Rather, it faced south with a Garden Avenue address and a splendid view of Blackwell Park. Two years later, it would be moved to make way for the railway. The house, built on 1.3 acres, was turned 90 degrees and moved from the center of the south side of Block 21 of Forest Heights to the northeasterly corner.

According to the Coeur d’Alene Evening Press, January 25, 1910, the Milwaukee paid Mayor Hamilton in the neighborhood of $25,000 for this property.

Fred Tiffany, City Clerk and friend of Boyd Hamilton, bought the northeasterly portion of Block 21 from the Idaho and Western Railroad Company in 1910. The southerly portion would remain the right-of-way for the Milwaukee. The Hamilton’s house was moved to its new location facing Government Way.

This house has been the home to a list of remarkable people: Boyd Hamilton, mayor; Fred and Florence Tiffany’s nephew Gregory Pappy Boyington, born in Coeur d’Alene in 1912; William F. McNaughton, District Court Judge (1920-1930) and Idaho Supreme Court Judge (1930-1932); Agnes and Miles Robbins, proprietors of the Kozy Korner Café; Paul and Sadie Elder, who contributed to NICs music program and whose son Dean became an internationally renowned pianist; and from 1940 to 1975, William Hawkins, Kootenai County Prosecutor, and Agnes Hawkins, soloist, both civic leaders, raised their family in this house. From 1975 until recently, attorney Romer Brown and associates occupied the home.

Recently, this house at 627 Government Way, a worthy candidate for preserving our history, has been the focus of neighbors and other citizen groups striving to prevent it from being torn down by the County for expansion plans.
From the Board President

It happened! The J.C. White house has been moved and is resting proudly on its new foundation at the base of Tubbs Hill. This move and the appearance of the house at its new site has generated a level of excitement and support that the Museum of North Idaho has seldom, if ever, witnessed before. People from all over the Coeur d’Alene region come forth daily to offer their ideas, services, donations and labor to move the project on to fruition. And this is just how it should be.

It took the close collaborative effort of many people to get the White house moved, and it will take a much broader community effort to complete the project. Much is left to do to design the research/education and exhibit spaces, write our story, and create exhibits that will illustrate that story in a way that will make viewers want to come back again and again to learn more. No single individual has the gifts necessary to make this happen. The museum board, staff, and consultants together don’t have all the skills and ideas needed. This will truly require the help of people from all over our region. So much is still needed. It will take everyone chipping in, contributing however they can, to build a state-of-the-art, ever-changing and improving venue to honor our history, and to encourage thoughtful consideration about how we want our future story to read. We need your thoughts, your dreams, your stories, your historical artifacts, and very importantly, your financial help.

When the doors finally open for the first time it will be said that WE, the people who lived here in the early 2020s, built this great museum as both a tribute to those who came before us and a prized gift to generations to come.

In my next letter I hope to provide more detail about what you will see when you first visit the new museum. But don’t forget the current museum. Join us. Become a member. Invest generously. Help us as we Move History Forward.

Mike Dixon, Board President

People and companies who volunteered time and/or helped us reduce costs to accomplish the move:

- Johnson Construction
- John Swallow
- Architects West
- City of Coeur d’Alene
- Launder Family donated the house
- Avista
- Costa Fab
- Zayo Communication
- Traffic Corp

We Moved History

The Museum’s plans for expansion took a huge move forward on November 16, 2019 when the J.C. White House was moved from 8th and Sherman to 8th and Young, south of the Coeur d’Alene City Hall. It was placed on a full foundation and will be the centerpiece for a new museum.

The land and rent-free lease were made possible through collaborative efforts with the City, ignitedca and the Tubbs Hill Foundation. Museum savings allowed the Museum to complete the move and foundation. We have started a campaign to raise $4 million for repair of the White House and the construction of two lower level wings to provide a premier regional museum space. The Museum inspires a dynamic connection to the unique heritage of the Coeur d’Alene region by celebrating, preserving, exhibiting and sharing history with its community and visitors.

Building Fund Donations

Up to $100
- Diana Oswald
- Sally Barnett
- Dennis & Vinetta Spencer
- Jaque Lane
- Marshall Mend
- David & Barb Zimmer
- John & Barbara Schultz
- Sharon Ostrom
- Ron & Sally Barnett
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- Mike Dixon
- Jan Marie
- John Oaks
- Sarah DeArmond Jones
- Judy King Eichelberger
- Tara LeGore Stefanoff
- Dave Morrow
- Judith Schurr Salzer
Remember friends and loved ones with a memorial donation to the Museum’s Endowment Fund. Or just make a donation to the endowment.

- For Deanna Goodlander from Doreen Dixon
- For Gail Tulleners from Michael & Sylvia Claflin, Douglas & Adrienne New and Paul Tulleners.
- For Chuck Adams from Mary Adams
- For Joan Gundlach from Linda Wolovich
- For Red & Patti Barry from Marc & Tamara Richter
- For Maxine Hulick from Mel & Jackie Schmidt
- For Ken Brooten from Jay Broderick

You can send the donation to us or deposit it directly to the Idaho Community Foundation at www.idcomfdn.org then type in Museum of North Idaho. Endowment donations ensure the future of our history.

If the donation is for a memorial please include the address of the family member you would like us to notify.

Memorials

Year-end Fundraising
We greatly appreciate the response to our year-end appeal letter. Thank you all for supporting the Museum.

Cash Donations
Sheena Christman
George & Wilma Wilhelm
Michele Williams
Tim Conces
Paul McCord
Janet Torrline
Shelley Garvey
Ken & Vickie Roberge
Alice Adams
Sandy Sanderson
Buff & Catherine Kobs
Eric & Heather Rude
Mike Fritz
Dennis & Jennifer Parent
Wally & Pam Adams
James & Lois Worst
Todd Snyder
Chris Smith
Gene & Charlene Boyd
Linda Wolovich (Chapel)

New Website Coming
We received a Community Enhancement matching grant for $990 from the Idaho State Historical Society for a new website. Out of 28 grant applications reviewed only 16 recipients were awarded. Zenith Exhibit will create a new mobile friendly website that will allow us to easily update content.

Chapel Floor
We received a $5,000 matching grant from the Idaho Heritage Trust toward a $13,000 project to refinish the floor of the historic 1880 Fort Sherman Chapel. Crist and Sons Painting will do the work.

The Idaho Heritage Trust has funded several projects at the Chapel. The Museum is seeking donations to match the grant. For more information call 208-664-3448 or email: dd@museumni.org.

Serve on the Board
Please consider serving on the Board to ensure the Museum continues to thrive and preserve our history. Email dd@museumni.org or mail to the Museum a resume and/or a letter discussing your strengths. Contact Dorothy Dahlgren at 208-664-3448 or dd@museumni.org. Go to www.museumni.org for more info.

Women Featured
This year’s feature exhibit will commemorate the Coeur d’Alene region’s women and their contributions to our communities. We are following the Idaho Women in Leadership and the Idaho State Historical Society efforts to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the women’s right to vote and to recognize the influence of women in Idaho. We reopen April 1.

Coeur d’Alene Historic Homes Then & Now
Robert Sinpletary’s Free Lectures On Coeur d’Alene
Coeur d’Alene Public Library 7 pm.

Feb. 27: F.A. Blackwell House Mar. 26: William Dollar House

Annual Celebration (Annual Meeting and Dinner)
April 21, Tuesday, Best Western Coeur d’Alene Inn.
Reserve a table of eight for $500

More information about the dinner, along with the ballot for the election of board members, will be mailed in late March.
Get on Board!

Send in Your Membership

☐ Friend of History $500
☐ Georgie Oakes $100+
☐ Idaho $100
☐ Flyer $50
☐ Amelia Wheaton $25

Make An Additional Donation To A Special Fund

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Membership Benefits Include: Free admission to the Museum *10% off in the Museum Store * Quarterly Newsletter

Please check your mailing label for your membership renewal date.

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To pay with credit card call 208-664-3448 or go to www.museumni.org
Please add dd@museumni.org to your email contact list

Museum of North Idaho

Our mission is to collect, preserve and interpret the history of the Coeur d’Alene Region to foster appreciation of the area’s heritage.

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