

Sumpter Valley Railroad Interpretive Site Virtual Tour

Welcome to the Dixie Pass, part of the Sumpter Valley Railroad ca. 1890 to 1947

Sumpter
Valley Railroad
INTERPRETIVE SITE

MALHEUR
National Forest

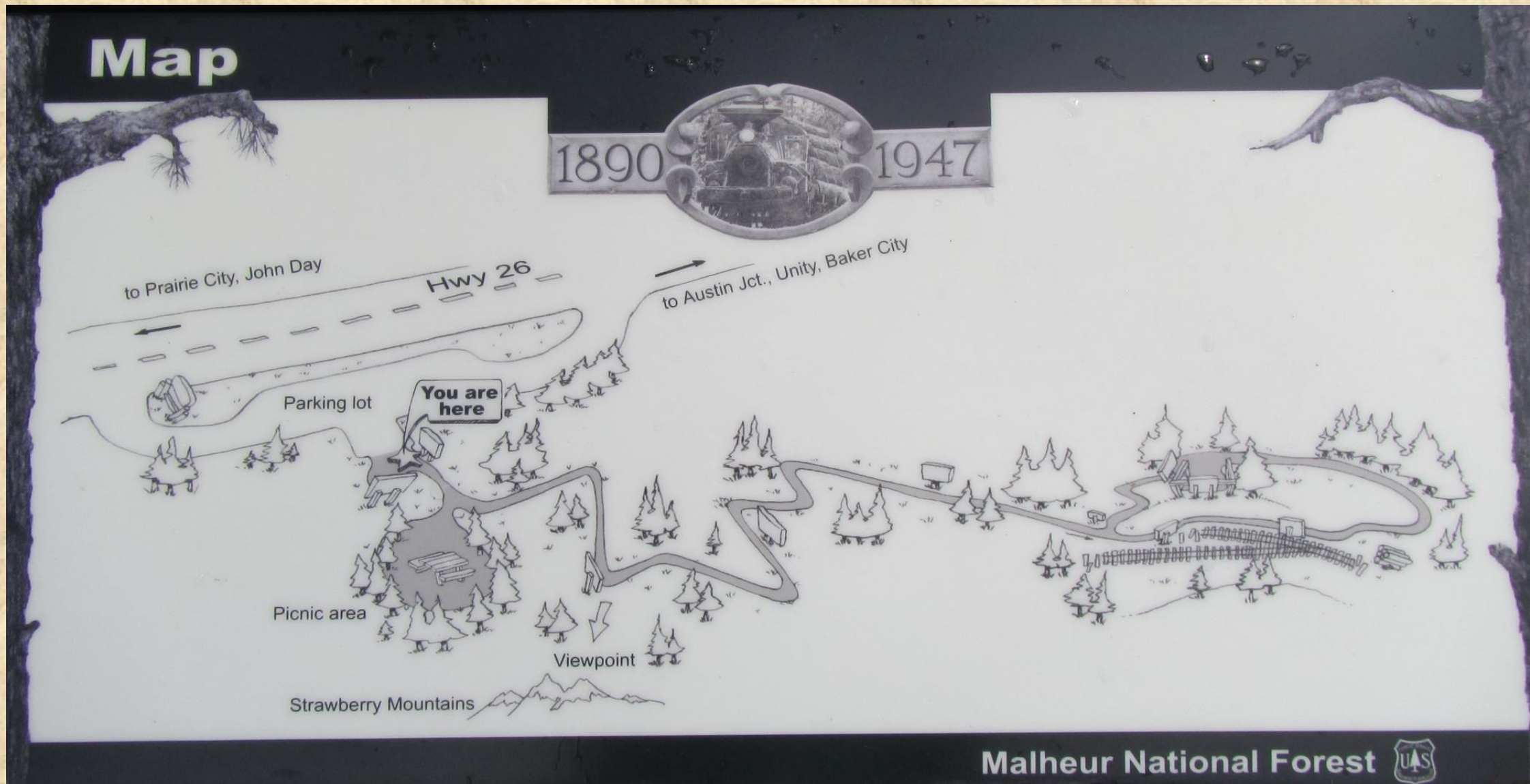


U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Introduction

- The Oregon Lumber Company in agreement with Union Pacific built the Sumpter Valley Railway in 1890 as a way to access rich tracts of timber southwest of Baker City.
- The Railway replaced wagons as the primary transportation to McEwan, Sumpter, Whitney, Austin and Bates, Oregon, until the advent of trucking.
- In 1987 seven portions of the Railway were listed on the [National Register of Historic Places](#), as the Sumpter Valley Railway Historic District.
- One portion, Dixie Pass, the newest addition to the Sumpter Valley Railway, was built ca. 1910 as part of an attempt to finish the Nevada-California-Oregon Railroad. This route was important to John Day Valley ranchers for transportation of their livestock to market.

You are following in the footsteps of Sumpter Valley interpretive trail at the Malheur National Forest.



First Stop: Sumpter Valley Railway History

American Indians first created trails through these mountains hundreds of years ago.

Later, in 1825, Hudson-Bay Fur company trappers, lead by [Peter Skene Ogden](#), crossed this very pass.

In 1862 more people made this difficult journey by stagecoach and freight wagon in search of gold. Gold prospectors were followed by farmers, ranchers and others.

In 1890, [David Eccles](#), a prominent businessman from Utah, helped create the Oregon Lumber Company and plans were set in motion to build a railroad to haul logs to a sawmill in Baker city. The first 22 miles of track ran through the mountains to McEwen.

By 1910 the rails were over 80 miles long, reached all the way to Prairie City, and hauled logs, livestock, people, and other freight. Cattle and sheep were shipped on specially-scheduled trains to the stockyards in Portland.

However, logging was the mainstay of the railroad. Neither could prosper without the other. The railroad was the only way to get the logs to the area sawmills, and those train loads of logs kept the railway running.





Second Stop: The Timber

This beautiful mountain scenery has been used by people for thousands of years. American Indian groups have been in this area for 10,000 years!





The ponderosa and lodge pole pines in this area are part of the second growth of trees that sprouted after the logging. Some are now approaching 100 years old.



This is the winch system from a steam powered skidder or “steam donkey”. It was used to skid logs to the rail cars. It was abandoned, then reused by local miners as late as the 1970s.

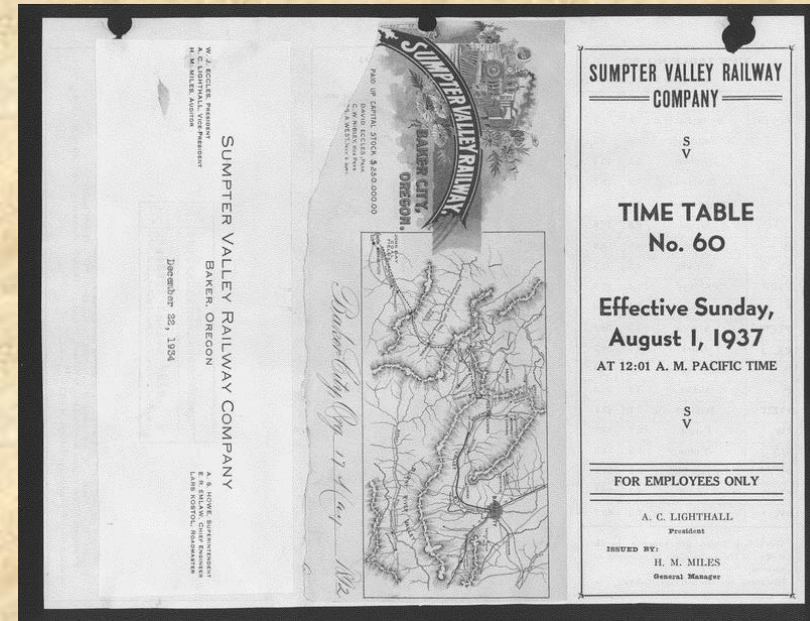


Third Stop: The Route

As the railroad crossed the mountains from one valley to the next, new territory for harvesting trees opened, making travel easier for people and products.

In 1905 the train arrived in Austin, and five years later made its final stop in Prairie City in the John Day Valley.

The final stretch of track entered Prairie City in 1910.



Picture from Sumpter Railway Restoration, Inc.



The Sumpter Valley Railway used narrow gauge rails (36 inches instead of 56 inches) because they cost less to build and operate, particularly for difficult terrain, like the mountains.



The cheaper cost was also important for railways that are built in isolated areas where the transportation volume is too small to make up for the cost of a standard gauge rail.



The route was slow and perilous.

The deep snows of winter made crossing three mountain summits over 5,000 feet high a special challenge. Trains were often delayed for hours, sometime even days.

Spring thaw brought new dangers as the rains and melting snow softened the earth. Railroad ties shifted and iron rails tilted causing entire trains to derail and topple over.

Pictures of Train Crashes from Sumpter Railway Restoration, Inc.



Fourth Stop: The Dixie Pass Switchback



Commonly known as the “Stump Dodger”, for its twisting paths, the Dixie Pass portion of the Sumpter Valley Railway was very different.

At 5,280 feet above sea level the descent from Dixie Pass was the 3rd pass built and the highest most difficult grade to design. The trains needed a high trestle to cross Dad’s Creek and also needed a way to drop nearly 2,000 feet into the valley.

The trestle did not survive the abandonment of the railway in the 1930s.

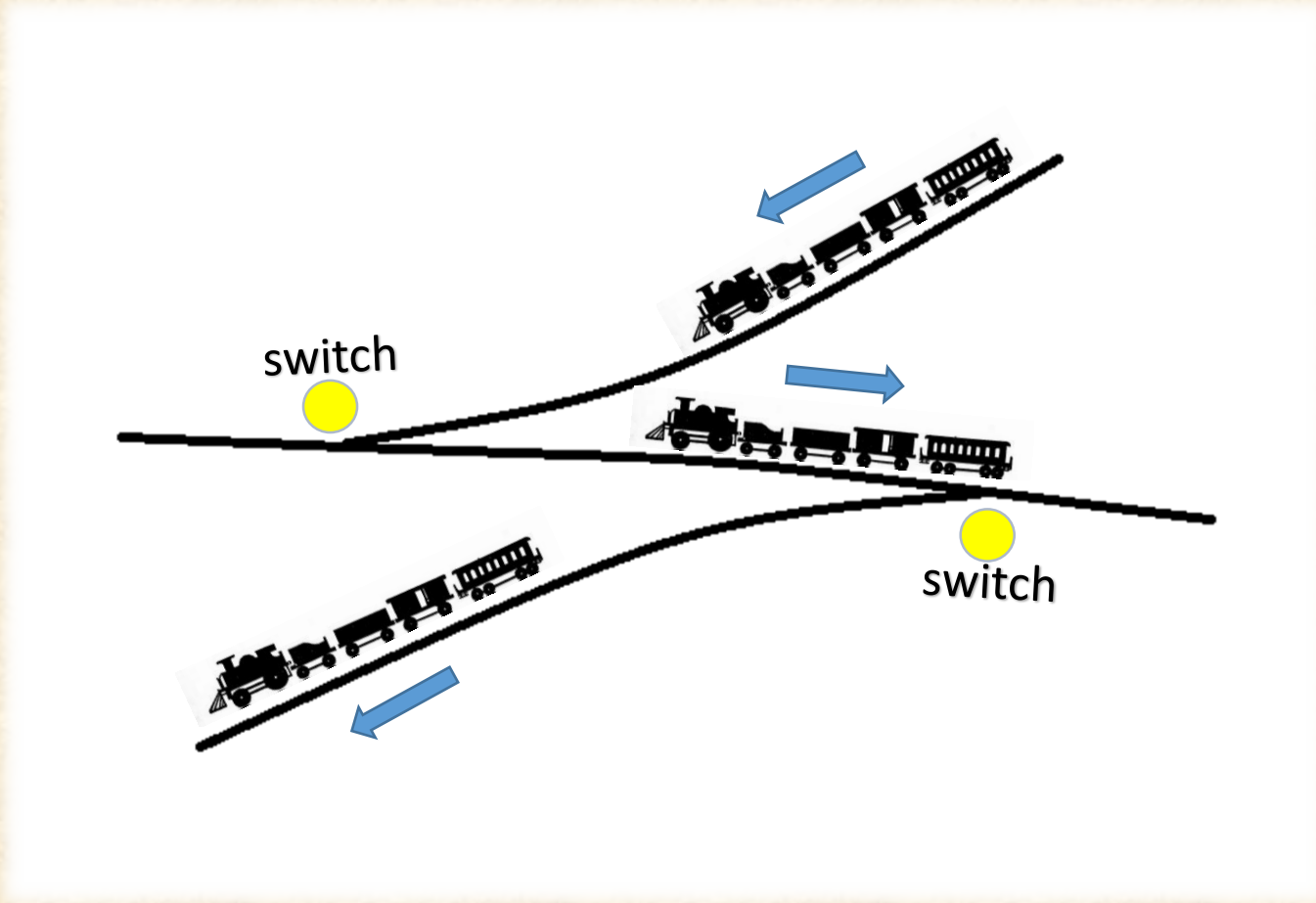
Joseph A. West had the ingenious idea to create a series of switchbacks zigzagging down the mountainside, which allowed the train to lose elevation as it went back and forth.



Picture of trestle (from Sumpter Valley Railway Restoration, Inc.) and of a switchback (from a model trains website).



Stylized picture of how a switchback works



Switchbacks are a system of tracks where the train moves forward in one direction and then backward the other direction. This signal would have alerted the train driver when the rails had been switched so that the train could back onto the other track.



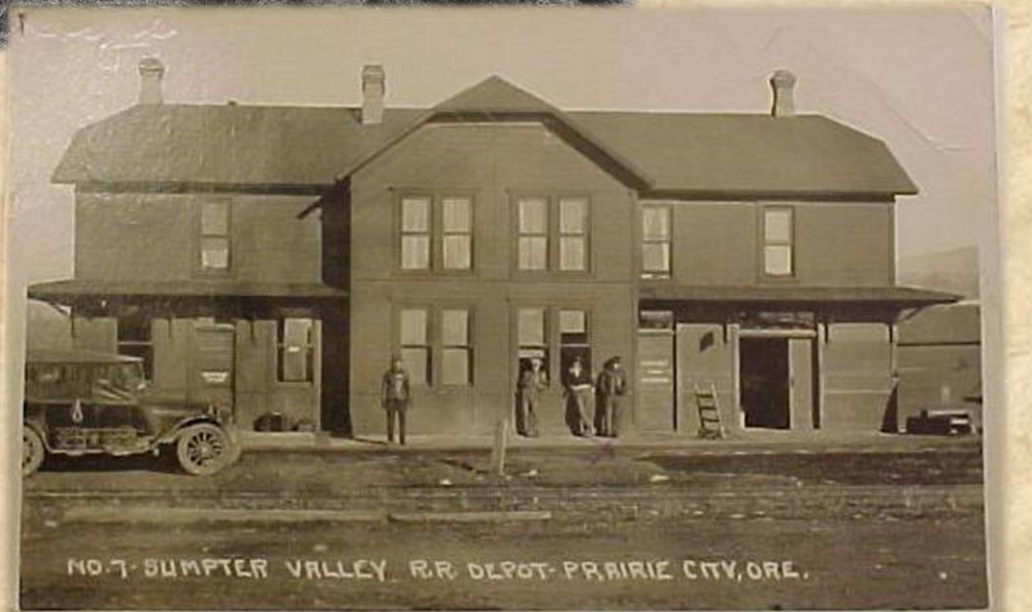
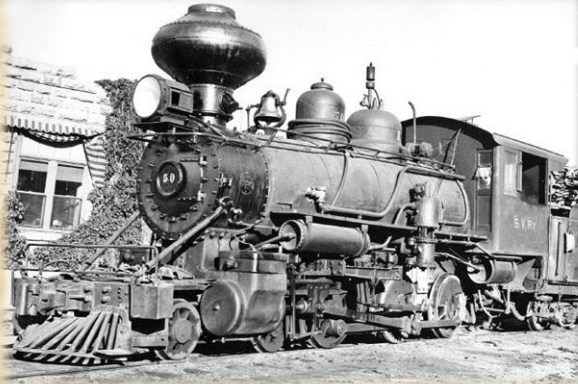
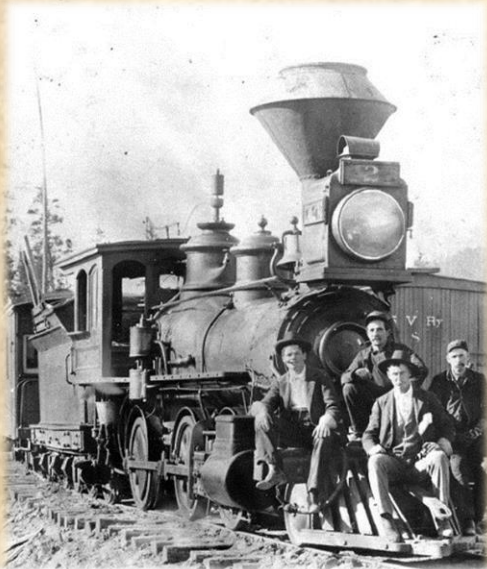
The trails evoke the shape of a switchback rail. Easy horizontal slopes are much easier to walk than a steep slope.

Trains cannot travel on a slope that is greater than 6%, and the Dixie Pass is much steeper than that.

The view from this
lookout shows what
remains of the Dixie
Pass switchback.



Just Imagine the journey....



[Pictures from Sumpter Valley Railway Restoration, Inc.]

End of an Era

The big dream to expand the railroad to meet up with the Nevada-California-Oregon Railroad in Nevada was never carried out. Just as the railroad edged out the need for stagecoaches and freight wagons, better roads took their toll on the railroad. After World War I, rail traffic declined and the Railway started abandoning segments of the line. The first section, dropped in 1933, was the line running from Bates to Prairie City, including the Dixie Pass. The last run of the Sumpter Valley Railway occurred in 1947.

The rails were removed, and equipment was sold or scrapped. The rail-bed was reclaimed by the forest or repurposed as road beds.



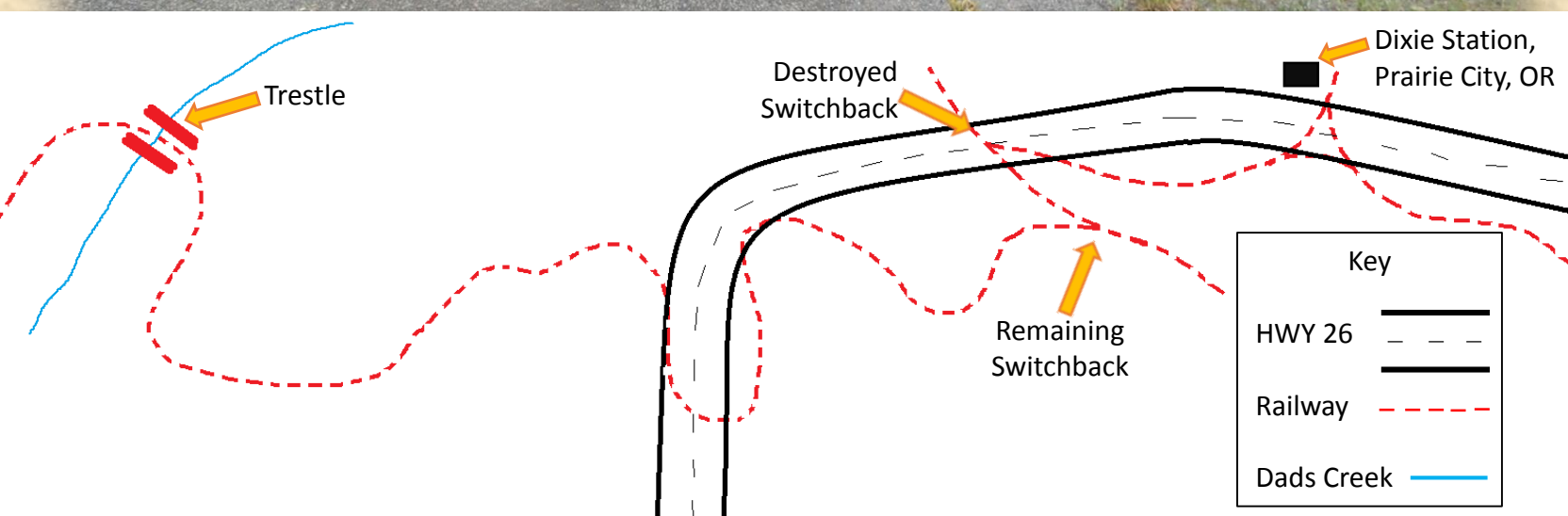
*Picture from Sumpter Railway
Restoration, Inc.*



A current picture of US Highway 26 near the Sumpter Valley Railway Interpretive Trail.

Today, only a small portion of the Dixie Pass switchback remains. US Highway 26 was built over much of the top section of the switchback. The bottom of the switchback has been obliterated over the years by logging.

Overall, much of the original 80 miles of Sumpter Valley Railway are gone. The rail beds reclaimed by the forest after the rails were salvaged by Pacific Unions, or repurposed when the roads were put in.



The section that has been presented here is what currently remains and is being maintained by the Malheur National Forest.

Revitalization

In the late 1960s the [Sumpter Valley Railroad Restoration Inc.](#) embarked on a project of renewal.

The association fixed up tracks and bought period appropriate equipment.

In 1976, they had a cutting ceremony for their revitalized train station.

The train runs from McEwan to Sumpter in 1 hour and roundtrip in 2 hours. Tickets are sold online.

You can visit the Sumpter Valley Railroad Archives with a pre-visit request.



Also available to visit, the Prairie City Depot, built ca. 1910 and abandoned in 1933 with the Dixie Pass, has housed the [DeWitt Museum](#) since 1983. Between that time the building was a private residence.

The Prairie City Depot was nominated for the National Register of Historic Places in 1976.

The museum is open from 10am to 5pm, mid-May through mid-October, provides guided tours, and has a gift shop.



Other Historic Places Along the Journey Through Time Scenic Byway:

- [John Day Fossil Beds National Monument](#)
- [Kam Wah Chung State Heritage Site](#)
- [Grant County Museum](#)
- [Grant County Ranch and Rodeo Museum](#)
- [Bates State Park](#)
- [Sumpter Municipal Museum](#)
- [Sumpter Valley Dredge State Heritage Site](#)
- [Baker Heritage Museum](#)
- [Oregon Trail Interpretive Center](#)

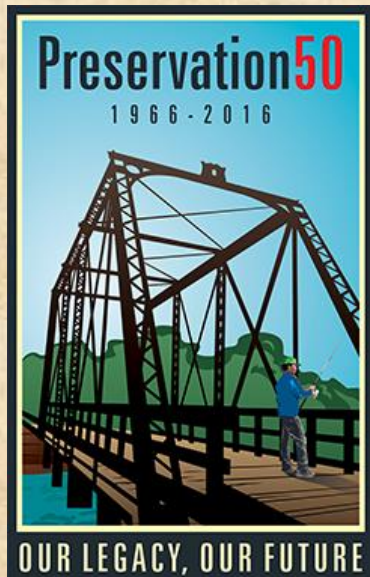


Acknowledgments

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The project was developed as part of Preservation 50- the national celebration of the 50th anniversary of the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act.



PRESERVATION 50

COMMEMORATING 50 YEARS OF THE NATIONAL HISTORIC PRESERVATION ACT

For volunteer opportunities in the Forest Service Heritage Program see the Passport In Time website:

www.passportintime.com

