

# What is going on with the railroad from Danville to Republic?

By Bryan Bremmer

(Article first printed in Caledonia Pax Cultura Autumn/Winter 2006)

## What has happened in the past?

For the last year and a half the topic of “the railroad” has been sporadically showing up in conversations, billboard signs, Letters to the Editor, and in County Commissioner meetings. Why? Who cares? And why is it coming up now? Perhaps the best answer to these questions is to take a quick look at the history.

In the early to middle of the 18th century the English colonies in America were a scattered bunch of fishing villages, small towns composed of farmers and assorted shopkeepers, a few larger trading centers, and a few scattered loners running around the back woods. Then in the 1770's some of the fisherman and traders got angry at the British trade and tax laws and decided to stage a revolution so that they could make more money. Well, they won, and they made more money. However this didn't change things very much. Outside of a few politicians and shippers, life stayed remarkably the same for the fisherman in his boat and the farmer in his field. The real changes came because of a few English, Scottish, and then later American inventors who were beginning to make funny little machines that grew up and turned into locomotives. Over a period of about 150 years these things really changed how we lived. Probably the single most important aspect of this industrial revolution for most people outside of big cities was the railroad.

The high point for American Railroading was around 1916 with about 270,000 miles of track. In 1898 the Republic mines were going strong but shipping the highest-grade ore overland by horse-drawn wagons was very expensive. By 1902 mining had mostly shut down because of the expense. Then the Kettle River Valley Railroad, or "Hot Air" line, began operations, and several months later the Great Northern Railway arrived. With these two railroads competing the mines boomed again. This greatly stimulated economic activity, including lumbering for mine timbers, ties, and buildings, and agriculture to feed all of the new workers.

However for every high point there follows a decrease. In 1910 the Hot Air

line had ceased operation. By the 1980's more than half the rail lines in the US had been abandoned and by 2004 the last train left Curlew for the Vaagen Mill site.

Meanwhile, back in 1983, concerned by the rapid contraction of America's rail network, the U.S. Congress amended the National Trails System Act to create the rail-banking program. Rail banking is a method by which lines proposed for abandonment can be preserved through interim conversion to trail use. This act states that if there is any possibility of future use such as recreation, utilities, or local transportation, the entire line should be preserved through rail banking.

## What is happening now?

After a period of no activity, the first rumors of the railroad being shut down arose in the spring of 2005. Not much more happened until May 2, 2006 when the managers of the Kettle Falls International Railway, LLC wrote a letter to the Ferry County Board of Commissioners informing the Commissioners of their plans to file a request to abandon the 28 miles of track between Danville and San Poil. Following this they filed a notice with the Republic News-Miner and a petition with the federal Surface Transportation Board. Choosing to preserve this vital piece of county infrastructure (Rail Bank), the County Commissioners retained an attorney to file the necessary papers with the STB and negotiate with the railroad company. In the October 12, 2006 News-Miner the County Commissioners reiterated their stance about trying to preserve the rail corridor through "rail banking".

## Why would anybody want to keep an old railroad track?

There are many reasons for retaining the railroad right-of-way; some of these are the following.

**Economic:** Railroads are by far the most economical means of transporting freight. If we are ever going to have any large natural resource based industry again, an existing railroad line would be a valuable resource. As fuel prices go up this becomes even more valuable.

**Environment:** For most of the way between Danville and San Poil the railroad runs beside rivers, creeks, lakes or wetlands associated with them. The law

prevents construction within 100 feet of such wetlands. There is very little that could be done with the right-of-way for much of this distance. If construction and the stripping of vegetation near the water were to be allowed the water quality would continue to decrease and Curlew Lake and other bodies of water will become more and more polluted. We could lose our ability to use and enjoy both the lake and the creeks.

**Historical:** Republic was once served by two railroads and there were feeder lines running up some of the side valleys. The Curlew Lake trestle has been an icon ever since the railroad came to the valley over 100 years ago. It has surely appeared in more pictures of the lake than any other feature. Most of the children who have grown up in this area have either played on it or fished from it. For 100 years tourists have visited the area and remembered and taken pictures of the trestle. We need some reminder to help tell our story to our children and grandchildren.

**Cultural resources:** There are numerous known archaeological sites around Curlew Lake and undoubtedly more that have not been found. With a full survey it is very likely that sites worthy of full excavation could be found between Torboy and Danville. It is quite possible that we could get a local university to excavate the site.

**Tourism:** Studies have shown that over 80% of Americans who drive more than 50 miles on a vacation will stop and visit historical or cultural sites. What would bring more of these tourists? If it is possible to maintain the tracks there are possibilities of a day train-dinner trip. Other communities including Metaline Falls have found events like this to be valuable. If we cannot save the tracks a multi-use trail would add a lot to our economy. A walking, cycling, skating, trail could attract a whole new class of tourists. A horse trail would add an alternative to the mountainous Kettle Crest Trail. An active archaeological excavation always attracts onlookers. There are ample opportunities for nature, historical, glacial, archaeological, and wildlife interpretive sites. For special events guided tours like those sponsored by the birding group could be offered.

## What would happen if a trail were to replace the railroad tracks?

I can't speak for everybody but personally I don't want to replace the railroad tracks with a trail. My preference would be to retain the tracks and put a trail along side of them. If that is not possible I would like to retain the tracks by

themselves for the potential economic benefit to the county. If we cannot retain the tracks I would like to replace them with a multi-use trail with the county maintaining right-of-way for utilities like sewer, natural gas pipe, or whatever public use may be appropriate. If not enough money can be found to build a trail now, we need to retain the right-of-way for utilities with an option to build a trail later. As a final worst-case scenario, we should try to maintain county ownership of as much of the right-of-way as possible. Curlew Lake has already been placed on the 303(d) list for excessive phosphorus by the State Department of Ecology. The Curlew Lake Association in cooperation with the Soil Conservation District is already taking steps to ameliorate this problem but they may not be successful. If worse comes to worst the State could require a sewer system for the lake. If this were to happen it would be much better to have a utilities right-of-way already in place than to have to condemn property for right-of-way at overwhelming expense.

## What would happen if we did have a trail?

There are several concerns here: property values, crime, the economics of the trail, and the benefits of a trail.

**Property values:** In all the studies that I am aware of, property values have gone up after a trail was built.

In Wisconsin, a study showed that lots adjacent to the trail sold faster and for an average of nine percent more than similar property not located next to the trail.

In a survey by the National Association of Realtors and the National Association of Home Builders, trails ranked as the second most important community amenity out of a list of 18 choices.

Realizing the selling power of greenways, developers of a housing development in North Carolina added \$5,000 to the price of 40 homes adjacent to the regional greenway. Those homes were still the first to sell.

In other areas trails and greenways have reduced environmentally mandated remediation requirements, lowering taxes, and reducing flood insurance costs.

**Crime:** Studies between 1979 and 1997 showed that crime either stayed the same or was reduced along trails. Studies of the Burke-Gilman trail in Seattle, numerous trails in Minnesota, and trails in rural Iowa, Florida, and in suburban San Francisco all showed this result. The police generally felt that the main

reason for this was the separation of the potential criminal from his escape vehicle.

A 1997 study of all 861 rail-trails in the US showed that crime on the trail was much less than crime in adjacent neighborhoods. In this case most of the trail crime in the US was centered on one trail going through a slum in South Boston.

You may have been hearing news reports of crime on the Centennial Trail in Spokane. If you look at the reports very closely you will find that most of the crimes are breaking into cars parked in the city parking lots. This is mostly expensive parked cars with top-of-the-line CDs, audio systems, packages from Nordstrom, etc.

**Economics:** External funding would be required to acquire the right-of-way and to build a trail. The Commissioners are currently exploring grants. I would expect that most of the day-to-day maintenance would be done by local volunteer groups, similar to the efforts of the Back Country Horsemen and road cleanup groups. Law enforcement would need to be performed by the Sheriff's Department but this would probably be no more than a quick check of parking areas. If motorized vehicles were to be allowed on the trail, groups supporting such use should provide or plan for law enforcement for this use. Most maintenance expenses would need to be supplied by grant funds or user/volunteer labor and financing.

**Benefits:** The benefits mentioned above were all for local property owners. How about other benefits? There are many reports of economic gains after trails are constructed. The existence of greenways and trails makes it easier to attract employers and employees.

Following the opening of the Mineral Belt Trail in Leadville, Colorado, the city reported a 19 percent increase in sales tax revenues. The trail helped Leadville recover from the economic blow of a mine closure in 1999.

Visitors to Ohio's Little Miami Scenic Trail spent an average of \$13.54 per visit on food, beverages, and transportation. They also spent an estimated \$277 per year on clothing, equipment, and accessories to use during trail trips, some of which was spent prior to arriving at the trail.

The Mispillion River Greenway in Milford, Delaware is credited with spurring downtown investment with a gain of about 250 people employed downtown

over a period of 10 years.

## Could we get people to come to Ferry County for a trail?

We already are. On July 14, 2006 a Letter to the Editor appeared in the News-Miner from Claudia Coulson. She was thanking the people of Republic and Ferry County for providing the facilities for her and her group to take a speeder (railroad motorcar) trip between Torboy and Danville. The group came from all over the Northwest and some from farther away.

On September 7, 2006 an article in the Spokesman-Review reported on a 54 year old woman who had come from Toronto, Canada with a group of 26 to inline skate the Trail of the Coeur d'Alenes. She spent \$1,500 for a 5-day tour. As a closing statement the article mentioned that a tour guide came to the Enaville Resort and Restaurant to warn them that a group of 26 skaters would be coming by to eat shortly. The table on the front porch was taken. It was occupied by four cyclists from Las Cruces, N.M., who were also riding the trail.

Randy Sage of Republic reported that at the end of August he was able to join a group of 8 rail-bike riders for a short ride. This group had members from Spokane, Coeur d'Alene, Seattle, and San Francisco. They had ridden on the tracks from Danville to the Vaagen Mill. Two of the riders had ridden on railroad track in many places, including a trip to Argentina. As they were riding past Lake Roberta on a warm summer evening with the sun highlighting the hills to the East of them, one of the riders turned to Randy and said, "You know, this is just about as good as it gets!"

A local Forest Service employee has reported that numerous groups of 5 to 10 bicycle riders have come over from Seattle and the surrounding area to ride on the Kettle Crest Trail.

I am certainly not a cycling nut who has the ability to travel all over the world searching for the best bike trail, but I have been to a few places. When we go down we take our bicycles. We have gone on three trails, Yosemite Park, the American River, and Monterey. All three are nice, But:

Yosemite Park has some spectacular views, Half Dome, Yosemite Falls, and El Capitan. Beyond that you have a mountain valley that looks a lot like the San

Poil, only shorter.

Monterey has some beautiful coastline, very rocky with very few places to get close to the water, but it is too cold for swimming anyway. The aquarium is world class but other than sea lions and seals the wildlife is pretty similar to what we have. Their trail is OK, but for most of the way it is several blocks from the ocean, behind two or three story buildings or huge piles of sand. The only place you can really see the ocean is from the parking lot at the Monterey pier.

The American River trail southeast of Sacramento is on a dry dusty flood plain, except when the river is flooding. You can see the river from many spots along the trail. The river is typical California, big shallow ditch with steep sides and a smallish muddy stream in the middle. Sort of like Lake Roosevelt when the water level is down but with much less water.

What do these places have that Ferry County doesn't? Other than a few outstanding features like Half Dome, the aquarium, and Yosemite Falls in the spring, not much. However they have one human factor that Ferry County seems to lack. That is a pride in their surroundings and a willingness to work at making their area better and more welcoming to visitors and local residents.

Railroads have been very important to the history and development of our country and our county. We need to act now to save whatever we can of this icon of history. Saving the railroad right-of-way isn't throwing away money; adjacent landowners, small businesses, and the citizens as a whole will gain economically. The whole community can gain from recreation and quality of life. A properly developed trail system could bring many tourists into our area. It would even benefit businesses in nearby counties.

While in Monterey I took my 2-year-old grandson to Dennis the Menace Park. It is a great place for kids: swings and slides and tunnels and rope bridges that bounce and make lots of noise. And an old steam locomotive. Where is the first place he headed? Nobody had to give him a lecture on The Impact of Railroads on American Culture. Even I had fun crawling around after him. There is something about railroads that just grabs our imagination and won't let go. We need to keep some reminders of our heritage. And if it can serve a useful civic purpose, be used by the local residents, and bring money into the community, why not?