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GILMORE AND PITTSBURGH RAILROAD

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Construction of a California, Idaho, and Montana railroad--designed to connect Boise with Butte and San Francisco--gained support from many localities along the projected route during the quarter century before highways displaced railways as a preferred transportation network. At one time or another, the Great Northern, Northern Pacific, Burlington, Union Pacific, Chicago Northwestern, and the Milwaukee got a lot of publicity from hopeful developers as major companies thought to be interested in the Boise-Butte segment of such a route. And the Boise-Winnemucca stretch received a great deal of attention. After a decade or more of that kind of promotion, the Idaho Midland began construction from Boise toward Butte in 1900. Generally, though, most of the projects failed to get beyond the survey stage. A lot of surveying--much of it extremely difficult--was undertaken through central Idaho's mountain ranges. And at least two or three segments actually were completed. A line from Caldwell reached Wilder after the panic of 1907 halted construction. (Later, the Western Pacific from Winnemucca to Oakland was regarded as part of this development.) One other Idaho portion--the Gilmore and Pittsburgh also got past the survey stage. Like the Caldwell to Wilder portion of the Boise-Winnemucca project, the Gilmore and Pittsburgh line tried to become an important regional carrier. But the Gilmore company lacked resources to provide service beyond Lemhi Valley.

Incorporated February 20, 1907, the Gilmore and Pittsburgh Railroad Company, Ltd., originated as a transportation system essential for production in a major lead-silver lode at Gilmore.

An eighty-five mile wagon road from Gilmore to Dubois utilized an ideal grade, but ore wagons could not begin to haul enough heavy metal to enable the district to realize anything close to its mineral potential. An experiment with a four car steam train, operating on the wagon road rather than a railroad, had failed in 1906. (Ore cars simply could not be maintained in operating condition on the rough wagon road.) So the Pittsburgh investors at Gilmore had to build a railroad if their mine were to resume operation. Then the Panic of 1907 ruined their chances to obtain the necessary capital. Finally in 1909 they got the Northern Pacific Railway to put up the funds. (This transaction, which represented a Northern Pacific invasion of Union Pacific territory, was kept secret: The mining company president

insisted he had no idea who gave him the money--\$4,812,181.77--necessary to build the line.) Although built to serve Gilmore, the line also was extended to Salmon, where a golden spike celebration was held May 18, 1910. Plans to build up the Salmon to Challis and through the Sawtooth country to Boise (or alternatively, around to Arco and Boise) never materialized, although a little work was started toward Challis. Another option, to build down the Salmon to Lewiston, also failed. With no additional need for secrecy concerning Northern Pacific participation, the later company took over the capital stock of the Gilmore and Pittsburgh. Considering that the cost of building the railway ran about half the gross production of the Gilmore mining district after the line was finished, the mining company certainly lacked incentive to retain the Gilmore and Pittsburgh. At no time did the railway make operating expenses.

So after the mine ceased production in 1929, the Northern Pacific had no interest in keeping up a losing operation during the depression. The Northern Pacific had enough deficits elsewhere. By neglecting track and equipment maintenance, the Gilmore and Pittsburgh managed to continue until April 30, 1939.

Service had to be suspended because of frequent derailments and the need to repair one of the engines. Both engines had to be available at all times, because the other engine always was required to get the operating engine back on the track. On the last trip, with his locomotive derailed three times, the engineer decided to quit. So the Gilmore and Pittsburgh shut down. Highway construction had long since left that railroad unable to offer competitive rates. Finally on March 22, 1940, the Interstate Commerce Commission granted permission for suspension of service. On April 10, 1946, after the Northern Pacific had taken up the track, the Gilmore and Pittsburgh Company was dissolved. Only some old buildings and equipment, along with abandoned railway grades, remain in Lemhi Valley as reminders of that transportation system. The modern highway from Leadore to Salmon uses the old railroad grade.

Additional material may be found in an article by Rex C. Myers, "The Gilmore and Pittsburgh: Lemhi Valley's Railroad," Idaho Yesterdays (Summer 1971, 18-23).