

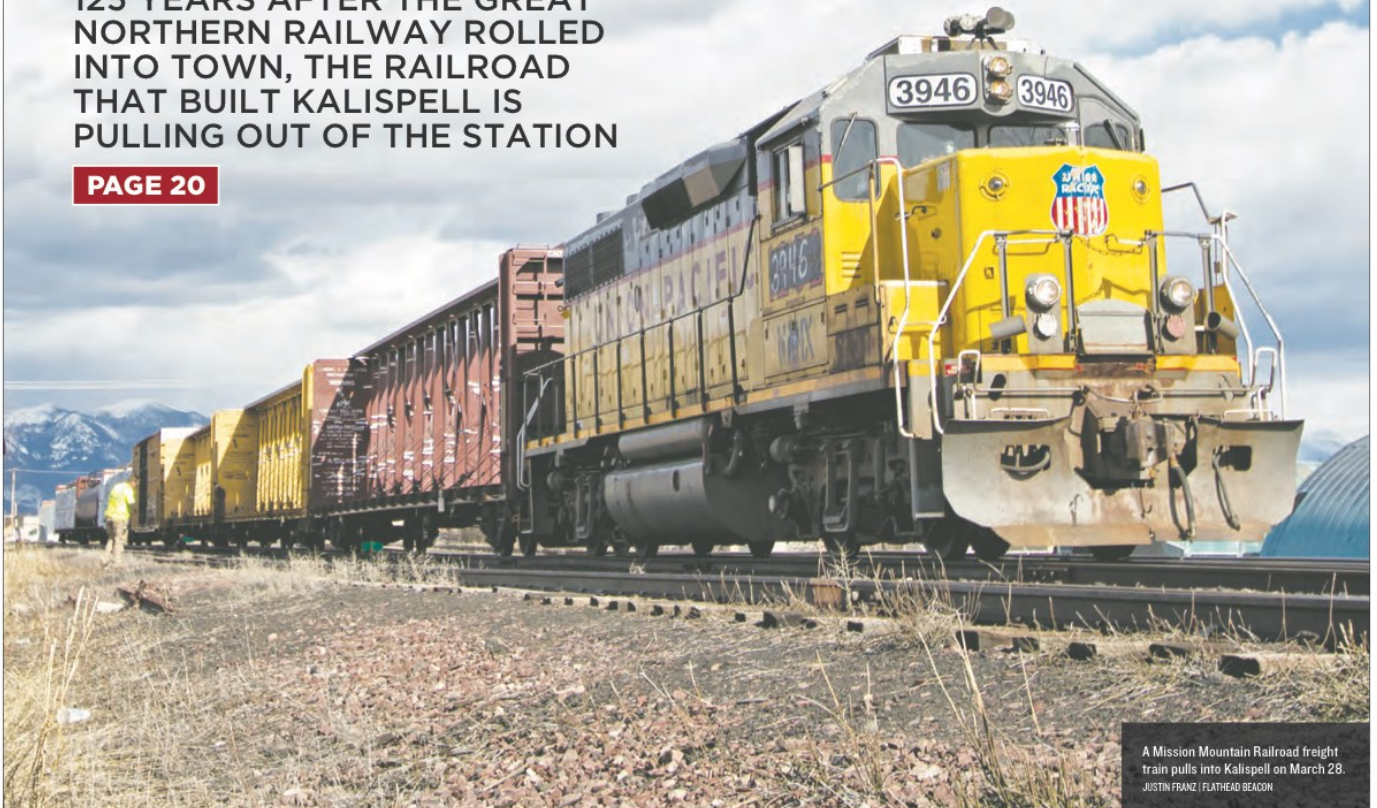
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THE END OF THE LINE

125 YEARS AFTER THE GREAT
NORTHERN RAILWAY ROLLED
INTO TOWN, THE RAILROAD
THAT BUILT KALISPELL IS
PULLING OUT OF THE STATION

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A Mission Mountain Railroad freight train pulls into Kalispell on March 28.
JUSTIN FRANZ / FLATHEAD BEACON

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COVER

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STORY AND PHOTOS
BY JUSTIN FRANZ





A Mission Mountain Railroad locomotive delivers a boxcar to Northwest Drywall in Kalispell, one of two industries that still rely on the railroad in Kalispell. Northwest Drywall and CHS Kalispell are currently building new facilities at the Glacier Rail Park in Evergreen to make way for a new rail trail through downtown.



Engineer Brent Keys blows the locomotive horn to warn drivers near downtown Kalispell on March 28, 2018. Keys has been a locomotive engineer for 20 years.

At some point in the coming months, a diesel locomotive will pull the last freight train out of Kalispell.

The train will travel past the CHS Kalispell grain elevator and the Northwest Drywall warehouse, and rumble behind the Kalispell Center Mall before crossing U.S. Highway 93. It will then slowly roll past the old railroad depot on its way toward Woodland Park, where it will turn north on its way out of town forever.

It is entirely possible that the drivers waiting for the train to cross U.S. Highway 93 or the shoppers loading their cars with groceries at Super 1 Foods or the children playing at Woodland Park won't give it a second thought, even though the railroad has been a fixture in Kalispell for more than 125 years.

It is also entirely possible that they won't realize that the railroad was responsible for the development and early prosperity of the town they now call home.

The reaction to that last train will undoubtedly be different than the scene that greeted the first train to Kalispell on Jan. 1, 1892. On that cold winter day, approximately 3,500 people filled the young town to see the last spike — a prong

made of melted silver dollars to commemorate the occasion — hammered into the final stretch of track. After the waiting locomotive steamed into town from the east, hundreds of track laborers joined the thousands of local residents who gathered for a parade through town on their way to a large banquet.

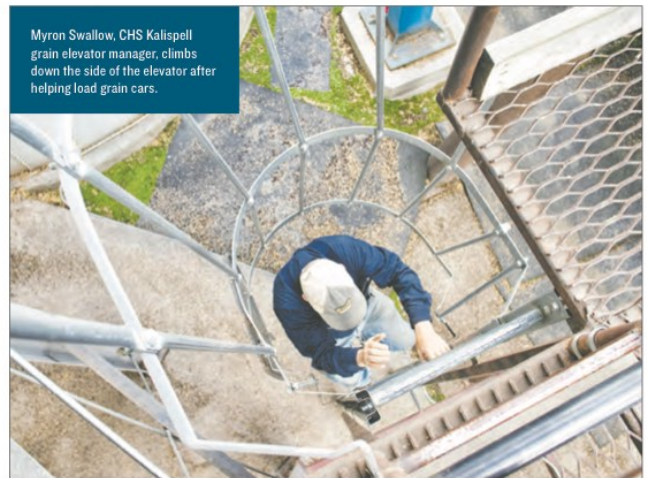
Kalispell was no longer a dusty outpost on the edge of civilization. It was a railroad town.

"The citizens are justly enthusiastic over the advent of the Great Northern," the Salt Lake Tribune reported. "Bands played upon the streets all afternoon, repeatedly serenading the railroad (officials) and their sturdy crews. Tonight the city is ablaze with bonfires and colored lights that can be seen at every quarter of the city ... This is the 'red letter' day for the metropolis of the Flathead Valley, one long to be remembered by everyone who witnessed the demonstration."

In the 1880s, as Great Northern Railway boss James J. Hill extended his iron road west, towns like Kalispell waited with bated breath wondering if they would become the next station stop. In the late 19th century, a railroad often brought with it people and prosperity. The Flathead Valley's fate was sealed in 1889, when surveyor John

F. Stevens discovered a route over Marias Pass that guaranteed the Great Northern's main line would come through the area.

But even as laborers laid rail across the Great Plains toward Marias Pass, it was unclear where exactly the tracks would go after the line had descended through the Middle Fork Flathead River canyon. One suggestion was to take the rails directly west across the valley toward the Kootenai River Valley. In January 1890, Hill dispatched locating engineer Charles Haskell into the wilderness to explore routes across the Flathead and toward the Kootenai. What followed was 52 miserable days in the snow, according to historian Thomas Robischon, who



Myron Swallow, CHS Kalispell grain elevator manager, climbs down the side of the elevator after helping load grain cars.

wrote about the misadventure for the Great Northern Railway Historical Society in 2002.

Tired and exhausted from a month and a half in the elements, Haskell and his team hightailed it to the closest town of any significant size, Demersville, the first incorporated settlement on the north end of Flathead Lake. Later on, when Haskell submitted his report to Hill, he suggested that building south toward Flathead Lake and then northwest toward the Kootenai — along the route of today's U.S. Highway 2 — was the best route west. In reality, heading directly west across the valley would have been preferable, but Haskell's miserable winter in the mountains west of Whitefish was fresh on his mind, and there was no way he would direct a railroad there.

In 1891, the railroad entered the Flathead Valley from the Middle Fork canyon and turned south toward the lake. While Demersville had hoped it would be the next station stop, Hill decided to run his railroad just north of there through what would become Kalispell because there was more available land for sale, some of which was owned by his friend Charles Conrad. Kalispell became a "division point" where trains were serviced and maintained, and a yard was built in the heart of town. According to Robischon, within a year of the railroad's arrival, Kalispell was home to 2,000 people, had four newspapers, two dentists, four doctors and 13 lawyers.

But all was not well. The route west of Kalispell over Haskell Pass was a headache for the railroad and expensive to maintain because of its tight curves and bridges. Hill and other Great Northern officials were at the time preoccupied with expanding their railroad west, but they knew that eventually a better route west of Kalispell would have to be found.

A decade later, long after the railroad was completed to Seattle, the Great Northern started to look for additional sources of revenue. One potential source was the coal fields of southeastern British Columbia. In 1901, Hill announced that he would build a branch off his main line into Canada to move coal to market. Two routes were considered: one directly north from Kalispell and a second from Jennings (east of Libby) that would follow the Kootenai River.

After much consideration, the Great Northern decided to build its new branch north out of Jennings, crossing into Canada near Rexford. At the same time, Hill decided he would build a new main line from Columbia Falls to Rexford, through Whitefish, where it would connect with the branch to Canada. The new route was longer than the existing main line but not as steep or expensive to maintain. The railroad west of Kalispell would be abandoned.

A decade after being dubbed "the metropolis of the Flathead Valley," Kalispell was delegated to the end of a branch line. The new route was completed in 1904, and the division offices and servicing facilities were moved to Whitefish,

resulting in the loss of about 200 to 300 employees, according to Robischon. "A great gloom" enveloped the town, a newspaper reported, as locals worried if Kalispell would become the next Demersville: nothing more than a wide spot in the road.

Despite the perceived "gloom," Kalispell persevered as its population doubled in size between 1900 and 1910. Even though it was no longer on the main line, Kalispell had maintained its status as the economic heart of the valley. And even if the Great Northern's most important passenger trains, like the Empire Builder, didn't stop in Kalispell, trains still made the 14-mile journey to town to move people and goods.

The Great Northern eventually became Burlington Northern and finally BNSF Railway. In 2004, BNSF decided to lease its Kalispell branch to Watco Companies, a Kansas-based company that specializes in running shorter rail lines. A few times a week since then, Watco's Mission Mountain Railroad has delivered freight cars of material to Northwest Drywall and taken hopper cars full of grain from CHS Kalispell.

In the last decade, city leaders have eyed the land along the railroad near downtown for redevelopment. In 2015, Kalispell received a \$10 million federal grant to help build a new rail yard near Evergreen. Later this year, Northwest Drywall and CHS Kalispell will move their facilities to the new yard, and the 2 miles of track through downtown will be replaced with a walking trail.

When the final freight train does pull out of Kalispell, it will bring to a close more than 125 years of history in town. But those familiar with the story will always know that Kalispell was once a railroad town.

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Mission Mountain Railroad engineer Brent Keys, left, and conductor Jason Sharp, right, talk about the freight cars they need to deliver to Northwest Drywall and CHS Kalispell on March 28, 2018. The Mission Mountain moves freight cars to Kalispell that are delivered from BNSF Railway in Columbia Falls.



A CHS Kalispell employee closes the roof hatch on a grain car near downtown Kalispell on May 2, 2018. The grain elevator has been a fixture in downtown Kalispell since the early 1900s. Grain is loaded into freight cars that are then taken to Columbia Falls where they are added to BNSF Railway freight trains and delivered across the country.