

# THE **END OF THE LINE**

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

**STORY AND PHOTOS BY JUSTIN FRANZ**



A Mission Mountain Railroad freight train arrives in downtown Kalispell after making the 15-mile journey from Columbia Falls on March 28, 2018. In Kalispell, conductor Jason Sharp, brakeman Reed Edwards and engineer Brent Keys will deliver a boxcar of drywall to Northwest Drywall and empty hopper cars to CHS Kalispell to be loaded with local grain.







Conductor Jason Sharp walks out of the cab of Mission Mountain Railroad locomotive No. 3946 to help deliver freight cars to Weyerhaeuser in Evergreen. While the final two miles of track in Kalispell will be ripped up, this section of track will remain and continue to be served by the Mission Mountain.

**A**t 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, which 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.

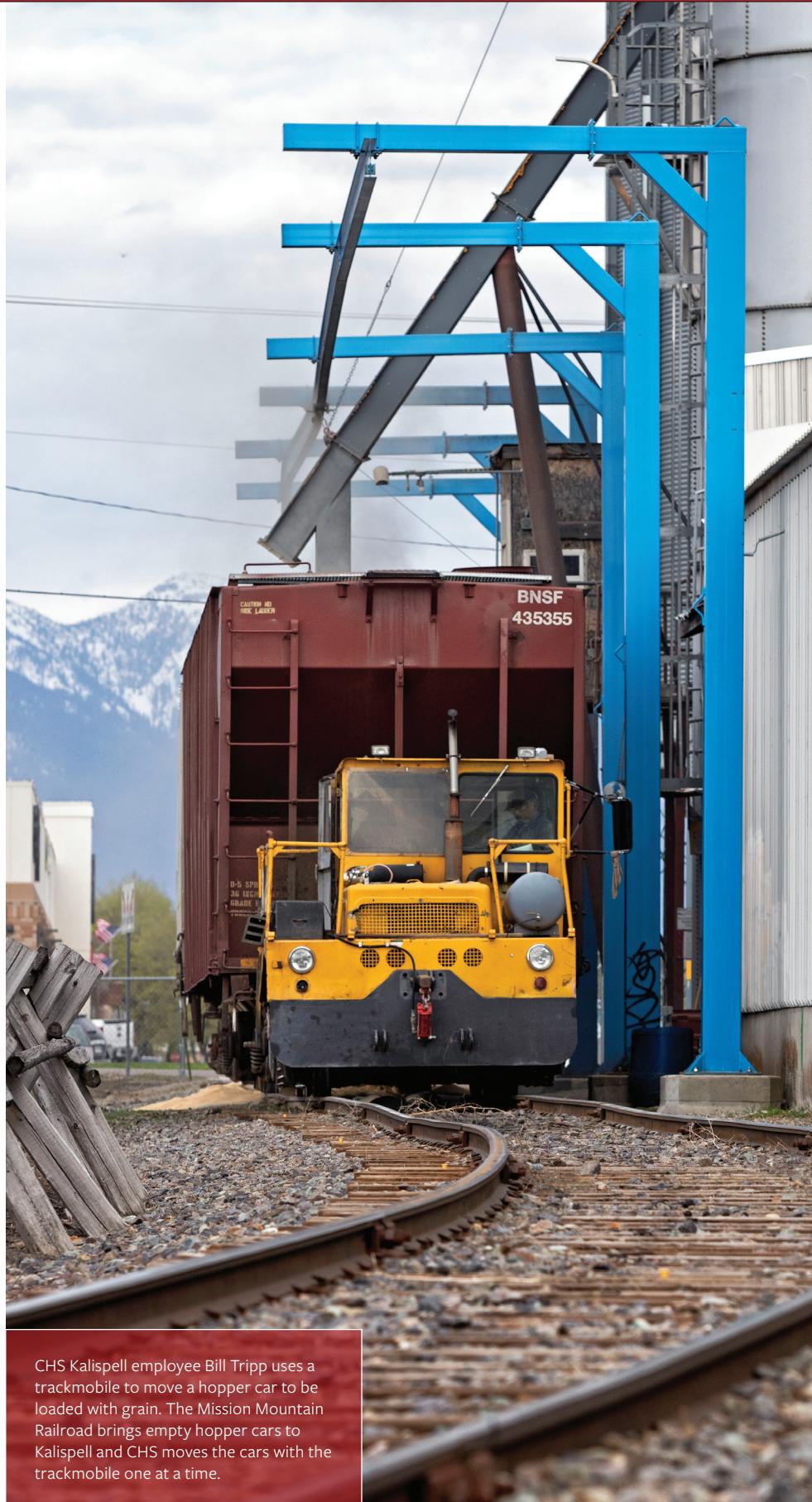
Kalispell was no longer a dusty outpost on the edge of civilization. It was a railroad town.

“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 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.



CHS Kalispell employee Bill Tripp uses a trackmobile to move a hopper car to be loaded with grain. The Mission Mountain Railroad brings empty hopper cars to Kalispell and CHS moves the cars with the trackmobile one at a time.

## END OF THE LINE



Kent Loveall uses a forklift to unload a freight car at Northwest Drywall in Kalispell. Sometime next year, Northwest Drywall will move to the Glacier Rail Park in Evergreen and this section of track will be ripped up.

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

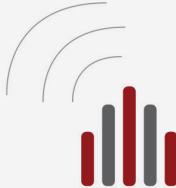


Mission Mountain Railroad brakeman Reed Edwards walks ahead of a train in Kalispell so that he can hand throw a track switch, allowing the locomotive and its cars to go down a different track.

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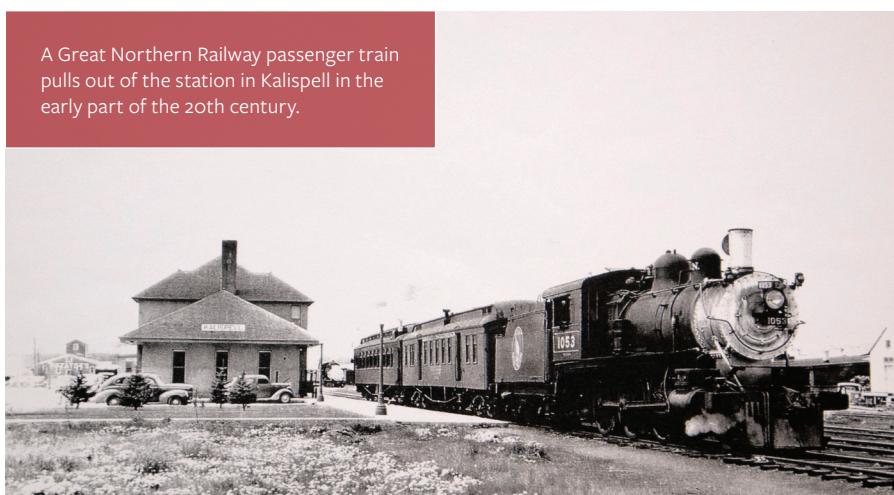
The Kalispell rail yard sits empty in the spring of 2018. The walking trail that will replace the tracks is part of a core redevelopment plan that city and economic officials hail as a cornerstone of Kalispell's growth and evolution.

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 Rextford. At the same

A Great Northern Railway passenger train pulls out of the station in Kalispell in the early part of the 20th century.



time, Hill decided he would build a new main line from Columbia Falls to Rextford, 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 a branch line station stop. 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 15-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, part of a core redevelopment plan that city and economic leaders hail as a cornerstone of Kalispell's growth and evolution.

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. ■



Conductor Jason Sharp checks his paperwork while switching freight cars near the Glacier Park International Airport March 28, 2018.

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