



A History of the Washington Park and Zoo Railway

Community vision, community action in the 1950s

The maiden run of the silvery streamlined Zooliner was on May 22, 1958. A few days later the Rose Festival princesses were treated to a ride, and on June 5, the Zooliner carried its first paying passengers. The magnificence of the Zooliner rolling down the track with its flags flying heralded the prosperity of this post-war era. Approximately 200,000 passengers rode the train that summer. Soon four other engines and a speeder were added; three of the engines were surplus equipment from logging railroads or lumber mills. The exception is the Oregon No. 1, which was built in Portland and is a custom-built steam train pulled by a classic style iron horse steam engine.

When the railroad was new, it was called the Portland Zoo Railway, and it entertained the still-young baby boomers as well as their parents. The creation of the railroad gave shape to something in our local character and identity. It showcased the civic spirit and optimistic outlook of the region. People were amazed and delighted by the little railway. It was described by one pundit as “something that springs from the city and makes it a place that belongs to us all.”

The Washington Park & Zoo Railway is a recreational excursion line, with approximately one- and one-half miles of track built on a series of grades through the Oregon Zoo, Hoyt Arboretum, and Washington Park. The track is 30-inch gauge steel, and the rolling stock was built to 5/8th-size standard railroad equipment. It is second only to the Disneyland Railroad considering the route design, its length, and the quality and quantity of the rolling stock. It was not a coincidence that Walt Disney was an honorary board member of the Portland Zoo Railway when it was first built.

The Washington Park Loop opened on May 10, 1960. The visionaries who built the railroad knew one of the biggest thrills would be the majestic ride on the Rose Garden Loop through the forest to the Washington Park Station at the International Rose Test Garden. This was a 20-minute ride through a Douglas fir and western red cedar forest, when trilliums, wild currant, ocean spray, and dogwood were in bloom. At the Washington Park Station the scenery opened to views of the city and Mt. Hood beyond. The route has aspects of a mountain railroad, and everyone agreed it provided the most spectacular ride of any recreational railroad in the nation.

The push for the railway began in 1954, and it snowballed into an enthusiastic effort that included many individuals, school children throughout Oregon, the City of Portland, and executives from seven regional railroads who came together to construct the biggest little railroad in America. The running gear of the Zooliner and the frames and couplers of the steam engine were built by the Northwest Marine Ironworks. The streamlined aluminum body of the Zooliner was built by the H. Hirschberger Sheet Metal Company. Abbott Lawrence of the architectural firm of Lawrence, Tucker & Wallmann designed the plan. The route was surveyed by engineers of the Southern Pacific Railroad. The grade was engineered by the staff of the Spokane, Portland, and Seattle Railroad (now BNSF Railroad) and built by the Ketell Construction Company.

These visionaries created the railroad for the benefit of Oregon's citizens and visitors. Their strategy was that ticket sales for the ride would provide funding not only to sustain the railroad but also to build the zoo and fund the care of the animals. In 1957 the zoo organizers sent an expedition to Antarctica to gather

penguins, and the leader of the expedition put a dinner-plate-sized sticker with the logo of the Portland Zoo Railroad on a directional sign at McMurdo Sound. The zoo itself (then known as the Portland Zoological Gardens) was under construction when the first phase of the railroad opened for business. Half of the cost of the railroad came from City of Portland zoo levy funds, and the remainder was obtained by a bootstrap statewide operation in which nearly 25,000 citizens and over 100 companies contributed labor, expertise, materials, and cash. The railroad was the golden goose of the zoo and has continued to generate more funds annually than it takes to operate. These funds continue to provide financing for improvement projects within the zoo.

Some of the money used to build the Washington Park loop came from a fund campaign that sold "stock" in the train for a dollar a share, worth two free rides on the train when the extension was complete. This stock was sold by schoolchildren as well as bartenders in Portland's taverns who wore engineer's caps and literally passed the hat and peddled the stock to patrons. The zoo commissioners also pledged to sell stock, some as much as 1,000 shares.

The railroad (tracks, tunnel, trestle, platforms, and signals) and the five trains are the work of many talented railroad men and women, including architects, railroad design engineers, grade design and maintenance experts, and train engine and rail car designers. Even before the first train moved, more than 25,000 people had assisted or contributed to the effort to build the railroad, making the Washington Park and Zoo Railway an outstanding example of the cooperative community effort. This effort was memorialized on the floor of the United States Senate in 1959 by Oregon Senator Richard L. Neuberger, who in his address described and commended the "unselfish and altruistic community interested in the Portland Zoo Railway" and stressed that the railway demonstrates "what can be attained by public-spirited people."

Generations of memories

The railroad has carried more than seven million passengers and is beloved by generations of Oregonians. In 1960 the railroad carried 250,000 passengers, and gross receipts were \$80,209. By 1961 the number of passengers had increased, and in 1962 and 1963 combined the railroad carried approximately 600,000 passengers. In 1962 runs to Washington Park and return listed 41,452 customers boarding at the zoo station, and another 7,436 boarding at the park depot to visit the zoo and then return to the park. Zoo loop rides within the zoo proper lured another 15,106 passengers.

The zoo offered romantic Moonlight Rides, which were after-dark trips to Washington Park and back with a 10-minute layover to view the city lights. In the summer of 1962 alone, these rides were considered the perfect romantic date and produced 7,425 cash fares. That year the railroad grossed \$125,000 for the zoo, which provided funding to build an animal health and research center that opened in the spring of 1963. In 1971 it was reported close to 200,000 people bought a ticket to ride on one of the trains of the zoo railroad. In 1988 revenue from the railroad was over \$350,000 and in 1989 revenue was over \$400,000.

In 1978 Metro commissioned a study that revealed that the zoo itself needed repairs and improvements for animal care. The year before Metro took over the zoo, the zoo administrators had overspent their budget. The zoo railroad came to the rescue: there was money available from the zoo's contingency and capital improvement funds, which came in part from the profits from the zoo railroad. According to ZooBeat, the bimonthly publication for Friends of the Washington Park Zoo:

Most years, this railroad runs at a considerable profit, generating revenue for other zoo programs. During the last fiscal year [1992] the Zoo railway carried 267,000 riders, netting \$134,000 on total revenues of just under \$500,000. A 1990 survey of the nation's recreational railroads revealed ours to be, by a considerable margin, the largest, most heavily travelled, most profitable of them all.

The railway was met with enthusiasm from many quarters and several traditions began. Annually the

Oregon State all-star football players would be treated to a steak barbecue at the zoo, and later in the evening, they would board the zoo train for a tour of the Portland Zoo. For a number of years, the Rose Festival Court was treated to free rides. On Packy the Elephant's birthday, children under five would ride the train for free. On Mother's Day moms would ride free. On Senior Citizens Day in June, seniors rode free. Fred Meyer, founder of Fred Meyer, Inc., was treated to a free ride in 1977 for his contributions to the zoo. Train passes were handed out as tokens for donating to the zoo programs. Children who read a number of books during the summer would receive as a reward zoo railway passes handed out by librarians who verified the number of books the children read. Conventions that took place in Portland would often include a train ride and a visit to the Rose Garden.

Around Halloween riders would take an evening ride haunted by ghosts and highlighted by a stopover at a "haunted cave." In 1962, close to 3,000 passengers rode the trains during five days of ghost train runs. The Halloween train was so popular that people had to stand in line for hours. The Halloween train was an annual event into the 1970s. In its heyday the event was so popular that for thousands of people the zoo was the place to be on Halloween night. People would line up three abreast from the ticket window and across the zoo parking lot, waiting sometimes as long as three hours to get a scary train ride.

Zoolights during the winter holiday season continues to be an annual tradition for many families. The trains are lit up with strings of lights and travel through festively illuminated tableaux to entertain young and old.

The train was open to people of all abilities and backgrounds. Students from the Oregon School of the Blind often visited the zoo, where they enjoyed holding rabbits, listening to birdcalls. A ride on the zoo train was the highlight of their visit. The Kiwanis organization annually brought thousands of youngsters with disabilities to the zoo, where their day was capped with a ride on one of the zoo trains. In 2004 the Zooliner was reconfigured to be accessible for people using wheelchairs.

The zoo railway has played an important part in moving people through Washington Park. During music festivals and plays that took place at the amphitheater in Washington Park, the trains transported audience members from the zoo (which has a large parking lot) to and from performances. In the summer of 1975, for example, trains transported audience members to the amphitheater for the Oregon Symphony Orchestra, the Al Kader Shrine Temple Band, the Portland Symphonic Band, a ballet by the Ballet Workshop, the opera Secrets of Suzanne, a performance by the Portland Chorale, and the play Legend of Sleepy Hollow for a fare of \$1 to the show and 50 cents on the return. When the Jefferson High School Choir gave special concerts for the opening of the Japanese Garden, the trains were featured in the festivities and christened "Cherry Blossom Specials." When available, the reduced-price combined ticket packages for the Washington Park Zoo Railway and the Japanese Garden also helped relieve parking problems and congestion at Washington Park.

The Portland Zoo Railroad Company has had some famous riders. Foreign dignitaries and rock stars were treated to free rides, and during political campaigns, politicians knew a ride on the zoo train was a good photo opportunity. In 1959, during Senator John F. Kennedy's presidential campaign, he took a ride on the steamer Oregon when it was temporarily loaned to the Oregon Centennial Exposition. In May 1968 while campaigning for president, Senators Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy both rode from Washington Park to the zoo in the Zooliner, though at different times. After visiting the zoo, Kennedy, his wife Ethyl, and astronaut John Glenn rode the train to the International Rose Test Garden, where they disembarked and boarded the campaign bus. In 1976 when candidate Jimmy Carter was running for president, the Carters, including their eight-year-old daughter Amy, rode the train to the elephant house.

On May 12, 1977, an agreement was signed between Metro (Metropolitan Service District) and the City of Portland pursuant to Ordinance No. 143589, wherein the City of Portland leased the Zoo Railway to the Metropolitan Service District. The terms were at no cost and included the railroad line, a 20-foot right-of-way along the entire route of the railroad line, and the entire Washington Park terminal. This ordinance was retroactive to July 12, 1976. Metro was allowed to install and operate exhibits and displays for the holiday ZooLights event and the Halloween Train. One stipulation was that if the zoo ceased operations on the rail line, the title to such property “shall revert to the City.” The operation of the railroad was not transferrable to any other party unless assigned by the city and approved by the City Council. The last paragraph stipulated that Metro “shall keep the railroad right-of-way free and clear of all encumbrances and will hold harmless, defend and indemnify City from any and all liability arising in whole or in part from the existence or operation of the zoo railroad.”

Pausing the Rose Garden loop

Between 1960 and 2013 the track was 2.5 miles long. Currently it is 1.56 miles in length, although almost a mile of track (.96 mile) is now unused due to deferred maintenance. The route was shortened to make room for new exhibits that were built in 2013. A crib wall collapse caused Metro to close the loop serving the Rose Garden and Washington Park. In 2017 a draft update of the Washington Park Master Plan called for replacing the Rose Garden loop with a walking path. When citizens testified against this outcome at public hearings, the final plan was changed to allow the option of a regional path beside the rail line.

Historic Register listing

The Washington Park and Zoo Railway was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2020 due to its national importance as an outstanding example in the United States of a small excursion railroad. This status protects the railroad from impacts from projects that may have an “adverse effect” on the physical components of the railroad, or the feeling and integrity of the setting. This means that removing the railroad or building a trail on the route is now unfeasible, and that the path element inserted into the Washington Park Master Plan should no longer be considered.

The Washington Park and Zoo Railway is significant because it exists as a small-scale stand-alone fully realized and engineered 5/8ths scale railroad that runs real trains pulled by authentic locomotives. It is important in part because of its engineering. Like other railroads, the railroad itself is made up of steel T-rails joined together with joint bars and fastened by spikes to wooden cross-ties bedded in a ballast of gravel resting on a roadbed made by grading up the hollows and grading down the hills in the line of the road. There are culverts and structures necessary for crossing, abutments, and drainage. The engineering features of the railroad that are the most significant are the ~3 percent grade of the roadbed, and the 3-foot gauge of the tracks, which permitted a radius curve of 75 feet, which was sharp enough to negotiate the planned winding route and the loops at both stations.

The railroad is significant and determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places because it was built in the post WWII era and served families during the height of baby boom through to the present. The Zooliner in particular is exemplary of the sleek mid-century style that was considered futuristic when it was built. The railroad (tracks, tunnel, trestle, platforms, and signals) and the rolling stock are the work of many talented railroad and construction professionals, and as a whole these elements embody the distinctive characteristics of a well designed and engineered railroad.

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