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SPECIAL



Steam engine No. 1 "Oregon" at the Centennial Exposition in, 1959. Mark Moore collection.



PORTLAND ZOO RAILWAY SPECIAL

BY DONALD R. NELSON



Photo of the No. 2 “Zooliner” train in December 1958. The engine and railcars were moved to the Oregon Centennial site in North Portland in the summer of 1959. Don Nelson collection.

The first time I rode the train at the Oregon Zoo would have been in 1959 or 1960 when I was growing up. We would go to the zoo, on occasion, on Sundays after attending the First United Methodist Church. Later, my wife, Patty, and I would bring our children to the zoo as they grew up in the 1980s. The railroad at the zoo was originally named the Portland Zoo Railway.

Among the board members of the Portland Zoo Railway were writer and historian Stewart Holbrook and US Senator Richard L. Neuberger. Construction of the tracks began in 1958 as the zoo was being built. The “Zooliner” as well as streamlined styled passenger cars were in use later in the year. The train’s route transported visitors around the zoo.

Two of the zoo trains were temporarily moved to the Oregon Centennial site in North Portland in the summer of 1959. When the Centennial Exposition ended, the two trains were returned to the zoo and joined the rolling stock of the Portland Zoo Railway. The train station at the centennial was dismantled and rebuilt overlooking the Washington Park International Rose Test Garden at the end of the Washington Park extension of the zoo railroad. The route, to Washington Park, was officially opened with a golden spike ceremony in 1960.



Real photo postcard of the “Zooliner” at the Oregon Centennial in 1959. A second train was powered by the zoo railroad’s Weyerhaeuser Timber Company engine. Don Nelson collection.

Originally the rooftop of the station at the Centennial was adorned with a sign with “Oregon Railroads” painted on it. It was later repainted to read Portland Zoo Railway Washington Park Elevation 480 feet and still later Washington Park and Zoo Railroad (renamed in 1978) and in small lettering Washington Park Station.



Real photo postcard of the Weyerhaeuser Lumber Company engine and railcars at the Centennial, also from 1959. When the steam engine was completed that summer, it then replaced the Weyerhaeuser engine at the Centennial site. Don Nelson collection.



Photo of the Centennial Train Station in 1959. Don Nelson collection.

The top of the roof featured the logos of railroads that served Oregon. Among the railroads were the Great Northern Railway, Northern Pacific Traction Company, Northern Pacific, Union Pacific, Spokane, Portland and Seattle and the Portland Zoo. Over the years they were changed due to railroad mergers.



Lithographed chrome postcard by Carl Vermillion showing the Zoo Train at Washington Park, published by the Portland Zoological Society, circa 1962. Don Nelson collection.



Steam engine No. 1 “Oregon” at the Centennial Exposition in, 1959. Don Nelson collection.

4-4-0 No. 1 “Oregon” is a 5/8-scale replica of a classic American 4-4-0 steam locomotive of the 19th century. It was built in 1959 by the Oregon Locomotive Works and it is a scale copy of the 4-4-0 locomotive, “Reno,” of Nevada's Virginia & Truckee Railroad (built by Baldwin Locomotive in 1872). Unlike the original, No. 1, “Oregon” uses oil as a power source, but it is still a real steam locomotive (not a diesel that is made to look like a steam locomotive). It weighs about eight tons.

The engine carried passengers for the first time on June 20, 1959, on the temporary Centennial Exposition line in North Portland, but was moved to the then-new Portland Zoo site around the end of the summer, when the Exposition ended. This locomotive has four associated passenger coaches built at the same time. They were designed to look like early twentieth century open-air excursion cars that resembled those of the Portland Electric Transit Company. They feature a clerestory roof with transom lights. Each car has a step rail to access the swinging doors. The body panels are constructed in a lattice of horizontal boards attached to a vertical board framework.

The “Oregon” was taken out of service in August 2002, in need of extensive repairs, and was almost retired and relegated to static display, due to the lack of funds to pay for the repairs. However, donations helped resolve this problem, and the locomotive was overhauled and returned to service on April 2, 2004. Nowadays, No. 1 is normally only scheduled to operate on a few busy weekends per year, including Memorial Day weekend and Labor Day weekend, but it is also brought into use, as needed, to meet demand for train rides on weekends that have a particularly high number of visitors to the zoo. It is also normally used during the annual “Zoo Lights” event, held between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day.



Lithographed chrome postcard showing the "Zooliner" on the trestle at the zoo in the 1960s. Mark Moore collection.

The No. 2 "Zooliner" is a 5/8-scale replica of the diesel-powered Aerotrains, which is famous for its unusual shape that was influenced by automobile designs of the period when it was built. It was considered futuristic at the time.

The "Zooliner" was built in 1958 and its mechanical parts were built by Northwest Marine Iron Works. Its streamlined bodywork was fabricated by the H. Hirschberger Sheet Metal company of Portland. It "officially" carried zoo guest passengers on the date of its dedication, June 9, 1958 (and this date is lettered on the side of the locomotive), but its actual first day carrying passengers was two days earlier.

No. 2, the "Zooliner" was originally powered by a 140-horsepower (100 kW) diesel engine, and it is now powered by a 165-horsepower (123 kW) diesel engine with a hydraulic transmission. It is numbered as WP&ZRy locomotive No. 2. The brakes are pneumatic, the same as on its full-size namesake.

The original train included four streamlined passenger coaches pulled by matching locomotive No. 2. An additional (fifth) similar smooth-side car for the trainset was built in 1996. The rearmost car was rebuilt in late 2005 to resemble a dome car, in connection with the installation of a larger and more powerful wheelchair lift.



Photo of the zoo train with the backup engine, no. 5, the “Oregon Express,” on 4-5-2024. The Zooliner was in the maintenance shop that day. Don Nelson photo.

The train now known as the “Oregon Express,” is the only one that is not a copy of a real train. Its diesel locomotive is WP&ZRy No. 5. It was built in the 1940s by the Milwaukee Locomotive Co. and acquired by the zoo from the Portland Machinery Co. in 1958.

No. 5 was the original construction locomotive, named “Casey Pioneer,” used for laying the original portion of the Zoo Loop track at the zoo in 1958. It operated at the Portland Zoo in 1959 while the other two locomotives and coaches were operating at the Oregon Centennial. It was made to look like a steam train at that time and called the “Circus Train.”

Engine no. 5 was later rebuilt a few times to a relatively more modern style, with a slanted front end. The color scheme and decorative motif of the train have been changed over the years, as has the train's name, which has gone from the “Casey Pioneer” to the “Circus Train” to the “Astroliner” to the “Orient Express” to the “Oregon Express.” This locomotive has four associated passenger coaches.

There are other locomotives including No. 3, built in 1929, and No. 6, built in 1938. They are small industrial diesel locomotives, not normally used for passenger service. They are used for track maintenance and switching, but if needed they can haul the passenger cars of the “Oregon” or “Oregon Express” trains as a substitute for those trains' regular locomotives (Nos. 1 and 5). Both were acquired second-hand from Weyerhaeuser. No. 3 resembles an early EMD switcher.



Photo of the Washington Park Train Station in 2010. Don Nelson photo.

Subsequent maintenance of the train depot protected the architectural bones of the Washington Park Station but with the railroad signage removed, its iconic charm has been lost.



Steam Engine "Oregon," also known as Locomotive 1, is pulling cars with passengers on the Washington Park loop in 2010. Don Nelson photo.



Photo of Robert F. Kennedy, his wife and astronaut John Glenn riding the zoo train in May 1968.



Portland Zoo Railway Post Office first day cover from June 13, 1961, the first day of operation for the Railway Post Office. Mark Moore collection.

The Portland Zoo Railway carries U.S. Mail and it was one of the first recreational railroads to have its own postmark. It is the last railroad in the United States to have continually offered hand-cancelling and processing of mail. The postal cancellation stamp was issued to the railroad by the U.S. Postal Service in 1961. The locomotive of the “Zooliner” has a postal mail slot on the side of the cab, and mail boxes are located at the Zoo and Washington Park stations.

The Washington Park loop was closed for zoo expansion in 2013. Subsequent landslides and damages occurred on and near the tracks which disabled the use of the Rose Garden Loop in 2013. The Washington Park and Zoo Railway was designated a National Register Historical District in 2020. A plan to replace the trackage with a walking path was blocked due to landmark status. The zoo train still runs on a short route around the Oregon Zoo.

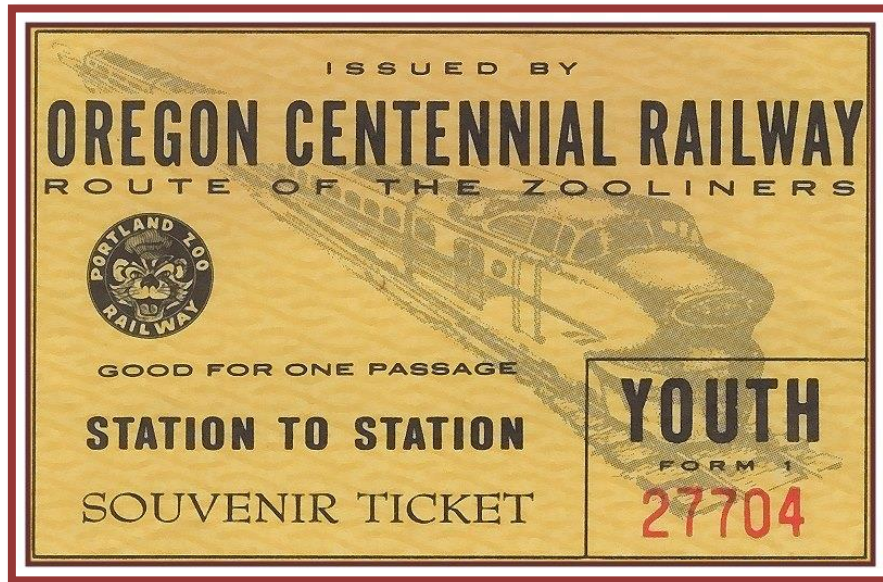
Advocacy for resurrecting the rail route to the Rose Garden has been growing for several years. According to its website, the non-profit group, Friends of Washington Park and Zoo Railway, is dedicated to restoring the Rose Garden Loop of the Washington Park and Zoo Railway.



For more information or to donate: <https://www.fwpzr.org/>



Steam engine No. 1 “Oregon” at Washington Park in 2010. Steve Morgan photo.



Your ticket to ride the Oregon Centennial Railway in 1959. Mark Moore collection.

Sources:

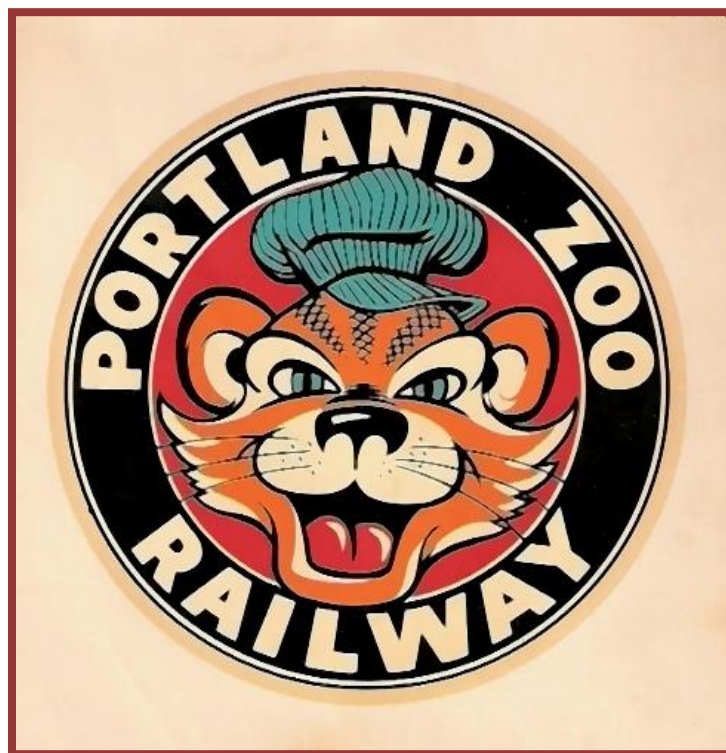
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