

Big Blackfoot Railroad

In **1886** the Montana Improvement Company formed and the Bonner Mill was built. The first timber was logged in and around Bonner. In **1898** Marcus Daly purchased the mill, but the name was not changed from the Big Blackfoot Milling Company until **1910**. Then it became the Anaconda Company.

As the company logging crews moved farther up river, they used river drives to get the logs to the mill. River fluctuations caused some interruptions in mill operations.

Some of the river drives were in Johnson Creek, Marco Flats, the area of River Bend, the property that later belonged to Tommy Clark, the Lockwood area and Heyer Creek across the river, East Twin Creek and the Flats across the river, Bear Creek, the lower end of Gold Creek, Sheep Flats, Sunflower Mountain, Daigle Eddy, the Flats by Red Rock, and Placid Lake and Seeley Lake.

In **1904** the Company purchased two 32-ton Class B shays from Lima Locomotive Company. They were delivered to Bonner and then disassembled and hauled by wagons and sleds to the Potomac area and reassembled for the **1904-1905** winter season. The logs were taken to MacNamara's Landing, dumped into the Blackfoot River, and driven to the mill at high water.

In **1911** the Milwaukee Railroad built a branch to Potomac and then hauled the logs to Bonner ending river drives until the mid-twenties.

An anecdote to the Potomac story: In the Potomac Valley area the Company had about 180 head of horses and about 600 men working in six different camps. Some locations are identifiable still.

After the Milwaukee started to haul logs to Bonner, Anaconda changed from 20' Russell cars to 40' cars. In **1911** the larger cars caused the Company to purchase larger shays and shays No. 1 and No. 2 were retired to work trains.

In **1912** Mack Ross, the brother of Kenneth Ross who was in charge of the whole Bonner operation, hired an extraordinary man. That man was Cassius Wells McEwen. McEwen started working for the Company at Trout Creek near Superior. After one year he was sent to Potomac to replace the supply man there.

There McEwen met Bill Kelly, the time keeper who had worked for the Company and its predecessor for many years. When McEwen started making changes, Bill Kelly told him he probably wouldn't last too long. Well, he lasted 44 years, and he looked out for both the Company and the men.

C. W. McEwen was responsible for recruiting Don McKenzie as a scaler. McKenzie went on to become "Bull of the Woods" or logging superintendent for 40 years. It was a unique situation. The two Macs ran the Company operations.

There were two main camps in the Potomac area. One was Headquarters, the Company ranch just east of Potomac. This was where all planned and supplies were handled and dispersed to the various smaller camps throughout the valley. (Glenn and Julie Hacker currently own this ranch. It is private property so permission is required to enter.)

The other main camp was McNamara's Landing, the place where the logs were decked and rolled into the river for driving to Bonner until **1911** when the Milwaukee built their bridge. It was also the locomotive shop and servicing center where rolling stock was serviced and repaired. (Dennis Sain saved as much of this site as possible while working there.)

In **1914** the railroad was built up Arkansas Creek where there were several camps. Part of the county road is now on an old railroad grade. The railroad was extended up Union Creek where logging occurred until **1916** when the Potomac area was abandoned and operations moved to Stark in the Nine Mile.

Bull of the Woods Don McKenzie stated years later that in the Potomac Valley they didn't want railroad grades steeper than 9 or 10%. McKenzie related a story about one winter on a 9% or greater grade. Workers chained logs cars to the track while the train was loaded. After the train was loaded, the chains were released but the locomotive couldn't hold it and began sliding down the mountainside like a sled. When it reached the valley floor, it derailed on a curve, scattering locomotive and cars with a resounding CRASH.

When the locals heard the crash, they rushed to the scene looking for injured men or bodies. They found the jammer operator sitting in a daze in the "slide ass." When he was asked about the rest of the crew he said, "Oh, they're up grade in the snow banks. They joined the birds."

That winter two more shays wrecked that way. They were the newer Class C shays so the older Class B shays were put back into service while a crew from the Lima Locomotive Company came out to repair the Class C shays and put them back into service.

In 1916, the ACM ended logging operations in the Blackfoot and moved the complete operation to the Nine Mile Valley where they logged until May, 1926. They then moved the whole operation, including 31 sixteen-man bunkhouses, back to the Blackfoot.

The Milwaukee had built another 14 miles of track to Sunset on the Nine Mile Prairie. Before the new headquarters could be set up, a bridge across the Big Blackfoot River needed to be built. The bridge was started in May, 1926 and finished in October, 1926 and the Greenough Camp was up and running. But while the bridge was being built, camps #5 and #6 were established to supply logs for the Bonner Mill and the last log drives down the Blackfoot River were run.

The Anaconda Company built about 22 miles of track in and around the Greenough area. Six miles were built up Elk Creek to the North Fork of Elk Creek where a camp was

built. However, the only visible traces of the railroad in Elk Creek are up the North Fork as Elk Creek was dredged for gold after the rail was pulled.

Also in **1926** ACM started using crawler tractors to skid logs. This was the beginning of the demise of horse logging.

But **1929** slowed that process quite a lot as the demand for wood products was brought almost to a stand still. According to C. Dick McEwen (C. W. McEwen's son), a lot of the approximately 600-man crew was laid off. He also stated that most of the loggers just moved out into the woods and built shacks. They did odd jobs and lived off the land.

In **1934** the Milwaukee built another 15 miles of track to Cottonwood Creek. From there the ACM built another eight miles to Woodworth where another headquarters was built. Over time there were 12 camps based out of Woodworth and railroad tracks were built to seven of these as the transition to trucks was beginning to happen.

Woodworth remained active until **1949** when the last live-in camp was established at camp #9 at the lower end of Salmon Lake and logs were hauled to Blanchard Landing on the Milwaukee line.

In the fifties there were three truck to rail landings. These were Rossignol's at the end of the track past Cottonwood Creek, Bear Creek just west of Sperry Grade, and Blanchard at Blanchard Creek. These were used until around **1959** and this was the end of rail hauled logs in the Blackfoot.

From **1905** to **1949** the Anaconda Company built 128 miles of railroad. The Company had as many as eight locomotives. Two were fueled with wood, five with coal, and one was fueled with oil. Only two locomotives are left. No. 7 is now on display at the Historical Museum at Fort Missoula and No. 5 is now some place in Arizona.

No. 5 is a Willamette and No. 5 is a Lima.

Logs were still hauled by rail elsewhere. The Thompson River Landing remained active for many years up to Champion ownership. There was also a railroad spur at Fish Creek where Bernard Helin had a camp. This was abandoned in the 1960s. There was also a Milwaukee landing for Harper Logging by the Ravena Substation.

“Still searching for more tidbits....” Dennis Sain, BMHC