What comes to mind when you hear a train whistle? Most picture a locomotive barreling down a track. Many remember Thomas the Tank Engine or the Polar Express. Some recall sitting at a crossing waiting for the final railcar to pass. Rarely do we give the trains and whistles in our lives more than a passing thought. However, past Clark County leaders believed the whistle of a train signaled a coming economic prosperity and fostered the American ideal of independence.

Initially, Clark County focused on the Columbia River as the main pipeline for the transportation of goods and people into and out of the area. In the 19th and 20th centuries, civic leaders moved to running rails through Clark County. The world was growing smaller and the potential for economic growth larger. Railroads eliminated some of the problems with water transportation, such as long routes and obstacles on the rivers. Cities and towns made great efforts to be on the railroad route. Businesses were eager to consolidate and incorporate in order to supply and tap vastly larger markets than those of their local towns and hinterlands. They saw railroads as the means to do so. People, goods, and services could travel farther, faster. From the earliest efforts to establish railways to the creation of the Spokane, Portland, and Seattle Railway, known as “The Northwest’s Own Railway,” railroads have played an essential role in shaping Clark County’s economy and identity. *All Aboard! Clark County Rides the Rails* explores key moments in the over 150-year history of railroads in Clark County and Southwest Washington.
In the mid-19th century, a transcontinental railway became a reality as the final spike was driven at Promontory Summit, Utah. At the same time, local leaders hoped to connect Clark County with the world by rail. However, early efforts were never more than ideas on paper, sometimes referred to as a paper railway.

The transcontinental railroad’s “Last Spike” was connected to wires that sent signals to cannons facing over the ocean in San Francisco and New York, which fired signaling completion of the line.

In 1868, conflicting interests ran high during the formation of the Puget Sound & Columbia River Railroad (PS&CR). The major problem: the location of a railway bridge over the Columbia River. Vancouver competed with Washougal and others. The Vancouver Register wrote, “Let the Railroad cross [at]...Washougal and Vancouver will henceforth be known as a first class sheep pasture—nothing more.”

Territorial governor Isaac Stevens headed a railroad survey, which included a path down the Columbia River into Vancouver.

Eventually, Ben Holladay was hired as the railway’s builder. The line’s leadership requested federal lands, solicited donations, and publicized the advantages of a railway from Vancouver. However, Holladay never started construction. The bridge—and the railroad—ended up nothing more than a fading dream on incorporation paper. A train never chugged down a single mile of track.

Ben Holladay, known as the “Stagecoach King.”
In 1904, the lack of an east-west railway and bridge frustrated Clark County’s economy. Well-established rail lines fed into Portland, Seattle, Tacoma, and Spokane, growing their economies substantially. Vancouver struggled to be relevant. Fortunately, railway magnate James J. Hill, “The Empire Builder,” provided a solution.

Hill found a railway on the Columbia’s north bank was feasible. The cost: $7.3 million. The Great Northern (GN) and Northern Pacific (NP), Hill’s other railways, would pay for construction and oversee the new Portland and Seattle Railway (P&S). Fearing obstruction from competition, Hill’s agents discreetly purchased land and and rights of way.

Edward H. Harriman dominated Oregon rail traffic with his two lines, the Union Pacific (UP), which ran along the South Bank of the Columbia River and connected Portland with Ogden, UT and the east coast, and Southern Pacific (SP), a line running south through the Willamette Valley and connecting with California. Hill’s railway threatened his domain. Harriman attempted to gain rights-of-way on the North Bank and halt construction.

In addition to battling Harriman, Hill’s project ran well over budget, surpassing $50,000,000 in August of 1908. GN and NP fought over construction costs. Regardless, neither Harriman nor the parent lines slowed progress. The railroad was soon completed, though, with continued squabbling between GN and NP. Not long before the line’s golden spike was driven, its name was changed. The Spokane, Portland, & Seattle Railway (SP&S) was born.
On March 11, 1908, the SP&S line’s “golden spike” was driven into a tie near Sheridan’s Point completing the route. After decades of hope, Clark County celebrated the new railway. Even before this jubilation, portions of the line were operating. SP&S locomotives now ran along the North Bank Road.

Vancouverites and city leaders came out in force to rejoice. The Columbian proclaimed, “To witness this epoch-making event…were present more than five hundred Vancouver people and their guests, who stood in a circle around the now-historic spot.” All were optimistic for the economic boom the line would bring; this optimism carrying from the moment Hill first unveiled his plans and declared “what that line wants…is a heavy traffic; the rates are of less consequence than the volume of business.” The SP&S’s parents disagreed.

The SP&S was built as a “bridge” line between Spokane and Portland taking advantage of the water level route through the Columbia River gorge as an alternative to the mountain pass routes of the Great Northern and Northern Pacific railroads. However the GN and NP preferred to keep traffic on their own routes for financial reasons.

They stifled the line. While freight and passenger service began promptly, obtaining its own traffic and equipment was difficult. It lugged along with GN and NP hand-me-downs; eventually being gruffly nicknamed the “Spit, Pop, and Sputter.” Nevertheless, the adolescent railway provided local jobs and hope for better economic days ahead.
In 1905, the subject of a railroad bridge over the Columbia once again reared its head. Fortunately, the momentum of Hill’s road guaranteed no more talk or speculation; a bridge would finally cross the lower Columbia. Furthermore, unlike the conflict around the PS&CR railway bridge in the 1860s, a debate over the location of the bridge was practically non-existent. Vancouver would host the crossing; actions taken 15 years earlier ensured that.

The first tangible effort to bridge the Columbia River at Vancouver took place in 1890. Led by the Portland & Puget Sound Railway, a joint UP and GN project, a pivot pier was constructed. Unfortunately, the financial panic of 1893 forced its abandonment, the lonely pier left standing in the river.

In 1905, SP&S capitalized on the 1890 failure, utilizing the pier for the new swing bridge. Construction began the next year. The bridge took form over the next two years. In November 1908, regular passenger service ran across the bridge for the first time. Upon completion, the bridge was touted as the longest in the world. With the new railroad and bridge, Vancouver trusted it would never end up as a sheep pasture of any class.
Once fully operational, Vancouver enjoyed being at the center of a large portion of the SP&S operations. The city housed many SP&S facilities. Moreover, freight heading east originated in Vancouver.

In addition to terminal facilities in Vancouver, the city also hosted a major locomotive facility and yard for the SP&S. This included the main shop, machine shop, roundhouse, turntable, paint shop, and stores department. Vancouverites saw their city as a significant stop on the line and demanded a depot larger than the standard one-story structure. However, the SP&S refused this request. Vancouver would not receive a large brick building similar to Union Station in Portland, but instead a unique depot from original designs. SP&S knew concessions were needed and expected as the new line grew--to a certain point. The depot represented this fact. Regardless, Vancouver felt it was finally garnering the respect and economic attention it had pushed for since the 1860s.
During WWI, the nation climbed from the depths of recession to achieve a nearly four-year economic boom. In Vancouver, wartime industries improved the economic picture. They also increased SP&S traffic and revenue.

The Standifer Steel Shipyards and the United States Military Spruce Production Division Cut-Up Plant, two large wartime operations in Vancouver, were key in increasing SP&S traffic and revenue. The traffic became so heavy that Vancouver’s five-track yard was expanded to eleven and a spur connecting to a shipyard, the Hill spur, was built in 1918. The SP&S also serviced traffic at the Spruce Mill. For the duration of the war, these operations fed the now growing and hungry SP&S.

Yet the SP&S continued to battle with its parent lines while economic troubles hampered operations. By 1921, the SP&S’s wartime gains had begun to slip away. The line fell to nearly 20 percent below previous year levels in car loadings amidst a decline in the local timber industry. By the late 1920s, the line had lost its wartime momentum. Operations at the shipyards and mill ceased as production in local mills declined. Unfortunately, the rail line remained more valuable absorbed into the operations of its parent lines. Subsequently, GN and NP scoffed at any large allocation of new equipment to the SP&S.

By 1932, the line was enduring nose-diving revenues and neglect as it hemorrhaged approximately $6,000 per day in net losses. The SP&S then implemented a ten percent reduction in pay for its workers while GN and NP leadership dissolved the SP&S executive department and took over the role of its president.

However, in the mid-1930s, some rays of hope shone through for the young line. In 1934, the SP&S was able to construct a massive grain elevator with a capacity of 2,000,000 bushels in Vancouver, which was expanded to 5,000,000 in 1939. Additionally, the line gained traffic, hauling gravel for the construction of Bonneville Dam. Better days lay ahead.
The Second World War was a booming period for railways. For the duration of the war, and years after, the SP&S line was restored and finally able to realize its potential, rising above the whims of its parent lines. This restoration led to the adoption of new locomotive technology.

Major operations at the grain elevator, Kaiser Shipyards, and ALCOA Aluminum Plant provided growing traffic for the line. The Eavan stop was the major point along the line during the war, feeding materials in and out of the Kaiser Shipyards. Activity on this section continued long after the war, eventually housing a Port of Vancouver industrial park. The increased wartime traffic compelled GN and NP to rehabilitate the North Bank Road, including reducing curvature, replacing trestles and rails, eliminating unnecessary bridges, and installing signals.

By the end of the war, the SP&S was stronger than ever. SP&S president E.B. Stanton credited locomotive dieselization with adding to the line’s strength. At the same time, the SP&S was one of the largest employers in Vancouver.

In the late 1940s and 1950s, the line saw the construction of a new diesel shop, a dispatchers’ building, and a company-run hotel for employees in Vancouver. At the same time, the SP&S purchased their first diesel locomotives, unique in that the diesels were purchased new, not hand-me-downs from the GN or NP as were most of the steam locomotives. By the end of 1956 all the steam locomotives were gone and the SP&S was all diesel powered.

In reflection of the lines growth, Stanton remarked, “The SP&S for many years was pretty much a stepchild in a growing country...the present traffic is here to stay.” Hill and Clark County’s vision for the line had finally come to pass. In the years to come, the lines employees did not just work for the SP&S they lived SP&S.
Today, the locomotive whistle has been replaced with the horn. When a horn or whistle is heard in the County, it signals our enduring connection with the railways of our past.

On March 3, 1970, the SP&S railway became part of the new combined Burlington Northern Railroad Company. However, the SP&S railway lives on in the fervent efforts of those who worked and lived SP&S and the SP&S Historical Society. For many years, the SP&S Railway Museum occupied the basement of the Clark County Historical Museum.

Clark County’s other railway, the Vancouver, Klickitat, and Yakima also lives on. In 1948, the line was extended to Chelatchie Prairie in North Clark County to service a plywood mill. When the mill closed, the road languished for several years and portions began to deteriorate. It was purchased by Clark County and operates from Rye Junction to Battle Ground as a freight railroad. Fortunately, a passionate group of volunteers assembled in 1998 to restore Clark County’s own railway. Since 2001, the road has operated the road beyond Battle Ground as the Battle Ground, Yacolt, and Chelatchie Prairie Railroad Company, a functioning historical tourist railroad.

Though the local railways have struggled, succeeded, and changed greatly for nearly one and a half centuries, they continue to play a prominent role in Clark County to this day.