

Wellington: A Town So Famous They Had To Change Its Name

For a few weeks in late winter of 1910 Wellington, Wash. was the most famous railroad town in North America due to the greatest avalanche disaster in US history that occurred in this Cascade Mountains village just west of Stevens Pass.

John F. Stevens, locating engineer for Great Northern Railway, had chosen the site as the western terminus of the elaborate switchback operation that got goods and passengers across the rugged Cascades and completed Empire Builder James J. Hill's vision for the shortest northern rail route across the country. Until GNRy most rail traffic to the Pacific Northwest consisted of goods coming west. Hill believed and later proved big money could be made shipping the west's vast timber and mineral resources, plus tea and silk from the Orient

At the time Stevens presented his route to Hill in 1892, he saw the switchbacks as a stop-gap measure to get goods and revenue flowing; Stevens also showed Hill his proposed route for a 2.6-mile tunnel to replace the switchbacks. Thus, for a period in the late 1800s Wellington was home to 800 tunnel workers, a power plant, hospital, bunk houses, dining hall, etc. (all shown in the photo at right) while still operating rail service via the switchbacks over the pass. A covered walkway connected the main housing area to Wellington School, part of Skykomish School District.

The tunnel successfully ended the cumbersome switchback route when it opened in 1900, but exhaust from east-bound steam engines pulling the 1.7% grade made it deadly causing at least one death and several near-misses. A 6.2-mile electrical system completed in 1909 solved the exhaust problem. It was powered from a dam on the Tumwater River west of Leavenworth, and Wellington settled in as a small railroad village where the three main activities were hostling electric engines on or off trains going east and west, clearing snow in winter, and building snow sheds over the tracks in summer.

Above right: Construction site at Wellington during building of the Cascade Tunnel, with the switch-back rails crossing above the west portal.

Right: Wellington before the slide, with steam engines being replaced by electrics for the pull east through the tunnel.



In late February of 1910, however, two westbound passenger trains were trapped for several days by snowfall east of the summit at Cascade Tunnel Station. Due to diminishing food supplies needed for rail workers, James H. O'Neil, superintendent of the Cascade Division, moved the trains through the tunnel to Wellington on the west side. The decision to move promptly proved prudent when within 24 hours a slide swept across the section of track where the trains had been, killing two and wiping out the "beanery" where passengers had been taking their meals.

At Wellington snow continued to build up for several days preventing the rotary snowplows from making significant headway at clearing the tracks. A few hardy souls hiked west in the snow and worked their way down to Scenic, the eastern most open rail connection from the west, but most of the passengers remained with the trains.

After days of heavy snowfall, the weather warmed and heavy rainfall followed causing the snow to absorb tons of water. On March 1, 1910 the hillside let loose of all this supersaturated snow and down it came across the tracks smashing the two trains in its path to splinters and twisted metal.



A total of 96 people were killed, 61 railroad employees and 35 passengers.

Days of digging were required to retrieve the bodies and identify them. The slide happened shortly after midnight, thus most of the dead were in sleeping attire and not carrying identification papers.





Ultimately the bodies were tagged, wrapped in Great Northern checkered blankets, placed on toboggans, and slid west along the tracks, then lowered by rope down toward Scenic. The final body was not found until the end of July, twenty-one weeks after the avalanche.

Six rail workers were never identified and are buried as "unknowns" at Mt. Pleasant Cemetery in Seattle. It was not uncommon in those days for transient laborers to sign on under names like Joe Smith to avoid something in their past.

It took two weeks for the tracks to be cleared, and 15 days before normal rail service was restored.



It is worth noting that when Stevens selected the Wellington site, there was no history or evidence of avalanches in the area. Logging and almost routine forest fires started by sparks from steam engine boilers themselves had denuded the standing trees above the tracks all along the line.

In October of 1910 GNRy changed the name of the town to Tye, ostensibly to avoid reminding travelers of what had happened there. Tye remained an active railroad town for nearly two decades after the disaster, back to the roles of adding or removing electric engines from every passing train, snow removal in winter, and snow shed building and maintenance in the warmer months.

When the New Cascade 7.8-mile tunnel was completed in 1929, all rail activity above Scenic ceased, and Tye quickly became an historical footnote and little else. Sixty years later, however, the "Wellington" site became the east end of the Iron Goat Trail, and now is visited by hikers and sightseers routinely in summer where they find interpretive information and an ADA accessible trail. Signs explain what one is seeing as she/he passes through wonderful natural beauty and a few defunct snow sheds along the old GNRy roadbed. It is also possible to walk up and see the western portal of the Cascade Tunnel, although entry into it is now considered very dangerous and has been blocked for some years.

One other sight at Wellington these days is a howitzer, aimed up and south to an area above Highway #2 on the opposite slope for the purpose, one assumes, of starting controlled avalanches. An oddly ironic reminder of why Wellington had to change its name.

Top right: The slide missed Bailets Hotel, store, and beer hall which continued to operate until the rails closed. Right: The Oriental Limited and an eastbound electric in front of a snowshed at Tye.



Sidney Dennis Herbert Jones was the only resident of Skykomish to perish in the Wellington Avalanche.

The photo is Sidney and his bride Hester Dors on their wedding day 29 May, 1906. He was born in Montgomeryshire Wales, and she in Ontario, Canada to English parents who hailed from the mining areas near Wells, England. Jones had fought in the Boer War in South Africa before heading to the new world and the mining country of Ontario. When work there died out they came west seeking other opportunities.

SHS has a copy of a letter home where Sidney writes of having killed a deer so his family, which now included three small children, would at least have meat while he was looking to find work. Just three months before the slide he hired on with the railroad.

Her compensation package was \$250, considered generous or at least adequate at the time. It is doubtful families of loggers or other laborers who died on the job in that era got anything in most cases, as workmen's compensation laws were only beginning to enter political dialogue. Hester subsequently married William Timpe and their daughter Florence is the mother of SHS president Pat Henry Gallagher-Carlson

This is an expanded version of an article by Warren Carlson originally written for *The Index Wall*