Even before there was a railroad...

Skykomish Was Meant to be a Railroad Town

When James Jerome Hill, the man ultimately known as "The Empire Builder," was wheeling and dealing in St. Paul, Minnesota in the 1880's, he had no idea Skykomish Valley existed. He recognized there was enormous opportunity in establishing a railroad to the Pacific Northwest; not only were there vast quantities of standing timber and mineral resources, such a rail line would traverse thousands of square miles of potential agricultural land as well.

Earlier Great Northern attempts to find a route across the forbidding Cascade Mountains had been unsuccessful until a young locating engineer named John F. Stevens made Hill's dream a reality. Stevens' first accomplishment for Great Northern had been to locate the lowest and most efficient route through the Rocky Mountains at Lost Marias Pass in Montana. He accepted the challenge of the Cascades and starting in Wenatchee began looking for a route to Puget Sound.

The pass Stevens found, which would subsequently bear his name, was hardly ideal, but Hill needed a rail line completed to begin creating revenue, thus any workable routing was better than none. The original rail line over Stevens Pass required a series of eight switchbacks, sharp curves, steep grades up to four percent, and a crew of 3000 men working 12 hours a day for two years to complete. The final spike being driven January 6, 1893.
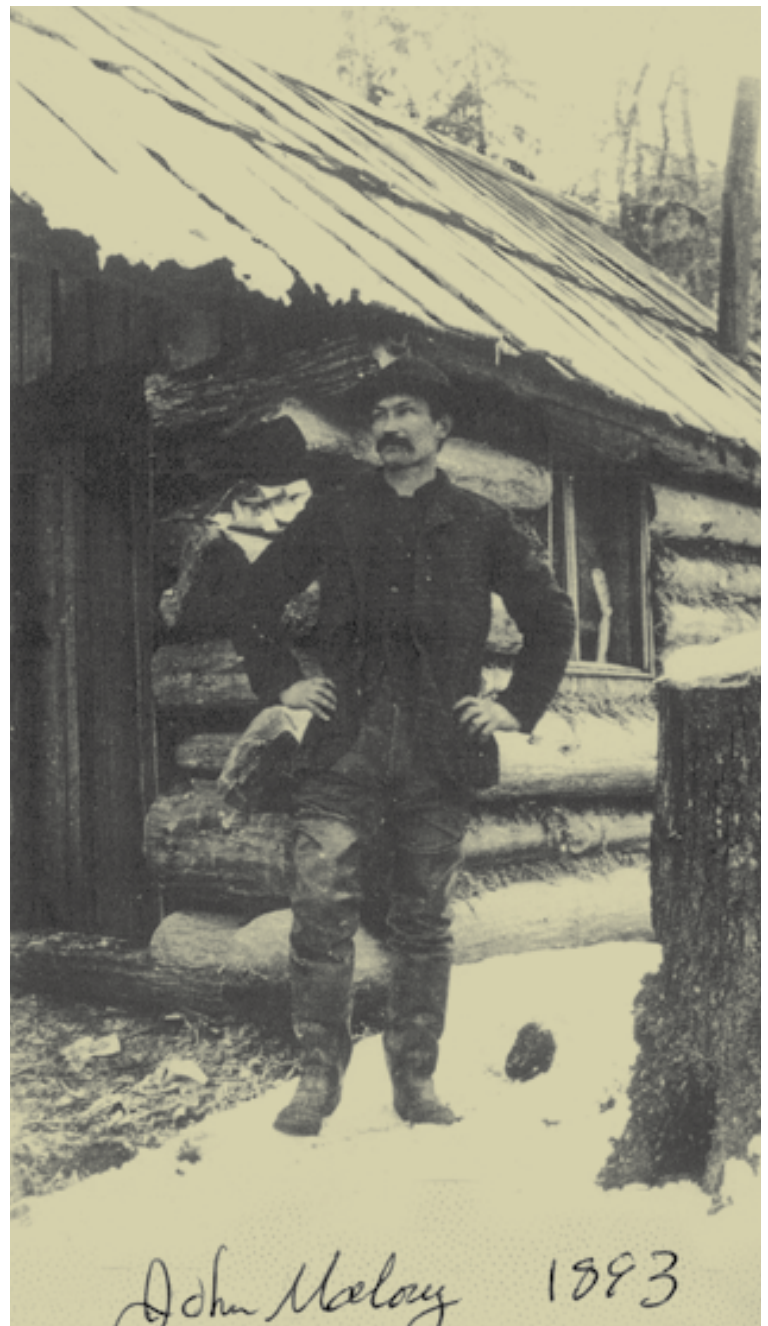
John Maloney was 33 years old at the time he met John F. Stevens. The only one of five boys in his family to go west, Maloney labored in mines, prospected in at least four states, and operated a successful copper claim in Utah for eight years. By 1889 he was prospecting in Alaska where he and his partner floated the Copper River to the sea in a moose-skin canoe, ironically passing over ground where famous copper mines were later developed. The story goes their supplies gave out a few months into the trip, and the last two months were spent surviving on game and fish. Arriving in Ayak too late in the year to head back inland, he booked passage on a steamer to Seattle.

Two days after arriving in Seattle Maloney found work for J. J. Donovan as an ax man on a railroad survey crew running a line between Marysville and Sedro Wooley. (Decades later Donovan, a principal in Bloedel-Donovan Lumber Co. would acquire Skykomish Lumber Co. from Maloney and his partners.)

When the rail survey ended Maloney went east and located a ranch at the head end of Lake Chelan, where he soon encountered Stevens in his quest for a route to Puget Sound. Maloney signed on as part of a survey crew.

Per Maloney's grandson Ralph Hildreth, a family story says John and engineer C. F. B. Haskell knew from their survey the flats where Skykomish stands now would be a division point for the railroad, and they made an agreement. Knowing the building of the railroad would require all manner of support systems they positioned themselves to provide such services. Each would stake a claim on one side of the river with the understanding he would cede his claim to the one on whose the side the rails ended up.

A strapping John Maloney in his mid-thirties alongside his cabin in 1893 in a few inches of snow. It rains 100 inches a year in the upper valley and snows in winter, but through summer and winter he had been clearing old growth Douglas fir along the flat stretch of river land where Skykomish now stands, waiting for the Great Northern Railway to reach his "town."

Top: Norwegian photographer Anders Beer Wilse took this photo of Skykomish on 12 June 1894 looking east from about where "The Mill" would be built in less than a decade. The original water tower can be seen center right along the tracks. Above: Early bridge in Sky about where today's bridge spans the river. The long building at back left is the GN coal chute. The first hotel roof line is center right above the bridge stanchion. The roof line at the right is the original Maloney's Store. The two buildings closest to the river on the left are believed to be Maloney's Shingle Mill.

There remains research to be done as to how these claims were "staked" in a state just two years old in 1891, and how Maloney financed clearing the old growth Douglas Fir that covered it, but when the railroad arrived in 1893, Maloney's claim was ready, and the flat stretch along the Skykomish River he and Haskell had chosen would be a division point on the Great Northern Railway for the next sixty years.

From the west rail bed could be built at 1% grade all the way from Puget Sound. Immediately east the grade becomes 2.2%. A single "Consolidation" steam engine of the era could pull a 25-car train up the 1%, but thereafter it would need to be reconfigured with helper engines to climb the steeper grade over the pass. Original railroad maps show four through tracks plus a house track, a coal track, and a turn-table track.

Those maps label the location Foss Creek; in February of '93 Great Northern changed the name to Skykomish, and in June Skykomish Post Office was established with John Maloney as postmaster.

Various sources suggest it was first called Maloney's Siding, but per Hildreth his grandfather was a humble man and preferred to name it after the river or the first people in the valley: the Skykomish. "Skaikh" is inland or upriver in Lushootseed, one of the Coast Salish family languages; and "mish" means people.

Great Northern Railway's final spike was driven eight miles east of town January 9, 1893, but it was months before regular train service began. GN Cascade Time Table 1 dated June 18, 1893 shows a daily passenger train departing Seattle at 8:00AM and arriving at Sky at 11:19 AM on its way east, and a west bound arriving at Sky at 1:28PM on the way to Seattle where it arrived at 5:47PM. There were also two scheduled freight trains a day.

Within the first year the original 1893 three stall roundhouse was expanded to five stalls, and the number of trains per day continued to increase.

Top: It is believed this sketch was made about 1900, and the middle photo essentially confirms its accuracy. It is unlikely "POST OFFICE" was written in giant letters along Maloney's Store or people danced on flat cars much, but Frank Wandschneider's first log hotel appears in both, as does the coal chute, water tower and telegraph poles. Bottom: About 1902 the hotel was doubled in size and a boomtown facade added that dwarfs the facades of the Confectionery and Saloon & Restaurant next door to the right.

A general store, a log hotel, and saloons soon appeared. According to early accounts, by the 1904 fire in addition to four saloons Sky offered a laundry, a restaurant, a cigar and gents' furnishings store, a barber and a baker. An impressive new school was built in 1902. By 1913 there were ten passenger trains a day stopping in Sky, and each with a mail car and delivering and picking up mail. Postcards were the "twitters" of the day often being delivered within hours of when they were posted and saying only a terse sentence or two.

The initial rail line had been built quickly and expediently in order to begin getting a return on investment. This also meant almost from the beginning there was constant upgrading and refining of the line requiring a steady supply of rail workers in addition to those in town who operated the rail yard, roundhouse, and fueling and maintenance facilities. One additional economic boost the location offered was its position as a decision point for trains in winter; they were passed or "held" in Sky in snowy weather, periodically depositing winter travelers in town for random amounts of time.

Top: Skykomish from the SW. The logging railroad in the foreground, the 1902 school before the gym and manual arts buildings were built. The depot is still south of the tracks. John Maloney's shingle mill and a foot bridge can be seen at the river. Middle: Eight steam lokies awaiting assignment at the roundhouse. Bottom: Estimated at around 1910, buildings are festooned and those not in baseball uniforms are n their Sunday best. In the middle of the street a man in a baseball uniform has a bat in his hand and appears to be facing a pitcher farther up the street.
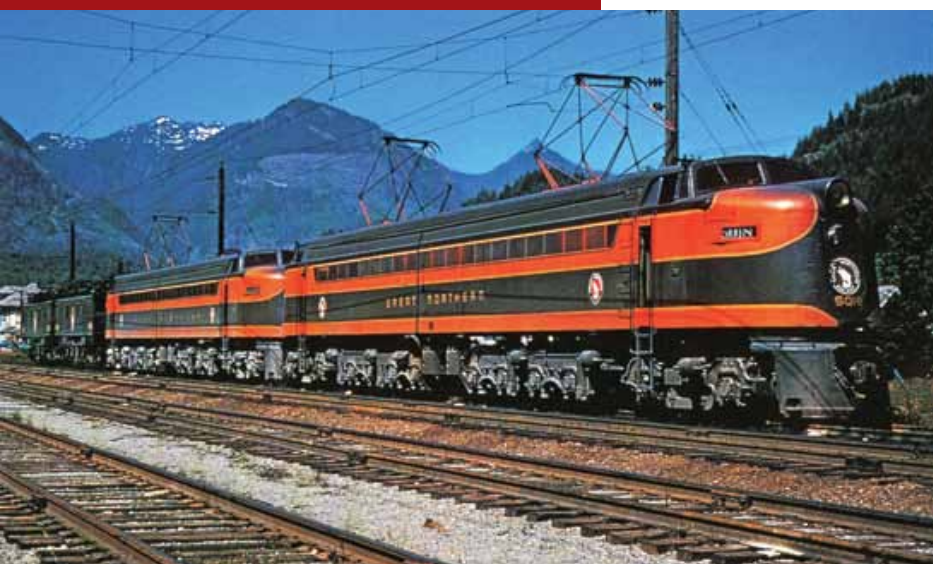
In the '20's, railroad influence in the life of Skykomish spiked again. In 1923 the round-house was expanded to 12 stalls. The railmen who transferred from Gold Bar with the expanded roundhouse were Masons, and within a year a hall was built with volunteer labor and donated materials and Masonic Lodge #259 was established.

The depot was moved north of the tracks about the time of the roundhouse expansion and later in the decade when GN was building the 8-mile tunnel from Berne on the east side to Scenic on the west this also changed the skyline of Sky.

Inherent in the decision to build the tunnel came the requirement to electrify the line, as exhaust fumes from steam engines were well known to be deadly in long tunnels. Skykomish was chosen as the western terminus for the electrics, and a four-story transformer building was erected in Sky. Technically, it was the Frequency Converter Building, but to locals and railroad employes alike it was the Sub-Station where Puget Sound Power and Light current was converted to 11,000 volts to run electric engines between Sky and Wenatchee, again insuring there would be a huge railroad workforce in town for the next thirty years.

In the 1950's technology changed all that. Diesel electric engines and a fan and blower system in the tunnel phased out the need for electrics to be put on or removed at Sky, and the railroad's role as a major employer in the town came to an end.

However, after all the rich history and legacy of the railroad seemed to be behind us, the railroad is bringing one last major change to Skykomish. Decades of legal but ill-considered practices involving fuel spills and the disposition of used petroleum products has meant the ground under the town would eventually be awash in oil and other toxic chemicals. The massive oil-spill clean-up that is largely being paid for by the railroad and going on in Sky today is once again changing the town forever. In addition to the clean-up itself Skykomish received a new waste-water treatment system thanks to the railroad and Washington State Department of Ecology.

Top: Building the Sub-Station in 1828. It was in this building AC 60 cycle current from the grid was converted to 25 cycle for driving the trains. Once they'd pulled the hill, generators within the engines themselves used the gravity inertia of the downhill run to generate power and put it back into the system. Middle: Railyard at Sky during the electrics era. Bottom: the giant Great Northern Electrics in the rail yard at Sky in the 1950's. The last of these behemoths came through Skykomish and the tunnel on July 31, 1956, ending an era.

Also from the beginning...

Skykomish Was Always a Major Lumber Town

Mills grew like mushrooms up and down the valley in the early days and Skykomish was no exception. The valley was covered in virgin timber, and the demand for ties, beams, and trestles for railroad, logging, and mining operations, and lumber and shingles for the towns that grew along the tracks meant instant local markets for timber products.

About 1900 John Maloney, George Farr, Peter Larson, and A. L. Smith formed Skykomish Lumber Co. to supply snowshed lumber and ties to Great Northern. Maloney also operated a shingle mill in town, and at one point there was a second shingle mill as well..

Top: The valley which is so beautiful once again was a charred sidehill of stumps with a logging railroad running through it in 1905. The "wye" where it is today is clearly visible. The plume in the center is likely John Maloney's shingle mill. Middle: Horse and donkey logging. In the earliest days when big logs were along the river and close, "ground lead" logging worked just fine. The horse pulled the line out into the woods where it would be attached to a choker around a log, and the steam donkey yarded the logs to a landing. Bottom: A logger bevels the leading end of a choked log, prior to it being yarded to a landing. The bevel reduced the number of hang-ups on rocks, roots, and stumps the crew would be required to clear as the log ground its way along.

3278A. BLOEDEL-DONOVAN, SKYKOMISH.   DARIUS KINSEY
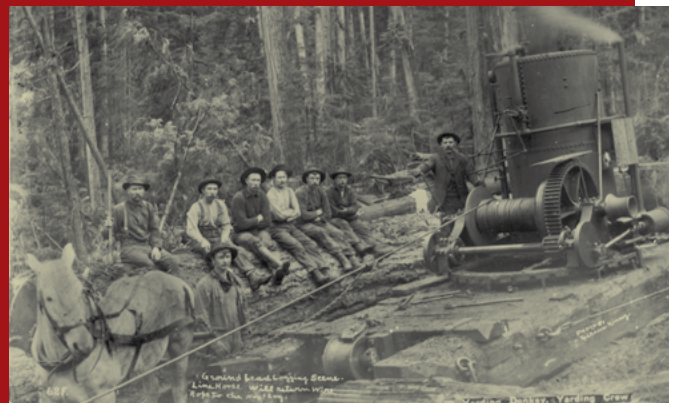
Part of James J. Hill's vision when he built his railroad was to tap the vast timber resources of the Pacific Northwest, and for half a century millions of board feet of lumber left Sky by rail going east and west, as the hills in all directions were logged off.

"The Mill" was acquired by Bloedel Donovan Mill Company in 1917 as part of a bequest in Peter Larson's will, according to the book *Stevens Pass* by JoAnn Roe. As can be seen from the photo at the lower left, the mill was considerably closer to Sky along the tracks than Milltown seems today. Except for a nearly five year stretch during the Great Depression, the mill operated continuously until it was sold to Robinson Sawmills in the late 1940's and down-sized, and then closed completely in 1958.

Skykomish continued as a significant timber town for another dozen years with numerous contract logging operations hauling logs by road to Snohomish, Everett and Lake Washington, but these too have moved on. There is again some small logging as second growth timber matures, but new mechanized logging equipment makes it unlikely logging will ever again be a major employer in the area.

Top: Classic logging train photo of Bloedel & Donovan's then almost new Climax Engine No. 11(before it became "Old Number 11") on the bridge at the east end of Skykomish taken in the mid 1920's. The bridge was 1750 feet long and featured a concourse for foot and horse traffic under the rail bed. This bridge was used by all to walk to the ballpark and Beckler swimming hole. In the '30's a road bed was added for joint use by log trucks in addition to trains. Middle: "The Mill" at Milltown, looking east. In the early years the mill closed in winter when the logging sites were snowed in, but in the 1930's logs were cold-decked above the millpond so the mill could operate all winter. Bottom: Skykomish as seen from the Milltown mill. Lumber sales were inconsistent in the '30' and at one point there is said to have been more than a million and a half board feet of lumber stacked all over the mill yard looking for a buyer.

The early promise was never fulfilled, but...

In the Early Days Skykomish Was Also a Mining Area
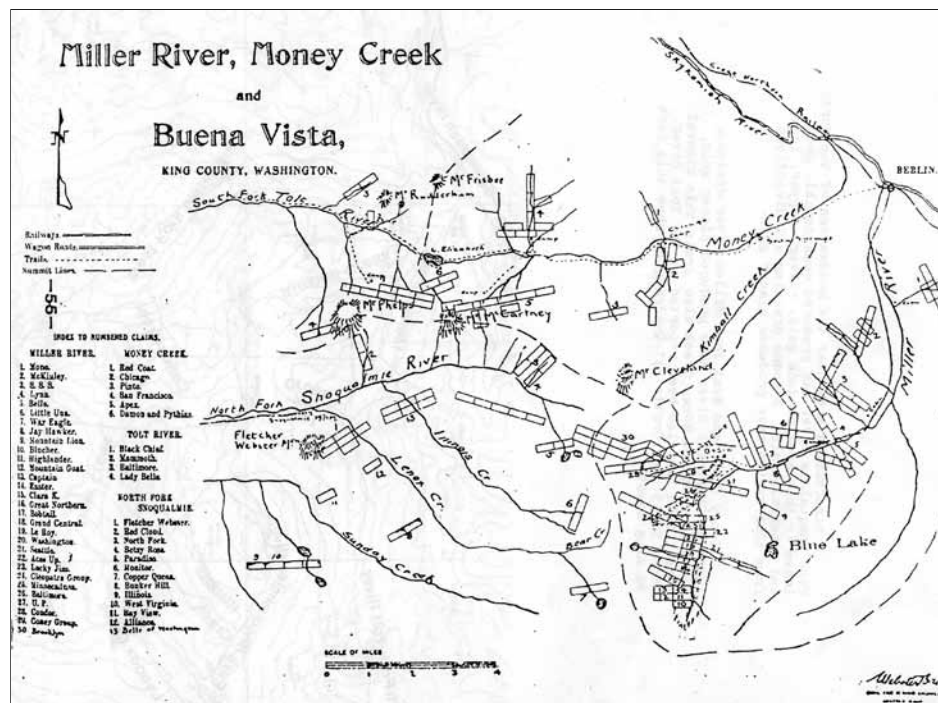
It is somewhat difficult to imagine these days just how important the promise of mineral riches was in developing the west in the early years and developing Skykomish Valley in particular. From the California Gold Rush on, in the back of the mind of many who came west was the idea that if one could just find that vein and stake that claim, a fortune could be made.

Many of the early "businessmen" in Sky were also principals in mining claims: John Maloney, Frank Wandschnieder (Skykomish Hotel), William Timpe (carpenter). While he was Great Northern Chief Engineer John F. Stevens was also a partner in the Apex mine above Berlin in addition to being a partner with John Maloney in a lumber mill at Sky.

Hugh McIntosh came to the area from Canada in the 1890's as a section foreman for Great Northern Railway. Over the next dozen years he filed/owned more than 40 mining claims. His name appears on mining stock certificates as superintendent of Metropolitan Mining Co. and as vice president of Superior Mining Co. both of Berlin, (renamed Miller River in 1917 as part of WWI anti-German sentiment). As a principal in numerous mines, Macintosh also needed a day job; there is a 1907 photo of him working for wages perhaps as a foreman in a logging crew.

Records are inconsistent about what happened in what years, but seem to agree $100,000 was spent by Alexander McCartney around 1900 on improvements, and that $80,000 in ore was shipped in that period from the Apex.

A popular tale tells of the principals of the Apex receiving a check for nearly the amount they owed creditors, but instead of paying up they issued a dividend to stockholders who were mostly back east. Within months they had sold enough additional stock to pay their debts and continue to operate for some time.

Like the Cleopatra and several others, the Apex was worked off and on until the early '50's, and is said to have considerable gold still in the ground, but the ore matrix is also embedded with arsenic, so until a non-polluting method of separation is devised, it is unlikely anyone will make as much from the Apex as the people who paid the dividend instead of creditors.
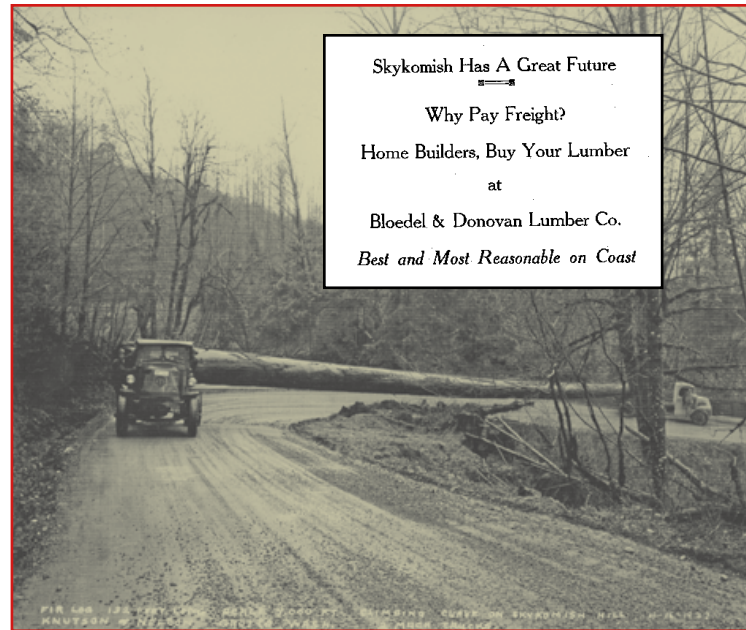
There were mining claims and developments up Foss River also, but only Trout Lake was seriously developed and by 1909 it ceased operation.
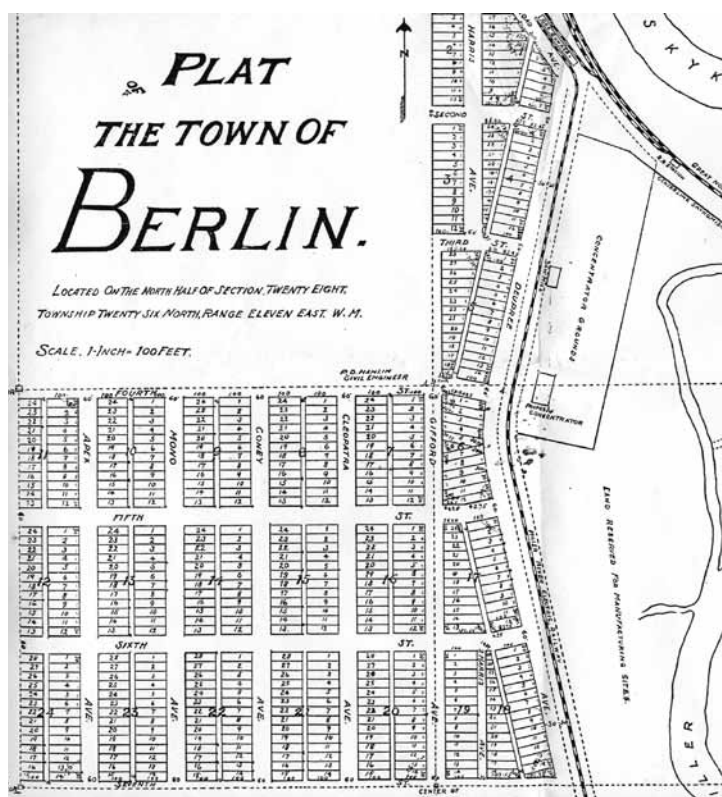
Top left: Sketch of mining claims as published by the Seattle P.I. in the book *Mining in the Pacific Northwest* in 1897 listing 36 claims along Miller River and Money Creek alone. Top right: Apex mine buildings about 1900 showing the tramline which ran down to Money Creek. Middle right: The Apex ore car as used by W.J. Priestley throughout the 1920's. The white horse pulled the car six miles to the base of the tram where it was loaded, and then the car was coasted back to Miller River. Priestley's daughter Helen is in the car (photo courtesy of Helen Priestley Brumbach). Lower right: Plat of Berlin in 1900, with numbered streets and the avenues named after mines. Land speculation was part of the mining boom, there are reports that Berlin's population was near 500 in 1900, but when Berlin was wiped out by fire in 1906, it was not quickly rebuilt the way Index or Sky were after their fires.

For the first half of the last century...

Milltown Was Anything but a Quiet Little Suburb

Skykomish Has A Great Future

Why Pay Freight?

Home Builders, Buy Your Lumber

at

Bloedel & Donovan Lumber Co.

Best and Most Reasonable on Coast

Beginning about 1900 the Skykomish Lumber Company Mill was a major producer of wood products, and the village that grew west of the mill became, reasonably enough, Milltown. In the early days nearly everyone who lived in Milltown worked at the mill, and some of the early houses were built by the mill to provide housing. The population of the village was said to be about 100. There was a grocery store with a gas pump out front and a tavern next door. In the 1930's there was also a shingle mill and a dairy, and Stevens Pass Scenic Highway ran through town. By 1940 the "new" highway bypassed Milltown on the other side of the river, and by end of the '50's all mill activities had ceased. Milltown began settling into the peaceful place it is today.

Above left: The millpond where logs were sorted and fed up the ramp to be sawed. Above right: A bridge stringer being hauled down "Mill Hill." Despite being Stevens Pass Scenic Highway, in winter it became a super sledding hill as well, with a bonfire at the bottom. Inset: Bloedel & Donovan Lumber Company advertisement in the 1922 Skykomish school yearbook *Herald of the Hills.*

In a 1917 photograph of one "mill" crew nearly half the workers are Japanese. It was not uncommon for a Japanese worker to save his money, go to Japan, acquire a wife, and return to United States. In the '30's several such families lived in Milltown. As a boy Don Gallagher's good pal was "Jack" Kawaguchi, shown above between Don and his sister Babs. In the lower photo Shizuko Kawaguchi on a Milltown boardwalk path in a kimono. The Japanese community was about as well integrated as any racially different group could be in 1930's America. At Skykomish school they were student body officers and star athletes. After the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor the Kawaguchi girls' kimonos were burned by the families so as not to imply divided loyalties. After being taken away to concentration camps in 1942 none of the Japanese-Americans returned to Sky to live, but several come to the annual Old Timers' Picnic these days.

A Shadow of its Former Presence...

The US Forest Service Maintains a Ranger Station

Since early in the last century, the USFS has been a player in Sky's history, siting and maintaining campgrounds and trails, providing forest fire protection, monitoring timber sales on National Forest lands, and coordinating CCC projects throughout the Great Depression. Many Sky boys spent summers clearing trails as members of Forest Service trail crews.
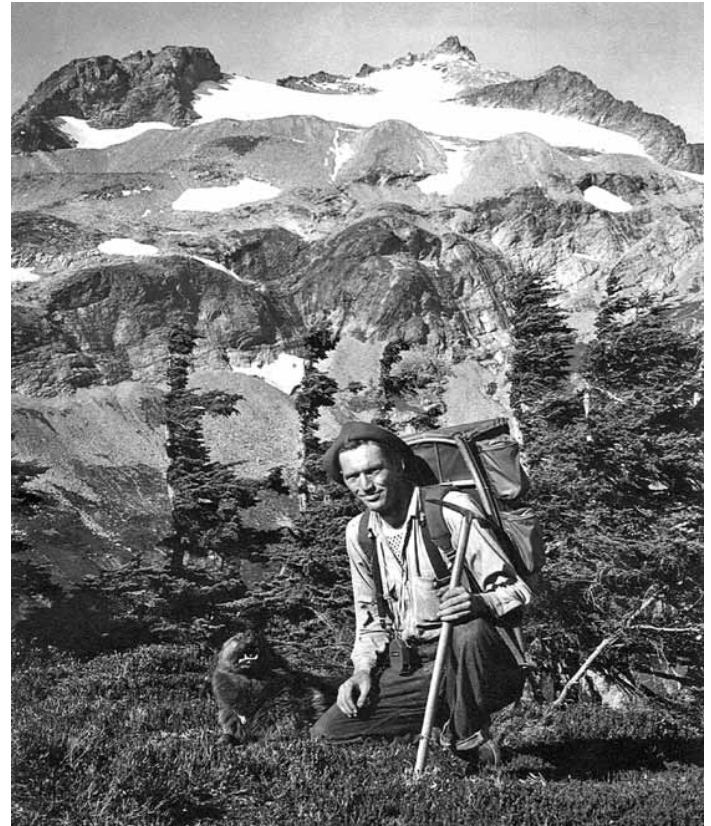
Top left: USFS campground at Money Creek Park in the 1920's. Top right: Long time USFS "Trail Man" Bob Norton and Mokie. Bob selected and designed portions of the Pacific Crest trail, "located" and named the Iron Goat Trail, and collected vast amounts of Sky Valley historical data and memorabilia. Left: Assistant Ranger Norm McCausland and District Ranger Dale Farley inspect the new Heybrook lookout tower in 1964. Like most fire lookouts, Heybrook went out of service in the 1970's replaced by air surveillance and satellite imaging. Heybrook became available for hikers to rent for overnight stays. Above: The original Beckler Peak lookout was a crude tower atop three standing trees In the 1930's a Civilian Conservation Corps project built a proper tower around the trees and added a log cabin.

The Oil Cleanup Going on Right Now is Major "History"

As early as 1912 there were reports of oil spilling in and around the roundhouse and other areas of the railyard, but not much was made of it. Decades of legal but ill-advised fueling and disposal practices resulted in massive amounts of oil collecting under Skykomish and leeching into the river. By the 1990's the toxic hazards of oil, PCP's, and other chemicals were well understood, and a modest buzz began as to what should or could be done about it.

At the school the video class was looking for a project and chose to document the oil under the town. The final result, a short video called *An Oily Sky*, was completed in 2000. The film won the President's Environmental Award and the students who made it were invited to the White House to receive the Award from President George W. Bush personally. The video focused considerable attention on the oil beneath the town and is recognized as a catalytic agent in what has followed.

After years of meetings and discussions, in 2005 agreements were reached between Washington State Department of Ecology, Burlington Northern Sante Fe Railway, and the town as to how the cleanup would proceed. The "five year" cleanup project began in 2006, and not much in town has been "normal" in Skykomish since. It remains to be determined if the final area to be cleaned under, Skykomish School will be finished in 2012 or 2013.

Top: Skykomish School video class receiving the President's Environmental Award from President George W. Bush for the film *An Oily Sky*. The film was funded by a grant secured by Skykomish Historical Society. Middle four pix: Throughout the cleanup period, disruption of normal activity in Sky has dominated. The Post Office and Historical Society Museum have been moved across the tracks to the old Forest Service Compound. The Whistling Post Saloon closed its doors for the first time in 104 years to be lifted, moved 50 yards west, cleaned under, put back, and finally reopened six months later. Cascadia Inn was closed for several months, while the Sky River Inn was demolished completely, with the promise of being rebuilt when the cleanup ends. Left: The 100+ year old Maloney's Store building on wheels headed for a resting place near the river where Sky River Inn formerly resided. After a year the store was returned and put on a new foundation, and may now house the Historical Society Museum.

June '06

July '06

August '06

August '06

September '06

September '06

November '06

October '07

Houses take a "Year Off"

This sequence of Michael Moore photos taken from the roof of Skykomish School over 16 months during an early stage of the cleanup clearly elaborates the general process.

Four homes and various outbuildings are picked up and moved up Railroad Ave to a resting place several blocks east along the railroad tracks where they sit empty for half a year.

The ground is prepared and the existing levee removed. A coffer dam is built in the river.

More than 31,000 gallons of oil is trapped and skimmed to be reprocessed for industrial use, and 70,000 cubic feet of contaminated dirt is removed to be cleaned. A new levee is built. New soil replaces the old.

Foundations, sewer hook-ups, sidewalks, parking pads, etc are reconstructed and the buildings are returned and made fit for re occupation. With new foundations and septic systems the houses are considered to have been improved by the process.

The other positive aspect of the cleanup is that Sky now has a wastewater treatment system that will allow growth. Prior septic system concerns had retarded development within the town.