McMinnville 100 Years Ago
Reflections On A Changing Way Of Life

MSCM 430 History Project
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Our project presents a historical view of transportation and its development in Yamhill County in the 1910s, and it especially focuses on McMinnville in 1912. McMinnville was incorporated as a town in 1876 and became a city in 1882. By that time, the Yamhill River provided an early artery for pioneer travel and commerce, and people still frequently rode horses (including stagecoaches) to travel between towns. Railways started to expand in Oregon in the late 1800s, when the nation was gripped in a railroad mania and the train was a wonder to behold by each town. Until the 1910s, steamboats and rails were two major public transportation modes, before many local residents could afford a car and traveled the roads.
Waterways

(Left) The Dayton band poses in front of a steam boat in Dayton, Ore. In 1912, getting photographed was a special honor, which is evidenced by the crowd gathered in the formal snap shot.

Because of rough roads, boats (both steam boats and human-powered styles) were a main mode of moving goods and people during 1912. The Yamhill River (a tributary of the Willamette River) was used most frequently, as it could weave through obstructions as far as Dayton, and logs could be passed down from 50 miles above the mouth of the river. Before steamboats entered the transportation scene, crews from the Klickitat tribes oared boats up and down the rivers, carrying loads of wheat or lumber to the necessary destinations. The first steamboat to reach Dayton was “The Hoosier” in 1851. The construction of the Lafayette locks was completed in 1900, which made it easier to navigate though the Yamhill rapids. Dayton and Lafayette were both major hubs of activity in the water transportation world, sending goods to locations such as Oregon City, McMinnville and Portland.

“So much rain falls, that it is difficult to keep the roads in repair…Most farmers from the interior who haul their produce to market, complain that the roads are in bad condition at the most important season of the year—just when their produce is ready for market.”  
– The Oregonian, 1865

“Bonita” at the Yamhill Locks
Because river transportation was so necessary (due to rough roads), the Yamhill Locks and Transportation company was formed in 1869, which was meant to spur the construction of locks along the Yamhill River, making it simpler to navigate rapids and obstacles in the water. During 1896-97, Congress appropriated $200,000 for constructions on the Yamhill River. This money was to be spent building 275-feet long locks with a dam that could raise the water level 16 feet, allowing year-round trips to McMinnville. The Lafayette Lock was completed in September of 1900. The were used until February of 1954. Then, the Army Corps of Engineers closed them because they were not being used enough to justify the cost of keeping them running. By 1959, the country sold the locks and dam to Yamhill county at the price of ten dollars.
Unlike many cities founded as new rails were built, McMinnville was the few cities that has been occupied for many years on the site of an old mill Newby built in 1853. At the time the nation was gripped in a railroad mania, McMinnville as a small town successfully had railroad lines built.

1856
Arrival of the transcontinental railroad

1878
The first steam lines from Dayton to Sheridan under the guidance of a well-know railroad promoter Joseph

1867
The Oregon Central Railroad Company had been incorporated to build a line toward Forest Grove and McMinnville.

1880
A rain station was first established in the city of McMinnville while the Western Oregon Railroad built a mainline going south.

1910
The state had about 2500 miles of tracks
1915
Southern Pacific Railway Co. provided Red Electric interurban trains between Portland and Lake Oswego with stops in Newberg, McMinnville and beyond

“The railroad decided to route its line to Corvallis through McMinnville as a result of a determined effort by McMinnville civic leaders and citizens, who offered both labor and materials in order to obtain the railroad service.”
- The News-Register

1929
Because of development of automobile, train passenger services were hurt and abandoned.

Freight House (above) was the original McMinnville station. Before the railroad came to town, this building was rumored to have been a “rooming house for ladies with questionable moral standards,” according to The News-Register.

An announcement/advertisement in 1909 on The News Reporter

A local Train Service schedule in 1912
Automobiles

Rise of automobile transportation started in late 1910s and occupied business of passenger service between towns. McMinnville also had its first year of paved streets in 1912.

(Bottom) Yamhill County’s first rural mail vehicle, a 1912 air-cooled Franklin.

(Above) Local banker Wortman Family bought the first automobile in McMinnville.

Conclusion

During a time when the economy was so fueled by production, transportation was vital for people in all different areas of life. During the span of the 1850s to the 1900s and on, Yamhill county went from relying on human-powered boats to steamboats. Roads improved and railroads were implemented. Eventually, horse tie up areas turned to parking spaces for automobiles. 1912 landed in the middle of all these transitions, making it a pivotal year in its decade.
References

- Photos of the Lafayette locks and railroads are courtesy of the Yamhill Historical Society and The Yamhill County Parks
- Photos of the Dayton Steamboats are courtesy of the Dayton City Hall
- Rydell, Ruth, Tributaries of the Willamette. The Oregonian. October 26, 1930.
- K.m. MacDuffee, Navigation of the Upper Willamette River, 6,8.