



Mountain Loop Conservancy Fact Sheet:

The Everett & Monte Cristo Railroad: Hartford Eastern Railway

History of the Everett and Monte Cristo Railroad

When prospector Joseph Pearsall discovered a “broad, glittering streak” in 1889 in southeastern Snohomish County near Index, the rush was on. He and his associate, Fred Wilmans, christened the area ‘Monte Cristo’ and began development of a mining camp. The site was located in a deep canyon surrounded by 7,000 foot (2,134 m) high mountains. Access was difficult. Silver and gold were present in the rich ore deposits but they had to be transported to a smelter for processing.



Westbound train crossing the Stillaguamish River.
Photo courtesy of Granite Falls Historical Museum.

The transcontinental Great Northern Railway was expanding towards Puget Sound in the late 1880s. Charles Colby and Colgate Hoyt, of the Northern Pacific Railroad, traveled to Anacortes speculating that that was where the line would end. They tried to quietly buy up land but word got out and prices soared to as much as \$5,000 per acre. Henry Hewitt owned land near Port Gardner and suggested it might make a good spot for the terminus. He pointed out that the deep bay at the site would be easily accessible to large ships. They again proceeded to buy up land in the area. They named the area ‘Everett’ after Colby’s young son.

Meanwhile, a group of local men consolidated their interests in the Monte Cristo mines and they became known as the Wilmans-Bend group. They approached the Colby-Hoyt syndicate about building a rail line up to Monte Cristo. Hoyt convinced his friend John D. Rockefeller

to provide the funds necessary to build the railroad, smelter, and concentrator. The contract was signed on February 3, 1892. The Everett and Monte Cristo Railway Company was incorporated on March 11, 1892.

H. C. Henry, of Seattle, began construction in April 1892 financed by Rockefeller interests. They consulted with Charles Colby and F. N. Finney of Milwaukee. Barlow and a team of 30 surveyors planned the route. A team of 75 men started working on a wagon road alongside the tracks. Barlow planned a long, winding route around the Robe Canyon after local settlers warned him about the Stillaguamish River. They said that it might appear to be a tranquil stream now, but that it would become a raging torrent later in the season. The syndicate, however, wanted the shortest route and instructed the surveyors to design the railway to go through the canyon. Six tunnels were bored through the canyon.

In November of that year, a warm Chinook wind brought in a fierce rainstorm. The snowpack accumulation rapidly melted and construction along the river washed away. Nevertheless, the executives supporting the operation believed it was a “freak 100-year storm” and ordered repairs and regrading. A large Leslie-pattern rotary snowplow helped keep the tracks clear. The plow worked well, but the snowfall-covered tracks had to be probed with long steel rods in order to remove large rocks and branches that would damage its blades.

On August 14, 1893, the tracks reached Monte Cristo. The route began in Everett, went southeast to Snohomish, north to Hartford (north of Lake Stevens), then northeast to Monte Cristo. By September, passengers could travel from Everett to Monte Cristo for a round-trip fare of \$2.50. Excursions during winter months were limited, but by the summer of 1893, the route became popular with tourists, businessmen, and politicians.

Weather and geological conditions continued to affect the route. Heavy rain and snowfall caused flooding. Landslides in areas of unstable soil blocked the tracks. Debris clogged the tunnels. In 1900, the Northern Pacific bought the line. They rebuilt and reinforced the route to Monte Cristo. The hard winter of 1902 did not cause nearly as much damage. ASARCO bought the Everett



Rock slide in Robe Canyon. Photo courtesy of Granite Falls Historical Museum.

smelter and Monte Cristo mines in September of 1903 and shut down the mines almost immediately. The train did not transport ore from Monte Cristo again until May 31, 1907.

Hartford Eastern Railway Company

Logging was another important business in the area. There had been a sawmill at Silverton since 1895. There were about twelve mills in the Granite Falls area. On May 11, 1915, the Rucker brothers signed a 10-year lease with the Northern Pacific to use the Monte Cristo branch for their logging operations. They renamed it the 'Hartford Eastern Railway Company'.



Hartford Eastern gas cars at Silverton. The car on the left is towing a utility trailer; the one on the right has a small snow plow attached to the front. Photo courtesy of Granite Falls Historical Museum.

Passengers were carried in regular gas cars that had been modified with metal-flanged tires to run on tracks. The cars were painted white and they had removable tops. Three cars were used on the line. The big, comfortable seats carried around 20 passengers. The largest car could carry 30 passengers and 2 tons of baggage.

There was another hard winter with heavy snowfall in 1916 and keeping the tracks open became impossible. The problems continued into the summer and fall when rockslides blocked tunnel #3 in August and October. Mining companies and miners in the area made formal complaints about keeping the line open to the Washington State Public Service Commission. They wanted an expensive trail constructed over the top of the tunnels. The Hartford Eastern Railway Company

said that it had used "every reasonable means" to keep the track open. The commission agreed with them. The commission ordered them to notify them whenever the track was impassable and to keep a register book at all of the stations.

Adverse weather conditions and increasing usage of automobiles in the area affected the Rucker's business. Heavy rains, flooding, and large slides blocked the tracks frequently. In 1919, a dirt road was constructed that went around the Robe Canyon to the base of Mount Pilchuck. It was a popular automobile route for tourists. The Ruckers decided to start building Camp Glacier (later known as Big Four Inn) to offset some of their losses.

The 10-year lease the Ruckers had on the railway ended in 1925 and they intended to extend it. However, the Northern Pacific wanted to rid itself of the unprofitable line and gave them only one option. They were told they could buy it all or forget about the whole thing. Since they had several logging contracts along the Stillaguamish River and the Big Four Inn business, they felt they had no choice. They ran the line for 3 ½ more years but by 1928, they were running a deficit of nearly \$140,000. After the stock market crash of 1929, logging business plummeted. The Rucker brothers ended up selling a rebuilt mill in Lake Stevens, the Hartford Eastern Railway, Big Four Inn, and 4,500 acres of timberland to the Puget Sound Pulp and Timber Company for \$575,000. The new owners used a 40-passenger gas coach on the tracks for a twice-daily summer route to Big Four Inn and Monte Cristo. However, by 1932, few tourists ventured out to Monte Cristo.

The economy and weather conditions continued to take their toll on the Monte Cristo Railway. The Forest Service had begun constructing a road through their property as early as 1922 after continual track closures. Due to the economy and other factors, the construction progressed at a sluggish pace. After intense pressure in 1932 from politicians, organizations, and residents, the railroad abandoned its right-of-way and turned it over to Snohomish County. A road connecting Granite Falls to Darrington – the Mountain Loop Highway – would be created. Workers began removing the rails in 1936. The work was completed in December of 1941.

Interesting Fact: In 1920, the Rucker's lumber mill in Lake Stevens burned to the ground in ½ hour. A locomotive on the trestle over Lake Stevens at the time of the fire, rolled into the lake. It is still there.

Sources:

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