

Ribbons of Steel in the Wilderness: The Rail War for the Slocan's Wealth

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Because the Slocan district held so many different varieties and grades of ores, smelting them was a difficult process. As a result, many of these ores had to be transported to smelters at Trail, or even further afield in Washington state. By 1892, over 750 claims had been staked in the area, and an economical means of transporting these ores to the distant smelters, as well as bringing men and supplies in, became a pressing concern.

With the prize of the richest silver-mining district in Canada hanging in the balance, Sandon became the focus of an all-out race between two of the largest railroad companies on the continent: the Canadian Pacific Railway and the American-owned Great Northern Railway. By 1892, the CPR had leased the rights to the Nakusp & Slocan (N&S) Railway, while the Great Northern was acting under a charter it had received for its subsidiary, the Kaslo & Slocan (K&S) Railway.

The CPR's original plan was to connect its main line at Revelstoke with the N&S line, which was to extend only as far as Three Forks. In this way, the CPR hoped to avoid building a line up the steep and treacherous grade to Sandon, by making the mine owners transport their ore downhill to Three Forks. By the autumn of 1894, the N&S line had reached Three Forks, but meanwhile the GNR had not been idle. Working west from Kaslo along the Valley of the Ghosts, the GNR had been busy pushing through the K&S Railway as fast as it could.

The K&S line followed much the same route as the present-day highway, climbing steadily uphill as far as Fish Lake. At that point, it followed a level grade around Payne Mountain as the floor of Seaton Creek valley dropped rapidly below. At Payne Bluff, a dizzying 1,000 feet above the current highway, the K&S line turned south and continued on to Sandon. When the CPR realized it had been outmaneuvered by the GNR, it was forced to extend its line to

Sandon along what was, at that point, the steepest grade on any rail line anywhere in the world. By 1895 the K&S line had reached Sandon, with the CPR extension following in a matter of weeks. Later, the K&S added a spur line to service the mines around Cody.

In an attempt to keep costs down, the GNR had built the K&S line with second-hand three-foot narrow-gauge equipment imported from the southern United States. Because it was a narrow-gauge track, the line was able to navigate much sharper curves than the CPR's four-foot standard-gauge track. Crossing more than 30 trestle bridges between Kaslo and Sandon, the K&S line was an engineering feat that still provokes admiration from railroad buffs to this day.

