

Still riding the rails

Even in retirement, Bob Shanklin remains true to his career

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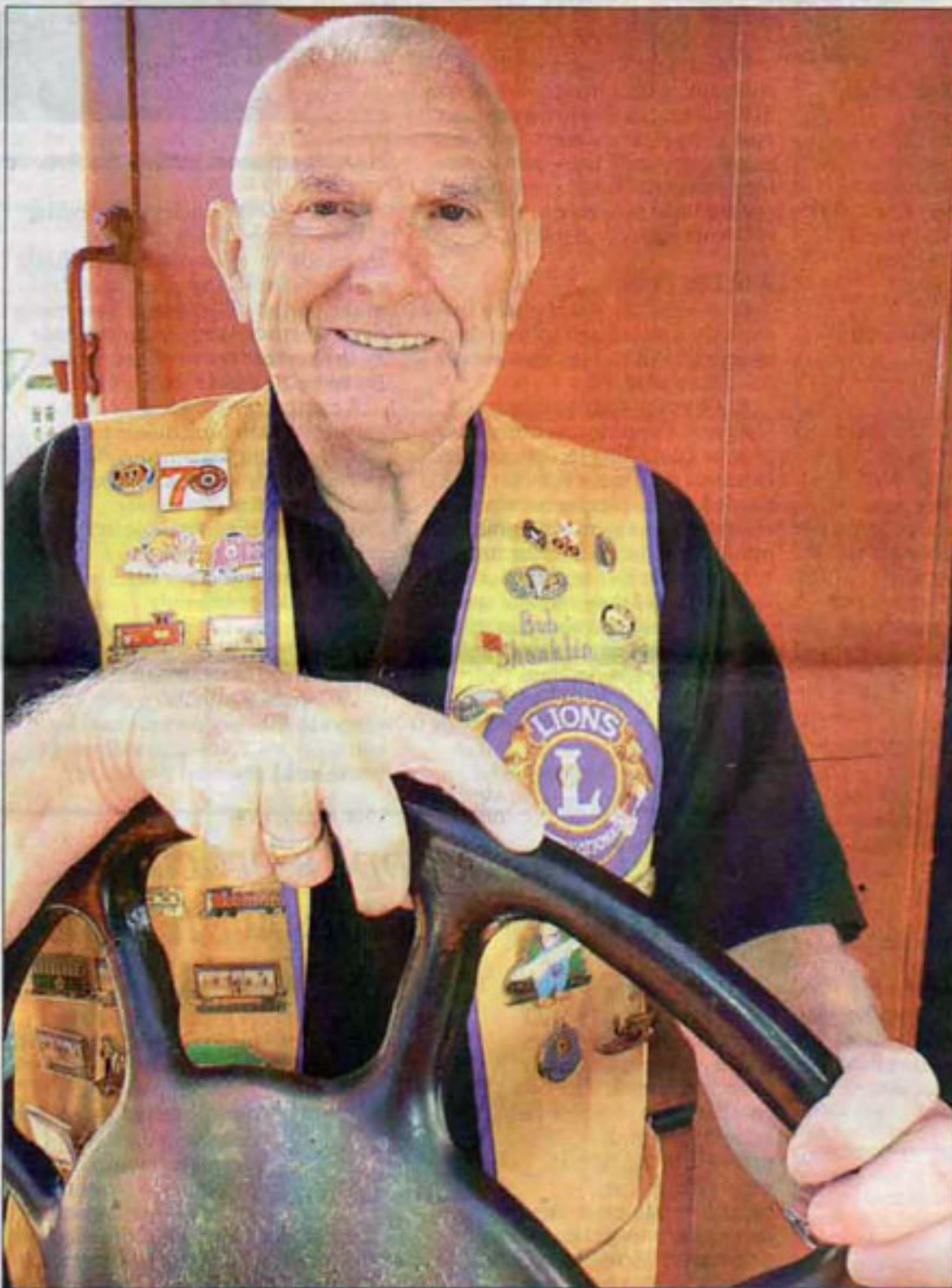
One way to experience the region's autumn colors is aboard the North Pend Oreille Valley Lions' tour train. Last year, more than 10,000 passengers made the 90-minute round trip between Ione and Metaline Falls.

The person most responsible for making sure everything - including the occasional train robbery - goes smoothly is Bob Shanklin, whose career in the railroad industry spanned more than four decades. Now officially retired, Shanklin still serves on a port commission, an economic development council, a tax board and an exhausting list of community and rail-related organizations. He traces his railroad roots back to his youth.

Shanklin: I was born and raised in Drummond, Mont., 50 miles east of Missoula. When I was around 12, the section foreman for the Milwaukee Railroad would have some of us kids help him load sheep into double-decker sheep cars. I was the shortest one, so it was my job to lead the billy goat through the cars, and the sheep would follow the billy goat. Otherwise, they were dumber than a stick. The old section foreman would pay us kids 25 cents, which was good money back in those days.

S-R: When did you decide railroading might be a career?

Shanklin: When I graduated from high school, I really planned on going to college. But I was the oldest of four boys, and there wasn't money to send me to school. So that



MIKE GUILFOIL Special to The Spokesman-Review

Lions Club train committee chairman Bob Shanklin worked more than 40 years in the industry.

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SHANKLIN

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summer I worked as section laborer, driving spikes. I got laid off in November, and the next day I went to work for the bridge and building department. Six months later I was set up as a bridge foreman. I was only 19 years old, making me the youngest b-and-b foreman on the Milwaukee system.

It just mushroomed from there. A number of years later I was promoted to head of all the b-and-b crews on the division. After the Milwaukee went bankrupt, I worked four years as superintendent of a short-line railroad over on the coast. When that little railroad folded up, I managed the Pend Oreille Valley Railroad for 11 years before retiring.

A few years after I retired, I ran for the port commission, which runs the railroad, and I'll be starting my third term as a port commissioner in January.

S-R: Where does the Pend Oreille Valley Railroad operate?

Shanklin: It starts in Newport and goes up to Metaline Falls, and from Newport east to Sandpoint. Mostly we move newsprint and lumber products. But in its heyday 100 years ago, the railroad ran two passenger trains a day from Metaline Falls

Five facts

- The North Pend Oreille Valley Lions Club and Pend Oreille Valley Railroad teamed up 30 years ago to offer tours. Early passengers rode on a single flat car surrounded by chicken wire.
- This year, the club will offer 34 excursions between July 30 and Oct. 23, with each train ride accommodating 380 passengers.
- The 10-mile route crosses the Pend Oreille River's Box Canyon and traverses two tunnels.
- While the train idles in Metaline Falls and the engine is repositioned for the return trip to lone, passengers occasionally are robbed by Ma Cutter and her gang, whose hideout is said to be in the town's Cutter Theatre.
- Trip reservations can be made at www.lionstrainrides.com.

into Spokane, plus freight trains. There was a cement plant at Metaline Falls, a zinc plant and big lumber mills. Now there's very little industry other than the paper mill. We also have our locomotive repair shop at Usk, where we refurbish and rebuild locomotives for various short lines and the Burlington Northern. One of these days that might be our salvation. We may not have any other industries other than our shop facility, the way things are going.

S-R: How did the Lions Club tour train come about?

Shanklin: When they formed the port district to buy the railroad from the Milwaukee in

1979, the manager here joined the Lions and suggested the club give some train rides. From there it kept growing. We leased a couple of coach cars from the Inland Empire Railway Historical Society in Spokane, and bought a third coach car. We also have three open cars. One of them was used to haul wood chips. Another was a double-deck car used to haul pigs and sheep. And the other was a box car that had been converted to an equipment operator's bunk car.

S-R: Who actually runs the train?

Shanklin: The railroad furnishes the engine and the train crew, and the Lions Club pays for the railroad's operating

costs. But most of the maintenance on the cars – upkeep, painting – is done by Lions volunteers.

S-R: How long have you been involved?

Shanklin: Since 1985, when I first came here. I've been chairman of the Lions Club train committee for about 20 years. It takes 30 people or so to pull off a weekend ride, and I'm head of the ground crew.

S-R: How many people ride the train during the season?

Shanklin: Last year was our best year. We handled 10,550 passengers over six weekends. The train has filled up since we started taking reservations online. We could probably use another car or two. It's been a great fundraiser for the north end of the county. The Lions Club has done a lot for the community up there.

S-R: Do you travel by train anymore?

Shanklin: Once in a while, we'll make a trip back east on Amtrak. And I've ridden little excursion trains all over the country. There isn't anything better than riding a train – the scenery and such, and not having to drive. And you're not up in the air, where you can't see anything.

S-R: Do you think train travel will ever regain its popularity in this country?

Shanklin: It just depends. We're behind the times. England, France, Germany and Japan all have trains that go 150 mph. Sure, they pile them up every once in a while, but surprisingly there are very few fatalities. In this country, Amtrak is subsidized by Uncle Sam and they've been cutting back. Now it's probably going to get worse.

S-R: Did any of your children follow you into railroad careers?

Shanklin: Nope, not a one. In this day and age, I wouldn't want to work for the major railroads either. It isn't the way it was when I started. Back then, you had three of four generations of families working for the Milwaukee. Now it's kind of dog eat dog. But I feel like I'll be a railroad person until my dying day.

S-R: Have your grandchildren had any railroading experiences?

Shanklin: All my grandkids got to ride up in the locomotive at one time or another. Kind of on the QT, you know. When I was manager, I could do most anything. ... You're not going to print all this, now are you?

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2011 Weekend Train Ride Schedule

Down River Days

- July 30
- 1PM & 3PM
- July 31
- 11AM & 1PM
- Labor Day Weekend*
- Sept 3
- 11AM, 1PM & 3PM
- Sept 4
- 11AM, 1PM & 3PM
- First Autumn Colors
- Oct 1
- 11AM, 1PM & 3PM
- Oct 2
- 11AM, 1PM & 3PM
- Second Autumn Colors
- Oct 8
- 11AM, 1PM & 3PM
- Oct 9
- 11AM, 1PM & 3PM
- Third Autumn Colors - A New World Through Glasses
- Oct 15
- 11AM, 1PM & 3PM
- Oct 16
- 11AM, 1PM & 3PM
- Great Pumpkin Rides
- Oct 22
- 11AM, 1PM & 3PM
- Oct 23
- 11AM, 1PM & 3PM

*All train rides originate in Ione, except the Labor Day Weekend trains. The Labor Day Weekend trains originate in Metaline Falls