

Taking the sand out of ‘Sand Point’

How Sandpoint’s namesake substance helped the region’s railroads

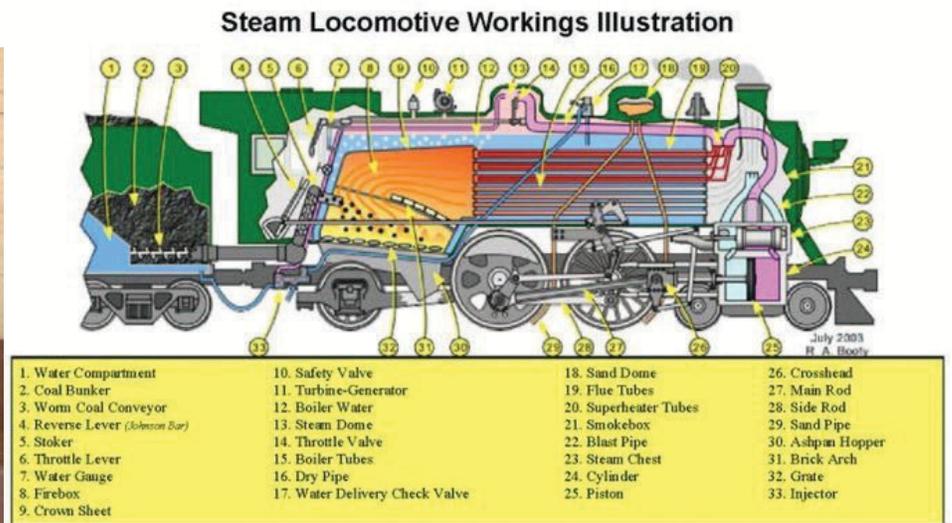
By Hannah Combs
and Will Valentine
Reader Contributors

“‘Sandpoint’ suggests and always will suggest to the outsider a dreary waste of blowing sand,” wrote George R. Barker, editor of the *Pend d’Oreille Review* newspaper, in 1913.

Today we may scoff at this ungenerous description of the natural beach from which Sandpoint takes its name. We might chuckle at the alternate names townspeople proposed to replace Sandpoint, including Corbin City — intended to draw railroad business from D.C. Corbin and the Spokane International — or Lucerne, after a beautiful lake in Switzerland but ultimately deemed too romantic a name to “tickle the fancy of the old timers.”

In the early 1880s, according to Mel Nesbitt, a child at the time, “the bathing beach was a mountain of glistening white sand with a few pine trees on its crest.” The sand was deposited by the currents sweeping around the point and down the river. The Kalispel and other Salish tribes regularly camped on the pristine beach; but, by the turn of the century, the iconic “sand point” was no longer the natural beauty of years past and neither was it yet the idyllic, manicured spot we know today.

When the Northern Pacific railway came through in 1882, the shore of Lake Pend Oreille swiftly turned into an industrial center. Docks popped up to service the steamboats hauling building supplies from the south end of the lake. Then lumber mills sprang up to produce railroad ties and other building materials. A town grew along



both sides of the NP track to a steep grade or even get started. house the railroad workers, their Think of trying to climb a steep families, visitors, lumbermen hill on a bicycle from a dead stop. and merchants. It’s tough but doable with enough

Barker’s biting criticism of exertion. But what if the bicycle the name Sandpoint continues: was hooked up to dozens of bike “[Sandpoint] is a misnomer and trailers loaded with brimming a relic of a bygone day when growlers? Impossible. the Northern Pacific went into The secret ingredient to start- the lake to procure sand for its ing a train and climbing a grade right-of-way and the town that is fine, dry sand. grew up along the track took the The profile of a steam en- name of the siding.” gine is topped by a medley of Though it’s unlikely unsta-figurative and literal “bells and ble sand was actually used for whistles,” as well as two distinct a right-of-way, by the time the domes. In front of the “steam NP rail line was complete, the dome” is the “sand dome.” bounty of fine, silky sand to When the engineer identified a the east side of the track was challenging patch of track — certainly singing its siren song such as a rail slick from rain, to the company. Why would wet leaves, dripping oil or a a powerful company like the steep grade — they would re- Northern Pacific be so enchant-lease sand from the dome. Fine, ed by mounds of mundane dry sand would run down nar- crushed stone? row piping and drop just in front

At the time, hauling tons of the drivers, sprinkling the of freight in a single trainload track and providing just enough was possible through the use of traction to help the train keep powerful steam engines. Though moving. Today’s diesel engines steam engines were an efficient still use sand for traction. method of transportation, they One story from railroad could sometimes be foiled by the history describes a locust infes- lack of friction between the steel tation on the Great Plains, when wheels (drivers) on steel rails. insects were so numerous they Despite their inherent power, the covered the tracks. When an driving wheels would lose ad-engine ran them over, the oils hesion with the rails and would from their bodies completely slip, flattening the rail. greased the rails. Without the

Sometimes a steam engine traction provided by the sand, simply couldn’t muscle its way up the trains would have been liter-

ally halted in their tracks.

On the rail lines that crossed through the Rocky Mountains and Cascades, steep grades were hard to avoid, making sand essential. Yet it was difficult to come by a reliable inland supply until the NP tapped the potential of the sandy shores of Lake Pend Oreille. The sand at Sandpoint’s beach was deemed perfectly suited to serve the Northern Pacific’s rail line. Though the fineness of Sandpoint’s sand was desirable, one characteristic was absolutely essential: The sand had to be bone dry to be effective. The Northern Pacific set about building a “sand spur,” or dead-end track, off their main line near the Sandpoint depot, down toward the beach.

Next to it, they built a “sand house.” The damp sand was stored in a fenced area next to a small building. Inside, sand was shoveled into a furnace and dried. The sand was then loaded into gondola cars and transported to a sand tower. An engine at a maintenance facility would sidle into a sanding spur, stopping under the sand tower while a hostler or fireman filled its sand dome.

With so much industrial activity happening on the shores of Lake Pend Oreille, it’s no wonder that the citizens of early

Left: A model of a sand house built by Mark Paulson. Right: A diagram of a steam engine, including its sand dome (18) and sand pipes (29). Photos courtesy Bonner Co. History Museum.

Sandpoint were eager to draw attention away with a more “distinctive” name. At some point, it seems that the Northern Pacific was at risk of over-extracting from the beach. Mel Nesbitt remembered, “Only congressional action on request of the local citizens’ petition presented in person by W.F. Whitaker [the first state senator from Bonner County] stopped the devastation.”

The “dreary waste of blowing sand” was eventually restored by the healing river currents. Over the years the area has been reimagined many times, becoming the recreational space we all know today. From Indigenous camping grounds to a sand pit to City Beach, the face and shape of our “sand point” has changed frequently. Through it all, despite decades of disagreement, the name Sandpoint has stuck around.

This article is brought to you by the Bonner County Historical Society and generously sponsored by Kendon Perry and Farm Bureau Insurance Associates. Research provided by Will Valentine and the Bonner County History Museum.