

# THE WHITE PINE ROUTE QUARTERLY

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<b>Inside this issue:</b>	<i>Overlooking the Obvious</i>	2	<i>Hiding a Bridge (In Plain Sight)</i>	4	<i>BENX 182 Gets a Facelift</i>	6
	<i>New Items at the Company Store</i>	2	<i>Camp 8 Photo</i>	4	<i>WI&amp;M Locomotive Flangers</i>	8

## FIGHTING SNOW ON THE WI&M

### Winter in North Idaho

means snow; there's no two ways about it. For many people in today's society, snow means skiing or some other form of recreation. At worst, it's a minor inconvenience for us. But for folks who have to make their living out of doors, snow just means more work. A lot more work.

For men employed by the Potlatch Lumber Co. to harvest and haul timber down from the mountains, most of their work was done by the time winter set in. Heavy snow in the mountains made logging virtually impossible, so the logging crews usually managed to stockpile enough logs during the summer and fall to keep the mills running until the following spring.

Of course, winter weather also impacted mill operations. At Potlatch's Elk River mill, the winter snowfall was so great that management had to shut down the entire mill for five to seven months each year, resulting in its final closure in 1936. Compared with Elk River's annual average of nearly 110 inches of snowfall, the Potlatch mill only had to deal with 45 inches per year; but don't tell the men that worked there how easy they had it. No question it was tough going for them as well.

There's little doubt, however, that the Potlatch employees who faced the greatest challenge from winter weather were those men running trains on the Washington, Idaho & Montana Ry. As a common carrier railroad, the WI&M had an obligation, both to its



*Looks like the plow has already made one pass along the tracks. Mac Benson snapped this photo of the "Potlatch Plow", sometime in the mid-sixties, on the head end of an eastbound at Deary.*

owner and to the public, to open the line as quickly as possible following a snow storm. Of course, the heaviest snow on the WI&M usually accumulated at the higher elevations near Deary and Bovill, but snow could still be a problem on the Potlatch to Palouse line from time to time. With traffic flowing east and west from Potlatch, the railroad had to keep both ends of its line clear all winter.

Fighting snow on any railroad is no easy task. A variety of specialized equipment must be available to force the snow off the tracks. Most mainline railroads had access to a rotary snowplow – basically a

*The non-profit WI&M Ry. History Preservation Group, Inc has been organized for railroad historians, enthusiasts, and modelers interested in gathering and sharing information on the Washington, Idaho & Montana Railway, from its origins in 1905 through it's operations of today.*