

The Tunnel Keepers of East Portal
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EAST PORTAL – Six times a day a train rumbles through cavernous St. Paul Tunnel, nearly two miles long, high in the mountains west of Saltese.

Carrying cars and timber, fuel and food, the trains link the Pacific Northwest with industrial points to the east. To keep these trains running, eight persons live at the East Portal substation near the tunnel, and from November to May, they are snowbound.

East Portal is three miles from Interstate 90, the nearest plowed road, and by the highway it is approximately seven miles to Saltese, the nearest town.

Those who live there go in and out on snowmobiles – their own. Before snow-cat days, they covered the three miles on snowshoes. Only rarely do they take the trains, which usually pass the isolated substation without stopping.

In front of the huge snowshed leading to the tunnel, George McGreevy shoveled snow from around the heated switch rails and dumped it toward the creek. Then he entered the shed, climbed into a booth, and called another station on a crank-up railroad telephone that looked like something out of an old movie.

“Next rain’s at Alberton now,” he said. When the train was due, it would be his job or that of his replacement to open the tunnel door by means of a winch. “When the wind’s right, it’s easy,” he said.

A chilling blast of air rushed out as he opened an aperture in the middle just large enough to let a man through. “This door at the east end is to stop the drafts. Otherwise too much ice would form inside the tunnel and the trains would hit it,” McGreevy said.

In 1907 and 1908 when it was being built, the tunnel was a whole rip-roaring town’s main reason for existence. The town, Taft, has long since vanished, but the monumental tunnel remains – although McGreevy said extensive repairs are now planned for it.

Just down the tracks the red brick substation building stood in 95 inches of snow. Icicles 15 feet long and more were hanging from its high eaves. Inside the warm switchboard room Bob Williams, chief substation operator, had coffee perking.

He explained the purpose of the substation – to produce direct current from alternating current in order to feed the railroad’s electric trolley. The substation’s six generators produce 3,400 volts.

Electric engines using the trolley are called “Joes,” Williams said, because they were brought from the Soviet Union during the era of Joseph Stalin.

Other Milwaukee Railroad substations at Primrose, Tarkio, and Drexel are operated from East Portal by remote control, he added.

Like the other two substation operators, Williams works on a schedule of 28 days on followed by four days off. The three men operate the switchboard around the clock. Mrs. Williams lives at Polson on the family fruit farm. “That’s where we’ll retire,” Williams said.

Those at East Portal through the winter are Williams, McGreevy, section laborer, and Mrs. McGreevy; Carl Aldrich, section laborer, and Mrs. Aldrich, Homer Walter, section foreman, Francis Pressey, Operator, and Hal Ruegamer, operator.

Families of Walton, Pressey, and Ruegamer, who have school-age children, live at Saltese.

Pauline (Polly) McGreevy is tall, but the snowy sides of the path leading to her house tower about her head. In her early twenties, she has a serene manner and a ready smile.

To her it seems no hardship to be snowbound with telephone or television and with mail delivery only once a week, unless someone happens to bring it earlier.

“The grocer checker wondered what was going on last fall when I bought \$300 worth of groceries at once,” she said. “It was our winter supply. We missed getting it all in before the snow came, though, and had to bring \$100 worth of meat in on a snow-cat.”

A 1967 graduate of St. Regis High School, Mrs. McGreevy attended commercial college in Great Falls where she met her husband, George. They have lived at East Portal for two and a half years. Her father, Homer Walton, also lives at the substation.

Instead of canisters, two full-size metal garbage cans hold flour and sugar in her kitchen. On the porch stand three barrels of coal. “Our houses are heated by coal, she explained. “My house uses two barrels a day; Dad’s uses five.”

Mountain lions were seen near the station last spring, but deer and elk are rarely seen. East Portal temperatures are frequently not as low as those of communities in the St. Regis Canyon but the snow is deeper.

Though Mrs. McGreevy doesn’t look like a bear hunter, she bagged one last hunting season. Their only game for the year. It went into the freezer. Her opinion of bear meat? “Oh, it’s pretty good,” she said.

Almost everyone at East Portal has a hobby to combat boredom and loneliness. George McGreevy paints landscapes in oils. Mrs. McGreevy uses embroidery paints and belongs to a mail order handcrafts club. Bob Williams has his ham radio gear.

“Then too, when you’re doing your own cooking,” Williams said, “that’s a hobby in itself.”