

James M. Fredrickson, Rest in Peace

Jim Fredrickson, master railroad photographer and historian passed away April 15, 2016, at age 89 in Tacoma, Washington. Jim's memorial service was held May 13, 2016 at 3:00 PM in the rotunda of the Tacoma Union Station, the building that he was so instrumental rallying support for it to be saved and become a Federal Court House.

Jim started working for the Northern Pacific Railway (NP) in 1943 and retired from its successor, the Burlington Northern Railroad in 1981. He educated the majority of fans of the NP with his significant photos taken from the early 1940s into the 21st century and his operational knowledge of railroading.

Jim wanted his substantial NP collection to go to the Northern Pacific Railway Historical Association (NPRHA) which has an Archive in St. Paul, Minnesota. However, Jim requested that his collection be kept on the west-end of the railroad in the Puget Sound region. This generated the initial motivation to form Pacific Northwest Railroad Archive (PNRA) as a place to preserve Jim's collection.

In 2005, a group of NPRHA members started working at Jim's home to catalog his collection. That initial work evolved into a group that met each Wednesday for a total of six years and cataloged 80% of the collection before it was moved to PNRA in 2012. That group continues to work each Wednesday at the Archive.

A summary of Jim's life was published in 2008 when he was honored at the annual NPRHA convention that was held in Tacoma that year and is in later pages of this document.



JIM FREDRICKSON, HISTORIAN AND PHOTOGRAPHER

Gary Tarbox

We have been blessed with many distinguished Association members who were Northern Pacific employees, pioneering photographers and railfans. Ron Nixon, Al Farrow, Warren McGee, Jim Fredrickson and others have captured the essence of the *Main Street of the Northwest*. One of these distinguished members will be honored this summer at our 2008 convention with its theme, *Jim Fredrickson Country*.

I first met Jim at the 1986 NPRHA Convention in Tacoma. Most striking was his breadth of knowledge of Northern Pacific operations. After the convention, I worked with Jim to produce a video based on his NP film footage. He gave comprehensive descriptions of important events that occurred during his railroad career. Since then, Jim and I have worked on a number of other NP presentations featuring photographic images from his collection.

Jim is a true historian, seeing the value in everyday things that disappeared from American life over the last half-century. As I began to appreciate the level of skill required to be a train dispatcher, it was obvious that Jim had been one of NP's best. His knowledge of people, events and artifacts is amazing. Often, when asked a question, Jim will go into his archive and quickly retrieve a letter or diagram that illuminates the context of his answer.

He and his wife Cereta live in Tacoma and have two sons, a daughter and four grandchildren. They all live in the Tacoma area, except for one son who lives in New York. For the last two years, Jim and Cereta have welcomed NPRHA members into their home every week to help organize and catalog his collection. Through these visits, we have developed a strong friendship.

BECOMING A PHOTOGRAPHER AND RAILFAN

Born in Tacoma, Washington, on December 19, 1926, Jim grew up during the depths of the Depression. His father, Martin, was a longshoreman and union leader. A prolonged dock strike in the early 1930s made those years especially tough for his family. With scarcely enough money for family necessities, Jim started earning money at an early age. He picked blackberries in vacant lots in his neighborhood and sold them door-to-door during the summer, but needed something to sell the rest of the year.

Selling magazines was the answer, so at age ten, he started selling the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Liberty*, and *Country Gentleman* door-to-door. Finding people who could afford to pay even the five-cent cost of magazines during the Depression took lots of walking and doorbell ringing. However, as an extra incentive to sellers, the company awarded bonus coupons for making sales, which could be redeemed for an array of prizes. With his coupons, Jim chose a small, nineteen cent camera and

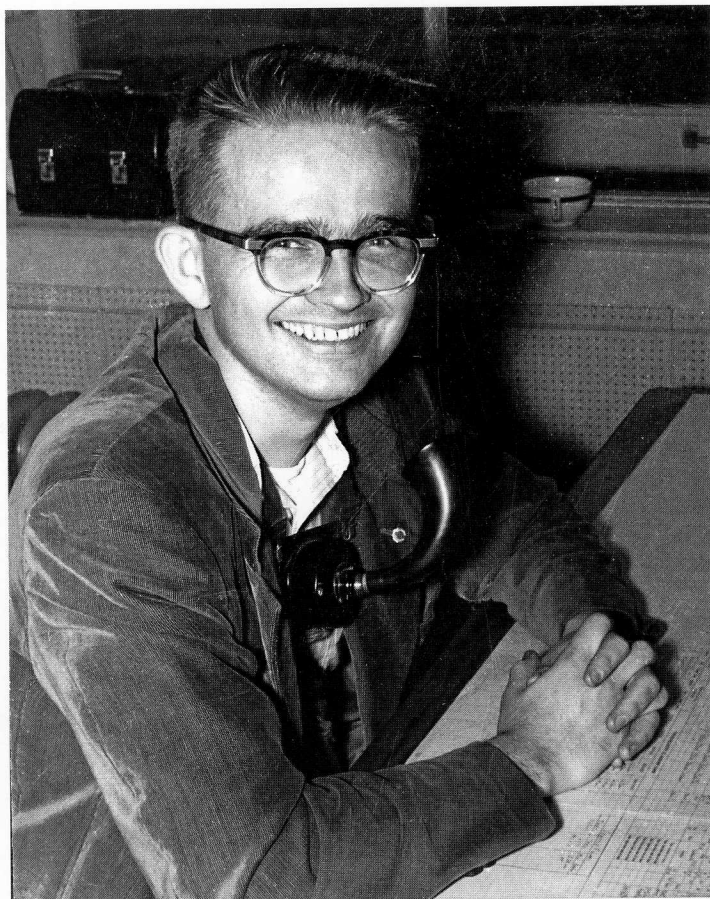


photo developing kit. This started him down the long path of serious photography and railfanning.

Jim soon graduated from selling magazines to delivering newspapers for the *Tacoma News Tribune*. With the extra money, he bought a better camera and railroad fever began creeping into his bloodstream. In the mid-1930s, the family began taking train trips to visit Jim's grandmother in Nebraska, normally taking Northern Pacific's *North Coast Limited* to Billings, Montana, where they transferred to a Chicago, Burlington and Quincy local for a less comfortable journey through the dust bowl to Cook, Nebraska, a small farming town fifty miles beyond Lincoln.

In the summer of 1940, Jim's mild case of train fever suddenly became an incurable disease—strangely enough as the result of going to Nebraska by automobile instead of train. The family spent a night at an auto court in Drummond, 40 miles east of Missoula. Jim was the first one awake on a beautiful, sunny summer morning, and set forth to explore Drummond. When he opened the door, he found Class Z-6 Challenger 5107 standing across the street. It was the most marvelous machine he had ever seen, and he was hooked.

Later, while passing through Jamestown, North Dakota, Jim saw a passenger train at the station and asked his father to stop so he could take a picture with his new camera. This photo of NP 2660, a Class A-3 Northern, included more than just the intended image of an engine. It showed the engineer oiling around and a clerk loading mail into the Railway Post Office car. Paired with the two-year-old locomotive was a massive tender with a curved tank that greatly impressed the thirteen-year-old railfan, since the NP locomotives around Tacoma had smaller, boxy tenders.

Opposite: Jim's first regular job as train dispatcher, seen here on August 25, 1952, was the third trick double track north job, handling the Seattle mainline and all of Tacoma's branchlines.

Above: Telegraph Operator Fredrickson mans the levers in the 15th Street Tower, 1944. The tower controlled movements on the Prairie Line, Point Defiance Line and Union Station.

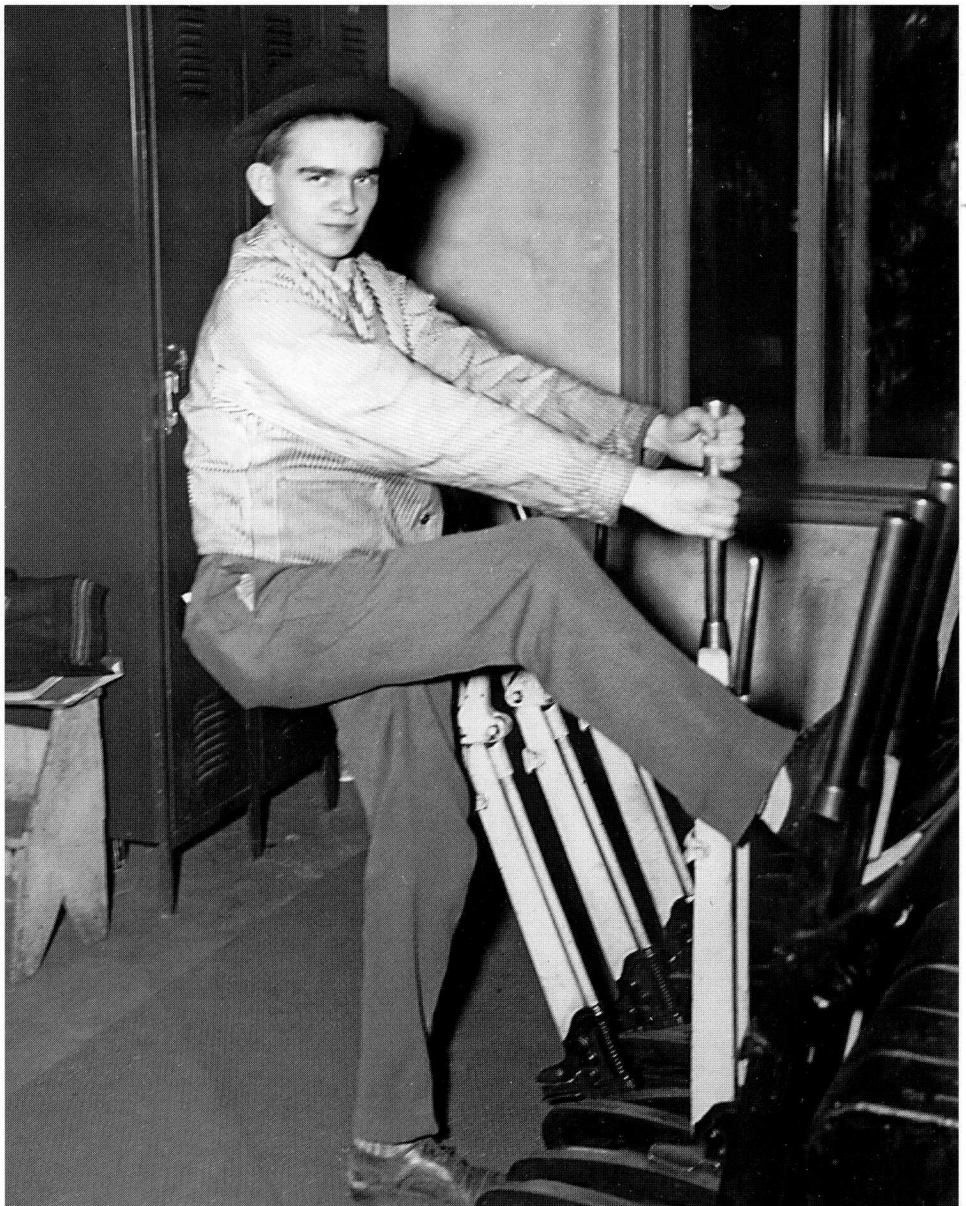
—all photos, J.M. Fredrickson collection

This started a quest to find NP's big steam power like the A-3s and Z-6s seen on his trips. After returning to Tacoma, Jim rode his bicycle 30 miles from Tacoma to Seattle in search of them. Roundhouse crews told him there were no such engines on the West End, and later learned they were too big to run through Stampede Tunnel in the Cascades, since the tunnel was built when locomotives were much smaller. The lack of the newer, larger locomotives on the Tacoma Division didn't dampen Jim's train fever, and he continued to visit Tacoma's Union Station with his camera.

In 1941, Jim started working in the circulation department at the *Tacoma News Tribune* as a "kick-chaser," delivering newspapers to customers who had been missed by their regular carrier. He also helped people at the office counter and learned to run the telephone switchboard to relieve regular operators. As a sophomore at Tacoma's Stadium High School in 1943, Jim was the photographer for the school newspaper, the *Stadium World*, and its yearbook, the *Tahoma*. After school, he divided his spare time between the *News Tribune* and his pursuit of trains at Union Station. About that time, Jim got simultaneous job offers from Dan Walton, the *News Tribune* sports editor, and Austin Ackley, Northern Pacific's chief dispatcher for the Tacoma Division, whose offices were located in Union Station. Each asked him to go to work as World War Two had created an immense shortage of civilian workers. Though it was a tough decision at the time, Jim chose the Northern Pacific, which he says he never regretted.

NORTHERN PACIFIC CAREER

Tacoma Division's dispatching office, located upstairs in Union Station, was a busy place in 1943. With the crucial role railroads played in the war effort, activity was at its peak. Overall supervisor of



this complex control center was Chief Dispatcher Austin W. Ackley, a big, burly bear of a man with incredible ability to deal with the frustrating problems of the overburdened railroad. One assistant chief dispatcher was responsible for coordinating passenger train movements, an extremely critical position with the heavy volume of troop trains. Another assistant chief dispatcher handled freight train operations. Six trick dispatchers worked each shift controlling Tacoma Division train movements, while stenographers and clerks handled the typing and report writing. An adjoining telegraph office transmitted and received Morse code messages and reports to and from stations across the Tacoma Division.

By the spring of 1943, Jim was spending

a great deal of time trackside at Union Station, and he recalls passenger train Conductor Ed Jensen or Engineer George Voerge uttering the fateful words, "You're always hanging around here, kid; you might as well go to work." They took the sixteen-year-old upstairs and introduced him to Chief Dispatcher Ackley.

Ackley was told that Jim was eager to become a railroader. The chief dispatcher was obviously not thrilled about hiring a green kid barely sixteen years old, but the desperate wartime shortage of workers overcame his misgivings. Most of the jobs under Ackley's supervision required years of training and practice, but the job of call boy was one a newcomer could learn fairly quickly. Ackley offered him the call boy

job, working out of the dispatcher's office. Call boys telephoned conductors, brakemen, engineers, and firemen to notify them 90 minutes in advance of the time they were to report for duty. Since not everyone had a telephone, call boys often had to notify the crews on foot or by bicycle.

Jim worked an eight-hour shift, sometimes two in a row, in addition to attending high school. His schoolwork suffered at times, and he occasionally fell asleep in class after a hard night's work. With the telegraph office next to the dispatcher's office, Jim spent all the time he could there learning the art of Morse code. Like other things in Jim's life, all those dots and dashes became a passion of his.

By November 1943, Jim mastered Morse code well enough to qualify as an extra telegrapher on weekends at various locations around Tacoma. His first assignment was at the Fifteenth Street Tower which controlled switches from the drawbridge line into

Tacoma Union Station, and the line from Moon Yard to the Prairie Line. At sixteen, he was probably the youngest telegrapher on the NP—or the nation. After graduating from high school, he became a full-time telegraph operator, working at most of the stations on the Tacoma Division.

In 1947, Jim met and married Cereta Curtis, an NP telegraph operator in Tacoma, who learned her trade at a telegraphy school in Spokane. The two of them, along with son Fred, moved to the New Stampede station during the winter of 1949. Jim was the third-trick operator there, and Cereta worked as a relief operator at various other stations on Stampede Pass.

Jim later became a train dispatcher at Union Station, then night chief dispatcher and finally, a transportation assistant in Seattle dealing with car availability with the Burlington Northern in 1970. Jim retired in 1981 after working all his 39 years on the Tacoma Division.

On the weekend of his seventeenth birthday, Jim was sent to Eagle Gorge to sub for first-trick operator Clara J. Benson. Here, Jim is hanging up orders for Train 3, the *Alaskan*, on December 19, 1943.



HISTORIAN-PHOTOGRAPHER

Jim mastered the art of photography, especially railroad photography, early on. His images have been published in countless railroad books and magazines, and he continues to make his images available to the NPRHA for publication in the *Mainstreeter* and our calendar. Until recently, Jim traveled North America as a tour guide and made new friends as he enjoyed his favorite mode of transportation. For a number of years, he wrote a popular column, *The Best of Jim Fredrickson*, for the BN West Credit Union newsletter published in Tacoma. These columns were the genesis of his three successful railroad books published by Washington State University Press (available through the NPRHA Company Store). They show many of Jim's greatest railroad photos along with his encyclopedic descriptions which tell the historical significance of each photo.

Jim's interest in photography did not stop with trains. He continues to be the chief photographer at most NP- and BN-related social occasions in the Tacoma area, and has a large photo collection of people who worked with him over the years. In 1946, while attending the University of Washington, Jim became a huge Huskies sports fan. He has taken photos of football and basketball players and coaches, and continues to attend Husky games whenever he can. Jim

Left: Bride-to-be Cereta Curtis posing in front of the telegraph school she attended in Spokane. Jim and Cereta met and married two years later in Tacoma.

Right: Working on his day off as mountain trick dispatcher, 1967.

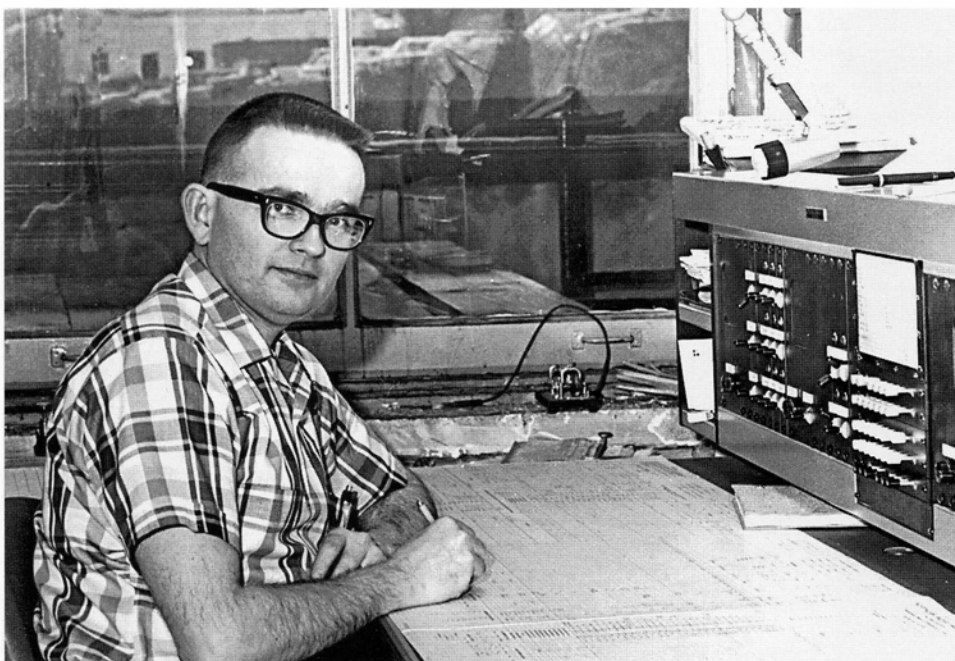
Center: Visiting Hoquiam as transportation assistant for the BN in 1981, sitting at the same telegrapher desk he worked in 1944.

Lower: Dressed in period garb, Jim demonstrates his Morse code skills at a recent model railroad show in Seattle.

became active with the Boy Scouts and took photos of their outings. He led hikes into the Cascades, often around Stampede Pass using NP passenger trains to reach the trailhead. Jim started photographing high school swim meets during his children's school years. He also visited Westport on the Washington coast to photograph fishing boats and their fishermen returning from a day in pursuit of wild salmon. Over the years, Jim has also developed a skill for restoring old, faded photos, giving new life to hundreds of pioneer scenes.

Jim is also an avid collector of railroadiana. He began saving things he saw being thrown out at work: timetables, ticket stubs, company calendars, advertising flyers and dining car menus featuring such specials as "The Great Big Baked Potato for One Thin Dime." Jim also had the foresight to collect railroad artifacts, documents and correspondence when the Union Station dispatching office and South Tacoma Shops closed in 1973.

Today Jim still generously shares this information with researchers, who find it invaluable in understanding how the Northern Pacific operated and how it still affects our lives. His collection is now large enough to fill a small museum, and encompasses thousands of items.





Tacoma is Jim Fredrickson Country to all who revere his contribution to Northern Pacific history through photographs, memorabilia collections, and firsthand experiences. The photographs in this gallery, taken at his favorite hometown locations from the 1940s to the 1960s, are some of his best.

Since NP rails arrived in 1873, Tacoma became a vibrant railroad center serving four Class I railroads. Northern Pacific mainlines and branchlines radiated south to Portland, north to Seattle and Canada, and east to Auburn and Stampede Pass. South Tacoma on the Prairie Line was once home to NP's West End steam locomotive backshop, and Union Station on Pacific Avenue remains an architectural triumph to this day.

As with the NP, the Milwaukee Road made Tacoma its western terminus, building its huge Tideflats Yard complex and ferry slip on Commencement Bay. The Union Pacific arrived in Tacoma on NP rails from North Portland Junction in 1908, but proceeded

north on Milwaukee Road tracks to Seattle from a place called (Indian) Reservation. Tacoma's fourth Class I railroad, the Great Northern, had the smallest presence, operating from a small yard before leaving town on NP rails to Seattle and Portland.

Jim doesn't get out as often as he once did, but there are still close to 50 BNSF, UP, Amtrak, Sound Transit and Tacoma Rail trains to watch and ride. Though NP's historic Prairie Line was severed when Tacoma's Link light rail crossed it in 2003, there are plans to reconnect it at Freighthouse Square to extend Sounder commuter service south to Lakewood.

Since the 1940s, this has been the Tacoma railroad scene that Jim has captured on film for all of us to enjoy today.

How can we say thanks?

—Gary Tarbox