

**Tacoma Community History Project**  
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

**Narrator:** Colonel Gary Emmons, USAF,  
Retired  
**Date:** May 17, 2017  
**Interviewed by:** Karin Crelling  
**Place:** Tacoma, WA

**Gary Emmons:** I worked for eight years as a telegraph operator and train dispatcher here in Tacoma. So, there is my first person ever involved in the railroad; his name is James Patrick Tone, that's his home up there on M Street in South Tacoma. That was his home and...I'm going to skip by this next slide here...that doesn't really have anything to do with anything....anyway...One of the things he was involved with was a runaway train down behind where the UWT is today. He was a brakeman and jumped...the report in the newspaper back in 1903 said he jumped from boxcar to boxcar, trying to tighten the hand brakes on that runaway train...everybody jumped...he was the last person on and the train finally derailed there at 15th and A Street in Tacoma and he, too, jumped and I'm glad he made it; 'cause if he didn't make it I would not be here today...

**Karin Crelling:** Right.

**GE:** Probably heard that a lot...and he had a son by the name of Ralph Tone, who was a chief clerk and a.. in a official position at the Moonyard. The Moonyard is a place right opposite the Foss Waterway right now in that area; at one time a very very active rail yard for lots of switching and so forth, for boxcars going back up towards South Tacoma and then also towards Portland and so forth so it was a very very busy job. And that was his job as a chief clerk in the Tacoma Yard, about 1952. And this is the day he retired in 1968. He was working about 50 years or more here in Tacoma for a clerk in the railroad. That's my Mom's family, my Mom in the center there, but all those folks were railroaders in Tacoma. And that's where a lot of the Northern Pacific heritage and dynasty. On my Dad's side, the Emmons side, his Dad was a telegrapher and train dispatcher for the Milwaukee Road, starting out in Glencoe, Minnesota, but ending up here in Tacoma. And here it's showing on a roster that he went to work in nineteen four (1904) and a..

\*harmonica music playing\*

**Tacoma Community History Project**  
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

..That's one of the stations he was working at as a telegrapher back in South Dakota.

\*music stops\*

He met my Grandmother back in that area, that's a long story about that too, but it's an interesting story because it has a tremendous Tacoma tie, why that was an important marriage back there in that part of the world back at about nineteen ten (1910).

That's what a train dispatchers job looked like in nineteen thirteen (1913), at a place called Roundup, Montana. That's my Grandfather there on the left. And using both, Morse telegraph and other means to communicate to telegraph operators to make sure that trains didn't crash into each other.

And I put this symbol up, that's a Masonic symbol, maybe you know something about the Masons, maybe you don't, but the railroads back then were largely... when I say "Masonic organizations"...they weren't officially..., but a lot of the members were Masons. And that was a sort of a way that I guess that a lot of the hiring and firing...I mention this because it is an interesting connection, not germane to what we talking about here, but nonetheless was a fact.

Eagle Gorge...you know where Eagle Gorge is?

**KC:** I do not.

**GE:** Okay! It's about...it's on the Green River, which flows through Auburn, and this was the main line; east from Auburn to Saint Paul, Minnesota, about nineteen twenty-three (1923). This is a very typical telegraph office, back at that one he was the operator there at Eagle Gorge for a little while and there is a snow storm at Eagle Gorge... again.. this is at the foot of the Cascades, just outside of Covington, Ravensdale area..

Alright. And that was his family to include my Dad who is a two-year-old there and he just..my Dad just passed away here a couple years ago. My Dad, of course, was a telegrapher as well. He also worked at a place called Stampede..you probably heard about Stampede Pass..

**KC:** Yes..

**GE:** But there was actually a station there back in the 30's and 40's and 50's and ...long story behind that but we're not going into that right now.

My Grandfather was chief dispatcher here in Tacoma, which..... very prestigious job in

**Tacoma Community History Project**  
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

the Union Station in Tacoma and he was appointed that in nineteen fifty-three (1953)...some other stuff here....

Let me just take a little diverging route here for a moment, 'cause this is kinda interesting from a historical standpoint. My Grandmother, Della Gould Emmons,.. again, married my Grandfather back in the Midwest about nineteen ten (1910), and they moved west with the railroad, sometimes much to the chagrin of my Grandmother who came from a fairly well-to-do family in Minnesota; and life as a train dispatchers wife, and a telegraphers wife, was very, very bleak and very poor; ended up in places in Montana and North Dakota, that were just...not even...Tacoma "dusty town" would be a.. probably a misnomer, there was just nothing there and she was..she was kind of down about the whole thing. But one of the interesting things... she took a lot of notes, she had a college education, which...very unusual for a woman back then..graduated the University of Minnesota, and started to intermingle with the Native Americans and found out that the route of the railroad she was..and her husband were kind of traversing from job to job, was the same essential route of the Lewis and Clark expedition. And she started taking first-hand notes about Sacagawea and so forth...anyway...long story short: she wrote a..the first definitive book about the Lewis and Clark expedition and Sacagawea, the Shoshone Native American maiden. And nineteen forty-two (1942) the book was that well received by publishers because they wanted more of a..male account, and this was done through the eyes of this....but my Grandmother said there...and I remember her telling me about this, that the real story was that brave woman, who carried a baby on her back, walked all the way from North Dakota to out here on Long Beach, right outside the mouth of the Columbia River with that expedition and guided them.

Anyway...she was very popular here in Tacoma, she was on every talk show, well..they didn't have talk shows then, but they had everything else and then in nineteen fifty-five (1955) she got a call from Paramount Pictures in Hollywood and they wanted to do a movie about the Lewis and Clark expedition. They had no other reference, except her book, and they used her book and she went on location when they filmed the whole story.

\*plays movie trailer from *The Far Horizons*\*

**Tacoma Community History Project**  
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

Anyway...that was that was made on her book, and it opened up in Tacoma at the Temple Theater in nineteen fifty-five (1955) and was a hit, and when that movie hit she became a gigantic star here in Tacoma, based primarily on the fact that had she not married a railroader, coming to Tacoma on the Northern Pacific, the story would have never happened and it...the whole thing would not have occurred. Anyway...that was my Grandmother Emmons and my Grandfather Abe Emmons. His son was my Dad Bud...  
\*loud telegraph morse code clicks\*

...and that noise you hear is telegraph. Okay? And that station was at the foot of McCarver Street here in Tacoma and the Ruston Way Road out there, okay? And that was him at that telegraph typing a message July 26, 1921, okay?

\*Code clicks stop\*

And that's the station, you, probably...if you've been down to the waterfront you probably recognize exactly where that is, and that's a train engineer grabbing orders from a train hoop there before he leaves town and he's going about forty miles an hour, and he's leaning out to grab a string and his train orders...and then later..my Dad.. they closed that station and they opened up another station at the foot of 15th and A Street here in Tacoma..

\*loud voice recording\*

...it was automatic...press buttons... and that board thing with the buttons controls all the train movement in Tacoma for almost thirty years..

\*recording stops\*

..and that's a picture of Lakewood...Lakeview...if you know where that is..but right now if you go out towards Lakewood, on the Sounder tracks, they store the Sounder trains out there. There used to be a station right there and that's exactly now where they store the Sounder trains...that's a passing train in nineteen forty-seven (1947), that was heading out towards...towards that area in Lakewood. Some people like to see that...

**KC:** I know where that is.

**GE:** ..yeah, it's right about 100th and.....

**KC:**..yes, I know..I live in that area..

**GE:** Okay...and I show the old movie camera, and that old tape recorder, because I

**Tacoma Community History Project**  
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

brought those two things down in McCarver Street myself and this is a picture kind of..me putting up train orders at McCarver Street in nineteen fifty-eight (1958). Take a look at the surrounding areas there...you can see the old Dickman Mill back there. That's how the train that's how he handed up vital instructions to the train crews through those little hoops there and the string.

**KC:** And they picked that up while going by?

**GE:** Yeah. I got a picture of it here.... if it doesn't freeze up on me...sorry about that... watch the engineer grab it..right there..and bam!.

**KC:** Geez!

\*mantle clock chimes\*

**GE:** Anyway...we can swing around to that...because it's just gonna repeat...and ..

\*recording of a male voice\*

That's information coming from the train dispatcher in Tacoma to the little town of Lester here at the foot of the Cascades, and that's what a telegraph office looked like back then..I'll just keep moving here...and that's me.. about sixteen years old, as a telegraph operator up at Lester, and i...that's what I would do between...I was going to school full time, but then they would sometimes call me out and say:"You gotta go work these distant stations and I would do my morse code thing. And there's another little operation here on the other side of Tacoma; you can probably see that same bridge down there...it's the same \*\*\*\*\* bridge you go over today, and that little station there had a series of levers,..that's me, also, there...being a telegraph operator there, but that's me also throwing the switches here in Tacoma by hand, to steer the trains in the right routes going into Tacoma, okay?

And that just shows I was working full time there as a train dispatcher and that was me fifty years ago, almost to the day, as I was dispatching trains here at the Tacoma Union Station between Portland and Tacoma. And some other people...yeah, they were also ..\*\*\*\* down there..

That's my uncle, at the Tacoma Station, doing....dispatching trains via, what they call, a CTC machine. And that's a picture of... coming into the Narrows bridge on the engine of a train...kinda skip through some of this stuff..

**Tacoma Community History Project**  
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

I'm gonna bring this up; only because my railroad connection here made me a selection to do a specific military operation for strategic air command about 30 years ago when they were gonna put missiles on trains. They looked at my background, I was in the Air Force at the time, and it's a little bit bring.....that's me in some missile area underground..but I don't think we want to focus too much on this, because it doesn't really talk about Tacoma as much.

Anyway...so I think I'm gonna stop this right here..'cause the rest of it is just about the missile stuff on the railroad and railroad on missiles and the missiles on railroads.

Okay. So that was just a little bit of a background. So from here...where do you want me to go?

**KC:** Well, I would like to know more about what you did; I mean..you started when you were sixteen, you said?

**GE:** Yeah, yeah, I did.

**KC:** Yes..

**GE:** ..and actually you saw me putting those little things up there when actually I was about ten years old; my Dad brought me to work with him down at McCarver Street and it was just really neat. Because not only was I able to have a very interesting relationship with my Dad, watched him work, learned the skills about being precise in railroading, understanding the dangers of railroading, and so forth and nonetheless earned and learned a skill, that....by then they were still using telegraphs back in nineteen sixty-two (1962), so when I turned sixteen, I was able to go to work, not under his tutelage anymore, but under mine as a full fledged adult working in the telegraph and railroad industry.

**KC:** ..and still going to school.

**GE:** ...and still going to school, yeah, I went to Wilson High School here in Tacoma and University of Puget Sound is where I graduated and got my Air Force Commission in 1968.

**KC:** So, did you always, did you go back to working.., yeah, you did go back to working with the railroad after ..

**GE:** ...I...it's interesting, because when I went into the Air Force I decided to make it a career, and I did it for 30 years, and I'm a retired Colonel, but the railroad intervened

**Tacoma Community History Project**  
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

mysteriously when I got a call one day from essentially the White House chief of staff, saying "hey, we need..we're putting this nuclear system onto the nation rail system, we need somebody with expertise on how to interface with railroading because we didn't know anything", so I went back into railroading as such for almost three years, helping to develop the operational concept of that weapons system, which all went away when the Cold War ended in nineteen ninety (1990), and so no longer needed my railroad skills. ...retired in nineteen ninety-four (1994), I did some other ancillary work with a few railroads here in the Tacoma area, and to this day still do some consulting work, mostly just pro bono for companies and people who don't know much about railroading and railroad history and ...not a whole lot, but some. So that's part of my railroad history from nineteen sixty-two (1962) to today.

**KC:** That is pretty amazing. So, when you started out, how much money were these guys making?

**GE:** You know, actually, this...the hourly wages were fairly good. But you'd have to define good in comparison what isn't good. Okay, so let's ...we ought to be fair when we throw terms like that around. I do know I have some ideas of, for example, the operator, the operators or telegraph operators at McCarver Street in nineteen seventeen (1917) made seventy-five dollars (\$ 75) a month. Okay> And that was eight-hour day, seven days a week. They didn't get Saturdays, Sundays off, so I don't know, but you could probably run a comparison to see what that would..that wage would be like today. But it was..it was...it was steady work for one thing. And you had o value the work, the fact, that a steady paycheck was coming in is always worth something in addition to the dollars coming in. I do know that when I went to work in nineteen sixty-two (1962), I was making about two dollars and 25 cents an hour (\$ 2.25). You can say "gosh, is that all?" but if you do run the consumer price index against that, that's pretty close to about thirty dollars an hour today. Which is still considered to be a pretty good wage today. And then when I became a train dispatcher in nineteen sixty-seven (1967), I was promoted, it was a promotion job, and I was five dollars an hour (\$ 5), but if you run that number that's about like fifty-five dollars (\$ 55) an hour today, which is considered a super-super wage. So, as a young teenager and guy going to college and so forth, I was

**Tacoma Community History Project**  
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

able to pay all my tuition to UPS and still have a nice bank roll; I mean, I bought a brand-new Mustang in nineteen sixty-seven (1967), at Titus Will here. I laid out the money, twenty-seven hundred dollars (\$ 2700), cause I had twenty-seven hundred dollars. So..yeah, the wages were, I think, very very good for that craft. My uncle, gosh...I had uncles and everything else, was also a telegraph operator, but he was also a school teacher here at Mount Tahoma High. And his annual salary on the railroad as a telegrapher was about three thousand dollars (\$ 3000) a year more than his as a school teacher. So that gives you some idea that the railroads were fairly..pretty good paying jobs back then.

**KC:** Yeah...did they include like benefits , like they have today?

**GE:** You know...that's interesting. The answer is yes, they had....the railroad here in Tacoma had it's own hospital over on McKinley Hill.

**KC:** I didn't know that.

**GE:** I was born there, in nineteen forty-six (1946), and...mainly because railroading was dangerous, ...not that... you know..it was...safety was preached, believe me. Throughout the entire day, I mean, everybody.. we had it..we respected the fact that's heavy equipment and lot of things could go haywire. But nonetheless they did have things that needed hospital attention, so they had their own staff of doctors. It was about an eighty (80) bed hospital, fully staffed with nurses and doctors and specialists and everything else. I think the medical on that was two dollars and twenty-two cents(\$ 2.22) a month, to have your medical coverage for your entire family.

**KC:** Wow, that is pretty good.

**GE:** So I grew up in Tacoma here, and to be perfectly honest, we didn't run to the hospital very much back then, okay? And I had all the childhood diseases, every one of them, and all they did was keep you home. I don't recall going to the doctor until I had my physical at sixteen (16) years old and I'd never had..for example, blood drawn, you know..anything..all the things the kids and everything else... So, that was a.. but that was a benefit and they had, I think an insurance plan. Railroad retirement, by the way, preceded Social Security as a concept for retirement. I don't know if people know that or not. Social Security Act came in by FDR in nineteen thirty-five (1935); August of thirty-



**Tacoma Community History Project**  
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

five. The Railroad Retirement Act actually preceded that by ten years. And Social Security actually based its premise on the Railroad Retirement Act. There wasn't a whole lot of dollars doled out by the Railroad Retirement Board; but nonetheless, it was the first pension, the first meaningful pension established in this country were from the railroad; so that's kind of an important fact.

**KC:** That's pretty cool. I did not know that.

**GE:** Yes, very true.

**KC:** Well, you mentioned safety was preached. But I assume as a telegraph operator, you were probably less endangered than, let's say a train operator.

**GE:** Well, I guess that's all a matter of degrees. I had to go out and you saw how those hoop things work, sometimes those...they didn't have those...the little wraps to put them in. You had to stand up right near the train to hand up those orders to the engineer. And I don't recall anybody ever getting hurt by that..I mean, ..and I did that a lot at different stations I worked at. But the whole thing about railroading was making sure that everything was under control and that people were following the instructions, the safety instructions, the signaling and so forth and when that was done, it was a very safe operation. If that didn't occur, then the chances for something to happen were pretty catastrophic, were always there. You can always go back in time and read about a train wreck here and there, and they did occur. But overall I never felt unsafe when I was working. I had a very healthy respect for what I was doing, I was drilled in it by my Dad when I was seven, eight, nine, ten years old and he made it clear to me if I was not gonna follow that, then...you know..you go home, and don't bother to come back to work in the morning. So those were some of the things, and I think on the Northern Pacific I can say with some sincerity and some clairvoyance here, that these notions of safety was preached throughout the entire chain of command. If you were doing things that were derelict or that were unsafe, your peers would quickly put you in place and say, "hey, you know something? We don't do that here. And if you chose to do that kind of thing, either quit or go and work for some other railroad". So that was sort of embedded in the culture of railroading here in Tacoma and I didn't appreciate it until I went to other organizations, and found out that that notion, that feeling, that dedication to doing things

**Tacoma Community History Project**  
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

right wasn't necessarily embedded in the organisation like it was here in the railroading here in Tacoma. Very safe.

**KC:** So, you went into the Air Force, How many years did you work as an operator there?

**GE:** In the Air Force?

**KC:** No..I mean before you..

**GE:** Oh, okay, legally ...I mean I was doing things under the guidance of my Dad of course, but legally I couldn't go to work until I was sixteen (16), because of state labor laws. But I went to work July of nineteen sixty-two (1962) and went into the Air Force in the later part of sixty-nine ('69). Probably eight and a half years or so as a railroader.

**KC:** And then after the Air Force you went back as like a consultant..yeah?

**GE:** Yeah...a little bit on and off here and I still do some...I do.... for example I do briefings, called Operation Life Saver. It's a process of going out to schools and any organization that will listen to me under the guise of the State of Washington Department of Transportation I actually work for them as a volunteer and I brief rail safety. Okay? And the perils of trespassing on railroad property and trying to go around a downed railroad gate crossing gates and it's an unfortunate thing but there are probably five- or six hundred deaths a year across the country, all of them needless, right? Every one of them could be prevented. Every one of them! And some tragic deaths that happened locally, here in the local area, because of failure to just heed the warning signs. That's all it is! And don't trespass. Don't ... People sometimes say: "well I wanna play on the tracks" and I say: "well, so, do you play on the Interstate five?" And then they'll look at me as like...well that.. No! It's the same difference. That is...that is a thoroughfare to right-a-way, it's private property. It's private property. So I do that a lot. I've got a couple of briefings coming up here in the next couple of weeks and especially with the new addition of the high-speed trains coming through Lakewood .....

\*mantle clock chimes\*

I do a lot of briefings out in the Lakewood area to Rotary clubs and so forth. And then I do some docent work on the couple of the passenger trains and then I also do some volunteer work at the Foss Seaport Museum which has a very old little display in there

**Tacoma Community History Project**  
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

and I volunteer down there then I do some consulting work with the city of Shelton right now about a logging railroad that they are trying to find another economic development for. So...yeah...it's all volunteer, it's still...railroading is still of interest to me after all these years, it's sort of...it's part of my, I guess DNA or something.

**KC:** Right. So one thing I learned with my researching the area here in other classes that I took, was that African Americans didn't really come here until after World War II in this specific area, so was there a lot of diversity in the railroad? Were there..

**GE:** Oh yeah, yeah...that's an interesting question. And the answer is yes. Much diversity. I know this kinda first hand from an interesting little story we'll talk about and it involves the railroad...you saw my Dad and he worked down at the McCarver rail station there but about nineteen fifty-four, fifty-five-ish.. a lot of people had two or three jobs back then. People talk about it today, they say oh my gosh I gotta work a couple of jobs...so my Dad was working the railroad, but he self...taught himself the intricacies of how to repair television sets back in nineteen fifty-four and fifty-five. He just did it out of books, sheer learning, and started his side business, yeah?, of repairing television sets and was very good at it. I think at one time at the height of his television repair service here in Tacoma he had five or six hundred customers and he would service them after he was done working for the railroad. He'd go home and go out at night and repaired TV's. I bring this up only because a lot of the people he repaired sets for were employees of the railroad. For one thing people...you know...you always wanna know if you'd find somebody you can trust to do any kind of thing for you and the word spread that my Dad was not only good at it but he was very, very fair in charging people. In fact, sometimes he wouldn't charge at all. And a lot of the clients he had were folks of color, working for the railroad, that sometimes couldn't get service, but he would. And I remember this because I'd go with him sometimes in the evening doing that. And I learned at a very young age...he was...he was really a man that believed in serving his fellow man or person. Okay? And he didn't have any...any concern about race, creed or color. And these people were...a lot of folks were very, very happy with their...that, and sometimes they couldn't pay him. And he'd say "you know...next payday give me a couple bucks, or something". Okay? And they would sometimes drive by our house but these were..there

**Tacoma Community History Project**  
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

were...you know the railroads had...they did have.. .African Americans working there, not as many as you would probably say.. but there were. People of Italian ancestry, Irish, lots of Scandinavians out here as you probably well know.. o...and lots of.. to a certain extent Japanese..I remember Morris Miyago...remember Morris Miyago...there's a name I haven't thought of in about a hundred years. [chuckles] But he was a... working on the section gangs and doing some other stuff like that but he had a...he had a little farmhouse. He was a railroad employee, but he had a little farmhouse out in the Sumner/Kent area and my Dad .. we were out there servicing his black and white \*\*\*\* television set, so..yeah that's an interesting question, but we were kind of a, as a family right in the middle of it never gave any of it a thought. We just... we just.. my Dad's make up to help people out...and yeah..he made a few bucks, but he was...I remember I think a service call... I think he charged three dollars and 50 cents (\$ 3.50) for a service call. And installed television antennas, I remember a television antenna installation job was twenty-one dollars and ninety-five cents (\$21.95).. that was nineteen fifty-seven, fifty-eight. I used to help him do that too..so..anyway..that's probably the...but yeah, it was diverse and again you know...and again can see as compared to what...well, you had to roll the clock back sixty or seventy years and realize that the influence of the military had a big impact on all that. But the railroads too, had a...there was, you know, back at the construction of the railroad out here, there were lots of Chinese folks out here too.

**KC:** Yeah, I heard that.

**GE:** So it was, yeah...we were kinda in the middle of that and very proud.

**KC:** That was really good to hear. I didn't know that. "cause you never really see it in pictures.

**GE:** You don't and the...that's...but I ..and I... and that's a good point but there were, you know, one of the interesting stories about the railroads in labor and so forth..the Chinese helped built two significant tunnels, in around the area; one was at Stampede Pass, the two mile tunnel between Stampede and Morton which is still in operation today and the other one was right out here at Point Defiance, called Nelson Bennett tunnel. That was also done with Chinese laborers. The one up in Stampede... people say, well ..they asked me before, where does the name Stampede come from. Do you know where it came

**Tacoma Community History Project**  
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

from?

**KC:** No, I don't.

**GE:** Okay, well the first thing people think about is maybe a bunch of wild white stallions, galloping down that mountain, you know...No. The name of that pass up there was Garfield at the time.Garfield...that area was called Garfield. And 'bout halfway through building the tunnel, which they started on either end, just chipped away at that rock up there...there was a financial panic nationwide. The folks that were running that up there couldn't make the payroll. There was a stampede of Chinese laborers, very upset, they came rushing out of that tunnel, to do some...maybe a little vengeance there on the folks running the whole thing. But that's where Stampede came from.

**KC:** I did not know that story...yeah. So...whatever you would like to tell me when you were still working; stories you might have or...

**GE:** Coming from a railroad family I thought that...I didn't really think this, but..I thought a lot of people just kinda worked. And my mother was a very driven individual who believed that she should have a job as soon as you could have a job. So I started out as a paper boy for the News Tribune in nineteen fifty-seven or eight (1957, 1958) and had learned that telegraph trait so it's just a natural thing; you just keep getting jobs and you work and you save and it's an old depression era type of thing that is very very built into my family. So..the idea of having multiple jobs and going to school, attending Air Force ROTC, working part time for the railroad was just part of, what I thought, everybody kinda just...you got off and did jobs and worked and worked hard... I enjoyed every moment I worked, and some people can say: "Gosh, you know...I don't like that job" and so forth, but I truly enjoyed every second I went to work. I thought that was sort of the neatest thing I could go do and would lament the fact when I didn't get a call to go to work on a weekend job or something like that because there was no need for my services. So I never did think about it as a job; I just thought it was kind of a neat place to go and interact with all these... all these trains. The pay was good, and again...it enabled me to attend college, otherwise, I probably wouldn't have, different scenario would have evolved. You know there were interesting times; I don't know of anything that...nothing comes to mind that is, you know, sort of like disastrous or anything like that. Pretty much

**Tacoma Community History Project**  
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

I just had a pretty benign career for those nine years. But..the one thing about Tacoma I think is somewhat overlooked in terms of it's DNA is the fact that of course, it was the western terminus of the Transcontinental Railroad over Seattle, and some of that history that is probably a little boring right now, but needs to....you might wanna look into in terms of how it was financed and how some of the financial panics almost broke the railroad because they had to be at the western terminus within about a month of when they were here or they would lose all their land grant status from Congress. So there as this...there was this \*\*\*\* to make sure they pushed west and got a train rolling out of here as soon as they can. Some of the financing through Mister Ainsworth, a banker that...Ainsworth Bank actually became US Bank, but he was actually the financial person that saved the Northern Pacific by obtaining loans and pushing it through...Railroads are very both, they're very labor intensive and capital intensive. Labor and capital... they chew up a lot of both. So there is some interesting stories about Mister Ainsworth, ..streets named after him here in Tacoma; then Mister McCarver...actual General, he was a General in the army, General Morton McCarver, for whom McCarver Street is named too, but General Morton was the actual person who'd selected Commencement Bay as a terminus. Steilacoom was vying for it, Olympia was vying for it, even up in Port Townsend and Bellingham; they were all vying for that... to be the terminus to include Seattle. But Seattle had only about 700 people about that time, okay? That's all!

**KC:** Right, and look at it now..

**GE:** The..and then there is a interesting story about Seattle finally got real connection but that's probably not necessary \*\*\*\* to hear. But to realize that's the... that's kinda who we are and what we were for a long, long, long time, and fueled by the lumber industry and...you know, copious amounts of fresh water and copious amounts of power and all these other factors that were... that were... made Tacoma very unique. Sometimes when I read stories in the paper and so forth, I wish the reporter would do a little more history why this is, you know, and the connectivity between... that's s much of it that evolves from railroading. The South Tacoma Shops, you've ever heard of those out there in South Tacoma?

**Tacoma Community History Project**  
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

**KC:** Yeah..

**GE:** Actually between 56th Street and about ... 38th...and that area west of South Tacoma Way was a gigantic retail shop area for the Northern Pacific employing thousands of people back then in the nineteen tens, -twenties, -thirties, -forties, -fifties and -sixties...up until about nineteen seventy-eight, seventy-nine when they started to close the shops out here, but one time twenty four seven employing again, having a huge economic impact on Tacoma and South Tacoma. So... and you know, those...I think there is one building, an old Griffin Wheel building, a brick building, that's still...only the remnant of that whole ...but that was an incredible amount of...they could build steam engines out there, they built box cars and there was...they had, you know, lumber shops and metal shops, forges, and people with all kinds of credible skills up in South Tacoma, so...Yeah, so many of these things that made an imprint and people sometimes wonder how that happen, where did that name come from, and so forth. But typically railroading had a intrical part of all that here in Tacoma.

**KC:** So, when did it start to kinda go away? Because what I researched at the Northwest Room, for example, the photographs that I saw, that...it was just...there were black and white photos, where it was just deserted and there was the warehouses that are now the UW Tacoma, they were falling to pieces, cause there was nothing in there anymore; there were no cars, no people, no nothing. It looks like a ghost town.

**GE:** Yeah, there were...that, you know... you never really realize decay in your life or people around you, because it happens gradually, right? One industry closes and you...oh, okay..., you know. Like...often equated to watching an icicle melt, you know...one drop at a time. But in five minutes you get bored, and you think, oh that thing's ever gonna melt. But you come back in a day and a half and it's gone. And this is kinda what happened with railroading. From a technological standpoint, from an evolutionary standpoint, from a manpower-intensive standpoint, the railroads from almost day one were always looking for ways to modernize. You mention railroading today and people don't think of railroad as being very progressive or modernisation at all, but they really were at the cutting edge and they still are to a certain extent. So...from about nineteen twenty forward, they were trying to move away from steam engines, which were very labor intensive, to

**Tacoma Community History Project**  
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

diesel/electric locomotives, when the steam engine met it's demise here in the Northern Pacific about nineteen fifty-six (1956), the need for coal and water ... so all the people in that business on the railroad were laid off, and telegraph, well, you know, I was a telegraph operator and you heard some of that clickety-clacks there. By nineteen sixty-four or -five microwave had come in and telegraph wires were all pulled out. So...linemen and telegraph operators and everything else were no longer needed, you know. And that's one thing I tell people when people tell me today: "gosh, I got laid off because Microsoft is coming out with something new", I say, well, you know, I could be down at McCarver Street, demanding my telegraph job still be down there and people would think I was crazy, right? And so you begin to realize, and you see the scenario developing all around you, that jobs, industries, money, capital, all these things move toward supposedly the most efficient. The railroads are no different than any other industry looking for ways to do things safer, more productivity and fewer people. And so that's been around for a long time and that started to happen at... that change started to happen on Pacific Avenue, probably as early as the thirties, right in the middle of the Depression, when things were changing. And then the areas that occupied UWT now, of course, were all manufacturing \*\*\*\* and buildings that produced everything from furniture to beer and there was a processing plant up there for food and all these other things. And one by one they either moved out of the area and...became more efficient doing something else and so forth... so, yeah, you wake up one day in nineteen seven...let's pick a year... nineteen... maybe seventy-five; and you walk down Pacific Avenue and you see that little arcade down there at 13 and Pacific, and some of the other things that were not so nice going on down there, and you look around and, yeah... lots of empty storefronts and broken windows and you go all the way further up towards the Union Station there right across UWT now and you'd find vacant buildings and no manufacturing and so forth, so by seventy-five ('75) the whole mood and change of Tacoma was clearly moving out and, again, I think punctuated by the fact that the Tacoma Mall opened up in nineteen sixty-eight (1968), just leaving downtown Tacoma in devastation. People's Store, Penny's, Woolworths, Rhodes Brothers, all those things that were hallmarks and anchorage for people that would go downtown to shop...all gone! So



**Tacoma Community History Project**  
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

once those dollars started to flow outside and once the other things become a little less desirable to be around, then there is usually a pell-mell maelstrom of running away from all that stuff. And then it really starts to go downhill, so by the mid-eighties or so Tacoma was in pretty tough shape and its downtown environment was ...but thank goodness there was people in legislature and other people and our leadership here in Tacoma, that saw that need and started to funnel resources with the Washington State History Museum... One of the guys that I was a close friends within the railroad... he was about my Dad's age and he died here a year ago, his name was Jim Frederickson. I gotta mention him because he was the guy that saved the Union Station from being bulldozed and a lot of big effort when it was being considered... it was in disrepair, just like everything else down there, and the railroad wanted out of it. Because it was just a horrible amount of money each month to keep that place...

**KC:** I saw the pictures with the plaster on the inside falling and pigeons everywhere ...

**GE:** So they found, of course, the federal courthouse needed a place, a building and they did the rehab here, but he was significantly involved in that, so little by little there has been a renaissance, right? And I think... I think you could stand back and look at that area now... oh, you know, I went back and did a refresher course for my MBA at UWT about three years ago and I loved the professors down there...you know? Now here, I'm an old guy, but I liked the campus life again and I just had a ball. And even though it was a difficult thing for me to go back to school, but I loved it. And I loved the... I sat in those classrooms and listening to the prof at night and I would look at the old open beams down there in some of the buildings and stuff like that. I have a little different perspective than the young person that is eighteen years old sitting beside me, "what's this old guy doing here.." So, I've appreciated it in more ways than one, right? "Cause I actually went back to school there and did the .... so the campus... there's still a little bit of railroad... they still preserved down there through the campus. I think that was really important because that line was the first line into Tacoma right there. I'm not a...I'm not much of a nightlife person, or anything else, but I do know that there are a lot of areas down there where people come down to have some fun in downtown Tacoma. The theater district, the link... light rail down there and the expansion that's soon to be up on Emerald K; I

**Tacoma Community History Project**  
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

think it's all good, and I think there's gonna be more of a stampede of... there's not a good word for stampede...of good things happening down there with folks being able to find affordable housing and really...Tacoma is a pretty town, I mean... come on! And I know it has an interesting name, being gritty and blue collar and so forth, but it really is an interesting place and there is lots more to be done, but I think Tacoma is gonna be considered a little... a little gem out here in the Pacific Northwest.

**KC:** I think so too. So when you were working for the railroad were they like... I mean... what I learned from the Tacoma history in Dr. Sullivan's class was that people tended to group together where they lived. Like, the Italians all lived on the Hilltop and the Japanese lived around the area of where the UWT is now..was that a thing with railroad people as well? Did they form communities?

**GE:** Well, definitely in South Tacoma. A lot of the little homes you see out there, that maybe look like only one... like mini houses today, were built with the help of the railroad out here on Tyler from about 56th over to about...oh...38th...if you go back...If you wander around that area those were a lot of the homes that the shop people at South Tacoma Shops lived in. It was close, they could walk to work, and they had a little home, usually one bedroom, with a kitchen, and so forth. But you can still see little remnants of those left; some of them are, of course, remodelled. Then there were other areas early on in South Tacoma, in addition to that little area from the Sout Tacoma Shops, then...gosh, I would have to say from an employment standpoint I would think that ethnicity groupings, even for non-railroaders, probably were more germane to the area than railroad workers were, okay? 'Cause I knew a lot of rail...I knew a lot of, well... my whole family was railroad, and we were kinda spread out in South Tacoma, North Tacoma, 'cause I actually grew up, I was born out here and raised out here in South Tacoma, but by the time I was about nine or ten we were out in North Tacoma. So I would probably say, early early on, maybe at the turn of the century, when Tacoma really hadn't expanded out too far, and railroad jobs were right in Tacoma, there probably were lots of folks that worked for the railroad maybe in Old Town, around McCarver Street, and then maybe downtown where they had ...maybe an apartment and they were called up to duty every sixteen hours or something for railroad services and engineer, conductor, firemen. But I

**Tacoma Community History Project**  
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

don't recall like a railroad section to Tacoma. But the possibility that early on the turn of the century probably was true, but by the nineteen twenties or thirties everything had pretty well spread out. I think there were still communities that considered themselves Scandinavian, Irish, and yeah, so...but that part I would probably have a little hard time trying to...to draw. To draw on that one, because it just...that does not resonate with me. Doesn't mean it didn't exist...but by the time I was on the scene it definitely didn't exist. There was enough diversified employment especially with the lumber industry and some service industry and well...let's see, what were the big...railroad was big, financial became sort of an interesting player here in the fifties and sixties, retail was pretty much all downtown and yeah... the lumber I think...lumber would be the next...when I say lumber that would be the pulp mills and the other things, like wood byproducts...

**KC:** So that one picture that we saw with the clicking in the background...what sort of messages would you get? I mean, it wasn't like a post office where you could like...you know, tell Aunt Mary that you were well.

**GE:** This is the actual instrument from McCarver Street. That;s the one I pulled...my Dad pulled up before they tore the station down.

**KC:** Oh my god, that is fantastic!

**GE:** That particular instrument was built about nineteen hundred (1900).

**KC:** That is so cool.

**GE:** And if you tap on the top, ...noo...a little bit over...yeah, go ahead, you can..

\*clicking noise\*

**GE:** That's the sound of a telegraph. And....there you go>>

**KC:** That is so cool!

**GE:** And so those instruments, and you heard that actual instrument in nineteen forty-one (1941), that's the one he pulled out...

**KC:** That's the one?

**GE:** Yeah, and it was , you know... like the letter A is a dot and a dash.

\*clicking\*

**GE:** That's an A. B...

\*clicking\*

**Tacoma Community History Project**  
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

**GE:** So the word "Tacoma" is T A C O M A, okay? And the train dispatcher in Tacoma would send a message that my... that other operators would copy and might say to the train engineer "slow down to ten miles an hour, there is a broken rail ahead." Pretty important stuff. And then what would happen, my Dad would copy the message, or I did too...and hang on a second; I'll show you something else... I'll be right back here in about two seconds.

**KC:** Sure!

**GE:** This is the one from McCarver Street, that's almost sixty years old, and...

**KC:** That's such a simple design!

**GE:** Yeah... so you remember you saw the guy put his arm through there...I'll let you go ahead and put your arm through... and just keep walking, keep walking. keep walking...there you go!

**KC:** Oh, I was wondering if you really had to aim for the paper to grab it.

**GE:** No, he just put his arm right through this thing and it would just snap out, okay? So that was the messages,

**KC:** That is so simple...

**GE:** and that's the way they delivered messages all over the country; all over the nation was this system for almost a hundred years, okay? Yeah, so you put it so that... they would have just to kinda aim for it, But you go like this, and like this and... see this down, this little spring down here...

**KC:** Oh, and you just snap it in...that is brilliant.

**GE:** So those two actually came from McCarver Street in Tacoma and I still got those as a ...

**KC:** Would it be okay if I take a picture of those when we're done?

**GE:** Yeah, sure. The News Tribune, if you want to look at it, just did a story on me, on that and this, about a month ago and ... let me see here... they did a pretty good job with capturing all that, but yeah. If you want to take a picture...Anyway, yeah, so that's what that was all about.

**KC:** So..yeah..so you would just get messages pertaining to the railroad.

**GE:** Only to the railroad, yeah.

**Tacoma Community History Project**  
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

**KC:** So that was not then an all day ongoing thing. You would have times of where there was nothing coming through...

**GE:** That's true, yeah...it wasn't twenty-four seven. Although I worked at a relay office as a telegrapher in Tacoma in the station. And pretty much there you'd be getting messages in about all things going on in the whole division, all the way from Bellingham to Portland, to Yakima and these little stations would... the operators would telegraph that they needed more for loading lumber and so forth, and that was sort of the central collecting point. I literally had my head in this thing for eight hours a day. I'd be typing the messages out, so... I became very proficient as an operator. I can still copy this stuff like... it's no problem at all today. Even fifty years later.

**KC:** Once you learn it...

**GE:** Yeah, it is... you know... and I hear things, that people don't hear. When something clicking, or something in the background... I'll convert that immediately to a letter and people, you know...of course I drive my wife nuts, because she was never involved in the railroad, but.... My Dad, when he passed away... just before he passed away he was... he had some... he had an operation, he was ninety-six (96) or something... so he had a full life; lived well up to about the last five months of his life. At the hospital, Tacoma General, and they had machines on him, 'cause he'd gone through an operation and he didn't come out of it. And you've been to a hospital room and there are all kinds of bells and buzzers and everything else going off and he was really... well, anesthesia knocked him out and he never came out of it. So he was sitting...he was not... he was pretty much comatose. But he'd have a moment where he'd kinda come to and one of the machines... when you crimped your arm it would send off a little alarm. It wasn't necessarily something that was... that the nurses raced in to... but they would come often and they would maybe have to, you know,... But I remember I was up there with my sister and we'd say "How you doing, Dad?" and no response and so forth. and we'd say "How're you doing?" "...A...it's an A", and what we realized was... or what I realized was the machine was making a dot and a dash. A. So he was saying A not because he was saying Hey, but because he heard that and that was still registering even though he was pretty much out of it. Isn't that great?

**Tacoma Community History Project**  
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

**KC:** That's fantastic. Oh my gosh... Yeah... you don't think about that. You hear clicky noises in the house and you're like...

**GE:** Yeah... I do, and I'll be out some place and I hear something and I'll... I don't say anything, but, ..okay...I hear a bird tweet and I'll hear morse code. And nobody else does...

**KC:** Dashes and...that's fantastic. So did they have night shifts then? Or was that not necessary?

**GE:** McCarver Street was twenty-four seven. Most railroad work was twenty-four seven. Because they didn't shut down, so I worked many, many, many, many, many nights, staggered to school, little drowsy and pull through and...but, yeah. Twenty-four seven, just about every place on the railroad...it kinda still is today, although it's not as labor-intensive, but it's still twenty-four, you know ...there's still transit in the middle of the night, you know... the Sounders leave at four forty-five in the morning, which is the middle of the night, yeah, it's a pretty much twenty-four seven operation.

**KC:** My son-in-law works for them...

**GE:** Oh, he does? What does he do?

**KC:** He's a train operator.

**GE:** Oh okay, Wow, alright.

**KC:** But he has really weird shifts and hours. You know, sometimes he's gone for a week and then he's home for a week and a half, or... yeah...

**GE:** You know that part of railroading hasn't changed in a hundred and fifty years. There is a young man I've known and I helped him get on to the railroad as a conductor and he's working now out of Gillette, Wyoming. But he too, you know... they'll work him to death for about six or seven days and then theres no j b for him for three or four or five. And that just hasn't changed at all.

**KC:** ... and he's on call a lot.

**GE:** Yeah, yeah. You don't have a life necessarily, but the pay is still good on railroading. You know. a hundred thousand dollars a year for most railroad employees is pretty typical.

**KC:** That's pretty good, yeah. Well, is there anything else you would like to talk about?

**Tacoma Community History Project**  
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

**GE:** I think I probably have maxed the course here. I think I gave... I hope I gave you a pretty good snippet about Tacoma and what it was like to be a part of that whole....

**KC:** I'm gonna look more into the history of that McCarver station to kind of tie it all together...

**GE:** You should. McCarver Street represents kind of the gunlock of Tacoma railroading, and it's very much in Tacoma, it's been...it was part of that. In fact, the reason that story came up is it was the hundredth anniversary of McCarver Street, here in April. I called down at the Trib, cause I had a couple of old pictures of it and I said, you know... at first it was interesting because the reporter said no, you know...but then he called back and he says, well, he says... there is no station down there at McCaver Street and I said yeah, I realize it's been gone for fifty-five years and he says, well, everybody up here in the newsroom says they don't even recall ever seeing a station, and I said oh no...that was a big... that was a very important station. Every train had to get one of those before they left Tacoma, or they couldn't leave Tacoma. And there were like forty, fifty trains a day down there and during the war, it was considered a vital link down there that was protected as a key line. Anyway, so this one reporter says I gotta talk to you. [laughs] And I said oh yeah, and I said that's fine. And so we met, and next thing I knew I was on the front page of the News Tribune a month ago. Yeah, with that very hoop right there and so... yeah, it was about the twenty-seventh, twenty-eighth of March when the story ran. And that picture that you saw, my Dad they ran that also in there and they ran a very lengthy story about the.... then they also shot video. If you go to the video lib, I actually operated that for them on a video, you know... if you wanted to take a look at that, that's fine. Yeah, it's an important part of Tacoma and it's history and I'm sure there are other people that can give you some better perspectives too, but probably not much more than me, 'cause I lived it.

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