

VIRGIL STAFF COLLECTION

- Rod McClure, FRRS President

I received a call at home one day in 2005 from the esteemed Virgil Staff. I had met Virgil a few times at WPRRHS conventions and at the Museum when Gail McClure arranged for notable WP authors to attend Railfan Photo Day a few years back. I did not really know Virgil and his wife LaVada well at that point. However, I was well aware that he and my father, Jack McClure, were good friends. Virgil spent a lot of time riding with Dad on the *California Zephyr* between Oakland and Oroville in the late 1960's, filming the trips and tape recording interviews.

Virgil's call was to ask if we were interested in receiving some of the WP archives and materials he had gathered over the years. After a long conversation about the past, I arranged to come to his house and see what he had for us. Gail and I drove to the Bay Area to spend a day with Virgil and LaVada without knowing what was in store for us. Once we arrived, we were treated to a wonderful lunch and lots of conversation about the WP and Virgil's many adventures. In looking around the house, we found it packed with file cabinets containing records and research on the railroad. Pictures of the WP covered the walls and shelves sagged with all manner of books and manuals from the WP.

We had some interesting discussions regarding Virgil's original intent to donate his collection elsewhere. In the past, when he had offered it to the FRRS, he did not receive a good feeling that it would be properly cared for. At that point, he offered all of his WP materials to the FRRS. I promised Virgil that we would handle his priceless collection with the utmost care and safety. Thus began the slow and careful task of moving everything from his house in Berkeley to, at first, the spare bedroom at our house. Part of the deal was that all of his collection would be safely stored in a climate controlled location and that it would be cataloged and secured, with the additional understanding that no part of it would ever be sold or disposed of.

After the second load, our spare room was full. The FRRS Board of Directors, along with Thom Anderson and Dave Pires of the WPRRHS, agreed that we should rent a secure, climate controlled storage room. A 10 ft X 20 ft room at a high security facility was located that met our specifications and the materials moved into it.

Shelving was assembled by Thom and Dave and the room prepped to receive what remained at Virgil's. After about eight more trips to Berkeley, we have now filled that room to bursting with the Virgil Staff Collection. Every time we believed that we had made the last trip, Virgil and LaVada would unveil new treasures for us.

Recently, Virgil took a bad fall at home and broke his hip, requiring him to be in a nursing home for recovery. Virgil has had a rough time bouncing back, but, being the tough guy he is, he has not given up, especially with the help of LaVada. Gail was recently down to see him and lifted his spirits with a home-made cheesecake and some pictures of FRRS equipment for his room. FRRS member George Childs makes regular visits to keep an eye on Virgil for us also.

This outstanding collection is an absolutely fantastic gift to the FRRS and our mission to preserve the history of the WP. In looking at just a random sample from all the boxes and files we have received, the photos and documents are unbelievable. One that stands out to me is a letter regarding the operating of an excursion from Carson City, NV to Portola, CA over the Virginia & Truckee and the Reno Branch. It was outlined in detail, including the use of wood-burning V&T engines and where wood and water would be obtained. I don't believe this ever happened, but at some point I am sure we will publish details in a future *Headlight*. Other items include construction era personnel reports, plans to extend the Tidewater Southern to Bakersfield, the use and testing of UP Turbine locomotives, and a huge number of original AFE's dating back to the 1910's and 1920's. Of special interest to our Steam Department is the last FRA Form 4 on the WP 165 and its condition when put on display. Repair records for the "Silver Hostel" and "Silver Plate" were also noted.

A big thank you goes to Gail McClure, Eugene Vicknair, Thom Anderson, Dave Pires and John Walker for their help in moving and cataloging Virgil's collection. And, of course, our heartfelt and profound thanks to Virgil and LaVada Staff for preserving this WP history and entrusting it to us for the future. Once cataloged, it will provide first hand insights into the history of the railroad and be an invaluable resource for our preservation and research into the WP.

I will keep all of you up to date on Virgil's condition as we hear it.