

Membership Spotlight – Norm Holmes*- Kerry Cochran & old Train Sheet articles*

With the arrival of the NPOAZ (mail, pigs, autos) in Portola Sept. 28, 1987, Union Pacific Engineer and Feather River Rail Society founder Norman Holmes brought his railroad employment to a close. Having reached age 60, and with the incentive of an early retirement separation allowance, Norm figured forty-two years with the railroad was enough.

Norm loved trains and particularly the Western Pacific from as early as he could remember. At age 17, he went to work as a steam watchman in San Jose. As soon as he turned 18 (August 1945) he started on his student fireman trips "covering the road" from Oakland to Portola. His first pay trip as a fireman was on a steam switcher in Stockton, doubling through from an afternoon shift to a midnight job--16 hours. A brief stint in the Army in 1946 cut into his career and when he returned to civilian life he was cut off from his firing job. In 1950 and '51 Norm worked in Portola and Stockton, but it wasn't until 1953



"HAPPY RETIREMENT NORMAN" reads the banner on UP 3369, Norm & Barb (4th & 3rd from right) with all the well wishers that were on hand for his last run 9/28/87.

- photo from Train Sheet issue 27



Norman's accomplice in the creation of the Portola Railroad Museum was none other than WP President Robert G "Mike" Flannery, who became President and Chief Executive Officer of the Missouri Pacific Railroad after the merger. Norman and Mr. Flannery during the donation ceremony of WP 921 in Portola on August 27, 1983.

that year round employment was available. Norm worked switchers and locals in the Bay Area, made 90 round trips as a fireman on the *Zephyr* and was promoted to engineer in 1959.

In 1970 Norm decided to return to Portola with his family. They bought 15 acres of pine forestland, built a home in 1971 and lived there for 31 years. Norm's last assignment was in the freight pool between Portola and Winnemucca--211 miles.

Railroading has been important to Plumas County since the first rails were laid in 1887. Regular passenger was started in 1895 linking residents by rail to the outside world via Reno.

Western Pacific rail were being laid in 1908 with the first passenger train operated through the Feather River Canyon August 22, 1910. It wasn't until the advent of the *California Zephyr* in 1949 that tourists discovered the beauty of Plumas County from the vista-domes of this "most talked about train." While most earlier train schedules traversed the canyon during darkness, the *Zephyr* was scheduled for scenery. Unfortunately jet aircraft cut into passenger train travel and operating costs increased so much that the Western Pacific discontinued passenger on March 22, 1971.



Official grand opening of the Portola Railroad Museum in May 1984.



Norm at the Throttle of WP 921.

Western Pacific was absorbed into the Union Pacific System on December 22, 1982. In an attempt to preserve equipment from the WP, Norm Holmes organized the Feather River Rail Society and arrangements were made with UP to donate a "covered wagon" streamline diesel locomotive for preservation at Portola. The unit was formally presented to the Greater Portola (now Eastern Plumas) Chamber of Commerce at the Feather River Railroad Days in August 1983.

An agreement was reached with the Union Pacific and the City of Portola to lease the abandoned diesel shop to establish a railroad museum. A grand opening ceremony was held on Memorial Day weekend, 1985.

Under Norm's leadership, the museum grew from literally an empty building to what it is today.

In the early days, Norm and his wife Barbara operated the museum gift shop. If you ever needed to find him, you would just go to the gift shop and ask Barbara, she would know where he was at on the museum property. Both Norm and Barbara worked almost every day at the museum; you could find him working on equipment, painting locomotives and everything else that needed doing.

In the 1980's Norm met Ken Roller (Ken passed away 12/31/17), Norm invited Ken to the railroad museum and from that the rest is history.

Norm also wrote several railroad books, one of the more popular books was *My Western Pacific Railroad, An Engineer's Journey*.

In September 2012, Norm found it necessary to move out of Portola, looking for a better location for him and Barbara for health care reasons. They moved to Carson City Nevada, where he still lives today.

Over his career of railroad employment, Norm collected railroad artifacts and memorabilia; he was an avid photographer, taking several hundreds, if not thousands, of photos and slides.

Norm has recently donated his collection to the society and they are now in safekeeping for the membership to view as soon as we get them inventoried.



Norm - August 2019