Membership Spotlight - Don Nelson

I don't know of any family background of railroading. I have always been interested in trains. When I was a child, my older brother had an American Flyer train set and when I got old enough, I got an HO train set. My brother still has a collection of American Flyer stuff set up in a small room in his house.

Where my father worked was next to the Northwestern Pacific line between Eureka and Willits and sometimes when I got to tag along to his work, I got to see the final part of the makeup of trains leaving Eureka and heading south (timetable west).

I became a member of the Northern Counties Logging Interpretive Association (now Timber Heritage Association) in the late 70's. This is where I became exposed to operating big trains (one-to-one), although the operating equipment was not that big, comparatively.

In 1981, the Northern Counties Logging Interpretive Association was invited to participate in the grand opening ceremonies of the California State Railroad Museum in Sacramento. The association took the Bear Harbor No. 1 locomotive and a small redwood log on disconnect trucks for display. This consist also participated one day during the pageant at the roundhouse and turntable where the locomotives, in our case, the entire train, pulled onto the turntable and was rotated around during a musical performance. Most of the time, our consist sat on a track, under steam, and we could operate the front bull gear for demonstration. One of the comments from a hostler of the more famous locomotives said it was cool that we could be operating our locomotive without having to move, as all the tracks were filled up and no one could operate but just once a day when they shuffled everything around for the pageant. One advantage of being part of the crew was I could visit all the locomotives before the crowds arrived.

I was a member of the model railroad club in Eureka when I heard about the Portola Railroad Museum. In the mid 90's, I thought I would check it out. My first trip was to take the rules exam and also do an RAL. Unfortunately, that was all I did the first season. But I was hooked. The next season, I got my feet wet and started getting the training and qualifications. I am now a qualified passenger engineer.

In 2003, I checked out the Roots of Motive Power museum in Willits. They had very limited operations, but it was much closer to home. I went through their training program and became qualified in all the positions including steam fireman and steam engineer. Eventually, the Roots museum installed enough track to have a ¾ mile loop and some side trackage. Basically, a one-to-one model railroad. Unfortunately, they only have scheduled operations three times a year and some training classes where we get to operate. The Roots of Motive Power was an invited guest of the Niles Canyon Railroad for a couple of their Steamfests. Roots took the Mason County #7 2-6-2 saddle-tank locomotive and I got to operate on the Niles Canyon Railroad a few times.

In 2014, I heard the Oregon Coast Scenic Railroad was looking for crew members. Well, this is quite a drive, but from Humboldt County, any serious railroading involved travel. If you want to do railroading, you've got to travel. The first couple of years, I fired on the Curtiss Lumber Co. #2, a 60 ton Heister locomotive. Then Oregon Coast Scenic Railroad put the McCloud #25 2-6-2 65 ton Prairie locomotive on line pulling the regular train. I really like this locomotive. It's the real deal.

In 2018, after a long and very expensive restoration by Oregon Coast Scenic Railroad and many others, the Skookum #7, a 2-4-4-2 71 ton Mallet locomotive moved under it's own power. I got to do some initial training on this locomotive in Oregon. It has since relocated to the Niles Canyon Railroad. The owner of this locomotive is one of the principle members of Roots of Motive Power and I have known him since my participation in that group. I have now become involved with the Niles Canyon Railroad so as to be able to work with the Skookum as much as possible.