LE VERN DRAPER

Union County resident for 87 years

AN ORAL HISTORY

Interviews in July & August, 2002
at his home in Union OR

Interviewer: John Turner

UNION COUNTY, OREGON HISTORY PROJECT
Affiliate of the Oregon Historical Society

2004
(revised from 2003)

UNION COUNTY, OREGON HISTORY PROJECT

An Affiliate of the Oregon Historical Society

A non-profit, tax-exempt corporation formed in 2002

In collaboration with Eastern Oregon University
Cove Improvement Club History Committee
Elgin Museum & Historical Society
Union Museum Society

Purposes

To record & publish oral histories of long-time Union County residents
&
To create a community encyclopedia

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Preface

Much of the history of a place is stored in the memories of people who have lived there. Their stories may be told to family members, but, unless someone makes a special effort to record these stories, they become lost to future generations.

Each of the historical societies in Union County, Oregon has begun to make that effort. Tape recordings exist in several locations, some of them transcribed in written form, others not. A more ambitious and thorough effort seemed necessary so that more of the oral history of Union County could be captured and preserved.

The Union County, Oregon History Project, begun in 2002, is making that more ambitious effort. One of its principal purposes is to collect as many oral histories of older Union County residents as possible and to make them available in both taped and written form. This edited transcript is part of the series of oral histories to be produced by that project.

About the Interviews and This Edited Version

The interviews with LeVern Draper took place at his home in Union. At age 87, Vern walks with a cane but still drives his car. His memory of events and ability to recall details are remarkable.

The interviewer was John Turner, a volunteer with the Union County, Oregon History Project. He completed two one-hour interviews on July 21 and August 9, 2002 with short, follow-up interviews on November 6 & 24, 2002.

Heather Pilling's full transcription (available for research purposes) presents the literal contents of the interview. The edited version presented here differs from the literal transcription in the following characteristics;

- reorganization of content

- deletion of some extraneous comments

- omission of false sentence starts and other normal speech fillers that detract from readability

- normalization of pronunciation and grammar in conformity with standards of written English.

LD designates LeVern Draper's words, *I* the interviewers'.

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Early Years in Union, Oregon

I: When and where were you born?

LD: The 17th of March, 1915 in High Valley. My name was Dick LeVern Draper. My dad's name was just Dick. When I got old enough to vote, they got it all mixed up and the courthouse suggested that I change it to LeVern Dick. That way it didn't mix me up with my dad.

I grew up here at Union and went to school here. I graduated from high school in 1932 in a class of thirty-one. Now only about eight of us are left.

I: When did your grandfather come?

LD: My grandfather came, I think, in 1862. He had a thousand acres in High Valley [a few miles northeast of Union]. At one time he had a dairy and made butter. I don't know how they stored it so it didn't get rancid, but they hauled it by six-horse team and two wagons. They peddled it around the mines up around Cornucopia, Cooprum, [about fifty miles southeast of Union] and Idaho.

After Granddad had the dairy, he had a bunch of sheep. My dad, when he was younger, was more or less the camp tender. Granddad had cattle, the ranch in High Valley, and about two hundred-forty acres, I think, of timberland beyond the breaks of Little Catherine.

I: Did your father take over afterward?

LD: No. You see, after my dad's mother died, Granddad married again, but she only lasted a year. Then he married a third time. Dad would never put out very much information, but there was some friction in Union in 1919. We used to live down in the gulch--what they called the gulch--below Granddad's place--in a little, old, boxcar-like house.

I: How old were you at that time?

LD: Four.

I: Did you start school in Union at the Mayfield School?

LD: No. My folks were strict Seventh-Day Adventists; there was a Seventh-Day Adventist school where the parking lot of the Mormon church is now--on the corner next to Elm. I went through eighth grade there. Then the Depression was on, and Dad wanted to send me to the Gem State Academy, which was a Seventh-day Adventist school in Caldwell, Idaho, but we didn't have the money. So I went to the high school here at Union as a freshman at age thirteen; I graduated when I was seventeen--the youngest and smallest boy in the class. The night I graduated, I didn't weigh one hundred pounds and I wasn't five feet tall. Old Claude Cadwell said, "I got a little guy here for the last diploma." (I was the last one in the class to get my diploma.) I had begun to figure I wasn't going to get one. Then old Claude put his arm around me. I used to shovel snow for him at his hardware store--clean his sidewalk in front of the store for a quarter. That's the way I bought my school supplies. It was the big, square, white house right across from the Methodist Church.

I: You ended up to be 6'3", though.

LD: I'm 6'3" and at one time I weighed two hundred-forty pounds.

I: Did you do any outstanding thing while you were going to high school?

LD: No, I wasn't big enough to be in any of the games or athletics. Sometimes I was water boy for the football team, but that was about it. Just normal school activities. I did play trumpet in the high school orchestra.

Finding Employment

I: When you were in high school, did work at Hot Lake [former sanitorium southeast of La Grande]?

LD: It was after I graduated in 1932. I forgot when W. T. Phy [the doctor who owned the sanitorium] died, but then his son Mark took over. They had a guy there by the name of McPhearson, I think it was--a Seventh-day Adventist. He used to come to the church here at Union. One Saturday night he come to the house--you could hardly find a job doing anything--and he asked me if I wanted to go to work. I said, "Yeah, you bet." He said, "Pack your suitcase. I'd like for you to work as a bellhop--to help clean the lobby, help in the bathhouse, meet the trains, put the mail on the train, carry luggage, and stuff like that." I worked there, I think, about three or four months, and then things started going to pot and they started laying off.

LeVern Draper at graduation from Union High School in 1932
Photo courtesy of Le Vern Draper

Then I got a job working for an old orchardist here by the name of Weaver, who had a prune and cherry orchard. I worked for him until I went to work on the railroad.

Becoming a Railroad Section Hand in Very Cold Weather

I: What was your first job on the railroad?

LD: I went to work on the section the 26th of December in 1936. The snow at Telocaset [nine miles from Union] and on the highway was about to the top of the hill at Telocaset, so the track was plugged from there the rest of the way to North Powder [sixteen miles from Union].

I worked for a Japanese section foreman, George Kobioshi--a nice guy to work for. He never got rough on any of the men. He'd say, "Come on boys, let's do it this way."

We worked twelve-hour shifts. If we worked over twelve hours, we got time and a half. The railroads on the section at that time paid straight time for the first twelve hours. We made some-thing like $2.50 or $3.00 a day in a twelve-hour shift--around 30 or 40 cents an hour.

So that we didn't have to come all the way into Telocaset, he assigned me and another guy from Union to take care of the section of track at Crooks. That's a passing track this side of Telocaset--between Telocaset and Union. Going west, there were Telocaset,

Crooks, Pyle, and Union Junction. We took care of the switches at Crooks. It was the deepest snow I ever saw in this country. The snow at Telocaset was clear up to the cross arms on the telegraph pole.

Telocaset was a helper station at that time. It had a coal chute and a water tank. Some of the engines were coal burners, some oil. A tank car was hooked up to steam to keep the oil hot for the helper engine.

We had to keep the switches open into these tracks and the Y at Telocaset. Several times George would even call some of us into his house, where it was warm, to eat our lunch. Outside, it was ten or twenty degrees below zero.

We ran out of places to plow snow, so the railroad sent a clamshell with a bunch of gondola cars. They loaded six gondolas full of snow from around the depot so we'd have a place to pile more snow. I guess they hauled them off somewhere to sit and let the snow melt out of them. That was the way they got rid of some of the snow. One afternoon in a blizzard, you couldn't see twenty feet in front of you. A fellow we called Red Henry and I were supposed to clean the west switch at Telocaset to let the snow plow out. Plowing down in the storm, they missed a derail, shoved the dozer over the derail, and derailed the front wheel.

In those days they had what they called a re-railing frog. It had sharp points on the bottom edge; when they were put in place, they had to be spiked down with a track spike. One of them had to be underneath to guide the wheel back on the rail. We worked there, getting that thing back on the track for twenty-four to thirty hours. Since train crews could only work so long on account of federal law, they exchanged crews out there.

I: How did you get from one place to the other? On a motor car?

LD: We walked, though several times he'd put me on a train that was going to dead-end at the passing track. My first train ride was from Telocaset to Crooks. I had to clean the switches before a train could head into the passing track at Crooks. The snow had drifted in till the brakeman couldn't throw the switch; they had to stop and wait for me to clean the switches out. The brakeman swept the points, but the section men had to dig the snow out from underneath and clear it back with a shovel. We carried a shovel, a pick, and a broom. We had to pick the ice where they threw the switches because they couldn't throw the switch till we cleaned that ice out between the switch points. George put me on the engine and said, "Vern, you'll have to work by yourself down there. You stay there and work till you're relieved." I think it was along about midnight before another guy showed up. In the meantime, I tried to keep those switches open, walking from one end of the passing track to the other, cleaning the switches.

I: Was the reason for having passing tracks to allow a fast train to go by a train that didn't need to be as fast?

LD: Or opposing trains, like a westbound train meeting one going east. The dispatcher would time them and predict passing time and put out train orders. If it was a superior train, the inferior train would wait at various passing tracks to a certain time on the schedule. They were supposed to clear the opposing train, the superior train, by at least ten minutes.

I: Is it true that, when the war started, Mr. Kobioshi went back to Japan?

LD: No, that isn't true. He was interred in a concentration camp. He never did go to Japan to my knowledge. I think he was a loyal American citizen at that time, the way I understood it.

I saw George in later years when I was working on passenger service out of Portland. A Japanese man grabbed me by the arm, and I about jumped out of my uniform. When I looked around, he said, "Vern, how in the world are you? You don't recognize me?" I didn't. He said, "I'm George Kobioshi." I said, "Where are you going, George?" He said, "I'm going to ride with you tonight." I said, "You're welcome to ride with me anytime you want to."

We had quite a visit. He was going to Payette. After he had gotten out of the internment camp at Nyssa, or Vale, or wherever it was, he acquired a little ranch between Payette and Weiser [all towns in Idaho]. He raised onions and sugar beets. He said, "I tell you, I'm much better off now than I was carrying a pick and shovel on the railroad."

Initial Work as a Railroader

LD: There was a conductor named Bill Driskell who came out; he was my first wife's aunt's husband. George K. told another guy and me to go in the caboose and get warm, dry our gloves, and try to get dried off a little bit. Bill said, "Vern, what are you doing wallowing around out there like a damned hog in the snow? If you want to work on the railroad, why don't you go to train service?" I said, "I didn't know how to get in, Bill." He was the one that helped me. I talked to George, and he give me a transfer from maintenance to transportation service. I hired out on the road the 21st of February, 1937.

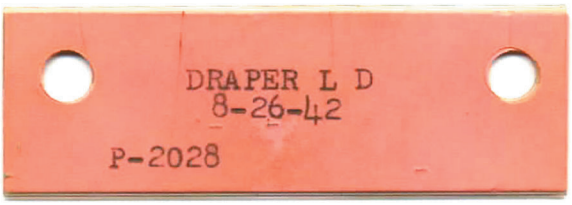
I: Was that the date that determined your seniority on the railroad?

LD: My seniority date was established the 13th of March, 1937. Then they got another slump and I was cut off. I was on the board [a place where each worker's nametag was placed on a hook, in priority order, for the purpose of assignment to crews]. I got up to take an out [i.e., assignment to a crew] and got cut off. I couldn't work again till the summer of '39.

Interim Work as a Bulldozer Operator

LD: I worked for ranchers driving a Cat [Caterpillar bulldozer] and whatever job I could find. When I got cut off the railroad in '39, I went to work for Burt Shelton in a logging camp, driving Cat and then as a grease monkey. I worked at Pondosa [21 miles southeast of Union]. That was when Pondosa was still a very active mill; they had a big gyppo contract out there opposite Thief Valley highway at what I think they called Fisher's place. That gyppo contractor got the job logging that area. I worked for him until he shut down; I had four V8 Cats and six trucks that I'd grease, service, and fuel up.

I: Would you explain what a gyppo is?



Vern's nametag for the "board"
Original courtesy of Le Vern Draper

LD: A gyppo is more or less a contractor, who bids on a job for logging so much timber. The logs are all figured on an estimated scale by a guy called a scaler. His scaling stick, called a dipple stick, gives a fairly close estimate, using markings at eight, ten, twelve, and sixteen feet, I think. But a lot of times the logs don't saw out, or maybe they saw out a little more than what the scale says, depending on the length of it.

In those days most all logs were cut sixteen feet, six inches so that, when the lumber went through the edger in the mill, which took the bark off, it then went out on the greenchain, where saws cut it exactly to sixteen feet.

Beginning Long-term Work with the Railroad

LD: I was called back to the railroad in July of '41. I worked, I think, six weeks and got cut off again. After two weeks, I was called back again.

As the younger men came on the board, they'd assign us to an outside point. I was assigned to Reith Pendleton [a railroad yard two miles west of Pendleton, used for car storage, switching cars, and icing reefers--now called Pendair]. I switched in the Reith Pendleton yard from the latter part of August of '40 till February or March of '41 before I had seniority enough to get back to La Grande.

I: What did a full train crew consist of?

LD: A full crew on the main line included a conductor, a flagman, and two brakemen. In those days, whenever a train stopped, if it wasn't on the passing track, the rules were that the flagman would go back and protect the rear end of the train; he'd go back a half mile and place two torpedoes. A torpedo was a little piece of powder in a device that clipped on the rail. If he wasn't recalled by his engineer, he'd proceed on back another three-quarters of a mile and place two more torpedoes. Then he could return to the first torpedoes and wait there until relieved or called in by an engineer. The engineer called him in, if the flagman was east of the train, with five long blasts of the whistle. If he went to the west, he'd give four longs. They said the reason for that was there were more people in the east than in the west so that they whistled more to get them to come in from the east.

Work as a Flagman

LD: It was an interesting job. I have worked as a flagman quite a bit. In handling the trains off the hill from Kamela toward Pendleton and Kamela toward La Grande, we used to use a retaining valve to help the engineer maintain constant air pressure. It held ten pounds of air against the brake cylinder so that, if the engineer had to release his brakes to recharge the train line, he still had some brake against the train to stabilize his speed until he could make another application. We used to stop first at Meacham to cool the wheels for ten minutes and then again at the passing track called Huron, seven miles down the track.

One night in a snowstorm, the engineer whistled me out. Whenever he stopped and wanted to protect the rear end of the train, the engineer whistled one long blast and three short ones. I'd go out for about five to ten minutes while they looked the train over. If everything was all right, usually we'd go again in ten minutes. They called me

in, and, when I turned to come in, there was a helper locomotive coming down the hill behind us. I left three torpedoes and a red fusee [warning devices, called flares when used on highways] on the track.

When I lit the fusee, I saw a flash of eyes down the track toward the caboose. I had a little white lantern, so I could see it was an animal. When I got there, a cougar had come around the back of the train and walked in my tracks--followed me clear out about thirty or forty feet behind me when I stopped to put the torpedoes on the track. I lit an-other fusee and threw it at the animal. The cougar jumped out of the track and went down into Meacham Creek. I looked where he had stepped in my tracks; I could lay the palm of my hand right in his track and see the front of his track all the way around my hand.

I: He was a big cougar!

LD: When I got back to the caboose, I hollered at the conductor, Denny Dougherty, "Hey, Denny, come here. I want to show you something." "What do you want?" I said, "Get down here before I get my highball [a hand signal, meaning proceed]. I want to show you something." We could see where this cougar had come up along the side of the train, stopped at the step of the caboose, walked around the caboose in between the rails, and followed my tracks out when I went flagging. It was in the middle of the night, but I wasn't scared. I'd gotten left down there several times, but that was one time that I actually saw the animal when I threw the light of a red fusee at it.

Fusee, a kind of flare, used as an emergency signal by railroaders
Photo by Eugene Smith

I: What year was this?

LD: Probably in '46, '47, when we still had steam engines. I think we got the steam diesels in '51 or '52. When diesels were first being introduced, the train might need additional power. It might have two or three diesel units plus a steam engine on the head end or at the rear of the train as a helper; each would have its own crew.

Work as a Fireman on Steam Engines

LD: I enjoyed really enjoyed riding on the old steam engines, called mikes. They were noisy and dirty. Some of them were still hand-fired when I went to work in '37. My problem was that I always worked right-handed with a shovel, and that put my rear end over in the engineer's face and he didn't like that. He wanted to make me turn the other way, but then I couldn't hit the fire door with the shovel.

I: Did the brakemen have to shovel?

LD: We did. When going up a hill, a fireman would throw a shovel full of coal in; it would go "poof, poof," and it was gone. It wasn't anything to go through thirteen or fourteen tons of

coal from Union to Telocaset. Some of the engines had stokers; some didn't. But the stokers were good because the fireman could pile the coal up in the back of the firebox and then take a big, long poke and break that pile down and push it to the round [a pile over the grate] in the firebox. It would heat evenly and keep the steam up. Otherwise, if he got too much piled up back there, it wasn't hot enough to keep the steam up.

Technical Aspects of Steam Engines

I: Someone asked me what a Mallet [pronounced MAL-ee] was. Could you explain?

LD: A mallet was two engines in one. The original Mallets were called sleds. The front engine was a scavenger engine because the hot steam went to the back engine, and then, when the cylinders on the back engine exhausted, the gases would go into a chamber in the front engine. The cylinders on the front engine were about one and a half times the size of the ones on the back engine. About thirty-five to forty miles an hour was their top speed.

I: That would run the drivers?

LD: Yes. They claimed that was cold steam running the front drivers. They had a valve or a kind of throttle so that, if they needed a little more steam in the front, they'd open that valve, which was called the Blue Goose because it was usually painted blue.

As I remember, they had converted most of those old sleds to oil burners by the time I went to work. When they converted them, they said they "simpled" the engine [that is, a means of increasing efficiency]. The front engine was on an oscillating plate so that, when the engine was going around a curve, the front engine would turn under the front of the engine and the boiler would still stick out straight as it came around the curve. With this oscillating plate, the engine would go back and line up with the boiler on the straight and level track. Most of them were what they called 2400- or 2880-type engine: two pony trucks, four drivers, and no trailing trucks behind.

I: That was the size of the engine?

LD: Yes. The other engines were the 3500 and the 3800 series. The 3500 had fifty-one-inch drivers. The 3800 had sixty-six-inch drivers, or five and a half feet. The old engines carried about 190,200 pounds of steel. Some of the 3800s carried 320,000 pounds of steel; some didn't have quite that much, but they were a faster engine than the 3500.

Vern and a Mallet [pronounced MAL-ee] steam engine, ca. 1942
Photo courtesy of Le Vern Draper

I: Until finally they came out with a 9000, wasn't it?

LD: The 9000 engine was a 2-12-2, I think: that's two pony trucks, twelve drivers, and two trailing trucks. The 9000 had three cylinders. The two hot cylinders were on the side; the front driver had a connecting rod and a cylinder in between that was underneath the engine, in between the rails--a scavenger cylinder. After the steam exhausted from the main drive, the cylinders outside would activate the third cylinder inside. It was bigger in diameter than the ones on the outside.

The front drive shaft was like a big crank. The center cylinder sat up even with the front of the boiler. It was a really rigid engine--rigid enough that it could knock the track out of line. They did run it in here a time or two, but we had too many curves that were over eight degrees, especially between here and Huntington and also west of La Grande, and it knocked all the curves out, so they had to regauge a lot of the track.

When the outside temperature was cold, all you could see was the headlight and steam coming out of those things as they'd come out of the roundhouse at Huntington. You could hear the 9000s coming into Huntington, once they came across the Snake River, all the way up the river into the yard. They made a funny kind of "ch-choo, ch-choo" each time they exhausted.

Huntington was a division; at one time this wasn't Union Pacific but the Oregon-Washington Railroad & Navigation Company. We worked on this end under the old OWR & N rules and special instruction. The Oregon Short Line was from Glenn's Ferry to Huntington. We always designated that they were the Short Line and we were the OW. In those days they used only steam engines.

Those engines had a lubricating system that, as the cylinders worked back and forth, tripped a little trigger-like device that squirted oil out of the lubricators onto the glide rod, where the side rod was connected to the piston. The 9000s were all on the short line. Here they used the 2-10-2s on passenger trains; I believe they were a seventy-two-inch driver. They were really slippery engines; the wheels would spin on the rail when they were trying to start, but, once they got going, they could really keep rolling.

I: What was about the biggest size that they could run?

LD: The 3800 and 3900. They tried to bring in 4000; that was a big boy that worked out of Cheyenne--the biggest steam engine made. They got it to Huntington and didn't have any problem, but when they started to come west of Huntington it wouldn't go through the tunnel at Weatherby [about two hundred yards long, with a curve, east of Baker City]. The air pump and everything was out on the front of the engine--a 4884-type engine. If I remember right, that's an eight-degree curve in the tunnel at Weatherby. They started through with an official riding on the running board to see. When they got about half way into the tunnel, the front of the engine oscillated but the boiler wouldn't. They didn't have clearance enough to go on through and had to back out. They had to build a special track, a Y, at Huntington to get the thing turned around so it could go back to the short line.

That was the only time that they ever

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5000 class steam engine
Photo courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens

7000 class steam engine
Photo courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens

9000 class steam engine
Photo courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens

brought a 4000 here. The 3900s, I think, were eighty-one-inch drivers, used on passenger trains like the Portland Rose, till they brought the 800s--called the 8444 now. It had eighty-one-inch drivers and was a 484-type engine.

I was on a cherry train one time when John Ward [engineer] was on an 8400. Going across Baker Flat, I clocked him one hundred and two miles an hour. That engine was riding like a rocking chair--just bobbing along. He started slowing down about five or six miles out of Baker so he could take water at Baker.

Railroading during World War II

I: Tell me about the conditions of working for the railroad during World War II.

LD: We had a lot of troop trains. Business picked up. When we were called to work, we figured it would be sixteen hours before we got to the other end of the line.

We worked by train order. The dispatcher had so many trains to move as best he could. Sometimes we'd sit in the passing track for three or four hours, waiting for opposing traffic to go by.

The chief dispatcher would get a notice, or line-up, out of Omaha or Pocatello. This way they knew the number of trains they were going to run that day. Each train was designated by a number or a symbol.

I: At the beginning of the war, weren't there armed guards on all the railroad bridges in case of saboteurs?

LD: Yes. The armed guards were like guards in the service, I guess. They were supposed to control the bridges and tunnels. The Weatherby tunnel had a guard at each end. The tunnel between Telocaset and North Powder had guards, as well as the tunnel between Meacham and a passing track called Huron down the Meacham Creek west of Meacham [near the western edge of the Blue Mountains, east of Pendleton]. Right out of La Grande and at Hilgard, where there were bridges, there were guards. Most of them were colored guys, and they were tough.

In those days, they had rock fences where there was a chance of rock slides. If a rock came down and pulled the plug on the fence, it held the block signal on the train and we'd have to stop. If it was a yellow semaphore block, we could go on by at reduced speed. But if it was a red one, we had to stop. Then the brakeman on the head end would have to walk ahead of the train to see if there was an obstruction on the track, such as a broken rail or one of the rock fences that had fallen.

One night, after leaving Meacham, we had a red block come up just as we started to leave. I had to flag the block down the canyon toward Huron. When I got down to the bridge--in those days we wore a brakeman badge on our hats so that they knew we were railroad employees--a guard wasn't going to let me walk across that bridge. I told him, "According to our rules and regulations, I have to." I had to produce evidence in addition to my badge on my hat that I was a brakeman; I even had to show my brakeman card, my watch card, and anything that pertained to the

job to certify that I was a brakeman. He didn't let me go by myself; he walked across the bridge and through the tunnel with me.

I: If one of those lines had gone out, wouldn't it have tied up the transportation from Omaha to Portland?

LD: It would have tied traffic up in every direction because the dispatchers might put out a flat meet. For example, a train leaving Meacham would meet an eastbound train at Huron; an order would state that #257 will meet #260 at Huron; #260 couldn't leave there until we showed up. That's a flat meet. If something went wrong, such as our breaking in two or a guard not letting a brakeman go through the tunnel, it would be delayed. The train might have to sit there three or four hours with a lot of freight that should be moving and would delay other trains. It was imperative that we tried to make the meets as close as possible.

La Grande's Importance to Transcontinental Traffic

I: Is it true that La Grande's location, with hills either way coming out of La Grande, kept the railroad division point in La Grande?

LD: That's right because we worked both ways out of La Grande. We worked at chain-gang freight service--first in and first out. Supposing I came in from the east part of the state. I'd go to the bottom of the board. As they called the crew, I'd move up, and the next crews that came in would go on the board behind us. Maybe I'd go west toward Reith and Hinkle the next trip. We never knew which way we were going to go until we were called. La Grande was a definite terminal at that time. The hours and service would hardly ever let us double on through La Grande, except in a case of emergency.

I: How many hours could you work?

LD: Almost every trip was sixteen hours.

Working with La Grande Yard Staff

I: When you were working out in La Grande you knew Leo Miller?

LD: When I was first hired out in 1937, Leo was in charge of the board as head manifest clerk. In those days they weren't handling that many trains. He was in charge of calling the crews, sending out a call boy [the call boy, a man, notified crew members of an assignment] or giving him instructions. Leo was in charge of how we were called to go either west or east.

I: When you were called, how much time did you have, generally, before you had to be on the train?

LD: Usually, we had about an hour.

I: They had the regular board and the extra board?

LD: Yes.

I: The extra board was used to fill the spaces for men laid off the regular board.

LD: In those days the crew consisted of a conductor and three brakemen--the head brakeman, the swing [or fill-in] brakeman, and a flagman. In the early days of railroading, a brakeman carried a brake club, about three feet long and shaped like a baseball bat, which he used as a lever to assist the engineer

in braking the train. The engine crew was an engineer and a fireman. The rules of the railroad--and also the state law--required a flagman to protect the rear end of the train. The flagman had to have at least six months' experience in Oregon to work as a flagman on a train.

Later on, as business picked up, the railroad made Leo chief manifest clerk. Dick Lindsey was assistant manifest clerk, working under Leo. By the way, Dick used to have a dance band that played for Union's Saturday night dances and at the old Zuber Hall [in La Grande].

Leo was in charge of assigning clerks to different jobs in the office--calling crews, the manifest of trains, and supplies like switch lists. We called them wheelers--lists of all the cars, the engine, and the conductor's and engineer's names--for each train that was handled through the yard. If a train was switched or made up, this wheeler was made up from La Grande to Huntington, say. It had several lines; for the train crew that handled it from La Grande to Huntington, the conductor would fill out "La Grande to Huntington" and sign the engineer's name and his name to it.

I: Who was in charge of the train?

LD: The engineer was in charge of the engine; the conductor was in charge of the train, and his word was law on how trains moved. If there was any delay, the conductor had to make an accurate report of delays or anything that happened.

I: Wasn't there was a demerit system?

LD: Yes. If you got thirty demerits, you stood to be pulled out of service unless they pulled some of the demerits off. If we were cut off for over six months, we had to take the exam to go back to work.

Performance Tests

I: What were some of the tests like?

LD: One was called a red lantern test. The official would put two torpedoes--the clamp-on device with powder in it--on the track a half mile from the lantern. When the engine hit it, it would explode. The official would go back one and a half miles from where the lantern was, because of the speed of the train going downhill, and place two more torpedoes. A lot of times you couldn't get stopped in a mile and a half. It depended on how the engineer could handle the air or what had taken place before we hit the furthest away torpedoes.

Sometimes the officials made mistakes. I almost got fired one time. At the top of the hill east of Baker, where it breaks off to go east toward Huntington and Idaho and west into Baker, we cut out our helper at Encina and started down the hill.

When the official used a red lantern, he was supposed to leave a note on the lantern that said, "This lantern must be replaced; then you may proceed at restricted speed"--which was fifteen miles an hour for the first mile. As we came around a curve, this red lantern was sitting at the edge of the track. Bill, the engineer, saw it first and went to emergency. As fast as we were rolling, it took awhile for the train to stop. We passed by the light.

If it had been a legal test, all of us would have been fired. As soon as the

train slowed down enough so I could be dropped off, I walked back to the light. There was no note on it.

I saw a car sitting over on the highway. I just wound up and I threw that lantern just as far as I could throw it over the top of the train. It made a beautiful red light going out across there.

When we went into Baker, I cut the engine off and Bill went to the water tank. The train master's name was Lee Carroll. He said, "Draper, you're fired. Get off the property. You can't even ride the train into La Grande. You'll have to get home anyway you can." I said, "Thank you, Lee." The general superintendent, M. C. Williams, who was with him, stood there and listened. When Carroll went into the telegraph office to call another brakeman to take my place, I started over to the restaurant to get something to eat. Mr. Williams called me and he said, "Just a minute, Draper. I want to talk to you." He said, "Why did you throw that lantern over the train?" I said, "Mr. Williams, if you don't know, I'm not going to tell you." He stood there and he looked at me for a minute. He said, "You're not out of service. Wait till I get hold of Carroll." He called Carroll out of the office and told him, "You're not going to fire Draper. I've got a notion to fire you." Boy, old Lee reared up and said, "He destroyed company property, and they got by the light without stopping." Mr. Williams said, "Carroll, you put Draper back to work right now." He turned to me and he said, "You go over to the restaurant and get a meal. I'll be over there in a little bit."

Carroll said, "Why are you putting him back to work?" He said, "That wasn't a fair test." He said, "First thing, you didn't put out any torpedoes to warn that train that that red light was on the track. Second, you never put a message on that lantern as to how it was to be handled. I don't blame Draper for throwing that lantern over the train. I would have, too."

Job Insurance

I: Is that why all you railroaders had job insurance? So you had somebody that fought for you to get your job back?

LD: That's right. I took job insurance out quickly after that. In the 40 years I worked, I drew job insurance twice--once for derailment and the other for a breakage.

I: Was it serious when you get fired but not **that** serious because they looked around for somebody to blame?

LD: Oh, yes! They always had to hand down. Maybe I shouldn't say this, but I felt that a lot a times some of things that the officials pulled went beyond the book of rules and also their test standard.

LD: I was stuck there till they cut me off, and I bumped back on the chain gang.

Seniority

I: Was that where seniority came in?

LD: Your seniority let you place yourself on some job that a lesser seniority man was on. You selected a job that you wanted to try and get on, and then, if you had seniority, you made application to be put on there. They called it bumping. When I got cut off, I checked the board, and I couldn't hold a branch job [one off the main line] so I couldn't bump there.

I: Was seniority, then, very important for you to continue working?

LD: Seniority and time were the most important things on the railroad.

Taking Tests in the Rule Car

LD: Let me tell you about the rule car, where each of us had to take the book-of-rules examination every two years. The trainmen and conductor had to take an examination that usually lasted about an hour, in two sessions. One session was on the book of rules; the other was on train orders. They used a projector to throw a schedule on a screen or they'd throw a train order at us and require us to explain what we could do with that train order.

For example, we had to explain whether we could make it to the next station or whether we should stay in a previous station. If a train was superior [i.e., took precedence over other trains], it would wait, say, at Hot Lake, to a certain time. If it wasn't there at the designated time and we were in the passing track, we couldn't leave.

In the rules car they wanted to make sure that the train crews and the engineers understood how to read and interpret the orders--what they could do and what they couldn't do.

When I came out of the rules car, the crew dispatcher said, "The train master wants to see you upstairs." I thought, "Oh, boy, now what've I done?" I went up there, and in walked in Ben Johnson, the assistant superintendent. He said, "Draper, do you want to be a passenger conductor?" I said, "I tried to learn what I could, and I guess if I had a chance I could learn it." He said, "We'll fix it so you can learn it. You're assigned as a ticket conductor on a passenger train."

Assignment as a Conductor

LD: They gave me a letter. I was to make two trips with a guy named Mahoney that was on the Portland Rose. He handled the Pullman section of the train, and Mel Gallberts had the coach section. I was to learn coach work, and then I was to make one round trip on the Streamliner. I had to make nine trips all together. He said, "You make a time slip just like you were working. When you complete it, bring your letter and the time slips to me and I'll OK them."

I was the youngest '37 man. In those days, you had to have five years to be promoted to a conductor. When they promoted to conductor, they promoted down; that included me in 1942. The passenger train business had picked up because of the war; there so many passengers that one conductor couldn't handle everything. A passenger coach was supposed to seat forty-eight people, but, after I had learned a little about conductor work, a lot of times we'd have sixty or seventy people in one car.

I started out on The Idahoan. It came out of Pendleton at 1:00 in the afternoon, and I'd work it until we met Section 17, which was the coach section of the Portland Rose. Wherever we met, they had to stop and let me off to get on the other train, and then I'd work back to Pendleton. That didn't work out too well because it took all the time of two conductors to check a train just from Huntington. We had to check every passenger going into Pendleton because Pendleton was a division point, and there were so many

soldiers and sailors. Walla Walla had an Army base, Pendleton had an Army base, and Farragut had the Navy base. We had to make sure everybody was checked, and anybody going to Spokane or up that way got their ticket back. Several times I found passengers riding in the ladies' or men's lounge with a ticket that didn't have a punch mark in it. They'd come all the way from St. Louis or Kansas City on the train and had never been checked, but we had to check everyone.

Many a time, I punched the last ticket while we were going by the hospital at Pendleton. Then I'd have to sit in the train for maybe forty-five minutes or an hour, making out my passenger count and report to go to Omaha. It was really a workout. The older conductors got off from it because it was tough and they could make more money on freight. Every trip was sixteen hours, so they were making the maximum amount that they could make every trip.

Becoming Eligible for Military Draft

LD: When I was assigned a passenger slot, I was single and had been reclassified 1A [the most vulnerable military-draft category] by the draft board. I thought, from my experience in driving a Cat and trucks, I could get on with the Seabees [a military branch that involved building airfields and other such projects] and get a pretty good rating. So I laid off and went to Portland because there was no recruiter in Pendleton. The Navy recruiter said, "Yeah, you bet, but you gotta be cleared through your draft board."

When they classified a man, the draft board had to notify his employer; my draft board notified the railroad that I was put in 1A. Where I was working on passenger--and I worked steadily--I didn't lay off. I hardly ever laid off. I was taught, when you went on a job, you worked the job, and that's the way I always tried to work.

The Navy said, "It'll be eight to ten days before you know whether you get to go or not." After I came home and tried to set things up so I could go, I got a card from the draft board: "4A for the duration with no reclassification." The Navy turned me down. I was frozen to the job on passenger service.

I worked as a passenger conductor for about three years--till the war was over, anyway. Of course, when the war was over, that broke that freeze, but I couldn't hold anything but chain-gang freight [the method of moving nametags up on the board, resembling

The rule car at the La Grande depot
Photo courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens

a chain gang] as a brakeman. I couldn't bid off the passenger job as a conductor back to a brakeman job.

Wartime Rationing

I: During the war, did you experience any difficulty with rationing?

LD: No. There was a lot of stuff that was scarce, of course, but I was single and ate in a restaurant most of the time then. It didn't have much of an effect on me, though I couldn't go into a restaurant and order a steak or anything like that. Usually I got fish or maybe once in a while some chicken. The restaurants had a lot of fish, for some reason or other.

I: Weren't shoes rationed?

LD: When I was on passenger service, I had to wear polished dress shoes all the time. To get dress shoes was sometimes a problem; I had to go to the ration board and get a slip to get shoes.

I: If you had a car, about how much gas were you allowed?

LD: Five gallons of gas a month, I think. I had an A-stamp [the lowest category of allowable gasoline; B-stamps allowed ten gallons; C-stamps allowed fifteen] and parked my car most of the time. Once in awhile somebody would have a little extra gas or get a little bootleg gas. I didn't have time to use it for anything else.

Railroad Time-keeping

I: Speaking of time, I think every railroader carried a railroad watch.

LD: My watch was a 992 Hamilton. I still have it. I carried it for forty-one years. There were standard clocks in all the stations that would be electrically set from the national observatory in Washington, D.C. at 12:00 noon, 9:00 a.m. here. When we went to work, we had to check our watches with the standard clock and sign on the register that we had checked our watch and that it was within ten seconds of the standard time.

I got my watch from Jack Peare, the designated watchmaker in La Grande. He had a standard clock that was set the same as the railroad clock. Every fifteen days, we had to go in and have him check our watches to make sure that they were within ten seconds of the standard time. If we missed a fifteen-day watch check, it was thirty demerit marks. If we got too many demerit marks, we might get pulled out of service. I lucked out. I got only one set of thirty demerit marks when I'd been on a work train and couldn't get in to have my watch checked. When I explained where I was, I had to go upstairs and tell the trainmaster; he pulled the demerit marks off.

Vern's gold railroad watch, for which he paid $5 down and a total of $62;
still runs after sixty-five years
Photo by Eugene Smith

Time on the railroad was a very important thing. If your watch was off and you missed one of those meets that had a time wait on it or if you didn't get in the clear for a passenger train, you could get pulled out of service.

A Snowslide at Meacham and Everlasting Gratitude

LD: Here's a story about one of the last winters that we had very deep snow at Meacham--1945 or '46. The snow was somewhere between eight and twelve feet deep on the level there. The highway looked like a canal, where it had been plowed.

I was called to go out on a railroad snowplow from La Grande to keep the track open. Along toward the later part of January, we had a warm-up thaw--half snow and half rain. We had plowed down to a station called Duncan, where there was a Y, so that we could turn and plow back up to Kamela.

While we were there, the operator came out and said, "The trainmaster wants you back at Meacham. A snow slide has come down." Below Meacham about a mile is the High Bridge. The track out of Meacham is on the south side of Meacham Creek; High Bridge crosses over and puts the track on the north side of Meacham Creek. The slide was about a mile below Meacham.

The trainmaster's name was Howard Burnett; he had just been promoted to trainmaster. He was a good official and eager to see this snow slide. We took turns on the caboose: one brakeman would put on his warm clothes and be outside for about an hour, while the others rode in the caboose; then we'd trade.

It was my turn after I'd been working outside, throwing switches. I rode the rear end of the caboose as we backed down the hill from Meacham to hit this snow slide. It was probably around 10:00 or 11:00 at night. We didn't see it till we were right into it. When the snowplow stopped, Howard jumped off the caboose. I told him, "Look out, there might be a hole in that snow." As he went up over the top of that slide, I saw his flashlight disappear.

Following his tracks, I had gone probably eight or ten feet when I saw the reflection of his flashlight in the snow. I couldn't quite reach him, so I smashed the snow down and dug it back with my hand until I got hold of his hand and pulled him out. His glasses were full of snow; he could hardly see. When I got him in the caboose, he said, "By golly, Vern, that was worse than I thought. You saved my life. I thought I was done for. If you hadn't followed me, I would have been there when they plowed the snow out."

Through the years it didn't make any difference where along the railroad I ran into Howard Burnett. He always came over and shook hands with me and passed the time of day. His wife and mine had worked as telegraphers and were friends.

The last time I saw Howard was when I was on passenger out of Portland. He had gone up the ladder to vice-president of operations out of Omaha. He had his own private car, his own chef and waiter, traveling in a luxurious style. When I got to Union Station from where we went to work, here were officials, all walking around stiff-legged. When the train pulled in and Howard got off, he completely ignored all those officials, had a great big smile

on his face, shook hands with me, and told me how good it was to see me.

His wife, Evaline, asked about my wife and how she was. She shook hands and give me a big hug. The other officials looked at me as if to say, "What in the world has he got that we haven't got?"

Racial Discrimination in Huntington OR

I: Did you notice that in Huntington some restaurants had signs that suggested racial discrimination?

LD: The signs were "All white help," but they used to feed the porters. They wouldn't hire any colored people to work in the restaurant. At one time the railroad had the Beanery in the depot at Huntington; it was operated by the railroad's dining-car and hotel department. The porters and everybody ate in there at that time. When I first went to work on the railroad, the Beanery was one of the best places along the road to eat. The food was good and well prepared. Most of the cooks in the restaurant had been dining-car chefs.

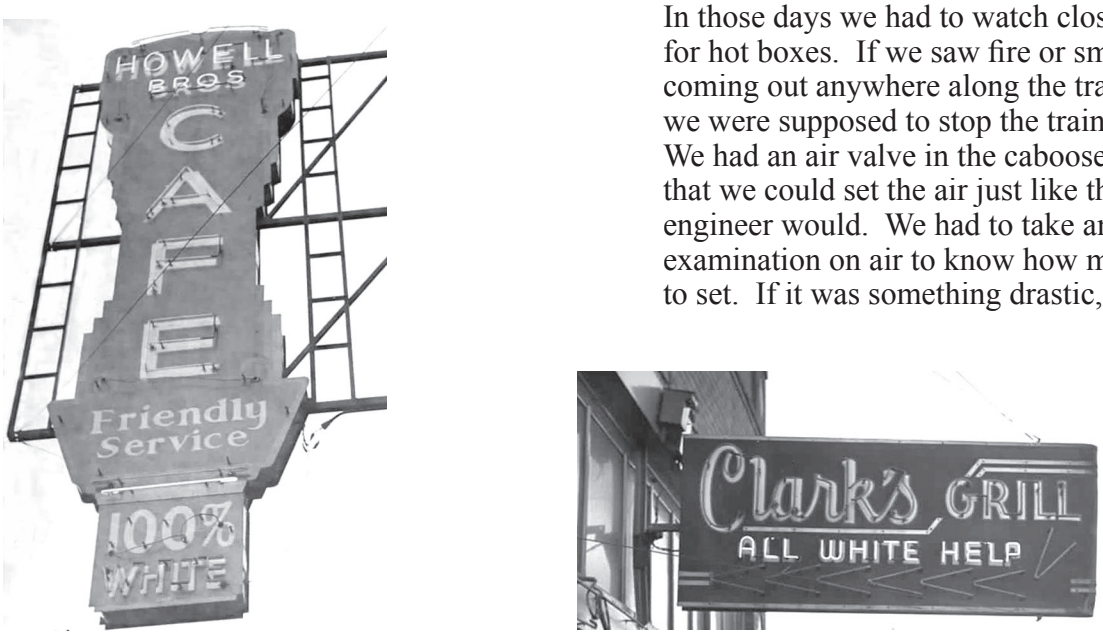
The Pullman porters went all the way through. The chair car porters would get off at Huntington; the ones that come on the Portland Rose east would work the Portland Rose back into Portland. I can't ever remember them not feeding the chair-car porters.

More about Cabooses

I: There are no longer cabooses on freight trains. What were the purposes of a caboose when they were in use?

LD: That was our home away from home. We had our beds and all our work clothes for any kind of weather. It was a place for the crew to ride on the back end. The cupola had a seat on each side; the conductor usually occupied one side and the flagman the other.

In those days we had to watch closely for hot boxes. If we saw fire or smoke coming out anywhere along the train, we were supposed to stop the train. We had an air valve in the caboose, so that we could set the air just like the engineer would. We had to take an examination on air to know how much to set. If it was something drastic,



Cafe signs in Huntington OR empasizing a racist attitude, 1940s
Photo courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens

we opened the valve wide and put the train to emergency and waited till it stopped.

I: How did you communicate with the engineer from the caboose?

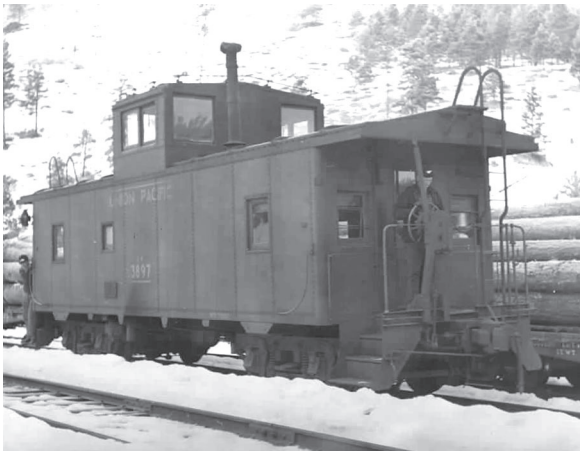
LD: By hand signals, provided by the rule book. If you moved your arm, or your lantern, in a circle, that was "back up." If you wanted to go ahead, you raised your hand up and down. If you wanted him to stop, you moved your hand back and forth down low.

I: How do you get the engineer's attention to see a hand signal?

LD: We usually busted the air hose and put the train to emergency to wake him up!

I: But if things were going normally, you couldn't signal him because he wouldn't be looking around to see the signal, would he?

LD: Engineers and brakemen were required by the rules to look back every so often to make sure that everything was OK.



Steel caboose (replaced wooden caboose)
Photo courtesy of John Turner & Richard Hermens

Return to Freight on the Joseph Branch

LD: When they pulled the passenger trains after the war, I had enough seniority to go on the branch line from La Grande to Joseph--a local run. I bid a job on the Joseph branch. It was a traveling switch engine. After we worked out there awhile, we knew what the shipper wanted and how they wanted their cars spotted and set up. We'd get officials out there who tried to get it otherwise; they got us in dutch with the foreman of the Bates Lumber sawmill in Wallowa or Boise Cascade in Joseph. At the time it was one of the best jobs--six days a week and one day off.

JT: Did you go up and come back in the same day?

LD: To start with. Then they changed it to going up one day and back the next because there got to be so much business. Several times we came in with seventy-five or eighty cars of lumber. Harris Pine in Pendleton was shipping between eighteen and twenty cars of logs out of Joseph every day.

Also, they used to ship black marble out of Enterprise to Union Carbide to make flashlight batteries. A lot of times we'd leave Joseph with twenty-five or thirty cars and pick up five cars of black marble in Enterprise.

Grain growers were shipping wheat from Lostine, and at Wallowa we'd get a bunch of sheep that needed to be loaded out at lambing time.

Bates also had a little sawmill at Lookinggglass [near Elgin]. We'd take empties from Wallowa to Lookingglass, switch them out there, and the

next morning pick them up to take them back to Wallowa.

I: Did you ever let any fishermen off and then pick them up coming back?

LD: Yes. We'd load them on a flat car. We even loaded people that were going to drift the river--stopping at Rondowa and helping them unload their boats and get in the water. We didn't travel very fast; ten to fifteen miles an hour was about all the track would allow. The fishermen we'd dropped off from Rondowa up toward Vincent and Minam, would be looking for us. We'd alert them with a whistle coming down through the canyon, pick them up, and bring them back to Elgin.

I: Great time!

LD: Oh yes. During hunting season, we'd load a bunch of hunters on the flat car with their camping outfits. I did that a lot of times. We unloaded them wherever they wanted to get off, and they'd stay out there all hunting season. We hauled a lot of elk and deer out of there.

A Little Girl and a Doll

LD: Another memory I have of the Joseph branch line is about a little girl. Her folks had bought a piece of ground about a hundred yards off from the railroad track and about a mile and a half from Enterprise toward Joseph. They had moved a house onto a foundation and had it set up early in the fall. While they were getting it finished, they had a fire that destroyed part of the house.

The little girl--her name was Gale Ashenbrenner--would always wave at us when we went by at night. It didn't make any difference what time of night; if she heard that train, we'd see a flashlight at her window. In the mornings, she'd be out on the porch, waving at us when we went by.

In the Brunswick Café at Elgin, where we often ate, there was a bride doll on a punch board. We asked the lady who worked there how much that doll was worth. "Oh, I can't sell it," she said. "It's on the punch board." We asked how much was on the punch board. We punched out the whole board, but the number for the doll wasn't on it. The lady was bewildered about it and said, "I don't know what I'm gonna do." So we talked it over. The six of us on the crew told her we'd give her $30 for the doll and why we wanted it. She wrapped this doll up and tied it beautifully when we picked it up.

The day before Christmas we went to Joseph and started back early Christmas morning. Dave Rose was the engineer and I was one of the brakemen. When we got down to there where these folks lived, some of the other guys acted like they were afraid they'd get in trouble. So I carried the doll out and handed it over the fence to little Gale and her father. She was four or five years old. As she ran across that field, with snow eight or ten inches deep, her long, blond hair waved in the wind, her mother behind her. With tears streaming down her face, she said, "You are the most wonderful guys I ever saw in my life. You've made Gale's Christmas. She lost everything she had in the fire; if it hadn't been for you boys getting this bride doll and giving it to her, she wouldn't of had a Christmas present."

Years later, a woman got on the train in Portland with a ticket to Enterprise.

I said, "Do you happen to know a girl there by the name of Gale Ashenbrenner?" She said, "She's one of my best friends. How did you know her?" I told her about the doll. She said, "You know, that's Gale's pride. She wouldn't part with that doll for anything in the world."

Another time my wife and I were in Enterprise with the motorhome and found Gale. She worked for the Forest Service at an information bureau by the courthouse. I said to my wife, "I'm going over to see which one's Gale." I said, "Is one of you ladies Gale Ashenbrenner?" She said, "I am." I said, "Years ago, when you were a little, bitty girl, some guys gave you a doll for Christmas." "How did you know about that doll?" I said, "Dave Rose and I were the two guys that carried the doll across the field to you that morning. On Christmas morn-ing of that year--it was in the '50s--you gave us a big hug and a peck on the face. You made our Christmas for us." She said, "And you made my Christmas for me."

Back to Passenger Service

I: What did you do after working on the Joseph branch?

LD: I went to Portland on passenger in December of '60. The Harriman family was in charge of Union Pacific. Roland Harriman was chairman of the board and Averill Harriman, an ambassador, was also on the board. Passenger trains were number one--superior trains. If you delayed a passenger train, they wanted to know why. The trains were on time; people knew they'd get to where they wanted to go.

I worked on the City of Portland from Portland to Huntington; we'd have four to six coaches and three to four Pullman cars every trip. We left Portland many times without a vacant seat. The mail was handled on the trains, and they had RPO, or the Rail Post Office. You could mail a letter on the train out of La Grande or Baker, and it would be delivered in Portland the next morning. When they killed the passenger train, they pulled the RPO cars off.

The City of Portland, the Union Pacific streamliner, connected with two trains in Portland. It was the most superior train on the track. Freight trains had to be in the clear by twenty minutes at the last station on the employee's schedule where time was shown. If you delayed it, boy, you'd better have a good reason or you could be pulled out of service for it.

I: Sometimes during the war and the harvest season for fruit, didn't the railroad have fruit cars intermixed with the passenger cars?

LD: Yes, on the Portland Rose and the Idahoan but never on the streamliner. The Portland Rose sometimes would have three or four cars of cherries or fruit. In those days at Hinkle--when the McNary Dam went in, they moved the yard from Reith to Hinkle--fruit cars would come down Yakima, Wenatchee, Walla Walla, and Milton-Freewater. They put them on the head of the train, ahead of the RPO car, and then they'd ice them: cut the ice and add so much salt and so many blocks of ice--whatever it took to fill the bunkers up. I think they put 100 pounds of salt on each side to help refrigerate the car in order to keep the fruit in good condition when it reached the final destination.

I: Changing the division point to Hinkle

was really what did in the La Grande roundhouse, wasn't it?

LD: No, the diesels were what really did in the roundhouse. A lot of times, a steam engine would come in on a freight train; on the passenger trains the steam engines went through.

When they ran the steam engines, they had to go through the roundhouse, where a crew with grease guns would lubricate the side rods and the drivers and check them all over while they were unloading and loading the mail.

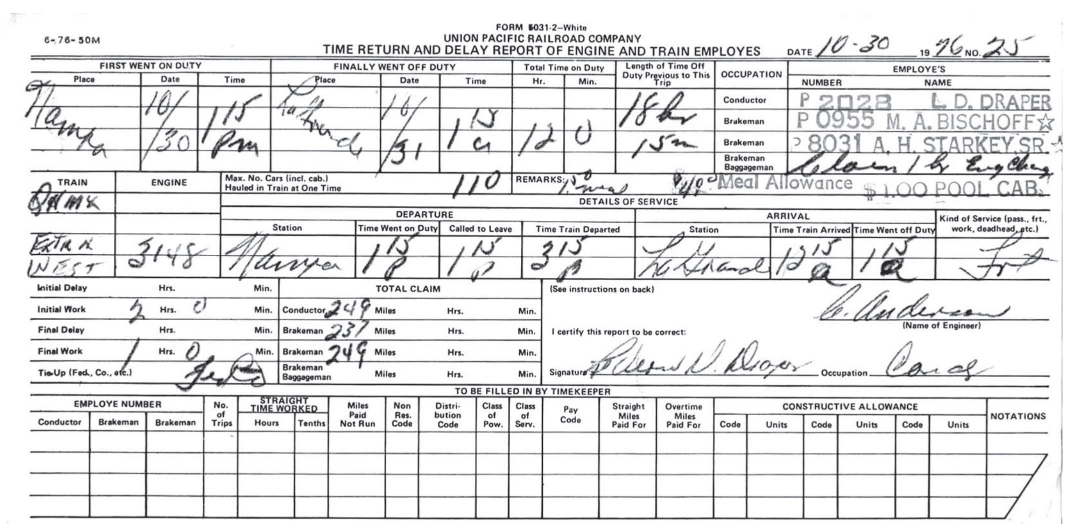
I: Were those crews called car toads?

LD: The car toads were the car inspectors. The others were roundhouse grease monkeys. They used a heavy, graphite-like grease on the side rods, applied with an air gun, made by Almight--a type of grease gun. There were usually two guys--one pulling the trigger and the other guy feeding a stick of grease into the gun to force it into the side rod bearings and the sides where the cylinders went in and out of the piston housing.

I: Tell me more about your experiences as a conductor.

LD: Many times, like on The Idahoan going into Pendleton, I handled as high as four hundred and five hundred through tickets, in addition to the tickets that I'd give back and the cancellations for people that got off, got on, and ran to catch another train. We used to haul a lot of people in the Meacham Creek Canyon. They didn't have roads or gasoline so they'd ride the train out to La Grande for supplies, and we'd pick them up. Some of them had passes. I had to make a record of all the passes.

I got turned in one time for carrying people without proper authorization. When I first went to work on passenger service, I was working with an old-time conductor, who said, "Vern, I'm going to give you a few pointers to cut your work down. For officials and section men and the water-service gang--people that ride the train all the time--get their pass numbers and mark them in your book. When they get on to go to service the water down in the canyon, they'll tell you where they


6-76-50M
FORM 5031-2—White
UNION PACIFIC RAILROAD COMPANY
TIME RETURN AND DELAY REPORT OF ENGINE AND TRAIN EMPLOYES DATE 10-30 1976 NO. 25

Conductor P 2028 L. D. DRAPER
Brakeman P 0955 M. A. BISCHOFF
Brakeman 8031 A. H. STARKEY SR.
Meal Allowance $1.00 POOL CAB.
Max. No. Cars (incl. cab.) Hauled in Train at One Time 110
Engine 3148
Total Claim: Conductor 249 Miles; Brakeman 237 Miles; Brakeman 249 Miles
(Name of Engineer) C. Anderson
I certify this report to be correct:
TO BE FILLED IN BY TIMEKEEPER

Official delay report for train #25 filled out by Vern on October 30, 1976
Original courtesy of Le Vern Draper

want to get off. You just hat-check them for Huron, or Meacham, or Pelican, or Gibbon [places between La Grande and Pendleton], or wherever they are going."

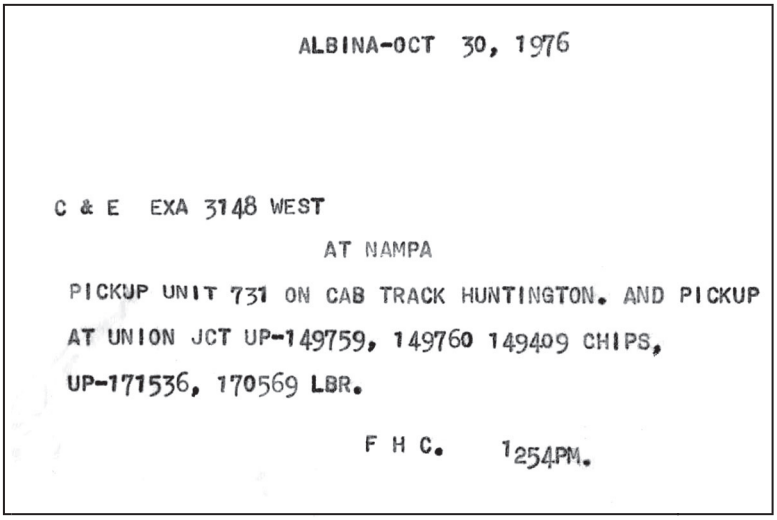
We stopped at Union Junction, North Powder, Haines, Baker, and sometimes Durkee, a flag stop. Old Bob said, "Just mark their pass down, and then, when they get on, you know who they are. When you get to your desk, you can take the number out of your book and write on your passenger report where they were going. It will save you a lot of time out in the car, and you can sit down and do a lot of it."

There was an operator [telegraphic] who got on at La Grande. She'd been partying and didn't get a pass back to Huntington. I was going east on #26. If she had come to me on the platform and said, "I didn't get a chance to get a ticket or a pass," I would have taken her. But she waited till she got in the car full of people, and, as I checked, she said, "You'll have to carry me. I didn't have a chance to get a pass, and you'll just have to carry me to Huntington." Anything like that was putting me right up against the blaze because I was responsible to make sure that everybody had the proper transportation authorization.

I said, "You'll just have to pay a cash fare." Oh, she got mad. There was a roundhouse foreman there; he said, "You can carry her on my pass as my wife." I said, "Your pass doesn't have your wife's name on it." You see, there were A passes and B passes: an A pass for a semi-official and for him alone; a B pass could cover the employee or his family, and it was good on some trains, not on others. An A pass was good on any train because it was for an official.

He said, "You can carry her on my pass." I said, "Mister, your A pass isn't good for her to ride." I made her pay a cash fare because she put me right up against it, and she turned me in.

The trainmaster's name was Bruner. He followed me through the train and watched every move I made--rode all the way from Pendleton to Huntington with me. I didn't know I'd been turned



ALBINA-OCT 30, 1976

C & E EXA 3148 WEST

AT NAMPA

PICKUP UNIT 731 ON CAB TRACK HUNTINGTON. AND PICKUP AT UNION JCT UP-149759, 149760 149409 CHIPS, UP-171536, 170569 LBR.

F H C. 1254PM.

A sample train order
Original courtesy of Le Vern Draper

in, so, remembering another thing that old Bob had taught me--that, when you picked up some local tickets, you should keep an extra one in your pocket and then if you got in a tight spot you had something to show--I always had two or three extra tickets. I made sure I turned them in before the expiration date to have an alibi in case I got caught.

Bruner counted every passenger, and, when I got into Huntington, he wanted to know what my passenger count was. When I gave it to him, I had a record of tickets I'd punched, cash fares, and everything. I exceeded what he had counted on the train.

He didn't say anything about my being turned in, so the next day, when I was called for #25 to come back here, he was on the train and followed me all the way through to give back the tickets and to check me. You see, the Idahoan had three Pullman cars in addition to eight to ten passenger cars. A conductor had to cut what we called an exchange or extend check. Tickets on a passenger train were local and interline. A local ticket was one that was issued on Union Pacific or just over the Union Pacific line. An interline ticket was one that covered two or three lines--like those coming out of Kansas City on Norfolk and Western, or on the Rock Island from Kansas City to Denver, or on Union Pacific from Denver to Seattle or Portland. We had to cut this exchange check on a coupon that was on an interline ticket so that Union Pacific would get their revenue from, say, Denver to Portland. Great Northern and Northern Pacific, in addition to Union Pacific, were running out of Portland to Seattle. These extends were good on any of the trains. It was like other tickets, only it was an exchange. There was a coupon on the back that we stapled to the other coupon and sent it in to the auditor.

Bruner didn't understand why I was cutting those extends. He didn't know anything about that. So when we got to La Grande, I unloaded a lot of people; I knew most of the people that went to Huron and Duncan and Gibbon toward Pendleton. They couldn't get out of there except on the train. They'd have their groceries and stuff, so I'd load them first. Then, if I had any room, I'd take through passengers. I had a bunch of water-service gang men that came through, and they told me where they wanted to go; I hatchecked them.

Coming into Pendleton, Bruner said, "Have you got a minute to talk?" I said, "I guess so, why?" He said, "Let's wait till we get off at Pendleton. You were turned in for carrying passengers that didn't have proper transportation. You never asked me for my pass." I said, "I've got your pass." He looked at me strangely; I took my book out of my coat pocket and said, "Here's your pass, A-number so and so"--I forget what his initial was--"Bruner." He stood there, looked at me, and said, "How about a certain one, like going to Duncan?" "Oh, here's his pass number." I had put it on the 3618, the passenger report. He said, "I don't know how you did it." I had three or four passengers that didn't have tickets, but I had tickets in my pocket to cover for them. I knew what I was doing so that I could cover up and make everything work out all right.

When I got off at Pendleton, he said, "I don't know what your system is, but you show more people on the train then I counted." I said, "Did you count all those that got off at Pendleton and

that I gave their tickets back to?" "I didn't understand why you were giving their tickets back." I said, "They're getting off at Pendleton. They may ride a bus out of Pendleton, they may ride passenger train, maybe they'll ride a car. So what? That's their ticket." He said, "Oh, forget it, Vern. Just go ahead the way you are."

Another experience was kind of funny. I had cut an extend and went back to the Pullman, where a lady was playing cards with a group. I walked up to her and said, "Are you going to Seattle?" She said, "Yes, I am." I said, "If you'll give me your claim check, I'll give you your ticket from Portland to Seattle." "That's all right, young man. You tell the conductor to come back. I'll give him my claim check, and he can give me the ticket." I said, "Lady, I am the conductor." She reared back, looked at me, and said, "You? A young whippersnapper like you a passenger conductor? Why, passenger conductors are old, grouchy men with big, fat bellies!"

End of Union Pacific Passenger Service

LD: When they killed the passenger train, I was on one of the first trains that came into Portland after the Harrimans released it and Chase Manhattan Bank took over. When the bank took charge, they immediately started to kill the passenger train. They wanted the freight, but they didn't want the passenger service. They said it wasn't feasible; it took too many employees to operate the passenger train: Pullman porters, chair-car porters, and a dining crew--a steward, four cooks, and usually four to six waiters. The train crew was a conductor and two brakemen. The bank said they weren't making enough money from it.

We used to go into Portland and get transferred to the Southern Pacific. At that time, Southern Pacific ran the Shasta Daylight south out of Portland fifteen minutes after the City of Portland got there. The Portland Yard was controlled by an interlock system. Telegraphers and operators handled the switches. They had a tower on the east side of the Steel Bridge on the Willamette River and also one on the west side. They'd handle the switches to put the trains in and out of the yard. If they didn't want the trains to go in, they'd hold a block red on it, and we had to stay there. They weren't blocks that we could flag. They were blocks that were positive, and you had to stop and stay till the one that put the block red gave you authority or cleared.

We were right on time with the City of Portland, with eighty-some passengers to transfer to the Shasta Daylight. They held us thirty-seven minutes on the east side of the Willamette River. We sat there and watched the Shasta pull out with empty seats and nobody in the diner. The people on our train saw their train going south and they weren't on it. I'm telling you, the train crew took an awful going over--a lot of unhappy people.

Sometimes, they would put the City of Portland in a passing track between Troutdale and east Portland and put out a flat meet to hold us out there till they ran a freight train out of the Albina yard. I went to the phone several times to call to see what was going on. The train wasn't even made up yet when we were there. In twenty minutes we could have been in the station and on our way home.

I think it was six or seven years after they pulled the passenger train off when Amtrak started through there.

Of course, they didn't use the standard railroad uniforms, so, after I went in on the last City of Portland, there would be no reason for me to keep the uniform. There'd never be any chance to work a passenger train after that. The museum at Union had a year when they were celebrating the railroad. I gave my uniform--the one I wore on the last trip into Portland on May 1, 1971. We piled anybody on that could get on the train that morning going in. When we got to Hinkle, a bunch of people wanted to ride the train for the last time. There was standing room only by the time we got into Portland. We were late but not too late, and there was quite a reception. A picture in *The Oregonian* showed me, unloading the people as the train stood there in the terminal at Union Station in Portland. Now, there's no passenger service either way--no way for people to ride the rails at all. The railroad thinks they have a big thing. They have a promotion every so often that they'll bring some of their equipment in and maybe go out to Union Junction and let people ride the train out and then take them back in La Grande Central--only about ten or twelve miles one way. To me that wouldn't be much of a train ride.

Vern as conductor on the City of Portland passenger train,1971
Photo courtesy of Le Vern Draper

I: It seems, as the highway is blocked both ways from La Grande during the wintertime, it would be quite an advantage to be able to have rail service going either east or west.

LD: At one time that was the only way to get over the mountain in the wintertime. I've seen a lot of times when the highway was closed between La Grande and Pendleton, even La Grande and Baker, and the only means of transportation was the trains; they kept rolling. The way the railroad killed the passenger train was the saddest thing.

Whistling at Crossings

I: What is your opinion about requiring train engineers to whistle at crossings?

LD: I think that is something that should never be stopped. People holler about that whistle. I saw a time and time again in Pendleton, where whistling was against the city's rule, coming down there on the main line by the old depot, we hit several cars on Main Street. They would see that train coming and say, "I can make it." They'd pour it on. When the train hit the crossing, ka-wham. There used to be storage tracks just to the west of Main Street; I don't know how many times I saw cars plastered up against those box cars in the storage tracks that trains had hit.

I : You seem to be saying, though, the drivers were trying to beat the train. How would a whistle slow them down?

LD: It could warn them that we were closer to the crossing than they actually thought we were. The engineer was required to blow two longs, a short, and a long. The last long whistle was to be continued into the crossing.

I: Would they try to go through the gates?

LD: They didn't have gates then.

Most Unpleasant Railroad Experience

I: What was the most unpleasant part of your working for the railroad?

LD: Being on call all hours of the day and night for freight work.

I: Sleep was always interrupted?

LD: You had to sleep days; you had to sleep when you had a chance. I don't know how many years I worked that I was never home for Thanksgiving or Christmas. You never could lay off around the holidays. Anything you wanted to do, you had to plan it to be at some time other than when it was special. I told the wife when I retired, "I can go to bed and I don't have to sleep with one ear open to the telephone." It seemed that the majority of the calls at night were between 12:30 in the morning up till about 3:30 to 4:00.

When I was on passenger runs, I could mark the calendar a year ahead and know what days I'd be home. I knew whether I was going to be home on a holiday. I made a trip every four days. That eleven years was about the nicest job I had. The best paying job I had, though, was on the Joseph branch; that was a mortgage lifter.

Reflection on Railroad Work

I: Is there anything else that you've ever wanted to do other than the railroad?

LD: Not till after I'd worked a long time on the railroad. When I hired out at the railroad, men were railroad men. They knew how to switch cars; they knew how to handle trains; they knew how to tie hand brakes. But they got a bunch of officials that came out of college and never made a student trip as a brakeman or moved up through the ranks. They didn't know the A-end from a D-end on a boxcar. And then they'd try and tell us how to do the work.

Lifelong Interest in Flying

LD: While I was railroading, I had learned to fly as a hobby--something I always wanted to do. When I hired out on the railroad I thought that was the best thing. It was the best job a person could get. Yet I was always interested in flying.

I: Tell me about the first time you rode on an airplane.

LD: I'll tell you, it was one of the greatest thrills of my life. When I was a little kid, we lived west of town here in Union. The first planes to come in here were JN4s, bi-planes, selling hides at stock-show time. I climbed up on the highest post I could find so I could watch those airplanes flying around over town. I slipped and tore the seat out of my pants and consequently got paddled for being up there on the pole. As I grew up, every time I had a chance to go see airplanes I grabbed it.

My dad subscribed to *Popular Science* magazine that had an article on flying an airplane--pictures of how it came in to land and the position of the controls. I read everything I could find. After Lindbergh flew the Atlantic, I read every book I could about Lindbergh

and anything that pertained to flying. I really ate it up.

At a stock show during the Depression, two guys had a Curtis Robbins that they landed alongside the highway just outside of Union. I asked my mother if I could go out and see the airplane. In those days, if I went any place, I had to have permission from the folks; I couldn't just jump on my bicycle and go somewhere; I had to have permission. She said, "Yeah." She didn't put on any restrictions like "You be back by a certain time."

When I got out there, they were taxiing up to where they wanted to tie the plane down. They had to go to La Grande to get gasoline from Standard Oil. In those days aviation gas was brought in five-gallon tin cans. They wanted to make arrangements for additional gas while they were here for the stock show. They told me and another kid, Kenneth Faust, if we'd get shovels and fill in the ditches that had been plowed ditches to irrigate the alfalfa field, they'd give us a ride. I went over to Roy Wheeler's ranch and borrowed a shovel. Kenneth and I tamped those ditches till the field was as smooth as it could be.

The guys weren't back from town yet. So I took the shovel back over and give it to Roy Wheeler. Then I went back out there and waited till finally they showed up. The Standard Oil man came out with a car and four five-gallon cans of aviation gasoline. They poured two of those cans, one in the wing on each side. Then they inspected the ditches.

The guy named Alexander was going to stay on the ground, and the other guy was going to take us kids up. They told us that we had done a very good job and to get in the plane. We got in the back seat of the plane, and the pilot sat up in front. They made sure the seatbelts were fastened, fired up the engine, and taxied out.

It was one of the greatest thrills I ever had. When we took off, we were sitting there, watching the ground disappear below us as we climbed out. I just couldn't believe. It was a dream more than anything. They gave us a real good ride, advertising for the stock show. They flew all around Union and over to La Grande, to Imbler, and back. I imagine we were up for twenty-five or thirty minutes. I know it didn't seem very long, but it was a real thrill.

When we came in to land, I was all eyes, trying to see whatever he did, but with him sitting in front of us, I couldn't see how he handled the controls, except I could see feet moving a little bit. He landed; I thanked him and started for home because I figured I'd really hit it. Before I got home, I met my mother coming to meet me with a handful of switches. She warmed my back from my ears to my tailbone. She said, "I'll teach you to disobey me." I tried to tell her I hadn't disobeyed her, but she said, "When your dad gets home, he'll give you another one."

My dad was a strict one on work. If work was satisfactory, that was fine with him. When Dad got home, she said, "I want you to give this kid another licking. He disobeyed me." Of course, Dad didn't know anything about my being on an airplane ride. I didn't have a dime to my name and couldn't pay for a ride. He said, "What'd he do?" She said, "He went for an airplane ride." Dad said, "Beu-

lah,"--he very rarely called my mother by her first name--"I'm going to find out the boy's side of it before I punish him." She said, "You just do as I said. He disobeyed me and I want him to have another licking." Dad turned to me and said, "Son, how did you get that airplane ride?" I went into detail about how they offered us a ride if we'd fill in the ditches. Before I got through, he said, "Did you do your work good?" I said, "They said it was all right and they were well pleased. They told us to get in and they'd give us a ride." He turned to my mother and told her he wasn't going to whip me because I'd worked and earned my ride and I was entitled to my pay. Boy, it was kind of an unhappy place around there for a while.

Relaxed Flight Instruction

LD: I got to be real good friends with the fellow that taught me to fly. He was one of those men that pioneered the air tanker service to fight forest fires.

I: What was his name?

LD: Eldon Down. He was a funny little fellow. Maybe he'd talk, maybe he wouldn't. If he wanted to talk to you, he'd talk. If he didn't, he'd just sit and look at you.

I have to tell a little incident about Eldon's teaching me to fly. I told him I could learn to fly. He said, "Get your permit, then." In those days there was still an air-identification zone between here and Pendleton on account of Hanford, so you had to have a government card with your picture and your fingerprints on it. I still have one of them. After I got my student permit, I went out in car with my arm in a cast; I'd had an accident and broken my arm. He followed me out to the car and told my wife, "Move over. I want to talk to Vern. I have a proposition to make you." I said, "Eldon, I can't go to work. I broke my arm on the job, and I have a claim against the company for pay while I'm off." He said, "Who in the hell said I was going to pay you anything? I'll teach you to fly and you flag for me. I won't pay you anything, and you won't pay me anything."

That's the way I learned to fly. For most student pilots it takes at least eight to nine hours before they're qualified to land and take an airplane off. He soloed me in four hours and forty-five minutes.

LD: So then I started flagging for him when he was doing crop dusting. The eight swaths of the plane when he sprayed with a spray boom covered approximately forty-five feet. I'd start fifteen feet in from the fence, carrying a big, white flag on a stick. I could carry it in my left hand, with my right arm in a sling, and I could hold it up so he could see it. He would line up with me at a point at the other end of the field. When I'd see that he'd lined up with me, I'd take fifteen steps, or forty-five feet, over and he'd go on by on that swath. He'd make a turn and line up with me again going the other way. I was flagging the fields for him so that there weren't any skips in flying back and forth. We started at daylight and work till about 8:00 or 9:00, till it began to get hot and the spray wouldn't settle in; then we quit.

I learned to fly in a Veronica Champ, a little sixty-horse airplane--Putt-Putt, I called it. It was fun to fly. We'd fly out and look at a field, and he'd show me where he wanted to go. After I'd soloed, I'd fly out and take a map and map fields, and then I'd practice maneuvers to get ready for a check ride.

A lot of that time I never logged because I figured he was flying the airplane. I was just starting out and didn't know anything about it except to push the throttle and take off. Come to find out, I was doing all the flying, and he was sitting in the back. He said, "You come out this afternoon. I want to ride with you." So I went out about 4:00, when it began to cool down.

LD: We climbed in the Champ and went through a bunch of maneuvers--like stalls, slow flight, minimum control speed--just learning to control the airplane from all attitudes. We went back in, shot a couple of landings, came around, and he said, "Make a full stop landing." I figured my lesson was over for the day. When I came in, just as I flared it out to touch down, he hit the throttle wide open, hit the stick, and made the wheels hit the runway. We bounced that plane about thirty or forty feet in the air. He said, "Take over and land it." I grabbed the power, got it all set up, and landed, still with plenty of runway. He said, "OK, let's taxi back."

I figured the lesson was over. When we got to the taxiway to go to the hanger, he said, "Let me out. Now you go up and make three touch-and-go landings, come in, and I'll ride with you again." I started to sweat. I'm telling you, my shirt got wetter all the time. So I taxied up on what was 2-9 then. Now they call it 3-0: that's the magnetic heading of the runway.

I: At the La Grande airport?

LD: Yes, at the La Grande airport. So I took off. That Champ was a sixty-horse engine, and without him in there it just hopped off--didn't take very long to get airborne. So I climbed up four hundred feet, made a ninety-degree turn to the left, looked back at that runway, and there it was way, way down there. I thought, "What in the world are you, a stupid idiot, doing up here? You don't know anything about it, and here you sit and the runway's way down there." Then I sweated some more. The first landing I made was pretty good. The second landing wasn't quite as smooth, and the last landing was what you'd call a basketball landing: I dribbled all the way down the runway and got it stopped. I started to get out, but he give me a sign to keep the engine running and got in. He said, "That's pretty good, but I want you to smooth up your landing." And he signed me off.

After that, he'd give me a map and send me out to map the fields so he didn't have to go. That's the way I built up my flying time. I worked for him till my arm healed and went back to work on the railroad. That fall we were elk hunting near Red's horse ranch. He checked me out going into Red's--another tricky place to get in and out of.

LD: The next year we were out hunting west of Anthony Lake. It had been a miserable day, snowing and everything. We'd seen a few cows, but there were no horns. I had a camper on the pickup; we were sitting in the camper while I was getting ready to cook dinner. He said, "Vern, I got a proposition to make." I said, "Don't want to turn you down." He said, "No, I don't think you'll turn me down when I tell you about it." He told me about the Forest Service wanting to start using aircraft to fight forest fires and that he had made a bid on some B25s at Davis Molison in Tucson. He said, "I'm going to need co-pilots on all these tankers. All you have to have is

a commercial license." That's all you needed in those days; now you have to have a commercial license, as well as instrument and multi-engine rating to fly co-pilot on tankers. He said, "You use my airplane"--I had to build up to 300 hours--"and I'll help you get your license. I'll give you the first co-pilot seat."

A La Grande "Bombing Run"

LD: I made a trip to Tucson with him to fly co-pilot on a B25 to begin to get acquainted with the airplane. When we got back, we scared the people at La Grande half to death. We lined up in kind of a military formation and came across the valley at about a hundred and fifty or two hundred feet--right over La Grande--made a big turn, and then peeled off to go into the airport to land. Those big old props were really growling.

A neighbor lady came out and told my wife, "I think we're being bombed. Those looked like bombers and they were flying so low. I hope they don't hit anything very vital." Bernice, my wife, said, "Don't worry, they won't. They just a bunch of idiots coming home."

Fighting Eastern Oregon Fires from the Air

LD: After I got my commercial license in 1960, a lightning storm came through and set the first big fire at Anthony Lakes. We started using borate then--a crude of borate soap chips, four pounds to a gallon of water. A gallon of water weighs eight pounds; that made a mixture weighing twelve pounds. We carried one thousand gallons, or twelve thousand pounds. The airplane carried nine hundred-sixty-four gallons of gasoline and twenty-five gallons of oil on each engine. We grossed thirty-eight thousand pounds on take-off.

When we dumped that slurry, we had it hooked up with an electric switch. I could dump five hundred or a thousand gallons or stagger them, depending on what the fire boss demanded. It had a vent scoop on the top--I think a twenty-seven-cubic-inch air scoop. When we'd open those doors and get rid of that load, we'd get rid of twelve thousand pounds in three seconds. The change in the attitude of the air-plane put on a G load--the power of gravity pulling against you when the airplane is in negative configuration. The most we ever pulled was two-and-a-half Gs. The plane, if I remember right, was dressed for six negative Gs (the down pressure on the wings and the pressure going up) and either nine or ten positive Gs (the pressure underneath the wing that holds the airplane in the air). Several times we used that G load to help get us out of a tight spot. The Forest Service would allow us to fly five and a half hours a day. Before the summer was over, I had accumulated pretty close to a hundred and fifty hours of engine time.

The fellow I flew with, Howard Mayes, was a B17 pilot, who had

B25 performing test of simulated borate at La Grande airport
Photo courtesy of Le Vern Draper

flown thirty some missions over Germany during World War II. He brought in a B17 several times pretty badly shot up. He had been shot down behind the lines and spent a year through the underground getting out of Germany back into England. He was one of the sharpest guys to fly with. He taught me how to land and take off.

If we had a load, I'd fly it out to where the fire was. I knew the country around here, so they'd tell me where the fire was, and we'd just take off and go. He'd take over when we made the drop. I made the drops, and he'd fly it back. Then we'd load up, and he'd take off the next time. After we'd made the drop, I'd fly it back, land and load up, and then I'd take off the next time. That's the way we worked. I learned quite a lot about flying old engine airplanes from him.

Origins of Eastern Oregon's Lightning Storms

LD: The lightning storm that set the Anthony Lakes fire was one of the most vicious storms--until we had one here about a month ago--that I ever saw. I flew a lot of charter flights and for the Forest Service for a lot of forest fires. I learned that a lot of our electric storms generate around John Day. The heat comes off the desert there, the Abert Desert, is blown by the wind into the mountains north of Burns, where the timber and the cooler air are. That meeting generates electric storms that will start at the Strawberries [mountain range] and move over to the Elkhorns [another mountain range southeast of La Grande] right into this area on out to the northeast. Most all electric storms move from the southwest toward the northeast, though a few move from west to east. You can sit here in the Grande Ronde Valley and watch a storm out toward Elgin or over toward Wallowa. That storm has passed, unless it's a freak storm, and you'll never see any more of it. The next one will be coming out of the Elkhorns.

The lightning had set a big fire up near Missoula, Montana, right on the breaks where the Salmon River turns west from Idaho down to Riggins. Then it turns left to the River of No Return. From there down to Riggins there are no roads. The fire they called the Elbow Fire was right on the top of the ridge, above where the Salmon River makes a turn toward the west. We'd been flying on that for about four or five days--just one load right after the other. The fire was spreading.

Experiencing St. Elmo's Fire

LD: We were coming back from there the night the electric storm went through and set the Anthony Lakes fire. As we came into the Grande Ronde Valley, over Mt. Harris, the lightning flashed over the airplane, and it almost blinded me. I was flying. We picked up St. Elmo's Fire--just one big arc of fire all the way around those big propellers. Sparks were flying off the tips, and fire was running all through the cockpit. If you moved your hands or fingers, the little blue flames would run up and down your arms, your hands, your pant legs. You couldn't feel a thing, but you could see that fire running up and down. It'd make your fingers glow. Then you'd touch your control and you couldn't feel anything, but if you moved your hand, you could see those sparks fly off your fingers.

I: Was it injuring you in any way?

LD: No, we weren't grounded. If we had

been, it would have killed us. The magnetic compass was spinning one way, stopping, and spinning the other way. There's a gyrocompass in an airplane that is run off a vacuum that's nonmagnetic, and that thing was spinning so fast it was a blur. All the instruments went goofy. Howard said to me, "Well, buddy, go ahead and land it. We've got to get it on the ground, but you stay in the cockpit."

When we got taxied up to the gas pump, he dropped the escape hatch so there wasn't any way to touch it. He was a small man--about five feet six or seven inches and I'm six feet three inches--so we looked like Mutt and Jeff, working together. Anyway, he got down, and, before he touched the ground, he just folded his arms and dropped through that hole in the bottom of the airplane to the ground. Then he picked up a ground wire, and, when he touched the landing gear of the airplane and grounded it, there was a spark about as big as the palm of my hand that jumped off that landing gear. He went around various places touching that airplane with the ground wire. He said, "OK, buddy, now you can get out."

We gassed it up the next morning, and, when I preflighted the airplane before we took off, there were two or three little black arc marks up to the tip of each one of the propeller blades, where static electricity had gone out to the tips.

The Anthony Lakes Fire

LD: When the Anthony Lakes fire started, it was five fires burning together--looking like five big arches as we flew over it. The smoke went up and made an arch, and the sun was shining through between each one. I'd give anything if I'd had a picture of it, but I didn't have my camera; I had sent my movie camera on a DC3 to get pictures of dropping smoke jumpers in Hells Canyon. I do have a four-hundred-foot reel of dropping slurry on the fire at Anthony Lakes and moving pictures of smoke jumpers jumping out of a DC3 over Hells Canyon.

To start with one day there, the Forest Service designated each fire with a number--like the fire dispatcher is 2-2 and Glass Hill is maybe 2-0-4. Point Prominent would be something else, depending on the area.

When it gets really hot, the lift to get off with a loaded airplane is equivalent to taking off from a runway of six thousand to seven thousand-foot elevation instead of twenty seven hundred feet. Grossing thirty-eight thousand pounds on takeoff, we'd use every bit of the runway to get off. Sometimes we'd pull the gear up to keep it from hitting the fence when we went over the end of the runway.

We were flying by a lookout, and one of the ladies that was in the lookout called the fire dispatcher at Baker and said, "Uncle Etchway 2-2." He said, "What is it?" She said, "This is 2-0-4. I have a complaint to make." He said, "What's your complaint?" She said, "I don't like these big airplanes flying so close to my lookout. It rattles the windows." Mayes, the pilot I was flying with, didn't say anything.

When it was my turn to fly out next time, he said, "Old buddy, I'll fly this time." I said, "All right." It didn't make any difference to me. He was captain, and, if he said he was going to fly, he was the boss. As we took off, we saw an engineer parked off the road

right the end of runway 3-4 in a brand new pickup. When we went across, he had slid down in the seat till I could look right down his throat as he was looking up. I'll bet those propellers missed that pickup by inches.

We'd have to make about two-and-a-half turns here in the valley out over a field to get elevation enough to get up. Mayes always wore gloves when he flew--why, I don't know. I don't like gloves when I'm flying. He'd put those gloves on, pull them down, and take hold of the control. He reached down to the throttle and added another couple inches of manifold pressure--that's adding power--and eased that plane over a little bit closer to that lookout when we went by. Just before we got to it, he reached over and got hold of the prop controls. They were a constant speed prop, and you could change the pitch by changing the controls. He pulled that prop control back and came back up to cruise. Those big old fourteen-foot props went "Rrrr." He said, "Buddy, I'll bet that rattled her windows." We never heard another peep out of her.

Later years I was at the Elks temple, and guy named Merrick said, "Vern, I've got a question I want to ask you. What happened at Glass Hill?" He had heard about it and remembered. He said, "I never did hear the outcome of what you crazy bums did." So I told him what happened. He said, "You know, she never let a peep out of her. I bet it broke every window in that lookout!"

The engineer that had parked right off the end of the runway--his name was Rodenburger: how did he get by the guards? They had guards out to keep people off the airport because we were so busy, with so many airplanes they were afraid somebody would walk into a propeller. He said, "Say, you came awful close to my new pickup." I said, "Rosy, nobody but an idiot hoghead would park right off the end of the runway because he didn't have a brakeman to lead him around. If one of those engines had caught just as we went over your pickup, we'd have taken you and your wife and your new pickup right along with it."

Saving a Bulldozer and Two Lives

I: You were going to tell me about when you dropped on a Cat [bulldozer] up there at Anthony.

LD: When we took off, two Cats were right off Anthony Butte, plowing fireline. They got in the smoke and fire, and the Caterpillars died. The chase plane--or the birddog plane, as we called it--that was circling around called us. Our plane was #21. They said, "2-1, there's two Caterpillars trapped in the fire down there. If you can pick 'em up, hit 'em."

So we circled and circled, and all we could see was the top of a snag sticking up out of the smoke. As we made one circle, I happened to spot them, away from this snag. I told Howard, "I picked up the two Cats. They're right down there." I pointed out the snag. He made another turn and pulled to the right of that snag so it was on his left, and he spotted them down there. We used this snag as a spot to drop on and just hoped we'd hit them. We went up over Anthony Lake, put flaps on, and slowed up. We were supposed to drop at about one hundred forty miles an hour; we called it knots, which would be pretty close to one hundred sixty miles an hour. We slowed up, came down, and, just as we got there, he give me the sign, and I dumped it. The

chase plane said, "Boy, that looked like you cut a hole in the smoke. Go back and get another load and drop it right in the same place." We went back, loaded up, and dropped it. They fired those Cats up and drove them out.

Later that fall I was working out of Portland, living in a trailer park. One of my neighbors and I got talking about airplanes and flying, and I showed him the moving pictures I had taken of the Anthony Lakes fire. He told a guy who worked in the shop where he did; he wanted to know, if he'd come out, could he visit with me. I said, "Sure." He came out and said, "I was hoping someday I'd get to meet the guy that saved my life. I was driving one of those Cats that died in the smoke. I thought we were dead. We had buried ourselves in the dirt underneath the Cat that was a little bit damp and cool to get what little air we could. When you guys came in and dropped that, you painted us the color of that borate from end to the other. I've never felt anything so good in my life. You guys saved our lives and I'll never forget it." That was one of the things that meant a lot to me from working that summer--that I had helped save somebody's life and that they were able to live and tell about it.

Vern's Own Plane

LD: I owned my own airplane. I flew it over two thousand hours. When I lost my physical ability to fly in '97, I had accumulated almost five thousand hours of flying time.

I: What size airplane did you own?

LD: I owned a little two-place Cessna 140. I put a one hundred fifteen-horse light combing in it and flew a lot of search and rescue. That greater power didn't increase the speed any, but it give me a little more power to climb out of canyons. And it was a fun airplane to fly; you could get a lot of enjoyment out of it, but you didn't want to get too complacent and think you had it mastered because it would bite you. It would spin with you, I'll tell you that.

Hazards of Flying Near Red's Ranch

I: You said it was interesting to fly into Red's horse ranch. What were some of the obstacles that you run into?

LD: I was turned in for flying too low. Red's horse ranch sat right in the bottom of the big Minam canyon. To go in there took eighteen minutes in a 206, and I flew a Cessna 206. It had a 300-horse engine on it, and it'd cruise about around one hundred forty-five to one hundred fifty knots. I'd climb at eighty and ninety knots out of La Grande. To go over Moss Springs, we had to climb up to six thousand one hundred feet. If we went over by Point Prominence over Rock Springs, we still climbed to six thousand one hundred feet. Then we had to drop and work our way down into the canyon. Red's was at thity-six hundred feet. Going over Moss Springs, as soon as I broke over the hill toward the little Minam and we turned down the little Minam, it was probably about four or five miles. I'd put the nose of the plane down and lose about a thousand to fifteen hundred feet till I crossed the hogback--the divide between the little Minam and the big Minam. The summit was forty-five hundred feet. I cleared it at five thousand. We'd make a thirty-six-degree turn over Red's, lose another thousand feet, fly about two and a half miles down the river,

and get our speed down to approach speed, which was around seventy-five or eighty miles an hour.

There was a wide spot down there where we turned back up the river. We'd line up with Minam River Lodge, which was north and south. Red's was northwest and southeast. When we let down, we had to be over the Minam River strip to about forty or fifty feet off the ground. The Minam River makes a bend between the two strips, and we could get all kinds of air currents there. We didn't know whether we were going to get a lift or a drop. We had to be on the power so that, if we got the lift, we eased off on the power. If we got a drop, we added a little power but not enough to change our approach speed. We made about a forty-five-degree turn and set down on the runway--a one-way strip. We landed up the river and took off down the river. There was no going around. Once we started to land, we had to land. We took off down the river and just hoped we didn't pick up tailwind coming down the Minam. After 11:00, if it was very hot, we didn't want to even try to go in there. There just was no air. The plane would drop right out from under us.

I'd come out late one day, making one more trip more than I should. I fought that airplane almost to where the highway goes to Wallowa before I got out of the canyon with that three hundred-horse engine. A time or two, I didn't know whether I was going to make it. It felt like that plane was starting to drop out from under me, even using all the power I had. It's a tricky canyon. It's claimed a lot of airplanes

When I was working for Mike Trindell at Baker, he said, "Take all the seats out of the Dual Six, Vern. This guy's got a lot of equipment." He was referring to a man who had flown into Portland from Ft. Worth, Texas and had driven a rental car to La Grande. I never saw so many cases of bows and arrows and camouflage clothes in my life. That 206 was piled full.

He wanted to go to Red's Ranch. I didn't know he was a pilot, but, when we went in there, I noticed he watched every move I made. I went over Moss Springs, put the nose down, went down

Vern with his Cessna 140, ca. 1989
Photo courtesy of Le Vern Draper

Vern with his Skyhawk 172, which he used for instructing potential pilots, ca. 1989
Photo courtesy of Le Vern Draper

the canyon and into Red's, and landed. When we got unloaded, he came over to me, shook hands, and said, "That was a very good demonstration of handling an airplane." He handed me his card that said he was a senior captain of Southwest Airlines--checked out in 747s and everything. He'd flown from here to the Orient and all over. I looked at his card; his name was Mark Thomas. I said, "Mark, I feel I was on the wrong side of the airplane. If I'd known I was flying somebody like you, I'd have put you in the left seat." "No, you wouldn't. I'm going to tell you something, Mr. Draper. You can have all of this you want. I wouldn't put an airplane down in here if you gave it to me."

When I flew him out, he watched every move I made again. He got out and said, "You can have that. I wouldn't go in there for anything in the world."

And I got turned in for flying too low! Flying over wilderness area, an airplane isn't supposed to fly belowtwo thousand feet. I'd made seven or eight trips in there. I can't tell you how many I made in there because I logged between six and seven hundred trips, and then I flew a lot of trips after that. I got tired of logging each trip in my log book--so many trips into Red's or Minam River Lodge.

When I got home, my wife said to me, "What have you done?" I said, "I haven't had any close calls or anything. I don't know. Why?" She said, "The FAA's hot and they want to talk to you." Before I had a chance to call the FAA guy, Greg Sines, the telephone rang. He said, "Vern, what are you doing up there?" I said, "Going in and out of Red's. Why?" I tried to get him to ride with me so he could see what we had to put up with. The FAA wouldn't ride there with me. "Well, you're flying kind of low, aren't you?" I said, "No, I don't think so. Not any lower than I have to." He said, "You've been below two thousand feet over the wilderness area." I said, "OK. You tell me something, Greg. How am I going to go in and out of Red's and stay two thousand feet above the wilderness area?" He said, "I was afraid you'd ask me a silly question like that." I said, "You asked me a silly question so I want a silly answer. Why?" He said, "Some guy gave the tail number of your airplane and said you were two thousand feet lower than he was." He was sitting in Horseshoe Basin to the north of Moss Springs, and he said I was two thousand feet lower than him. I said, "If I was two thousand feet lower than him, I'd have been plowing up the trees in the little Minam canyon." Greg said, "Just don't aggravate him too much." I said, "Come on, take a ride with me someday." "No," he said, "to hell with you."

I flew another guy out. He had a six-point bull--a beautiful rack of horn. When we went to load it in the 206, the only way I could get it in was to turn the horns toward me in the seat and lay it kind of on edge. When I put it in, the nose gear went right down on the sitter right to the point. I thought, "Boy, that's going to throw too much forward CG [center of gravity]; I've got to offset it." He wanted me to fly the whole six-point bull out at one time. I said, "No way! I can bring eleven hundred pounds out, but that's all, and I won't take any more than that." I wound up with a little more than that.

I put a hindquarter in the back, which put the tail down to the ground. I thought, "Boy, now I am into it." So I

tried moving it, and that didn't change anything. When they cut the animal, they made one front quarter a little smaller than the other. We raised the head and cape and slid that front quarter about halfway under the head so it would change the CG in the airplane and the tail would come up. With him in the front seat with me, that gave me enough forward CG to handle it.

At that time there was a bog hole right in the middle of the runway. I had about eight hundred feet to get off. It was getting late in the afternoon by the time I got all that stuff loaded. But if I went in that bog hole, I knew I was stuck. We had a way to taxi up to a dog leg at the extreme end of the runway. I took every bit of it I could get. I wound that engine up with all the power I could, and I didn't put any flaps on. Flaps are used to help lift the airplane; we had ten, twenty, thity, and forty degrees of flap. We usually used ten to twenty degrees of flap to get out of there. I held it without the flaps and got up to about forty miles an hour in the first eight hundred feet. Just before I got to the bog hole, I put on ten degrees of flap and held a little back pressure on the control. I was kissing the top of the water with the main gears, and I went across to the other side. Just before I got there, I went another ten degrees, and then, by the time I got to the other side, I had enough speed that I could begin to fly.

The air was rough. An airplane has a stall warner so that, if you drop below a certain speed, that thing will bellow at you to let you know that you're too slow. That stall warner was squalling all the time. So I thought, "If I'm going to lose it, I can set it on the Minam River strip and hope I can get stopped. By the time I got over the Minam River strip, I had about two hundred feet elevation so I kept going. We hit a little rough air and that stall warner let out a squall. My passenger grabbed for everything he could find. Thank God, he didn't grab the yoke [i.e., control wheel].

When we got to La Grande, I had to fly that airplane to the ground. I couldn't glide it because I had so much weight I had to use power all the way down to the runway. When I got it unloaded, I said, "Are you going back and help me load the rest of it?" "No, to hell with you," he said. "I'll pay you for whatever it is to get it out of there. Just you get it out."

Retirement Years

I: You're still living in Union after all these years. You must have liked it over here.

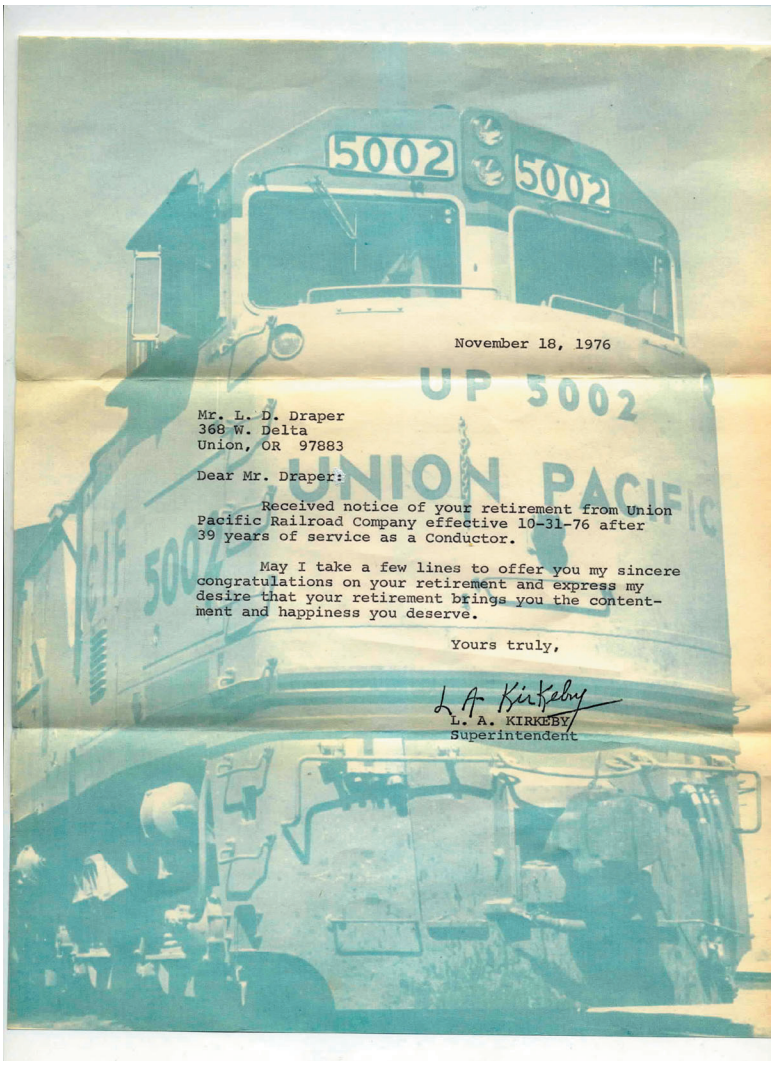
LD: When I moved back from Portland, I had a doublewide trailer; I couldn't put it on my own property in La Grande. I was at Sundowner [a trailer park in La Grande], and my wife at that time was sick--she had heart trouble--and she didn't like it there. We found this vacant lot in Union; I bought it and I've been on this corner thirty-two years. I set it up for home.

The railroad gives full pension at thirty years of service and sixty years of age. I wanted to retire; the officials we had weren't railroad men. They didn't know how to operate a train.

After my wife died in '75, I didn't see any use in retiring. I remarried--to a woman I'd gone together with years ago. She'd been married and her husband had died; my wife was dead. We renewed acquaintances and got married late in the fall of '75. I worked a

year so she'd be covered. We figured what it cost me to make a trip--road expense, union dues, job-insurance fees, income tax, and everything. I called the railroad retirement office; they gave me an estimate of what I would get. When we sat down and figured, I was working for $25 a month. I said, "That's enough of that." So I gave the company notice that I was going to retire. I took my pension the 31st of October in '76. Up to now I've been off twenty-six years, and I don't regret a minute of it.

I've traveled a lot. I've been in every state west of the Mississippi except Louisiana and about ten states east of that river. I've been as far east as Nashville and I've been to South Bend, Indiana and as far north as Jasper, Alberta, Canada, clear across to Winnipeg, and back into the States. I spent about three weeks in Canada and saw Banff, Lake Louise, and all that area. I've been to every point of interest that I could find.



November 18, 1976

Mr. L. D. Draper
368 W. Delta
Union, OR 97883

Dear Mr. Draper:

Received notice of your retirement from Union Pacific Railroad Company effective 10-31-76 after 39 years of service as a Conductor.

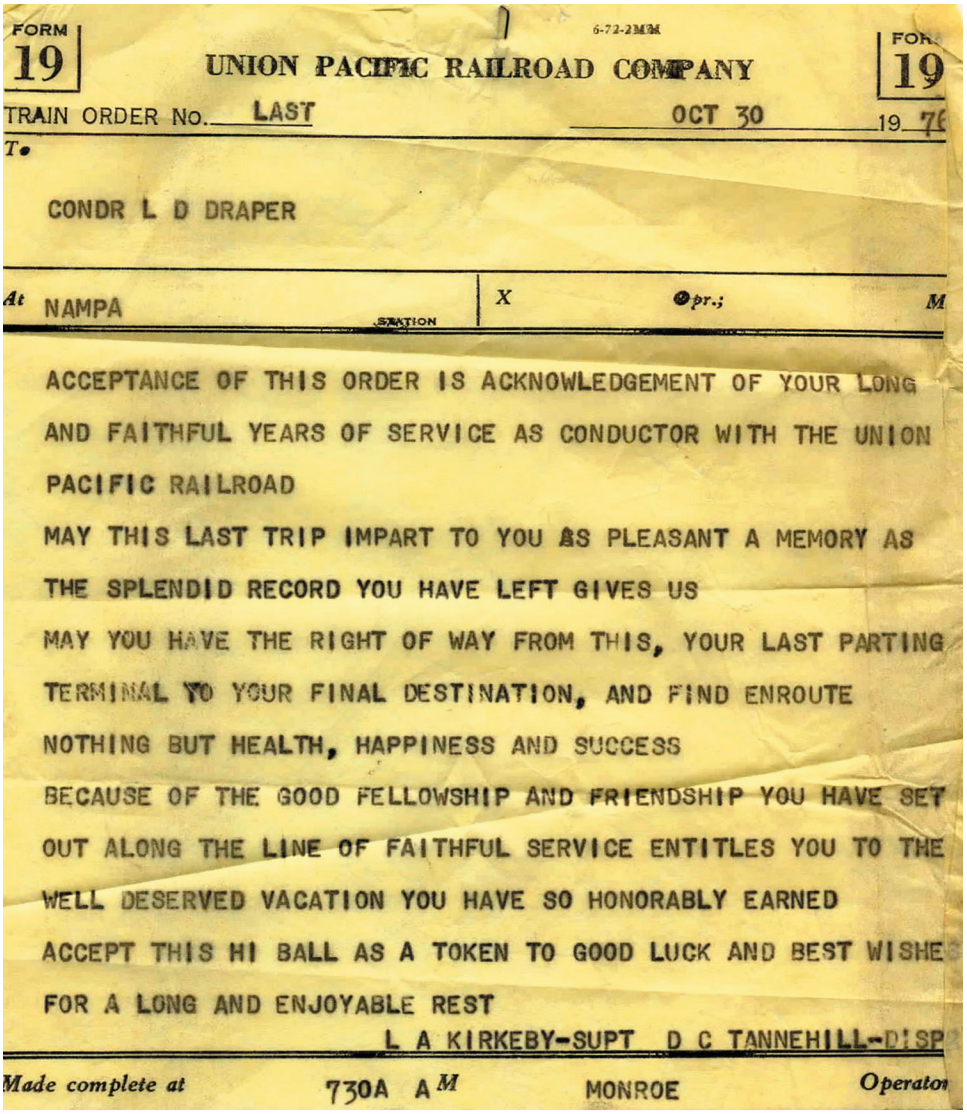
May I take a few lines to offer you my sincere congratulations on your retirement and express my desire that your retirement brings you the contentment and happiness you deserve.

Yours truly,

L. A. Kirkeby

L. A. KIRKEBY
Superintendent

Standard Union Pacific Railroad retirement letter, 1976
Original courtesy of Le Vern Draper



FORM 19

6-72-2M

UNION PACIFIC RAILROAD COMPANY

FORM 19

TRAIN ORDER No. LAST OCT 30 19 76

To

CONDR L D DRAPER

At NAMPA STATION | X Opr.; M

ACCEPTANCE OF THIS ORDER IS ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF YOUR LONG AND FAITHFUL YEARS OF SERVICE AS CONDUCTOR WITH THE UNION PACIFIC RAILROAD

MAY THIS LAST TRIP IMPART TO YOU AS PLEASANT A MEMORY AS THE SPLENDID RECORD YOU HAVE LEFT GIVES US

MAY YOU HAVE THE RIGHT OF WAY FROM THIS, YOUR LAST PARTING TERMINAL TO YOUR FINAL DESTINATION, AND FIND ENROUTE NOTHING BUT HEALTH, HAPPINESS AND SUCCESS

BECAUSE OF THE GOOD FELLOWSHIP AND FRIENDSHIP YOU HAVE SET OUT ALONG THE LINE OF FAITHFUL SERVICE ENTITLES YOU TO THE WELL DESERVED VACATION YOU HAVE SO HONORABLY EARNED

ACCEPT THIS HI BALL AS A TOKEN TO GOOD LUCK AND BEST WISHES FOR A LONG AND ENJOYABLE REST

L A KIRKEBY-SUPT D C TANNEHILL-DISP

Made complete at 730A AM MONROE Operator

Union Pacific Railroad retirement congratulations in the form of a playful telegram, 1976
Original courtesy of Le Vern Draper

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