

Cheyenne man honored for 70 years of documenting rail history

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CHEYENNE — Jim Ehrenberger is thorough, but he's no "rivet counter," his friends say.

Ehrenberger has amassed a huge collection of photos, negatives and transparencies of trains, estimated at more than 100,000 artifacts. The collection, now headed to the University of Wyoming's American Heritage Center in Laramie, is a testament to Ehrenberger's singular obsession with trains.

All of those artifacts, and his memories, are the product of a more than 70-year-long career as a rail historian.

On April 20, Ehrenberger was given the Railway and Locomotive Historical Society's Gerald M. Best Senior Achievement Award for his commitment to railroad history.

Ehrenberger's friend, Al Dunton, owner of Centennial Publications, moderated the award ceremony.

"Those of you that know Jim will appreciate his consistent willingness to accurately and graciously answer your questions and provide insight into the details and nuances of railroad history," Dunton said. "About the only thing he refuses to (answer) is when a modeler asks, 'How many rivets?' or 'What was the size or spacing on that locomotive?' He refuses to get down to that level of detail, but that's about the only thing."

Guests attended in the Union Pacific Steam Shop, where several steam locomotives are maintained and preserved by a small crew to this day. The venue is a special place for Ehrenberger, who worked there during his time with the Union Pacific. Members of the Wyoming and Colorado railroad community gathered to honor him in front of one of the last operating steam engines in the U.S., Big Boy No. 4014.

Ehrenberger's career with trains began in the early 1950s, with him working as a "call boy" for the Union Pacific. Dunton said Ehrenberger held more than 40 positions with UPRR from 1953 until his retirement in 1988. He worked his way up to the position of manager of rules and safety with the railroad.

Ehrenberger began his career in the waning days of the steam engine, as railroads began to manufacture trains that relied on diesel fuel. While working on the railroad, he had a parallel enthusiasm for photography. As time went on, he was able to document the transition to modern railroad infrastructure.

"In the 1950s, he photographed, in the last days of steam, all 25 Big Boys," Dunton said. "There's only a handful of people that can make that claim, that they photographed the Big Boys in service."

Dunton also mentioned that Ehrenberger authored, co-authored, compiled and produced almost 70 books throughout his career.

Union Pacific's Senior Manager of Heritage Operations, Ed Dickens Jr., who oversees the steam shop, mentioned that Ehrenberger's work played a part in cultivating his early love of trains.

"It's a joy seeing everyone here, where we can take a few minutes and think about all the great things Jim has done," Dickens said. "Guys like me, when I was in university, read Jim's books, looked at his photographs

(from) years prior to when I was even born. It's a real privilege and honor to have you here, Jim."

The president of the Railway and Locomotive Historical Society, Robert Holzweiss, was also able to attend to talk about Ehrenberger personally.

"One thing you've done, (Jim), that elevates you to the next level is that you've done the planning," he said. "How many times have I received a call from someone who said, 'My father, my brother, my friend, my uncle has passed away, I have a closet, the garage or a storage unit full of photographs, models, documents, I have no idea what it is. I have no idea what to do with it. If you don't come in a week or a month or two months, it's going in the garbage.' Jim has done the heavy lifting."

Once it came time for Ehrenberger to accept the award, he kept his remarks brief.

"I told someone that I would only say 25 words or less," Ehrenberger said. "I don't have to say anything else, Al's already given you all the secrets. ... If you can't do the little things, how do you expect to do the big things? That's, kind of the way I look at it."



Cheyenne resident Jim Ehernberger holds the Gerald M. Best Senior Achievement Award on April 20, 2024, in the Union Pacific Steam Shop. Ehernberger was recognized for a lifetime of significant contributions to railroading history by the Railway and Locomotive Historical Society. KIRK MILLER/FOR THE WYOMING TRIBUNE EAGLE

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