



Age of Steam Roundhouse Statement on the Passing of Jerry Joe Jacobson

Jerry Joe Jacobson has died. After a long illness and surrounded by members of his family, Jerry passed away peacefully on September 13, 2017. He was 74.

Visionary, businessman, anesthetist, philanthropist, entrepreneur, family man, railroad tycoon and friend to many. Of the many words used to describe Jerry Joe Jacobson perhaps his most favorite was “paratrooper”; more specifically,

Sergeant Jacobson, parachute rigger, Company B, 407th Supply & Transportation Battalion, 82nd Airborne Division, US Army. He continued his military service with the U.S. Army Reserve, eventually rising to the rank of Captain.

Born in Jacksonville, Illinois, and spending his youth in the shadow of northern Indiana's sprawling steel mills, Jerry's character was forged by his tough-as-nails father, yet tempered by his loving mother. The family moved to Ohio where Jerry enjoyed high school activities of playing drums and wrestling, but most of all he loved watching the last steam locomotives still operating on the Baltimore & Ohio's Akron Division main line near his home in Cuyahoga Falls. Jerry vowed that one day he would own his own steamer, realizing that in order to run his own locomotive he would have to own his own railroad.

Jerry studied at Kent State University for two years and then went on to receive his degree in anesthesia from a teaching hospital in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, right in the middle of a Pennsylvania-Dutch country. Spending available weekends at the steam-powered Strasburg tourist railroad, he came to appreciate the simple, quiet life of the surrounding Amish community. Jerry moved back to Ohio and began his anesthesia career in maternity suites and operating rooms at local hospitals.

During the early 1980s Jerry became involved with the operation of two Ohio short lines, and dreams of owning his own railroad came true when in 1988 he purchased a little-used branch of the Norfolk & Western. Running 90 miles between Brewster, Ohio, and Zanesville, this former W&LE/Nickel Plate line was renamed the Ohio Central (OC). One of the first things Jerry did was to acquire from Steamtown its ex-Canadian National 4-6-0 #1551 in trade for his Jackson Iron & Steel 0-6-0 #3 (formerly Baldwin Locomotive Works plant switcher No.26, recently rebuilt and again operating at Steamtown). Jerry rebuilt the 4-6-0, acquired open-window passenger coaches, and began operating daily-except-Sunday steam-powered tourist trains on his new railroad line...that just happened to pass through the largest Amish community in the United States. It was a natural fit—people came from miles around to shop and visit the quaint Amish

community of Sugarcreek, and, while in town these same tourists would ride OC passenger trains. There was the occasional freight train, but on some days the line's sole income was derived from the tickets sold to eager steam train passengers.

Little-by-little freight traffic increased as Jerry acquired, rehabilitated and operated more and more down-on-their-luck railroads until he had amassed the ten lines that comprised the greater Ohio Central Railroad System. Stretching from Columbus to the Ohio River with satellite rail lines in Youngstown and Pittsburgh, the OCRS had grown to 550 miles with more than 200 employees. Instead of abandoning rights of way or giving-in to non-revenue producing bike trails, Jerry had revived 10 faltering railroads that now paid taxes and purchased millions of dollars' worth of fuel, supplies and services. Offering fresh competition to the monopolizing trucking industry, Jerry's railroads caused shipping costs to fall and businesses to relocate beside his railroad tracks. His railroads created jobs whose employee's paychecks stimulated local economies, and whose payroll taxes supported on-line communities. As an added bonus, upon an employee's 10th anniversary with the OCRS Jerry took them on his annual trek to Fort Bragg to celebrate the 82nd's All-American Week.

Jerry eventually acquired ten steam locomotives and two-dozen passenger cars, and for nearly twenty years OC's summertime tourist trains and day-long excursions were pulled by steam locomotives to the delight of millions of people, both aboard the trains and those watching from trackside. But OC's main focus was hauling freight, and the little railroad prospered beyond all expectations by hauling plastic pellets, aggregates, grain, paper, chemicals, pipe, bricks, steel and unit coal trains.

In 2008 Jerry reached retirement age and sold his railroad empire to the Genesee & Wyoming. He pursued other interests, including the establishment of an investment business and the Jerry & Laura Jacobson Foundation, Inc., a charitable institution. Along with devoted wife, Laura, the Jacobsons funded the \$10 million construction of a new student dormitory at Fork Union Military Academy in

Virginia where their two sons attended high school. Back home in Ohio, Jerry built a functioning steam locomotive repair facility right out of the 1930s, including an 18-stall roundhouse, 115-foot turntable, back shop, wood water tank, huge store house and depot/office, etc., to restore and exhibit his collection that had grown to 19 steamers, 28 diesels, two-dozen passenger cars and other historic railroad items. The Age of Steam Roundhouse is the world's largest, privately funded, railroad historical project, and the roundhouse is one of the largest timber-framed structures in the world.

Jerry Joe Jacobson's childhood dream had come true. Everyone who loves trains—and many who only know trains as an occasional annoyance at grade crossings as they wait for a slow-moving freight to pass—also enjoy the many benefits, public and private, created by Jerry Joe Jacobson's dream.

On September 14, 2017, the Fort Wayne Railroad Historical Society honored the late Jerry Joe Jacobson by displaying his name on the cab side of former NKP 2-8-4 #765 that the FWRHS will be operating this weekend on the Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railway in Ohio. Photo courtesy of Kelly Lynch, FWRHS.



