What Happened to that Train?

A southbound Amtrak train heads for the main tunnel.

Nelson Bennett has the answer
photos and text by Darlyne A. Reiter

Distant train sounds command attention. The bright engine light shines from far away. The image and sound of the approaching train evoke feelings of wanderlust and wonder. Where is it going? Where has it been? What is it hauling? Who is aboard? The loud whistle alerts anyone on or near the tracks. The chug-a-chug of the rotating wheels gets louder as the train gets closer. Whoosh! The train goes by. The sound grows softer and softer as the train recedes and continues on its journey—delivering passengers or freight.

On my homeward commute, a long, slow freight train lumbers on the tracks above me as I cruise along Ruston Way between Commencement Bay and the train tracks. We each enter our respective tunnels—mine being the car tunnel at the old ASARCO smelter site, while the southbound Amtrak train heads for the main tunnel.

Ralph Decker receives Murray Morgan Award

Ralph Decker was presented with the Tacoma Historical Society’s Murray Morgan Award April 9 for his work in recording the history of the Tacoma Fire Department.

The presentation took place at the society’s 17th annual meeting, held at Tacoma Public Library.


A fire buff since his Stadium High School days, Decker has been official photographer for

Murray Morgan Award continued on Page 2

Inside

Historic Homes of Tacoma Tour ............... 3
World War II Memorial...................... 7
train nearly fills the short train tunnel above me. We exit from the conjoined tunnels together; the long train veers slightly to the left, I turn slightly to the right on the temporary road built by ASARCO, turn left and proceed up the curved hill. The freight train snakes its way along the gully—parallel with me again. The sound recedes, then abruptly disappears while I’m at the stop sign in Ruston. Where did it go?

From my deck at home, looking toward the Narrows, I see the headlight of another train as it meanders along the water coming toward me, under the Narrows Bridge. It sounds its loud horn to announce its arrival into Tacoma from the south. The chug-a-chug gets louder as the train gets closer. Then it disappears. The sound stops abruptly. The train never gets closer and it never whooshes by me.

How did these trains disappear from my sight and sound? Where did they go?

The explanation is the Nelson Bennett Train Tunnel. The first train tracks to Tacoma were completed in 1873 from Kalama, Washington. They came up the current main line as far as Tenino, then went to Yelm, Rainier, Roy, crossed what is now Fort Lewis and intersected what is now Interstate 5 at the railroad bridge by McChord Air Force Base. The tracks came up through Lakewood to South Tacoma, down Nalley Valley, and through the current University of Washington Tacoma campus to Half Moon Yard, which is below Old City Hall and the Northern Pacific Building at 7th and Pacific. There was a wharf

What Happened to the Train—continued on Page 4

Ralph Decker receives Murray Morgan Award continued from Page 1

the Tacoma Fire Department since 1971. He was one of the organizers of the Tacoma-Pierce County Fire Buff Battalion.

Decker, a native Tacoman, retired from Weyerhaeuser Co., where he worked for 31 years as a computer operator.

In presenting the award, society president Dale Wirsing said Decker’s long service to the Historic Homes of Tacoma Tour and to the society as an officer and board member merited recognition.

The society’s Murray Morgan Award for documenting and preserving local history honors the late Tacoma historian, teacher and author. Morgan died in 2000.

Ralph Decker

Previous recipients have included Brian G. Kamens, Winnifred Olsen, Caroline Kellogg, Ottilie Markholt, Gary Fuller Reese, Ronald Magden, Cecelia Swinth Carpenter, Robert Tschida, Caroline Gallacci and Ron Karabaich, Charlotte Medlock, Jim Fredrickson, Dode Trip, Marie Hayden, and the Tacoma-Pierce County Genealogical Society.

Visit the THS
Exhibit Center & Store

Where Tacoma’s History Is Celebrated

747 Broadway – in Tacoma’s Old City Hall Historic District

Noon to 5 pm Wed—Sat 253-472-3738

“Building Tacoma” Exibit Explores City’s Early Growth

“Building Tacoma” traces Tacoma’s history from the first Euro-American settlement activity in 1852 through its emergence as a city of some world importance by 1915.

“The John Graham Collection – Tacoma History in Post Cards” offers well over 100 views of early-day Tacoma.

* Both exhibits curated by Dr. Jim Hoard.
The Tacoma Historical Society presents

*Historic Homes of Tacoma*

Tour 2007

**NORTH CENTRAL TACOMA**

*May 5th & May 6th*

**Saturday 10 am to 5 pm**

**Sunday 1 pm to 5 pm**

**Tickets $20.00**

*Available starting Wednesday, April 4th at these outlets:*

- Pacific Northwest Shop • Stadium Thriftway
- Columbia Bank locations: 21st & Pearl • Fircrest • South 19th & Union
- THS Exhibit Center, 747 Broadway, Wednesday–Saturday 12–5

Tickets also available for purchase May 5th & 6th at the Reception Center
Epworth Le Sourd Methodist Church, 710 South Anderson Street
and at the Tacoma Historical Society’s Exhibit Center, May 5th

*Proceeds benefit Tacoma Historical Society Museum Fund*

*501(c)3 organization*

www.tacomahistory.org
between Thea Foss Park and the grain elevator, which served as the station for about 10 years. That original Northern Pacific main line was a steep climb out of downtown Tacoma to South Tacoma. It was a 2.2% grade known in railroading as mountain grade. This required helper engines to boost trains to the top of the hill. Heavy freight trains also moved slowly across Pacific Avenue, tying up traffic. Although the distance would be approximately the same, the railroad decided to build a water-level, minimal-grade line along the shores of Puget Sound to allow operation of heavier trains. Since it would have been impractical to build this line around rugged Point Defiance, the Nelson Bennett Tunnel was built.

Ninety-five years ago, in 1912—less than one month after the huge “unsinkable” luxury liner, Titanic, hit an iceberg and sank in the Atlantic Ocean—thousands of miles away in Tacoma, Washington, huge equipment sank into the ground, scooped out the soil, and construction began on a new, much-needed train tunnel.

One year prior to those two events, in November 1911, the engineering department of the Northern Pacific Railway released a report stating that construction of two tunnels would begin in the spring, to be built simultaneously with the Point Defiance railroad line. It was estimated the tunnels would cost about $300,000 and take one year to build. The shorter tunnel through the smelter site—which would give the town of Ruston an outlet to Tacoma’s water-front—would be a distance of 302 feet, more difficult to build than the other and cost approximately $50,000. It would be 17 feet high, 20 feet wide and lined with concrete. The difficulty would lie in “the fact that excessive care will be have to be exercised in excavating and timbering through the hogback of land under which it passes lest damage is done to the smelter works.”

The second tunnel would be larger: 5,000 to 6,000 feet long, beginning on the Narrows, emerging in Ruston, and costing approximately $250,000. In December 1911, Engineer L. A. Nicholson and W. R. Rust of the Tacoma Smelting Company opened 16 bids for the construction of the two tunnels. A Seattle firm was awarded the contract for the shorter tunnel. Nelson Bennett’s bid of $23,603.25 was $657 lower than the next lowest bidder. The design called for a train to emerge from the shorter tunnel, travel along a gulch for a short distance—heading west—and then enter the longer tunnel at Hanover Street (present-day Winnifred Street) in Ruston.

The rail lines and the tunnels would all be double-tracked: one northbound, one southbound. The Point Defiance line would have a maximum curvature of 3% and a maximum grade of six-tenths of 1%. “When the Point Defiance line is built there will not be a city in the United States as little troubled by grade crossings as Tacoma.” In addition, the benefit of the scenic route along the water—as a tourist attraction—would be unsurpassed anywhere on the West Coast. To make this possible, the long tunnel under the city was needed. Nelson Bennett had come out of retirement to respond to the need for a quicker, more efficient way to move trains through Tacoma.

At age 69, Nelson Bennett, “PIONEER RAILROAD BUILDER OF THE NORTHWEST, INDIAN FIGHTER, MINER, STORE AND SHIP OWNER—[was] Drawn Back to Work by Lure of the Game…” Bennett, well known for his attention to detail and perseverance, was the man for the job. He and his brother, Sidney, had undertaken the overwhelming task of building the tunnel through Stampede Pass in the Cascades. Twenty-four years earlier, in 1888, they completed the task of allowing trains to run under the mountains: meeting deadlines while overcoming severe obstacles and giving Tacoma a direct connection with the East.

The work in Tacoma began on May 10, 1912. The long Tacoma tunnel, beginning at the Narrows portal and coming out at the east portal in Ruston, was to be entirely completed as it was being built. “When the wooden headwork men emerge at the east portal of the 4,000-foot stretch the concrete crews are expected to be right behind them.”

Many difficulties had to be overcome before
beginning. The hillside was so steep that humans could barely cling to its side. Earth had to be removed to create a platform for the camp buildings and equipment and to reach a level needed for the opening of the tunnel. Earth from the hill was used to create the bed for the rail line. A seawall was needed to protect the hillside; a wharf, a cement house, a gridiron, a lumber dock that was even with the sea-level grade, a boom derrick, a compressor house, a cook house and five bunkhouses (in the area of present-day Salmon Beach) were all built. After five weeks of work at the Narrows portal, the 75 workers had bored 250 feet into the earth. However, emerge they did, through the soft and heavy earth: on schedule, a year and a half later, in December 1914.

The new train tunnel broke through the dark to the light at the other end in Ruston. The crucial link for Tacoma’s wide-ranging development was a successful venture. And Tacoma celebrated “…the new link in Tacoma’s commercial greatness” when 350 diners invaded the Commercial Club. “…every sound ceased when President G. M. Savage arose and proposed a toast to the late Nelson Bennett, whose heroic pioneering conquered the Cascades and later tunnelled under Point Defiance Park.”

Bennett did not live to see the completion of the 4,403-foot tunnel that he engineered and was rightfully named for him. He died Tuesday, July 22, 1913, a year and a half before the completion of the tunnel. It is interesting to note that his widow, Lottie Bennett, took over and completed the contract.

In a tribute to a great man, during the celebration of the completed Narrows water-grade line and essential tunnels, Judge George T. Reid, assistant to the president of the N.P., stated, “When the contract for the Nelson Bennett tunnel was about to be let, the Northern Pacific officers insisted that, if possible, Mr. Bennett should be given the contract… it was probably Nelson Bennett who kept the United States congress from repealing the N.P. land grant.”

On December 15, 1914, 350 Tacomans stood in the cold within viewing distance of the opening of the tunnel in Ruston to honor Nelson Bennett, who “died in the harness.” They stood 100 yards from the mouth of the tunnel that Bennett was working to reach when he died. “To the right of the Tacomans stretched the broad waters of the Sound, in front of them steep sand banks rose, and on their crests thousands of fir trees, their snow-covered branches glistening in the sunlight, made the scene a fitting spot to honor a great man.”

The Nelson Bennett Tunnel has played a huge part in the commercial and industrial development of the city, in addition to contributing to civic pride. Steilacoom Museum marked the 80th anniversary of the Nelson Bennett Tunnel with an exhibit in December 1994. Over the course of 80 years, some things have changed in the approximately seven-eighths-of-a-mile-long tunnel. The original double-track line, one track for southbound and another for northbound, had to be changed to accommodate higher and wider loads on freight trains to avoid hitting the concrete top and sides. In 1987, one of the tracks was removed and the tunnel was changed to one single track in the center, which has resulted in congestion and delays to trains that must wait their turn to go into the tunnel. In addition, as railroad companies have merged over the years, the ownership and maintenance of the tunnel has gone from Northern Pacific to Burlington Northern in 1970, then to Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) in 1995. To be sure, the solid concrete train tunnel will last longer than anyone involved in its creation 96 years ago.

A research paper about an icon like the Nelson Bennett train tunnel would be incomplete without stories from local residents. Jim Tallman, a lifelong Ruston resident, recalls walking through the tunnel as a young boy. He readily admits it was “very scary” when a train came through while he and his friends were in the tunnel, even though there are alcoves along the way to duck into. The noise is inconceivable to anyone who has not experienced this daring act. Mr. Tallman remembers straddling the top of the tunnel, looking up to see the light shining through the opening of the tunnel. It was a fitting spot to honor a great man.

What Happened to the Train—continued on Page 6
What Happened to the Train – continued from Page 5

The tracks disappear into the small tunnel.

The train on my commute didn’t permanently disappear, it just went through the Nelson Bennett Train Tunnel; it will emerge in a few minutes on the Narrows—blowing its horn.

– Notes –

2  Jim Fredrickson, Tacoma Historian, Retired Northern Pacific/Burlington Northern Santa Fe Dispatcher, E-mail and personal conversation with author, January 2001.
5  Ledger, 19 November 1911.
7  “Pioneer Railroad Builder of the Northest, has ‘Comeback’,” Ledger, 16 June 1912, 39.
8  Ibid.
9  Ibid.
13  Ledger, 16 December 1914.
18  Jim Fredrickson, E-mail from author, 29 January 2001.

Darlyne Reiter moved from North Dakota to Tacoma in 1969. Her interest in Tacoma’s history began shortly thereafter while researching for a newspaper contest in which readers identified historical facts about the city. Darlyne, a University of Washington Tacoma alumna, is currently writing a book on the history of South Tacoma and is a member of the Tacoma Historical Society.

tunnel at the opening and watching trains go in and out of the tunnel. That tunnel opening, under the Winnifred Street Bridge—now hidden by overgrown brush and scotchbroom—is nearly concealed from the pedestrians who walk over the Winnifred Street Bridge above.

The first Winnifred Street Bridge was built of wood. A concrete bridge was built over the top of the wooden structure in 1941. A metal sign fastened to the bridge stated it was erected by the people of Ruston for “A United Community.” How fitting that the portal of the tunnel that united Tacoma with the rest of the world should be shielded by this bridge. The Winnifred Street Bridge was closed to motor vehicle traffic for about four years, but it was rehabilitated and reopened in 2002.

The Narrows portal is even more challenging to view. Many Tacomans are unaware that it even exists. With luck, the opening can be seen from the Narrows Bridge. When traveling east, it is to the left, looking north along the water, where Salmon Beach begins. It can also be viewed from the residences across the water above the bluff.

On any given day, 40 to 50 trains travel through the Nelson Bennett Tunnel, including eight Amtrak trains, 20 or more Burlington Northern Santa Fe trains and 14 to 16 Union Pacific trains. In the event of a hazardous chemical spill in the tunnel, the Tacoma Fire Department is ready to respond. According to Ron Stephens, Assistant Chief, Tacoma Fire Department, a response plan exists that covers any and all incidents, and the plan would adapt to a spill in the tunnel. The area around the tunnel opening on the Ruston side is shared by graffiti artists, transients, youth and deer.
Support with your gifts

A Memorial Monument to Honor
Pierce County’s 800 World War II Dead
Our Fallen Heroes

To be Dedicated Fall 2007
In Tacoma’s War Memorial Park
Jackson Avenue and Highway 16

Sponsors:
Edward B. Rhodes/Parkland Post 2
American Legion
The Tacoma Historical Society
501(C) 3 Organizations

Send Tax Deductible Donations to:
Tacoma Historical Society (THS)
Memorial Monument
1814 Skyline Drive
Tacoma, WA 98406
For Information (253) 752-7722
TACOMA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Regular meetings

June 11, 2007 – Monday, 7 pm
Tacoma Public Library
“The Great Streetcar Wreck of 1900”
Russell Holter

July 19, 2007 – Thursday, 5–8 pm
Walking tour of Tacoma’s Historic Auto Row
In cooperation with Historic Tacoma

August 13, 2007 – To be Announced

September 10, 2007 – Monday, 7 pm
Tacoma Public Library
“Beyond the Richards Studio: Photographs at Tacoma Public Library from other collections”
Robert Schuler
Photography archivist, Tacoma Public Library

www.tacomahistory.org — 253-472-3738