

Riding the Rails

White Salmon editor never lost his love for trains

By Jeanie Senior

Even a brief description of D.C. Jesse Burkhardt would have to include two words: writing and railroads.

Jesse is a newspaper editor, a photographer specializing in trains and the author of six books about railroading. From the mid-1970s to 1980, he traveled about 37,000 miles on railroads in North America—grabbing rides on freights, sleeping in what the people who ride the rails call “side-door Pullmans”—boxcars.

Those years are the subject of Jesse’s most recent book, “Travelogue—From an Unruly Youth.”

Although the book is about his journeys—and about love, and youth and a different world, Jesse would not call “Travelogue” an autobiography.

“It’s a travel adventure,” he says. “It’s more about adventures during a certain era.”

His first book, “Backwoods Railroads: Branchlines and Shortlines of Western Oregon,” came out in 1994, followed by “Rolling Dreams: Portraits of the Northwest’s Railroad Heritage”; “Freight Weather: The Art of Stalking Trains”; “Railroads of the Columbia River Gorge”; and “The Ann Arbor Railroad.”

“Backwoods Railroads and Rolling Dreams” both are out of



Above, Jesse Burkhardt’s photo of a Burlington Northern Santa Fe freight roaring down a snow-covered gorge track.

print and sold out.

“You might be able to find them in bookstores,” or online, Jesse says, “but they’ve been long gone for a few years now.”

Trains always have been part of Jesse’s life.

“I grew up in Jackson, Michigan, 45 miles from Ann Arbor,” he says. “It was a small town, and you could hear the train in the night. As a kid growing up, I’d hear that and I always wondered where they were going. It created a mystery and romance that’s followed all my life.”

After high school, Jesse moved from Michigan to Ashland, Oregon, where he went to college, and rode the rails.

“I had a series of jobs, all kinds of crazy things,” he says.

He operated a bean harvester in Oregon, and worked in peach and pear orchards; loaded fruit from cold storage onto rail cars, and drove automobiles at a Michigan speedway where auto manufacturers tested production cars.

“I took a lot of jobs where I’d work for a few months, then quit and go traveling,” he recalls.

That ended when he started getting better jobs.

“At some point, the jobs were too good to dismiss,” Jesse says.

He took one last major train trip, in 1987, from Minnesota to Washington.

After he graduated from the

University of Oregon in 1981 with a degree in political science, Jesse worked at Sacred Heart Hospital in Eugene—in the print shop, the library and the department in charge of sterilizing medical instruments.

After a three-year stint at Oregon Business magazine, where he became associate editor, Jesse moved to the Columbia Gorge in 1994 to become the editor of the White Salmon Enterprise.

“I heard about this job and came for an interview,” he recalls. “It was the first time I’d ever seen this town. I really hadn’t ever heard of it.”

Now, Jesse calls White Salmon “a really great community, with great schools and great people to work with.”

He enjoys the variety involved in editing a small weekly newspaper.

“It’s great to live in the White Salmon area, and a privilege to have a job where I’m on a first name basis with, for instance, the mayor and the police chief,” says Jesse. “Being in a small town, you pretty much know everybody and everybody knows you, which is a good thing in many ways.”

Besides Jesse, the Enterprise staff includes Elaine Bakke, the publisher; Sverre Bakke, who covers sports; and Lynn Lamson, the business manager.

Although White Salmon is a small town, and people sometimes ask Jesse how the staff finds enough



Above, Jesse exits the White Salmon Enterprise office. Below, the cover of his book about riding trains in his youth.

to fill the newspaper every week, he says that's never a problem.

"There's always a lot going on," he says. "Something serious, something light, as simple as the weather. We've had murders. You really have to cover everything. And sometimes there's so many interesting things going on in town we really can't cover it all."

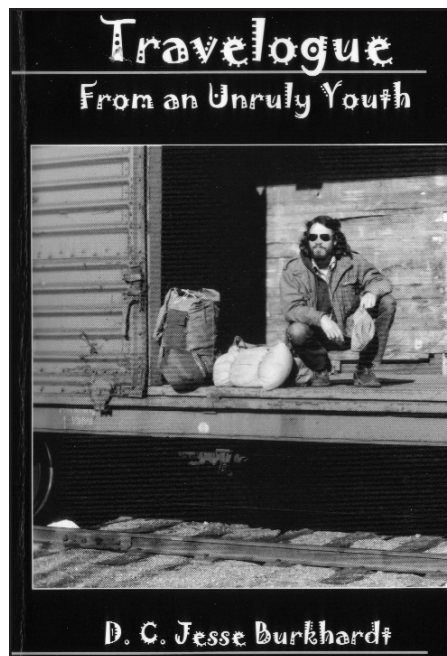
Of course, it's not all good news. Jesse recalls murders, downturns in the area's economy, fires and the flood in 1996 that devastated area roads and railroads.

Jesse now mostly shoots train photos when he is on vacation.

"I'm so familiar with what I see around here, although when it snows, I love to go out and get different shots," he says.

With main lines of both the Burlington Northern Santa Fe and the Union Pacific railroads running through the gorge, the area tends to be popular with rail fans.

"In my case, I've always had more of an affinity for backwater rural



lines that run once or twice a week, something that's really disappearing," Jesse says, citing the woes of Port of Tillamook and Mount Hood railroads, shortlines that suffered extensive flood damage in the past few years.

Besides his newspaper job, Jesse spends evenings filling orders for his books. He self-published the last few. They are available through Amazon.com and at railroad shows.

Jesse's daughter, Clare, is a fourth-grader at Whitson Elementary. His wife, Marie, works as a sign language interpreter in the Portland area.

He says he would like to do another large-format book of Northwest railroad photographs.

"I have the material ready to go, I'm just waiting to win the lottery to cover the costs to execute the project," he jokes. "I sure can't afford self-publishing in this economy we're in these days." ■

Several local booksellers carry some or all of the other books: Artisans' Jewelry, Collage of the Gorge, The Book Peddler, and Butterflies Flowers and Gifts in White Salmon; Antiques and Oddities in Bingen; Waucoma and The Book Stop in Hood River and Klindt's Booksellers in The Dalles.