

## Lee Mason Interview Transcript

Narrator: Lee Mason (LM)

Interviewer #1: David B. Hedberg (DH)

Also Present: Barbara Mason (BM) Catherine Volle (CV)

Date: March 3, 2010

Location: Aloha, Oregon

Transcribed by David B. Hedberg March 5-23, 2012

**Note to auditor:** Highlighted names could not be verified for spelling. Other proper nouns were verified for spelling

Style: [indicates nonverbal cues]

{Indicates editing or implied content}

*Three audio files:*

*Part 1: 32 minutes, 39 seconds*

*Part 2: 69 minutes, 15 seconds*

*Part 3: 28 minutes, 08 seconds*

*Total Interview: 2 hours, 10 minutes, 02 seconds.*

Time Code	Transcription
	<b>Audio File 1: 32minutes, 39 seconds.</b>
0:00 –	DH: This is a recording identification. I am David Hedberg from Portland State University; today is March 3, 2012. I'm at the home of Lee and Barbara Mason, and we will be doing an oral history interview for the silicon forest project for Washington County {Historical Museum}. Lee could you tell me your date of birth and place of birth please?
	LM: January 5 <sup>th</sup> , 1929, Elrose Saskatchewan, Canada.
0:0:50	DH: Excellent thank you. Could you tell me about how you came to the Pacific Northwest?
Narrator's birth, and railroad family.	LM: Well yes, it's fairly involved. Oh how many minutes do I have?
	DH: You can have as much as you want.
	LM: Ok well, I came from a very fortunate family. My dad was the telegraph

<p>0:02:00</p> <p>Discusses coming to Portland Shipyards</p>	<p>operator for the Canadian National Railroad. So we lived in the railroad station right beside the tracks and I was born right before the depression hit. So we were living there all through the depression in this station house that furnished us with everything. Coal, water, ice, electricity and maybe some other things that I can't think of right now. So my dad taught me how to be a telegraph operator, so I learned how to do that when I was bout ten. And then when I, we left Elrose and lived in two or three different towns in Saskatchewan. And then when I, between my, oh ill back up a little bit.</p> <p>In 1943, it's at the height of World War Two, my brother Glen and I came to Portland to work in the ship yards for the summer. That was between about grade seven and grade eight I think, for two months in the summer. And we were making about a dollar an hour. And even adults in Saskatchewan, If they had a...well... they were having work then because the war had started. They were probably making twenty-five cents and hour. So we worked all summer, and saved our money. So went back and we got in involved in a little band and stuff, bought our own instruments and everything. So then we lived in three towns, Hanley Saskatchewan, Punnichy Saskatchewan, and Nokomis, Saskatchewan. We learned to ski and we had a band in a couple of towns. We played Hockey and we Ice did curling. I don't know if you're familiar with curling or not. Its done right here in Portland now.</p> <p>DH: [nods head affirming]</p> <p>LM: So then, moving a little bit further ahead...Oh, between grade 11 and grade 12, when I was seventeen, I came down to Portland again. Went up to the big station in Portland, Union Station. I'm sure you know where it is.</p>
<p>0:04:40</p> <p>Applying for job with Southern Pacific Railroad.</p>	<p>DH: um hmm</p> <p>LM: And I took the elevator up to floor two where the dispatching offices were for the Southern Pacific Railroad. And I was in there and applying for a job. So I was treated so well, fella all in a suit and everything brought me in and about ten minutes interview, took me into where the guys were telegraphing and gave me a little test that was very easy for me. And asked me about some of the rules of the railroad, how to keep trains from crashing and this and that. Well the rules</p>

are a little different in Canada from the states, but very similar. So he said "well I'm goanna send you to Woodburn, Oregon to learn our way, the Southern Pacific way." And that was such a nice little town then. That was 1946. The funny thing about that, there was an agent there and a day operator. Normally in smaller towns you just have the agent that does the telegraphing and selling tickets, express, freight, and all that. But it was fairly busy, so they had an operator there. So the agent introduced me to the operator and he had a unique name...Do you remember what it was Barbara?

BM: I don't sorry

0:05:35

Connection  
with  
Woodburn  
operator to  
Saskatchewan

LM: Oscar...it was Oscar...well Ill think of it in a minute. Anyway, I said "well..." Oh, Oscar Froese [spells name]. So I said, "what do you know, where I come from in Hanley Saskatchewan, there were some Froeses there." Although I pronounced it [Fro-ZEE], because that's the way we pronounced it up there. Oh, he said, "That's where my relatives were from." So anyway, head had a car. So he drive me around, we played tennis, and introduced me to people I should know. I didn't have any money; I had five dollars with me. But he found me a place to get room and board, a very nice place. I think I could still find the house in Woodburn. It was right beside the tennis court. And so the first day I went into, there was a café, right across from the station. The station is no longer there but you can see where it was by the sidings and so on. So anyway, I went in to have something to eat, and I only had five dollars. So I looked at the menu, and they had sandwiches for twenty-five cents, real nice. But they had a hot beef sandwich, and I had never heard of it before. Sounded real good and I had to think about it for a while because it was forty-five cents. Don't remember if that included coffee or not. But anyway I ordered that and it was very good.

So being as I worked for my dad so much I quickly learned. So in about four days they got a call from chief dispatch in Portland. And said wee need an agent at, I'm trying to think of where it was...Toledo, Oregon. Actually said we need an operator at Toledo, Oregon. I was actually both an operator and an agent. So

0:08:15

Worked at station in Toledo, Oregon

they put me on a bus, I was only there for four days during business. I and went to Toledo and stayed in a hotel there, and man came to visit me, the agent. The agent in Toledo came to visit me, he was a man about forty-five, seemed a little old at the time to me. And since then, I have wondered about him. He met me very nice, but he saw this skinny little kid about a hundred and fifteen pounds, soaking wet hundred and fifteen pounds. And he was going to turn the station over to me to run the next day. But not really because it was a bigger station, there was a chief clerk there and an other operator. Well as it worked out, the operator would be the agent and I would be the operator. But I had to get up real early in the morning and open the place up. About six o'clock in the morning, it was about a block away. Am I going on to long here?

DH: No, no no not at all.

LM: [Laughs] So anyway, I went down there and found me a place to stay down near the high school, and oh I went and sat down in the telegraph office. I'm the first one there, no body around, so I knew I had to telegraph. So the lines from, I think they came from Eugene, the telegraph lines to Toledo. And there was trees overhanging them so when they were telegraphing you sometimes missed the dots, you just had to guess, was that two dots and a dash or one dot? But I had some pretty good foresight. We had to copy these train orders that told the trains where to meet. So if you made a mistake you could actually run those trains together. There was no signals like there are now days. They just went by these train orders that we [booped] out. Your probably familiar with that are you?

DH: um yeh. {nods yes}

LM: So anyway, I had the foresight to go through some previous train orders, and see what the names of the towns were. Because they would say a certain would meet another certain train at Myrtle Creek or something like that. So you had to spell that, if you knew that and your reading the telegraph and it starts out

0:11:00

Transfer to  
Wicopee  
Station

with M-Y... Oh you pretty well know its Myrtle Creek. Even though they missed the odd letter going along. That was very helpful. I didn't make any mistakes. Never crashed any trains. I was there for two weeks relieving the operator, who was relieving the agent. And then the operator was going on this vacation for two weeks, so I was there for a month.

And then they were sending me to, off the main line, south of Eugene. To a place called Wicopee [spells name]. It was just a place where they had a passing track and a few shacks where the operators live and where the section foreman would live. So the agent at Toledo was very nice, they provided us with a large trunk full of dishes and everything. Because there was no cafes or anything, there was nobody who lived in the town except the railroad people. No town there maybe about fifteen people there maximum. So he told me all the stuff I should get, canned stuff and so on and so forth. So when I got there I was totally exhausted and they stopped the train to let me off. The trains would never stop. They stopped the train to let me off. I introduced myself to the afternoon operator who was a lady. They had a fair number of lady operators during the war. Which I had never met before. Up in Canada we had no lady operators. And she was very nice, but I mentioned the hoops that you have to hand up to the engines. And in most places you have these wooden hoops that are shaped like that [Stands up and gestures with hands making a large circle]. Ill draw one for you later on. About this size, and when you get these train orders you clip them on like a little...what kind of little wooden clip you know?

BM: like a clothespin?

LM: Clothespin. Yeh

DH: Yeh, Okay.

LM: Clothes pin, so when the train goes by you hand one of these hoops up to the engine and one to the conductor. [Still standing gesturing a hand up]. But

0:14:12

Recalls a near miss train order

this town Wicopee was on the highest grade of any railroad, I believe, in the United States. [Sits back down] It was about a two point five grade, just remembering it, and most railroads do not want to exceed two percent grade. So this meant that coming out of Oakridge Oregon they put on helper engines. Now the freight trains would have about three extra helper engines on there. To pull maybe fifty cars. But the passenger trains they would put at least one sometimes two engines on. So that meant that there had to be a lot of train orders handed up. So the way it worked there you went outside the office right beside the track there was a tower with the ladder that went up about eight or ten feet. So you could put these hoops along the automatic thing that stuck out towards the engine. One was lower for the conductor. So I would have to, if a passenger train was coming along, I would have to put up two train orders for the engineers and one for the conductor. Well getting back, I was exhausted, so this lady operator showed me this new type of hoop. Where you had to thread like a binder twines, it was a spring-loaded thing, and you had to thread binder twines through it and attach the train order to the binder twines. So I'd just come to work at midnight and took over from this lady. Things were very quiet until about five minutes till one. And there was a yellow light that came on in front of my desk, and so I called the dispatch in Eugene. We were on phones there not telegraph.

DH: [Nods head] Uh hum.

LM: I called them and I said, you had know which trains were coming, you could tell by your schedule. I said "number eleven just hit the yellow light." Oh he said "oh well clear him" and now that means that I put off, I read off about, Okay I said "Clear number eleven with order numbers six, eight, ten, twelve, about four or five different orders all had numbers. All these train orders on my desk and he said, "oh wait a minute I might change the meet." So ok then I'm waiting while he's deciding what to do and pretty soon I'm looking out the window and I can see the headlight of the train coming less than a mile away. So

Continues  
with story  
about  
stopping  
number  
eleven train

I said “hey the number eleven, I can see the headlights.” “Oh clear him.”  
“Okay.” So I have to read these train orders out. And he said “okay” and his  
name I remember it was A.J. Green. So he said “Okay A.J.G. Fine” So I turn  
around and run these hoops, there spring-loaded and I have this spring that I  
have to put on. Put the order in, and tighten it up. And I get one done I got two  
more to do and the engine goes by... Well now, now they can’t keep going  
because they have a red board. And they can’t go unless I hand up the order. So  
all of a sudden I hear these two agents screeching to a halt, and it was the  
daylight, our fastest train we had going down to Oakland actually. All these  
beautiful yellow cars going by, yellow and orange cars. And by the time that last  
car got just in front of my station they got stopped. Well by then I had all the  
train orders put together, and I ran out and ran way up. There was a little gravel  
path fortunately right beside the track. So I ran up to the first engine. [Stands up]  
The engineer, which would be the helper engine because they just put them on  
the front, and handed up this train order and he took it [gestures handing up then  
sits down]. I thought he was going to chew me out, no word.

[All laugh]

LM: Then I came back to the regular engineer on this real nice beautiful orange;  
it’s the engine that’s the one that’s in Portland now.

DH: Ah okay um hum.

LM: Forty-four-forty. I have millions of pictures of it. I handed it up to him,  
never said a word [gestures hand up]. Probability thanked him, and then I ran  
back to the conductor and handed it to him. Never said a critical word. Then,  
[Mimicking a steam train sound] because it’s on this steep grade [continues with  
train sound] both engines, and then away they go. So I come in and said to the  
dispatcher “number eleven arrived and one o’clock and left at one-o-two.”  
{Dispatcher} “What did you stop him for?” {LM:} “Well I didn’t have time

remember, you didn't clear him till I could see the lights of the engines."

{Dispatcher} "Okay, Okay" he was kind a mad. I said to my self "Ill never hear the end of this." So the night went all through no problems, lots of trains going left and right. And no problems now that I had the dispatcher clear these trains as soon as I told them they hit the yellow light. So no problem. But eight o'clock when I'm getting off and turning everything over to the day operator, there was a side phone that just rang...And said, "this is Vern Fields the chief dispatcher in Eugene. What did you stop number eleven for last night?" So I went through the little scenario and he was still mad and thought it was my fault. You know, it wasn't my fault at all. I was quick to admit if I ever made an error. And so he said "Okay, well don't let it happen again." So these fellows were all worried because any time you stopped a streamliner they had to send a report right to the general manager superintendent the high mucky-mucks of the Southern Pacific Railroad.

DH: I see, yea

LM: Which would be ridiculous because they would have made that time up in about a half and hour. He would have been on time again but you had to do that. So that's what brought me down to Oregon, I guess that was your question?

DH: Yea, yes.

LM: So that was my first time in Oregon, no that was my second time. I'd come down for the shipyards and then I came down for this job, yea.

0:20:15

Coming to  
work at  
Portland ship  
yards

DH: Yes I wanted to follow up with you on working in the shipyards.

LM: Oh good! Good.

DH: You know, it sounds like you were quite young when you came down.



LM: Well actually, when I came in forty-three, I was too young to work in the shipyards. But my brother Glen, he was a couple of years older than me. You had to be sixteen to work in the shipyards. So he got on the shipyards and I went out and picked berries. I have some stories about that but... So on the shipyards, then the next year when I came out, I hired out. And that's when I made the dollar an hour, because I did not make that much picking berries for sure. So I was a burner. Now, you learned to be a burner before you become a welder. Maybe your familiar with burning or not?

0:20:45

Hired as a burner in Portland shipyards

DH: Okay, no. Welding but not burning.

LM: Well being as I...well this was so interesting about the shipyards. In Portland this was...[thinking] 1945 I guess, yea, maybe made a year error there but it doesn't matter. So it was in forty-five when I was working for them and so they hired me out and you just had to sign up. Hire you out and we'll find something for you to do. So hired me as a burner and I went on graveyard shift and met this old foreman that was probably fifty years old. Real nice guy. And said this fellow will show you how to be a burner. So he took me out and handed me this, looks exactly like a welding torch. I think it's probably the same thing. But you don't weld its just got this hot flame coming out and you can adjust it to get it just right. Well I was pretty handy so I learned right away. So had about a five-minute instruction how to be a burner. So then they said that when you begin, these ships had double bottoms, double bottoms started after that famous ship went down. What was the big one? That they made the movie about?

BM: Oh yea, I can't think of the name but a...the Titanic?

LM: you know the name of it [looking a Barbara] The Titanic!

DH: Oh, all right.

LM: Apparently it wasn't if I got the story right. It wasn't double bottomed. So after that I think even the...there was a sister ship to the Titanic, and they took it back in and put double bottoms on it but I might be wrong on that. So the double bottoms, there's the original bottom, and then about we'd say maybe two and a half feet below there's an other bottom, with this air space between it. But they had cross bars like they were steel and bout a half inch steel by two inches by maybe three and a half feet long that they used when they welded all this stuff together. But they didn't want the weight in there so my job was to go down there and cut these things out. And I just left them on and somebody else would come and pull these bars out later. But most people that did that did welding and burning had leather pants. Well I was just a kid; I didn't have any money to buy leather pants. So I just had my own pants. So about every twenty minutes I'd smell smoke and see my pants were on fire. [DH and BM laugh] So I'd just, with my hands put the fire out and keep going. So was there for almost two months and earned some money and went home and it was a wonderful job. In fact, what they did, they were so good about maybe the ladder part of July is when Japan surrendered. But they still kept building the ships because you can't just shut things off. So most people, the older people, they wanted quit and go find a job somewhere else. And they knew that us younger guys wanted a few bucks you know, which was big money to us. So they kept us on right till the end of July when we had to go back to school. So I thought that was pretty nice of them. And...

0:24.29  
Discusses  
how many  
ships were  
made a day.

BM: How many ships a day were they making?

LM: Well at then end we were launching a ship a day I think. We were building twelve ships at once. They were called ways you've seen them on T.V. where they'd lower the boats. So you just start with these big twelve by twelves or what ever it is going into the water and then you see the ship is partially built up with the double hulls sitting on them. Most of the stuff was prefabricated and

0:25:40  
Discusses  
Kiser  
Permanente  
Hospitals and  
family  
connection.

they'd move this double hull onto the ways. And the next one was half built up and the next one was two thirds built up and when you got to the twelfth one it was launched. And then of course they'd start building there, with a new one, and so on. So we just kept rotating around. And we started out building, when I went there in [thinking] July first of forty-five we were building Liberty ships. But they switched over to Victory ships and the last of the war we were shipping a ship a day.

DH: Wow.

LM: They got...Henry Kaiser was the fellow that started the ships. Now might be interesting, my first cousin **Linn Clark** and his wife...[thinking]

BM: **Onley**

LM: **Onley Clark** were the two first aid people there. **Linn Clark** was a doctor and his wife **Onley** was a nurse. That is all the doctors and nurses that they had for; I imagine there was ten thousand or more people their clock around.

DH: Ahh Wow, yea Right.

BM: That was Kiser...

[Chuckling]

LM: So then this was Henry Kiser that owned the shipyards; he had them all across the country. And his wife, I believe its called Kiser Permanente because I believe his wife's maiden name was Permanente.

DH: Oh.

LM: So it's called Kiser Permanente hospital now. So at first he wanted, his

wife wanted to start this hospital and the doctors were all resistant about it because its socialized medicine [gestures making quotations] and they resisted it. But they kept going on it and after a few years the doctors just loved it because now they don't have to take care of any paper work, they don't have to hire nurses and secretaries, they just have to go and be a doctor. So we're still with Kiser and very happy with it. Although, it's getting way too expensive. They've in the last few years they've hired chief executives officers and they first thing they do is surround them selves with more people and more money and there's so much money going out for administration. Henry Kiser would just roll over in his grave. Because he was an efficient guy. He put lots of people on the job but they had to be efficient, no extra people. Anyway that's a little bit about the shipyards, is that enough?

DH: Yea, what...were you working on V.J. {Victory in Japan} day?

0:27:48

Experienced celebration in Portland for end of the war.

LM: I was working on V.J. day and I can remember it like it was yesterday... Well I don't know if I was right in the plant on V.J. day I think I was at home. In fact, was it on a weekend? I don't remember exactly when they announced it on the radio. We didn't have T.V. then. But my brother and I and a friend of ours was down with us, my friend from Elrose Saskatchewan, he worked for the Safeway during the summer. We went down to Interstate Avenue where the busses run quite regularly from Kenton. Little town of Kenton which is still there and is very similar to the way it was in 1945, the main street. So went down there and caught the Interstate bus that went into Portland and there was all kinds of Big Bands just like Harry James and like, it was all across the country. And the Dorsey brothers, but Portland had several Big Bands. They were on flat beds going right down Broadway playing all these songs. What we had in those days instead of T.V., you had newsreels. There was one movie house right down in the heart of Portland that all they showed was movie tone news. All day long, and it was updated every day just like television is now. So of course went to that and it would show all of these sailors and the famous

sailor that kissed this girl you seen pictures of that?

DH: [nods yeas] yea, uh-hum.

LM: On life magazine, I'm not sure if we saw her, but it was exactly the same in Portland. The streets were full of sailors and soldiers. And getting back to the station, when I applied for that job the station was full of soldiers. Because they were going on troop trains and stuff. Totally full of soldiers in the station. I was just down there a couple days ago putting my brother on. The station today is exactly the same as it was then. Except I went up to the second floor, and now the whole station is owned by the city of Portland. And so they are refurbishing the upper floors, but I see the same door that I went through to be hired out and there is a communicator up there that works for Amtrak I guess. I had a little visit with him. But it's nothing like the old days, no telegraphing or anything.

DH: Wow...So after you worked for the Southern Pacific...What did you do after words?

0:30:29

Last job with  
Southern  
Pacific in  
Clackamas

LM: Well I'll finish up how I was...My last job in the Southern Pacific was Clackamas Oregon. You know where?

DH: [nods yes]

LM: There's a...The station is still out in a field about a mile north of where it used to be, that they were going to turn into a museum. I doubt that it will ever happen. But anyway, they needed an agent somebody that...A lot of the operators weren't agents, they didn't know hoe to sell tickets and stuff like that. So we had a supervisor of agents, the nicest guy you ever met. So when I worked at various places, if I ever had a problem, I'd just call him up. [Referring to supervisor] "Oh yea, this is how you do that." "Okay." So he took me out to Clackamas, and showed me the ropes. There was a lady station agent there that

had never learned to telegraph, she went back forty years. So she couldn't handle these train orders and stuff, she was more or less just selling tickets and stuff. So they were so happy now to have a...so we could give train orders to these trains going out just as they left Portland. Sometimes they don't get out of Brooklyn Yards is where they start out. You heard of Brooklyn Yards?

DH: Yes, uh hum.

LM: Okay, and that incidentally is where that forty-four-forty train is, the engine, they store it there.

DH: Yes okay.

LM: So he showed me the ropes of the place. And this very nice lady, I think her house was, she just lived a block away. Station is gone but I think her house is still there; I'm going to drive by one of these days. So the next morning I get on way over. By this time my brother had moved out of Vanport. First of all we went to Vanport.

DH: Oh, Okay yea.

LM: So my brother moved over...[phone rings] to Saint Johns so I had to get up about four o'clock in the morning catch the bus [phone rings] to downtown Portland, and take an other bus towards Kamloops, I meant Clackamas, on the....

0:32:39  
End of Part 1

DH: Here, I'll pause this for a minute...