

Carl E. Mulvihill, fire chief, railroad chronicler, straight shooter

June 24, 1936 – November 4, 2021

Carl Eugene Mulvihill, a man who did more things for Skagway than probably any person in history, lost his life to cancer on November 4. He died at home at the age of 85.

Reading a list of what he was involved in, you would think he were several people: veteran, railroader, clerk, fire chief, historian, photographer, model designer, author, police officer, customs officer, chair of several boards and committees, Masonic Lodge leader, husband, family man.

He came from one of Skagway's prominent early railroad families. His grandfather, William J. Mulvihill, was chief dispatcher for the WP&YR and was elected to several terms as mayor. "Mul's" son, Harold Eugene "Mickey" Mulvihill and the former Gwladys "Gladys" Krater were married in 1932 and had a son on June 24, 1936, born at the White Pass Hospital.

But Carl's upbringing wasn't easy. An only child, he lost his mother to cancer in 1945 at the age of 9. His father, a conductor on the Whitehorse train, which overnights in the Yukon every other day, was in Skagway only half the time. Carl would go along with his dad on some trips, helping the brakemen hook up hoses on the cars, but he lived a lot of the time away from home, with the Mark and Edith Lee family. He said the Lee girls, Kristin and Marcia, were like sisters to him.

As a young boy, Carl spent time with friends camping, fishing and exploring the outdoors. His first job was stocking groceries at the commissary operated by the Fairbanks family on Second Ave. There was a family connection there. Barbara Beitingger, whose mother was Carl's aunt Gertrude, married Ed Fairbanks, son of the grocer.

Carl first worked for the railroad on the section crew when he was 16, and then as a brakeman and relief dispatcher. He also joined the Skagway Volunteer Fire Department in 1953.

A good student, Carl graduated from Skagway High School and went on to the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Wash. Right after graduation from UPS on July 4, 1959, according to Carl, he received a letter from President Eisenhower inviting him to join the Army. Carl's dry sense of humor was in full display back then, but the young draftee called his time "a wonderful experience." He enjoyed being stationed at Fort Ord, Calif. and was promoted to Company Clerk and Personnel Clerk. In all, he served six years (two active, four inactive) in the Army.

When he returned to Skagway in the early 1960s, Carl went back to work for the railroad as a dispatcher and then chief clerk. He also became more active with the fire department.

Local residents elected the young man to a seat on Skagway City Council in October 1963, and he served until

1968 when he became Skagway's new fire chief. Carl had been doing all the fire department training and took the job after two assistant chiefs declined. He would be the longest ever to serve in the chief position – 31 years – until his retirement in 1999.

His first major fire, and the largest, was the White Pass roundhouse fire on October 15, 1969. Carl was working at the depot and grabbed the only company vehicle there, leaving its driver, the rail superintendent, behind as he followed the smoke to the fire at the north end of town. The 300-foot-long building was engulfed and went down in an hour in a 35-knot wind, he said during his retirement party, but they saved valuable equipment.

Carl photographed every fire. He also shot pictures of every car on the railroad and many of its major transformations, movements and accidents over several decades. He was not an official railroad photographer, nor was ever asked to be one. He recently told interviewer Keith Nore, a fellow railroad historian, that he was extremely grateful that he was allowed to take his camera to work with him. "No one ever bothered him or told him not to take pictures," Nore said. "He was very conscious to stay out of the way of the workers, especially at the scene of an accident.."

The resulting work was thousands of photographs, carefully cataloged by Carl in two stories of his garage. Add to this many discarded artifacts, including the dispatcher door to his grandfather's office that was thrown out by the National Park Service when it restored the old depot, medallions

from steam locomotives, and other items. “If the shops threw it out, I drug it home,” Carl said in an interview with Nore.

Carl kept meticulous notes and took measurements of rolling stock that he would use to design model railroad cars of the White Pass. His company, Mulvities, helped market them for European model makers.

A good writer, Carl also penned a history of the SVFD for a state firefighters’ convention that later appeared in the book *Skagway: City of the New Century*, and in 2000 he published his *White Pass & Yukon Route Handbook*, a mile-by-mile guide of the historic narrow gauge with photos. Toward the end of that book, he compiled a list of locomotives in use and a capsule history of every passenger car. But this was just a start: he had information on just about every car that had ever been on the railroad, and his next book would be a railroad fan’s dream catalog of rolling stock history. He finished the book, *Century of White Pass and Yukon Route Equipment*, with Nore’s help this past summer, and its publication is forthcoming.

Carl’s working career didn’t stop with the railroad. In the early 1970s he became a police officer and later joined U.S. Customs and Border Protection Services in 1979, working the Skagway Port of Entry up the highway for years with Boyd and Jean Worley and others. But mostly he enjoyed driving down to Skagway to meet the returning trains that had crossed into Canada. He loved meeting them at the shops and riding all the way to the depot as he checked

passports. Conductors remember Carl hopping on while the train was still moving to show he could still do it like a brakeman, and he liked visiting with dispatchers in the depot after the train was cleared.

Ten years into his service, he met a fellow officer from Canada Customs, Renate DesRoches. Their cross-border courtship lasted 17 years before he popped the question, and they were married on a train at the summit of White Pass on September 20, 2003.

Both retired, Carl and Renate set out to travel the world, venturing many times on ships to faraway places like Europe, South America, Russia, and Antarctica.

When asked what she admired best about her husband, Renate said: “His sense of humor, and he was always so honest. He never said anything bad about anybody that I’ve ever heard. He was the love of my life.”

He gladly welcomed Renate’s family into his life and enjoyed visits by the grandchildren every summer.

Carl’s reputation for integrity led him to become leader of White Pass Lodge No. 1, Free and Accepted Masons (he had achieved 32nd degree), and numerous boards and committees: Museum Board (chair), Conservation Committee (chair), SS Princess Sophia Committee (chair), Clinic Board, and Skagway Centennial Committee, among others. He was instrumental in the creation of the Veterans Memorial, the Skagway Centennial Statue and Time

Capsule, and the SS Princess Sophia Memorial, which was dedicated in October 2018.

Carl became sick in 2019 but remained active as long as he could. During the summer of 2020 he was often seen walking his dog Rosie on the disc golf course and Yakutania Point trails. And whenever a new engine arrived on the barge, he was there with his camera.

In addition to his wife Renate of Skagway, Carl is survived by two step-children: Steven Spalleck (and Lisa) of Penticton, British Columbia, and Sandra Doan of Simcoe, Ontario; five grandchildren; three great-grandchildren; and numerous cousins in Skagway and afar.

A graveside service by the local Masonic Lodge was being planned for Friday, November 12 at 1 p.m. Carl will be carried to the site by SVFD Engine No. 2. The family has asked that memorial gifts in Carl's name be sent to the Skagway Volunteer Fire Department.

— Compiled for the family by Jeff Brady and Keith Nore