

Bernard Gallagher, railfan and force behind modern private car movement, dies at 89

By John P. Hankey | December 7, 2017

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WASHINGTON — Bernard “Bernie” Gallagher died on Dec. 5, at the age of 89. He had recently retired, as the chief mechanical officer of the Washington, D.C., Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society.

A railfan from an early age, Gallagher began his railroad career as a machinist apprentice in 1946 on the Southern Railway at its Alexandria, Va., shops just south of Washington. He then briefly worked at Fruit Growers Express before hiring on at Washington Terminal Company as a machinist at its Ivy City Shop in Washington.

He was of the generation of railroaders who trained as steam locomotive men and transitioned to diesel locomotives. In 1957, he moved to the Washington firm of Allen Mitchell, where he worked as a senior machinist until retirement. The firm did contract work for Washington Terminal, area railroads, and later, Amtrak, which allowed Gallagher to remain engaged with contemporary railroading. He also served in a U.S. Army Railway Operating Reserve Battalion, which occasionally trained at the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad’s Mt. Clare Shops in Baltimore, Md.

Bernie was lifelong member of the Washington historical society chapter. He helped found the chapter’s equipment program and in 1979 became its chief mechanical officer, overseeing the acquisition and restoration of the 1923 sleeper/buffet/lounge car *Dover Harbor*. Over the course of 30 years, Gallagher shepherded the car on charters and excursions throughout the U.S. and Canada safely and without major incident.

He also was a skilled model railroader, creating detailed 2-rail O-scale Southern Railway locomotives, cars, and landscapes. The skills he brought as a machinist and the deep knowledge and understanding he had as a working railroader made his basement machine shop and operating railroad a true representation of the Southern Railway as it existed in the 1930s of his youth.

In 2007, the chapter acquired two former Pennsylvania Railroad Budd coaches, expanding the fleet to

three cars. All are certified to run in Amtrak trains. Gallagher's calm, steady leadership and vast knowledge made the historical society chapter one of the most respected and successful private car operators in the country. His rigor and experience helped the chapter forge a close working relationship with Amtrak and demonstrate that railway heritage institutions could also be reliable, responsible operating entities.

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