

# J. Parker Lamb A witness to transition

His objective: making technical subjects  
into artistic objects

By John Gruber • Photos by J. Parker Lamb

**A**FTER A REWARDING, 40-YEAR ACADEMIC CAREER, J. Parker Lamb is returning to his roots—railroad photography. Lamb, who started taking photos when he was in the 11th grade in fall 1949, plans to retire from the University of Texas at Austin in January 2001. "I am giving up the profession that has provided a good life and retirement security for another profession that gives me a great deal of pleasure," he says. "I have many hundreds of photographs that never have been printed other than contact prints or proof prints. I want to continue printing those, and marketing them in books and magazines. And I want to spend more time on historical research."

In his photography, Lamb tries to show scenes having familiar railroad elements from unfamiliar angles. Another of his goals is "to display railroad machinery (generally greasy, dirty, and unattractive to many) within scenic compositions that cause people to respond with a comment such as, 'Now, that photograph makes the train look beautiful!' Thus, the objective is to make technical subjects into artistic objects. As

Sharp "pan shots" that blur the foreground and background are a Lamb specialty, and his work on Gulf, Mobile & Ohio around Meridian, Miss., fills a geographic void. These elements come together in this July 1958 view of Alco FA's on a northbound freight at Marion, Miss.



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an example, sometimes I wanted to get viewers to see a steam engine as 'about to drown them with loud noise along with smoke and cinders.' With diesels sometimes my desire was to emphasize their speed," he continues.

Although Lamb still prefers black-and-white photography, he changed to color in the mid-1980's when *TRAINS* and other outlets started switching. "If there was still a strong market for monochromatic images, I would do more contemporary black-and-white."

Lamb was speaking in the Amtrak lounge at the Illinois Terminal Building, the new intermodal transportation center in Champaign, Ill., surrounded by a traveling exhibition of 50 railroad photographs (six of which he had taken in or near the city). He finished his Ph.D. degree work 39 years earlier at the University of Illinois' main campus in this city, 126.5 miles south of Chicago on Illinois Central's passenger racetrack. His friendly smile and neatly combed silver hair complement his "professorial" appearance.

The 5-foot, 11-inch photographer has an impressive publications record, carefully recorded in his railroad bibliography: 22 illustrated articles, 9 photo stories, 23 special photo presentations, 7 extensive contributions to historical society publications, 2 books of his own, and contributions to 49 other books. His next book, to be published by Boston Mills Press, is due out in 2001.

The Railway & Locomotive Historical Society recognized his work in 1991 with its award for lifetime achievement in photography. "While other well-known photographers provided most of the imagery of the passing of steam, it was often Parker who provided the best contextual images of the conquering diesels," the citation said.

### Southern roots

Lamb was born in Boligee, Ala., a tiny crossroads community on Southern's Alabama Great Southern main line between Birmingham and Meridian, Miss. The family moved in 1938 (before his fifth birthday) to Meridian, a busy junction city with three Class 1's and a short line. He became a serious "watcher" just after the war when he discovered *TRAINS* and *Railroad* magazines.

He learned about railroad operations from a tower operator, Guy Horton. Says Lamb, "His wife and my mother were having children at the time, so they got to know each other. Later, when I

was in junior high school, Guy had moved to Birmingham and worked for the Frisco. Every time we visited there, I would beg my mother to let me go down and watch him while he worked. He was in a shanty beside a junction north of one of the major yards, where a line from downtown used by passenger trains joined the freight line leading to the yard. I spent many hours learning about the operation of railroads, Morse code, handing up orders, things like that. He was one of the closest people I knew in my early age that was a railroader. Of course, in the intervening years, I have known other railroaders, from operating people to dispatchers to executives."

While attending Auburn University in Alabama during 1951-55, Lamb took photos of most southern regional lines from New Orleans to Memphis to Atlanta to Mobile. His first published photo in *TRAINS* (August 1954) is a sentimental favorite. "It was a very early morning shot of the Gulf, Mobile & Ohio *Rebel* train southbound from St. Louis to Mobile, leaving Meridian. I got a low angle of the two PA units on the front. The first unit was the PA that had been on the Freedom Train," Lamb recalls.

"Being a neophyte, I didn't really know much about submitting photographs when I sent in my first batch in 1954, but I got an encouraging letter back from David P. Morgan, the editor. Over the next four to five years, he kept encouraging me to take more pictures

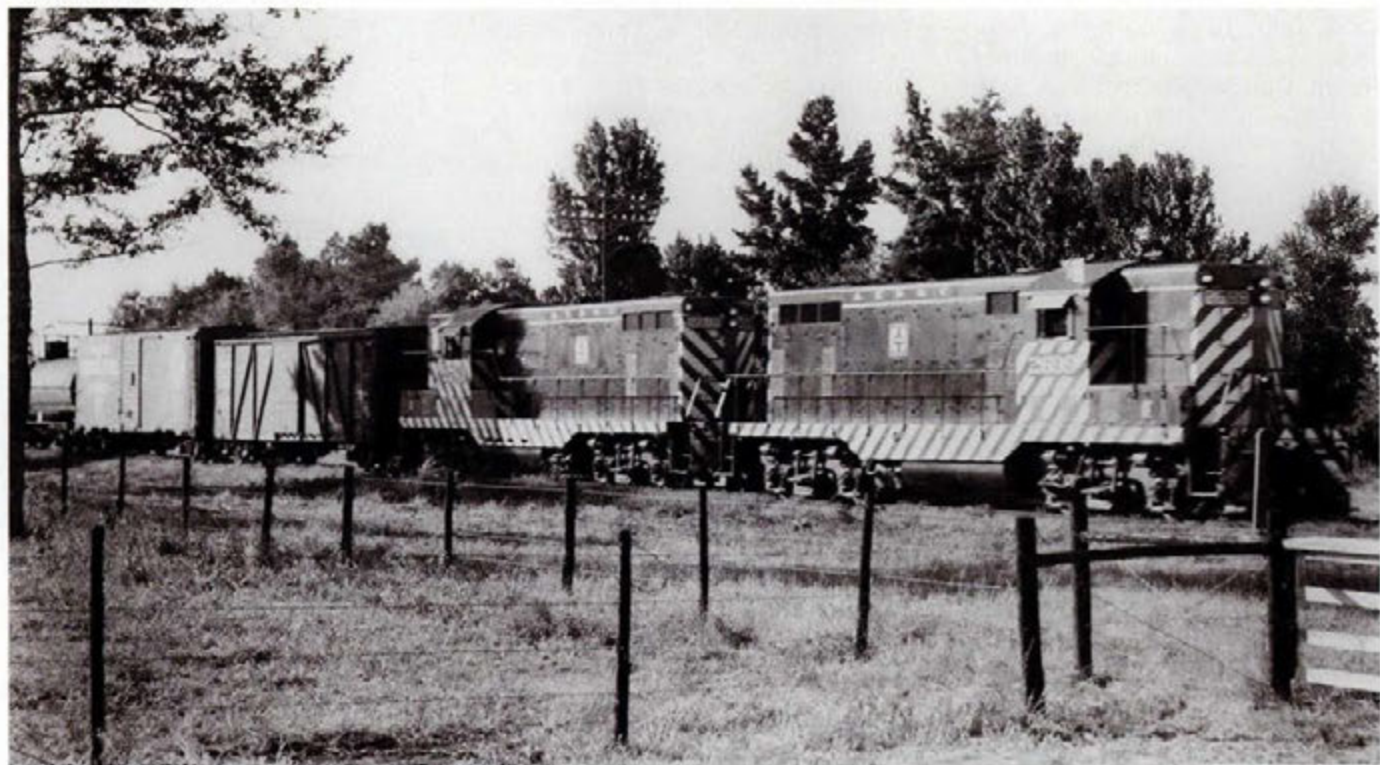




Illinois Central's attractive chocolate brown and orange E units (left) lead the southbound *Seminole*, a joint IC-Central of Georgia-Atlantic Coast Line train between Chicago and Florida, across the CofG-Western of Alabama diamond and into the shared station in Opelika, Ala., in December 1954.

CofG train 3 (lower left), a Macon-Birmingham local led by 4-8-2 473, eases into Opelika on a July 1952 morning. In the clear is southbound freight 34 behind two GP7's and an RS3 in the Central's early gray, black, and blue livery. Lamb rode a city bus from his nearby college town home of Auburn to spend the day at the depot.

Lamb's first photo of a Santa Fe train (below), on his first trip to Texas, shows a local with two black GP7's leaving Longview for Kirbyville in August 1951. On request, he'd driven his mother and her friends the 400 miles from Meridian to a friend's farm for a visit, and he thought to take his camera.



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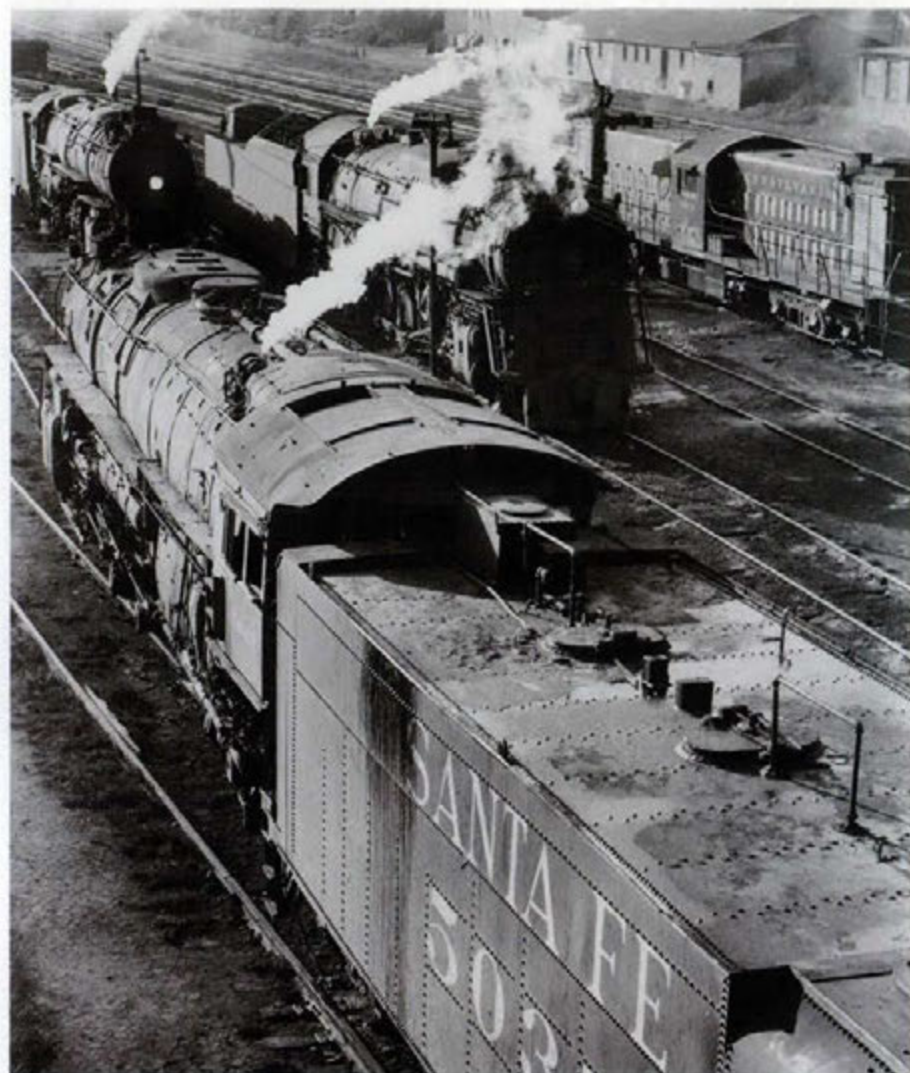
because he said they didn't have much material from the South. So I must give considerable credit to his encouragement in my younger days." Historians today, especially those who concentrate on the GM&O, remain grateful for Lamb and his work around Meridian, which indeed fills a geographic void few other photographers visited.

Readers of TRAINS from those days will recall that Lamb's credit line generally read "J. P. Lamb Jr." Lamb is a self-taught photographer, with little formal instruction but a lot of self-study from books, so he needed the encouragement. "I looked at TRAINS magazine, and saw what people like Dick Steinheimer, Robert Hale, Jim Shaughnessy, Stan Kistler, and others of that era were doing. Obviously they were 5 to 10 years ahead of me. I used as much as I could of their techniques, particularly the pan shots. I had a reputation for doing a lot of pan shots. Once I had coverage of what I might call traditional types of train photographs, I would start doing pan shots. Hand-held pan shots, when you are moving the camera manually to pace the train, are pretty much a gamble. You really don't know until you develop the film if they are successful. I did a lot of pan shots of steam and diesel through the years, and people have said they enjoyed those in particular."

### Steam in Ohio

In 1955, Lamb moved to Dayton, Ohio, for a two-year tour as an officer at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, photographing the last of steam and a lot of first-generation diesels.

He missed photographing the steam-to-diesel transition in the South, since it happened before his photo capabilities had developed. "I lucked out since it was just occurring when I arrived in the Midwest. In Ohio, around Dayton, Cincinnati, and Columbus, there was still a lot of steam on the Baltimore & Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York Central. So I was able to get some great scenes of NYC Hudsons on mail trains and Pennsy 2-10-4's hauling coal trains to Sandusky. I was there during June 1956 when the Pennsy leased some Santa Fe 2-10-4 5000-series locomotives. With steam power wearing out, PRR had a new order of diesels coming. That summer, running short of power, Pennsy worked out a lease arrangement with the Santa Fe, which was quite unusual in the steam era. Most railroads did not lease power, except in unusual circum-



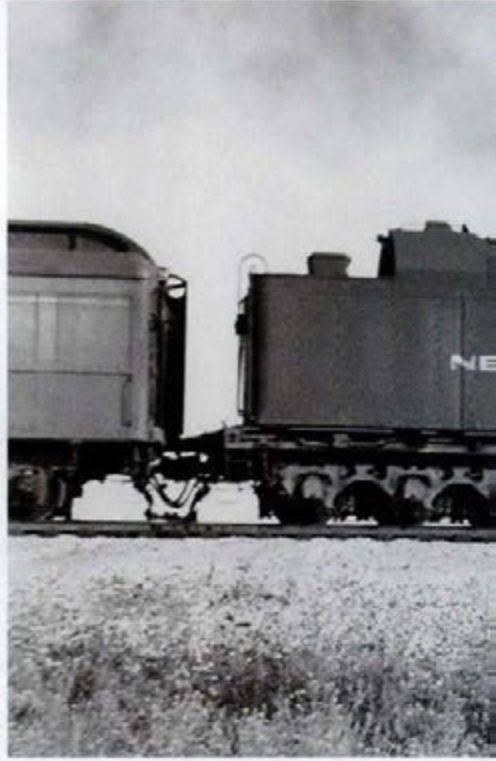
Pennsy's Sandusky (Ohio) line is noted for employing 12 leased Santa Fe 2-10-4's during summer 1956; above, two keep a PRR 2-10-4 and a big Lima transfer diesel company at Columbus, Ohio.

Lamb learned after moving to Dayton, Ohio, in June 1955 that New York Central still used Hudsons on its Cleveland-Cincinnati mail trains. That August, 5247 (right) was heading south near Fairborn.

While at Southern's Meridian engine terminal (upper right) in December 1953, Lamb heard the *Southerner* approaching and found a spot on a Geep's running board to snap the train's E8 showing between the FT nose and the pole. The FT's at far right will follow the *Southerner* to Birmingham.

stances. Anyway, I love the steam era and I wish I'd gotten more of a chance at it. Most fans say, 'I wish I had been born 10 years earlier.' But others respond, 'Yes, and you would probably be dead by now.' So I guess there is a downside to that fantasy."

The trip to Champaign in March 2000 was Lamb's fourth since graduation from U. of I. in June 1961. "Each





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time I visit I am quite surprised at the number of changes that have occurred. It now would be difficult for me to find places where I took the photographs."

Among the retired railroaders in the audience during Lamb's slide presentation on historical railroading in Champaign was Dick Stair, the long-time first-trick operator at IC's Champaign Tower. "He was a mentor to many generations of railfans who had come to the University of Illinois," Lamb says of Stair. "In the days before radio communication, a railfan who wanted to find out about what was going on had to find someone working on the railroad. If they happened to find Dick Stair at work, they would immediately know they had a friend. He gave me many tips on what was going on and the general operation of the Illinois Central. He also knew quite a bit about the history of railroad development in the area."

Lamb was surprised to find other people with similar interests when he started graduate school at Illinois in September 1957. Until then, he'd been taking photos for almost 10 years fairly seriously, mostly in the South and in Ohio, but had not encountered many fans. Through Stair, he met Bruce R. Meyer, an electrical engineering student from Bloomington. Others included Ted Rose, an art student; Phil Weibler from Quincy, Ill., also an art student, and later a locomotive engineer on the Rock Island and C&NW; Jim Boyd, later editor of *Railfan Magazine*; Harold Edmonson of Chicago, who would edit Kalmbach Books; and Bob Hundman, an engineer living in Decatur, Ill., who also got into railroad publishing. The highlight of his activity in Champaign was going on long "steam safaris" with his new friends.

"For example, Weibler, Meyer, and I struck out on a Thursday afternoon in 1958 to drive to Toronto, Ontario, on the July 4th weekend, to see some of the last of Canadian Pacific and Canadian National steam locomotives. We spent a couple of days, at least, in the Toronto area, but due to intermittent rain, ended up with a lot of pictures inside the roundhouses. On the way back, the engine in Bruce's Chevrolet quit. Although we didn't have much money with us, we were fortunate to get to an Amish community where there was a diligent mechanic who fixed the car the next day.

"We also made trips to catch the last of steam in southern Illinois, on the Norfolk & Western in West Virginia, and

the Bevier & Southern, a steam short line in Missouri which hauled coal from a mine to the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy. At that time, it used an old Illinois Central 2-6-0; later it had a CB&Q 2-8-2. The general manager was an elderly gentleman who was very friendly to fans. He even had a card for the railroad that stated, 'Have train, Will haul.' Weibler had known about the line since it was not far from his home in Quincy, in western Illinois."

### From Illinois to North Carolina

Lamb's most photographically productive years started in January 1961 as he began a teaching career at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, in the department of engineering mechanics.

"My wife and I did not have any family at that point, so I had plenty of time to indulge my hobby. I soon met a former Seaboard Air Line fireman, Wiley M. Bryan. After serving in the war, he went into the real estate appraisal business, and he still knew many operating people, as well as a few officials, on the Seaboard. So at least two weekends a month, we'd travel up and down the Seaboard between Hamlet, N.C., and Richmond, Va. We also drove to the Atlantic Coast Line yard in Rocky Mount, N.C., and we explored other North Carolina and Virginia railroad points.

"Bryan knew many good photo locations because of his work for a mortgage bank. He worked all over the eastern half of North Carolina inspecting prop-

erty. Wabash used Illinois Terminal track next to NYC's Peoria & Eastern through Champaign, Ill., (below) and the only time Lamb saw the Wabash in town was on a cold January 1959 day, as it was overtaken by a P&E eastbound. In nearby Tolono (right), at the Wabash-IC diamond, the agent gives train 98's conductor a "hotbox" signal in August 1959.

The last months of IC steam in southern Illinois gave Lamb and friends opportunities for short "steam safaris" south from Champaign. On January 27, 1959, the mainline Cairo Turn, with 4-8-2 2613 in charge (far right), gets out of Carbondale, Ill. In four years at Champaign, Lamb saw a snowplow in use only once, on IC's Rantoul-Pontiac branch local in March 1959 (bottom). IC Champaign Tower operator Dick Stair tipped Lamb off.





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erties, taking photographs, and providing appraisal estimates. So, having a camera as part of his job, it was easy for him during lunch or break times, or after finishing his work, to seek out railroad photo locations."

Lamb also spent many evenings at the Seaboard station in Raleigh. "It was well lighted, and it was near the engine-house, so I took quite a few night time exposures, and got some very interesting effects. I was in North Carolina only 24 months, but as it turned out, I took more photographs in that short period than at any other time."

### Combining business with pleasure

His more enjoyable photographic years came after moving to Austin in January 1963 as a professor in the University of Texas' department of mechanical engineering. "I was able to travel to distant places I had always wanted to see. As a professor, I was a member of various professional societies, and each had at least one to two meetings per year. As an administrator, I was paid to attend these meetings and represent the university. When the meetings were in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Denver, or other interesting places, I was able to go early and stay late, and do railroad exploration in a rented car.

"As an example, I had a meeting at the University of North Dakota in Grand

Forks, and was able to pace trains on the Soo Line from Thief River Falls, Minn., to the Canadian border. After a meeting at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, I was able to spend the weekend exploring New England scenes before the Guilford consolidation.

"I brought back samples of trains on Maine Central, Canadian Pacific, Bangor & Aroostook, and Boston & Maine. I went by the famous East Deerfield Yard bridge, and had some interesting conversations with the fans who gathered there. My Texas accent was certainly an unusual event for the regulars."

Lamb also traveled extensively with an Austin fan, Robert Macdonald, who had a four-wheel-drive, diesel-powered truck that could go off the road. "With an SP permit, he and I would explore good photo locations on remote maintenance roads, which were quite rugged and used for construction equipment. During a dozen or more trips, we have probably driven almost the entire distance on the Sunset Route between Houston and Tucson, Ariz., except for stretches that clearly are not accessible.

"We also went northward on the Golden State Route as far as Tucumcari. In recent years, I worked in Albuquerque at Sandia Laboratories for short periods in the summer, and I was able to explore Santa Fe's double-track main line in the Belen and Vaughn areas."

One of Lamb's most enjoyable trips was to British Columbia, where Dave Wilkie, whom he met through Wiley

While in Raleigh, Lamb heard through friend Bill Swaltney about the imminent demise of N&W's ex-Virginian electrification. On his June 1962, trip to Roanoke (right), Lamb found a bridge near Singer and waited until freight 72 showed up at dusk.

Seaboard's station in Raleigh was a hangout close to Lamb's home. This May 1962 portrait (below) of E4 3002 on the *Silver Comet* was one of many night photos he took while living in the capital city.

On a June '62 afternoon at Apex, N.C. (bottom), an RF&P F7 leads five Seaboard Geeps on Potomac Yard (Va.)-Atlanta hotshot 27 by the Durham & Southern interchange and a D&S Baldwin RS12.





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Bryan, hosted him. "Dave was a retired engineer from the British Columbia Telephone Company who was gracious enough to show me around the Fraser and Thompson River canyons areas as well as Lillooet and other spots on the British Columbia Railway. I found that it was almost impossible not to get good photographs in that country."

Photographing close to home was not as productive. Austin is the capital of Texas, but it has never been a major rail center. Missouri Pacific's first crew stop north of San Antonio was 30 miles north of Austin, at Taylor. The first crew stop for the Katy out of Waco was in Smithville, 50 miles to the southeast. Austin always has been a run-through city with a few small industries. "So after I moved west, it became more of an all-day chore to get out and take pictures, whereas in Raleigh there were two yards and the passenger station only about a 10-minute drive from my apartment."

### Lots of variety, lots of favorites

As with most photographers, Lamb has difficulty picking one or two favorite experiences or photos. "If I look at my steam shots, I am happy with the coverage of Illinois Central in southern Illinois and Kentucky. I also made a trip to the Missabe Road in Minnesota and got a few shots of their 2-8-8-4's. In Ohio, I got great shots of the B&O *Cincinnatian* and the New York Central Hudsons."

For later years, he is hard pressed. "Like with most people, the Santa Fe Warbonnet scheme was always a favorite. I got a few pictures of Southern Pacific's 'black widows' after moving to Texas. I am pleased I photographed the early diesels on the GM&O, and New York Central's Baldwin Shark-noses. I also got the Baldwin diesel-hydraulic unit used on the lightweight passenger train, the *X-plorer*, which ran every day between Cleveland and Cincinnati. I liked colorful schemes, even for black-and-white film. Conversely, the solid blacks of Illinois Central and Norfolk & Western didn't appeal to me. In the South, there were some colorful lines such as the Southern, L&N, ACL, and Seaboard. The Pennsy's dark Tuscan red was not too great to photograph."

"As I look back, I am glad I have been able to see and record as much as I have. It pleases me when people tell me that my photographs have brought back memories. Although I enjoy taking the photograph, I also enjoy producing the



image in the darkroom, because I am participating in the creative process much more than when I mail color film for someone else to process."

Lamb looks forward to his retirement challenge—showing more of his work to the public. He regrets he did not get to more places, but feels privileged to have started at an early age. "Almost any development today will be covered thoroughly, whereas in those early days, there were relatively few photographers in certain parts of the country."

His legacy? "When I am too old to print and when I pass on, I hope that people will use my photographs as a way of seeing what railroading was like, particularly from 1950 to 1975, before the number of photographers became quite so large." ■

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One of Southern Pacific's three double-engine EMD DD35's (upper left) spices up a diesel consist behind a U25B and a GP35 as a westbound freight pulls out of San Antonio's East Yard and past Tower 121 to begin a 600-mile overnight run to El Paso.

On a hot September day in 1959 (above), a Tennessee Central train from Nashville to Hopkinsville, Ky., has stopped at Clarksville, Tenn., to do some switching. Meanwhile, beneath the TC train's caboose, a northbound Louisville & Nashville local behind F7 911 has done the same.

Racing through the hills near Jasper, Ala., in July 1964 (left), new black, second-generation diesels leading a Frisco Birmingham-Memphis freight display the difference in height between GE's early U25B's (which evolved from low-clearance export designs) and EMD's GP35's, which on some Frisco examples had their air tanks on top to allow for larger fuel tanks to be installed under the frames.