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John Miller shows off his antique kerosene signal lamp at his 90th birthday bash. Miller, a project engineering manager helped give birth to the BART and Metro Rail systems. *Photos by Ned Racine*

Railroad Man John Miller Turns 90; Keeps Metro Rail Agreements on Track

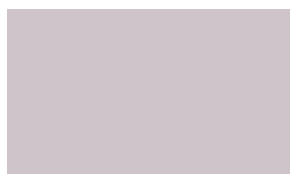
- 'Father of all Metro light rail lines' also helped build BART

By NED RACINE, Editor

(June 18, 2008) John C. Miller is a 90-year-old railroad man. He's worked for railroads for 60 years. And when he was coaxed from retirement in 1983, what did he do? He became a transit railroad man, helping build the Metro Rail system.

To commemorate Miller's 20 years of service to Metro and mark his birthday, Mike Cannell, general manager of Rail Operations, will present Miller with a plaque during tomorrow's Operations Committee meeting.

When John Miller's colleagues joined him for a May 16 celebration commemorating his 90th birthday, they knew him well enough to place toy train cars on his whipped cream cake.



Rail Operations DEO Aida Asuncion braces the birthday cake for John Miller's 90th birthday candles blowout.



Before the cake was cut, Mike Cannell, general manager of Rail Operations, called Miller the "father of all our rail lines," referring to Miller's instrumental role reaching agreements with the Southern Pacific Railroad to acquire rights-of-way for Metro's light rail lines.

Besides paying tribute to Miller as an engineer, Cannell told the birthday guests that Miller watches over all the Metro rail agreements—some over 25 years old—as well as working on the Expo Line project and the Crenshaw-Prairie Transit Corridor.

Miller, a project engineering manager, also negotiates with the Public Utilities Commission regarding Metro's railroad crossings. He testifies in court for Metro and has become involved in rail accident investigations.

Kathleen Sweet, principal environmental specialist, noted that Miller was the architect of the original Blue Line and Metrolink agreements. "He sets out to do [things] in a very different, gentle way," she said.



Bonnie Verdin, left, and Kathleen Sweet are among the 25 or so birthday celebrants.

Norma Flores, Return to Work coordinator, tickled Miller with the group gift—a Southern Pacific Railroad kerosene signal lamp made in 1921, when Miller was three years old—the perfect gift for the man who has three train calendars hanging on his office walls.

Flores captured the tone of the celebration when she added she didn't want to give Miller a red lamp, representing a stop signal, because she doesn't want the Pattison, New Jersey, native to stop!

"Mr. Miller is a very polite person," said Flores, who has worked with Miller for five years. "He's one of the most diplomatic persons I have ever met.

He's positive. He protects the agency. He does that without hoopla and he never complains. A lot of people could learn from him."

Tom Eng, safety certification and operations manager, recalled when he and Miller were first walking the route of what became the Metro Gold Line. He thought to himself, "Don't go too far or too fast for John." But when they had finished their 1.5-mile walk, Eng was tired and hot. Miller said, "Tom, you stay here. I want to check something else."

"The nice part . . . is to be able to participate in work I really enjoy," Miller told his colleagues in his composed voice. "Work I still enjoy or I wouldn't be here."

Miller was born in 1918, the age of steam locomotives, when trucks and highways were much less important to industry than rail. World War I ended that year. An influenza plaque began. It would kill as many as 40 million people worldwide. When Miller was six months old, it killed his father.

He graduated college with a Bachelor of Science degree in Civil Engineering. After working a year for the New York Central Railroad, he briefly left railroads behind, serving four years as an officer in the United States Navy during World War II.

Facing a glutted post-war job market, Miller found work with the Western Pacific Railroad headquartered in San Francisco. He stayed 34 years.

Miller battled crew deaths, derailments, rock slides, storms and the mercurial moods of the Feather River Canyon—100 miles of the Western Pacific ran through the canyon.

While working at Western Pacific in the 1960s, Miller discovered a win-win situation for the railroad and helped give birth to the Bay Area Rapid Transit District (BART), much of which is built on Western Pacific right-of-way.

"I talked to our chief engineer and then our president, and I suggested to them that the ways our lines were laid out, it would be advantageous to our railroad to accommodate [BART] on our right-of-way, which would result in improvements to our bridges, closures and grade crossings."

In 1983 he began working on Metro's agreement with Southern Pacific Railway to acquire the right-of-way that became the Metro Blue Line. "I did this on the Western Pacific [railroad], and I just kept going."

Stefan Chasnov, DEO Human Resources, noted at the birthday celebration that Miller is Metro's oldest non-contract employee. Would Miller still be working when he is 100, Chasnov asked. "I won't pledge to that," Miller said wryly.

What does Miller attribute his longevity to?

"Of course, the good Lord has given me health," Miller answered. "I kind of watch my diet. I don't eat a lot of meats or fats. I try to eat a lot of vegetable and fruits, and, of course, I gave up smoking years and years ago. Maybe every once and in a while, I'll have a glass of wine. I try to do calisthenics every day. I try to live by the Golden Rule, so to speak."

So why his fascination for railroads?

"That's hard to say," Miller responded. "When I was a youngster growing up there was a railroad within sight of our house. I could see the trains. And, of course, I had a Lionel train for Christmas. It's one of those things; it's ingrained and it's interesting."

What is the Orange County resident most proud of when he looks back on his considerable body of work?

"The work on the railroads and the work I did getting BART built," he answered. "And down here was probably the most important work I did. Because it's coming to use in a critical time in history. This is a critical thing for the city and the area: to get this transit system in operation."

"Now, of course, it's on everybody's mind because it's an alternative," Miller said. "And they're beginning to wake up that it's an alternative to the congestion on the highways."

What gets him up in the morning after all these years working? "Just getting things done, getting things moving," said the grandfather of two. "Since Mike took over, it's a dynamic thing right here on this floor [11]. He's doing a lot of things. Hopefully, I can help him."