A century ago, dalmatians were popular firehouse mascots. Their eyes sparkled and ears pricked when the firebell clanged. Robert Trennert reacts similarly when he hears a locomotive’s lonesome whistle. "I enjoy many hobbies, most of them history-related," Trennert says. Historical subjects should interest Trennert, since he’s made his living for almost 30 years as a professor of history, the last 22 of those at Arizona State University. Trennert’s father worked in the aerospace industry. He was interested in railroading and owned some model trains. During his days growing up in California, the young Robert took to railroading with a passion. He still pursues the hobby with a camera around his neck.
When I was a youngster, my father would take me to the Los Angeles rail yards to see those huge locomotives up close,” Trennert recalls. “Later on, I was exposed to railroading in high school, where I took photography as an elective. My instructor was a railroad buff. He was involved with several fan groups.”

While Trennert was snapping photos, the major railroads began to phase out steam locomotives.

“We had a couple of years to act before the steam era ended,” he says. “I joined some friends in chasing steam engines from California to Nebraska. We snapped some great photos.”

Over the years, Trennert has accumulated about 10,000 railroading slides; not merely of locomotives, but also shots of depots, roundhouses, equipment, and just about anything associated with railroading. The photographs are now historically valuable since most vestiges of the steam age have long since vanished.

A logging railroad in the area near Flagstaff, Ariz., provided grist for Trennert’s first published article on railroading and inspired three others. All have an Arizona connection.

“In 1963, I was a research assistant at the Museum of Northern Arizona and got involved with the logging railroad that had been built in the area,” he says. “I interviewed old timers and collected data. It was a fascinating study.”

Since that time, Trennert has photographed the Grand Canyon Railroad and Verde Valley Railroad many times. He also is fascinated with the narrow gauge trains operating out of Durango, Colo. From time to time, he has been involved in restoring locomotives.

But what about sitting high in the cab, peering out the cabin window, and actually running a steam locomotive?

“You bet I have. Had my hand on the ol’ throttle and all that,” he admits, face cracking into a wide smile. “What a thrill!”

Trennert also remembers the danger of Philadelphia’s big rail yards, a prime location for some of his early photography. “Several electric locomotives were always moving about. These are relatively quiet,” he explains. “You really can’t hear them approaching so you must be alert at all times. I’ve never had a close call, but I did experience some ticklish situations.”

He vividly recalls a tragic incident involving the funeral train of Sen. Robert Kennedy that was carrying the body of the assassinated presidential candidate from California back to Massachusetts.

“I went to the Philadelphia yards to photograph the Kennedy train,” Trennert recalls. “Several people were killed or seriously injured because they were too close to the platform’s edge. Suction caused by the passing train pulled them under.”

In recent years, Trennert has begun his own collection of railroad memorabilia.

“I’m interested in Santa Fe paper items, especially those dealing with the image of Native Americans,” he says. “Such items include brochures, timetables, calendar covers, advertising pieces, and menus featuring pictures of Indians. I’m curious about how the railroads, particularly the Santa Fe, portrayed Native Americans.”

The interest marks a junction point connecting Trennert’s long time hobby with the area of his academic scholarship. The ASU professor is a noted expert in the area of federal policy regarding Native Americans and the forced assimilation of Southwestern Indians into white culture. But before Trennert could pursue and write about those issues, he had to learn the skills of the historian.

Trennert’s interest in railroads, ghost towns, mining, and photography may actually have induced him to pursue a career in history, but it was his lack of talent in mathematics that actually swung the pendulum of his career destiny.

“I had intended to follow my father into aerospace and actually had some summer jobs at North American Aviation,” he explains. “During my freshman year in college I did rather poorly in an algebra course. Math just wasn’t for me. Instead, I went to Occidental College in Los Angeles and earned a degree in history.”

Trennert went on to earn a master’s degree at Los Angeles State University and his doctorate at the University of California at Santa Barbara. His dissertation focused on the “Philosophical Beginnings of the Reservation System During the 1840s.”

Trennert credits Professor Wilbur Jacobs, his dissertation director at UC Santa Barbara, for spurring his interest in history in general, and Indian history in particular. Thomas Karnes, a retired former chairman of the ASU history department, also influenced Trennert’s career.

“Tom Karnes is a fine scholar who had distinct ideas on how to approach research and how to discipline yourself to write and be productive,” Trennert says. “He had a strong influence on my research methods and writing style.”

During his tenure at ASU, Trennert served six years as history department chairman. Administrative duties definitely reduce the research productivity of a historian, he says.

“Administrators become involved in many time-consuming situations. Added responsibilities are bound to impact anyone’s research,” he says. “However, heeding the counsel of Tom Karnes, I made a conscious effort to research and publish while I was chairman.”

Federal Policy and Indians in the Southwest: Trennert’s first full-time faculty appointment was at Temple University in Philadelphia. He was asked to develop an Indian history course.

“Although I considered myself a Western historian, I began to concentrate on Indian history,” Trennert recalls. “I did not focus on Indian wars or tribal history. Instead, I specialized on the history of the U.S. Government’s American Indian policy.”

One of Trennert’s major works on the topic, The Phoenix Indian School: Forced Assimilation in Arizona 1891-1935, was published by

“Assimilationist education was an honest, if misguided, attempt to solve what the government perceived as ‘the Indian problem,’” Trennert explains. “Although student treatment was strict, discipline harsh, and the system racially segregated, the school was not as repressive as is often assumed.”

Trennert says that the Phoenix Indian School was purposely located in an urban area. Interaction with whites was an important part of the assimilation effort.

“White citizens had financial and other reasons for cooperating,” Trennert continues. “Their role proved to be important to Native American education in the Southwest.”

The Indian School, which followed a military regimen from the beginning, was expected to train Native American youngsters to fill white occupations—specifically farming and domestic work—while keeping them separated from the reservations and traditional Indian culture.

“Students wore uniforms, marched in drill formations, and faced corporal discipline for the first time in their lives,” the ASU historian emphasizes. “They were required to adopt Christian names that were acceptable to the teachers.”

According to Trennert, the most significant policy change occurred in 1898, when the student base was broadened by admitting students from distant reservations.

“Originally, the school was intended to serve Pima, Papago, and Maricopa youngsters from central Arizona reservations. Service was expanded to include Arizona’s Hopi, Navajo, and Apache reservations, as well as reservations in California and Oregon,” he says. “This gave the school the multiracial concept it maintained for the rest of its existence.”

At first, the transition was rough. Local students, who regarded the school as their own, resented the foreign intrusion. Some Pimas ran away rather than associate with “strangers.”

In time, the change was accepted, and the Phoenix Indian School moved through the 20th century as a multiracial educational facility of national repute.

The school’s physical plant developed rapidly. By 1900, it was a self-contained educational community serving 700 students. The school boasted handsome buildings and spacious, landscaped grounds.

“President William McKinley visited the school on May 7, 1901, to offer personal congratulations for its fine work,” Trennert notes. “There was little doubt in anyone’s mind that it was one of the nation’s major Native American educational facilities. After 1918, when the Carlisle Indian School closed, the Phoenix institution became the nation’s largest off-reservation boarding school.”

**Medical Care on the Reservation**

Trennert’s current research is focused on the status of medical care on Indian reservations. His newest book, *White Man’s Medicine: Government Doctors and the Navajo* (University of New Mexico Press) delves into that overlooked area.

“Historians have studied missionaries, Indian agents, schools, and a variety of programs to help acculturate Native Americans,” he says. “However, scant research has been done on the white doctors involved in the government’s health care program for reservations.”

This effort was particularly strong from 1860 to 1950, when health conditions were sinking fast on the reservations.

“During that time frame, the Bureau of Indian Affairs was responsible for Native American health,” Trennert says. “After 1953, the Public Health Service took charge. Obviously, a distinct change occurred.”

Trennert says that government doctors faced a major challenge on the Navajo Reservation. Navajos have their own system of dealing with medical problems that includes detailed ceremonies and shamans. The white government doctors viewed these native healers as barriers to the overall civilization effort.

“Conflict occurred as doctors tried to bring modern medicine to these people. They were extremely reluctant to use it since it conflicted with tribal culture,” he says. “All in all, it was a very difficult program to implement because the Navajos did not want to accept it.”

In Trennert’s opinion, the adage: “The road to Hell is paved with good intentions” accurately summarizes the federal government’s long association with Native Americans.

“At times, government officials had some creative, well-intended solutions to improve its relationship with Native American peoples. Unfortunately, they never would invest sufficient resources to implement the best of plans, and often failed to consult with Native Americans about what they themselves wanted,” he says. “Some Indian traders provided additional thorns. They were exploitive, buying goods at a low price and selling high. They also became active political lobbyists. As a result, the federal government’s relations with Native Americans never were very successful.”

Trennert has received many awards for his scholarly writings. For more information about his past or current research, contact Robert Trennert, Ph.D., Department of History, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, 602.965.5778.