

## Gary Wolf is the recipient of Wheel Rail Seminars' 2023 Worth Award

by Bob Tuzik



Gary Wolf, president of Wolf Railway Consulting, is the recipient of the 2023 Worth Award. The award, presented by Wheel Rail Seminars at the annual Wheel/Rail Interaction conference in June, is named for Art Worth, who was Manager of Standards and retired as Senior Manager – Advanced Technology at Canadian National, and was known throughout the industry as a walking encyclopedia of railway engineering, standards, and practices. If you were fortunate enough to have Art on your team, on your committee, or in your contacts, you had access to an unparalleled resource. He was interested in and knowledgeable about all aspects of railroading, from the mundane to the arcane, and was ever ready to share his knowledge. In his honor, the Worth Award is given to someone who has worked in the industry for 25 years or more for a railroad, transit system, research institute/university, or as a consultant or supplier; published a significant book, number of articles or papers on railway or rail transit operations, maintenance, technology, and/or safety; been an active teacher, coach, and/or mentor; and made an impact on operations, practices, and/or safety in the industry.

“Most significantly, the Worth Award goes to someone who has made a difference,” said Gordon Bachinsky, President of Advanced Rail Management and founder of Wheel/Rail Seminars, which established the Worth Award. “Gary has done that in spades.”

“Gary’s life mission is the improvement of railway industry safety,” said Norm Hooper, Principle of Hooper Engineering, and former Vice President - Maintenance and Chief Engineer of the former BC Rail. “His lectures, papers, investigations, and his amazing manual *The Complete Field Guide to Modern Derailment Investigation* are all part of it.”

“You don’t need a PhD in engineering to make a good derailment investigation,” Wolf told *Interface Journal* upon the publication of *The Complete Field Guide to Modern Derailment Investigation* in 2021. “What it takes is hard work, getting dirty, perseverance, determination, and teamwork.”

While he holds a master’s degree in engineering, Wolf is not an academic. And while he is no stranger to the laboratory, he is not a researcher, the article pointed out. He is a practitioner who gained his expertise the hard way, picking through the wreckage on hands and knees for evidence of the causes of the more than 4,000 derailments he has investigated over the course of his 50-plus-years in the railway

industry, which includes a 17-year span in the Southern/Norfolk Southern Mechanical Engineering Department and 35 years as a consultant. He is as well versed in train operations, testing/instrumentation, vehicle dynamics, vehicle/track interaction, track assessment and maintenance, as in identifying the causes of derailments.

“It’s remarkable for one guy to have such a comprehensive knowledge of the Track, Transportation *and* Mechanical sides of the industry,” Brad Kerchof, the former Director of Research & Tests at Norfolk Southern and Senior Consultant to ARM, told *Interface Journal*. That, coupled with his in-the-weeds, knee-level perspective on what happens when one or more of those aspects — vehicle, track, train operation — goes wrong, provides a unique and valuable perspective.

In addition to derailment investigations, Wolf has conducted hundreds of classes in which he has trained more than 6,000 railroaders in the techniques of derailment investigation, and the fundamentals of track geometry, vehicle and track inspection, and vehicle/track interaction. Anyone who has attended Wheel Rail Seminars’ annual Wheel/Rail Interaction conference, at which Wolf is a regular speaker, knows the value of his clear, practical, dynamic, yet down-to-earth presentation style.

Norm Hooper, Principle of Hooper Engineering and former Vice President - Maintenance and Chief Engineer of the former BC Rail, who met Wolf at one of his derailment investigation courses and later collaborated with him on many investigations and projects, including the development of a lateral load detector, said that, “for Gary, the purpose of investigation is the prevention of future derailments.” Throughout his career, he has believed in, developed, employed, and supported technology to improve safety.”

Mike Iden, a locomotive and railroad consultant with Tier 5 Locomotive LLC, former General Director of Locomotive Engineering at Union Pacific, and fellow Southern Railway alum who first worked with Wolf on AAR’s Track/Train Dynamics Implementation Officer’s Program around 1979, called Wolf a “thought-leader” in derailment analysis and prevention for decades. “His institutional knowledge is encyclopedic. His analyses and recommendations are consistently spot-on.” Wolf’s reach in the industry is global, Iden said. “If it involves flanged-wheels on rails, it can and will derail,” he said, “and Gary will likely be on the scene.”

David Casaceli, Railroad Accident Investigator at the National Transportation Safety Board, former Track Safety Specialist at the Federal Railroad Administration, and another of the 6,000 students whom Wolf has taught, first met Wolf at a training session to teach FRA track inspectors about cars and mechanical issues. “At the end of the course, he offered me something he offers all his students — a phone number,” Casaceli said. “And he’s always willing to answer that phone. He gave us access to knowledge and information, and obtained as much knowledge and information as he could from us.”

Matt Dick, Chief of Strategy and Development at ENSCO Inc., who worked for Wolf at Rail Sciences, which Wolf owned and operated from 1987 until it was acquired in 2010, described working for Wolf as “a swift kick from his iconic steel-toed boots into the deep end of the pool. But it worked,” Dick said, “because Wolf always made time to share his knowledge, and had an immense amount of trust in his employees.”

“I never expected to be mentioned in the same breath as Art Worth and Joe Kalousek (the 2022 Worth Award recipient),” Wolf said upon receiving the award at the WRI conference. “You know the quote: I’m here because I stood on the shoulders of giants, and I’ve learned from all of you.”

But he acknowledged that information doesn't come easily in this industry. "When I started 53 years ago, there were no books, no videos, no internet. I found that learning from the ground up was the best way. It's all happening out there in the field. Unfortunately, I think today, we're losing that physical touch."

In railroading, everything occurs in that dime-size contact patch between the wheel and rail, Wolf said. "That's where the wheel wears, where the rail wears, and where the fuel is spent. We understand a lot, but we don't know everything about it."

"People ask me: 'Gary, why don't you retire?'" Wolf said. "I think when I quit learning, that's when I'll give it up. But this industry has so much potential for learning."

But always the engineer, the investigator, the motivator, the mentor, the industry prodder and defender, Wolf reflected on a tough year for the industry amidst the fallout from the East Palestine, Ohio, and other high-profile derailments. "It's unfortunate, because from the big picture, we do a hell of a job safely moving chemicals every day in this industry," he said. "We haven't had a fatality in the past 12 years or so of moving chlorine. But we've had a dozen or so high-profile derailments in the past few months and some of them were entirely preventable. So, we have to double-down. We have to understand the mechanisms that cause derailments. And we have to get out there and do it."