



## Daniel Allen Oral History Interview, June 16, 1983

### **Title**

“Daniel Allen Oral History Interview”

### **Date**

June 16, 1983

### **Location**

Location Unknown.

### **Summary**

Daniel Allen was born in Muldoon, Texas in 1899. His railroad experience began in 1915 as a “sniper” caring for a stretch of railroad track in one area. The crew was racially mixed. Allen recalls working as cotton harvesters with his family until they ran out of money in Lubbock, Texas. He then worked as a cement worker for a contractor and went on strike with six or seven other workers to demand a raise. Soon after he got a job as a chair car porter on the Santa Fe railroad but was fired when the contractor he had worked took revenge by calling the railroad about him. Allen then worked at the Giles Lake shipyard until he was hired by the Union Pacific in 1945. The pay was so low that his sons still working at the shipyard helped to pay his bills. He retired in 1967. Allen also describes racism in Portland Oregon and the brotherhood he felt with his railroad co-workers.

### **Interviewee**

Daniel Allen

### **Interviewer**

Michael Grice

### **Website**

<http://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/oh29/allen/>

## Transcript

**Michael Grice:** Okay, want to state your name please?

**Daniel Allen:** It's Daniel E. Allen.

**MG:** Okay. Where were you born?

**DA:** I was born in Muldoon Texas, Fayette County.

**MG:** And when? Can I ask you that?

**DA:** 1899.

**MG:** 1899.

**DA:** Mhmm.

**MG:** Well, you heard some of the things that we've talked about already. I wondered if first we might talk about where you grew up, how you got involved with the railroad, and then talk about your work and talk about some of the incidents that you recall on the road that may have made a difference for you, or what. So go back to when you began on the road or how you got acquainted with it. Were other people—were you living in Texas at the time, or had you moved to Omaha, or?

**DA:** No, no, no. No, I was living in Texas, Texas at the time. Well, then I was a section painter. I worked on the section there for the SNAP [spelling?] road.

**MG:** What's SNAP? San Antonio?

**DA:** San Antonio [00:01:29 unintelligible].

**MG:** Okay.

**DA:** And so I was, where I was at was then, I started with them, then 1915.

**MG:** Go ahead.

**DA:** Yes, started with the year. And so from then on I was with them, then so went back to [00:01:56 unintelligible]. And then about 1917 I married, and then I moved from Daddy's house, not too far from him, and so I get railroading. I started working as a sniper on the SNAP.

**MG:** Uh-huh. You said it's called a sniper?

**DA:** Well, the section hand, well they called them snipers, you know, but then they said you—we wait there, you know, and we, I guess you know [00:02:31 unintelligible]; we put in ties, you know, and line up the track, yeah, and take care of the road there and so forth and so on.

**MG:** Did you have one section of track that you covered all the time, or did you move around different parts of the railroad company line?

**DA:** No, no. No, we had a, well I guess we would call it we had so many miles that we worked. See, for out of the town where we lived folks, well they, during that time they called it the south end and the north end, and they had a crew to go through the north end, a crew to go to the south end. They worked about, oh about five or six men. And we was on the hand car. You used a hand car, you know, for, that's right, uh-huh.

**MG:** [Inaudible].

**DA:** Yeah.

**MG:** Yeah. Now, was it all-black crew?

**DA:** No.

**MG:** A mixed crew.

**DA:** No, a mixed crew.

**MG:** And this was in Texas?

**DA:** Yeah, that is in Texas.

**MG:** Okay. So people probably will be interested to realize that, that there were integrated work crews at that time. What year was that? That was in 1916, '17?

**DA:** Yeah, yeah. Mhmm, yeah, that is from 1915 on up to oh, I think it was—yeah, 1917. And I quit route sniping then. And so, I just went to doing my lifetime in—I bought a car, so I guess mine wife and I, I think had one or two kids. We was just going different places harvesting.

**MG:** Huh. You had the car.

**DA:** Yes, had the car.

**MG:** Huh, so you worked at harvesting...

**DA:** Picking cotton. So we'd go for different places picking cotton. You know, during the season.

**MG:** Right.

**DA:** And so finally we went to Lubbock Texas, went there during the time we were harvesting, and so while I was there picking and everything oh, I had about six kids during that time. [00:05:05 unintelligible], so I was expecting to go back home, back to Texas, to Muldoon Texas, but what they called it, we went down there and the deal went down on me.

[00:05:19]

**MG:** The deal went down on you?

**DA:** Yeah, we didn't have enough money to go back home.

**MG:** Oh, uh-huh.

**DA:** And so I stayed there in Lubbock then, and the way that I stayed there, well I picked cotton. Well, then I went farming with the fella that I was at his wedding. His name was...

**MG:** Was it a man that you worked with or a man that owned the property, or what?

**DA:** Yeah, the man owned the property. And so I was heading into problems and so he gave me about, oh I guess about ten acres for me to...for me a little crop.

**MG:** Right.

**DA:** And so then I—and then he fed me through the winter, and then when this crop material whatever [00:06:15 unintelligible], then he gathered up and we gave him his money out of what I made.

**MG:** Right. So you had an opportunity right there.

**DA:** Mhmm.

**MG:** Did you feel that that was a good opportunity for you, or—

**DA:** No.

**MG:** Just what you could get?

**DA:** No, no, I didn't like it at all. I was just out there just that one year.

**MG:** Uh-huh.

**DA:** And then after that, that one year, well then I left there and we moved to town.

**MG:** So it was outside of Lubbock and you moved into Lubbock Texas?

**DA:** Yeah, yeah we moved into Lubbock. I was out in the town at Acuff. That's about twelve miles from Lubbock out in the country. And so then I left then, come on, I come back to Lubbock in town, and so we went to—we stayed in town in a...oh, we stayed with a lady, you know, and wife did the work in the place there for the rent. And from that on, then I, after—that is along about in there...along about twenty...no, it was along about '29.

**MG:** Okay.

**DA:** Mhmm, '29.

**MG:** Alright.

**DA:** And then, then we—then I stayed there, then I went and got a job with a contractor. So I worked with a contract. And —

**MG:** What was your next encounter with the railroad?

**DA:** Hmm?

**MG:** When was your next encounter with the railroad?

**DA:** Well, the next time I went [00:08:09 unintelligible] with the railroad was—I worked for this contractor and so they had a job in '42, and so when I started to work for him in '30 and he was kind of tough, you know, and then so I worked off and on with him, and when he get a pretty good contract, you know, well then I'd just work on with him.

**MG:** Right.

**DA:** And so—

**MG:** This was during the Depression years now.

**DA:** That's right, that's right. And then so when I worked with him, well then during the time that he got this job, well the fellas that poured the mud, they was really the fellas that, you know, that if they didn't work, well the other fellas couldn't do nothing. So we struck. It was about seven or eight of us that the cement fellas, you know, that [00:09:10 unintelligible] and so forth and pulled the mud. And so we held up the job, and so they put it all on me, said "well he wants to give us a raise, and so couldn't nobody tell us about what he's going to give us." So the foreman, he was the man that owned it, was a contract; he wasn't there. He lived in Lubbock also. And so they finally got ahold of him, so he come in, so it's about three days before he got there. Well, and so the third day I left there coming on home. I went on back home. It was about a hundred and twenty-five miles' drive. And so I come on home, and so during that time I come home, well then I went on to get a job from the Santa Fe as a chair car porter. It was running from Clovis New Mexico to Sweetwater Texas.

[00:10:15]

**MG:** That was on the Santa Fe?

**DA:** Yeah, on the Santa Fe.

**MG:** Mhmm.

**DA:** So I got the job and I worked on that, so I was doing alright, and so I went to—I worked there about thirty days and here come the road master at a little town, Slaton Texas, where that's ten miles from Lubbock Texas, so he says [00:10:39 unintelligible] said "well Allen," said "we're going to have to let you go." I said "yeah?" I said "what's the trouble? What's [00:10:47 unintelligible]?" He said "well I can't tell you," said "you have to find out yourself." And all the fellas I was working with was all they liked me alright, conductor and so forth, they wanted to know what was the situation. And so he said "you have to find out yourself," so he didn't tell me, and I don't know whether he told them or not. And so he says "when you get back to Clovis, you turn in all your"—see, they furnish your uniform— "turn in your uniform and everything" and says "we can't use you no more." So when I—I drove to Clovis there because that was my going out place, and then I'd drive back home, you know, and I was off about three or four days and I'd go home and then drive back up there to go out. And so I drove home, drove back home, and so the next day the first thing, I said "I believe I'll just go and see this contractor." Let's see, can't think of his name just now.

**MG:** He's the one that you had struck.

**DA:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. One of the—yeah, had struck. And so I went in and spoke to him, I says "is you the one that caused me to lose my job?" He said "yeah, that's right." He says "I did it," he said "because you caused me to lose a lot of money up there in that Clovis job," said "working in that cement there," said "you caused me to lose a lot of money," said, and said "I caused"—he said "by you doing what you did," he says "I told them like that you were, you wasn't trustworthy." And man and I'd been—we had to run to own the job to get to stay there. And so when I found out that he did that, well then they says, told him this, he says "well, how many—do you still got all them kids?" I told him "sure I have them." He said "well, for them kid's sake I'll tell them to put you back to work," he said "but for you, for your service," he said "I wouldn't tell them to put you back for nothing." And I waited around there for three weeks going down to the station trying to see if they was going to call me back, you know, and they didn't. I ain't heard nothing. And so there's a lot of people was coming out to Portland here out to shipyard work, so forth, and so it was a fella at home that he was going to drive out here. And so he said "Brother Allen," said "if you give me twenty dollars"—him and his wife was coming—"give me twenty dollars and help me drive," said "you can go with me." And so I did that, come on out here in '44. And so, went down and went on in...let's see, my first was what they call that place over there in?

**MG:** Albina Yard?

**DA:** No, not Albina Yard.

**MG:** Vanport?

**DA:** No, for the ship. No, you know where the folks say working in the shipyard.

**MG:** Vanport?

**DA:** No, not Vanport. Out there by Montgomery Ward, what do—

**Unknown Speaker:** [00:14:21 unintelligible] Bagley Downs?

**DA:** No, not Bagley Downs—

**MG:** Giles Lake? Giles Lake was another one.

**DA:** Yeah, yeah, Giles Lake. That's where I went out there and stayed. I came here, came there, came here in '44. And so I got a job at the shipyard. So I went there and worked there, worked there five months. I had a bonus coming if I worked there six months. And my boys, I had some boys old enough; they were working there also. And so I said "well," I said—now in '45 we found out that Union Pacific was hiring. They wanted chair car porters, Pullman porters, waiters, cooks

and everything in '45. And so I said "I'm going to take it," because I didn't want to go back home, because if I went back home I'd have to be, have to continue with this fella, 'cause that's his home, because it would make it hard again. Because oh man, they was rough on black folks during that time.

[00:15:38]

And so I goes and I get this job in 1945, got hired. Ted Freeman [spelling?] was our supervisor. And so I got this job, I went to work, started working at sixty-eight cents an hour, had as much starting off, and the quit work with the shipyard was paying two dollars and sixty cents an hour. But then what's the thing that was happening, had two boys was working, and so I just went on that. But I took the job because—

**MG:** They continued to work at the shipyard?

**DA:** Yeah, they were working at the shipyard. It's the one I left.

**MG:** Right.

**DA:** And so, after I got this job, well of course that sixty-eight cents wasn't too much, but I knowed the Union Pacific would be there.

**MG:** Right.

**DA:** Yeah. I know perhaps I'd get to stay there and work on until I retired, which so I did, but then the kids, well the kids were working, so they kind of helped me get along in my finance and so forth. And so I went to work as a chair car porter for the Union Pacific and I had about eight years for the Santa Fe and SNAP altogether, about eight years, but after I retired all I got was five years, was all they give me.

**MG:** From the Santa Fe—

**DA:** Yeah, from the Santa Fe and the SNAP. And so then I went on here as a chair car attendant. I didn't want to take none of these other jobs because I figured that waiter job was too tough for me, because I couldn't hold up my hands doing all that waiting, waiting stuff. And then the dining car was too—I mean then the Pullman car was too tough because I was too low. You know, during them times they didn't have them—they had them old big ones, you know, you had to reach up there and pull them things down, and I wasn't tall enough to do that. I said uh-uh, I don't want that. And then I didn't want to go out to the yard cleaning coaches, so I said I'd take chair car tenant, because I was experienced a little bit in that.

**MG:** Right.

**DA:** I knowed that, and so I took that job. And so I just stayed with that job until 1967, that's when I retired.

**MG:** Is that right?

**DA:** Yes sir. Got along with everybody. Of course these conductors, they were kind of rough during them days. I had a chance to get my boys on, got three of them on the job, but then they wouldn't take nothing like I would, and so they got fired. So William, he stayed on there longer than any of them, but he just thought he would just quit and do something else. He was [00:18:52 unintelligible].

**MG:** Do you remember any particular incidents of when you were working on the road that was particularly interesting?

**DA:** Well...

**MG:** Did you get to mention some of the things that you had made note of there, because I—

**DA:** Well yes, well I just about told you all just about what I, yeah what I had down here I guess.

**MG:** But do you recall any incidents on the road that made it special or made you like it a lot, or made you not like it a lot, or that come to mind and—

**DA:** Oh, well yeah. Well I liked the job. After they, you see after we got unionized, well then we began to, you know, where a fella could be he was getting something worthwhile; that he could—

**MG:** Right. Do you remember when that occurred for the chair car porter?

**DA:** Huh?

**MG:** Do you remember when that happened for the chair car porters?

**DA:** Oh, I don't know. Brother, when'd that happen there? You know when we went in with the...

**Unknown Speaker:** [Inaudible].

**DA:** Huh? Webster [spelling?] and them? Webster, you know, Webs in the—

**Unknown Speakers:** [Inaudible] Pullman porters.

**DA:** Yeah, in there with them. See the Pullman porters, they—what you call them was over with them, and so Webster finally worked in union of the chair car porters.

**MG:** Right, brought them all in the same—

[00:20:15]

**DA:** Yeah, sure. But I don't know exactly now what year this was. But then anyway, after that happened, well then we began to have—be put in nice jobs.

**MG:** Sure. How did you feel about Portland compared—of course you didn't—you left Texas on a bad number, but how did you like Portland compared to other places, or what did you feel about it when you got here?

**DA:** Oh, oh well I liked it alright, only I was just surprised to find it like it was. You know, well it was so—I believe there's a Mr. Cabbage [spelling?] said a while ago it was so bunch of prejudice.

**MG:** Right.

**DA:** Yeah. Man, till you just couldn't hardly go nowhere, no places. Like that, that's what kind of had you—

**MG:** Was it much different in Texas, though?

**DA:** Well no, it was just about the same. Texas was just about the same way; you couldn't go in these cafes and so forth. If you did you'd go in the back door and all that kind of stuff.

**MG:** Was your expectation that Portland was a little bit different when you first headed out here?

**DA:** No, no I thought Portland was even worse, that's what I thought.

**MG:** Oh.

**DA:** Yeah, when I got here and saw all this I said "goodness, that's just about worse than it was in Texas." But you always had to say, I don't care if it was a—after you got up to age fifteen to sixteen, it was "Mister." And so, during the time and coming out I found out that, after living here, and I board here, and so I found out that things made you change, you know, and changing where we come to be so that we liked everything alright.

**MG:** Mhmm. Okay. So you retired in '67, right?

**DA:** Yes, in '67.

**MG:** The railroad had made pretty good provisions for retirement, so that was one thing that would sort of distinguish it from other jobs. Had you considered, or did you take other jobs in-between there from 1945 to retirement? Or you stayed right with the road the whole time?

**DA:** Well no, I stayed right with the road at the whole time. I didn't take no other jobs. I just stayed, stayed [unintelligible]  
—

**MG:** Having continuous employment. So...

**DA:** Huh?

**MG:** It was continuous employment? There wasn't no strikes or interruption to—

**DA:** No, no, no, no.

**MG:** Okay. The other thing I wanted to ask about is the other people that you worked with, that there was a kind of a brotherhood or association, or things that made the job fairly pleasant because everybody knew everybody, or—

**DA:** Yeah, yeah.

**MG:** What was that—

**DA:** Yeah, that was kind of a brotherhood, you know; association. Because everybody seemed to get along alright, because once in a while they'd have to call a fella in, you know, for something, have them on the train, something like that or something. But other than that everybody got along. Everybody got along alright.

**MG:** Alright. You ready Dr. Wilson?

**Wilson:** Like boiled ham.

**MG:** Huh?

**Wilson:** Like boiled ham [laughter].

[end of interview 00:23:48]