



James Brooks Oral History Interview, May 8, 1983

Title

“James Brooks Oral History Interview”

Date

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Location

Location Unknown.

Summary

James Brooks was originally born James Thompson in Mississippi. He moved to Portland in 1929 where his uncle, Mr. Green, was a Pullman porter. Brooks discusses the poverty at the time which made racial differences less apparent, as many white residents in the area had no jobs at all. Brooks talks about the white and black communities in Portland co-existing because the black community was not an economic or social threat to the white community. At the time, Brooks says the black population in the entire state of Oregon was only between one or two thousand persons, mostly concentrated in Portland. Brooks talks about his work as a chair car porter and the hierarchy of positions on the train, with waiters at the top and porters at the bottom. Brooks compares this hierarchy to the hierarchy of slavery where house slaves were viewed as above others, and discusses how this hierarchy continued into post-slavery life. Brooks also explains why porters suffered more abuse from passengers than waiters did, and the lack of recourse for railroad workers. Brooks describes an underground system of mentors and family-like bonds among railroad workers, even with the hierarchy.

Interviewee

James Brooks

Interviewer

Michael Grice

Website

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

Transcript

Michael Grice: Give me a few details about coming to Portland; when you came and where you came from, and then we'll talk about the railroad.

James Brooks: Okay. Tell me when to go.

MG: You can start. I'm just testing the important stuff. Don't mind the microphone, alright?

JB: Alright, my name is James Brooks, originally I was James Thompson when I arrived in June 17th, 1929 from Kansas City, Kansas where I had lived for six years, having been born in Greenville, Mississippi. Arriving in Portland in the 1929, in the midst of the Depression, as compared to what I had left in Kansas City, was a significant memorable experience. Life in Portland, even during the Depression, was substantially better for a youngster than it was in Kansas City, Kansas in 1929. I immediately fell in love with the place. As I can recall, there was only one—two black families on the block that we lived in. Significantly, the difference was not apparent, simply because everybody was poor. My uncle, Mr. Greene, was a Pullman porter who had a regular job. Many of the white families on the block did not have any job, so while we were poor, so was everybody else. So the marked difference between the Depression years, the Recession years in '52 and we're presently experiencing was not quite the same thing. Through the midst of this all, my uncle Mr. Greene was adamantly opposed to taking any kind of giveaway. He would not allow surplus food to be in the house. He wouldn't, did not—adamantly would refuse any help from the WPA or the whole realm of services that emerged in 1932 under the Roosevelt administration. He's an extremely prideful person, and I think that's carried over in my cousin Si Greene and myself today, that we only want what we earned and we don't take anything, we don't want anything if anybody give us anything. We grew up in that kind of an atmosphere. There was very little animosity...what should I say; overt animosity between blacks and whites in that time, and I say this without any compunction at all, that simply that blacks were no threat. There was no threat from blacks; there was no economic threat, there was no threat of them taking over housing, there was no threat of them crowding the schools, there was no threat period. And so the relationship was easygoing. Oh yes, we had childhood fights, we'd fight like animals, and the next day we're out playing ball together.

MG: White and black.

JB: White and black. And we, below Russell, south of Russell; whites and blacks would gang up against whites from other neighborhoods.

MG: Territorial.

JB: Yeah, it was a kind of a turf kind of thing rather than a racial kind of thing. And even in those days there were some blacks living over in southwest Portland. Notably among those is Art Shepard [spelling?], who turned out to be a tremendous athlete, but the rivalry was just as intense based upon territorial, not racial. Again, simply because we posed no threat. And I think that sometimes we forget that any time that you as a force become a threat to whatever kind of system the majority system has, then they are going to begin to maneuver and machinate systems to restrict you. If you—whatever it may be; if you don't become a threat, you got no problem.

MG: So, that can be based on territory, it can be based on race, it can be based on economics.

JB: That's right.

MG: But they're protecting.

[00:05:00]

JB: That's right. And I'm saying, in those early days, that the only kind of threat we posed was a territorial turf kind of thing that happens among kids. It really didn't happen among the adults, because we weren't a—black families were no threat.

MG: Do you think that would—when you say Mr. Greene, that was on the side of daddy?

JB: That's right, yeah. I think the other thing, interesting thing about that is that taking all of this into context, in the economic system blacks were absolutely, absolutely, no equivocation, defined in certain categories, as far as economic system. That was servile, domesticated kind of services. Again, that posed no threat to whites. If you didn't work for the railroad or one of the hotels or shine shoes, you didn't work. If my memory is correct, there were no more than eight or nine black folks who were in various federal or city civil service kinds of jobs.

MG: What was the black population estimated during those years in the thirties?

JB: Anywhere from a thousand to two thousand in the whole state.

MG: Mostly concentrated in Portland?

JB: Mostly concentrated in Portland.

MG: They also concentrated along the railroad lines. There were some blacks that lived in La Grande and Pendleton.

JB: La Grande and Pendleton and...right. And some down in the Southern Pacific branch going down to Klamath Falls, etc. Those were railroad hands, labor hands that were—they had settled there. Very few otherwise, because the climate, the social climate was so restrictive. Very restrictive.

MG: Okay. What part, when—at what point did you work with the railroad?

JB: Well I first started working with the railroad my first year out of high school. I was—I started out as a chair car porter.

MG: How'd you get into that? Someone bring you to that? Did Mr. Greene have something to do with it?

JB: No. In fact, the business here's another paradox; among the men working for the railroad there was a hierarchy, and the lines were very definitive. The waiters were the elite. The Red Caps were the second in command in this level hierarchy. The porters were the last. And then of course you had the section hands and the labor gangs and those kinds of things. So I very vividly recall that when I went down to apply to work as a Red Cap, the supervisor at that time asked me who was my folks, and I very [00:08:01 unintelligible] told them "what the hell difference that make?" And I didn't get the job through them.

MG: Yeah.

JB: And because I knew Mr. Freeman, Ted Freeman [spelling?], he put me to work as a chair car porter, and then I gravitated into being a Red Cap when I wasn't a chair car—but the supervisor of the Red Caps at that time wouldn't hire me because I didn't belong to any of that hierarchy. Of course I was a—let's face it—I was a snot anyway, you know.

MG: Right, well that's fair enough. And that's an interesting twist, too—

JB: Sure it is, sure it is.

MG: [00:08:35 inaudible] saying about Ted Freeman, I was going to ask you what blacks did you know who were already in position? Forty years later Ted Freeman hires us to work on the railroad.

JB: Right. Ted Freeman, Mr. Reynolds...

MG: You talking about Dr. Reynolds' father?

JB: Yes, that's right. And Willie Torrence [spelling?] were always concerned about what happened to the young man, the young black. Anything those people could do to help a young black, especially if that young black was interested in going to school and furthering his education, they would do it. And to them, who your parents were or what your hierarchy was didn't mean anything as much it did to some of the other old time folks who had lived under that old system. And that really isn't hard to understand if you look at black history from the perception of what happened after the slavery; after the

Emancipation Proclamation. Because who were the people in charge? The people who were in charge were the black folks who had access to the lifestyles of the white folks. And who were they? Commonly called the house niggers.

MG: Right.

JB: And who were the house niggers? They were the favorite black folks who were the offspring of the masters' extracurricular sexual activities with the slaves. But after the Emancipation Proclamation, they're the ones who knew how to talk, who knew how to dress, who could read and write, so therefore they begin to—they had the power, because they were the ones closest to the power.

[00:10:13]

MG: Right. Were there—

JB: So you know, a lot of that residual still carries on today. A lot of those folks still think in those terms, and you could see it. I didn't understand it at that time. As far as I was concerned, he was a son of a bitch.

MG: Right.

JB: Excuse the expression. But you know, as I learn more about history, where he came from and the system under he—then I could understand how come he thought that way.

MG: Well I was going to ask you, too, about other people who, that you recall...was there—first of all, was there a distinction between the chair car porters and the Pullman porters?

JB: Absolutely.

MG: Where did they rank in the hierarchy?

JB: Pullman porters, the chair car porters were below.

MG: Was the Red Caps—were the Red Caps [inaudible]—

JB: The Red Caps was next to the waiters.

MG: Huh. That's interesting. Was that based on income, or perceived income, or was it just a—

JB: No, I think it was—well I think basically it was the...oh, the social arena in which they worked, okay? Red Caps, for instance: very, a mass amount of contact with the passenger, but only for a short period of time. So the passenger felt like you were doing him a service and he paid for that service and that was the end of it. The waiter: the same kind of thing. The Pullman porter, different kind of thing. It was almost like a master and a slave.

MG: Because it went on for a ways, yeah.

JB: Went on for two or three days.

MG: Yeah.

JB: See, and the passengers at that time had no compunction about "boy," "nigger, shine my shoes," doing all those kind for two or three days. But see, with the Red Cap and the waiter, it was lookie, I serve you your ham and eggs and I'm through with you.

MG: Right.

JB: Or with the Red Cap; I put your bags on the station and you pay me and I'm through with you. See, it's a different kind of arena that they were working, and I think basically that was—plus the fact that the tipping was based upon the

service rendered at that time rather than your demeanor. See, because a Pullman porter and a chair car porter, if he wasn't nice and subservient to the passenger, he didn't get no tip.

MG: Right.

JB: Okay, but you serve the man his ham and eggs and his coffee, he going to leave you a tip.

MG: Anyway.

JB: Anyway, see. So you know, it's a very complex kind of thing. It's not the kind of thing that you can really systematize and draw a black and white reason for, or reasons why now. And you know, when you look at it, you have to take in all the kinds of issues to really place why it existed, how come it existed, and how come it lasted that long. And again, each one of those were jockeying for favor with the white man who really controlled his destiny. Because they'd fire you right on the spot, no questions asked, no hearing, no nothing, you see.

MG: Did you ever experience people getting fired, or witness other people getting fired, and what were the reasons for that?

JB: No, I heard of a lot of cases of people being, for instance, being put off the train in the deserts of Utah and that kind of thing, but it never happened to me. I bluffed my way through a lot of times. I think they—they didn't think I had good sense, so they left me alone.

MG: Did you have to manage the issue of am I a man, even though I'm working as a servant? And in such a capacity—

JB: All the time.

MG: How did you manage that?

JB: Well—

MG: Was it a conflict, or—

JB: Yes it was, and there's no question about it, that...Okay, take myself when I'd start calling off the names of the people that I graduated from high school with: Governor Atiyeh, the chairman of the Port of Portland right now, Ben Lusher [spelling?], who's a postmaster general—I mean a postmaster here, you know, and I was a better student than they were but didn't know it, didn't realize it. When I began to realize that and find out what I had to do to learn a living in order to go to school and saw where they were without having any brains, and simply because they were white, then you have to confront that conflict. You have to say if I'm going to get where I'm going to go, then I'm going to have to accept this. And that gives you some strength. Many times, you know, you wanted to raise up and say—walk off and say forget it, but all that does is assuage your ego. It does not put you one step forward. Makes you feel good for ten minutes.

It's like the situation where black folks says "well man, I went there and I told this so-and-so and so-and-so and so." Oh yes, you told them, and then what? He closed the door and forgot about you. You off the record. So all you really done is just made yourself feel good; you haven't changed the system at all. So yes, you had to confront that. You had to say am I going to do this? You have to take all this crap, you know. In my mind, I always felt that I was better than they were; that I didn't give a damn what they did, that I was still better than they were. And if you didn't have that, you were in trouble.

MG: What about your system turned to a support? Did everybody work in and around the railroad, or what range of occupations, say, did Mr. Greene have? You said he was a Pullman porter?

JB: He was a Pullman porter, right, yeah. And I—oh I could list the names of people: Mr. Johns, Mac Johnson, Mr. Lee, Jim Lee, [spellings?] all those people when I started working, when Si started working, they were supportive because they knew...

MG: They were reaching [inaudible].

JB: They—sure, they knew Mr. Greene. And they used to come over to the house and saw Si and I as kids, and so anything they could do—they would [00:16:34 unintelligible] idea what would happen. Like if I was a chair car porter and I got on the train and oh, Mr. Lee or Mr. Johns or somebody there be, he'd say "so-and-so, so, he's a conductor, watch out; he's a son of a bitch." Or "hey, it's alright, you can do with these kinds of things," and it's a kind of an underground, you know, and so that's the way we helped each other, you know. And so you knew, for instance, that on some of the damn runs—you guys, both you guys worked on a chair car—you know you couldn't go to sleep if you had one of them chicken shit conductors, but if you had a conductor you can work with—and these guys knew him because they traveled up and down for years, and so they knew every damn conductor there was, so they could tell you man, "hey, when you leave so and so you can get you twenty minutes, or thirty minutes or forty minutes" or whatever it was. So again, it was a kind of an underground system that gave you support. And I think you put the term right when you said family, because it was kind of an understanding family, even though the hierarchy existed.

MG: We're about out of tape too, and I didn't bring any, any more. I want to make a prototype here. So some of the things that—I'm going to come back and do this again, so hopefully this initial conversation will sort of stimulate some thought, and if you mind doing it again when I got some [00:17:54 unintelligible], if I had brought more tape than I thought, I would just try this.

JB: No, yeah, you didn't know I talk so much [laughter].

MG: No really, no the tapes are like twenty, thirty minutes at a time and I had some other stuff on the beginning of the tape.

JB: Yeah.

MG: That was really inter—well I'll mention that after we run out of tape. Anything else that you can think of that had to do with the railroad and the dynamic that it played in your life?

JB: Well, I think that when you look back upon it, given the circumstances, given the arena in which we were in, we have to be thankful, because those were hard times. For white folks and black folks, not even—here again, you can use all kinds of terms. You might have said you sold your personality, you sold your psyche for a job. That may be true, but while there was lots of white folks in this city on WPA and taking welfare, the blacks were working.

MG: Earning income.

JB: Earning income. It's really a paradox when the administration now begins to holler about blacks being on welfare; in those days there wasn't and no blacks on welfare. It was all for white folks. See, the welfare system was created for white folks. You know, nobody got upset about it until they—because the niggers started getting on it. You know, they—see at that time, like I say, practically every black family, there was hardly a black family in the city of Portland that wasn't working.

MG: Were there any whites that occupied the same jobs as black?

JB: No, absolutely not.

MG: Now whites— [00:19:37 inaudible]

JB: No, no.

MG: [Inaudible].

JB: No, no, there was that line drawn. Invisible line that was there.

Unknown Speaker: Caste system.

JB: It was a caste system, certainly was. Again, you got to look at it though: it gave us strength, because we working. We were independent. I remember—I'll never forget when they—you know how they used to do in first or second grade

or whatever at school, they'd go around the classroom: "what does your father do?" And I felt really ashamed, I said "a Pullman porter." I felt kind of ashamed to say it, you know, because, well as a black person there was only three or four things you could do: Pullman porter, a waiter or a shoeshine boy. That's it.

[end of interview 00:20:30]