



Group Oral History Interview of Eddie Butler, Lonnie Wilson and Others, 1980s

Title

“Group Oral History Interview of Eddie Butler, Lonnie Wilson and Others”

Date

1980s

Location

Location Unknown.

Summary

In this recording several retired railroad workers recall their experiences. Many relate stories about working on special trains, which were lucrative in terms of tips, and not easy to get chosen to serve on. One speaker describes being treated well by passengers on a train full of important Mississippians, one of which stood up for the workers when a white steward tried to refuse them time to eat. Eddie Butler describes black employees being reprimanded for taking offense at racial slurs, and his philosophy of diligently doing his work so he could more safely stand up for himself when being mistreated on the job. Lonnie Wilson relays his experience serving on a special train for the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and the Harriman special train. Wilson also discusses being on a train trapped in snow for four days and the measurements taken to care for the passengers, as well as his experiences as a stationary pantry man. Please note that this interview includes remembrances of a culture of racism and the use of racist, derogatory language toward African Americans, including the N word.

Interviewees

Eddie Butler, Lonnie Wilson

Interviewer

Michael Grice

Website

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

Transcript

Eddie Butler: because so many things was going to be said, and if you fly up at everything when you working for the public...

Michael Grice: Right. And you—

EB: Well, they'll keep you jumping at the, say from pillar to post all the time.

Unknown Speaker: You know one thing, Eddie?

EB: And—you're not still recording, are you?

MG: I got the recorder going but it's just [00:00:23:02 unintelligible] now, so it won't—but go ahead.

Unknown Speaker: Eddie, you know one thing that I think that mostly amongst our black race is one of the most misinterpreted words that has ever been used towards we as serving the public is the word Uncle Tom.

EB: Yeah.

Unknown Speaker: See. Now, just because you're polite and courteous doesn't mean that you're an Uncle Tom.

EB: Right.

Unknown Speaker: So many would just "oh man, he's an Uncle Tom." You're making your living, that's all.

EB: That's right, that's right, mmmm.

Unknown Speaker: I found out this once too, in the early days when the dining used to do like the Pullman car; we assigned to a special train, we went from Los Angeles to New York, see, like during those days when the Shriners—we did it out of Portland to Los Angeles and picked up the Detroit Shriners, came back through Portland, Seattle, Vancouver across the [00:01:25 unintelligible], down into Detroit, you know; the dining cars would go everywhere, everywhere. And another interesting thing that I found; I was assigned or picked for the West—the Union Pacific was very choosy when it comes to special trains. In those days they had what was called these boosters, these commerce specials. So, this one I was assigned to who wanted waiters and pantry man was called an Old Mississippi [00:02:02:14 unintelligible] Special. This was in 1929. I never shall forget the man's name, he was governor of the state of Mississippi; Dennis Murphree. So, [00:02:14:10 unintelligible] was superintendent of the Union Pacific dining car department here in Portland at that time, and so the men that were selected, he called us all in; "oh, you've been selected and this is a very lucrative, nothing but wealthy businessmen from the state of Mississippi, including the governor and his staff." He said "there's no coaches on the train; it's all room car," see.

MG: Yeah.

Unknown Speaker: Now, in those days your lounge car—

[tape cut].

--on the train.

MG: You had a barber on the car?

Unknown Speaker: Oh yes, had a barber on the train and all, see. So let's get back to this special. So Mr. [00:02:55:01 unintelligible] called us in there, he says "now," explained to us they were all important people and wealthy people from the state of Mississippi, chamber of commerce; that they represented the state, and how lucrative it would be to us, and we would go all the way to Biloxi, Mississippi. That's the capital, isn't it? In the state of Mississippi? Sure it is, yeah. "Now if any of you men cannot stand to be called 'nigger,' hold up your hand and you won't have to go." Nobody held their hand

up. Even though on that trip it was all those wealthy southern businessmen and the governor and his staff, never once did we hear the word "nigger." Now we--

MG: [00:03:45:14 unintelligible] quite the people, too.

Unknown Speaker: Mhmm. Now here's a really interesting thing about it: see every Pullman porter on that train was a musician.

MG: Is that right?

Unknown Speaker: We had ten cars, ten room cars on there; every porter was a musician. In other words, we had a band, dance band on there. The maid, she was colored, had a beautiful voice. And when we left here from Portland, we went north as far as Vancouver. In the meantime, we stopped in Tacoma and they took them on a trip up to Mount Rainer, and one of those southern women come back to the—she gone back to the chef cook, said "do you have a fruit jar?" "oh yes, here's a jar," you know. He gave her this mayonnaise—not mayonnaise, because in those days you had to make your mayonnaise, what am I talking about mayonnaise, we had to make everything in those days; slice the butter and mix the dressing—anyway, it was a jar. She took it up there and brought it back full of snow [laughs] and she's holding it, you know, first snow she's ever seen. Amusing. We get to these terminals, this station, and they's roped off a section of the station and the Pullman porters come out with their instruments and they rope off and they play this dance music. This girl who was the maid would sing, and they'd dance. Of course they invited all of the chamber of commerce [00:05:20:06 unintelligible] them to come down.

[00:05:22]

MG: Is that right?

Unknown Speaker: And then we had four or five protos, display cars showing what Mississippi was famous for, what they grew and...

MG: Yeah.

EB: Mostly it was an educating thing you ever want to see. But never did we hear the word nigger, never. And another thing—

EB: [Unintelligible]

Unknown Speaker: Oh pardon me; let me tell you this one thing. This old steward I was with, he was a German, and so he wasn't going to let any of those peoples in that dining car, he wasn't going to let the porters eat. Well big train, you know, and all, see. And I talked to him and said "what—it's past our time to eat." "No, [00:06:10;15 unintelligible] eat." Well I went on back, I don't know which one of those big Mississippians was back there; man that fella [unintelligible] through there and said "you telling me that my boys can't eat?" says "I want to know the reason why," and that big Dutchman started shaking in his pants. Said "well, I'm going back and getting my boys." He said "boys, come on in there."

MG: Yeah. When the people work with you they seen the value of the service and they see that it done right [inaudible]—

EB: But that rich southern white man some milk, baby.

Unknown Speaker: He was a man, he was a gentleman. You better know it. You right with him, you alright. I don't care what they say. And I was born and raised up here in the north, in the west. Tell me about these rednecks up here.

EB: [00:06:57 unintelligible] I, when I was approved of all the locals here and one of the things that really I, so many times right now I have to kind of laugh about, you know, when [00:07:17 unintelligible] you know. So, and I was with—I kept in contact with a representative down in Los Angeles with him real well. So there was a reporter in Salt Lake out of Los Angeles, but he made a trip to Salt Lake, and this is real, real comical, you know, and during his trail, well some passenger back there called him a black so-and-so, and this porter was running all up and down the train going what [inaudible under unknown speaker's laughter]. So, when they called him in, in this investigation, the superintendent

told him, said "well now, you know you're not supposed to do things like that," said "man calls you that, alright, but you couldn't do that, you could have just walked on off and said nothing." So this porter asked the superintendent, he said "well Mr. Fitsque [spelling?], what would you have done if he had called you that?" So, Mr. Fitsque told him, said "well, he couldn't call me that, because I'm not black." He said "well, what would you have done if he had called you the kind you are?" [Laughter]. He said "will you get up and get out of my office?" [Laughter]. Yeah, so I, as I said though, then they made me conductor. But I guess they—you don't have to take a backseat. If you do your work, everyone [inaudible] I did my work when I was on, because I didn't want nobody getting on me, and I considered...

Lonnie Wilson: [Unintelligible].

EB: Yeah. And if I do my work, you don't got something to say about it, and I can talk back, but if I'm not, well you can say most anything to me and what can I say? I'm wrong, [00:09:16 inaudible]. So that's why I always did my work.

MG: Put yourself in a position where you [inaudible]—

EB: Yeah, and so then they made me a conductor. I never did make a trip, though, because the Pullman Company went out of business at that time.

MG: Was that '67, or—

EB: No, that was in '69 when they went out of business. Yes, it was '68 I made conductor, because they went out of business in '69. The railroads took over all the Pullman cars.

MG: Mr. Wilson, you was trying to say something a minute ago?

LW: Well I've been on several big sharp trains, well the Mormon special, you know.

MG: The Mormon?

[00:09:53]

LW: Yeah, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. We picked them up in Seattle and we took them as far as Pocatello Idaho, but—I mean Spokane, it was when we went to Spokane—well, they gave us free tickets for their concert. I mean we had some of the best seats. Then we was on the Harriman special, that's all the, you know, they were big stockholders for the Union Pacific, and a lot of those big stockholder were from overseas and they had all this set—I guess that it was selected crews, you know; they had stewards and they had pantry man. I know I was a stationary pantry man in [00:10:54 unintelligible], and...let's see...well anyway, there was four of us stationary pantry man.

MG: So, the point where you work on special trains that they had different, important crews?

LW: You know, I mean they had everything to eat available.

EB: Oh yeah. I've been on many of those [inaudible]—

LW: You know, on that, on that Harriman special they had two freight trains ahead of it. You had two [inaudible] on the track at the same time. All of the bridges and all of the...they had airplanes going over and everything, you know, protection. [Several voices speaking at once].

MG: Protection?

LW: Yeah, they had [unintelligible] the tunnels and they had telephones on those specials.

MG: Well what was this Harriman special? What was that?

EB: Well it was for the stockholders, special stockholders.

LW: Yeah, stockholders.

EB: International. [Several voices overlapping].

LW: I mean you're talking about a nice group of people. They all loved it. [Several voices overlapping]

EB: --the best group I believe as a whole. What I mean, you know, like individuals, the best group as a whole. I was on a sixteen car tour from what they call the Sullivan tour.

LW: Oh yeah, I remember those Sullivans.

EB: Yeah, I was on that and they didn't have any brothers who were on my car. I had some big, you know, I had the president there and the [00:12:39 unintelligible] company and all those people like that on there.

Unknown Speaker: [00:12:43 unintelligible] Buckwheat was on there, the big [unintelligible].

EB: Yeah, and we were going for twenty-one days. And during that twenty-one days, not counting my salary, which ran way up on the overtime on a Saturday, I made I think it was eighteen hundred dollars in tips.

Unknown Speaker: Sure, I know you did, because we were always trying the special. I have [many voices overlapping].

EB: Nothing but rooms on that train. No open seats or nothing, all over them. So, we made the chair, we went from here up and all up through [00:13:21 unintelligible] and around and then New York, spent three days in New York; we left and then come to Washington, spent two days in Washington and then down to Miami and then—

MG: Now who was Sullivan? Was he also something with the railroad, or—

EB: No, he was [voices overlapping] tours—

LW: Tour company. The tour director on the big tour company. He was out of Boston. To this day.

MG: Well, maybe by the time that the railroads get back to what they once were there'll be a train like that, and there'll be black passengers in them.

Unknown Speaker: I doubt it.

MG: You doubt it?

Unknown Speaker: I doubt it. I'll never live to see it. No.

LW: Another one of my experiences is on that...we left Chicago I think on the January the second and definitely had all of that freeze back in that part of the country, and we stopped at a little place called Edgerton, Wyoming, so we stayed there five days.

MG: Stuck on the train?

LW: Yeah. The passengers, they left on the fourth day when all the passengers, they had to get off the train. Now, the elder people went in the station, because they had a consolidated—they had a school, so they had all the younger passengers and a lot of students on there that were going to Laramie, some of them going to Star Valley, and those [00:15:05 unintelligible] we had to form a chain and lead them off to the school. And so they had [00:15:14 unintelligible] and that's where they slept and ate, and they broke in those refrigerated cars and got—well they had, the army had [00:15:28 unintelligible] was a god-sent blessing, you know? They had all that meat and stuff. Then they dropped K-rations from the airplanes and...

[00:15:37]

MG: Was it a storm literally that snowed the train in?

LW: Yeah, that was snow in 1949. So all the Pullman, they took all the blankets and things over there and carried them over to the school for the people that were—and all these mattresses and things in the—all the people that had took the mattress off and then slept in—they moved them in the station. So, well they had good heat there, and we had to melt snow to make the coffee and a lot of the cooking. See we—we cooked their breakfast, and it turned out the first coffee shop in the main [00:16:25 unintelligible], so I remember taking my own coat and I think I made earmuffs.

MG: Did people come off of the train to eat?

LW: No, they was on the train then, and that day, and we served them breakfast before they got off.

MG: Oh, I see.

LW: Then they let them off in that school and we let them take the [00:16:49 unintelligible]. So on the fourth day when the [unintelligible] came down we got the rations, and picked them up, and [unintelligible]. And a lot of those waiters, when the trains stopped they stopped. They wouldn't do nothing. But I helped every way I saw fit. [00:17:18 unintelligible] when they got ready to load the passengers and all those buckets, you know, I even went back there helping the Pullman porters unload theirs, blankets. Shit, man I picked up twenty-five dollars a foot. No need to turn around.

MG: You know I was just going to wrap it up, because I've worked you a long time now. I'm going to be getting ready to leave and I wanted to finish up before dark, in case anybody's looking for you to get home, and it's been very enjoyable, really. And we'll do it again and we'll try not to—we'll try and keep it, you know, like this. And how did it seem to work out? Fairly well as a session, in terms of when you had to wait? And you waited to the last. I worked with Mr. Butler, and I've worked with all of you, in fact I've worked with Mr. [Unintelligible] and I've worked with Mr. Dudley [spelling?] in putting together the project, and sort of became associated with him, so I sort of consider him as a resource and a friend where I view him like I do my partners, you know. So, I should let him relax, he waited longer than—

Mr. Dudley: That's fine, I didn't mind it one bit, it's perfectly alright, and the next time I'll be last. I don't mind waiting. And the system that you've got here, I think that is better than having...

MG: Just one on one, or...

Mr. Dudley: You know, have it just like we had here. I think this is regular [00:18:46 unintelligible] that I think, don't you? And then you see each man can talk and he not be cutting in or this and that and wants to comment, and so on. I think it's very good.

MG: Well I like the last part here to add to it, the discussion. I don't know how well—and I'll find out when I listen to the tape—how well the microphone picks up, you know, in a large group.

LW: Well I can tell you all about that dining car.

MG: Well, we'll let you here.

Mr. Dudley: Now this a—pardon me, Mr. Grice, this another thing I want to—I don't know if you knew or not, but you have done it beautifully; you have all of us here and you have four sections by years of railroading. This man came along before any of us here, see. I came along next, then here comes Wilson and Eddie around about in the same time, see. And I know things of the dining car that this man never experienced, see, and when I came along I've never heard of such a thing as a stationary pantry man.

LW: Well they had stationary pantry man on the railroad streamliner.

[00:20:02]

Mr. Dudley: Uh-huh.

LW: And we had stationary pantry men on the little streamliner.

Mr. Dudley: Since when?

LW: That's when E. Hill and—

Mr. Dudley: I made the first trip on little streamliner, first streamliner—

LW: Ellison was—

Mr. Dudley: Henry Ellison [spelling?] was not on there, brother. Neither was E. Shelton Hill, not on the little streamliner.

LW: I'm talking about you know when, in the latter year, and see I don't know when the little streamliner first started, but I know Ellison, who was a stationary pantry man on the—he and George Turner.

MG: What's a stationary pantry man now? What's he referring to?

Mr. Dudley: That's a wait team. He's just a pantry man, he fixes the salads and does the pantry work, like you do in the hotel. He'd wait on the porters, see.

MG: Wait on the porters.

Mr. Dudley: Yeah, that's right.

LW: Not the stationary pantry man, he's not supposed to wait on nobody. Sometimes—

Mr. Dudley: But he did, he did [inaudible]—

LW: See something, now we had one of our, the one go behind you, and he didn't want us to wait on the porters. See, in the beginning—see in the beginning we was in the pool, the kitty, but I had to put twenty-two dollars and fifty cents to bring my salary up—I mean that, in other words I was getting a little more than what I was as a stationary pantry man. So, I had to put twenty-two dollars and fifty cents in the kitty each month so I could be in the kitty.

Mr. Dudley: That's what make the difference between the salary.

LW: Yeah. Then, well—see you remember, right, to be a stationary pantry you had to, in other words, you had to bid for that. You had to bid for that and so you didn't have no trouble as the stationary pantry—

Mr. Dudley: What about your seniority of the [inaudible]—

LW: Yeah, you didn't have no trouble just being a pantry man, because didn't nobody want to be a pantry man, didn't nobody want to be a stationary pantry man, and they put it up for a bid. If you bid for a stationary pantry man, get up in the ladder here when they started putting off the stationary pantry man because he worked when the others couldn't work. They pulled the—when they pulled, just drove down the cost, they abolished the stationary pantry man.

MG: But I know—

LW: We had, see we had job seniority, so then we didn't have to go out. So all we had to do just walk down to the commissary pick up our checks. When they did pull us out, well we [00:22:51 unintelligible] as well, because we got stationary pantry man pay. Didn't bother us when we still got the...where we didn't have to work. Now a lot of the fellas, they wanted to, shit, they wanted to knock that stationary pantry man's job out altogether, you know, talking about cut him down so his seniority, so there's no, ain't no seniority there, because you had a chance to bid for a station, you got a—you didn't do it, you know. So they didn't—you work and get over it. So we—

Mr. Dudley: Well those in America really have enjoyed the train as a result of the service that the brothers have provided; they've made it something that they, all of the people who was passengers, remember.

Unknown Speaker: You know, I wanted to be a Pullman porter, okay, you see [00:23:47 unintelligible], you see, but then I was just too little, you know, to handle them beds back then. You see, they took them off after so long a time, you see, and the rest of the beds wouldn't be so high. You had our switch, you know, to pull them down was much easier, but I wanted it because you could go all over town, but I was too little to reach that [many voices overlapping].

[end of interview 00:24:18]