



Vernon Gaskin Oral History Interview, June 16, 1983

Title

“Vernon Gaskin Oral History Interview”

Date

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Location

Location Unknown.

Summary

Vernon Gaskin was born in 1908 and raised in Cheyenne, Wyoming. His parents were pioneers in the state, being the only black family in the area for many years. He recalls moving to Portland in 1927 and discusses the racial segregation encountered there. He first visited Portland in 1925 after joining the Union Pacific. He went on a trip around the world as a waiter in 1926, then continued with the railroad. He discusses meeting his wife in church and his habit of going to the closest church in every town he stayed in on the railroad. Gaskin switched to the Southern Pacific in 1933. He describes the many unexpected duties of dining car workers, such as nursing sick passengers and dealing with emergencies, and the long hours and working conditions. Gaskin also talks about segregation on the train, both in physical spaces and in the types of jobs and wages available to black workers.

Interviewee

Vernon Gaskin

Interviewer

Michael Grice

Website

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

Transcript

Michael Grice: Okay, state your name please.

Vernon Gaskin: Name is Vernon Gaskin.

MG: And where's your home, your original home?

VG: My original home; I was born and raised in Cheyenne, Wyoming.

MG: Is that right? Huh, I didn't know if we had a substantial black population in Cheyenne or not.

VG: Well, I think the Gaskin family was it. At one time, of course, later on in the later years, why there was about fifty at the most.

MG: Had your parents been there for a generation?

VG: Oh yes, they were pioneers of the—of Wyoming. My grandmother cooked for two generations of governors in the state of Wyoming.

MG: Is that right?

VG: So, I—

MG: Your grandmother?

VG: My grandmother, yes.

MG: Oh, now what—

VG: My mother's mother.

MG: Mhmm, see that's got to go back a few years.

VG: Oh yes.

MG: So, and when were you born, Mr. Gaskin?

VG: 21st day of January, 1908.

MG: And we talked about our focus is on the railroad and moving to Oregon, people settling in Oregon and people working in Oregon, primarily for the railroad, and so I would like to just explore that with you, and you can branch to any part of it that you want, but there are a couple issues that we will try to cover. One is the work, of course, and your colleagues, the specific work that you did. The other is the relationship that you had with your family and the community and other brothers and what they did in relationship to you. And then the other is sort of the social climate here and how things changed in Portland. So, some of this is sort of the history of Portland as well. So, when did you come to Portland?

VG: May 1927.

MG: And what was the condition of Portland at that time? How would you describe Portland, and where did you, where'd you settle in Portland?

VG: Portland at that time was quite prejudiced, I might say, and when I came here you had to sit upstairs in the theaters and there was many of the restaurants in the downtown city of Portland that you could not eat in. But all in all there was such few, and we were so scattered, the Negro population at that time, we really actually didn't have a ghetto at that time. The pioneer Oregonians, the black Oregonians, I might say, were pretty well scattered throughout the city. So, we actually didn't have a ghetto, so there wasn't too much harassment as you might call today. We lived normally, it was no trouble.

MG: Do you think that kind of other than the discrimination in public places—

VG: That's right, no racial problems at all, of any kind like that, no. Well, you know, like riots or anything. Unheard of in those days.

MG: What about working with the railroad? I mean when did you start? Did you start with the railroad as soon as you came here? Is that how you came here?

VG: Oh, I came here starting, as far as the railroad is concerned, you know, in my home in Cheyenne that was the main source of regular work for the black man in the Cheyenne, because that was the terminal division point for the Union Pacific railroad.

MG: Right.

VG: And at vacation time, why the youngsters, we— they would hire us, the Union Pacific would hire us as engine wipers. Of course naturally that was during the old steam engine days, you know.

MG: So, you lived in the transition from the steam engine to the electric engine to the diesel?

VG: To the diesel, right—actually from the steam to the diesel. Then we, after my father passed away we moved to Omaha Nebraska, and in school and during the summer, why my first job on the rails, I might say, that is traveling, was as a Pullman porter on the tourist car. I never shall forget the trip. I know these gentlemen, if they served as Pullman porters, can remember the old tourist cars with the baker heaters. I won't go into that, because that's your part of the show, but I have to say this; I made two trips and turned my keys in. I'll tell you why: I got tired of stoking that baker heater and the wires that held the upper berth down; my hands were raw after two trips. Couldn't take it.

MG: Was it cable wires?

VG: They cable wires, you know, and when you pull the upper down, it'd take two men. That's one thing I'll say at that time, that the porters, we would help one another in the tourist cars, you know, to pull those berths down. One would hold and the other would take that cable wire and hook it, you see. Because you see it was tight.

[00:05:13]

MG: On a spring, then.

VG: Well no, not on a spring, you just had to have brute strength to—

MG: Tension.

VG: Or tension, we'll call it more or less, see, because that berth couldn't do that, you know. You can't be tight. And anyway, those wires had my hands raw so I turned in my keys and I went to the Union Pacific Dining Car Department and hired out as a waiter.

MG: Now these were two different companies, is that right? The Pullman Company and the Union Pacific Dining Car Company were two different kind of [inaudible]—

VG: Oh yes, oh yes. Pullman Company was individual company, oh yes.

MG: Although they hooked onto Union Pacific trains, though.

VG: Oh yes, yeah they had a contract with railroad, see.

MG: Well, what made you want to work with the Pullman car and not work the railroad, say the dining section, to start with?

VG: Well, I was like a drowning man; I grabbed for the first straw, and they were hiring for Pullman service and so at that particular time I had gone to the Dining Car Department, but they weren't ready to hire the extra men for the summer, and so the Pullman job came up and I grabbed that, you know. And my first run was from Omaha to Casper Wyoming in my home state. And that's the last summer and only Pullman service I had. Then I went the following vacation year. And by the way, that was a—that experience occurred, it happened to me in 1925, and the following year I went to the Union Pacific Dining Car Department. And— [audio cuts out]

MG: Okay, but anyway, you had switched now to the Union Pacific.

VG: Yeah, to the Dining Car Department.

MG: Okay, and then you was brought to Casper and then—

VG: That was 1925, that's the Pullman service. That was the only, that's the one summer on the Pullman car, and then—not one summer, but two trips on the Pullman car. And in '25 I had switched over to the Dining Car Department on the Union Pacific and made my first trip to Portland, see.

MG: Out of Omaha?

VG: Out of Omaha. We were living in Omaha, you see. After my father passed away, we moved from Cheyenne to Omaha, and then I came to Portland first time in that year. And I liked it, liked the weather and all. So...

MG: You recall when you were traveling from Omaha to Portland what people in Omaha—what was their impression of Portland? Did you tell people about it or had you heard about it, or...?

VG: Oh, well there were other dining car runs going to various places, and I don't know, some of the fellas had been to Portland on different occasions, special trains, et cetera. And I don't know, I don't recall any particular comment. Of course I raved to my friends about how wonderful it was out here, you know, the weather conditions and so forth.

MG: Had you met people here when you got here too that sort of gave you an indication that it was an okay place?

VG: Oh yes, oh yes. When I was getting back to what Mr. Wilson stated about friends of his he'd railroad with, he'd take them to church with him. They wouldn't go to church at home but were off on a turnaround point; they'd go to church with him. Well, that was a habit that I had formed that going into a strange city, I found out that—was taught the nicest people are in church. So, I'd get to the quarters, take my bath and clean up and head right to the closest church, see. So, that's where I met my wife, at Bethel A.M.E. Church.

MG: Is that right?

VG: Right here, that's located there on Larrabee and McMillan.

MG: Down where the coliseum is now, in that area?

VG: All that area, that's it.

MG: It's in a kind of red pinkish building.

VG: That's right, red brick, mmmm. And then I...that summer I came back and then reported there 1926 and the superintendent of the dining car commissary called me and several other waiters and said that the commissary in Portland needed waiters, but we'd have to make Portland our headquarters, and then "you men like to volunteer, we'll give you your transportation"— [phone rings].

[00:10:11]

MG: Go ahead [unintelligible].

VG: "And the meal order." So, I came out in 1926 and signed out of dining car commissary for the Union Pacific. And I'm trying to think, '26...yeah, and we were good for what, three months. We come out here in May...no, June, first week in June and we worked until about the first of September when it was, was summer vacation months, you know. So just before I was getting ready to go home back to Omaha, go back to school, I was confronted by a friend of mine out in Seattle, said "oh, how'd you like to make a trip around the world?" Hey, this is—I said "are you pulling my leg?" "No, they're signing up in Seattle. [00:11:20 unintelligible] Alexander's going to make a trip around the world. They need waiters and bus boys and cabin boys and et cetera." Well, I had never shipped so I said well, I'll try that.

MG: Right.

VG: So I signed on, made a trip around the world in 1926.

MG: Is that right?

VG: Mhmm. Came back and went back to Omaha, went back to school.

MG: What kind of school were you going to? I mean were you in college?

VG: I was going up to University of—Creighton University, that's Catholic.

MG: Uh-huh, sure. So that's in Omaha, isn't it?

VG: That is in Omaha, yes.

MG: Now you—and you met your wife at that time already?

VG: Oh, I had to—no, I met my wife in 1926.

MG: Uh-huh, but you weren't married at this time though [inaudible]—

VG: Oh my, no, no. That was...wasn't thought of. She was in school, I was in school, and that was taboo.

MG: Right.

VG: My wife and I didn't marry until 1932.

MG: I see.

VG: So then I popped the question to her mother about how would she like to go to Portland; she said "well son, you're the breadwinner, wherever you go, I will go." So, I made arrangements with Union Pacific and came to Portland.

MG: Now this was the—they had a need for people working the dining car commissary [inaudible] at that time.

VG: Oh yes, yes. Yeah, they were short of help out of the Portland commissary. So I worked for the Union Pacific until 1933.

MG: So after you'd been married a year or so.

VG: Yeah, I was married in '32 and left the Union Pacific in '33.

MG: Did you work at the railroad after that?

VG: After leaving Union Pacific?

MG: Right.

VG: Why, I left the Union Pacific and signed in with the Southern Pacific.

MG: I see.

VG: And that's—put in the rest of our railroading days there with the Southern Pacific.

MG: In the dining car?

VG: In the dining car, mmmm.

MG: You recall any interesting incidents in working in the dining car?

VG: Oh yes, yeah. Many of them.

MG: What comes to mind?

VG: Well, only thing about the dining car is that men in the Pullman cars would tell you it's the heart of the train. Don't care what happens on that train, they going to run right to the dining car with that problem. Yeah, that's right. A woman's raped, if she's robbed, kid gets sick, a woman's going to have a child, they run right to the dining car. I have assisted in bringing two children into the world.

MG: On a train.

VG: On the train, mmmm. Back in the [00:13:56 unintelligible]. That's right, mmmm.

MG: It is like a hotel on wheels maybe, so to speak.

VG: Really, mmmm. And that same way with the—well, I'll let the old men know, but the same way with the Pullman cars. You know, if you became ill, even though you had a coach seat they'd haul you back to the Pullman car because that's where the bed was, see. Oh yeah, mmmm. And we were everything on the train, yeah. You're a waiter, you're a porter, everything. You're a nurse. And it was rewarding, the job. Hard work.

MG: What would you say the hardest thing about it was?

VG: The hours.

MG: The hours. Long hours?

VG: Long hours. See, a normal day for a waiter was sixteen hours, and you were going that sixteen hours. Sometimes you'd have to eat your meals standing up, see. And even at that, our day was shorter than the Pullman porters, believe it or not. So I'll let—I won't go into their department. I'll stay away from that, but it's hard after being connected so closely with the Pullman service and the dining cars are all together on the train, and it's hard to separate, you know—

[00:15:22]

MG: Sure, it was all one team, more or less.

VG: Friendship. Yeah, that's it, all on one team, yes. And well, it's we came a long way as black workers. I might add that when I hired out in 1925, the salary was fifteen dollars a month. That was your monthly wage. And you didn't work on an hourly basis; you worked on a daily basis. We had no unions; unions were unheard of in those days.

MG: Okay.

VG: So you just had to grin and bear it, whatever they requested. Now I—well I'll stay, let's stay in the Dining Car Department.

MG: Alright.

VG: I worked in about every position; a cook, waiter, and the last seven years that I was on the road I was finally elevated to steward, I'm a steward. Of course that took place after the equal opportunity law came effective. They had to promote us. Those of us that worked in—

MG: Do you remember what year that was? Was that in the sixties?

VG: Oh yeah, let's see, you know, because I retired in '73. That's been nineteen what, '66?

MG: Well, it was '64 the Civil Rights Act.

VG: Yeah, the law was at about that time but I didn't get my promotion until about '66, along in there.

MG: Yeah, because I remember I worked on the road '66, '67, '68, and they didn't—I never had seen a black steward.

VG: They were few and far between.

MG: Yeah, there were some, but...

VG: Mhmm. And so that was one of the highlights of my railroading career is to make that promotion to become a steward in charge of the dining car.

MG: What about your relationship with other people who worked? Did everybody seem to get along, or were there—did everybody—well I know everybody couldn't always get along, but do you recall any incidents that were particularly difficult [inaudible]—

VG: Oh, we were more or less—oh yes, some of them. We naturally rubbed shoulders with men of our age from all levels, and some of them that are still living that I know today that are doctors and lawyers, we got so many college men, see, because that was their hope, their means of continuing their schooling, to get on the road during the summer months and earn that money, you know.

MG: That's exactly what happened to me, you know, I had to continue with the railroad a long time.

VG: The salary wasn't the highest in the world, but the gratuities were great.

MG: Yeah.

VG: See. And back in those days, why our salaries were so small that the IRS didn't think about...

MG: Auditing all that.

VG: Auditing and taxing gratuities.

MG: Yeah.

VG: You know, the bellhops, the taxi drivers and maître d's and the waiters and all such, Pullman porters, they didn't bother us about our tips. They didn't have any idea, but we was making a living, yes.

MG: What about the people who travel on the road now—of course you've seen all kinds—did you encounter other black people in the day?

VG: Oh yes, as travelers, yes very much so, mhmm.

MG: Did they treat you differently, or were you inspired by them, or did you—

VG: Oh yes, yes. We had some that embarrassed us and some that didn't. Oh, this was another thing I wanted to tell you about, that oh, I can't—I don't want to forget this.

MG: Alright.

VG: Back in the days, they had a curtain that separated the main part of the dining room, see. It was two stations below the curtain that was a pantry or a kitchen into the dining room, see. And at first they used to—all dark people had—black people sat behind the curtain. You were segregated, discriminated that way, segregated that way, you know. And but they finally broke that down as far as the passengers were concerned, but a lot of those stewards, those old-timers that's in their hearts and mind, body and soul; Pullman porters come in to eat, snatch that curtain, you know. I think I was one of the first waiters to snatch one of them back [laughs]. Of course you know what happens behind that. Soon as I got in town I was called into the superintendent's office.

[00:20:08]

Unknown Speaker: [00:20:08 unintelligible]

VG: Oh yes, yes, should say.

MG: What would you say—

VG: Yeah, I got ten days on the ground because there's no union to protect me. I got ten days on the ground. I said "well I'll do it again, if it happens." Mhmm. Fortunately, I got with a steward; the good lord was with me, I got with a steward that was broad-minded and he wouldn't pull the curtain. So I guess that's the only reason I had a railroad career, because I was determined to snatch that curtain, pull it back, see.

MG: Any other incidents that you could think of that would—that highlighted your career on the road that—and we'll come back to them if it comes later, but...

VG: Outside of a couple of train wrecks and outside of being on the first diesel transcontinental train, the first diesel which was operated out of Portland was put in service running from Portland to Chicago, and when we had all the fanfare and ceremonies, and the train leaves [00:21:19 unintelligible] Union Station here in Portland. Oh, everything was just so, so, you know. That's for uniforms of course, and by the way, the Union Pacific, they picked a crew—they tried to pick—by shades of color, skin color, see. If you had a crew, all most of them be my color, not darker than Mr. Butler. You can believe that, see.

MG: That's how they grouped them?

VG: That's right, mhmm. Yeah, sure. But they soon found out that they couldn't—they had to have the service rather than the color, so that finally fell apart, oh yes. So, getting back to this first trip on this first passenger diesel which operated out of Portland to Chicago, and when it came time to go to bed, they found out that there was no beds, no arrangements made for the cooks and waiters. None whatsoever. So the result of it is we had to sit up all the way from Portland to Chicago and worked, still worked sixteen hours that next day. So when we got to Chicago, why there was a diesel tank fuel tank between the kitchen and the baggage car, so they pull the train up to La Grange Illinois—that's where the diesel shop was—and they cut a hole through that tank in through the baggage car and they set up some bunk, three-tier bunk beds, enough for the waiters to sleep in, see. Now, at this particular time on the Union Pacific there were no black cooks on the deluxe trains, even though they had black cooks on the road, or on the Union Pacific. It was only the white cooks.

MG: On the deluxe train.

VG: Yes.

MG: Now what were you classifying as a deluxe train in those days?

VG: Well, like the streamliner, see, and they had short haul trains that colored cooks worked on, but the first top trains that was like all deluxe; only white cooks.

MG: But they still had black waiters.

VG: Oh yes, oh yes. There were no white waiters, oh no. So they cut this hole about the size of the fireplace there and when we got ready to go to bed we had to get on our hands and knees and crawl through that hole to go to bed. And our

diesel tank is separating this section where we were sleeping and the kitchen and we had to sleep breathing that diesel oil all the way back.

MG: No good, huh.

VG: No good, was terrible conditions. They finally put a dormitory car on. They had to because of the health laws, made them provide a sleeping space for us.

MG: Right. Okay, one last thing; do you recall what changes or what you experienced with the union when the union came on? [audio ends].

[end of interview 00:24:42]