



Si Greene Oral History Interview, Part 2, August 13, 1983

Title

“Si Greene Oral History Interview, Part 2”

Date

August 13, 1983

Location

Location Unknown.

Summary

Si Greene discusses working as a Red Cap from March of 1940 to July 8th, 1970, when he retired and began working for Crown Zellerbach. Greene describes discrimination in which railroad jobs were closed for black employees, such as engineers and brakemen. There is also discussion about the issue of “service-oriented” jobs being less open to black persons as blacks in the sixties began to avoid such jobs and whites took the jobs as the pay was increased. Greene also talks on the benefits of the railroad unions that he and his father were members of. His father was a member of the Pullman porters union from about 1926. Greene also lists some of his hobbies.

Interviewee

Si Greene

Interviewer

Michael Grice

Website

<http://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/oh29/greene2/>

Transcript

Si Greene: This is how I knew what was going on, because he and [00:00:07 unintelligible] were around the man's car all weekend [laughter]. The man had some mileage on his car and when he finally got back—

Michael Grice: [00:00:17 inaudible] I try to drink my beer.

SG: But anyway, that was one of things that I was kind of looking out for, which is why I didn't go out there at that time. But it was a place to make some money.

MG: What, at the airline?

SG: At the depot. Well, even there would have been a place to make some.

MG: Oh, you're saying at the airport at the time when he first went out there. Sure, sure.

SG: And Paul made a, Paul made a beaucoup of money. He wasn't hurting, which is why he was came with it, you know. They weren't doing him any harm, or any of the rest of them who had been out there at the time. He—because Paul was not the only one who had to make a choice as to whether to leave or whether he wanted to stay on there with a reduced atmosphere, you know.

MG: Right.

SG: I think I would have welcomed that at the depot, had I been confronted with it at the time. I think I would rather have had that than what I was presented with. Even there that was an insult there. "We will find you a job." Hell, I may not want the damn job that you find.

MG: Yeah.

SG: You know, I don't know what you going—I don't know what you looking for, for me.

MG: And I'm not—yeah, you don't give me no hand in it.

SG: Yeah.

MG: I think I'll find me a job.

SG: Yeah, "we will find you a job," hell, I may not want that damn job. Shit, I can find my own damn job, I found my own, I found this one back during hard times.

MG: You want a beer?

SG: Huh? Yes, please, because I'm about to get started [laughter]. But I don't need Charlie to do too much for me, no way.

MG: No way.

SG: And I'm telling you that I'm an independent...

MG: Soul.

SG: Black—thank you for saying soul, because that wasn't what I was going to say [laughter].

MG: Yeah, you's a black soul.

SG: I don't need anybody to find me no damn job. Shit, I'll find my own misery.

MG: Since I have to work.

SG: Yeah. That's the thing that I ain't particular about in the first place.

MG: The working part, whose idea is this, you know?

SG: Yeah. Shit. You go find yourself a job.

MG: There you go.

SG: Yeah. Don't find me one.

MG: I'll tell you what let's do—

SG: Which really that's always been my idea. Shucks, you find you a job and I'll get by some kind of way, because that's what I was been doing most of my life anyway, and I can do that.

MG: Sure, you're right. Well, and I'm thinking—me coming along and sort of looking at it or studying it, saying what happened to all those people, you know...Hello.

SG: [Laughs] You don't even have to be careful now, because he's already out.

MG: Yeah, the dog's is off.

SG: He's going on about his business.

MG: Did you make it to store barefoot? You walk on the grass? That's smart, that's smart.

SG: You mean they won't want—hi June.

Unknown Speaker: Hi.

SG: Fine, how are you?

Unknown Speaker: [unintelligible].

[Tape cut]

SG: And Sam who have maintained a stance to give the young people something to shoot at.

Unknown Speaker: Mhmm. Is this mic on? No, it's not on.

MG: [Talking to dog]: Why don't you sit down or lay down somewhere, Mr. Duffy [spelling?].

SG: Come on Mr. Duffy. You have to get away from me; because I'm not trying to—I'll remember next time you move to remind you.

MG: I hope you got your mic on, because...

SG: Mr. Duffy, Mr. Duffy, come over and lay down.

Unknown Speaker: That's a really passive dog.

SG: Ain't that a name for a dog? Mr. Duffy. Mr. Duffy, lay down. Please? Please lay down. If them grandkids was here you'd lay down, because they'd squabble at you till you—

[Tape cut]

MG: We'll do this: go through the demographic information. It's just like a questionnaire. Then we just get that out of the way and we'll just talk. And this is just a preliminary tape; now I got another tape that I'm going to do, and we'll see how, what our comfort is timeframe-wise.

SG: I'm sure, I'm sure glad you and Neman [spelling?] got all these things named and...

MG: Labeled out?

SG: Mhmm.

MG: Yeah.

SG: Because I don't know what you talk about no—

MG: Okay, age.

SG: Age?

MG: Approximately.

SG: I don't have an age.

MG: Okay, you don't have an age. Sex: male—

SG: I think [laughs].

MG: [Inaudible], married.

SG: Now what? Don't ask me no more questions, Michael.

MG: Okay. The year you started with the railroad?

SG: I did?

MG: The year that you started with them.

SG: [Laughing] you know I'm going to be silly, don't you know that?

MG: I know, it's okay.

SG: What year did I start with them? June—no, no, no, no, no, that's when I was finally hired. June 20th, 1940. I started in April of 1940. In fact, in March of 1940.

[00:05:17]

MG: What year did you retire from the railroad, or leave them?

SG: I have—huh? From the railroad? Sure glad you asked me that. I can put this on record now [laughter].

MG: I knew there would be something good about this dull part of it.

SG: July 8, 1970, that's when I wrote out my resignation. I'm going to make very sure that I get all that down on paper. You know, there's a reason for that.

MG: Why?

SG: It means that I had thirty years.

MG: That it does.

SG: Because I started June 20th, my starting date was June 20th 1940, right, and my quitting time, my resignation time was July 8th, 1970. That's the last day I worked.

MG: Okay. That has to be significant.

SG: Did you hear that?

MG: I heard that. The last day that you worked, I hear you. Type of work in the first year of railroading?

SG: Type of work? Red Cap.

MG: When you first started, you started as a Red Cap?

SG: Mhmm.

MG: Type of work at retirement?

SG: At retirement?

MG: When you retired. When you retired, what were you doing, what was your job?

SG: I was a warehouseman for Crown Zellerbach.

MG: No, no, let me say when you last worked with the railroad, what was you doing?

SG: When I last? Red Cap.

MG: Red Cap.

SG: 1970.

MG: Yeah, well distinguish it from leaving the railroad and actually retiring.

SG: Mhmm, yeah. Okay.

MG: Okay, you retired from Crown Zellerbach then? Because I wasn't—

SG: Not yet.

MG: Oh, I see.

SG: I retire from them December 1st, 1984.

MG: Is that right?

SG: Yes.

MG: I should—

SG: And when I say that I'm going to retire, that is definite.

MG: That's definite [laughter], and you've thought about that, huh? You're looking forward to that date, that's good.

SG: Uh-huh, yes sir.

MG: City where you first worked on the railroad?

SG: Portland.

MG: Okay. Last year of school, or last grade of school attended?

SG: [00:07:36 makes sound effect].

MG: What school you go to? You go to Washington High?

SG: Washington High School, I graduated in, I don't remember, '38, nine, somewhere in that vicinity. I don't—I'm not exactly sure.

MG: So twelve is the last year of school that you did, huh? First year of membership in the Railroad Senior Citizens Group?

SG: I haven't joined yet.

MG: Okay. Most preferred outdoor activity?

SG: Fishing. Fishing, hunting.

MG: Fishing, yeah. I had fishing, hunting, family outings—

SG: And just sightseeing I think does it a lot for me.

MG: Same here. I'd just as soon do that. It's what I did today. I went out to work out and to go for a walk, but—

SG: I have been more different places doing more different things and attracted an awful lot of company, like my granddaughter Lisa, she is disappointed with me because I told her I was going to take her up and go down the old Indian trails from out of The Dalles, going down toward—

MG: Indian trails?

SG: Yeah.

MG: On foot, or what?

SG: No, no.

MG: In a car?

SG: Yeah, well they've got a lot of switchbacks down that highway. 197, I believe it is. I believe it's 197.

MG: Do you want to get your phone?

SG: Okay, thank you, because I am—

[Tape cut]

But that's what it was all about. You worked for all the railroads, and of course at that time, at this particular time, it was better than it is now because during those days Mr. Reynolds and Mr. Ivy [spelling?] handled all the railroad business that encompassed...

MG: [00:09:44 unintelligible] employees?

SG: Porters and waiters, almost all the waiters, not quite all the waiters, but they were able to place them, these people into jobs. Including—he and Clarence did all that kind of stuff. Clarence moved into...

MG: I'll get it this time, I know—

[00:10:04]

SG: The people who were at the shipyards. Mr. Ivy, he had all that business in hand. And they were union reps and this sort of thing, these two men were. They covered the whole area as far as this particular area was concerned, and they had a lot of power. They...they were representatives of the Union Pacific or the Southern Pacific, whichever it came to. You see what I'm talking about? And this is—this will kind of clarify it for you if you want to make some references toward the—accurate references at a future date. And this is what they did, and this is the capacity that they worked in.

Unknown Speaker: You know, people in my generation were mistaken in vain during the sixties when they said that black people shouldn't hold those types of jobs. Now today we see the income has doubled and nothing but Caucasians and Asiatics in those positions. How do you feel about—do you feel that was a mistake for blacks to get away from those types of service-oriented jobs?

SG: If you will pardon my saying, I'm very definite on that particular thing because that's one of the things that I have observed very graphically over the years, is that we have lost out.

Unknown Speaker: In what way, sir?

SG: We don't even have those jobs to go back to. Red Cap jobs, we don't even have those to go back to. Those jobs, while they didn't carry any prestige, they were jobs where you could make money.

MG: And they were steady.

SG: Yes.

MG: They were steady jobs for thirty years at a time.

SG: Now you can't even get one because white people, they pay money. One of my observations over the years has been that as soon as a job starts to paying money, white folks take it over.

MG: Exactly.

SG: Waiting table, men or women, even hotel maids, where does that leave us? Out in the cold, don't it?

Unknown Speaker: Yes sir.

SG: Excuse my English, but that's where it leaves us. I regret that, because at least it's a start. Now what are we going to do? Start out as computer operations? We don't have the education for it, and they constantly tell us, whether we have it or not, they constantly tell us that we don't have it. It gives them another step, another loop hole, doesn't it?

MG: Sure does.

SG: I hate that. I hate that.

MG: Well you know, sometimes I feel—

SG: And there are few things in this world that I hate.

MG: Sure. I—when I worked from the road I could never understand why that we was relegated only those jobs, you know?

SG: Yeah.

MG: And—but still, in other words I thought we should be brakemen and engineers, but what they did when they opened it up is the same thing they did when they desegregated the school.

Unknown Speaker: How was that?

SG: When they closed it up in the first place, Michael, if you look back in the history far enough you will find that in Kansas, Missouri, in Texas, brakemen even were black. You look back that far into it you find that that's what it was.

MG: Yeah, because a brakeman job was an outside job, tailing off—

SG: I could brake them in.

MG: Into the train, yeah?

SG: Here in this area, and they assigned them, the conductor would tell them "you go work for Si, he'll tell you," and I could.

MG: How to brake?

SG: Yes, and I could. But I couldn't get the job, you see? But this is what it—and I didn't know at the time that brakemen's jobs were black jobs in the south and in the central United States anyway. As how far in or out of there I don't know, but I think it was like in the area around—

MG: Like St. Louis, Kansas City?

SG: St. Louis, Sioux City and these areas, and Kansas City and back out this way and down south.

Unknown Speaker: So how did that make you feel, to train someone, a seventeen-year-old boy, son of an engineer, and then to have him all the sudden either be your supervisor or get a job—

SG: And he was, and the first thing he wanted to do was to declare himself independent of me by telling me that such and such a car up there needed cleaning. This is what used to happen to—and I'd usually "you dump," you know, I would salvage my own image through my own independence.

[00:15:17]

MG: Right, sure. And that was one of the questions that came up with this—

SG: And I still do the same thing. This is what's so disconcerting: they would like for me, on the job I'm on now, is to clarify the situation for this white boy who's going to take my place, and I tell them "I ain't training nobody else." And I can do this now.

MG: Yeah, right.

SG: When I was first starting out I couldn't do that. But I have this option now, and that makes me feel good.

MG: Yeah, you don't have to train, no, no.

SG: No, let the dummy go ahead and train his self. Let him learn like I did. See, and I don't mind telling them anymore. I don't bite my tongue too much for anybody anymore, because ain't nobody too much can hurt me, because I only got a few months to go for my retirement, and I ain't going to get no more or no less.

MG: Or less, right, either way. Either way.

SG: See, and I have paid all the dues in the world, at least I feel that way anyway.

MG: Oh yeah, people have verified that. People have verified that. Most preferred indoor activity? Listening to music, cooking, cards, board games, reading, television? All equally attractive.

SG: Raising children. I'm addicted to that. I like to see things grow and I like all that.

MG: That's good. Location of parents?

SG: Sometimes I don't like the participants, but...

MG: Yeah, well that's all that goes with the territory, doesn't it? Hey, here's the thing, I feel really privileged, one, to be as young as I was when I started teaching so that at the age that I am now I'm seasoned even though I'm young, you know?

SG: Yeah.

MG: But—

SG: And it means something.

MG: It does, but working with them, I'm telling you—

SG: Sometimes—

MG: Her and her brother was one of my students, as a matter of fact, too, so she knows from my own perspective, as well as from here.

SG: But it's something that if you had to do again you would do it again.

MG: Oh, do it, yeah. It's special.

SG: Yes, I find this, and I think that sometimes that you've got to be crazy, out of your mind.

Unknown Speaker: So when the union started on the railroad, how did the gentlemen that were working perceive it? Did they perceive the union as something that could help them when it first started?

SG: I'm very well-versed in unionism and railroads. In fact, one of the dissertations that I gave during my—at my senior year was on how it—that labor and management were going to have to come to some kind of an agreement on an outside influence as far as mediation was concerned.

MG: Mediation arbitration?

SG: Uh-huh. I had a teacher who insisted that I give—because I had tried to get out of all them kinds of things—

MG: Oh, so this is what he was going to—this is what's the payback from him.

SG: Yeah, May Darling [spelling?] insisted that I write this thing, so I finally, I wrote it, and it has been emblematic. At the time there was not a federal mediation board, so—

Unknown Speaker: Now this time we're talking about the forties here?

SG: A little earlier than that, even. And I did this thing, I'm quite proud that I happened to be one of the few who saw the need for this sort of thing, even at that early age, as far as I'm concerned.

MG: Sure, though.

SG: And it's a means of flattery, at least I take it so. But I did write the thing, and my history teacher, Mrs. C, even insisted farther that I give a live, on the spot dissertation before the class, and she would not relent on that. She insisted that I do it. Not because of any great—except that she was trying to teach me something, and all these days since I have appreciated that immensely, because it took me out of one category into another.

MG: Yeah.

Unknown Speaker: How did your peer groups perceive the union at this time?

SG: I—back during that time—let me name—would have been probably somewhere between 1938 and 1940, white people were not overly fond of unions, although unions were created for them, not blacks. My dad was a union member, staunch and reverent, from about 1926.

[00:20:35]

MG: In what union?

SG: Pullman Porters.

MG: Pullman Porters union?

SG: Even thought at the time it was—at the time it was...

MG: Underground?

SG: Underground.

MG: Your father was a Pullman porter?

SG: Yes.

MG: Okay.

SG: So that speaks for something, doesn't it?

MG: Sure.

SG: And this is what it was, and he was—I saw where he was coming from, and by observing things that had happened, like if they took him—if he was on a regular line, they paid him a certain salary. At that time, a certain salary was the accepted method. But if you were pulled out of line and you doubled here and doubled there and maybe had two to four days extra work, he didn't receive any extra money, which is why we never had a telephone until I got up big enough to start work, and I had the telephone put in my name, because he didn't want to have them call him and tell him to double-out and go to Boston or Florida and get all this extra time, because he was not going to get any extra pay.

MG: Is that right?

SG: And if he ask them about it, you know what their answer was to him?

MG: What?

SG: "If you don't like your job, go somewhere else." And this was a stock answer.

MG: But this is your job, this was your job, we're going to send you to Boston and we'll get as many hours out of you in the month as we can, then.

SG: Yeah.

MG: For the same monthly salary.

SG: Yes.

MG: Based on the fact that you had a certain run.

SG: Yeah.

MG: Once you had a certain run established, then you were on salary, which included whatever else.

SG: Mhmm, but if you—

MG: Did unions change that?

SG: Unions changed that, because unions said if you work two hundred and forty hours you've got two hundred and forty hours pay.

MG: Yeah.

SG: And if you worked over two hundred and forty hours—this was the first one, this was one of the first ones, I'll say— if you worked over two hundred and forty hours, then you got over two hundred and forty hours pay.

MG: Right.

SG: And this is where the breakdown began.

MG: Breakdown between who?

SG: The union and the company. We had all this trouble—

MG: The company had been getting free services essentially, which probably if you'd multiplied it per man, you know, one trip to Boston and back is, in terms of hours, was a tremendous savings to the railroad company.

SG: Yeah, mhmm. And my dad was, being a union man and in his heart a union representative, which is what I have been all my life too, it just based on his outlook on it.

MG: Right.

SG: I couldn't go any other way, and I have been.

MG: [Inaudible]

SG: Huh?

MG: That collective action was valuable?

SG: To me?

MG: Yeah, certainly.

SG: It's the only way to go, because if we don't look out for ourselves, the company is certainly not going to, and it's been my experience that they won't.

MG: Yeah, it's not just that you think they won't.

SG: Yeah, no—

MG: Evidence, there's enough evidence—

SG: It's a proven fact.

MG: to say it is a proven fact.

SG: It's a proven fact.

MG: Yeah, that they have the union [inaudible].

SG: Yeah and guys, the guys asked me today, they want to talk about against unions; no. I said "well, if I were you I certainly would consider what the options are before I made any definite commitment, because I think somewhere along the long is somewhere you're going to find out..."

MG: That the union was of some value to you.

SG: To you, yeah. Not only—

MG: What was the main objection to the union? Was it a person who just didn't have time for it or didn't want to get involved?

SG: Oh, mostly not getting involved, mostly being too deeply involved in life themselves and not realizing where they help came from.

MG: Because they had already received some help, yeah.

SG: Not necessarily so. What I'm speaking of is to this fact: you've got house payments of nine hundred dollars a month.

MG: Right. [audio cuts out].

[end of interview 00:24:50]