



## Cliff Jackson Oral History Interview, Part 1, August 23, 1983

**Title**

“Cliff Jackson Oral History Interview, Part 1”

**Date**

August 23, 1983

**Location**

Location Unknown.

**Summary**

Cliff Jackson was born in Marshall, Missouri in 1900. He spent 38 years working for the railroad. When he first joined he thought he was going to Portland Maine but later was glad to be in Oregon instead. Jackson worked as a dining car waiter before becoming a Red Cap. He describes the duties of each. He recalls being a waiter on a special train with President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Jackson recalls the Local 465 Dining Car Waiters union and going to meetings despite the risk of getting fired. He describes the social and entertainment life during time spent at various different stops along railroad trips. Jackson also recalls the advent of baggage carts for passenger use as the end of the Red Cap career.

**Interviewee**

Cliff Jackson

**Interviewer****Website**

<http://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/oh29/jackson1/>

## Transcript

**Interviewer:** [Unintelligible] in 1900. And so where were you born?

**Cliff Jackson:** I was born in Marshall Missouri.

**Interviewer:** When did you first come in contact with the railroad?

**CJ:** I came in contact with the railroad in Kansas City Missouri with a friend who came out to the west coast during the Depression. Nobody had no jobs, 1930. I went down to be examined by the doctors at the [00:00:34 unintelligible] in Kansas City Missouri; lady comes to the telephone and says "you ready to leave? As you passed; you're leaving tonight." I got on the train, thought I was going to Portland Maine. I brought a friend of mine who come out to Kansas City because I had a business in Kansas City, a drug store. He said "Cliff, you know the [00:00:57 unintelligible] ain't got nothing going east; everything goes west," said "you're going to Portland Oregon." I said "where is that?" "Oh, it's out around Seattle out there someplace." I said "lord, lord, well I ain't going to get off the train." So I said "well get off at Douglas, now I [00:01:14 unintelligible] got this pass that says go to Portland Oregon. So I came on to Portland Oregon, and I don't regret the day I came to Portland Oregon, because I've had great success here.

**Interviewer:** And so this was during the Depression?

**CJ:** During the Depression. 1930.

**Interviewer:** The railroad, were they advertising for men to come out here?

**CJ:** No, they—well see, they wasn't—no blacks, very few blacks in Portland. When I came out here there was very few blacks, and one of those railroad men—the Medley [spelling?] Hotel right there on Broadway, that's where we all stayed at.

**Interviewer:** At the Vincent Hotel?

**CJ:** Medley.

**Interviewer:** Oh, Bedley.

**CJ:** Yeah, Medley, right. It's right there on Broadway now. I can't—you know where the post office used to be down there?

**Interviewer:** Yes sir, I do.

**CJ:** Well, right there on the corner there, Medley. [00:02:07 unintelligible] hotel, Medley hotel. Mr. Allen run the hotel, he was—Bob Allen was [00:02:13 unintelligible], but he's—they all did. And the Rutherfords had the barber shop, and like [00:02:18 unintelligible], his daddy was a barber in the barbershop, and everything was down there. And Negroes didn't live no father, no Negro in a while [00:02:28 unintelligible] Mississippi down there. Wasn't down off in this part of town.

**Interviewer:** And so what did you do when you first started working for the railroad, and what year are we talking about? When you—after you got boarded on the train, came out here, what year was that?

**CJ:** 1930.

**Interviewer:** And what did you do? What was your first duties as—

**CJ:** I was a waiter.

**Interviewer:** A waiter?

**CJ:** Dining car waiter.

**Interviewer:** Dining car waiter. Okay, what were your duties as a dining car waiter?

**CJ:** Serve the people, make the car and serve the people, got to know how to set the food on a table. Never cross somebody; the food goes out the right hand on the side; don't never cross, just go on the right hand side, and taking seventeen dishes to serve one meal. You wore your white coat, black pants, black tie and a white apron. That was our duties.

**Interviewer:** So let's get back to how Portland was when you first came here. What were your first impressions of Portland? What are the first things that struck you when you got here?

**CJ:** Well, see I had a friend who was out of Kansas City, was out here for a while with us, that was Dr. [00:03:40 unintelligible]. And then I met my wife out here and I said lord, I like this town. But what made me fall in love with her, the first thing I did is buy a Chinese lottery here.

**Interviewer:** Chinese...

**CJ:** Lottery.

**Interviewer:** Lottery, uh-huh.

**CJ:** Well back home in Kansas City everybody's writing policy. See, if you got three dollars, for a nickel you get a [00:04:11 unintelligible]. I went up to the Chinese lottery place; I wasn't out of luck, she was right next to the barbershop on Holidays [spelling?] Barber Shop on 2nd street right off of [unintelligible] street, right of Union, got 2nd street. We have [00:04:27 unintelligible] coming to me. So I went in there and she said to me, she says "you give me your numbers, you play back home in policy and I'll pull them in Chinese." I said "well eight, thirty-eight and forty-nine is Clifford, twenty-six, thirty-six and fifty-two is a baby roll, twenty-five, fifty, seventy-five is a delta roll." She said "that looks good." And I just, I [00:04:55 unintelligible], I bought, it was thirty-five cents, I said "well, I better play a two-draw" and she said "we'll have two drawings a day." I was like "well, I got to go out tomorrow morning," so I said "well, I better give you a dollar, five or so." She said "okay, I'll put it back for you in case you're here."

[00:05:13]

So I got back at home, back uptown, I went to the barber shop and a shave is fifteen cents, a haircut is thirty-five those days. I went there, she "oh," she says "you catch a [00:05:29 unintelligible]." Well see, I didn't know what a big [?] was, I didn't know about no [unintelligible], so I went to Dave—and he lived out here, he was on a roller—I said "Dave, she says I catch a big[?]." Dave said "well, I was going to say," said "man, you got three hundred and sixty-nine dollars. You got eight or a nine." Out uptown, the California bank, I went "well, if I get fired I'll sure be able to get back home." Of course my first wife, she wouldn't come out here, of course. She was from New York, she said "oh, I'll never go out that far away, that's [00:06:01 unintelligible]." But I said "well Honey, I will send you a hundred dollars, I'll set up faster." "Oh, I'll think about it." She said "forget about it," so I just, that was the end of that. So I been here ever since.

**Interviewer:** Okay. So during the time—how long did you work for the railroad, first of all?

**CJ:** I worked on the dining car out of Kansas City—I mean out of Portland over here. Let's see, I worked on the dining car at '30, I was seventeen.

**Interviewer:** Seventeen years?

**CJ:** Wait a minute, let me get it straight, because see I went in—it just was the dining car. I was '30, '43; thirteen years on a dining car.

**Interviewer:** And after you worked on the dining car, what did you do for the railroad after that?

**CJ:** Red Cap, at that station down there.

**Interviewer:** Why did you go from a waiter to a Red Cap?

**CJ:** I could make more money.

**Interviewer:** Okay. Tell me, what did a Red Cap do?

**CJ:** Red Cap gets the people's baggage, he writes it up; what space, what car there. In those days we have beautiful sleeping. We had a bedroom, a parlor car and everything, and to put all the people in coaches right on the bed, like you had one seat B in 117, you write down on the bag, had four pieces of paper and tag it all up and go out and put it in the bedroom for her. You tried to get it all before the people got on so when they got out there it'd be there. You'd never hide no bags; you put it where they could see it.

**Interviewer:** Yes sir.

**CJ:** So all the bags are—and if they give you a tip before or after, a lot of people give a tip before, see. And then you'd be out there and they'd get on the train and you had to get—you had to beat 458 coming out of Seattle if you're assigned on that, you have to beat that. If you was an inside man, there'd be two men to a train, one to be a transfer, one to be inside. That's what we had to work.

**Interviewer:** From the times that you were working both as a waiter and as a Red Cap, what is the most memorable experience that stands out in your mind that happened while you was working for the railroad? In your total number of years, what was the main experience that stands out in your mind?

**CJ:** Well, the main experience I feel that I met some wonderful people on the dining car. I met the vice president. I was on the train when President Roosevelt came out here to declare the [00:08:46 unintelligible].

**Interviewer:** Mhmm.

**CJ:** I was one of the waiters on the car with him. And there was a colored fella, was his valet, and Mr. Roosevelt was always in the wheelchair, and we had to serve the food to him. He didn't eat in the diner, we had a diner with special food for him to cook, and the cook I think was...it'll come to me. His name was Duke. His last name was Duke, he was a cook with him. And we served the food and that's it, and then I would take up all the rest of the people employed, see. But what made me fall in love with Portland; when I got out here and seen all these beautiful mountains. See, I never seen no mountain where I came from.

**Interviewer:** In Missouri they didn't have no mountains?

**CJ:** I had some hills, no mountain. I never seen no mountain at all, but I got out here and I seen all these beautiful mountains. And then we'd just go pick—there wasn't but a few blacks out here and the first girl I met out here was Lenore Hennison [spelling?]. And it was Lenore Hennison, Chistalee Maxwell [spelling?], Gus [unintelligible], Winslow and another girl I can't recall her name right now. And she worked in California. And, oh what's the name of the other—Della Scott [spelling?]. Those are few people, but it wasn't—Stoddard William [spelling?] is, he was a friend of Della's, [00:10:36 unintelligible]. And of course what showed me around Portland was Asa Brock [spelling?], the Brock—he's got four daughters here. His dad [00:10:46 unintelligible]. And Brock was from St. Louis.

[00:10:50]

But anyway, I sat by having some, making some money, and all the railroads, see I wouldn't go but to see all the people were on the train. If you couldn't make yourself thirty-five or forty-dollar trip, you had a bad trip. That's tips. And it wasn't prejudiced like it was in the south where the people'll pull the curtain, they head up further. I worked with a beautiful steward, his name was Errol Furniss [spelling?]; a lot of people would wait till when he was going out because they liked to ride with him.

**Interviewer:** Why was that?

**CJ:** Because he was such a wonderful person to seat you, see. And he would always not be eruptive and not be nasty. He knowed how to meet the people. A lot of people don't know how to meet the people, see. That's how I come to be set by the [00:11:45 unintelligible], knowed how to meet everybody, see. I met them all.

**Interviewer:** So what were the major changes that occurred on the railroad while you were working there, and how many total years do you have working on the railroad?

**CJ:** On the railroad all together?

**Interviewer:** Yes sir.

**CJ:** Let's see...I retired the railroad and I went to hospital. You're counting Red Cap too, that's railroad.

**Interviewer:** Yes sir.

**CJ:** Let's see, thirty-eight years.

**Interviewer:** Thirty-eight years, okay. So in those thirty-eight years, what were the most—what were some of the changes that occurred?

**CJ:** Well, I'll tell you one change; when they started the Union—started having the Union station charging people ten cents a bag putting on the train for them and they put all of the carts out there for people carry the baggage out, we had to go over to the baggage room and buy them checks and put them on all the baggage. Well, I know she going out the gate then, that was a change. That Mr. fella, Mr. Reynolds, Doctor Reynolds, while he organized a credit union at the station Clarence Ivy was there, so every day he'd ask to put some on the credit union, and I said "shoot, I'll build up that credit union, because I know I'll make me some money there." So if I had to go there, I'd say "well put me down for ten." So I got plenty of shares in the credit union, MPD [?] Credit Union.

**Interviewer:** Back to the change, you said they put the carts out for the passengers to carry their own bags?

**CJ:** Yeah, carry their own baggage.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**CJ:** You go down there, you'll see them down there.

**Interviewer:** Yeah [laughs].

**Unknown Speaker:** That was near the end of ya'll.

**CJ:** That was the end of my career.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. Okay. How did the union impact your job when they started the union? Would that make things better?

**CJ:** Well, we had a union, I think it was Local 465 Dining Car Waiters. Soland Bell [spelling?] I think was the man in Omaha who organized the union. And we'd run to Omaha and the railroad was going to get on us if we went to the meetings, see. Well, I don't let nobody lead my life. I went to the meetings, see, because I wanted something. But I had some money in the bank; I didn't care what happened.

**Interviewer:** How did the railroad tell you not to go to the meetings? They just come out and tell you?

**CJ:** Well, they didn't want to have no union. See, we wasn't getting but sixty dollars a month, see. Of course the food wasn't—food was cheap too in those days, see. What can you get for a dime now? You can't get nothing. So I went to the meetings there, so had a little fella named Clarence Ivy, he came back, and I didn't see—they had quarters for you to stay in [00:14:37 unintelligible]. I didn't want to stay in no quarters; I stayed out with some friends. I had some girlfriends there, I didn't want to be staying in no quarters. And Omaha was a great town to go to, see. I had a friend named Jess Hart [spelling?] and he'd come out here [00:14:50 unintelligible] out of Kansas City and he had a bar and a [00:14:53 unintelligible] kind of place there. So I wanted to go out where I could—well, I'd go to dances and have a good time.

[00:15:03]

So we'd go out and have a good time, and so Clarence said "Mister [00:15:08 unintelligible], Cliff don't stay at the hotel, I know where he goes; I think he goes union meetings," said "you go to union meetings?" I said "who told you that?" I said "I wasn't fired," I said "I don't go"—you see he a two-bit gambler. I ain't no gambler. I spent my time the other way. I liked to go out and meet people, go to parties and different things. And I got some friends in Omaha, I got a lot of people I'd go to dance, and I loved to dance. Those days we would have the waltz, two step, [00:15:42 unintelligible] and the charlottes and all that. Don't do all that dance like people do it today. You'd get your girl, you would waltz around everything, see. So, they said "Clarence told us," I told them, well I say "he's a gambler, see. I'm no gambler." So that was the end of that.

**Interviewer:** So how much schooling have you had?

**CJ:** I graduated from [00:16:05 unintelligible] school, went to Lincoln High School but didn't go to college. What I wanted to be when I was a kid coming up, I wanted to be a minister.

**Interviewer:** A minister?

**CJ:** Yeah. I used to go to church and my mother sang in the choir in the church, Methodist church in Kansas City, Missouri. Me and my two sisters be sitting on the front row. We was getting— [00:16:29 unintelligible] out of the circle. And like I say, those people walking in churches with the robe on in the choir, they would come out of the rear and the choir'd be singing and the reverend would be coming in with them. He'd be leading them. I said man, I know I can do that, see. So anyway, mother—after my birthday I wanted to go school we're so close, [00:17:02 unintelligible], I was so close. So Mother said [00:17:04 unintelligible] Washington University, but we didn't have enough money to send me to—Mother said I wasn't going to be no [00:17:13 unintelligible] preacher; I had to go to college and learn to be a minister, see. And I guess Mother, she was living in day she saw, because I always felt that I could have been a minister, see. That's why I like going here over—because I'm an Episcopalian because my wife's Episcopalian, see. And I was brought up in the church and I like to hear a minister preach. We had some good ministers, we have some good ministers here.

**Interviewer:** Are you Episcopalian?

**CJ:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Father Stone [spelling?]?

**CJ:** Yeah. Father Stone's dead, you know.

**Interviewer:** Right, yes sir.

**CJ:** Yeah. Well see when I went to come out here I was going to the Methodist church. I hadn't joined yet; I was visiting the church. My mother told me "I want you to get"—I said "I go to church every Sunday, Mother, but I haven't made up my mind which one." Well he joined, and he joined some church. Well after I got married, she was Episcopalian and her little, probably her little boy, he was also part of the Episcopal Church with Father Stone. So I didn't want to—see first which church get out at ten o'clock. I mean you go at ten, you get out early, but see other church don't get out till one or one-thirty. So I said well, I ain't going to have her walking home. I said I'm going to join the Episcopal Church. Well I didn't know how to get in the church; she said, "but you just follow me to do well there. See you walk in, you bow your head at the altar and you go by and you sit down and you get on your knees and you pray, and you sign the cross." That's what I did. And I've been there ever since.

**Interviewer:** Okay. So where were your parents born?

**CJ:** Well my mother was born in—my mother has four brothers and her great—her grandfather was white, out of North Carolina. They [00:19:17 unintelligible]. And my father, who came out of Oklahoma, and he was part Indian blood. So Mother had three sisters, all of them are gone now. Her youngest one, she died of TB in the early days, and Mother died in 1942. Ella died in '48. And the other three brothers, her brothers, I just found out, one of my cousins just called me, wrote me from Chicago, she's going to have a—writing a book on this, and that's Uncle Berg's [spelling?] daughter. And she's going to write a book on it and she said that she's going to—because they know more about where the people are, where the relatives are than I do. I don't know, see.

**Interviewer:** Excuse me a minute, Mister.

[end of interview 00:20:09]