



## Hazel Murray Oral History Interview, June 23, 1983

### **Title**

“Hazel Murray Oral History Interview”

### **Date**

June 23, 1983

### **Location**

Location Unknown.

### **Summary**

Hazel Murray was born into a sharecropper family in North Carolina on August 20th, 1913. Though he couldn't attend school past second grade, he learned the fundamentals of electrician work and worked as a contractor in the south before being drafted into the Army in 1943. Stationed in Vancouver, Hazel visited Portland Oregon and later settled there after meeting his wife in the area. He discusses “white trade only” signs in Vancouver that angered the non-white soldiers, who “wrecked” downtown Vancouver on a Saturday night. In 1945 Hazel left the army and worked at in the shipyards for six months before joining the Union Pacific Railroad. Hazel describes the “miserable” working conditions as a railroad fourth cook. He retired after thirty years in 1975. 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.

### **Interviewee**

Hazel Murray

### **Interviewer**

Michael Grice

### **Website**

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

## Transcript

**Hazel Murray:** He said they ain't union [00:00:07 unintelligible], he said they going to do this under the cover.

**Unknown Speaker 1:** Yeah, that's something about the railroad [inaudible]—

**HM:** Is it'll come up and hit you any time.

**Unknown Speaker 2:** Jumping down and all that, tax 'em. Put them all on the tax system.

**HM:** Well I'll tell you this, I don't trust this man, that you [00:00:22 unintelligible]

**Unknown Speaker 2:** Well he's no good for us. [Several voices at once]. He's for the high middle class, he's way up there, the middle class ain't—and they ain't catching it.

**HM:** One thing I can't understand the man, he made this statement; he said he'd never have no discrimination in America. He made that statement, "I just want to old—"

**Unknown Speaker 3:** He never failed because he never was in contact with any of them.

**HM:** I wonder what was he was in World War II, when the Army was integrated, where was he?

**Unknown Speaker 2 and 3:** Making movies.

**Unknown Speaker 3:** He's supposed to have been in the service for a little while, I don't know for how long.

**HM:** So a man like that, he's lying every time he opened his mouth.

**Unknown Speaker 3:** He's worse than Nixon. I thought Nixon was worse, but doggone, he is.

**HM:** Yes, he is, yes he is, that's right. He's dangerous, yes.

**Unknown Speaker 2:** Well he's no good for us. He's no good, no—

**HM:** He's going to set this country back forty, fifty years.

**Unknown Speaker 3:** And you know what? He's going to get reelected.

**Unknown Speaker 2:** I believe it.

**Unknown Speaker 4:** That tell you what the education system is doing for you, really. Undereducated can't make a decision—

**Unknown Speaker 2:** And they believe everything that he says.

**Unknown Speaker 1:** And he's want—he's for turning everything back, giving the state's rights back. When you go back to the state's rights, you're asking for Jim Crow, exactly what it is, because if this state says you got to go—me and you—because we're black, got to go to the back door to get a hamburger or a hot dog, that's Jim Crow. We got to go to the backseat of a bus. That's state's rights. [Voices continue in the background].

**HM:** You're set up here.

**Michael Grice:** Yes. This is on loan, by the way, from the Library of Congress, because we are unable to—they are interested in the project and have helped us in a lot of ways. Let me get down some information from—state your name, please.

**HM:** Hazel Murray, H-A-Z-E-L M-U-R-R-A-Y.

**MG:** Two Z's?

**HM:** No, one Z.

**MG:** Okay. Two R's.

**HM:** Right.

**MG:** And where were you born?

**HM:** I was born in North Carolina, Alamance County; Burlington North Carolina in Alamance County.

**MG:** And when were you born?

**HM:** August the 20th, 1913.

**MG:** And are you married?

**HM:** Yes, mhmm.

**MG:** And children?

**HM:** Yeah, we had four but one passed in '74.

**MG:** And how much schooling did you have?

**HM:** Well practically the most schooling I had, I didn't even finish probably the second grade school. Like I pointed out to you before, that I was raised on a plantation. My daddy was a sharecropper and we never could—there ain't no chance to go to no school. In fact, the school that we would have went to, it was nothing but this one [00:03:20 unintelligible] little country school. And we had to go out in the woods, pines, in places like getting together brush and stuff to keep warm in the wintertime. That's the way it was.

**MG:** And how many brothers and sisters did you have?

**HM:** I have one brother and three sisters living. I got one sister dead and one brother.

**MG:** So you had six all together.

**HM:** Right.

**MG:** Okay, tell me about your early work days, before you got on the road. You worked on a farm—

**HM:** Oh yes, I was raised on this farm, was here the sharecropper, and I worked there on up until I, oh I guess I must have been around about fourteen or fifteen years old, and I got away from there and went out and did construction work and things like that, done electric work. I worked with a contractor, that's why I started off in electric work. I worked with him and I learned the fundamentals of wiring, electric wiring and stuff like that, and of course I was down in the south at that time; they wasn't paying me nothing but one time I had about—sometime I'd have at least five white boys with me, and sometimes four. And I was their boss, to see that they didn't get hurt, is what it's all about, but they was making more money than I was. That's the way it was down there in those days.

[00:04:58]

So I worked around like that until the war come along. When the war come along I was inducted in the service. It was in '43, when I was called up for service, and I was—went in the induction center at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, stayed there two weeks, was shipped out of there one night about between twelve and one o'clock. Didn't know where we was going to; we're just on the troop train, five hundred of us on the troop train, all black. That's before the Army was integrated. We woke up the next morning, we was in the state of Georgia, and on this train we had five white officers on the train.

The walked through the train all day long, said "fellows, don't put the shades up, don't raise the shades," said "we're in the state of Georgia. We don't want the train tore-up." So it's like we was in a cage or something and we couldn't even raise the shades because we was in the state of Georgia. And I don't think there was a man on there who volunteered. I know I didn't volunteer. We was in uniform, supposed to be fighting for America. Well that seemed very much unfair to me, but that's the way it was in those days.

**MG:** What year was that?

**HM:** That was in '43. So when we would up—we was in route for five days and five nights and we was coming to Vancouver Barracks. At that time Vancouver Barracks used to be an old fort. Vancouver Barracks had no [00:06:53 unintelligible]. It was Fort Vancouver, but when it opened up, after we got there we opened it up. And that's when it got the name of Vancouver Barracks. And we was there for quite a while; we saw training films and stuff like that. Of course all five hundred of us didn't come to Vancouver Barracks. They'd take off two hundred and fifty of them, sent them somewhere in California somewhere in route, yeah. We don't know where they cut off. They did it at night, sent two hundred and fifty of them to California, and the other two hundred and fifty we came in to Vancouver Washington over at Vancouver Barracks. But what we really was mostly coming here for is a work crew, that's what we're doing, because shortly after then they started sending men here; they ship them overseas to the South Pacific. See one time—a lot of people didn't know it—but Vancouver Barracks used to be a POE. They could take them, after twelve o'clock at night, take them right down, put them on the boats, send them right on the South Pacific. That's the way it was at that time. But getting back to—when we did get a pass to come out of town, like Vancouver and Portland, I'm going to tell you that sign went up in all the places downtown in Vancouver; in restaurants and places like that, anywhere I drove, taverns: "we cater to white trade only." We couldn't go in there, and those signs went up. Well these guys got pissed, and I can't blame them for getting mad. They was in the service and didn't want to be there. So the next night they went downtown on Saturday night, and they was together, they went downtown in Vancouver, and man they wrecked that place.

**MG:** Downtown.

**HM:** Yeah, in Vancouver. People out in the street didn't hear about that, it didn't hit no paper, wasn't on no news. They just washed it down, see. Just washed it down. Never forget it, either. We had our colonel over there; he was a colonel of the whole base over. Colonel Wheaton [spelling?], his name was Colonel Wheaton. So he went downtown, he made a speech. He had one of those boys that drive one of them—they go on the flatbed trucks, and he stood up on that truck, he told the mayor down there, he told the chief of police, said "look, these fellows are here to protect your home, protect your business," he said "damn it, if you don't treat them like men, and they can't be treated like men, set everybody down, well now you got to move out." He said "do you realize the Japanese are breathing right down your throat, right here on the coast?" And there was—see a lot of people, like I said, the people didn't know that, you see. He said "when our men, these men come downtown, they're going to be treated like men."

**MG:** Did things change in Vancouver, or did no—

**HM:** Well, they taken some of the sign down, but it didn't change too much. You know, you couldn't—you could see it. I tell you, we could walk downtown, I've been over to Portland here, we went to Portland; you walk downtown all day in Portland. Now this was in '43. You could walk downtown in Portland and I—if you see three or four black people, you'd lift your eyes up. I mean civilians. That's the way it—that's the truth. It might have been more of them here, but that's what—I didn't see any. That's the truth.

[00:10:15]

**MG:** So your introduction to Portland then was through the armed forces and arriving at the barracks.

**HM:** Yes, through the armed forces, that's right.

**MG:** How'd you get involved with working on the railroad?

**HM:** Well I was living with a Mr. Hicks [spelling?] at the time. My wife was there renting a room in there before I got out of the service.

**MG:** Is [00:10:32 unintelligible] the same—okay.

**HM:** They called him John Brown [spelling?]. Probably Cleophas— [voice in background] Yeah [00:10:38 unintelligible], that's his name. Yeah, that's his name. My wife got a room there while I was in service, and now it's closed. I was shipped out of here. She used to stay on the post over there with me until I was shipped out of here. See, I used to work the MP in service. I worked MP and I couldn't get no furlough to go home, because they kept me on the MP all the time, and I used to work out town, patrol out town, and I had to work the gates over there. So they'd give me permission to bring my wife out, and she stayed right out on the post over there with me. We stayed upstairs in one of the officer rooms. The captain and his wife lived downstairs, and his family; me and my wife, we stayed upstairs over here. So after I was shipped out of here on special orders, there was eighteen of us shipped out, shipped us to Breckinridge Kentucky, to the 372nd inf., that's where we went. So we had, we stopped in Chicago, we had a six-hour layover there, and those six hours we decided we wanted to go downtown somewhere and have a few beers, a few drinks. So we did, we went downtown. We walked in a place downtown, just right downtown the Loop, and we walked in the place there and there was a black guy in there, I guess he was shining [00:12:03 unintelligible] or something around there. But anyway, he run up to the door and stopped us, threw his hand up; "fellows, don't come here, don't come in here, they don't allow no niggers in here; they don't allow no niggers in here." So we told him—and in uniform too—that's right downtown Chicago in the Loop. That's the god heaven truth, yes sir. That's a fact. So we backed up and didn't go in, went on back up to the station and milled around, fooled around till it was time for us to leave there. We got out. But in the meantime we all, my wife was staying with Miss [00:12:36 unintelligible]. When I got out of service I come back there, and that's where we were staying. That's how I got with the railroad; through him, because he was working on the railroad.

**MG:** Who's that?

**HM:** What's his name?

**Unknown Speakers:** Hicks, Hezekiah, [spelling?] that's his name, yeah. So he's the one directed me to go down to the commissary. I put my application in down there. I walked down there and put my application in and these men, pretty bad that time. That was in '45.

**MG:** Were you out of the service at that time?

**HM:** Yes, I got out in January of '45. When I went to the shipyard, I worked in the shipyard for six months. This was in June in '45 when I went down to the commissary. So I got home right away. They were needing men over there; I went down there, put my application in and they called me the next day, go right out. I went out with Walter Davis [spelling?], to [00:13:33 unintelligible] on the [00:13:33 unintelligible]. So that's how I got with the railroad. And my wife, she was working at Emanuel Hospital at that time, and when she started it, she started at Emanuel Hospital at that time; Emanuel Hospital didn't have no worker there too much, at that time. Because I think her and [00:13:55 unintelligible], my wife and Irma Kong [spelling?], when they went in that hospital they went in there using a mop, mopping the floors and things, and I think they were the first two blacks that worked at the Emanuel at that time. That's a fact, yes. So from then on I was under the—I come right in sometime and they'd send me right back on the railroad, because they needed—

**MG:** What job did you have on the railroad?

**HM:** I was a fourth cook, washing dishes, cooking.

**MG:** You started as a cook, started in the kitchen.

**HM:** Yeah, that's right. And they were needing men; they were short of men because them cooks was jumping off, all of them, down the line. So I stuck with it, and I had—I attempt to quit several times but my buddy Davis, boy, my Walter, he took a liking to me somehow or another, and he talked me into staying on, staying on. I signed up for a waiter, but they needed a cook.

**MG:** What do you suppose caused Walter, Walter Davis [spelling?] to stay on the road? Some were jumping off, why were they jumping off?

**HM:** Well he was a chef cook at that time. He was the chef. And I got on the crew with him and worked with him, but he took a liking to me somehow or another. That's really not—that's really not—got thirty years now by him talking to me, coaching me along, to stay on.

[00:15:14]

**MG:** Okay, without that kind of coaching you think people would [inaudible]—

**HM:** I think I would have quit, I know I would have quit.

**MG:** Why?

**HM:** Well it was because the working conditions were so bad, my god. In that kitchen, man you—it was miserable in that kitchen. It was nothing but a sweathouse. That's all it was. It's ridiculous. That's most one that—one of the most hardest, toughest job I ever had in my life. That's a fact. Ain't nothing but a sweathouse, that's what it was.

**MG:** And then you changed from the fourth cook to the third cook and down the line?

**HM:** Yeah, third cook. And I worked second cook for quite a while; then I'd get knocked back down. So thank god I stuck with it for thirty years, kind of proud of it now since I—because I don't think I could have had another job would have paid me the pension that I get from the railroad today.

**MG:** And were you looking at the pension at that time?

**HM:** No, I didn't think about it at that time, didn't think about it.

**MG:** And you're mainly concerned about maintaining employment and—

**HM:** Right, right.

**MG:** How did it compare with prospects on other jobs where if you had thought about quitting, had you thought about what kind of work you would do if you just put that away, [inaudible] work?

**HM:** Well wasn't nothing in Portland too much that I could do, because I went down, I was going to quit one time when I tried to get my license for to go into electric work; went down to try to get my license; that man looked at me like I was crazy, said "you got to work as [00:16:45 unintelligible] with a contractor for eight years." I said "I'm not trying to be no doctor." Well, eight years. I said "you work as a [unintelligible], you working less than a laborer. You supposed to be just learning." So I just forgot it. And I was telling, I was still doing electric work, I run into two or three inspectors, city inspectors, and I was telling them about it. Couple of them told me, shook their head and told me "well Murray," said "look," said "let me tell you something," said "you was up to the city code and the national code," said "anytime we come behind you and check where you've been," said "we don't have no doubt this ain't done right." He said "pay that no attention," says "just go right on with your toolbox and do all the work you can get," and that's what I did. I couldn't get in that field, no way. It's too much money for the chance for me to get in there.

**MG:** Too much money, you say? To get into it?

**HM:** That's right, too much at that time. They wouldn't let no black get in that field at that time, no way, no sir. And that hasn't been no hundred years ago since they have let blacks get into this field, and plumbing too.

**MG:** Right.

**HM:** Do you remember a plumber boy around here by the name of Hank? Remember Hank the plumber?

**Unknown Speaker:** Washington?

**HM:** Huh?

**Unknown Speaker:** Washington?

**HM:** I guess. I don't know his last name.

**Unknown Speaker:** Washington, Hank Washington [spelling?].

**HM:** You asked him sometime how tough it was for him to get his license, and he didn't get his till real late. That's right. It was tough.

**MG:** Anything that you recall about—now where did you run? Did you have a regular run that went on out of Portland?

**HM:** Oh yes, when I started my regular run was Denver at that time, Denver Colorado. We'd come in, go to Denver, make a trip, then we'll come in, get night layover, then we go to Spokane. Then we come back out, I should remember now how many days we get before we go back to—

**MG:** This with the UP?

**HM:** Yeah, Union Pacific. And like Cleophas was talking about, they put—the day--the streamliner out; I went on the streamliner with Cliff Walker [spelling?]. We were the first crew out of here on the daily streamliner. Cliff Walker was my chef. I was an icer and a cook. We were the first crew out. But Cliff had to fight like mad to get on there. That's right; they had to fight like mad.

**MG:** Was he a resident of Portland too?

**HM:** Oh yes, yes. So they didn't like him because Cliff knew how it was. The other union was like this here: the waiters had their union and the cooks had their union. They were divided. That's the way it was. And we had union meetings sometime up at the Labor Temple. Now I'm going to tell you something about that; you know what a Labor Temple? I think it's up on Washington, it's on Jefferson Street? Up in there somewhere. Well, that big Labor Temple up there, and we had a union meeting up there, and I don't forget; we had a union meeting up there one night and this boy Hanson, J.A.B. Hason [spelling?], he brought it up in the union meeting about "oh, why is it that when we in route going to these different places, different cities on the train, we all sleep in the same dormitory, but when we got to these different cities, destinations, that we—the white cooks would have to go to one hotel and the black cooks and the waiters have to go to another hotel?" J.A.B. say "I want to know why Mr. Chairman, why is it like that? Our union man, his name was Steve Larson [spelling?]; he hit his gavel on the table, rapped him down, told him he was out of order. That he was out of order. Now you know that's—

[00:20:34]

**MG:** For raising the question.

**HM:** Yeah. That you out of order. And we had one black, one black cook in there, I won't call his name; he was for the union man. He said "oh, he should never have brought that about." See, he's the type of guy want to sweep these things under the rug. Somebody got to bring these things forward to make things better for us and for our children. Like I said to you a while ago back; if this man Dr. King hadn't come along for the struggle he fought, brother we'd still be in a bad way. That man had power. I'll tell you the reason why he had power; I got documents of proof at home. That man, he integrated two-hundred and ninety-six lunch counters down through the hardest south, like Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and the bridge, inside of two years; two-hundred and ninety-six. That show you he had power. And that NAAC had been around for many years. I don't mean to knock the NAAC; it's well and good, and the Urban League too, they're both very good, but this ball never got rolling till Dr. King got in the push. He was on this movement for thirteen years before he got snipered down in Memphis. And he done more good these thirteen years he was there for the black people, and not only black; the white too. He done it for—I mean the poor white. He done good for everybody. The reason why I tell that; look how many white died with him in his marches. See what I mean?

**MG:** Yeah, a lot of people didn't see [inaudible]—

**HM:** That's right. But in those thirteen years he was on this march, on this campaign, making things better for all of us, the people. He was for the human race.

**MG:** You experienced some of this while you was working on the road—

**HM:** Absolutely.

**MG:** And King came to prominence in later years on the road. And what year did you retire now?

**HM:** I retired June the 30th, 1975, June the 30th.

**MG:** I remember the couple times that I went out and you reached out to me.

**HM:** Right, right. 1975.

**MG:** [00:22:39 inaudible].

**HM:** Yes, and I was so proud of it I could have shouted. That was what I'm telling you, I was so glad to get away from that, and that's the truth. I was glad to get away, because it was rough before I left there, because they had broke the crews down, so.

**MG:** They had mixed crews now too, when you started; was it white and black?

**HM:** Oh yes, yes, we was mixed up all the time. But they had broke down—well Jimmy and Cleophas both; they know what I'm talking about, where they had cut the forces back. And we had a superintendent down there, even down to his coworkers worked with him down there, didn't like him. John Draper [spelling?] was his name. You fellows know what I'm talking about. So I was glad to get out from under that pressure.

**MG:** Yeah, so they broke the crews down, that's less men to do the same job?

**HM:** Oh yes, men were doing two or three men's work. Am I telling the truth, gentleman, or not? That's right.

**Cleophas:** Yeah, well Jimmy was gone.

**HM:** Yeah, Jimmy was, but Cleophas can tell you that's right. It was rough, that's right. And he'd tell you this; if you didn't like it, quit. He's told some of the fellows that. You don't like it? Quit. That's the way it is. One of his good friends, his name was Jimmy Palmers [spelling?], chef cook, he was white. I was working with Jimmy at the time, we come in from Chicago and we was loaded all the way across the country and there were three cooks; he done pull the fourth cook off, and we was tired, my god. Train pulled in the station and Mr. Draper, he come on to see with dinner, come on in there and inspect it. We had some old skillets out there in the hall in a little lockout there. We never did use them, but they had laid out there and got rusty, and he come in there and inspecting, looking, he looked down and saw those skillets, throwed them up in the kitchen there and—[audio cuts out].

[end of interview 00:24:32]