



Willie Rice Oral History Interview, Part 1, September 1, 1985

Title

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Date

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Location

Location Unknown.

Summary

Willie Rice was born in Starkville, Mississippi on December the 15th, 1921. He began working for the railroad in 1944 as a waiter. He describes having to put up with racial slurs and the threat of being fired unfairly and without recourse. He was fired from the Great Northern Railroad for refusing to buy a bottle of liquor for a white steward. Rice describes trying to work as a welder prior to the railroad and having no success due to racism. One plant hired him but demoted him to janitor, and at another plant the white workers did not want to work with him, so he had to quit join the railroad. Rice explains the amount of money made was dependent on tips, so suffering racial slurs calmly was important. He details the duties of a waiter and challenges on the job. Rice asserts that the 1971 Amtrak merger made conditions worse for employees and also notes that black employment on the trains went from 99% to less than 50% after the merger.

Interviewee

Willie Rice

Interviewer

Michael Grice

Website

<http://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/oh29/rice1/>

Transcript

Michael Grice: Hello, hello. Testing. [Inaudible background conversation]. Okay, tell me; state your full name and your birthdate and your birth place.

Willie Rice: ...Oh, you want it now?

MG: Yeah, whenever you're ready.

WR: My name is Willie Rice, birthplace Starkville Mississippi, December the 15th, 1921.

MG: Okay, hang on. Okay, now when did you first start working with the railroad?

WR: 1944, around about July.

MG: In what capacity?

WR: As a waiter.

MG: How did you manage to—

[Tape cut].

WR: Oh, you want to know just something about what the railroad was really like at the beginning. The bad or good.

MG: All of it.

WR: Well, it was... it was really bad for black men at the beginning, really bad. The names; you was being called any name you could practically think of as a waiter to bring the food or the coffee to the table. Maybe it was just a way of life, but it was an insult to anybody. Had—well that's years ago, that's thirty-five years ago I was saying. Amtrak came by say thirteen years later, and the condition really got worse. I didn't know what the beginning was like until I see what's it like now; the condition is really worse for us now, and it was then. They came in and merged and promised a lot of things; we didn't get any of them. We didn't get anything. They merged the railroad and promised that our condition would remain better or no worse than we was already in, and it's much worse. You can lay away from home three days or two days and all the expenses while you're laying away is at your own expenses. And you'll only make time arriving at the city, like say Portland, and at the old time that you was paid for having to wait from home. So they condition, it just gradually got worse and worse, and today it look much worse than it ever been, for just the working man.

MG: In the old days, tell me about what you recall about your first days working on the road. When you first came on what did you do and who did you meet? What were the guys like that you worked with? What went on in the car?

WR: Well my place [00:03:15 unintelligible] I didn't even have an application in. They just send me out to work. I was working with what they call the in-charge men. That's right now the St. Paul and the [00:03:25 unintelligible]. And it was just nice to make about forty-six cents an hour, somewhere in that neighborhood, or forty-four. And the work conditions just wasn't too bad, because I didn't know what it was going to be like today. The work condition wasn't too bad at that time, but it looked bad because people's always saying salty things to you; call you John Henry, anything they thought to call you, and that's what you had to go along with. And all the bosses, like all the stewards and things, all the conductors, they was bad on you and them could just say "well, you know, come out of this crew." I even got fired back at the time, for not going to get a white steward a bottle of liquor before I go to North Dakota. And he had all the rest of the black crew to sign up, because they wanted to get along with him. I got fired for not getting off the train to go get the white steward a bottle of liquor before I go to North Dakota. That's just hard to believe.

MG: What railroad were you working on?

WR: I was working for Great Northern at that time. Yep, I got fired for it. But that was just a common thing, to get in trouble for not doing whatever a white man told you to do. He could tell you wrong and you had to do it wrong and then

you go to an officer and report and you know you ain't going to get no justice, so you just go on and do whatever you thought was best for yourself.

MG: What other jobs were available to you other than the railroad? And what was your starting date?

WR: My starting date on the railroad was July 1945, so right in that year—not '45, '44.

[00:05:06]

MG: And how old were you at that time?

WR: Oh, I was somewhere in the neighborhood of, just guessing right now and not thinking, I guess I was only about nineteen years old.

MG: Had you worked before that?

WR: Yes, I had been working a long time.

MG: What other kind of work had you—

WR: Well, I had been an arc welder at Cadillac Motor Division in Detroit, or Clark Michigan, I worked there and I got a flash—see I always didn't—there was a union there, so they didn't take black in, just occupational black, in the blueprint room and things like that, so I got a flashy—gave me a lifetime job down there, but I nearly worked a day they gave me a job as a janitor with janitor's pay, and if I had belonged to the union I would have got the welder's pay and wouldn't have been the janitor. So when I found out I got a bad deal, I left to Minnesota. That's how I got to Minnesota.

MG: Why Minnesota?

WR: Well, I just heard Minnesota was a nice place. So I went there and I got me another job as a welder. And there I ran into race trouble there; so they hired me, I passed the test as a welder, but in order to give me a position then I had to have a helper. So I was the only black welder there, I was the only black fella working there, so the guy in charge there, he told me, he says "there are guys that are trained to work," he said "but I don't know nobody want to work under you. So most guys, a black guy in this town, yeah they work for the railroad." He went to the one and showed me what a railroad was, so that's how I got the railroad, from that race—St. Paul Structure Steel, where I was working. White dude showed me. And I quit that day at 2:15. Same day. But this guy I had been working for a long time, he said "it ain't me," he said "see, I've been here twenty-some years," he says "I'm just telling you, because I see them giving you a hard way to go," and he said "if you go ahead and mention to them," he said "don't mention my name; I'm just telling just why you having the time you have." So I quit that same day. I didn't wait until the next day; I quit that same day.

MG: Started working the railroad. And that was Great Northern at the time?

WR: Yeah.

MG: What was the name of the train that you worked on?

WR: I worked on the [00:07:23 unintelligible], Empire Builder, that's about it.

MG: Was any one train better than another, or did you prefer to work on one than another?

WR: Yeah, yeah. Well they had a coach section, and at that time, and a Pullman section, and I preferred working on the Pullman section, because it wasn't too crowded. On the coach section you just had all kinds of people just working; they didn't tip for nothing. You did get a dime or fifteen cents maybe per person on the Pullman section on the train, so that means a lot. You was only making a little money; if you get a dime each person or a nickel each person, you was going to town, that's big money.

MG: Right.

WR: Yep.

MG: Who made the most money on the train, among the black men?

WR: Among the black men, I would say the waiter.

MG: Because he had so many customers—

WR: He had so many customers to deal with, and the average fella—on a nickel a customer, you was doing pretty good. A Pullman porter, he did pretty good too, as in the sleepers, but overall I would say the waiter made more, because he's dealing with more people.

MG: Did you know any Red Caps in Minneapolis?

WR: Yeah.

MG: What was their job like?

WR: Their job was just handling bags and stuff like that. Putting things on the train in the bags. They made good money. Not good money, but at that time they'd make, say a dime a bag, that's pretty good.

MG: And when you ran out of Minneapolis, where did you run to?

WR: I did all my railroading right out of Minneapolis at St. Paul. I never ran no place—oh, you mean on the train where would I go?

MG: Where would it go to?

WR: I'd leave there to go to Duluth Minnesota. I ran over there for a short time and I left, beat it off that run and I came on the run from St. Paul to Seattle; from Seattle back to Chicago. That's where I spent most of my forty years, right there. I'd say at least thirty-six almost put there.

MG: The majority of the years you spent as a waiter, or as a chair car—

WR: As a waiter. I spent thirty years as a waiter.

MG: What about the crews that you worked with, what are some of the things that you recall about working with the other men? What was the job like?

WR: Working with most men was nice. Most biggest trouble I had was with the white stewards.

MG: What about the money that flowed on the train.

WR: The money was pretty good, pretty good. Money was pretty good. You really just make your own money. It depends upon how you treat a person, then that depends about what he's going to give you. If you didn't do much, you didn't get nothing. You let him talk to you anyway and you kissed him and did everything; you made pretty good money at that time. Yeah, but if you just did what he wanted to eat and walked off and stood up and left, you didn't get much.

[00:10:17]

MG: Were you able to do a fairly—to make a fairly good wage without clowning, or without demeaning yourself, or—

WR: No, no, you had to clown around to make your money. You definitely had to be a clown to make some money. You ain't going to make no money being a gentleman. Might not even go out with that crew next trip.

MG: Did they ever—a crew—have a blackballed man, or—

WR: Yeah, I was blackballed.

MG: Because?

WR: I was blackballed, it's a shame to tell it, but my last time, that's only been about fourteen years ago, this is one blackball off of the crew. A lady came on and she ordered some grilled ham. Dick Hall [spelling?] was this supervisor which you called the inspector, and I was the waiter. So she didn't want no potatoes; she only wanted some peas. So me being the pantry man, I got peas up there. So I get some, handed peas into the kitchen and says "broiled ham with peas" and just started to set up for her. So old Chef, he didn't want to do it though, and the inspector's sitting there in the dining car, so he started arguing and I continued to argue with him, because I wasn't going to let him run over me.

So I started to go out and get this Dick Hall to come out there and straighten it out, but I never was a guy to snitch, so I just went on to it and forgot about it, and when I got in town they wrote me up. They wrote me up. So the same dude was sitting out there in the diner, which is the inspector, was a friend of the chef. So he calls me to pull me out of service, and I said "what do you mean pull me out of service?" I says "I was trying to please the guest, you sitting there in the diner," I said "I didn't think enough to even make it to you after you start [00:12:10 unintelligible]." So he said "well, that's the way it's going to be," said "if you don't leave the crew." So I left the crew. When he told me to leave the crew or be pulled out of serving and having to investigate, so I left the crew. That's what I did at that time. That's why I didn't have no chance to win.

MG: Sure. Was there times when you worked and there wasn't a union and then a union came on, and was there a difference?

WR: No, we always had a union.

MG: Okay, what union was it?

WR: That EFLCO

MG: Who did they represent?

WR: They represented just the porters and waiters. It was just kind of like a union, like a company union, something like that. You had to be one of the dining car porters [00:12:56 unintelligible] the unions. You didn't expect much and you didn't get much.

MG: From the union.

WR: No. See, there's not much, you're just dealing with common sense management. You wasn't trained in the field or nothing, no training.

MG: No training regarding your job?

WR: No. No training regards my job or labor or nothing. Just using common sense about whatever it is now. So it's mostly like a company union, whatever company, that's what it was.

MG: Were there cases of representation with the union where—

WR: Yeah.

MG: Men took a situation to the union and tried to do—

WR: Yeah.

MG: What kind of situation did people take to the union and try to get help?

WR: Well, most likely I was a lot of – missed getting along with conductors and porters, or the white stewards and the waiters, and these were most of the cases they had trouble with. And they lost 99% of them or better, better than 99, yeah. [laughter]

MG: Was it a time when men banded together and were effective?

WR: No, didn't have the chance, no. you didn't have a chance. Once there we won one case, but...

MG: It was wasted time for the most part?

WR: It's wasted time.

MG: Did you have to pay union dues?

WR: Yeah, we paid them.

MG: Did you – was it taken out of your check?

WR: No. well, it could – you could sign and have it taken out, but most of them just paid it. Yeah.

MG: Well, Amtrak came in in 1971.

WR: '71. So, it was somewhere in that neighborhood.

MG: Tell me about Amtrak.

WR: It isn't really that bad, yeah.

MG: Did you continue to work in the same job as a waiter?

WR: Yeah. Yes, I did, until they came in and had four dining cars serviced with two waiters, and then I had to leave the dining car then. It was just too much. You couldn't please nobody, couldn't please the guests. It was too much to do. Some of the guys fell dead working. You should really get a story behind that. I know at least three guys died there trying to keep up with all that bull.

MG: What did the work consist of?

WR: Just –

MG: Waiting tables?

[00:15:13]

WR: Waiting tables, cooking, and things of that sort, and stocking the cars with us short of help, and it's pretty hard on the guys that had been working there for years, and it's still hard on some of them. That's the way it went. That's the way it did.

MG: And you said stocking the cars is what is – they called stocking the pig.

WR: Yeah, putting on all these supplies for your trip. And that's pretty hard with no help. Or to clean car, like the Pullman cars, so they took all the Pullmans. So, they sat there and you pulled into Chicago, you're pulling out, pulling in, and you go down to leave, and you get there and you've got a clean car, no lender, no nothing. You've got to rent to whole car. We'd take you all the way across the country, get that car made up. And then you – one man got to work at the car, that's pretty hard, he's got to work there all night, and on and off all night, and they don't do it like the Pullmans did. They don't sell a – guy get off at twelve, spend the night at Spokane, they'll sell that same space to a guy going on to Seattle, so you up all night. And you get to see how you got to make that whole car before you leave. So, that's pretty hard on a lot of guys. That's really bad, made it worse than it was.

MG: This is after Amtrak came in?

WR: No, this is since Amtrak came in under this. I went to that system and I left that too. That's why [00:16:34 unintelligible]. I can [00:16:37 unintelligible] and get off right with the guests; I ain't got all them beds to make up and nobody to help or nothing, so I just give it up. Yeah, I've given up.

MG: One of the guys that we've got on the project—

WR: The person to do is the dining car, he was the one did all the work. And the sleeping car, that adds up now. The chair car man, I don't see that he have an easy way to go, but he's got a better way to go than anybody on the train.

MG: He had to deal with a lot of different people but he don't have the same load of work.

WR: Not the same load of work to contend with. I can leave here, I can pretty much do my work coming in here for going back. All I got to do is do a little of the car, and that ain't like making up beds for maybe a whole Pullman car. And you got to do the clean-up, and they're serving coffee, milk, juice every morning. Where you used to be, you'd be trying to make the bed up while the guests is up there eating breakfast, you there trying to serve coffee to the other guy just waking up. Had the hardest job on the train. They made it twice as worse as it has been in the past.

MG: What was the most interesting thing, or among the most interesting things that you recall working on the road?

WR: Meeting different people, nice people. And most of them are nice. The guests are much better today than they was I would say thirty years ago. They will very seldom just call out your name. You can maybe make a trip now without being called out of your name or somebody trying to give you a bad way to go. Yeah, now that's much better, but our working conditions weren't so bad. But people's traveling is generally—you don't have too much trouble with them like you used to, because they don't call you all these dirty, nasty names.

MG: Treat you bad.

WR: Uh-huh, treat you too bad. Now you just got one or two. You can always bet he'll more likely be an employee of the company. Most of them treat you nice.

MG: Anything that you can think of that we haven't touched on that you want to talk about, that you think is important?

WR: That I'd like to talk about that I think is important. Yeah, what I think about, I knew a lot of things and probably just really don't know how to say them. I was saying [00:19:08 unintelligible] they came in and promised us that we wouldn't be affected by their merger agreement, our condition wouldn't be no worse than it is at that time, but since that time, that changed everything. I would just like to see what you call, I guess, something like a federal investigation into what happened to the employee was working there before the merger agreement and the way they'll treat them. They did them all for dirty, and it's no way to get through. It looks like they bought the union out; there's no way to get through it to let nobody else know what happened. But that just should be look like a federal, a state or some kind of investigation into what just actually happened to the employees that they promised that there wouldn't be no—they wouldn't be working in no worse condition than they was under before the merge, that's what they're supposed to have guaranteed us.

[00:20:00]

MG: What kind of changes did you go through that you didn't expect? Or what things specifically got worse?

WR: Everything got worse. Even changed all the rules, the system. We had what you call kind of like a crew race, a seniority, but now you just don't have it. You'll have to—they cut off at St. Paul now; we're just supposed to have to go over thirty miles longer way. We'll have to go all the way to Chicago or maybe all the way to California to work. And under the merger we really weren't supposed to be this, but they got around and fooled around with our little union guys, which didn't know nothing, wasn't trained or nothing like that, and swapping one thing for another, you end up with nothing. And the hiring policy got worse under Amtrak; they hired practically all white peoples. Where we was 99% [00:20:54 unintelligible] servers on there, we're less than 50% today.

MG: Black man.

WR: Black man is less than 50%.

MG: Why do you suppose that is? Is the job more popular?

WR: No, the work got scarce and the white peoples needed jobs so they didn't just raise it out of Cain; they went to recruiting out of the city, the University of Illinois. Well okay, you's a small majority in that field. They left there and they went to recruiting out of Washington State here.

MG: Pullman or Seattle?

WR: That's Seattle. So, and before that time they used to recruit—it looked like tried to help blacks get an education, they would. They used to recruit out of [00:21:37 unintelligible], some black schools down south that they'd send a scout, but after Amtrak come in that was all eliminated at once, and right now I'd say we less than 50%--no, about 50%. And that's how they got around that. It made it look good, just for you looking at it; you'd just believe they was going to really integrate, but they've given us about two or three jobs we didn't have before and took away—say if they give us twenty jobs, they took away a hundred and forty that we already had. It's a thing you'd have to be there to see it to just—and I did. But we end up with no jobs.

MG: I've heard that a number of times from a number of different sources. Usually that is phrased like when a man find a job that makes him money or when he needs a job, he takes your job.

WR: That's what he did. See, the job pay—some guys are making thirty thousand dollars a year that wants to go in and double out; they make good money, but they just took the job from the black man. They'll find a way; they'll give him a job as a steward, or something like that, just say they hired six stewards, I guess, and they must have took away six hundred jobs.

MG: What field were men most often losing their jobs or most often changing? Was it the dining car or—

WR: The dining car, any field you get in with, because right now you've got your white women and black women and white men working in the sleeping car, tending waiters, porters, stewards, everything. Everything. When they just hired mostly white, you got them chiefs. Ain't got a few black chiefs.

MG: What does a chief do?

WR: He is what you call the inspector. You just call him a chief. He goes around and watch everybody on the train, write up what he sees wrong and stuff like that. Most of them are very nice. They're younger guys.

MG: The professional type.

WR: Yeah, professional type, mostly all college graduates. He makes in the neighborhood about thirty-six thousand dollars a year.

MG: They travel?

WR: Mhmm, travel right with the train.

MG: Sure.

WR: Yeah.

MG: How about the idea of having to be away from home; did that really affect you, or affect your family at all? Did they —

WR: No, that didn't affect the family. Most of the thing about being held away from home; see we used to get paid for being held away from home. Like say a terminal, we'll pull in, we'll be at terminal, so we would be paid for the whole day here. So when I came here today I was paid up until arrival, then I won't get no more pay until I start tomorrow, and I got to buy everything I have to get here, from taxi—that's another thing they do wrong now. The trainman come here and

he works in Spokane here and he gets a private room and we have to share a room, this and that. So it's just one of them things— [audio cuts out].

[end of interview 00:24:37]