



## Willie Rice Oral History Interview, Part 2, September 1, 1985

### **Title**

“Willie Rice Oral History Interview, Part 2”

### **Date**

September 1, 1985

### **Location**

Location Unknown.

### **Summary**

In this second recording of Willie Rice he describes his survival strategy on the job of not getting too close to co-workers who he felt would take advantage of him. He also discusses his daughter’s education at the all-black Howard University and his reasons for choosing an all-black school. He gives advice to young black men and women in regards to their black identity, education and efforts in life. Rice reflects on the abuse he put up with to stay with the railroad and the pros and cons of the job. Rice also discusses a class action lawsuit against the Burlington Northern Railroad, their failure to follow through on their promises, and his unsuccessful attempts to get training and settlement money that the lawsuit was designed to achieve.

### **Interviewee**

Willie Rice

### **Interviewer**

Michael Grice

### **Website**

<http://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/oh29/rice2/>

## Transcript

**Willie Rice:** --can be two or three people. I can only be one somebody; that's me.

**Michael Grice:** Right. He's okay.

**WR:** He's okay, I've had no difficulty with Juan since I've been working with him. Not this new bunch that's at Amtrak administration. I ain't had no trouble with either one of them, because I'd have—we'd never go that far. We sit down, we'll talk. And this one that I got here, now he got a little fresh this morning; now he was saying something about [00:00:23 unintelligible]. I looked right at him, he didn't say another word. I just looked. I started going to tell him off, but I didn't. Yeah, you get to friendly with them and they'll...

**MG:** And they want to take advantage of it.

**WR:** Take advantage. I don't usually get too friendly with them, lest I get low. Go by and have a few words and I'm going on about my business.

**MG:** When you meet or see, well a guy like myself, and I saw some other guy coming on the other train just while we was down taking photographs, what do you think about those guys? Did anything cross your mind, or you—

**WR:** When they're coming on that other train?

**MG:** Uh-huh.

**WR:** No, you don't think about anything. You'll figure they're just doing what you've done; try to make a living.

**MG:** What about—one of the things that when I get all done with this we'll be sharing this with young people in school to help them appreciate some of what you went through to make better for them. See, no matter that people treated you bad and my dad bad and so forth; in the meantime you're able to establish your home—

**WR:** Yeah.

**MG:** Raise a family—I don't know about your children, but to do those kinds of things.

**WR:** No, my daughter is a lawyer. I scuffled to get her a degree. Now she's a bona fide lawyer, sitting right there and just come back from Israel. She's well-off on her—in her field. [00:01:46 unintelligible]. Done that—she must [unintelligible] a half a million dollars.

**MG:** Mhmm. Tell me something about your family, and then I got another question for you.

**WR:** That's it.

**MG:** That's your only child?

**WR:** That's my only child.

**MG:** What's her name?

**WR:** Marlene Cooper [spelling?].

**MG:** And where's she work out of?

**WR:** She work out of Washington D.C. She works at the mail office in Washington D.C. She's with that—she comes in here a lot, she all over the world. She's with that revenue sharing thing. It's all in there. I don't know—

**MG:** Revenue sharing though, huh?

**WR:** Mhmm, it's a government project. She did something in Israel, just got back from Israel. She was over there about five weeks. Five weeks or three weeks, I mean.

**MG:** Well, you met my daughters didn't you?

**WR:** Mhmm, yeah, I met them.

**MG:** Yeah, well they're growing up. I'm—you know, of course my kids are not of age yet, but when you think about young men—I teach school, so I deal with a lot of kids, with eleven, twelve years old, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen years old; what do you think is important for them to know?

**WR:** Them to know that they're black and they ain't going to get talked to that white, get—I know this is true, because it's what I did to my daughter; well she got ahead in life, I even sent her to a black school, and if I had to do the same thing over, I would do it, same thing again. And I know I had to pay an out of state fee. I'm living in Minnesota; a lot of people thought I was crazy when I don't sent her to University of Minnesota. That's a white school, and I wanted her to go to a black school where she'd be accepted more-so in school, and I didn't want nobody just dealing with her and because she was forced to she's got to be here, and I'm knowing there's a lot of peoples in there care less about her than they did out on the street somewhere. So I sent her to a black school, and I said if a white person go in there and they're teaching, [00:03:38 unintelligible]. But I didn't want her to be in one of them hate schools. I didn't want her to be in that. So, she—

**MG:** What school did she go to?

**WR:** She went to Howard University.

**MG:** Washington?

**WR:** Yeah, Washington D.C., graduated there.

**MG:** She go to law school there too?

**WR:** Went to law school, everything there. I put her right there and she come out of there good.

**MG:** So, you think that their identity is important—

**WR:** I know that's important.

**MG:** What else? What else would you try to pass on to, say a young guy; you seen him trying to figure out what he's going to do—

**WR:** Try to get an education, and if he see his self slow, jump into vocational school, get something out of life other than "I went to school and I don't master nothing." Master something, if it ain't nothing but welding or auto mechanics, just have one trade of something you can do. Refrigerator, anything. Of course you ain't going to be able to hardly get jobs like what I got now. You'd have to have a college degree to get a job to sweep up a train, be a train porter. You know, they don't hire just ordinary peoples no more.

**MG:** Of course when you started they hired about everybody.

**WR:** Just hire you. All you had to do was be black, that's about it. I didn't even have an application in, and when the time to get paid in, that's when I filled out my application, to get paid. That's really [00:05:00 unintelligible]. So I really would say, like he have two daughters and I did really teach them, see you are black and the opportunity ain't going to be as ready for you as the other white girls. You going to have to be something like a Babe Ruth in your field in order to get the same opportunities. It's true. Got to be good. That's the only thing I say about my daughter, a setback, but she said "don't worry," said "Daddy, there's ten white peoples there, see I'm going equal, be equal with them. They give us a test." And so she makes it on her own.

[00:05:37]

**MG:** That must give you a good feeling, huh?

**WR:** Give me a good feeling, alright. She don't make [00:05:41 unintelligible] and I don't ask her for nothing. I'm be ready to depend on myself. I worked a long time and I do very well. I really have did. I have a farm in Mississippi, all paid for, and I got my home, I got a couple of homes there in the city where I live, all paid for. So I don't have no hard time, but [00:06:02 unintelligible] I put up with a whole lot of stuff, that's the only thing about it. You had to put up with a lot to get ahead. So I put up with a lot of crap right there, dealing with white people.

**MG:** Sure.

**WR:** Yeah. I wouldn't mind them knowing this [00:06:15 unintelligible].

**MG:** Yeah, well they supposed to know.

**WR:** [Laughs] I tell them about it. And a lot of them, they like me for it. So after I got enough time to retire, I said well, I says they've been so nice to me I hope something I can see every one of them; I'd pull up there in a Rolls-Royce [laughs]. That made me feel proud. That is me, that's Willie Rice, and everyone out there know it. Some of them don't like it, but I don't care. I can retire.

**MG:** Sure. In that sense, when you think about the jobs and opportunity that was available to you, do you value your experience on the railroad, do you think it was—

**WR:** No, it worthwhile. Course, now they came out, [00:06:55 unintelligible] came out, they were just all—and BN came out admitting that they have treated us unfair all these years. They send out a minority application, I peeled mine off in there on the train. They called me and offered me a fireman on the train, but not—see, the application said "choose the field and you'll be trained in the field you go into" and I wanted in there, so they called me and offered me a fireman and I told him no, I didn't want fireman; I wanted what I put my application. He said "okay, we'll get back to you." So I haven't heard from them today, so.

**MG:** When was that? A few years ago?

**WR:** Yeah, this is approximately twelve years ago. I ain't got the date on it. But anyway, so it's a couple guys in Seattle—no, in Chicago—they had put in for the same thing as I did and they was turned down. They filed suit, class action suit. So they got a judgement against BN for sixty million dollars.

**MG:** Right.

**WR:** Okay. So okay, so I filed the same thing to get a portion of this sixty million dollars, because I never did get what I went for, so they turned me down scot-free; I don't get any parts of that money. And then didn't even get the job; I wasn't even schooled in the job that I applied for. So you can see just by how I really feel or how I really think about how white peoples will treat you.

**MG:** Right.

**WR:** They really treat you wrong. They treated me wrong in that case. I knew I was entitled to something. I was entitled, if I didn't get no money in the end, I should have been entitled to the schooling, since I filed the application to be trained in the field. So I didn't get either one, nothing of either one of them.

**MG:** Exactly.

**WR:** So they wrote letters back to me stating why I didn't get anything, but I still didn't get anything out of life after being there all them years. They didn't train me in no field and sort of like I didn't deserve anything. See, they almost got me feeling the same thing, but I know I'm true. It's just the way they do things, [00:09:14 unintelligible]. And nobody got no pay yet. Supposed to been paid off in this month. Nobody got a thing.

**MG:** What about other black men that you know, either from your home town or from Minneapolis, Chicago, and their work? They work jobs better than the railroad, or were they worse off, not quite so fortunate to work on the road—

**WR:** Well, most of the guys—you mean just the blacks, or?

**MG:** White men [inaudible]—

**WR:** Well, they had putting you in jobs, or what they would hire in, and that was the packing house, they can hire you there; Red Caps, you could get a job there, and they had a place called Caesar's [spelling?]; that's where they made refrigerators and stuff like that, they would hire you there. So you had a pretty good chance of getting a job. Post office didn't hire too many black, not in Twin Cities. And the streetcar would hire about thirty. So the biggest jobs in the Twin Cities was the packing house and railroading, and the blacks did pretty well that had them jobs and didn't get fired, and put up with what they had to put up with. They did pretty well. So I'm a good example, I did good with what I had to do it all for. It took forty years of doing, but I did good. And I got me a new—I got about a hundred-thousand-dollar house I live in.

[00:10:37]

**MG:** Yeah I know, that's why I'm—

**WR:** Air conditioned.

**MG:** That's why I'm making this film.

**WR:** Everything.

**MG:** Part of what my—go ahead.

**WR:** I doubt if it was worth it. If I had to do it over again, I wouldn't do it. Not go through what I went through to really get where I am.

**MG:** The abuse—

**WR:** The abuse.

**MG:** --the long hours—

**WR:** No, the abuse, that's what it was. The abuse. The long hours wouldn't, I wouldn't mind working along with some [00:11:07 unintelligible]. Fanners [spelling?], there wasn't no fanners back then at that time, and they [00:11:12 unintelligible]. I can bet you going to get the worst there. Just tell me the case, any case you have, I can tell you just what you have almost. I got the answer.

**MG:** Pretty close, huh?

**WR:** Pretty close, I ain't going to be far off. Now if it's two black involved, I won't have the answer, but there's a white man involved, I got the answer. I almost bet.

**MG:** Sure.

**WR:** Yep.

**MG:** Yeah, and that's where I've been pretty observant in that situation, too. It's unfortunate.

**WR:** Them conditions haven't changed it one bit; they even got worse.

**MG:** What do you think—well, and again, I use this for in terms of young people who don't have the history, don't have the understanding, really don't know what's going on in many ways, kind of things that they should look out for. Now, you said the education—

**WR:** Education—

**MG:** --or knowing that they're black; well what kind of things should they look out for, what kind of things that'll make a difference for them?

**WR:** Well I—what make a difference for them, they don't have to experience, maybe, what I experienced through life. They just sit down and still reading their comic books here; I sit down and I read the JET, for maybe six months, and find out what actually happening to me and my people, then you will try to plan. You're young; you should easily figure out a way around that. You could—a lot of this stuff if I hadn't been reading, I could have avoided it. But see I didn't read. I was sitting there reading the comic books and crap like this, which you don't get nowhere, this is a lot of crap for you, but if you find something like JET and order a magazine that's teaching you that you're disadvantaged in life and how you're being treated—your first thing, when you see you're treated wrong, the first thing is try to figure out a way around being treated that way, and more than likely you're going to have to do it yourself, because you're going to be dealing with peoples one-on-one. You get a place and you're looking for a job and you see the man go to telling you about, says "well," says "that's been filled." "Well, why you run an ad in the paper then, that's been filled?" "We'll call you," if you'll know what to sit down, tell them it. You study, but if you don't, you think the man's being honest to you. "We'll call you as soon as we have a vacancy in the job," then still running in the paper another four or five days. Same things looking for an apartment. It's the same old thing. "I'm sorry,"—if they don't want you they just tell you "I'm sorry, it's been rented."

**MG:** Right.

**WR:** Jobs same thing. But I think for a black person, if I was a young person and had to live it over again I'd read more black material and different things, and it'll help you out, because they're always telling you what happening to you, see. Like most blacks eat a lot of salt and they're subject to high blood and all this kind of stuff, and if you started reading this things at an early age, so you will know how to avoid it without anybody telling you. Same as looking for jobs.

**MG:** Even the bible speaks about wisdom.

**WR:** Yep. Just read, get an education and start reading the right books. Just don't read about all this comic stuff. And it'll help you out.

**MG:** Okay, we'll I'm about done. I think we've covered it. Anything that you think I might have overlooked, or—

**WR:** No, you could talk about this from any time; investigation in why and how you was treated and were you paid fair and all this, you know. But the biggest thing they should do—I mean if they didn't forget their way back past, but bring it up to present—is to have a federal investigation for the merge, on what happened to the blacks. Now, a few years from now on, peoples going to come up and say "well, it used to be this; how did they get rid of them?" They'd soon find out then when they decided to get rid of—and why they got rid of. That would really be nice to have a federal investigation and charge the railroad; they'd find a whole lot of wrong done. And make them pay these people for treating them wrong.

[00:15:19]

**MG:** I know the Burlington Northern, when I contacted them, they at first weren't very helpful, because they had said they had to pay this sixty million dollar—I think they called it a decree.

**WR:** Yeah, but they ain't helpful now, because I see some people's now, they were supposed to spend forty million and set up a training center and so forth to train minorities, and they ain't trained one yet. Not a one. Because my next-door neighbor, I told him about it, I said "tell them that they's got forty million people to train, and they know nothing about it down there." That's the papers. Now, I tell you, you can't just get discouraged and fall on the wayside because somebody from—I don't pay it no attention; I'm just keep right on going.

**MG:** Yeah. Yeah, wait for the promise to come.

**WR:** [Laughs] no, I ain't worried about that. Just keep right on going. And I'm going to make it. I done made it already, at my age.

**MG:** Sure.

**WR:** I should have been retired, but I didn't want to retire.

**MG:** Well, I'm going to stop the tape.

[end of interview 00:16:22]