



Alfred Richerdson Oral History Interview, 1980s

Title

“Alfred Richerdson Oral History Interview”

Date

1980s

Location

Location Unknown.

Summary

Alfred Richerdson was born in Kansas City, Missouri on September 28th, 1916 and moved to Philadelphia at three months old. He talks about his mother working in the Pennsylvania school system at that time. In 1941 Richerdson went to work for the Union Pacific as a waiter. He gives his first impressions of Portland, that the black population was so small that some people had never seen a black person. He describes the racism encountered in Portland and the daily life and hours of a railroad waiter. Richerdson recalls when one of the states declared it unsanitary for waiters to sleep in the dining car, and after much legislation railroads had to provide a dormitory. The last month he worked for the railroad the rules changed to allow black persons to apply for the position of steward. Richerdson also mentions the Railroad Retirement Act and a Streamliner called the City of Portland that hired only light-skinned black employees.

Interviewee

Alfred Richerson

Interviewer

Website

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

Transcript

Interviewer: Testing, testing. And sir, the question, the first three questions are the date of your birth, where you were born and when did you first come in contact with the railroad.

Alfred Richerdson: I was born 9/28/16. I was born in Kansas City Missouri and I left Kansas City Missouri, my parents left Kansas City Missouri four months after I was born—

Interviewer: Excuse me. [Tape cut]—left Kansas City Missouri.

AR: Yes. And then my parents went to Philadelphia Pennsylvania where my mother was one of the first black married persons to occupy a seat in the school system in Pennsylvania. At that time the Amish were very persistent there and it wasn't a custom for the people in Philadelphia to have a married woman in the teaching system. And this is in the early years. And...

Interviewer: Early years, so we're talking about the—

AR: We're talking about—

Interviewer: 1890s?

AR: No, we're talking about 1917 or '16.

Interviewer: Okay, I'm sorry. 1917 or '16.

AR: Yes.

Interviewer: Okay. And sir, when did you first come in contact with the railroad?

AR: I first come into contact with the railroad of May of 1941. I was going to school and I wasn't making any progress, but I wasn't making any money. This is the whole thing about it. So I found out the Union Pacific was recruiting people to—or waiters I should say, instead of people—they were recruiting waiters to go to Portland Oregon. Well, I hadn't been any further west, I think, than Chicago. And so I went out to Portland Oregon and I was hired in 1941 of May. So I came to Portland Oregon in 1941.

Interviewer: Sir, you said the—they came around recruiting waiters; what incentive did they provide you? How did they go about recruiting you?

AR: Well first of all, the—at that time it was a black spectrum wherein the only waiters, or the servants there, were black people. And by my parents being—that they expose you, so they asked me would I come out—asked my mother would it be alright for me to go to Portland Oregon, and she consented.

Interviewer: Okay. So, in 1941, is that also the year that you first came to Portland?

AR: That's also the first year I came to Portland, correct.

Interviewer: And it was through this employment that caused you to come to Portland.

AR: Correct, you're right.

Interviewer: Okay. And sir, back in 1941 you were employed as a waiter for the railroad?

AR: Correct.

Interviewer: What was your first impression of Portland?

AR: My first impression of Portland was, needless to say I was very disappointed, because I came from a city that had as many blacks as the whole state of Portland—as the whole state of Oregon—had total population. And of course there was the black exposure. There wasn't a lot of black exposure on the west side of Philadelphia. There were people in Portland, the whites, to name, per se, that had never seen blacks before, or some had seen blacks but all the blacks that they knew in Portland, they were either pimps, gamblers or they were seamen or they were in transition to another place. But there was not enough blacks in Portland to recruit from the ranks as waiters, and the--of course the waiters were cond—this was an allocation, this was a black job; this was not a per se job where a Chinese, Oriental or Caucasian could be. This is strictly a black deal. This was the policy of Union Pacific Railroad; this was the policy of all railroads, because this was a subservient job.

[00:05:17]

And in answer to your question, I was very, very disappointed with Portland. I was depressed about Portland and I wanted to go home the first week I was here. I wanted to turn around and go back. But I didn't want my parents to think that I made a failure of myself to go, to turn around and go back after they made the effort, and so forth. But Portland was very racially prejudiced. In those days Orientals and blacks could not own property, and this is, it kind of hurt me, but I found this out later on. In answer to your question, again, I say I was very, very disappointed in Portland, but we've come a long ways since then.

Interviewer: Sir, you indicated that your job was a waiter on the railroad, is that correct?

AR: Correct.

Interviewer: Now what were your duties? What were some of the daily duties—

AR: Daily duties were we were the people that we made long runs. We—I ran from Portland to Green River while my daily duties, I would be up at five o'clock in the morning, and then after having get up I had to shave. This was a daily deal; you had to shave because you were meeting the—the establishment told you that you had to look good before the public and make an impression, because you were a representative of the company. Average day: up at five o'clock, breakfast was served on the dining car at seven o'clock. You reported for duty at nine o'clock the previous night, but you were up at five o'clock the next morning. So this meant we were around, we were someplace between Baker Oregon. We rolled all night. We slept on cots, and there were six people in the crew, including four—not including four cooks. And the crew consisted of a steward, six waiters and four cooks. And usually, this goes back, but usually the chef cook was a Caucasian. The second cook, such old timers as Willie Taylor [spelling?], which was a very good cook and had gourmet taste, but he was never promoted to chef cook until maybe five years later, although he had the ability. Then we would go to—get through Baker, serve breakfast in Baker and then the steward would various often tell you "say now, I want to see more smiles of you. I want you to smile." And I was, I guess...the people that were recruited out here, they were mostly from the south, and I wasn't southern and I wasn't a smiling person. And then we'd have maybe an hour's recluse between breakfast and lunch and then they would send this—you must remember these were the warriors in 1941. This was a post-Pearl Harbor, and after post-Pearl Harbor, then they could use the—they were drafting and they could use everybody that they could possibly use, so there were troop ships that was going between Portland and Chicago, Portland and the west coast and so forth. And then we would sell sandwiches on the train for the people that couldn't afford to go into the dining room. This was lunch. We come back for lunch and then we would have a maybe two hour recluse, we would sit back on the—some of us sleep on the tables and so forth. Then we'd have dinner. But in the meantime, the—some state, I think it was the state of Idaho, decided that it was unsanitary to sleep in the same place that you serve food. And we had a big confrontation about that.

[00:10:18]

Interviewer: What was decided from that, Mr. Richerdsen?

AR: It went into litigation and the litigation took approximately an hour and a half—I mean a year and a half. And the final decision was that we, as dining car waiters, should sleep like the rest of the crew in a dormitory, not in the dining room. [Tape cut]

Interviewer: What were the major changes that took place during your years on the railroad?

AR: The major changes: the dining car waiters were not allowed to sleep in the dining car, which I thought was a major change, and the very last month that I was in the railroad, blacks were allowed to apply for steward. The steward is a person that controls the dining car. He approves the menus; he makes some money. In other words, he is the...he is the boss of the dining car. Another change is that they allow the pantry man, which is the number one waiter, they gave him additional money, but he was not allowed to serve the person, the patronage. We initiated—"we" refers to the union; the union is the waiters' union, dining car waiters' union—we initiated a certain—or we put in the [00:12:08 unintelligible] of synthesis of certain legislation to improve the status of the waiter.

Interviewer: Certain legislation; you mean you actually went to Salem and—

AR: No, see the—we were on the Railroad Retirement Act and this entailed the federal government.

Interviewer: Okay.

AR: Not Salem, because this is a national deal. We had trial stewards; we had blacks, but we're on trial, the last three months of my employment, to perform the duties as a steward. And as far as I can remember, these are the major changes. Oh, I'll go back, I will recount: they did hire some—a couple of Caucasians and Orientals on private cars, which had never been done before.

Interviewer: And private cars—

AR: Private cars is when a railroad official, officer that is what we might call a boss person or a higher echelon person that has a private car. And they have all the goodies.

Interviewer: Sir, is there anything special about your years on the railroad that you'd like to share to our Portland audience?

AR: Yes, they are so numerous that—

Interviewer: If you could think of the most memorable.

AR: Well, one of the most memorable, the thing that I—that really caused me to quit: I, at that time I was of the Lutheran religion, and of course the Lutheran religion and the Catholic religion is two of the most integrated religions that there are. And when I would leave Portland, very often I would meet some of my constituents on the railroad and they knew me and I knew them and I was a waiter, and we would have a conversation on a one-to-one basis and we would talk after I had finished my duties. And the steward who was the, what do you say, commander in chief or the person in charge, the in-charge person, would call me aside and say "well, I don't like your familiarity with these white girls" and so forth. And we would have a...well, we'd have a one-on-one conversation. But I told myself that he's an employee just like I'm an employee, and I'm not going to let another employee on the same level take over the job.

[00:15:27]

And I remember they had the city, they had a streamliner called the City of Portland that ran between Portland and Chicago. Now, we were the only people except Pullman Porters that would run between Portland and Chicago, which was approximately almost a three-thousand-mile trip. And I remember when they started the City of Portland—this was a streamline train—and they matched the employees like they were horses; only light skinned blacks, regardless of your efficiency as a waiter. They matched all the black skin, the dark and the white—the lighter skin—blacks. They're the only ones that can run on the City of Portland. And— [tape ends].

[end of interview 00:16:23]