



Railroad Senior Citizens Association Meeting, Part 1, April 12, 1984

Title

“RRSCA Meeting, Part 1”

Date

April 12, 1984

Location

Location Unknown.

Summary

In this recording several retired railroad workers give their reactions of Michael Grice’s film and relate some of their experiences as railroad workers. A former Pullman porter discusses working with the Union Pacific in the early forties and changes in certain rules and the improvement in salaries after the formation of the Brotherhood of the Sleeping Car Porters. James Sullivan discusses secretly transporting union literature before unions were allowed, and a Red Cap, a dining car worker, a pantry man and a cook share experiences of working and living conditions on the railroad, including incidents or racism and segregation.

Interviewee

Railroad Senior Citizens Association

Interviewer**Website**

<http://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/oh29/rrsca1/>

Transcript

Unknown Speaker 1: Any of the people in the program. Okay, can we come in just a little bit closer since we're here? We'll just be a few more minutes, if you are all still here. And I appreciate you staying too; I hope that you enjoyed it. I realize that it's kind of a long program and a lot of people may have had other engagements or commitments today. But maybe just one at a time you can give me your impression of the program; what kind of things struck you or reminded you. What is significant, stick out in your mind about the program, anything?

Chair Car Attendant: Yeah, well I'll say Brother Bless [spelling?] I enjoyed the program—

Unknown Speaker 1: The mic will pick you up; you can stay relaxed in your chair if you want.

Chair Car Attendant: Oh sure, will do. It just makes me think about old time. You see, I might get homesick a little while about it, and I'll tell you I just enjoy talking about it, and so I have witnessed some of that what went on. And also I knowed Randall [spelling?].

Unknown Speaker 1: Nicola Randall [spelling?].

Chair Car Attendant: And Webster [spelling?], yes, they showed him on that. And one thing I didn't see, they didn't show the main man was on that.

Unknown Speaker 1: Who's that?

Chair Car Attendant: That was a chair car attendant.

Unknown Speaker 1: They didn't show the chair car attendant, they—?

Chair Car Attendant: No. That left me out, you see.

Unknown Speaker 1: Well, we're going to fix that up, okay? We'll turn that around.

Chair Car Attendant: Yeah, yeah, sure. But I really enjoyed, enjoyed looking at that program.

Unknown Speaker 1: But that one broke me in on the road, see? Because chair car attendant, that's right. But this program was focused around the sleeping car porter, the Pullman porter and Nicola Randall, but since they showed the other aspects of it, the train—and I think this is going to be the strength of our film, is that we got people in all aspects of it: the dining car, lounge car, as well as the sleeping cars and the chair car, so we'll get sort of a diverse film. Anybody else?

Pullman Porter: Well yes, as being a Pullman porter for almost thirty years, the film was very good. I enjoyed it and it just brought back memories, because so many things on there that was said, I knew it was true because I went through some of that, through what they said and also what passengers did too. And I really enjoyed it. It was very true, that's one thing about it; it was true, it was no make-up, it was true.

Unknown Speaker 1: Yeah, it told the story just like it was.

Pullman Porter: It told the story just like it was, that is so true, because when I first started to work we were making, I think it was a hundred and ten, a hundred and thirteen dollars a month.

Unknown Speaker 1: When did you start working?

Pullman Porter: 1942.

Unknown Speaker 1: 1942, during the war. How old were you then, about?

Pullman Porter: I was in my thirties.

Unknown Speaker 1: You was in your thirties. You come in today, you [unintelligible overlapping voices and laughter]. Well what brought you to the railroad, and then what brought you to Portland? How did you end up—

Pullman Porter: Well what brought me to Portland, and I was a—my home was in Texas.

Unknown Speaker 1: Where about in Texas?

Pullman Porter: In Stephenville. That's about sixty-eight miles out from Fort Worth. And I was working, I worked at a—I did quite a bit of hoteling down there, after which, well I had a brother-in-law out here by the name of Anthony Smith [spelling?], and he was with the railroad. So I decided that I would try the railroad.

Unknown Speaker 1: Did you start with any particular rail?

Pullman Porter: Well, I started with the Union Pacific, that's where I started out, on the Union Pacific. And during that time, as I say, when I first came to Portland that's why I was in Portland, was intention to start on the railroad.

Unknown Speaker 1: And you wanted to start here at your operating point?

Pullman Porter: Start right here. I started here as my operating point and I closed out here. It was twenty-nine years and four months.

Unknown Speaker 1: Any particular changes that took place during the time that you were working on the railroad from the time that you began to the time that you ended?

Pullman Porter: Well yes, two particular things I would say that I noticed in that picture there, that while you were speaking about in the smoking room, that's where we had to sleep. We weren't allowed to sleep over a female [00:04:29 unintelligible] you weren't allowed to sleep over. And those blankets that we slept under, they had them dyed blue. We weren't allowed to sleep under the blankets that the passengers slept under. We had to use the porter's blankets that were dyed blue.

Unknown Speaker 1: What color were the passenger's blankets?

Pullman Porter: Well they were brown, something similar to the color that the [00:04:53 unintelligible] got.

Unknown Speaker 1: Yeah, a camel color?

Pullman Porter: Mhmm. All wool, solid wool.

Unknown Speaker 1: If you think of anything else, then let me know [inaudible]—

[00:05:02]

Pullman Porter: So we was—as I said, that was two of the major things that was changed before I left the railroad. You could sleep anywhere you want to at any time and over anybody and sleep under any blankets you wanted to.

Unknown Speaker 1: They relaxed the rules a little more.

Pullman Porter: Relaxed, uh-huh. And naturally this, after we were organized, the salaries got much better.

Unknown Speaker 1: After that—you were there during the time that the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters came into being.

Pullman Porter: Yeah, they had just got into being when I started.

Unknown Speaker 1: I see. Any other impressions about the film, things that you were reminded of or that the film stimulated while you were watching it today?

JPS: Well it reminded me of 1932—

Unknown Speaker 1: Mr. [00:05:49 unintelligible], we'll get those chairs for you before it's over. Yeah, we'll get them. I brought some help with me today.

JPS: Driving back to me when we was organizing. It was 1932, we wasn't allowed to join an organization [00:06:06 inaudible] job. I was an undercover man running between here and Chicago, and I used to carry messages, [00:06:21 unintelligible], paper to Chicago, Omaha, and back here. And if I'd had been caught I wouldn't have been able to retire. I'd have been fired. But then—

Unknown Speaker 1: You were carrying papers for whom, now?

JPS: For Local 465, Dining Car; this is Dining Car.

Unknown Speaker 1: So you were working more for the—you were working for the union, then.

JPS: Well no, I was working for the Union Pacific, but—

Unknown Speaker 1: But you were also helping your organization.

JPS: Yes, helping the organization.

Unknown Speaker 1: Huh, that's fascinating. Now, were there many people that were doing what you were doing?

JPS: Yes, there were.

Unknown Speaker 1: Were other brothers aware of what you were doing?

JPS: Yes.

Unknown Speaker 1: Did they cover for you or help you out in any way?

JPS: Yes.

Unknown Speaker 1: In what ways?

JPS: Well, nothing ever got out, we always operated between ourselves, and when President Roosevelt was president, when he was elected, he made it a law that we could organize, and we went on from there.

Unknown Speaker 1: And then they had information that you were taking to Chicago; is that where the headquarters were located?

JPS: No, headquarters in Omaha Nebraska.

Unknown Speaker 1: Omaha.

JPS: But I was running through Chicago, but there would always be an agent that'd meet me in Omaha and pick up the literature that I had.

Unknown Speaker 1: What kind of literature?

JPS: Well, it was something pertaining to the union.

Unknown Speaker 1: Uh-huh, I see. These were documents then that were important to the union.

JPS: That's right.

Unknown Speaker 1: Uh-huh. I'm sure they didn't entrust those just to everybody though.

JPS: No.

Unknown Speaker 1: How did you come about that particular—

JPS: Well I—

Unknown Speaker 1: Did you volunteer for it, or somebody ask you?

JPS: They were organizers and I was a charter member. We would get together out here.

Unknown Speaker 1: A charter member of the union?

JPS: Yes.

Unknown Speaker 1: What was the local here?

JPS: 465.

Unknown Speaker 1: Anybody else reminded of something that they saw in the film, or that stimulated the film? What's your name again, brother?

JPS: [00:08:39 unintelligible], James P.

Dining Car Worker: That was quite interesting too. When I was—I was on dining car, Union Pacific, and of course we worked sixteen, eighteen hours a day, left about five-thirty in the morning and then worked till we got through. And our sleeping car quarters was right under the dining car. You had these army cots, mattresses and blankets. It was down underneath the dining car. We had to move the chair, take the tables down and move the chairs, get down in there and get these [00:09:26 unintelligible] mattresses and cots and make the beds out. It had curtains that we would put up. Of course there was people going through all night long [00:09:37 unintelligible] conducting everybody, flashing with their lights and everything.

Unknown Speaker 1: Mhmm, no privacy.

Dining Car Worker: And we had no place for to shave or wash up, to have a little—they had a pantry but they had a—some of those old dining cars—they had a wash basin there. Of course, we never did use it, you see, because—but we had to go up in a...

[00:10:07]

Unknown Speaker 1: Chair car?

Dining Car Worker: Chair car, where we brushed our teeth and washed up the best way we could.

Unknown Speaker 1: Where'd you run from?

Dining Car Worker: I run from, one time for a while, I run from Ogden Utah to Los Angeles, and then I run from Salt Lake City up to Butte, Montana.

Unknown Speaker 1: And when did you start with the railroad?

Dining Car Worker: Oh, 1936. I only put in ten years, then.

Unknown Speaker 1: Uh-huh. But you started well before the union organized.

Dining Car Worker: Well they were organized then; they organized them then [inaudible]. Things had been starting to change. And they finally worked up to where they had dormitory cars for crews. And, well there they had to—a pantry man, he got what, a pantry got what, two or three dollars more a month?

Unknown Speaker 2: Two and a half more.

Unknown Speaker 1: Two and a half more as the pantry man. And they had the linen man; he was the one that's responsible for all the linen.

Unknown Speaker 1: All the tablecloths?

Dining Car Worker: Yeah, tablecloths and everything else. He's the man that had to—he had to make up the stewards' bed. And until, I don't know, after I quit I don't know how it—well naturally after they got the dormitory car everything changed, see.

Unknown Speaker 1: Uh-huh. Prior to the dormitory cars you slept right in the dining car.

Dining Car Worker: We slept right in the dining car, yeah. And they had a little [inaudible] where we washed the silverware and the glasses. It had a little old basin, I guess about that wide, about like that, see. We washed the silverware. It had a [00:12:04 unintelligible] where the brush, [inaudible] bottle brush, we washed the glasses, we'd usually rub them up and down on that, see. And they'd talk about sanitation now, boy, it's a wonder that every crew member and everybody that worked on those dining cars didn't come down with hepatitis or something, huh? And finally—and some of those cars had cockroaches on there, boy you couldn't open a drawer up that wasn't [inaudible] with the cockroaches would just jump at you. And there was mice on them [laughter].

Unknown Speaker 1: On the dining car, yeah.

Dining Car Worker: Yes. [Laughter and overlapping voices]. People talked about how good that food was, [inaudible] didn't know what they was eating.

Unknown Speaker 1: Yeah, they claim it was the best food in the the world, better than a hotel [laughter].

Pullman Porter: The experience that I had once, and I say this, and I was—as soon as I finished my instruction, they put me on a car going down in Arizona, and I never will forget the little name of the town; Hyder Arizona. And to show you what they thought about a Pullman porter, when I got down there, well I got my, I was putting away my bed—I was hauling service mail—and when I got all the linen stripped off the bed I just laid it down in the seating in the floor there, you know, because all of that service mail was gone. Well an inspector, he came through and he asked me "what's all this linen down here for?" I said "well," I said "I'm sacking it up, getting it, putting it in the bag." He said "well don't you know you're not supposed to put that linen down there?" I says "well, there's no one in here but me," so we let it go at that. So when I got back to the office he called me in and wrote me up and called me in. The superintendent asked me, says "why would you have that linen in the floor and the soldiers walking on it?" I says "some of the linen was in the floor alright," but I says "all the soldiers was gone." I said "they wasn't walking on it, no soldiers on there. Nobody on there but me." He looked at me and he says "now, you mean to tell me that a white man'll tell a lie?" [laughter]. I said "well Mr. [00:14:31 unintelligible], I'm not saying that he will tell won't and he won't tell one, but one thing I can say, he said it was some soldiers on there and I said there wasn't any on there. So now that's the way I see it."

Unknown Speaker 1: Right, we got a dispute here, ain't nobody calling nobody anything, uh huh.

Lawrence Alberti: I remember when I got out of school there was no jobs available and so you either railroaded or waited table or go down there and Red Capped. So I knew Mr. Reynolds [spelling?] and I asked him, he said "now come on down and I'll see if we got something available."

[00:15:04]

Unknown Speaker 1: This is Doctor Reynolds now?

Lawrence Alberti: Well, his father.

Unknown Speaker 1: It's Doctor Reynolds' father?

Lawrence Alberti: Yeah, his father. And so I recall when [00:15:12 unintelligible] was organizing [00:15:14 unintelligible] boards, he sent a representative out to talk to us about Red Capping. So we talked but we never did what

you call get organized with him. We were in the process. So I remember meantime some guy from Southern Pacific, from California, came up, was giving us a public relation work, how to make more money and better service. And so we had all these old guys—we were all young—and one guy, Mr. Smith we used to call him, he said "well now, just how much do you make?" Mr. Smith said "well, I reckon someday I make less and sometimes I make more." He said "well, can't you kind of pin it down to a figure?" He said "about a dollar a day average?" "Oh no, no, no," he said, "I couldn't say that." So he never had pinned this old man down, so he all schooled us the same way about how much, you know, if anybody asks you. So I remember occasionally we would get called if somebody to check our port is be happening, and we got to make a little run to Seattle or somewhere, sometimes, down the [00:16:21 unintelligible] or something like that on [00:16:22 unintelligible]. And I always remember when we'd go to eat they had this curtain; they'd pull that little curtain back and we'd sit there and eat, see. Well we couldn't, you see, they'd always—you know, I was fairly healthy, and if you catch a good cook he would give you what was on the menu, but most of them, I remember a trip that he'd always give me something that [laughs]. I said "well can we get some"—"no, that's what all the cooks get, chefs make, that's all you get." But anyway, it was quite a unique experience, you know, when you'll get on the train and Red Capping at the same time. But I recall after this fellow Ferguson [spelling?] came down there to, you know, he was going to show us how to make my money; they put the check and charge you. You know, they started charging us ten cents a bag. That really broke up our play on making all that good money, because we started—had to start buying the checks, and if you get caught taking the checks off the bags, you—

Unknown Speaker 1: It's a little white check with a string on it?

Lawrence Alberti: Just a little old check like we use, we go in there to the baggage room, ask for fifty a box of checks, and they give you a big box of them, there's fifty in there. And so we'd just stamp our numbers on them, and they had checks all over. Then they come out, they were ten cents apiece, you had to buy them. So that was a breaking up; that's one of the reasons why I left being Red Cap, because I'm thinking I'm going to steal, and I said if I want to steal I might as well go get me a regular job. But I must say though, I do respect you, to all the hardships and all that we did go through, that I must say that I did enjoy my work while I was out there, and I made the best of it because I had to take care of my family, and I did. I put most of my kids through college and everything on this job. But, as they said there in the picture there, that you don't have to Uncle Tom unless you want to be one. You don't have to do it.

Unknown Speaker 1: Yeah. You're still a man, no matter what your job is.

Lawrence Alberti: You still a man, and I think I was recognized and respected as high as any porter on the train, and I never did Uncle Tom. But I did my work. That's one thing I assure you; I did my work.

Unknown Speaker 1: I can appreciate that. Yes, Sir?

Pantry Man: I came to porter in 1941 in Paris Texas, founding out that two of the teachers there had quit their jobs and came out to Portland to run on a dining car, I knew my move too. So I came on out and when I started to work they put me on as a [00:19:18 unintelligible] man. That's selling sandwiches and coffee and milk through the coaches. I worked on that several months. Well, the main fellows were Stan Duke [spelling?] and Harold Gray [spelling?], and I would relieve one of those fellas. So, after so long a time, I went on the Seattle run, and a lot of time on the Seattle run when you come in they send you out on a soldier special. And they put—sent me out when I was the assistant pantry man. In other words, they called us pantry man's mule.

Unknown Speaker 1: Pantry man's mule.

Pantry Man: Pantry man's mule. So worked on and worked on. So we'd make a trip to Green River, come in, then we made a trip up to Spokane. And finally the main pantry man came to be off, so they stuck me in the pantry, so I worked in the pantry ever since he left. And finally when they put their daily streamliner on, well they had to be in for the pantry, for the stationary pantry, but did nobody want to be a pantry man, because that's where the work was. All that cleaning up and all that and so on. Then, on top of it, the pantry man, he had to feed the Pullman porters. Ain't no pantry man [inaudible]. He didn't like to feed the Pullman porters. But I always counted it a pleasure to feed the Pullman porter, because I know what they had to eat early in the morning, then their next meal was at four o'clock in the afternoon. I know they're bound to have been hungry. So I'd always see that they would get something extra. I didn't skimp the pantry

—I mean the Pullman porters. So they always looked like—seemed as if they enjoyed my being on the train, when they come that time to eat.

Unknown Speaker: You know, in a lot of jobs there's sort of a hierarchy so that people who work in one job think they a little bit better than the people working another job. Was there much of that, you feel, or did everybody sort of recognize that everybody was more or less in the same boat?

Cook: Same about me being a cook, that's the feeling that I had toward the waiter. That's the feeling the waiter had towards me; he was more than me.

Unknown Speaker: Because you didn't get no tips, huh?

Cook: I didn't get no tips. I thought the same about him; I'm the one made it possible for his tips. But I was just a cook. As we'd start to get going out to Chicago they would get a little meal allowance. So the one waiter, he's dead and gone now, I turned in and I allowed for whatever, about three or four dollars, and somebody said "man, you know that's too much, how can you all turn in that much?" And it was me, I said "I didn't turn in but a dollar and a half." "Well, it takes more for a waiter to do a good job" [laughs]. [Overlapping voices]. One hardship, hard part, was me and that white man wiped down the kitchen together in that small place, even I might have been over him. When we get to our termination, where we were going back there, he went one way and I went another one. We couldn't stay in the same building, but we could work together. On that train we slept that close together. But in the building we couldn't sleep in the same building. And I asked the question, I wrote—Mr. Hansen [spelling?] just got to be the superintendent and I wrote him a letter, and the answer that I got back, I lost that letter in the flood our in Vanport, that says "you Johnny-Come-Late, what you crying? If you don't like your job, maybe that job, maybe you should seek other places to sleep." Man, they will tell you, that was the only ones I know wrote a letter on that, discrimination of where we were staying at, at the end of the terminal. White cooks staying, but still we slept together all night on the train there, and we couldn't stay in the same building on the other end, paid the same union dues— [audio cuts out].

[end of interview 00:24:12]