



Otto Rutherford Oral History Interview, August 12, 1983

Title

“Otto Rutherford Oral History Interview”

Date

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Location

Location Unknown.

Summary

Otto Rutherford was born in February of 1911. His parents had come to Portland in 1897, his father and uncle coming to Portland as hotel barbers. Rutherford began working for the Union Pacific in 1934 as a summer job between school sessions. He describes the tall and short crews and uniforms on the railroad and relays an incident where a white woman temporarily lost her diamond ring and investigators searched the crew, but not the passengers. He noted that the crew was always seen as guilty, and defending yourself could get you fired. Rutherford was a member of a union of cooks and waiters that met secretly in Holiday’s Barbershop in Portland. He discusses the values of organizing and the fear of being fired for union activities. Rutherford also discusses work hours and income and describes several unpleasant incidents on the railroad, as well as the family-like bond among co-workers. Also in this recording he describes growing up in Portland when there were very few black residents.

Interviewee

Otto Rutherford

Interviewer

Michael Grice

Website

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

Transcript

Michael Grice: You want to say something Mr. Rutherford? Speak into the mic.

Otto Rutherford: Speaking of the women, yeah there are two when I was working; I haven't been with them since I've retired, but Maggie Friday, Minnie Johnson, [spellings?] you know her? That's Babe's wife. You know Maggie Friday?

MG: Yeah, living on 12th avenue?

OR: Yeah, over in that area, yeah.

Unknown Speaker: Okay, it looks like you...

MG: Switched chairs?

OR: Changed places.

MG: Right. The other thing I was—

Unknown Speaker: Be care of the mic cable, Mr. Rutherford.

OR: This little one? [Tape cut]. What was your father's name?

Unknown Female Speaker: Beaver.

OR: Beaver, Beaver, Beaver....

Unknown Female Speaker: It's Joel.

OR: Oh lord, yep.

MG: February 5th nineteen what?

OR: Eleven. Two o'clock on a Sunday.

MG: Your parents came here in the—

OR: 1897.

MG: They came to Portland?

OR: To Portland.

MG: What was the occasion that brought them to Portland?

OR: My father was a—and my uncle came out here as barbers when they opened the Portland Hotel, and the head waiter was from Columbia, South Carolina, and he came through Columbia to pick up waiters. However, my father and my uncle were barbers, so they came out as house barbers. They were not waiters; they were house barbers.

MG: House barbers for the hotel staff?

OR: For the hotel. They did room service. They did not work in the barbershop. No, they did room service.

MG: So they did people's hair but they would do it at the room.

OR: They did everything that a barber had to do but it was done up in the rooms, not in the barbershop.

MG: Huh. And why was that?

OR: Well that's the way it was in those days. The waiters were black, or colored, as we called them in those days, and the two barbers, my dad and my uncle, they were the house barbers. They did the room service. But you see, the thing about it is that my dad and uncle were out here a year before they went back to Columbia South Carolina to get their wives, my mother and my aunt. And they established themselves out here, then they went back to Columbia and brought my mother and my aunt out here.

MG: So people were—your folks from South Carolina.

OR: Columbia, South Carolina. And my grandfather was a country school teacher in North—in Columbia, South Carolina. I can remember my mother saying, seeing old man Rutherford; he rode a bicycle with a big wheel in the front and little in the—he'd go in the country and teach school.

MG: Is that right?

OR: During the week.

Unknown Speaker: Michael, we're rolling. Whenever you're ready.

MG: Okay.

OR: Take it from the top?

MG: Yeah, well I'll get to it in a second. [Tape cut]. Okay, what we want to focus on is the railroad and the role that the railroad played in black men and women's lives and establishing the black families in the Portland area, but also in the Pacific Northwest. So I want you to reflect back to your early days in Portland and then your beginning with the railroad, how you got on with the railroad. Tell me what led you to—

OR: Well to begin with, I got on the road because of my mother. I came home from school, I went to, as they called it then, Los Angeles Junior College, and I came home for the summer and after I sat around house for a week, my mother said I should go to work. They were hiring waiters. And I didn't know anything about being a waiter, so I applied at the commissary and they gave me an apron and a jacket and I was a waiter.

MG: Right here in Portland.

OR: Here in Portland.

MG: For which railroad?

OR: Union Pacific. And then I worked all summer, then I went back to school, and—

MG: What year was this, now? Do you remember?

OR: 1934.

MG: 1934, this is well before the war years.

OR: Oh, definitely, yeah. And I went to school another year and I came home and I worked on the road again, same company, same occupation. Then I went back in September and went to UCLA, then I got disgusted because I ran out of money, and I came back to Portland, went back for the Union Pacific, and they put the streamliner on then, the first streamliner on. They had two crews: a tall crew and a short crew, and I was on the short crew. They made uniforms to fit certain men. I'll tell you one thing that stands out so vividly in my mind, and I curse the Union Pacific till the day I die: one day between Pocatello and Green River, a woman, needless to say she was white, went to the lavatory early in the morning to clean up, and she swore she had left a diamond ring on the edge of the basin.

[00:05:44]

MG: The night before?

OR: Early in the morning. So when we got to Green River the special agents got on and searched the crew. Never a passenger. I knew, John Miner [spelling?] knew, and my workers, the fellas who worked with me, knew we didn't see the woman's ring. And so at lunch time the woman got ready to get ready for lunch, she looked in her purse and doggone it, there was her ring. I still resent it, that we as employees never had a word to say. We were always guilty, always guilty. And I'll curse the Union Pacific and everybody else till the day I die.

MG: They didn't give you an opportunity—

OR: But in those days, you see, we didn't have this civil rights sort of thing, so all you had to lean on was to open your mouth and then get fired. So I—the Union Specific was great for that. They'll bring on a special agent and search the crew; never search the passenger.

MG: They wanted to absolve the railroad of any responsibility.

OR: Right. Let me ask you this, were—how about the specific tasks that you had on the road? What did you do specifically as a waiter?

MG: Well as a waiter I just waited tables and cleaned silver, et cetera. But on the streamliner we did the identical thing that your stewardesses, or whatever you call them, on the airline. They're nothing but waiter-porter. They do the same darn thing that we did on the road. They got more money—

Unknown Speaker: Stop. Got a problem. Not yours; mine.

MG: Okay. Little problem, big problem?

Unknown Speaker: Little problem.

MG: Cut tape. [Tape cut]. Okay, do you have brothers and sisters too? What about your family?

OR: I'm from a family of five boys. There are only two of us left; my younger brother and myself.

MG: Where your younger brother at?

OR: He's in Los Angeles, he's a retired engineer.

MG: Engineer, not a railroad engineer?

OR: Oh, heavenly days, no.

Unknown Speaker: Say, let's check the mic cord out. Mic cable out. I got to find out where we've lost [inaudible]. [Tape cut].

OR: --big GM van that goes all over—they've traveled over the world, I don't know how many—they've been every place but the North and South Pole. His wife takes still pictures and he takes the movie pictures.

MG: Video? He take video?

OR: Yep, yeah. And he brings them home and he splices them and does what one does to film to make it coherent and whatnot. Yeah. My brother is, he's the youngest brother, he's the same age as my wife. He's what—yeah, they're both the same; seventy. I'm the oldest. I'm the only one living [00:08:46 unintelligible], you know.

MG: We're your elders in the family [inaudible]?

OR: Oh— [tape cut].

MG: We got to turn, we'll deal with that and then we'll come back to the specific jobs working and waiting tables, okay? Are you rolling tape yet?

Unknown Speaker: Whenever you want. [Tape cut].

MG: --they had before they had the sleeping car porters. Did that—

OR: Yes, the union came on before, before I went into the union, became a member, but however, when I was a member of the union, we had to meet secretly, and we would meet...we would meet in the back of Holiday's Barbershop, and it was, the word of the meeting was passed on from person to person, and then after we came down from Seattle when we would go back there. Johnny Baker [spelling?] was our first chairman.

MG: Now this particular union, was this the union of waiters, or was this the...?

OR: Cooks and waiters.

MG: Cooks and waiter's union. And the sleeping car porters had—

OR: They were separate. They were—

Unknown Speaker: I thought porters were in that too though, weren't they?

OR: No, they weren't with our union. We were two separate unions.

Unknown Speaker: Chair car wasn't?

[00:10:00]

OR: Oh, I thought you said Pullman Porter. Oh, chair car porters, yeah, yep.

MG: They were a part of—

OR: I thought you said Pullman porter. When you say porter I think of Pullman porters. Yep.

MG: Pullman porters were separate. They were a part of their—

OR: Oh, they were the—that was Randolph's outfit, yep.

MG: Right. They had preceded the formation of your organization.

OR: Oh yeah, they were before we were. And you see the cooks took us in. We went in with the cooks.

Unknown Speaker: Michael, what I'm going to do is I'm going to start panning here.

MG: Okay.

Unknown Speaker: The two of you. You talking.

MG: Okay, keep talking.

Unknown Speaker: I'll start panning and then when you see the camera lined up in the corner of your eye, you'll know you're on camera.

MG: Okay.

Unknown Speaker: But I'm just letting you know what the shot.

MG: Alright, what's going on.

OR: Yep.

MG: Did the formation of the—

Unknown Speaker: Okay, we are rolling.

MG: --A. Philip Randolph's organization affect or influence the formation of the dining car and the—

OR: I should say so.

MG: Uh-huh. Were you encouraged by that?

OR: Oh yes, yeah. We saw the value of being organized, to have an organization. But just as waiters they weren't strong enough, so they went in with the cooks. But you see, the cooks also included the bartenders association, so you had the cooks, the waiters and the bartenders association. In other words, you had all the hotel culinary workers in one group. Yep. And to use it in a trite sort of way; we came on the skirt tail of the big union. And so when they received a benefit, we received a benefit.

MG: Even if it wasn't exactly what they ask for. But you can say that A. Philip Randolph was indirectly a big influence.

OR: He was, he was. That I must admit.

MG: Did the other employees enjoy working with the railroad and enjoy the relationship that you had?

OR: I don't understand. Employees, you mean like the brakemen and the conductor—

MG: No, the other black employees. Did they—

OR: Oh lord—

MG: [Inaudible] similar opinion about [inaudible]—

OR: No, no, no. No, no, you had some of the older men, just like A. Philip Randolph had in his organization. I know some men in Portland that I hesitate to name who wouldn't join the organization. We had them in the waiters' organization. The old men, you know, who had been on there—got on the railroad when they were paid twenty-five dollars a month; they had to pay for breakage, you had to pay for being late, and that came out of that twenty-five dollars a month. But you see, the Union Pacific thought that Mrs. Smith, with her two-bit tip, would pick up the slack. That's the way that company thought.

MG: So they were almost counting your—

OR: Oh they were, they were depending on the gratuities of the public to supplement your income, or whatever you want to call it.

MG: But then after you became organized, the waiters and dining car employees and the lounge car employees, you had better conditions, better working conditions as well?

OR: If you want to call it that, because our contract called for two hundred and forty hours a month, and when I ran on the streamliner we had two crews. The streamliner made five trips a month; one month you made two trips, the next month you made three trips, but interim you went to Seattle, or you picked up and went to Pocatello or Pendleton or whatever. You had to get you two hundred and forty hours, that's what it was, two-hundred forty, and that's a heck of a lot of hours to get in.

MG: Sure it is.

OR: To fulfill your contract. Yep. However, I understand that they have broken it down now. Well, we don't have any waiters anymore anyway, but prior to the end of the Amtrak thing, UP thing, whatever you call it, I think it came down to a hundred and ninety hours or something like that. But it was a vicious thing.

MG: Yeah. Did working conditions change with the formation of the union? Did they improve, or—

OR: No, because—I say no because on the streamliner the head waiter and the two waiter-porters did not have a bed. We sat up. We had the last seat on the coach. And sometime some jackass at the station would oversell and then we ended up with no seat.

MG: Wow.

OR: However, on the first streamliner, that little one, there was a bunk way up ahead that you had to crawl under a hole and then go up, and then when they would run the oil tanks over, you'd smell that diesel oil, so we didn't even bother.

MG: What kind of things do you—what kind of incidents do you recall as being either the most interesting, [inaudible] Mr. Wilson referred to one incident when they had got snowbound. Any incidents—

[00:15:10]

OR: I was never snowbound.

MG: Are there any incidents, though, that come to mind [inaudible]—

OR: Oh I know one thing that turns my stomach...we had just out of Pocatello, and you see the station master in that part of the country where you have a lot of sheep is supposed to let the train know when the sheep are coming across. Well something went wrong, I don't know what, but they had all these sheep going across the track, and we hit them. And hitting a flock of sheep is like hitting your brakes on ice, and it was the most—of all my years, I only had thirteen years on the road, but that stands out in my mind. I don't know where the snafu was but I do remember that, because I do remember the conductor saying "pull down the curtains, we don't want to see, these people"—

MG: Took out quite a few sheep.

OR: Oh lord, yeah. Took out a gang of them. And you see the fleece gets mixed up under the wheels and the wheels just slide along the track like it's iced. I was very fortunate; I didn't have too many bad incidents. Oh, I lipped-off a few times. I remember one time right out of Portland, the mayor of [00:16:33 unintelligible] got on the train in Portland here. He was drunk and he started cursing and whatnot and I told him he couldn't curse. And we were out in the vestibule then; we were just up by Multnomah Falls, and I told him he would have to calm down. "You can't curse like that, we have ladies in here, and children." Well, the first thing he did was to infer that my mother was a dog; then the next thing he inferred that I was a nigger, and when he said "nigger" I reached back—you know what a stepstool is, that steel thing?

MG: Yeah.

OR: I got it right in the lip of it and I was going to crush that man's head, and just as I brought it up, the brakemen stopped me. I ought to kill that honkey. Damned if I wasn't. That was the closest I ever come to—and so when we got to The Dalles, the conductor put him off. And he had told me he was the mayor of [00:17:37 unintelligible], but he would never call me a black son of a bitch. Not and keep his head. He better head up to state [laughs].

MG: That's okay. In working with the crew, do you find it was sort of working as a team to—

OR: Oh lord, yeah. You'd never—

MG: Comradery [inaudible]—

OR: Oh lord, yeah. See, we spent more time with one another than we did with our family.

MG: Because you were gone for about five days at a time [inaudible]—

OR: Oh yeah, we spent all our time together, more-so than with our family, because even after we came home we would be doubled-out, as they called it.

MG: Right. Did you establish friendships then that—

OR: Oh yeah, I have some very lasting friendships.

MG: From the railroad.

OR: And some have died and some have moved away. There's one fella here now, Willace Williams [spelling?], he's a retired school teacher. He and I ran together for about four years.

MG: What about Portland and living in Portland? Now, you were born in Portland, is that right?

OR: Yes.

MG: And being a native Portlander and a black person, that wasn't—there weren't very many blacks that were living—

OR: No, there were not.

MG: But even fewer that were born here.

OR: Right.

MG: What was Portland like for you and how did it change—

OR: Well I'll tell you one thing; let's go with our church: when I wanted to see you or George or whoever, we had to go to church, because that's where we met because we lived all over the city. We went to school. See, I never go to...I never went to school with no one but my brother and maybe one or two others. There were no black kids in school. [Tape cut] —Sunday school, that's why we had such a strong Christian Endeavor and Upward League, and we went to the Baptist [00:19:18 unintelligible] that group, whatever. And see, we would meet around six o'clock, and then after Christian Endeavor and the Baptist kids were out and all, we'd get together. And then we'd go to somebody's house and have what we used to call a stomp; wind up the phonograph and—until nine o'clock, because at nine o'clock was the curfew, and the arc lights would blink, and you better get home or be on your way home.

MG: The arc lights, now what does that mean, street lights?

OR: I mean dark, but the streetlights, yeah.

MG: They would blink?

OR: Yep. And the fireboats would whistle.

MG: Who would enforce the curfew?

OR: Police.

MG: And the curfew was for the purpose of?

OR: For juveniles. You had to be off the street or be in the company of an adult, and after one o'clock an adult had to account for himself. Yep.

[00:20:05]

MG: But you found the educational process was pretty fairly satisfactory?

OR: Some were, but we had some very prejudiced teachers, yep. And we had some very beautiful teachers. I'm in contact with two high school teachers now. I've kept up with them.

MG: The church played a central role—

OR: Oh lord yeah, the church. But let me say that it wasn't because we were religious; it was a chance for me to see you and you and you. You went to Franklin and she went to Grant or wherever, but Sunday we got together.

MG: Oh, good. Anything else about the railroad that stands out in your mind that was a—would be of particular importance?

OR: Well yes. In the early days the railroad treated—I'm only speaking from the standpoint of a waiter—we had these inspectors and a waiter had no defense at all. If the inspector said that you had on yellow shoes, you couldn't defend yourself. By the same token, if a passenger said that you had mistreated them or mishandled them, and write a letter into the company, the person who accused you would never confront you or whatever you call it.

MG: You don't get to meet your accuser.

OR: But finally the union broke that down. You just couldn't—because a lot of people, if you didn't care for a person, you could write a letter into the company and then you would get called off the road and they'd do what they call put you on the ground. That means miss a trip. You wouldn't be suspended; you'd just miss a trip. But now—I mean then, after the union got this thing figured out, the man who accuses you has to face you. You don't go on just somebody's letter.

MG: [00:22:02:06 inaudible].

OR: Yep.

MG: So, the union changed a lot—

OR: The union had the—

MG: of the treatment for—

OR: You bet your life. Plus, the wage scale.

MG: Okay. The wage scale improved but still maintained the shape—

OR: Whatever.

MG: Okay. What about—were there any other changes that took place in the—during your tenure on the railroad as you made other—

OR: Not a great deal. You see, it's been twenty-odd years since I ran on the road.

MG: Okay.

OR: And a lot of things have transpired since I was on the road.

MG: Any more changes you've seen since the time that you were on the road to now?

OR: Oh, yes.

MG: That—

OR: One is the wage scale.

MG: Right, the wage scale has gone up.

OR: And they don't—I don't even know if they used to send a man out anymore. Like we used to come in from Chicago and the platform man was standing there and he says "Seattle in the morning." All you have time for is to go home and run through some water and get a clean white shirt and report at six o'clock in the morning. One time I came in from Chicago, got right off the streamliner and got right on the train going to Seattle.

MG: I've had that happen as a chair car porter, running from Pocatello and get on the Seattle train.

OR: Yeah.

MG: But we were trying to make money, so we weren't trying to get back to anything anyway.

OR: And here, I'll never forget; it was Christmas Eve, I'm supposed to be home Christmas and go out New Years. I'll be John Brown if they don't send me out. I was ready to quit.

MG: Ready to quit.

OR: Finally, I did quit. I kept wolfing and wolfing and my wife said "why don't you quit?" Doggone it, I go down to the commissary and threw my keys on the desk, threw my twenty-five-dollar chain—I was a chair car porter then. I quit, and that was the end of my experience.

MG: Well, I thank you for your time.

OR: Oh, I thank you, been a pleasure.

MG: [Inaudible] and we'll talk to you again and maybe get a second part [inaudible] some things that we'll think about.

OR: Right.

MG: That we don't have on this tape. And so, if you don't mind—

OR: Not a bit. I'm on the same corner.

MG: Same corner— [tape ends].

[end of interview 00:23:57]