



Cleophas Smith Oral History Interview, June 23, 1983

Title

“Cleophas Smith Oral History Interview”

Date

June 23, 1983

Location

Location Unknown.

Summary

Cleophas Smith was born in Mississippi on December 1st, 1916. He grew up in Chicago and began to work for the Union Pacific Railroad as a waiter in 1942. He discusses growing up during the Depression and the sudden effects on his family’s lifestyle, the contrast of racism in Chicago versus Portland Oregon, voluntarily joining a railroad union, becoming familiar with working for tips, being trained on the job by fellow co-workers, the duties of the job, the uniform, and the hierarchy among railroad waiters, which was based on age, experience and seniority. Smith also recounts an incident where he and his railroad crew banded together to defend a fellow crewmember who was being kicked off the train by a steward.

Interviewee

Cleophas Smith

Interviewer

Michael Grice

Website

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

Transcript

Michael Grice: Okay. And like I said, we have about twenty five minutes and—

Cleophas Smith: Well I don't know twenty-five minutes-worth to talk about.

MG: Well you'll see how fast it gets. I got twenty-five minutes' worth of questions, anyway. State your name, please.

CS: Cleophas Smith.

MG: Okay, and where was your birthplace?

CS: Mississippi.

MG: Whereabout Mississippi?

CS: Well that's, it's a mystery.

MG: A mystery, huh?

CS: Really I've got about three different places listed that...

MG: Go ahead.

CS: Information was given to me and I don't really have an authentic place to really give you.

Unknown Speaker: Can you put the wires underneath his sweater?

MG: Sure, he can.

Unknown Speaker: So the wires don't [inaudible] mic him from the bottom.

CS: I'm listed in Moneys, Moneys: M-O-N-E-Y-S, Moneys Mississippi. That's on my delayed birth certificate. I'm one of those, I'm one of those.

MG: Okay. And what was your birthdate?

CS: December 1, 1916.

MG: Okay. And we're going to go through just a series of baseline data and then I'll want you to try to call the significant part; how you ended up coming to Oregon, number one, and number two; your involvement with the railroad and how you got involved with—and I'm moving this microphone on you because of your sweater, so it's not, so this can be a little more stationary. It's comfortable?

CS: Fine, yeah.

MG: Were you in the armed services?

CS: No.

MG: Not in the armed services. Married?

CS: Yes.

MG: Okay, you have a wife and how many children?

CS: Well, four.

MG: Okay. And you went to school in Mississippi?

CS: I went to school in Chicago.

MG: Went to school in Chicago. How far in school did you get?

CS: Third year high school.

MG: Okay. Well let's go back to Mississippi and make a quick jump to your school days and then to the transition to manhood where you began working with the railroad and you moved to Portland. Maybe just tell us [inaudible]—

CS: Well my move from Mississippi was fast. I was born in Mississippi, taken to Chicago at three years of age, never went back to my place of birth, reared in the city of Chicago, went to school in Chicago.

MG: Okay, south side?

CS: On the south side of Chicago. Lived on the south side of Chicago for all of the years that I lived in Chicago, actually, up until the time I came to Portland.

MG: And what caused you to—well, tell me a little bit about your life in Chicago.

CS: Well, raised in the city of Chicago, went to school in Chicago on the south side, worked as a grocery clerk and meat-cutter, quit school to help take care of my parents; my mother, basically, and sister.

MG: You had brothers and sisters?

CS: Just one sister.

MG: One sister.

CS: And my father didn't have a job and I quit school to go to work.

MG: Whereabouts on the south side did you—

CS: I lived around 51st street, if you're familiar.

MG: But was it around, like Hyde Park?

CS: Well no, no, just 51st around Michigan State, Indiana. Not in the Hyde Park area. That would be off around 5th.

MG: Right.

CS: Which is farther south.

MG: Yeah, farther south. It seems like it is very close, but really it's quite a distance.

CS: Well it would be a distance. I mean Hyde Park is another ballgame altogether, you know, when I was a youngster.

MG: Or course now it's changed though.

CS: Drastically.

MG: Considerably. You obviously lived through the Depression years—

CS: Well I grew up, I grew up in the Depression as a youngster.

MG: Okay. What are some of your recollections that were significant?

CS: From my recollection is living from, like living in a nice six-room apartment, you know; a lot of people didn't own houses or properties—I mean if you were a doctor, possibly a lawyer, you owned an apartment building, maybe, but my father worked as a construction worker and we had a, say, six-room apartment, and everything was nice. I went to Catholic school when I was young. And then all of the sudden we had moved out of this apartment when I was ten, eleven years old, and we were living in one room. And from that one room, that was a time that from that was the time that I started to work, after I got around sixteen years of age, I started to work; going to school and then working, and then I eventually quit school and just worked constantly. And I worked from the time that I quit school at sixteen until 1976.

MG: When you retired.

CS: When I retired.

MG: Okay. You retired from the railroad, Union Pacific Railroad.

[00:05:02]

CS: Union Pacific Railroad, that's right.

MG: Now where did you start working on the railroad? In Chicago or in Portland?

CS: I started in Chicago, I worked two weeks for the Milwaukee Railroad and then they laid us off, we couldn't get any work, and a fellow came by and said that they were hiring over at the UP office, and they were sending fellows to California and Ogden, but they didn't mention Portland. So a friend of mine and I went over and hired out with the Union Pacific out of Chicago, and the fellow told me that they were going to send us to Portland.

MG: And how old were you at that time when you started working on the railroad?

CS: Oh, I started when I was twenty-five.

MG: And what did you start as, what occupation?

CS: As a waiter.

MG: You started as a waiter?

CS: I worked as a waiter the entire time I worked for the railroad.

MG: Do you recall what year that was?

CS: 1942.

MG: 1942 you started the railroad here and were about twenty-five years old.

CS: That's right.

MG: Okay. So, and you weren't married at this time?

CS: Well I was married when I started to work for the railroads.

MG: Okay. So when you moved to Portland you brought your family with you.

CS: Well I came first and brought my wife, see. So I was here about a month and then I sent—they let me bring my wife out.

MG: Do you recall any of your early impressions of Portland?

CS: Well my first impression of Portland was let me get on the train and go back to Chicago, because when I got off of the train the first thing that I saw—what street was that, coming up from the station?

Unknown Speaker: 6th street.

CS: Up 6th. There was a restaurant, a pool hall and a barbershop.

Unknown Speaker: Or Hoyt.

CS: Was that the Hoyt? Hoyt Street? And the first thing I saw after I got off the train, walking up the street, was signs that says "we cater to white trade only," and I had never seen anything like this.

MG: No, you hadn't experienced any of that kind of discrimination in Chicago?

CS: No, no, no; no signs. You know, discrimination was different in Chicago. I mean you had an area that you lived in, and if you went in another area you had to fight.

MG: Yeah.

CS: You know.

MG: Right.

CS: It was like "well you can't come in here, because you're black." You had to fight to go where you wanted to go, and nobody bothered you. If you wanted to fight, you kept going.

MG: Right, fight you all, well—

CS: You fight your way south. You mentioned Hyde Park; in order to get into Hyde Park when I was a kid you had to fight to go into Hyde Park, and if there was enough of you then nobody bothered you, but if you went over there by yourself you got beat up and sent back home, or back into your own area. So that was my first impression.

MG: So your first impression—

CS: Because—

MG: Was one of there's a discrimination here that was—

CS: Well it's the first thing I saw.

MG: Out front here.

CS: It was right out front, see, because I had never done anything, I hadn't even gone to work. I'd just been hired out and brought out here on a train. And they told me to come back; we came in in the morning and they told me to come back at twelve o'clock, and I met a fellow who—his name was Walter Riggs [spelling?], he's passed now, and he took me to a place where I was able to get a bath, and we went out on the road. When I came back in I got a room with Mrs. Miles [spelling?] up in Sacramento. Little—

MG: Right around the corner.

CS: Around the corner of Sacramento and [00:08:17 unintelligible], and I slept in the attic. She kept railroad men. She had beds in the attic and she had two rooms rented out, and it was railroad men in the rooms and there were about three fellows that slept in beds in the attic.

MG: When you arrived at age twenty-five in Portland, working for the Union Pacific Railroad, were there other men already there working?

CS: Oh yes.

MG: And were they older, your age, was it pretty much people your age who were working, or were [inaudible]—

CS: There were men, there were men younger than me, there were men my age and men older that were working for the railroad. Men like we call old-timers were already working when I came. See my familiarity with the railroad was just; it was a job for me.

MG: Right. And it was a switch from the [inaudible]—

CS: It was a swift switch from what I was doing in Chicago, that's right.

MG: Were you an adventurous type person, or did you need work, or did you—

CS: I had a job; I quit the job that I had to take this job.

MG: Was there a reason for that? Did you want to see more of the country, was there more money involved?

CS: Well I felt—well I didn't even know what the salaries were on the job, but the fellows—a friend of mine suggested railroading to me, and I thought that I was going to California, but when they sent me out here I said well, I try it, see what it's like. I'll go out and stay three months; if I don't like it, I'll go back to Chicago. I can always get a job in Chicago.

MG: Yeah, nothing to do over there.

CS: Nothing, see. So then I came out here and started to work, and after I started and started to work, it was something that was interesting.

MG: What was interesting about it?

CS: Well I got a chance to travel and make money.

MG: And meet people too?

CS: Well, I wasn't too—I mean at first it wasn't, meeting the people wasn't a big thing because I was busy trying to learn what I was doing, yeah. And then in time—and I enjoyed it because I was working with nice people.

[00:10:12]

MG: The people that you worked with were nice.

CS: Right, the fellows that I worked with were nice, they taught me how to do my job, which I didn't know, because when I first started I'd never had a tray in my hand in my life.

MG: Did you belong to the union, or was a union in force when you first started working?

CS: No. I joined a union after I started to work. They did have a union.

MG: Do you remember when you—oh, they had a union in existence at the time [inaudible]—

CS: Oh yeah, the fellows were already unionized when I came to Portland.

MG: Okay. And was there any pressure to join the union?

CS: No, no.

MG: The union was an option?

CS: At that time, it was your option; you could join I you wanted to, and you didn't, and then later on I think it became a closed shop, didn't it Jimmy?

Jimmy: Mhmm, that's right.

CS: At that time, it wasn't a closed shop and you had a choice; you could join if you wanted to, and if you didn't want to, you didn't have to.

MG: Had you seen any treatment by the employer toward employees that either gave you second thoughts or made you especially pleased to work with the railroad?

CS: No, everything was fine when I started, because they needed the men.

MG: Okay.

CS: You know, there were fellows sixteen, seventeen years old working; you could work as much as you wanted, I mean if you wanted to go out when you came in town, if you wanted to double-out—you know what doubling out means? If you wanted to double back out, you could double out if you wanted to.

MG: And make all the money that you can?

CS: Well, they weren't paying you very much, but whatever they were paying, you could make that and plus the tips that you made on the job.

MG: Were you surprised at the tip income? Was it more than you expected, less than you expected, or were you surprised with it?

CS: Well, I wasn't really familiar with tipping, because the job that I worked on before was strictly a salaried job, and I'd never worked in a service job where you served people and got tips. I mean I worked on a job where they paid a salary, and if anybody gave you a tip it would be at Christmastime, because I worked in a grocery store and I had customers that at Christmastime they would give me a tip or buy me a bottle of booze or something, because I worked in a liquor-grocery store combined, and it was a different type of gratuity on that job, compared to this. And you know, picking up nickels and dimes, I never really, didn't know too much about it. And pretty soon it started to get a little better. The checks weren't too good; I don't think they were paying but about eighty dollars a month.

MG: So your tips were [inaudible]—

CS: So the tips were almost as much as the checks, you know.

MG: Did the other fellows that you worked with right away treat you good, or did you have to get to know them better; was there—was it like any other situation, where [inaudible]—

CS: Oh they were all, the fellows that I worked with were all nice, because they knew that when a youngster came on the job he didn't know anything, and they would always help him. You know, if he didn't know how to make a salad bowl or whatever, they would show you. And then I worked with a steward who was exceptionally nice; he was a youngster named Abe Rubin [spelling?] and he took a special liking to me, and he began to show me a lot of the things that you needed to know to work on the job. You see, they didn't have a school.

MG: For training.

CS: For training.

MG: It was all o—

CS: You got trained on the job.

MG: Right. Tell me about the specific duties that you had, what you did from the time you came on to the time you got off of the train.

CS: Well we stocked the car; you'd come to work at like, if you worked on the—if you went out in the morning on what they called the pig, you come to work at six o'clock, the train left at nine, you had to get the supplies and—

MG: Where'd you get the supplies from? The commissary?

CS: From the commissary. They'd load it up and then they'd put them on a wagon, bring it around to the station in a truck and put it on a wagon and then you'd grab the tongue on that old wagon, which was, if you worked in the station, like those luggage—

MG: Carts, yeah.

CS: Baggage carts, those big old baggage carts.

MG: And then you'd tie the cart to a truck, or [inaudible]—

CS: Right, two or three of you'd get on and one'd get on the tongue and the others would push it on over onto the station and push it up to the back door or the side door of the diner, and two or three guys would get in, the shelf would be at the door, one door, throwing it in, the guy would be on the other end taking it in, and you brought your stuff in and cooks put their supplies away, the waiters put theirs away. We had ice boxes, we put those supplies in. When you got all your stock in, then they'd bring the ice on. You know, at that time they were using regular ice blocks, is right. You know, you'd put fifty, a hundred or two hundred pounds of ice up and ice down your ice cream. You had to cut the—chop it up with ice picks and put salt around it and pack it. You know, and it was all what we call from the [00:15:06 unintelligible] in those days, that's right.

[00:15:08]

MG: Nothing prepared for you.

CS: No, no, no, and you'd get a case of oranges on, and after you got all your supplies on then you'd cut the oranges by hand, and with that old hand reamer you'd squeeze the oranges and put them in your steel jars and put it—

MG: Orange juice.

CS: For your fresh orange juice. It was fresh.

MG: Yeah.

CS: It was fresh. And that was the way they were doing it, when I started. And that was part of my duties, and then the linen man would put his linen away; he was in charge of all the linen, the bed linen, the table linen, seeing that the linen was on the car for the crew, the jackets. You furnished your own pants at that time; white shirt, dark pants, black shoes, black tie.

MG: You wore a tie all the time that you worked?

CS: Oh yes, had to be clean.

MG: It was one of your characteristics of your service.

CS: That's right.

MG: And then what, in terms of waiting tables? Did you have your own tray that you found all the time? You just pick up a tray and you [inaudible]—

CS: Well they had about seven, seven trays on the car, and they had a tray rack for them. And they were all practically all the same. Some of them were a little lighter than others, some were tin, and most of them were plastic, a kind of a plastic type tray. And when you started a meal, like our meal at that time, breakfast was the first meal, and the steward would seat the people and you had a station; there were six stations on those old thirty-six seaters; a four and a deuce, and at that time they were carrying five and six waiters. Each waiter had his own station and they had an extra waiter to work the coach service, which they called jitneys, selling sandwiches and milk and coffee in the coaches with apples or whatever you—whatever they put on the car to sell in the car in the coaches.

MG: Did you have sort of any kind of hierarchy among the waiters? Was one waiter who had been there the longest get the lightest, or tables closest to the kitchen, or?

CS: Well I guess—I wasn't too familiar—I guess it went by seniority. I guess the oldest waiter was the linen man, or he was the number three man; worked on the silver, and the number four man, but I finally learned that the number six man was a helper for dining—I mean for the linen man. So whatever the linen man wanted done, see he just asked the number six man to do it, see. And the number five man was the pantry man's helper. See, he had to go in—

MG: Pantry [00:17:43 unintelligible]

CS: Right, that's what they called him. When the pantry man got through he had to go in and wash those slats and clean up for him, you know, get everything cleaned up, and in a lot of cases pack his ice cream for him, you know, crack that ice up around the ice cream and put the salt on it and pack it down, get it all cleaned up. And that was just Pacific duty.

MG: Right. What about the actual waiting the tables now? Was there any technique that you had to make sure it was happening all the time, things that you sort of did that other people would not really notice, that you took as part of the [inaudible]—

CS: Well when I first started, it was carrying the tray with two hands, because I'd never walked on a moving train with a tray in my hand, but—

MG: Full of food.

CS: Really. Well, even with a cup of coffee, didn't have to be full of food. But then after I worked for a while I became pretty adapted carrying a tray with one hand, and some guys could carry bags, and most of them carried them underhanded with a—you know, on your fingers, and you could maneuver it and you could feel the sway of the train. The train moved, you'd go with it and balance your tray. In other words, most of the fellows that had been on the job for a while, they were acrobatical [sic].

MG: Yeah.

CS: You know, you learn. You learn how to move.

MG: How to go; become a part of the train.

CS: That's right, that's what you were. You're a part of the equipment, is what they called it.

MG: What about the clientele now? The people that you served? Did you ever have any problem with serving people, saying I don't really want to serve these people, or you seen as your job, did anybody give you any backtalk or make it difficult for you to want to do the job?

CS: You mean a customer, or?

MG: Customer, clientele.

CS: Well not me, I never really had any problem, because see I'd worked in the public practically all of my life, and it was easy for me to work with people.

MG: What about supervisors or your steward?

CS: Well most of them were pretty good, but then there were some that were pretty hard. They picked certain people to put their foot on, you know, or ride, as we called it. We had an incident in my early work where a young fellow came on the car and we had a steward who he had a habit of picking on the young man, the young man on the car. And this particular morning we were stocking the same pig and when we came back on the car he was having words with this fellow for some reason, and he had bothered him on the trip prior to this and we had decided that we weren't going to take it anymore.

[00:20:25]

So he had a run-in with the fellow; we were all putting the supplies on, we came back on the car, he was telling the fellow that he couldn't ride with him, and I said to him, I said "well, what did you do?" he says "well, I didn't do anything," he said "he just picked me out to pick on." So then we said that if he don't go, we aren't going. So we all got our jackets and bags and hit the ground. Now the train, we had stocked the car and the train was due out at nine o'clock and it was eight. So they had an inspector who came over and he called the superintendent and the superintendent says "well, get another crew." And they called a crew coming in town and it just so happened that the crew coming in town had had a fellow on there that this particular steward had put off two trips prior to this. Well, nobody on the crew coming in liked him anyway, so they had—Mr. Baker [spelling?] was on the car with him, Mr. Johnny Baker [spelling?], who was a black inspector, he came over, he said "well, what's the matter?" He said "well, we're having trouble with the steward and we aren't going out with him today. We're not going to have him putting people off anymore." So they had called this crew to come around and the crew came up and they saw us standing on the ground and said "what's wrong, Smitty [spelling?]?" Says "well, we're having trouble with [00:21:51 unintelligible]." And the guy said "well, you mean you want us to go out on the car with him?" I said "I guess so, because we're not going." So they said "well, we're not going either."

So then the inspector went back over and they told Mr. Wells [spelling?], said "well, we can't get anybody to go." So Mr. Baker [spelling?] went over and told him, says that he had been telling him before, you know, that you're having trouble on it, he says, Mr. Baker [spelling?] says, "well I told you that you were going to have some trouble with this steward," and he says "I can get the crew to go, but you will have to promise me that you will move this steward away from these men, because they aren't going to work with him." So he came back over and asked us if we would go with him, he would go back with us. So we said that "if you go, we'll go."

So he got back on the car, after coming in off of the road that morning, and he went out with us. And he went as far as Hood River, and he says "well I don't really need to go with you fellows, because you know what you're doing," and he got off at Hood River and he caught the next train back home. Well, we didn't have any more trouble out of that steward that entire trip, but when we got back in town they wired the trip—the steward—off away from us and sent him out with somebody else, and we never heard another word about it. Nothing. But we actually refused to go. We refused to go with him. Now that was one incident that we had on a car.

MG: I'm going to ask you to think about some other incidents that, as we talked with some of the other gentlemen, but we'll come back and do a little summary tape; we're about out of tape for you. But this is—this'll run out in a minute, but this isn't the first instance that we've talked about incidents where the men themselves took some kind of action, and usually a collective action, whether it's unanimous or not, but usually a collective action.

CS: Well it always helps.

MG: Mhmm, it always helps.

CS: Mhmm.

MG: Good. Well, see that went pretty quick.

CS: Mhmm.

MG: So I'm going to stop it now.

[end of interview 00:24:08]