



Jimmy Sullivan Oral History Interview, June 23, 1983

Title

“Jimmy Sullivan Oral History Interview”

Date

June 23, 1983

Location

Location Unknown.

Summary

Jimmy Sullivan was born in San Antonio, Texas on April 24th, 1906. He served in US Army in chemical warfare from 1942 to 1945. As a young man, Sullivan worked a variety of service related jobs in Texas until following his brother to Portland in 1929. He lists the few jobs that were open to black men and women at the time. He began working as a dining car waiter in 1949 and retired in 1969. He details his experience of being away from home for work, balanced with the benefit of many days off to spend with family. He was a member of a secret Railroad union before the Local 465 dining car union was formed openly, which he joined. Sullivan defines the various issues dining car workers faced on the job. He also discusses customer loyalty and working on specialty trains and streamliners.

Interviewee

Jimmy Sullivan

Interviewer

Michael Grice

Website

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

Transcript

Unknown Speaker 1: --started to walk up on the mound, he said he called in all the field, so they ain't going to be no hidden.

Michael Grice: You sit down right around here.

Unknown Speaker 1: Yeah, that's right, call in all the field, come on in.

Jimmy Sullivan: Well, they tell me that's true.

Unknown Speaker 1: Well Chappy told me that a long time ago.

Unknown Speaker 2: Well, when they did this picture of his life they showed it, they showed him doing that.

Unknown Speaker 1: Yeah, mmmm.

MG: Okay, we going to start with the same kind of information that I did with Mr. Smith, so—

Unknown Speaker 2: Excuse me again, I got to go back again—

MG: Okay, just make yourself at home, please do. Okay, your birthplace?

JS: San Antonio Texas.

MG: Let me back up there; state your name, please.

JS: James P. Sullivan.

MG: Birthplace?

JS: San Antonio Texas.

MG: And birthdate?

JS: April 24th, 1906.

MG: And did you serve in Armed forces?

JS: Yes.

MG: And what years?

JS: Let's see; from July 1942 to October of '45.

MG: And branch in the armed forces?

JS: What branch?

MG: Yeah, it was—

JS: Army.

MG: Army, but I'm saying—

JS: U.S. Army.

MG: Was it infantry or quartermaster or?

JS: No, this was something new, a chemical warfare.

MG: Hmm. It was new at that time.

JS: Yes.

MG: Hmm. And were you a soldier in chemical warfare, were you as a—did you design it, or what, may I ask, what role did you play? What did you do in the army? What was your job?

JS: Well, what my job was; I went in as a PFC and within three months they split the company and made two companies, and then they looked up my record and I gave my record of being a food handler and then I was moved up to sergeant within three months. And then the next thirty days I was made staff sergeant, I was a mess sergeant.

MG: Okay. We can try to focus a little bit on your childhood and then transition to manhood and then transition to the railroad up there, or different or the same in terms of time, and then specifically about Portland and your association with the railroad and some of your experiences and encounters there. Why don't you just begin describing some of the things that you experienced as a child and let that sort of lead into when you started with the railroad?

JS: Well let me see now, I moved, we moved from San Antonio in 1913 to a little town in Runge Texas. And my father had a strip of land there and we worked that for about seven years. And finally we were all grown up and then nobody wanted to farm and we moved back to San Antonio. And then my brother, he come west in the early twenties to Los Angeles.

MG: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

JS: I had one brother and five sisters.

MG: So your brother had already moved out west.

JS: Yeah, he'd come west, and he's practically the main reason why we moved to Los Angeles; we left San Antonio and moved to Los Angeles.

MG: Okay, do you remember when you did that?

JS: Let's see, that was, the first trip there was in 1924 in the summer.

MG: Did you come on a visit first and then—

JS: On a visit.

MG: Okay.

JS: And then I went back and I was—didn't quite finish high school. I was approaching eighteen. See, my father worked for the railroad in San Antonio.

MG: Now what all, was that Santa Fe and—

JS: No, he worked for the IGN, the International Great Northern.

MG: Okay.

JS: And we could get a pass, see a free passes then, and I was approaching eighteen, so I got out of school to get a pass so I can come back to California. And then I went on back to California, and that's the way I started working in different places, like at a new car place as a kind of a trouble shooter, go out and fix flats, or people have a breakdown. And I never did delve into any dining car business until I was about fourteen; I picked up a train and worked at the Gunter Hotel.

[00:05:25]

MG: Now is this in Los Angeles?

JS: This is in the San Antonio.

MG: Okay.

JS: And then I got a little experience in handling food and serving people, and then I went on to Los Angeles and I worked around different places. I had an old 1922 Dodge touring car; I worked for drug stores as a delivery boy, I used to deliver then and I had to have a car, so I had a car. Then I had a friend that was working in a garage, he and my cousin and him, all three of us. He wanted to go to New York, and so we got together and planned this trip for the three of us, and it's a wonder we didn't freeze to death. We left Los Angeles on January 1st 1929, come up down through Colorado and our destination, we got at Kansas City and that's as far as we got.

MG: Now were you driving?

JS: Yeah.

MG: Were you driving a—

JS: No, I wasn't driving my car. My friend's car.

MG: But you had decided you were going to drive from Los Angeles to New York.

JS: Yeah, mhmm. That's where we were headed. Well, we got that far and then we worked in Kansas City. And my brother's already running from Portland to Omaha Nebraska, and so he found out I was in Omaha—in Kansas City—so he called me long distance and wanted to know if I wanted to come to Portland, and I said "no, I'm headed for New York." And what I was going to do in New York is—I think I was about twenty in 1920, twenty years old, I don't know, but he finally talked me into it and I come on to Portland. I got here on May the 4th, no—yeah, May the 4th 1929 and left out on a run May the 6th 1929. And up until 1979 without—with the exception of being in the service, I never lost a day.

MG: Huh, is that right?

JS: Mhmm.

MG: So you are—so you worked continuously from 1929 to '76.

JS: '79. '69.

MG: '69.

JS: I retired in '69, June.

MG: Let me go back then; are you married?

JS: I was.

MG: Were you married?

JS: I lost my wife in '77.

MG: Okay, did you have children?

JS: No, we didn't have any children.

MG: Okay. And how far did you go in school?

JS: I went up to within a half credit of finishing; that's when I left in order to get back to California. Of course I didn't know how I was going to get there without a pass, and so I just got out of school and never did go back. I did—when I got to Los Angeles I enrolled in night school, but oh, I just wasn't—

MG: It wasn't working?

JS: I wasn't settled enough. Oh no, it wasn't so much of working.

MG: It's just not of that much interest for you.

JS: No, there wasn't that much interest.

MG: Let me ask you something: as you worked, did you have long-range plans other than like travel to New York? Had you considered yourself to eventually become a service occupation worker or a doctor? You know, in terms of planning, what was your dream about what you was going to be when you grew up, even in your late teen years?

JS: Well, I wanted—

MG: Did you guys have that kind of imaginings, or...

JS: Well, what I wanted was to be secure. I wanted a job where I could raise a family and provide for them, and that was my goal. And in those days, why this railroad, railroading was about the only thing most—we could do out here.

MG: Did you come to discover that by accident, or had you known that all along, that occupations were pretty limited?

JS: No.

MG: Did you know that you were only going to be—that there weren't many jobs?

JS: Yeah, oh yes, yes, I did.

MG: So you weren't surprised that—

JS: No, uh-uh.

MG: That the railroad was about the most—the greatest option for you.

JS: That's—and it was the best for the black people.

MG: Mhmm. When you started on the road your brother was already working on the road?

JS: Yes.

[00:10:01]

MG: He was here in Portland.

JS: Mhmm.

MG: He was working between Portland and Omaha.

JS: That's right.

MG: In what capacity did you start in with the railroad, the dining car?

JS: The dining car, waiter.

MG: Okay. Well, did you have on-the-job training, like—

JS: No. I went right to work in the dining room and—

MG: With no training at all.

JS: No training whatsoever. See, I had experience serving, handling; I knew how to set a plate down, and so I had no problem there. Only thing I had, as Smith was telling you, handling that tray.

MG: Was that the biggest adjustment to it?

JS: That's the biggest adjustment.

MG: At the time now, then, you—were you married at the time?

JS: No.

MG: Mhmm. So in 1929 when you started with the road—

JS: I was single.

MG: You were single. Did you have any concerns about being away from home, or were you pretty much wide open to living any place?

JS: Oh, I liked it. And then when I got married, why we got adjusted, my wife, and then after later years we got a pretty nice layover. We'd work six and off six. Well, that's just like a vacation every other week. And so we kind of liked that. We could go to the beach, stay four or five days, come back and take my run out, come back and go somewhere else. And so we got adjusted there. It was no problem.

MG: You found that that was pretty satisfactory as far as [inaudible]—

JS: Very, very much so.

MG: How did other people in Portland relate to you as working on the railroad? Were they envious, did other people try to get on the road at the time, were there other jobs that you would have preferred to have had? Just talk.

JS: Well, there were other jobs that were preferable but there wasn't any. I think we had one mail carrier—not a mail carrier, a mail...hmm. One mailman and then we had about four or five mail clerks, railway mail clerks. And no, that was about it. And we had two chauffeurs.

MG: What did womenfolk do in Portland as an occupation?

JS: Well, Meier & Frank was about the biggest.

MG: Working in the store?

JS: In the store, as maids.

MG: Maids in the store, not as retail clerks.

JS: No, oh no. That was out of the question.

MG: So there's maids in the stores.

JS: That's right.

MG: Private homes as well, or was it more on the—

JS: Well there were quite a few in private homes.

MG: Did people—did women seek those jobs, or were they fairly readily available where it was a matter of going out and locating them or just contact—

JS: They tried to contact and they tried to form a kind of a union like, where they could apply for these jobs. But they wasn't successful.

MG: Now we've talked about, before, about your involvement with the union. Tell us, if you would, some of the early entrée of the union as it affected the railroad workers, that you recall, and your involvement.

JS: Well, before '32, 1932, we wasn't supposed to belong to a union, and if you were caught trying to join a union, you were fired. But prior to that time, why I was one of the men that was what you call an underground carrier. I would bring—I was running to Chicago and then Omaha, I would bring literature from Omaha and Chicago and vice versa, I'd take from here. We were trying to get organized from here to Chicago and Omaha Nebraska. And after 1932, then President Roosevelt made it mandatory that we could join a union and not be fired.

MG: Okay. Up till 1932, though, it was a hazard to be associated with or be—interesting. When did the unions come on? Was there union activity or was there actually a union to join before 1932?

JS: No, wasn't nothing before 1932.

MG: 1932 was there a union? Did something come to be?

JS: Yeah.

MG: And what, what was that?

JS: Well, that's when we organized, in 1932.

MG: Okay, and was that with the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, or—

JS: No.

MG: Or was this an adjunct [inaudible]—

JS: No, this was—we were alone, Local 465, Dining Car was local.

MG: Dining Car Union?

JS: Mhmm.

MG: Dining car workers?

JS: Yes.

MG: Was that the union that you were servicing then—

JS: Yes.

MG: as opposed to—was it affiliated with the AFL–CIO?

JS: Yes. AFL–CIO.

MG: Did you have any association then with A. Philip Randolph and his organization, or did your group—

JS: No.

MG: --sort of come under the umbrella there, or you were more or less independent?

JS: More or less independent, we were.

MG: Okay. Did you associate with the Pullman porters? Did union—how should I say—did labor practices or labor issues that were common to—such as hours, wages or whatever that were common to the dining car workers, were they also common to the sleeping car porters?

[00:15:26]

JS: No.

MG: So, you had more of independent issues.

JS: Yes.

MG: What were some of the things that your labor union wanted to address?

JS: Well, job security was number one, but it took us a long time before we got that.

MG: What else?

JS: And bargaining for higher wages, shorter hours.

Unknown Speaker: And wage guarantee.

JS: Yes.

MG: And wage guarantee, now what was a wage guarantee, now? So you get the same amount per month regardless, or?

JS: Yes. Regardless of seniority.

MG: And that's not so much hours but on seniority.

JS: Yes.

MG: Had there been a distinction prior to that?

JS: No.

MG: So people with more seniority made more, or?

JS: No.

MG: Okay.

JS: Seniority didn't count, as far as the wages.

MG: Okay. Well, let me let you talk for a minute. I've asked some questions; what kind of things do you recall that are particularly of interest, that someone listening to the tape eventually—and since we have a limited amount of time—that you would want to be sure and share about the railroad, about your experience, and/or about your role, either as a waiter or as a representative or assistant with the union?

JS: Well, I don't know if there's anything that I could tell you about that.

MG: Did you spend a lot of time at your—when you got to your destination you ran from Portland to Omaha?

JS: Portland yes, first Portland.

MG: Well tell me about your run, first of all.

JS: Well, say for instance we leave here like today and then a third day we went to Omaha and Nebraska, and then there we would—we were furnished quarters and we'd stay two nights at that time. Back and come home and stay two days and make the same trip over again.

MG: What were the positive aspects of working on the road?

JS: I don't quite follow you there.

MG: What did you like best about it?

JS: Oh, well I liked it because you got a chance to see the country and meet new people every trip, and besides, you were making a living.

MG: You were certain to be employed [unintelligible].

JS: Yes.

MG: Did things change much between the time that you started on the road and the time that you finished? What were some of the significant changes that you—

JS: Oh yes, you might say day and night difference.

MG: Such as?

JS: Such as working conditions.

MG: What were the working conditions when you began?

JS: Well, working conditions, I worked six hundred hours a month and I—my check wouldn't be twenty dollars more. Practically, I know I remember working four hundred and some hours and I think I drew down fifty-eight dollars for that month. This is in the early thirties.

MG: Well, you was on a monthly wage?

JS: Yes.

MG: You got paid by the month—

JS: I got paid by the month, that's right.

MG: Huh. You needed a union, then.

JS: Yes, and then that's where the union stepped in and got us shorter hours, a guarantee...

MG: Okay, anything else that you recall changing between the time that you began and—was there any change in the clientele or the kind of people that rode the train?

JS: Oh yes, very much so.

MG: Such as?

JS: Well, it was like—we were all just like one family when you used to ride the streamliner, and there's a certain people they would want to ride with a certain crew. They would call up and find out who was going out and they'd try they best to arrange so they could catch this certain crew.

MG: You talking about passengers?

JS: Passengers.

MG: Is that right?

JS: Yep.

MG: These were frequent riders of the railroad?

JS: Yes.

MG: You see some people over and again?

JS: Oh, yes.

MG: Did you ever work any specialty trains?

JS: Quite a few.

MG: You want to elaborate on any one of them that you recall? Was it very special, or would have been unusual?

JS: Well, let's see. That million dollar special we had, yeah.

Unknown Speaker: [unintelligible] special.

JS: Yeah.

Unknown Speaker: I guess that would have been the outstanding one.

JS: That's about the most outstanding special.

MG: Tell me about it. Tell me about it as what you recall of the role of that special. Where did it originate?

[00:20:13]

JS: Where it originated? Well let me see, we picked up some of their clientele here in Portland and then we moved on up to Seattle and we picked up the rest, and that meant the president, vice president of the Union Pacific and general managers and their wives. And it was just like a, you might say a vacation, on that trip. They had the best of everything. And when we come to the—got in the station here, we wasn't allowed to go home, because they were just that strict. They had special agents, there's policemen all around the train, and they watch. You ever got off of that train they'd play who's coming back.

MG: Was there any reason that security was so high? Is this the Harriman [spelling?] special?

JS: Yeah, that's the one.

MG: Was there—and I guess I understand that he was a—well maybe you could tell me who he was and why people were so concerned about his safety and whatnot.

JS: Well, he's just such a big man. That's the only reason I could understand why they were so concerned.

MG: They wouldn't let you go home though.

JS: No.

MG: And then where did the train go from here?

JS: Well after, let me see, after their sessions were over then we were released, and they took off; some of them went by plane and some went by train, back to their destination.

MG: But many ran from what, Omaha to here, to Seattle and back, or Portland?

JS: No.

MG: Originated in Portland, went to Seattle and back?

JS: Yeah, mmmm.

MG: So, where was the headquarters in for UP, and where did the president have his office in? Seattle, or—

JS: Omaha Nebraska.

MG: Omaha, okay. With your co-workers, do you recall any incidents on a train that were particularly nerve-wracking or exciting or unusual?

JS: Not a one.

MG: Not a one; pretty routine then? Having gone through all those years you might run—

JS: Forty-one years and not a one. Left with flying colors and didn't have no enemies. Not that I know of [laughs].

MG: You didn't have any [00:22:39 unintelligible], don't believe so.

JS: Nope.

MG: I believe you, so...Well, anything else that you can recall that you want to add to your own life story, or your own particular—I'm leaving something out, I feel, and I—

JS: Well, getting back to my railroading, what I liked best was when they first inaugurated the little streamliner, run from here to Chicago, it made it in two nights and a day at that time.

MG: Is that right?

JS: Thirty-nine hours and forty-five minutes.

MG: They got the little streamliner?

JS: Mmmm.

MG: That had a shorter train than a regular streamliner?

JS: Yes, it was. And that was put on—

MG: What kind of train was it now? How many cars are you talking about?

JS: I think it was two, three Pullman, two, five—it was about seven, eight including the engine. About eight, I would say.

MG: You got a baggage car, a dining car.

JS: Yes, a baggage car and dining car.

MG: A lounge car also?

JS: A lounge car, three Pullmans and two coaches.

MG: And it made it in two days—two nights and a day.

JS: Two nights and a day.

MG: Is that right?

JS: Yes. And that was inaugurated on June 1935.

MG: Now, you mean to tell me in 1935 they had a train that could go to Chicago in a couple days.

JS: That's right.

MG: And they have much improved on them. I mean the trains could go, actually go that fast.

JS: Yes.

MG: Was it an express train, so they had limited stops?

JS: Yes. They only make about— [audio cuts out].

[end of interview 00:24:34]