



Lonnie Wilson Oral History Interview, 1980s

Title

“Lonnie Wilson Oral History Interview”

Date

1980s

Location

Location Unknown.

Summary

Lonnie Wilson was born in Paris, Texas on October the 23rd, 1906. He reflects on memories and the character of “Old Good’n,” Michael Grice’s grandfather who worked on the railroad as well. Wilson’s parents were railroad people; his mother was a matron at the Santa Fe Frisco station in Paris, Texas and his father was a porter starting in 1917 on the Frisco line. Wilson describes working for a private family, the Scott family, from 1925 until 1941 when he left for the railroad. Wilson also recalls working as field executive for Boy Scouts and serving in the US infantry before coming back to the railroad in Portland in 1945. There he started out operating the jitney, selling sandwiches, coffee, milk, fruit and candy in coach, and then worked on the dining car.

Interviewee

Lonnie Wilson

Interviewer

Michael Grice

Website

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

Transcript

Lonnie Wilson: Who was his grandfather?

Michael Grice: He was a neat old man. Huh?

LW: Who was his grandfather?

MG: Chappy Grice, yeah.

LW: Well I know Chappy.

MG: Now, there's two Chappys; there's old Robert Grice who...

LW: I know the one that your father worked at—

MG: Red Cap.

LW: He was a Red Cap at the station.

MG: Right. Now his father, also name of Chappy, he ran on the road on the Southern Pacific.

LW: Well I didn't know him.

MG: Oh, you didn't?

LW: Mm-mm.

MG: Yeah, I—

LW: He was on the Southern Pacific; I didn't know him.

Unknown Speaker 1: Well you've missed something, you didn't know the Old Good'n.

Unknown Speaker 2: Yeah, that's right. Yeah, I used to run with him down to Coos Bay, how about that? [Several voices saying "yeah"].

MG: Would you like more soda?

LW: No, no thanks.

Unknown Speaker 3: I don't think I knew him either. I guess [inaudible].

Unknown Speaker: You know, come to think about it, I haven't seen him in a [00:00:49 unintelligible].

MG: The Old Good'n?

Unknown Speaker: Old Good'n.

Unknown Speaker: That's what I say man, he was light as a—

Unknown Speaker: step out of that house, he looked like he stepped out of a [00:00:57 unintelligible]. And you could see your face in his shoes.

Unknown Speaker: That's true, that's true. That man, he was a card, I'll tell you [laughs]. Yeah, he showed us the way.

Unknown Speaker: Yeah, he was a character, bless his heart.

MG: Well, we'll talk with Mr. Wilson and we will talk to Mr. Butler, and then we'll close it down. Are you comfortable?

LW: Oh yes, yes.

MG: Okay. We got more of everything, so. Well, state your name.

LW: Lonnie W. Wilson.

MG: And you was born where?

LW: Born in Paris Texas October the 23rd, 1906.

MG: That's where [00:01:52 unintelligible] is from Paris, Texas.

LW: Yes.

MG: You know—

LW: I know June and...

MG: Of course my mom is from De Kalb Texas.

LW: Well I knew—I know the whole family.

MG: Down that way.

LW: Oh yes.

MG: They're pretty close, I mean—

LW: Oh yes.

MG: Paris and De Kalb and Texarkana, in that area.

LW: Oh yes.

MG: Okay, you've heard some of the things that we have talked about. I'm basically interested in how you got started with the railroad and how you got to Portland and how you found it. You know, how you liked it.

LW: Sure.

MG: And who helped you out and so forth. I'm going to bring the microphone towards you just a little bit, just swing forward.

LW: That's right?

MG: Mhmm, that's fine.

LW: In other words, my parents were railroad people. In other words, my mother started as a matron at the Santa Fe Frisco station I guess around about 19...I guess around about 1905.

MG: Now where is the Santa Fe Frisco station?

LW: That's in Paris Texas.

MG: In Paris, huh?

LW: Yes. That was after—well my mother and my father separated when my brother and I were real small, and she married my stepfather I think around about 19, I guess about 1914. In other words, I was coming up six, and my brother was eight, and my mother worked at Santa Fe Frisco station until the Depression came in 1929. But prior to that time they wanted porters on the train there, on the Frisco, so they asked my mother, wondered would my stepfather be interested, so it saved our—he was working for a private family, so he accepted that to run on the road.

MG: So you're father started—

LW: No, that's my stepfather.

MG: Your stepfather started running on the road as a porter?

LW: In 1917, and he worked until he retired, and I think he ran about forty—about forty-four years on the Frisco.

MG: Now the Frisco, was that a separate line from the Santa Fe?

LW: Oh yes. See Frisco, what they had the [00:04:34 unintelligible] station to Santa Fe, and the Frisco, there was a terminal then, in Paris.

MG: In Paris, uh-huh. Now where did the Frisco line run to?

LW: Well the—in other words, out of that it ran from Paris—his run was from Paris to Monett Missouri, and he ran on that oh, quite a long time. And when the Depression came in 1929, well they abolished my mother's job at the Santa Fe Frisco station, but she could have gone over to Fort Worth, because she had seniority in that line of work as a matron. But she didn't go. She stayed at home. And my stepfather, he was running on the road, so at the same time he was a mechanic. So when he'd make his trip, he'd come in and put on his overalls and go do mechanical work.

[00:05:42]

MG: When you say mechanic, is that an auto mechanic, or—

LW: Yeah automobiles. Then a lot of time at night, well he would be called to come out and get cars and get them started back, so my brother and I, he would never have to ask us to go with him, you know, when he'd bring—so we would always volunteer and go with it. One reason; he was so, I say he was good to us, and so it was a joy for us to have gone with him, so we would do the driving while he would be in the back seat asleep until we got where the fella or person was in trouble with the car. And he'd work on it and start it if he could, and we'd tow it in, they'd tow it in. And so then, well I worked, I started to work for a private family in 1925. It was a Rufus Scott Jr. [spelling?], and well, he and his wife he married in 1924, and I started working for them in 1925, and they had two little girls. And well, the older little girl was four and the baby girl was two when Mr. Scott died, so that left her, and so I worked for her until 1941. That's when I came to Portland.

MG: And what prompted you to come to Portland?

LW: The one reason I came to Portland; Mr. Hill and Mr. Ellison, they were both teachers there in the high school in Paris Texas.

MG: [00:07:51 unintelligible] Hill?

LW: Yes. Yes, he was the science teacher, and Mr. Ellison, he was the manual training teacher. And also Mr. Hill, he was the athletic director of the school and Ellison was the football coach. And they came, they would come to Portland after school was out and run on the diner, during the season.

MG: During the summer?

LW: Yeah. Then they would come back and teach school. So in 1940, well they came out in '41, but they came back to Paris and gave up their teaching jobs to come to Portland and wait table on the Union Pacific. So Mr. Hill wrote me a letter and asked me would I be interested in coming to Portland. So in the meantime, I had taken a civic service

examination and I passed, but they wanted to send me to Lake Charles Louisiana, a little place got Mission Texas, to work in the Post Office. But that was janitorial work.

MG: Mhmm. The civil service [00:09:19 unintelligible] janitorial work.

LW: Yeah, so I didn't take that. And I was married and my wife, she was a beautician. So I decided to take a beauty course that's hair styling and barbering. And so before that developed, Mr. Hill asked me how would I be—how would I like to come to Portland. So I accepted and I came—

MG: [00:09:50 unintelligible]. And had he described Portland to you before, or did he try and tell you anything about it and just to invite you to Portland? Did he tell you it was worth it or it would be a good idea, or—

[00:10:01]

LW: Well, I know—he didn't have to tell me, because I know if he was giving up his position to come to Portland to run on the—

MG: On the road.

LW: --road on the dining car, it must have been worthwhile.

MG: Right.

LW: So he didn't have to twist my arm to get me to accept. So I accepted. So he wrote me a letter, you know, telling me about it. Then he said "when they get it all set up," he said "I will let you know." So he sent me a telegram telling me that my job was ready, said "but you wait for a letter of instruction." So he wrote this letter, I got this letter of instruction, you know, telling me to go to Kansas City to see a Mr. Beland [spelling?]; he was hiring in Kansas City, the waiters there. So after getting that letter of instruction I knew what to do. And so at the meantime, a lady that was cooking, you know, at the place where—she had already informed my boss lady that I was planning on quitting, and that just broke her heart.

MG: Mhmm. This is the same lady you had been working for with the two kids.

LW: Oh yes, so I worked there, worked for them for sixteen years. And so I think the young—I think the older girl, she was just ready to enter high school. But in the meantime, well after he passed, well I had to do all the errands and the taking them to the doctor and just everything.

MG: Everything, right.

LW: In other words, it looked more or less that she depended on me to do that, which it seemed like it worked. It was a pleasure, because they were lovely people to work for. Her mother and father and Mr. Scott's mother and father, they—oh, it was just a lovely family. And I'll tell you another thing; my stepfather was, had a house for rent, and this fella, he was coming over to sell this place, and so my stepfather told me about it. He said "now you say you—Scotts are so crazy about you," said "now this place is coming up, and so you know the place, it's a nice place, since you're married it would be"—no, I was just fixing to get married—said "it would be a nice place for you." So when she came in to breakfast that morning, well about nine o'clock, well I told her that I wanted this place. And then she called down to the first—in other words, she called a bank and told a body down there. So they sent a man out to appraise the place, and so when he came back, well he called and told her the place was worth more than it was being sold for. So when the man—so he said "when the man come, well I'll handle it, I need to come up to the bank so they can fix out the papers and then close the deal." And so when he got there, I guess around about twelve-thirty, by one o'clock the place was mine, because she done paid cash for the place. Yeah. Said "one thing about it; you won't lose it."

MG: Huh.

LW: Yeah. So it broke her heart when I left. Man, she wanted to, you know, "wait, give me a"—oh, but I done already made the plans in and out, so I just carried—

MG: Carried them on out.

LW: Carried them on out.

MG: I mean, she was trying to make it better for you to stay, and so forth.

LW: Oh yes, but even at that, at that time you know, Camp Maxey—wasn't too much going on there in Paris, you know, but this Camp Maxey came to Paris after I left, and it, oh, it hired a whole lot of people, this Camp Maxey. But after that—that was after I was gone. But she wanted, oh, she wanted to give me a good salary, but I—in other words, at that time I got pretty good money from, you know, the family. In other words, they gave me all, got all, bought all my clothes, a gold [00:15:02 unintelligible], all—they'd give me extra money. We'd go to Colorado Springs in that little cabin up in Manitou and up on Cheyenne Mountain. I'd go out in, and the real estate man, he'd take me out and I'd pick out the cabin. And see, I would drive out there, then they would come out on the train and everything would all be all set up for them.

[00:15:33]

MG: Right. Huh.

LW: So, but they were—I hated to leave, but you know it's like I said; I had married and money was a thing then.

MG: Right, it wasn't just a matter of taking care of yourself; it was a career.

LW: But my ex-wife, she was a beautician, and so she made good money. You know how women, when they make more money than you, well little boy, say it's time for you to do something to...

MG: Yeah.

LW: So I came to Portland. So I was coming out to Portland to work for two years, then I was going back to Paris. So sure enough, I came to Portland and I went for a little better than two years and I decided, when I came home on a visit and a field executive job for the Boy Scouts came up—of course in the meantime I had served as a Boy Scout master—

MG: Here in Portland?

LW: No, in Paris. For ten years. So when this field executive job came up, well they considered me. So when I was out on my vacation they asked me how would I like to be a field executive. So Uncle Sam was after me too, because all them deferments that they just kept on deferring me on the road, you know. So I accepted it. So in 1943 when I went back to Paris and served as a field executive, I had a good set-up. I enjoyed the work, but I paid for the work. In the meantime, it wasn't too long when I got there that I had to go to Mendham New Jersey to take my professional training in scouting. So while I was there I got greetings from my "uncle," but the wife didn't send it up there; she waited till I got home. And so when I got back, well quite naturally that was my greeting. So when I reported, I told that I had my greeting, so well, they would send you over to Dallas to take your physical examination. So when I got back, I passed, and so I had this field executive pin on, you know, and so after I passed he said "what kind of pin that you wearing?" I said "it's a field executive for the Boy Scouts." He said "well you'll make a good man in the infantry." Boom, they put me in the infantry. So on my papers it said "you have twenty-one days to get ready, so don't mess up." So when I came back and I reported that I had passed, so the executive called the president of the Lone Star [00:18:54 unintelligible] Council and told them I had passed and said "go to the draft board and see if you can do something about it." He said "now, we're going on a mission this morning, so in about an hour, so we'd like to know before we go.

MG: Go away.

LW: Yeah. So I guess about a half an hour, telephone rings, he laughs, he said "Lonnie," said "it's all over." I said "what's all over?" He said "Mr. Pat May [spelling?] went to the draft board and they done re-classed you." So about two weeks later I got a reclassification: 2-B. At the meantime, he tells me, said, he said "Lonnie, I'm glad you passed for to serve," said "but I hate to give you up." I said "you mean to hate to give me up to go to serve for my country?" he said "I don't mean it like that," said "you a good man, so I just hate to give you up." I said "well, I want you to know that I'm not the

cause of my getting out of it. See, because if I already passed and they done stamped it on my paper and I was physically fit to go in service and you done got me out of it, well I blaming you." And well, we just laughed it off.

[00:20:34]

Well, about four months later a lot of the fellas that took their physical examination the same day I did, I don't know what they did, but they sent them right on up. Some of them was in New Guinea. Yeah, they were in New Guinea.

MG: So they went right into the infantry.

LW: They went right on in.

MG: So when did you get back to Portland?

LW: Well, I came back to Portland in 1945. And well, I went on to the commissary, he was a black called Mr. Welles [spelling?], had already told me, said "Lonnie," said "you get out there, don't like your job; you always got a job here." So I didn't have no problem getting back.

MG: Okay, what was it that brought you back to Portland?

LW: Well, what brought me back to Portland was finance.

MG: Okay.

LW: Cause see, in other words freelancing is a job that starts you off at a hundred and—at that time—a hundred and twenty-five dollars a month and sixty dollars travelling expense. Well, that was pretty good money at that time before all these other things started, but see—

MG: Couldn't compete.

LW: Yeah. So but after I had worked these two years out in Portland, shit I was picking up more money in tips than I was in—

MG: Salary.

LW: Salary and everything, than I was picking with everything.

MG: Uh-huh. And you came back up here and worked in the chair car, or dining car?

LW: No, I was in the dining car.

MG: Okay.

LW: But the first, when I first come to Portland, well I caught a, I think it was an Ogden crew, but they came out of Kansas, they had been to Kansas City and working their way back, and so that diner was out of Kansas, and when they cut out they cut out at, I believe, at Green River. So I caught a Portland crew out of Green River into Portland. But in the meantime, I helped them in the diner on my way. You know, familiarizing myself with the work. I knew how to work waiting table because they would call the fellas from the school to serve a lot of the parties and conventions and things at the Gibraltar at the hotel.

MG: Right. Where is the Gibraltar Hotel at?

LW: That's in Paris.

MG: Paris, okay.

LW: And I knew food, because they had all types of good food with the family that I—and we even had one of the big Navy officials that...I can't recall his name. Anyway...

MG: But anyway, you came in here and worked on the diner.

LW: Yeah, well I came and started back on the diner, but when I first came to Portland I operated the jitney. I worked on the jitney for all—practically the whole two years.

MG: Okay, is a jitney is—is a snack car?

LW: No, that's where you sold sandwiches and—through the coaches and—

MG: Oh, you walked through.

LW: Yeah. Coffee and milk.

MG: Right.

LW: Fruit, candy. And so, then they—I was, in other words, I relieved either Harold Grey or Stan Duke [spellings?]. But they finally put the— [audio cuts out]

[end of interview 00:24:36]