



Woodrow E. Wilson Oral History Interview, August 12, 1983

Title

“Woodrow E. Wilson Oral History Interview”

Date

August 12, 1983

Location

Location Unknown.

Summary

Woodrow E. Wilson was born in Dallas, Texas on January 13th in 1924. His mother placed him and his siblings in an all-black orphanage home in Gilmer, Texas where he stayed until he was fourteen. At seventeen he moved in with his half-brother's family in Portland Oregon. He joined the Navy in 1942 and joined the Union Pacific Railroad in Portland when he returned to civilian life in 1946. Wilson describes working first as a fourth cook, then third cook, and finally second cook, and describes the duties of each level. An unknown speaker in the recording tells stories about waiters making fun of him as a dishwasher on the train. Wilson talks about working at a hospital for four years and about working on special trains and his involvement with the association of chefs in Portland. He relays passenger feedback about the food served on the train. Wilson also discusses the pros and cons of railroad work and recalls getting trapped on a train in a 1948 snowstorm.

Interviewee

Woodrow E. Wilson

Interviewer

Michael Grice

Website

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

Transcript

Michael Grice: Okay. Start over again.

Woodrow E. Wilson: Okay. I was born in Dallas, Texas.

MG: State your name.

WW: My name is Woodrow E. Wilson, I was born in Dallas, Texas January the 13th, 1924. And my mother had four girls and a boy. She sent us to a place called an orphanage home in Gilmer, Texas. During that time, they didn't have welfare, and so...

MG: They had orphan homes.

WW: So they had orphan homes, and this was an all-black orphanage home.

MG: In Gilmer Texas?

WW: In Gilmer Texas. And I stayed there until I was about, oh, I'd say fourteen. Then I went to a place called Paris, Texas. I was with my—I went to live with my half-brother's family named Hooks, Mr. and Mrs. Hooks, and I went to stay there. And I stayed there until I was about seventeen. And then my mother came to Portland, so she wrote my oldest sister, which was Clara, which had gone to Oklahoma City, and she asked my mother to come. And I wanted to join the Navy, but I wasn't quite old enough. So you had to be eighteen to get in the Navy, so my mother came and she had to sign some papers in Los Angeles so I could join the Navy.

MG: Right. She had been living in Portland?

WW: She had been living in—she's living in Portland.

MG: What year was that?

WW: That was in, oh...I got to go back and think, let me see. It was...oh, I've got my Navy papers downstairs. I've got...we'll I'd say about '42.

MG: '42, during the war.

WW: During the war, about '42.

MG: Okay.

WW: Yes.

MG: So your mama's living here around then, in Portland.

WW: Mama, she was living here in the forties, and so I came on about in '42 and I went in the Navy. And I went to Chicago Great Lakes to be inducted. And then I left from Chicago and I went to San Juan Puerto Rico where I was stationed at. And I traveled all over in the Caribbean area, see, and I was on the ship called the YP-64, and I forgot how many crew, how many crew was on there, but anyway it was a YP—it was a mine sweep.

MG: Right.

WW: Okay, and I spent about three and a half years in the Navy, and after I got out the Navy I came to Portland to—

MG: Came on back here where your mom—

WW: Came on back here where my mother was and talked to my mother. In the meantime, all before that I had been keeping in contact with all my sisters and things like that. And then after I got to—after I got to Portland, my brother

Lonnie, half-brother, told me "go down and try for the Union Pacific Railroad," I wanted a job. And I went down there and I start cooking at the Union Pacific Railroad. And—

MG: And did you pick up cooking skills in the Navy?

WW: Well no, I picked up some cooking skills in Paris. I worked at a few restaurants around in Paris, Texas, which I was more or less a helper, and I was watching the cooks and things like that. So—well I don't want to tell you down there, down there they had a lot of blacks to do this and that. So I was washing dishes and restaurants and cafes and things like that, being around food, right. And so then I got on the train and I started washing dishes on the Union Pacific as fourth cook. Then I worked my way on up to third cook, which is a vegetables, you know, prepare vegetables and things like that, and I finally got to be the second cook, which I would prepare breakfast and things like that for the crew, in which I would run from Portland to Los Angeles and Portland to Seattle, and I'd run from Portland to Denver, and—[tape cut].

Unknown Speaker: Working in the kitchen, you know how smart mouthed waiters were?

WW: Oh yes, I remember them.

Unknown Speaker: Okay. "Need some matches." "For what?" "So you can burn up them dishes. You sure in the hell ain't going to get them washed up." So finally he says "what you need, you need to get you some elbow grease." Like a fool: "where is it? Where can I find some?"

WW: You were looking for it [laughs].

Unknown Speaker: "Underneath the sink, see if it's under there, might be some under there." They had me looking for elbow grease for about ten minutes, then I figured out what was going on.

[00:05:08]

WW: After you hear little sniggers here and there.

Unknown Speaker: No, they's laughing out loud; they were just laughing out loud. [Tape cut].

MG: Okay, let's pick up when you came to Portland now. Tell me, you got out of the Navy and then what?

WW: I got out of the Navy and I came, I went to Los Angeles. And then my sister talked me into coming to Portland. I came to Portland where my mother was living—

MG: Okay, and when you got out of the Navy, now what year was that?

WW: That was in '46.

MG: Okay, alright. Now that's about the years, okay.

WW: Then I came on to Portland and to stay with my mother. And then I went—I worked at a poultry yard for about, oh about two months.

MG: Poultry.

WW: Poultry, yeah. Then I left there and started working for the Union Pacific Railroad.

Unknown Speaker: Stop.

MG: How did you get onto the road, though?

Unknown Speaker: Michael, could you come here please? [Tape cut].

MG: Okay.

WW: And I stayed there till in 1953 and I went from a fourth cook, then I went on to the third cook and went on to second cook.

MG: What was the difference in the job? What did the fourth cook do?

WW: The fourth cook, he washed the dishes and things.

MG: Uh-huh. The third cook?

WW: And then third, the third cook, he peeled all the vegetables and helped wash the dishes, and then got to be the second cook. The second cook did most of your frying and watching the chef, helping the chef bake and do things like that.

MG: When you say bake, did they bake bread on the train?

WW: Well not—they had stopped baking bread by the time I got there, but they once did. Now they mostly baking meat and pies and things like that.

MG: They did bake pies on the train.

WW: They did bake pies, yes.

MG: So the pies people were eating were freshly baked.

WW: They were freshly baked, right. And then in 1953 they kept changing men; when the men come in they would have no work for them, they had quite a few people on the train, so I got disgusted and started working at a hospital. One of my friends told me about this cook job at the hospital and I tried to—decided I'd give that a try. Okay, and after I started working in hospital I went up, you know, as a first officer to third—well I'd say a third cook, you know, and then I'd help with the vegetables and things like that. And then I did that for about, oh about four years, and we was preparing good food for the hospital.

MG: During the time that you were working on the train, where did you travel to? Where was your run?

WW: Oh, I ran from here to Chicago on the streamliner, city of Portland, and then I would go from—also I would go sometimes to Green River Wyoming and back, and then back. And sometimes I would go up to Seattle for three days and come back. So it was really nice. And also I would sometimes—we would go out on specials and I would go places like Omaha, plus Denver, things like that.

MG: And what would a special consist of?

WW: Special would be consist of soldiers. Sometimes they would have some soldiers that was going different places and things like that. So, they—

MG: They put special trains together run on UP tracks.

WW: Special train to run on UP tracks, and they had soldiers and things like that, and we fed them three meals; breakfast, lunch and dinner.

MG: Were there any—oh I see, you had a regular schedule of meals.

WW: Regular schedule of meals, yeah.

MG: Did you also work on any of the special trains with the railroad personnel?

WW: Yes—well no, you talking about private cars, more or less. Well no, because what we would do sometimes, we would be borrowed from the Union Pacific to go out on the Southern Pacific, which that's from here to Oakland. We

would go on the Union—Southern Pacific down to Oakland and prepare meals. We'd do that about three or four days until then we could come back.

MG: Same job.

WW: Same job, yeah.

MG: So the person that was, say, the second cook, he would know all the jobs.

WW: He would know all the jobs.

Unknown Speaker: Stop. Michael— [tape cut]

WW: --in which I think was really nice. Okay, and then I got to meet, in fact I got to meet the vice president once of the Chef De Cuisine. And we'd meet every first Monday, we'd meet the second Monday. We'd meet the first Monday for the board members and then we'd meet the second Monday for the entire crew of the chefs, yes.

MG: And these chefs had come from where? Were they all other railroad chefs as well?

WW: The chef—no, it wasn't the railroad, it was the chef that was around Portland, different restaurants in Portland and things like that. So you know, you'd make—shall I call, can I call some names?

[00:10:09]

MG: Sure.

WW: Okay, [00:10:10 unintelligible], and also...prime rib and downtown at the Benson.

MG: Chefs at the various established eating...

WW: Right, at the Benson Hotel, the chef at the Benson, right. And then Multnomah Hotel and things like that, you know; chef at different eating places, and we'd get together every so often and we'd exchange ideas and things like that.

MG: When you worked, when you worked on the railroad as a chef, did you get very many comments from the people then about the food?

WW: No, I wasn't on as a chef, see. I got—I worked on the railroad as second cook, see. I left the railroad, though.

MG: You still contributed to the food on there.

WW: Right, for the food on there. I didn't get—

MG: Did you get very much feedback?

WW: Oh yes we got very, a lot of feedback, and people enjoyed and things like that, you know, and they enjoyed the meal and they send you little notes and things like that, that they enjoyed everything, you know.

MG: Now between Portland and Chicago it takes you a couple; three, couple, two and a half days to get to Chicago, right?

WW: Right.

MG: What's the crew there—where did you sleep?

WW: Well we had, we would sleep in a car next to the dining car. We would tear down and we would make a box, make our box down and things like that.

MG: Is this is a dormitory car?

WW: It was kind of like a dormitory car. All the crew would sleep right on there, see, in this car. And it was pretty nice.

MG: Do you maintain a relationship with the gentlemen through the Railroad Senior Citizens Association? Is that a, is that a good organization?

WW: Oh yes, that's a pretty organization. I still know the fellas and we all still converse with each other and things like that.

MG: Working on the railroad obviously was a very special time, even for the people that only served a few years, like yourself.

WW: Right, right.

MG: Because it was one of the few places that blacks got in.

WW: Right, right.

MG: What do you think other people perception of the railroad is? How did it work for them?

WW: Oh, I thought it worked real good for them, especially for the waiters because you take a lot of waiters, they bought homes by working for the railroad, you know, and the money was really—the money was really nice too, you know. Per se—tips, per se, and things like that, so the guys got a chance to buy things that they wouldn't have, in other words. See, in other words you got jobs, the job on the railroad; you couldn't get jobs in Portland like that, you know. And the railroad, you could get real good job, you know, even though I tell you like if—even if you wasn't skilled by the time you got on the railroad, you build up your skill. You get a chance to really do things on the railroad.

MG: I would say, and in many ways it almost became a profession for many.

WW: Right, it almost came profession too, and really, and I liked the railroad.

MG: What was the hardest thing about working on the road? Was it being out of town or meeting the long hours, or—

WW: Well it really, to me—well during that time I was a young man it was being out of town; I want to come in. I'll never forget I had to go out and Duke Ellington was playing someplace and I had to go out and I hate to miss it, you know, and I definitely had to, you know, go out on the train, and a lot of things that I missed that were, by me changing jobs, I got a chance to, you know, participate in all of these things.

MG: On the other hand, while you were out of town you were getting a chance to travel and see other cities and fresh from another angle, and people were stationary didn't have a job that took them places, —

WW: Right

MG: --weren't able to see.

WW: Right.

MG: Could you appreciate that?

WW: Oh yes, I really appreciate that, because sometimes I get in Chicago and it was—I liked some hotels and things that I'd go to in Chicago, and then they had the Persian Hotel in Chicago that I really liked, and also Denver; when I'd travel to Denver, Denver Five Points, that was really nice, and—

MG: Did you ever establish friendships in other cities, that you had friends in Chicago or friends in Denver that you—

WW: Oh yes, I had—I established friendships in most of those cities and things like that, well yeah.

MG: Was this the case with most of the crew, that they were enjoying the city at the other end?

WW: Yeah, most of the crew, most of them enjoyed the city at the other end. They established friends, you know, and sometimes the friends would even come out here, you know, on special things and they'd get a chance to meet and converse with each other. It was really nice, yeah.

MG: Anything, any special incident that you can think of that happened while you were working on the road that—

[00:14:45]

WW: Okay, I remember one, I remember one. We had a—I'll never forget, this was in 1948, I do remember this date. We had a snowstorm and it was in Green River Wyoming and this snow storm the train got bogged in all this snow and they couldn't move out, and the steward came on, the steward told all of us "now, we have to feed these people because they are stuck here, so we have to feed them and everything," so we didn't know we was going to run out of food if we stayed, you know, because we usually, we don't take food to last us about a couple or three days, because we usually get where we were going. But by the same token, we knew that we didn't have enough food to get beyond three days, and this was about the third day, and we start looking for food. Well, right on this track father over was a box car and it had food in it, and we broke in that and got some food and things like that and we had to feed all the people free, and also we condemned all of the—well we condemned all the whiskey on the train too, see. And we stayed there and then until finally about four days, which we thought it lasted about six. We didn't know what would happen. And about the fourth day it kind of start smoothing out and then we got ready to go, which was really nice.

MG: Huh. But during all that time you kept it from being a crisis by—

WW: Right, we kept from being a crisis by using...

MG: Using ingenuity.

WW: --ingenuity and also by breaking in this car and getting these supplies where we can keep feeding, you know, keeping the food up so the passengers, you know, we didn't let them get panicked.

MG: Right. Of course that was a service to the railroad.

WW: Right, right. So it was alright. And I was just thinking about some phone calls after I got stuck that I had made and we had made and I know I made one to my wife. I said "I'm stuck," and that's as far as I could go, that I'm stuck, you know, because one of those kind of quaint phones, and then she asked me when I came home what did I mean that I was stuck; she couldn't understand [laughing]. Yeah, because it was really—and then a lot of—

MG: That you're snowbound though, right.

WW: Snowbound. A lot of other people, they had making phone calls and things would go wrong, and we had a lot of fun talking about different things, you know. So actually when you end up, it was a fun trip more than it really was an emergency trip, really.

MG: Yeah, an experience.

WW: Yeah, an experience, really.

MG: Those kind of occasions really make quite a few with the railroaders that—

WW: Oh yeah, and I—and then too I think you get friendly with the fellas more that way when you get in a crisis and things like that, you know.

MG: Did fellas seem to pull together as a team, as well?

WW: Yeah, they really did. They pulled together as a team and really by—I don't know when the fellas worked as a team like that, and they go together and they stand together right there and they kind of tell about their family and you discuss your family and you get to be where you really know each other, you know.

MG: Would you say that they generally got along as a crew and it wasn't too much fussing? Because they had to work together for days at a time.

WW: They generally—generally they got along, you know. You had a few little incidents, but it wasn't much, you know. But really they—as a rule they got together, because when they'd come in town, I'll tell you, when I came in town some of my friends I go see all the time when I came in town; very, very nice. And one of the—one of my chefs when I was on the railroad, he moved—I was living in southeast Portland then—he moved all of my stuff over here on northeast in this house I'm living now, and I got ready to pay him, he said "just put some gas and forget it," because you know, this is kind of guys they were, you know.

MG: Yeah. Of course when you look at the constituency of the Railroad Senior Citizens Association there's a lot of good people.

WW: Right a good—lots of them, really.

MG: Well anything else that you want to add? We got a couple minutes on the tape. Is—

WW: Well all I can say, I enjoyed working on the railroad and I still keep in contact with all my fellas that I worked on the railroad with, and some that I knew of when I was on the railroad we still converse with each other and everything, so I think the railroad was really nice, nice place to work, I really do.

MG: Okay. I think we're about out of time, right?

[end of interview 00:19:23]