

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Erie Lackawanna Railroad

Personal Experience

O H 1303

EDWARD I. HIGGINS

Interviewed

by

Joseph Demetra

on

December 7, 1989

## EDWARD I HIGGINS

Mr Higgins was born in the Youngstown area, but as a child growing up in the Depression, he was sent to the "country" to relatives who could better feed him. He has a very good recollection of the 1930's. After graduating from high school, he tried to get into the Merchant Marine service, but after a few months training, he found that he didn't like life at sea. He was then drafted by the Marine Corps and was sent to the Pacific theater. He returned to Youngstown (Girard) after the war and got a job as a clerk on the Erie Railroad. Not long after hiring, he was promoted to yardmaster and then full-time yardmaster.

In 1961, he was promoted to General Yardmaster at Leavittsburg. He was transferred two years later to Kent, Ohio. After a few more transfers, he was promoted to General Yardmaster in Chicago, Illinois. In this capacity, he put in twenty hour days, six and seven days a week. He also encountered a lack of support from his superiors and stiff resistance from the pro-union train crews.

He returned to Youngstown as yardmaster in 1972 and worked until 1982.

D This is an interview with Edward Higgins for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on the history of the Erie Lakawanna Railroad, by Joseph Demetra, on December 7, 1989

H [I have] two distinct memories, but I do not know the time sequence of which came first and which came second. My first that I can recall is leaning on the dining room table in my house, and the doctor was pouring alcohol in my arm. I remember the pain.

D He was pouring alcohol into your arm?

H Yeah. I had an abscess. I was struck by an automobile which I found out later I got a fractured skull and this arm was torn up. The whole left side was torn up. It was my first memory, I think.

D About how old were you then?

H Five or six years old. I do not remember anything from my childhood before that. My younger brother told me that we went to Philadelphia when I was three or four. He remembers, I do not.

My second memory is when we lived up on Washington Avenue. I went to school at St. Rose, which was about two miles [away]. I remember crawling home along the curb because the wind was blowing so hard, and it was raining so hard that it knocked me down. I had to crawl along the curb to get to my house. My first memory of school was the third grade. I do not remember first or second grade. That is about it.

D What was it like in the Depression? Do you remember soup lines or a lot of adults being unemployed?

H It broke my family up. My father went out to work for people on farms. He had to stay there. He worked just for milk and eggs, and chickens and things that he would bring home. We would see him on the weekends, maybe. My mother had to go. She finally got a job. I do not know how old I was when she did it, but she got a job as a scrubber at a Hotel. My younger brother and I, when she was working -- I would say I was eleven or twelve, and my brother is two years younger than I am, he was nine -- we did most of the housework. I have three brothers and two sisters. There is five years difference between me and the next oldest. They were all grown up and they were all doing their own thing, and we were left all the chores. I did the washing, the ironing, and the scrubbing and everything else.

D What did your dad do before he had to go out and work on the farms?

H He was a puddler in a steel mill.

- D A puddler? What does a puddler do?
- H Well a puddler, he took off the top of the molten metal. He was making a hundred and twenty dollars a day.
- D A day?
- H In 1928.
- D That was pretty good money for then.
- H A lot of people made a lot of money before the Depression. They were making good money like they are now.
- D You went to Girard High School?
- H Yeah.
- D Do you have any memories of going to Girard, like your first car?
- H My first car I got after I was married. I had been married for a year and a half at least.
- D You did not need a car before that?
- H I could not afford a car before that. To get around to do the necessary things, we had bus transportation. It was very good bus transportation.
- D What was Youngstown and Girard like back then? I hear a lot of people say how busy it was. The downtown area was really bustling.
- H You could go to downtown Youngstown at twelve o'clock at night and see more people down there at twelve o'clock at night than you see at noon today. You did not walk around frightened. Nobody was afraid of anything. Girard was the same way. It was bustling town.
- D Were a lot of the people involved in the steel industry in Girard?
- H They had the tannery and they had the steel plant. I do not know if you consider it in Girard, called Ambridge--American Bridge and Iron. They had a steel mill. That was the last mill that my father worked at. After the Wall Street crash, from what I can understand, they just packed that steel mill up, took it right off the concrete foundations and moved it. Then my father was out of a job. Then of course, he tried everything. He went down to Pittsburgh and tried to work there and got it. It lasted for five or six weeks or three or four months or something like

that, then they would close down. Then he would go up to the lake and try to work on the fishing boat. It got so that there were too many men and not enough jobs. So he ended up doing what he did.

D Did you serve in the military before you were on the railroad?

H No. I hired out on the railroad the day that I graduated from high school.

D How did that come about? Why the railroad?

H Well, my brother Tommy, my oldest brother, had worked for that railroad in the engineering department. He had a connection. That was how they hired. They hired family or you knew somebody. I could not get anything else to do. Just waiting to get drafted anyway, or called up. I hired out on the Erie Railroad on May 31, 1943.

D Do you remember the steam engines back then?

H Oh yes. The steam engines were still being used in 1943. Diesel came in after the war.

D You were hired as a clerk?

H Yeah.

D Then you really would not have had much of an occasion of being on the steam locomotives then, right?

H No.

D What was your first clerical job? Where at?

H NK yard.

D At Briar Hill?

H No. They had three yards in the Youngstown area. The NK yard which is down near Hazel, Briar Hill and Holmes Street which is where the terminal was downtown. Holmes Street was the former name of Fifth Avenue.

D Oh, yeah?

H Yeah. Remember the bridge? Remember the Consolidated Warehouse on the other side?

D Yeah

H Okay That was called Holmes Street

D. H-O-M-E?

H H-O-L-M-E-S

D. Was the yard down there pretty big?

H It was a passenger yard Passenger station and also there were store cars there for Consolidated Warehouse and the other industries and little warehouses, and various industries they had downtown Also, we had our freight house there.

D Did you work in the freight house?

H Yeah

D So you were pretty much on call wherever they needed you, then?

H When you were first hired out, everybody was like that Everybody that they hired down there was called You answered the call. If you did not take the call, you did not work anymore

D They would not call you in?

H No.

D How did you get into yardmastering?

H Well, I went to the military six months I went in the Merchant Marines sometime in winter

D Why did you do that?

H Patriotism Everybody that I went to high school with was either joining up or being drafted I knew I was going to get called anyway, so I thought I would try the Merchant Marines I did not like the Merchant Marines I quit

D Did you make any trips with them?

H No. All I did was go to school

D What did you not like about that?

H Well, they lied to me. They told me when I went in, I went to school to be a fireman on the ship I went to school for that for, I would say, two months I learned to be a seaman too Then when it came time to graduate, they wanted to ship me out as a messman So, I just told them no, and I quit It was not actually military service

D You still could quit?

H Oh yeah So I quit there and I came back to work Then, I think it was about seven months later, I was drafted I went to Cleveland, and he asked me which service I wanted and I asked for the Marine Corps.

D Why is that?

H Because he wanted to be in the Marine Corps, too, I suppose We went to boot camp together, but I never saw him again after that I got back out, I think, in 1946 Wait a minute -- November of 1946.

D Discharged in November of 1946?

H Yeah So, I went in January of 1945, so it was almost two years

D Did you go over seas with the Marine Corps?

H I was in Central Pacific, and I was in China

D Was that interesting? Anything you had to learn a little about that?

H Well, I really cannot say too much about the Marine Corps, per see, about what I did in the Marine Corps, except to tell you I did a lot of things in the Marine Corps. I drove trucks I was an M P (military police) I was a mailman in China Just about anything I did anything anybody asked, or told, me to China was the experience that I will never forget I saw that, and I could not imagine why people put up with what those people put up with

D Like what?

H Poverty People in the United States really do not know what poverty is They see how people live One side of the street you have got people who are millionaires and on the other side of the street, you have got millions of people doing everything to stay alive What really got me, I suppose, is those people took it I could not understand that. Then I found out later that they would have been taking it for two thousand years As far as us being over there, I know it was stupid It was very dangerous because that was the time that the communists and the nationals were fighting over who was supposed to protect

the Americans. But, they gave us rifles and guns, and they gave no ammunition with them

D No ammunition?

H No ammunition. One of my last jobs was driving with mail and military correspondence, and so on. Back and forth it was about a seventy-five mile trip one way across the desert by myself. That was what I did three times a week. It took a day to get there. The roads were so bad. And another day to go back.

D Did you ever break down?

H No, thank God. Then I got discharged and I came back. I had a month's leave coming to me, so I took it. When my month's leave was up, I went back to work on the railroad.

D They held your job for you?

H Yeah, they had to because they passed a law by then making the employers do it. When they first started going back after VE day, employers did not want to hire you back. They already had employees. Then Congress passed the law.

D What do you think about the atomic bombs on Japan?

H Well, they say it saved a lot of lives and it saved money, but it sure opened a can of worms. That is all I can say. I would rather they had not discovered it.

D You came back to the Youngstown area, and were working for the Erie Railroad as a clerk still?

H Yeah.

D Okay, what kind of jobs did you do in that?

H Then, I got married and went to school.

D At Youngstown?

H On the G I Bill of rights. I would go to school to study to be an accountant. I got married in 1948. I was working part-time on the railroad, going to school, and then my father -- we living in an apartment -- my father talked me into building a house. So, I was building a house, going to school, working, and we had a new baby by then. It was just too much for me. I had to give up something. By that time, I had been in 1949 or 1950, I was working on call as a yardmaster. So, I gave up school. Then in 1951, I was made a full-time yardmaster. I had to fight



to get that

D How was that?

H Well, there was an older man who was a yardmaster. He had not made yardmaster until he was forty years old. In 1951, I was twenty-five years old. He thought I was too young to be yardmaster. He told me, "The man was honest. I cornered him on it, and I asked him why. Because when he got promoted to yardmaster, the superintendent called me in and talked to me. See, I got along with the company. They also asked the other officials what they thought of me. He was the only one who thought I should not become the yardmaster. Well, I asked him why, and he told me, 'I think you are too young.' I said, 'What do I have to do--be sixty-five before I become a yardmaster?' He said, 'I was forty before they made me one.' I says, 'What has that got to do with me?' Then he thought about it for a while, and he says, 'You are right.' He put in a good word for me and then I was made yardmaster."

D They wanted to see how you acted in the company at all?

H Yes. They do it with all of the persons. You did not know that did you?

D. No.

H. Every corporation does it.

D [Do you have] any regrets about going into yardmastering instead of school?

H No. Not really. I love railroading. I really like railroading, and I loved working for the Erie Railroad. It was the same, but every day was different. It seemed like it was. You went out, and you switched cars, and you did that. On the surface, it looked like everything was the same every day of the week. It was not. You can never tell what is going to happen in the railroad. I enjoyed it until we became Conrail.

D Was this like early 1950 or 1951 when you were made a full-time yardmaster?

H: [It was] 1951. That was also the year that the railroad yardmasters became unionized.

D What did you think about that?

H I thought it was a good deal. When I hired out, I went to work seven days a week.

D As a clerk?

H As a clerk Also, I was working seven days a week as a yardmaster One of the first things they did when they became unionized, was they got one day a week off Now, since 1951 up until 1971 when I came back from Chicago, I never worked a five day week It was six or seven days for twenty-four hours a day Because in 1968, I got promoted again

D To what?

H To general yardmaster in Leavittsburg The major reason I took it is because it was the time of the steel strike. Business generally in the country was down In 1960, I did not have enough seniority to hold a yardmaster's job, to become a yardmaster I had just barely enough seniority to hold on as an extra. Well, they promoted me to general yardmaster and that was one of the reasons I took it

D: Was that a supervisory job?

H Yeah Then, Leavittsburg was very, very busy Of course, when I went there, like I said, steel was down In fact, when I first got the job on July first, my first action after I became general yardmaster, was to knock off three jobs. There was not enough business for them But the job, my territory was from Leavittsburg, Ohio to Cortland, Ohio In along what we call North Warren--the town of steel, Copperweld Steel, Heltzel, Wean Engineering There was a small plant approximately every half a mile on both sides of the tracks from about Leavittsburg to where the Packard Electric plant is now Almost into Cortland Wean was big at that time Manufacturing was very large then When business picked up, we of course, brought them back on. Right now there's nothing out there but Packard

D Did you enjoy that job?

H Yeah It was a challenge

D Was that the kind of job that you were on call twenty-four hours?

H Yeah

D How long did you do that?

H One year Then I went to as the general yardmaster Then I started at Kent outside of Industrial Switching The only thing I did there, we handled main line trains That was my first experience with main line trains Everything was a different experience. I also worked at the passenger depot in Youngstown while I was around here I enjoyed that a lot I had passenger train experience in Youngstown at the depot I had major industrial switching experience at Brier Hill with the Sheet & Tube and Ohio Works and the big mills, and all that stuff, and

coal. Then at Leavittsburg, I had industrial switching, and handling crews around the clock for twenty-four hours. Also I had the responsibility and authority to go within approximately a thirty-five mile railroad. I enjoyed it. Then, when I went to Kent, I got into handling mainline trains which I had no experience with.

D Did you move to Kent?

H I moved to Ravenna. I moved from Youngstown to Champion when I got the job at Leavittsburg. When I got the job at Kent, I moved to Ravenna, which is only four or five miles from Kent. I was at Kent about a year and they wanted me in Chicago.

D As general yardmaster?

H Yes.

D How did you like that then?

H Well, it was an entirely different world. All the other places I had worked on the Erie Railroad, everybody got along. I do not mean all the time, but there was no man against management, or man against boss, per se, around Youngstown or Kent or where I worked before. Going out to Chicago was like moving into hostile territory. It was strictly adversary. I cannot really explain it. They just did not like authority for some reason -- of any kind. They did not like their own union bosses. They kept changing them every six months. They would be in one union, and they would be in another union. Then they would go back. But I enjoyed it. It was another phase of work I enjoyed, the Piggy Back operation. They had quite a piggy back operation out of Chicago. It was the biggest one in the town.

D. How long were you out there?

H Six years. Then I gave it up. I quit that. I would say this was in 1968. While I was at Kent, Erie and the Lakawanna merged, or became one railroad. They were two dying railroads.

D The Erie Railroad was dying at that time?

H Well, the Erie Railroad was in bankruptcy from the day I hired out until the day it no longer was the Erie Railroad. It went into bankruptcy sometime in the early Depression, and it never got out of it, not even during the war when times were good. They never got out. The Lakawanna was going bankrupt, so they merged which meant over a period of time they made some bad decisions as far as the piggy back operation was concerned. Then the N & W started nosing around because they wanted a gateway to Buffalo. They wanted a gateway to New

York They formed an outfit that I do not even know if you can recall It was called Derrico The N & W took over the operation of the Erie Railroad That lasted until about 1970 or 1971 when they started talking about Conrail I quit because everybody was frightened

D Frightened of what?

H Frightened of losing their job I was a protected employee I could always go back They could too, but they did not want to But, I was working too long and doing too much, and they would not give me any help I do not know whether you heard of the big snow in Chicago, or not

D When?

H It happened in either late 1968 or early 1969. I lived twenty-five miles away from where I worked When I went to work one morning, it started to snow By noon the snow was up to the windowsill in the yard office I did not stop snowing for another day and a half At noon it was standing up to there I started to call Cleveland which was the operating headquarters to tell them to stop all trains coming to Chicago It was snowing and there was no way that we could take the trains in the piggy back yard. They would not believe me because it was not snowing in Cleveland. It kept on snowing, and at three o'clock that afternoon I shut the yard down I had to, because there were not enough men to clean the switches

The railroad over which we traveled was not the Erie Railroad We traveled from Hammond to Chicago, we had piggy back trains loaded nose to nose sitting between Fifty-first Street and Indiana. We had them come up behind each other, put a load down, and shut them down. So we had them lined up from the east end of Fifty-first Street to 157th Street until we finally shut them up The only thing that was kept open was the track that went up by the yard office to the engine office I had a crew around the clock The whole city was paralyzed The crowning blow was I was there for two and a half days We finally got big snow blower put together The UP and the other railroads got them in and they started blowing snow The railroads out in Chicago are all dirt streets until you get near downtown They had no place to put the snow They had to ship it out

When first I left work, it was three and a half days after I got there We could go home after we had finally taken in two of the piggy back trains We were the first railroad to open up in the city of Chicago The first piggy back yard as far as I know When they started pulling the first trains in, I gave a call, and I started home Twenty-five miles away, it took me eight hours I drove through backyards, down railroad tracks, across unfinished highways, through towns that I had never been to before in my life In fact there was one point in going I said, "Boy, I'm following this traffic," and all of a sudden it stops There was something up ahead I had to back up two and a half miles Anyway, I did it So

I got home I left work about four o'clock in the afternoon, and I got home at about midnight or one o'clock I told my wife to call me at six o'clock in the morning so I could go back to work She did not call me She let me sleep until about noon. So I woke up and went back to work It took me about three hours They had some of the expressways open by then It took me about two and a half hours to get to work When I got to work, the superintendent was there He was not there for two and a half days because he could not get there He wanted to know where the hell I had been Four months later, I resigned in May It worked great Larger climates on business really upset the morale of everybody from the janitor right up to the president in charge of the operation Nobody believed it was going to happen You are afraid to make a mistake, and when you are afraid to make a mistake you improve I did not like it

So I came back to Youngstown I became the yardmaster again. It was not pleasant I will tell you, we had some where we had one guy, and this is the honest to God's truth, the only way I could tell where he was at was with his smoke No matter where he was in the yard, if you were looking for him, all you had to do was look for the little column of smoke No matter where that man was, if he was standing still, he started a fire Then there was another time, I had been here about six months I am sitting at my desk and I feel this cold thing on the back of my neck I turn my head a little bit, and there is a character with a shot gun against the back my neck I said, "What the hell are you doing with that thing?" He said, "I thought maybe I would scare you a little bit " He thought it was funny That stupid shot gung was loaded.

Right in the middle of Fifty-first St yard, across from the yard office, there was a grain elevator not operated by the Erie It was just there Well, the operator of the grain elevator was a real drinker He would drink to the point where he would lose his mind, you know Not staggering or anything He would walk and you would never know he was drunk But he would go crazy I had never met him I found out he was that way after he came through the door of the office with a crowbar in his hand He was looking for me I had never seen the man before in my life I did not know who the hell he was He was going to crown me with that crowbar, and I had no idea why After they grabbed him and held him down and calmed him down, he finally explained to me why he was so mad In our fueling station, there was a little tank where they had fluorine which they used in the bleaching process in the grain elevator They had parked the engines on the adjacent track so that this man could not get in there to open up the fluorine to let it go over the grain elevator So, instead of coming and asking to move the engine, he just blew his mind and come after me with that crowbar He thought that I had done it on purpose I did not even know the fluorine tank was there That was only a few of the things

They went on strike every six months, I think I tried to cut down the overtime After I got there and learned the operation a little bit, I tried to cut down the overtime They went on strike I saw more of my old buddies out in Chicago than I did in all of the other towns All the coalmen, all of the train masters, they were all out there switching cars About every six months they

went on strike No matter what

D I do not see how you could put up with that

(Tape cuts off here )

End of Interview