

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Erie Railroad Project

Personal Experiences

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RAY KING

Interviewed

by

Julie DiSibio

on

June 4, 1980

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: RAY KING

INTERVIEWER: Julie DiSibio

SUBJECT: jobs, merger, railroading of the future,  
Conrail

DATE: June 4, 1980

D: This is an interview with Mr. Ray King for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on June 4, 1980. The subject is the history of the Erie Railroads.

Mr. King, would you give us a little bit of your background starting with your childhood, where you grew up and about your family and school?

K: I was born in Youngstown, Ohio, June 4th, 1917. I attended Delason Avenue School until 1925. At that time I moved to Pontiac, Michigan where I resided and completed my junior high school in that city. I returned to Youngstown, June 16, 1932, and entered South High School. I graduated from this school. I entered service with the Erie Railroad on December 8, 1936. I progressed through the various clerical positions from yard clerk to grade clerk, to bill clerk to ticket blerk. I worked at Youngstown, Sharon, Greenville, Meadville, Warren, North Randall, and Cleveland, Ohio. I entered the U. S. Air Force on June 9, 1942. I returned on November 19, 1945 at which time I was assigned duty in the superintendent's office as a division statistician. One June 9, 1946 I was promoted to chief clerk to the trainmaster in Meadville, Pennsylvania. I held that position until June of 1969 at which time I became a division car distributor and later director of data control for the former Mahoning division, which I still hold. Now it's called . . . It's not the director of data control. At this time it's called the supervisor of transportation reporting. That title was changed

when we became Conrail.

D: Going back a little bit, when you began your career on the railroad in 1936, what was your first job?

K: The first job that I held in 1936 was United States mail clerk for the railroad.

D: What were your impressions of the railroad when you first started?

K: I loved it and I still do.

D: Why did you choose the Erie Railroad?

K: Well, at that time jobs were not too plentiful. I had applications at several companies, all railroads. I was fortunate enough to be hired by the Erie.

D: After you were a mail clerk, what job did you go to?

K: From mail clerk to assistant baggage agent.

D: What do you do as an assistant baggage agent?

K: Assistant baggage agent, at that time, had to do with the checking of passenger baggage, which we no longer have, the handling of the U. S. Mail, the sorting of the U. S. Mail, and overseeing the operations of the baggage room and the mail room.

D: Then what job did you go to?

K: From baggage I went to ticket clerk at Youngstown. I worked in Youngstown, Sharon and Warren for about a year and a half as a ticket clerk.

D: You would go to all three different places?

K: Well, as required. If somebody was off sick or on vacation.

D: Now what year would this have been?

K: That would have been 1937, 1938, around that period. In 1939 I went into freight service, yard clerk. Then from yard clerk to grade clerk at Warren and Niles. When I entered the service I was a reservation clerk in the ticket office in Youngstown. That was in 1942.

D: Now in 1942 you joined the Air Force?

K: Yes.

D: Were you stationed in the United States?

K: I was stationed in the United States for approximately fourteen months. Then I went to England and joined the Ninth Air Force in England. I was in the Ninth Air Force until the end of the war, serving in England, France, Germany, and Luxembourg.

D: Then in 1945 you came back home?

K: I returned home on November 19, 1945. I returned to Youngstown and at that time I went into the superintendent's office as division statistician.

D: You were on the railroad when the Depression was in it's deepest?

K: Yes, toward the end of the Depression. Work was difficult. There just wasn't any.

D: How did the Depression affect the Erie Railroad?

K: The Erie, we were bankrupt at that time.

D: Now when you came back from the war you were division clerk at this time for the superintendent?

K: Statistician.

D: Statistician?

K: Yes, not division clerk. It's two different positions.

D: Who was the superintendent at this time?

K: V. J. McMullen, Vince McMullen.

D: What were your duties under him?

K: Under him . . . Well, it was on a division level. We did what was called an eight-twelve report. That was a passenger train report, to and from, keeping track of mileage; it was an interstate commerce report. I kept the statistics for the various stations, as to the progress of percentage of increase or decrease in one field or another. It was all mathematics, accounting work.

D: Then from that position what position did you go to?

K: Then I went to chief clerk to the trainmaster. Duties of the chief clerk at that time, and still now, were hiring and training enginemen. I took correspondence, did filing. I had a trainmaster east of Meadville to and including

Salamanca, and a trainmaster west of Meadville to and including Kent. We had crews working at Kent, Leavittsburg, Meadville, Youngstown and Salamanca. I did all the hiring. I took all the statements when necessary.

D: Were you in a union?

K: At that time?

D: Yes.

K: Yes.

D: What was the name of the union?

K: The Brotherhood of Railway Clerks.

D: What were your impressions of the union at this time? Had you been in one all along?

K: Yes, all along. At that time we didn't have a closed shop. Closed shops came along about 1947; I can't remember the exact date. But at that time it was voluntary. I did belong to the organization all of the years up until I was made a supervisor.

D: How did you feel about the union, positive?

K: Necessary, positive. I still think management and the unions should work together. I think it's necessary.

D: Are you presently in a union?

K: Yes. The same union.

D: That didn't change once the railroad consolidated?

K: Yes. In 1969 I was promoted to supervision. Now as a chief clerk I was a supervisor, but belonged to the organization. It was necessary; you had to. When I was promoted to car distributor, that position no longer required that you belong to the organization, nor does the position I'm on now. From 1969 to July 1, 1979 I did not belong to an organization. In 1979 we were required by agreement to join the union.

D: Now what agreement would this have been?

K: That was an agreement between the BARC or Brotherhood of Railway Clerks and Conrail. It's a national agreement. Certain positions known as the supervisory positions must join the union. The reason for that was that all of the either came from clerical rosters, the trainmaster rosters,

or what have you. The union dues we are paying today are to protect our rights.

D: Now do you receive the same benefits as the men in the union?

K: Yes, and the death benefit. It's the same thing.

D: When they receive rate increases does that affect you?

K: No, that's the one thing that we are not included in.

D: Why is that?

K: We're on merit basis, as a supervisor. If you're doing your job well, you get an increase. If you're not doing your job well, you don't get an increase. It's an individual merit set-up.

D: In 1969 you took on a different position. What was that?

K: In 1969 I was promoted to car distributor.

D: Could you tell me what a car distributor is?

K: A car distributor is responsible for receiving car orders from the various industries, seeing that these orders are fulfilled. If it's Sheet & Tube it goes to Sheet & Tube. They used to order gondolas from us. They may want ten, twenty, thirty cars. It was the responsibility of the car distributor to take the order and then see to it that the order was filled by communication between the yard and myself. If we did not have cars available then the cars were brought in from Meadville or Marion.

D: Did you ever borrow cars from other railroads?

K: On a rare, rare occasion. The reason is . . . Well, the rule of thumb is when a foreign railroad does not have access to an industry and they have cars to be loaded, it is their responsibility to furnish the empty cars. You could say we borrowed cars from them, but it was for their own loading--to go back by their own line.

D: Then from that position you went to the position that you now hold?

K: Yes. I was car distributor until 1971. At that time I was promoted to director of data control, Mahoning division. I can't remember the date. Well, it was in the Fall of the year. August runs in my mind, or the

first part of September, 1971.

D: What were your job duties there?

K: I took the responsibility of overseeing the yards: Brier Hill, Ferona, Meadville, the IBM equipment in those yards. The clerks that operated them worked under my jurisdiction.

D: Now what kind of data did you collect?

K: What would be train data, pertaining to cars and train movements.

D: Had you had any previous experience with computers?

K: No. I had a great deal to learn.

D: So you were trained for it?

K: I was trained for that type of work.

D: Did you find it difficult?

K: No, because I enjoyed it. I read my manuals. I climbed over the manuals until I had in my mind exactly what was to be done, and how it was to be done, and when it was to be done.

D: Currently the title has been changed, is that correct?

K: The title was changed; it's the same duty. Everything is the same with the exception that they call us the supervisors of transportation reporting which means the same thing--reporting train movements, car movements, cars to industries, cars from industries needing information.

D: Just for certain parts of the railroad or for the whole railroad?

K: For the whole railroad, but my duties are for Brier Hill, Ferona, Meadville, Niles, Warren and Garrettsville. That's the extent of it.

D: Now you worked for the Erie Railroad when they merged with DL & W?

K: The Erie Lackawanna, yes.

D: What were your impressions of the merger? Do you feel that it was necessary?

K: Well, at that time, yes, I did. I think that nothing worked out; we still lost in the end. But it was a grasp. The general trend in railroading was to merge to acquire greater shipment.

D: So you feel it was a good merger?

K: I thought it was at that time, yes.

D: Then what do you think led to . . .

K: The downfall?

D: The downfall of the Erie.

K: Not having access to the records. My objective here is purely on a personal basis. I think that if the Erie itself or the Erie Lackawanna could have existed at least six months longer, they could have made it on their own.

D: At the time they became Conrail?

K: At the time they became Conrail. It was a general slowdown in business and the tremendous storms down east. The Susquehanna was completely wiped out by storms. The tracks were tore up; the bridges were out. Everything was out and it was just too much. The old Erie Lackawanna just . . . They didn't have the financing. They couldn't get the financing to pull back the shops that were taken away at the time. I feel if we could have gone on a little while longer . . . we were on our way back.

D: What are your impressions of Conrail and the consolidation?

K: Well, the consolidation was all right. Naturally, when you consolidate two companies doing the same work along the same lines something has to go. And that's what they're doing now. It just isn't good business to operate two companies parallel to each other, serving the same industries. One has to go.

D: When you refer to two companies, you're referring to the . . .

K: Erie and the old PC. In this general area, we're parallel to each other, Warren, Niles and even west of Akron. The old Erie and the PC are running parallel to each other, and serve practically all the same industry.

D: What are your general impressions of western railroads? Why have they been more successful than eastern railroads?

K: Western railroads depend a great deal on farms, beef. They're not industrialized as heavy as the railroads in



eastern and the northeast. When the Depression hit here . . . like we're going through right now, the steel companies are gradually leaving. The western railroads didn't experience this to the extent that the eastern railroads have. Some of the western railroads have gone by the wayside. The Milwaukee has had bad circumstances. The Rock Island is completely shutdown. They're going through a period of merger right now. The Burlington and the Northern Pacific merged. The Burlington Northern is now in the process of trying to merge with the SLSF Railroad. The N & W is talking of merging now with one of the western railroads. They're talking to merge with the Southern. It isn't that business is that great. It is that they have to go back to where everybody can be competitive.

D: While we're talking about the competition, what are your feelings about federal regulation?

K: Federal, I think they're too heavy. ICC regulations have held the railroad down considerably.

D: Could you give me some examples?

K: Well, our grade rating structure for one thing is not what it should be. It's outmoded. It's old. It's what we've worked with for years. We need something more modern. That's my opinion.

D: Do you think that the truck industry and the airplanes have hurt the railroads?

K: The airlines hurt the railroad to a degree. I won't say they didn't hurt some, they did. The airlines hurt the passenger business. Finally, they just didn't have passengers. They have Amtrak, but it's nothing like it used to be, nothing at all. Trucks have hurt the railroad. I think that if this fuel system gets serious then they'll have to do something about it.

D: And you think the railroads would be the logical . . .

K: I think railroad would be a logical mode of transportation. Yes, I do.

D: Why do you think the passenger service in the east has taken such a downfall?

K: Has failed? Automobiles, updated highways, turnpikes, interstates, roads. It's too easy to get into your automobile and drive a hundred miles than it is to take a train. People feel that when they get to their destination, they have their automobile for transportation where we don't.

D: Generally speaking, what do you see in the future for the railroads in this country?

K: In this country?

D: Particularly Conrail. Do you think it's going to make it?

K: I think Conrail is going to make it. I think they're striving in the right direction, to curtail switching the yards, to consolidate their switching programs, to update through modernization of input to the extent where they wouldn't.

D: Do you see a difference between former Erie Railroad employees and the other railroad employees in their attitudes toward the railroads? I've heard that attitudes come out. Erie Railroaders are more serious about railroading than some of the other railroads.

K: I don't think they're any more serious. Being a supervisor, I have both working under my jurisdiction. I have good Penn-Central people and I have people that are mediocre. I have good Erie people and I have people that are mediocre also. I think the majority of the people want to do a good job. Not all of them, but the majority of the people. This is true in outside industry. You find this basically everywhere. I don't think the feeling is as bad maybe now as it was when the PRR and the New York Central had their merger. As I understand--I didn't experience it--but as I understand they did have hard feelings. I don't think that exists today.

D: Do you think that the railroads in this country will make a comeback?

K: I think so. I think they're going to have to. I believe, like I said before, in the lack of transportation. If our fuel really gets serious, they're going to have to do something with these trucks, and the load of transportation would naturally go to railroads. Maybe they can set up terminals whereby trucks can handle things from a given terminal within a hundred mile radius and whatnot. But this long coast to coast and north to south is going to have to go if fuel is as serious as they say.

D: Do you think that the government is going to step in and take over all the railroads?

K: I don't think so. I don't think the government wants to step in and take over all the railroads. They are trying to keep Conrail on a going basis. I think Conrail will make it. I think they will go into the black. I feel right now that we have the right people going and perhaps

we'll make it.

D: One final question, do you feel that consolidations of railroads, like Conrail, are going to be the future trend for all railroads? Do you think we would ever see one major railroad?

K: The entire country? No, I don't think so. That would create a monopoly, and I don't think you'll ever see it. You may see a few smaller or larger mergers, but I don't think you'll see it down to where there is only one rail system, unless it's federalized in which they take all the railroads over, which I doubt very much will ever happen.

D: Is there anything that you would have liked to have seen done on the Erie or the Erie Lackawanna that wasn't done, or maybe even to Conrail that isn't being done, that you think would be a benefit to it?

K: I think we're going in the right direction now. There are new types of IBM equipment being developed. They are going to have them. I think that in the very near future we're going to sequential reporting, which I think is a very smart idea.

D: Now what is sequential reporting?

K: As it happens, if a car is pulled from an industry you make the report, right then, when it happens. Before, we've had newer methods. We've just set up a new program here whereby boxcars are forwarded to a plant and plant records are being made right then. So in the very near . . . starting the ninth of this month we will have this new concept in operation. We will capture just the cars that are moving on trains. Everything will be captured. Sequential reporting is very important to the well-being of any company. It takes a little effort on everybody's part. There are a lot of headaches involved, a lot of drawbacks, but we are going in the right direction.

D: Is there anything that I didn't ask you that you wanted to add?

K: No, I think you covered it pretty clearly. You have done a good job.

D: Thank you for the interview.

END OF INTERVIEW