

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Erie Railroad History Project

Erie Railroad

O. H. 233

JAMES GALBREATH

Interviewed

by

Julie DiSibio

on

June 11, 1980

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: JAMES GALBREATH

INTERVIEWER: Julie DiSibio

SUBJECT: Career on the Railroad, opinions on rail-
roading, Conrail

DATE: June 11, 1980

D: This is an interview for the Youngstown State Oral History Program with Mr. James Galbreath on June 11, 1980 at 9:20 a.m. The subject is the history of the Erie Railroad.

First of all, Mr. Galbreath, do you want to give us a little bit of your background, starting with where you were born, and a little about your childhood?

G: I was born in East Altoona, Pennsylvania. My father worked on the Pennsylvania Railroad. I don't know what year it was, but we moved down to a place they call Rockhill Furnace. My father got a job on the East Broad Top Railroad, a narrow gauge road. I think my grandfather helped build it. He worked as an engineer, and later in the railroad shop until he retired.

They still run a train down there, a historical train, a passenger train. It runs, I think, about five or six miles out, down to Shirleysburg. When they first started they used to use two engines, one to pull it down and one to pull it back. Finally, they put a "Y" in, and turned the engines. They get people from all over the world down there now to watch and ride this train. It starts in, I think, July and runs into September.

I stayed around there until I was seventeen years old, with the idea to take off for the West. I got as far as Youngstown, and I've been here ever since.

D: What did you do when you got to Youngstown?

G: I had two uncles here, and I didn't have any money. I commuted between them. Finally, I picked up a job in a lumberyard. I guess that was up into 1926 when I lost my job there.

Then I put about two years in the carpenter trade. I tried to learn the carpenter trade, and it went haywire. I went down to New Castle in October 1928, and got a job on the B&O Railroad. I worked there a few months. When the ore season stopped I was furloughed. I was called back in 1929. The Depression hit, and I was furloughed again. I think I got one day in in 1935.

Then I came over to the Erie Railroad. I started in October, 1936, and worked until 1938. We had another recession, and I was furloughed 21 months. I was called back to the Erie, and I stayed there until I retired.

D: In 1936 what was the job you had?

G: I was hired on as a brakeman.

D: What does a brakeman do?

G: He usually follows the engine around, helps make up trains, breaks up trains, and takes orders from the conductor. Wherever he sends us, we take the train.

D: You said you were furloughed, and then you came back.

G: I went back on the extra list as a brakeman.

D: As a brakeman again?

G: Yes.

D: Where did you go from there?

G: They called us in, and we were promoted to what you call a flagman. When you get to be a flagman you move to the rear of the train. You protect the train, and do the field work of making up these cars. When you get a train in there you switch it out, and separate the cars wherever they're going to go. When you take a train out of the yard you protect the rear of the train until you get to your destination. You are still working under the conductor and the yardmaster.

D: After you are a flagman, where do you go next?

G: You're promoted to a conductor, then you're the boss. You tell the flagman and headman what they're supposed to do. The yardmaster calls you in, gives you a list of trains he wants switched, and you line them up, and make up trains. When you get it made up, you put it on the air. The car inspectors take over until they are through. When they're through, they notify the yardmaster that the train is ready to leave. The yardmaster then notifies the chief dispatcher, who in turn gives the yardmaster permission to call road crew, and send the train on its way.

D: This would be the yard conductor, right?

G: That's right.

D: What did you do next?

G: The war came along. In 1941 I started working as an extra yardmaster. After you get a job as yardmaster, you tell the conductor what you want done. The first thing you do as yardmaster is turn over the yard, and tell him what's in the yard. The next thing you do is call the chief dispatcher, and tell him what cars you've got in the yard, and how many. Between the two of you, you decide where you're going to run the train. He'll tell you to call a crew for Meadville or Shenango, wherever he wants it, maybe Cleveland. Then you get the bill of the trains to be switched from the clerk. You make a train list of the cars, and give that to the conductor to switch the cars, and make up the train. After the train is made up it is turned over to the car inspectors, who take about two hours for their work. While these men are working on the train the yardmaster calls a road crew, who must have one and a half to two hours call. When the road crew reports you give the bills to the road conductor, who gets a clearance from the dispatcher, and the train is on its way.

D: During the war years you worked as an extra yardmaster?

G: That's right. I worked as extra yardmaster until 1946 when I got a regular job as yardmaster. I held that until I retired.

D: You did the same things, only with passenger trains?

G: That's right. It was fun, a lot of fun, a lot of excitement. You handled the public. You had to get

the mail lined up, the express lined up, and see that the people got on and off the train.

D: What was passenger service like in 1946?

G: It was rough. There was a lot of it. I worked second trick down there. I think nobody else wanted it. That was, I think, about the roughest trick that there was, from 4:00 to 12:00. All the trains seemed to come in there at once. Keeping the freight trains out of the way was the chief dispatcher and dispatcher's job. Getting the passenger trains in and out was my job.

D: Did you belong to a union?

G: Yes, I belonged to the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen and the Yardmasters of America.

D: What were your impressions of the unions?

G: They were good. I enjoyed it. It kept the men in line, and helped the supervision. If they had any problems, they had what is called a griever. They went to him with their problems. He went from there to the superintendent. They got along very nicely.

D: Do you think the unions have changed since you first joined them?

G: Yes, I do. I think they're too strong, out of order, for one thing. It used to be that you got along a little better than you do now. Now it seems they want everything, and give nothing.

D: What is your feeling about the merger that took place between the Erie and the DL&W?

G: Sometimes I think maybe it wrecked the Erie, but they got a lot of business off the Lackawanna. From there on that seemed to be the downfall. After the merger they did away with the steam engines and put in diesels. It seemed to go from bad to worse. We ran out of business, that's all.

D: While we're still on the subject of merging, what's your opinion of the recent consolidation?

G: I don't think much of it. It's an outfit down in Washington. I don't know if they put a shoemaker in there to be a railroader instead of taking the men out of the ranks to run the railroad. They have what we

call "school boys." They put a pencil behind their ear, and after two or three months work, they're going to tell you how to do the work when you've been doing it for forty or forty-five years. They're going to come in there overnight, and tell you how to do it. It doesn't work.

D: What do you think would have been better for the government to have done with these railroads, rather than just mass them together like this? Do you think that was all right? Is it just the management?

G: It's the management. If they would have used railroad men to run the railroad, I think they would have done better.

D: What are your impressions of the western railroads?

G: I don't know too much about the western railroads, but they don't seem to have the cities and yards to contend with that the eastern railroads have. When you leave Chicago with a train going east, unless you have a through train, you've got to stop for almost every city, set off and pick up. Out in the west, I don't think it's done that way. In the west, they go for miles before they ever stop. On the eastern roads you might go ten miles, and be there two or three hours switching, picking up, and setting off cars.

D: What is your general impression of railroading as a whole? Would you encourage a young man today to go into railroading?

G: No. No, I wouldn't.

D: Why not?

G: Because there's no future in it. I don't know where they're going to go. I hope they come back. When railroads went from steam to diesel, they did away with a lot of men, even track men. The result was the roadbed deteriorated. Now they're trying to fix it up. The blind leading the blind is the way it looks to me.

D: I had one gentleman tell me that he thought steam engines would come back because of the fuel situation.

G: I wish it would come back. I loved the steam engine. It was a challenge for an engineer to take a steam engine and take a train out on the road. You could give him a couple hundred tons extra, and tell him

what he had, and he would go over the hill all right. Today, you can bet your boots that as soon as he hits the hill he's done, he's stalled.

D: What are your feelings about federal regulations of the railroads? Do you think they ought to be slackened somewhat, or do you think they're all right the way they are? Do we need them?

G: They have too many in one sense of the word, but for inspection of trains, tracks, et cetera, I don't think they have enough. If they put it back into the hands of people who know how to run railroads, I think we would get along much better.

D: Looking back, would you have chosen another career?

G: No.

D: You would do the same thing over again?

G: I would. I loved it.

D: Thank you for the interview.

G: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW