

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Erie Railroad Project

History of the Erie Railroad

O. H. 144

AGNES GABLER

Interviewed

by

Julie Di Sibio

on

June 9, 1980

## AGNES LOUISE GABLER

Agnes Louise Gabler was born on August 7, 1923 in Oil City, Pennsylvania. The daughter of Theodore and Margaret Gabler, she graduated from Rayen High School in 1941 and found employment with the Erie Railroad. Agnes entered the Marine Corps in 1944 and was discharged in 1946. She immediately went back to work for the Erie Railroad and remained there through the Conrail Corporation takeover in 1976. Agnes performed the duties of a clerk and car distributor with the railroad and thus offers a unique woman's perspective in the following interview.

Miss Gabler belongs to Saint Brendan's Catholic Church. Among her pleasures are tennis and swimming.

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INTERVIEWEE: AGNES GABLER

INTERVIEWER: Julie Di Sibio

SUBJECT: The History of the Erie Railroad

DATE: June 9, 1980

D: This is an interview for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program with Agnes Gabler on June 9, 1980 at 5:35 p.m. The subject is the history of the Erie Railroad.

Okay. Would you like to tell me a little bit about your background starting with your childhood?

G: I was born in Oil City Pennsylvania in 1923 on August 7th. Shortly thereafter we moved to Youngstown, Ohio. I think I was about two years old at that time. My father went to work for the Erie Railroad and that's why we settled here. And then subsequently I went to grade school at Parmelee Grade School on the North Side of Youngstown. And then on through Hayes Junior High School. It is still in Youngstown, Ohio where I graduated in 1941. I went to work for the Erie Railroad as a secretary to four men in the Youngstown freight office where I took dictation half the day and transcribed it the other half as general correspondence at that time. I worked there for a year.

Then I went to Sharon, Pennsylvania and worked as a clerk in the joint car record office where I did records of cars being interchanged from one rail to the other. That's about all I did all day because that's the kind of job it was.

And of course, with the railroad being run on strictly seniority, you're always getting bumped so you have to

go and find another position. From the joint car record office I went to the car shop in the Ferrona Yard in Sharon, Pennsylvania.

That lasted until 1944 when I left there to join the Marine Corps. In the Marine Corps I went to Camp Le Jeune. I went to basic training. And then I was stationed subsequently in Edenton, North Carolina, where I worked in an office that ran a boat dock. That was interesting. I liked that. From there I was transferred to Cherry Point, North Carolina where I worked as the secretary to a flying major for the largest part of the time and I also did Navy relief work there, interviewing and okaying monies being put out to people who needed it in the Navy. I was discharged because they disbanded the Marine Corps or I probably never would have come home. But they disbanded the women's portion of the Marine Corps in 1946.

D: Did it have a particular name?

G: No. We were just called the Women Reserves, the U.S. Marine Corps Women Reserves.

D: What was the reason for your joining the Marine Corps, any particular reason?

G: Oh probably boredom at that time because all your friends were in the service; there wasn't much going on in town besides. Plus the fact that my older sister had already joined the WAC's, the Women's Army Corps and found it very interesting. Of course she traveled extensively compared to me. She went to England, Paris, all over. But anyway, that probably had some bearing. I decided I'd might as well do something like that, too. So that's why I went in. And then, like I say, when they disbanded, I came home. Your seniority carries over so I went right back to work because I was able to get a job. At that time I went into the car distributors office as a secretary to the car distributor and an assistant car distributor.

D: Now, what is a car distributor?

G: A car distributor, for instance, if Republic Steel Corporation is going to load steel and they need an "X" number of gondolas to put the steel into, then they call the car distributor to get that amount of cars they're going to need for that day, and this is true of every industry that was in the Youngstown area. So that's where I worked for a year. Then I was fortunate enough

to be called upstairs in the passenger department to work as a secretary at first.

Then after two years as secretary, the position of chief clerk became open and I took that. Now in that case, I did things like handle Pullman reservations. We took tour groups to New York. I did those reservations. We took high school groups too, at that time. We had taken Girl Scouts. We did that sort of thing. Actually group travel, mostly to New York and Chicago because that's where the Erie ran passenger service in those years. Then I stayed there until that service was dropped completely; and I don't remember the year. I took the last train ride to Scranton and then came back on the last passenger train coming back to Youngstown from Scranton. My brother was working for the railroad there, so I road those trains for the last time, but I don't remember the year of that. You'd have to look it up or I would.

But anyways from there then, when they disbanded the passenger business, I went back to the car distributor's office, this time as the assistant car distributor and I worked with Ray King who was the car distributor at that time. Then in 1970 Ray was promoted and our superintendent at that time was Mr. K.W. Dingle, who offered me that position as car distributor, for the first for a woman. And I gladly took that. And that's basically the position I hold today, except that there's no assistant or stenographer or anything. It's just a car distributor. And that's what I do today, car distribution for Conrail at the Ohio One Building under the supervision of Mr. R.E. Hatton.

D: Okay. Going back a bit, were you in a union at any time?

G: I've always been in a union, yes. I still am.

D: What is the name of the union?

G: Brotherhood of Railway Clerks...BARE is what it is. Brotherhood of American Railway Employees, I presume. I'd have to look at my card, really Julie, to see that. But it's a union and I have belonged ever since I started for the railroad, although there was times as supervision, I didn't have to.

D: What were your impressions of the union when you first joined them?

G: They were very good. The unions did a lot for us as far

as our salaries go and working conditions. They're not as strong today as they used to be compared to supervision.

D: Okay. At the time that you came back to the service on the Erie Railroad, we were just coming out of the Depression and the war. What was it like going back to work at this time?

G: Very busy. Extremely busy. You worked a solid eight hours without stopping except for lunch. Sometimes you didn't even make lunch. But it was fun. I liked that.

D: How do you feel about being a woman and working on the railroad?

G: Well, I think because I grew up with my father working for it, my uncle and my older sister and myself, I've always been with the railroad because I used to go with my dad to Briar Hill Car Shops and visit. Spend the days when I could. On his days off we'd tour. So I've always loved it. And I still do.

D: So you feel that it's a career that any woman could. . . ?

G: Definitely, definitely.

D: You worked with the Erie when it merged with DL & W. [Delaware Lackawanna and Western]

G: The Erie Lackawanna.

D: What were your impressions of the merger?

G: That was a good merger. That was a fruitful merger, I'd say, as far as I was concerned. I thought that it improved our business. It gave us a lot more things to do and I liked that one. The Conrail merger has not been beneficial to any of us. That's my personal opinion.

D: How has the consolidation changed your job?

G: Basically, it hasn't, because I still maintain the same relationship with my customers that I always had, because you see, I don't deal as much with the railroad people as I do with the different companies. And so, my telephone is busy all day with the customers calling me. And they haven't changed over the period of years. They've always been the same people or the same industries.

Maybe different people, but the same industries.

D: So you think that as far as business goes, there is no difference in the consolidation?

G: Not previous to today's time. Not just because of the consolidation, no.

D: Is it the attitude that's changed?

G: The attitude has changed somewhat because, I would say, it's basically the people who ran the railroad before were railroaders and dearly loved it like we all do. Today, most of your supervision or not supervision, but the people who run the railroad were never involved with the railroad. So their interest isn't as great. And I think this is probably one of the biggest faults that we have today business wise. They just weren't raised with the railroad like we were.

D: In your job, do you have much contact with Federal regulations?

G: No.

D: Do you come under strict Federal regulations?

G: The railroad itself would, but not my job.

D: Do you think that Federal regulations of railroads have helped them or hindered them?

G: Hindered them because here again, they're people who are not involved with actual railroading and they don't have a conception of railroading. They're just businessmen. And as such, they're good, but they're not good railroaders.

D: What are your impressions of the western railroads?

G: The passenger or freight wise?

D: I would say both.

G: Both.

D: Yes.

G: Passenger, of course, they've maintained it where our Erie Lackawanna Railroad let the equipment deteriorate to the point where people weren't going to use it because it

wasn't first class travel. Freight wise, of course, I have no idea why the decline in this eastern part of the country instead of the western part. I really have no idea of the scope that that would cover.

D: You were involved with the passenger service quite a bit, weren't you?

G: Yes.

D: Do you think that passenger service is going to come back?

G: I was hoping it would. I thought that this fuel economy and all the things that we've had to cut back on, I thought surely they would turn to the railroads and rebuild passenger traffic, but they don't seem to be doing that. I can't understand why they don't. To me it would be a perfect solution to all the travel problems.

D: You said that you were in charge of various tour groups. Could you tell us a little bit about that? The groups that would go to the various cities?

G: One of the biggest parts we had probably would be that we ran the high school groups. Graduating classes would work and make money so they could go to New York. One great instance was when the New York World's Fair was there, and they would take that as their class tour at the end of the year. Okay, then we would handle all the reservations. We had Mr. Bill Schorr who was in charge of traffic and he took the tour groups. In other words, I made all the arrangements and then he actually took the tour. When it got to be busy enough and we had groups left that didn't have a tour guide, I sometimes would have time to go. And that was great because I took Girl Scout groups, made sure they had their tickets. After you would get to New York, you'd have to make sure they had all their bus tours lines up, all the different tickets they needed for shows, whatever. And then take them and pick them up so that they didn't get lost. This was very interesting. I spent quite a bit of time going to the World's Fair.

D: So you acted almost like a travel agency.

G: We would be a railroad travel agency as such.

D: What is your overall impression of the consolidation? What has it done for the seven bankrupt railroads? Has it helped the situation?



- G: Well, you wonder. It probably would have but under the present economy, I don't see how any company that is Federal backed, could expand because they're not going to have the business. And you can't run a railroad without any business. I don't know what might have happened had the economy stayed up. It would have presented an all together different picture.
- D: What do you see for the future of Conrail? Do you think it's going to make it or do you think it is too big?
- G: No, I don't think it was too big. I think it is mishandled and I don't think it's going to make it now because of Youngstown economy. However, I think if it hadn't been for the economy, it would have had a decent railroad again. I hope the day comes that we could do that, but it doesn't look like Conrail is going to be maintained as one big railroad.
- D: As far as National Defense goes, do you think that railroads are going to have to make a comeback to help in times of war?
- G: I'd say, yes. Definitely. I don't know how you could have a war without them.
- D: Do you think nationalizing railroads would be the answer?
- G: No. That would be bigger yet. I don't see how that could ever exist.
- D: Okay. What do you see for the future of railroads in this country? Are we going to do something about them?
- G: I certainly hope so. I would hope that someone would eventually, after the next election, find a way to build this all back up and use it. Definitely use the railroads. They're not using them today. They're just letting them promote themselves and you can't do that. You need more sales. You need more people behind it that really want the railroad to run.
- D: One final question. From a woman's perspective, would you encourage a young woman today to go into railroading?
- G: Yes. Not strictly Conrail, but certainly into a railroad, because it's a fun place to work. It's very, very interesting. There's always something different happening. You learn and learn a lot.

- D: What particular field would you encourage them to go into, strictly a management?
- G: No, I'll tell you the truth, if it was up to me today, the first thing I would go after is to be an engineer. Now I don't say every woman is going to want to do that. But I think if you would start working for a railroad in an office until you learn railroading, I think eventually they should. I'm surprised that more girls haven't gone to being engineers on a train.
- D: Okay. Thank you for the interview.
- G: You're very welcome, Julie.

END OF INTERVIEW