

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Erie Lackawana Railroad

Personal Experiences
O.H. 1304

JAMES HUMBLE

Interviewed

On

May 21, 1990

By

John Demetra

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INTERVIEWEE: JAMES HUMBLE
INTERVIEWER: John Demetra
SUBJECT: Erie Lackawana Railroad
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D: This is John Demetra interviewing Mr. Jim Humble for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program. Mr. Humble I see that you were born in 1909 in Youngstown. What are your earliest recollections of that time? For example childhood memories and what it was like growing up in that time period?

H: I've always liked Youngstown. When I was a child we had good times, ice skating, roller skating, swimming....

D: Where did you go ice-skating?

H: Down at Lake Glacier. We went swimming at Lake Glacier and Lake Cohasset. In those days those waters were good. I went to school at South High, graduated from South High and went on to Youngstown College for three years. Some of it was part time. In those days there was only one Youngstown College building on the corner of Wick and Lincoln. Then I went to Hall's Business College.

D: Where was that?

H: That was in downtown Youngstown. That organization is no longer in existence, it hasn't been for some time. I took Demographic work. Then I was employed by Joseph Scrap Iron Company down near the east end of Youngstown for a short time. In those days it seemed like male stenographers were in big demand

because I was called by the employment agency to take a job with Puba, a jewelry company. I worked there a short time as well.

D: For more money?

H: A little bit more money.

D: What were you making back then?

H: My first job was about a hundred and twenty-five dollars a month or maybe a little less. I was also called on a job for Stambaugh Thompsons downtown in the office. Then, after a few months, I was called by the employment agency to take a job with the Erie Railroad in 1928.

D: You just kept going when the agency called you to go? It was more money each time?

H: I think it was a little bit more money each time or I probably wouldn't have made the change, except for perhaps going to the railroad because it was interesting and desirable.

D: What was Youngstown like back then?

H: Downtown Youngstown was very decent and busy. I was employed in the downtown area most all the time and I would go to Star Fishburgs for my lunch. That was where a lot the office people in the downtown area went for lunch.

D: Did you drive to work?

H: Yes I had a car. I even had a car when I was going to South High School.

D: That was pretty unusual wasn't it?

H: I think it was because it made me popular.

D: What kind of car was it?

H: It was a Ford Roadster.

D: What year was it?

H: 1929. My brother and I both drove a brand new 1929 Ford Roadster at the same time. My dad bought them for us. In those days they were over six or seven hundred dollars I think.

D: What did your dad do?

H: He worked with the steel company. He was roller at Youngstown Sheet and Tube.

D: Was that a pretty good paying job?

H: Yes that was a very good paying job.

D: Do you remember the stock market crash?

H: Yes I do in 1929.

D: What do you remember about that day?

H: Not much because it didn't mean anything to me. I don't think my people had any money invested in the stock market but of course it threw the economy into a bad loop. Later I was eventually laid off by Erie because of business conditions in 1932. Nonetheless I continued having an office with my employer at that time because I did short hand reporting for him, and for others and some attorneys.

D: You had your own business?

H: Yes I had my own business. I was self-employed. They would call me when they needed me. Even the courthouse called me sometimes as a relief court reporter. Then I would bill whomever I worked for for my services. Some months I would make up to five or six hundred dollars, other months I'd make only a hundred or a

hundred and fifty dollars. Then after four years of this the railroad asked me to become a claim agent in the Personal Injury Claim Department at Meadville Pennsylvania and from there on I stayed with the railroad.

D: So you moved to Meadville?

H: Yes. After about a year and a half I was transferred to Binghamton New York where I stayed only five or six months then I was transferred to Huntington Indiana.

D: As a claim agent?

H: As a claim agent. From there I went to Marion Ohio and after three or four years I was promoted to district claim agent at Huntington Indiana. Then after a few years there I was transferred to Jersey City New Jersey.

D: What did you think about going to Jersey City?

H: Not too much really but it was a good promotion so I went. That was in the early fifties. I was there for three or four years then asked for an early retirement in 1957 on a disability basis.

D: What did the claim agent do?

H: He investigates, handles and settles extra claims. Like personal injury claims, damage to property claims anything involving employees or the public.

D: Is anything particularly memorable as far as like maybe some really big numbers involved?

H: Yes there were a number of big cases, which in this day is unbelievable. I remember down in Jersey City I settled the claim of an employee who had had an arm and a leg amputated for fifty thousand dollars. In these days that would be a

case worth five million dollars and that was a fair settlement for him at that time. Apparently the railroad was satisfied too with the amount. There were other cases involving twenty, thirty, fifty thousand dollars but that was an outstanding case that I remember.

D: Do you remember any famous personalities that you may have met or dealt with along the way?

H: No I don't think so. Well known people certainly.

D: Like who?

H: In the areas where I was located they always retained the very best attorneys. In Youngstown Kennedy, Manchester, Gordon, Bennet and Powers were local attorneys that represented the company. Some of those firm names are still active here in Youngstown. In Jersey the best attorneys there and the best in New York City represented them. They always had high-class reputable legal representation. As a claim department representative we didn't handle law suits we only made investigations. If and when it became a lawsuit it went into the hands of the law department.

D: You worked strictly for the Erie Railroad right?

H: Yes from 1928 until it became the Erie Lackawana Railroad when the two companies joined.

D: What did you think about that merger? Was it a good merger?

H: Nobody was too happy about it. The Lackawana railroad was an eastern line and the Erie ran from New York to Chicago anywhere below the Midwestern

Railroad. They had different personalities and were a different class of people in the opinion of most of the Erie people.

D: Do you remember working through the depression? What was Youngstown like during the depression?

H: Actually the depression didn't affect me too much financially because I was earning money, but of course it wasn't good for the whole community. My dad was eventually laid off by the steel company but I don't recall my family being in bad shape as far as needing money.

D: Do you remember seeing bread lines and things like that?

H: No I don't. I remember during the war that we had to worry about rationing. We'd have to stand in lines for cigarettes and things like that but that was a different time that was during the war. When the war came along the railroad came out of their depression and things improved for all industry.

D: Did you have to put in long hours during the war times?

H: I was on duty whenever needed. Twenty-four hours a day. I could be called out because of an accident any hour of the day or night. So I was not on an eight-hour shift I was available whenever I was needed.

D: Did you like your work?

H: Yes I always enjoyed it. The Erie was not a company that paid compensation in the sense of state compensation it was a federal company to the extent that if you were injured you could sue the company but they could settle directly with you.
.....State compensation as so many of the other industries had.

D: Were you a member of the union?

H: No, my department was not unionized.

D: You didn't hire out as a clerk?

H: Yes a clerk stenographer.

D: The clerks weren't unionized?

H: No. There may have been a clerk's union but I was never a member of it and was never asked to be. I think in my department we didn't have a union of any kind.

D: Do you remember getting involved in claims by companies shipping coal that ended up losing coal cause people would throw the coal off?

H: No I don't because my department only handled personal injury claims or damage to property other than our own. If there was a train derailment for instance which damaged adjacent properties then we were involved but for any other kind of damage that was another department. In fact there was a freight train department that handled freight shipments.

D: Were drugs and alcohol a problem back in the early days?

H: No, not to my knowledge.

D: A lot of the people that I've talked to who worked for the Erie or retired from the Erie always mentioned that there was a real sense of family on the railroad. Did you find that to be true?

H: I think that's true.

D: More so than on other railroads?

H: I think that's true.

D: Why is that?

H: I think it was because of the area that the old Erie served. There was a presence of general cooperation and respect in all the departments. If my department needed information or help from any other department on the Erie we had no problem getting it.

D: Did you ever see any of the presidents' of the Erie Railroad?

H: Yes, over the years I saw them and met them. I didn't associate with them intimately but I knew who they were; vice presidents, general managers, superintendents of divisions...

D: They'd always make the rounds?

H: Yes they visited the areas regularly. The top officials with very rare exceptions were well liked and respected.

D: What was the community's opinion of the railroader?

H: In the early days if you were employed by the railroad it was considered a good job as far as money and that sort of thing. I think the town through which the railroad operated had respect for the railroad too. You'd occasionally have someone that was with the company that was perhaps not as friendly or cooperative as most of them were but most of them were very fine gentlemen that came up from the ranks.

D: You hired out back in the time of the steam engines, did you ever get around to ride on the steam engines?

H: Yes. I knew very little about the mechanics but I have ridden in steam locomotives and cabooses.

D: What did you think?

- H: It wasn't an experience you often had. Sometimes there wasn't any passenger service available so you'd use a freight train and ride in the cab of the locomotive or the caboose.
- D: A lot of people that I've talked to said that they're kind of sorry to see the diesel taking over the steam locomotives but they always admit that the diesels are much better for the railroad.
- H: I'm sure the diesel locomotives are more efficient but of course the old timer perhaps hated to see the steam locomotives go out of existence.
- D: Are you glad that you worked for the Erie?
- H: In introspection most of my years with the railroad were good. I received what I considered was a good salary until the merger then things were not as good as they had been. Is that the general impression you got from the people that you've talked with?
- D: They all feel that way. They even have less respect for the way that Conrail is doing things now.
- H: I don't know too much about Conrail. I should think that competition would be better in different companies.
- D: So you don't think about railroading too much anymore?
- H: No I don't. I've been retired for thirty years so I've lost interest in railroading. There's no passenger service anymore.
- D: I suppose you could get passes with Am-Track.
- H: Yes that would be nice.
- D: Would you take Am-Track?

- H: I'd like to. In the old days my wife and I traveled with passes to California several times. The western railroads were superior to the eastern railroads. The Erie was actually predominately a freight line although we had three passenger trains a day east and west between New York and Chicago. Had you been told that?
- D: Yes I understand there was train called ninety-eight?
- H: Ninety-eight would've been a freight train. The passenger trains were numbered one and two, five and six and seven and eight. Three each way. The odd numbers went west and the even numbers went east.
- D: They had some name trains too like Bebe Snow?
- H: Yes, but that was Lackawana I think.
- D: How about one called the Black Diamond Express?
- H: No. It wasn't Erie at least. We had the Erie Limited, numbers one and two, and five and six were the Lakes to Sea names. I don't remember what seven and eight were called.
- D: What was it like traveling by passenger train then? Was it nice?
- H: Yes it was nice and interesting.
- D: The service was good?
- H: The service was generally good until the war years.
- D: Things went downhill then?
- H: Yes things went bad. The passenger trains took a back seat to the trip and freight trains.
- D: What do you think caused this decline in passenger trains?

H: Planes and automobiles. The highways and turnpikes are better now. I believe that if passenger service got you there fast it could be successful.

D: So you think there's a future for passenger railroads?

H: I think there might be.

D: How about freight in railroading? Do you think there is a future in that?

H: I don't know about a future for freight service with all the trucks and other means of transporting freight, I couldn't say.

D: Do you have anything else you'd like to add?

H: I enjoy going back to those good old days because working for the railroad was interesting and everyone to my knowledge was dependable and cooperative.