YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ERIE RAILROAD PROJECT

History of The Erie Railroad

O.H. 118

CYRIL P. BUSER

Interviewed By

Julie Di Sibio

on

May 12, 1980

CYRIL PAUL BUSER

Cyril Paul Buser was born in Buffalo, New York on June 2, 1916, the son of immigrant parents who had arrived from Germany. Upon the death of his father, Cyril was sent to Seton Hall, New Jersey and then he was transferred to Assumption Abbey College in Richardton, North Dakota for the rest of his schooling. The Abbey provided Cy with a strong background in classical studies which he now greatly appreciates.

After graduation, Cy worked at various jobs ranging from owning grocery stores to raising chickens. With World War II approaching Cy and his brothers enlisted in the service and he chose the Army Air Corp. However, he was not in the Air Corp too long before it was discovered that he could read, write and speak the German language and so he became a German interpreter. On February 16, 1946, Cy was discharged from the Army and returned to Kingston, Arizona along with his wife, Margaret, to start a contracting business.

In 1950 though, because of unforeseen circumstances, Cy returned to Youngstown, Ohio with his family and began working for the Erie Railroad. Cy worked at different jobs but when he retired he was a yard conductor. Cy found his career on the railroad very rewarding but regrets the situation that railroads find themselves in today. Another firm believer in the power of railorads, Cy feels that they will make a comeback and replace trucks, at least in freight shipment.

Cy retired from service on January 6, 1979 and enjoys his retirement. He plays the piano and organ and enjoys his H.O. train set immensely.

Julie Di Sibio

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INTERVIEWEE: CYRIL P. BUSER

INTERVIEWER: Julie Di Sibio

SUBJECT: Erie Railroad

DATE: May 12, 1980

D: This is an interview with Cy Buser, by Julie Di Sibio for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program at 10:45 a.m. on May 12, 1980. The subject is the history of the Erie Railroad.

Okay, Mr. Buser, would you like to tell us a little bit about your background, starting with your parents, your family and some of your background and childhood?

B: My mother and dad were German immigrants. They came to this country between 1912 and 1914. My brothers and sisters were born in Germany with the exception of Johnny and myself. We were born in Buffalo, New York. My dad was a German baker. He baked for various bakeries in the United States, in the Buffalo area. He died in 1930. At that time I was about fourteen years old. My brother, Gus, became my guardian. He sent me to a boarding school. I went to Seton Hall for part of the year and from there to North Dakota where he, being a priest, had been assigned by his bishop and he placed Johnny and I into a boarding school at Assumption Abbey College. I spent five years at Assumption Abbey. That's where I've got what education I have, graduating in 1935. My brother Johnny stayed on and a short time after that I went to Minneapolis. Johnny joined me the following year and we started five grocery stores in Minneapolis. That was during the Depression when bread was a nickel a loaf and eggs were nine cents a dozen. I remember that real well. We didn't do so good in the grocery business and we sold out. We went into the poultry business in Big Lake, Minnesota. And in our prime year, that was shortly before the War, we put on the market around forty-two thousand broilers a season for the night clubs

of Minneapolis and Saint Paul. We had a good business going and then when the Japs attacked Pearl Harbor we were using close to two thousand gallons of fuel oil a month for the incubating brooders. The War Energy Board cut us down to a hundred and fifty gallons a month, so we figured the only thing to do was to get out of the business. We saw the handwriting on the wall. My brothers Johnny, Joe and Gus, who was already a reserve officer in the Air Corps, and myself, enlisted within a matter of, I think six or eight weeks.

D: Okay, before we go any further, what was the reason your parents came to this country?

B: To be frank, my dad was a loyal German, he loved his country, but he couldn't make a living over there. He had a contract with the German mines over there, something similar to what we have here. It's similar I guess to the Appalachia territory where they have what they call the country store. And my dad had the baking contract for several mines, which was in itself a good set up, but what happened was the price of wheat went up and he was bound to the old contract price. It broke him: he went bankrupt; it cleaned him out. So he came over to this country as an immigrant like so many thousand others. The land of promise. He came over here and started all over again.

D: Now, does your mother come with him?

B: No, my mother came over, I think about sixteen months later, she came over with the five children. He worked two jobs and saved money enough to send for her to come over. And she came over about sixteen months later with five children.

D: Now why did he locate in Buffalo?

B: Because he had a brother that was a priest, stationed out in West Valley, New York, which was a small farming community about forty miles out of Buffalo. That was probably the reason he located there, so he'd be with someone he knew. After all he was a stranger in a strange country; didn't know the language too well.

D: Okay, you say in 1930 your father dies: is your mother dead at this time also?

B: No, my mother died in 1959.

D: Why was your brother appointed your guardian then?

B: Well, at the time of my dad's death there was a little insurance money and he wanted to make sure that we got somewhat of an education, so my brother Gus, he had just been ordained a priest several months after my dad died, said he would handle everything, the funeral arrangements and everything and then with what money was left, he put us into a boarding school. And he never became my legal guardian. We just accepted him and presumed that he would take care of everything.

D: Now, the school that you mention, Seton Hall, where is this at?

B: That's at South Orange, New Jersey. It's quite a famous school. I mean, at that time they were charging ninety dollars a month for a boarding school. So I didn't stay there too long. It was too expensive.

D: And your other brothers were there also with you?

B: My brother Johnny was there with me. We both left at the same time. We went to North Dakota.

D: Did your mother go to North Dakota also?

B: My mother did at the time. My brother Gus was assigned to a mission parish. There was no income. It was strictly for the honor and love of God because there was no income to pay a housekeeper so the bishop told him "If you have a mother living, bring her along, she could be your housekeeper because you won't be able to afford one." And that's the reason my mother went along.

D: Do you remember what the school was like that you attended in North Dakota? Could you give us a description of the school?

B: The Abbey?

D: Yes.

B: I think it was one of the finest schools I've ever attended in my life. To this day, I still say there's a lot of schools that have to work hard to come up to par with the Abbey, because they made one thing prominent in your mind, the moment you entered there. Your folks were paying five hundred dollars a year and it was hard earned money and you were going to earn it. You were going to study. We had two Latin classes a day, two English, two history. Everything was doubled. All you did when you were there was, you studied. And to this day, I'm grateful for having gone there. It was an excellent school.

D: Now was it mostly run by nuns?

B: No, it was run by priests, by Benedictine priests. It was a Benedictine Abbey. They were a very learned type of people. They were all very well educated. Each one of my teachers, probably enjoyed two or three, maybe four degrees in different majors. They were excellent teachers.

D: What year did you leave this school?

B: In 1935.

D: And then you worked in various jobs?

B: After we left there, that's when we started the grocery stores in Minneapolis. And when we got out of the grocery business we went into the poultry business. And we stayed in that until the Pearl Harbor affair. And then from Pearl Harbor... I remember shortly after we all enlisted we took my mother, incidentially this was in Buffalo, New York, to a restaurant called Laube's Old Spain. I still remember it. And we had a farewell dinner because we figured with four of us going in the service, it would probably be the last time we would be together. The law of average had to be against you. We figured one of us is going to get nailed in this War. So we figured we'd have one farewell dinner. Right after that dinner, Gus went to Fort Ord, California. He was chaplain at Fort Ord, California. I was still a civilian at the time, but I was getting ready to go in. I went out to Merced, California and enlisted. My brother Johnny went down to Fort Bragg and enlisted in the Army and became a medic; he went with the artillery as a medic. And my brother Joe held a Marine license on the Great Lakes. He went into the Coast Guard as a chief petty officer. And by coincidence, six months later we all met again at the west coast. It was almost unbelieveable because I enlisted on the field my brother was chaplain. Johnny came out on his furlough and Joe took a group of sailors out to La Jolla, California, ninety miles north of Merced. He came down and we had a dinner together again, all four of us, with my mother on the west coast. So it was kind of prophetic it turned out that way. But after that we dispersed.

D: Okay, now what year did you enter the service?

B: In 1941.

D: You say that you went to where, Fort Ord?

B: No, I enlisted at Merced, California.

D: Merced?

B: Merced is presently a B-52 Base. And I was there about three months and then I was sent to Kingman, Arizona. It was the largest gunnery school the Army had during the War. It was run by the Air Corps, aerial gunnery, for B-17 gunners. I had something unique happen to me of which I'm proud. One year I entered that field as a Pfc, [Private first class] and one year from the day I was a Pfc, I was first sergeant of a military police unit. One year almost to the day, I became first sergeant of the outfit. And then I worked for Counter-Intelligence on the field. I was sworn into Counter-Intelligence by Major Endicott. I worked that job until I was sent overseas. I was picked because I spoke and wrote German. I was picked as a German interpreter and I was sent to Greensboro, North Carolina. And for six weeks we did nothing but eat, sleep, talk, read, everything in German. Everything even our close order drill was in German. It was kind of weird. We were in the American Army, yet we were fenced off. We were a group by ourselves. And the whole idea behind it was to make us proficient in German. It was like getting the rust off of all the metal; bringing back words that you hadn't used for years in your association with other Germans. Little by little it all come back to you and then they sent us overseas. I went overseas on the Queen Elizabeth, like a tourist. We landed in London on a Sunday afternoon.

D: What year was this?

B: Believe it or not this was the month after Germany surrendered, when they sent me overseas.

D: 1945?

B: Yes.

D: Okay.

B: I landed there on a Sunday evening and they took us right down, another fellow and myself, they picked us, and they took us down to an office and made us translate some documents. It was all top secret stuff. As a matter of fact, we had over five thousand tons of captured German documents that we were cataloguing for shipment to the United States. And at that time the United States Government had an agreement with England and Russia that we would microfilm all the documents and would give them a

copy of everything that was microfilmed and in return for doing all the work we kept a copy for ourselves plus the original document. And those documents were all sent back to Wright Field, Dayton, Ohio, and during the course of these documents, I liberated, so to speak, (MP's Military Police never took anything they weren't suppose to). They always used to say they liberated when they grabbed a souvenir. I liberated several brochures on Messerschmitt the M62 and different planes. And I translated the document, the German wording on the plane that was shot down. They had it on display at Hyde Park when I was over there for, this is still with the Intelligence office out of Dayton. My buddy and I translated all the German wording on the markings of this aircraft that was shot down and at Hyde Park, London. I think it was the 363 Messerschmitt, a ramjet engine. They crated this aircraft and they said they were sending it back to the United States to Wright Field and I saw the same plane. It was a nostalgic moment. It was thirty some years since I'd seen that plane. I was looking at it rather closely and the guard came over and he said, "Sir, your're showing an unusual interest in this airplane. Is there any particular reason?" I knew what he was thinking, maybe I was going to take a souvenir or something. And I remember I says, "Son, I climbed all over this airplane before you were born." And I told him about it. He walked away and didn't say anything. He came back with the curator from the museum from the Wright Field. "This gentleman tells me that you knew this plane when it was over in England." I said, "Yes, and as a matter of fact, I have some literature on it at home." And at Wright Field they're cataloguing a library of all the German aircraft. He told me, "We have almost a complete set, except about ten or eleven that we're missing." I said, "When I get home to Youngstown, Ohio, I'll send them to you." I had the eleven they were looking for, believe it or not. It was no theft, you know what I mean, it was just souvenirs. But who would of thought that later on they'd want to start a library of all these German aircraft. He wrote to me and sent me a mailing pouch and everything. and he says, "For God's sake, we'll appreciate it if you'll send them to us,to complete our collection." So I sent them to him and I had about a hundred pictures of the bombing of Hamburg. That is when we were bombing Hamburg. I had all those pictures and I told him I had them. He said they'd be very much interested in seeing them. I said, "I'll send them to you as a gift, you can have them." I took them down to this Civil Defense Headquarters downtown. I said,"Do you want to put these on display, show the people what it

looks like when a blockbuster takes a whole block off at once?" "No," he says, "We wouldn't be interested." They've got them down there now. And I sent them everything that I had, that I brought back.

D: Okay, how long were you stationed in London?

B: Believe it or not, six months, and I came back to Wright Field.

D: Okay. Now when you got back to Wright Field, what did you do?

B: Well, they had one entire building with all the documents that we had brought back. And they interviewed us. And there were a little over two hundred in this project and they were desperately trying to keep German translators. This was not colloquial German; this was all technical German. And you had to know a little bit about technical aircraft before you could even try to transpose the words from one language to another. As a matter of fact, when I was over in London, I was interpreter for about a month for Piccard. The fellow who went up in a balloon and down the Bathosphere, I was his translator. He's a Belgian. I was his translator for about a month. See, there was a typical case. When his brains were sleeping he was brighter that I could be when wide awake. But he didn't know some of the technical wording. That's where they threw us into the slots to kind of help out. So we got this whole thing going. But when I got back to Wright Field they interviewed me. They offered me a captain's commission in the Army, permanant rank if I stayed for three years. Nobody stayed. (Laughter) I'll never forget, I asked him, "Have you got anything with stars on it?" He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Brigadier general on up." I said, "After four years of this baloney, I don't want anymore." (Laughter) But it was a unique experience.

D: Now what year were you discharged?

B: 1946.

D: What did you do after that?

B: I was self-employed. Let's see. I was discharged. Peg and I lived in Arizona. My daughter was born in Arizona, while I was overseas, and we went back to Arizona after the war.

D: Why Arizona?

B: Well, I was stationed at Kingman and you kind of fall in love with the country. I was raised out West from, I'd say from thirteen years on an all that. I always loved the West. It's wide open and free. Not a different type of people, but. . . well, you just felt more at home there. So Peg and I went to Arizona. I did carpenter work after the War and later we moved to Phoenix. I had a business started there. I was doing contracting. My daughter Peggy Ann got sick. My wife brought her east to Saint Elizabeth Hospital. And one thing led to another. She came back again and then she had to return East again. The climate was bothering her too much. And the doctor here said that Arizona is not the climate for her. Between doctor trips and everything else one thing led to another and I started to go downhill financially and I had to get out of there. So we came east to Youngstown. I worked in Youngstown again as a carpenter. Built some houses. Did repair work.

I got sick in 1949. And in 1950 I was off about six months. I had to start looking for work. I was running out of money. I started doing carpenter work and a fellow at the lumber company said, "Somebody down here on Trumbull Hill is looking for a carpenter to rough in a house for him." I took the job. He was a railroader from the Erie. We got to be pretty good friends while I was building his house. And he said, "Why don't you come down on the Erie Railroad and get a job?" And so I thought I would. And I applied and that's how I got on the Erie Railroad. I did carpenter work for the last twenty-five years on the side. I used to augment my income by doing carpenter work, by building family rooms and things like that.

D: Okay, so you started on the railroad then in 1950?

B: 1950, September 30, 1950. I still got my original tag. I asked for them when I left the railroad.

D: All right, what was your first job on the railroad?

B: The first night I worked, I worked at Briar Hill, the west end yard, as a brakeman. And I was the headman and I don't know why they do this, but I think that's wrong. There should be something done about that in railroading, because the newest man has the least seniority so consequently he has to work the midnight shift and the job that nobody possibly wants. Now what happens, I got out into the railroad yard and there were two engines working, one working the long lead, one working the short lead, but every switch light looked to me like an engine coming at me.

I swore there must have been a hundred engines coming at me at once. I think it's terrible for a new man. You get scared. You think you're going to get run over. You don't know where to stand. At a distance you can't discern a moving object from a bright light, especially at night. Why don't they break in a new man in the daytime where he's got a fighting chance to survive?

D: So there was no training?

B: There were two trains working. I was working with my conductor on one and the other one, . . . it makes you awful nervous. I was glad when I was finished. And then we finished all our work. We worked right through to about four thirty. The conductor said, "Okay, put the engine over there on that track and go home, we're done." And I well remember I came home and I told my wife, "I don't think I'm going to stay on the railroad. I went down there to get eight hours pay and we only worked about four and a half hours." I said, "That's no good." I didn't know that eight hours or less constitutes a day. I thought I was only getting paid for four and a half hours. And then after I found out that I was going to get paid for the eight hours, I said, "Man, I'll never leave this place." (Laughter)

D: How long were you a brakeman?

B: Nine months. And I got promoted because of the shortage of conductors at the time. They needed someone to run the crew and they called me up and told me that you'll run the crew today. I told them, "I'm not a conductor." He said, "You are now, we'll take all the responsibility." Later on I was formally made a conductor. I had to go in for the exam and all that, but I ran the crew before I was formally made a conductor according to their rules.

D: Okay, now you were a conductor until the time you retired then?

B: Till I retired, yes. But you have the option when you're a conductor that does not mean you have to run a crew every day. See the way the ground crews operate, I can be the oldest conductor on the job and the youngest man is the headman, but if he's also a promoted conductor I can force him to run the crew in my place, merely by saying, "I'll take your job today, you run the crew." They have some crazy rules. To me they just don't make sense, not even today. The conductor is responsible for the crew. Now you've got, what they call the hindman, and the headman. One works with the engine, one works the field, lines switches when you cut cars and so forth. But if

But if that hindman throws the switch into the wrong track, mind you, he's probably five hundred feet away from you and I cut the car and that car side swipes another, damages you, I get blamed for it, yet I had nothing to do with it. I was five hundred feet away. But that's the way they play the game. All the railroads are that way. And it doesn't make sense, does it?

D: No.

B: No, and the same way with the headman. If the headman takes the engine into a track and the other track didn't clear and he took a corner off a car, the conductor gets called in for the investigation. They say, "Well you're the conductor, you're responsible." If you have a man go home or he just takes off and sneeks home on you, you're responsible. You might not even know the guy is gone. You might think he's down there lining switches. Somebody might have seen him over at the bar having a beer, maybe one of the superintendents. Boy, you're in trouble, but you didn't even know the guy was gone. Those are some of the things that they should iron out sometime. But, it's always been that way the twenty-nine years I was there.

D: What was a typical day like as a conductor? What were your responsibilities?

B: Well, during the regular season, I used to work the east end or the west end yard. Let's say I worked the east end job for quite a few years. When you went to work you reported in and filled out the time slip, stamped your name on it and made sure your crew was there ready to go to work. Your engine would be on a certain track, usually the engineer and fireman would be on the engine after they'd made out their time slip and threw it into the collection box. They'd usually be on the engine and wait for the conductor to come out. If the conductor wants to be decent with his crew, he'll tell them all what he's going to do. Some of these conductors, they just come out and give you signs or yell, "Bring your engine over here." You don't know where you're going. But, I always made it a point to inform the crew. It came out at one of the book of rules meeting and for which I was grateful. And I'm not beating my own drums, but a young brakeman mentioned that. He said, "Cy Buser is one of the few guys I ever worked with that'll tell you before you're going to do something, what you're going to do and he won't yell at you if you do it wrong." So, I said, that made me feel good because I always figured if you treat the other person the way you wanted to be treated yourself, you're going to get along better. And it

prevents the guy from getting nervous and getting hurt. And that's always the main thing. The guard master would give you a track. He'd give you a consist [a list of cars] of maybe forty-five cars you're going to switch. Well the switching lead would only take about twenty cars at a time. And the cars are all marked as to what track they go on. You mark them with a chalk before you bring them out. Well then the hindman, you give the hindman a car list and he's got all the numbers e.g. two for six, one for eight, one for twelve, whatever it is. And he just goes down the lead and keeps on lining the switches. And the headman will work with you. You're constantly looking at the card. You'll say, "Cut two." And you'll line it for six and so forth. Certain switches you'll take care of, but the back field the hindman will take care of most. And he'll cut tow cars off and you bump the cars towards that track and after they clear you line the switch and you say, "All right, let one go." One for eight and one for twelve. And that's the way you get rid of them. And then you go over and get another cut of cars. In other words, what you're doing is you're breaking up a train that came into Briar Hill from Meadville, let's say. Well, now you're breaking it up. In that Meadville train there were cars, some have to go to Chicago, some have to go to Cleveland, some have to go to Marion, wherever they have to go, each yard has tracks that designate those different towns. And then, you place all these cars in there. Now after you're all done, usually after dinner, the yardmaster would give you a list. After dinner you made up the train. Now you might make up a train for Cleveland. You pick a track, all the Cleveland cars, that are going towards Cleveland like Mantua, Solon, Niles, Warren, they're all usually on two tracks. Well, you look at the whole list. You got the whole list of both tracks. You take out the one that's easiest to handle. Now you know your last stop is Cleveland, So now that you pulled all the cars out of one track, you got an empty track. Now you put your Cleveland cars in there first. Then your Solon cars on top of that and then your Leavittsburg cars. You keep on piling them in so they would be in station order. And when you're all done and that train heads for Cleveland the cars nearest to the engine will be the Niles cars and right behind the Niles cars will be the Warren Cars. Now when he gets to Niles, the headman has a train list or consist. It'll say,"Niles, eighteen cars." He's got eighteen cars for Niles, The head eighteen cars are for Niles. When they get to the siding that he's going to back those cars in off the main, the headman will drop off and make a cut behind eighteen cars. They'll pull up over the switch. He'll open the switch and and he'll back those eighteen cars into that siding. Those are all for Niles. Then he comes on the main track

again. Now if there are any empties, you pick them up on another track, tie on to your train and you go to Warren. Again he checks the list. It says "Five cars for Warren." He takes his eighteen empties or whatever he had in empties, plus the five for Warren and he pulls up and does the same thing again. Backs five into the Warren track. Picks up the Warren empties. And that's the way they do it all the way to Cleveland. Once in awhile they pick up all the empties on the way back. It depends on how many there are. But that's the whole operation...they classify their whole route all the way to Cleveland and back. Now that is a roadman's work. We don't do that. All we did was get the train ready for the roadman. We never left the yard. A yard conductor is bound by yard limits. If I go over the yard limits, I'm doing a roadman's work. The roadman can claim a day's pay because I'm doing his work. And if a roadman comes in the yard and switches out cars I can claim a day's pay because he's doing my work. I hired out to be a yardman. I didn't hire out to be a roadman.

D: Okay, now you worked for the railroad during the consolidation?

B: Yes.

D: Can you tell us a little bit about that? How the railroad changed with Conrail?

B: Well, nobody liked it. I can honestly say, I can't recall a single individual that liked the news that we were going to consolidate. Remember, at first the Erie consolidated with the Lackawanna. That wasn't bad, but everybody knew that we were taking over a defunct railroad. As a matter of fact the way the brakemen used to talk about the consolidation in the brakemen shack, there were certain good areas that the Erie couldn't service that the Lackawanna had. This could be a boon for us. It could be an improvement. So gradually the Erie absorbed the Lackawanna, but then along comes Conrail. Well, that's like a puppy dog fighting a monster. Conrail was already Penn-Central and they took in the other railroads. And then if you recall, the Erie-Lackawanna didn't go in on the merger with Conrail at the beginning. They only went at the tail end and then the government had to tell Conrail, "You have to take in the Erie." So I suppose the Erie saw the handwriting on the wall. This was going to be a little game of freeze out. You can see it today with Conrail. What they're doing now, they're talking now about cutting out the run through Youngstown. Now they want to bypass Youngstown. Well, when that happens, goodbye Youngstown. Downtown, that's gone. There are no more

railroad tracks down there. That's supposed to be in the plans for the future. But, as far as Conrail is concerned, it was an entirely new ball game when they took over. They've done things that are just impossible, it does not coincide with railroading. Now, years ago, someone, I remember reading an article on railroading and years ago some fellow who made the remark. A fellow in Congress, I think it was a Congressman. He said, "If there were no railroads, they would have to be invented." And he said that by way of stressing the importance of railroads. And where would Youngstown be without railroads? Youngstown would never be in existence if it were not for the railroads. How would they bring in the ore to dolomite the stone and everything and take out the steel. How would they do it? It's impossible. You see trucks on Route 80 now and over here on this other highway bringing in the ore. And, my God they're running back and forth just trying to keep up. Then Conrail took over. Conrail, they do not care about customer service. I've never seen anything like it. I worked over at Niles. They don't care. When we used to work over there, a firm wants four gondolas, you take two. And you got extra gondolas in the yard, but take him two. I mean you don't know what the purpose is. And the management, nobody liked the Conrail management, nobody. They've started this harassing continuously. I'll be honest with you, I used to be glad when I had my eight hours in with Conrail and got home. I mean just to get away from it. When I worked for the Erie, I mean we used to work overtime. It wasn't that you wanted the money from the overtime, but I mean if the boss came out and said, "Hey you guys, I've got work here. We've got a hot train to get out tonight." I mean nobody ever squawked. I mean it was like one big family. But not with Conrail. It's a dog eat dog proposition. But I've talked to some fellows recently down there at Conrail, some of my buddies I used to work with. Now they were waiting until this year to take the severance pay. Some of them said we're going to get out of here, severance pay or no severance pay. We can't take it anymore. Believe it or not, they're actually going to quit. It's such a dog eat dog game. . .three minutes quits--you might be done with your work for two hours, they make you sit there. The railroad was always great for giving the men a quit, but there was a reason for that because if you knew you were going to get an hour and a half, two hour quit on the job, you gave them twelve hours work for that two hour quit. Their rules were switch strictly by the book. A couple cars, you don't kick or shunt cars nothing like that. You're lucky if you switch out twenty-five, thirty cars in eight hours the way they want you to switch them, but you never get your trains out on time. I mean these different towns say, "Hey, where's our

merchandise, it's late." So they leave it up to the ground crew to do the switching. And we know when to kick a car. We know when to kick a car and when they let them go fast. If it's an empty we let them go fast because there's no damage. But merchandise, you're careful with merchandise. That's my bread and butter. I'm certainly not going to ruin my own job. But consequently you switch out maybe a hundred and fifty, a hundred and seventy-five cars in eight hours. And you have all the trains ready on schedule to leave the yards. But with Conrail, they catch you kicking a car, well as the old saying goes--I told one official one day because I wasn't switching cars fast enough, I said, "Hey, I can have cars going down three tracks at once, and you'll say, boy that Cy is a good switchman, but kick one car and damage it, you got me in for an investigation." That's about the size of it.

D: What were your impressions of railroading? Did you enjoy it on a whole?

B: I did! I did. Yes, well it's my whole life. As a matter of fact, just recently I went down to the railroad and somebody said, "Gee, Cy, you always come back and so do the other guys." It seems that all the ex-railroaders come back. Why? You figure it out. I've got a brother in California, I saw him three times in the last thirty years, right? I was on the railroad twenty-nine years. I saw those guys everyday. They're closer to me actually, you might say, than your own relatives are because you worked with these fellows everyday. You were there when they got hurt in an accident. You went up to the hospital to visit them. When they had a death in the family you were over there. So you develop an association that gets to be awful close, I would say. And that's always been my impression. We still call each other up on the phone. I still go down the railroad once in awhile, ride the engine with the gang, and just make small talk. They're glad to see me. I'm glad to see them.

D: Okay, is there anything of major significance that happened during the time that you worked on the railroad that sticks out in you mind maybe that happened?

B: Well, this one accident, a fellow got run over. A steam engine backed over him. And he was wrapped up underneath the axle of the tender. And I remember the report, it said that his one leg was broken in forty-three places alone. I climbed under the engine and they had to move the engine over me to get him out. I had to unwrap him. He was just like a piece of taffy wrapped all around the axle. They backed the engine away and as he come down I

had to twist his shoulders free of the brake rigging. The poor fellow only lived about a half hour later. And the pathetic part of it was that he was talking to me just prior to the accident that he was taking his vacation, plus a couple of weeks and he was taking his mother to Italy. He wasn't married. And he got killed a week before his vacation. That was a hard one to digest.

And I had another buddy lost over at Briar Hill. They kicked a car into another car and he got the brake rigging into his side. It punctured his side and he got blood poisoning out of it, I believe. But you lose a lot of them. It's a dangerous business. I had a brother-in-law that used to drive a semi-truck. He came to Briar Hill one time to visit me from Buffalo and he pulled into the yard. I was just on the lead switching cars. They kick the cars and you hop the cars on the run and ride them down into the track. I went over to see him, he said, "Why you darn fool, you could be killed doing that." I said, "What are you talking about, we do that everyday." He thought that was just the first time. I said, "We do that everyday." Hop the cars and climb up and tie a brake on them. And he's a truck driver and I wouldn't drive a semi across the highway for no money. I'd be scared. And he saw what we were doing and he said, "Man,you couldn't get me to do that." And that's true with railroading. You make one miss and it's going to get you. But, fortunately the railroaders, the guys on the ground, and the engineers and firemen, everybody kind of keeps an eye out for everybody else. We always kind of watch. Nobody wants to see a person get hurt.

D: Okay, could you give me your impressions of how the eastern railroads matched up to the western railroads the time that you spent on the railroads?

B: Well, I will say this. I've traveled quite a bit,as a single person that is, around the United States. And I think the western railroads are superior to the eastern. Now somewheres between 1931 and 1936, I traveled on the Great Northern from Williston, North Dakota to Chicago. They already had six barber chairs on the train and showers for their Pullman passengers. I don't remember ever seeing that on an eastern train. And I'll tell you another thing, the western roads, they seem to be more prosperous than the eastern roads. And the reason for that is of course the Federal Land Grant, after the Civil War. When the railroads went west of the Mississippi, the government induced the railroads to go west by giving them an amount of land or the Federal Land Grant. And that's why all these western railroads, when they go through a town, they own the town. They own the very

ground that the town is on. When the Erie went through Niles, the Niles local government said, "Hey boys, you owe us some taxes." City, state taxes. When they went to Warren it was the same thing. How much tax did the Erie pay just from here to Cleveland, hundreds of thousands of dollars. But out west you don't have that problem because under the Federal Land Grant, this land that all these towns like Flagstaff, Arizona and all these towns, Williams, Arizona for example, they're all on railroad land. So the railroad doesn't have to pay. They give the cities money to run their schools and that, but there's no compulsion because it's their land, you see. I'm not going to pay you to live on my own land. So you can't very well tax me. So the railroads out west, I would say are prosperous compared to the eastern roads. The eastern roads, besides maintaining their own roadbed, which the west had to do, also have to pay an enormous tax to every city and town they go through. Out west they don't have that.

D: Okay, while we're on the subject of the federal government, do you think that federal regulation of railroads, especially eastern railroads, has helped or hindered the railroads in this country?

B: Well, I would say it's a two-way street. I would say as far as the personnel is concerned, they're not strict enough as far as their management and financing. If you want a person to stay in business, you got to give him the opportunity to do business. I mean you can't lay down twenty, thirty laws that he has to abide by. He'll say, "Well, I can't make a dime this way. Sure, I'm living up to all your regulations." Why don't they let the railroads compete with the truckers, it has to compete with the airline, right? Now you take the airline. I remember reading in the Reader's Digest where some airport out in Montana got a federal grant of eight hundred and some thousand dollars to fix up the runway. If you shake it right down to the pennies, there were several pennies in it that the railroad paid in taxes. There were several pennies that came out of my income tax that helped pay for that runway. Well, I'm not interested in that, I'm on the railroad. Now why don't you give that eight hundred and sixty-one thousand to the railroad as well and say okay we're going to treat you all the same. We build a highway. These highways, I think [Route 80] they paid a million dollars a mile. We built that, the truckers are using it, right? But they don't give anything to the railroads. Let's treat them all the same. They build the roadway for these trucks. They build an airport for the aircraft. And the railroad they say, "Go to grass; do it on your own.

Now how are you supposed to compete? I mean it's unfair, that part is unfair, I think it is.

It's a hard thing to say. There's so much politics involved in it. I would say that if they would deregulate, let them compete. Because if this grocery store for example, is selling potatoes for a dollar a peck and the next one says I can sell them for ninety cents, I'm going to go down the block further and get them for ninety cents, right? So consequently this guy must be able to do it cheaper too. He just wants a bigger profit. So he'll start dropping his price. The consumer is going to benefit by it. I'm going to benefit by it because now we got two fellows that are selling them for ninety cents, right? And if this fellow tries to jack up the price, the other guy is going to undercut him. I would say deregulation is good. Let them fight it out and see what happens, because there's enough business for all. And I'll bet you the moment you deregulate and let them run free again, you'll probably get some passenger runs back again. Don't tell me they can't make money on these passenger trains. We used to have No. 629 and No. 628, a passenger commuter, that ran to Cleveland. That thing used to be jammed every morning when it got to Cleveland. They said, they're not making money. Who are you kidding? But that was only one train. They were making money on that. Of course Conrail wanted to take it off so they could run freight. But the B & O and all these other railroads, for years we've had passenger trains in town. And all these years they've been making money. All of a sudden overnight, everybody is losing money. You can tell that to a little kid, but not to a grownup. That's kind of hard to swallow. Like I said, if they would deregulate and let these fellows operate independent, they'll start competing. If they start competing, they put out better cars, they put out better service and everything. And you're going to ride with the best. It's one reason why we have these big chain grocery stores. They're always competing with one another, right? And that's the reason they're good. And we benefit by the bargain, and by the service. And you can get the same thing out of a railroad, I would say.

D: Do you think you're going to see passenger service on railroads come back again?

Well, I would just hate to think of what would happen the way we are situated right now, if we would get into a full scale war. What would we do? We couldn't move troops, it would be impossible. We don't have anything left in the passenger line. And I remember, it was a moment, everybody had a lump in their throat when Conrail

took the cars from No. twenty-seven and No. twenty-eight and sent them to Chicago. I think they went to Chicago to be cut up for scrap. A lot of us took a last look at them and we figured that's the last time you'd see a passenger train. It doesn't cost that much to run a diesel engine with five or six cars behind it. Who are they trying to kid. It's hard to believe. Look at your European countries, they're not all nationalized yet. Maybe that's the answer, nationalize the railroads, but not if the government has to stick money into them. They should stick management into them. That's what they should do. There's no greater respecter of education than me, but you've got some of these slide rule boys, God they drive you crazy! They know everything in theory, on paper, but not in actual practice. It's like telling a fellow you got to plant these potatoes six inches deep, eighteen inches apart. First you take a shovel. He says, "What's a shovel?" That's what you got a lot of times with management. Some of these fellows don't know what they're talking about, I would say. I had an inspector the last year I worked on the railroad at Niles. He rode with us and he was one of these time study men. We went from one place to another and he was going to ask us all along, "Why are we stopping now?" He was constantly writing this down for management. It was a time study project. And in the course of the conversation he asked me several questions. Finally I asked him, "How long were you on the railroad?" "Oh," he says, "Ill be here thirty-one days tomorrow." And I thought to myself, here I spent practically my adult lifetime on the railroad and this punk of thirty-one days is now going to tell me how this should be done, and is going to make a report and send it in and that's going to change the way we're doing things, with thirty-one days experience. I said, "You don't walk down frontwards, you turn around and go down backwards and grab the rails so you don't fall." And this was the fellow that was going to send in a report to management that was going to tell us how we should handle our operation.

D: All right. During the years that you spent on the railroad you were involved with the union.

B: Yes, I was the secretary of 952, the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen. And then when they merged with the switchmen, the ORC and the firemen, they became the United Transportation Union. I was secretary of that union as well. I was elected treasurer for seven years too.

D: What are your opinions of the unions and what they've done to the railroad?

B: Well, a union is the greatest thing in the world if it's run right. But if it's run wrong, it's hell. I mean, I couldn't possibly think of a railroader working without having a union backing him up. But let's say, in all fairness, sometimes they get a little ridiculous. I mean I think there should be a closer cooperation between management and union. I don't think you'd have these outlandish demands that they make. Of course they always ask for a quarter and settle for a nickel. That's the old policy. The other fellow can chew you down. He figures he made a bargain and you figure you got what you wanted. But I actually believe they should get together on, not just on saying "Well, we got another contract coming up." They should get together more often and eliminate these things that cause these court cases. Now, we've had cases. We've taken them to the PUCO [Public Utilities Commission of Ohio] in Columbus. I remember we had one case down there involving covering switch stands. A minor affair, yet the railroad did not know whether they were going to do it or not. And I remember the judge that heard the case, he said,"If I put out an order, you'll move that entire lead track and it'll cost you better than eighty thousand dollars." And actually, what we wanted was to cover up a few ties. To be exact, two ties on the outside of the switch stand so that the brakeman would not get his foot caught in that hole between the ties. I think the whole operation cost them forty dollars to do. There was no need for taking up all this PUCO time and cost. They should have just gotten together with management and have said, "All right, we'll send a man out to Briar Hill and look at it." And have one of our men go say, "Here's all we want. Just get a sheet metal put over each one of these switch stands so a fellow don't get his foot caught," because one fellow got his ankle twisted in there. Several of them got them sprained. And it was continued and they were bringing it down to the Union Hall, and making a case out of it. It was just as simple as that. They should have more closer cooperation between the two.

D: Did you see a change in the union's attitude, once Conrail took over?

B: Yes, I would say. Now what little cooperation you had between management and labor is now management versus labor and labor versus management. It's to the point of "Don't turn your back on them." I've noticed that. I

was getting off the railroad at about the time this thing got hot, but I've noticed with some of the other fellows that I talked to, there's absolutely no possible chance of "let's talk this over," anymore. As soon as something happens, write it up, send it to Columbus, get a hold of the PUCO, get a hold of the union lawyer. I mean there's no chance of "let's settle this amongst ourselves first." And we used to have that. We used to have a nice setup between some of our superintendents on the railroad. You could talk to them and they listened to you. And they said, "Okay." And you'd be on a first-name basis with them because it was like one happy family. He didn't want to see anybody get hurt. He wanted to see the men happy because then his work was getting done. But you don't have that anymore. I mean with management. Nobody would walk past an offical at Conrail right now, to be honest with you, I don't remember; I would say, "Hello. How are you?" or anything. You just walk by and ignore the fellow and he ignores you. I mean that's a strange relationship to work under when you're in a dangerous business like railroading, which only lately has been classified on the insurance policies in line with other businesses. At one time when I took out a policy with Prudential, they gave me the highest rate in the book because they said, "You're a railroader. It's the most dangerous job you can have." So I mean when you work that way, you want to work with peace of mind, right? I used to tell the guys, "If you got any family troubles, leave them at home. Don't bring them out here, you're going to get yourself killed." And the insurance company evidently thought the same way. But you don't have that anymore. There's none of this comradeship or anything. It's gone.

D: Okay, looking back, what changes would you have liked to see instituted that might have changed the outcome of things for the Erie Railroad?

B: In my opinion, when the government gave this two and a half, or three billion dollars to Conrail, why didn't they give five hundred million or something like that to the Erie on a long term loan. I think if that would have happened the Erie never would have gone into Conrail. I think the Erie would still be independent today and you'd still have the same service you used to have. The Erie was always a thorn in the side of the Penn Central, and in the Central and the Pennsylvania, and then when they merged it was paramount to get rid of the Erie. Get rid of the Erie, because they were right in the middle. The best thing in the world as far as Conrail was concerned, was when the Erie had to join

them because now they could do what they wanted to do for years. They could cut it up and nobody could say anything. And that's what's happening, they're eliminating the Erie, one location after another, they're getting rid of it. They say, "Well, we finally got our competitor in the middle." Because I think the Erie has the shortest run between here and Chicago and it serves a lot of industry. Now they're picking out what they want and what they don't want, the heck with it. Let it die on the vine. That's just what it's amounting to. All along the line from Hoboken to Chicago. Everything they don't want they're eliminating. Conrail says, "Well, it's not a money-maker." But it always was a money-maker for the Erie. See the Erie had poor financing to start with. If the government would have come in with, like I say, half a billion dollars and says,"Here Erie, we'll give you this to see if you can iron out your problems. We'll put you in trusteeship,"--they were in trusteeship for quite a few years--and would have told them, "We're going to keep an eye on you, but you're going to get a half a billion dollars here to put this thing on a good basis," The Erie would be competing with the best of them today. I really believe that, because the Erie had something the other railroads didn't have. It's personnel. The personnel that worked for the Erie, they loved the railroad. Now the Erie is known as a father and son railroad. There's more father and son and brothers on the railroad. It's a family railroad. And that's from one end of the line to the other. And consequently, I think it would have worked out. Because at one time, the Erie, I understand,and this was way before my time, when the Erie was in bad shape, the fellows didn't get their pay checks on time. They didn't even squawk. They were paid little by little. What employer do you do that for? You must have a certain love for your job and the personnel you're working with. I think that would have worked out, because if they would have told us on the Erie, "Fellows, we can't give you a raise for two years, you're going to have to work with the same salary you've been getting because we're in financial straits. But we're going to stay independent." I'll bet you the men would have voted,"we'll go along with it." Because Conrail, nobody likes. I'll be honest with you, nobody likes Conrail, because the way they do things. It's too sneaky, there's no heart in it. You're nothing but a number, and that's all you are. And they don't care if you live or die, you're a number. "Well yes, I'll put so and so in his place. He can work that job," and that's the end of the conversation. No, I think the Erie would have made it on its own if they'd have gotten a little financial backing.

Why didn't the government help them? Now you see the Chessie took over the Baltimore and Ohio, right? That's a prosperous railroad. How come they're not in with Conrail? The P&LE is a prosperous railroad. They're not in with Conrail, right? So what is Conrail trying to do? I mean, I can't see it. But it almost looks like "We're going to eat up everybody that's in our way, and then when we're all done, then we'll just have one railroad that will be still Penn-Central, or we'll break off and you go Central and you go Pennsylvania again." I don't know. You don't know what they've got in mind.

But they own all kinds of property. They sunk all their money in the property and that is called money. How come that money isn't being put into Conrail? It sould be put into Conrail.

And like I say, this severance pay, when they gave me severance pay, they bought off an Erie guy. And they bought off I think thirty-five of them at the same time in my group, Erie men that took the severance. I mean, this don't make sense. You know what I mean, if you're starving and I give you a loaf of bread, I don't expect you to turn around and give that loaf of bread to somebody else because you told me you were starving. I gave it to you to help you out. Now you give it to somebody else. And that's the same way with Conrail. They're financially in trouble, the government has to come and help them out. Now they're turning around and giving it to other guys. I mean this could be like a bottomless well, couldn't it? This could go on indefinitely. And this money has to be paid back.

D: Okay, now you retired in 1979, right?

B: 1979.

D: And what have you been doing with your time since then?

B: Since I retired? My boy bought an older home in Hubbard and I started on that in May. I've been remodeling that. Well, we tore the entire house apart. There wasn't very much left except the framework. We remodeled it inside and outside, and I built all the cupboards, the bathroom plumbing, everything. And he moved in there February 2nd. And then over the winter I sat at home and took it easy, and last month I started out and helped my other boy put a bedroom on his house. Now the end of this month, the other son is going to continue with his project over in Hubbard and put on the two-car garage and three bedrooms. I'm sharpening up my tools now to go in on that project

again.

D: If Conrail hadn't taken over the Erie Railroad, would you have retired when you did?

B: No. No, if Conrail hadn't taken over, I would have stayed with the railroad until I was sixty-five. I had two and a half years to go. See, when I took it at sixty-two and a half, I had to take a twenty percent reduction on my pension, which naturally if I would have stayed with the Erie, I would have stayed until I was sixty-five and claimed the full pension. But Conrail, with the way they handled things and set it up, I couldn't refuse. They were offering me $17,300 for two and a half years of more railroad time. Well, no matter what I earned, I wasn't going to put that much amount of money in the bank, out of my savings in two and a half years, because if you can save $17,500 in two and a half years, you're a genius. So I was eligible for the pension with a twenty percent reduction, so I took the check and went down and signed up for my railroad retirement. I receive no benefits for the wife. She's not eligible yet. But I'm getting enough to get by on without hurting. At the same time, I think what prompted me more than anything was to get away from the railroad, to get away from it all. I didn't like it anymore toward the end. It was too nerve-racking.

D: Okay, is there anything else that you think is importany that you might want to add about your career with the railroad that I haven't asked you about?

B: No, I couldn't think of anything.

D: Okay. Nothing?

B: No. I'm enjoying my retirement!

D: Well, that's good. Well, thank you very much for the interview.

B; You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW