

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Erie Railroad Project

A Woman's Perspective Of
Railroad Life

O.H. 119

GRETCHEN BRICKLEY

Interviewed

by

Julie Di Sibio

on

June 8, 1980

GRETCHEN ELIZABETH BRICKLEY

Gretchen Elizabeth Brickley has been affiliated with the railroad business all of her life. The daughter of a railroader she found it natural to remain in the lifestyle to which she was accustomed when she married a railroader, Kenneth E. Brickley on April 4, 1951. Born on April 8, 1931 in Cambridge Springs, Pennsylvania, Gretchen has spent a good deal of her life on the move following the railroad. Although having no regrets herself about the lifestyle she chose, she would prefer her four children and grandchildren choose another lifestyle and occupation due to the railroad industry's decline in recent years.

The daughter of Lloyd J. and Ann E. Carter, Gretchen graduated from Huntington High School in Huntington, Indiana. Before becoming pregnant with her first child in 1952, she worked for the Phelps Dodge Corporation from September, 1950 to November, 1951. Currently residing in Youngstown, Ohio, she is a member of the Westminster Presbyterian Church and enjoys cooking and gardening.

Jeffrey Scott Suchanek

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INTERVIEWEE: MRS. GRETCHEN BRICKLEY

INTERVIEWER: Julie Di Sibio

SUBJECT: A Woman's Perspective of Railroad Life,

DATE: June 8, 1980

D: This is an interview for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program with Mrs. Gretchen Brickley at 3:00 p.m. on June 8, 1980. The subject is a woman's perspective of railroad life.

First of all Mrs. Brickley, do you want to tell me something about your childhood?

B: Well, I was born in Cambridge Springs, Pennsylvania, and my father worked for the Erie Railroad, which ran through Cambridge Springs; in fact, it was the halfway point between New York and Chicago. Soon after I was born, we moved to Corry, Pennsylvania, and there my brother was born. Dad worked in the freight office in Corry, and I spent part of my childhood there. My older sister, started first grade there and then soon afterwards due to job difficulties in Corry, (laying off during the Depression) my father was moved to Jamestown, New York.

That's where we lived for most of my childhood years-- I went through grade school and junior high school. When I was in seventh grade at Lincoln Junior High School, my dad was transferred to Meadville, Pennsylvania. We lived outside of Meadville with my grandfather on his farm for about a year and a half. We attended school in Cambridge Springs, Pennsylvania then, and it was a new experience for all of us. We went to a smaller school and we rode a school bus, which was a new experience for us and it was just a different time in our childhood. We were there for

about a year and a half and then my dad was transferred to Huntington, Indiana, and at that time my brother and I were in high school and our older sister married and chose to stay behind. So this was really the first breaking point in our family. It was one of the more difficult moves I'm sure for my mother and dad; although my brother and I didn't find it too hard.

We graduated from high school there in Huntington and I met and married a railroader, an Erie railroader, and we started our married life there.

D: Okay, before we go any further, your father worked for the railroad during the Depression years.

B: Yes.

D: What were your impressions of the type of life you led during the Depression? Was your father able to supply your family with a relatively good living compared to other people at this time because he was a railroader?

B: Well, I believe so. He was always steadily employed which was different than a lot of other occupations. I was quite small at the time, but I would say we had a pretty good life. It did mean, I imagine, some sacrifices on their part but really as children, we had a really good childhood, so I would say that it was probably a pretty good livelihood.

D: What were your feelings as a child, being moved around from place to place like this? Did you enjoy it or did you find it a detriment?

B: Well, as I said, I think the hardest move was when my brother and I were moved in our high school years. These were the years where we had formed our friendships and it was harder to move into a larger school system and make new friends. But we did, and I basically don't think it was too difficult a period in our lives.

D: Do your brother and sister feel the same way about it?

B: Well, no, I would say that my older sister was a little resentful about moving the first time because she was a senior in high school at that time and really it was quite a difficult move for her. But my brother, I don't believe, ever felt that. We weren't moved as often as a lot of families had been moved.

The housing situation I think was the biggest thing with us because it was postwar years and housing was very difficult to find, and this was kind of a bad experience.

D: What year was it that you moved to Huntington?

B: 1947.

D: And what year would you have been in school at that time?

B: I was a sophomore in high school.

D: Okay now, after you graduated from high school, what did you do?

B: Well, I attended a business college in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and it was a six-month business course that I took; and then I went to work in a payroll office of a corporation there and worked there until, oh I think it was 1952. The fall of 1952 I was pregnant and in 1953 I had my first child.

D: Okay now, at this point, your husband was working for the railroad in Huntington?

B: Yes.

D: What was it like being married to somebody that worked for the railroad instead of just being a daughter of a railroader?

B: Well, as I said before, it was a good, steady employment. Not the best hours, because he worked shift work, but I was, I guess, probably accustomed to those kind of hours because my father had worked those kind of hours when I was young, and so I really didn't feel it was anything too abnormal.

It was when my first baby was probably two or three years old, he went on the job as a wrecker where they helped to clean up train wrecks; and these were very uncertain hours. Sometimes he'd be gone two and three days at a time and they worked around the clock, and when he came home, he was dead tired. You know it was kind of an exhausting life for him. He missed a lot of those childhood activities. But yet, as I've said, as far as good, steady employment and pretty good pay at that time, I really couldn't fault it too much.

- D: All right, now, your husband was transferred quite a bit with the railroad. What were your feelings then as a young wife and mother with children being moved from place to place?
- B: Well, as the family increased, the moves became a little more difficult. Our first move to Hammond, Indiana, was not too difficult because we just had one school-age child at that time, and the transition period was not too difficult for him. Again, the housing situation always presented a problem because, although the railroad helped you with your moving expenses, financially it was kind of a drain on the family finances to move. It was hard for the children sometimes to find new friends and playmates but basically they adjusted quite well; as they became older it became more difficult.
- D: In what ways do you think it may have been a detriment to your children? As far as maybe school is concerned, did you find moving from maybe one state to another might have proved to have been a detriment to them?
- B: I think probably as years went on and schools became a little more sophisticated, it did become a little more difficult for them especially when the children became older and got into the high school years. That is when it really became difficult for them. Scholastically it could really be a setback to move from one school district to another.
- D: All right. How did you feel about railroading as a life style? Did you feel that it was a good career or do you wish now that maybe your husband would have been in another occupation?
- B: I really can't find too much fault with it. I really think, from my standpoint, it hasn't been difficult. I think there have been a lot of times where he's missed a lot of things. Our weekends were never free. Most of the time we are confined because of railroad business and so you don't have the carefree life. You just can't take off for a weekend to do the things that a lot of people can do.
- D: Let me ask you some more basic questions about railroading. In 1960, the Erie Railroad merged with the Delaware & Lackawanna. What were your impressions of this merger?

B: Well, I know it caused quite a lot of talk within the ranks of the railroad people. I guess my impression was the Erie inherited different equipment and a lot of decrepit equipment. And there was a lot of uncertainty as to who was going to have a job and who was going to be out of a job. We were fortunate that my husband hung on and had the qualifications, I believe that he could withstand these mergers. There was a lot of bitterness. Socially, people that had been maybe close as railroaders sometimes become, I think because they move so much and each move you meet somebody you've known in another area of railroading, and so there's a little tie there, but all of a sudden this tie has been broken because there isn't the same railroad family that there had been.

D: All right, now the Erie has been incorporated into another corporation--Conrail. What are your feelings of this consolidation with Conrail?

B: Well, again, there's a lot of hard feelings and a lot of uncertainty. I think it's the uncertainty that probably causes a lot of stress and strain. The hard feelings, I'm sure, on the part of many Erie people is that they have been shoved into the background and they have gotten the bad end of the deal. So I think there are hard feelings; and there definitely isn't the working relationship. You can feel it in the conversation in the evenings that there just is not, there's not the trust and there's just not the same feeling that there was before.

I realize this is a much larger organization but still I think it's the trust that has been broken and that you just don't have the working relationship. So therefore, if you don't have a working relationship, you don't have as good a corporation.

D: Would you choose railroading as a career for any of your children?

B: I always said, maybe I always said it kiddingly, but I suppose maybe underneath it all, I really felt it to be true, no I don't really believe so. And now, it's so very uncertain, I feel that I would recommend them to get into something else.

D: Why is this? Because of the uncertainty of it or . . . ?

B: I think the uncertainty; and I feel sometimes that as I look back, I think maybe you're further ahead to put

down your family ties and maybe stay in one area. Financially and otherwise I think families are better off being left intact instead of being uprooted every two or three years and being shipped off to the end of the railroad.

- D: Then in your opinion, railroad life isn't as conducive to family life as maybe other professions?
- B: Definitely not. Definitely not, I don't believe it is. It takes a lot of work to understand a railroader's life. I really feel that socially, people that don't work for the railroad can't understand how anybody could live under such circumstances.
- D: Okay. What do you see in the future for railroads? Do you think that railroads are going to be important to this country or do you think that they're going to go down the drain?
- B: Well, I feel that they are important and it seems to me they are our answer to a lot of this energy business that we're hearing so much about nowadays. To me, I think that the railroads could be made to be profitable. I think that something's terribly wrong in this country where they're all being torn apart. They seem to be going down instead of up. So I don't know whether it's federal regulations or mismanagement or just the changing times and the inflationary times that we're having but they certainly are taking a beating right now.
- D: Do you think that railroads should be nationalized in this country as they are in Japan and Germany and other countries?
- B: Well, possibly this is the answer. Possibly this is the only way that they can be made to serve the people and become profitable and safe. The railroads have gone downhill and their safety is now a big question in the minds of everybody; and so I think that this is what it's going to take. Canada has a very successful rail system, very profitable and very modern and it's nationalized, so this might be the answer.
- D: You lived in an era where passenger service on the trains was very prevalent. Do you miss passenger service on railroads? And do you think that this might possibly have a comeback?
- B: I enjoyed passenger service on railroads and I'm not an air traveler so I, more than ever, would think that

it would be great for it to come back. To me, it's a relaxing way to travel; you get on and you really don't have any worries except maybe if your train isn't going to meet its schedule. I think that train travel is very enjoyable. I wish it would come back. But I don't know what the future holds for it.

D: Do you think railroading is a career for women?

B: I think that Conrail, particularly, has tried to make a place in their upper management for women but I feel that they're pretty well confined to the clerks and there's very few if any women executives. To me it would be a little difficult maybe for a woman to make it in, you know, say as a gang foreman or something like that. But there are quite a few women clerks, but other than that I don't know of too many management jobs that are open to women right now.

D: If you had it to do all over again, do you think that you would marry into a railroading life? After experiencing it as a daughter, do you think that made it easier for you to accept it?

B: Oh, I think it did. I definitely think it was easier for me to accept it than a person that had never been accustomed to the irregular hours and the uprooting of a move. I think it was much easier for me to accept it. But I don't know whether I'd do it all over again or not. I suppose so. But I certainly feel there are more desirable ways of life, more family-oriented types of professions that make it better to raise a family where the father's home a lot more than say a railroader.

D: One final question: on a whole, would you say that the life that the Erie Railroad provided you as a daughter and later as a wife and a mother, was a good life.

B: Yes. I couldn't say that we had had anything but a good life. We always had financial security and my children have all seemed to survive all the moves and they're basically pretty well adjusted. So I really have no qualms about saying this but I really feel that maybe for my children I would want a little different life and for my grandchildren too.

D: Is there anything that we didn't cover that you might want to add?

B: I can't think of anything right now.

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D: Well, thank you for the interview.

B: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW