YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Erie Railroad Project

Railroad Experience

O. H. 262

HOWARD PALMER

Interviewed

by

Julie DiSibio

on

June 11, 1980

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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INTERVIEWEE: HOWARD PALMER

INTERVIEWER: Julie DiSibio

SUBJECT: Railroad life, Erie Railroad

DATE: June 11, 1980

D: This is an interview for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program with Mr. Howard Palmer on June 11, 1980 at 9:00 p.m. The history of the Erie Railroads is the subject.

Okay Mr. Palmer, do you want to tell us a little bit about your background, such as your childhood and where you grew up.

P: I was born in Blandinsville, Illinois, 1902, May the 27th. At two months of age, my father and mother moved to Missouri. I lived on a farm northwest of Myrtle, Missouri until 1925, April 6th. I was hired out with the Erie Railroad as a telegraph operator. I worked the first year at various jobs on the extra list. After the first year I was given a second trick job, a ticket agent at Niles, Ohio.

D: Okay, when you hired out as a telegraph operator, where did you hire out at? In Youngstown?

P: Youngstown, Yes.

D: Okay.

P: Then I was at Niles one year. Let's see, that was 1926 to 1927. I bid in a third trick job in the chief dispatcher's office at Youngstown. Then I worked that until they combined the Meadville and Mahoning Divisions in 1928. It added a first trick telegraph job, which I bid in.

D: Okay, what did you do as a telegraph operator?

P: Well, we handled various reports, consists. Just general type of telegraphing, like diverts and stuff like that which we got a lot of during those days. They would buy this stuff and then divert it to where they wanted it in transit mostly to houses in New York. Then in 1929, I believe it was March 1929, I was promoted to train dispatcher. I worked on the extra list through 1929 and part of 1930. Then the Depression came along and I didn't work anymore as a dispatcher until, I think it was either 1933 or 1934. I don't know which it was, but along in there someplace I got it back.

D: What did you do in between the time that you quit working as a dispatcher?

P: Well, I was able to hold a job as an extra telegraph operator. Before, I worked various places, wherever I could find work or something, mostly in the Youngstown office most of the time. Then in 1934, I'm pretty sure, I got some dispatching. In 1935 a little better. In 1936 they put in a five-day week, I believe, and I got a regular job as a relief dispatcher on a second district. That was in June, I believe, 1936. Then I worked that approximately three months. In the meantime they used me as an assistant chief dispatcher. In 1941 I was promoted to night chief dispatcher. I worked on that job for approximately four years, I think it was, about four years anyway. Then I got an assistant chief's job to a day chief, working across the desk with him until 1957. I was promoted to supervisor of operation, working under the general manager. I worked that until they abolished the job in 1962. I went to Cleveland as power patrol supervisor. I worked that until I retired June 1, 1967.

D: Now, going back a little bit, you worked for the railroad during the very heart of the Depression?

P: Yes.

D: How did the Depression affect the Erie Railroad?

P: Pretty doggone rough. We didn't run many trains then. (Laughter) They were just scratching along, but we kept going. The railroad kept going too, for some reason or another. We kept going.

D: At any time did you belong to a union?

P: Yes. I belonged to the Train Dispatchers Union for probably thirty years.

D: What were your impressions of the unions at this earlier time, when you first joined them?

P: Well, it was good. It was really good for us.

D: During the Depression, do you remember if the government stepped in and helped the railroad at any time?

P: I don't remember. I don't believe they did though. I don't remember, but I don't believe they did. I'm pretty sure they didn't during the Depression years because one time we were moving a lot of coal off the P&LE in western Maryland to the lakes at Cleveland and then going across and bringing iron ore for about, I would say, approximately three years. We moved very little, very little and very few extra trains. Of course, the main line business, Sioux business, held up fairly good because of the stuff going to the coasts. Then in 1939 when war broke out in Europe we began to move an awful lot of war material for England and France. It was airplanes and everything else. We had one wreck in Warren, where we unloaded a few airplanes in the street. (Laughter)

D: I was going to ask you about the World War II years, what it did for the railroad?

P: It really moved them out. It was busy, busy, busy. I'm telling you. At times you didn't know if you were coming or going.

D: Okay, now during the war years you worked here in Youngstown?

P: Yes.

D: Do you remember the prisoner of war trains?

P: Yes.

D: Could you tell me a little bit about that?

P: Not too much about it. We handled several of them, mostly at night. As night chief dispatcher I had several of them. Mostly we kept them moving right along. There was pretty good movement all the time, we tried not to detain them.

D: Anything special about the train that designated them from other trains, that you could look at them?

P: No. They were often time long passenger trains, seventeen, eighteen coaches on them. They used coaches only. We never had any trouble with any. Never had a bit of trouble handling any of them.

D: After the war, what job were you working with?

P: Well, I worked, after the war I worked assistant chief dispatcher, chief dispatcher some, and supervisor of operations, just wherever they wanted to use me until I was promoted in 1958 to supervisor of operation.

D: Okay, could you give me an idea of what a chief dispatcher does?

P: Well, he was control of the train dispatchers in regard to movement of the train. He has the tonnage, all the tonnage to figure for what an engine will handle. The commodities, such as freight and all perishables and stuff like that, we have to handle. Also, passenger train and passenger equipment. There's where we usually run things. (Laughter)

D: The supervisor of operations, what is that? About the same thing as a chief dispatcher?

P: No, that was a little different. We had control. Now I had control of western district, from Cornell to Chicago. We had there the tonnage on all the fleet trains. Each division varied because like on the Kent divison our engine was rated at 2750, and the Mahoning division, it was 3200; Meadville division, it was 5500 and on through Cornell. Well, we had to figure our trains and their tonnage accordingly, whether we had to run extra trains to take care of the surplus, also passenger trains and make the schedules for the passenger trains and for freight trains. During that time we ran a lot of special trains, such as cherry, solid cherry trains and strawberry trains from the west coast. We'd pick it up at Chicago and take it to New York. I have a book that my grandson got for me or my son, the one in Columbus. It's entitled Power of Erie and it shows pictures of those special trains that they were running. My granddaughter was looking at it. She's thirty years now. She said, "Grandpa, I didn't believe that they ever ran solid freight, and solid cherry and strawberry specials." I said, "Oh yes, we did. We ran a lot of special trains, not only strawberry, but everything else."

D: I've never heard that either.

P: They were preference. They had preference over everything except first class passenger trains.

D: Okay, I was going to ask you about some of the special trains that were running this time. Like, I think, what was it, the Erie Lackawanna ran, not the Limited? The special trains with the special names like the Phoebee Snow and the . . .

P: Well, that Lackawanna ran that before they came to the Erie. Now we ran what we called number 1 and number 2 of the Erie Limiteds between Chicago and New York. Number 1 is the West bound, number 2 is the East bound the Erie Limited. They were a little more fancier train.

D: Now would they be considered first class passenger trains?

P: Oh yes, they were first class. One time we had to have instructions to clear everything thirty minutes ahead within this time. Well, then the war came along and you just forgot that thirty minute business. You had troop trains and POW trains. Those prisoners of war you had to give preference. We kind of slid by on that a little bit. We did pretty good I would say.

D: Okay, after your job as supervisor of operations, what did you take next?

P: They abolished the job here and I went to Cleveland as power patrol supervisor. That was in 1962.

D: Okay, now what was that?

P: All we did was handle power, distribute the distribution of power all over the system.

D: Power meaning . . .

P: Yes, the engines. When the oil business started here we had to move engines from Buffalo or some other place here to handle the ore business, coal business. On the lesser divisions we'd take the power of the ones that were working, heavier. We sort of just balanced out the power.

D: Okay, now you worked for the Erie during the time of the merger with the DL&W [Delaware, Lackawanna, and Western]?

P: Yes.

D: What were your impressions of the merger, good or bad?

P: Well, in some ways it was good, in some ways it was not so good. I don't know. It didn't really affect us too much. We weren't affected too much, just a few more trains, a few more headaches.

D: How do you feel about the recent consolidation of the railroads in the northeast? Do you think it's going to work?

P: I don't know. I hope so. To be frank with you, I don't know.

D: Why do you think that western railroads have been more successful than the railroads in the northeast, like the Santa Fe?

P: Well, I think for one reason, they're scarcely settled companies and they've got almost a straight long-range haul all the way from Chicago to New York or to San Francisco and on out in there. A lot of their commodities come from grain crops, fruit crops and stuff that has got to be moved and moved pretty fast.

The Burlington Northern, that's one merger I happen to know. They moved an awful lot of coal from Montana to the eastern districts like Chicago and Davenport, Iowa and all those places where they have power. That is supposed to be the best coal. I spent some time in Illinois. I have relatives out in Iowa. I've been along the Burlington Northern, I've seen as high as 120 to 125 carloads of coal, sometimes more moving right along on all the trains. They're still doing good business out there. Actually, I think the whole east is starting to fall apart sometimes. That's my personal opinion.

D: In your various positions that you've held, did you come under federal regulations?

P: Oh yes.

D: What do you think of federal regulations of the railroads compared to trucking and airline industries?

P: I think they overdid it. There are too many regulations. I think that's true of everything today.

D: In your opinion, what do you see as the future of railroads in this country? Are they going to be important or are we just going to let them . . .

P: I would say they will be very important with this oil shortage and gas shortage, but the way they're going, I don't think a lot of people see it that way. Even some government officials, I don't think, see it that way. I do think that we're going to have to fall back on it if this shortage continues. I don't see another way out of it.

Not long ago, during World War II, we were hauling 70 to 80 cars of oil from Lima to Norfolk, Virginia to the Navy base. I saw those come back, there were 160 cars; we took them out at the end of the yard one morning, 160 cars. Just think how many trucks and drivers it would take to handle that. I was just thinking about that the other day.

D: In your opinion, do you think that the federal government is going to have to let up on these federal regulations so that the railroads can continue?

P: I think so. I think they're going to have to if it ever comes back to what it should be.

D: Looking back, would you say that railroading was a good career? Would you do it again?

P: I certainly enjoyed it. I don't know; in those days I don't think there was anything that I would have liked to have done better.

D: Do you think this attitude has changed among younger railroaders today?

P: Really, I don't know because I haven't been around them. Since I've left the Erie, I haven't been around any railroad, just seeing them going by observation. I haven't even been to the office since I've left.

D: Had you seen the attitude changing as the years went on and you were still in the service?

P: No, not when I quit it wasn't. When I retired it wasn't, there were still a lot of people, most all of them, enthused with railroading. I don't know if that exists today.

D: Okay, one final question. I suppose you remember the Centennial of the Erie, the Centennial train?

P: Oh yes.

D: Did it come through Youngstown?

P: Yes.

D: Could you tell us a little bit about that?

P: Not very much. I was working nights, but I did come down and see it down at the depot. It was rather small compared to the equipment we had then. but it was here. Otherwise, I can't say too much.

D: On the whole you would say that railroading was a good life and you would do it over again?

P: Yes, I would. I would really enjoy if we went back like we did in those years, but I don't know what it's like today at all. I've been away from it.

D: Okay. Thank you for the interview.

END OF INTERVIEW