

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

History of Railroads Project

Railroading Experiences

O. H. 743

H. NELSON OSBORNE

Interviewed

by

Lillian Eminhizer

on

August 6, 1975

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INTERVIEWEE: H. NELSON OSBORNE

INTERVIEWER: Lillian Eminhizer

SUBJECT: different jobs, air brakes, hobos

DATE: August 6, 1975

E: This is an interview with H. Nelson Osborne. Nelson lives at 104 Ponce de Leon in Greenville, South Carolina. This tape is done for Youngstown State University by Lillian Eminhizer on August 6, 1975 and it is about 11:00.

O: I worked for the Dupont Company. Just after I got out of the service my brother-in-law came and got me and we went to Old Hickory. That's where he was employed for the Dupont Company and he got me a job there. I worked for the Dupont Company until 1934. They had a layoff during the Depression and I came east. My father and mother were living in Rhode Island at the time, and my father had a stroke and he passed away in 1934. While I was working for the Dupont Company I had met my wife and she was from Hopkinsville, Kentucky. She worked for the Dupont Company as I did. We worked there until I was cut off and then I came east. We didn't get married until three months . . . My wife lost her mother and father. Finally, she didn't have a home so she came east and we were married in 1935. We moved from Rhode Island to Massachusetts.

It was during the time that I came east that my father died. My sister took my mother with her back to Tennessee because my brother-in-law was an official to the Duponts.

Later on I could see that the company was going to fold up so I got a job with the railroad. Railroading was never my calling, but art work was. I worked for the New Haven Railroad until I could see that that was going to fold up. I wrote to four railroads and the Southern said they needed a man. I came to Greenville, South Carolina.

OSBORNE

E: When you worked for the New Haven between 1938 and 1944 what was your job?

O: Inspector.

E: What does an inspector on the railroad do for the New Haven?

O: The inspector on the railroad has to go and know every position and every mechanical part on a car that is safe for the public to run. In other words, you step into a car and you think everything is fine. You don't think about the running material, the operation or anything and the next thing you know you've put all your confidence on the railroad, but you never know. It's just the same as you driving your car out here. Everything is fine, but you never know when something is going to break. You go to a mechanic and the first thing he does is find out what the trouble is. If you had known it ahead of time you wouldn't have gotten into it. That's the same with the railroad, with the running part of the car.

I've had three very, very close calls on the railroad. In fact, I've been dragged as far as from here to that road and I never knew what was wrong with it.

E: Going back to the New Haven, did you inspect only passenger cars?

O: No, passenger and freight.

E: What did you look for?

O: All defects. There is what they call a running gear under each car, under the rear and the head end part of the car. You never know what is going to happen. Hotboxes or anything, I have waved them down so not to have a bad wreck. I have seen some terrific wrecks and some bad, bad accidents and it was all a negligence on someone else's part. When you take a train ride you think that's fine; the train comes in and everything goes great. You never know what the running gear is underneath there.

On the wheels they have various cutouts. They call them flat places and hollow pots on the rim. I've seen about two-thirds of the rim broken off and just missed the trestle down in Greenville from having one of the worst wreck they have ever had. That was our duty, to go and watch out.

Railroad, as I said, was never my calling, but my brother-in-law's father was one of the oldest engineers. He drove the trains during the Civil War to Nashville. I don't know why I took to railroading, but it was fascinating.

E: What railroad was it that your brother-in-law's father worked for?

O: He was an engineer on the NC & St. L, National Chattanooga and St. Louis. His grandfather was an engineer before him during the Civil War and he had seen some very close calls. He got wounded by one of the rebels. They didn't have hospitals and things like they have today. I heard my brother-in-law's father say that he went back on the next run. That was during the Civil War and that was when fighting was very bad in Tennessee.

I had some very close calls on the railroad. In fact, it's a miracle I'm sitting in here now.

E: When you came down to work for the Southern in 1944, what did you come down as?

O: I had gone for the Southern and finally landed in Greenville. I came from Greenville, Rhode Island to Greenville, South Carolina.

E: On the Southern Railroad what did you do? What was your job?

O: I was an inspector.

E: Did you work just in the Greenville yard?

O: Yes.

E: Did you ever just go out on the road?

O: No. I had a chance to go, but I was one of the older ones and I stayed at the yard.

E: Did they give you seniority when you came here from the New Haven?

O: No, I was the lowest man when I first came here. I think there were forty-five ahead of me. I was the lowest one. When they retired me in 1960, there was only just one ahead of me.

E: Railroading changed over the years; in the car construction what types of changes did they make in car construction?

O: In the running gear of a pullman or regular coaches they didn't move so very much that line. During the freight they were always constructing and building new cars like, for instance, the refrigerators. They make them much longer. Also, in hauling grain they have cars here that are long enough to put a full size bowling alley in there. During the war, that was a very, very hard time because of the

different size tanks they had; General Sherman tanks were tremendous. During the shifting of the cars in the yard it would move the construction part of the tanks so they would break away from their blocks that they were on. We had to go and get on the car and go into the tanks and see anything that was wrong in there and report it, make a drawing or write it up, then report it to the foreman.

Also on the running gear of the cars you had to find out what part was broken and what was missing and then you had the right to go and stop the train and send that car back to the repair shop. Many conductors got a little angry because they couldn't let the train go farther, but that car had to come out and go back to the repair shop.

E: When you took a car out, what did you do? Did you give it any special order?

O: Yes, we had a bad order tag and we had to write what the bad order was for. Our name was law; even the president of the railroad company couldn't move that car.

E: When your name was put on the bad order tag, even the president of the railroad couldn't move it?

O: He couldn't move that car until that car was sent back to the repair shop. They couldn't be moved until they were fixed.

E: What could go wrong with one of the hotboxes?

O: It could derail a car easily. On each wheel at the end there is what they call a journal and it sticks out that much from the wheel. The wheel is encased in a little, metal box. It's packed with packing in there, lubricated, and on that journal that sticks out of the wheel there is what they call a bearing; the bearing consists of a lid, a babbit bearing. Now they are doing away with that and they use ball bearings instead. Ball bearing is the coming part of a car. They used to have these babbits, the lid bearings and when they don't get lubrication, that causes hotboxes. This is something that inspectors have told different people: "If you're ever riding out to the country and you come across a railroad and there is a train coming and you see smoke coming up from one of the ends of the boxes, there is a crew in the end of the caboose at the rear of that car, and you put your hand to your nose and the conductor in the caboose will signal the engineer and that will save an awful lid." I have told many people and several of the inspectors have passed that along.

I've known this to happen. This never happened to me although I have stopped a few. In the Railroad Times, a monthly magazine issued to the railroad . . .

E: The Southern?

O: Yes. It will tell that if you are traveling and you see that you're coming across a train with a hotbox smoking and you give them the signal, you don't know it but they will come and find out where you live and you will get a reward for doing that. I have seen it in our magazine many, many times.

E: That's interesting. You slide one hand up your arm and hold your nose?

O: I'm going to tell you, I have seen some wicked ones. I have seen them jump the rails and I thought my days were numbered, but the Lord saved me.

E: What else can go wrong under a car besides that?

O: On the wheels you can have broken flanges. A flange is a very slim part of the wheel that holds the rail. That chipped part, about two-thirds of it, that's condemnable because you never know when it may hit a bad place on the track. Yet they have these track men who come down in cars and inspect the rails every once in a while. They have a car that looks just like a circus car; it's all dressed up in orange and everything. They make their run along the rail and they write it up and it goes right back to the head office. The crew will send a bunch of fellows down there and they will find out if a new part of a rail has to be put in and they will do it. They will get a reward, a commendation, or something like that. It's fascinating to a certain extent.

E: Did you ever have a wheel that wore thin?

O: Oh, yes, many times. The flange on there has gotten just like a knife and that's very dangerous because the rails today are putting on longer cars, longer trains. The longest train used to be around eighty cars; now they are making a train that holds about 350 cars. They use five diesels to haul that many cars. Some of the flanges on the rails are on the cars or on the cars are almost about half the width of my finger. Sometimes the flanges will get about two-thirds broken off.

Railroad is fascinating, and, of course, it isn't like it used to be. I used to like the old steam locomotive. On the steam locomotive you can hardly see the engine.

E: The drive irons working?

O: Yes.

E: You had nothing to do with the engine, did you?

O: No ma'am.

E: That's the mechanics business.

O: That went into the roundhouse and the men were assigned to it. All our duty was on passenger cars and freight.

E: Did you take care of the cabooses also?

O: On the cabooses we inspected the wheels and inside, the construction part of the car, and anything that went wrong we put it on a bad order tag and sent it back to the shop. No one was allowed to move that car until that was repaired.

E: If the car was loaded with freight, did you still go ahead and repair it or did you have to reload the freight?

O: If it was loaded, it all made a difference in the running gear of the car. If the wheels were bad, we would have to send that car back to the shop.

There is an old lamp there. That was an old inspector's lamp years and years ago. I can't tell you the age of that.

E: What did you burn in it?

O: We burned kerosene. Now they have a little light. This light was thrown in a bin. That must have been nearly about sixty years old or something. That was in bad shape and they told me to throw it away, but I threw it in my car.

E: I see you have an oil can?

O: That oil can there, that was supposed to go to Washington on that locomotive in the Smithsonian Institute. That was in bad shape and I said, "No, that's not going in the Smithsonian Institute; it's going to Ponce de Leon." That's old so I went and repainted it, but that was supposed to be on that locomotive in Washington, D.C.

E: Did they have to reload the freight cars if they sent them to the shop? Did they have to move the freight to another car?

O: Not unless that harness was injured or something. If they had been cased inside there and the cases were damaged, then that would have to go back and get reloaded and repacked.

E: How long would it take to get a car ran through the shop that had to have repair on it?

O: You never know because you never know what other cars may be ahead of that one. If that was a rush car, then they held all the other cars and put that one in the lead and got that one

ready to move. It's a fascinating piece of work and I always enjoyed it. Several of the crews come by and they wave because I always chat with them and draw for them.

E: What about the brakes on the cars? Were you responsible for the brakes?

O: Yes, ma'am. The braking part on the car, that's the life of a car. They have what they call a brake shoe on there and it is close to the flange and the wheel. A brake shoe had to be just so thick for running purposes. If it came down almost to about a half an inch, that was condemnable because that would possibly be the means of derailing or costing an awful lot of damage. They have what they call pitted-out wheels. After a wheel has been used and run so many thousands of miles and it is hollowed out in there, that is condemnable because they are liable to hit a bad place in the rail and they will derail.

E: Did you replace the brake shoes yourself?

O: Yes.

E: You just had some handy as you went down the train?

O: It's a hard, hard job. Sometimes they really had to get to the shop and have a torch to go and burn the part out to get the old shoe out of there and put a new one in.

E: You couldn't replace them while they set in the trains?

O: Yes, if they weren't too bad. We had to have a bar and it was awfully hard work. Many, many times I've had to do that both on passenger and freight. Railroading is an awfully tough enterprise. The reason I was forced on the railroad was on account of my health. I had to get out from Duco Paint and railroading was my only salvation. I was glad I got on with the railroad because it showed me a lot of different things I never would have known.

E: Did you work with another man inspecting?

O: He was under me. The older man had no responsibility and the other man helped me.

E: You went down one side and he went down the other?

O: Yes.

E: How long would it take you to inspect a train?

O: It all depends on the different parts of the car that are all right and the ones that are not. It all depends on the length of the train and the cars. A 300 car train will take up three



tracks because there are only so many cars on a track; it can't hold the entire train. There are so many cars on a track and then the engine will take another part and go over to the other track until they have all the tracks filled. Usually we never inspect a train unless it's going to be there for a certain length of time to give us plenty of time. If we come to cars that are condemnable, then we put a tag on it and the conductor comes down and takes the tag and has the car pulled out and sent back to the repair shop.

The inspector has an awful lot of responsibility, more than what people realize.

E: On going from Salisbury to Greenville how often would the train be inspected?

O: If a train comes from Atlanta, it will come to Greenville. They change crews there and then there are inspectors right in Greenville. If some of the station agents get word between Atlanta and Greenville, they will notify Greenville because that is a repair shop down there. The next repair shop will be in Spartanburg, the next one in Charlotte, and then Greensboro.

E: Every yard did not have a repair shop?

O: They're supposed to. Some of them there have been getting so many cars and they only have so many people that it is making traveling very hard. Although, they're doing away with a lot of the old tracks and instead of having a plate to hold this track and this one they are welding it and making one long, long rail. It makes it much more safe for the passenger. Many, many people don't realize the danger of traveling on a railroad until they see some of these things. I don't want to discourage anybody, but that is a fact, and I have seen many of them.

E: That would be true of any type of transportation I suppose.

O: Yes, just the same you go out in your car and you're depending on the mechanic that the car that you're driving is okay, everything is fine. Little do you ever know when something is going to snap in that car. I suppose it's the same way with human beings. I was well until something happened to me just like that.

E: True. Going back up to the New Haven Railroad, you worked with steam engines up there?

O: I worked with the steam before they dieselized. When the first diesel came into Rhode Island and the New Haven, they had big, big locomotives, what they call the General Sherman Locomotive. That was with big, long tanks and sixteen wheels, guarders.

The pullmans, they were very long, long cars. Now they have even longer ones.

E: Where did you work on the New Haven?

O: I worked from out of the Providence yard, Providence, Rhode Island. I had to work two or three yards out there.

E: What other yards did you work at?

O: That was in the inspecting yards. I also had to go in the station and work the passenger trains. When the passenger trains come in, they have a certain time to stay there and if anything is wrong with it, the inspector has to go and look at the car and make a notation of it and give it to the yard-master or give it to the foreman and then he has to cut that car right out.

During the war it was terrible because when the troops were moving fast there was a hotbox on one of the cars that was hauling the troops. I just happened to look down there and I saw this hotbox and I put a tag on it. The conductor of the train said, "What are you doing that for?" I said, "Bad order this car; this isn't safe." My foreman came up and I pointed it to him and he said, "That's right Osborne; it has to go back to the shop." They had to unload the whole entire car, the soldiers and all their equipment and everything. They had to wait until another car was put in there and they hooked it on; they had to delay the train. I didn't want any criticism because that was our duty if we saw anything like that.

That's the same if you go down to the station and a train comes in and you see something that you know is dangerous. All you have to do is notify the station agent down there and he will notify the foreman.

E: I want to go back to the brakes a little bit. What about the construction of the brakes?

O: On the construction of the brake, they have what they call the emergency brake. The emergency brake is on the left. They have a service cylinder on their right. The brake rigging on each car comprises this bar that holds the brake shoe and also the braking part, the braking rod that connects both the rear and what we call the head end of the car. They have this automatic braking system, the service and the emergencies. This was really my job. They put me on this brake test and as soon as the car is coupled up from the engine the engineer applies the brake from the inspector. He gives the signal to apply the brakes after the train is all connected. He puts on the pressure. The brake comes right straight on against the wheels. That is operated between the two cylinders in the center and on the service part of the train is what they

call the piston rod that comes out. As soon as the brake comes on that piston comes straight out and applies the brakes to the wheels. If anything is wrong with that on the emergency, that will throw the entire train into emergency because one brake of one car with a service and braking part can stop the whole entire number of cars. That has to be very, very sensitive.

My job was to go and not only inspect the train, but if there was anything wrong with the braking power I had to go and take off the two cylinder blocks and take it back to the shop and take it all apart and see what was wrong. If there was a little particle in there, that would mean throwing the whole entire train into emergency and stop. After you would get the blocks off from there, one of the service and one of the emergency, then we would take off the big block where the cylinder comes right straight through in there. They have to be cleaned and regreased all over. Every part had to be in good, serviceable condition, put back again and if there is any flaws or anything that had to be replaced, then they connected it all again and put the Carter keys back in their specific places. They have an air pressure just the same as it would be on the engine only on the side of the track where we tested those things. We tested on just the same as the engineer would apply the brakes and the things and the cab. If everything worked on there, that would work fine on the train. They put the car back on the rail and start the operation. If everything worked fine and they tried the air and that came up, you could know that everything was fine.

Up on the top of a car they have these little release valves. Sometimes a car would be all right, but the release valve on the top . . . We had to go up and take the little release valve and take it all apart and try it out down on the ground to see if that worked all right. If that operated fine, we would go up to the top of the car, replace it, and try it again. It was a good ten minutes braking system where after everything worked fine you would go to another one and do the same thing; that is if it was bad ordered. We wouldn't do anything unless there was a bad order tag on there. If the inspector of a different terminal didn't have any repair shop . . . Spartanburg has a big repair shop just the same as Greenville had, but they're doing away with a lot of it in Greenville down here letting Spartanburg have it because it makes it much easier and yet it doesn't throw all the work in one place.

E: In the movies every once in a while some guy gets up on the top of a car and he turns this wheel.

O: That's a hand brake.

E: Did you have that to inspect?

O: That was the old system. On the old freight cars they have

that now. That's the hand brake on the top. They do have the mechanism underneath there, but many cars have that old system on the top of the roof to release the hand brake or apply the hand brake. They also have something else to contend with and that is the footboard on there. Some are all decayed and rotted and you have to be careful. The inspector has to go and see about that footboard. If the footboard is all decayed, we usually take a hammer and really go to town and throw it down so that it will have to go back to the shop. There are many different things that a person would never realize about the responsibilities an inspector and a man who works on a railroad would have to encounter.

E: When you got dragged under the pullman car, what happened?

O: I was dragged under a pullman car. In each place where the piston goes in there is what they call a hole and the Carter key is placed underneath there; that was to hold it. I had a man and he wasn't on the job; he had his mind on the girls on the platform. He was supposed to watch me and I was much younger than he and I could crawl underneath there and get things down much quicker than he could. He had his mind on girls when he should have been watching me. I had everything done but putting the Carter key in and bending it. The conductor was watching us down the passenger station and the conductor was so anxious to get that train out. They called this fellow lost John and he said, "Okay," and I was still under there; all I had to do was bend that. I wrapped my legs around the axle and someone hollered, "My God, there's a man underneath there!" The conductor jumped the platform, pulled the cord twice, and stopped the car that much. I don't know, but I was told that a couple of women fainted because they saw me underneath there. I came very close to the crosswalk and being killed. I never even knew that. I was just approached about two months ago when I went up to the drugstore. There was an old colored man who recognized me and he said that he had seen me that day. I had told the engineer not to pull the train until he heard from me. He said, "What's the matter?" I said, "I was under that train." I came back and crawled under the car, bent the Carter key, and came out and told the conductor he could pull them. I went up to my foreman and said, "Let me tell you something, sir; if I wasn't a Christian man and wasn't thinking about what I was facing up there, I would stick this right between your eyes and you would never know it. You're not worth two cents on this railroad."

I met that colored man and he goes and cleans up for Campbell up at the pharmacy and every once in a while he'll remind me of it. I came so close to being cut in half. The engineer is dead now; that was the one who I thought so much of. Every once in a while I see that conductor and he says, "Osborne, I'll never forget those memorable days." I said, "Forget about them, I've already forgotten it." It was

a close, close call.

E: You said you got your bib caught one time?

O: I got my jumper caught. I was making a coupling and it wasn't my fault either that time. My pal was supposed to be on the other side and I had a feeling in my stomach . . . I had an old jumper on and I got it caught. He waved to the engineer and the engineer pulled and I got out. I've had two or three calls like that.

E: When they sent a car off on a siding because something has gone bad with it, did you ever have to go out and inspect it and order it in?

O: Yes, I did many times. If the car was on the train that I was working on and someone set that out, I had to go and look that car over and see what was wrong and have a bad order tag put on there.

E: Were you ever able to send a crew out to fix it or did you just order it in?

O: No, I never did. I sent it in and they took care of that. It's a miracle I'm alive today with what I have been through.

E: I guess so. If a conductor sent a car off of a train and it couldn't be brought back in, what would you do?

O: I couldn't go out on that because I wasn't out on the road; I wasn't doing roadwork. They would have to send a man who was doing that work and he would have to go and inspect it and make preparations to haul that car in. All my job was around the station and in the yard.

E: They had means of bringing cars in?

O: Yes, they would go down there and send a switcher down there and send a crew down there and then they would haul the car back to the station. My work was just inspecting at the station and in the yard.

E: Did you have any problems with the coupling devices on the trains?

O: Couplings, I've had many. The parts of a coupling that would be broken once in a while you would come across a place, like in the yard, they have different parts that you could replace in case, not on passenger work unless it wasn't too far from the terminal but on freight they usually have parts where they can go and replace them.

E: Have you had any pins or anything like that go bad?

O: Yes, many, many places I've seen pins laying on the side of the track. It's very rare they have a broken pin; it's more of a knuckle. They call them a knuckle where the coupling comes together like that. If the knuckle is broken, if there was an empty car on the other track and you knew it was going to be there for a long time, I have taken a broken part that was on that car and I would throw that down and I would get the knuckle from the other car and replace that. I would then make a notation and send it back to the shop and they would have it fixed. Many times I've done that on a passenger train and they were waiting for the light to change and go ahead. We would put a red flag on that engine so that train couldn't be moved. The president of that railroad could never move that train as long as that red flag was put there and removed by the man who put it on. That is his protection.

E: Even when it has been to the shop you have to approve it?

O: Yes, because the person who moved that car put that red flag on there and if someone got hurt, he could bleed the railroad for every cent they had. If he got hurt and that red flag was on there and they went and moved that car, I know that because of two or three cases of that happening.

E: Did you inspect both passenger and freight for Southern?

O: Yes.

E: Did you look for the same things on the two different types of cars?

O: On passenger cars you looked for the running gear, the wheels, and the braking part. After you got the running part, you look at the knuckle, the coupling, the drawhead underneath, and on the running part underneath, the braking system, and the dates when it was inspected and when it was stenciled. After that is all taken care of you just look at the wheels and see whether the wheels are in good running order with no broken flanges, no cutouts, no shelled out parts on the wheel, and that the brake rigging was all in good working order. Then you would come back, that was from one end to the other. You would go inside if it was a passenger car and see whether the water system is running all right and try the air.

On freight you would have to go from the top to see if the running board was in good working order. The footboard takes part of the hand brake on the top. You would have to make sure the footboard is not decayed and climb on the top and see if the running board is in good condition. If it is broken, decayed, or anything, you would have to make a notation and have it repaired. You would see if the ladders are in good working order. If there were any broken ones or decayed or anything, you would have to make a notation of that. The footsteps,

where you step up onto the cars, you would have to see if any were bent and needed repairing. You would go down underneath and see if the braking rigging is okay on both sides and see that the working part of the air brakes are all working.

E: There is a lot to it. Your official title was car inspector?

O: That's right, and repair.

E: I think this is very interesting. Can you think of anything else you would like to tell me?

O: No.

E: Did you have any interesting experiences with the conductors?

O: Yes, I've had some very experiencing times. I've had two or three fine men and every time they used to see me they would make it a point to come down and talk with me. The same way with the engine crew, I've had many enjoyable hours with them.

E: Do you think most of the men on the railroad enjoyed working there?

O: With their years of experience they wanted to finish out their time. I only had five more years to make it, but I couldn't do it so they retired me at sixty.

They had at one time a school for that. I worked with a man who was very good with brakes; that was just after they had the emergency and the service part of the brakes that worked. They never used to have that years ago; all they had was a hand brake on the top. Years ago when they wanted to stop a car or a train, a man got on the side and crawled up and applied the hand brake. When they wanted to make a coupling, a man had to get in between cars.

E: Did you ever have any experiences with hobos?

O: Yes, many times. I always had my hand on the hammer in case he took a swing at me. I kept moving, but I kept watching him all the time. My foreman told me that the only protection I had was my hammer and to use it if I had to.

E: Did the hobos give you a hard time?

O: No. I would see the inspector and two cops and I would tell them there was a guy there. They would handcuff him and he would use profanity when he came near me. He knew that I didn't use profanity. I've had two or three hard cases of them that I would never let anyone know about now.