

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Railroading Project

Work Experience

O. H. 585

GEORGE SNOOK

Interviewed

by

Lillian Eminhizer

on

August 15, 1982

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY PROGRAM

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INTERVIEWEE: GEORGE SNOOK

INTERVIEWER: Lillian Eminhizer

SUBJECT: U. S. Army Railroad Corps, B & O Railroad, Steam locomotives

DATE: August 15, 1982

E: This is an interview with George Snook at his home at 321 Glendola N.W. in Warren, Ohio. He was employed for the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad for quite a number of years from 1936 until 1976. This is Lillian Eminhizer doing the interview. This is for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program and takes place on August 15, 1982.

What was your position on the railroad as far as a job?

S: Engineer.

E: You were an engineer?

S: Locomotive engineer.

E: You started out then as a fireman?

S: I started out in the shop.

E: You started out in the shop. Well, that is different. What would have you done in the shop?

S: I was a hostler helper and engine watcher.

E: What would an engine watchman do?

S: At that time we had steam locomotives and you had to keep the steam up and the fires going while the engines were in the shop. Also you cleaned the fire and supplied the engine when they came in off of a run.

E: What do you mean by cleaning the engine, washing the outside?

- S: By cleaning the fires I mean that I would shake all of the dead ashes out and get the clinkers out of the firebox and get them ready to go back out again.
- E: Could you tell me what a clinker is? This is a term we run into quite frequently.
- S: That is residue of coal. It forms a solid nest like a slag that would come out in the open. This is formed from coal. Anybody who lived when they had coal furnaces used to get clinkers in their coal furnaces. Naturally, you would get it from coal on a steam locomotive.
- E: How many steam locomotives could you watch?
- S: One man took like seven or eight. In the summer it was probably more than that. In the wintertime it was difficult because we all had to see that the weather pipes didn't go to the boiler and freeze.
- E: Did they store these outside then or inside?
- S: Where I worked they were outside.
- E: The steam would continue to circulate through the pipes?
- S: Absolutely all the time.
- E: Did you have to keep the boilers full of water then?
- S: That is right.
- E: Did you have to run the engine someplace in order to fill them?
- S: Yes, we had a place down where I worked. Naturally, they all had different spaces along the railroad. They always had what they called pen stocks which was where you filled your tank that supplied the boiler. You would have your steam locomotive and behind it was the tender which held the coal and the water.
- E: Which shop were you in?
- S: DeForest.
- E: You were in over at DeForest. When you left DeForest . . . Or were you always at DeForest?
- S: After I transferred from the shop and engine service I worked different places. Mainly I worked out at DeForest, but I also worked out at Painesville. I worked out at New Castle; I worked out at Cleveland; and for six weeks at one time I worked out at Chicago. That was as a fireman when I first started in the engine service.

- E: When you came out of the shop from servicing the engines, did you go then as a fireman on the railroad?
- S: That is right.
- E: At that point then you would learn the road and learn how . . .
- S: Learn how to run the locomotive.
- E: How many years were you a fireman?
- S: Shortly after I went firing . . . I went firing in 1940. Then I went in the Army in 1942. After I came back I picked up my fireman's duties. Then I didn't fire too long. I was promoted from fireman then to engineer in 1948.
- E: So you really moved up in a hurry.
- S: That is true because a lot of the older fellows were starting to go then. When they started hiring firemen on the B & O, it was after the Depression in 1939, and the men who were in the service at that time were getting to be pretty well up in years. During the Depression, some of them didn't work. Some of them were furloughed in that four-year time period.
- E: What would they have done for income during that period of time?
- S: At that time if they couldn't get a job on the Public Works like WPA (Works Progress Administration) and if you didn't have any savings in the bank, you were just in bad luck. There wasn't anything you could do.
- E: Were some of the men able to go to other railroads and get jobs?
- S: Not very many. Occasionally at the height of their season, there would be some western railroads that would take our men. I knew a few who went out there towards the tail end of the Depression and got jobs on different western railroads, but they were only seasonal jobs.
- E: That is interesting. When you trained to be an engineer, you trained for only a certain section of road and you have to be reeducated for another section?
- S: That is true. When you are training for an engineer--which you are doing all the time that you are a fireman--at that same time you are learning the mechanical aspects of the locomotive. It was not only the mechanical part, but also the handling of the bridge system. Then you had to learn the book of rules which were operating rules. Then after you got through that section, then you started to learn the road. Of course, some of the road you had already learned from riding over it as a fireman. When you are training for an engineer, at that time

you went through a period of examinations--written and oral. They had first year machinery, second year machinery, and third year machinery. All of these were tests that you had to pass with a certain percentage or you didn't get promoted and you were terminated if you didn't pass these examinations. In other words, if you didn't pass, you were done on the rest.

E: You couldn't stay forever a fireman?

S: No, no way. Only if you were over the age of fifty when you were required to go in for these examinations which some guys who had been furloughed during the Depression were fifty before they were called in for examinations for promotion; they were exempt. But under that age you had to pass these examinations or you were terminated.

E: I never knew that. So it wasn't an automatic promotion?

S: You had to pass a written and oral test.

E: Or you were out.

S: They were supposed to be scheduled every year. They were delayed during the Depression because there weren't enough people working or enough demand for engineers. When you started, you had three years in which there were separate examinations on mechanical features of the locomotive. Then you had to pass a test strictly on the air brake system, how to brake your locomotive, and how to brake your train. Then after that was finished then you went in for your book of rules examination which was all the operating rules. When you got through all of those examinations, if you passed, you were a qualified engineer. Then you could go work anyplace in yard service. But in order to work over the road through freight or passenger, then you had to learn the railroad itself--the characteristics of the railroad. You had to know where your switches were and grades and block signals and so forth.

E: So you literally could run that in your sleep.

S: That is right.

E: That is really interesting. How much were you required to be able to repair your engine when you were on the road? Was there any problem?

S: Very little. There were some emergency repairs. It was whatever you could do to get it into the next terminal.

E: You started on a steam engine?

S: That is right.

E: What size engines did you operate at that time?

S: I operated mallies which are the biggest steam locomotives that the B & O had. It was the biggest steam locomotive that the B & O ever owned.

E: That is interesting.

S: You were asking me about steam locomotives. I started on steam locomotives, yes. In fact the first diesel on passenger went to Youngstown the year I started on the railroad which was in 1936.

E: When did the B & O actually have very many of these diesels?

S: The diesels came to DeForest area and switched engines in 1948. Through here they operated steam up until about 1956 or 1957. There were still some steam locomotives operating between New Castle and Painesville. After that the railroad was completely diesel.

E: Did you have a regular run? You were out on the main line part of the time.

S: I was on the main line only as a fireman.

E: Oh, only as a fireman. Where did you run as an engineer?

S: The only running I did on the road as an engineer, regular, was from Painesville to New Castle.

E: Did you go out and work a certain number of days, or were you in the pool?

S: I was in the pool. That means you were subject to telephone. They had so many terms--that is, so many crews in the pool. There was an engineer and a fireman. You worked first in, first out. That was when they called it.

E: How many groups would they have in the pool?

S: When I worked that last time out of Painesville, we only had three.

E: That was all?

S: That was all. When I first started when they still had the coal and ore docks in Painesville, in the summer they would have as high as sixteen. One time at Painesville, when I lived in Painesville and when my dad worked on the railroad, they probably had sixteen turns or more in the pool plus maybe ten or twelve yards jobs. In the summer they would have as high as 300 men working in the car repair shop. Today Painesville

is nonexistent as far as it being a railroad.

E: That really shows the decline in the railroad.

S: That is right. In fact this last month they finished taking up all of the rail from the top of rail steel north on what we called the lake branch to Painesville. There is no railroad there anymore.

E: What will happen to that right of way at the B & O or it is the Chessie now?

S: That is hard telling. People might buy parts of it for one reason or another. In places like where they had sidings or like up in Chardon where they had a smaller yard, they might sell it to somebody. The thing is that they take up all of the rail and take out all of the switches because it reduces their property taxes. A railroad pays taxes on every bit of property that they own and run on. If the rail is in there and the switches are there, their tax base is higher. By removing that it is just ordinary land. So they save an awful lot of money on taxes. It also reduces the amount of money that your schools need and that they get from tax revenue off of this railroad property.

E: How wide is the railroad right of way on an average single track?

S: It varies. I couldn't tell you.

E: You don't know?

S: I don't know.

E: You said that your father worked for the B & O.

S: That is right.

E: What did he do on the railroad?

S: He learned his trade as a machinist. When he retired, he was a shop foreman.

E: He worked where, in Painesville?

S: He worked various places. He started in Newark, Ohio, and he worked in Pittsburgh; he worked in Willard; he worked in Sandusky; he worked in Painesville. When he retired, he was shop foreman in DeForest. During the war they had as high as twenty shop personnel in the locomotive end at DeForest.

E: What does a mechanic do? Does he have to maintain the engines?

S: That is right, mechanically.

- E: Now would he have anything to do with the cars also?
- S: No. That is a separate department. You have your car department and your engine service department.
- E: Would he be in charge of replacing parts or rebuilding them?
- S: At the time he learned his trade as a machinist he had to be able to take a part of the steam locomotive and take it into a machine shop, make it, and take it out and put it on the locomotive. Today they don't have to know that much. There was a lot of difference between the maintenance of a diesel than there was between the maintenance of a steam locomotive.
- E: I guess there would be.
- S: When a diesel needs a major overhaul, they generally send it back to the people that they bought the locomotive from. They do any rebuilding that has to be done.
- E: Does this account for the disappearance of the machine shops around?
- S: That is right. Far less maintenance.
- E: They didn't have as much maintenance then on the diesels?
- S: In fact at DeForest, they only have two men.
- E: That is all?
- S: They have what they call a working foreman and a labor; that is it. Youngstown has no shop men at all. They had over 100 down there at one time.
- E: How many tracks do they have through Youngstown now?
- S: They still have their yard tracks down there, and the B & O main line still runs through Youngstown. Basically, they are the same except for the operation. There are approximately five crews working in Youngstown. When I came out of the service in 1945, I went back to work for the railroad. In the summer at DeForest junction, they had thirty-three crews, counting the crews that worked in the Republic Mill and outside crews and road crews working that we had. Today they have five.
- E: Thirty-three to five. That is amazing. Do you think the country would be better off if the railroads functioned more completely today?
- S: Absolutely. They are the most economical outside of waterways; they are the cheapest form of transportation that we have got when it comes to conserving fuel.

E: How did the war affect railroading?

S: The war?

E: Yes, World War II.

S: The railroads during the war did more business than they did anywhere. In fact much of the military personnel and machinery would have never been and couldn't have been possibly moved any other way than by rail. There is no way that the trucking industry or any other form of transportation could have handled what the railroads handled during World War II. It would have been just impossible for them to do it. Even with your trucking fees today they couldn't do it.

E: You worked a couple of years at the beginning of the war?

S: That is right.

E: On the road, were you able to get your rests in your layovers?

S: Oh, yes.

E: They didn't call men out on short notice and that sort of thing?

S: Once in a great while. Of course, at that time you still had the service law. At that time you were allowed to work sixteen hours. If you worked sixteen hours, they had to give you at least eight hours rest. Of course, today that sixteen hours is cut down to twelve. That is all you are allowed to work in transportation on the railroad is twelve hours.

E: Because you can run more mileage in twelve hours?

S: Well, it was that. And through union negotiations and everything they found that actually you are not at your peak if you work sixteen hours. Then they would call you out again in eight hours, and you would know that you would have to put in another sixteen. At one time you were required to do that. I worked out at Painesville. I was riding back from DeForest and I would come in maybe fourteen or fifteen hours on the road by the time I would go into Warren. If they needed me within eight hours, they would give you a two-hour call which basically only gave me five hours at home to eat, sleep, change clothes, and get back to work again. After all, your truckers are only allowed ten.

E: Did the men really work sixteen hours a lot?

S: Oh, definitely.

E: Was it easier to work a fireman sixteen hours than an engineer?

S: No. It was the other way around.

E: How?

S: A fireman's job was harder. It is harder to fire an engine than it is to run one.

E: Did you have to fire by hand?

S: Both. I fired both. Mostly your road jobs were stoker fire, but they still were a lot of work. Practically all of your yard engines were fired by hand. It was hard work, but you were used to it. You thought nothing of it. I worked ten months one time and eleven months another on a crew that ran between DeForest which is Warren and Butler, Pennsylvania. That was almost fourteen to sixteen hours every trip one way. We would layover in Butler and get a rest and come back. You could almost bank on spending at least fourteen hours and usually sixteen.

E: What happened when the sixteen hours were up?

S: If you weren't either at Butler or DeForest, you were relieved someplace else like New Castle or Youngstown.

E: You had to pull into a siding and wait?

S: Usually, yes. You couldn't pull into a siding. You had to pull into someplace where they had accommodations for you to sleep. If you were coming from Butler and when you got to New Castle and if you saw that you couldn't make Warren within your limit, you would generally layover in New Castle.

E: If you were driving, how far is it between Warren and New Castle and New Castle and Butler?

S: It really isn't all that far. It is probably sixty miles.

E: I don't know.

S: It is around sixty miles.

E: You could drive it in an hour then or in an hour and fifteen minutes?

S: Today, easily.

E: Why would it take the train so long to go sixteen hours or fourteen hours from Warren to Butler? What would you do?

S: It was the work you did on the roads.

E: What do you mean by work?

S: When you would get to Youngstown, you would have to set off

cars, pick up cars. After you would pick your cars up, you would wait until the car inspector inspected the train and inspected the area and so forth. Then if you would have to pull into a siding for a faster train to go by, you might be delayed an hour or an hour and fifteen minutes. You would get to New Castle, and you would have work to do there. Sometimes you would have to get coal and water for your locomotive at New Castle. Then between New Castle and Butler you had several small stations where you stopped and switched. That all takes time.

E: Every time there is a cut in the train, the train inspector has to inspect it?

S: If you are at a terminal.

E: At a terminal.

S: If you pick at an intermediate spot where there is just a siding, where there is a feed mill or a glass factory or something, then you didn't do that. If you were at an originating terminal or an intermediate terminal like Youngstown or New Castle where they had car inspectors, they had to be inspected whenever you picked up cars.

E: Who hired the car inspectors, the railroad or the government?

S: The railroad.

E: The railroad, and they made their reports back to the railroad?

S: That is right.

E: How many cars could you put on a train?

S: At that time sixty or seventy cars was a big train. If they were empty, you could haul maybe 100. Of course, nowadays, they might haul between New Castle and Painesville generally ninety to a hundred cars. After we got the diesels we could run up to 190 cars. I have hauled 190 to 195 cars.

E: Did they pay you more when you hauled more cars, or did they just pay for the job?

S: No. They just paid for the job. The trainmen get more money after so many--over 100 cars. Then they get so much. In engine service the only way your rate would vary would be the type of work or the size of the locomotive. The bigger the locomotive, the more money you got.

E: What determines the size of the locomotive?

S: The weight on the drivers, how much they weigh.

E: The weight on the drivers.

S: It is the wheels of the drivers.

E: Yes. Are you talking about the wheels or are you talking about that driving rod that connects?

S: No, the driving wheels themselves, the ones that propel the locomotive. Whatever the weight of the locomotive is on those wheels. If you had one that was 250,000 pounds and another that was 300,000 the 300,000 would pay more than the 250,000. With the diesels it is the same way. The more units you have the heavier they are, the more you get paid.

E: When they were double-headers on the steam engines, you had to have a full crew on each engine.

S: That is right. On a steam engine you had to have an engineer and a fireman on each locomotive.

E: Then the engineer on the head end was the one who determined the functioning?

S: He determined the braking and the speed.

E: And the other . . .

S: They just helped.

E: The other crew was just there to assist?

S: Yes, to assist. If you needed more power, all they would do was add another unit, but no more men.

E: I was just going to ask how the crews were different today from then.

S: That is the difference. The B & O has the policy that six units is all you can operate as a single unit, but the same two men would operate all six as they would operate one.

E: In the salary range they would get more money?

S: Yes, but not nearly enough to make up for the . . . Say if you would have five steam locomotives in addition to the lead engine, that would be ten men. For an additional unit they might pay 75¢ or \$1 more.

E: Did the fireman and the engineer work as a unit all the time, or did you know who your fireman was going to be before you went out?

S: After I had enough seniority to work as a regular man . . .

Of course, they call the pool turn regular too. The reason they were called pools was because the same engineer and fireman worked together all of the time.

E: They did?

S: Then they maintained what they called extra pools. That was where a man wanted to take a day off or he was off sick; then they call a man from the extra pool to fill his vacancy. For instance, if I was a fireman and I laid off, they would call an extra fireman to work with him.

E: But then the regular fireman . . .

S: When he came back, he went back with the same man. Today a lot of engineers are working without firemen. They have done away with them. They are getting rid of all of the firemen. They only keep enough firemen or hire enough firemen with what they estimate they will need as an engineer in the near future.

E: How do they train for the engineers in the future then?

S: They send them to school. When I was promoted, the quickest you could get promoted would have been four and a half to five years with the examinations you had to take. Today they can make an engineer in six months.

E: Do you think it is as safe?

S: No. It has been proven that it isn't. They had a rash of accidents here about a year ago on some of the southern railroads. It was proven that it wasn't safe. They had the mechanical knowledge and the basic technical knowledge to operate a locomotive, but when they stuck them out on the road and they were handling 125 or 150 cars, they didn't have the experience because there is a difference of handling 100 cars that weigh 100 tons a piece loaded than reading about them in a book.

E: You wouldn't know how much air to put on.

S: Right. There is a certain amount of slack between each car. If there is twelve inches of slack and you have 100 cars, that is 100 feet that your locomotive can move before your caboose starts to move on the other end. If you start that locomotive out on the front end as fast as it goes, by the time that slack would run out the train would break in two long before it got back to the caboose.

E: I hadn't thought about that. How does that affect the braking?

S: That is what you have to learn, too. They had trouble with

trains buckling. While the young men were promoted in six months without sufficient experience in train handling, they would brake the head end of the train too fast and when the rear end started to run in against it, the train would buckle in the middle.

E: Especially with it empty I suppose mostly.

S: It was more so when you would have a mixed train--when you emptied and loaded all scattered throughout.

E: That brings up this question. Did they have any special way of arranging cars?

S: No.

E: So when you came to set cars off, you could have been setting them off from three to four different places on a train?

S: That is right. When you left the terminal, your train was arranged. The yard engine made the train up like all of your cars for your first stop were on the head end and so on back through your train. If you were leaving Warren and were going to New Castle and you had cars to set off at Youngstown, your Youngstown cars would be next to your locomotive.

E: Why?

S: So he could set them off without switching your train. In other words, if you had ten cars for Youngstown, you would set the first ten cars off.

E: You would leave setting out for someplace; you would cut your train and you would go put those ten cars in and then . . .

S: Then you would take up whatever you had . . .

E: I really didn't think about the Army having . . .

S: Oh, they still have a lot of guys. Bob Smith was a yard brakeman like I was. He was in the railroad. Clair Kearney was in a railroad in North Africa and Europe. Les Brady came over in February, and we shut that operation up in 1945. He came over in February, and we closed up in June. I came back in June.

E: What did you haul over there?

S: War material for Russia--all Russia. They hauled ammunition and gasoline and oil and tank parts and machinery parts.

E: That is interesting.

S: I didn't work that. I went in the army in 1941. I only had a little over a year in engine service and four years in the shop. Your operating battalions had a headquarters company and an A company which was maintenance--track and bridge maintenance. The B company was a shop battalion of locomotive repairs. The C company was your transportation of your engineers and trains. Because I had four years in the shop they put me in the B company in the railroad battalion. We trained on the Pennsylvania Railroad. We got overseas. When we finally got over there, the English were operating the railroad, and we relieved them. We got up in the mountains at the terminal. The building was called Sultanabad. They called the station Arak. The first night on the job we were going to work twelve hours. I was supposed to be an inspector. In addition to the battalion at Fort Wayne, when we got to the west coast and were ready to ship out, we picked up four company's track men to keep the track in repair. When we got over to Iran, they found out it was cheaper to use the local labor for labor work. So they transferred all of these track men. The companies split them up. They put a guy in the office. He was a lieutenant. He was in charge of the engine house there. He didn't know anything about locomotives.

I was a clerk. That was all I did overseas the whole time. I had to make out all of the engine reports and correspondence.

E: Did you have any other railroad experience in Europe besides Iran?

S: I was in Iran. I went overseas in 1941. I left here in 1941 and got there in 1942.

E: When you came back to this country, you came back to the same job that you left, didn't you?

S: Do you mean on the railroad?

E: Yes.

S: Oh, yes. Your seniority went on while we were gone.

E: You were a fireman at that time?

S: Yes.

E: So you didn't have to worry about qualifying on the road again? What about the engineers that did go in the service? Did they have to come back and requalify?

S: On the road itself; that was all. It wasn't as far as the other exams. There weren't very many who were already engineers. But there were a lot of them who were firemen here in the States who hadn't been promoted and as soon as they were in the service

the army promoted them right then. It was just on the bases that I have experienced. When I went over there, if I would have wanted to give up my office job, I could have run an engine even when I only had one year and a half as fireman.

E: Then would have that seniority counted in with the B & O in the States?

S: No. My seniority counted. I was on the same place on the seniority roster as the guy who left here; I still followed them on the seniority list. In fact there were guys promoted to engineer with less seniority than I was when I got back to the railroad, but when I got promoted, I went ahead of them, of course.

E: The men who were actually engineers, did that count as engineer time in their seniority in the States?

S: Oh, yes.

E: And not as general seniority with the company?

S: It was seniority with the company. You didn't lose anything by being in the service. You didn't lose a thing as far as the railroad was concerned.

I didn't want the army to start with. Of course, I was drafted. When I was called up, they asked you what branch of the service you wanted. I requested the air corps. As soon as they looked at my record, I didn't have any choice. I think there were twenty of us left at Camp Perry at Fort Wayne. They were all ex-railroad men.

E: Who went from here besides you?

S: From here at my outfit?

E: Yes.

S: A guy from New Castle; I forget his name, but I met him at Perry. I didn't know him here. Here there was Bob Smith, Les Brady, Clair Kearney that I know of from here at DeForest.

E: That was a pretty safe place for you to be too, wasn't it?

S: Where?

E: The railroad in Iran.

S: There was because there was no combat. Clair Kearney had a couple of trains that were blown out from under him. He has a hospital train bombed when he was in Europe. I was lucky.

E: The railroad was in fact an exempt status during the war?

S: Oh, yes.

E: When the military railroad men worked on the Pennsylvania Railroad, did they haul just military equipment or military men, or did you just work for practice?

S: Worked for practice.

E: But the regular railroad men did the hauling of the military?

S: Yes. If the Pennsylvania had a double-header of two engines, they would put a civilian crew on the lead engine and a military crew on the second.

E: Was that because of the shortage of men?

S: Yes, partly. They were drafting so many of the railroad men and were leaving the railroad with a shortage. In fact after I was drafted there were a lot of guys who went to work on the railroad strictly to get the draft exempt status. As soon as the war was over, they quit. The only reason they joined the railroad in the first place was because of the status.

E: That is interesting.

S: But they had to have men. They had railroad men in World War I. They still have railroad battalions.

E: They still do?

S: They have one down east someplace somewhere in Louisiana and Texas.

E: I didn't know they still kept them.

S: If they go into a country and take it over, they have to have experienced men to operate the railroad mostly because they can't trust a civilian.

END OF INTERVIEW