

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Erie Railroad Project

Railroading Experiences

O. H. 601

ROBERT VESTAL

Interviewed

by

Julie DiSibio

on

May 15, 1980

ROBERT E. VESTAL

Robert E. Vestal was born in Youngstown, Ohio on May 5, 1920. Bob attended school in Youngstown and graduated from South High School in 1938. Throughout his school years he worked in various grocery stores and upon graduation began looking for more stable employment. Bob began working for the Erie Railroad in 1941, but World War II intervened and he enlisted in the United States Navy.

During the war he worked in the signaling division of the Navy and was primarily stationed in the United States as an instructor. Bob was discharged January 8, 1946 from the Navy and he returned to Youngstown and began to work for the railroad once again. Bob has worked in assorted clerical positions throughout his career with the railroad and is currently an employee of the Consolidated Rail Corporation or Conrail. Bob enjoys railroading and says that if he had it to do all over again he would most probably choose railroading as a career. It is his hope that Americans and in particular, the government, will realize the value of railroads to this country before it is too late. As he so aptly stated, "Railroads are the backbone of industrial America."

Bob and his wife, Miriam, currently are living in Austintown, Ohio. Bob seems to find time between working to garden and is an avid sports spectator.

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INTERVIEWEE: ROBERT VESTAL

INTERVIEWER: Julie DiSibio

SUBJECT: Solomon's Market, Charles Terrill, military experience,
Conrail, changes

DATE: May 15, 1980

D: This is an interview for the Youngstown State Oral History Program, May 15, 1980 with Mr. Robert Vestal. The subject is the history of Erie Railroad.

First of all, would you give me a little background information? Tell me about your family life and something about your childhood.

V: I was born in Youngstown, Ohio on May 5, 1920. My father was Roy W. My mother was Martha B. Evans. I have three brothers and one sister. I am the second oldest in the family. I was, of course, raised mostly after 1928 during the worst part of the Depression. My dad was a bus driver and he managed to hang on to a job throughout the Depression. I went to South High School and participated in many sports through high school age. I played a lot of sandlot football. My main love is baseball and I participated in baseball until I was forty-eight. But after I graduated from high school I started out working at a grocery store as a delivery boy. I worked seventy hours for ten dollars a week.

D: Now what is the name of this grocery store?

V: Solomon's Food Market. After that--I was there one year--I gave them an ultimatum that if I didn't get a raise I was going to quit, so he gave me a two dollar a week raise. So the next year I made twelve dollars a week. Then I got a job at Republic Steel in the pipe mill at Center Street. I worked there for about a year or so I would say. I worked the third trick for five dollars a day and then had a chance to work at another food market. I dilly-dallied around and finally got them up to forty dollars a week.

I went to work for what they called the Quality Food Market right across from South High School. I also worked at the Warner Theater; I was an usher. After a few months, I became the chief usher or head usher as we used to call them in those days.

By the way, I also play the electrical Hawaiian guitar and when I was fifteen I started to work for the National Hawaiian Conservatory of Music which was in the old Erie, P & LE Railroad Station, at Commerce and Phelps Streets which eventually is where I ended up working for the Erie Railroad. I did that until I graduated. After I graduated, of course, I didn't have the time to do that.

Then this is how I managed to land a job on the Erie Railroad. I delivered groceries to a man by the name of Charles Terrill. At that time he was the chief clerk to the general manager of the Erie Railroad. He asked me if I was going to drive truck all of my life or if I had other ambitions. He told me that if I was interested he would keep me in mind. Well, I had been told this by many, many people throughout my driving around to the various homes and nothing ever happened, but Chuck was true to his word. And I would say about two months after that, I got a phone call at work and was asked if I could sneak downtown and get an interview, which I did. I was interviewed by a man by the name of C. G. Johnson. He was supervisor of stations at the time. He asked me if I typed and I said, "Well, I typed about six months in high school, but I haven't typed for about four years." He called a freight agent at Warren, Ohio, a man by the name of Frank England and he said, "I have a young fellow here that I think might make you a pretty good clerk." At the time they didn't have any openings up there so he said that perhaps he would hire me as a mail clerk messenger the following week, if I could pass a physical. At that time they also gave you a test, a written test, in order to be hired. You had to pass this test or, of course, you weren't hired. So I managed to pass both of them and I was hired on January 27, 1941, as mail clerk messenger in the division superintendent's office at seventy-five bucks a month, forty-eight hours a week, six days a week, no overtime. I worked there . . . I was there until my birthday. I remember that.

The first move I made was on my birthday, May 5, 1941, when I transferred to work for Mr. England at Warren Freight Station. When I was called back to Mr. Johnson's office and he had talked to Mr. England, Mr. England must have asked him if I could type. Apparently, he must have asked him if I was a good typist and he said, "Oh, my, yes, he's a good typist." So, Julie, I went up to Warren and I worked second trick.

They had the old fashioned billing machines and I had never seen a typewriter like that in my life. It was all capital

letters and numbers. So he brings over some bills and he set them down beside me. He brought me a couple to show me how to do them. He said, "You just follow here and you read them off of here and put, more or less, the same information." So I started by the hunt-and-peck method and about two hours later Mr. England came over and stood by my shoulder and said, "You know, Mr. Johnson was right." I said, "How's that?" He said, "He was right. You're one hell of a typist." (Laughter) So that's how my career started.

You might be interested to know that at that time we had three tricks at Warren Freight. We had about twenty-two clerks around the clock, that is counting everybody. We had a warehouse with a foreman and an assistant foreman and about ten men and by the time the . . . I would say about fifteen years ago, they were down to four people. That is how the railroad changed over the years, but not to get ahead of my story.

So then after I was there for awhile--I handled various jobs up there--around June of 1942, I came back to the division superintendent's office and I worked for the car distributor, a fellow by the name of Jerry Murphy, who's now retired. He ended up being my assistant later on.

Then in October--of course by that time we were in the war--I joined the United States Navy. I tried to get in the Air Force first, but I had a bad knee from baseball and they wouldn't take me. So I went in the U. S. Navy and I was one of the three highest people in the testing that they give. As a result, myself and two other fellows were given an opportunity to choose any profession we wanted to undertake in the Navy. I took signaling, visual signaling and I went to Butler University for my studies, for six months. I was then sent to Farragut, Idaho, in the middle of the mountains believe it or not, Lake Farragut; it was called Camp Farragut. There I became an instructor in signaling for about a year. Then I took special training and was sent to New Orleans for what they called dock . . . Let's see if I can remember now what the heck they were called, floating docks, they were built in sections and very peculiar to this type of service because it had never been tried before. But they built them in sections large enough to take the largest carrier that we might have in the service at the time. They built ten sections. These sections were, as I said, built singly and they were in the form and shape of a boat or a ship. It had a bow type and then the very square stern and two wing walls that laid down in the middle of the vessel. Those wing walls then were pumped up and set upright. We went across the ocean to Guam and there the ten sections were put together. Guam is where we started to take the biggest carriers; our battleships, our carriers, destroyers would come in. This saved us, the Navy, from sending them all the way back to

San Francisco or to Hawaii to be replaced. So I served out my time, most of it, there. I was training then, finally, for the landing in Japan. I was to take an LST in when, thank gosh, the war ended.

D: What is an LST?

V: That's a landing craft. You probably see them where they drop the front end like at the landing at Normandy and that. You've seen pictures though I'm sure of that in World War II. My job was to pilot it in. You would go into the point where you thought the drop-off was shallow enough, that the men with all their paraphernalia could get off without drowning and then you would get the devil out of there. But, as I say, fortunately the war ended and we didn't have to invade Japan.

Then I was discharged in 1946 and came back to work at the Erie. I debated for awhile as to whether to go to school or not. Then I decided that I would come back to the Erie, which I did. I came back to the division superintendent's office in March of 1946. I worked various jobs in the division superintendent's office until April 1, 1958. At that time I was appointed to the post of division chief clerk and I remained in that post until the formation of the Consolidated Rail Corporation on April 1, 1976. Shortly thereafter, my title was changed to administrative assistant and then shortly after that they changed it again to office supervisor for convenience purposes as far as I know. And that's about my background as far as my service record goes.

Some interesting points would be the fact that when I started on the railroad in 1941, we had--if my memory serves me correctly--six trains between Chicago and New York. We had three trains between Cleveland and Youngstown. We had two passenger trains, round trip, that consolidated with the P & LE Railroad in Youngstown. In other words, you could get on the Erie Railroad passenger train in Cleveland; you came to Youngstown; the Erie crew got off and the P & LE crew got on. You could stay on the train and go right on into Pittsburgh and vice versa.

In those days Julie, when I went to work at seven thirty or quarter to eight, I had to fight my way through the first floor where the waiting rooms were because you couldn't get up to elevators there were so many people. At that time, in fact, I spent all of my career in the division superintendent's office and so forth in that old Erie P & LE Station building until we finally moved out of there with Conrail in September of 1978.

All those years I spent there, they had ticket offices of course. We had the fifth and sixth floors for our offices. The waiting

room took up the entire first floor with the exception of one end where they had a little restaurant. The basement was some more waiting room space plus a complete barber shop, also Red Cap offices were down there. We had matrons around the clock, twenty-four hours a day that did nothing more than take care of the women's restroom. And, as I say, over the years that all dwindled down to nothing until of course now. As of today we have no passenger business at all.

D: Okay, now the Erie and P & LE station that you're talking about is the old terminal on . . .

V: That is the old Erie terminal building that's right at the corner of Commerce and Phelps. It has been there all these years and at one time the ownership of that building kind of flip-flopped back and forth. At one time a woman owned it and she was going to tear it down, so the old Erie bought it. At that time I think we were the Erie Lackawanna.

Somewhere in the sixties, Julie--I'm not sure when. That's why I didn't say anything about it--the Erie was struggling somewhat and the Delaware and Lackawanna on the east coast was struggling. It was decided in the interest of both that we would consolidate into one railroad. So they started negotiating and of course . . . If you've ever watched the mergers, it takes two, three, four years for a merger to go through. When we started, the Lackawanna was in pretty good financial shape as was the Erie although we were both struggling. As we ran parallel to one another for hundreds of miles it was only natural to figure if we could just run on one railroad we would save a lot of money via maintenance, et cetera. So this was the idea behind it. But by the time all the paper work got out of the way and the merger was set to go, the Lackawanna was in deep trouble. On top of that, we understood they had given some terrific raises to all of their non-agreement personnel so that when the merger finally took place, they had train masters almost making more money than our division superintendents did. By the time the two railroads got together it was a real struggle because what we had left was practically dragged right down. But we went along pretty good until I believe it was Hurricane Agnes came along. That was what killed the Erie Railroad--Erie Lackawanna at that time.

We suffered ten million dollars worth of damage to our bridges and to our track and we didn't have the capital. We had been borrowing right along and what we were doing as the cash came in . . . If I remember correctly and don't quote me, the system had to have enough cash in the banks to cover, I think, two pay periods and so we were just doing this and then they were paying the bills from behind as they could with the cash they had. Consequently, of course, we had a lot of creditors who were screaming. Finally this hurricane hit and just wiped . . .

Well, we didn't have the cash. We had no choice; we had to go into bankruptcy again.

Eventually, we went into Conrail although for a long time the Chessie System--that was the B & O and C & O who had merged--they were a going railroad and they were interested in parts of our railroad. In fact, it had gone so far that some of us had even been interviewed by the Chessie. I was interviewed and was informed that I would move to Akron if the Chessie took us over. I would be the only one from this area going. I would go simply because of my knowledge of the operation of the Erie Lackawanna at that time. Then of course that fell through because Conrail took over, Consolidated Rail Corporation. So that brings us up to about where we are now.

We're located in the Ohio One building now. Probably the most beautiful offices I've ever worked in in my life. I never had a carpet under my feet until two years ago. It is probably one of the nicest offices that most railroaders have ever worked in. In fact, our people in Pittsburgh say when they used to come down here that they had to be the nicest offices they had ever seen, and their own are pretty nice.

- D: Before we go any further, could you give me a description of what you did as a division chief clerk? What were your responsibilities?
- V: I was responsible . . . Third in command for the division which meant that as division superintendent, I was responsible for all the departments on that particular division. We were responsible for all the yards. We were responsible for all the road trains. We were responsible for the passenger stations, the freight stations and so forth right down the line. The master mechanic, who would be in charge of the mechanical department for the repairing of cars and locomotives, et cetera. The division engineer, who was in charge of the maintenance of our tracks and buildings and facilities, they all had to report to the division superintendent. Now my job was to coordinate all of these particular phases of railroading. I had complete charge of all the clerical forces on our entire division which ran at that time, in 1958, from Meadville on the east to Kent, Ohio on the west and then various branches including the Cleveland Branch which went up to Cleveland, Ohio. We had charge of all of the personnel, both operating and non-operating. That would be conductors and engine men, clerks and operators. Everything that went on on the division had to go through the division superintendent's office. So my job was, as I say, to coordinate all these things. All the mailed crossed my desk at the time and not only mine but whoever happened to work the desk. I had to answer all of the correspondence. We had to take care of contracts, had to deal with sidetracked agreements. We took care of land

sales. We wrote various agreements locally here, sent them to our legal department where they were looked at and sent back to us to handle to a conclusion. We handled all the employment records for every man, woman, and child that was on our railroad from the eighteen hundreds on up. We had all the records here in the division superintendent's office. I did all the hiring of the clerks. I was responsible to see that all the claims that were submitted both for the operating people and the clerical forces and so forth were handled. I handled all that correspondence and then at the same time, I had a force of sixteen in the division superintendent's office that I had direct authority over. In that office we had an assistant chief clerk. We had an employment clerk that took care of nothing but employment records and passes which at that time were a big thing. We had a contract clerk who handled all the agreements. We had an accident clerk who handled all the accidents, derailments. We had a file clerk naturally. We had three secretaries. We had what we called a report clerk. We had a mail clerk messenger. We had a car distributor. So really, anything that came up the division handled. We had complete responsibility for running that division no matter what it was. To put it in a nutshell, I guess we just handled everything from soup to nuts. We were just responsible to run it in those days.

Eventually, in 1963, our division was widened 209 miles from Meadville east all the way to Hornell, New York and we consolidated the two divisions into one. Our former division was known as the Mahoning Division and it remained the Mahoning Division after we consolidated. I was appointed and kept on as division chief clerk at that time and the fellow who had the same job in Salamanca was abolished. Because of his age, he decided to stay there. He only had a couple of years to go or something like that at the time. So consequently . . . again I was lucky and I hung on to my job more or less not because I was any better but because I just happened to be younger. So that's how that happened.

I could tell you a little story about your grandfather here. When we consolidated the two divisions, we had a meeting in the division superintendent's office and at that time the vice-president who was a man by the name of Fred Diegtel came down and explained what was going to happen. Your grandfather and I were in there and he said that certain individuals were going to get raises and so forth and so on. Your grandfather asked, "Mr. Diegtel, what about Bob and I?" Mr. Diegtel replied, "Well, Lloyd, you and Bob, I guess you're just going to get more work." (Laughter) You can ask your grandfather about that.

So that's how the merger went, but like I say, I don't think it had anything to do with my ability any more than the fact

that I was the younger of the two. Also, we were going to keep the main headquarters here in Youngstown, so it would only be natural then, I think, to keep the force that was here. Believe it or not, out of the entire force up in Salamanca--which was a big force--they only brought two clerks down to assist us in taking over the whole entire division. So it was quite a challenge. At that time, the general manager's office closed upstairs--we were known as the Western Division at the time--and they moved lock, stock, and barrel. They wiped out the general manager level and all those people were offered an opportunity to move to Cleveland which most of them did. And those that didn't, of course, were given a chance to exercise their seniority, which they did too. So that takes you through that part. Now what else do you have?

D: How has your job changed under Conrail? Is it primarily the same job responsibilities?

V: No. I was told I need not worry when we merged. What we did is, the old Penn Central had what they called the Valley Division with headquarters in the Stambaugh building here at Youngstown. We, of course, had the Mahoning Division of the old Erie Lackawanna which was housed in the Erie building. When it was decided to form one division out of the two, it was to be known as the Youngstown Division. Here again, this time the balance went against me because it was decided that the Penn Central Superintendent who at that time was Bob Hatton would take over the responsibility for the new division, the new joint division which would be the Youngstown Division. The superintendent over on the Erie who was Bill Flight became the division superintendent in Altoona, Pennsylvania. Well, of course, our offices were wiped out although two or three of the jobs were moved across the way. We were to move into the Stambaugh building and most of the departments were the same way. They abolished quite a few jobs, but they kept a few at the same time. So Mr. Hatton told me not to worry, that he would see that I was taken care of. I have to admit that he did do this.

You've asked me the difference between what I do now and what I did then. I took the secretary with me and she and I became an office force for the assistant superintendent. Then they formed a new position called terminal superintendent and they also had a position called division road foreman. So they put the secretary and I sort of in the middle of these three and we became an office force for these three.

Again, I think because of my age at this time that . . . As I said, the balance went the other way. The young fellow that was on the same type of job as I had on the Erie Lackawanna, it was his superintendent that took over. Naturally, he stayed on because he was familiar with his operation. I was, as one person

put it, "You're just like a blanket that has been put on a shelf." And that's exactly more or less what I have been. I have no responsibility. To put it bluntly, I'm probably no more than an accident clerk or a glorified clerk although my boss keeps telling me that I'm his office supervisor. But I don't have too much to supervise. But they did give us one more person here a couple of months ago, so now I have a secretary. This other lad and then myself, we more or less just work together. I don't try to use my authority too much, because I feel we're all in the same boat. I know that my job, I'm sure, was created again. After they got rid of, not rid of, but after they transferred Mr. Flight, I was about the only one left from the old Erie Lackawanna Division office level who was familiar with all the operations, the people, the clerks, the names of the yardmasters, and so forth and some of the operation. So in fact, the statement was made to me, "Hurry up and get over here because I need your knowledge of the old Erie Lackawanna." So that's how my job came about and like I said I think the man was true to his word. He did save my job for me and so that's where I am now.

D: Were you ever a member of the union?

V: I'm a member of the union. I was a member of BRAC, Brotherhood of Railway and Airline Clerks; BRAC, it's known as. I belonged to that long before a union shop came into effect on the railroads, voluntarily. Then when the union shop came in, of course, we all had to join. When I was appointed to a non-agreement position in April 1, 1958, I retained my membership in the BRAC for a number of years. Then when I was denied an opportunity to attend a meeting, I withdrew from membership with an understanding that if and when I went back to a position that came under the union I would then rejoin. Recently, the Conrail or Consolidated Rail Corporation made an agreement with the BRAC and certain non-agreement positions. Many of them high up on the railroad were compelled to join the union with the understanding that this would retain our seniority right, which we had anyway because they couldn't take our rights away from us. The old agreements all said that when we were promoted to a non-agreement position, not covered by contract, that we would be considered as being on leave of absence. Under that particular rule, which is rule forty-two in the book, it meant that whenever we came off of that job we would then have the right to displace any junior employee under us that we would be entitled to with our seniority. Now, what we've done really, what Consolidated Rail has done, has just meant that we get no rights from the BRAC. We still get all the wage increases and so forth as given by the company to non-agreement employees. We get no benefits or privileges of the union but it costs us the union dues which right now are twenty-three dollars and twenty cents a month. Theoretically, I'm paying about two hundred and forty-fifty dollars a month

for rights that I had anyway. Theoretically that's what they did and now I am also a bona fide member of the BRAC even though I hold a non-agreement position if you can figure that one out.

D: What is your opinion of the unions?

V: Well, they're good and bad but I'll tell you this, without the unions we would never have the working conditions we have today. It's like anything else. If we didn't have the union Julie, we wouldn't have anything. We would be starving to death. We wouldn't have the companies then we wouldn't have any jobs. It's one of those deals where both sides are good and bad because there's never a middle. It seems as though this is a good time now with inflation the way it is. If it weren't for the unions battling the way they do, even before I was forced to join the union under this new agreement--which has only come in since last July--I wouldn't get any wage increases. That is, we, as non-agreement personnel or supervisory personnel would not get any wage increases at all because the only reason we get them is because contract people get them. And if they're going to keep their supervisors then they've got to grant us some. Now we never get as much as the contract people get. Mostly what happens, union contracts are usually for three years and about every six months--the first of January and the first of July--they get a raise. For instance, they got a big raise coming up here but not so much percentagewise, five percent. But they also have the cost of living tied into that which would be a huge amount, probably twenty or thirty cents an hour, maybe more than that, on top of this five percent. Now we get one raise a year normally. It's what they call a merit increase. Your dad probably has told you about that. What happens there is each supervisor is judged once a year on his abilities on the position that he holds. They have various steps and you can be marginal or unsatisfactory. You can be doing a satisfactory job, a superior job, or an outstanding job. They figure seventy-five percent of our personnel are satisfactory. There are about fifteen, maybe twenty percent that are superior and only about five percent that are considered outstanding. Then your percentages are based on where you're put, that is whether it's satisfactory or so forth. Then they also have in that . . . They also have three steps. You have a minimum salary range, you have a middle salary range, and you have a maximum on that particular job. Depending on the location, the size of the job or your responsibility, they also give what you call points. So, for instance, you might have a train master's job in Youngstown with five hundred and ninety-four points. I might be the train master in Sharon over here with only four hundred and ninety points, so consequently, my wage, my opportunity to get to a certain level is less than this guy's because he is going to be rated higher. See, that's how it's done.

If you're in the first table between the low minimum wage and the middle wage, you can fluctuate in there and get ten, fifteen, twenty percent, depending on what it is, but you only get one increase a year. I would say they probably average, if you take them all in, ten percent and inflation is running a lot higher than that.

This year the company has done something which I haven't seen a railroad do in a number of years. The first of January they gave every non-agreement man the same increase flat out, one hundred dollars a month to help us with inflation. This was over and above the merit increases that any of us got last year and whatever we get this year. So that is one thing that the company did do this year which in all my years on the railroad I've never seen it happen. But they did come out with a flat raise. Normally, if they even give you anything, it's usually a percentage, but they felt that if they gave say, a five percent . . . Here's a man with twenty thousand a year at five percent, well, it costs him just as much to live as a guy that's making thirty-five thousand dollars, but at five percent he's going to get a lot bigger increase than the guy at twenty thousand. So they decided to give a flat rate so everybody got the same from the top man all the way down. They got one hundred bucks a month and as I said, I've never seen that happen.

If you want something interesting . . . I've completed thirty-nine years and I have never lost a day's pay. I have never seen a day go by that I didn't get paid and I don't think that many people can say that in any kind of a company anywhere. I was off for one operation, but the company paid me. I was off one day on account of a strike, but they called me out at ten o'clock that night--the same night. I wasn't supposed to be there but the superintendent called me out. It took six months and I thought that I finally had a day when I wasn't going to get paid, but after about six months Karl Dingle, who was division superintendent, fought and fought and fought and I finally got my day's pay. So I can truthfully say I have never lost a day's pay. Of course, I was in the military service. I wasn't working so I didn't get paid, but I meant while I was with the railroad I never lost a day's pay. That's kind of nice over the years when you think of all the strikes and everything. You may not make the biggest money in the world, but I've known what I'm going to make and that really helps.

D: So in your opinion then unions helped?

V: Absolutely, we would be nowhere without them. As I said before, naturally, they do wrong things, but then so do the companies. You've got to have them to balance one another out and sometimes the unions go too far and sometimes the companies go too far. For instance, the union might ask for

a ten percent wage increase and when the company makes their counter offer, they'll want to cut your wages twenty percent, do away with all the overtime, make you work forty-eight hours for forty hour's pay, all kinds of ridiculous things. So one's just as bad as the other when it comes to negotiating. What always seems strange to me is before they go on strike, nobody can agree, but after they go on strike for awhile it seems like you can always sit down eventually and iron it out and ninety percent of the time it's exactly what it was in the first place between the two, maybe a penny or two difference. And so all you've done . . . These people have lost all this money which they never get back. Although you can't explain this to anybody; they think because they get a five cent an hour raise, they're going to get rich, but they're never going to get the money back they've lost. So it's a vicious circle. But I'll tell you, we need the unions and we have to have them protect us, absolutely, whether we're non-agreement or agreement doesn't make any difference.

- D: Let me ask you your opinion of the competing railroads that the Erie is competing against--when it was just the Erie or the Erie Lackawanna rather than Consolidated Rail Corporation now--what was your opinion of the eastern railroads it competed with?
- V: Well, that's a tough question because as you probably know, the railroads are tied down, ratewise, by the ICC. There are so many things that an individual railroad cannot do. So really, what you're talking about is service. If your railroad can provide better service than the Baltimore and Ohio going to that same location for instance--where numerous railroads sometimes do all go to certain places--then you're going to hang on to the business. So it's like any other competing business where you compete with other companies. In our business it's nothing more than service. If you don't provide service, you don't get the business, it's just that simple. So consequently, it depends a lot on your sales people. Then if the sales people can sell some company the fact that our company will provide better service for their company than another railroad, another competing railroad, and you get the business, then it's up to you, your operating department to see that the trains move on schedule and move the freight. And that's the only thing you have to offer, Julie, is service.

Here in Youngstown, we competed, in the olden days, with the P & LE, the LE & E, the Youngstown and Southern, the Penn Central, the B & O, but we competed with all those railroads. And when you get out of Youngstown, of course, then like towards Cleveland, we ran into the N & W and the C & O and so forth. In Akron, we ran into the NKP or the Nickel Plate;

again the N & W, the B & O also went into Akron. So consequently, you're just trying to provide better service, faster service. You can't do it any cheaper because you all have the same rates you see. So it really is nothing more than service. That's all you had to do.

As the Erie Railroad, the one thing that was in our favor was the fact that we could handle a higher and wider load than any other railroad in this area. Our line was so constructed that we could move what they call high and wides and deliver them all over the country and get them to other railroads where the B & O couldn't handle them for instance, or the PRR at that time couldn't handle them. NYC couldn't and eventually, of course, they became the Penn Central, but they couldn't handle them either. So these big loads for instance that come out of Westinghouse, these big transformers, we used to get them all. We were known as the railroad that served the heart of industrial America. The heart of industrial America, that's us. We ran from the east coast to Chicago and that's as far as we went.

- D: While we're on the topic of the federal government--you mentioned the ICC--what is your opinion of federal regulation of the railroads? Has it helped or hindered them?
- V: No, definitely it would have to hinder. It would have to hinder because, I feel this way, this is America and in order for railroads to compete with other forms of transportation--I'm not going against the truckers because they're held down the same way we are but at the same time we ought to be free to compete. If we want to offer to haul a company's freight to Cleveland for two dollars and forty cents a ton whereas the B & O is charging three dollars a ton, we ought to be able to do it. And I think it would have been a great thing for the railroads. I think if we would have had open competition that we wouldn't have had all the bankruptcies we've had. Over the years, when the railroads weren't making money, what they had to do and I know our railroad did . . . We all owned cars, railroad cars and when they needed heavy repairs we didn't have the cash to do it so we set them on what we call storage tracks and we just stored them and so what happens then is we didn't have enough of our own cars so we start using the cars of our competing railroads. This was true of all of us. Of course, when you used the other railroad's cars then you have to pay what we call per diem on them. So consequently, we ended up paying out more money than we received. Normally you try to balance this; you try to figure that there's so many of their cars over here and we kind of balance one another out in order if we're going to make money. Well, eventually it got so bad that ninety percent of the cars we were using were foreign railroad cars

which meant we were paying per diem and we didn't own any of these cars and it was costing us a fortune. We might get the load but at the same time it was costing us a fortune because what we were actually doing was renting cars of another railroad. Eventually when we got a new president, the first thing he did was get busy.

We tried to get more system cars again. What we call system is the owning railroad. By that, if we could do that, then again we started to balance out so that we're using less of their cars and they're using more of our's. So instead of us paying them, they start paying us. Really and truly, the Erie, after a few years, we never had the ownership of the number of cars that would allow us to actually let them use more of our cars than we were using their's because eventually we were practically using all per diem cars and very few Erie, Erie Lackawanna, cars were around.

That was one reason, I think, why Consolidated Rail came into effect. That the Penn Central more or less was the reigning railroad because of course they owned more than anybody. And so, it only made sense that if you're going to change over to a certain type of railroading then the most economical way would be to go to the biggest because if we would have gone . . . Say if they wanted to decide to do everything the old Erie way, just think that we could fit in one, little corner of the former Penn Central Railroad. So it would have been a tremendous amount of change over the other way where we could take the other five railroads and change them over to the Penn Central way a heck of a lot cheaper than to do it the opposite. And I think this is another reason why we just ended up with more or less Penn Central people in the general manager's positions and so forth.

- D: What is your opinion of Western Railroads? Why have they been so successful?
- V: Because they have long hauls; it's just that. What we call long haul means that you get a carload of freight or a ton of freight and you haul it from San Francisco to St. Louis or you haul it from San Francisco or L. A. all the way to Chicago. You see, they didn't have all the industrial states that we do on the east coast. Consequently, we did not have what we call long hauls, that is, as long. It is nowhere near as far from New York to Chicago than it is from Chicago to the west coast. So to make it simple, it's just the fact that they had the opportunity of long hauls. On top of that, I think they were a little better managed but of course, this is hard to say because they would have had a little better financial record, I think, than the east coast railroads. And another thing, I think that if you will recall and look over the maps, you'll find out there are not nearly as many major railroads doing that long haul as

there were here in the east, especially the northeastern part of the United States. You can just start and you couldn't begin to name all of the railroads that compete against one another here in the northeastern part of the United States. You have a few southern railroads that do very well, again because they run all the way from the Gulf of Mexico to Chicago or up into our sections up here, so they do have that long haul.

The L & N is a good railroad. The Southern is a fine railroad. It's making money and has made money for years; why, I don't know. They have a tremendous maintenance program. They have a good car repair program. I think here again the question is, is their management better or do they know something that we don't know up here in the northeastern part of the United States. But I can't believe that the northeastern railroads all went bankrupt because they were all managed badly. It doesn't make sense that everybody's going to be bad. I think it was just strictly the fact there was too much competition, too much federal regulation, and when the going got rough there wasn't any way we could offer a service cheaper to try to hang on to what we had or so forth. When our cars got so bad or our engines got so bad, they broke down, caused railway delays, transit time. Then naturally they went to a railroad that maybe would give them better service and we gradually lost our customers. We lost them perhaps like to the Chessie, for instance, which was a good railroad; still is a good railroad. The N & W is a good railroad.

Another thing that we don't have anymore is coal. Coal is a going product. In other words, you make money hauling coal, and that's why the N & W and Chessie do so well. They do have the coal. Now, the old Erie had the ore. When we hauled the ore during ore season, we made money. Trouble was that the ore doesn't run in the winter, and so in the winter months then, we struggled because we didn't have all this ore coming our way. So naturally we didn't make as much money.

- D: In your opinion, what was the reason for the demise of the passenger service on the Erie Railroad? Why did it just die out?
- V: Well, there are a number of reasons. The foremost, I think, was the construction of your major highways. It made it so much easier to get back and forth to our major cities. A good point there would be Cleveland. How much easier it is now to travel to Cleveland than it was to go 422 and battle your way through every little town to get up there. Number two, of course, would have been the planes. Air flight is much faster although sometimes on a short haul it isn't. By the time you drive to the airport for

thirty minutes and get a plane and get out of the airport in Cleveland and back to downtown Cleveland, then maybe you haven't saved too much. But if you go a little farther . . . There's no doubt that the airplane did hurt the railroads at that time.

Another reason would be the fact that on our railroad-- I don't know how the rest of the railroads were--we lost money. You couldn't make money. Now one of the major factors that caused the demise of the passenger trains was because the United States Government Post Office took the mail away from us. I bet when you were a child you can remember that we used to haul the mail and this is what kept the passenger trains in business. Passengers alone were not profitable. We used to have the mail and then when they took the mail away from us, that was the downfall. Then we didn't have the money to put into the passenger cars to keep it up. Once we started losing money, we decided it was cheaper to get out.

The last two trains we ran were the commuter trains between Cleveland and Youngstown. We were losing five hundred dollars a day and you can't operate and lose. What happened there naturally was, we not only didn't have too many passengers, I think we had one get on here at Youngstown and that was what we called a deadhead. That would be a company employee that was deadheading to Cleveland to work in the general offices of the railroad company. And when you got past the first, like from Youngstown to Niles to Warren, probably ten passengers didn't get on. They get on after you get west of Warren in those little towns just outside of Cleveland. Again, seventy-five, eighty percent were what we called deadheads going to work in Cleveland for the railroad. So without mail . . . it was the mail, really, I think. If I had to pinpoint one thing, I would say number one was the mail. Number two would be the highways and number three would be the airplanes.

- D: In your opinion, do you think that railroads in the northeast will become important again or have they lost their importance and won't be able to pull themselves together?
- V: In my opinion, right now, the biggest railroad of course is Consolidated Rail Corporation or Conrail and as far as I'm concerned, Julie, it will never make money; it will never make a go. It's too big. What we need and should have done at the time they formed Conrail, they should have made a couple of competing railroads against one another. In other words, they should have cut down the Penn Central to begin with and taken the other railroads and formed two railroads out of them. That was one of the plans but no one would pay any attention to it and they just went ahead and formed this one, huge giant. I don't think Consolidated will ever make it,

never. Eventually, what's going to happen to it, it's going to get cut up and it's going to be bought in pieces by the other railroads such as the Chessie and, like I said before, the N & W perhaps.

It all depends on what railroads are operating in the territories that we're talking about. Now you know Conrail runs all the way from the east coast and up the east coast, all the way to St. Louis and then branches in between north and south. So consequently, you're competing against a lot of railroads; the N & W could take part of us; the Southern could probably take part of us; the Chessie could take part of us; the P & LE could take part of us. Now when we get out further east, I don't even know what's over there anymore. But, in my opinion, Consolidated will never make it.

- D: Looking back, what changes, if any, would you have liked to have seen made that could have maybe saved the Erie Railroad from what has happened to it today? Would it have been this consolidation that they went through with Conrail?
- V: I think that where the mistake was made . . . I think that the Erie Railroad or the Erie Lackawanna at that time, after the hurricane which meant we had to have ten million dollars cash . . . I feel that if they would have taken our railroad and granted us say, a twenty-five million dollar loan and subsidized us the way they're subsidizing Conrail with millions and millions and millions and millions . . . We needed about one-twentieth of what they're pouring into Conrail. In fact, I don't think we would have needed one-twentieth, probably one-fiftieth of what they're getting and we could have operated and I think with a smaller railroad and good management, we would have made it. I think that's what should have been done with all the smaller railroads. They should have broken up the huge Penn Central and sold it off to all the smaller railroads along with the Chessie and N & W who are making money. They would have been further ahead and I think you would see a much, much better railroad segment here in the northeastern part of the United States. Then throw out the ICC regulations so that railroads can compete on a free and equal basis. If I want to haul your freight for fifty cents that's up to me. I think those two things, if they would have taken each of the railroads, even if they wanted to put somebody in there as the head of each railroad to kind of watch over, okay. If the government was going to pour some money in, I think you would have seen a much better railroad operation than you're seeing today.
- D: On a whole, looking at all the railroads throughout the country, what do you see for the future of railroading in this country? Will it become important to this nation again?
- V: Well, Julie, let's put it this way: You could line up all the

trucks in this country bumper-to-bumper and they couldn't begin to move the freight that one railroad can move. So whether anyone thinks the railroads are important or not isn't the question. They just have to be important. And if our country is going to sit back and let the railroads just go their own way until they just end up with nothing I feel for this country. If we ever get to a point where we have another war, we'll never be able to move the freight that we're going to have to move. One freight train can just . . . When you figure that we can move as high as one hundred and fifty carloads of freight, there's no way trucks are going to handle that freight--that's just one train. And when you stop to figure the millions of railroad cars that move every day, they have to be important. If somebody doesn't see the light pretty soon, why, I don't know what will happen to the future, but the railroads have to be in the future. There is no way you can move food or anything fast enough to feed the millions of people. It just has to be that they have to recognize the importance of the railroads and someone will have to figure out whether we're going to spend money on roadbeds or go to a different type of engine or what we need anyway to compete is what we're going to have to do. They're going to have to keep the railroads and I don't know whether it's going to be you and I as the government . . . We would hate to see the government get in debt anymore, but here they are sinking billions into Conrail. Like I said, if they would have turned around and put a few million in some of these fine railroads that we're talking about like the New Haven and the LeHigh Valley and the Erie Lackawanna, we would have been much better ahead I think. But the railroads are the backbone of industrial America and they're never going to get away from it. They're going to have to do something to make certain that they stay in operation. Like I said, I don't know how--I'm not that brilliant--but somehow they're going to have to figure out a way.

D: Is there anything that I maybe forgot to ask you that you might want to add?

V: I don't know. I've talked an awful lot.

D: Thank you for the interview.

V: You're entirely welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW