

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Railroad Project

Work Experience

O. H. 283

ROBERT EUGENE LEE

Interviewed

by

Lillian Eminhizer

on

August 5, 1975

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: ROBERT EUGENE LEE

INTERVIEWER: Lillian Eminhizer

SUBJECT: Railroading

DATE: August 5, 1975

L: This is an interview with Robert E. Lee at 215 Robinson Street, Greenville, South Carolina on August 5, 1975 at about 11:00 in the morning. The interview is by Lillian Eminhizer and this tape is done for Youngstown State University.

E: When did you hire out on the railroad?

L: I hired out Lord, honey, I can't tell you, but I do know that I hired out in train service in 1916. I started in 1911, I believe it was. I don't know what day it was in 1911. I started as call boy and then I went to school. Then I came back and went on the railroad.

My mother tried to make a preacher out of me. She couldn't make a preacher so she decided she would make a lawyer. When she couldn't do that, I just wanted the railroad. Then she found out that I wasn't going to take a college education and she put in as a machinist. I didn't like that at all, so I quit that and went and got a job on the railroad. I railroaded, I was down on the main line for fifty years, I reckon.

E: When you hired out for a regular brakeman job with the railroad . . .

L: Yes, 1916, I believe it was, 1916.

E: Was this on the main line when you hired out?

L: Yes, I was hired as an extra brakeman, I mean trainman, as trainman. I was hired as a trainman. I served seven

years till I was promoted to conductor. I was conductor from then on until I retired.

E. You started off with steam then, didn't you?

L: What?

E: You started out with steam engine?

L: Yes. Oh yes. I started out with the steam engine. Of course, I went to calling. I went to calling forever . . .

E What did a call boy do?

L: He called the crews, honey. He called the crew. He called like . . . They call me on the telephone, but when I was in a mile they would come after me. But, they got the telephone, why they'd call you on the telephone.

E. But, if you had no telephone then the call . . .

L: Yes, when I was calling, I had to walk. That was years and years ago. I was just a kid, just twelve or fourteen years old. I called at night from seven till seven for a dollar. A dollar, thirty dollars a month. Then after I did that, I went on the rail. I meant on the road, got a job braking.

E What did you do as a trainman? What was the job of the trainman on the steam engine?

L: Well, one more thing was I was flagging and I was braking too. Different things, but until I got promoted to a conductor and I only got promoted, well, I had somebody to take my place when I was called. I was conductor, Lord I don't know how many years, till I retired.

E: Where did you ride on the train?

L Well, when I was braking I rode in the engine, steam engine. Then when the diesel came I rode on the diesel. Then when I was promoted I rode the cab. When I was flagging, if I was flagging, I rode the cab.

When I started out 35 or 40 cars was a train. But, when I was running it when it had the diesels, anywhere from 150 to 275 was a train.

- E: Wow. Well, when did the diesels come on the Southern?
- L: Honey, I'd just tell you, I really don't know. I really don't know.
- E: Did you work just freight?
- L: Yes.
- E: You never worked passenger?
- L: Well, sometime I worked some, but my wife was a train nurse and she stayed on the carted run. I'd run that run, but if I went on the passenger train I'd have to go to Salisbury, from Salisbury to Atlanta. I stayed on the carted run so I could be home.
- E: Now, were all of the roots or sections of the divisions, did all of them originate in Salisbury and go to Atlanta?
- L: Well, no. We had different turns. Those on freight service wouldn't go any farther than Atlanta to Greenville, but all passenger trains, they went through Greenville. They went to Salisbury. We went from Salisbury to Atlanta on passenger trains. Now freight train or freight service, we didn't go but 152 miles, you see. That was Salisbury to . . .
- E: Now, why would they have the freight men work a shorter run than the passenger men?
- L: Well, the freight men?
- E: Yes.
- L: Well, at that day in time the sixteen hour law would get us then, two or three times, making a trip a hundred mile . . . (Laughter) But, after we got diesel and double track it was different. When I started out though, the sixteen hour law would get us.
- E: Did they ever change the sixteen hour law?
- L: No, I don't know whether they changed it yet or not. They never work sixteen hours now. It doesn't take much longer than five or six hours to make a trip. It's different with double track you know.
- E: Yes.

- L: But when I started, well, that's when it was bad, really bad.
- E: Is the flagging different on a single track than a double track?
- L: Oh, yes. They pass one another on a double track. They pass one another. They don't stop at times on double tracks, but single tracks you'd have to take sides and let the other ones go by.
- E: Did you work the Salisbury end of it on the freight or did you work the Atlanta end of it?
- L: I worked from Salisbury to Greenville. Then I worked some on the passenger train from Salisbury to Atlanta. Then I was on a short run too, Salisbury to Charlotte I believe it was. Just a short run.
- E: Was that freight run, Salisbury to Charlotte?
- L: Yes.
- E: Well, when you were a conductor, what was your job as the conductor? What did you do?
- L: I told the men what to do. I did a little bit of everything. I was in charge of the train. The conductor is in charge of the train. A lot of people think the engineer is, but he isn't. The conductor is in charge of the train.
- E: Did you have anything to do with the way the train was put together?
- L: No. They put the train together at the terminal and then we'd switch it out. If we had cars for Charlotte or Spartanburg, we'd set them up ourselves.
- E: Did you have any type of a sheet or anything that gave the makeup of the train?
- L: Well, I had a car book. I had a book that tells about everything. They had a sheet that tells how the train was. We knew how. We had the bills. The bills run with the car. All the cars had a bill if they had it loaded. If they didn't, why, they would have this empty slip. But all the carted runs, most of those were loaded cars on the carted run.
- E: Now, who did you pick up your orders from?

- L Well, from the operator and the chief dispatcher. The dispatcher would give it to the operators and the operators would give me orders.
- E Are they the ones that you got your waybills from?
- L. No. We got the bills from the clerks down at the yard office. At the yard office we'd get our bills there and then we'd get the train together. If we had to pick up we'd pick up a few and that would make up what we had to pick up. It mattered where the car went, but most of the time they went through, you see.
- E: On some of the railroads, the conductor is the one that kept the coffee pot going in the caboose. Was that your job?
- L: No. If we wanted coffee we'd put the pot in. (fire box of steam engine) If it didn't knock it off, we'd drink it. (laughter) We had coffee at times. Sometime we had something to eat, pie, something like that and we'd have our lunch with it, take a lunch.
- E. So you carried your lunch?
- L: Yes.
- E: You never did any cooking?
- L: I had a flagman that did. Sometime he'd cook. But sometime we didn't have time to cook on the carted run.
- E: Where did you put your coffee if it didn't get knocked off?
- L: (Laughter) Mostly set it down on the floor. We didn't have a refrigerator, something you could put it in, the icebox. We had no ice on the carted.
- E: Did you carry mostly iced tea?
- L: Yes, in the summer time. In the winter time we'd have coffee. There is a lot of difference now in railroading than when I quit, than it was when I went to work. We'd be anywhere from twelve to sixteen hours making a trip and sometime we wouldn't make a trip then. We'd have to lay over and take our rest, then start out again.
- E Did they ever send another crew to take your train?

- L: Sometimes, yes. Sometimes they would take a second crew after us. Most of the time they did. Most of the time they would send a crew after us.
- E: When they sent a crew out, did they send it from, like if you were going to Salisbury, did they send down from Salisbury?
- L: No, they'd send them to the closest place, Salisbury or Greenville, which is the closest. The closest place, they'd send us.
- E: That's interesting. How many steam engines did they put on a train?
- L: One. One steam engine. Sometime we had stokers too, so long a time. But we had a fireman that had to shovel coal when I first started. Then they got the stoker. He had a stoker on the engine and he'd feed the coal. But then he'd have to see if it went down to keep the engine hot. But the stoker fed it until we got the diesel. When we got the diesel, why that . . .
- E: Where did you take coal and water between places?
- L: In the coal chute with Charlotte and Spartanburg. And going north we'd take it at Spartanburg and Charlotte. At different places along the ride when it got cold we'd have water. Different places they had those water tanks. Steam engines had water tanks.
- E: Did they have the water tank where they had the coal or did they have . . . ?
- L: No. Sometimes they did. Sometimes they didn't have water tanks in different places, so they'd get water. The coal would last longer than the water, you see.
- E: What size engines did they run out there?
- L: Forty-eight hundreds. Why, I started out with forty-five hundreds and then they got the forty-eight hundreds. And then they got the diesels.
- There is a lot of differences from when I started than it was when I took the pension.
- E: What is the countryside like? Is it mountainous between here and Salisbury?

L: No, it isn't mountainous. Where my father was, he was on Asheville division and it was mountain railroad and he was killed at Mudcut in 1902. No, my uncle was killed in 1902. There was a rail bent in the track when my father's engine turned over. The fireman didn't get killed, but my father did. He was hurt. The fireman was hurt bad, but my father was killed. And I was just a small child, six years old, I think. I was about six or seven years old when my father was killed.

I always wanted to go to railroad. And I wasn't satisfied until I went to railroad. My mother didn't want me to go to railroad at all.

E: What railroad did your father work for?

L Southern, and his branch served the Asheville division, that was going into Knoxville in through there. He went from Salisbury to Asheville, 143 miles. That was mostly mountain railroad. The rail was bent around the track and he turned and they didn't and my father ran into it. He was killed. The engine turned over.

E. Yes. They had a lot of bad accidents on the rail.

L: Oh, yes. At that damned time, they did have bad accidents. Good gracious alive.

E: Well, was that section of the railroad, was it with Southern Railroad?

L. Oh, yes. It was a branch. It was kind of a branch line, Southern with a branch line. It went to Knoxville. It went as far that way as it did down this way. See Salisbury to Atlanta and, of course, after it left Atlanta it was Southern Railroad in different places too. But from Salisbury to Asheville and then the Northern and then the Chattanooga and all through there that's carted run through the west. And this is the south.

E: There were some of those small lines that became part of the Southern?

L: Oh, yes.

E: But, he was an engineer?

L. Oh, yes. He was the engineer. My uncle was too, and my cousin was. He got his leg cut off.

E: Was he a conductor, brakeman?

L: Yes, he was a brakeman at that time.

E: I guess that was one of the hazards of being a brakeman, was not getting out of the way of those cars.

L: Oh, yes. And then doing the switching too, on the ground. Of course the conductor is on the ground, but he was seeing it was done. I don't know how long I was on that till I got promoted, not too long till I was in charge of the train.

E: Were all of the men that worked on the train, all the brakemen and like that, were they all white, Caucasians?

L: Yes, most of them. They had a few colored, but just a very few when I went on the railroad. But they got to hiring colored fellows and colored farmers. But, at that time while I was on the railroad all the time, there was no promotion to them. There was no colored engineer or no colored conductor. But I think now, I think they all have.

E: Well, I knew there were certain positions that some of them held.

L: Yes. They were brakemen. When I went on the railroad, there were very few colored people that could write or read. That has been a long time ago.

E: I guess. Now, did you ever work in the yard, switching or anything like that?

L: No, only calling. I never worked in the yard.

E: What did you do, bring your train in the yard and leave it?

L: Yes. I brought the train in the yard and left it. We did set off at different places. Like Charlotte and Spartanburg, we set off there, but that's all. And then we'd keep going. If we had anything to pick up, we'd pick it up.

E: Did you have any interesting experiences out there in the road?

- L I sure did. I was hurt two or three times. I was switching and I ran into the cab at Salisbury and they sent me to Washington under Doctor Shans. I had a broken leg. That's where I met my wife. A barrel of oil fell out of the freight car on me. I was shook up a couple of times in the cab.
- E What about the people you worked with, how were they?
- L What do you mean?
- E Were they pretty good to work with?
- L Yes, oh yes. There ain't no doubt about that. The Southern Railroad was a good company to work for too.
- E I saw your fifty year pin.
- L That's from the president. You've seen those pins, haven't you?
- E They're very pretty. Very good. Graham Clatter, here, president of Southern Railway.
- L Yes, I reckon he's about ready to retire, too, now.
- E Well, his brother has something to do with Northwestern too?
- L Yes, I think so.
- E He's the vice-president.
- L I don't know if I had seven superintendents in all, train masters and all.
- E Who accounted for the accidents? Did the conductor or the engineer or who?
- L Well, being that we had an accident?
- E Yes.
- L Well, I never had more than a wreck or two. Actually, I was the only one that got hurt.
- E You didn't have to go in for any questioning or anything?

L: No.

E: That's interesting. Okay, first we're going to talk to you about yard setup. Now, as I understand it, on the Southern Railroad, a crew that worked in the yard could never work the main line.

L: Well, sometimes they went to the main line. But, when they hire at the yard, they generally stay on the yard until they get through, until they get ready to retire. And they'd go as a brakeman and they come out and get promoted and go to a conductor. All the firemen go to engineers, just like they do on the main line.

E: Could they move from one yard to another yard?

L: No, they don't do that. Like if they hire here in Greenville, they stay here. Hired in Salisbury, they stay there. Hired in Charlotte, stay there. Hired in Spartanburg, they stay there. They don't run from one yard to another. No.

E: They can't move back and forth from the main line to the yard?

L: No, not unless they want to go to the main line. Some of them go to the main line, as far as that's concerned. But, generally, they're going to stay on the yard. A lot of them go to the main line. So it's the same way with the firemen when they were started.

E: Now, going back to this single and double track, for single track, what did you work under, train orders?

L: Yes, mostly.

E: What were they like?

L: Well, they're just train orders and they'd tell you what to do. We'd have different meet orders, like meeting at different places, meeting another train. Like if I was coming south and while being a train going north, why they'd give me a meet order to meet him at such and such a place. Single track, but after they got double track and the lines up, why, everybody took care of themselves.

E: You all worked under signals?

L: Yes.

E: Did you ever have any trouble with the signals not working?

L: Sometimes, very seldom. Sometimes, though, we'd have trouble with them, but they would have somebody out working on them to get them fixed.

E: I think Mr. Jones, Owen Jones, was he the signal man? Do you know any of them that worked on the signal?

L: No. There are a couple engineers, Jones, though. One lives right across the street, that's Bert. And then he had another brother. Of course, his brother is retired. But the brother across the street over here, he still works on it.

E: Who did you work with when you were out on the road?

L: Who did I work with?

E: Yes.

L: I worked with several different ones. I worked with different ones. Sometimes, I'd have a flagman for three or four months or he may have got rolled or something like that. I'd have a brakeman. I'd work with different ones. I was the conductor, you see, and I had a crew. If some of them were promoted, why, they'd go do the same thing that I was doing.

E: You didn't always work with the same engineer?

L: No, no, not all the time, different, with different engineers.

E: The term 'roll,' that would mean that somebody would come along and take your job?

L: Yes. Yes, somebody would come along, older they were in age on the railroad. Say, like a man came in 1915 and another one came in 1916, why, the man who came 1915 was oldest. It's like when I came in, 1918. Well, I think I went to work about, callboy in 1911 or 1912, somewhere along there. I was just a kid.

E: Your years of calling, did that give you years of seniority when you went out as a trainman?

L. No, no indeed, no indeed. When I went as brakeman, that's when my seniority started. When I went to braking the run, that's when my seniority started.

E: When did the unions come into the railroads?

L: Lord, I don't know.

E Did you have unions when you first went to work?

L: Yes.

E: What was the pay like when you first started out? When you were a call boy, a dollar a night, but what about when you first went to work?

L Well, when I went on the railroad, it was about two or three dollars a hundred miles. They would raise them once in a while.

E: And you were working a 152 mile run?

L: Yes.

E: So that would mean you were making about four or five dollars a run?

L: Yes, about. Then I got a raise once in a while. Every couple of years they'd pay a little bit more.

E: Did you know an engineer named Dobson?

L: Yes, ma'am, I certainly did. I worked with him.

E: So, his father was an engineer?

L: Yes.

E: Was he an engineer, too?

L: Yes.

E: So, you worked the same

L. The same as I did.

E: Do you remember any of the other men you used to work with?

L: Men, I worked with?

E: Yes.

L: Lord, Yes. James Malone, he's dead. And Cline, he's dead. Ike Gambles, Charlie Gillman. Oh, Lord, I don't know how many, I can't call them all as I worked with time. We'd meet on the road. I mean called, called to go together.

E: What did you do with the cars that developed hot-boxes?

L: We'd pack them up sometimes and maybe set them off. If they got too hot, we'd set them off. Most of the time, we'd set them off.

E: Did you have any trouble with the yard crews when they made up the trains, not taking out the cars like that?

L: No.

E: Who rode the back end for you, the flagman?

L: Yes, the flagman rode back there with me. And the brakeman, the fireman and the engineer rode on the head end until we got such long tains. When we got such long trains, I'd ride the engine at times.

E: To watch the train. What else could happen to the train, besides the hotbox?

L: Well, sometimes it would break in two or break a knuckle or sometimes it would turn over or have a wreck. Something like that would happen.

E: Did you ever have a car derail in the middle of the train?

L: Oh, yes. I had several wrecks like that, derailed.

E: What would cause the car to derail in the middle of the train?

L: Oh, why different things. Sometimes it would be a brake rigging down or the track could spread or something like that, or it wasn't just exactly right. Lots of things could cause it.

E: How did they keep the track in condition?

L: They kept it good. They always kept it just as good as they could when I was out there.

E: Who took care of the track?

L: Track people, trackmen. Trackmen worked on the track, laborers, and then they had a foreman. He would check. And then they had a supervisor. They all looked after the track, you see. The men with the tools, they could work on the track.

E: Were those the gandy dancers?

L: No, I don't know what they called them at that time, but they just worked on the track.

E: Eventually they got these big fancy machines.

L: Well, they had different kinds of machinery when I was out there. I mean, they worked on the track.

E: Well, when you first hired out though, didn't they do most of that work by hand?

L: Yes, oh, yes. Yes indeed, they certainly did. When I first started out they did it mostly that way. Then they got better along all the time.

E: I was going to ask you, where are the yards when going from Greenville to Salisbury?

L: Where are the yards?

E: Yes.

L: Now, I don't know, but there was a yard at Spartanburg. There's a small yard at Gastonia and then at Charlotte is the big yard. Then Spencer is the next stop which is a yard. That's the end of our run. Then when coming south on a freight train, it's the same way, Charlotte and

E: Spencer and then Charlotte and Gastonia and Spartanburg?

L: Yes.

E: Now when you go down to Atlanta, where are the yards between here and Atlanta?

L: There's not but one or two yards. There was a yard at Taccoa. I think that's about all between here and Atlanta.

E: Taccoa, Georgia?

L: Taccoa, Georgia.

E: How often did they put the siding in?

L: Oh, well, sometimes it would be a good bit according to where you'd meet the other man, when it was single track. The siding, you mean, were there different places where we'd set off cars?

E: Yes, but like the siding on the single where you could have the run around.

L: Yes.

E: Okay, now. Did they have any

L: Where we'd meet somebody, meet a train?

E: Yes. How often did they have siding? Was there any . . .

L: Well, there are different places, you see. Sometimes twenty miles, sometimes fifty, sometimes thirty and forty. Different things at that time. The siding was a thing of the past after they got double tracking. We just went into the yards and places like that.

E: Did you have running orders that permitted you to go from one siding to the other?

L: Oh, yes. We had orders like that. We'd have orders all the way through. Then we had time cards, what to do and all. Then the passenger train, we'd have to stand in the clear for the passenger train.

E: Once in a while, you'd have to call back to the dispatcher, right? Did you have telephones or did you have to use the telegraph?

L: No, when we got the diesels and stuff like that and then too in the cab we could talk to them, talk to the operator and the dispatchers too, you see.

E: You had two-way radios?

L: Yes, to talk to the engineer.

E: Now, before you had two-way radios, how did you communicate back to the guy that was giving the orders?

L: Oh, we didn't communicate. Only when we stopped somewhere and called him up at some yard or something. That's the only way we could, you see.

E: You never had to climb the telephone pole?

L: No, might fall off.

E: That's interesting. Do you know any interesting stories that you want to include?

L: No, no, I better not.

END OF INTERVIEW