

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Railroading Project

Railroading Experience

O. H. 310

ELLIE WALDEN

Interviewed

by

Lillian Eminhizer

on

August 4, 1975

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: ELLIE WALDEN

INTERVIEWER: Lillian Eminhizer

SUBJECT: Railroading, Southern Railroad, Job Descriptions

DATE: August 4, 1975

E: This is an interview for Youngstown State University with Ellie Walden at Greenville, South Carolina. This is the Oral History Program and the time is 3:00 on August 4, 1975.

What did you start out as?

W: I started out as the bill clerk.

E: What was your job like? What did you do?

W: I made all the bills for the incoming freight.

E: Were you in the freight office, then?

W: In the freight office.

E: Tell us a little bit about your history and your employment. Did you always work in the freight office?

W: I worked in one office the whole time that I worked. Later, after being bill clerk, I don't remember just exactly how many years it was, I was assistant accountant. After that I was secretary to the chief clerk. That is the job that I continued in until I retired in 1960.

E: Tell me a little bit about your job that you did down there. What was it like?

W: I really enjoyed every minute of my working years and I really loved to work and I loved my work. I

think to really get the most out of anything you have to really love it. And I really did.

E: Most of the railroad people liked their work?

W: I think so. They said it gets in your blood. I'm not sure about that.

I want to tell you a little bit about my background. My father was with the Southern Railway in Atlanta, Georgia, and he was master mechanic. I have to go in there and look on that tray in the dining room, that silver tray. That silver server was presented to him exactly one hundred years ago. I think it's the East Tennessee, Virginia, and Georgia Railway. Later, it became the Southern Railway. That was presented to him, as I said, in 1875. It is one hundred years old this year. My father's health failed and they sent him to Greenville when they built the first Southern Railway roundhouse in Greenville. They called it the roundhouse. It was really round. They ran engines in there to be worked on and repaired. As I said, his health had failed him and they gave him this place. It's not the same as master mechanic, but he was general foreman of the Southern Railway of the shops. He came here when the shops were built new in Greenville. They were called the railroad terminals. He was the first general foreman in the Southern Railway shops here in Greenville. He came here from Atlanta. Then my older sister worked in his office until she married. She worked in my father's office. Then as I said, my father's health failed. He had intended for every one of us to have college education, but after his health failed he was not able to do that.

He said he wanted to give us a trade. We both went to Salisbury or Spencer. I'm not sure whether it was Salisbury or Spencer, North Carolina. I went in as an apprentice machinist for a year. My older brother was general foreman for the Central and Georgia Railroad in Albany, Georgia. They wanted him to go somewhere else as a master mechanic, but he turned it down because he wanted to stay in one place on account of his children. He wanted his children to grow up with their friends. So he never did change positions.

But my brother Fred, he would change every time. He was master mechanic for the Southern Railway in Birmingham, Alabama later in Ludlow, Kentucky, which is right near Cincinnati, Ohio. I think it is the end of the Southern Railroad in that I think it is the end of that terminal of the railroad. I'm

not absolutely sure about that, but I think it is. So I said that is the reason we were allkind of following in my father's footsteps, you might say.

E: Tell me a little bit about this bill clerk position. What did you do as a bill clerk?

W: Well, you make all the bills for the bills It's consigned. It comes in consigned and there are different consignees. We made the bills for all the freight that would come in. That, of course, was delivered to the cashier and the cashier collected the bills. This man that was an accountant, of course, I was just really assisting because I have never considered myself an accountant at all. When I went to business school after my two years in college, I just took secretary's courses, at least shorthand and typing. Then after I was on the assistant accountant's job, I kept this position until I retired in 1960.

E: Did the freight rates go up a lot over the years?

W: Oh, yes. Every time we would get a raise the freight rates would go up automatically like it does today. (Laughter)

E: Did you have any complaints from any of the customers about the freight rate?

W: Well, I probably wouldn't know very much about that. The cashier would know more about that than I would. Of course, when we first started making the bills, they were made quite differently. I think they were about four or five copies, but they were just made on a regular billing machine. Before I left the office I had to learn to use an IBM machine and we made them on an IBM machine. You had to go in and every few days you would have to change a carbon. You had five or six copies which you could make a whole long row of bills. It was mechanical, of course, and you had to learn how to use that, but the IBM man came in our office and taught me how, taught us how; there were several, more than one bill clerk. Towards the last of my work, when they started giving us raises, they would always cut somebody off too. They would distribute that work among several different people. I had to bill some each morning and each afternoon. I asked the agent of the Southern Railway, I said, "Well, now listen, if I'm going to have to do that I would like for you to give me a time that I'll have to do it so that I will know

how much time to spend on my own job." He said, "Well go there at 10:00 in the morning and stay till 12:00 and then stay until 2:00 in the afternoon." That's what I did, even though I was secretary to the chief clerk, I had to do this other job in the last few years that I worked. As I said, I really enjoyed every minute of it and I enjoyed the association with the people that I worked with. I liked them all and got along with them all really well. I was really happy in my work.

E: When you first went to work in 1918, did they have a lot of the office machines or did they come afterwards?

W: They came afterwards.

E: Did you have copying machines and this sort of thing?

W: Yes, just a few years before I left. Our agent said, "Now, Miss Ellie, I want you to go in and the man is here to teach us how to use these machines. I want you to go in and take your instructions from him and then you can tell the others in the office how to use it." That's what I did. I learned to use it. Of course, it's not very much trouble to use a copying machine; anyway, somebody had to learn about it.

E: When you first went to work though, if you wanted more than one copy did you have to write the bill out more than once?

W: No, I wish I could remember. We had a colored man, Salvador Johnson, and he worked down in our record room. We had a room we called records. We had to keep records, I don't know how far back. They were kept up alphabetically and bound in books. This colored man did all this binding. He also had a machine that he made that was sort of like a printing press thing. I don't really know very much about that because I just knew that he operated it. But he had to make copies of certain things on that machine. It was done with indelible ink and it was thin yellow tissue that they did it on. Now I don't know whether that was the cashiers records or what. All the freight officers, they had traveling auditors out of the main office. It used to be out of Washington, D.C., but later it was moved to Atlanta, Georgia. They would come and check so often to see if the cashier's books were in order

and everything like they should be. So I guess that's one reason they kept copies of some of these things. Of course, the records were . . . I really don't know, I remember that they had so many records to be kept up. In addition to being secretary to the chief clerk, I did a lot of general office work.

E: Did certain companies that shipped a lot with you, did they have their own record books that you would enter in and so forth?

W: No, we just kept copies of freight bills. See, that's why they were bound up in these books. This is that colored man that did this. He was really smart for a black person.

E: Then eventually they went to filing cabinets?

W: Yes, I did the files in my office. I did that as part of my general office work. I did the filing too.

E: They had filing cabinets in those early days apart from these bound record books?

W: Yes, kept the correspondence in them. I also made out the payroll. We had at that time, I guess, about sixteen black men working in the warehouse. The cars were delivered to the freight warehouse. I had to make the payroll. We made it twice a month. Before I left there, as I said, when I first went to work there were about sixteen, but they were using these forklift machines and they had two black men in the warehouse where they used to have about sixteen. Towards the last days, the payroll was not a great deal of trouble to make out, but it used to take quite some time.

E: Did you do the payroll for the office group where you were?

W: Yes.

E: How many people worked in the office?

W: I'm trying to think now. I would say about eight or ten, about ten people I guess.

E: You had a good size office. Where was the office located?

W: It was on River Street. It 'has' since been torn down. It was really a landmark because it was quite old. Of course, it's no longer in operation. I think all of the freight is delivered at the old Southern Railway Depot.

E: Today?

W: Yes.

E: When they moved from steam to diesel engines, did the freight move faster?

W: Yes, I'm sure it did. I don't know too much about that, but I think it did. Our office was about a mile or more from the yard office, so they called it the yard office. It was down where the Southern Railway Passenger Station was located. Now the freight, some of it it delivered there. Most of it is delivered to the industries in Greenville to their own siding. They have private siding. They have this containerized freight now that they can just take it off of a flat car and put it on to, I'm not sure, but I think they put it on a truck bed and move it to different people there, their customers.

E: That's very interesting. Did you come in contact with any of the other employees besides the freight people?

W: Not very often. Very seldom. I knew the ones down in the yard office. Most of them I knew. A lot of the men that ran on the railroad that were engineers and like that, I knew them, but a lot of them I didn't know because I didn't come in contact with them.

E: Do you remember any of the names of some of the people that you worked with? Who was the auditor?

W: Well, the agent of the Southern Railway is the one that was at the freight office. I first went to work for Mr. Gillespie, who has since passed away. Then following Mr. Gillespie was Mr. Frank Hammond, and he went from here to Birmingham, Alabama. He has since passed away also. I worked for Mr. Ralsh; he has passed away. Mr. Newsome, I think Mr. Newsome is the present agent. He was really young when he came to the Southern Railway.

E: They didn't change freight agents very often then?

W: No, generally they stayed as long as they lived. I want to say that there are three of them. Well, one of them did leave to go to Charleston. It was really a promotion. It was a larger place.

E: With the freight men, they didn't move around much?

W: No, not very much. Well, the ones in the office did because we had a seniority system. For instance, if your job was cut off, you had the privilege of rolling a younger employee. If you were capable of holding or qualified to hold the position that you had, you could roll that person. They still have that, I think.

E: That's an interesting term, rolling. Some of the railroads have other terms they used. Did this term "rolling" apply out on the main line and the station?

W: Yes, everywhere.

E: In the freight office at one time you said you had sixteen black men that worked. Now did they have a supervisor or was it one of them?

W: Yes, a warehouse foreman. He had charge of the warehouse. The agent had charge over all of it, really, over all the clerks, the warehouse, the warehouse agents, over everyone. Of course, the main position in the office would be the chief clerk, the rate clerk, and the cotton clerk and the warehouse clerk. Then there were car clerks and bill clerks. The cashier, of course, was one of those main positions too. Then, of course, they had a janitor.

E: They had a cotton clerk?

W: Oh yes.

E: Did they handle, what, all of the freight?

W: They handled nothing but cotton from the cotton warehouse at Greenville. See, Greenville is the textile center in the south. So there was quite a lot of cotton shipped in and out of Greenville. There are a lot of cotton warehouses in Greenville.

E: That's interesting that they would just have a clerk for that. Do they still have the position today?

W: Well, I'm not sure. I used to go to the office after I retired as long as it was uptown. The freight office

was almost up near the center of town. Every time I would go uptown, which I don't do very much anymore on account of these shopping centers, I would go to the freight office. Since they moved down to the old passenger station, they moved the freight office down there and I just don't go down there anymore.

E: It's out of your way. At the time that you retired, did they still retain the cotton clerk?

W: Yes, when I retired they still had the cotton clerk.

E: Did you have any interesting experiences with any of the employees?

W: No, I don't guess so, not particularly.

E: I always have to ask that question. (Laughter)

W: I can't tell about all of them. I don't mean that there is anything wrong. I went with one of the chief clerks for a long, long time. He died. He was promoted to assistant agent over in Spartanburg and he died while he was over there.

E: What time did you go to work in the morning?

W: Eight o'clock and we worked until five, with an hour for lunch. When I first started to work, we just got off every other Saturday. That was the reason there were about four bill clerks. Two would get off one Saturday and two the next.

We were members of a union, Brotherhood of Railway and Steamship Clerks. I think it's airline clerks now, I'm not sure. They're all in the same union. They started getting more things for us. Like, we finally got every Saturday off. At the last, I was getting every Saturday off, but I didn't when I first started to work. When I first started to work, I didn't even get any vacation. I'd just take a vacation and lose that week's pay. Now, I think they have about five weeks vacation depending on the number of years that you've been with them. If you've been there with them long enough, you would get about five weeks during the year. When I retired we were getting two weeks vacation with pay.

E: What kind of salary did they pay when you first started?

- W: When I first started to work--now this seems funny now with the present salary--everybody thought I was getting a fabulous salary. I went there for \$75 a month, that was a fabulous salary. When I left, I was getting about \$100 a week to take-home pay.
- E: That's quite a bit of improvement. (Laughter)
- W: Now, I guess they are getting almost double that, I don't know. I'm not sure about that. They are getting a lot more than I got when I retired in 1960, but everything, living expenses were so much more reasonable than that. You had just about as much as you have now with making more money.
- E: That's true.
- W: Things were not so high.
- E: Did you ever have any problems with any of the auditors that came through?
- W: No, I didn't personally. The cashier may have had a few, but they would be the main ones because they would check those books.
- E: You were kind of in a good position, you didn't have to take any of that stuff.
- W: No. As I said, the longer I worked, the more work I had to do. The last few years of my life, I was under so much pressure because they kept adding work to your job. When they cut somebody off, they would distribute that work throughout the office and you just have a little bit more to do than you had been doing.
- E: Tell me about the warehouse clerk, what did he do?
- W: Well, the warehouse clerk had charge of all the black employees that loaded and unloaded freight. They kept their own little time book and would hand it over to me. The warehouse kept it there on all black employees because they were the ones that unloaded freight and loaded freight.
- E: Each employee had a time book?
- W: No, just the warehouse clerk.

E: You mentioned the car clerk. What did the car clerk do?

W: The car clerk kept the record of all the cars that came into Greenville and the numbers. As I said, I don't know too much about it because I never worked that job myself. They would know where to place them for the different industries. They would be switched out to their plants by the yardmen. The yard engineers would switch them to the plant. Of course, he would give the instructions where to place the different cars. Then different industries would call in and say that they wanted a car placed at their plant to be loaded and he would see that that was done. He had to keep a record of all that, of course.

E: Did he have anything to do with the making up of the trains?

W: No, I don't think, just the moving of the cars in the yards.

E: Just moving of the cars in the industry. You had a rate clerk, what did he do?

W: For instance, if someone would say they wanted to make a shipment and according to what the shipment consisted of, or if they had a rate book to look in to see how much the rate on a certain commodity might be, then they would know how many pounds they were shipping and figure the rate in that way. We had an excellent rate clerk. He was really good. He would put the rate on all outgoing freight.

E: We talked about the cotton clerk and his position.

W: He was a rate clerk for cotton. Cotton is very complicated. You don't realize it, but a cotton clerk has to know an awful lot on account of transit cotton. It seems that I don't know enough about that to talk to you about it. It is transit cotton and it could come to one concern and they can ship it on to somebody else. You have to know those rates are all together different from the other rates. I don't know too much about it because I never worked on that job in my life. I didn't know a thing about it.

E: Then the cashier took care of . . .

W: All the incoming and outgoing freight.

E: The cashier?

W: The incoming freight. I said the outgoing, but I think it's the incoming freight. Those bills were made by bill clerks and handed over to the cashier and the cashier collected them.

E: You mentioned earlier, what about the claim clerk?

W: That's for damaged freight. Any freight that was damaged people could put in a claim for. Of course, they were paid so much per pound for the damage that was done to the freight.

E: Was that a difficult position to hold?

W: Well, it was one of the rather important positions. I'll tell you, I forgot when we talked about the warehouse foreman, they had check clerks that checked the freight in and out of the cars. Now those jobs were not considered so important and neither was the bill clerk considered too important. You had to be able to type well and do things like that, and fast too, because they wanted you to work fast. The more important jobs, I would say, would be the rate clerk and the cotton clerk and the cashier and the accountant to the chief clerk. The accountant had a little better job than the bill clerk or the check clerks that checked the freight in and out of the cars.

E: What was the job of the secretary to the chief clerk?

W: Well, you just had to take all dictation and write the letters. I wrote the letters from the chief clerk and agent too. I took dictation from both of them. The agent didn't write too many letters because the chief clerk got most of that work. Occasionally the agent would give you a letter, but not very often.

E: Were most of these positions held by men?

W: Yes, most of them were. All the rate clerks and the ones that I mentioned were most important. We had lady bill clerks and the secretary to the chief clerk. That was all the women I think we had. We've had about four or five women down there at one time on the bill clerk job and other jobs, too.

E: Did you just work the one shift? Did any of these clerks work around the clock?

W: No, they all worked eight to five.

E: Even in 1918 when you first went to work?

W: Oh, I'll take that back, because during the war and time like that we worked a lot of overtime. Of course, you got time and a half overtime. We had to do a lot of that during rush periods, like during both of the wars. I was there during World War I and II both. We really had to work. In World War I especially, there were so many of the boys that had gone into the service that the ones that were left really had to work. Then during World War II, there was so much freight. It was war material I guess, a lot of it.

E: Did they employ a special clerk for the war material?

W No.

E: Did they employ extra clerks during the war?

W: I think perhaps they did have more than usual because the work was very heavy. Of course, our work was very heavy until trucks. They came along later and that took a lot of our business away from us. We didn't have nearly as much as we once had.

E: What about this piggyback business now?

W: Well, that's what I was telling you about, that containerized freight. That's piggyback, isn't it? I think it is. I think that is what they called piggyback. They were just getting that in. It had just been in a short while when I retired.

E: I wondered on those freight bills if you had to have an itemized amount or if you just transported the containment?

W: It's an itemized amount. That's what made them hard to make. For instance, like Woolworth, they had so many of this article and so many of this article and every one of them was a different weight and everyone of them was a different rate. Of course, then you had to put the amount opposite each end of the total down at the bottom. They had a . . . what do you call it that comes with the freight? I've forgotten the name of it.

E: A waybill?

W: A waybill that comes with the freight, that's where they get this information from. Then our rate clerk would check it, I think, to see if it was correct.

E: That's interesting. When these companies would order a car to put freight in, did you just take the company's word that there was so much freight in that car, or did you have any way of checking?

W: I really don't know because I wasn't a car clerk. I never worked that position so I really don't know.

E: This tape was made by Lillian Eminhizer. Miss Walden worked at the Greenville, South Carolina, office during her lifetime of service for the Southern Railway.

END OF INTERVIEW