Donald Bliss (DB) Interview Transcript

DB: I had met some fellas that worked in the Postal Service and with the Railway Mail Service, and it sounded like a good opportunity. And so I took the examination and passed and got on. And it was just a step above, or several steps above what I was doing beforehand, and it just, a good paying job, had benefits to it, and retirement, and it was just, it was more of a position than a job, and it was a fun job, I say fun. The people you worked with were all really good people to work with and the camaraderie, and you know we had our work cut out for us, and we had plenty to do and, if I would’ve, if the Railway Mail Service would have continued, 1967 when they started taking the trains off en mass, I went to the Post Office and I was never happy with the Post Office, at the Post Office because it was, you had no, when you worked in Railway Mail you had connections to get mail home, and you had the feeling that you were actually doing something. You know, that you were getting people’s mail home to them. Where the Post Office, it was just, a ho-hum place, just a place to go put in eight hours. So that’s, and you know the benefits, that’s the reason that I took the examination and got in there. And it was a really enjoyable job. There was a lot of work to it, a lot of studying, but you had the feeling that you were doing something worthwhile.

INTERVIEWER: What jobs did you have on the trains?

DB: Well, I had several different jobs because I changed, we would have what they called reorganizations every year or so, and you could bid on different jobs according to your seniority. And I did all sorts of jobs, letter clerk, pouch-racker, paper clerk, and worked all sorts of mail, registered mail, and just everything the Post Office had, you know, the Post Office had, we did on the road and we were just, we were a post office on wheels.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned in your letter that you were a sub before you became a regular. Can you talk to me a little bit about the difference between being a sub and a regular?

DB: Well, what a substitute, when you started out and you got appointed to the Railway Mail, you went out, you were a substitute clerk. Which meant that you didn’t have any regular job, you were guaranteed no hours, but any time there was, a man was on vacation or called in sick or something you could be called out and you worked by the telephone and, or by the office would send you orders from the Chicago office to us to report to the depot, the train at a certain time to go to work and you would work, well depending on if there was a man on vacation, you took his job and you would work the amount of trips that he worked. Then you’d go home and then wait for another call to get called out again. Fortunately I was, when I went to work and was subbing, I didn’t have much home time. I was kept pretty busy, which I liked. And so then after two years I got appointed regular, which meant I had a regular job on a certain train and certain days that I would work. Like I, if I had, I bid of letter case one way across the road from Chicago to Omaha I’d work letter cases, or then I would bid a job coming back the other way from Omaha to Chicago and possibly work the pouch rack, which, this was the mail that came in and had to be sorted out and bundles and so forth and there was always mail that we had to work then, too. And so you’d have a job as a pouch-racker, and then you’d have jobs that were paper clerks so you worked newspapers. And then the letter cases, so you had all kinds of different jobs in there and each man, each man on the train was appointed, was assigned to a certain job. And that was his job. Now if I got overloaded with mail I would get help when somebody else would get out, or you know get caught up with their mail, then they’d step over and help the guy that had more mail. And you just would run and then of course you could do any job in the car as far as that goes. But you had your own assignment and then you had to carry heavier equipment for that assignment. So...

INTERVIEWER: I’m also trying to get a kind of idea of what the typical day would be for someone working for the Railway Mail Service, like, you know, when you’d work up, when you’d go to the station, what would you wear, what would you eat, the kind of hours you worked... could you maybe describe that for a little bit for me?

DB: Okay, now, one job that I had, I went to work at, if I remember right in Chicago, on one train I’d go to work, I believe, it was 6:30 in the morning I believe. And we would not get to Omaha until 9:00 at night. Now we would work into Chicago at the depot, well the mail cars would be set into the Post Office track down there and then the mail, and the mail handlers from the post office would bring mail down to us. Well we would set there and work mail from, we’d go to work and we’d have to dress a car, we’d have to hang all the pouches, and the sacks, and everything, and then we wouldn’t leave Chicago until 11 o’clock in the morning and we would be working mail in the car from 6:30 until 11 o’clock and then leave to go to Omaha and we would get there at 9 o’clock in the evening. And, as far as eating, we’d, we would get lunches made in Chicago, or a lot of times when I was coming through Burlington, here, my wife would come down to the depot and bring a lunch down to me. And she always had enough food for several other people too, you know, and then would go, get out to Omaha the next day we would head back to Chicago and we’d get a lunch made out there, we had a little kind of a delicatessen we’d go
and have sandwiches made, and get a lunch for going back, and as far as clothes, we just wore regular street
clothes. We had no uniforms, no nothing, and we just wore, just regular street clothes. Now, it was a dirty job, so
we had, we took work clothes with us and wore, you know, not regular work clothes to work we’d wear ‘em to the
train and then we’d, when we got on the mail car we changed clothes and put on our regular work clothes because
they would get dirty during the day because all the dust coming up through there, you know.
INTERVIEWER: Do you remember where you stay between shifts? Were there any places that you would stay
regularly?
DB: Yes. We had a motel in Chicago, most of us stayed at Fort Durburn hotel which was an old hotel over there,
and they had, they had, during the Depression years when jobs were hard the Railway Mail clerks, a lot of ‘em,
most of ‘em stayed at the Fort Durburn and they’d give ‘em good rates, and they always gave us good rates up
until the time we were, the trains were taken off and of course that hotel is gone now, but, and, we’d, we stayed in
cheaper hotels because we, well we got expense money, but were like, where I lived I had to have a motel at both
Chicago and Omaha for a couple of nights and so, you know we couldn’t, we didn’t stay in any Holiday Inn’s
[laughs] and we just stayed in just a place where we had clean rooms and clean sheets and so forth.
INTERVIEWER: Was it a lifestyle that was particular difficult to get used to?
DB: Was it what?
INTERVIEWER: Like difficult to get used to, like that kind of lifestyle?
DB: Well, yes and no. You just, you know you were working all hours, you had a regular job, you had jobs where
you’d work nights and work in days and some had, some you’d run, well like, when I went west out of Chicago it
was a day job, and starting at 6:30 in the morning until 9 o’clock at night, and then coming back the next day, we
would leave Omaha in the evening and, it’d be an all night run then to Chicago. We’d go to work at, 6 o’clock, 5, 6
o’clock in the evening in Omaha and we’d get to Chicago at 4 o’clock in the morning. Then we’d walk down to the
hotel and go to bed or else maybe might have to wait around, maybe I ended my tour there because I would be
working, well like, like four days and then off 8 days and I would work, oh, 8 days and be off 6, you know just
different, different times like that, different schedules, and so we just, you just got used to it, you just, you know,
and you worked every day of the year. If you were assigned, if your case run on a holiday, you were on the train
you didn’t get the holiday off. And no matter what day it was. Christmas, all of ‘em. So, that made it kind of rough
sometimes because you’d be gone Christmas time, but it was just part of the job and you just had to do it.
INTERVIEWER: Would you do anything special with the crew for a holiday like Christmas, or was it just pretty much
business as usual?
DB: With the crews? No, no. No, we’d just all go our own way, we’d go out if we were out there on a holiday and
well we’d get together and go eat together, you know, and like that and, oh we may, may go to a ball game if we’re
in Chicago, we’d go up and have a, the day off and go up to the ballgames and yes, we would get together like that.
And so we all worked together and everybody got along, along good. There was a real closeness to people, and you
know, and still, after not, not being on the Railway Mail since 1967, every year we have a get-together with the
guys that we worked, that worked together there, and we have a reunion every year. And have had, for thirty-
seven years. This is something you don’t find in a factory job at home, you know, or whatever.
INTERVIEWER: Was there anything you don’t like about the job?
DB: Not really. Not really. A lot of fellas didn’t like to study, but that was just part of the job, and what I mean by
studying, was that you had to know how to get the mail home to every town in the state, and you had to take
examinations where you had to go in and learn the state and how they got their mail and you’d go in, oh, probably
twice a year, sometimes more often depending on the size of the state, and you’d have to go in and they would
give you a hundred, hundred cards out of, with the towns on them, in that state, and you had to sort ‘em in a little,
a little small letter case, just like a letter case in the Post Office, pigeon holes, and you had 8 minutes to do that.
And if you, if you missed more than, well when I first started if you missed more than 3 cards you flunked the
examination. So you had to have a 97% efficiency. And, so, but no, there was really no aspect of that job that I
didn’t like. Like I said, it was a position to me.
INTERVIEWER: Did you ever run into any dangerous situations on the job?
DB: Not really dangerous situations, but I was never, never on a train that derailed, and never had any close calls. I
was on trains where we had, where we hit cars and hit people and all but we were not directly involved. No, and
the danger was never, never any danger crossed our minds, and even when we went to the door to, if we went
had to go to the door and do local, which was, by throwing mail out the door or catching mail on the fly, you would
go to the door and no matter how fast you were going, all you had was just a bar across the door between you and space. But, I never, I never considered that dangerous. They would today, but believe me... yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember transporting anything unusual?

DB: OH yes, yes. I remember, yes. We had a lot of, we’d have new money coming out of the Denver mint going to Chicago. We would have any kind of, and we had payroll for military bases, we just had all kinds of stuff like that, and it was just, just part of the job. You know, it was, we, we took it serious, but yet, you know, it wasn’t really concerned about anything happening. If something would happen or if something could have happened we would have been half-way prepared. We all, we kept the doors closed when we were going down the road, and normally kept the doors, well we had to have the doors open when we stopped at the station to pick up more mail, or dispatch, or get the mail out to the mail handlers outside. So, and then, we were wide open to the public but you know we, nobody’d ever come around the cars.

INTERVIEWER: I’m also looking for any stories you might have; if there was something particularly funny that ever happened, or you know your proudest moment, just any memories you have in particular.

DB: Well, about one of the, about the biggest thing that ever happened that I remember was in 1965 when the Mississippi River was flooded here, and I remember going to work on, and I don’t know why I remember this, but it was on a Tuesday evening when I went to work in Omaha, and we were to go and get in Chicago Wednesday morning at 4 o’clock. Well, when we got to Chicago finally, we left Tuesday night, and we didn’t get into Chicago until Thursday morning and we had to go get something to eat and get a lunch packed and get back to leave by 11 o’clock to head back to, back to Omaha, and that was on Thursday morning and we didn’t get out there, out to Omaha then until Friday at, Friday, I think it was Friday around noon when we got there. And that was on continuous time from Tuesday night, Tuesday evening, until Friday, noon. And, but we had to do a lot of detouring. So, and that was one of the biggest things that I have, had happen, you know, I never, never knew of anything that was, that was ever really exciting, I was never on a derailment, I was never, I knew fellas on the train when they hit grain trucks and that, and they would get jarred around a little bit, but I was never in anything like that. I kinda had, kind of a, not dull life, but just, just stayed out of the way.