Donald Bresland (DB) Interview Transcript

DB: I just got out of the service in 1946 and then I… there wasn’t too much around, and Railway Mail came up, and I went and took the exam and it, well I can say that the headquarters was in White Rivers and I lived in Bellis Falls and I went up and took the test and passed the test and then was appointed a substitute Railway Mail clerk.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have family that worked with the Post Office Department at all or were you the first one?

DB: No, I was the first one.

INTERVIEWER: I would like to talk a little bit about your workplace—what size RPO car did you work on?

DB: Well I worked on what they called a Newport and Springfield, Newport, Vermont and, usually they’d head out of Springfield, Mass. and go to Newport, Vermont. Well, they had different trains, you had day trains, and night trains, and I guess they head out of Springfield Mass. on a night train and go to Newport, Vermont, stop all along the way, at stations all along the way, and stay overnight and get into Newport, Vermont in the morning and sleep all day, and head back down to Springfield, Mass. at night. And I worked on the Boston… St. Albans and Boston, and that was from Boston to Montreal. Used to head out of Boston and go all night there and get into Montreal in the morning and sleep all day and then go to work that night and head back to Boston again. And I was a substitute; I had to fill in for regular clerks that took off. Regular clerks that took off usually worked 6 days and had 8 days off but I had to work whenever they were off, most of the time it was every day or like that, or maybe get one or two days off a week but not very often. And I worked on what they call the Concord and Claremont RPOs, it was a small line, it was a one man job. You first get on there you didn’t know… where the next station was, anything like that. You had to be working all the time and watching out for the next stations and when you slowed down you’d know you were coming to the station. So a lot of those places there you didn’t stop, you had what they call a catch and a throw. You take a mail bag and throw one off, and raise the arm on the RPO and then catch the mail bag that the post office put up there and I worked on the St. Johnsbury and Lamoille County, and I worked from Burlington, Vermont to Albany, New York. And, let’s see… at that time there was, oh God there was, 1950s there was all kinds of trains running there, the odd numbers went one way and the even numbers went the other way. And, you didn’t, usually assigned to a week at a time on a job, didn’t know what job it was going to be or like that, they’d send you orders and you’d have to report for… what’s it called, 7-12 and 7-11, the odd numbers would be going one way and the even numbers would be going the other way, and 79 and 78… 79 would head up, and up to Newport and 78 would head out of Newport the next day, so… but we always had a great crew that worked together. I mean, nobody got caught up ahead of anybody else and when the crew was caught up the whole crew was caught up, you’d have to wait ‘til you could get to the next station to pick up more mail to work. And sometimes, what train you were, you headed out of Boston on the paper train that, the… just before you left the station the armed guards would pull up with money that you would have to carry from one station to the next station. You’d get to the first station and there’d be cops there with shot guns, sawed off shot guns and machine guns and like that and you’d put the money off and go to the next station and the same thing would be there, like that and you were equipped with a Smith and Weston snub-nosed 38 yourself, you always had to carry that with you. And let’s see, anything else?

INTERVIEWER: Um, I’ve just a few, like, specific questions, what size RPO car did you work on?

DB: Well, I can’t remember if they were 80 or 90 feet, there, and well they had 30 footers… I worked on all sizes. Some of them you’d have 7 or 8 men on, you’d have a full car, a full Railway Mail car, and other times you’d have just 2 men on and you’d have a 15 foot car or a 30 foot car.

INTERVIEWER: Was it a lifestyle that was particularly difficult to adjust to?

DB: Oh yeah, like I say, usually, you didn’t sleep in the best of places. A lot of times we’d… you’d get into Springfield, Mass. and you’d have a little layover for an hour, two hours, three hours, and you’d go in the station, there, and lay down on a bench and it happened to be in the middle of the night you had to put your Railway Mail badge on when you were laying down because if you didn’t, the cops would come along and whack you on the bottom of the feet, and tell you to get moving, they thought you were a bum or like that. You dressed in your work clothes, and all that, and by dressed up, I mean just a Railway Mail badge and like that. And, it was a hard life to get used to but once you got used to it, it was good and like I say the people that had regular jobs worked 6 days and had 8 days off, so that was good, they had a whole week off, and your hours were 48 minute hour because you had to do a lot of studying at home, and you’d have to have different states, you’d have to have every…you’d have little cards that you’d study on, and on the front of them would be the town and on the back of it, you’d turn it over and it would tell you which sectional center it went to and like that. You’d have to know all those, which...
all of them towns, they had their own post offices but they were dispatched to sectional centers and they had which sectional center it was. And when you took a test you’d have to take... I can’t remember when the tests were... every three months or ever six months but you’d have to go to the head office and take a test, and they’d pick up 100 cards out of the whole state. You didn’t know what 100 cards it was, and you had to get a 97 or you’d have to take the test over again. And, like I say, some of them had, some of the states were so big that they were divided into A, B, and C and probably to come back was the same way. You really had to know everything, absolutely every little town and what they called “nixies” there too, they weren’t post offices but they were little towns that, you had to know which town that mail would go to, and I say it was a lot of studying to be done at home.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned that you worked with some really good guys; did you have any really good friends in the RMS or stories about people you worked with?
DB: The guys I worked with? Oh they were all a great bunch of guys, I mean they were, like I say it was... each, they had regular crews on each train and you would fill in, and you worked on those trains all the time. Well not all the time, but once this week and once next week, but you always knew which crew you were going to work with. They were all a great bunch of guys. Everybody worked like the dickens, and like I say, nobody was sitting down and somebody else was working. Everybody was... the hands were going all the time and you just throw on mail, or like that.

INTERVIEWER: Did anything very unusual ever happen? Or were your runs always very routine?
DB: Oh no, like I say... you know, one time when, on what they call a 7-12 we were going to Northampton, Mass, and not to Northampton, Mass but outside of Northampton, Mass, and there was a cross in there, and the train hit a car trying to beat the train, and flipped over and went all over the sides of the mail car and all that flying glass came in and like that, you didn’t get cut or anything they had mesh screens inside and the glass was fine but you had to, you were delayed for quite a while until the police investigated the accident, held the train up for that much longer. A lot of places and well, in Westminster, Vermont on the trains we used to pick up chickens, baby chicks, they used to come over from Hubbard Farms in Walpole, New Hampshire, they’d put ’em on and all the time from the time the chicks were put on till the time you get off the train that’s all you could hear was the little chicks chirping all the time, there. A whole bunch of boxes making a heck of a lot of noise, there. Like I say, everybody, they were all a great bunch of guys to work for, I never worked for, worked for the post office, but after that, after I worked there I transferred into the post office and there were a good bunch of guys there but like I say there were nothing like the guys that worked in the Railway Mail. They were a team, and it didn’t matter which Railway Mail you got on they were all the same. They knew what they had to do, and like that, so...

INTERVIEWER: Did you have family at the time when you worked for the RMS?
DB: Yes, yes I did, I had a wife.

INTERVIEWER: Was it very hard for her, when you would leave?
DB: Yes, yes yes like I say we lived in Bellis Falls and you’d go through there, like I say, different times of the day... which train you were on and a lot of times you didn’t know what time the train was coming and come down to the station and bring you lunch or at eleven o’clock at night or whatever time the train was going through, and you were away a lot. When you were a substitute you’d get home on a Friday night or a Saturday night and have to leave on a Sunday again. It didn’t give you a heck of a lot of time with your family, and a lot of times you were living in Bellis Falls and the trains didn’t start out of Bellis Falls you’d have to go from Bellis Falls to Springfield, Mass. or Boston or like that, or what they called dead-heading you had a railway pass, a railway free pass on the railway and you wouldn’t have to pay but you’d have to dead-head from Bellis Falls to wherever you were going, where the train started out of, where your job started out of and spend two or three hours of what they called dead-heading and that took up a lot of time, you had to get to work but trains were the only way to do it. Most of the time you’d probably lay down and stretch out and put your coat on one of the arms and sleep all the way. You had to catch up on your sleep.