Robert Henry Hammond Interview Transcript

Robert Hammond: My name is Robert Henry Hammond. I went to work for the Postal Transportation Service, Railway Mail Service in 1956, October 1956, I believe it was. I worked in the PTS Terminal in Atlanta, Georgia and then the transfer office there at the -- well, as a substitute in both transfer offices. And then I became a regular at the airmail facility and then I became a regular at home in Charlotte-Atlanta and let’s see it was on March of 1957. I was out there until July of 1962. I actually left the service and I came back, in, let’s see, it was like March of ’64 and stayed up on the road as a sub until the following January and then went back in to the airmail facility. So I had about I guess a total of six years on the trains. I was on the Charlotte-Atlanta as a regular between ’57 and ’62.

INTERVIEWER: What rail lines did you work with and which locations did you travel between?
Robert Hammond: Charlotte and Atlanta was when I was regular on and that ran between Charlotte, North Carolina and Atlanta, Georgia. We also overlapped with the north end to Salisbury, North Carolina, sometimes. That’s a southern railroad. As a substitute, I ran on that one as well as Nashville-Atlanta, going to Nashville and Hamilton-Atlanta going to Hamilton and Knoxville-Atlanta going to Knoxville, and Chattanooga-Atlanta going to Chattanooga. Most of those are southern. There’s one it was [indiscernible] I think.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. And just to clarify that you did serve as an RPO clerk for approximately six years, you said from 1957 to about 1962, correct?
Robert Hammond: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

Robert Hammond: Yeah, and then also in -- yeah, in ‘64.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, yeah. Why did you want to become a Post Office clerk?
Robert Hammond: Oh, I just needed a job, you know.

INTERVIEWER: Was there anything that appealed to you about the job?
Robert Hammond: Well, you mean, after I got on it?

INTERVIEWER: Just, you know, the reasons for picking the RPO.
Robert Hammond: Well, I think at the time that I went to work I was looking for a job and that one happened to be available and I passed the test and was appointed and then I found out more about it right, and, yes, I wanted to go on the train from the terminal position that I was inducted in or reported to you or whatever have ya, because that seemed a little bit more exciting or whatever, travel or what can you say?

INTERVIEWER: All right. What positions did you have on the railcars?
Robert Hammond: Well, you bid on various jobs and so you worked the various ones. I worked on pouch racks, I worked on paper racks, I worked on letters, I worked on registers at one time or another, so I guess the most time I probably spent on paper racks which is where you distributed newspapers and usually did the local, you know, the exchanges and one thing or another.

INTERVIEWER: All right. You know what I’m talking about?
Robert Hammond: I do.

INTERVIEWER: I do.

Robert Hammond: Okay.

INTERVIEWER: Could you describe a typical day on the railcar?
Robert Hammond: Okay. I take a shuttle down at 34. As an example, we went to work at 6:00 a.m. in advanced time in Atlanta. We had three hours of advanced time from six until nine, during which time we were receiving mails from incoming trains. Of course, the first thing we did when we got there is hang all the racks, the pouch racks and the paper racks and the letter clerks then run their headers into the cases and whatever have you and then we begin receiving mail and begin to distribute it. We usually left Atlanta at 9:00 a.m. and we had various stops up the road. I can tell you right now how many or how many exchanges. I could probably name them off still but I don’t know that you want to sit there and count. But let’s say we had I think five between Atlanta and Gainesville, the exchanges and one stop at Buford and then we had several stops like [indiscernible] and then Dacula and then we got into South Carolina and we went maybe five more to Greenville and about seven or eight to Spartanburg and three more to the North Carolina line and maybe eight to ten into Charlotte, okay. So, you know, it was a long day, very hot, the mail -- well, I say that depends on the time of the year, of course. The mail cars had no air-conditioning and, you run with four doors open usually in the summertime. Originally, when I went out there, there were no gates or anything. Later on they put gates in the doorways to keep mail from falling out because we had a limited amount of space and it was quite common to stack mail at the door.
Very little of it ever fell out by the way, but there were some and so at some point and I’m talking about not on our line necessarily but throughout the system. Eventually, they put gates, it came down and you could stack against those. Help me out. What else do you want to know?
INTERVIEWER: Okay. Did you like any of the positions you occupied or did you dislike any of them, and if so, why or why not?
Robert Hammond: Well, I guess to a certain extent you endured all of it but you enjoyed a lot of it, too, okay. There was a certain camaraderie and a certain team type of situation where you help one another out to get work up in between stations which didn’t happen too much on our line because we were what you call a trunk line. We were catching mail all the way from California going north and all the way from the Maine coming south. We had a lot of mail but on some of the smaller lines I get caught up quite frequently and we would get caught up if we, let’s say missed a major connection somewhere because of a late train or whatever have you. But, yeah, there was a certain camaraderie, there was a certain amount of foolishness which was carried on as well. You know, having a real joke on one another or whatever have you. But, at any rate, help me out here. What else you want to know?
INTERVIEWER: What type of car did you work on?
Robert Hammond: Sixty-foot. I have worked on 30s as well but 60-foot most of the time.
INTERVIEWER: Okay. And when you worked on the railways, what was your starting salary?
Robert Hammond: Oh, gracious. I do know my starting salary in the PTS which was a regular I mean, like 39-10 a year but I think when I went on the road it was like 42-something, $4,200-some a year. Of course, this was in 1957 when I went on the road, I think. Yeah, that’s right.
INTERVIEWER: Okay. So for the railway you don’t remember what your salary was?
Robert Hammond: That’s what I’m saying, about 4,200, somewhere along there, yeah.
INTERVIEWER: All right.
Robert Hammond: Somewhere in that neighborhood, yeah.
INTERVIEWER: Okay. Do you remember your ending salary?
Robert Hammond: I’m going to guess and say probably 62 or something like that, somewhere along in there.
INTERVIEWER: Okay. For the positions that you occupied, do you think that this pay was fair?
Robert Hammond: For that time, yes. For, you know, the date and time, yeah.
INTERVIEWER: Okay. What did you typically carry with you in your grip while you were on trips?
Robert Hammond: Oh, just an extra change of clothes plus I had labels, maybe a pair work gloves or thumbstalls. Do you know what that is?
INTERVIEWER: I do not.
Robert Hammond: A ring knife, you know, to cut twine with and labels would be two different kinds. There’d be labels for letters which are like pieces of paper that you put on top of a letter package, and labels for sacks which are, you know, go into the holder. Right now, I can’t think of anything else. If I happened to be running in-charge which I did sometimes, I might have the post mark and things like that. I had a gun, you know, revolver.
INTERVIEWER: Okay. What was the longest trip you ever worked?
Robert Hammond: I guess the longest was one where we had a train breakdown and we stayed in Buford, Georgia all day long and then we were hauled back to Inman Yard and then we jumped on a deadhead all the way to Charlotte and caught the train coming back so that we never really, really, really stopped. We were working all the time but, yeah. So it was like, maybe, what, 24 to 28 hours something like that. But I wouldn’t really call it a trip. Normally a trip would be, let’s see, some of them would run from, say, nine o’clock at night to eight the next morning and then eight the next night to six or so the next morning or something like that. I mean, that -- some of them that I ran on but --
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INTERVIEWER: Okay.
Robert Hammond: There are a lot of lines that had much longer trips than ours because we were just going on a shorter distance, you know. Okay?
INTERVIEWER: Okay. Did you have a family while working as an RPO clerk?
Robert Hammond: Yes, a wife and a baby.
INTERVIEWER: How did you cope with leaving your family behind on this trip?
Robert Hammond: Well, we weren’t really gone that long. I mean we were gone a day and a night and then back the next day and then another day and a night, back the next day and then get four days off. So it was like a four
Robert Hammond: Oh, very well. My wife is very resilient anyway. That was never a problem.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Do you keep in touch with any of the former clerks? If so, what are their names and if you have their contact information we would be more than happy to receive that as well?

Robert Hammond: No, I don’t. Almost everyone that I worked with out there is dead today. I imagine there might be one or two but I don’t know who they are even. I’d get up until the late ’80s I went -- I continued in the Postal Service and I was posted to the D.C. area at that time and I kind of lost touch with anybody here in the Atlanta area. But I was one of the younger clerks ever to be on that line, I guess. I went out there when I was like 22 years old. Most of them were World War II people or beyond, so I don’t really know if they’re still living.

INTERVIEWER: All right. Did the post office ever issue you anything either for your safety or for the position you occupied?

Robert Hammond: We had a revolver and we had -- I guess other than that a pair of gloves, right. I don’t even know if they -- no, they didn’t give you those. You had to buy them, buy them in. But the revolver was to protect the mail not to protect yourself.

INTERVIEWER: Why to protect the mail and not yourself?

Robert Hammond: Well, because I think the last freight train robbery was somewhere in about 1939 or somewhere along there but that was the purpose of the revolver was to protect the mail.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Were there ever times of danger while on the railway? If so, please explain.

Robert Hammond: Yeah, I got caught at a catcher crane one day at Suwanee, Georgia coming southbound. So on 37 we were running probably a little bit too fast. If I had to guess, I’d say he was clocking close to 75 or 80 or more and the train was somewhat rocking and when he lifted the catcher arm it caught the crane. You understand? Okay. So in other words, it caught the pole and dragged it up side the train and of course you just tore it all loose in the ground and the metal pole and everything just disintegrated more or less. It completely strained the catcher arm. And, yeah, that’s a dangerous situation but I wasn’t hurt and it all happened so fast I didn’t even hardly know it.

I was also on a fire [indiscernible] 34 going north in the middle of winter. The train crew had -- or I mean, the ground crew, you know that services the trains in the Atlanta terminal station there, they had taken blow torches and tried to unfreeze our pipes which they did but they started a smoldering fire in the boards underneath the car. The fire burst through the floor at Chicopee, Georgia which is right south of Gainesville. And we pulled the emergency cord, stopped the train, got off, managed to save some like 17 pouches for New York City, something like that, the rest of them was all burned up. In fact, there was significant amount of coin and money that was burned up because it was at that time located in the middle of the car as registers to be put off at Camilla, Georgia. It was a molten melted mass from what I understand from the inspectors when they talked to us about the fire later.

Of course, they wanted to know why we didn’t rescue it but we couldn’t. The car was on fire; we managed to save what we did because it was on one end and we opened the end of the car, to cut it loose from the train. I guess there was some danger there.

I remember one time we hit a combine up in Converse, South Carolina that was full of peaches. When we did, the engineer pulled the emergency cord and was trying to keep anybody from -- anytime the emergency goes on, you have a significant chance of derailing and so there’s a certain amount of danger there. I think I was working the
pouch rack that day and I just got down slower and hung on to the tables above me. Whereas most of them got up on the safety bar but where I was I couldn’t get down that easily. Okay?
INTERVIEWER: All right. Did you ever hear of anybody else experiencing anything dangerous on your line or on any other line?
Robert Hammond: Well, I guess I don’t remember right now, but I’m sure that other people have similar tales but I just don’t remember any of it right now.
INTERVIEWER: Not a problem. All right. Did you face or witness any type of racial discrimination while you were a post office clerk? If so, please explain.
Robert Hammond: I don’t think it was significant. I think that when I first went out there that there was still somewhat of a caste system with respect to who washed up first but that really didn’t last very long because I went out there in ’56 and I would say that by 1960 most of that had disappeared.
INTERVIEWER: Okay. Do you know of anybody who experienced racial discrimination while on the cars? If so --
Robert Hammond: Well, I’m sure that the black members felt it, okay. Although I’ve never heard any of them complain about it and I had a very good friend, one that I worked with for many years and thereafter who became quite successful in the postal service. His attitude, I think, was pretty much that those were the times and you learn to live with them and things got better. But that’s just my own assessment of things I’ve heard him say. But I don’t know if that’s how he felt. That’s what he said to me, you know. I’m white, okay. He might talk to me in a different way than he would talk to a fellow black person. I don’t know.
INTERVIEWER: All right. Were you a member of any type of outside organizations such as unions or clubs that were affiliated with RPO clerks?
Robert Hammond: Yeah, we had an association and right now I can’t tell you the name of it. I’m 75 years old, okay. I don’t have significant dementia but I have slight dementia, okay. I want to say it was the National Association of Postal Transportation Clerks. I’m thinking that’s what it was. At one time it had been the National Association of Railway Mail Clerks. I believe that’s how it was.
INTERVIEWER: All right. Were you featured in any publications for the organization or group?
Robert Hammond: No, I don’t think so. There might have been a blurb in the newspapers at the time our mail car burned up but that’s all I can think of at this time.
INTERVIEWER: All right. Was there anything that you wanted to change about your position? If so, what was it and why?
Robert Hammond: No, I don’t think so.
INTERVIEWER: What do you miss most about being a Railway Post Office clerk?
Robert Hammond: Well, it’s almost too long ago to remember. I had a pretty good career after which so when it was buried and I did a lot of things with the post office and so I don’t really dwell on the fact that that disappeared by virtue of just the times changing, you know, what it amounts to.
INTERVIEWER: Okay. Then, for the last question, is there any other information you would like to make accessible to researchers about your experience with the RPO such as anything interesting or funny stories that you would like to tell?
Robert Hammond: No, I don’t really know of any. You know, I think that in and of its day that it was a very successful and a very efficient way to handle the mail and progress overcame it in terms of air travel is much faster and you just -- the sheer volume that came about made it difficult and impossible to continue that method of distributing and moving the mail. So progress overcame it, I guess, would be what you’d have to say.