James Hoffman (JH) Interview Transcript

INTERVIEWER: What made you decide to work for the Railway Mail Service?
JH: I was fresh out of the military, I had a job, but I saw the advertisement in the paper and thought well, I’d give it a try, and I ended up second in my class. When they had the examination, you know, for the job.

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me a little bit about the conditions on the train?
JH: [laughs] In the summer they were hot and dirty, and in the winter they were cold and dirty. Very seldom did the steam lines work that were supposed heat the Railway Mail car. The rest of the train was fine it seemed like, but boy that mail car was either hot, well of course they weren’t air conditioned, but in the winter they were cold.

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me a maybe a little bit about your schedule?
JH: I subbed for 16 years, on every line in the 11th division. And then I had a chance to go regular on the Fort Worth and Galveston. It was a choice run on the Texas Chief, trains 15 and 16 between Fort Worth and Galveston. And after subbing over there a couple of times I realized that that was a choice job, so I put in for it. 16 years later I get a call from the superintendent, on the 11th division, and there’s an opening on the Fort Worth and Galveston, and did I still want it? So I said, yeah! And I had a whole bunch of clerks that were mad at me. They had been in the service a whole lot longer than I had, but they had never, ever put in for the Fort Worth and Galveston. Especially trains 15 and 16. They were not happy for a while over that one [laughs]. Well, I kept telling them, it’s your fault, you could have got it if you put in for it. Well yeah, but why did you put in for it? [laughs] It was a daylight run, most of the time, between Fort Worth and Galveston. One of those streamline trains that didn’t stop very often. Had about 32 catchers on the line, and thing always ran about 80 miles an hour.

INTERVIEWER: When you were first starting out as a sub, did any of the regulars give you a hard time? Or did you get along with everyone?
JH: No, everyone was good. My very first trip, I was a brand new sub and I crawled in the mail car and I looked up at the clerk in charge and introduced myself, and told him, this is my first time in one of these things, what do you want me to do? And he told me, and I did it. And at the end of the run we got back to Fort Worth, it was on the Fort Worth and El Paso, and we got back to Fort Worth and he says, sub I think you’ll make it, you did a pretty good job.

INTERVIEWER: Was it a lifestyle that was difficult to get used to?
JH: Oh yeah, yeah. Until I went regular, 99.9% of the time it was night runs, go to work at 8pm and you didn’t get to the other end of the line ‘til 9:30 or 10am, and coming back it was the same way. So that was kinda hard to adjust to, but I learned to make do.

INTERVIEWER: So you worked on holidays too?
JH: I was pretty lucky what I did when I was subbing, yeah. I worked every Christmas and New Years and every other holiday when I was subbing, ‘cause the regulars wanted off all the time. But after I went regular we had a regular schedule that we operated on, and I’d run every one week on a Sunday Monday and the next week I’d run a Saturday Sunday. And the rest of the time it was, you know, you’d run one day and you’d make a two day run and the you was off a day on another run. And it was real good in that res pect. I liked that.

INTERVIEWER: What would you say your favorite thing about it was?
JH: The camaraderie with the crews. I never, ever had a clerk in charge get mad at me over something I did wrong. And I did some wrongs, I got demerits like everyone else did. But I never had a clerk in charge get mad at me. Except maybe one time. We were making a run on the Amarillo and Fort Worth and I’d been in the mail service about four months. We had a brand new sub. He hadn’t been in the mail car. And we pulled out of Fort Worth, heading for Amarillo, we had a box of baby chicks for a little town called Rome, where the train does stop. So I put them in the door opposite to where Rome was, and told the sub well we’ll put those off at Dewey, because the southbound train will pick them up, and it stops at Dewey, it’s the local, and he says okay. So we told him what to look for, for a landmark because he had to make a catcher there, and the clerk in charge and I, just a three man crew, the clerk in charge and I told him what landmarks to look for and after a while he says, I see the red barn. Okay, now you throw yours off and then you’ll catch the bag. Okay. I went back to work. I heard a bang bang when he caught the bag of mail. And I went back there to get it. And I noticed over there near the door, the box of baby chicks wasn’t there. I went over to the other door where he just caught the bag of mail and looked out, and all I saw was feathers. He had kicked the box of 25 baby chicks out the door. I doubt if any of them survived. All I saw was yellow feathers [laughs]. I went back to the clerk in charge and I says, you’re not going to like this. What, as I handed him the mail from the bag. The baby chicks are no more. What do you mean?! He kicked them off when he
threw the bag of mail off. I thought you told him to take them to Rome! I says, I did! You should have been back there supervising him [laughs]. I think those were the only harsh words I ever heard in the 27 years I served [laughs]. When I, when they pulled the trains off I went to the transfer, the transfer clerk’s office and worked at two depots in Fort Worth for a number of years before I went to the [superintendent’s office]... as a railway specialist and you write up the bills of lading for the railroads, how much mail you carried and all such as that so they could get paid for it. But it was real interesting, I liked the work. And I didn’t particularly enjoy the nonstop catchers, because in the summertime you’d look through that little windshield they had for you to look through and you still got lots of cinders and dirt all over you. Especially in the days of the steam engines, because they put out a lot of smoke and cinders. But it was a good job. I guess my best experience was on the Fort Worth and Galveston one day, we were through, we had the mail all worked and we were ready to run into Houston to unload. One person was going into Galveston, and we hit the little town of Orchard. And I was sitting on a stool in the door because I had already cleaned up and was getting ready, and I looked out the door and we hit the switch there, at Orchard, and I noticed a sheriff’s car parked alongside the highway where the track ran right alongside it, for about 40 miles of straight, level track. I didn’t think anything about it, but I knew we were running late, because we left Fort Worth about an hour and forty minutes late. And we back into the depot at Houston and we’re unloading the mail at Houston, and we hear a big argument going on out there on the platform. So the two of us that got off at Houston that evening, we crawled out of the mail car and there’s a deputy sheriff from Harris County. And he has a ticket for speeding, and he’s trying to serve it on the train crew. It seems that the sheriff’s car out there in Orchard, which was in Fort Bend County, had been getting complaints from the people. The railroad ran right through the middle of town. They’d been getting complaints from people that the train was going too fast through their town. They had a speed limit sign there, I don’t know if you’ve ever seen them, it’s like a V for Victory sign and it says 55, 80. That meant 55 for freights and 80 for passenger trains. Well we listened to the conversation, and the conductor’s asking this deputy sheriff, the deputy sheriff at Fort Bend had wired the sheriff in Harris County. We hear the conductor asking the deputy sheriff, well how fast were we going? And the deputy sheriff says, well from this telegram from the Fort Bend County sheriff’s department says you were doing 115 miles and hour. And the speed limit was only 80. When we went to the hotel the sheriff, and the conductor, and the engineer were arguing over who was going to get this ticket. He tried to give it to the conductor, and the conductor says, points to the engineer, says, well he’s driving the damn train! And the engineer says, well I’m driving it, but he’s in charge! And that’s true, the conductor’s in charge. He’s in charge of the train. Well we went to the hotel. We never did find out who got the ticket! [laughs] But a hundred, 115 miles an hour in an 80 mile speed limit. I knew we were going fast. Well, I said we left Fort Worth an hour and forty minutes late? We got to Houston twenty five minutes late. So they were running pretty fast [laughs]. That’s the funniest thing I think ever happened to me.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Did you ever run into any sort of danger?
JH: Oh, in my course of time on the Fort Worth and Galveston, I think we hit five or six cars that were trying to cross, you know, in front of the train. We hit five or six cars. And once when I was subbing on the Newton and Fort Worth, Newton, Kansas to Fort Worth, we were coming out of Oklahoma City and we had several bags, several pouches of mail for the federal depository in Dallas, and they told us this was an, old bills that were going to Dallas to be destroyed. And we had 8 or 10 bags of them. Just before the train left Oklahoma City, a guy in a suit got on the train, identified himself to the clerk in charge, and when he got off the clerk in charge told me, he says, we’re expecting a robbery at Pauls Valley, they’re expecting a robbery at Pauls Valley, Oklahoma tonight, with those eight registered bags we got back there. Keep your gun handy. We pulled into Pauls Valley, and I started to walk back towards the door, and the clerk in charge comes with me, he says just open the door a crack and see how many people are out there. Now this is like three o’clock in the morning. And I opened the door a crack and I said well there’s a baggage cart out there with one man on it. Transfer the Pauls Valley mail as fast as you can. And then shut and lock the door. So we did. Shut and locked the door, came into Fort Worth, we still had them eight bags of bills that were going to be destroyed [laughs]. Where they got their information, they didn’t tell us. They just said they’re expecting a robbery at Pauls Valley. But it didn’t happen [laughs].