J. Greg Lowell (JL) Interview Transcript

INTERVIEWER: What made you decide to work for the Railway Mail Service?
JL: Well, let’s see, that was back in 1959, and it was a pretty good job at that time, and there wasn’t, you know we were in kind of a recession I think, so I had lived in Bloomington, and the, I musta seen an ad or something in the paper or someplace. And I talked to the postmaster. He sent me up there to Chicago and I started up there then.

INTERVIEWER: Can you describe a typical day for you, the kind of hours you would work, where you would go to work, what you would wear, what you would eat, that sort of thing?
JL: Well, you packed your lunch usually because there wasn’t any place to eat, you know you had to take a lunch with you, and you know you’d carry a grip and a little suitcase, with a change of clothes so you would put on work clothes, you’d go down there in casual clothes and change in the mail car and, I subbed for as long as I could, which was, the ideal situation at the time because you could get all the hours, you could handle if you got the job, and the best I ever did was, 160 hours in two weeks [laughs]. And, but it was a lot of fun because it was interesting, and you know there was no two trips exactly alike, and I had, you know I ran thirteen different states, because when I was subbing, because if you headed out of Chicago, and you know, went to Buffalo, to Memphis, to St. Louis, to Cincinnati. You know, make a 500 mile ring, and that’s where the runs usually terminated. And the pay was decent and the work was hard, and there were, everybody out there worked, you know, and somebody got finished with their job they helped the other guy, so it was, a lot of camaraderie, and the, if you didn’t, if you weren’t a good worker, the supervisor would make a notation on that and you wouldn’t last too long. And, I enjoyed it, and then when I got forced into being a regular, you know, a week on and a week off, those aren’t bad hours but you know you’d have to do something on that week off. It’s hard to find a job like that, but it all worked out, and I was, if I had, if I, if they kept it on, then I got surplused in ’66, I think, so I was only out there about, 6 or 7 years, and a junior guy at that time had 33 years in, so I didn’t have a chance. And, well, like I say, the pay was good, and you got per diem, for, you know, for being away from home, like that. And it was, I mostly ran out of Chicago to Port Huron, Michigan, and when I was a regular, and when I was, when I was subbing I subbed on all of them, but I was on what they called section 2 in Chicago, which was the Santa Fe and the Port Huron. And between those two lines it kept you pretty busy. And we had a lot of different mail at that time, you know it’s all changed since then. But they used to make the, our train had to wait for the Wall Street Journal out of Chicago and we affected next day delivery. Any house in Michigan, upper peninsula and lower peninsula, the whole works. Making connections, we ran across the state, and we made connections north and south so everybody got their mail the next day. But, it’s all changed, and after I got surplused I went to the main, not the main PO in Chicago, I was given an opportunity to go anywhere that had an opening, and I went to North Suburban, which is a sectional center and worked there ‘til I couldn’t stand it anymore, then I quit. I came back about 17 years later and figured I’d, go back in there and, you know pick up the pension, which I did, and that worked out just fine. But, it was a lot of fun. I enjoyed it, and if I could’ve stayed out there, and I’d a been out there 42 years. But the, they changed it all around, and, it’s not the same in the Post Office because there’s a lot of dead wood in there, as you can imagine.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever run into any danger on the trains?
JL: Uh, we had, we caught a couple of, we caught a thief one time, we didn’t catch him, but one of the guys, on one of trains that we ran on, one of the clerks, they was a sub out of Chicago, stole a cash shipment and caused a lot of grief to a lot of people because they, you know, yanked ’em all off at the end of the line, and gave ’em a lie detector test and all that. They finally got the guy, because the inspection service at that time, was pretty effective, I don’t know how it is today, but it was then, and then when they had the Cuban Missile Crisis, unknown to me, I was subbing, and I was on the train that ran to Evansville, and then anyway it went down to Florida. And the car ahead of us had missiles on it [laughs]. We didn’t even know. But we all wore sidearms, so I jumped off there to get some coffee for the crew, usually stuck the sub with that job, you know, run for coffee. So I’m running back up there and there was a marine guard standing there and I’m running at this guy with a sack in my hand and a gun strapped to my side and this guy was about ready to shoot me. I didn’t know what we had on there but that’s what it ended up being. They were sending missiles to Florida for that, Bay of Pigs thing and all that. But, and we had our train wrecks and I was fortunate not to be on them, but, some of the other guys did and they all came out alive but, broken backs and arms and legs and killed both the engineer and the fireman. They hit a truck load of steel, you know, going wide open. Did a lot of damage. But all in all I have nothing but nice words for the crew, and made a lot of good friends, and of course they were all pretty much old timers, and went to a lot of funerals on account of that. It was an enjoyable time.