Robert Freeman Interview Transcript

Robert Freeman: My name is Robert Freeman, and I was a substitute clerk performing my duties on highway post offices and railway post offices which later became known as Postal Transportation Service. I did this service from the year 1949 to the year of 1988.

INTERVIEWER: Which rail lines did you work on and which locations did you travel between?
Robert Freeman: I worked many lines because I was a substitute at the time I was performing it and the substitute does just what the name sounds to be, filling in for employees that did not report for duty. I worked on many lines. I worked out of two installations, one being the Albany, New York Terminal where I worked at the Rouses Point in Albany and the Burlington in Albany Highway Post Office. And then working at Pennsylvania Terminal in New York, I worked out of Pennsylvania Terminal and worked mainly on the New York and Washington although I did have some turns on Boston-New York and Boston-Springfield in New York.

INTERVIEWER: You said earlier that your career with the post office was 1949 to 1988. How long did you serve specifically as a Railway Post Office clerk?
Robert Freeman: I served as a railway post -- again, it was a -- my entire term in the post office was - let's see now - I guess around 1972 or '73, the railway post offices were terminated and incorporated into the post office department itself so I lost the term of railway postal clerk but I did perform my service as a railway postal clerk from 1949 until the termination of the service which I believe was in 1972 or 1973.

INTERVIEWER: What inspired you to become a Railway Post Office clerk?
Robert Freeman: Well, it was not the call of the open road as it might seem to be. I had just come out of military service in World War II and looking as many, many others of my comrades were looking for something to work at and because I have a disability from military service, I headed up on some other people that were applying for civil service jobs which seemed to be my best route because I would be getting credit for my military service by joining the government forces. That was the inspiration for me and from there on; I guess it was all history.

INTERVIEWER: What types of jobs did you have on the railcars?
Robert Freeman: Again, serving as a substitute clerk, you get all the unwanted dirty jobs. You do not get the privilege of working with the regular men who were assigned regularly to the Railway Post Office cars or the highway post offices. You fill in, you do mainly, as I said, the dirty work of it, dumping up and then when you get ahead of them and dumping up and opening the pouches of mail, you'll get in to do the actual work of sorting the mail and as we call it dressing up the rack. When the pouch is full and the bag is ready to go, it is taken down and that is my position, to take it down and put up another pouch so that the men can keep right on working and not lose a beat.

INTERVIEWER: Could you describe a typical day on the railcar starting from when you first went into work and then getting off of work?
Robert Freeman: Well, it was a little -- I had it a little different than the regular clerks who were assigned to the railcars. They would come in directly, report to the railcar wherever it's located, either in the Pennsylvania Terminal or as I say in Albany, New York and they would come in and start to do the work; they call it preparation of the car. As a substitute, I usually would be notified by the end of my tour which usually ran from 4 p.m. to 12:30 a.m. I would be notified somewhere around 11 p.m. to be ready to fill in because somebody had called in sick or was not able to work that day, I would be taking their position. So by the time I came into the car, I got into the latter half of the preparation of the car and what I was doing mainly was putting the pouches in position for the distribution to begin.

INTERVIEWER: Was there one position that you liked working the most on the railcars?
Robert Freeman: No, they all seemed to be more or less -- I could tell you what I did not like and that was the dumping of the pouches, it was real dirty work. I mean the pouches were stored in the car. These are the pouches of mail that had to be opened and sorted, were stored in the car, and they were all lying on dirty, dusty floors. The conditions were not perfect and nowhere near what anyone would want to have as their workstation, but that was the dirtiest of the positions. I guess you might say the best of the positions was either this boxing up mail which was sort of the clean work and was done by the senior clerk or even the supervisor of the crew and the handling of the registered mail.

INTERVIEWER: What type of railcar did you work on the most?
Robert Freeman: The railcars were mainly all about the same. They had a large storage area where the large parcels, the large pieces that could not fit into sacks were placed in independently from the sacks and pouches.
themselves. We had first class mail to distribute and when the time presented, we had second class mail which was newspaper mail which might seem a little strange to people. That had a higher priority in distribution than the actual first class mail. I guess it’s a feeling that the news is eminent and has to be read by people at the next day of printing. So as I say, the two classes of mail were the only two classes we ever worked other than registered mail in itself.

INTERVIEWER: Was there a particular length of car that you worked on the most?
Robert Freeman: I believe they were 90-foot cars and as I say, about one-fourth of the car or perhaps even maybe one-third of the car was dedicated to the storage of mails. There was a large amount of mail that was the mail that had to be prepared was on one side of the car and the mail when it was completed and the pouch was locked was placed on the other side of the car not to have them mixed while in transit because sometimes, the train would make a sharp turn and you did not want the mails mixing with another, the pouches that is.

INTERVIEWER: When you worked on the railways, do you remember what your starting salary was?
Robert Freeman: Oh, yes I do. I was an hourly worker at all times when I was on the railway. I did not have a guaranteed position. Even though I had that priority of being a disabled veteran, I still went in as a substitute clerk until I made regular clerk which was a period of about four or five years I was substituting. And the glorious position I got was $1.29 an hour which I have to say was four or five cents an hour more than the regular post office clerks and letter carriers received. That might have been an inducement at that time in 1949 to work for the Railway Transportation Service and Railway Mail Service in that you got a big five cents an hour increase above the salary of the regular post office people.

INTERVIEWER: When they discontinued the rail lines, do you remember what your salary was then?
Robert Freeman: Not really, at that time, I was on an annual salary which is what the regular people did; they had regular salaries. I went off the hourly basis and I would have to guess my salary might have been somewhere and about the $5,000 range.

INTERVIEWER: What do you remember about your pay, do you believe that for the amount of work you had to do, you were paid fairly?
Robert Freeman: Well, not really. It’s the habit of civil service people that they do expect that when they come into civil service that they will be receiving less comparably to what outside industry costs were but the benefits and retirement are something that you have to take into consideration. I am enjoying the benefits right now, I have to say. So comparably, for the work, it was a lot of hard labor. We’re not sitting at a case and distributing mail. It was a lot of hard and dirty labor so I have to say that the salary was fair.

INTERVIEWER: What did you typically carry with you in your grip while you were on runs?
Robert Freeman: We always had to carry a weapon. We had a .38 caliber weapon and had an LA key which is the key to open up the locks on the pouches that had to be opened and distributed. We carried a scheme book which was considered our bible of all the states that we had to pass through and distribute mails for. And I guess we could squeeze something in there, maybe a light lunch or I don’t want to let something out of the bag but there was some sort of liquid lunch in there by the regular clerks that they were going out and prepared their lunch on a liquid basis rather than on a solid food basis.

INTERVIEWER: Could you just describe the liquid lunch a little bit more?
Robert Freeman: Oh, yes. The commode that we had, assigned to the railway postal car was strictly for the use of ourselves. Our car was locked at both ends. We were sort of towards the front end of the train but we were locked in at both ends, people could not pass through. The passengers from the railcars could not pass through, so we had all our facilities for ourselves. We were not allowed to go out, they were not allowed to come in to our area, and the commode was filled with ice and just everything, mainly beer I’d have to say. You don’t ice hard liquor but there wasn’t much hard liquor. I saw very little of it but it was mainly beer that the clerks enjoyed and helped them, carried them through the run.

INTERVIEWER: What was the longest trip you ever worked?
Robert Freeman: On one occasion, I worked New York to Pittsburgh which was the longest trip of all.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember how long that took you to get there?
Robert Freeman: Oh, it is not altogether a direct run. I would have to guess it was somewhere in the area about six hours. The trains were rather slow in those days.

INTERVIEWER: While you were working as a Railway Post Office clerk, did you have a family?
Robert Freeman: Oh yes, yes, I had a family. They were coming and growing up around me and I did not get to see them as often as I would like to have seen them. But shortly after I entered the Railway Postal Service, my wife
gave birth to our oldest son and three years later, we had my lovely daughter so we did have the two children.
And as I say, I would like to have seen them more often but whatever presented, I need the wages to go with the
homecare that my wife spent alone most of the time when I went on train runs and I had to provide that for her.
INTERVIEWER: And that kind of leads into my next question which is, how did you cope with leaving your family
behind on long trips?
Robert Freeman: Well, the longest trip I'd be away from home would be overnight so it wasn't really a long trip
necessarily. When you had your runs, most of the time I ran from New York to Washington and in Washington,
you would, as I say, layover. We would sleep in the YMCA in Washington; most of the men would, except those
who had girlfriends at the other end of the run. They had to put them [indiscernible] having a woman at each port
and they would have a good bed under them. I had to sleep on a cot and I spent overnight and would return the
next day so it was really not much more than an overnight situation.
INTERVIEWER: While you were away, what types of things did your family do to keep themselves busy?
Robert Freeman: Oh well, we had two young ones, at first one and then two. We were newlyweds and my wife
had to learn very quickly about how to take care of young children. We did not have the pleasure of having
readymade diapers, everything was done just like old school and to occupy herself, I guess hopefully my wife
missed me and we would meet at the end of the run.
INTERVIEWER: What are some of your fondest memories of working on the railroad?
Robert Freeman: There was a great deal of companionship. Even with the regular crew, when a sub came on and
never knew which crew he was going on with so I was more or less on my own and the sub was treated rather
harshly by the members of the crew in that given all the hard labor and dirty work, catching pouches on the
catching hook and such things that they didn’t want or would rather not do themselves.
But there was a great feeling of camaraderie there. The men were so active and so great up on their work that
they would usually complete the work as they would like in the New York and Washington area, they would
complete the work around the Baltimore time and start to close up the shop, close up the racks and there was
time for a little enjoyment and banter between the sub who would finally get to speak a few words and the rest of
the crew. There was a great feeling of camaraderie. It was really good.
INTERVIEWER: When the work was complete, was there anything special that you guys did rather than sit there
and talk?
Robert Freeman: No, nothing special. At least -- would plan in their own way, they knew, as I say, for the regulars,
they were more or less in the same situation. Each time they went out on a trip they knew which states they were
going out. The sub was on a fill-in basis so he did not know from one day to the next whether he'd be going out on
a train run or actually which train run and it was all left up in the air. But there wasn't much talk other than we'll
see you on your way back.
INTERVIEWER: Do you still keep in touch with any of the former clerks?
Robert Freeman: No. Unfortunately, again, it was not that close companionship with the rest of the crew.
Hopefully, most of them are still around. But the last companionship we had, we used to have here in Florida
where I live, we had the railroad mail reunions and we would meet one another once a year at those. But
unfortunately, time took its toll on the people, unable because of illness or death to attend and we just broke up.
And there's actually nothing I hear from any of the gentlemen I worked with.
INTERVIEWER: Did the post office ever issue you anything either for your safety or for your position?
Robert Freeman: Well, as far as going out on the train runs and the highway post offices, other than the weapon,
you were issued a pair of safety goggles which were rather not safe. I had to wear these when we were coming to
a catcher hook and the train being not diesel all the time and sometimes using coal, the sparks would fly and the
safety goggles were intended to keep the sparks from hitting the eye and unfortunately, some of them did have
that. But the biggest part about the safety with the catcher hook and why a lot of people did not want to go for
that position was that the safety hook was a quick snatch and grab and the hook would reverberate and slam
against the side of the car and this was going at about 55, 60, 65 miles an hour so you had to be mighty quick and
shifty to get around. There really should've been safety equipment for that but other than having heavy work
gloves and the goggles, there really was nothing else provided for us.
was sort of quick medications to ease the burning sensation that you had and this was available in the Railway Post Office car.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever hear of anybody who did experience anything dangerous or got into a car or a train accident?

Robert Freeman: No, there weren't; safety was pretty prominent down there. We had safety directors going through, safety inspectors going through the cars prior to being hooked up and put into use. They looked at it for cleanliness, they looked at it for safety. Cleanliness was not there when we came to the end of the run because of the movement of the pouches and the shifting of the dirt that was around there and balls of twine which we used to tie up the package were scattered all over the place but these conditions weren't as bad. There were no serious accidents or any that I was aware of that occurred, at least on the lines that I ran on.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever face or witness any type of racial discrimination while you were working as a Railway Post Office clerk?

Robert Freeman: Well, I sensed it. It really wasn't a matter of discrimination performed by one employee upon another but unfortunately, I recognized what was going on there. When I first entered the service, it was primarily white and I say primarily in that with all the employees that I had and I worked with a number of them, at least 500 of them when I worked in the terminal prior to going on to the line and I can only remember one Hispanic, one black, not by number but just this is the way it came up, one black person, one Hispanic and one authentic American Indian that I could ever remember being with the crew of at least 500 people that I worked with at times. So I don't know whether the discrimination was being performed by the civil service agency who did the hiring or just a matter of the people of color and of heritage not wanting to work that type of work. I really couldn't say which it was but it was very, very noticeable that it was a 99.9 percent workforce of white persons.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever hear of anybody who did experience or witness racial discrimination on the railcars?

Robert Freeman: No, never, mainly because they never were there, that's what I'd have to say. There never were any racial prototypes on the car that were different than the, as I said, 99.9 percent white persons, the Caucasians.

INTERVIEWER: Were you a member of any type of outside organization such as a union or club that was affiliated with the Railway Post Office clerks?

Robert Freeman: Yes, there was a union of sorts. Although the government, federal government did not recognize unions, we did have a union which provided us with some, in addition to the membership fee they provided us with some sort of standing. If there was a dispute with management, they would go to bat for you. They did have a health plan of sorts which does not measure up anywhere to what we have today in that they had what they called group membership because of the amount of people that they brought in, they would get a cheaper rate for the employee, but of course the federal government was not giving us any health program at that time so we had to stay with the Railway Mail Clerks' Union to get any health coverage. And as I say, in the time any disputes came up, it would go to someone who was I guess today be recognized as a shop steward and present your dispute with the shop steward and management personnel.

INTERVIEWER: And were you an active member of the union?

Robert Freeman: Not really, no. As I say, subs have very little standing. In fact, it was only after a few years that I was in that they would take subs in because of the comings and goings of the subs, not many of them stood in the job. It was quite strenuous and I'd have to say other than the physical demands of the job, there were the schemes and the schemes would just go on and on and on. This is the knowledge of the schemes of the states that you would pass through or do work sorting the mail for in the terminal or do work on the road. You had to have the qualifying scheme and the schemes were an ongoing thing, 365 days of the year. To keep the schemes up to date, you had to have knowledge of them. You were tested on them and this might have been a little too much for at least many of the employees I know that dropped out were because of the scheme.

INTERVIEWER: Was there anything that you ever wanted to change about your position with the Railway Mail Service?

Robert Freeman: Not really. I enjoyed that it gave me a sense of freedom and it was, as I say, wonderful camaraderie. We all knew our situations; we all had the same demands placed upon us for the schemes. It was a highly qualified number of gentlemen that were in there. We had persons that were lawyers, we had persons that had studied for medical professions, highly trained college personnel. So you were in a really upper class of the workforce there and I wouldn't have changed it for anything. It was great for me.

INTERVIEWER: What do you miss most about being a Railway Post Office clerk?
Robert Freeman: Well, again, it really was the camaraderie. You knew just that the other fellow was just in the same position that you were in; the schemes were very demanding, the knowledge that you had to have. People were able to rattle off names of towns and communities and had a great pride in that. When they distributed mail, sometimes you’d have just a street and maybe a state and not even the name of the city and they were so knowledgeable that they know exactly where these pieces were intended to go. It was sort of a disclaimer to the employee if he had to put into the sorting case something that they called the nixie, which was N-I-X-I-E, which was intended to mean that the mail could not be defined as going to any particular sorts and would have to be returned to sender.

And before they would give up on any piece like that, we used to question one another. Do you know this place? Do you know that place? And someone would come up with the answer, the correct answer and it really was a lot of pride in that that they would not give up on a piece of mail to say we have to return to the sender because the address could not be interpreted.

INTERVIEWER: For the last question, is there any other information that you would like to share with researchers about your experience or position with the Railway Post Office? This can be anything from interesting sights that you saw or funny stories that you would like to share, just anything at all.

Robert Freeman: Well, as far as -- I would love to see something like the Railway Mail Service come to being again because it was the quickest way of delivering mail that people never knew that existed. We were very, very less informed to the public than they knew about us. We had the distinction of being I guess you can call it top grade-A people. I really took pride in that. This was the top personnel that the post office presented and the service could be so much better than it is today.

I did do some of my work in the latter stages of my career with a new type of prototypes that were put in, machinery and scanners or whatever else and nothing measured up to, of course, the volume with what the post office was interested in, in getting volume of mail out rather than getting out the correctness of the mail and knowing that the piece would not be mishandled. And so we see a lot of that missing today. I see it in my own personal mail that mail is sent back because it doesn’t have an apartment number or it doesn’t have a unit number or something of that nature. But this would never have happened under the Railway Mail Service. There was a lot of pride in the service and I don’t see that today.

Just as a note for closing I guess, the one instance I can recall that was kind of comical to me when I entered the service. I was only in the service for about three days in the Albany-New York Terminal and I was sent out on the Rouses Point and Albany run all by myself. I had to do the dumping. It was not a line of heavy volume. Rouses Point is one of the last entry points for New York State into Canada and a lot of it was trans-Canadian mail that was being moved back and forth. But I was never even told about anything other than go to the car and do your best, and when I went in there, I just did as I was told, I distributed the mail. And when I got to the end of the run, a gentleman came on the train, a post office employee at Rouses Point and said, where are your regs? That’s R-E-G-S. And I said, what’s a reg? And they said, oh my God, what happened to the reg? I said I don’t know. I don’t know what a reg is.

It turned out the reg was a registered piece of mail which had to be kept secret, kept away from the ordinary run of mail and had to be logged in and accounted for piece by piece. And my not knowing and ever having been introduced to a registry piece, I distributed it along with the regular mail and that held up the distribution. The train had to be halted. We had to bring on personnel to search through each and every pouch to pick up each piece of registered mail that I had inadvertently dropped into the mail along with regular mail. So I took my lumps for that and I learned what a registry piece was and I think I accomplished that in my later career.

INTERVIEWER: Are there any other stories that you would like to share, just fond memories that you had?

Robert Freeman: Well, it was great, the times I went out. I had wished that I might be able to get a regular run as a regular employee but you needed very high seniority number to get there and the seniority numbers moved very, very slowly and to apply for the job and then I had the restriction of having to understand that my wife was trying to bring up -- we were both trying to bring up two young children and I couldn’t place it upon herself to have me away from home every other night. It was a four-on and six-day-off schedule that you had but it was complete roundtrips and it meant being away from home, sometimes two days rather than one. So I had to consider and say if my time came up that I would become a regular clerk on the line, I would have loved it for myself but knowing that this would have been difficult for my wife to undertake, I sort of gave up on that as just a fleeting thing and saying that I’m better off at least for the home situation to be in a steady run of being able to work a steady shift and coming home each time at the same hour.
INTERVIEWER: All right. Is there anything else that you would like to add?
Robert Freeman: No. Other than that, it was a great experience for me and I would love to see something like this innovation come through again. I doubt if it will ever happen again but it was a wonderful experience for me. I loved every moment of it and I look back at it and it gives me some great, great memories.
INTERVIEWER: All right. Well, if there isn’t anything else, that concludes our interview and thank you very, very much for sitting down and talking with us.
Robert Freeman: It has been my pleasure and I thank you very, very much, you and your staff, for bringing this to the people and have the knowledge that we even existed, the Railway Post Office, and let them know what they were getting for their penny and two-cent stamps, they were getting an awful lot of service. And I hope it gets to the people and they understand that it was just more than just putting a stamp on an envelope and saying somebody's going to hopefully get to a situation. If it went to a railway mail office, you definitely got your delivery service and that is not the situation today. So I do look back at my memories and it was great. I really loved it all the time.