Robert Gordon Interview Transcript

Robert Gordon: My name is Robert Gordon, Robert J. Gordon.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. And also, could you please give the title of your positions with the Railway Mail Service?

Robert Gordon: I was a clerk on the train. I run between Charlotte and Atlanta and Charlotte and Washington and they cut the trains off in – cut my job off in 1967 and I went into the Rock Hill Post Office as a clerk and then went up the administration in the Rock Hill Post Office and went on up to Elkin, North Carolina Postmaster for about five years, four years. And I retired in 1977.

Did you want to know anything else? And I ran on all the trains from Charlotte to Washington and from Charlotte to Atlanta. I started at first, in 1948, September of ’48 and I went into the terminal up at Atlanta, Georgia. That was when they thought you had the seniority count and so I had to go in and to substitute and I stayed in there about three or four months and they had an opening in Atlanta Air Mail Air Field and so I went out there and stayed about three years and the opening come on the train which I liked better and so I went up and it was on Train 34 and 37 by working and made the exchanges from Atlanta to Greenville. And then I worked states on up from there and come back and worked at Atlanta City from Charlotte to Atlanta and I stayed on there a good while.

And then I went to -- let’s see, in 1966, I believe it was, I transferred from Charlotte and Atlanta to Charlotte and Washington. I worked New Jersey State going south and Georgia going -- I mean Georgia going south and New Jersey going north. We went out on the train at six o’clock in the afternoon and got to Washington at 5:30 and we went back to work at 11 o’clock at that same morning and work about one o’clock to work. That’s about one o’clock it arrived in Charlotte and I worked over there. I worked at Georgia coming south and I worked New Jersey going north. We only had about four hours time in Washington sleeping back on the train. And I worked a good while on train 30, 35. I worked Atlanta City going in to Atlanta for about three or four years. And let’s see--

INTERVIEWER: What rail lines did you work and which locations did you travel between the most?

Robert Gordon: The rail lines I worked with, there was the Charlotte and Atlanta and Washington. That’s the only trains, I mean the two stations. And I worked around from Charlotte, out of Charlotte. I was headed out of Charlotte and I was in Charlotte to Atlanta and back to Charlotte. And I worked in Charlotte to Washington and back from Washington to Charlotte. That’s the only train I run on, that southern line.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. How long did you serve as a Railway Post Office clerk?


INTERVIEWER: Okay. And why did you want to become a Post Office clerk?

Robert Gordon: Well, at the time, it was the money. It was paying better here in Rock Hill. But I loved my job. I liked it on the trains. I probably stayed until I was 70 years old if they hadn’t cut it, start eliminating them. And so I talked to the postmaster here in Rock Hill and he had a couple of vacancies so he let me come in to the Rock Hill Post Office. We were all looking for jobs back when they started cutting them all. And then I worked there for about, like I said, from ’67 ’til about ’70, I believe it was, and then I went to, like I said, I went up to Elkin Post Office postmaster and stayed there until ’77 and I retired in ’77.

INTERVIEWER: All right. Which positions did you have on the rail cars?

Robert Gordon: Oh, I was just a clerk. You see, all we did was to stick mail. We just had one man who was in charge of trains and the rest of them were just clerks. They worked all night coming south. They worked -- I worked on North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Mississippi and Louisiana. And coming north, we worked up in North Carolina, Virginia, and South Carolina. I worked South Carolina some. I worked just a little bit about everything.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. And could you please describe a typical day on the rail car?

Robert Gordon: Well, back from Atlanta to Charlotte, we got on the train at seven o’clock. It was still in the rail yard and we left there about eight o’clock when I worked South Carolina, the state of South Carolina, like at Charlotte and Augusta and Augusta to [indiscernible]. It was all the trains and you had to know every train and what time it got into the city and what port, star routes we called them, went out the city so you could make it as quick as possible to get the mail there as quick as possible.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Did you like your position? Did you dislike anything about your position?

Robert Gordon: Oh, I liked it. We had a bunch and everybody had their own job to do, even the clerk-in-charge, we called him, he had -- sometimes, it was harder than your job, you know what I mean, and all he did was keep
the books, keep the records. And like I said, I liked my job. I worked South Carolina coming north and I worked Atlanta City coming south on trains 37 and 48. Those were the two trains I run mostly on. And then I then worked on the trains 34 and -- I worked different trains, you know what I mean. You just liked the job. One likes your job better than the other, you just transferred. When the job becomes open, you’d bid on it. If you were the senior man, you got it. It wasn’t nothing political. You just worked like -- they just had seniority kind of in most all of it.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. What type of car did you work on?
Robert Gordon: Just a regular. You mean a car?
INTERVIEWER: Uh-hmm. Just describe --
Robert Gordon: It’s a mail car. It was just a typical mail car and it had racks in it, the pouches, and it had cases in there, what you called cases to sort your mail, and it had what you called a rack to dump up the mail and then [indiscernible] pouches where they had to go. And I did have a man on the end of the car where he works parcel post and he dumped it up in sorted the big parcels up in the back of the train. And everybody was somewhere, men working on what they called a pouch rack. They picked up the pouches and dumped them and sorted the mail where it’s supposed to go. And everybody, except the ones that worked on the pouch racks, would be working sorting mail in the little boxes they just put the letters in.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. When you worked on the railways, do you remember what your starting salary was?
Robert Gordon: Not much. It was very little. It was about, I’d say, maybe $3,500 a year.

INTERVIEWER: And towards the end of being on the railway, do you remember what your ending salary was?
Robert Gordon: Oh, it was I think around $9,000.

INTERVIEWER: And for the position you occupied, do you feel as if the pay was fair?
Robert Gordon: Say that again.
INTERVIEWER: Do you think that the pay was fair for the amount of work that you did?
Robert Gordon: Oh, no, it was little. A bunch of us, I was with a bunch, we went to Washington and we had to beg for money. We paraded the Senate and the Congress to authorize our salary and we go there about once every two or three years and try and get more money and then some were very receptive and some of them weren’t so -- but the pay wasn’t bad. At that time, it was better than an average salary, I’d say. Base pay was based on the years and then that’s a lot sometimes. You get a raise from [indiscernible] he wasn’t called the postmaster, the man who was in charge of the railway system. But I’d say, what you did, you got a little allowance. When you went to Atlanta from Charlotte, you spent a day in Atlanta and they allowed you $10 I believe for food and [indiscernible] input for that day. And then on the weekends, if you had a layover, you go down on Saturday nights. You can go back to the train back on Monday and then you had what you called a layover. I think you got about 15 and something -- I can’t remember exactly how much it was. But we could get by. Back then, you could buy, get -- it wasn’t a first-class hotel but you could get one for and spend a day and a half for about a dollar half. You leave there and get there at five o’clock in the morning and you get a room about eight after they cleared them out and then you got up at three and went back to work at seven that night.

INTERVIEWER: All right. What did you typically carry with you in your grip while you were on trips?
Robert Gordon: Well, you had what you called headers, you know. You put them -- once you worked, you had headers made up for that. You make them up yourself. And you had your dress clothes and you had your gun and you had labels stuck in the boxes. And mostly and a lot of times, you would come inside and you’d have your lunch to eat, you know.

INTERVIEWER: and what did you typically eat for lunch while you’re on the train?
Robert Gordon: It was a sandwich most of the time, maybe a -- my wife, she used to make me different types otherwise you get tired of eating the same thing. And she’d mix me a ham sandwich sometimes and a chicken salad sandwich, something like that. It was just a regular little sandwich, you know, and then you have it and you take your drink. We had a little box which you put your drinks into the cooler to keep them cold. And you had to take them, when you would have a certain time, you drink or you had to keep your mail and put it in a safe and you try and get in for the next run or something. A lot of times, you just had to eat on the -- you take a bite and stick a letter and sometimes, you get a lot of mail. Sometimes, you wouldn’t get as much in short periods from one day to the next sometimes.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. What was the longest trip you worked?
Robert Gordon: Well, the longest trip I worked was from Washington D.C. We went to work at 11 o’clock in the morning and we worked ‘til about 1:30 the next day in Charlotte.
INTERVIEWER: And that’s 1:30 p.m. in Charlotte?
Robert Gordon: Yes, that would be about 1:30 so I think that’s pretty close to right.
INTERVIEWER: Okay. And did you have a family while working as an RPO clerk?
Robert Gordon: Did I have anybody in the family? No. Just me.
INTERVIEWER: Just you? You weren’t married at the time?
Robert Gordon: Oh, yes, I was married. I thought you meant was there anybody else in the family that worked with the Railway Postal Service.
INTERVIEWER: Oh, no, no. While you were working, did you have a family?
Robert Gordon: Oh yes. I had my son and two of my daughters and then when I went into the Rock Hill Post Office, I had another daughter.
INTERVIEWER: And how did you cope with leaving your family behind on these trips?
Robert Gordon: Well, they -- oh, I’ll go out one day and come back the next. I was never away more than 24 hours at a time except on certain weekends. I had to go down on a Saturday night and come back on Monday night and that was the longest time I was away from my wife and children.
INTERVIEWER: How did your family cope while you were away?
Robert Gordon: Well, my wife worked in an office for a sum and we got a maid come in and stay with the children while we were working. And they’ve done real good. We seem to get along all right. It worked pretty good. It [indiscernible] as much as we’d like but it worked out, I’ll say. [Indiscernible] on Charlotte and Washington, I had off every other week. I worked a week and off a week. And I’d go out on six o’clock on Monday night and get to Washington at 5:30 in the morning, go back to work at 11 o’clock that same morning. You only had about three or four hours sleep and you’d got to work from after that until 1:30 and you went home until six o’clock the next day. So I was home a good bit of the time.
INTERVIEWER: Okay. And what are some of your fondest memories of working on the railways?
Robert Gordon: Oh, I don’t know. You had a bunch of crew that worked together and we enjoyed it a little. We go to, you know, we had some friends. It was real good. We worked together [indiscernible] and two or three of my friends, they worked on the railway, we would go down to the beach and [indiscernible]. I got a man with [indiscernible] and I finished it, me and my friends finished it up. [Indiscernible] and they’d go [indiscernible]. We had a good relationship with the rest of the crew.
INTERVIEWER: And do you keep in touch with any of the former clerks?
Robert Gordon: I did but just about one or two [indiscernible] but just about all the rest of them are dead so that eliminated that.
INTERVIEWER: Did the Post Office ever issue you anything for either your safety or for the position?
Robert Gordon: Issue you? What do you mean?
INTERVIEWER: Did the Post Office ever give you anything for --
Robert Gordon: They gave me a -- I have, I got a couple of hundred dollars each time for superior performances better than -- they did give them out every once and a while to some and I got two.
INTERVIEWER: Okay. And other than a revolver, did they ever issue you anything other than --
Robert Gordon: A badge.
INTERVIEWER: A badge? Okay.
Robert Gordon: And that’s all I can think of. Oh, they did give us a pass to ride the trains. We did get that. And we could use that anytime we wanted to. We could get on the train and ride for free.
INTERVIEWER: Okay. Were there ever times of danger while on the railway?
Robert Gordon: Well, when you were making exchanges from one, well, you know, [indiscernible] you throw all the pouch and catch one [indiscernible] catch one [indiscernible] you got to be awful careful about that or sometimes, the thing wasn’t put on all right and it flies back at you and you have to be awful about getting hit. But other than that, I don’t think there was any danger. We never was in a, we never was in a train wreck. And they had some train wrecks and we had to go around but I never was in one of those.
INTERVIEWER: Okay. Did you ever hear of anybody experiencing anything dangerous on your line or on any other line?
Robert Gordon: No, I didn’t. No, I didn’t hear anything about that because, like I said, I never was on a train wreck. They had some, not mail cars, but freight cars and stuff had wrecks and we had to bypass ‘em and go around another way sometimes. We would have to go to Columbia back around and get past the wreckage. Sometimes, we’d be 10, 12 hours late getting into either Charlotte or Atlanta. But we had bypassed the train wreck and you had to go on a different route and all that. It took a little while sometimes. Sometimes, I mean it only took a couple of hours late and then you get in. It was like that, not all the time, once in a while. I think about three times is all in all the time I was there.

INTERVIEWER: All right. Did you face or witness any type of racial discrimination while you were a clerk?
Robert Gordon: No. No, we all worked together. There were some who [indiscernible] like the whites. Some were better [indiscernible] the whole car [indiscernible] you know what I mean. They were all, had their assignment to do and some of them were better liked, us, and some were better than others, you know what I mean. And [indiscernible] I didn’t see no racial discrimination. We all [indiscernible] together.

Robert Gordon: But no, that’s one thing I’ve never seen while I was working in the Mail Service.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. And did you know of anybody who experienced any type of racial discrimination while on the rail cars?
Robert Gordon: No, I never -- I think everybody had their job to do and you didn’t have time to look around. You’d do the [indiscernible] and there were a lot of times I’d help if I got caught up with the mail, I’d help white or black and it’s always the same way. I mean everybody worked together on the mail cars. I never [indiscernible]. I had good experience with everybody.

INTERVIEWER: Well, that’s good to hear. All right. Were you a member of any type of outside organization, such as a unions or clubs, that were affiliated with the railway postal clerks?
Robert Gordon: No. I sure wasn’t.

INTERVIEWER: And was there anything that you wanted to change about your position?
Robert Gordon: No. Everything there, I liked my job on the train. I liked it better than I did in the stationary. It was more -- everybody worked together and in the Post Office, it’s a little different, and you get up above and it’s a lot different. So I enjoyed my job as a postal clerk and like I said, [indiscernible] trains because everybody had their own job to do and everybody worked together. If you got caught up, you’d help somebody else get their mail caught up.

INTERVIEWER: And what do you miss the most about being a Railway Post Office clerk?
Robert Gordon: Well, I guess the people you worked with, you know what I mean. A lot of them, we were good friends of each other and I think the whole crew done that, just came and work together and I enjoyed it.

INTERVIEWER: And for the last question, is there any other information you would like to make accessible to researchers, any interesting or funny stories that you would like to share?
Robert Gordon: No, I can’t remember any. When you get 77, your mind don’t, well, I’ll be 88 the 2nd of July. But my mind is slipping just a little bit. Not much, just a little bit. And I enjoyed my postal work. Like I said, I would have loved to stay on as long as I could but when they cut the trains off, I had to find me a stationary place. I could have went to Charlotte and worked in Charlotte but I was lucky that the postmaster in Rock Hill here where I lived, he -- I worked up there a couple of Christmases when my time was off and I worked in the Rock Hill Post Office just to help them out and he kind of liked my work so he told me he’d put me in there. And like I said, I stayed there and he went on up to be assistant postmaster general, one of them. But like I said, I just enjoyed the service on the postal rail. You feel like you’re doing and accomplishing something when you’ve mailed a letter in Atlanta at five o’clock in the afternoon and it would get to Washington in time to be delivered the next day. And a lot of it, you’d have it a lot faster in the Mail Service than you have now. Of course, it’s more expensive. They couldn’t afford to keep going because everything got higher and they couldn’t afford it, I understand. But that’s about the best of it. I can’t think of anything else.