Alexander Patterson Interview Transcript

INTERVIEWER: Could you please state your name and affiliation with the Railway Mail Service?
Alexander Patterson: Well, Alexander Patterson Jr., and I was with the mail service -- oh, I've got to think now. It was over 20 years.
INTERVIEWER: What position did you have with the rail service?
Alexander Patterson: Position I was a mail clerk.
INTERVIEWER: What rail lines did you work and which locations did you travel between?
Alexander Patterson: Oh, I was a sub, see. I've been on many of them. I've been on the [indiscernible] the last one was the Pitts and Chicago. I ran -- this was when I was a sub. Back when I subbed, I ran just about as many as I could. So I do officially [sounds like]. I ran on the -- it’s been a long time, you see? This is Chicago and Minneapolis. I knew I should have caught them on tape because I had this --
INTERVIEWER: Just remember a couple of them, that's all right, you don’t have to remember all of them.
Alexander Patterson: Okay, all right then, I ran on the Pitts and Chicago, Chicago to Pittsburgh, it was a 15-footer from Chicago. Well, I went from Chicago to Cleveland, I know but outside, I'm thinking it was -- Arizona went in there. That's why I can’t remember, I guess. Well, we have -- I'll think of it. It was a 15-footer from -- we went to Cleveland on it, Cleveland-Chicago. No, no, Cleveland not so much of that 15-footer I ran on, and my main line was Pittsburgh, Chicago to Pittsburgh. I ran on the -- when I was subbing, so many I can’t continue now.
INTERVIEWER: Okay.
Alexander Patterson: That can show you I'm getting old, right?
INTERVIEWER: Well, we can just move on to the next question and if you randomly remember other lines we can just go back, okay?
Alexander Patterson: Okay.
INTERVIEWER: How long did you serve as a Railway Post Office clerk? I know you said that it was approximately 20 years but do you remember the years that you ran?
Alexander Patterson: I ran from -- yeah, that’s I think -- I would say right off the top of my -- I will say at least -- now you are thinking -- I remember the ones that I ran on or [indiscernible]
INTERVIEWER: No, the dates.
Alexander Patterson: Oh, the dates?
INTERVIEWER: Yeah, from like 1950-something to 1960-something. Just --
Alexander Patterson: Oh, okay. From 1950 -- George [phonetic], how many years I’ve been out there?
George: [Indiscernible]
Alexander Patterson: [Indiscernible]
George: From '58 to [indiscernible] that long ago.
Alexander Patterson: I went up there on -- well, let’s say at least 15 years, I believe longer but I can’t really remember. But I know it was in the -- it was most in the -- when did I go out there, '58?
George: [Indiscernible] like Michael was born [indiscernible].
Alexander Patterson: That’s probably '56, I went out there. When they closed it down, when was that, '87? Fifty eight -- I’ll have to check my -- I’ll say some 50 -- you know, I wish I had kept and saved it. Now, really I could tell you right off every one that I ran on, but right now I’m just -- well, we [indiscernible] -- I mean I’d say for at least about 15 years now. I’ll put it at that or more.
INTERVIEWER: Okay. Now, did you serve until they shutdown the railways?
Alexander Patterson: Right.
INTERVIEWER: Okay. So, it’s probably from -- you said 1956 to about 1966-67?
Alexander Patterson: Something like -- something in that order.
INTERVIEWER: Okay. Why did you want to become a railway post office clerk?
Alexander Patterson: Well, I just got out of the service; I had to get me a job. I had just gotten out of the service so I -- well, I started in the main post office then I transferred to the railroad service. So we’re looking at -- oh, my gosh. I was up -- after the [indiscernible] not off the top of my head. I would have stopped about 15 years, could be a little longer. So I -- you know, you put me in a bad -- if I had known this is going to part of the quiz, I could have had all the writings with me, in front of you.
INTERVIEWER: It’s all right. Do you remember the types of jobs you had on the railcars?
Alexander Patterson: Oh, yes. Well, I did a little of everything. I was in registered mail, pouch rack [sounds like] which is the normal letters going to different places. I just about did -- I did just about everything that was assigned to me at that time and there were several positions that I had. Like some days I might have the pouch rack. Some zip I might have the big boxes that we call -- and the registered mail and -- let's see, what else? Oh, and I would be on some trains, I would have to throw and check. That means I had to throw the mail off and check it about the same time. You throw and check. That's what we called it.

And the registered mail, big boxes, letter mails, I thought that one day I wouldn't have to see the letter mails and stuff out in one of the trains I ran on besides the fifth in Chicago. That was my main line but whenever I -- I would just gung ho, you know, in a sense come about [indiscernible] take attempt at a trial. I'm not brave, I just succeeded because I got -- I never got a low mark, you know. Like if I'd be off and then control [indiscernible], well come on, you know. That's how I progressed I guess pretty fast out then on the road because I just was a railroad [indiscernible] I guess if you want to call it.

I met some guys and you know, that I would help, you know, the best I could, you know. You see some new guys will come out even regular clerks and you know, if I'll be there and ran on such and such a train and I know what I'd operate, I could show him and how to throw and check. That's throwing mail off and checking about the same time.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. For any of the jobs that you did, could you describe a typical day on the railcar starting from when you first went into work, what you did throughout the day and then, you know, coming back?

Alexander Patterson: Right. Okay, well, we first would get our grip which is what would be a little suitcase now, so we would change into a regular mail -- the clothes we're going to work in plus we have our other clothes that we would hang up but we -- when we get to the next station we were going to get off. And we, you know, we dress and -- well, we all -- we would take our mail, everybody would take turn and help take in some parts of the mail, you know, just to get setup. So once we get started, we'll be right on our way. Everyone has to -- assignment. Even if you didn't -- wasn't assigned an assignment, well, we would pitch in and help each other. And we would hang the bags for mail -- letter mail that is and registered and then for the big boxes as we call them. And that's about what I can tell you everything that we did.

INTERVIEWER: All right. And out of the jobs that you worked, was there any one that you liked the best?

Alexander Patterson: Oh, yeah, well, I could do them all but the best one that I would say was the pouch rack where you have to get all the mails and stuff. Your pouch was where you would do a lot of local mail and mail that you want to get home quick or mail that you were going to take into the terminal to pass it on to the next crew that was going to get home, going like from Cleveland -- from Chicago to Pittsburgh, okay. When you get to Pittsburgh, the Pittsburgh crew going to New York, we have everything set up for them before then and the pouches and whatnot, so they didn't have too much difficulty. It was time consuming.

So what we were doing is we work what we could up and then some of the mail that we couldn't work up, we return it to the Pittsburgh Post Office and then would rework it. We would have [indiscernible] things going to Philadelphia and whatnot so we can get it home as quick as possible. That's about all I came to see, you know. But I didn't mind any of it. I could just not brag. I could just about work just about anything. After a year's time, I could just about know which way the mail was going, how it should be, including what types of sacks or [indiscernible] it should go in and I just enjoyed it.

INTERVIEWER: And was there anything that you ever disliked about any of the jobs that you did?

Alexander Patterson: No, I never refused any job. I liked them all because I wanted to learn. If you don't get on and learn more in the job, you'll be in trouble then because you don't know when somebody is not going to come along, you know when they're going to get sick or anything so I just volunteer to learn as much as I could as quick as I could.

INTERVIEWER: And what type of car did you work on?

Alexander Patterson: Well, I was on a 30-footer, 15-footer and when we double up. Well, that's about it. A mail you had pouches to do you had big boxes to do, you had letters to do. And I just learned all I could and as quick as I could. So if anybody didn't show up, I knew what to do.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, and now, you are the first person who has ever told me that they worked on a 15-footer car, so what types of like, what was on a 15-footer car that may not have been on the 30-footer?

Alexander Patterson: Well, one thing you had more room on a 30-footer. Fifteen-footer it was just about everything was right together. You had to work with the mail. If you get registered mail, you had to work that,
you get quite a bit of mail and you had to take that in. The big boxes or whatever you had to take that mail on and
try to -- you had to be kind of fast because it didn’t take long for you to get to where you were going.
I like the 15-footer but you had to do everything. And then you had a little time before you put it through another
station. They’d give you -- pass mail along to you. You take it all the way into Cleveland. I enjoyed working on a
15-footer. You’re only on that by yourself, though, no help, and you have to do everything as quick as possible.
One day, I couldn’t get it all, but I was sent right into the Cleveland Post Office because I [indiscernible]. I never
turned any job down if I was called. I did the best I could which I never got no complaints because I was doing
something right and I enjoyed it.
INTERVIEWER: When you worked on the railways do you remember what your starting salary was?
Alexander Patterson: Oh, now you’re really -- it wasn’t too much I’ll say. I don’t know what the -- but I do know it
wasn’t too much but after a while it’s -- you go ride and it became more and more but starting off, it was so low I
didn’t think I would ever progress in there. But once we started getting raises, I can’t complain because we
wouldn’t have no raise but, however, I look at it this way; it was a job and my family needs it. But it wasn’t like
today now I thought it was then. So we progressed but --
INTERVIEWER: And from what you do remember about the pay, do you think it was fair for the amount of work
you had to do?
Alexander Patterson: Now that’s a very good question. Most people will say no it wasn’t but I -- my theory is I was
making a living where my family could progress. It wasn’t bad but we need it. Okay?
INTERVIEWER: And what did you typically carry with you in your grip while you were on trips?
Alexander Patterson: What would I take? Oh, mostly we would take canned foods. You know, you’re either
getting lunch where you go but not supper but going on the road, we could carry cans, not quite a bit of canned
goods so it wouldn’t spoil but I really enjoyed it. But that’s not the most I can say on that but sometimes at some
places you could jump off the train and get some food but you’re taking a chance because if that train pulls out
then you’re left there. But I would take food from home first and what I get on the road, it will help me till we got
to the next stop and then I would eat the regular stuff. But most guys carried canned foods, something that
wouldn’t spoil right away.
INTERVIEWER: Okay. And what else did you carry with you in your grip?
Alexander Patterson: We had change of clothes and whatnot and -- let’s see, change of clothes. We carried a
revolver, a gun at that time. It was just something I guess for protection and I carried my clothes in there, you
know, change of clothes until we can get back home.
INTERVIEWER: What was the longest trip you worked?
Alexander Patterson: The longest one, let’s see, Minneapolis, no. I made several -- I got to think now which one
was the longest. Some of the shifts we had a turnaround. That’s what I’m having to see because when you had a
turnaround, you’d go so far and you get off and come back towards Chicago. But I’m trying to think which one is
the longest. I guess -- now that’s a good question, which one was that? I just want to -- I can’t remember, I think
the trip from Chicago, either that or -- let’s see. I would say -- now you’re really -- which was the longest trip? I’d
say -- there’s only a -- that’s a very good question, what was the longest one at one time? I would say -- oh, let me
see. I really can’t say now but I know it was one trip, yeah, Marion, I think it was. I believe it was one of those just
on the Marion, it was east to west. Let me see, east to west, north to south there had to be an east to west trip.
So I’ll just say the lake -- no, let’s see. I’m trying to think of the one go to New York. I would say that right off
Marion. Marion -- I’ll think again. Most of them, probably almost the same. Well, I’ll say -- not the Marion, the --
is it Marion or --? I can’t really say it because most of them are probably in the same category. Well, I’ll just say it
seems to me the thing call in Pittsburgh. That with Pittsburgh. I’ll say those two.
INTERVIEWER: St. Paul to Pittsburgh?
Alexander Patterson: In Pennsylvania.
INTERVIEWER: Okay. And do you remember how many hours that took?
Alexander Patterson: Oh, that’s another good -- because -- if I ran on the 50, of course it was on the fast train, we
could --
INTERVIEWER: It could just be a rough estimate. It does not have to be exact.
Alexander Patterson: Oh, I would say it’s just the -- the quickest or the slowest? I would say the Pennsylvania was
because we made two stops on that from Chicago to Pittsburgh and on the [indiscernible], let me see -- Chicago to
Marion and Omaha, that was a pretty long -- you can tell I don’t --
INTERVIEWER: We can move on to the next question and then if all of a sudden you do, we can always go back, okay?
Alexander Patterson: Okay.
INTERVIEWER: While you were working as a Railway Post Office clerk, did you have a family?
Alexander Patterson: Yes. Yes, I did.
INTERVIEWER: How did you cope with leaving your family behind on long trips?
Alexander Patterson: Oh, well, after the -- we did -- everyone got used to it. They know what day I have to go and when I’ll be back so we adjusted to it very well, I would say.
INTERVIEWER: How did your family cope while you were away?
Alexander Patterson: Well, as though their mother would tell them and say, well, you probably got to go. We got to eat so we all have to hold up together as if he was here with us and now we never had no problems with his travel. But the time when it’s time to go, everybody will be [indiscernible]. Well, we got to eat. I guess I got to work somewhere so they adjusted to it very well.
INTERVIEWER: Okay. And what are some of your fondest memories of working on the railroad route?
Alexander Patterson: Oh, let me see. I got to see different places that I might not have gotten to see if I wasn’t on the road. That’s the only thing I can see, you know, after once adjusting myself to the road and knowing when I had to leave and when I had -- and when I would be back, sometimes we’d have to turn right back around, you know, come home for -- especially if the train was late and we had to be back on the train at a certain time. Now that’s kind of -- because you’re sleeping but other than that, yeah, we adjusted really well to it.
INTERVIEWER: Do you still keep in touch with any of the former clerks?
Alexander Patterson: Oh, yes. Ted and I, I keep up with him and he keeps up with me and I had another one I was keeping up with but he passed. So it’s just really me and Ted really keeps up with each other.
INTERVIEWER: Earlier, you said that the post office issued you a revolver. Did the post office issue you anything else for the job or for your safety?
Alexander Patterson: No, not that I can recall but that’s mostly with that revolver. I guess if you are to run into a problem of someone trying to rob the train, that’s one reason, plus if you’re working in registered mail, you needed that revolver because you never know who might step on the train. But, no, I really didn’t have no problem like that but because at that time many people knew that a postal clerk was officially carrying a gun just to protect the mail. That’s wild, wild, west but it wasn’t that. It was just to protect the mail and the registered mail and other mail, things going through, that was being sent through the post office, through such and such a phrase. Other than that, I really -- I have to tell you when you think about it, nothing like that but you’ll never really would know. Anything can happen because I’m --
INTERVIEWER: Were you ever in a dangerous or a bad situation while on the railway?
Alexander Patterson: One time and that was the first day I went out on that 15-footer. You know, you got turn and stop, you just stop and then people would -- I didn’t really have no -- but some things wasn’t right but after I leave the [indiscernible] station I have to get everybody, especially when I was going on that 15-footer because the way the train went and right after we -- I got used to it and I could see -- there’s always no clarity and you see but you’ll never know they know you have a gun but you don’t know who else would have a gun. But other than that, that’s the only thing that would bother a person especially if you’re on that by yourself because on those 15-footers, you’re on there by yourself and you never know, say, if the train will stop and [indiscernible] time what might happen. You throw it all out in there. And that’s the only thing but other than that, I had no problems.
INTERVIEWER: Did you ever hear of anybody experiencing anything dangerous on your line or on a different line?
Alexander Patterson: On my line -- what was the last line?
INTERVIEWER: Or on a different line.
Alexander Patterson: Or on the front line. No, I never ran into a situation like that. I don’t know. I’ve heard some of the guys did but I never had no -- just that one on that 15-footer. That’s the only time I had any problems. Other than that, I had no problems.
INTERVIEWER: Okay. Did you ever face or witness any type of racial discrimination while you were a Railway Post Office clerk?
Alexander Patterson: Yes and no because sometimes you figure that if you [indiscernible] mail or registered mail and somebody else get on that and say, well, I can’t do that, well, I can’t do it. I really didn’t have too big a problem. Just like I said, the only problem I really had was when I was on that 15-footer. Other than that, I had no qualms with anyone.
INTERVIEWER: Did you know of anybody who did experience racial discrimination while on the railcars?
Alexander Patterson: I've heard some guys said it but I never was on one of those things when that happened. I can't say it didn't but I never ran into no problems like that.
INTERVIEWER: Okay. And would you care to tell us what you did hear?
Alexander Patterson: Would I care about that -- say that again.
INTERVIEWER: Could you just tell us what you did hear?
Alexander Patterson: Oh, when I was on that 15-footer, is that what you're saying?
INTERVIEWER: Yes.
Alexander Patterson: Oh, some people came down and they want to know why I was on there and I shouldn't be on that train and if I come back on it again there's no -- and such, and such a thing but I didn't let it bother me. Everywhere, doing that same thing, off and on, someone would say something. But I really didn't have too much, other than that particular -- especially the first night because they were used to seeing -- it is like [indiscernible]. They never saw it like I did. They did not. Something like [indiscernible] somebody is coming through there with the mail alone. I just checked it off. I was called a few names but I guess that's right. Other than that, you know, that's the only problem I had and I didn't let it bother me. [Indiscernible] other than that, that's the job. That's one incident but really I had problems in there. But after the next trip, the next time I came to that, no problem. Other than that, that's really only incident I had.
INTERVIEWER: Okay. Were you a member of any types of outside organizations such as a union or club that was affiliated with the railway postal clerks?
Alexander Patterson: No.
INTERVIEWER: Was there anything that you ever wanted to change about your position with the Railway Post Office?
Alexander Patterson: Yeah, I wish I was out there [indiscernible] but other than that, it was a living. I always looked at it this way. Whatever happens, happens, but as long as I could put food on the table for my family that's the only thing that matters.
INTERVIEWER: What do you miss the most about being a Railway Post Office clerk?
Alexander Patterson: Oh, well, I missed that throwing and checking three or five times and checking them at the same time. You know what I mean? Other than that, I enjoyed the railroad. I'll put it that way. There were no problems.
INTERVIEWER: For the last question, is there any other information that you would like to make accessible to researchers about your experience or position with the Railway Post Office? This can be anything like an interesting fact or funny story that you would like to share?
Alexander Patterson: Oh, well, the only thing I would like to share is I had a -- I'm going to go back to history. I had a job. My family I wouldn't say didn't get hungry, but we survived. Other than that, when the railroad was closed, but that was my -- having something my kids could eat or my family needs and --
INTERVIEWER: Now, was there like anything interesting that you saw on any of your trips that you would like to tell?
Alexander Patterson: No. Is there anything that I saw off the train or on the train?
INTERVIEWER: Either.
Alexander Patterson: No, I don't think so because anyway, at that time anyway you go there was always somebody swearing up and down in one way or the other. I really didn't have no qualms but, because I'll put it this way, I had gotten out of the service and I was happy that I had a job. That's --
INTERVIEWER: Okay.
Alexander Patterson: When the [indiscernible] seeing at that time. Other than that, I was really satisfied.
INTERVIEWER: All right. Well, if that's all that you have to say about your position with the Railway Mail Service that concludes our interview. So --
Alexander Patterson: That concludes -- well, I don't know maybe -- are you grading me on this?
INTERVIEWER: No.
Alexander Patterson: I enjoyed this, being on the road because I was making a living so much [indiscernible] and we owe to that. That's about all I could say, you know. But I miss some of the guys, you know, joking around. I miss some of these fellows who were there. That's the only thing I really -- because I always been a person like -- I always see that everybody is the same. And then as best as I could, I put it that way. But other than that, I can't complain.