John Robertson Interview Transcript

John Robertson: My name is John Robertson. I went into the mail service a couple of months after I got out of the army, and I spent about a 37- or 38-year career with the postal service. I retired from the government with 40 years of government service in 1980. So I've been retired since 1980.

INTERVIEWER: And were you a regular or a sub on the Railway Mail Service?
John Robertson: During the days of the Railway Mail Service, I was a substitute.

INTERVIEWER: And which rail line did you work on and which locations did you travel between?
John Robertson: Well, the couple of years that I was substituting, I was all over the state of Florida, on the seaboard, coastline, what have you. I forgot what the rest of the question was.

INTERVIEWER: The cities that you travelled between?
John Robertson: Well, it was all over the state of Florida.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever travel outside of Florida?
John Robertson: No.

INTERVIEWER: And how long did you serve as a railway post office clerk?
John Robertson: I think I said a couple of years I was substituting and then I went as a regular clerk out at the airport airmail field.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember which years you served as railway post office clerk?
John Robertson: Well, let's see. I came out of the army -- let's see. D-day was '44, right?

INTERVIEWER: What years you served as a railway post office clerk?
John Robertson: '46 and '47, I guess. Two years.

INTERVIEWER: And what types of jobs did you work while on the railcars?
John Robertson: Well, I just did what you had to do in the mail car, just doing what had to be done, working parcel posts, flats, letters, whatever.

INTERVIEWER: And for any one of the jobs that you did on the railcars, could you describe a typical day for me?
John Robertson: Well, not really. I mean, they were all about the same. You go to work and you get lined up, you get the mail in from outside, you dumped it up in a bucket and start throwing it off here, there, and everywhere, and that's about the story. I don't mean to be so blunt but there isn't much to describe what you're doing there. You're just going through a sack of mail and separating to where you're heading, what part of town or what part of the state you're going to.

INTERVIEWER: And was there any one position that you liked doing the most?
John Robertson: You mean in my career?

INTERVIEWER: As a railway post office clerk? Like, was there any one job that you just loved doing more than the others?
John Robertson: No. I just enjoyed the work.

INTERVIEWER: And did you ever dislike any of your jobs on the railway?
John Robertson: No, I was very happy with my job and what I was doing and glad to do it. That’s why I stayed with it so long.

INTERVIEWER: And what type of rail car did you work on?
John Robertson: I don’t know what you mean by that. I thought all the RPO cars were the same.

INTERVIEWER: Well, was there a specific length that you worked on the most? A lot of the former clerks have said that they worked on the 60-foot cars more often than the 30-foot cars, and we even have some people who said that they worked on the 15-foot cars for their career?
John Robertson: I could not tell you that. I don’t know. It’s not in my itinerary.

INTERVIEWER: And when you worked on the railways, do you remember what your starting salary was?
John Robertson: I have no idea what I was making.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that the pay was fair for the amount of work that you had to do?
John Robertson: Yes. Back then we had no complaints about the salary. I’ve got $1,440 annual salary in my mind but I can’t picture what -- I think that was when I was working at the FBI in Washington when I graduated out of high school, that’s what it was. My salary then was $1,440 annual salary. But that was my first job out of high school, I was working as a clerk at the FBI in Washington, D.C. And then I went into the army, came out of the army and that’s when I had my couple of years substituting in the Railway Mail Service then.

INTERVIEWER: And what did you typically carry with you in your grip while you were on trips?
John Robertson: I was just carrying whatever it took to get by as a meal. If I wasn’t going to go where the crew would go to eat, then I’d have to have sandwiches or something. I would just be prepared with my sandwich and sweet roll or whatever it was like a candy bar. But that was no big deal.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever carry with you an extra change of clothes?
John Robertson: No. I didn’t have that occasion in my substituting.

INTERVIEWER: What was the longest trip you ever worked?
John Robertson: That’s too far ago. I couldn’t say. I just substituted all over the state of Florida, that’s all I know, but it was just a day trip or a night trip on the train from here to Pensacola or here to Miami or wherever.

INTERVIEWER: And do you by chance remember or know kind of like an estimate or an approximation of what your or like how long your average trip would take, how many hours?
John Robertson: No. I don’t think you could come up with any average figure like that. It was just whatever it took to – six or eight hours of train ride was basically what they all were, I think, or something like that.

INTERVIEWER: And while you were working as railway post office clerk, did you have a family?
John Robertson: No. That was before my married days.

INTERVIEWER: What are some of your fondest memories of working on the railroads?
John Robertson: I hadn’t really given it any thought as to what memories are working on the railroad. It was just something I did to make a living and that was -- I can’t really picture that as anything much. Sorry about that.

INTERVIEWER: That’s okay. Do you still keep in touch with any of the former clerks that you worked with?
John Robertson: No. I’m pretty much out of touch. We do have -- there’s a half a dozen of us that have met every other month or so for several years and I had to turn down an invitation this past week. It was four of us who were going to meet but then I came up with a doctor’s appointment at the same time as the luncheon so I had to turn down the luncheon so there was only three of them there, but there would’ve been four of us and we were all RPO clerks back in those days, but I missed being with them the other day.

INTERVIEWER: Did the post office ever issue you anything for your safety or for your position as a railway post office clerk?
John Robertson: I have no idea.

INTERVIEWER: And were there ever times of danger while you were working on the railroad?
John Robertson: No. I don’t have any memories of any exciting event.

INTERVIEWER: But no memories of being in danger on the railway?
John Robertson: No, no.
INTERVIEWER: Do you remember if you were ever put into a bad situation?
John Robertson: If I what?
INTERVIEWER: If you were ever put into a bad situation?
John Robertson: My memory doesn't serve me that well. I don't remember anything, though. Nothing comes to mind.
INTERVIEWER: And did you ever hear of anybody who did experience something dangerous or put into a bad situation?
John Robertson: No. I don't have any idea of anything like that.
INTERVIEWER: Did you ever face or witness any type of racial discrimination as a railway post office clerk?
John Robertson: No.
INTERVIEWER: Did you ever hear of anybody who did experience racial discrimination on the railcars?
John Robertson: No, no.
INTERVIEWER: Were you a member of any type of outside organization such as a union or club that was affiliated with the railway postal clerks?
John Robertson: Well, I was a member of the union, whatever that did or whatever it was. Everybody was a member of the union but that was just part of the job, being a union member. Can't think what the name of it was.
INTERVIEWER: And were you active with the union?
John Robertson: No. I was just one of those inactive members on the membership.
INTERVIEWER: Was there anything that you ever wanted to change about your position?
John Robertson: Nope, I was satisfied with the way things were going.
INTERVIEWER: And what do you miss the most about being a railway post office clerk?
John Robertson: At my age, I don't miss anything. I don't mean to be smart answered but I was happy in my job, I enjoyed my job but I have had a good retirement, I've enjoyed that, but I'm ready to go anytime to meet My Maker now. At 85 years old and the way the country's going and I mean downhill that's going, I don't have any interest in being around with the way the country's going, I don't have any interest in it at all. Sorry. That's just my attitude.
INTERVIEWER: No worries. And then 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? And this can be just any small tidbits that you remember.
John Robertson: No. It was just an interesting experience running back and forth all over the state and meeting people and seeing the scenery and that kind of stuff, but that was just a small part of my growing up and I was very young at that time when I was doing it. But then I went out and quit my substituing on the road and went out to the airport and worked out there, made supervisor and worked my way into being quality control officer. I had my last four years in my postal service, I was quality control officer and I enjoyed that immensely. But I went to the post master when I was 58 years old, had 40 years of government service, I went to Mr. [indiscernible] and I said, “Boss man, I’m ready to retire.” And he looked at me and said, “You’re just a young fellow, John.” I said, “Well, I’m 58 and I’ve got my 40 years government service, but the main reason is I don’t have a hunting license.” And he looked at me like, “Am I talking to an idiot or just a plain moron?” And I said, “Yes, two years I’ve been quality control officer, now for four years and that’s just two years ago they put a computer in my job,” and I said, “I had to sit there at my desk and hunt here and pick there and hunt here and pick there.” I said, “I didn’t have typing in high school so I didn’t know anything about a computer.” So I said, “I think it’s time to let somebody else do the hunting and picking and I’ll move on down the road,” and he looked at me and he said, “Well, maybe you’re right.” So that’s how I retired out of the postal service. Anyway, that’s not part of your story, is it?
INTERVIEWER: Not really but that’s okay. But what made your job such an interesting experience?
John Robertson: How’d you say that now?
INTERVIEWER: What made your position with the railway post office so interesting?
John Robertson: Other than to say I just enjoyed my work and I enjoyed the people I worked with, and that’s the whole thing. I just enjoyed doing the work, that’s the reason I stayed with it and kept working my way up. I just enjoyed the work.