Carl Robinson Interview Transcript

INTERVIEWER: Could you please state your name and affiliation with the Railway Mail Service?
Carl Robinson: My main affiliation was it?
INTERVIEWER: The position that you occupied.
Carl Robinson: Oh, I was just a clerk on the Washington-Cincinnati RPO.
INTERVIEWER: And then your full name as well.
Carl Robinson: Carl W. Robinson.
INTERVIEWER: What rail line did you work on and which location did you travel between?
Carl Robinson: Well, the one I was on most of the time was C&O from Washington to Cincinnati, the Wash & Cinn. I was on the west division from Cincinnati to Hinton, West Virginia and from time to time I ran on some other lines.
INTERVIEWER: What other lines did you run on?
Carl Robinson: I ran on the Park and Hunt HPO that is from Parkersburg, West Virginia to Huntington, West Virginia, and I ran on the Fort Wayne and Cincinnati HPO that ran from Fort Wayne, Indiana to Cincinnati. I ran on the Cincinnati to St. Louise a couple of times and I went to Chicago and Cincinnati a couple of times, and I went on N&W from Cincinnati to Bluefield, West Virginia Sound [sounds like]. I guess that’s it.
INTERVIEWER: How long did you serve as a Railway Post Office clerk?
Carl Robinson: Well, about nine-and-a-half years I guess.
INTERVIEWER: Do you know which years?
Carl Robinson: Well, it would have been from 1958 and sometime in 1967, I believe it was.
INTERVIEWER: Why did you want to become a post office clerk?
Carl Robinson: Well, it sounded very interesting to me.
INTERVIEWER: What part of it sounded interesting?
Carl Robinson: Well, just what it was, sorting mail on a train. It just sounded neat.
INTERVIEWER: What kind of job did you have on the railcars?
Carl Robinson: Well, I worked all of them really. I mean when I was a regular, I was mainly the register clerk for four or five years. The rest of the time I was a substitute and you just took other people’s place when they were off.
INTERVIEWER: Could you describe a typical day on the railcar?
Carl Robinson: The typical day was we worked mail on the mail car.
INTERVIEWER: I know, but for any one of the positions that you worked, just kind of walk me through a day going from when you started the task you did until you got off that night.
Carl Robinson: Well, I usually went to work a couple of hours before the train left town. You hung your pouches and sacks and you took on the mail and then you started processing the mail. Sometimes another train arrives and gives you more mail while you’re waiting. Then like this kind of weather, you’re just glad the train started moving because railcars sit in the hot sun all day and it was very hot and of course there was no air-conditioning, and we took off down the road. Sometimes when we got to Maysville, Kentucky on some occasions you get off and get your sandwich or something. You had to order in a day before though or the trip before because there wasn’t time. Then we went on down the road and stop at Portsmouth, Ashland, Huntington and each time you put out mail and or you switch on mail and you process again. You do this all the way through and when you finished, you emptied everything you had done and pouches and sacks and hung it and move for the crew to get on in Hinton. And then they took over and you transferred your registers and everything and of course you know the mail was still on the car. They would have to put off our work individually and of course at that time you got an awful lot of newspapers. But I guess I got off, my main time as a regular I got off at one o’clock and I got back on the train about 7 o’clock in the morning and came back and did the same thing on the way back. On the way back you have a few places where you caught the mail that was hanging on whatever you call it pole, and you threw off mail that was for them. Of course, on some trains you got a whole lot more of that than you did other trains. Mainly the trains that ran on the daytime did that.
Some of the early morning runs, like on Sunday morning, you had a lot of Sunday papers. There was so many and when you had to throw them off that you have to put a couple of sacks down on the floor and then stack the sacks of newspaper on them and then lift up the whole thing so you can get them all out in time. We couldn’t throw one
at a time off you had to put them all in one time otherwise it will be all the way down the road. That’s about it I guess.

INTERVIEWER: Was there any one position that you liked doing the most?
Carl Robinson: One position?
INTERVIEWER: Yeah, was there any one position that you liked doing the most?
Carl Robinson: Well, I like the registered clerk job myself. There was a little more writing into it. It wasn’t all just sticking letters, or throwing newspapers and parcels, working on the bundles of mails and the pouches off the rack. It was a mixture so I kind of liked that more so than just standing at the case most of the way.

INTERVIEWER: Out of any of the jobs that you worked, was there anything that you every disliked?
Carl Robinson: No, not really. No, I kind of liked pretty much the whole job.

INTERVIEWER: What type of car did you work on?
Carl Robinson: Just the standard 60 foot.

INTERVIEWER: When you worked on the railways do you remember what your starting salary was?
Carl Robinson: I believe it was a $1.76.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember what your ending salary was for the railcars.
Carl Robinson: No, I can’t say to that I do. It was probably somewhere around $6,500 a year.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that the pay was fair for the amount of work that you had to do?
Carl Robinson: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: What did you typically carry with you in your grip while you’re on trips?
Carl Robinson: Well, I bring my lunch and a change of clothing and the pouch labels or sack labels if I was on that type of job and my little tiny P38, my little .38 gun. That was probably it.

INTERVIEWER: What was the longest trip you ever worked?
Carl Robinson: A few times probably without counting the layover. If you count that I was gone from home approximately 48 hours, but that was because of the snow slide or something like that or a wreck; in other words, you couldn’t get back. The normal time was like, the main one I worked on most of the time I was only gone 24 hours. The other train that I worked I was gone probably 32 hours.

INTERVIEWER: While you were a Railway Post Office clerk, did you have a family?
Carl Robinson: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: How did you cope with leaving your family behind on long trips?
Carl Robinson: Well, I really didn’t think much about it to tell you the truth. I mean it was the job I had when I got married and it was pretty much accepted. I mean there was no trouble with it.

INTERVIEWER: How did your family cope while you are away on long trip?
Carl Robinson: Well, it was really not a whole different from working the night shift or something else. I mean you just happen to be gone like I said, 24 hours and then I was home for 24 hours before I went back out.

INTERVIEWER: What are some of your fondest memories of working on the railways?
Carl Robinson: The best or the worst?
INTERVIEWER: Whatever you would like to say.
Carl Robinson: Well, I know some of the worst was when we didn’t have any heat. The other one was sometimes in the middle of summer it was awfully hot because the cars were made up of nothing but steel. They had a little fan and you could put your finger in the fan to stop it. It was so slow. I don’t know how, you know -- that was like the bad times, I mean those were the bad things about it.
The good things was you were a small group and you kind have pride that you wanted to get all the mail worked up that you had. In fact, you would like to get it up of a little bit of -- you’d like to get it up ahead of time and then you could take a little nap or play a couple of hands of cards before you got off over the next stop. It was just better cooperation between people you had pride in, you’re a crew. Naturally, you were glad to get off when you got off and if you had a substitute, some worked 12 or 14 years as a substitute. If you were a regular you basically work a week on and you’re off a week. You got your 80 hours in on one week so you’re off the next week which was pretty nice. Of course, a lot of people who had families, they did a side job on the week they were off. But, again, I guess that was it. I mean I enjoyed the job. I thought it was interesting, it wasn’t so monotonous.

INTERVIEWER: Do you still keep in touch with any of the former clerks?
Carl Robinson: I keep in touch with one. There aren’t too many around.

INTERVIEWER: Right.
Carl Robinson: On our particular train most of them live up in West Virginia, really, or further up in Kentucky but there wasn’t too many of them that actually lived here in Cincinnati.
INTERVIEWER: Did the post office ever issue you anything either for your safety or for the position?
Carl Robinson: Issued me anything for safety?
INTERVIEWER: Yes, or just for the job in particular.
Carl Robinson: Well, they issued me that gun. It was just a little thing. I don’t know what I would do with it if somebody was going to rob us they would have something bigger. No, I can’t say they really issued us anything.
INTERVIEWER: Were you ever in a dangerous or bad situation while on the railway?
Carl Robinson: No, I can’t say that I was. Sometimes we hit a car or something like that but it really wasn’t bad for us. I mean, it would jolt you a little bit where they made a fairly quick stop but some of the people were -- I mean there was some -- I mean not too long before my line went off, they had a big rockslide. They ended having to stay there for about a week or so until they get them out because of the slide and bring in a work crew from the railroad and they were just railroad workers. It turned the mail car like sideways on the track and it was right next to the river. I went up the other side of the river a couple of times and they were still over there. But myself, I was never in any danger.
INTERVIEWER: Are there any other stories of wrecks or bad situations that you heard about other than the rockslide?
Carl Robinson: No, not too much that I’ve heard.
INTERVIEWER: This can be anything before your time as well, like any stories that you heard of train robberies or just horrible wrecks that occurred?
Carl Robinson: The only thing I heard was a guy got up during the night then he thought the train had stopped and he thought he was getting off as normal. And I mean he stepped off the mail car and he was on a bridge, and he fell to the roadway and killed him. I mean I have no proof of it, I heard that, but I don’t know of anything. But I never heard of any robberies or anything of that nature. I heard a story about where they brought the gold and put it on Fort Knox. They shipped it in the mail car. Of course, they shipped it that way but really they had the guards and everything from the military.
INTERVIEWER: Did you ever face or witnessed any type of racial discrimination while you were a Railway Post Office clerk?
Carl Robinson: No. Basically, there was none.
INTERVIEWER: Did you ever hear of anybody who experienced racial discrimination while on the rail cars?
Carl Robinson: No.
INTERVIEWER: Were you a member of any of type of outside organization such as unions or clubs that were affiliated with the railway postal clerks?
Carl Robinson: Well, we had a little union. They have their regular little meetings just like they do today. There was a union that was just for the railway mail clerks and then when they came up we just combined them with the regular -- can’t even think of their names now. They were just a regular union for all the clerks. There’s clerk union and there is a carrier union and mail handler union. We just went into it. The guy who was in charge of it, I think he became president of an air taxi service.
INTERVIEWER: While you were a member of the union what type of things did you participate in?
Carl Robinson: I didn’t participate in too much. They had a little party once a year or whatever you call it at a park. You went and everybody got together and they had food and drinks. Then you went to a meeting and they discussed what might be a problem at that time. It was just the fact that maybe you had a hard time getting off from work because they didn’t have the help to replace you or something like that and of course we didn’t get overtime at one time. You just got time off in place of it, but you didn’t get overtime. Well, as a matter of fact you, just got straight pay for most of it, but if your train ran late you just got your regular time; you didn’t get overtime. The last little bit they finally got you overtime before the part is over your normal time.
INTERVIEWER: Was there anything that you ever wanted to change about your position?
Carl Robinson: I can’t stay that there was anything. Like I say, I kind of liked it pretty much the way it was. It would have been nice to have air-conditioning.
INTERVIEWER: And heating.
Carl Robinson: Yeah, well, we had heat but sometimes the steam would go out and then it wouldn’t be too comfortable. We’d lay sacks on the floor to try to keep it from being so cold. The air-conditioning was the hard
thing. You’re just glad to be getting moving because then you had all the doors open and you could get some air in there. When you’re sitting still in the station, there is no air and so no way of cooling the car off until you moving.

INTERVIEWER: What do you miss the most about being Railway Post Office clerk?
Carl Robinson: Well, the fact that you get your 80 hours in, in one week and get the other week off, I wish I had gotten to enjoy that more because that was kind of nice. You could do things. Well, the job that wasn’t as boring is a clerk in the post office, in the building. I guess the time off was the big thing.

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 such as interesting facts or funny stories that you would like to tell?
Carl Robinson: I can’t think of anything right off but some guy wrote a little book about it. I don’t know if you heard of that or not. It was just kind of reminiscing book. I didn’t find it all that interesting but somebody else might think it was. I heard all kinds of stories I can’t remember. There was an old story going around where somebody shipped their daughter to their grandma or something like that, sent her by mail because it was cheaper than sending her by bus or something. A few things like that but I can’t remember them off hand.