Joseph Rochelle Interview Transcript

Joseph Rochelle: My name is Joseph A. Rochelle and I was a railway mail clerk.
INTERVIEWER: And what rail lines did you work on and which locations did you travel between?
Joseph Rochelle: I traveled on the Nashville to St. Louis most of the time for 20 years plus but then also ran some to Atlanta, Georgia, Montgomery, Alabama -- I’m trying to think -- Cincinnati would be it. But most of it was Nashville to St. Louis.
INTERVIEWER: Okay. And how long did you serve as a railway post office clerk?
Joseph Rochelle: Oh, now, I’d have to think about that for a minute. Twenty-five, 30 years. I was hired on as a railway mail clerk almost immediately after I was discharged from the Air Force. If it happened today, I don’t think I could have made the job, gotten the job because, while World War II was going on, if you don’t mind me telling my little story?
INTERVIEWER: No, go ahead.
Joseph Rochelle: The Railway Mail hired ladies to take, fill the vacancies that were there because we were all in the military. After I was discharged, I heard that Railway Mail was hiring men to go to work so I went down one day to the old Nashville Post Office Terminal and Railway Mail and asked them, told them I’d like to have a job. And they took my name right then and wrote it down, made a note of it or something, and said, “Come with me.” And we went over the second floor and we were crossing the hallway to the backdoor to the old terminal and went in and the man picked up the speaker, the loudspeaker and called some lady’s name and “Come over here.” And she came over and introduced me and I don’t remember her name but she was real pleasant and he told her that “This is Rochelle. He’s just discharged and here he is taking your job.” She thanked him for the work that she had. I don’t know how long she’d been there but she left and never did come back and I went right to work and I stayed there as a temporary sub but I of course soon got the regular job later.
INTERVIEWER: And you basically answered the next question, which is why did you become a railway post office clerk? Which positions did you occupy on the rail cars?
Joseph Rochelle: Basically all of them at one time, everything from clerk-in-charge all the way down to the paper clerk on the mail car.
INTERVIEWER: Okay. And could you just elaborate a little bit more on that?
Joseph Rochelle: Well, let’s see. I’m thinking how to say it. When I went to work on the trains, the office was in Nashville, Tennessee and sometime in there, they changed the office to St. Louis, Missouri. And there was an old gentleman on the train who was injured off duty and they put me in his position. He was a clerk-in-charge and that put me clerk-in-charge and he never did come back to work in the Mail Service Post or Railway Mail and I stayed in his position for several years. I don’t remember how long. But after he retired, I stayed right on, stayed on the same train and stayed with them. Well, that’s about the way it was.
INTERVIEWER: And could you walk me through a typical day on the mail car?
Joseph Rochelle: Oh Lord, I will attempt it.
INTERVIEWER: Okay. And what position did you like the best?
Joseph Rochelle: Well, I’ll pick one day a month that was interesting. I was a register clerk which had to do with registered mail and we always had advance time to prepare the car for a run hanging pouches and the sacks and some when I worked in advanced mail. And one day of each month, for a long time, they bring with you the registered mail and you come down outside of the car, the railroad or the postal car, with two men with their little .38 caliber revolvers with 12 or 15 pouches of registered mail. And what it was was going to Fort Campbell, Kentucky. The payroll for the whole big base up there. Of course, I have no idea how much money was in it but they brought it down with their two armed guards and of course, I had my .38 and I’d take it up to Hopkinsville, Kentucky for a platoon, I guess it was, of military, coming down to meet the train to get their payroll and they all had their Tommy guns and they’d surround the whole area and they really took care of that but I was glad for them to sign me up on that trip with them. That was the biggest amount of money, I guess, is the way to say it and I knew what it was but that’s all I knew what it was. But anyway, it was the winter time and cold in the winter time, hot in summer time and no air condition, which we didn’t know what air conditioning was then, but I had a good time, not a fun time but a good -- working conditions were acceptable and I liked my job.
INTERVIEWER: And what position did you like the best?
Joseph Rochelle: Well, I tell there wasn’t a big difference out of any of the jobs on the train itself because the clerk-in-charge had his duties to work mail just like the paper clerks did. So they were all interesting jobs. I’m just
I'm glad I'm not expected to learn and pass the distribution that was required by all mail clerks, railway mail clerks. I couldn't do it now. But anyway, that was a satisfying job.

INTERVIEWER: And was there anything that you ever disliked about any of the positions you worked?
Joseph Rochelle: No, I'd never say that there was. I liked all my positions. It was all on seniority and I came out and I got the seniority assignment, choose where I wanted to be or what train I wanted on and that's what I did and I liked it. It took care of me and my family for years and years and still taking care of us. I'm not going to complain about it.

INTERVIEWER: And what type of rail car did you work on?
Joseph Rochelle: Pardon?
INTERVIEWER: What type of rail car did you work on?
Joseph Rochelle: It was just the -- let's see -- I don't remember -- 40-foot cars, I believe it was, the full length of them, the car. And also, I had a run from Nashville to Evansville, Indiana on a 30-foot car, half of the mail car and I liked them both. It was the smaller cars had fewer people, had fewer clerks on them. But I think we did a good job on it.

INTERVIEWER: And when you started working on the railways, do you, by chance, remember what your starting salary was?
Joseph Rochelle: Oh, I really don't. Do you know what the start -- you would know what I started -- I'm with my daughter now. She would remember that, but that, I don't remember what my starting salary was in railway mail. But it was enough that I wanted the job and got it and kept it.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. And then because you don't remember your starting, you're probably not going to remember the ending salary for the railway mail service.
Joseph Rochelle: No, I don't remember.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. But just from what you do remember of the pay, do you think that the pay was fair for the amount of work that you had to do?
Joseph Rochelle: Well, I think if I'd been too discontented I'd have looked for something else to do so I was happy with what I got. They always paid me.

INTERVIEWER: And what did you typically carry with you in your grip while you were on run?
Joseph Rochelle: Oh, of course, clean clothes and then everything pertaining to the job, a revolver, scheme, schedules, everything pertaining to it, so I don't know how to answer that. But it was a bagful.

INTERVIEWER: And what was the longest trip you ever worked?
Joseph Rochelle: Nashville to St. Louis, Missouri. Nashville, Tennessee to St. Louis, Missouri.

INTERVIEWER: And do you remember how long it took you to get there?
Joseph Rochelle: I'd have to do some looking. All I'll tell you on that is, all I can tell you is I have I think in my possession a schedule that I could look and see how long. It was our travel time or leaving time in Nashville and arrival time in St. Louis. But I don't remember.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. And while you were a railway post office clerk, did you have a family?
Joseph Rochelle: Yes, I did.

INTERVIEWER: And how did you cope with leaving your family behind on long trips?
Joseph Rochelle: Well, I handled it fine and my wife handled it fine and she raised three pretty good little rug rats.

INTERVIEWER: And what were some of the things that your family did while you were away on these trips?
Joseph Rochelle: Well, my wife and I always planned my time off in advance. I don't know whether you're familiar with the way the railway mail operated but we had our road time and so many hours of work and so much to make our whole time in this, our pay, and called road time I think it was. And they allowed us to plan our retirement -- no, not retirement -- our days off in advance and so they could always keep the assignments filled with people. But it was a fine way to do it, in my opinion.

INTERVIEWER: And what are some of your fondest memories of working on the railroad?
Joseph Rochelle: Well, on the train, when I get in and go to work, we all knew our assignments and, the old saying we had, "every ship sits on its own bottom." I'd go to my assignment and go to work and no one bothered me and as long as I did my job, I didn't hear from anyone. So I was really working on -- even though there were other people on the car, I was still working individually as my own pace, and I knew how much to do or how much I had to do or how much I could do and I was just happy. That's about the only way I know how to express that.

INTERVIEWER: That's perfectly fine. Do you still keep in touch with any of the former clerks?
Joseph Rochelle: No, they’re disappearing fast. I haven’t talked to a former -- I really can’t remember [indiscernible]. My friends that I knew real close were -- they’ve left me. They’re just dying out quick. Let me see. On the third day of next month -- maybe not third day -- yes, third day, third of August, I’m going to turn 87 so I’m getting to be one of the last ones that’s going around that I know of. I saw a bunch of them when I was at the Railway Mail Museum but I didn’t know many of them.

INTERVIEWER: And I know that you mentioned a revolver, but was there anything else that the post office issued you for your safety or for the positions you worked?

Joseph Rochelle: Oh yes. We had, of course, our badge, identification badge. Also, toward the end, they furnished us, they issued us some goggles to keep the cinders out of our eyes when we were going to the door and making an on-the-fly exchange of mail, throwing the pouch off and catching one on the go. That’s about all I could remember.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. And were you ever in a dangerous situation while on the rail cars?

Joseph Rochelle: I was never on a big wreck but I was on a few times one would get derailed when the trains with the mail car would be off the tracks and go bumping on the cross ties but I didn’t consider that too dangerous. I really didn’t know enough about it, I guess. As far as being actually in danger, I’m not going to say I was ever that way at all. We were careful. We always locked our doors when we thought they had to be locked, and not just closed. But anyway, I’m not going to say I was in any kind of hold-up situation.

INTERVIEWER: And do you remember what happened when you derailed?

Joseph Rochelle: Let me see. Grab a bar up overhead and if we could get to that and grab a hold of it, your feet off of the floor of the car, we can make all those bumps easier. Our arms, I guess, would flex better. But anyway, that’s all it was. I’m not explaining it very well but that’s about the only way I know to say it.

INTERVIEWER: And do you remember what caused the train to derail?

Joseph Rochelle: No, I don’t.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. And did you ever hear of anybody experiencing a dangerous situation either on your line or perhaps another line? And this can be while you were a railway mail clerk or something that you heard before you came on.

Joseph Rochelle: I’ve heard some of the things. I was in the position where I’d talk to my brother about it, him being a postal inspector, and we would discuss some of the things that went on that he knew about on the train wrecks and [indiscernible] but I didn’t know any myself personally.

INTERVIEWER: And do you remember any of the stories behind the train wrecks?

Joseph Rochelle: There was one at Guthrie, Kentucky where it was a junction of where the Nashville-St. Louis across the tracks was one of the across Kentucky. I can’t think of the name of it. But one of the trains ran into the side of the other train up there. It’s on the junction point and they just sat for quite a while. And another one was in 1966, a freight train in Kentucky had a little crossing on I believe it was the Red River and the little cross little bridge over it failed and the freight train broke through, tore the track up and of course, put that line out of business and that’s the year that they got the trains off. I was due out on the road. I wasn’t on that day but I was due out the next day or two and I called the office about what they want me to do and they said, “Get yourself up to St. Louis and get ready to go out on your run and we’ll get you there some way.” I said, “What, you want me to -- are you going to fly me up there or what do you want me to do?” The line was broken. There are no trains leaving St. Louis. They said, “We’ll get here the best way you can but we’re not going to fly you.” So I got on the train and I rode for hours. Of course, I had my, I forgot what they called it, a little card, a little flashy card that’s for paying my passes on any train. I had to do that. So I went up through Louisville and I don’t know where all, and by the time I got to St. Louis, I walked into the -- got there by rail. I walked over to the mail car and I don’t know how long it took me to get there, but when I walked to the door, the chief clerk met me at the door and then I don’t remember his name now, but he told me to call him Joe. He said, “Go on back to Nashville and report to the Nashville Post Office Monday morning.” And I never did get the mail car up there at St. Louis. I turned around, I went back, got on the train somewhere and took off, and got back to Nashville and that was the last run I ever made on a train. I reported to the Nashville Post Office and they did away with the Nashville-St. Louis in 1966.

INTERVIEWER: And did you ever face or witness any type of racial discrimination while you were a railway post office clerk?

Joseph Rochelle: Oh Lord, I’m not sure about that. I knew -- well, I will say it this way. I knew some of the African-Americans. I knew some of them really well and some of them I really liked and some I didn’t like much but it
wasn’t because of discrimination. It was just because of temperament, I guess. We didn’t like some of them and they didn’t like some of us. But my overall experience with the African-Americans is quite well suited for. They made good clerks.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. And did you know of anybody who ever experienced racial discrimination while on the rail cars?

Joseph Rochelle: No, I didn’t.

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?

Joseph Rochelle: No, I wasn’t.

INTERVIEWER: And was there anything that you ever wanted to change about the position you occupied on the rail car?

Joseph Rochelle: No, I don’t think so. Anytime anything came up for jobs I would look at them and exercise my right to be in on them and accept it. If my seniority got me the job, I’d take it. If they did not just marked it off and wait for the next one. So I’m not complaining at all about it.

INTERVIEWER: And what do you miss the most about being a railway post office clerk?

Joseph Rochelle: That was long ago. I guess the time off. Six days work. When I had a run, we worked six days on and eight days off and I got my full work schedule in in that six days, hours I’m talking about, that was decided by the mail service. So that was a good part of it.

INTERVIEWER: And then for the last question, is there any other information that you would like to make accessible to researchers about your experience or the position with the railway post office? And this can be from anything, interesting facts or just funny stories.

Joseph Rochelle: Well, I was -- I’m trying to think about how to express it. My oldest son was also a postal inspector and we talked a lot about it, but I liked the way that -- and I knew two or three of the people that got caught stealing from the mail. But I think the, well how do I say this, that’s up to the attorneys, but not just fire them when they get caught stealing. They ought a had to serve some time but that’s just my opinion. I hope I haven’t been too vague on some of this stuff but I’m just trying to remember and doing the best I can telling you.

INTERVIEWER: No, you’re doing perfectly fine. Is there any other story that you would like to share?

Joseph Rochelle: Oh, I got one that’s kind of funny.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

Joseph Rochelle: On the outskirts of one of the cities there were some people or person or something shooting at the trains, knocking windows out and so forth with some kind of a small caliber gun and we knew [indiscernible] in the newspaper. We were going through this area where it was going on and we all on the train would -- excuse me just a moment.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

Joseph Rochelle: We would all get below the window level and until we got clear to be sure a bullet wouldn’t come through. So I got my hand full of locks when we’re all going to get to that point. We were down below the window level and nobody looking. Everybody is just sitting there looking out the windows, I guess. We would go get in there and I pitched that handful of locks up on the pouch rack, made a good noise and scared some of them to death, and I shouldn’t have done it, I guess, but I did and I got a kick out of it. And they all laughed at it too. But that’s about the only thing. There was nothing dangerous about it, in my opinion.

INTERVIEWER: And is there anything else?

Joseph Rochelle: I don’t think so except I did, I had a good life in the mail service. The Congress passed the law one time to give us a raise. Best I remember it was 2.5 percent and the president was Harry Truman. And he got on his desk and he looked at it and said, “There’s not enough money,” and he vetoed it. And I thought [indiscernible] if that’s all we’re going to get, but he vetoed it anyway. But I never did complain about it either. I tried not to complain. But anyway, it was a good life and I’m still enjoying it.