INTERVIEWER: Could you please state your name and affiliation with the Railway Mail Service?
Wally Waldman: Wallace Waldman and I was a railway postal clerk, distribution clerk on the trains.
INTERVIEWER: Were you a regular or a sub?
Wally Waldman: I was a substitute.
INTERVIEWER: What rail line did you work on and which locations did you travel between?
Wally Waldman: Mainly I worked between Chicago and Memphis and from Chicago-Memphis most of the runs were through Carbondale, Illinois, it’s near where I live. Most of my runs were from Chicago and Carbondale. I run most ways out of Carbondale and out Chicago. And then as a sub I also had to make runs – I first started out in Marion, Iowa and ran to Omaha, Nebraska from Marion and to Chicago then back to Marion.
INTERVIEWER: How long did you serve as a Railway Post Office clerk?
Wally Waldman: Approximately seven years.
INTERVIEWER: Do you know which years those were?
Wally Waldman: That would have been from ’62 to ’69.
INTERVIEWER: What made you want to become a Railway Post Office clerk?
Wally Waldman: I guess the main influence was my father did it and I had two uncles doing it and so I just kind of followed in line.
INTERVIEWER: Was this something that you always felt like you should do or it was just interesting to you when you were growing up?
Wally Waldman: Well, you know, when you’re young you’re not sure what you want to do but I did that because it was a good job, good steady work where you were going to get your pay and have good benefits.
INTERVIEWER: I know that you said you were a distribution clerk, what types of jobs did you do as a distribution clerk?
Wally Waldman: What jobs did I do? Well, if you were working letters, you worked the letters in the pigeonholes, the cases and then also you work on the pouch rack, you dumped the pouches and put them in the appropriate pouches and if you work in newspapers, you worked the newspaper sacks and distributed them into their proper destination.
INTERVIEWER: For any one of your jobs, could you describe a typical day on the railcar, starting from when you first went in to work?
Wally Waldman: Well, you start your day, you would go into the railcar and change into your work clothes and then you would get your supplies out. If you’re working letter case, you had to put your headers in. If you’re working pouch rack, you had to hang your pouch rack and label it and then mail started coming in and then whichever you were doing, if pouches, you had to dump the pouches and work them into the pouches or give it to letter clerk for him to work. If you’re working letters, you worked the letters and when you come to stops you had to have the mail out and throw it into the pouches ready for dispatch at that destination.
INTERVIEWER: Did you have any layovers at all?
Wally Waldman: Yes, you would layover, I would say like I ran out on Carbondale, Illinois, you get to Chicago then you layover that day and then you come back the next night. You ran through the night most of the time so you would layover on one end or the other, you know, both ends wherever you stopped.
INTERVIEWER: Was there any one job that you liked doing the most?
Wally Waldman: Well, probably working the letters, that was a little bit easier than handling the sacks or pouches.
INTERVIEWER: Was there anything that you ever disliked in your position as a railway mail clerk and this can be anything from a small complaint to something that you just could not stand?
Wally Waldman: Well, not really, you know, there were some better than others but nothing that I really, really disliked.
INTERVIEWER: What type of railcars did you work on?
Wally Waldman: What type of railcars? Well, there was an RPO car; it was set up for working mail. They had different lengths. Some of them, you know, if it wasn’t real far you had a 30-foot car and then some of them were 60-foot cars and one train I ran on that had two 60-foot cars in it. I guess I’m not sure how much you want on that.
INTERVIEWER: No, you answered that. When you worked on the railways, do you remember what your starting salary was?
Wally Waldman: I think I started out at $2.12.
INTERVIEWER: When you ended your time on the railway, do you remember what the ending salary was?
Wally Waldman: No, I sure don’t. I can’t remember what that was. Okay, there were different levels of pay in the
post office department. If you were in a permanent side, you were level four; then the people on the trains were
level five so you usually made about 10-15 cents more than the people in the stationary unit.
INTERVIEWER: From what you do remember about your pay, do you believe that it was fair for the amount of
work that you had to do and if you could just explain why or why not?
Wally Waldman: Well, it was probably about average pay then. It seemed like I did good with it. I had a couple
of children and built a new house and everything, you know, so I think it was a good living. The only problem when
you were subbing a little bit, you didn’t get any overtime, so it was straight pay no matter how many hours you
worked. So the one time I worked like, in two weeks, I worked like 158 hours and that was just straight pay. It was
the only problem.
INTERVIEWER: What did you typically carry with you in your grip while you were on runs?
Wally Waldman: Well, you would carry, well your change of clothes and also your lunch and then you would have
your supplies for whatever case you were working. If it was like letter case, you had your headers or if you had
labels you had to have them prepared for the pouch rack and put them in the label holder for each pouch and then
you would have your [indiscernible] if you work in registers, or if you’re clerk-in-charge you have a gun and
otherwise you would have like your ring knife and your slips in thumb stall and just your regular supplies I guess.
INTERVIEWER: Do you remember the longest trip you ever worked?
Wally Waldman: Well, the longest I ran was from like Chicago to Memphis because that’s approximately 500
miles. You would go to work like about six in the morning and then you’d get in to Memphis around five in the
afternoon.
INTERVIEWER: While you were working as a Railway Post Office clerk, did you have a family?
Wally Waldman: When I first started I didn’t but then two years after I started, I had a family.
INTERVIEWER: How did you cope with leaving your family behind on long trips?
Wally Waldman: Well, that was a little problem, you know, if you leave for say – if you leave like one night, you’ll
be on the next day and not get home until the following morning. The one thing at least I had learned, on the one
end like at Carbondale, I lived close enough there; for my layover, there I would be home. And the thing is too, if
you’re a regular clerk, you would make three round trips; you worked six days then you would be off eight so you’d
be gone like three days out of two weeks.
INTERVIEWER: How did your family cope while you were away on long trips? What are some of the things they
did to keep busy?
Wally Waldman: Well, like I said, I wasn’t married then. When I got married I had a couple of small children and so
that pretty well kept them occupied.
INTERVIEWER: What was their attitude towards your job?
Wally Waldman: Well, it was pretty good because they didn’t like me being gone, you know, but then it was a
regular paycheck and had a pretty good living.
INTERVIEWER: What are some of your fondest memories of working on the railroad?
Wally Waldman: Just the people I worked with, I still have a lot of the friends and everybody worked together so
good. It was really a pleasure working with the people and everybody worked hard together. I think that’s what
makes the job liked so much because of the people that you worked with. Everybody seemed to get along great.
INTERVIEWER: Do you still keep in touch with any of the former clerks?
Wally Waldman: Yeah, there are a couple of them. I think I’m about the youngest one left as far as I know around
so there’s still a few of them around because there are couple of them live near where I do. There are about three
or four of them I knew and a couple of others, 25 to 30 miles away. We have a little reunion every year in our
area, a get-together and see some of the people you ran with.
INTERVIEWER: Did the post office ever issue you anything either for your safety or for the position?
Wally Waldman: Well, they didn’t offer too much as far as safety but they supplied you with all your supplies, your
labels and stamps and everything. You have a stamp to stamp each label or slip, your name, and date and train
you were on and they supplied you with all that and your twine and ring knife and thumb stall that was all supplied
by the post office.
INTERVIEWER: Did you ever experience a dangerous or bad situation while on the railway?
Wally Waldman: Oh, not real bad, I saw a train derailment but not that that we were on. And one time I was
running on that train from Chicago to St. Louis and we were usually right behind the engine and for some reason
we were on the end of the train, we were going through the country side and we started slowing down and we looked and it come uncoupled, the train left us sitting out there in the middle of nowhere. We weren’t really in no danger but just kind of an experience, you know, got left out there in the middle of the country.

INTERVIEWER: What happened with that?

Wally Waldman: Well, some kind of coupling came loose on the train, you know, and they didn’t realize it until they get to the next town. Then they had to back up and get us, you know, so the danger of the train going off rails, you know, if something happens -- isn’t too much but it was just kind of a rare experience.

INTERVIEWER: Were you ever on trains that hit cars, trying to cross the tracks and beating the train?

Wally Waldman: Yes, I did a couple of times. And one time when I was working out in Iowa running from Marion to Omaha, there was an Indian reservation down the line and they said they would walk on the tracks and one time we hit an Indian on the track and so we came to a stop, you know, as soon you could and, you know, killed an Indian. I kind of remember that.

INTERVIEWER: Were there times where there was a robbery on the train or a stowaway or even perhaps a fire?

Wally Waldman: Nothing that I was on. When I started, you know, a little later, pretty well the stuff of train robberies and that were pretty well over by then. But I never had anything real, anything like that happened.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever hear any stories from other clerks who may have experienced a dangerous or bad situation?

Wally Waldman: Well, yes. I ran with this one clerk and he was in an accident. They went down into a river and he said that he was up in a corner of the mail car and that was the only place where there was air until he got rescued. He said that was a pretty scary experience.

INTERVIEWER: How did he then get into the accident in the first place? Did the train derail and then --

Wally Waldman: Yes, derailed where there was river and the mail car and several other cars rolled down into the river.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember hearing any other stories of accidents and this can be even before your time?

Wally Waldman: Well, no, I never heard anybody talk about any other being [indiscernible]

INTERVIEWER: What about your father and your uncles, did they ever experience any accidents?

Wally Waldman: No, I don’t think. My father did it for almost 42 years.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever face or witness any type of racial discrimination as a Railway Post Office clerk?

Wally Waldman: No, sure didn’t.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever hear any stories from other clerks who did experience racial discrimination?

Wally Waldman: No, never heard any problems.

INTERVIEWER: Why do you think there weren’t any problems?

Wally Waldman: Well, I think that everybody, I say everybody really worked good together and actually as far as racial we had very few colored people on the train.

INTERVIEWER: Were you a member of any type of outside organization such as a union or a club that was affiliated with the railway postal clerks?

Wally Waldman: Yeah, we had a union.

INTERVIEWER: What are some of the things that you did with the union?

Wally Waldman: Well, there were your like bidding rights and your work assignments and we had a representative for each line. Like for instance Memphis, we had one representative that went and bargained with the people about the jobs and the times. When you needed more help than you thought, or you thought one job need to be changed or something, well, he went and bargained with them on that. It went pretty good too; there was never no big problem with that and our wages or with all the rest of the postal people so they pretty well decided that and you just -- whatever you got, you took.

INTERVIEWER: Were you an active member with the union?

Wally Waldman: Not really, no.

INTERVIEWER: Were you ever featured in any type of publication for the union?

Wally Waldman: No.

INTERVIEWER: Was there anything that you ever wanted to change about your position, anything from a serious change to some sort of fickle things?

Wally Waldman: No, I don’t think so. I don’t know really much could have been changed the way it was done.

INTERVIEWER: What do you miss the most about being a Railway Post Office clerk?
Wally Waldman: Well, most of it, it’s about the people you worked with. Everyone worked real great. And also the time off, you worked a lot when you’re working but then you had a lot of time off.
INTERVIEWER: What was a normal schedule for you?
Wally Waldman: Well, like I say, being a substitute it wasn’t really normal because you worked when somebody took a vacation, they will let you know when you had to work with the letter and then if it’s an emergency sick they would call you and you had to go to work with that so there was no real normal schedule with a sub, you were on call all the times and didn’t know when or where you would be working.
INTERVIEWER: 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? This can be anything from interesting things or sights that you saw on the road or funny stories that you might have.
Wally Waldman: Oh, I can’t really think of anything out of the ordinary. Sorry, I can’t help too much on that.
INTERVIEWER: Did you guys every played pranks on one another?
Wally Waldman: Yeah, there were always a few guys that played pranks and things. If you were meeting a train like you’d put mail off train going the other way, opposite of what you’re going, if you had some mail that you carried by sometimes they’d put some things there, pranks in there. One time, I experienced – when a guy put a snake in a pouch and the guy in our train then dumped it and there was a snake that came out of it, you know, so there were some kinds of little pranksters that you have.
INTERVIEWER: Do you remember anything else that you guys did to one another?
Wally Waldman: No, not really.
INTERVIEWER: What where some of the interesting things that you may have seen in the mail?
Wally Waldman: Well, back then they did a lot of things differently, they shipped chickens and all kinds of things by mail then, you know, that’s how most rural people got service but as far as really unusual I can’t really think of anything on that either.
INTERVIEWER: Did you see any interesting sights while on the road even during your layovers?
Wally Waldman: Well, not too much. On the train you were working so you don’t get to see too much and when you’re in a layover about all you did there was slept and ate and went back to work. And I ran from Chicago to Carbondale most of the time so I’m pretty familiar with both those places.
INTERVIEWER: Is there anything else that you would like to say about the Railway Post Office, any memories that stand out to you?
Wally Waldman: No. Like I say, it’s that it was a – I really liked the job and I’m afraid I don’t have too much to say on that either.
INTERVIEWER: And then just out of curiosity, how old were you when your father was a Railway Post Office clerk?
Wally Waldman: From I think – right from about 19 when I started and he retired a couple of years after I worked so probably from about 19 to 24.
INTERVIEWER: How much do you remember about him being a Railway Post Office clerk?
Wally Waldman: Well, I remember I ran with him a few times with a lot of different crews. He was the, well, the boss. They called him clerk-in-charge. So I had some pretty fond memories running with him because looking through some stuff and you see where we were together and stuff on the train. That was really pretty neat.
INTERVIEWER: Did you ever run with your uncles?
Wally Waldman: One, I did. The other one had retired before I started but I ran with the other uncle. I just ran with him about once or twice and he retired too.
INTERVIEWER: You’re probably the only person that I’ve come across who actually ran with their father or their family member. Was that an interesting time for you?
Wally Waldman: Yes, it was. It was really a nice time, I really enjoyed it. I wish it would have stayed on.
INTERVIEWER: Did he ever show any type of favoritism since he was clerk-in-charge?
Wally Waldman: No, I don’t think so. I caught a little bit of slack from some of the other guys working. The first time I ran with him, I was helping a guy in the paper case and this guy he was kind of, you know, joke around too but I didn’t know at that time, he said, “Now, just because your dad is the boss, you don’t get to take it easy. You got to work and stuff” and that, you know, at that time when he said it I kind of said, whoa, but then when I got to know him I know he was kind of a joking guy and that I found that that the person who said it, it kind of upset me a little bit.
INTERVIEWER: Is there anything that you would like to say about your father or your uncle as an RPO clerk for this recording?
Wally Waldman: Well, my father was really a hard worker and he would – your boss would work right with you, he kept the records and stuff and that but he would -- the other clerks said too that he hated to tell somebody kind of to do something. He’d almost rather do it himself than tell somebody else if they were doing it wrong. He’d rather just correct it than tell them what to do, so everybody liked him and talked about him real good so that made me feel good too.