Walter Bell Interview Transcript

Walter Bell: My name is Walter Bell, Jr., and I was a substitute mail clerk on several many RPOs and then I became a regular clerk on two different RPO lines.

INTERVIEWER: What rail lines did you work on and which locations did you travel between?
Walter Bell: Let’s see. There were a lot of them. I worked on, let’s see -- well, most of them were in New York but there was a line called the New York and Point Pleasant RPO, New York and Allentown RPO, the New York and [indiscernible] RPO, the New York and Branchville, New Jersey RPO, and the New York, Geneva and Buffalo RPO. They were all serving the state of New Jersey and Pennsylvania. I also worked on the New York and Chicago East Division RPO which served New York State in the portion that we worked in the East Division. I worked on a Greenport in New York RPO, Montauk in New York RPO, the Port Jefferson in New York RPO which served Long Island. I worked as a regular. Those were -- I was substitute on those lines. And on the New York, Scranton, and Buffalo, New York, Scranton, Pennsylvania and Buffalo, I was a regular clerk, and that served New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. And I worked as a regular clerk on the New York and Chicago East Division which serves New York State. That was between the periods of 1953 to 1966.

INTERVIEWER: Why did you want to become a railway post office clerk? What got you interested in it?
Walter Bell: Well, initially I was in the post office as a temp at the regular post office and then they had a test that they held for railway mail clerk and that paid five cents more an hour. And so that was one reason. And then I wanted to have a chance to work on the trains and the railway post office is on the train and that was the only way you could do it.

INTERVIEWER: And what types of jobs did you have on the railcars?
Walter Bell: Well, I had all types of jobs. As a substitute I covered every job that was available on each of those lines, which included working the letter cases, working on the, what we call, the pouch cases where you threw the first class mail into the various pouches going to the destinations. I worked on the newspaper end where you worked special delivery of newspapers and distributed them into the sacks. And then I worked the transfer where you load and unloaded the mail coming into the cars at the stops, and also where you made nonstop mail deliveries and nonstop mail catches. The New York, Geneva, and Buffalo, which is one of the best lines that I enjoyed, they have 17 nonstop mail exchanges on one run which at times the train was going 80 miles or more an hour. They were pretty exciting.

INTERVIEWER: And for any of the jobs that you just described, could you walk me through a typical day on the railcar starting from when you first went into work and then getting off of your shift?
Walter Bell: Well, we would start, like for example on the New York, Scranton, and Buffalo where I was a regular, I would start each morning -- I worked three days out of each week and then I had an extra week off after four weeks because of the length of the time that we had to put in. I would go to work every Thursday morning about 6 a.m. and we would have to report. The train didn’t leave until about, I think it was 7:30 or eight o’clock in the morning but that was advanced, what we call advanced time to be able to work the mail that they would supply to us in the terminal. The terminal was at Hoboken Terminal, New Jersey. And while we were there, they would bring advanced mail to us to work before we left, and we would work that mail. We have to hang the car, put the pouches and booklets, the sacks in place and the pouches in places so that we could throw the mail into them, and we set it up so that we had a table to empty the pouches onto so we would have something to throw the pouches, the letter mail and the newspapers from. The table was a receptacle that we dumped the sacks onto. And when we finished that, we would go to the letter cases. It was a 30-foot car which is half the normal size of a railway mail car, and part of that car had the pouch and sack area, the other part had letter bins. We would distribute letters into the bins, and then, at the appropriate time, we tie them out and distribute them into the pouches and the sacks for delivery to the various stations that we served. We left the Hoboken, as I said, seven o’clock or eight o’clock in the morning, and we would serve places through New Jersey, Newark, Summit -- I can’t remember all their names, but various places throughout New Jersey until we got to East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania just across from the Jersey line, and then we stop there and then we go up through the Pocono Mountains, serving various places in the Pocono Mountains, Mountain Home, Tobyhanna, Pennsylvania which was a military stop and had a large military base there, and then we would come down the other side of the Poconos into Scranton, Pennsylvania where we -- that particular trip which was always our train 47 ended there, and then I had a layover, it was probably about 12 noon when we ended there and I had a layover until four o’clock in Scranton before I had to do the same thing coming back on train 44. We start about, I guess, five in the evening and we’d have to hang
the pouches and the sacks at that car, the same car, and then we’d distribute the mail that Scranton gave us at the various areas around there and then, on our way back, we would stop at the various stops and pick up mail to be taken into New York. That layover was in Scranton, sometimes I had a hard time because being black, it was hard to find a place where they wanted us to stay, so I usually had to sleep in the car, in the railway mail car that was laid up in the yards for the four- or five-hour layover. We arrive back in Hoboken roughly about 11:30 or 12 o’clock at night and we offloaded the various mails that were going to New York and the surrounding areas having served Scranton and some of the same places, Mountain Home, Stroudsburg, and on the way back. And we had to provide distribution for registers and air mail and we made the appropriate pouches and exchanges. The transfer clerks who were stationed at Hoboken would come and we’d turn over the registered mail to them and then I would go home about 12, leave the station to go home, and then report back the next morning at about six o’clock to do the same thing all over again until Saturday. I did it Thursday morning, Friday morning, and Saturday morning I worked each week, as I said.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Was there any one job that you liked doing more than the others?
Walter Bell: I think the most exciting job was the nonstop mail exchanges. I enjoyed doing that. It was kind of dangerous but it was also exciting. And there was one spot in New York State, I think it was Jacksonville, New York state was the name of the town, and there was an exchange where we had to throw the mail off just before you pass over a deep canyon, and if you didn’t throw it at the right time, the mail ended up down in the ravine in that deep canyon, and as I said, the train would usually be going about 80 miles an hour or so. That was exciting.

INTERVIEWER: Did you know anybody who dropped the mail into the canyon?
Walter Bell: I didn’t know anybody but I heard stories where it had happened. And then, of course, there were times when the mail would bounce into the equipment -- the mail exchange clerk hung the mail on the crane. If he left the equipment on the platform sometimes and they would bounce into that and it would just sever the pouch. But by large, it was a thrilling experience. As I said, there were 17 catches and throws on the New York, Geneva and Buffalo between New York and Buffalo each day. That was very exciting.

Then I enjoyed working the registered mail on one of my assignments on the New York to Chicago where we used to get tremendous amounts of registered mail from Canada on the 20th Century which was one of the most wonderful jobs in New York and Chicago, the 20th Century Limited, train 26 eastbound from Buffalo to New York, and so I used to work the register case on that particular train. And there were times I’d have over 5000 pieces to re-distribute, registered pieces to be distributed and each one of those had to be recorded hand by each number because it was the high priced priority mail. That was an exciting job also. I had to study schemes for the entire state of New York, the entire state of Pennsylvania, part of Ohio, all of Ontario, Canada, and New York City. That was a challenge, of course.

INTERVIEWER: Was there anything that you ever disliked about any of your jobs? Any complaints that you may have had no matter how big or small they were?
Walter Bell: Well, the complaint I had was really with the job itself, it was what happened at either end. For example, as I said, in Scranton, it was hard to find a place that would allow a black person to check into a short-term hotel for the four- or five-hour layover, and I had the same problem in a town called Allentown, Pennsylvania where I had a short layover there when I ran that line as a sub and so I spent most of the night stayed in the car. But in the winter time, if you got a rail employee hooked up the cars to the steam while it was laying over, some of them wouldn’t do it, because we weren’t really supposed to stay in the car but I had no place else to stay, and most of the times, the rail employee would hook it up to the steam so I would have heat. Otherwise, I’d have to load myself up with mailbags and try to stay warm that way for the four- or five-hour layover. But that was the only complaint.

The other thing as a black substitute, there were times when some of the clerks would not want to tell you what the next part of your job was so you had to try to figure that out yourself. But there were many people on those lines that were tremendous people, nice people. And because of the level of intellect it involved the people on the railway mail, there were a lot of people that were -- many college graduates, because it was a higher level of postal employment so there were many college graduates, and I wasn’t one but I learned a tremendous amount from many of them particularly on the New York and Chicago. So much so that it allowed me to have an extraordinary postal career. After the Railway Mail terminated all the RPO cars in 1967 or so, I then got a job in the regional headquarters and was able to move through the various levels up to general manager in Washington which was quite an achievement. I was the first black one that ever had that job, general manager of transportation in one of the branches in Washington, D.C.
INTERVIEWER: Wow.
Walter Bell: Yes, it was quite an accomplishment because as I said, I learned a lot from the fellows on the line in New York to Chicago, and I was given the highest decoration the post office gives like a medal honor. I was given that by the post master general prior to my retirement in 1987 because myself as general manager, we were just six in the northeast region and another general manager [indiscernible] general manager of customer service is [indiscernible], we developed a program for the postal service to provide express mail service to the military all over the world and the military postal office, the APO, the FPOs throughout Europe and the Transpacific, and then we had to go to those places and train them in how to use it, and that was one of the reasons that I received that award, which was a high honor.
We visited Europe, as I said, Germany, Italy, France, and England, all the military installations there to initiate the express mail service for the military that was overseas, and we went to Japan, to Korea, to Okinawa which is part of Japan, and to the Philippines, and then Hawaii, of course, to the bases there. It was a major change for the military to have express mail because of the logistics involved but we were able to set it up, and it became an over $4 million a year revenue earner for the post office at that time. But then some things happened where they had to discontinue it. But that was exciting.
INTERVIEWER: I know earlier you said that you worked on the 30-foot cars. Did you work on any different type of car?
Walter Bell: Yes. The large cars are 60-foot and 70-foot cars, they were on the New York to Chicago East Divisions. The 20th Century train 25 and 26 of the New York and Chicago East Division, they use special 70-foot cars because that was a special train that they had for their customers that was essentially nonstop from New York to Chicago, but it did make stops for crew changes and servicing the engines and so forth, where we made mail exchanges at those places, Albany, Syracuse, Buffalo.
Then the other car was a 60-foot car and was a special RPO car because the [indiscernible] of the train was made out of stainless steel. It was an all stainless steel car trains that the New York Central had, the Empire State Express, that was train 51 and train 50. They ran from New York to Buffalo and returned. That was a special 60-foot car that had -- they usually had 10 to 15 railway mail clerks in each of those cars. Well, I’d say eight to 15 depending on the particular train. Train 14 which was one of the largest RPO trains in the country, it started in Chicago and it ended in Grand Central Station, New York. It was an all mail train that had three 60-foot cars on it, from the time it left Chicago to the time it arrived in New York, and they delivered the mail for New York City and Brooklyn, New York State, of course, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, on the way back from Buffalo having been started in Chicago where the West and Middle Division on train 14, they used to distribute Indiana, Illinois, and in some parts of Michigan and, of course, New York State, then we would get on in Buffalo and travel the rest of the way into New York City Grand Central Station, distributing New York State, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Jersey, as I said, and Pennsylvania.
INTERVIEWER: When you worked on the railways, do you remember what your starting salary was?
Walter Bell: I’m not sure. I started I think it was about $1.20 an hour, which was five cents more, I think it was about $1.20 which was five cents more than you got as a postal clerk. They I think was $1.15. That was back in ’47 when I was in the post office, and then in ’51, when I took the railway mail test and passed it and was accepted as a railway mail substitute in 1951, and I think it was about $1.25. And then eventually, we got raises up to -- I don’t remember what the hourly rate was when I was terminated. By then I was a regular anyway so we got paid on an annual salary.
INTERVIEWER: And, by the end of your career as a railway post office clerk, do you remember what your ending salary was?
Walter Bell: I think it was about $5400 to $6000 a year, something like that, plus expenses that we be incurred in our railway mail for paying the hotels and for meals, we were given per diem for that, but I think it was about $5400 to $6000 a year.
INTERVIEWER: And do you believe that the pay was fair for the amount of work you had to do?
Walter Bell: Well, yes, I think so. Particularly considering that we didn’t work -- when I was a regular on the New York to Chicago East Division, I worked one week and was off one week. We got time off because of the extra duties we had to do at home. And so usually during those weeks we were off, many of the clerks had other jobs that they would go to to supplement their income. But the salary we received when compared with the postal stationary clerks, I think, was comparable and was fair.
When I retired, I was at a much higher level and so I was getting executive pay, believe it or not.
Yes.  Well, I have a company that I started when I retired.  When I retired in ‘87, I moved to Florida and I got a job with Eastern Air Lines managing their mail contracts.  And one time, Eastern was making something like $37 million a year flying the mail, and I managed those contracts for them.  And when Eastern went out business, I then went into business doing the same thing for other airlines but doing it as a private company and contracting it out to them, and I still do that for one mail aviation transport company in Puerto Rico that handles the mail from San Juan, Puerto Rico, to St. Croix in the Virgin Islands, and that contract is for M&M Aviation, and I manage that for them with the post office.

INTERVIEWER:  What did you typically carry with you in your grip while you were on runs?

Walter Bell:  Well, I had my work clothes, of course, and my various bill, documented, and books and things and manuals if I needed to refer to the various requirements for the states that I was distributing on that particular order.  If I was going on the one where I had to work Pennsylvania mail, I had to carry the Pennsylvania scheme with me and the schedule for the other lines that we’d intersect with.  And I’d also carry food that was like sandwiches and sodas and something to consume on the run because usually you didn’t have any time to get off and eat at the stations as you transit into the lines that you were working, and it was like sometimes eight to nine hours or more so we have to carry your food with you.  And that was there.  Along with, we had to have the keys to open the mail pouches with and either regular keys or rotary lock keys for the registered mail.  And we also had to carry revolvers to be a detriment to anybody that wanted to maybe come in and take mail.

INTERVIEWER:  What was the longest trip you ever worked?

Walter Bell:  Well, there was one trip on New York and Chicago, I don’t if it’s 14 or 52, which was a night train.  They had a terrible snowstorm, and I think we were 20 hours or more from Buffalo to New York because of the snowstorm.  And then I was on a train in New York to Chicago East Division train 51 where we had -- no, it might’ve been 95, the Empire State Express.  Anyway, we had a flyer on the train in the tunnel going from Grand Central, we had to go in a tunnel on the 5th Avenue until you get up to around 125th Street, and as they came out of the tunnel, there was a fire at 125th Street.  The fire engines came and I had to go to the hospital because I had smoke inhalation problems.  At that time, I had bad asthma and I had to go to the hospital, and I ended up in a government hospital where I sat down for a couple of days or so, and then I was able to go back to work, but that was the only, I guess, traumatic experience I had.  I’d been on trains where they hit cars, or trucks caused some derailments, course but it didn’t delay us as long as you might think.  I think that happened twice.  Upstate New York, they had several places where there was a major [indiscernible] near Syracuse, and I think we had an accident where the train ran into a car at that time.  And then I’d been behind the trains that were derailed and we had to delay our train until they could create a derailment, but that wasn’t the longest.  As I said, the snowstorm was the longest.

INTERVIEWER:  While you were working as a railway post office clerk, did you have a family?

Walter Bell:  Yes.  I had -- let’s see.  All of my four children were born while I was employed by the Railway Mail Service as a railway mail clerk, and what used to happen when I became a regular or even when I was a substitute, when I wasn’t working, I was doing some of the duties that my wife would normally do because she was working at a regular job so I would do a lot of the laundry and a lot of the cooking for my kids, and I would take them back and forth to school.  It was during lay off time that I had as a substitute and, of course, when I was regular during that entire week, I was doing housewife duties when I wasn’t – I eventually had a chance and opportunity to get a job during the week that I was off.  But when I didn’t have that job or when there was no work on that job because it was a part-time job then I would be doing housewife duties during the week that I was off.

INTERVIEWER:  How did you cope with leaving your family behind on long trips?

Walter Bell:  Well, what happened was -- the way it worked, for example, when I was a regular on the New York and Chicago East Division, I would work six days, I was off eight days.  During the six days I was at work, I would go to work on one [indiscernible], I would go to work about two o’clock in the morning, let’s say, on a Monday morning, and from that time I went to work, I’d end up in Buffalo that same day, Monday, about three o’clock in the afternoon then I’d get a train, I’d work a train 26, this is 20th Century, coming back that night and be back in New York seven o’clock Tuesday morning, and I’d be home from about eight o’clock in the morning to about 11 or so that night when I had to leave to go back to work.  So during the week that I was working I’d be home every other day during the day for a number of hours.  During the week I was off, of course, I was home the whole day.  So it wasn’t really -- in fact sometimes they would think I wasn’t really working because they’d concentrate on the eight days I would be home as opposed to the six days I was in and out, and because it was in and out during the time that they were sometimes sleeping and they’d see me when they go to school and come back and then I go to
work that night, it was like sometimes I wasn't working. I think it gave me more time with my family than I would have had I worked at a regular stationary unit.

INTERVIEWER: And so, I take it your family took it very well?

Walter Bell: Yes, my wife and the kids, of course, like I said, they liked it because their father was home with them more than most fathers so they liked it. What they didn’t like about it of course, we had to work holidays and so sometimes I was away from them on Christmas or Thanksgiving, stuff like that. But then it was made up by the time I would be off for the week off.

INTERVIEWER: What are some of your fondest memories of working on the railway?

Walter Bell: Well, the camaraderie. You worked with guys that were -- it was like family, and they exchanged a lot of their personal information with you and you would learn a lot from -- as I said, in New York to Chicago, they had teachers, many people were teachers during their week off, they were substitute teachers, many college grads, and so I learned a lot of things from those fellows. There were some that had businesses going, and one guy, IB Snider, who by the way, he’s still living. He retired down here in Florida, he’s in his 90s, he had a milk and butter-and-egg business that he had during his week off. And so the camaraderie between the fellows on the train was unbelievable. It was like family. They all watched out for each other and we would help each other without even asking when you needed help. It was a great experience for me in a human relationship point of view.

INTERVIEWER: And do you still keep in touch with any of the former clerks?

Walter Bell: Well, up until about three or four or five years ago, we used to have an annual reunion luncheon here in Florida in Fort Lauderdale, but as we got older and people started passing, that got away from us, and so I only now keep involved with the one I just mentioned. I talk to IB Snider, he’s in Sunrise, Florida. And then I have a friend of mine that worked while I was in the northeast region, a fellow named Jack Ruben, he’s up in Connecticut area there, Hartford. I keep in touch with him. And then the couple that I keep in touch with in exchanging Christmas cards, there’s a couple that I do that, but by and large, many of them had passed. I’m 82 myself and so a lot of my counterparts and colleagues have moved on.

INTERVIEWER: And do you, by chance, have IB Snider and Jack Ruben’s telephone numbers?

Walter Bell: Yes. I have to go into my file to find it for you because -- Jack also has an e-mail by the way. IB, I don’t know if he has an e-mail but I have Jack’s number, and if you want, I can call it into you after [indiscernible].

INTERVIEWER: Yes, that would be extremely helpful. A lot of times, the railway post office clerks know who’s still living and we’re trying to interview as many former clerks as possible, and we’ve been getting a lot of contact information from those who we did interview, so if you could look those up and then call me back.

Walter Bell: I’ll do so. I have some pictures you may be interested in, a picture of the Empire State Express which is a beautiful looking train. The New York Central Railroad was particularly proud of it being an all stainless steel, what they used to call the Silver Fleet, and they had a special railway postal car that they use on that train, I think it had a name even, and I think it was called the Cordell, but I have a picture of that. And I have the picture of the 20th Century railway post office car, so maybe I’ll send those to you too.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. That helps because we accept any pictures from post office clerks that have to do with their jobs. So if you would like to send those, please do. We will welcome them with open arms and add them to the collection.

Walter Bell: I’ll e-mail them to you because I have them on my computer.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Sounds good. Going on with the interview --

Walter Bell: In fact, that’s what I’ll do when I do those -- this afternoon, I will do that and I will also include IB Snider’s telephone number and Jack Ruben’s telephone number and his e-mail address.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Sounds good. Now, I know earlier you said that the post office issued you a revolver for the position and a set of keys if you’re working the pouches. Did they issue you anything else either for your safety or for your position?

Walter Bell: No. I think that was the only thing we had that was issued, the keys and the revolver. They provided us, of course, with the schedules and the scheme books, but as far as issuing equipment, no, we had to buy our own clothing that we used, our clothing and we were required to have shoes that had steel toes which we had to supply. So the only thing I think that I could recall that they issued to us in terms of equipment was the revolver and the keys and a badge. I’m sorry, also the badge.

And they also issued to us what we call travel commission which was a commission that gave us the authority to travel on any of the railroads that we worked so that we could dead head back and forth to the stops that we had to get on, and I used that commission many times to research. For example, I’d get to Buffalo on Train 90 or Train
3 when I worked the New York to Chicago on Train 3, I’d get to Buffalo early in the morning, maybe six or seven in the morning, and I didn’t have to report back to work until about midnight on Train 26 at Buffalo so sometimes I would ride the train on my commission in the passenger cars from Buffalo to Cleveland and back so I would have more familiarity with the stations that they served and better to be able to do the mail. I do the same thing when riding from Buffalo to Detroit and back because we did work Michigan mail, and I learned some of the stops that the Buffalo and Detroit train served to better be able to distribute the mail. So I did a lot of that.

And I’ll send a picture of that commission also. I have one that was validated but it used to be something you showed a conductor and he would allow you to ride the train free if that commission covered that particular line, and I was covered most lines, Pennsylvania Railroad, New York Central Railroad because we intersected with them and some of the clerks had to use to those trains to get to work. I’ll send you a picture of that also.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, sounds good. And we spoke about this a little bit earlier, about were you ever put into a bad or dangerous situation while on the railway? If you could just kind of elaborate a little bit more on when you’re going through the tunnel and the train caught fire. I mean, what exactly happened?

Walter Bell: Well, I don’t think it was the railway mail car. It wasn’t the railway mail car. I think the New York Central had electric engines that used to carry the trains up the [indiscernible] because the New York City did not allow diesels or steam engines to come into the city, so they had to change from diesel power and steam power to electric power to take the trains into the station at Grand Central and to bring the train from Grand Central back up to Harmon which is near Croton, New York, where they would exchange back into diesel and steam. And so I think it was a diesel, the electric engine that caught fire or either it was a fire on the tracks in that tunnel and, of course, all the electricity was off and just dense smoke throughout the car. But the car itself was never -- the railway mail car was never on fire. But they eventually got the electricity going to pull us out of the tunnel, and as I said, it was full of smoke, and they pulled us up onto 125th Street where the ambulances and the fire engines were congregated and they took care of us from there. That was a scary situation, as I said, because I had asthma and I had a hard time breathing. It was very difficult and they gave me oxygen and took into the hospital from 125th Street.

INTERVIEWER: And were there any other times where you experienced something dangerous or bad?

Walter Bell: No. Just the excitement and the danger of the non-stop exchanges. It was a dangerous job because -- at one time, I made a catch on the New York, Geneva, and Buffalo, I made a catch, I think it was Van Etten, New York, a little small town, and the pouch got stuck in the catcher arm and I had to get help from one of the other railway mail clerks on the train to help pull the pouch out of that catcher arm, and we got it just in time to be able to make the next catch. Those stops from [indiscernible], Pennsylvania to Geneva, to Ithaca, New York, we made something like eight or nine non-stop exchanges and some are no more than a minute apart, and as I said, it was about 60 to 80 miles an hour when we did that, and so you had to be careful of your safety and also be careful of the danger of how the catch is made. If you didn’t hold the catcher arm at the right level, it could knock that pouch back into you and knock you over, you could of course get caught in the arm. And so it was exciting and dangerous but I was fortunate to never have experienced anything other than having a pouch stuck in a catcher arm.

INTERVIEWER: And do you remember any stories of you hearing about other people experiencing dangerous situations?

Walter Bell: Well, I know that in the train, in the RPO car, the only facilities we had were a small commode and sink at one end of the car, and we had to use that to wash up before we changed our clothes to get off the car after having worked all night. And I remember one of the substitute guy named Benny Robinson, he was washing up and he was washing under his arm and he stuck his hand, and he raised his arms to do that and his hand got caught in the fan. And I wasn’t on the train when that happened but I heard about it, but that was about the only experience I could recall that I heard about.

INTERVIEWER: And earlier, I know you were talking about how in Scranton and Allentown, you did face some type of racial discrimination where you couldn’t stay in hotels overnight and you had to sleep in the car. Was there any other type of racial discrimination that you witnessed?

Walter Bell: Well, not that I witnessed but the whole premise of the Railway Mail Service was that it was an elite part of the postal service, and I say that in all honesty. It was a higher level of the postal service in general. And what happened was -- this is what I heard. I never worked in the south but I heard that in the railway mail had some terminals where they have stationary jobs, and because many of the southern clerks didn’t want the railway black people working in their stationary jobs, they would force them or make it possible for them to get road jobs.
which was on the train and that eliminated the possibility of them having to work in a stationary position with the black clerks at that time.
There weren’t a lot of black clerks in the Railway Mail Service. It was nowhere near the percentage of blacks in the railway mail as there were in the regular post office. For example, the New York to Chicago East Division, I think there were probably about 3000 to 5000 regular clerks and there was a less than a hundred black ones, probably less than 50. So what happened, as I said, I heard this from a couple of clerks and one clerk railway mail clerk on the New York to Chicago East Division, he was a regular there, his name was Adam [indiscernible]. He came from the south, and he said the reason he ended up on railway post offices rather than in the terminal or the stationary job was because many of the southerners in the stationary job didn’t want black people working with them so they somehow made it able for them to get on the trains which is really a break and it was a better job anyways, working on the trains and in the stationary units but that's about the extent of those two. It’s as though sleeping in the cars in [indiscernible], Allentown, Pennsylvania and Scranton, Pennsylvania. And most times the railway employees were cooperative and they would hook the car up to the steam, and when they did it was quite a challenge. And what I would do at other times, I would just get out of the railway postal car and get into the passenger car that would be laying over and they always hooked that up to the steam. But that was the biggest challenge, I guess, just racial-wise.
At the Buffalo Station, New York Central Station, it was at a Polish area but there was black family that had a hotel there and the black railway postal clerks used to stay there and have their meals there; they had a restaurant there also. But in Buffalo, we had the ability, if we had the time, to go downtown to the regular hotels and they would accept us with no problem.

INTERVIEWER: And did the other clerks treat you as an equal?
Walter Bell: Yes, particularly on the New York to Chicago. They were more than ideal. As I said, we were family. I never had a discriminatory problem or racial problem clerk to clerk. Never had it. Never had anybody call me any names or anything or say they didn’t want to work with me because of my race. They were very cooperative. And it was something that everybody had to do anyway because each one depended on the other to complete their requirements and so it was almost fait accompli that you wouldn’t have any discriminatory things going on because it could end up hurting you, the person that committed it because they knew that each one helped each other.

INTERVIEWER: It’s a very interesting topic I think because a lot of the other clerks that I have interviewed have said the same thing, and they said that just being on the train was different than working outside of the train, and it’s just kind of curious to see what each individual clerk has to say about race on the train because everybody really says that there virtually wasn’t any.
Walter Bell: Yes, there wasn’t. And as I said, it would be self-defeating to do so because you each then had to depend on each other and so it would self-defeating to start any discriminatory things that would impact the crew because, as I said, the crew depended on each one helping each other.

Have you talked to a lot of black former railway mail clerks?
INTERVIEWER: I’ve talked to, I believe, only a couple. It’s a very, very small percentage of the people that I’ve interviewed.
Walter Bell: Well, that’s because there was a very low percentage of black employees in the Railway Mail Service. The test, it was a much harder test than the regular post office test, and so many blacks that took the post office test just accepted that and didn’t try to go further into the railway mail. Then many of them didn’t like the idea of being away from their families, I guess, probably, I don’t know.
INTERVIEWER: And you basically just answered my next question which was, did you know of anybody who did experience racial discrimination while on the train, and you were talking about those that were in the southern terminal.
Walter Bell: This guy, Adam [indiscernible], he had told me before he came on the New York to Chicago East Division, the reason he started in the railway mail post office in the south where he came from -- I think he came from Louisiana -- he said was because they didn’t want to work with him in the terminal so they pushed him out onto the train, and he liked it and he eventually transferred up to New York to Chicago.
INTERVIEWER: Were you a member of any type of outside organizations such as a union or club that was affiliated with the railway postal clerks?
Walter Bell: Yes. One time when I was a substitute on the New York to Chicago East Division, I was a junior steward in the Railway Mail Association. There was a fellow named Sid Shapiro who was highly active in the union
on the Railway Mail Association which was the union for the Railway Mail postal clerks. At that time, it was a separate union activity from the regular post office union, and Sid Shapiro was highly active, and he recruited me into the union, Railway Mail Association, as a junior steward, but I eventually gravitated away from that, not because of any disassociation I wanted to have, just because of my movement in the railway mail precluded some of the things I needed to do, and eventually I ended up in management anyway, so that would’ve precluded me having being able to be in the union.

INTERVIEWER: And, when you were in the union, what types of activities did you guys do?
Walter Bell: Well, we would represent grievances some of the guys might have regarding the application of their hours or the work assignments they would get. Sometimes they would feel that their seniority wasn’t properly represented and, therefore, they should have a job that they bid for that they didn’t get and things like that. Sometimes it was working conditions where they might be grieving the fact that the train that they worked didn’t have heat and that the post office didn’t seem to be doing anything to put pressure on the railway line to correct those issues, just things like that.

INTERVIEWER: Was there anything that you ever wanted to change about your position, and this can be something small to something that you really wish that they had changed?
Walter Bell: Well, one of the things that used to happen a lot, we’d have postal inspectors coming on the train, and they would go over our adherence to rules and regulations, and some of them would be carsick because [indiscernible] inspector coming on with a book and that book says you should do this and you should do that, but the reality of the situation requires you to do something more realistic that maybe wasn’t covered in the book and they would call you out on that and say, “Well, why are you doing this?” And sometimes they would write you up about that. And if you didn’t have a good enough reason as to why you were going beyond or around the regulations, then you could get what they call demerits, and those demerits could be detrimental to your -- we used to get automatic increases depending on our performance, and if you’ve got enough demerits, you didn’t get those increases.

INTERVIEWER: What do you miss the most about being a railway post office clerk?
Walter Bell: It was the best job I could conceivably have had, and I miss the camaraderie of my fellow clerks. I miss the movement, the transportation. I think the fact that I was a railway mail clerk made it possible for me to be married so long because my wife didn’t have to put up with me for six days every other week, and so I think that helped to make it better for us. But I miss that. I miss the camaraderie, the movement of the transportation from one place to another. Some guys -- in fact, there were a couple of guys that had families on both ends of the line, surprisingly enough. It was easy to do because they could have a family in Buffalo, for example, and a family in New York, and one would not know anything about the other but of course that would require you to be able to plan your expenses the right way and stuff but there were a couple that did that.

INTERVIEWER: Is there anything else that you miss about being an RPO clerk?
Walter Bell: Well, as I said, I think it was mainly the camaraderie of the people, the wonderful guys that we met. And the fact that I could work a week and be off a week and get better pay than I could in a post office stationary unit, and the extra money I could make during the week off. I miss that until I got into regional headquarters and became part of management. Of course, that was a major decision because when I got into the regional office, it meant working every day, five days a week out of seven, and that was quite a departure. But the benefits of management began to take hold as I moved up and then I kind of forgot about some of the things that happened to me in the railway mail that was so beneficial.

INTERVIEWER: And then for the last question, is there any other information you would like to share with researchers about your experience or position with the railway post office?
Walter Bell: No. One would be -- what I’d like to leave as my last story would be what the railway mail imposed in to me or gave to me to give me a chance to become a part of management. I moved up into management when I got into the regional office, and as I said, at the hindsight, I never thought I would get to up to the point that I was a general manager in Washington. And each of those jobs I had, most of the jobs I had in the regional offices and then the headquarters offices were the first jobs that a black man ever had in that particular function.
I was the first -- they evolved eventually into a system of management called the transportation management offices and they had, I think, it was 15 or 17 of them throughout the country regional offices that managed the transportation part of the postal service, cars and trucks and rail units and air transportation units, and I opened the first transportation management office in that new procedure in New York, I was the first one to do that, and the first black one they ever had. And most of the management jobs I had from that point on, I was one of the first
black air officers that was going to be responsible for the management of mail contracts with the various airlines in a given area. The air transportation officer was the one that represented the post office and I had one of those first jobs as the air officer and as a manager of the distribution branch, manager of the transportation planning unit. So it was a very wonderful thing for me to be able to do so and open the door for others to do so.

INTERVIEWER: Is there anything else that you would like to say?

Walter Bell: No. I appreciate the chance to reminisce and to exchange some of the pictures and things that I’ll send to you. It was a service that was unbelievable that could happen for [indiscernible] the mail customer. There were people that knew our schedule, postal customers that knew our schedules that took advantage of the train schedules so that they could have same-day service. A person in Sayre, Pennsylvania that had a business that maybe wanted to exchange mail with people beyond Sayre on a New York, Geneva, Buffalo line between Sayre, Pennsylvania and Ithaca, if they timed it right, they could put mail on the train leaving Sayre that day that would be delivered to the box holders in places like Van Etten, New York, Jacksonville, New York, [indiscernible], New York, because the post offices would then get the mail that we would deliver nonstop and put them in the boxes for the customers so there’s nothing comparable to that today, that same-day service capability.

INTERVIEWER: All right. Well, if you don’t have anything to add, that concludes our interview.

Walter Bell: Well, thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to expand on my experiences there. It was a wonderful experience and there’s no way I could probably put that down unless maybe I wrote a book or something. I appreciate the opportunity.