

Pittsburgh Oral Histories
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LR

Interviewed by Barry Chad

Interviewed at Independence Court, Monroeville

04-11-07

Transcribed 11-25-07 – 11-27-07

Interviewer's Note

All aboard!

My own childhood memories are of my mother taking me to the Frankford station in Philadelphia on Sundays to watch the trains go by and of waving to the engineers. That was in the 1950s. "LR" was a steam engine fireman and eventually promoted to engineer. Working on trains was something he sort of dreamed about, but never thought would really happen, but he worked on trains from 1941 until he retired in 1980. Tales of carrying freight during World War II and of many trips around the "Horseshoe Curve" and of a dramatic wreck in Wilksburg that was a classic.

Interview

bc: You can hear me alright?

LR: I can hear you very well, but after 39 years of high decibels on a locomotive, it takes its toll.

bc: Please: tell me about the railroad.

LR: I was first hired in June of 1941. I was promoted as a fireman on steam engines and I was promoted to engineer in July 1946. Then I retired in June 1980.

bc: So during the War you worked on the railroad.

LR: Yes. I had enlisted in the National Guard—my brother and I. When I got married in 1938, three years before Pearl Harbor, I had a job in Uniontown and moved there. They didn't have a National Guard unit there to transfer to. And so they gave me a discharge and they never called me back. I expected they would, but they didn't. I guess they needed me for transportation. There were other railroaders that went to the Service.

[bc interrupts to tell the story of Buster Keaton in the film, "The General," and how the Confederate Army wouldn't take him because he serves a more valuable purpose as the engineer of a locomotive.]

I never knew what I was hauling, really, unless sometimes we had some tanks.... [When that was the case,] they had to put us on a siding to let the other traffic go by because tanks were so wide, they stuck out.... One day, when I was still a fireman, we had one car leaving Pitcairn and we had orders to make all speed possible with safety—do not have any accidents because that holds things up. We had no idea about that one car. We knew it had to be special. With those kind of instructions, my engineer was not wild, but he was fast. He only speeded on the

Pittsburgh Oral Histories

straight line and observed all the speeds on the curves. We found out afterwards it was something going to Aberdeen Proving Grounds, one car, and they wanted it there for testing. That's all I remember from the War years.

bc: You know, working on the railroad probably isn't as Romantic as it is in a little kid's imagination, but trains are still an important part of growing up for children. You worked through steam engines, diesel engines, probably electric....

LR: No...it was only electrified from Harrisburg to the East.

The diesel engines are actually a diesel engine generating electricity for the traction motors and there are traction motors underneath geared to the wheels. Your diesel engine generated 600 volts of electricity. You have 1500 horsepower sometimes on one unit but you can see two or three separate locomotives and they're coupled together by cables. I would be the engineer on the front one and I would control the throttle on all four of those through the cables. That would give you increased horsepower, of course. When you're going downgrade, you can reverse the current in those traction motors and use that for braking power—that's called dynamic braking.

bc: Steam engines. Did you actually have a coal tender?

LR: Oh yeah. And hand-fired engines and stoker engines. With stoker engines the firemen would control [steam jets], but it was not "wet" steam, it was super-heated and dry steam. You could have these jets shooting coal up into the front left, front right, in the back corner, or in the middle just by the pressure of you manipulating the hand gauges. If your fire was getting too heavy—you weren't getting the efficiency you needed, you could mess yourself up if you built up too much coal in one place.

bc: Did you actually have people shoveling coal?

LR: Oh I did that, yes. That's what the fireman does.

bc: Were these engines Baldwin engines [the company originally located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania]?

LR: We didn't have any steam engines by Baldwin. They may have made some but we didn't have any. We had Baldwins for a while with the diesels.

bc: The Baldwin engines I saw at the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia were massive.

LR: They had so many drivewheels, we used to call them centipedes....

bc: What's a drivewheel?

LR: All your wheels drive: the wheels that are on the track. And there's a sandbox—you can drop sand in front of the wheels when you need it to give you traction.

With steam engines our passenger runs went from Pittsburgh to Altoona and then they'd change crews and then they'd go on through to Washington or New York or Baltimore. The freight went from Pitcairn—freight didn't move East out of Pittsburgh—it all came into the Pitcairn yards to change crews. When the diesels came, they extended the run because you didn't run out of fuel. The fuel tanks were under the belly of the diesel. They would hold 1500 gallons. [Part of the time I worked passenger and part of the time I worked freight.]

Pittsburgh Oral Histories

[Working on trains] was something I sort of dreamed about, but I never thought it would really happen. [I've lived in] Pitcairn, [Allegheny County]. [Early on I moved to Scottdale, [Westmoreland County].

If you've never been to the Altoona museum, the Railroaders Memorial Museum, that's worthwhile going up there to see. And they have another smaller place down in the valley right below the Horseshoe Curve. (If I had a nickel for every time I had my picture taken at that Curve... 'cause there'd be dozens of people out there with cameras almost every trip taking pictures.)

bc: As you went by.

LR: Yes.

We went on through to Harrisburg then and changed crews. I worked, part of the time, out of Conway down the river—Rochester, I think, is the nearest town. And we would go from Conway to Harrisburg. There were tunnels at Gallitzin and then you go downgrade for twelve miles into Altoona. The Horseshoe Curve is on the route down. You have 25 mile-an-hour speed on number one track and, on number two, three, and four track, your speed was 30. They have the Curve banked a little wee bit.... The [reduced] speed was also for the wear and tear on the rails—the flange on the wheels would be rubbing against the side of the rails and it would put undue wear on the rails. If you were going faster, the rails would have to be replaced quicker.

bc: So what are some of your memories of the railroad?

LR: Do you recall a wreck in Wilkesburg when a locomotive went down on the street in '79? I was the engineer on there. I survived it; the fireman and I both survived it. We could have walked to the Columbia Hospital because we were that close to it. We side-swiped six cars that were derailed. We had a 30 mile-an-hour signal because we didn't have any train with us; we had pushed a train from Pittsburgh upgrade. (It's all upgrade from Pittsburgh to East Liberty and then levels off.) We pushed it out to Swissvale and then we cut away from the rear end of the train and he shoved the train back on this yardtrack in the Wilkesburg yard. It only held 100 cars and he had 106 cars so they went off the end of the track and bulged out and fouled our track. If it had made contact with my rail that I was on, my signals would have dropped and I would have known there was something wrong and I would have immediately gotten down to less than 15 miles-an-hour [and] prepared to stop. But it didn't touch my rails and my signal didn't drop. Fortunately we were only doing 30, prepared to cross over down at Homewood. (You lose all your braking power when you get off the rails. You're just skidding along in the dirt.) Then there was three feet of concrete, a waist-high barrier for safety, at the overpass so that the fellows working in the Wilkesburg yard wouldn't fall down on the street. My fireman was running the engine at the time and he hollered,

We're gonna hit!

I immediately threw myself down on the floor—I was sitting on the fireman's side [and I folded my arms over my head] to protect my skull and, when my fireman saw me doing that, he tried to get out of his seat and do the same thing. And it was good that he got out of his seat 'cause he would have been ground to hamburger.... That engine never went into service again. They used it for parts.

Pittsburgh Oral Histories

They'd use parts off of it and fix up another one of the same model. It was sitting on the siding; it had been towed over to the Altoona shops. Different fellas told me they'd seen it sitting there. When we got out of Columbia Hospital—they checked us out and they put us in a taxi and Max Solomon, who was in charge of the wreck train (and he was there before the wreck train was) he told the taxi, Now you take these two men any place they tell you they want to go. (I wanted to go down to 28th Street and Liberty Avenue, which is where the engine house was, where the crew dispatcher's office was and where my car was, so he dropped me off there; and my fireman lived over in the South Hills.)

bc: What was the longest train—in terms of length, number of cars—that you ever pulled? I know the laws have changed, but can you remember?

LR: I think 119 when we were pulling empties from Brownsville down the Mon [Monongahela] River into Port Perry. Port Perry was by the Edgar Thomson Steel Works. That used to be the heaviest freight tonnage concentration in the United States at that point because the B&O came down one side of the river. I think the New York Central was the other one. The Pennsy [Pennsylvania Railroad] was over on the other side of the river. And then the Union Railroad which fed the Edgar Thomson Works came in there. That's a lot of freight concentration. And Port Perry used to build boats there. And, speaking of Brownsville, the first cast iron bridge in the United States—still standing when I retired—is over a creek in Brownsville—a pedestrian bridge.

On my route I didn't go out of Pennsylvania at all. Conway and Brownsville were the westward extremes; the eastern extreme was Harrisburg.

I was born in Star Junction down near Perryopolis, Fayette County.

bc: What did your folks do?

LR: My Dad worked at various things. In Scottdale they had a rolling mill. They made body metal for automobile companies, Ford was one of them.... [They made pipe—that employed about 800 men.] They had a second plant out in the direction towards Dawson.... They had a little bit of a railroad there—just to bring stuff out to set it on the siding so the PR [Pennsylvania Railroad] could pick the cars up. And there was a pipe mill, less than half-a-mile away from the rolling mill and it employed 1200 men. It made cast iron pipe. During the Depression it was down to twelve men who were watchmen until they got everything out of there and secured. It was abandoned and moved to Burlington, New Jersey.

bc: You referred to the Pennsylvania Railroad as PR not PRR....

LR: Either one. We used to say, "PRR: poor rugged rascals." [He chuckles.]

bc: How did your family deal with the Depression?

LR: My Dad wasn't working in the mill at that time. He was a janitor at the YMCA in Scottdale. That was before the Depression. (I'll get back to that.)

For the early part of the Depression he was working in a foundry in Connellsville, [Fayette County]. They made steam pumps for the coal mines to pump the water out of the mines. They were right along the riverbank. Somebody bought them out and [he got laid off]. He didn't have any job during the Depression. When I got out of high school, I got a job in South Connellsville making corrugated paper boxes. Those boxes would be shipped flat to various glass companies. (Capstan Glass was right next door so that, of course, didn't require any shipping. And

Pittsburgh Oral Histories

that's the reason they located the plant right there.) Part of the time, my Dad would be working and I'd be laid off; or, I'd be working and he'd be laid off. We just managed and we made it.

bc: Did you have brothers and sisters?

LR: One brother. He went with the National Guard. He belongs to what they call the "S.O.B.'s"—Survivors of the Bulge. He's a retired schoolteacher down East now. The Belgian and Luxembourg governments, every ten years, on the anniversary of [the Battle of] the Bulge in December take a hundred men, or so, as guests—all expenses paid for 13 days—take them over there for a ceremony. [My brother] said that the people would come up to him and thank us for their freedom, "Thank you for our freedom! Thank you for our freedom!" One fella came up and asked him, Is it all right if I sing to you? [My brother] said, Yes. (He was dressed up like a businessman.) And the guy started singing "The Star-Spangled Banner." [LR gets choked up, fighting back tears.] And my brother cried the whole time. (And it gets to me even to hear about it: how they feel.) This was in December '04. In ten years, if there's any left, they'll have it again. Do you remember General [Anthony] McAuliffe, when they asked him to surrender, and he said, "Nuts!" (That's the kind of stuff I get emotional over.) They have a statue of him in the town square and every year, on the anniversary of that happening, the people throw nuts in the town square. [LR laughs.]

bc: How did you get the "dream job" of working on the railroad?

LR: My father-in-law worked in a coal mine. The fellas [he worked with] all road together—a whole carload. The mines were far away and they didn't want everybody driving so they'd pay somebody.... Charlie Pell was one of the passengers. He made the remark one day that they were hiring firemen on the railroad down at Pitcairn. My father-in-law mentioned that. (The way that Charlie knew was [because] his brother was an engineer.) I heard about it. My Dad knew Charlie Pell and Charlie's brother. Dad and I went to see them. [And the Pell who was an engineer] interceded with the road foreman in Pittsburgh. I went down for an interview, physical exam and got the job. A lot of fellas heard about it later, but I was gaining seniority. (Everything went by seniority: if you and I were both hired the same day, the one that took his physical exam first had seniority over the other one. And everybody had a number, a roster number. If you were one number below, that guy could bump you.)

bc: Was the union there when you came in?

LR: Oh yeah, they had the union. They didn't have any paid vacations at that time, but they got them later.

bc: What have you been up to since retirement?

LR: People kept asking my wife, What's [your husband] going to do when he retires? (So many people worry about retirement.) Finally I told her, When they ask you, you tell em I'm going to sit in the rocking chair for six weeks and then I'm going to start to rock—gently. [LR laughs.] I said, That'll give em an answer anyway. But, really, what I said was, I don't want to rust out, I want to wear out. And I've been doing that.

Pittsburgh Oral Histories

I belong to the Lions; I've been a member since 1988. As a matter of fact, I don't know if you noticed it, but there's a box down there where you sign in that collects eyeglasses.... I got permission to put that up. I've already turned in 120 pairs of glasses since last Memorial Day and I have 30 more in my room. I don't let the box get more than half full because sometimes people bring half-a-dozen at a time. And they're glad to do it. We have em and we know we shouldn't throw em away, but we don't know what to do with em. And there was a piece in the paper to get the word out and the secretary of the Lions got a phonecall from a church in Monroeville that asked to have a box in their church.

The glasses are recycled and they're handed out to people who need them. Everything is handled by people who are experts in the field. It's international: I think there are Lions in about 160 countries. We've had one meeting here in the private dining room. They meet in the Methodist church in Pitcairn. (They have two meetings a month. They have one business meeting and another that's a dinner meeting and business afterwards.)

I'm also a member of the Masons. I'm eligible now for a 60-year pin.

bc: Congratulations.

LR: Thank you. I belong to the Shrine and that's something dear to my heart. They have a slogan: Nobody stands so tall as a man who stoops to help a child.

[We get back to talking about the railroad and the yards at Pitcairn and at 28th Street in The Strip.]

LR: I worked out at 28th Street. I used to haul produce into the produce yards when they had the railroad sidings there.

A priority train is a banana train. I was a pretty new fireman; we got ordered out of Altoona and the engineer said to me,

Be prepared for a fast run: 'cause we won't be getting any helper [a railway locomotive that is temporarily attached to a [train](#) that requires more power or [traction](#) to climb a [grade](#)]. With that "helper service" you didn't lay away from home on those because it was what they called "turn around service." You'd maybe push two or three trains in your eight hours or ten hours or however long. It was a desirable job: you had to have enough seniority.

They never overloaded that [banana] train and you didn't have to stop to get any pushes up the mountain and stop to cut em away at the top. They hauled the bananas green. Then, along the siding, when they changed crews at Pitcairn another crew would get em and take em into the produce yards. You'd see bananas laying along there with holes punched in em: and here the inspectors were checking them with thermometers. They don't dare be too ripe. They have to be green. Or they'd be squished in the process of hauling.

bc: How has Western Pennsylvania changed in your lifetime?

LR: Things are better in many respects. But the industry [of course] has moved. And so many of these jobs are going to foreign countries now, but that's typical of the whole country, I think.

Scottdale was a mill town. We had four banks in a town of 5,000 people. We also had a professional baseball team—St. Louis Cardinals farm team in Scottdale. I saw some of those fellas going on to the Big Leagues. Oh and the best part was

Pittsburgh Oral Histories

that's when my Dad was janitor at the Y and the team dressed at the Y, their dressing room. When they came out to go to the game, to the park, I got to ride on the bus with the team. The other kids would see me getting off over at the ballpark and I'm walking about this high above the ground.

"Mickey King" was the name, but it was [Joseph Michael] "Ducky" Medwick later on, who's now in the Hall of Fame—[this is the story:] he was from New Jersey and he had a scholarship coming at Notre Dame, and he didn't want to lose his amateur standing so he played under the name of "Mickey King." Some of the guys from Scottsdale went down and wanted to talk to him when the team was in Pittsburgh. He said, "I never heard of the place." [That is, Scottsdale.] [LR laughs.] He refused to see them.

Another fellow from Scottsdale: Do you remember the Hindenburg disaster? Well, Herb Morrison was from Scottsdale and he was the fella that recorded that. He was the only reporter on the scene that had a cameraman with him and that voice you hear is Herb Morrison. He was my assistant scout master. He lived in Scottsdale and had worked for a Pittsburgh radio station, but he was working for a Chicago station at that time. That was in May of '37.

[Coming back to how things have changed:] One of the changes in Scottsdale: some developer had big plans and it was in the paper about all that they were going to do. They tore some buildings down along Pittsburgh Street, the main street and the deal fell through and there was nothing to bind him to the contract and Scottsdale was left holding the bag.

Transportation is one thing that has improved. [And, incidentally,] Governor Pinchot [1923-1927, 1931-1935]—some of the blacktop roads used to be known as Pinchot roads—he's the fella that got the farmers "out of the mud" by having all those country roads paved in blacktop.

The first car I bought was in 1936 and it was a '28 Chevy. I paid 50 dollars for it from a private owner. It didn't have a fuel pump; it worked with a vacuum tank.

In some of the old cars, when your gas'd get low and you were going up a steep hill and it would stall on you, you'd start the motor and turn around and go up the hill backwards 'cause you could get the fuel that way. I've been with guys that did that. [LR laughs.]

Every car had a toolbox: that was standard equipment.

My Dad and a bunch of fellas took a trip to Buffalo, New York, from Scottsdale; and they were delighted when they came back from that trip—they only had two flat tires on the whole trip! And they were so happy. [LR laughs.]