

ROCK ISLAND EMPLOYEE INTERVIEW NOTES:

EMPLOYEE: Ruth Williamson Armbrust (Nov. 5, 1905- Feb. 4, 2006)

DATE OF INTERVIEW: October 22, 2001

LOCATION: Little Rock, Arkansas

INTERVIEWER: Tom Sandlin. Also present was her son Bernie (same name as his father) and Helen Rice, a friend and widow of a Rock Island employee.

DESCRIPTION: Ruth Armbrust started with the Rock Island in 1952, spending 28 years with the railroad. Most notably she worked as the secretary for every superintendent in Little Rock from May 1950- November 1970 and knew the inner workings of management, was a stenographer for investigations held by the railroad, and administered tests to aspiring employees. She was also married to Rock Island Storekeeper Bernard Flynn Armbrust. At 95-years-old when the interview was recorded, she still had a sharp memory.

DIGITIZED: From cassette March 9, 2021 and edited by Michael Hibblen



FILE NAME: 2001-10-22-Ruth_Armbrust

ROUGH TRANSCRIPTION OF INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS:

Mrs. Armbrust on the monthly meetings of the Rock Island Club, a group of former employees in Arkansas who were still meeting:

00:00 Joyce calls me and tells me all about the meetings, who all was there. And of course, I'm crazy about **Olan West**. Olan is a mighty fine young man. We thought the club would fold up when Mr. [**Lenonard Tillman**] **Walker**, who helped to organize it and was president for years and years and years from about 1979 or 1980 until he had to quit and died and Olan was made president. Everybody thought the club would die, but sure enough it hasn't and has picked up and you might say it's going great guns and I'm just tickled to death. Olan worked most of the time at **Biddle Yard** [in Little Rock] in the yard office. He worked in the freight office and then he worked in our superintendent's office for a while. I did enjoy my work for the railroad company and my husband, he was storekeeper for the railroad company there at Little Rock at Biddle for years and years. I didn't have a car and he would say I would just talk and talk and talk, you know, about what went on at the office that day. He'd say 'Honey, I wish you'd leave your job at the office,' and I'd say, 'Well, I've got to talk to somebody.' So, I did enjoy it and I still miss it.

02:35 [Introduces herself] My name is **Ruth Williamson Armbrust**. I am 95. I will be 96 on the 5th day of November, two weeks from yesterday.

How she came to work for the Rock Island in Little Rock:

03:17 I was going to what they called part-time school when the war broke out. I knew that they'd probably get my husband and maybe my son. My son in 1941 was just 16-years-old, not quite 17, and my husband was in his mid-30s. So, I thought, well, I'd better go back to school and refresh my stenographic course, so I did. It was while I was down there, we were having a typing test that day when the principal came up to me and said, 'Would you like to go down and work for the Rock Island for eight days?' And I said, 'Ms. Bass, do you think I can?' And she said, 'Well, if I thought you couldn't, I wouldn't have asked you.'

04:15 So I went on down to the depot and worked for the chief dispatcher for eight days. Then the superintendent's office had a vacancy for the division engineer's secretary and I went over there and worked in that capacity for eight years. And the job of superintendent's secretary came open and that was during the war. I said, 'I don't know whether I can do that or not.' It was an important job, and

they said, 'All we want is somebody that can read their notes and transcribe them.' So I said, 'Okay, I'll try,' and I stayed on that job from May of 1950 until they closed our office [superintendent's office in Little Rock] in January of 1965. We then moved downstairs to the assistant superintendent's office, which a lot of people called the trainmaster's office. I worked down there for about three years and then they built the new building at Biddle Yard and we moved out there. And that's where I worked until I retired on November 27, 1970.

Asked if she remembered Alan Wagoner:

06:01 Oh yes, I remember interviewing him when he was employed as a brakeman. **A.O. Wagoner**, a fine young man. It was always A.O. to me. [The railroad officially used first initials and last names.]

06:30 I handled efficiency test reports the whole time I worked as the superintendent's secretary starting in 1950. That's how I learned a lot of the men and their initials. I know a lot of their names and all and I didn't know the men until we moved out to Biddle. And our office was the new building out there. Our office was on the far east end of it, on the first floor, right at the foot of the stairs. And then the other part of it was the freight office and the switchman had their locker room down there. They'd stop in to see me and the schedule examiner and we'd have a cup of coffee and maybe a cookie or something before they'd go upstairs to get their checks. I learned a lot about the men then, especially in the switching and train service, not so much the engine service because they were up at the roundhouse. I did enjoy it oh so much, so much.

08:04 Some of the clerks out there resented me working before eight o'clock and sometimes during my lunch hour. But I said I don't mind that because the men would come in and want to tell me about their new girlfriend or their wife becoming pregnant or something and I'm going to stop and listen to them. If I want to work through my lunch hour, a part of my lunch hour and make up for that time, I'm going to do it. And that's what I did and some of the clerks did resent it, but I couldn't help it, it was just the way it was done.

Her son noted she still had her union card and paid annual dues.

08:45 Oh, yes, yes, I do. I still pay them every year.

Asked about any notable experiences she would like to share:

09:39 When I was a little girl, I never did get to go out of Little Rock except to Arkadelphia. One time I was down there for a conference with the Young People's Department of our church and we were down there for a week. I said 'Wouldn't it be wonderful to marry a man whose name starts with A and works for a railroad company so I could travel.' I loved it and sure enough I did both. I never did have a second name, so I took my maiden name as my second name when I needed to. So that's how I came to get the Williamson in there. My husband and I enjoyed our travels a great deal. I've been to Australia after my son and his wife moved out there and worked there for nearly five years. I went out there and I never dreamed I'd ever do that. And we went up to Canada. We've been through every state in the United States except about five or six. And I've been up to Canada, up to Newfoundland, and we just traveled a great deal. We did love every minute of it and I have a lot of memories about our travels. And as I said, my husband was storekeeper for the railroad company here at Little Rock.

Her son asked about a head-on collision between two steam locomotives near Hazen, which her husband had to go to.

11:55 Oh, yes. Gosh, that's been so long ago, I'd forgotten all about that. I don't remember now who the engineers were. It was quite a catastrophe for sure. As I said, I didn't know, of course, I knew a lot of the men in the engine service because of me handing the efficiency test reports. And I know on the west end we had one of the brakemen violate a rule. And I was familiar with a lot of the rules because I interviewed a lot of the men when they came to work for the company. And I'd say 'Take the rulebook and you do so and so and so and so and be sure you look at this one or you look at that one,' and so when he violated a particular rule, of course a conductor was in charge of the train and the brakeman violated this rule. I had to take the investigation, which was just like court, as you well know. So they disciplined the conductor along with the brakeman and I thought, well, gosh, **Mr. Smith** wasn't responsible for that. He didn't do that, and I just cried and I cried and I cried, and Mr. Smith got word of it. And do you know that he came to see me at the nursing home here since I've been here the last five months? He and his wife came to see me and he remembered that. And I said, 'I didn't know that you remember that I cried so,' because I was so fond of Mr. Smith. He was such a nice person. But I took a lot of those things to heart.

One day in the investigation, I had to take notes just like in court, and we had to type whatever the men were saying. One of them was always getting up and

interrupting, and I knew him real well and was real, real fond of him. And I said, ‘**Jimmy**, if you don't sit down, I'm going to crack you over the head with this ruler.’ He laughed, he sat down. It was hard for me to keep up with him because they were just going so fast and they were so interested in what they were saying and trying to defend their men. He was just going so fast and my fingers just wouldn't type that fast and we were supposed to type every word as they said it. The superintendent was really the judge, you know, he was the one who was holding the investigation and would ask the questions.

14:59 When they gave me the retirement party, I had to cry. I'm such a sentimental old fool that when the trainmen's organization gave me a pin from the trainmen's organization and a sweet letter along with it. I started to read it when they gave the pin to me and I started crying and I handed it over to Mr. Stiver, who was our road foreman of engines, **Bill Stiver**, and I said, ‘Mr. Stiver, you'll have to finish reading this for me, I can't do it.’ He read it for me and I was embarrassed to death standing up there crying at my retirement party. But I did appreciate it so much of the trainman's organization, giving me a pin and writing me a sweet letter. He was an awfully nice person, he and his wife too.

Her son asks about when they traveled from Little Rock to Shawnee [Oklahoma] in 1927 during a massive flood of the Arkansas River.

16:23 Oh yeah, flooded all the way up. We were the very last train when we got over in that flood of 1927 and the water was up over the tracks until we got to Ola. There was a lot of water. It washed the Missouri Pacific bridge out. I know that when we got out around Pinnacle where it was so deep out there, and we went in a Pullman car of course. I grabbed hold of the window and I pulled on that window thinking that if we turned over, well, I'd at least be hanging on to something, scared to death that the track would be washed out. The section foreman would have to go ahead of the engine and see that everything was okay before the train could go on over.

Her son asks about her husband's accident.

17:59 Oh my yes, that was a long time ago in 1926. My husband was living at Shawnee, Oklahoma then and that was where the district headquarters were. He was made supply train storekeeper in September 1926 and he had only been on the job a little over a month. Coming down from Shawnee to Little Rock, he would come on a freight train and carry supplies for the various stations and section men instead of them having to bring them in. So he'd pick up their old worn out tools

and put them on their scrap car. He was at ~~Booneville, Arkansas~~ [later corrects that it was in Hartford, Arkansas] and was trying to catch his train. He told them he was going to eat some supper because he had not had any lunch and he was going to go eat supper. They apparently did not hear him and they were going to take off without him. So he ran to grab the train, grab hold of that handhold on the side of his car and missed his foot and down he went. And it dragged him several feet, split his head open, it really did do him in. And when I came on a passenger train the next morning, I saw him there at Booneville with his head all bound up and everything, scared me to death. But anyway, he got over it, but it was a long time getting over that head injury.

Son says for the rest of his life she would be picking coal or splinters out of his head.

20:23 It happened in Hartford, Arkansas. Booneville was the terminal, but it happened at Hartford, and that little country town up there, they didn't know much about taking care of emergencies.

20:40 He had a lot of experiences on the supply train. He had a group of cars that they loaded up with supplies for the section foreman and the agents. And as I said, instead of them having to send their stuff in, he would pick up their old tools and supplies and give them new ones. And then he had the scrap car. He had a group of about seven or eight cars that he had with new supplies and stuff on it and then the old scrap car. And he had what they called the house car and it had a bed in there and was all fixed up almost like an apartment. Had the bed in there and a little stove and a little table and everything and a little office. It was just real, real nice. When he'd go to Fort Worth over the weekend a lot of times, every third week he'd go to Fort Worth and Dallas, and I'd go down there to spend the weekend with him and I'd sleep on the house car with him. Oh it was so nice and all, going down the train yard at night for the flashlight. We really enjoyed that and he enjoyed working on the supply train. But they took him along on a lot of the locals, his seven or eight cars were attached to the locals, and of course they stopped at every station and picked up their old supplies and issued them new ones. All up and down the railroad from Shawnee, Oklahoma, to Memphis, Tennessee, and south to Alexandria, Louisiana, and south to Fort Worth and out west to Warwick, Oklahoma. But it was a wonderful time. A wonderful 28 years that I spent with the railroad company.

Did she have any favorite superintendents she worked for?

23:10 Oh yes, yes I did. They were just wonderful people.

Mr. **William J. Pasta**, and his wife's name was Leah, and I still hear from them every Christmas. He came from somewhere else, I don't remember now just where he came from, but he was certainly wonderful to me. Was there, I guess, in our office for a little over two years, and that was longer than any superintendent stayed while I was there. Some of the others were **C.H. Hardwick**. He was the first one that I went to work for in May 1950.

24:13 Oh, and then there was **J.H. Lloyd**. He was an awfully nice person. I was very fond of him. He was superintendent here at Little Rock for quite a long time then worked himself up to an official job out of Chicago. He was here twice. The last superintendent I worked for there was Mr. **Oliver R. Thurston**, who was also a superintendent in El Reno. Another that was such a nice person was Mr. **George Boss**. And Mr. **R.W. Anderson**, he worked himself up to a nice job with the company, and when he finally retired he moved out to California to be with their only child, a daughter. He didn't live too long after he retired, but his wife and I corresponded for a long, long time, even after he died. So she's been gone now for several years. I feel so good that some of them even think of me to write to at Christmastime... We had some wonderful ones who worked in our office.

27:04 Someone said that I remember like an elephant. Well, I sure hope I didn't look like one, but I do remember a lot of things about the company and all. My husband retired when they closed the storeroom here and they would have let him go on to El Reno at the same salary that he was getting here as storekeeper, but he would have had to work outside as a stockman. He had a bad heart and emphysema, and we knew that, and we knew what the winters in Oklahoma were like because we lived out there for nine years from 1923 to 1932. We knew we couldn't stand those winters in El Reno. I could have gone out there and worked in the superintendent's office, but we just decided that money wasn't everything. So he took an early retirement at 62 and I then bumped downstairs on the trainmaster's job, my first position with the assistant superintendent down there was **Mr. Jay Hare** (SP?), **Earl Hare** (SP?). Oh, he was an awfully nice fellow. And then my next assistant superintendent, Mr. **W. H. Hogle** (SP?), and then my next one was Mr. **S.G. McDaniel**. Harold? Yes. Oh, he was awfully nice, yes. And then my last one before I retired out at Biddle was **Homer L. Dyer**. I know when I worked down in the Assistant Superintendent's Office that young men would come in and make applications for a job and one fella came in and I said, 'Gosh, such a

young man going to work for the railroad company, doesn't look like he's over 16 years old.' During our conversation, I learned that he was coming as our new assistant trainmaster, **Clarence S. Branch** (SP?), and was at El Reno when I retired.

30:06 And I did appreciate it so much when Mr. **J. P. Buffalo** (SP?) was a yardmaster for a long time. Well, he was a switchman before he became yardmaster, but he was over from around Carlisle or Hazen and Mr. Buffalo was a wonderful person. Everybody loved him. Did you know Mr. **Elby Close**? He was a master mechanic. Did you know Mr. **Gerald Everett**, car foreman. Last time I heard from Gerald he was in Houston, Texas, San Antonio, Texas, or somewhere down in there and I don't know whether he's living or not.

Her son asks about a restaurant just outside of Biddle Yard where many workers ate lunch every day not far from the roundhouse. It was run by a woman and offered all you could eat lunches.

32:59 Oh yeah, I never did eat there. But my husband did and I know all the men did like it there very, very much...

SON: The problem was that she had a bunch of kids and I got out there one day and the pot that she was using to cook, she was also boiling the diapers in. A lot of the people from the roundhouse and those who built boxcars there and the yard office workers would come up there to eat. She always had quite a big group...

34:01 I just can't think of her name right now.

We had one fellow that was from Haileyville, Oklahoma when my husband was on supply train. He was from Greece and was always getting something from Greece and giving it to my husband. And down there at Haileyville there were a lot of Italians too, and they made homemade beer and homemade wine. They were always, whenever my husband would come home, he'd always have two or three jars of wine with him. And even after we came to Little Rock, after they discontinued the supply cars, Tom would send us some wine and all...

SON: And didn't he send us some barbecued goat one time?

Yes indeed, barbecued goat. It wasn't bad. We always wondered what Tom was going to send next. Old Tom Nix (SP?).

35:21 It was some wonderful times. They were mighty, mighty good to my husband when he was on the supply train. They called it a supply train, it wasn't

any train, it was hooked onto the local train, and it was just a group of about seven or eight cars that they did call the supply train.

On living in Shawnee, Oklahoma and going with the family to Oklahoma City during Christmas:

36:00 When we lived out there, of course, we had passes and the train would go over to Oklahoma City. They had pretty good passenger service back then in the late 1920s and we left there in '32. They'd have a parade over in Oklahoma City at Christmas time and Santa Cause would be out there. The train went right through the middle of town and we'd get off there at the depot and check our bags and go on uptown and watch the parade and everything and it was just wonderful. I used to go there shopping a lot and then the train would come back from Oklahoma City to Shawnee at about 4:30 or 5 o'clock in the afternoon. So we had a good time shopping over there and it was a lot of fun to go over there and watch the parades. And our son was born there in Shawnee, Oklahoma in 1925. I'd take him over and stand out there holding him in my arms and watch the parade.

Son noted that after moving to Little Rock they would sometimes go to Memphis.

We'd go over to Memphis, but not as often as we went to Oklahoma City [which was closer to Shawnee than Little Rock to Memphis]. 132.5 miles by rail [from Little Rock to Memphis] and 119.5 [miles from Little Rock] to Booneville

Asked about the woman who ran a restaurant inside the Booneville train station:

37:45 **Viola** (SP?). She was a black woman, the only black woman in Booneville, and all the men from the railroad company we're so fond of Viola. She would treat those men like they were her own children and they just loved her too, my husband did. She fixed their lunch for them and even if they'd get in at 8 or 9 o'clock at night, she'd fix their supper for them. And everybody loved Viola... Her home was down in Texas, somewhere in Fort Worth or Dallas.

39:10 Did you know **Mr. Dunn** in Fort Worth? No. Did you know **Mr. L.M. Tucker**? He was a dispatcher at Little Rock when I first went to work for the company and, oh Mr. Tucker was the sweetest person. He was so good to me. And then after I moved over to the superintendent's office, he had a stroke and was in the hospital for quite a while. And I had heard that a lot of times when people had a stroke it changed their disposition. Well it certainly changed Mr. Tucker's and

everybody just despised him. I was still working in the superintendent's office and hated to go over to his office across the balcony. Oh, I just put it off and put it off, I just didn't want to go because he was so nasty. They swapped him out with Mr. Dunn at Fort Worth and Mr. Dunn then came in as chief dispatcher there at Little Rock. But I was in the superintendent's office by then so I never did work for Mr. Dunn, but I did work for Mr. Tucker and the years that I did work for him he was such a nice person.

00:40:25 Did you know, Mr. **H.M. Long**? He was a division engineer that I worked for

Sandlin asks when the dispatcher's office in Little Rock was moved to El Reno:

1965, I believe.

SANDLIN: I was thinking I was in El Reno in '66 for a little while and all of the dispatching for the south end of the railroad was over here. I think there were two chief dispatchers, Frank J. Bridges and Harry L. Reyburn.

41:28 Oh, yes. Well, I remember the names and the initials, as I say, when I would handle the efficiency test reports and personal injury reports I learned the men's names and initials a great deal and then I did type seniority rosters and would proofread them.

SANDLIN: I think the superintendent's office would have been an interesting one to work in because just about everything that's going on in one way or another was kind of filtered through the superintendent's office. So if you worked there, you'd know everything that's going on just like the superintendent did.

42:22 Well, especially in that transportation communication department and clerical department that, as I say, in the car department and the mechanical department, they were out at Biddle. Now, that's where my husband worked. His storeroom was out there at Biddle and we think that maybe that's one place, he did smoke, but we think, the doctors did seem to think that was one place where he contracted the emphysema because the engines would pull up there alongside the storeroom and in the summertime they would just leave the windows up and those engines would idle there and all of that smoke, he would breathe it all day long. They thought might have contributed a great deal to his emphysema.

Did you know Mr. **Raymond R. Rich**? He and his wife were real good friends of ours. We went to the same church together.

Restroom break, some discussions of personal matters as people came and went from the room.

50:11 We never know what's going to happen to us, but I did enjoy my 28 years and four months with the railroad company.

51:43 You know, back in 1937, my husband and I went to Salt Lake City on a trip to the West and we started into the Temple Square there and he spoke to somebody and I said, 'Honey, who in the world do you know here in Salt Lake City?' 'Well, I don't remember his name, but he's a master mechanic over on the Missouri Pacific.' He knew people from everywhere and he had a lot of dealings with the people over at the Missouri Pacific and exchanging materials in the store department here.

BERNIE ARMBRUST: I was in the service in 1944 in Spokane, Washington and was coming home on leave before going overseas. I went down to the depot that night to get on a train and it was so crowded they weren't letting any more people on. So I went up to this conductor and told him, 'I'm going home on leave and need to get on it.' And I said, 'By any chance do you know Berard Armbrust?' And he said, 'Why, yeah I've heard of him.' And he said, 'Are you his son?' and I said yeah. He said, 'Well come on, let's see if we can get you a ride,' and he took me up to the engine, and it was the old steam locomotive, and I crawled up in the cab and went all the way to Lincoln, Nebraska in the cab of that engine coming home on leave because that conductor knew dad.

SANDLIN: Yeah. I think back in the old days there was a lot of that. In fact, I think there was a whole lot more then than there is now. Everything is so impersonal now.

BERNIE ARMBRUST (53:37): One of the highlights, mother mentioned the trip to Salt Lake City in 1937, one of the big highlights every year was in the late winter, we would start planning the trip for that year and mother would get timetables from all over various and sundry railroads and all three of us would sit down and plan out the trip and connections and all this and then dad would get the passes. I was thinking I had been in 40 of the 48 states by the time I was 12.

54:30 I think travel is an education in itself... We had been to Mexico City. We had been to New Zealand, in Canada, we never got to Seattle, but we went to

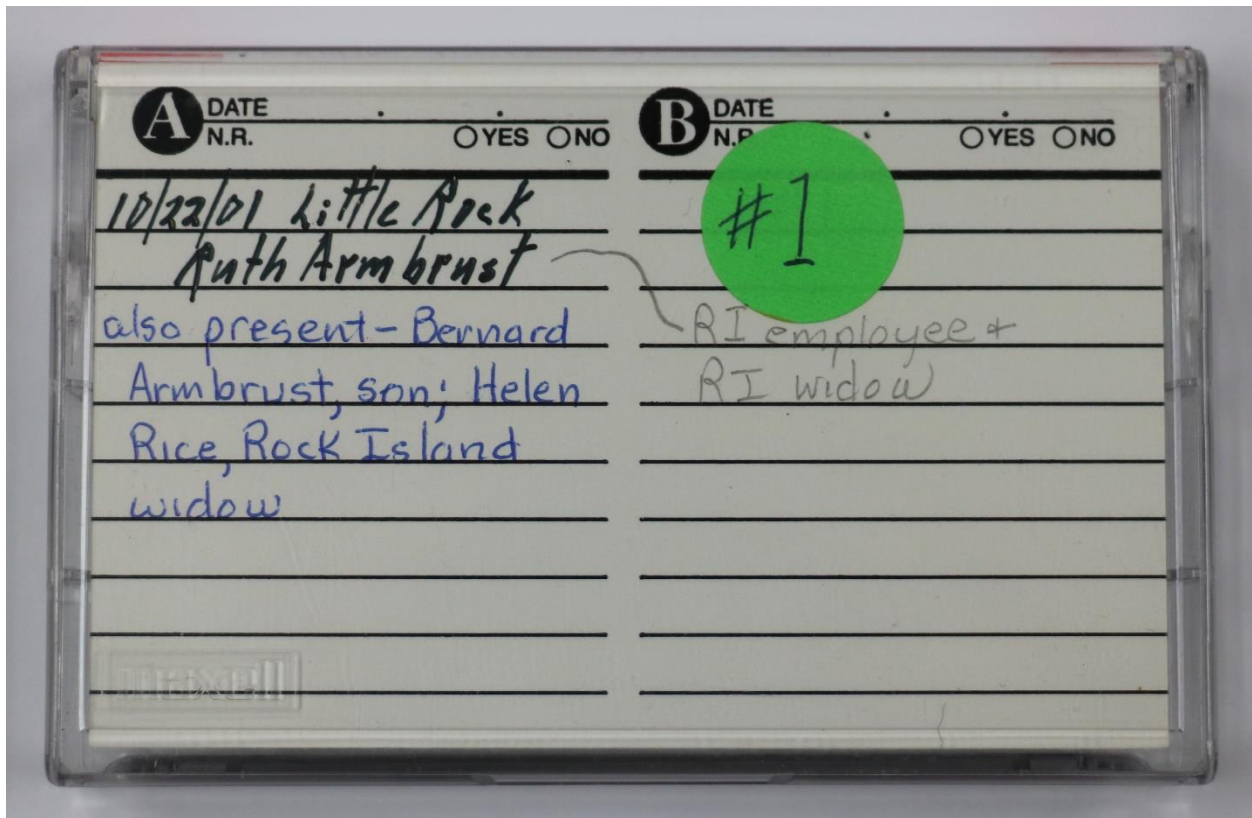
Portland, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and we were at San Francisco when the World's Fair was out there in 1939. I never did ride on my own service. I had passes, but it was on my husband's service because he had so much more service than I did.

More discussion on travels, concludes with the end of steam locomotives.

58:31 I remember when we were getting ready for the diesels to come in.

SANDLIN: Did everybody get excited?

Oh my, yes. Absolutely.



Edited, rough transcript of interview highlights, revised May 9, 2021, Michael Hibblen.