

ROCK ISLAND EMPLOYEE INTERVIEW NOTES:

EMPLOYEE: William "Bill" K. Robbins Jr.

DATE OF INTERVIEW: Sept. 27, 2016

LOCATION: Sherwood, Arkansas

INTERVIEWER: Michael Hibblen

DESCRIPTION: Robbins worked as a brakeman, then conductor for the Rock Island over 14 years, from 1966 until it was shut down in 1980. He later became owner of the shortline Dardanelle & Russellville Railroad.

TECHNICAL NOTES: Interview was recorded during the 2016 annual reunion of former Rock Island employees at Sherwood Forest with noise in the background.

FILE NAME: 2016-09-27-Bill_Robbins

ROUGH TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS:

0:00 [Introduces himself.] My seniority date was July 14, 1966 and I was with them until the end. I was a brakeman and conductor and I was actually off in December [1979] and January and February [of 1980] for cancer surgery and I was okayed to go back to work on March 17th and they closed on the 18th.

What was it like running the passenger train?

0:35 We had the old RDC cars that were not properly sprung. They rode roughly, but that's what we had for a passenger coach. I actually rode those cars several years earlier, when they were just an independent unit and they rode good, but after they took the engines out from under it and didn't respring them they rode pretty bad.

You were on the last passenger train?

1:00 I was working number 22, the last eastbound train through Arkansas. I got on at Booneville and went through to Memphis. I've got to go back and look at

the date, but I know Frank Warford (SP?) was our conductor and I'm trying to remember who the other brakeman was. I think it was Jay Verbeck (SP?), but I'm not sure. I'd have to go back and look at my pictures. I've got all the train orders and clearances of the last train 22 from Boonville to Memphis.

What was the mood like on that final run, knowing that was the end of passenger service?

01:41 Well, we knew it was. We didn't have but two or three passengers on the car, but that's right, that was just the last one and basically you knew when you got to Memphis you're going to have to deadhead back to little Rock and you were bumped [into freight service]. But I liked it because it's a darned good place to be braking in the wintertime. Man, I've had some times I'd be out flagging and freeze to death, thought I was anyway.

What did you do after the passenger service stopped?

02:18 I went down on the branch. I always tried to stay on jobs that, number one, were off on Sunday, and number two, you didn't have to live by the telephone. So then I went down, I think, on a Malvern p.m. switcher after that and then I was on the Malvern-Camden local until they pulled it off south of Sparkman. And then I spent my last two years on the west end.

What was it like all those years? What stories stick out to you?

03:00 When I hired on Rock Island in '66, it was still in pretty good shape, but we just saw it going down, down, down, down. At one time, up on the west end, it was 116 miles from Biddle Yard to Booneville and there were 120 cars laying in a ditch. They just let the track go to pot and you, if you can't run, you can't compete. That's what I keep harping on my boys all the time. We're in the railroad business. But we had some interesting situations. We had some real characters that worked out there and, matter of fact, with **[Bill] Anderson** there, I hired out in '66 and in November of 66, just before I went on a passenger train the first time we had a car come loose. The side frames came off the trucks and come back, four cars ahead of the caboose, come back and hit the caboose at Madison.

We dragged it all the way through a bridge, derailed. The constant things that happened after that got rather comical, but at the time it wasn't too comical.

Any other accidents or any scares in your time?

04:18 Well, one night we leaving Butterfield on the '88, the Hot Springs local, and we were so heavy that the Malvern p.m. switcher had to put our hind in on we could back up the hill to get it. We took off, went down through, going down through Rayburn (SP?) and went into emergency, and basically we wadded up 35 of them there and walked around and went on in after we kind of got a handle on everything.

04:50 Then in '78 or '79, I can't remember which, we derailed at Waveland at 11 o'clock at night and the fireballs were going up so big I didn't have to use a lantern to walk around town. And yeah, we had a car of pentane and a car of cyclohexane that went up. We had seven cars of molten sulphur. We had one piggyback that was full of denim remnants and the only thing that was left of the trailer was the axles. It melted it down.

05:35 Then another time we derailed going around a curve just east of... I'll think of the name of the place in a minute. Anyway, we tore out one steel span on the Fourche Creek bridge with the derailment. I had to crawl under the cars to get across the bridge. But we had several incidents. It was rather unusual. Most of the guys we worked with got along real well. We had a few anti-social people I guess you might say. And of course we come to something like this and you know, there's not nearly as many of us as there was, but I still enjoy it.

The railroad's been shut down for 36 years...

Yeah, I was 44 years old, six months out of cancer surgery. I couldn't get a job anywhere. I went back to my previous occupation as an aircraft mechanic and did that for about three years. I could see that place wasn't going to last very long. So I built two breeder hen houses and operated them for three years and then had a chance to buy the D&R Railroad at Russellville. I bought it and we've added three more railroads to it and switching services and an aviation operation.

Wow, good for you.

07:05 That was the Dardanelle & Russellville Railroad. It was originally built and ran from... August 15, 1883 was the first trip and it's the oldest continuously operating shortline in the state of Arkansas. And then we own the Ouachita Railroad, which used to operate from El Dorado to Lillie, Louisiana. It's the old Rock Island, that's one piece of the Rock, but we've abandoned it because we hadn't had a train down there in 15 years when we figured we might as well pull it up. And then we have the Camden & Southern at Cullendale, the old IP paper mill site. Then we have the North Louisiana & Gulf Railroad. We own it from McGehee to Lake Village and then we lease it from the state of Arkansas from Lake Village to the state line and the state line to the Port of Lake Providence. We lease that from the Port of Lake Providence.

How did you come to want to own a shortline?

08:12 I've always been fascinated by shortlines ever since 1960 and I would study everything that I could find about them. So I had a very, very unique opportunity and in '88, I bought the D&R and we just built it from there.

It's nice to see the couple of short lines still operating some Rock Island track. The Little Rock & Western picked up that stretch.

08:42 The Little Rock & Western and the Arkansas Midland operates some track out of North Little Rock out to where Maybelline is now. I forget the name of that station now. Like I said, it has been 36 years. And the Arkansas Midland also operates from Malvern to Hot Springs. I had a chance to look it over two years ago when my number two son, he's a lieutenant colonel in the Guard, he took command of First Battalion 153rd Infantry, and the ceremony was right there next to the track. I so had a chance to get over and to look at a little bit. I ran across there no telling how many times [with the Rock Island].

What do you think was the mistake that the Rock Island made?

9:35 Well, it's a huge mistake that you've got it tore up from Danville to Oklahoma because that entire region of the state is devoid of any opportunities to grow as far as industry or anything else. I worked trying to save it back then and the Western Arkansas Planning Development District was there and we told Booneville you don't have a river and you don't have a freeway. This railroad is your only way of getting out. But as you look now, after 36 years, what industries were there are gone. They had to leave and there's no... Well, like Booneville used to be a very thriving town. It's now a bedroom community for Four Smith and it would cost so much to put it back that I don't think it'll ever be put back. Arkansas has a very rich shortline history, particularly all the big lumber companies in south Arkansas used to have their own rail line. And then of course Alcoa used to have the Bauxite & Northern there at Bauxite and Benton.

11:00 There's a big history here. I know Bill Pollard has got a pretty good breakdown of them. I'll put in a plug for Bill, he and the late Gene Hull spent six years writing a book on the history of the Dardanelle & Russellville Railroad, and Bernice Anthracite [Coal] Company, the Dardanelle Pontoon Bridge & Turnpike Company that at the time was the largest Pontoon bridge in the world. When I took the railroad over I found just absolutely tons of historical data. As a matter of fact, in the vault in the office I've got the handwritten corporate minutes all the way back to 1883. It's beautiful handwriting but you have to study it to read it because we're so used to the printed page. But we have a lot of detail there.

What's the biggest challenge running a small short line?

12:06 Basically, bringing more and more regulation on to us that pertains more to the big carriers than to the small ones. But an industry really needs to get on to a shortline rather than the big carriers, because we can give them the personalized service that they want, because we don't have the multitude of barriers that the big railroads have. So we just give them a customized service to what they need. And this is how I've managed to survive from '88 to now, what is that, 28 years. I just knock on doors and I say I don't need your business, I've got to have it. What have I got to do to get it, and then I get it. So that's the way to get about.

And in terms of how to the Rock Island ended, were you sad?

13:00 Oh yeah, yeah I was sad to see it go. As a matter of fact, I had just bid in my first pool turn west as a conductor, and then I had to take off for cancer surgery and never got to make a trip.

Were you surprised it shut down?

13:17 They'd been in trouble, but all the railroads now are saying they made a huge mistake by not keeping that line open. The guys on the Cotton Belt did not want to see that merger [with Union Pacific] go through because from Brinkley, where we crossed the Cotton Belt, from Brinkley to L.A. was 565 miles shorter to go by the Rock Island, then the Santa Fe route through northern New Mexico than to take the SP route which went down on the southern border. And they could have saved four crew districts and a lot of... now they wish that they had it because the tracks that they have kept are now just about at capacity. But again, it'd just take too much money to put it back.

And if the Rock Island maybe could have survived a few more years until the deregulation...

14:20 That's the thing about it. The Staggers Act happened about that time and nobody really knew what they could do or couldn't do. 10 years later, they knew what they could do and railroads were shedding branch lines and picking up other lines. I think if historians look at the railroad history, parallel railroad mergers like the Erie Lackawanna, Conrail, all that mess, they don't work. But end-to-end mergers work real well. And that was where the northeast part of the United States got in trouble with their parallel mergers up there. That and some ridiculous union contracts.

Anything else stick out to you about your time on the Rock island?

15:17 No, just of course, I'm a rail and always have been. I was 7-years-old when I rode my first locomotive in Paris, Texas. Dad was hostelling down there on the Frisco, and then I ran my first one there in Fort Smith when I was 9. So I was hooked and have been hooked all my life. I really enjoyed my 14 years on Rock

Island. It wasn't without its problems, but problems are just out there to be solved and we solved most of them.

I've always heard the Rock Island was a family railroad...

15:53 It was As a matter of fact, I see Bobby Joe Franklin's widow over there. Come to find out some girls I grew up with in Fort Smith in grade school, they're kin to the Franklins and we didn't figure that out until here about three years ago. Buzzy [Joe P. Rook] asked me one time if I knew where there were any Packard automobiles. He was thinking about buying a Packard. Well, thanks to his alerting me on Packards, I now own three Packards. I've got a 1941 club coupe, I've got a 1953 convertible, and a 1955 two-door hardtop, amongst the others that I've got. Technically, I have planes, trains and automobiles.

That's incredible.

16:44 As a matter of fact, I could tell a story on Buzzy [Joe. P. Rook]. You might not want this on the tape. L.T. Walker was our local chairman and L.T. always wore a Kromer cap and overalls and mostly a white shirt, sometimes they were colored. But anyway, Tillman [L.T. Walker] caught the job as a conductor on the Hot Springs local and so he put on a fedora rather than a Kromer cap. So the guys on the switcher were down here at the little depot shelter and, shall we say, they had anesthetized themselves to the heat and what have you. They looked up and saw this guy coming wearing a fedora and it scared them. He thought it an official. Well Tillman showed up down there and Buzzy said, 'Good lord Tillman, you look like a Louisiana clap doctor,' and that nickname stuck with him until the day he died.

I interviewed, the first Rock Island employee I ever talk to was L.T. in 1988...

17:53 Yeah, L.T. I'll tell you what, a lot of people didn't like L.T., but when they got in trouble they wanted L.T. I was a rear brakeman for L.T. for a long time on that Hot Springs local and some other jobs. L.T. would talk to me about various investigations and things he had been into and that's one reason why I got a good insight into our contract was just talking with him. So consequently he retired and

everybody was hollering at me, 'Hey, hey, hey, what about this?' I said you ought to have paid attention. I was vice-chairman of the local for a number of years and then of course as a as a union member, you could ask anybody to represent you in investigations. I represented several of them because, I'm not bragging, but I did know the rule book. I had guys holler on the radio about a train order or something, but I studied it and studied it hard and I survived. That's the only thing I can say.

He could talk your ear off. He could tell a detailed story.

19:10 Well, yeah, he went into much detail and see that's why I would sit and listen to him. He'd go into such detail and I'd pick up the details. It was a real education for me working with Tillman. And of course Tillman comes from the metropolitan area of Ion (SP?), Arkansas. Now those that look up on a map, look on Highway 23 south of Booneville, about halfway between there and Highway 71 is the community of Ion. And Tillman was a very good football player, so Waldron paid him to come to Waldren for school and he got a football injury. If you noticed he had this tick, well that's where he got it was from playing football at Waldron. He was something, but everybody, every official knew L.T. and they always knew he was fair. Consequently, you couldn't have a better man in an investigation representing you than L.T. Luckily I only needed his services once and he got us out of it with 20 demerits.