

## ROCK ISLAND EMPLOYEE INTERVIEW NOTES:

NAME: James Springer (He did not work for the Rock Island, three relatives did)

DATE OF INTERVIEW: April 15, 2017

LOCATION: Little Rock, Arkansas

INTERVIEWER: Michael Hibblen

DESCRIPTION: Springer's father, grandfather and brother worked for the Rock Island in Little Rock, with the two older generations being African-Americans in the south during a time of segregation. As a child, James would bring his dad dinner at Biddle Yard and was allowed to ride with him in locomotives as they would be serviced. Springer says his dad trained many engineers, but wasn't allowed to become an engineer himself because of his race. Springer was about 80-years-old at the time of this interview.

TECHNICAL NOTES: The interview was recorded at Wordsworth Books in Little Rock while I was doing a book signing shortly after the release of my book. He came in to buy a copy of the book and started telling me his background, so I pulled out my digital recorder asked if I could record his experiences.

FILE NAME: 2017-04-15-James\_Springer

Grandfather: **James Gilbert** (Worked 1900-1945)

Father: **Worthy Springer** (About 1940-1955)

Brother: **Charles Springer** (Then 78)

### ROUGH TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS:

0:00 [Introduces himself.] My grandfather worked from 1900 to 1945 before he retired due to illness. Then I had a father who worked there from about 1940 to 1955 and he retired from the Rock Island. And then I had a younger brother, two years younger than myself, he would be 78 this year, he worked there three or four years in the car department repairing wooden cars. They would make them from scratch.

1:03 My dad trained a lot of engineers but he couldn't drive trains due to his color. He did it gracefully, training them knowing he would not be allowed to

be an engineer. Then in mid-1950s, diesels engines came in and the railroad phased out [steam] locomotives.

1:56 My grandfather was born 1862. He migrated down to Texas and was a trailhead working on a ranch, came back to Arkansas around the turn of the century and got with the Rock Island. They probably hired him not knowing who he was because he looked like a little bald-headed white man, couldn't be distinguished. Later they realized he was an African-American, but you couldn't distinguish him from a Caucasian.

2:55 He worked in the Biddle shops area and at the station, as did my dad. My granddad ensured switch mechanisms on the rails were working properly. He worked 45 years with the railroad.

3:00 My younger brother worked at the car department where they repaired wooden cars for shipping merchandise. At one time they had 50 people in that department.

3:57 I would take my dad his dinner the evenings that he worked and he would allow me to ride on the train with him on the engines as he serviced them and put water and sand or whatever the engine needed. So we spent quite a few years and quite a bit of time there observing my dad and he would take us along when he put the engines on the turntable to move an engine into a compartment and he would allow us to ride along with him.

4:52 It was exciting and we would share that with our schoolmates. On rare occasions a classmate would be allowed to accompany me there and it was just a thrill of a lifetime for them.

**Asked about the Rock Island being a family operation:**

5:15 It certainly was. I knew many of the superintendents, the higher echelon, and usually you were hired there by word of mouth. So yes, it was a close-knit, family-type operation. There was job stability because many people retired from there.

**Where any of his family members working there when the Rock Island was shut down in 1980?**

6:02           No. My dad was the last one and my younger brother had gone into the military so he departed before it shut down.

**Was he surprised the railroad was shut down?**

6:22           Yes, it was disheartening to learn Rock Island was coming to an end, but we had no control of that, we accepted it and we moved on.

6:50           In the early '50s airlines bought controlling stock in many railroads and were practically shutting down passenger service. They wanted you to fly. There is no reason for this country to not have bullet trains. France, Japan, China are now working on bullet trains. I lived in Dallas from 1973 to '93 and there was a group trying to get bullet trains between Dallas and Houston and Dallas and San Antonio, but airline lobby would not allow it. They would kill it every time. And you would think those bullet trains traveling at 300 miles an hour, no delays... It takes longer to fly than it would to take a fast train. Dallas is like a second home to me and it takes five hours to drive. It takes longer to fly between all the delays, getting to the airport early. It would be so wonderful if this country had bullet trains. Ordinary trains in Europe have such smooth trains, there's no reason to not have bullet trains here.

**Any final thoughts?**

11:00          I'm just happy that I was able to be associated with that railroad.

**How did you not go to work there?**

When I finished high school I was uncertain of what I wanted to do in life, but the draft was in effect so I went into the military the day after I turned 18 and spent four years in the military and decided I wanted to enter the federal sector. So that's why I didn't chose the railroad.