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### Oral History Interview: Don W. Boham

Don W. Boham

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ORAL HISTORY

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Date DEC 9, 1973

Don W Boham  
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Date December 9, 1973

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(Signature - Witness)



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Don W. Boham

KB: I'm talking today with Mr. Boham of the Penn Central Railroad. Mr. Boham, how long have you been with the Penn Central Railroad?

DWB: I've been with the railroad 34 years.

KB: What other railroads have you been with before the Penn Central?

DWB: The mother railroad, the New York Central and the CCC and St. L., the Cleveland Cincinnati Chicago and St. Louis, all in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois until I moved to West Virginia which was about eight years ago.

KB: Mr. Boham, could you give me a little historical background of the origin and growth of the railroad?

DWB: The origination of the railroad was by necessity. It had its beginning in England with the industrial revolution soon after the turn of the eighteenth century when man's search for metals and minerals was realized. The first necessity was for movement of bulk commodities. The railroads as we know them today had their start in England with small locomotives and wooden rails with strips of iron stretched on top. From this infancy it progressed in England to the steel rails laid on rocks, then to timber later. This transportation being invented in England, and of course you know the history of your own country, it was transferred to our country along the eastern seaboard. And in 1830 our railroads made their existence known. There were three approximately at the same time. One was in the state of Virginia coming west, the other in Pennsylvania going west and another in New York state going west. The one in New York state followed the Erie Canal. The one in Philadelphia followed a canal and the one in Virginia came to the foothills of the Appalachians. They were our early railroads in what is known United States.

KB: You talked about the railroads being a necessity.

How were they a necessity in the United States?

DWB: With the country in the early years located along the east coast and with settlers going west as the population increased. There was approximately a population of 175,000 located west of the Appalachian Mountains through Tennessee, Kentucky, West Virginia, Ohio. These people brought back stories of virgin timbers, minerals. These were all in great demand as our industrial revolution had started along the east coast. Consequently, with the stories of the raw materials which was west of the Appalachian Mountains, the railroads then began their westerly movement because of the bulk of virgin timber, minerals and coal. Only railroads or river boats which were powerless at the time was the means of extracting these commodities from the regions west of the Appalachian Mountains.

KB: You talked about this timber. Now how was this timber removed? How was the track built to facilitate the removal and such?

DWB: As these railroads moved westerly they were called mainlines. These virgin timber areas located in the mountains. And off the mainlines and usually at stream entrances the feeder lines were then built up what we call hollers to the mouth of the hollers. These were often called tram roads or what we now call today removable railroads. They were built with panels, timber, steel rails. They could be removed after the use of that particular area. And to this day into the mountains of West Virginia evidence of these tram roads are still in existence. That was the method that was used from the feeder line to the mainline. This timber was lumbered off, brought to the rails by horses and mules dragging the timber through the mountains, woods, timber lands and loaded on cars. These cars were then brought down on the feeder line to the mainline to be picked up and moved forward to finishing mills or large marshalling area where it was then resold and shipped all over the world and in our own country.

KB: This timber, was it loaded on flatcars?

DWB: Most of it was loaded on flatcars. Not the flatcars as we know them today. They were much smaller wooden under frames no bulkheads but stakes were driven into the sides. These logs then loaded secured by chains and brought out of the mountainous areas and usually stayed right on the cars to the marshalling areas.

KB: How many crewmen were necessary for this type of operation as apposed to the number we have today?

DWB: A large number. These cars had individual handbrakes. They were not equipped with our present day brakes. Often times coming down a mountain grade there had to be a man or employee ride each car. These was called brakemen. The way they got their name was that each man had what they called a brake club in his hand, similar to what you know as a ball bat, a small ball bat. He put it into a brake staff, open at the top, they would insert this club, twist to get the hand brakes to brake the car and it was a friction brake to the wheels.

KB: You talk about timber, now was coal removed in pretty much the same fashion. I realize that they didn't load it on flat cars.

DWB: Coal as a rule came after the timber. Coal was discovered here and large part of it in the surface area. But it was in surface mines then into the deep mines. The cars at that time for coal cars was then called hopper cars coal mined and brought down. That is the transition the railroad went through also with fuel, At the beginning the railroads used timber as fuel. A large number of employees of the railroad at that time did nothing but cut timber and pile it along the railroad every 5 to 7 miles. And these men then had to refuel the tenders behind the engines as they came by. As coal become more evident, the engines was changed to burn coal and then they could go 25 to 30 miles without being refueled. And the coal that was mined furnished the power for moving the engines all steam at the

time from their source and to the steel mills, lumber mills and to the people for heating purposes.

KB: You mentioned some of this older equipment that was used at the time. Could you give me a little more information about it?

DWB: The early railroads was individual cars, individual brakes, wooden under frames, very little steel was used. The connection between two cars was called the link and pin. It is a large metal link oblong about two inches in diameter and a pin for each car. This was the connection between the cars. The brakeman in those days as the engine would push the cars would insert this link. It fit into a slot which had two holes, top and bottom and as the link was inserted and the pin was dropped. That was one of the ways that the railroads hired their employees looking at their hands. So often many of the brakemen had fingers missing, parts of fingers missing from using this connection. But at that time it was the only known connection to hauling multiple cars.

KB: You talked about rails where they used to be steel on wood, what period would this be?

DWB: The steel on wood began around 1830 and as the engines and the cars increased in size from 10 to 15 tons up to 25 and 30 tons which came along in the 1850's and 60's, the timber rails with the steel was not strong enough. And they went to what we know of as a rail is today. It has a flat base bringing in to what we call a web and then the ball of the rail. This was manufactured at the steel mills and I might add that part of the rail that came over and that this type of rail was invented in England also and brought over to this country. And some of our early rail for our early railroads came from the Sheffield Steel Mills in England and was brought over in 1860, 1865 to 1870. I have a copy and a piece of the original Sheffield Steel in our small archives that came from the Sheffield Steel Mill in England and it is stamped 1867. This was removed from the main track of the New York

Central Railroad at Oneida, New York less than 20 years ago.

- KB: When talking about rails why don't we move on to bridges. I realize that bridges must have been mostly built of wood then too. The steam engines burning coal and timber must have been quite dangerous to all wood bridges.
- DWB: Steel at that time in this part of the country or in the early stages was just in its infancy, same as the railroad. The only known and plentiful material at that time was timber. They used hard timber, oak and built the bridges. Some fine bridges are still in existence in West Virginia, of timber construction. They had very good engineers at that time. The bridges, account of using timber and coal, had a walk way on one side and always you found barrels, at that time, wooden barrels, account of the abundance, filled with water. If any of these bridges did catch on fire, there would be buckets of water to extinguish the fire.
- KB: Were crewmen left on the bridge? Were there men hired to just watch the bridge?
- DWB: The track patrol usually took care of that, but as they go over it the crewman could see if there was any dropping of flames or cinders that might cause a fire.
- KB: Mr. Boham, as you mentioned earlier most of the engines or all the engines were of steam power either using either wood or coal as fuel. Could you tell me a little more about them, in terms of how much power they have compared to a diesel?
- DWB: Your engines were based on pilot wheels, which was your first wheels underneath your pilot to steer the engine following the rails. Then the drive wheels, then the carriage wheels under the cab, to the rear. For example, usually the early engines had two pilot wheels, two sets of drive wheels, and trailer wheels, such as two, four two. As the



engines increased in size due to the length of the train and necessity. Don't forget the type of engine. They was engines used in mountains to pull heavy grades. They used Malley's, small wheels, same as with your gears in automobiles today. And as these engines increased in size from 10 to 15 tons up to 250 ton or exceeding 500,000 lbs. some even larger than that. When our engines went out of existance in 1950's the steam engines were much more powerful. In fact a unit of steam powerful, much greater than a unit of diesel power that we have today. The only thing being with diesel power that we know it today is what we call M.U.'ed together one control with steam power with the full set of enginemen for each unit.

KB: Mr. Boham, we have just finished talking briefly about the differences in equipment used sixty years ago. I wonder if the number of crewman differ in this period as opposed to now?

DWB: Crewman, fifty to sixty years ago at the turn of the century and after that up to the modernization of the diesels took many more crewman for each train. As you had steam power it took firemen that are not needed on diesels. Also, before the advent of the airbrake, it took more brakeman to handle the train and brake on grades. It also, at that time, we had mailers of which took separate employees for mailcars. We also had cars that listed for merchandise that took listment that did nothing but handle merchandise into the cars. Flagman were very much of a necessity. In the early stages of the railroad, railroads had crossings as we know them today. But we did not have the electric and electronic equipment at crossings and gates. It took crossing watchman and in some of our cities we had to proceed down the tracks going through the town with a man on a horse. This was in the early stages of railroads to let people know the trains were coming. It takes much less employees at the present time. Also, into the yards and marshalling areas we had a man that would ride each car as it was switched. The modern railroads now have what we call retarders,



which are electronically operated and hooked to computers which automatically break the wheels and no brakemen are required. The crewman sank was reduced from seven and eight to a train. In modern day it can operate quite efficiently with three. Those being engineer, brakemen, and a conductor.

KB: Would you say this reduction of crewman has to do with the moderization of the railroad in terms of inventions and such?

DWB: Certainly. Whenever manpower can be eliminated there has to be something to take their place. In the early railroads, there was no means of communication and each railroad or each section was trained to operate and stop when the next section arrived. Then there was the early invention of the telegraph which helped expedite the trains as between employees at different locations a train was coming a signal would be set for another train not to enter. This expedited the trains, speeded up the traffic. The telegraph was one of our earliest inventions for communications. Telephones soon followed. Up-to-date data, information and after all transportation is for all practical purposes is based on communication. The telephone followed the telegraph. Then the 1880's, the early part of the 1880's Mr. Westinghouse who, I might add, the same gentleman who started the Westinghouse industry invented the airbrake which was a mechanism so placed on each car innerconnected with air with a pump on the main unit which is the engine with flexible hose between each car, cylinders, brake pressure tanks on each car. By maintaining the air pressure all brakes were released. The air brakes being released applied the brakes to each car. This eliminated large number of crewmen and at the same was one of the greatest safety inventions to the railroads today. That eliminated mostly probably brakemen I would say, the use of brake club. Yes, and also it did another thing. The one man the engineer had full control over his entire train. You speaking of grades, coming down grades. This brake system had a method attached to where by cracking the brakes would keep the brakes

dragging at all times. This had a tendency to retard the movement of the cars coming down the mountains at all times. After they were brought on to level rails the valve was closed. Brakes in full operation with better control over cars and better safety. Electricity as we know it today. We use a lot of electricity on the rail. In some section of our country the railroad is powered by electricity, electric locomotives. Large cities, New York for example, Philadelphia, there are some in Washington, D. C. Where there are a lot of people electricity is the mode to handling the trains.

KB: In terms of electricity, how about the crew themselves, the engineer and brakemen? How can electricity help them?

DWB: Well original engines were first brought out by carbide lights and oil lights. As electricity in each one of these units or engines had their own generators, electricity was brought in, electric lights on the locomotives and in the passenger cars. In the archives too you can see coal oil lanterns and lamps as you knew them years ago with the glass covers. This all went to electricity and save the hazard of fire. Electricity we use a lot in rail-roading today. After all the diesel is nothing but a large diesel motor working a generator which generates electricity and the electricity moves the traction car engine today.

KB: The brakemen, I realize in the past, use to use the coal oil lantern and kerosene lanterns in switching operations or in darkness.

DWB: It wasn't too many years ago on that. My first lantern given to me when I started switching was a coal oil lantern in 1940. I was told to shine that lantern before I went to work each time. We did it with an old newspaper. It had its advantages over electricity to one extent. In cold weather, believe it or not, there was enough heat given off so that your hands would always stay warm. I went from coal oil lantern to electricity and my first

electric lantern was given to me in the early 1950's.

KB: With the removal of timber and coal in this area the trend was set for many feeder lines, branch lines branching off from a main line. Could you tell me a little bit about the various branch lines in this area?

DWB: Branch lines was where the actual freight originated. The branch lines originally started in the state of West Virginia on my own railroad southward from Point Pleasant. It was the old Ohio Central lines. When it got to Charleston, of course, the problem of getting right of way was of prime importance. It was in 1880 to 1883 that this main line called the Ohio Central Line was brought in on the eastern side of the Kanawha River. As getting into Charleston and this area then with its growth east of Charleston to Gauley Bridge and all the way to Swiss hooking up with the Nicholas, Fayette, and Greenbrier Railroad. These feeder lines coming in was often private ownership and companies owning the timber rights and mineral rights of the area. There are several located into this territory for instance now the present Port Amherst Industries had their own private railroad running from the Kanawha River at Port Amherst up Campbell's Creek 17 miles to a little town called Putney. This served to bring out timber and coal and believe it or not this little 17 mile branch line ran their own passenger train. We will talk about that when we come to passenger service. Another railroad was the Gauley-New River at Gauley Bridge it running up into the mountains. It too brought out timber and coal. The B & O Railroad coming into Charleston followed the Elk River from Grafton, West Virginia to Gassaway and then the Elk River for 85 miles into Charleston. Campbell's Creek Railroad. Also at Cedar Grove, West Virginia a railroad known as the Kelley Creek Railroad was owned by a large coal company, timber rights and then into coal. And by the way this railroad is still in operation bringing out coal to the Kanawha River and to the railroad main line at Cedar Grove. Large number of other railroad feeder lines after the timber was

removed went in the Smithers Hollow at Smithers, West Virginia by the Cannelton Coal Company. Coal companies built their own railroads and they in turn had their own small gage narrow railroads on the insides of their deep mines to bring out the coal. And alot of these small feeder lines are still operating bringing out coal to the main line to be picked up either to the coast or to industries and power plants for power use, steel mills and so forth.

KB: You mentioned passenger service in one of those. Do most of these branch lines have their own passenger service? What passenger trains around here were running a half century ago?

DWB: Half a century ago you must remember there were not the modern highways you know today. There were not even roads into these remote areas. These territories and areas fed by the small feeder lines and branch lines serviced the communities also and up some of these hollows as many as two, five and one I know of particularly as many as ten thousand people are located. This was their only means of transportation out and in. Therefore each one of these lines had their own little passenger lines. Mail too was brought in and so forth. Some of these services that was needed in these remote areas was the transportation of school children. With no highway or roads for school buses, one in particular, the Hightop Branch operating out of Charleston a distance of 35 miles up into the Appalachian territory. This train left Charleston every morning covered the 35 miles and returned with the school children. They went to school through the day and in the evening the train left with the children and returned them home. This service was provided by the school board in Charleston and the county school board clear up to and including the year 1962 until adequate roads were built in this area to bring the children out. These children were the children of the people who work in the mines, miners and in the timber areas. This was their only way to get to school.

KB: We talked about commodities a little bit. You said they hauled commodities. Did they haul all kind of commodities? How did they do this? How did they accomplish this task?

DWB: Not only timber and coal was handled but the necessities to an area is large and varied. The merchandise brought in and at the turn of the century the largest and best known ways of getting furniture tools and so forth was believe it or not Sears and Roebuck, one of the largest mail order houses in the world. The merchandise would be shipped in, in bulk cars to headquarters such as at Charleston to what is called a freight house. It would be unloaded and reloaded into what we call way cars. Each car on the section of the railroad had its own station name on the inside of the car. Daily these cars were switched into the trains that went into these feeder lines and there was a member of the crew, it was his duty to see that each location this merchandise was unloaded and merchandise that was shipped out would be loaded. This man was called a listman. That was his exclusive duties on the train at that time. This was in service up to approximately 1960-1962 and then the roads became better, trucks took over on the short hauls and the way car went as so much of the railroad not needed. We become about this time heavy haulers. Now in these communities serviced by the way car most of them carried a mail car. There was employees that handled just the mail. As they stopped the one postmaster or postmistress would bring the mail in canvass bags and put them in the mail car and receive his mail. This employee would break the mail down and on arrival back in Springfield, or Charleston, or Columbus, or Huntington the mail was then transported to the post office. It was resorted and sacked and put back onto the through passenger trains for delivery to destination. The mail cars was in existence through the 1960's. At that time the U.S. mail service went into the beginnings of a contract mail service. The railroads started to fade as a mail service. Today you have the mail service as you know it.

KB: We have been talking about fading out of services as

of passenger service or mail car. Did these feeder lines also decline about this same time?

DWB: Yes they did and the remaining feeder lines that you have in operation today primarily are coal feeder lines.

KB: With the decline of these branch lines was all that was left then the mainline service?

DWB: Mainline service, yes. As I've said there are a small amount of feeder lines in existence. There are I might add alot of talk about with the ecology program, a shortage of power that you have heard about the last few months of some of these feeder lines being rehabilitated, going in and reopening some of the mines. It is possible in the next few years if this shortage of power continues that some of the feeder lines will be brought back into service to bring out coal.

KB: Well timber's gone in this area, coal still remains. Presently at this time, what operation is used for the transportation of coal?

DWB: Coal being the commodity for power, power plants and steel mills. The bulk of our coal that we handle today is for steel mills and power plants. Coal has gone to the extent of commodity in large cars, 100 ton cars, into the concept of what we call unit trains whereby one mine, one company will load 100 cars a day. That is what we call a unit train, loaded one day at the mine, all cars are pulled, transported and at destination unloaded in one day and brought back empty to the mine. If it, it's done as a unit concept it is done in tonage lots such as 5,000, 10,000, 15,000 tons of coal moving as to one train.

KB: After coal what other commodities and materials do the railroads haul today?

DWB: In this particular area the Kanawha Valley. Back when the early settlers settled in the Kanawha Valley,



two of the earliest that you would remember studying in history Daniel Boone and some of his co-patriots found the area rich in salt deposits. The oldest industry in West Virginia today is located along the Kanawha River and the Penn Central Railroad. It is called Dickinson Industries and it is still manufacturing salt. Salt being of quantities found in this valley is an asset to chemicals for manufacture. And in the early 1920's chemical manufacture entered into this valley. Dupont, Union Carbide, Monsanto, General Chemical are a few of your major chemical companies, FMC. To where the Kanawha Valley the last few years has become known as the chemical capital of the world. Plenty of water, Kanawha River. Transportation a railroad on each side of the river, mainlines to terminals. And today Kanawha Valley is shipping chemicals and coal as the two main commodities.

KB: Mr. Boham, with the railroad being an interstate transportation organization what sort of restrictions does the government put upon the railroad today and in the past?

DWB: In yesteryear the government had no restrictions on the railroads but as the separate railroads emerged and the question of tariffs of what is cost to move a car of merchandise there was what you call rate cutting with the two railroads or three or four or whatever it was. At this time the railroads were owned and operated by large financial organizations, banks and so forth. The government first intervention into the railroad operation was to eliminate each railroad charging what they pleased. Some of these rates was very high because it was the only means of transportation. You can realize why the railroads were such financial empires years ago because there was no restrictions as to what they could charge. The government set up what they called rates and tariffs to where one railroad could handle the same commodity between any two given points they would charge the same. This then was the first that the government interceded into the railroad with restrictions as, as we know them today. Safety was a large item.



In early railroading there was no restrictions leveled by the government. But in the early part of the 20th century from 1900 to 1910 the government became very interested in the restrictions that they were going to put against the railroads for them to follow for safety reasons. Not only for the railroads and employees but also for the communities which they served. The restrictions as to the way a train was to be operated. If you remember I talked to you about the way the cars were coupled in the early days, the link and the pin, and in the 1880's the present coupling which is a drawbar at each end of the car was invented and perfected. The perfection was improved on through the years to about 1910. The airbrakes was another. So the government got into the safety factor and they call it the safety operation. It is now under the Federal Railway Administration Department. We have restrictions placed to the good of the operation of the railroad, to the people in the communities and to the employees. Also the government operated the railroad by set rules, operating rules and to this day all class I railroads practically operate on the same rules as to how the operation is to be done. Small feeder lines and small railroads that are not under the class I, II, III are exempted from the regulations. Another thing the government involved in was taxes. Each piece of merchandise or commodity is now taxed. We pay taxes on all right of ways, all capital investments, all equipment whereby some of our competitors, river barges, do not pay anything for their right of ways. They are operated in the dams or locks are operated by the government at no cost to the shippers. The same way with the airlines. The airports are built by usually the cities, government help. They pay landing rights only. The railroads are different. They own their own property, their right-of-ways, they pay taxes on it and must keep the railway in operating condition. We cannot cancel runs or trains like the airlines. We have to get permission from the ICC to cancel any trains, especially passenger. That is the advent of what you know as Amtrack. The railroads could not make a profit on passengers with the removal of mail. The government is the governing factor in the operation of the railroad.

KB: Being in the center of an energy crisis, Mr. Boham, do you think this will kill the railroads or bring it back into some of its former hay-day it use to have?

DWB: Rail transportation now has a bright future. For example, how many miles do you think one ton of freight can travel on an airplane and the same ton of freight travel on a truck and the same ton of freight travel on a railroad? The difference is by plane the energy used will only take it three mile, a truck 15 miles, a railroad 40 miles. Now I ask you with the oil situation as it is, the energy on diesel fuel, the energy crisis on coal, all forms of energy, wouldn't it stand to that the railroad would be called upon to perform more and more of the hauling, especially coal to keep this country going?

KB: As far as heavy hauling, yes. How about the transportation of people?

DWB: You've already been reading in the paper about the expanding of the Amtrack on new runs to handle the people to their work. In New York alone, if the cars are restricted to gasoline and Philadelphia and Chicago and Washington, D.C. the Amtrack and the passenger train will be the answer to the ecology crisis and to the energy crisis. We are told that this energy crisis will last to at least 1980. Before railroads can expend this money and before private enterprise can expend this money, the talk is here now. The question is, will this last till 1980, or will it extend farther? I can see no let up. I can nothing but the railroads enjoying an expansion and be called upon to do more with less energy than has ever been known today. We are in more dire circumstances today than we were in WWII. We can do nothing but expand, because the energy crisis is with us and the cost and the amount of energy needed is much less with the railroad than it is with any other form of transportation.

KB: This increased service, won't it cost alot of money

to realize this?

DWB: A few minutes ago I mentioned we must know that it will continue and ways to finance this must be found. At this time the cost to this must be borne by the general public. After all you are a tax payer too. To get the necessities of life you're going to have to pay for them. There's only one answer, for the expansion the expense is going to be paid by the public by the raising of the rates and the tariffs and the passenger fares to correspond. After all, if gasoline becomes a commodity that costs a dollar a gallon don't you think that the railroads have a future?