

Layton, W. T.

Interview by
Miss Betty Turnell

for the
Decatur Public Library

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W. T. Layton Interview

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This is Betty Turnell speaking for the Decatur Public Library. Our guest today is Mr. W. T. Layton. I think most people call him "Bill" Layton.

Mr. Layton, I've saved an article that was published in the Decatur Sunday Herald and Review on June 24, 1979, hoping I could talk to you, and NOW WE HAVE FINALLY ARRANGED THIS MEETING. At that time you were retiring after 34 years on the Wabash and Norfolk and Western Railroads. What have you been doing since then?

A. Playing golf and traveling!

Q. It sounds as if you've been enjoying yourself - but you must have thought some times of those 34 years on the railroad since you retired... Let's go back to the beginning. Was it inevitable that you would take a job on the railroad?

A. Not really! (A chuckle from Mrs. Layton)

Q. Let's bring Mrs. Layton in here. I think she might have something to say.

A. (Mrs L) Not really. His father did want him to join the railroad, but he wasn't interested and it was the last thing in the world I wanted him to do, but I want to say now that I'm thoroughly happy and glad that he finally took the job on the railroad because it's been a very good living for us.

Q. Why didn't you want to be a railroader since your father was?

A. Well, my dad used to come home worn out after 16 hours of work. I had a job down at Meyers' Brothers. I was making real good money - about \$25 a week!

(Laughter)

- Q. Of course, those dollars meant a little more then, but even then it wasn't tremendous, was it?
- A. No, it was very cheap. Then I went into the army. My younger brother hired out before he went into the army. I hired out afterwards. I went out to Allis Chalmers and hired out and I think my pay was something like \$40 a week, and my brother's was 3 or 4 times more. So I decided I'd better go with the railroad.
- Q. So it was the financial rewards which convinced you. What jobs did you do during those years?
- A. First, I hired out firing, but they were going to send me to Quincy, but I was going to get married, so I hired out braking.
- Q. So you could stay in Decatur.
- A. So I could stay in Decatur at the time - So I made that terrible mistake there! (Laughter) I mean hiring out braking. Then I was furloughed, and then I worked on the section. I flagged crossings.
- Q. Let's talk a little bit about some of these jobs. Is firing a hard job?
- A. I don't know. I never did do it. Oh, a couple of times. I fired from Springfield to Decatur once - and from Springfield to Hannibal. Three or four times I fired switch engines - all hand fired.
- Q. This was in the days of steam engines?
- A. Right.
- Q. Now of course, it's different.
- A. Way different.
- Q. We'll talk about that later. What about braking?
- A. Braking was a hard job. My favorite job was the local. We worked 16 hours a day, both during steam engine days and diesel.

Q. Did you work 16 hours a day every day?

A. Six days a week.

Q. Oh! People wouldn't believe it. Didn't you belong to a union?

A. Oh, yes. It's just been in the last ten years that they've got it down to 12 hours. It went from 16 to 14, and we thought that was really something. Then they went to 12 hours, and its 12 hours now. We really thought that was a big deal for us.

Q. I suppose on a train, you have to wait until you get to the end of the line to stop.

A. They usually bring a "bear" crew - another crew out or they put us up overnight - at a hotel in Jacksonville or Hannibal.

Q. In braking, your job was to - ?

A. Switch cars. I believe it was 39 different spots in Jacksonville alone. Everything went by freight in those days, you see. The trucks came in later. Most everything went by train.

Q. So you had to have connections to many different places.

A. Right. You had to know the spots and line up your train right. It was a whole lot of riding and switching - a lot of fun.

Q. But you had to get in exactly the right place.

A. Oh, yes!

Q. What were some of the other jobs you did?

A. I was on section when I was furloughed.

Q. What does that mean? You're talking to someone who is very ignorant!

A. They call them "gandy-dancers" - the guys who work on the track. It's maintenance - a very hard job.

Q. Very important.

- A. Yes, very important, but it's very hard, and they are down on the totem pole. They don't get very much money. Any man who works hard at physical labor gets less money.
- Q. So you worked on the section.
- A. Yes - and at Springfield we used to have crossing watchmen. I even did that while I was furloughed off the train service. When I was furloughed from Decatur, I would go over to Springfield and hired out either switching or on section. Then they laid off on section, and I had to take a job flagging the crossing. Usually if I got cut off everything, I painted or worked at a filling station - anything to make a living.
- Q. They wouldn't have men flag at crossings now, would they?
- A. No. They have all crossing gates or lights.
- Q. What were you doing at the end of your career?
- A. I was a conductor.
- Q. Tell us about that.
- Q. The conductor runs the train.
- Q. You mean he tells the engineer what to do?
- A. That's right. He tells everyone on the train what to do. It's his train from one destination to another. Now, I don't know what it is now. Things have changed, but we used to run a train from Decatur to Moberly, Missouri - 211 miles. We handled all the bills and all the reports. We had to set out cars - pick-up cars for destination and all that. Then we had to obey all the safety rules.
- Q. And deal with crochety passengers?
- A. No - dealing with the public is the worst - at crossings - blocking crossings and so on.

Q. Not the public on the train?

A. No, no. The train would break down. The air hose would break or something like that. We'd have to fix it, and people would be raising heck for blocking the crossing.

Q. Oh, yes.

A. We couldn't do anything about it. The train would be in an emergency. We can't move it. There's no way to move it until you find the trouble. Guys used to get mad - threaten to whip us or throw us in jail. It makes you mad because you're trying to find the trouble, and they're raising heck with you. But it's still a lot of fun!

Q. What about the passengers?

A. I used to brake on a passenger train. That was the best job I ever had because we used to work one day on and one day off. That was a lot of fun. But it didn't last very long - passenger service declined.

Q. Maybe you could tell us about the N & W. When you first started, it was all Wabash?

A. All Wabash. Then the N and W took over. They improved the track tremendously and did way more business. We had diesel and got bigger trains. So that took care of the crews in that way.

Q. When did passenger trains end? It's been started again recently, but it was closed for a while.

A. About 25 years ago? I don't know exactly.

Q. Passenger service had ended before the N. and W. took over?

A. Right. We still had some around Chicago, but on the West end we haven't had passenger trains for about 25 years.

Q. Until recently?

- A. But that's not on the west end. They've got the service messed up now. The trains should be going to Springfield from Decatur. Then they could haul people who work for the state.
- Q. We mentioned briefly one change - from Wabash to N. and W. But what about what about other changes? You talked about the hours.
- A. From steam engine to diesel was the biggest change.
- Q. When did that happen?
- A. (Mrs. L.) - About 1950.
- Q. Did it make your job easier?
- A. I wouldn't say it made the job any easier, cleaner. And naturally, you hauled more. It made it easier for the engineer and fireman, but you had bigger trains.
- Q. Because the diesel gives more power?
- A. Only because - now get this - we had steam engines - one crew to an engine. Diesel - six, seven, eight units - one crew. That's where your power comes in.
- Q. So they figure they can save money.
- A. Man labor. Just like everything else. They do away with laborers. Progress? It's just like Reagan's doing now. He wants to bust up the railroad retirement.
- Q. Now, I can see that Mrs. Layton doesn't want us to get into politics!
- A. She knows I don't like what they're doing to us.
- Q. I think that's important. What do you think?
- A. I think Reagan's messing around with our pension. We paid for it. It's our money. We paid into it. He never paid a dime in our pension.
- Q. Are they trying to cut down on your pension?

- A. They're trying to do away with it - period - and put it into social security. I don't know anything about social security.
- Q. Railroad people have been on a special pension instead of social security?
- A. That's right.
- Q. Did you pay more in than social security would require?
- A. Absolutely.
- Q. Would it be possible for those who have paid in to get their returns and new ones to go on social security?
- A. Why do railroad men have to go on social security? We've always paid. It's always been this way.
- Q. A private pension fund?
- A. That's right. That's absolutely correct. We paid for everything. We pay for our own hospitalization.
- Q. I can see your point.
- A. The railroad man has paid his own dues ever since there has been a railroad. I don't see why the government has to step in on that.
- Q. Let's hope you can work it out.
- A. I'm too old to work it out now.
- Q. How is railroading different from other occupations?
- A. It gets in your blood really.
- Q. Because it's exciting?
- A. Every trip - although it's the same line, every trip was exciting.
- Q. You mentioned something about emergencies? Were you ever involved in accidents?
- A. Like hitting cars? Oh, yes. I think every guy who has worked over two years has been in wrecks. Kids playing chicken, pulling up on

the track and waiting for the train to come, then pulling off. Sometimes they make it, sometimes they don't. Then there are people who want to commit suicide.

Q. So you had some bad experiences.

A. Really bad - but I love railroading.

Q. You get to meet people?

A. Yes - I knew just about everyone from here to Hannibal, Missouri - in all those small towns. Naturally, I knew the men on the trains. Then I knew all the guys who ran the elevators. I knew the guys who worked at the elevators. I knew the section gangs. I knew all the officials.

Q. So it was a pleasant way to meet people and get along with people.

A. Oh, I made people like me.

Q. I can believe that! That's a great asset to a conductor or anyone who meets the public. Are there any other ways that railroading is different? It certainly isn't like going to an office, is it?

A. No. Experience on a railroad is done on the job. You can't sit here in Decatur and try to tell a guy in New Berlin that he's breaking a rule. That doesn't work.

Q. So you have to deal with the situations as they arise?

A. That's right - the safest way and not by the book.

Q. In 1979 your son Jim was working on the railroad? Is he still working there?

A. He still is. He's an engineer.

Q. Did you persuade him to do that?

A. He did it on his own. Before he could walk I had him on an engine. That was the only job he ever wanted. We used to live in Springfield. When he learned how to drive a car, he's take his Mother out to

Niantic or Harristown and wait for us guys to come by. We'd come by at the same time every other night. That was his fun. He went right from high school to the railroad. Now he's an engineer. He goes from Decatur to Frankfort, Indiana, or to Peru or to St. Louis - just about every day.

Q. He has a little boy, doesn't he?

A. Two little boys and a little girl. And they are all going to be railroaders. I imagine my granddaughter will work on the railroad maybe.

Q. What about women on the railroad?

A. I wouldn't doubt it - in time. I expect a lot of girls will be engineers, brakemen, and conductors. I don't suppose they'll work on the track, I don't think women are strong enough. But of course, they have machinery now. We used to pick a rail up by hand, but now they have machinery to do it.

Q. They have longer rails now, don't they?

A. Yes - they are 865 or 870 feet long.

Q. But it is all mechanized?

A. Yes - everything mechanized. When I worked on a section, we used to do everything by hand - take the tie out and put it back by ourselves. The tie weighed about 254 or 260 pounds. Now the tie is in three pieces. One machine takes it out. Another puts it back - all machines.

Q. What do you think is the future of railroading?

A. I think they'll end up by having about five main railroad lines all over the United States. All the branch lines will be gone.

Q. Will these be freight or passenger lines? Or both?

- A. Oh, I think we'll always have passenger trains. They'll operate in the red. They charge so much for toilet paper, napkins, and drinking cups and all that. But there will always be an Amtrak.
- Q. But it won't play as large a part as in the past?
- A. Who knows? Not everyone likes to fly or to drive a car - and it's cheaper to go by train unless the price goes up too much. Of course, the railroad companies don't like passenger trains. They want strictly freight.
- Q. Because passenger trains cause more headaches?
- A. Well, you have to clear freight trains, and a passenger train is a first class train so it has rights over everything else.
- Q. One problem from the general public's point of view is that the road beds aren't up to the other service. Is that true?
- A. Now the N. and W. has the best road bed we've ever had. We've got a 60 mile an hour track, which is very good. I imagine it would be an 80 mile track for a passenger train. We have 115 or 132 pound rail all the way.
- Q. But that isn't true all over the country.
- A. I don't know. They let the branch lines out here go.
- Q. Did I hear that there has been another merger with the N. & W.?
- A. Yes - Southern. It was in the paper a couple of days ago.
- Q. So that carries out your idea that there will be fewer lines?
- A. Sure. They're coming every day. They have to. Your airplanes and barges and trucks (make too much competition.) The railroads have a big responsibility, paying a lot of tax, whereas these other outfits don't.
- Q. Do you think that railroads are getting their fair share of public money, like the highways?

- A. No, I don't think they are getting their fair share. I think the railroads have to pay too much tax. They own the ground, they own the switches. They own the ties. They own the rails and all the equipment. The government steps in and donates \$100,000,000 for an airplane - the same with boats on the river. They built all these dams and levies and canals and all that.
- Q. Some people might say that the railroads got their share early.
- A. The railroad ground is not very big - 4' - 7" track - something like that. That's not a big span for a railroad.
- Q. And, of course, in the past, the railroads did open up the country.
- A. If it wasn't for the railroad, we'd still be in the horse and buggy age. A lot of people would never have tasted soda pop if it hadn't been for the railroads. Everything went by rail. That's why we had so many branch lines.
- Q. I can see that railroading is still in your blood.
- A. You betcha! I watch it like a hawk, but I've never been back but once.
- Q. Is that right? Too nostalgic?
- A. I just had no desire to go back.
- Q. But you do have other pleasures in retirement? I believe you said golf.
- A. Yes - and playing with my grand kids, traveling, taking care of my wife - cutting the grass. I love every minute of it.
- Q. I believe you said you had motor vans?
- A. I had two of them. We traveled all over the United States - and the Bahamas. And we're still going.
- Q. But you didn't go entirely by train!

A. I haven't been on a train yet - but we're going to take a couple of grandkids and take a little trip. I got a pass on Amtrak. I don't know if it's any good or not.

Q. And your health seems OK now?

A. Yes. I had a little heart surgery - an aneurysim caused the problem.

Q. But you seem to have recovered extremely well and are getting ready to travel.

A. I know we're going to the world's fair.

Q. And you'll take your van?

A. I don't have a van. We sold everything - our boat and all.

Q. I hope you have a place to stay at the fair.

A. She's got a sister who lives in Kentucky.

Q. We've talked about the future of railroading. What about the future of Decatur? What about your grandchildren? Are you apprehensive about their future?

A. Oh, no. We live a beautiful life, and I think we can take everything in stride. I think Decatur is falling back. They're letting the power companies run Decatur. Everything is too high. Water is going up. People can hardly make it, with many people being laid off. Everyone keeps raising prices. You never hear of a tax being cut. It's always added on. So that hurts.

Q. But you still think your grandchildren will come out all right?

A. Definitely! No doubt about it! I'll see to it! They'll come out all right. The younger generation don't pay any attention to it. It bothers me, but it doesn't bother them.

Q. Because they haven't seen any other time?

A. Yes. I was taught a little differently.

Q. They're learning a few lessons now, aren't they?

A. I don't know. My daughter said just yesterday, "Oh, gasoline's only a dollar and a nickel. I don't mind paying that." Then she said, "I've been brain washed for a dollar and a nickel."

Q. Well, at least you think that your children will have as good a life as you have had?

A. I hope so. I'm sure they will. This is still America.

Q. And a great place to live?

A. The only place. I wish those guys who want to be over in Europe would take off and go. Every time a politician gets on the radio about gasoline being \$2.75 a gallon over in Europe, that's where he ought to go. If he wants to bring Europe over here, let him go back over there. We don't need those guys. This is America. That's what we fought for.

Q. Very good! I've certainly enjoyed talking to you and to Mrs. Layton. It's been a real pleasure to talk to someone who has had such a good life and is so happy and optimistic about the future. I thank you very much.

You have been listening to the reminiscences of Mr. W. T. Layton (Bill Layton), who has been telling us of the years he spent working on the railroad.

This is Betty Turnell for the Decatur Public Library.