

Mr. and Mrs. William Bankson Interview

March 27, 1986

This is Betty Turnell recording for the Decatur Public Library. Our guests today are Mr. and Mrs. William Bankson. We are recording on March 27, 1986, at the Banksons' home at 3419 MacArthur Road in Decatur, Illinois.

Q. Mr. Bankson, I introduced you as "William" but what do most people call you?

A. Bill

Q. I thought you told me you have a nickname.

A. Nobody ever calls me that any more since I left the railroad.

Q. Would you tell us what it is?

A. As a young boy, I sold the "Grit" newspaper, and that's how I got the name of "Sandy."

Q. From the "Grit" of sand? That's quite a story... Well, Mr. Bankson, you worked for many years for the Wabash Railroad. What were some of the jobs you held?

A. In the first job I had I was known as a "grease cup filler." I took the plugs out of the side rods of locomotives, broke off a piece of lye grease with my bare hands and stuck it down the hole with my thumb. Naturally that lye grease ate the skin off my thumb, and I always had a sore thumb.

Q. Oh, dear! I hope you didn't have to do that very long.

A. I didn't have to do that too long. They had some other dirty jobs they wanted me to do. I went from that job to the labor

gang. I held that job not too long because I took every advancement the company offered me. I went on from that job to machinist's helper. I stayed on that job for a couple of years until they offered me another advancement to what was known as "handyman" at that time. That was a job where we did all the dirty work for the machinists. I stayed on that job for ten years at the Decatur Roundhouse. After I put in my ten years as a handyman, I was offered a job as machinist, but I had to start serving my time as machinist after spending ten years in machinist work. I thought maybe they would let me come out on accumulated time, but the union at that time forced me to serve four calendar years of time before they would put me on the seniority list of machinists. But I called their bluff. I stayed and did it. After I got my machinist card, I had to go back on night shift to start my seniority. So I stayed all through wartime on the 3 to 11 shift. I worked every job as a machinist, even to the operation of the machine shop. At one time I was the only machinist in the machine shop so I had to learn all the different machines in the shop. I'm proud to say I could run any of them. During that time I took on the electric welding trade, and I worked it all the rest of my career, along with the machine operation and the machine shop. Then a little later I started going on wrecker work, with the old steam engines and what they called the big crane--"the big hook."

We would have a wreck. They would call me, whether I was on duty at the time or not. We would stay with the wrecker until we had the wreck back in Decatur. I had a lot of experiences with the old steam locomotives.

Q. We want to find out more about that later. Did you stay on that job until you retired?

A. Not that job. I had other jobs later.

Q. It seems to me you were a one-man crew?

A. I served my time a second time when they changed to diesel locomotives. We had to learn all of our trades over again. We went to school on that.

Q. Right now, let's go back. We'll come to your work again, but now I'd like to find out where you were born, where you grew up, and where you met Mrs. Bankson--the early days. Where were you born?

A. I was born in Bethany, Illinois, on March 2, 1902. I was born next door to my wife. I was a year old when she was born.

Q. You must have taught her a few tricks if you played together.

A. I can't remember playing with her.

Q. You met again, later, then?

A. A good many years later. I can slightly remember Sunday School days when we were little.

Q. Well, Mrs. Bankson, do you remember when he was a little boy next door to you?

A. Yes--our folks had always been friends, and we lived next

door to each other until I was six. Then our folks moved out of town. My folks moved to Forsyth, and his folks went to North Dakota first--for health reasons. So we were gone three years, and then moved back to the same house. Dad had bought it. His folks didn't come back until we were in the 6th and 7th grades at school. They moved in just a block down the street, south of where we lived. We went to the same church, the same Sunday School, and the same school. It wasn't consolidated then--just a town school so everybody knew everybody. Really, we were a little shy then. I was shy of boys, and he was shy of girls. But the summer before I started high school we had our first date, and from then on we dated off and on over a period of five years.

Q. You were married just before the big Depression of the 30's, weren't you? How did you get along?

A. Well, the Wabash was very helpful then. They voted to all work four days and not lay off.

Q. That was very cooperative of them, wasn't it?

A. Yes. So we had four day's work during the Depression. It was a big help, but we still had problems. I don't think he told you he was making 38½¢ an hour when he started over there. He had advanced in pay during that time, but he wasn't making the big wages yet. We had a baby during that time. It was a little hard. We had to help out our folks too. I had a brother still in school.

He had a sister who was teaching, but she was getting a slip of paper for her pay.

Q. You mean on 38½¢ an hour you helped your families too?

A. He was getting a little more than that then. I had another sister living here in Decatur. She had three youngsters. We had Hubert. Between us we helped the folks at home. When my brother got out of high school, she took a sister in and I took the brother in. So altogether we got through it.

Q. And you were better off than people who didn't have jobs.

A. Yes--than those who didn't have anything. The neighbors thought I was quite well off.

Q. You had one child then?

A. Yes, and before we got out of the Depression, we had the second one--six years later, we had Jack.

Q. We'll hear more about them later, too, but let's go back to your railroading, Mr. Bankson. I'd like to have you tell us more about what you did and how railroading changed during that time.

A. Well, it was steam locomotives then--all real heavy repair work. We took the big wheels out from under the locomotive to repair the boxes and bearings on those. We had to drop them down from underneath in a big pit, slide them over and bring them up. It was very heavy work.

Q. You did this by hand?

A. We did all this by hand. We had hydraulic jacks--water

jacks--to lift the big wheels. Later they got a traveling crane, which helped out an awful lot. Before I got to be a machinist I operated that crane as a job. And then the diesels came in and we had to learn it all over again. But it was a whole lot lighter work. The company held classes in off-duty hours on this diesel work to let the workers learn all about that. We had several good foremen who were mighty helpful on this work. I don't know about one of them now, but one of the foremen was the mayor of Gravit, Arkansas later. One of the foremen lives here in Decatur by himself. I haven't seen him for a good many years, but I have talked to him on the phone. I saw the other foreman (in Arkansas) once when we were passing through his town. We called him up and went out to his house and like to never got away from him.

Going back to the diesel work, we had to learn all of the circuits and everything and the set-up of the traction motors, all that we didn't have in the old steam locomotives.

Q. What were the advantages of diesel over steam?

A. It's kind of hard for an old steam man to say there are any advantages, but of course there must have been because they stayed. The change-over from steam to diesel was pretty hard for the maintenance men and the operators, too.

Q. Trains seem a lot longer now. Is that due to diesels?
more cars?

A. No, not necessarily. They don't pull as many cars now as they did at one time. They learned better. They can move them over the road faster with fewer cars. And, of course, today they have eliminated a lot of positions. They don't have any cabooses on the trains any more. And they don't have a fireman on the trains any more. The engineer and the brakeman and conductors are all; they have very few maintenance men at the dispatch points compared to the old days.

Q. Did you ever work with passenger trains?

A. Yes. I worked a number of years before and after I was a machinist. I met the passenger trains at the depot when they were running them through. We would go to the depot and do the service work on the locomotives, fill them up with fuel from tank trucks and run them right on through from Chicago to St. Louis or Detroit to St. Louis.

That has been a great change in railroading--the stopping of passenger trains.

I inspected the locomotives. It was my job to see that all was in order before they left. I discovered one particular locomotive that had come in from Chicago, making practically all right-hand curves with one journal burned completely off, with one journal box sitting on the binder. He had made all those curves with the left-hand wheel against the curve and hadn't jumped the track. The engineer was on the locomotive ready to go on to

St. Louis. He wouldn't believe me when I told him he couldn't take that locomotive out of town. But I convinced him when he got down and saw what was the matter. That was just one of the problems we found. We used to find a lot of other defects. We had to make some quick changes to get the trains out without too much delay.

Q. I know you said you were on the wrecking crew. What was that?

A. I was a machinist. There was always a machinist on the wrecking crew. Others were carmen and sometimes pipe fitters. That was with the old steam crane. Whenever they had a wreck, they would call the crew to the depot, and we would leave town. We would get on the big hook and the wrecker cars at the depot, along with our bunk cars and the cook car. There was only one nice thing about the wrecker car. The cook always started frying ham and making sandwiches before we left Decatur. We always ate well until we got back. We stayed right with those cars and the wrecker until we got back to town.

Q. Were there many wrecks?

A. There were several. I was out on several big wrecks. The last steam locomotive wreck I was on was the last 2500 locomotive that was run on the north Chicago division of the Wabash. I could tell the engineer's name--Si Merker. I asked the fireman where he was when the wreck started. He said he was down behind the firebox. I

asked where Si was. He said he stuck his head out the window on the other side.

Q. How did it happen?

A. A journal broke off and stripped one side of the locomotive. It threw all the side rods off. So I had to go in there, take the rods off the other side, and block up the main wheels to bring it back to Decatur.

There was no one hurt in the wreck. Of course, it just derailed the locomotive. It didn't derail anything else. That was real fortunate.

The last passenger train wreck that I was called on was on the St. Louis division. The same thing happened. They broke a main journal and stripped one side of the locomotive. I had to strip the other side and block it to bring it in. The cars all stayed upright; as I remember, the locomotive didn't derail. They got it stopped before it derailed. That happened in Edwardsville. We were out a good many hours on those wrecks.

Q. Mrs. Bankson, while he was out on these emergency calls, wasn't that hard on your family?

A. It certainly was a little disturbing at times. We never knew when he was coming and when he was going. We were a one-car family then. When he was called at all hours of the night, I had to take him. The boys were in school. Sometimes I had to go in the middle of the night to get him.

But we always tried to have Sunday dinner together. Some weeks we didn't see him at all. Of course, he didn't go for weeks at a time. Then he would have a trip out.

Q. When he was on emergency duty, did he have a regular job and the emergency duty was extra?

A. Yes. He worked over there all the time. They just took the men from the work crew. If he wasn't working, they would call him. It was always the wrong time!

Q. And you had the problem of taking care of the family and disciplining the children?

A. We kept everything going. That was when he was working his regular hours. He worked seven days a week a lot of time. Then he would have Saturday and Sunday off every other weekend. Sometimes it wasn't always Saturday and Sunday. I remember one time it was Sunday and Monday he had off. Sometimes he had to leave at different times in the morning and sometimes he worked the afternoon shift. Then the boys would be home and in bed when he would come home-- or he would be sleeping in the morning when the boys left. So there would be a whole week when the boys wouldn't see him at all. But no matter what shift it was we tried to have one meal on Sunday together. One time Jack had been at Boy Scout camp over the weekend. It was quite a time when he hadn't seen his Dad. He was eating breakfast one morning when he said, "By the way, how is Dad? I haven't seen him for a while."

So it was a little hard on the family, but we never complained. We thought as long as he was doing a good job that was important.

Q. And such important work--to keep the trains running.

A. There were times when he worked the day shift and was home regularly and that made up for it.

Q. What kind of work did you like best of the jobs you had, Mr. Bankson?

A. I really liked it when I was operating the machine shop. I liked that job the best--operating the machines, but at that time I was also the electric and acetylene welder. I did the electric and acetylene welding for the round-house. I really didn't have much spare time. I was on the road very little at that time.

At one time my wife told the neighbors--this was during the time I was running the machine shop--that she never would get a new washing machine because every time her machine broke down, I would make new pieces for it. I even cut gears for that machine.

Q. You did have a machine made of new parts, didn't you? That was handy to have a machinist around the house.

A. That was quite a joke--I had that machine a long time, and he always made new parts for it.

Q. Let's talk now about the church. I know you are members of the First United Methodist Church. How long have you been members, Mrs. Bankson?

A. We've been attending there since the late 20's since Hubert was about 3 or a little older. That's when we started there. But we didn't change our membership from down home until Hubert went into the Church at Confirmation. He was about 12 then.

Q. But you've been members of the Church for a long time. Have you noticed changes in the church?

A. Quite a few. For one thing, we had a larger membership then and a much larger Sunday School. Our Sunday School class--the Come Double --started just as we started there. We were charter members, of the old Come Double class. Then we went into the Fellowship Forum. We used to have 50 or 60 members in class. Now we are aged and dropped out for one reason or another. In some ways it hasn't changed a whole lot. The people are still the same--It's always been a friendly church. At least, we've always found it that way.

Q. Do you remember some of the ministers who served there earlier?

A. Yes. We were there when Dr. Grummon was there--and Dr. Spear and Bill Cutlip and Dr. Lloyd. Archer was an assistant. There's another back there I missed. It was Dr. Lugg.

Q. Have the ministers been helpful?

A. Oh, yes. I just hated to see them leave--every one. I'd think the next one wouldn't measure up, but after we

would get used to the new one, we wouldn't want him to leave.

Q. Do you notice any difference in the form of the service?

A. We just had one service then, along with Sunday School and church. We've always had a large choir. Our choir is bigger now than it was for a while, but we had a big choir then and a Wesley choir. Jack, our younger son, sang in that. He was in a quartet. It was quite a thing. They had much larger youth groups then than they do now.

Q. Your son Hubert came up through the Sunday School and the church? I believe he makes trips to Mexico to take gifts to the people of Mexico. Could you tell us about that?

A. First, I should say that he hasn't been a member of this church all the time. After he was married, he lived north of Warrensburg, and they went to church in Warrensburg. Then he moved back here. He and Marilyn, his wife, went to Mexico on a work camp a number of years ago. The poverty down there just floored them. They thought they had it so good up here that they wanted to do something extra on their own. The first thing they had to do was learn to speak Spanish. They went down there a time or two without knowing very much Spanish and had a little trouble getting in--with all the red tape. So they took Spanish lessons. They took night classes and had a private tutor, an instructor, one winter and since then they have been going regularly. They take clothes and when they speak

of going back in the mountains to a mission--they only go back there once or twice a year. They don't go back there every time. They work through a mission a little way over the border. They love the work they do and the people down there seem to love them.

Q. They drive a truck down?

A. Yes.

Q. And they fill it with donations?

A. Just clothes. When they started with the first load they took down there, they took everything. They had bicycles and some typewriters for the mission down there. They got in trouble with that load. It never did get clear to the mission.

Q. Too many people wanted those items?

A. They stopped them. They didn't have credentials enough to get through. Hubert came back and flew down to Mexico City and got things straightened out so he can go clear down there. But they don't take those things any more. They take only clothes. They're not allowed to take toys in down there. I don't know why. They have a building where they store clothes. They pick the clothes up from everywhere--we get calls here for them to come to pick up clothes from other churches. Even their daughter, who lives in Iowa, has a load for them over there every once in a while. A minister who serves over there has gone with him on a number of trips. He's an older man.

- Q. Your son does invite people to go with him if they want to, doesn't he?
- A. Yes--anybody can go with him, but not very many want that trip. It's a hard trip and a long trip. He leaves here about 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning and drives into Dallas, Texas, that evening. Marilyn has a brother there, and they usually stop there, sleep an hour or two and then go on the next day. They get over the border then. They are always there two days. The food and water down there is not always safe. They have to be very careful about that. The people down there want to do nice things for them so they give them food. They take a bottle of medicine with them when they go because they can't refuse. When they go back to the mission in the mountains, it's a real treat for those people to give them a drink of water. They have to carry their water so far so when they offer a drink, they almost have to swallow it. It is a risky business, but they love it.
- Q. They're real ambassadors from the United States and from First Church. They are an example of goodwill between our two countries.
- A. They get real nice letters from those people down there. Some of them they know. They even have babies named for them.
- Q. It really is a tribute to you and to Hubert and Marilyn that they have built up such a feeling of good will.

You must have done a good job of raising the boys, especially since you had to do so much by yourself.

A. I don't know. I do know that I contributed a lot to keeping them in Sunday School and the Church. I thought that was the best I could do. I had a neighbor one time who said that a boy who tooted a horn didn't have time to get into trouble. So I saw that both boys had some music. Both boys played drums and piano; Hubert also played marimba and jack vibraharp. They haven't kept it up but they had it in high school. With Boy Scouts and 4-H they didn't have time for trouble.

Q. You certainly did a good job. Going back to your railroad-ing, Mr. Bankson, do you have any other experiences that you can tell us about?

A. Well, after the diesels came, they had a habit of sticking one certain bearing and sliding a wheel. Everytime they slid a wheel, they got a flat spot and had to come in at such slow speed that the minute they started sliding they would set them out at the first siding they could get them on. I don't know if I was real smart or stupid, but I developed a way of burning four teeth off one gear and freeing that wheel so it wouldn't slide any more.

Q. Great! Did you patent that invention?

A. No, I didn't get a chance to patent that. I got into an awful lot of trouble because these sidings were few and far apart and I would have to drive a truck close to get my equipment in so I could burn this gear off. Then the next train that would come through would tow this locomotive

in because after I cut this one gear they couldn't use the power to pull it.

I think I was on every siding on the railroad before I retired because I was still going out and doing that work not long before I retired.

I always had a foreman or some supervisor that they would send with me supposedly to drive the truck. They sent some with me that I wouldn't let drive the truck! I remember one time when they sent a road foreman of engines with me. We left Decatur a little after midnight. He got in the cab, sat down, put one hand on the seat cushion and the other on the door and promptly went to sleep. The fog was so thick that all I could see was the white line on the pavement. The next time I stopped and woke him to see where we were, we were five miles past where I was to go.

Q. He wasn't much help.

A. He told me how far back to go, and he was right.

Other times they would get me close enough to the wreck that they would put my equipment on a push-car and take me down to the wreck.

I remember the last steam job I went on on the West end. They got me within a little over half a mile of that one and then took my equipment down on a push-car. It was west of Springfield.

And then I went clear to the river west as far as

Forest north. South I would go to Edwardsville.

When I was laid off here at Decatur, the Wabash Company always took care of me. At one point they sent me to Montpelier, Ohio, as a machinist in the shops there. I stayed there almost a year. I got a call one night to come into Decatur and report to the superintendent's office for an interview. I came in and interviewed for an assistant roundhouse foreman's job.

If I had known what I do now, I would have gone back to Montpelier right away! But I didn't. I went back the next day and in a few days I was called to report to Decatur as assistant roundhouse foreman.

I came in here in the afternoon. That night I went to work as outside foreman above the Jasper Street subway to oversee the engines coming in and going out and getting them on the road again.

I stayed with that job one year, before I decided I didn't want any more supervisory work.

At the time I resigned from there, I would rather do the work myself than to get someone else to do it. So I took a job at the locomotive shop. It wasn't very long before a lay-off came, but before I left the shop the management came to me and said if I wanted my old job back at Montpelier, Ohio, to get on the night train and report there the next morning for work. So I did that. I will say that the company always took care of me.

I stayed there three years, living in a hotel, working the night shift--11 to 7--and coming in to Decatur once a week. I would come in Monday afternoon and go back Wednesday morning.

Then I got a call back at Decatur to go to work. I stayed here at the inspection terminal until I retired from the road in 1967--July 14, 1967.

Q. You've had a very long career and have done some wonderful service for the Wabash Railroad.

A. I ran into a lot of different problems with fellow foremen and workers that I really would like to forget. They sent me to Hannibal, Missouri, and I was over there two or three times. Once I was there three weeks. Anyway, I met a lot of interesting people, a lot of good people. I remember a certain old lady who took in the railroaders who were away from home. I roomed at her place all the time I was there. She treated me as if I were one of her own kids.

When my wife would visit me, she wouldn't even charge me for the room. I had wonderful experiences, wonderful friends.

Q. From where I am sitting, I see a wall hanging--a rug?

A. That was a real job I had doing that. It's a hooked rug.

Q. Maybe I should tell listeners what it is. It's a flag of the Wabash Railroad--It has "Wabash" on it. The top says "Follow the Flag."

A. It is the actual size and coloring of the Wabash emblem.
"Follow the Flag" centered on white background.

Q. It was a glorious time when the Wabash was here in Decatur.

A. That's right. It's never been the same since. From what I can tell from the men working for the road today, it's not the same by a long ways. So I'm glad I got my service in back with the old Wabash Railroad.

Q. When we think of how much the railroad has contributed to American life, I think you can feel very proud to have contributed so much.

A. (Mrs. Bankson) We've had a lot of nice trips, too.

Q. And you've enjoyed them!

A. Yes.

Mr. and Mrs. Bankson, we've certainly enjoyed your experiences and reminiscences. Thank you very much. We will certainly cherish all these memories you have given us.

You have been listening to the experiences of Mr. and Mrs. William Bankson. This is Betty Turnell.

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