

INTERVIEW WITH FRANK MULVANEY BY ALICE C. SMITH, 1986
Partial transcript

1 TAPE CASSETTE.

SIDE 1.

FM: I am Frank M. Mulvaney. I was born March the 25th, 1894 in Vicksburg, Mississippi. I am now 92 and 1/2 years of age. Mrs. Mulvaney and myself have been married over sixty years.

AS: Mr. Mulvaney, what kind of work did you do?

FM: My last position with the Southern Railway at Asheville, N.C., was Division Chief Clerk. I spent 46 years of continuous service with the Southern Railway.

AS: During that time, what sort of positions did you hold?

FM: I held various positions such as accountant, secretarial position, and chief clerk.

AS: Were any other people in your family involved with the railroad?

FM: My father at one time was superintendent of the Southern Railway here at Asheville.

AS: What was his name?

FM: His name was S. John Mulvaney. He was born in Edwards, Illinois, close to Peoria, Illinois.

AS: What was your favorite job?

FM: I suppose that my last job was the one that I enjoyed the most.

AS: And what kind of duties and responsibilities did you have?

FM: To boil it down, I did the work that the superintendent—all the details were handled by me. It was comparable to the superintendent, but my title was not superintendent.

AS: Now, everyone at the Southern Railroad says still, "If you want anything, you go talk to Mr. Frank."

FM: I've had a very fine life, and a very happy life. A nice family. We had five children. I lost one a couple of years ago. We have twelve great-grandchildren and seven grandchildren.

AS: How long have you been retired from the railroad now?

FM: I have now been retired twenty-seven years. One of my friends said, "Frank, you'll be able to retire from retirement."

AS: Wouldn't that be fun. Were you really born the same year as Southern Railroad?

FM: I was born the same year. In fact, about seven months before the railroad came into existence.

AS: Can you give me some background information on Southern Railroad and how it began operation.

FM: (reads) "...The Richmond and Danville Railroad sold these lines to the Southern Railroad in October, 1894....All engines were wood burners up to 1885. Thirteen coal burners were purchased from the C&O Railway in 1885..."

(continuing) Now I had some ideas of my own about railroads if it wouldn't be too lengthy. This is captioned, "Railroad History in Western North Carolina and Asheville by Frank M. Mulvaney." I have spent practically all of my adult life in the service of the Southern Railway Company, 46 years to be exact, and at present, being ninety-six and a half years of age, I have, by doing some research in addition to my personal knowledge, been able to gather a portion of the history of the railroads in Western North Carolina and Asheville N.C. The building of the railroads into Western North Carolina, due to the mountainous terrain, was a Herculean task, requiring the skillful ingenuity of a mastermind that only a most accomplished engineering student could terminate and bring to a conclusion after a great deal of theoretical study mixed with practical knowledge...

(goes on to talk about Major James W. Wilson, chief of construction; the use of convicts; the method of cracking rocks before dynamiting; the transport of the 8-wheel locomotive "Salisbury" via portable tracks on highway in order to meet legislative deadline; tunnels)

I recall on November the 13th, 1925...the Southern Railway handles 24 passenger trains, 91 freight trains, and 3,533 cars through Asheville, which at that time established a new record. Asheville enjoyed excellent passenger train service. We had first class overnight Pullman sleeping car service and excellent dining car service to Washington and New York, to Jacksonville, Florida, and to Cincinnati, Ohio. Each of these accommodations leaving Asheville in late afternoon or early evening and arriving at points mentioned early the next morning. A manpower survey conducted in the 1950s showed that we had two thousand employees on the Asheville Division.

When the railroads first came to Asheville, the passenger station was first located at the end of Spring Street, where Chesterfield Mills was located. The passengers had to walk from the depot on Spring Street to the top of the hill to Haywood Street to board the streetcar to take them to downtown Asheville. The latest passenger station was constructed in 1904 across from the old Glen Rock Hotel on Depot Street. This

substantial depot of Spanish architecture was torn down after the discontinuance of passenger train service in Asheville.

Another exciting portion of the Southern Railway is Saluda Mountain, which locates 32 miles from Biltmore toward Spartanburg. It is three miles from the top of the mountain to the bottom at Melrose, N.C., with a grade of almost 4%. This stretch has been the scene of many accidents, resulting in the loss of human lives and property caused by runaways. To combat this, two safety tracks were constructed, one halfway down the mountain and the other at the bottom of the mountain at Melrose, N.C. The safety tracks were constructed up the side of the mountain. Switch tenders were on duty around the clock. The switches were always set to the safety tracks. If the locomotive engineer handling the train down the mountain, had his train under control, he would blow the locomotive whistle, and the switch tender would throw the switch to the main line and let him downj the mountain.

With the coming of the diesel locomotive, equipped with dynamic brakes, the safety track halfway down the mountain has been removed. My service with the Southern Railway from July 5, 1913 to August, 1959 saw many changes even before my time. And I cannot help but think and make a comparison between early railroading and today. I have in mind the early days of railroading when the employees had to go between the cars and drop in a pin in order to couple them. This was known as the linking pin days. When the firemen had to fill the tender of his engine with coal at the coal chutes and load it at the water tanks and also at intermediate points on the line, when the firemen had to hand fire the locomotive with a shovel, a scoop to keep the steam on the engine, when the train men had to go on top of the cars of long trains where the brakes sit to tie up the hand brakes on the trains down the mountain and steep grades to hold there (?).

With the coming of the diesel engines and other improved methods, all of this has been eliminated. There are no coal chutes or water tanks, and the employees do not even have to go on top of the cars. The railroads are operated with air brakes and automatic signals and as I let my mind go back for several generations, so far as railroad employees are concerned, I am faced with the reality that there was a type of railroad employee who is practically becoming extinct. I think of that group as the pioneer railroad men. In those days, he drew attention from citizens because of his role in life. He was affiliated with an industry that was associated with business. He seemed to draw attention from citizens of other locations because of his good fortune and opportunity to share the things that a railroad career provided. There was a desire of most every boy to become a railroad man. They seem to be attracted to the casual way that a railroad man in full brass-buttoned uniform boarded trains and started on long journeys, which were filled with excitement. During that period, a railroad career was considered a choice occupation. The pioneer railroad man lived during the time when the railroad was practically the only means of reasonable fast transportation since it was before the days of automobiles, trucks, airplanes, and modern highways. In ability, character, intelligence, and ambition, the railroad man of today is equal to his predecessor of the early days, but much of the sense of adventure that the pioneer railroad man had has gone out of railroading. There are only a few of the pioneer railroad men who belong to that era which changing conditions

have eliminated. Time and advanced technology have brought about a change in the glamorous past of a mighty industry.

AS: That's wonderful, Mr. Mulvaney. I have some more questions that this brings to mind. When you spoke of Major Wilson, was he an army officer?

FM: Yes, for the Civil War.

AS: Was this a Federal or a State subsidy that built the railroads through.

FM: It was enacted by the State legislature.

AS: Why do you think there has been such a decline in the passenger service. The freight service is still operative, but there's very little passenger service now in the railroad industry. What do you attribute to this decline of the passenger service?

FM: I would say the change in the world, not only on the transportation viewpoint, but from all other viewpoints. That is, in the medical profession, in the educational system, in the news media, in the marketing, you see. I can remember in Mississippi going to little country stores and the potatoes that they had for sale, which still had some dirt on them. Everything is impulse buying now.

AS: And there could be no impulse buying on that passenger service?

FM: The advent of the automobile and the airplanes and the highways.

AS: Do you think because the government has subsidized those things and the railroads have become so much more of a private industry...

FM: Of course, it's just a change of conditions. Even the lifestyle of people is so different. I know it both ways. We've come a long way, but we've lost a whole lot. I remember when families had standards and principles. The home was castle. I can remember in our family—and in other families of all denominations—that you'd have night prayers before you went to bed. Now you can't even get them together. Everything is changed. The morals are changed...

AS: Could we talk a little bit more about the porter in the passenger service and the role of the porter?

FM: The passenger train was manned by the locomotive engineer and fireman and the conductor and the flagman and the baggage agent and the porter. It was a pleasure long years ago to take train trip with those fine dining cars and Pullman sleeping cars. It was just a luxury. You'd start about five or six o'clock in the afternoon and wake up in the morning in Cincinnati or wake up in the morning in Jacksonville to connect with the Florida East Coast to go to southern Florida or to Washington, New York. I've made those trips many times. And it was service, it was service.

AS: The service really made the difference and the luxury of the passengers. What did they have...?

FM: I have often said, which is original with me, that passenger train traveling was the most comfortable of any. You could get up and walk to get a drink of water from the cooler with the little paper cups and the little spigot, you know, and stretch. You can't do that in a plane; you can't do that in a bus. It was relaxing. You had freedom. I have thought—this is original on my part and I'm not supposed to have a great deal of sense—I have thought that the automobiles are getting so numerous, the parking space so scarce, that maybe in the future that they would come back to rail passenger service. It's like the bicycles—see, the bicycles, there's no place for them now. It's dangerous for them to be on the streets and the highways. But that's just a thought.

AS: What other kinds of services were given to the passenger on the passenger train. What was to be expected?

FM: There was what we call the news butch that goes through the train. He had candy bars, apples, oranges, bananas. He'd go through the train to each passenger who wanted to buy an apple. We finally among ourselves dubbed the news butch—he'd sell papers, too—we called him the apple conductor.

AS: And what else would happen if you were a passenger on a train? If I were to spend a night on a train, what would I anticipate would happen?

FM: You would buy what they call a berth, a lower berth or an upper berth in a Pullman car. They would pull down and the porter would make these beds up. Each people assigned. As a fellow said, the lower berth costs a berth would cost a little more because the upper berth, you'd use a ladder to get up in it—and as the fellow said, the lower was higher, and the higher was lower.

AS: When I bought my ticket, would I anticipate eating in the train? Did you serve food?

FM: They had the dining car, and the porter would come through the train, he'd announce, "First call for dinner, dining car on the rear," and whoever wanted to go back to the dining car and have dinner or supper or breakfast would go back through the train to the dining car, where he would be placed at the table, and the porters and the chefs would take his order and bring it to his table.

AS: Was this included in the price of the ticket?

FM: No, the dining car was separate.

AS: Well, was the food any good?

FM: Wonderful. I tell you, I served on the city council for twenty-three years and was vice mayor for fourteen years. The city manager was Pat Burdette at that time, and he said, "Frank, I want a pound of that delicious sausage that they serve on the dining cars." I said, "Okay, Pat." So I got him a pound of it and took it up to the meeting. "Frank," he said, "How much is it." I said, "Nothing." They had wonderful breakfasts, dinners of all kinds.

AS: Was the food purchased locally or was it...?

FM: It was purchased at the different markets. Of course, they bought the best.

AS: Was this supplied by Southern Railroad, or was it up to individual chefs?

FM: We had what we called a manager of dining cars. He managed all the dining cars on the system. And we had what was called a dining car conductor with his crew of porters on the dining cars. I would say that it was nothing less than perfect.

AS: And the utensils and things, were you served off of paper plates?

FM: Oh, no! Regular dishes.

AS: Like china dishes.

FM: Yes.

AS: My stars! It was nothing like the airplane service then...