

**Mel Grayson:** My name is Mel Grayson. I live at 34 High Court, Scarborough. Uh, I'm 58 years of age. Would you care to know anything else about me?

**Interviewer:** Yeah. How long have you lived out this way?

**Mel:** Uh, we've lived in Scarborough for about, uh, 55 it's 19 years, I guess.

**Interviewer:** Is that right? It's quite-- how did you decide to live out here?

**Mel:** Well, we were looking around for a place to live and, um, this is what we found. We found of course that the cost of homes in the East End was somewhat less than what it was in the West End, even at that time.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm. Yeah. You-you had been living down right in the, uh, center of the city where most Black people had lived, so to come out with something different, wasn't it?

**Mel:** Uh, yes, it was. It was, uh, let's say a venture forth anyways, but we wanted to buy a house and we didn't wanna buy an old house.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm.

**Mel:** And they certainly weren't making new houses downtown. Yeah. I mean wanna cut that for a minute?

**Interviewer:** So yeah, we were talking about the using, uh, the word Black now, which is a very favorite way in describing, you know, our proud people.

**Mel:** Mm-hmm. Well, I certainly don't approve of the expression because we're- we're made up of, uh, many races and, uh, some of us are quite dark, but some of us are quite light and, uh, some of us are in between. But, uh, I think the thing that, uh, concerns me most all is the fact that years ago, when we were kids and someone spoke to you and called you say, for instance, a Jewish boy, called you a Schwartz-a, which means, uh, actually in-- through interpretation, Black, you were ready to climb the wall or take a crack at them. Or if German people called you similar names and- and actually the word, uh, nigger had sort of this connotation at the time.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm. Right. Uh, when did you start on the road, Mel?

**Mel:** Uh, I started, uh, on the railroad in 1937.

**Interviewer:** Well, you were a very young man at that time. Why did you decide the road? Why did you pick the road to go on?

**Mel:** Well, would you believe that, uh, when I started to work on the railway, there were, jobs were very scarce in those years. And, um, I guess I've gotta go back a bit. When I came outta high school and started looking for a job, I found that there weren't any jobs to be found.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm.

**Speaker 3:** There were jobs possibly, you make a dollar, \$2 a week. As a matter of fact, I did work, uh, with a printer for a while and, um, I made, uh, apprentice to him and I was making \$2 a week. Well, this was just a little, in my opinion, just a little too little to be making after having, uh, accomplished grade 13, which in those days was, uh, some sort of accomplishment. The railroad seemed to be the place to go. And, uh, I looked around, tried, and, uh, I tried the CPR, they wouldn't hire me 'cause I was too short. So I tried the CNR where my father worked and uh, I was successful and uh, gaining work there.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm. And what was like-- what kind of things did you have to do then when you went-- when you first went on the road?

**Mel:** Uh, I guess the basic job that, uh, was available at that particular time, especially for ah new people working on the railroad, uh, would, uh, be that of making beds and looking after, um, people during the day. Uh, there would be just a general housekeeping job, so to speak. Uh, for instance, uh, during the day, uh, you'd be required to clean out uh the wash basins, toilets, mop up, uh, passageways, uh, mop up the car, keep it completely clean because, uh, the cars in those days, um, uh, were not air-conditioned as they are today. They were-- as a matter of fact, air conditioning was just coming in, but here, again, being a younger man in the service, I, at that time, didn't see an air-conditioned car, and, uh, the dust just seeped in. So you can readily realize that, uh, there was a lot of housekeeping to be done and, uh, all this is basically the work that we did.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm. Now, your-your father was a-a-a-a railroad man. Is that right?

**Mel:** He was, yes. As a matter of fact, uh, he, um, often told me he didn't want me to go to work for the railroad. And, uh, I figured when I came out of high school that, uh, the world was my oyster because I was-- as a matter of fact, in my graduation class, I was considered the boy most likely to succeed. I guess this is the person that never [chuckles] succeeds really. And, uh, but I looked around and there just wasn't any work. And, uh, I guess as a matter of, um, need, I wanted a job, I wanted to do something with my life. I wanted to try to make some money and, uh, be like some of my friends who were out working in brokery jobs and some worked for *Globe and Mail* and other places. But, uh, as I say, there was no work for me. So this is why I decided to go to work for the railroad.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm. Um, did-- do you ever at any point think of leaving the road?

**Mel:** Did I ever think of leaving the road?

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm.

**Mel:** Um, I did and I didn't. Uh, I guess it's difficult to explain, but, um, I thought at one time I took a leave of absence and, uh, went to California and looked around and, uh, I didn't like living conditions in California for the colored people at that particular time. And I decided then I'd come back and stay with my railroad job. But even during the period that, uh, I had worked, uh, prior to going to California, um, I had made up my mind that since I was working for the railroad, I was going to stay there and I was going to get some kind of promotion of some sort eventually. And I pestered my superiors and they kept shrugging their shoulders, et cetera. But, uh, nothing came through my particular efforts, uh, at that time.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm. Um, how much of a promotion was available say to the, uh, to the Porter on the road when you were on the road?

**Mel:** When I was there, um, there were different portering jobs, first of all, available and some paid a little more than others, but, uh, a promotion per se, uh, the only thing available was that of the, uh, job of porter instructor. And of course, this job was the bailiwick of, uh, much older employees than myself. And, um, I eventually did get the porter instructor's job and, uh, when things, uh, cleared up and, uh, promotions were available why, uh, I managed to get a couple of promotions.

**Interviewer:** What kind of things had to be cleared up before promotions would come through?

**Mel:** Policy had to be changed.

**Interviewer:** Oh, and how- how was that changed? You know, who brought that policy change about, or how was it brought about?

**Mel:** Uh, come up?

**Interviewer:** Well, what were some things you had to do as a porter instructor? What did that mean?

**Mel:** Uh, the porter instructor was responsible for training new employees who were, should I say porters to be.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm. And where do most of them come from?

**Mel:** Depends upon the years that you're talking about. Uh, at the time that I started and, uh, most of the porters that came to work for CN were from Canada, as a matter of fact, all Canadian boys, small towns, Chatham, Buxton, Windsor, and-and around that way, but in latter years, of course, uh, we've had quite an, an influx of West Indian people, uh, in the ranks of, um, porter.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm. Okay. Well, uh, the-the fact that we're talking about the fact that the-the porter was able to get away from just being a-a Porter, but he was able to, uh, progress and do other things within the-the system. Now, you were, um, uh, a porter instructor. And then from there, you- you had other promotions, didn't you?

**Mel:** Yes, I had, uh, two or three, uh, since that time. I went from the porter instructor's job to the job of, uh, being a platform inspector and, um, something else opened up a little later and I was made road inspector. I was road inspector for a couple of months.

**Interviewer:** What does a, uh, what-- first of all, what does a platform instructor do? Inspector?

**Mel:** Inspector?

**Interviewer:** Right.

**Mel:** Uh, I would say a platform inspector is responsible for seeing that, um, equipment and employees leaving the terminal were in tiptop condition, and the employees were well aware of their duties. And, um, the fact that, uh, they might be getting possibly special parties on-board, um, on route.

**Interviewer:** If there was gonna be a special party, you were made aware of this. And then you had to make your, uh, your porters aware of this. Is this how it worked?

**Mel:** We had-- as-as a platform inspector, we had to convey this, uh, information to porters, uh, sleeping car conductors, dining car stewards. Uh, these-- uh, we had buffet porters in those days too of course. And we had to convey this information to any people in these-- any of those categories.

**Interviewer:** What kind of special people would've been coming on board that you would've been, uh, involved in?

**Mel:** Oh, there were all kinds of people from friends of the president to, um, people who were just very important people. Uh-uh, we, for instance, I would say that, uh, years ago, um, large corporations used to travel more by train than they do now. And, um, they would, uh, charter special cars and, um, travel in these cars from point A to point B. And, uh, they would-- all of the catering would be done on board that car. Their meals and their sleeping corners would all be, um, self-contained. Uh, people that we had, uh, were presidents of corporations, um, boards of directors of large companies, et cetera. Do you want names of some sort?

**Interviewer:** If you have any you want to throw in there.

**Mel:** Oh, well, I know I had, when I, uh-- I used to go to several-- I went out many times with special parties and, um, I used to take the Bank of Nova Scotia directors down to Halifax, to their annual board of directors meeting. And, um, I think I first started when Mr. Barnes was chairman of-of the board of the Bank of Nova Scotia. This goes back several years and right up until the time that, uh, Mr. Nicks became president of the bank, uh, why I was still toting them back and forth, uh, in their annual track in December.

Then there were the directors of the Miranda Mines, Lamac Gold Mines, you name it. Uh, there are any number of very important people and I might say the directors of these companies were not only directors in the bank, uh, or in the mines, but there are directors in other large corporations, of chartered trust, uh, et cetera. You could go on that infinitum and, uh, we couldn't name all the corporations that they were.

**Interviewer:** Well, now when you took things out, what-- um, were you head of-of-of the group when you took them out? Or what was your position when you took them out, at least when you went out with them?

**Mel:** When I went out with them, I was, um, what they called the buffet porter.

**Interviewer:** Right.

**Mel:** And, uh, my job then was to make their beds for them, serve their meals to them, serve their drinks to them, and generally keep, uh, housekeeping, uh, at a very high level and make sure that they enjoyed their trip and had a con--

**Interviewer:** Oh, sorry. When you have this kind of person on board, uh, what kind of conversation do you hear?

**Mel:** What you hear you don't hear.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Mel:** By that, I mean that, uh, whenever conversations of any sort went on within the car, they were usually confidential, um, conversations and, um, they were not to be repeated and, uh, I immediately forgot what I had overheard.

**Interviewer:** Now, what was your impression of these-- what was the general impression that came across to you from these kind of people that you worked with and traveled with?

**Mel:** I found the majority of these people very interesting, very friendly, and very easy to get along with.

**Interviewer:** Did they ever engage you into conversation of any-any sort? Did they ever ask you about your background? Did they show like a personal interest, ask about your family or-or was it always just that, uh, you know--

**Mel:** I-I think everything was pretty well, highly impersonal. Uh, they never did ask about my background or anything, uh, pertaining to family life at all. Um, they never asked, uh, "What are you interested in doing?" Uh, never suggested that possibly there was a future to be made in the banking business or in the mining business. So I could honestly say that, um, there couldn't be any deep interest, uh, in that area.

**Interviewer:** And rather than being polite, they were-were sort of detached, even though you may have been, uh, had them on your runs a number of times.

**Mel:** They were detached yet friendly. If one can use that sort of an expression because we had one fellow in particular, a chap by the name of Mr. Herckert, he was very, very, very friendly person and, uh, he used to kid us to death, but, uh, still he was, you know, what should I say? Not, uh, involved or getting involved in my personal problems.

**Interviewer:** Right?

**Mel:** Dining car stewards and sleeping car conductors.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Mel:** Now part of this training would be upgrading of employees from, uh, for instance, we might be making a sleeping car conductor from a dining car waiter, and, uh, this is the sort of training that would be involved, or we might have hired someone new off the street and made a waiter out of them.

[background noise]

**Interviewer:** We were talking about, um, uh, the fact that, uh, porters, uh, at least the-the- the Black man who went on the road was allowed to-- Okay, Mel. Uh, okay, Mel. Um, we went-- we were talking about the fact that, uh, the Black man was at some point allowed to rise in, um, position. At first, he was only allowed to be a porter, but then he was allowed to-to progress in promotion, and you certainly were one of those persons. And, uh, at first you started out as a porter and then you were a porter instructor, then a platform inspector and a road inspector. Now, what did a road inspector do, Mel?

**Mel:** A road inspector traveled on our equipment, uh, between various points along and on our railway and he was responsible for seeing that service was being maintained at the level prescribed by the company.

**Interviewer:** Would this mean that you would get on the car at any point or, uh, any junction in?

**Mel:** Yes. This is exactly what, uh, was done by a road inspector, because the whole name of the game was to find, uh, conditions as they would exist when you were not around. Sometimes you found things, um, in pretty poor shape, and other times you found things in very good shape, but they had a method of passing information along to one another to the effect that, uh, somewhere along the line, the road inspector was coming. So they normally were ready for you, but there were many times that you caught people unawares. Okay.

**Interviewer:** Instructor, yeah. Then you could-- became a service instructor.

**Mel:** Yes and, uh, guess, uh, once again, you want to know what a service-service instructor does.

**Interviewer:** Right, was each one of these considered, uh-uh, promotion, one above the other progressive, uh, sub uh, promotion?

**Mel:** Um-

**Interviewer:** Two.

**Mel:** They were till we got the point of road inspector. Then the service instructor, uh, was, uh, on a parallel in so far as pay was concerned, uh, with the job of road inspector. Um, I guess you want to know what, uh, the service instructor had as his duties.

**Interviewer:** Right?

**Mel:** Well, he is responsible or he was responsible for training people in all phases of the services that were provided by customer catering services and we were once upon a time known time known as the sleeping and dining car department of the CNR. Um, the services, uh, that would be performed by waiters, services performed by dining car stewards, sleeping car conductors, and porters. We have a new category that is only recently come into use and that is the category of steward waiter. All of these come under the training guidance, shall I say of the service inspector-- instructor rather.

**Interviewer:** Now you are in a new position now, Mel, or at least-

**Mel:** Well, I've been in this position for two or three years now.

**Interviewer:** And what's the name of your new position?

**Mel:** I'm a service supervisor. I'm in charge of, uh, a group of service instructors. My overall duty, of course, is to see that, uh, the training courses are lined up, training courses are prepared, um, and, of course, not only prepared but uh, they are put on by the various service instructors. I too must put on courses occasionally as occasion demands. I'm responsible for hiring of, uh, new people to work in our various categories and I am responsible to the administration's officer.

**Interviewer:** What kind of people are coming on the railway now?

**Mel:** Uh, I believe that, uh, I'm gonna sort of answer your question in a round about way in that I'm going to say that, uh, we are like most, uh, concerns. We are having a problem, getting qualified help.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm.

**Mel:** Um, I'm sure you're aware that, uh, no matter where you go, everyone is singing the same song. Uh, the people that we hire today are not willing to become deeply engrossed in their job as employees did years ago, uh, they will work for a day's pay. And that's just about what they're doing.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm.

**Mel:** Many of them. We have the odd one who is, uh, the exceptional one and he-- the exception is the type of employee we would like to have, uh, hired 100% of.

**Interviewer:** Now, this used to be the domain of the Black man at one time. Uh, but is there-- is this-- are the jobs open now to everyone who, or who applies and who can qualify?

**Mel:** Yes. All of our positions are open to anyone who can qualify for them, but I must qualify my statement in this respect that, um, we don't hire sleeping car conductors off of the street, uh, per se, nor do we hire dining car stewards off the street. These are our two senior jobs. And, um, they come as a matter of promotion from the lower jobs, the jobs of, uh, porters, waiters, or even steward waiters.

**Interviewer:** How long would a man have to be in these jobs before he can qualify for these higher positions?

**Mel:** There are many things that, uh, determine this, uh, fact. Uh, one, uh, would be the necessity of, uh, our crew supervisor, who is the man responsible for maintaining crews. Uh, it would, uh, depend upon the number of these people, uh, in each category that he has working on his board. And, um, if we require more people in these categories, then we train. Now, we-- I might just, I'm doing a little digressing.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm.

**Mel:** And I have to do it. Uh, we have a bulletin that we issue to our employees once a year, uh, who wished this bulletin is, um, addressed to all employees who wish to better themselves in some respect and take advantage of the training that is available in my section. Um, these people apply for training, and, uh, their applications are considered by the, uh, administration's officer. And, um--

**Interviewer:** How long is the training period?

**Mel:** It depends upon the job.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm.

**Mel:** Uh, the steward waiter would take about nine days training plus, uh, student trips. A waiter would take three days training plus student trips.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm.

**Mel:** A porter would take five days training plus student trips.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm. Uh, I-I would like to, Mel, you-- get your impression of, um, of what it was like living in a house where, uh, many porters lived, uh, you-you have that experience. What-what kind of thing was that like, where you had the men coming and going all the time? What was that experience like?

**Mel:** I enjoyed that period of my life very much. Uh, it was just the time when I was dating girls and, uh, learning what life was all about. As a result, um, we, as porters were seeing life in its many, uh, facets on the railroad and, uh, discussed these, uh, various things that we had seen, uh, while at work. Uh, we discussed these things in our leisure time. We had wrap sessions, uh, heavy discussions about conditions as they existed, then, uh, attitudes, um, of the company, um, various-- two railroad companies in that they would not, at that time provide any promotions of any kind for us, no matter how hard we tried, no matter how qualified we were.

**Interviewer:** Uh, Mel, during, uh, the-the Depression and probably further back, even about the time of your father's time, uh, it portering or working on the road was the only thing that-that was really open to the Black man. That was a Black man's domain. Wasn't it?

**Mel:** It would appear to have been to case.

**Interviewer:** Yes. Uh, but yet the-the porter was able to raise a family and buy a home and do quite well, wasn't he often when other people were not, uh, were-- wasn't able to-to-- were not able to find jobs.

**Mel:** Uh, I might say that my father worked all during the Depression years, um, well, in 1929 of thereabouts, uh, and through those years as he, um-- we had a couple of neighbors that he used to provide food for quite frequently.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm.



**Mel:** Uh, we never starved. We weren't certainly-- we never dressed, uh, to-to the height of fashion or anything, but we were always well provided for and cared for.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm.

**Mel:** And, um, many students came up from the United States in those years to work for the railways. These same students are prominent in all phases of life in the United States today, doctors, lawyers. Uh, you could name any field and you'd find probably someone who worked at one time or another as a porter, um, on Canadian National or Canadian Pacific.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm.

**Mel:** Um, we have people here who've managed to put their children through university. Um, they've worked, uh, extremely hard to do it, but, uh, they've certainly done it. And certainly, the next generation, um, is going to show, uh, what does-- what the results of their parents' hard labors and their parents' ability to put up with the things that they had to put up with, when they were working as porters.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm. Uh, would you say that psychologically, the porter has to adopt, oh, a certain attitude that the man doesn't normally have?

**Mel:** I think anyone working in the service of the public has to adopt an attitude. The attitude, once again, that, uh, I'm here to provide a service to the customer. And if I am not providing that service to the customer, then there's no need for me to be here because, uh, a customer can acquire insults or the many other sides of things very easily without, uh, my assistance.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm. Uh, because so many men worked on the road and this is with their income. It certainly affected, uh, social life in the community, in the Black community, uh, as far as say as, uh, arranging parties or any special event.

**Mel:** All these events had to be timed around the, uh, so-called layover time. These were the times when, uh, the porters had their time off, uh, and they tried to make these things coincide, uh, to get the greater number of people present at these affairs.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm.

**Mel:** Uh, it had a lot to do with their church life, I would say in addition.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm. Yeah. Uh, do you-- would you say that railroad life is changing now now because of the fewer, uh, uh, cars that are running out, that use porters and this kind of thing? Railroad life seem to be cut back now that the airlines are--are cutting into, uh, moving people.

**Mel:** Yeah. Railroad life seems to be changing in this respect that, um, at one time, and I have to go back again to the time when I first started to work for the railways, there was a kinship amongst all employees. This went from the, um, lowly porter or pantry man, right up to the train conductor who was in charge of the train. There was quite a kinship and, um, people were close and, uh, did things for one another more so than they do today. Today,

uh, in the hustle and bustle to make the almighty buck, this feeling seems to have disappeared. And, uh, it's, uh, more of a feeling of every man from my-- for himself. And, uh, me for me and mine and you for you and yours.

**Interviewer:** Just like an individual job that one goes to, without that feeling of, um, of a team.

**Mel:** The teamwork still exists, but not to the extent that it did years ago. There must be teamwork for railroad people to function. If they do not have teamwork, we'd have to get out of business.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm.

[pause 00:30:06]

[00:31:56] [END OF AUDIO]