

**Mr. Bill Overton:** I don't know how, uh, let me hold it.

**Interviewer:** No, I'll hold it.

**Mr. Bill Overton:** All right. Um, well maybe we can start now and then you can edit it and hold it back.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm.

**Mr. Bill Overton:** Um, I think that, uh, perhaps it'd be best if my first arrival in Toronto was in October of 1909. And I, uh, came up because my wife's people lived here on Adelaide Street. 129 Adelaide, which is now an office building. And, uh, there, my, uh, father-in-law, uh, who at that time was just a-a porter on the CPR, but, uh, an intelligent man. And that was only a means to an end that he had was at the same time, conducting a restaurant and lodging place for porters or any Blacks who came to town. In-- at that time, it was, uh, for two reasons, unlikely that, uh, people would be, uh, in a hotel. And the special porters, they didn't make that much money. Uh, a dining car waiter received \$25 a month; a sleeping car porter, he received \$30 a month.

That was-- he received 30 because he had to buy his own meals. The dining car employee, of course, had his meals and \$25. And they-- I worked for the Grand Trunk, it was, and they would take out two d-- two cents a day for insurance. I don't know what for, it became a question later in life because, uh, they wanted to know what happened to the insurance. And, uh, as it was, they had such a buildup of insurance that they began giving it out as a bonus to retiring, uh, vice presidents. And one of them lived down here in Belleville. I don't remember his name, but when he retired, 'cause pensions was not the thing of the day then. And so instead of a big pension for him, they gave him several thousand dollars out of this insurance money.

**Interviewer:** And this was the two cents that you--

**Mr. Bill Overton:** This was the two cents a day. And this still, some of it being carried on-on the east end of Canada, the same fund because we had a privilege of bringing it up to date and going with the old plan or joining the new retirement contributions. Well, who wanted that two cents a day, which was insurance against, which was a health insurance, sick and accident that we didn't find it out until later, but they took it out.

So for years, my first pay was \$24.40 cents a month. And we had to go to a traveling pay car. There was a private car that would stay for a couple of days in Toronto and go to Hamilton for a couple of days. And all employees in that area would go to the pay car and get their money. Those are early days of what we had to go through. Now, if you happen to be out of town, which of course happened a great deal. And you were, say for instance, that, uh, many a time I picked up my pay in London because when it was in Toronto, I was in Montreal. And when we came through on the dining car, we stopped over in London and it was, uh, the next morning the pay car was there and I'd pick up-up my pay in London, the whole crew would.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Mr. Bill Overton:** It only required somebody to identify you. If it wasn't possible to get it like that away from home, or you were all sick or something, then you would go to the freight sheds, and in the freight shed, they would pick up and give you, they paid you in cash at all times. My first big money after that what came, uh, when one time I joined the crew that went to, uh, uh, a dining car crew that went from Montreal-- no St Albans, Vermont, to Boston over the Central Vermont Railway. We had a Grand Trunk dining car. We were working for the Central Vermont Railway, which is a subsidiary of the Grand Trunk at that time. And ran down over the Boston and Maine railway tracks into Boston. And we were paid by the Boston and Maine. Their method of paying was by the week and they paid us \$7 a week when we get in on payday, but they would come around and give each of us seven \$1 bills. 'Cause we couldn't have a use for \$5 bills in those days. [laughs]

Well, it is, uh, it's interesting when you think of the difference \$24.40 a month. Well, and the pensions, anyone that, uh, got a pension, they were supposed to get the same amount for a pension, which of course this is well, who stayed long enough to get a pension? Those few that stayed was-- they were very few because they didn't let you stay. They had no limit to when you would be pensioned off and you were pensioned off according to their well, they feel that, uh, you have worked long enough and that, uh, you were old enough that you wasn't much more good. So the pension usually came around 80 or 85 years of age at that time, and you would get \$25 a month so that you didn't get the pension long. [laughs] And then it is, uh, I came up as I say, in 1909 and I didn't go on the railroad right then. I went into a factory on Yonge Street. Now, when I came in, the old depot was standing just south of the Walker House and my wife and I, and my suitcase, walked up York Street because someone had met us to lead us up and they were building the New Union Depot. It was sometime later before it was finished, they'd had a big fire in Toronto. I can only-- I didn't and have never read, uh, a historical account of Toronto to know only from what my experience was. And this is all memory lane.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm.

**Mr. Bill Overton:** Anyway, I went up and, uh, my mother-in-law was here and I knew her back in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where I came from, uh, where I was born and, uh, her husband and, uh, so, uh, they was running this restaurant and rooming house. And I went in there for a few days. I helped wait on table.

**Interviewer:** What was the name of the rooming house or restaurant?

**Mr. Bill Overton:** It had nothing except it was Reverend Newsome's, uh, Restaurant. It, uh, uh, he later tried to develop it into a hotel and moved west on Adelaide Street. Just about halfway between York and Simcoe on the south side, there was an old building there and He tried to convert it into a hotel-like. And, uh, now I came up in 1909 and then when he moved there, I, uh, the next summer in-- early in nine-- I went to work that winter in this paint shop, even joined the union, uh, wagon painter. And we had one automobile, we did. And that was for the movers. They're still in existence. I forget their name on Yonge Street. Uh, they called them cottage agents, at that time. It was so strange, 'cause my father was a moving, uh, in the moving business. And when I come up here, this cottage is an English expression to us. That's where I first was acquainted with, uh, roast beef and what is it, this

kind of something was the main dish all the time and a meal was 15 cents. It wasn't a potato-

**Interviewer:** [laughs] Roast beef or

**Mr. Bill Overton:** -and Yorkshire pudding. I never hear of it nowadays. And I didn't know what it was then and it scared me because at home, my mother was always like any Southern woman, a very good cook. She had worked for, well, what is now Wanamakers in Philadelphia. The early family, she was a cook in that family as a young-- that's how long ago that was. And my sister was brought up as a cook. See, so the family was a cook, but I didn't go for cooking. I-I got in as a-a fluke when I started to go to Boston University to register and somebody wanted a-a waiter up in Marblehead Neck. And, uh, so I said, well, that'll do something for the summer then I'll come back and go to school. Well, I-I went up there and they, uh, put a jacket on me and called me a butler [laughs]. It paid pretty good. It was about the same pay as they gave a Navy man and a Black man in the Navy at that time had to be either in the mess hall or a gunner's maid, but the other ranks was out. And that's the reason I didn't go into the Navy. But anyway, as I was saying, I worked in this paint shop here. And then in the spring, they were recruiting for boats. The Toronto was-- I think it was the Toronto Steamship Company, ran excursion boats between-- not excursion a regular ferry service between Toronto and Niagara Falls, Toronto and Lewiston. And they were the *Chippewa* and the *Chicora*, I can't think of the other boat's name, but anyway, they would import help from the South, Blacks to work on these boats as waiters. And I got on, I didn't come with the group that came from, but that was the thing. That's how the railroads was manned in the summertime for the extra traffic. Would be, uh, two or three carloads then would be recruited in the states from some college down there. And they many, a doctor or lawyer, or what have you would be up here working in the summertime and make enough money for his tuitions for the next year.

Now, I didn't come in like that. I came in because my wife was pregnant and I had to be home, uh, bring her with her mother because, uh, I was trying to do for her. And, uh, so, uh, that was the reason I was here. But, um, my work first to paint shop, then the boats. Then when the boats ended in the year, end of the year, I got a job with, uh, at the Grand Union Hotel at the corner of Simcoe and Front Street, under a man named Marshall as head waiter. And, uh, Sparks was the general manager and they had a-a problem there. Sparks was very irrational and flared up. So I told Marshall the first time he flared up to me, I was gone and I was [laughs]. I went there one morning and he was mad about something. And he hollered at me. I was going across the dining to the breakfast room. I turned right around, walked right back. And he didn't-- I-- he wasn't even talking to me, but it-- I was very much of a sensitive somebody. And I felt I couldn't take nobody hollering around me like that. I came back to set the tray down in the kitchen, got my things, went home when Marshall come to get me and I wouldn't go back. And then I went on the railroad. I got on the railroad in November of 1910.

I stayed on the railroad, and that's where I, uh, on the first off, the first job was between Toronto and London. No Port Huron, it was. Sarnia they didn't—No that Café car. Uh, oh yes. We went from Toronto to Sarnia every day, 30 or 31 days a month, no time off. And they had a steward named Crosley, Crosby, or something like that. And he was a stickler for service. And of course, the men were from the States, all Black waiters then, he was

White. That was something at that time when I came from Massachusetts, I couldn't understand why they would have to be that set up, but it was because, in the states, it wasn't quite that bad. Anyway, I got on with him and I made good until one day coming in, uh, I was only there relieving somebody. And I think the man I was relieving was Reverend Dawson. Do you remember Reverend Dawson?

**Interviewer:** Yes, I remember.

**Mr. Bill Overton:** And, uh, he was getting off. In fact, he got off suddenly to go preach and they had to grab somebody to go in his place. So they-- and I had just come in town from the dining car. So they shipped me the next morning up to Branford because he got off on the road, on that morning train, and I got on there. And, uh, that is my first, uh, acquaintance with Reverend Dawson. He wasn't a Reverend Dawson then he was just a waiter on there and he liked to play the ponies, but was a turnabout. And when he got in town, he got off, he wouldn't even finish his run, came in town and he went up to see the superintendent, Mr. Bill E.W. Smith. And they asked him, uh, well, why did he get off? Why didn't he come out in town? He says, I couldn't go another step on and work for this guy, and I got to go to work for the Lord.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm.

**Mr. Bill Overton:** And that was quite something. It-it-it spread like wildfire, his actions of doing it. And, uh, because everybody knew him. Everybody knew who-- the girl who became his wife, uh, Bell. Bell, whatever his wife's first name was, I can't recollect now. But I can remember before I-I think, uh, early, before that, that he and his wife were like, uh, at a dance and they were the, uh, honoured guests and incidentally, this was before you were born. So I know [laughs] 'cause I worked with your husband.

**Interviewer:** My father.

**Mr. Bill Overton:** Your father, that's right. It was your father. And, uh, I hadn't got on that dining car with him then. And I stayed on that dining car with Crosley. And, uh, he was so strict and hard. I-I begged off on that and they got me a little buffet job. See? And anyway, the man that stayed on that run made money.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm.

**Mr. Bill Overton:** This \$24.40 was nothing. You could throw that away because on there a while-- I was on there, oh, month or two or so, but I had a family, I was paying doctor's bill, and putting money in a bank. I think they have the same bank now. I've never put any money in it since, but it was a provincial bank. It seemed like to me, and you could put in pennies.

**Interviewer:** Right. Mm-hmm.

**Mr. Bill Overton:** Now you could deposit pennies. And I come back and empty my pockets. It might be, uh, \$4.65 or whatever it was, we put it in and I saved money. And one that did that when I was getting much more than that and keeping family and everything. Well then on this buffet car, uh, someone else saw who had little seniority and they bumped me off of

that. And I went on a café car with a man, uh, a Black steward. And the point was it was experiment of having Black in charge. So I went on with him and we were doing all right, but he was thugging, stealing.

**Interviewer:** Oh.

**Mr. Bill Overton:** And I was so conscious of [laughs] of what was going on. I begged off. I didn't want Alfred going to jail, so I begged off. I wouldn't beg-- they wouldn't let me out so I quit. Packed up my family and left Canada.

[laughter]

**Interviewer:** Really?

**Mr. Bill Overton:** Nobody knew why I quit, but that's what it was. Anyway. I went away, went to New York, got on the boats from New York to Providence. I made a couple of trips, but I found out that if I wanted to work, I had to serve while the boat was out in the ocean.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm.

**Mr. Bill Overton:** So, uh, that is-- and I was on night duty. We left at night and served at dinner and then the-- you had to take turns what we call upstairs work, it's after-hours work. And the peculiar thing of it is, one night, in fact, it was the only night because the next day I quit, I had a call to take some sanitary stuff upstairs, as it was. And uh, this man looked at me, I kept on serving, and we looked at one another, and he says, uh, "Waiter, I know you?" I said, "I don't think that's possible." I said, "I haven't been in town 15 minutes." You know?

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm.

**Mr. Bill Overton:** Uh, I wasn't thinking about where I come from or anything. He said, "No, no, no, no." And he kept looking at me. He says, "Where'd you work before you come here?" I said, "I just got in town." "I know," he says, "but you must have worked somewhere else." Oh, yes I worked on the railroad." "What railroad?" "Grand Trunk." "Where at, where from, too?" I worked on a dining car from Toronto to Sarnia. He says, "Well, I'll be damned." He says, "I came through from Montreal one time, and you served me breakfast." Now I'm down in Providence, Rhode Island, and I meet this man, he's up in the room. I don't know who he had with him. But anyway, that-that's one of the things you run into travelling, see. And then I met him again from Montreal to Sherbrooke, went over there running, but, uh, at that time on the cars we used-- on the buffet car, we used Pintsch gas. I think that's the name of it P-I-N-T-S-H.

**Interviewer:** Ooh.

**Mr. Bill Overton:** Or P-T-S-C-H, something like that is spelled, a bottled gas. And in the, uh, the dining cars they had, uh, we had to use a taper to light the, uh, point them. They weren't electric.

**Interviewer:** Like the-the lights.

**Mr. Bill Overton:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Gas lights.

**Mr. Bill Overton:** They were like the mantle- like the mantle. And we had to put on mantles when they burn out and you had a stick and a taper on it. And you'd like the mantle to ignite. And uh, oh, when they did introduce electricity on there, we had an awful lot of trouble. Many a night you go along the meal gone, no electricity, [laughs] it-it was fun, I'm telling you. But, uh, then I went along and, uh, when I left, uh, New York then, went to Boston, got another job, a department store opened up and, uh, it lasted two weeks and I lost my job. So I got another job in a factory, a box factory, and it was right on the railroad and, uh, on the railroad, uh, which, uh, this railroad, uh, ran right by this factory, a box factory. And so, um, I'm in the shipping room. You see, my basic education was commercial. I was a stenographer, but I couldn't get a job at it. They'd give me, in Massachusetts, I had an offer for a job \$3 in a half a week, stenographer taking shorthand type, all that business, keeping books. So I-I, uh, I was in this shipping room and saw this train go by. There was a dining car on it. And the men hanging out there waving, white waving. So I got a little dose of homesickness for Canada. And, uh, but there was a cute little story about this beforehand, while I was working in this store. When I first went back to Massachusetts where this was, uh, this department store, the wife one time asked me to go to one of these seance meetings.

**Interviewer:** Ooh.

**Mr. Bill Overton:** So I go and, uh, for some reason or other, among other things, he comes around and he describes me, he's talking to me and telling me that he's seen me way off in a foreign land going and coming, going and coming, and handling money. And, uh, to me, that was just about as-as much as saying you're getting ready to fly.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm.

**Mr. Bill Overton:** So, um, you know, I paid him no mind and I didn't give it any more thought. We never-- my wife and I never discussed it. See? But what he told us, it-it-- we laughed at it. Said, "Well, maybe," but [unintelligible 00:24:12] she-she kind of believed in this, some of the stuff, you know? And when I lost my job, I moved from Cambridge up to West Medford, which is a suburb of-of about, uh, four miles away. Got another job with, uh, my uncle and his was seasonal work. And only lasted a couple of weeks, and then I went to this box factory, 'cause this is year-round. Now I'm all settled, got my, uh, little apartment and I was getting fixed up and everything. And so, uh, when I saw this dining car go by this factory, you know, I didn't think anything about it, then the next day they come along and they waved it again, and the thought come to me, I wonder if I rode back up there with, uh, I'd be able to get a job on a road again, because the money I'm getting was more in one way. But the tips I made on the other was a whole lot different, you see? Although it was, uh, almost 10%, the tips was what people would give you and anybody give you a quarter. They were giving you something because, uh, meal on the dining card would perhaps run 85 cents or a dollar at the most, anyone having a dollar meal had steak, I think.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm.

**Mr. Bill Overton:** So that was what was, and I, uh, from that, I rode up and I have the letter today that says come, and we'll put you to work, maybe not on the buffet car, but we'll find work for you.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm.

**Mr. Bill Overton:** And that's how I came back and continued when I-- that was in 19-- 1919, 10 years from the time that I went down originally I come back, but I'd been away about 4 years.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm.

**Mr. Bill Overton:** And then I started and I worked until I retired in 54.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm.

**Mr. Bill Overton:** But in that time that I came back then the unions, or there was talk of a union and it was in 1927 when I think the first union agreement came in and we began to get some difference. The pay was different and you must remember too that, uh, there'd been a war, First World War. I left twice. The second time I left, the job here was because I had to register in the army and I'd rather register in the American army because I was an American than in the Canadian army.

**Interviewer:** Did you have service overseas?

**Mr. Bill Overton:** No. I went back there and uh, they put me in 4-F I guess it was. And some woman [laughs] says, "Why don't you enlist?" I said, "You gonna take care of my four children?" I had four children then. And she says, "No," I-- "Well, when they take care of my four children then I'll go," but there was a lot of hardship with men going and the family had to look after them. They didn't- they didn't have the social services they have now.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm.

**Mr. Bill Overton:** And then, so that's uh, about how I got back there. Well, then as soon as the war was over, then I came on back here.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm.

**Mr. Bill Overton:** But it was right after the war was over, that I went into the Masonic Lodge.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm.

**Mr. Bill Overton:** And of course, when I left, that is in New York. And when I left there, well, I got behind in dues. You never get out, but you-you get dropped. And it was years later before I picked it up again.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm.

**Mr. Bill Overton:** But I picked it up here in Canada and it was through advice of my father-in-law where to join because he belonged up here. I didn't know that.

**Interviewer:** And this Chad was a very likable fellow.

**Mr. Bill Overton:** Yeah. He was very likable. And of course, it meant that his, uh, many of his passengers that he had was-- He always made plenty of money, you know, he'd get to them. So this family, it was a-- he was business head and had a whole family and take them to Vancouver for vacation. And he-he treated the family so well that the man, uh, asked when he was coming back. Well, it was usually those Vancouver trips, I think it was about every two weeks. That just suited the man. So he made a special effort to come back with this porter. Now, when he went out, he made reservations in the office for this-this drawing-room.

And, uh, I think he had a drawing-room and a- and a compartment because he had a family. And so he went on out. And when he was going to make this contact to come back, this is where the-- this porter, told him, he says, don't bother-bother making-- buying any tickets. I'll look out for you. So, uh, anyway, the man did, he came down with his family, no tickets and he got on and this porter brought him on in and gave him the same deluxe service all the way, and he got in. So the man was so appreciative of, uh, what happened, that he wrote to the president of the CPR about all the service and he spelled it out in detail. [laughs] So when-when it come to this part about don't buy your tickets and they looked up the records that he didn't buy no tickets, there was no tickets reported, [unintelligible] was in the street. [laughs] Well, so--

[pause 00:30:09-00:34:20]

[00:34:21] [END OF AUDIO]