

Bill Overton: 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's no tickets reported. [laughs] **[inaudible 00:00:20]** was in the street. [laughs] Well said, but it was too funny. He was so good and everything was all right up until then.

Interviewer: Hmm.

Bill Overton: Man kept his mouth shut. Then. Fine. But every-- all the porters, I understand that was doing that, but this man was so well pleased he just killed him. [laughs] Yes. But, uh, I was always in the, uh, dining car and, uh, when I came back, uh, I, uh, first off, they gave me, uh, re-relief jobs here or there. And, uh, then, uh, then they sent me to, uh, on a dining car, I got to run on a dining car and, uh, the bootlegging was going on.

Interviewer: Oh.

Bill Overton: So, from Montreal down to Portland, Maine, they had a café car and uh, this crew on there was--was doing a land-office business. And it seems like they stored a lot of liquor. In the café car they had one end, they called a parlor, in the middle was a smoker, and at the other end was 18 seats of the dining car. Well, in this parlor, having a Chesterfield arrangement, the crew had got with the yard crew and made it a false bottom in it and was storing their liquor in there. Well, it was all right, except that in putting it in, boy, it worked for ages, the, uh, immigration, customs officers was riding in there all the time, getting free coffee and everything was lovely. So, one morning they went down here's, uh, a stream of some kind of a liquid coming out in the middle of the floor. And of course, everybody noticed and wondered what pipe was broken and there was no pipes anywhere near there. [laughs] So when they saw it and the customer, was on that crew didn't come back. They just kept right on and got off bought it, and they haven't seen him since. [laughs] Well, they pulled me off the dining car and put me on there.

And when I saw what it was, I said, "You better get somebody, 'cause I'm not staying here." I knew that the pressure would be on you see, and in fact, it was because the next morning you see it went down, stayed overnight. No, it doubled the road and, uh, as far as it went from Montreal, and the next morning, the bootlegger that supplied the liquor, he had heard of it, but he'd come down thinking that he could-- he had an unfinished assignment, I guess he had some around there. Oh no our ticket, oh no. I'm too goody goody for that then and I wouldn't take it but I got off of that and got on a run-- they switched me with a man that ran from Montreal to Ottawa and I went on the Ottawa run. Well on the Ottawa run, I was just as bad because I was buying-- bought these little individual bottle of whiskeys out of the commissary for 75 cents a dozen.

Interviewer: A dozen.

Bill Overton: [laughs] Yeah, man. The same ounce and something and I was buying them 75 cents a dozen from them and selling them. And of course, uh, they were, uh, 25 cents a drink. Well, I did \$1.60, isn't it? [chuckles] But anyway, uh, and, uh, I stayed on there till, uh, they pulled the train off. It was a deluxe train. I think they called it the Senator Special or something like that. It was put on primarily for the, uh, po-political use. You see, the politicians were going back and forth. They had this train, the train ran actually from Ottawa

to Quebec, but the, uh, parlor car only went as far as Montreal. And anyone going down to Quebec, why, uh, there was a sleeper put on and they would go in the sleeper, it was on the-- and the train would go down and then that sleeper was put on the Halifax train. See. But, uh, I didn't stay there on Montreal to Ottawa very long. I got acquainted there. I, uh, had some mighty funny experiences around me, but there was nothing serious that I know of, uh, except that story I just told you about carpet and-- but, uh, then I, uh, let's see, when I got along about '29, I guess it was, there was, uh, trouble, uh, that is, uh, the union had got pretty well settled in.

They had the agreement of 27, which was their first railroad agreement, but the, uh, Brotherhood of Railroad Porters, the, uh, Randolph faction were of interested in the Grand Trunk trying to put them in with them, which was CPR. And, uh, the CPR had their own, see that made-- that is the CPR was with the trainmen, a White group, but Randolph had this segment of the porters. He was doing well in the States. And of course, uh, there was a lot of our trains ran into the States, but the Grand Trunk, we had a Canadian organization and, uh, we didn't come anywhere as near getting the conditions that the Randolph did and next, they--they got me interested.

Of course, first off was secretary. Then I opened my big mouth then I go from one thing to another. I was president of the union here once and then I was, uh, local chairman. Now the local chairman is the man who is nowadays called a shop steward. He's the, uh, in between man, the men and the management and, uh, whatever comes or goes, why he is the spokesman. And we were working 240 hours a month and, uh, no holidays off and, uh, no extra pay, straight pay. If you were late, you didn't get any extra pay for it. No matter-

Interviewer: If you're late getting into-- if the train's late, getting into-

Bill Overton: Stations, some, and of course on long trains, like to, uh, Winnipeg or Vancouver, sometimes there was two or three days late, but all they got was straight pay. Well, we managed to get some of that. They got, uh, it down so that they put hours for our assignment, uh, like Toronto to Hamilton and the regular, uh, tariff for time. And, uh, it had to be over a certain amount of period before you could catch-- collect overtime. I think a two-hour difference or something like that. That's when they first began to get conditions and it went on from 240, then, uh, they got me into it and I attended the, uh, convention in Ottawa in '42.

There was one thing came up on the docket of, uh, my first convention too. And, uh, came up, uh, about, uh, someone tried to introduce a resolution to do- do something about the conditions down in the Bahamas, in regards to unions down there, or it being allowed down there that the natives were paid a dollar a day. And, uh, the unions were demanding \$5 a day for imports and paying all expenses and they wanted to kind of equalize that. [chuckles] I can remember president Mozer [unintelligible 00:09:48] He says, "I don't know what we want to do about that, but, uh, oh yeah, brother Overton, uh, you ought to know something about this. Let, uh, Mr. Discrimination tell us what to do with this thing." And I told him, I said, "Before you start working in, uh, the Bahamas, let us clean up some of this trash around here." I said, "We sat here for a half-hour, the Scotchman complaining about conditions of discrimination down here in this, I don't know, Point Saint Charles or somewhere where it's a French district. And still, you wanted to go down to the Bahamas on

something." I said, "Let us straighten up this discrimination" because the man wasn't paid right.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Bill Overton: And it was discrimination, he on the job was one of the workers of maintenance. But on his time off, he was sent into the, uh, baggage room to assist in the baggage room.

Interviewer: This would be a Porter or this would be a French?

Bill Overton: This is a White.

Interviewer: This is a Frenchman?

Bill Overton: Yeah. A Frenchman, a Scotchman.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Bill Overton: And I says, "Now a Frenchman doing the same work as a maintenance and when he went into the baggage room, he collected extra pay, now why? And you're talking about going to the Bahamas. We don't need to go down there to have any problems." You know, that was just my attitude. That's when he called me Mr. Discrimination. But, uh, it worked out that, uh, I think that I really had enough, uh, what you would call stubbornness, uh, insolence to gain their attention because they-they-they were stuck on a-a basis of prejudice. And I was out on the road and they called me off my work to send me to Montreal, called me into Montreal, to tell them what to do about it.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Bill Overton: I went there and they told me what it was and they, uh, asked me how they could solve that problem. So, I told them how.

Interviewer: What was the problem?

Bill Overton: The problem was they wanted to have the Whites and the Blacks, uh, have seniority, but they would be Group One and Group Two.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Bill Overton: And Group One would be given a choice of area they worked on.

Interviewer: And who would make up Group One?

Bill Overton: Whites.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Bill Overton: Group Two was Black.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Bill Overton: The old Grand Trunk-- You see now it's Canadian National this period. And, uh, there was a lot that happened in the railroad when the takeover came from the-- when the Grand Trunk was taken over by the Canadian National.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Bill Overton: It's like the Shoemaker on the corner taking over the big factory and he takes all his insignificant help in there and put 'em in master positions. 'Cause I saw some of them, they brought out the Canadian National and put 'em in charge here it was ridiculous.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. So that Group One, which was the-the White-

Bill Overton: The White.

Interviewer: was-was put in charge over-

Bill Overton: -charge over and no Blacks, of course, come in, except now there were some Blacks in the Canadian-- on the Canadian National, before they came into the, they took over the Grand Trunk. And in order to impress everybody, these Blacks that came in had seniority over the Blacks that was-was there.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Bill Overton: And, uh, of course, uh, right here in Toronto, I think there was about 21 of them came over, Jerry Hart and, uh-uh, no, not Bill Hart. Uh, Jerry Hart and Garaway and uh, well the sleeping car porters, because the Grand Trunk had no sleeping car.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Bill Overton: See at that time, Grand Trunk didn't have any sleepers. The Pullman Company did all their sleeping car work.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Bill Overton: So, all the Canadian National porters came in, they even made them Porter Instructors, the little guy around there didn't know anything about a dining car come in and try to tell you how to run your buffet car, your dining car. And the discrimination at that time was, uh, I in charge of a buffet car was called a porter in charge.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Bill Overton: Group Two. Group One in charge of a buffet car he was called a Stewart Waiter. I received \$100. He would receive \$125.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Bill Overton: Same work.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm, and you had had the previous experience.

Bill Overton: I had well, previous experience and nothing else all my life, but a waiter, this guy just come out. Some couldn't even speak English.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Bill Overton: And knew nothing about food at all.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Bill Overton: And it was so, and this is not just to, uh, to emphasize a fact, but it is a fact that there was travelers who would wait for a coloured crew on the dining car rather than the White crew, if it was at all possible because there was a difference in the food.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Bill Overton: There was that difference. I've-I've seen some on, the man that was on the Queen Special this Mother Queen now, when she came through and the man that was on the dining car that served those people on, or one of the dining cars on there, I would really starve to death if I had to eat anything he cooked, because he was so filthy.

Interviewer: Really?

Bill Overton: And I've seen him do it. And when you see a man do it to not just a shelf, but just, in all of the food in the kitchen, you know, you can't eat in that.

Interviewer: This is the man that was on the-

Bill Overton: On the Queen Special.

Interviewer: Is that right? This would've been about 1935 or so.

Bill Overton: I guess it was '39, was it? Something like that.

Interviewer: Somewhere in there they came.

Bill Overton: When they made all that tour and special trains and this guy was put on it. I don't know where he is now.

Interviewer: Were there any, um, any Black men on the-the tour?

Bill Overton: Oh yes. They had some of them on there, but, uh, and uh, I could have been on it. You, they-they wanted, uh, of course, they had to screen you and if you wanted to go, but here's the point. I have a family and who wants to go out for six weeks around on that kind of a tour, there's nothing extra in it.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Bill Overton: It's only for the pleasure saying, uh, "I worked for the-- served the-- not even served the queen, was on the Queen Special. That's all you got out of it.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Bill Overton: And they'd fire you just as quick, but there was no extra pay. No-- they did after they got through and got back. Those that came back, then they gave them a week off. No pay.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Bill Overton: Just gave 'em a week off. In fact, at that time, when you were working, don't ask to get off, unless it's your mother that's dead and they got to know it's your mother that's dead, or they'll fire you.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Bill Overton: I, uh, negotiated with the railway for the first, uh, week vacation. We had it all passed and everything one week, no matter whether you was with the country, company, uh, I think you had to have a five year qualification. And, uh, if you'd been with them 50 years, the same thing, you only got one week.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Bill Overton: I was in Montreal and helped to negotiate that. And then when I got back, the superintendent here says, "Uh, well, uh, Bill, when do you want yours?" I said, "I guess I've already had it. I'll take mine at that time." I was down there because I-- that's the only way I could get any extra money.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Would this be a vacation with pay or just a vacation?

Bill Overton: Yeah. A vacation with pay.

Interviewer: Pay. Mm-hmm.

Bill Overton: In other words, it was time, pay and you couldn't get it. For instance, you couldn't work and get paid, vacation time.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Bill Overton: In other words, you couldn't say, well, uh, worked the whole month and I'll take the first week as my vacation and get that paid. No, I wouldn't have that because they'd all be doing that.

Interviewer: Right.

Bill Overton: That would only be just one week in the year that you would get double pay.

Interviewer: Right.

Bill Overton: Well, that, wasn't what we were fighting for. We were fighting for time off.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Bill Overton: See? And when, uh, you work along for six or eight months, uh, you can't take a time off why, it's ridiculous. And I meant-- when I say time off, Sundays and Mondays, holidays as well.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Bill Overton: Holidays was our most busiest time.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Bill Overton: In fact, the next year I had two weeks' vacation, we'd negotiated and got two weeks' vacation. And I went in after we had negotiated and went to the superintendent, say, "I want mine, the last week in June, and the first week in July. My family is having a homecoming in Denver, Colorado, and I would like to spend a little time out there." All right. You know, the night I came in, the inspector on duty says, "Well, Bill, I haven't anybody to relieve here." I said, "I don't care whether you have or not. Here's your keys." He says, "You wouldn't dare." I said, "Wouldn't I? If I dropped dead you'd find somebody." And I'm gone. So, the-the agent was sitting there and he says, "Bill, uh, what's the trouble?" I says, "I've made arrangements to get off tonight and I'm off. Here's the keys."

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Bill Overton: He says, "Well, couldn't you make another trip? Not one more trip, sir?" I says "This is all negotiated." "Well, I have nobody to relieve you." "That's all right. Car go out without anybody then I guess. I haven't seen one go out yet without somebody." He says, "Well, uh, I'll have to call up." I forget who was the superintendent? I said, "Sure, do that. Let me talk to him. I'd like to talk to him. No one know what's going on here. I'm not acting anything." "But you know, Bill, nobody gets off in the summer time." I said, "Why? Can you tell me one good reason why I should have to wait for November, December to get off or January for holidays? Who wants to get off then, where can I go?"

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. So, it was really a matter of taking a stand since you had no [unintelligible 00:21:42].

Bill Overton: Only I could have taken it.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Bill Overton: 'Cause anyone else would've got fired.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Bill Overton: Now, even though I'm retired since 1954, there's some of those retired inspectors around there look on the Black man as dirt. They feel that way about, they show it.

Interviewer: Is that right? Mm-hmm.

Bill Overton: They think that you have no right.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Bill Overton: Not equal right to anything.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. And this has been-- I suppose, this was your attitude, always been their kind of attitude.

Bill Overton: They just grew up. Excuse me. I remember the attitude of, uh, some of our poor workers, White and Black on trains, and there was one time coming from-- I was on a parlor buffet during the war and business was extra heavy so that they had an extra man assisting us, a porter. And he would be looking after the parlor car passengers, seeing them detrain or get on and off and uh, and kind of keep the car cleaned up while I was looking after the meal service and all and running the car in general. And this train man, because this parlor car was on the tail end, wanted to take over the vestibule, keep it open. And my assistant, working right there, refused to let him do it. Well, there was almost a fist fight about it.

Interviewer: The vestibule, would that be like the, uh--?

Bill Overton: Entrance from the-- you come up on a vestibule and then into the car.

Interviewer: Oh, right.

Bill Overton: See. And it was one of those blind end cars. The vestibule-the vestibule was only on one end. Now, if the vestibule end was on the end of the train, that would've been all right, but as that was in the middle, we can't have that vestibule open. People are going through the train.

Interviewer: Right.

Bill Overton: The porter and this trainman was having their problems. Well, [chuckles] the porter's now dead and he-he is, uh, he's very quick-tempered, uh, and all, and he was within his rights to insist that, that vestibule be closed. So anyway, when we get in and the, uh-- another thing, the porter has to put all the bags in that end to put any passengers off, that's getting off. You see? When we get in unloading the passengers, why, he's got to unload that. Well, here's this trainman just trying to be as nasty as he could around and one thing and another, and this porter getting hotter by the minute, 'cause he's interfering with him making his nickels and dimes. So anyhow, that was all right. And they got all done. And the uh, porter's quarters now, in the Union Station, was separate. The locker room was separate from the train mens'.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Bill Overton: So, in--

Interviewer: Keep in mind the trainman is White.

Bill Overton: Is White. Yeah. So, when the porter comes down, this train man chooses this [chuckles] porter, right in the locker room of our boys, dining car department. And this

[chuckles] this porter took care of him. He come out of there all bloody. So of course, uh, the station authorities reported right away to the superintendent. And, by that time, I had remitted and went to the office and said, "There's some trouble down in the locker room." I went down there. I said, "What happened?" He come in here carrying all that foolishness." I said, "Oh-oh." I said, "Keep still." So anyhow, this-this guy is bloody as mischief. So, uh, when they, uh, police was around there and had him, you know, and uh, all, but they didn't have the porter. See, they was taking a statement of this train man and another. So, uh, superintendent says to me, he says, "Uh, Bill, what happened on the way down?" I explained to him, I said, "Now, this man is asked for it." And I says, "This porter's been very, very much forgiving of all the things he did, took an awful lot of insults, more than I would've." And I says, "I expected that that's what would happen." He says, "Bill, but tell me this, what did he hit him with?" [chuckles] I had to laugh 'cause he's a West Indian. And he put the old head on him. You know the one—when the West Indians they hit you, they butt you.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Bill Overton: They'll split your head wide open.

Interviewer: But that's what he put on him. [laughs]

Bill Overton: 'Cause the superintendent said, "I never saw man of bloody in all my life." And he- and that was uh, God I don't remember at all.

Interviewer: No. Toronto in the early days.

Bill Overton: Yeah. Toronto in the early days, uh, it was rare that you saw a half a dozen coloured people outside of going to church or from church or in church. Everything was there was-- they were scattered around, there was hardly any districts, I guess at that time that you couldn't go into, but you couldn't eat in every place in Toronto. Uh, there was a Baltimore lunch down, I think on King Street about the only place, you get a decent cup of coffee, because in Canada at that time in Toronto especially, it was tea. If you went to get coffee, you got, um, it looked like dishwasher nobody-- but nobody drank coffee.

And uh, oh that is-- that is sold it in restaurants. I don't know about these better class people, places, restaurants, that I was able to go to why it was is, uh, main dishes, either fish and chips. And that's something you see very little of now, but that was all that was all around. And your best meal outside of that was of course the beef and Yorkshire pudding and the meal was 15 cents. But, uh, I know I, uh, have, uh, eaten, uh, plenty in the Baltimore lunch and that wasn't too, uh, they weren't too eager to serve a Black person. And to go into the theater, why a Black man had to go upstairs. There was no, uh, the only jobs around Toronto in the early days outside of railroading, was a Boot Black and they scattered one or two on the city, the shops and, uh, I think the richest, but, uh, then, uh, there wasn't too many coloured families here, that was permanent residence. The-the-the coloured came in the spring and went away in the fall.

Interviewer: Is that right?

Bill Overton: And, uh, there'd be car loads of them would come in. The men would [intelligible] were pretty good with the school French as an interpreter, you know, while they were in the dining room eating. And I don't know-

[00:30:19] [END OF AUDIO]