

BOOK 20

F R E D S M I T H

Interview with Fred Smith,

By Thomas J. Leonard

November, 1972

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Oral History Project

Fred Smith
recorded November 1972
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- I. Would you start with just a brief history of yourself -- where you came from, where you were born, how you came to be employed in the railroad field.
- R. I came to Chicago in 1929, hoping to go to school. But I wasn't able to carry my plans out because I walked into the depression. I finally started to work on the Illinois Central Railroad as a waiter in 1930. The working conditions were very bad at that time although we were in such straits that we didn't realize how bad they were. At that time we'd take a job under any working conditions because things were just that bad. In later years, 1932 or '33, we began to entertain the thought of trying to organize to better our conditions. But we got into many difficulties over it because a number of men lost their jobs on account of union activities, although the Railway Labor Act was in effect which was passed in 1926. It didn't have any teeth in it you see, to the extent that the worker was protected.

In later years, in 1934, the Railway Labor Act was amended and then we began to organize. The act was amended where the company would be held liable for the treatment of workers. They no longer would be fired for their union activities. If so, the company was subject to prosecution. And we organized on the Illinois Central in 1936. Our working conditions immediately began to improve. At that time we was working 240 or more hours a month. Bad working conditions. We would work all day long and after serving the last meal for the day we would have to tear the dining car down, put the chairs in the

pantry or some other place, and then make the car down into sleeping quarters. The next morning we'd get up and set the car back in shape and be ready to serve breakfast by 6:30 in the morning. Those were not only bad working conditions, it wasn't very sanitary to eat and sleep in the same place.

In a few years after our contract went into effect, changes were made. We were furnished with dormitory cars, with sleeping accommodations, toilet facilities, showers. Our hours were shortened and we received wage increases. We got vacations with pay, which was something that wasn't thought of until our organizing.

I. Mr. Smith, when you first started with the railroad, did you start as a waiter or did you seek some other employment first?

R. I started out as a waiter. At that time, that was about the only job that was available. I started out as a waiter. That was all they had -- just black waiters and black cooks. That was a place that they had set up for black people.

I. So there was no other employment that you could seek other than the waiters job on the railroad?

R. Not in that department. No.

I. What year was this?

R. 1930.

I. And at this time there was no union organizing going on and as you.

stated the hours that you had to work and the conditions you had to work under weren't that, that you later received under the union.

R. No, it wasn't. Actually you wasn't looked upon as being a human being. Because conditions that waiters and cooks worked under was so intolerable that no one else would have done that. Perhaps it wouldn't have been so bad. You see, it was just the condition of the economy of the country at that time. That was due to the depression in '29.

I. When you were first approached about a union or when you first heard about the union what were your personal feelings toward unionism?

R. Well, I know I had always been interested in labor organizations even before I ever entered the railroad industry, because the previous years I had been in the postal service and we had an organization there and I had been already oriented in the labor movement. I was among some of the first on the Illinois Central that began to talk organization.

I. Your agitating for organization, how did that affect you in your job status or personal life?

R. Well, we all were kind of dubious. Some of the people didn't want to take no chances. As a matter of fact they were even afraid to sign an authorization card because they were afraid to lose their jobs, but some of them were more daring than others. We all had to do it in kind of a subtle manner because we didn't want to lose the job.

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- I. Did people, in fact, lose their jobs because they were doing union organizing or had signed pledges to join the union?
- R. Oh yes, there were several on the Illinois' Central, not to mention other railroads where the men were fired for union activities.
- I. What was the name of the union that you were involved with at this particular time?
- K. You mean the one that was organized?
- I. The one that was organizing at this time.
- R. Dining Car Employees Union, Local 351. As you perhaps know, railroad unions divide into crafts -- operators and non-operators. There were 13 non-operating unions and we were one of those. We ran into one handicap when we did organize. Didn't any other crafts particularly want the dining car worker. And the only way that we got in was through the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union.
- I. So none of the railroad unions would accept your local into its organization?
- R. No. It's been so long that some of it has slipped my memory. -The over-all concensus was, at that time, that these white unions didn't particularly want any black members. We had to establish our own craft.
- I. Once the union was established, did you have difficulty in bargaining with the company?
- R. No unusual difficulties. It was always a matter of routine. We

didn't have any real strong leadership. Under our set-up your representatives were also employees. Although it is possible to get strong representation from employees, they, too, are taking a chance. They can't stick their neck out too far negotiating for me when they're subject to getting in bad, with the company. I never was closely related with the organizers, our representatives, you see, because I had a different idea than whatt they had.

- I. How was that .
- R. I didn't believe that we-could successfully have a viable organization if I was represented by another employee.
- I. In other words the union, you felt, should have provided for the leadership so that they would not be intimidated by the fact that they were employees -- that that might have some part in their dealing with the company, their level from which they dealt with the company, as opposed to being directly a representative of the union dealing with the company management.
- R. Very much. I can give you an illustration. We were trying to organize and the company was fearful of an organization to the extent that they began to try to organize company unions and that didn't succeed. When we did organize, several of the same people, that I worked with were the -representatives and I just couldn't separate them from their position as an employee and a representative. To illustrate -- the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, they had a strong organization and they were organized by what they called an outsider, A. Philip Randolph. And they had strong

I. In the first ten years after the union was started, how was the membership's backing of the union?

R. To be frank with you, unionism among the average dining car worker was something new. He felt that he didn't need a union. He felt that as long as he could bow and stoop to the steward or other office personnel that he could get some special favors and he didn't need a union. And some of the men actually opposed the union. We had to put a little pressure on some of them even to get them to join. In later years, the contracts were amended and we had a closed shop and then they had to join. It was a requirement. After working there 90 days or 6 months -- I've forgotten which -- they were compelled to join a union.

I. What type of pressure did you have to put on these people to get them to get into line with the others that were in the union?

R. Well, the thing is we'd tell them that it's no longer necessary to be an Uncle Tom; you can start to be a man. That was the first time they had ever been given an opportunity to act like men. Then some of them didn't want that responsibility of acting like a man.

I. Mr. Smith, in Local 351 how many railroads other than the IC were included?

R. There was the New York Central, the Santa Fe, the Milwaukee, the Northwestern. But that was back in the more prolific days. Now it's down. I think just two roads makes up the membership of 351; that's the Santa Fe and the Illinois Central.

I. During the more vibrant days of railroads did all the railroad employees

I. You mentioned that the company attempted to form a union at one time.
Was this prior to the organization of Local 351 or around the same time?

R . It was all happening around the same time. The company was fearful of
the union so they would try to get their own union in there, you see,
to kind of stymy the activity of those who we're trying to draw the union
in.

I. What year was this?

R. 1935.

I. OK, thank you Mr. Smith. I appreciate your comments.

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