

## Part 1

Jan 19, 2010  
Wilson Street in Elkins, WV  
Tom Simpson  
DOB: Jan 24, 1938

Been raised in Elkins, West Virginia. My grandfather, Meryl Cutright, worked for the railroad, and my father Lloyd Simpson started out as a...

I was raised in Elkins, and my grandfather Meryl Cartright, he worked as a carman, and my father also, he worked as a machinist in Elkins. My father started to work in the 20s as a machinist's apprentice. He started out at 20 cents an hour, and he later become roundhouse foreman. And his father, Jedson George Simpson, he worked also in Elkins, and he was—started out as wreck master and later became the car foreman of Elkins.

*Wreck master?*

Yeah, wreck master. Clean up the wrecks when they had the train wrecks. So he was a wreck master, and later on he was promoted to car foreman. [2:33] And, he—I have his railroad pass from 1915.

## Part 2

*Now we're rolling OK. Tell me about your two grandfathers.*

My grandfather was Jedson George Simpson, and my other grandfather was Meryl Cutright. And they both work in Elkins. And my grandfather Simpson was the Wreck master in 1915 and he was later promoted in 1916 to car foreman. And my grandfather Cutright also worked there as a car man. And he was also on the wreck train, and when I was a child I think maybe I'm guessing 8 years old, I'd stay with my grandmother and I would wait up until I could hear the wreck train coming with the whistle—the wreck train coming into Elkins before I go to bed. That was normally around 10 o'clock.

*Was there something special about that whistle that you?*

Well, I just, even as a child I loved to hear that train whistle and hear the train coming in.

*You probably knew all the different whistles then, huh?*

Well, at that time, there's only one—the old steam engine coming in. That was back before the diesels came into Elkins. My father, Lloyd Simpson, went to work there in

the 20s as an apprentice machinist for 20 cents an hour at that time, and he was later around a machinist and then a roundhouse foreman.

*Talk about the roundhouse a little bit because lots of people never saw it before.*

Well, the roundhouse, it was a huge place and we lived on—Benard Avenue about three blocks away from the railroad. And my mother a lot of times would pack a lunch, and I'd have to take the lunch up to my dad in the roundhouse, and the roundhouse was full of steam engines at that time, where they were working on the boilers and repairing the steam engines.

*What did that sound like? [2:57]*

Well, at the time, they were just working on em, and you didn't see anything other than—I can remember back in the old days where the smoke and the cinders were in the air and the sort of dirty around Elkins in the early years.

*So, did you grow up with your granny then?*

[3:24] Well, she lived two houses away, so we spent a lot of time at my grandmothers and later moved down to central street, it's only like 2-3 blocks from the railroad, because back at that time my father never had an automobile and my grandfather never had an automobile at that time. They'd walk to work and walk back.

[4:15] *Paint a picture of the whole neighborhood.*

Well, at that time most of the people that lived in that area worked for the railroad as the main employer in Elkins, and I can remember a lot of their names—hard to remember but I used to know—for a quarter—with the old motor—but that's been back years ago. I went to Third Ward school, then to central school, then to Elkins High School.

*What are your school memories?*

I don't really have too much.

*So, your dad sound like he was one of the few people who'd been able to come home every night. Most of the railroad men were out, weren't they? [5:33]*

Well, he worked the—he had a shift, he worked day shift or night shift at that time. The other railroaders, they'd have to go out on the trains, they'd have to be there anytime, day and night. My father would come home every night. And my father later'd built a home on central street...I got a car when I was 18 years old... he would watch me down at the square...he told me I went by that monument 20 times...he

was watching my mileage for me there...thought it was a waste of money driving around town.

[7:00] *So, what was involved being a machinist? How'd he learn that trade? Tell me everything that you know about your dad's life.*

Well, they had a training program where you'd have to be an apprentice and have to learn to do the machine work before they could become a machinist. They had a program back at that time to train machinists. I don't think they had to do it 3-4 years before they could be a machinist. It just took training—they trained the men up there.

They'd have to make the parts of the engines—wore out, you know, and they just done machine work. Bout all I can tell ya.

*But they could just make anything?* [8:05]

They could make anything. They could make a nut out of a hairpin. He'd done that before just to be doing it I think.

*Make a nut out of a hairpin?*

Right.

*Was he generally good with his hands? I mean did he do other kinds of?*

Yeah, he was very good at doing that machine work.

*Carpentry and other...?*

Well, carpentry – no he didn't do carpentry – it was just machinist – they had like a weld shop beside the carpenter shop, and then they had the machine shop. It was quite a large operation in the 30s, 40s, and 50s. And, I went to work in 1969, and my dad told me that they were trying to get rid of Elkins and I might work there 3 months and I might work there 6 months. That not to look for it to be long-term employment.

*They were trying to get rid of Elkins?*

Yeah, well they were trying to phase Elkins out, even back in 1969.

*Who was trying to phase Elkins out?*

Well, the railroad would like to get – they were trying to close Elkins down, and they kept doing that through the years, I mean I was lucky that I got my 30 years in so I could retire, but they finally shut the railroad down in Elkins, and moved it over to

Grafton, and then later they got rid of the Grafton to Cowen, and uh, they kept trying—they shut down quite a few places over the years, and they later shut Hagerstown down, they just kept shutting things down and running around them, I guess their business—they were focused on getting bigger trains, like they didn't want to pick up cars from these small mines—they wanted to back into a 100-car train and take off. So they were trying to shut down their weaker points and make bigger, you know, operations.

*But the Western Maryland Railroad was pretty functional, wasn't it? I mean, it picked up three cars here and six there, but it had it down, it knew what it was doing.*

It done that in the early days—they'd take their trains and they'd go to Norton and pick up cars, and in Junior and Gage and – they would go to all their points, pick up cars, and move 'em. Move 'em to other markets. But they just kept wanting more trains and bigger trains. They didn't want to fool with the little people after awhile.

Elkins become dieselized in—I think—1952. My dad had to go to Chicago when they converted from steam to diesel. He later became the roundhouse foreman and he had to go to Maryland Junction to keep his job. All the railroaders had to go to different places in order to keep jobs. My son, after the roundhouse burned, had to go to Hagerstown, and he worked in Hagerstown and Baltimore. He was working in Baltimore and he had to go to Hagerstown to keep the job, and then they got rid of Hagerstown, so he went to Richmond, Virginia, and got on the RF&P—Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac Railroad—well, year later, CSX bought the RF&P, so uh, everybody was working for CSX then. We went to Western Maryland Railroad into the Chessie system onto the CSX, but they kept buying up the littler railroads and then CSX had quite a large network with all the lines. They bought the seaboard coastline and different railroads to make it one big railroad.

[14:32] *And then they do away with the smaller operation?*

Yeah, right, yeah, they had a knack of doing that.

[14:48] *So you went to work in '60....?*

69. June the 12<sup>th</sup>, 1969.

[15:00] *Before you start on that, let me just ask you about growing up in a railroading family—did you always know you'd work for the railroad? Did it ever cross your mind you'd do anything else?*

Well, I went to work—my first job was Allegheny lumber company, and I worked there for two year. And then later, I went to work for the Kelly Foundry Machine Company, and I worked there for 10 years, and my first chance in 1964, I could've gone to the railroad, but my father talked me out of it because he thought I had a better job than I would if I went to work for the railroad. So I stayed at the foundry

another 5 years before they had an opening to hire more people. So I decided then I'd go to work for the railroad.

[16:04] *Better pay? Better benefits?*

Better pay, better benefits, better all around—it's a better job. So, I worked as a carman from 1969 to 1975, and I was laid off as a carman and I was lucky enough to get a job on the bridge and building bridge outfit. All they'd done is work on the bridges and buildings. So if I'd get laid off I'd go back to the caryard, and work over there, and if I got laid off in the caryard they'd make me go back to the bridge and building until I finally had to make my choice—which one I'd wanna stay in—and so I chose the bridge and building—I only had to go about two blocks to go to work, so I stayed with them. Later, in—I can't even remember the years—I had to go to Harper's Ferry for 8 months, I had to go to Point Pleasant for 6 months, and before I could retire I had to work in Parkersburg for 6 years. But I finally got my retirement in. [17:44]

*So why did you choose Bridge and Building over cars?*

Well, I seemed to like the work better. It's carpentry work, and I seemed to like it better than I did on the car department. But, uh, I made my choice to go to the Bridge and Building so I had to stay with it.

[18:25] *What was an average day like for you? Or what wasn't an average day, I guess? Every day was different.*

Every day was different, whether we were gonna work—what might happen—maybe a culvert would wash out somewhere, we'd have to put ties on a bridge, or..

*Ties on a bridge?*

Yeah.

*Means?*

[18:50] They would—we'd replace the ties on the bridges, and uh, then if it wasn't that, well maybe something'd happen to a building somewhere---and we also maintained the Slaty Fork rest house.

*Slaty Fork rest house?*

Yeas. We put a new roof on it, and lowered the ceilings and put up drywall and put up the storm doors and storm windows and fixed the place up before they burn it down.

[19:50] *What was the Slaty Fork rest house?*

Well, over at Slaty Fork, they had a rest house where the engines people would go, and they'd have to stay in that resthouse until they got their trains made up to come back to Elkins. And uh, my father worked there years—several years ago—and at one point, I had to go to Pennsylvania to work, up in York, and my father—my wife called me and asked me where I was staying—and she got mixed up and told my father I was staying on a boxcar, and he said that's no big deal I stayed in a snow plow at Spruce for 18 months. So...

[21:05] *What did he mean?*

Well he meant, uh—I guess he thought if he could stay on a snowplow I could stay on a boxcar.

?

He did he lived in a snowplow. They had a cabin and a heater where he stayed. I mean that's how things back in the old days—they had to utilize the equipment like that –there's no place else out there to stay. I guess there were boarding houses up there at one time, but uh, I guess he worked in the maintain the engines and stuff so he just stayed on the snow plow. It's like a caboose, in a way. It had the stove inside to keep warm, so uh..

[22:07] *So this was a snowplow that was pushed by a locomotive?*

Yeah, they uh...

*Can you say that? Can you describe it?*

[22:15] Yeah, they had a plow on the front and the steam engine have to push it, because they got a lot of snow up in the cut and different places on the railroad, it just plowed away for the trains to get through.

[22:45] *So the rest house at Slaty Fork was like a bunk house?*

Yes, it had several bedrooms in it upstairs, and then they had a woman that came and cooked—to fix the meals for the trainmen when they come over. But they finally phased it out and they got rid of this whole railroad up here, so...

[23:22] *Do you think there's generally a lot of pretty hard feeling about that? About the, uh, demise of the Western Maryland railroad?*

No, not really I don't think. Not really hard feeling, I don't think, but uh, it eliminated a lot of jobs for our city here---our state. But we just had to go where we could continue our employment.

[24:03] *So what were some other jobs you remember working on? Tell me about replacing ties on a bridge—how do you do that?*

Well, you go out and take the bolt—you had to remove the bolt, you had to jack the rail up, and then pull your ties out, and put the new ones in. Then you'd have to bolt it back down.

[24:35] *Were you working from up on a flat car? Or how did it—how did the operation work?*

No, we had a truck crane—the crane on the back of our boom truck—you'd have tie hooks, and you'd swing the ties out and then swing and get rid of them and put the new ones in.

[25:00] *And that crane was mounted on?*

It was a boom truck.

*Oh, on a truck?*

Yeah.

*Did the truck run on the track?*

Yeah, it ran on the rail.

[25:17] *So what were some other jobs you remember working on?*

Well, I remember working on the bridge from Parkersburg to Belfry, Ohio. And I remember we'd shovel about 8-10 inches of snow on the bridge before we could jack it up and start changing the ties. It was pretty cold off of that water. There was no place to get warm... so, that's one thing I remember. Then I remember we'd be out on the rail down at—below Bayard, and it came the sleet storm, and we were down at the bridge, and we had to put chains on the truck and lower wheels to where we could beat the ice off the rail to get out of there. I remember we'd been in some complete white-outs in that boom truck over around bayard.

[26:52] *Are the winters easing up some?*

They seem to be a lot milder than what they were, because I remember when we'd get a couple better than two fit of snow in just no time. Probably more than what we used to have.

*Tell me about your father's responsibilities as a roundhouse foreman, what did that involve? Sounds like a lot of responsibility.*

[27:29] Well, they'd take the engines as they came off their runs—they would have to service the engines, and they would have machinists and laborers, and all they'd road.

*So a lot of lubricating, and...?*

[28:02] Yes, they'd have to lubricate and change filters and oil the bearings and different things.

[28:21] *What about membership in the—was there one union for all the Western Maryland workers?*

No. They had a maintenance union, a machinist union, and electrician's union, they had a boilermaker's union—they had several unions involved.

*Wow, that must've made it hard to organize overall?*

Right. They had several different unions representing whatever people were doing. They even had like a blacksmith's union. They had –that's all I can think of now but there were several unions representing each of the different classes of employees.

[29:30] *Do you remember there being any strikes?*

Yes, I can remember, but usually on the railroad they would make the railroader's come back to work—you may only be of a day or two until the government made you go back to work and enforced an agreement on the contract.

*Did the government take sides in those issues? [29:44]*

Well they just made you go back to work and made you negotiate until they got a contract.

[30:05] *So in that particular strike did they make all these unions strike together?*

Usually in that strike everybody would honor that strike and you'd get behind whatever union was on strike. But it didn't happen often. I guess in the earlier days it did.

*What did you hear about that or remember about it? Did your dad ever talk about it?*

No.

*Or your granddads?*

I never heard em talk about strikes. They –I can remember one I can remember one or two, but you'd only be off a day or two and they'd make you go back to work—forced you back to work. [31:02]

*MK: Sam, are you coming up with any?*

*SB: Yeah, I was wondering, did any of your great-grandfathers work on the railroad?*

My great-grandfather Simpson—Jedson George Simpson—he was a rec-master in 1915, and then he was a car foreman in 1916.

*MK: That was your great-grandfather or your grandfather?*

I'm sorry, that was my grandfather.

*What about his dad?*

I'm not real sure. I've never traced it back that far.

*And on your mother's side?*

That was my grandmother Cutright, but his father wasn't a railroader.

*SB: Do you know who built the railroads around here?*

Henry Gassaway Davis and Stephen B. Elkins were the – I can remember when Elkins used to be down where Goreman Maryland is. They called it Elkins before they moved in to Elkins.

[32:30] *SB: Who built the railroads themselves, though? Who were the workers? Were they from around here, or from other countries, or what?*

They had Italians and different people when they first built the railroad.

[32:55] *MK: I wonder how those workers fared.*

Well, at that time, I don't know, because I can remember what the wages were very low, but I don't know. You hear stories about the old days where some of em, if they died while they were worked, they would just bury them right there. I've heard that. Especially like up in the cut, when they built the tunnel. They said a lot of people lost their lives over the years in the early, early days.

[33:42] *MK: What exactly do you mean by The Cut?*

Well, that they had dug out, when they went out across the top of the mountain, when they went down to Spruce—or up at Spruce—they had to dig a large amount

of dirt out to put the railroad it. It was just like a huge—lot of digging to get that through there.

*Like these big interstates going through the mountain?*

Right, right.

[34:20] *MK: So the cut you're referring to is up on top of Spruce?*

Spruce, yeah. There used to be a town at Spruce. Lumber companies—I've seen pictures in the early years where there were several houses. There's nothing there now.

[34:56] *MK: Well, it's all interesting. What have we left out? What else do we have to talk about?*

Well, I can't think ---

*Carrie: I was trying to understand how it worked with organized labor, really how all that got set up, and how people worked together, and what they were trying to accomplish—could you just talk about that some?*

Well, in the earlier days—I don't know how they organized that—I would have no idea how they organized the unions—I've been in the unions, but in the early days I don't know how they organized them.

[35:54] *MK: What about your union? Did you go to weekly meetings or monthly meetings?*

We had-uh...

*MK: Your union was called what, now?*

Uh, Brotherhood of Maintenance away employees, and uh, we had meetings maybe 4-5 times a year, but I was Vice-President one time, that's about all

[26:22] *MK: Vice-President of the local?*

Right. And some of the union members didn't like it because I was the foreman and I was representing the union, so I had a conflict of interest. I had to drop out of that.

*CK: What was the union working on then? What were some of the issues?*

Uh, I don't really know. Sorry about that, but..

*That's fine.*

[37:00] *SB: When things shifted over to diesel did people have to learn a lot of new skills? I guess your dad had to go to Chicago, but did other people have to learn new ways of operating?*

Well I guess they did, because they had the—it was a big change over from steam to coal—I mean steam to diesel. They had the early days—they had the steam engines there—they had the ash-dump where they dump the ashes—it was quite a changeover, but I know my dad had to go to Chicago just to learn the diesel.

[38:00] *How long was he out there?*

It seems to me like he's out there for a month, something like that, out in the windy city.