They Couldn’t Fight the Government

McAnnally: The people that were working for the railroad company were good Americans, and the railroad company was doing everything in its power to transport material and move troops on time, and I think everybody tried to cooperate. There was a good feeling amongst them, there was a good feeling amongst the operators. During the time that I worked, the Western Union went on strike. Well we couldn’t strike: we were government, we had to take these orders. So every once in a while, your key would give your call, and you’d answer it, and when you’d answer it they’d call you a scab—you know what a scab is. We weren’t scabs: we had to take those orders. We sympathized with Western Union, and we were handling Western Union, but we had to take those orders. Not just any telegram, but anything that pertained to government, we took, and they might break in and say “scab” any number of times, but we still took it. And they finally had to give in. They couldn’t win their fight because they couldn’t fight the government.

Everything Was Hush-Hush

McAnnally: One thing that was very interesting: Waco [?] was just a little spot on the road—it was between the river and the badlands—and when the troop trains came through, they used to stop there and let the men get out and exercise. But of course everything was hush-hush if it was for a troop train, see. They would take a siding at a certain station to permit engine number so-and-so to pass—that would be the only indication to the train that that was a troop train that had to pass them. And a freight train, too—1900 and something—had to be taking a siding to let a passenger train to pass, or a troop train.

Interviewer: Were the troop trains given the highest priority?

McAnnally: Always, always. They moved them regardless of how much they had to tie up. They did have priority—it was too dangerous to stop them, you see.

Interviewer: Why was it dangerous to stop them?

McAnnally: Well, there were some spies, and we called them “IWWs” at that time—“I Won’t Work”—and they were spies, and they really did the dirty work. Sometimes, you know, if they threw a switch at the wrong time, they could derail a train, don’t you see. Anything—these spies for Germany could do anything to delay a troop train or injure our troops. But, fortunately in Montana we had absolutely no trouble at all. Some places in the mountains, they did.

You’re Not a Hobo, You’re an IWW

McAnnally: It was really interesting work, and, as I say, it was frightening because you were all alone in those depots with the coyotes howling, and you never knew when somebody was gonna walk into your station—an IWW, or somebody like that. They never harmed a soul: they were just there to spy. Maybe they were spying on the operators, I don’t know. They used to ask lots of questions, but we never knew the answers.

Interviewer: So did you have some people who you thought were spies?

McAnnally: Oh I knew they did. One time I was working at Richardton [North Dakota] and this fella—he looked like a hobo—came down the track and he came into the depot. And I boarded with a very wonderful woman, she made me huge lunches that I carried in my lunch box—I never could eat them, but there were always some hungry kids around, so they could eat them. And so he said to me “is there a café?” and I said “well everything that’s open’s closed now.” He had walked from Antelope, which is about seven miles east of Richardton, and it wasn’t a town, it was just a depot. And I said “I’d share my lunch with you,” which I did. And I noticed his hands. Well, he was tellin’ me some big, fantastic tale of how hard he’d worked—he’d worked in the coal mines and everything else. And I sat there looking at his hands—he had never done a hard day’s work in his life, and he had manicured fingernails. I started to laugh, and he wondered what was the matter, and I said “You’re not a hobo; you’re an IWW.” And he admitted it, but he went on—and I don’t know how far he walked, perhaps the next town, and then he caught a passenger train out. But his hands had been manicured; you could always tell by a working man’s hands, you know. My hands looked a lot worse than his did. [laughs]

Interviewer: Well did he ask you questions about the operations?

McAnnally: Oh, yes, but I didn’t know anything. And he did remark to me, he said “how can anyone that dumb hold a job like that?” I said “that’s why I’m holding a job, because I’m dumb.”[laughs] I said “I’m dumb, but I’m not stupid.” We had many interesting experiences, and I am awfully glad I had that experience. It was excellent training.

The Doctors Couldn’t Begin to Keep Up with It

McAnnally: So then I was stationed in Miles City, and I knew some people who owned a store just across from the depot, so I went there. They had been in Glendive, and they had a rooming house upstairs. Well they were all down with the flu, so she gave me sheets and pillow cases, and said “if you go find an empty room up there, you go.” Well, everything was sixes and sevens, but I went up and I stripped this one bed and made it. I could hear someone groaning down the hall—they had the flu. Somebody else was groaning down the hall, and the doctors couldn’t begin to keep up with it, you see. So, I always had aspirin, and I’d give ‘em aspirin and a glass of water and, somehow, they lived. But I made beds and I cleaned bathrooms, and I did everything in my spare time. I was in Miles City for about three weeks, and then I was assigned to another job.

Gauze and Listerine

McAnnally: My first job was at a station called Tussler, about 10 miles east of Miles City. It was during the flu, and I worked the third shift—which was from midnight to 8 o’clock in the morning. And when one of the operators in Miles City got the flu, that left them short-handed, so a section man with a hand-motor car took me to Miles City, and I took over his first shift, and as soon as that was over they took me back to Tussler, and I slept for a few hours, and then went back on duty until midnight. And I did that for two weeks, until I got the flu, but I couldn’t get relief, so I worked. And we all had little gauze patches over the mouthpiece of our telephone—protect us to a certain extent—and we used Listerine to sterilize the mouthpiece.

The Hearse Was Always Going By

McAnnally: But during the flu it was really terrible. When I worked at Miles City I would have to go and find something to eat. And you may walk along the street and you see someone lying in a doorway, or you walk down and somebody’d start to stagger and they’d pass out—that’s how awful that flu was. And deaths—it was just terrible—the hearse was always goin’ by. We lost many, many people.

Broken In Body and In Spirit

Interviewer: Well, you were working in 1919 and 1920, at the end of the First World War What Kind of welcome did these people receive on their return?

McAnnally: They didn’t. There were ticker-tape parades, there were no bands out; they just came home. Broken in body and in spirit, and no jobs. Fortunately most of them had their families to come home to. And they wanted to pick up their life where they left it off; they wanted to marry and have families. Well, it was rough goin’.