

BLAIR LAVELL

Interview 164a

February 8, 2002, Texas State Railroad, Rusk, Texas

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ABSTRACT: In this interview with Jonathan Gerland, Texas State Railroad Maintenance Superintendent Blair Lavell reminisces about his years working for the railroad. A veteran of tourist railroads in other areas of the state, Mr. Lavell came to the TSR in the mid-1970's. He describes the engines, the tracks, and the bridges, the struggles to get the railroad started and to maintain it. Mr. Lavell recalls the politics involved in working with a state organization and he also describes working on movies that have used the TSR tracks and engines.

Jonathan Gerland (hereafter JG): Ok. It's February the 8th, 2002 and this is Jonathan Gerland and I'm with Blair Lavell at the Texas State Railroad shops here in Rusk and we're just going to do an oral history interview today. And I just thought we'd start the interview and just ask Mr. Lavell if he'd just tell us when he came to work for the state railroad and how he got here.

Blair Lavell (hereafter BL): That's pretty bad. (laughter) Well, I came here in March of '76. And I've been here ever since and I've never had a job I've enjoyed more. More fun than a barrel of monkeys.

JG: Oh, that's great.

BL: I've always loved trains. And I've been with a couple other tourist lines before this.

JG: Which ones were those?

BL: I was out there between Dublin and De Leon on the Texas Central. And then we had the Texas Export between Bridgeport and Graham.

JG: Ok. What years were those in operation?

BL: I guess probably '65, '69, or '70 on the one in Dublin, that was started about '70 outside of Bridgeport. Just a couple of years there. The fellow that had the money in it thought he could sell it for scrap and make money, but he missed a payment and they foreclosed on it so the people that hold the note ended up making all the money scrapping it. (laughter) But it was a lot of good experience.

JG: What did you do in those jobs?

BL: I did it all. I ran some engines, was conductor on the passenger train for some. Another fellow did most of the freight work. I ran a couple of freight trains.

JG: Uh huh.

BL: You know, we'd have seven or eight, or ten cars with the freight train up there.

JG: But now, you said those were tourist lines or...what...?

BL: Well, it was...they were both freight lines, but then they did the tourist stuff on the side.

JG: They did the tourist thing on the side. Ok.

BL: Yeah, trying to make an extra buck. A group I was with at Ft. Worth, or out in Weatherford had some coaches we'd bought. It was the Trinity Valley Railroad Club. We had that, and a museum in Weatherford.

JG: How did you learn about the opportunity here at the state railroad?

BL: Well, I was working on [Engine] 610, we were restoring it, getting ready for the Freedom Train back in '75. Or, actually it was January of '76. Ed McLaughlin was the Superintendent here and he came up and the fellow that had this job couldn't stand all the BS and all the pressure, and all the bureaucracy.

JG: Uh huh.

BL: He was going to drop back and just be an engineer; he wanted to run the engines.

JG: And who was that?

BL: That was Dennis Spendlove.

JG: Spendlove?

BL: Uh huh, Spendlove. And so, he wanted to know if I'd be interested in coming down to town, and I'd recently just got divorced. I said, "Man, yeah, I'll get out of this rat race here in Ft. Worth." I'd been a salesman up there, you know. Drive a hundred miles a day selling roofing material or whatever I was gonna sell, up in all that traffic. I said, "Man let me get out of here." I thought I'd died and gone to Heaven when I got down here. Drive thirty miles to work and end up seeing three cars on the way.

JG: Where did you live then, to drive thirty miles to work?

BL: Well, I lived in Palestine.

JG: Palestine. Ok.

BL: Yeah.

JG: Travel to Rusk to work.

BL: Used to spend the same amount of time going to work there. Go five miles, take thirty minutes to go...

JG: Yeah.

BL: Oh man, terrible, but anyway.

JG: What was it like to work here in those days?

BL: Well, we were still out in the dirt. We were in Maydelle then, trying to finish fixing the train up for our first run. And, so this shop was under construction, the Rusk depot was. And, so, we had made the first run. Neither the shop was finished, nor the depot, so we loaded the people in the park that day, June 25th, I believe was the first run we made.

JG: Is that when the Governor came?

BL: The Governor came, and we went over to...

JG: Is that Briscoe?

BL: Yeah.

JG: Ok.

BL: And we ran the, I ran the diesel on ahead just in case the steam engine didn't make it. They only had one steam engine working, so I had...

JG: And that was the [Engine] 200?

BL: Yeah.

JG: Ok.

BL: I took Diesel 7 and we went ahead and made sure they made it, which we did. Everything went off like a million bucks.

JG: So, the track work that the prisoners had all done, that was all completed by the time that you were here. The roads were...

BL: Right. Well, they were still doing it when I got here.

JG: Oh, they were. Ok.

BL: By the time of the first run, it was basically finished. And they had never...one of the big problems we had is the historical group wanted to make it historically correct. 'Course they didn't have ballast in the old days and they didn't want us to put ballast on there. And, every time it would rain the mud would, you know, you'd rock along. One thing that saved us, we had a group of people from Austin up here, I guess the following year. And it was just after a big rain and they'd look out the window and the car, you know, and they'd see the car going like this...waving back and forth, and they decided right then that we'd better say the heck with history and put some ballast on it.

JG: Put some ballast down.

BL: So we went into a several years program of putting the ballast down. We got it all ballasted around now.

JG: About when was that when you started putting the ballast down?

BL: It was probably '79 or '80. Yeah.

JG: '79. Ok, so for the first two or three years then you ran just with dirt huh?

BL: Yeah, right.

JG: Just old dirt.

BL: Yeah. A few places, the iron ore was thick enough and it was ok. But, most of the places it just would turn to mud.

JG: Yeah.

BL: 'Course the ditches hadn't been cleaned enough so we had some water problems.

JG: How were the trestles then?

BL: They were rickety. They had redone them and they were, you know...

JG: But they were all wood right?

BL: They were all wood. The old trestles had been there for no telling how long. They'd replaced some, but, they'd never drove a piling. So ended up when they replaced one, they just put a cap down there and would stick it. So, they were really unsafe, you know, if anything started to lean, why it might pull things over.

JG: So, they never put any new pilings in, they just built on top of the ones that were there.

BL: No. Yeah, they just put a mud seal down and then stick it on top of the mud.

JG: When did y'all start putting the concrete bridges in?

BL: I, you know, my memory is shot, I'm going to say '86, may have been a little earlier than that.

JG: Okay. What was the first one? Do you remember which one was the first...?

BL: No, it was '80 when we did the first one. 'Cause that's when we shut down and just ran the short run.

JG: Okay.

BL: We also learned something else. We thought this will be the best thing yet, because it's ridiculous to run a 60 mile round trip tourist railroad. You need a seven or eight mile ride. Get the people off and get them on their way. So, when we had the bridges out, we had these short runs. We'd go to Maydelle and back, or out to Meshaw and back which was about a fifteen mile round trip and took about an hour and twenty-five minutes.

JG: So, that's Palestine to Meshaw and back, or...?

BL: Yeah.

JG: ...and Rusk to Maydelle and back?

BL: Rusk to Maydelle and back. [Actually] we found out that people wouldn't drive three hours to come down here for an hour and a quarter train ride when they'd have to drive three hours back. So business went straight to the bottom. So, we found out that you need to have a long ride if you're going to be a long way from the country. But, we were a little over a year there, those five biggest bridges were the worst ones to replace. And every few years we'd get new bridges. I guess, it was about '95 or '6 when we finally finished the last one, or '97.

JG: So, all the bridges and trestles now are concrete.

BL: All...right. So, other than our rail being a little light we could even be hauling coal trains on it now, bridge-wise.

JG: Uh huh. What pound of rail are you using now?

BL: Most of it's eighty.

JG: Most of it's eighty.

BL: And it was British built made for Europe. Built for, during and after World War I. Rail that was meant to go to Europe to rebuild Europe after the War and it didn't go. And so it was donated to the State of Texas to rebuild this one. And they had about forty pounds on it before.

JG: And then how old is this rail that's here now?

BL: Oh, it was built in 1918.

JG: Ok. So the rail that is still here then, is the rail that was used in the '20's when the Board of Managers rebuilt it, before they leased it to SP?

BL: Yeah, right, right. Yeah.

JG: Same rail?

BL: Same rail. And we had Sperry-[unintelligible] test it several years ago, and there wasn't a blemish in it.

JG: SP never replaced the rail when they had it?

BL: No, they didn't do anything. They didn't even put ballast down. They were supposed to put ballast down that went with their rent. If they put ballast down they could deduct it from the rent. 'Course they always had these repairs they did or ballast they put out, but we never found any. So, I don't know if they ever really paid any rent on the line.

JG: Hmmm. Wow.

BL: And course as you know, there was lumber, I don't know how much they hauled, they used to haul tomatoes up there.

JG: Yeah.

BL: These tomato sheds in Maydelle and a little timber going on up there.

JG: Yeah.

BL: And, that's about it as far as they did. I don't know how they kept it as long as they did.

JG: Yeah.

BL: They made a few bucks.

JG: Well, I don't know, they must have, there must have been some reason for them to keep it going. But, I don't know all the details at this point.

BL: They may have had a bridge line, you know, the stuff that was on the Cotton Belt, they could take it...

JG: Yeah. Transfer it across.

BL: ...over to them instead of going...

JG: The way the contract with the state was worked out was where, past a certain point they would have to split the proceeds of maybe 25 thousand if you made, if the SP made like 25 thousand a year, anything over that was supposed to be 50/50 between Southern Pacific and the state.

BL: Okay.

JG: I don't think the state ever got any money out of that, so they never made that much money. Or they didn't report that they made that much money maybe. (laughter)

BL: Oh okay. They figured out how to do away with it.

JG: But anyway. What, going back more to your own experiences of working on the state railroad. Maybe just describe some of the changes that occurred. We already talked about, you know, the changes in the trestles and things like that and, you know, you commented on the scheduling of the thing, of the runs. But, maybe in management both here as well as maybe just the way that Austin has looked at the state railroad.

BL: I think, well, basically I think when we started none of them knew anything about railroads. And they...basically...

JG: They pretty much left it up to you to...?

BL: Just left it up to us.

JG: Okay.

BL: I mean, we had to fill out the right forms and all.

JG: But, as far as running the railroad and promoting the railroad that was all up to you or Ed McLaughlin.

BL: Right. You couldn't promote it because there was no advertising budget. So, and at the time the state parks had plenty of money and they didn't worry. So if, you know, thirty-five people showed up then that's alright. But those times have changed of course.

And they didn't realize how many people it would take. We ended up, we had twelve employees is what we had, including the clerk and two superintendents.

JG: Twelve employees.

BL: To take care of a twenty-five mile railroad and two depots. 'Course originally we weren't going to have a depot on the other end because, you know, when the... Now, I wasn't there, but, I'd say one good word from the Mayor here in Rusk, he and a group of people went over to Palestine to try to talk them into becoming involved in running this railroad. And they laughed them out of town over there. They told them they didn't want that railroad, it would never work, wouldn't be worth a darn. And so, they just did it all themselves on this end. And all we were going to have over there was a water tank. And, the story goes that when the depot here was under construction and the shop building was going on, they brought a bunch of the business men with the leisure set from Palestine over. And they looked at this thing and saw all this going on, 'course they had to have something to do with it. Politics being what it was, they couldn't tell them to bug off. So, they ended up building them a depot and, which was a beautiful thing, an asset to the community.

JG: So, they built it with private monies.

BL: Oh nooo. The state did.

JG: No. The state did.

BL: And both towns got a grant to build a camping park and neither one of them had the money to do it and they both fell on bad repair. And then they gave up, well, they just gave it back to the state...

JG: Yeah, I remember reading in '76 it was...the Rusk City Park.

BL: Yeah.

JG: Even on some maps from that time period they called it the Rusk City Park.

BL: Yeah.

JG: How long after '76 did it go back, did it go to the state?

BL: I can't remember.

JG: Do you recall?

BL: It had to be...

JG: Fairly close to...

BL:...pushing...between '85 and '90 I'd say.

JG: Oh ok. So, it was a city park that long then until maybe the late '80's.

BL: Yeah. And they had buildings in the Palestine parks over there that were falling down that weren't built properly. So I think we tore one down and rebuilt the other one.

JG: So, who built...where did the Rusk City Park and the Palestine City Park, where did they get their money, from the city or did the state build those?

BL: No, I think they got some grant money.

JG: Grants, okay.

BL: And Palestine also said if you do this we'll put a, like a diorama of model trains if you'll build us a building behind the depot. So they built this building.

JG: The little old gift shop thing?

BL: Yeah, well it's a gift shop now.

JG: Okay.

BL: And they never did come up with the money to do that. They backed out on that, so.

JG: It was supposed to be for model railroads.

BL: Yeah.

JG: A little model railroad display.

BL: Yeah. But they never built it. They never could get them to do it. And I did a bad thing, you see. There was supposed to be a meeting over there about enlarging the park and Curtis couldn't go, so he sent me.

JG: Curtis Pruett?

BL: Yeah. And I did like I usually do, I opened my mouth and said what I thought. (laughter) They wanted to know what about it, and so, I just told them. I said, "Well, they don't think much of y'all in Austin because your word ain't worth anything. You were supposed to do this thing on the model trains, blah, blah, blah." "Well, what do you mean?" And I pulled out the receipt – because I had a copy of the thing with it, where they'd said they'd do this and do that. Well they all, "Blah, blah, well I don't think..." Well anyway, they ended up coming up with some money so we put in a couple of trains anyway (laughter). But anyway...

JG: About when was that?

BL: Ah hell, that must have been '92 or somewhere in there.

JG: '92, somewhere in there?

BL: We ran it three or four years, had a great O gauge layout in there, built up.... With some of the money I bought a model that was up there that a group had and we reassembled it down here. And I got a modeler over there in town. We paid him a little money and he did a heck of a lot of work. He made up a nice looking set up with lots of equipment.

JG: It was an operating layout?

BL: Oh yeah, yeah.

JG: What happened to it?

BL: Well, ended up, we needed more room for the gift shop. 'Course we weren't paying any rent. And so, since they needed money, we decided the gift shop would be the best way. So we just did away with the model train. So...

JG: What happened to all of the model train equipment?

BL: I ended up selling it to a fellow.

JG: But, it was an O gauge layout?

BL: Yeah, [unintelligible]. It was neat.

JG: Was it modeled after East Texas or just a generic...

BL: No, not really it was...

JG: ...scenes and things?

BL: It was just, we sort of made it similar, but, I mean it was just a train and a couple of depots.

JG: Yeah. You didn't try to model the state railroad or anything?

BL: No. I'd like to, I ended up with a diesel that looked just like the 7.

JG: Uh huh.

BL: And painted it to look like it. But that's the only thing that ever looked similar. And...but anyway from the twelve, we, you know, needless to say, you can't keep up the track and keep all this equipment running with twelve people. So, a gentleman, Frank, not Frank, Paxton, his name was Paxton, who was an attorney in Palestine, and he was interested in seeing this thing prosper. He told us, "If you ever need anything, well, let me know." He was on the Commission.

JG: What Commission, the Parks?

BL: Park Commission.

JG: Park. Now, the Rusk City Park Commission or the State?

BL: No, no, no the State.

JG: The State Park, ok.

BL: And, so, that was, we still had Ed McLaughlin here then. He was sort of hesitant about going 'cause legally we weren't supposed to talk to politicians. I said, "Bull, he asked you to come if you needed anything." So we went over there and told him what we needed. And man they pumped it up and we got up to about 45 employees, from then on if we needed extra employees we could hire them.

JG: And about when was that? When did Ed McLaughlin leave?

BL: He left in '80.

JG: Okay.

BL: That's when Curtis come in. So, I'm gonna say this was probably '70, '80, or '81. Oh, I don't think in '81, I mean '77 or 8 when we got that thing started, 'cause we started getting more employees. And then later we got up to 40 something. 'Course we ended up, I think, getting ten more people. And some ballast 'cause we couldn't fix that. So we had some right-of-way work done by a contractor. So, we pulled that deal off, nobody got fired over that, 'course when I... (laughter)

JG: Nobody got fired, but a lot of people got hired, huh? (laughter)

BL: Yeah, but a lot of people got hired. And we did...what was I going to come up with next, probably illegal. I know one thing, I'm always wanting to get more equipment which the state really, the fellows in the office didn't want. And they're probably smart, because it takes money to keep the stuff up. But I hate to see old equipment go to the torch. They could use it in movies, and so, they'd have something. And I know one time, I'd heard that there were two old wooden coaches that we could get for nothing. But they were in Kansas City. And I went up there, I got the state to pay my way up there. So I went up there and looked at them. Anyway, weren't that bad, but you couldn't pull them.

The railroad wouldn't haul them so you'd have to put them on a flatcar or truck. So I had to find out what it cost to ship them down here, and I think it was a thousand a piece. And these were genuine wood coaches with old, best wood, would have been great in the movies. And so, we sent all that in, and Austin come back and said, "Well, get four movie companies to write and tell you that they won't shoot a movie unless they can use these cars, and we'll get them." I said to hell with them.

JG: A covert movie.

BL: Yeah. What a bunch of idiots. But anyway, that's telling us we couldn't have them.

JG: Yeah.

BL: But, I've gotten equipment, my son called me once and said, "There's an old wooden coach and a baggage car heading your way, and a snow plow, just going down the TP." I said, "Ok, I bet I know where it's at." I went to a wrecking yard in Longview. So I called that guy, I said, "I hear you got a snow plow." He said, "Yeah, I got two of them." I said, "Man I sure need that." And it's wood, you know, it wouldn't do any good for scrap, "So, why don't you give that to us." He said, "if you'll get me a letter and say it's worth \$50,000 you can have it. And I said, "Well I can get you the letter." (laughter) So we came, went up there and took a guy with me and man it was two old wooden box cars, and a wooden gondola, and a wooden hopper. All this neat stuff. And that baggage car was an RPO baggage, built in 1914. And it's been maintenance-of-way-way, mostly. And this snow plow, and so on, and hit him up for all of it. I wrote him letters that all of it was worth so much, you know, 20 thousand, 30 thousand, whatever.

JG: You wrote the letter and then signed it?

BL: Yeah, yeah. You know, I was just showing that it was worth that much as a historical railroad would use it.

JG: Uh huh.

BL: And we finally got it shipped up here, 'course they'd come all the way from the great northern down here to this scrap mill. But then, when we wanted to ship them here they got scared 'cause they were illegal really, they had the wrong kind of brakes and cast iron wheels. So we finally got the officer of the UP, 'course he was a mob then down in Spring, to say that it was ok to ship them. And then we got those and, they've been in some movies. And, that's just more of that stuff that needs repair. The Cotton Belt gave us a steam wrecker. Since they hooked up there wasn't any problem, they just put it over here. And, we've had a lot of equipment show up and we got those, they've been looking for a place to shoot a movie about the Jewish Prison Camps in World War II. That's Jimmy Peterson, foreign or European box cars. And a fellow that works here is a rail fan...or, he doesn't work here anymore. He said, "Well I know where there's a whole bunch of them north of Morrison." He said, "Let's go." Went up there...old Army box cars from World War II, made in Korea, and they were built like European cars.

JG: Hmmm.

BL: Well I found out how we could get them, they give them away. I think they sold them for \$150 a piece or something like that. And so we got ten of them, had trouble shipping them 'cause they had cast iron wheels. Can you believe the Army, that late, built the boxcars I guess on a World War I pattern? 'Cause it had cast iron wheels and K brakes.

JG: Hmmm.

BL: But anyway, we got them down but we didn't get the movie. (laughter)

JG: But you got them in case you needed them, huh?

BL: Oh yeah, well they come in handy, 'cause of storage. You know, when they built this place they didn't put any kind of a storehouse. So, we got that little closet in my office and there's a tool room off the machine shop and that's it, no place for storage. Being a skin flint, I've always, anything I can find, if I can find a guy to give us an old air pump or anything, I'm always getting it. Just like some of that stuff I got from you folks down there. All that old junk for [Engine] 22 you know. (laughter)

JG: And you've got that [Engine] 12's cab.

BL: Yeah. (laughter)

JG: The roof...

BL: But that'll come in handy. And I've got dreams of things I would like to do 'cause when I was a young buck, the Chesapeake & Ohio...maybe it was a combination of Chessie and B&O, anyway they'd come around the country and the department stores, and they'd set up and have the locomotive cab there. And you could look up, and you could pull the throttle and you could blow the whistle. And it was all on a tape...

JG: Uh huh.

BL: ... and a movie would come on and it showed the track coming just like you're on the engine you know.

JG: Oh yeah.

BL: Neat. Oh I thought I was living in great style. So, you know, we could do something like that.

JG: Yeah.

BL: The kids would come here, show them what the inside of a cab looks like.

JG: Well, that thing set there for years and years around the old TSE yards and I think, I don't know if I've told you that story before but, some of the old timers around Diboll would say that whenever they'd be working outside and they'd take their breaks, if it was like misting rain or something...

BL: Yeah.

JG: ...they'd take their breaks under the roof of that cab.

BL: Well yeah. (laughter)

JG: ...of 12. So it came in handy then too I guess.

BL: Sure.

JG: But...I was...

BL: But it was a neat old cab, there was nothing wrong with it. We got that old generator off of an old Baldwin, I guess. We've already scrapped it because, you know, we couldn't do anything with it. And, we got all those parts from that Diesel 22, spare parts.

JG: How's the 22 doing now?

BL: Well, it's not doing so hot 'cause one of the pistons was undersized. I mean, it was worn so much, so we're waiting for a rebuilt cylinder and piston.

JG: Where's that going to come from?

BL: I couldn't tell you. Danny ended up buying it from some outfit. And I think they all buy it from the same guy who lies and says, "I got it." (laughter) But then he hasn't, I mean he's got it, but, he hasn't rebuilt it.

JG: Yeah.

BL: He fiddles around and we've been waiting now for...got to be, two and a half months. The first guy we bought it from, it just rocked on and on and on. And then we said, "Well hell with it." So we went to this guy, and he said he had it in stock, and ended up he didn't have it. I mean...so we still don't have it.

JG: When you got the 22 from TSE what kind of condition was it in?

BL: It was in pretty bad shape. It was loose, you know, it was worn out.

JG: Yeah.

BL: It was running, and we ran it here some. And we decided we'd just rebuild it, 'cause it needed paint and all that. So, we had all those extra heads and other stuff so we got the best heads and the best pistons and one of them it was just a small, it was just knocking us out.

JG: What did, so...what did you use the 22 for when y'all got it? Did you, did it ever...?

BL: We did some switching here. We even had one movie thing when we were out, and we had to move some cars around and, about ten at night.

JG: Uh huh.

BL: And we used it on that, but basically just light switching here in the yard.

JG: What do y'all...you use the seven, is that the one you use mostly, the diesel?

BL: The seven or eight...

JG: Or eight.

BL: ...for backup stuff or work trains.

JG: Uh huh. And those are Alcos, is that right?

BL: And...yeah. And, one...

JG: How are they to maintain?

BL: Well, they're not bad, but the wiring is so old, you know, and it gets wet. If it rains hard, maybe, you might not be able to use seven till the wiring dries up. And it's all down under where you can't...we've rerun some wires to make...cause it'd get where it wouldn't run. We'd have to figure out which wire went to what, and just run a new wire under the cab. So, basically it's a good ole' engine, it's lost a lot of power of course in a few years.

JG: But it's got enough for what y'all need?

BL: Oh, well, it used to be, you know, you could pull five, six cars up the grades fine and it's really barely crawling now. That's the one we're going to rebuild.

JG: The seven?

BL: Yeah. It will be a brand new engine, just, it will look the same on the outside...

JG: You were going to comment on the 1.

BL: Oh yeah, the 1, of 'course we just use it in the yard. It's not legal, 'cause it was built so far back that it...the steps are not legal. So...it's ok to use in the yard but, we're not allowed to take it out on the road. 'Course it's so slow we wouldn't want to do it anyway.

JG: Hmm. And that was the one that y'all used to basically rebuild the track in the '70's.

BL: Right. Yeah, that was the old work engine. Yeah. They started out, I don't know if they got it...you know, we started... 'course we got the thing here in '72, not the engine, but, that's when we started getting equipment. We got that thing shortly after that. We rebuilt it, and re-engined it. 'Cause those old engines that were in it were so old you couldn't buy the parts for them.

JG: Yeah.

BL: So, we put new, well they're not new, they're just newer International engines in them. Theoretically, they're fifty horsepower.... I remember we painted it, fixed it up, but it's a little workhorse, it's a neat old train.

JG: Tell about what your job consists of kind of on...like the maintenance of the locomotives and things. What's typical of keeping a steam locomotive in running order?

BL: Well, after doing this I know why railroads went to diesels. (laughter) 'Cause there's so much work, you know, so much machine work, that everything on a diesel is just like an automobile, if a part wears out, you just put a new one in. But on these you re...

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

JG: This begins side two and Blair was just telling me about running the, or keeping the steam locomotives in shape.

BL: Well, anyway, you know, in the old days why a railroad might buy fifty of an engine, all identical. But you know, in just a few years none of them would be identical because one would wear faster on the cylinder and they'd have to bore it out and you would have different size ring and the sister engine might not have run as much or had better graded cast iron. And the same thing on the tires and rod bearings and all that. So, it's a constant thing to keep up with. 'Course since we only have one of each, we don't run into that problem. But still, you have to mike it and you've got certain clearances you have to maintain.

JG: What's your two workhorse locomotives right now?

BL: 400 and 300.

JG: How long have they, the 400, how long has it been a primary engine?

BL: Oh, since we got it back from Hahn and Clay, and I'd say that was about '88. So probably '89 on it's been...and it's the best engine, it's more dependable than any of the others. 'Course 300's dependable now, we just started it in '96. But, it's...both of them are the right size. We get a lot of good exhaust and for people making movies the rods are moving fast enough that it looks like you're doing something, where 500 with those seventy four inch drivers, you know, when you're going twenty miles an hour it looks like you're just barely moving.

JG: Yeah.

BL: But 500, 'course is one of the more popular engines, 'cause it's the bigger and it looks more like a real passenger engine, which it is.

JG: Yeah. Y'all used that one in the Teddy Roosevelt movie didn't you? Rough Riders.

BL: Yeah. Yeah.

JG: Uh huh. Why...was that y'all's choice or the moviemaker's choice or...?

BL: Well most of it we'd leave it up to the movie company.

JG: Ok.

BL: They'd look at the engine, decide what they want, we'd tell them what dates they were and we end up giving them the choice. And like, I think that one was one, I think they used every engine we had. One night we had three of them all fired up at once. And, it was in Palestine. To me that was, they were wasting money, but, we were making money. They were paying for an engine.

JG: Yeah. Yeah.

BL: For so many hours, you know. But, the movie business is great but, you've got to be patient. There's a whole lot of hurry up and wait.

JG: Yeah. You were telling me about this last movie that was done, American Outlaws.

BL: Yeah.

JG: And how you were paid in that. Can you comment a little bit more on that for the tape?

BL: Yeah. We...since it was illegal for the state to furnish vehicles to us since we weren't in law enforcement, we were using all these old vehicles. Especially like the

track crew's got two old, I think '80 model high rails. We've got to have them, that's a very important part of our operation.

JG: And those would be like pick-up trucks that run on the railroad tracks.

BL: Right, yeah. And so, we ended up coming up with this idea that the movie company instead of giving us a check, they'd just donate a truck to us in partial payment for the movie. And 'course it was legal for the movies.

JG: Just one truck?

BL: Well, we just started out with one. Then we got two. And then we ended up with...two high rails, one brush crew, two superintendent trucks...that's five...

JG: Those would be pick-up trucks, superintendent trucks.

BL: Pick up, yeah, all pick-ups. And then, the one vehicle, passenger vehicle, we sent to Austin and I can't remember the name of it, but, it was one of those snazzy Fords.

JG: Kind of like, not...

BL: SUV type.

JG: ...but kind of like it.

BL: Yeah.

JG: And y'all got Ford pick up trucks, F-150's?

BL: Yeah.

JG: Super cabs and super crew cabs.

BL: Yeah.

JG: And what would you estimate the value of those probably run up to?

BL: Oh man, I imagine 175 to 200 thousand dollars for all those vehicles.

JG: And then you got a check in addition to that.

BL: Uh huh. Plus a check, I can't remember now what it was, 35-40 thousand after all that.

JG: And you were telling me that it seemed to be like an awful lot of money for such a poor movie. (laughter)

BL: (laughter) I know. I'm just glad that somebody got a write-off on it.

JG: (laughter) And now, I'd asked you this on the telephone the other day, about when they blew up the smoke box of the locomotive.

BL: Oh yeah.

JG: And you were telling me how they did that.

BL: Yeah, they constructed a fake front on the engine.

JG: And which locomotive was that?

BL: 201.

JG: 201. Okay.

BL: They extended the smoke box about a foot and made a new smoke box front, they had the charge set up in that. They had a fellow riding on the engine, and when he fired the cannon, he saw the smoke go off and he'd pull the wire there and set off the charge, and blow the front off the engine, see.

JG: How did they make it jump the tracks? It looked like on the movie it sort of derailed a little bit.

BL: I wasn't there; I didn't see that. I couldn't tell you how they did it, but, it was...

JG: I wonder if that was a model that they used.

BL: It might have been, it had to be fake of course...

JG: Yeah.

BL: ... 'cause I think they would have liked for us to fall off a rail.

JG: (laughter) Blow it up and everything, huh?

BL: That's like when old [Robbie] Knievel was jumping. You know, he wanted to actually run into the ramp. We told him, "No way, all that stuff get under the engine, we're liable to derail."

JG: He was wanting the locomotive to run through the ramp?

BL: Yep. Yeah. So, we told him, "No way." 'Cause man, you know a couple three of those 2x4's get under the wheel...

JG: Yeah.

BL: ...they'd jump the track going twenty something miles an hour through the depot there. So we told them, he could build a fake one. So, you know, the ramp he ran up was like beside the track. And then they built a fake one out of there, just Styrofoam and plywood. So we did. But, it was just made out of 1x2's and stuff so it wouldn't hurt anything.

JG: Yeah.

BL: But, I guarantee you, that was more publicity than we've ever gotten in our lives.

JG: Really?

BL: 'Cause it was nationwide TV we got, you know, it showed pictures of the railroad, interviews with the engineer, I got interviewed. And it took an hour for that two-minute exercise with different things. And you know what, the folks on television got to see it, but the folks that were there in the crowd, being trampled to death by other people, every time something would happen all these fireworks would go off and it would blind them. I don't think they saw half of what was going on. I mean, you know, it was one heck of a show. And we were looking for five thousand people. I was wondering if we could take care of that many. And they estimated about twenty thousand showed up. They were walking from the loop in Palestine.

JG: Hmmm.

BL: Unbelievable. And pushing baby buggies and walking all that way, 'cause there was no parking. It shows that people are starved for something to do. But we did get the publicity.

JG: Tell about some of the other movies. The one when y'all took the engine down and made the movie with James Garner: The Streets of Laredo.

BL: Oh yeah.

JG: Tell about how that, what all that was about.

BL: That was really a neat deal, going back. 'Course that's the first time and last that we've ever been off of the premises. That was a seven hundred and something mile trip by rail.

JG: How did you get the engine out there, and which engine was it?

BL: 201.

JG: 201.

BL: Yeah. And we took it out there and it's...we went from here, through Hearne, over to...

JG: Did it run on a flat bed, or did it run on its own?

BL: Oh no, they towed it. We had a special train, with all the cars and the engine, you know, just had one diesel too.

JG: Just towed it huh? What engine pulled it? Was it a...?

BL: It was a diesel...Missouri Pacific.

JG: Missouri Pacific engine.

BL: Out to, well, till we got to Ft. Worth, then Sante Fe switched us over to the Orient. And the Orient took us all the rest of the way, and the same thing coming back.

JG: Who, on a deal like that, were you the one that got all the track clearances...or did you leave that up to the movie people?

BL: No, we'd get it all. They don't do the calls.

JG: So did you do it?

BL: I ended up, I got it all. And...one thing we did on that, we went across the highest elevation of railroad in Texas on the way out.

JG: Was that over the Pecos [River]?

BL: Yeah, right down there...which was neat. And 'course there we were trying to use our cell phones out in odd country. And it is out, a whole lot of nothing out there.

JG: And that was out at Bracketville right, that you shot that?

BL: No, no, no this was south of Marfa, just a desert country there. It was on some lady's ranch.

JG: Hmmm.

BL: And there was an old water tank there, I guess Sante Fe used it out there. 'Course the railroad doesn't use it, but, I think they sold it to the ranch.

JG: Was any of the movie, maybe, I think some of the movie was, but, maybe not the railroad scenes...that Alamo Village there at Bracketville, was any, I think...?

BL: I don't think so, they built a little village down there by the river.

JG: By the river, ok.

BL: And...they built some huts, had furniture and stuff in them, you know. That's where James Garner would go up when he was looking for one of these desperados.

JG: Uh huh. So...and what railroad was it that y'all were running on when...for the movie?

BL: Well, it's the Orient, it was the Orient then, but it used to be the Sante Fe. Started out as the...you get old and you forget things...well, it was the Orient, because it was going to be the shortest route to the Orient. This fellow started up in Kansas City coming down through Oklahoma, Texas, he went through there, hooked on to the Mexican line and went down to the Pacific Coast and then shipped stuff over.

JG: And so, just south of Marfa.

BL: Yeah, crossed the SP [Southern Pacific]. Well, actually it came down to Alpine and then it used the SP for about fifteen miles across the mountains. And then it switched off and went straight down to Mexico to Presidio.

JG: Yeah, I've been through Alpine and Marfa.

BL: Yeah.

JG: I'm kind of familiar with that area. Different country than East Texas, huh?
(laughter)

BL: Oh man, what are you talking about? (laughter) It is really different. But, it's pretty in its way...I'd hate like heck to live there but, you know, it's definitely different.

JG: Who ran the engine there, was it y'all's crew?

BL: Oh yeah.

JG: How many state railroad people did y'all...?

BL: We weren't running then, so we...five of us took the train down and brought it back. But, we had, once the movie got started, why, we had three engineers, a couple of firemen, a couple of other hostlers to take care of them. We filled up all the motels down there, between the movie people and us.

JG: Where was the locomotive? Was there a shed or something that stored out...just kept it out in the open?

BL: No. There was a siding out there on that ranch.

JG: Siding.

BL: A big, you know, apparently it loaded lots of cattle. There were lot's of...well golly, what do you call them?

JG: Loading shoots or something?

BL: Yeah.

JG: Corrals.

BL: Yeah. When they used to keep the cattle and so forth. There was a siding and that's where we stayed in case a train came. There weren't many trains, but, there were a few that were bringing some stuff up from Mexico.

JG: And how long were you there?

BL: We were there two weeks.

JG: Two weeks.

BL: It was an interesting thing. I, you know, we're hoping we're going to have another one this fall. It's about Pancho Villa.

JG: Oh.

BL: It's a big budget movie if it comes off. It will be a slick deal.

JG: Y'all might be driving Cadillacs next year. (laughter)

BL: Might be...(laughter) but I think that deal's over. I don't think we could do that anymore. We'll end up, hopefully if this thing goes we can truck it now if the budgets big enough. If the railroad won't pull it well, we'll truck it.

JG: Uh huh.

BL: And that would be faster, it might even be better on us because, you know, you're paying somebody five days on the road. 'Course the movie company was paying for it but...

JG: Uh huh.

BL: Well, I guess we were over five days 'cause their diesel that was pulling broke down. So, we were stuck an extra day in some town out in West Texas, Ballinger or somewhere. (laughter) They had to repair it, got it going, we got into San Angelo and we got a lot of good publicity there 'cause when we were coming back we spent a day in San Angelo and had the thing on tour in the newspaper and had a big article. Thousands of people came down to see the train.

JG: Now, it wasn't running though was it?

BL: No, no...

JG: It was just being towed.

BL: Yeah.

JG: But still just...

BL: Yeah, 'cause you know, they don't see a steam engine around anymore.

JG: Yeah.

BL: So anyway, we got all that done and we got a lot of good publicity there. A lot of folks called in, but, I don't think many of them showed up. 'Course that's a pretty good drive from there. 'Course actually that's the town where the 500 came from, it was at Ft. Concho there. So we spent the whole summer out there getting that thing ready and shipping it back in '80. That was another good experience.

JG: Tell about the 300, getting the boiler, and trading the 200 and all that.

BL: 200. Yeah. Well, when Ed McLaughlin had left here he'd gone off to a couple other jobs. Then he ended up starting the railroad in Ft. Worth. He was the one who set that thing up...and he loved the 200. 'Course he'd gotten that engine out in California. And so he wanted that engine and we needed a boiler for 300, so we made a deal where we'd trade. He'd just buy us a boiler and we'd give him the engine. And that went through and a lot of state bureaucracy. But it got okayed...so, he made the deal to find somebody to build the boiler. And he talked to a fellow in California...building it too cheap ... I think a guy in Austin [unintelligible], but they ended up building it. So we got that boiler and we had it shipped in here and we installed it, put it on the 300. Now we've runned it six years, and it's been a good boiler, no complaints. Another thing I learned about, of course it's a welded boiler and in the course of a welded boiler, why it's a 100%, whereas you lose about 20% on the riveted boilers, for all them rivet joints you lose capacity. But...that got the old 300 up, so it's the only engine we've got now that's at 100%. 'Course the others all have to have new Form 4's...so, we've got some decisions to make this year as to whether or not we'll, what we're going to do next year. Because, I hate to spend 10, 12 thousand dollars to get a Form 4 set up on a steam engine. 'Cause if were going to buy a new boiler for it the next year, to me that's sort of stupid.

JG: What do you use the 201 and the 500 for now, just sort of reserve, or movies?

BL: Yeah, back-up. Like, sometimes if we don't have a big train we'll use 201. Basically just for movies.

JG: Yeah. 'Cause it's the older one.

BL: Yeah, it's the older one. We can put the diamond stack on it. The 500, 'course could do it, but its draw back, you can't turn it on the wye, I mean on the turntable.

JG: At Maydelle.

BL: Yeah, it's too heavy.

JG: When did y'all put that turntable in at Maydelle?

BL: We did that in '80.

JG: In '80. Okay.

BL: That's how we could turn the train there with the engine.

JG: What was...going back to when you first came at Maydelle, what all was at Maydelle when you came?

BL: Oh just a couple of ten by...or maybe there were twelve by forty I guess, portable buildings. And a shed down there we kept a few things under, and two tracks, three tracks, two sidings, and that big pile of ties, extra rail and all there.

JG: Well, what's your ruling grade on the road?

BL: The heaviest grade's about two-and-a-half...

JG: two-and-a-half.

BL: ...and it's only about a half mile long out there by Oakland. And most the others are about...

JG: Is that this side of Bean's Creek?

BL: Yeah, just to this side.

JG: Oakland. So it's coming up out of the Bean's Creek.

BL: Right, out of Bean's Creek.

JG: About two-and-a-half, that's about what it was, I guess, in the beginning in some of these investigations from around 1913. And so...the Superintendent then mentioned that there were two spots that were 2 1/2, but maybe the other one was leveled out a little bit.

BL: Now, they must have done that, 'cause the rest of them are about one percent, 'cause they're not that bad. They're about 2 miles long each so...

JG: What is it coming up to about milepost 5? I guess it'd be the highest point on the track there at, just before you come into the I.D. Fairchild State Forest.

BL: Yeah, I...that's about a 1 percent going up.

JG: That's a pretty good one, only 1 percent?

BL: Yeah, maybe 1 and a quarter in a couple of places.

JG: I know the time that I rode with them in the cab of Engine 300...we slowed down quite a bit getting up there.

BL: Yeah. If you've got a pretty good train I'd...you know, that's a pretty good drag.

JG: Yeah, I think we had a full train. In fact they had to turn some people away...

BL: Is that right?

JG: ...the day we got...that's when I rode with Mr. Jay [Morrison].

BL: Oh okay. Yeah.

JG: And...we had got there and...yeah, they told us it was a full train. In fact, there were some, a Boy Scout troop that had come in over night, late Friday night, and they were wanting to ride, and Mark had to turn them away.

BL: Oh man.

JG: Because there wasn't enough room...so yeah, it was a full train.

BL: Well, with that, you know...strange, those old things, 'course I've got the formulas, but I've never bothered taking them, figuring out the pulling power on one of them.

JG: Yeah.

BL: The tractive effort and what tonnage our trains are, ours are really light.

JG: Two-and-a-half percent I guess is a pretty good grade though.

BL: That's a pretty good grade, yeah.

JG: What about your radius on your curves, you got any really tight curves?

BL: No.

JG: Not for what you do?

BL: No, not for what we're doing. We've got them all banked, which we don't need to...but, the good part of banking a curve, if the rail undulates a little bit it doesn't matter.

JG: Banks, you mean sort of offset for going into a turn?

BL: Yeah.

JG: Okay. So it leans into the turn.

BL: Right. If you don't, if it's level and the one rail drops a little bit, the outside one, you could run right off, see.

JG: Right.

BL: And we've got, we were very fortunate really, that all this was done. And 'course they built it poor boy style, they didn't want to cut through the mountains or hills, and so, they just sort of went around all the obstacles. And so it's two miles about the longest straightaway we got anywhere.

JG: That's really up till you get over into Anderson County.

BL: Anderson County, yeah.

JG: When you follow that Still's Creek, huh?

BL: Yeah, yeah. Right down in there. And that's a beautiful part of the ride; all those big gum trees and all that.

JG: I rode it back in the spring when there was a pretty big rain and several places, not the railroad itself, but the automobile crossings just short of the track, were under water. The water got up pretty high.

BL: Yeah.

JG: We were on an island for a good bit. Have you ever had...we were talking earlier about maybe in '87, '89 maybe when y'all had some floods and things, has the water ever actually gotten up over the road bed of the track?

BL: Oh yeah, you bet.

JG: It has?

BL: It would get over there at Bean's Creek until we re-did the bridge.

JG: Wow.

BL: What happened is 'course the hydraulic engineers figured out how the bridges should be and the trestle was 220 feet long, or whatever there at Bean's Creek, and Robinson Cattle Company. But the county came along and decided to put the road over the track, I guess originally it had gone under the trestle. And, but then in wet weather you couldn't get in, so they done that but that blocked it off so then all the water on one side couldn't pull through the little bit of trestle they had, so it was flooding all the time. But we had rectified that by extending the trestle further on the other side. But, we've had it on the other side of Bean's Creek wash out there for a quarter of a mile. That's an amazing thing that it gets that deep there, you know. When you look at the little two-bit creek, when there's a toad floater, boy that water comes up, it will be washed out over there this side of Maydelle. Cuts and ditches basically and they wouldn't handle the water and it would wash out.

JG: Yeah. What about near, on the Anderson County side, has water ever gotten up over the tracks coming in through there?

BL: I don't think it's ever gotten out, we washed out part of a trestle just below the Palestine Depot. And then 'course there back where Robinson Cattle Company, we've always had trouble there. But they built a bridge... 'course that was one of the last ones we did.

JG: That's that real long, long bridge there.

BL: Well, low, it's low but...

JG: It's just real low, it's like, just like an overflow area. It's not really a creek or anything is it?

BL: Yeah, well its part of that Stills Creek.

JG: Stills Creek, okay yeah.

BL: It circles right through there. And let's see... other than that, and being a scourge, trying to buy and get all this old stuff that I can get so we can always have some of this old junk. I've got rid of a few things, but, Ed had bought some Erie-Lackawana cars. We had a fellow working here, he was over the track crew, he was not really what you'd want, he was more interested in making a few bucks himself I think than he was in helping the railroad. That was before Murphy got here. He'd talk Ed into buying these

cars up there and probably some buddy of his had them. We paid too much and they were shot. And he shipped them down here, we rebuilt one but, we didn't do the other, so we ended up scrapping all of that...well, we rebuilt two of them. We traded the Army engine. A fellow that was here building the thing back in '72 or '73, somebody suggested we get a part, probably get the equipment from the Army. He called some, the story goes that he called this General or Major or somebody out there in Ft. Eustace...a train or railroad. And he said, "We could use a steam engine and some cars." The guy said, "Let me get some papers in here." And he got some photos and looked at this one, good looking engine. He said, "Ok, we'll send you this engine, two hospital cars, five, four tank cars and..." "Oh, thank you." But he never bothered going out to look at them. Well, what the Major didn't know is that the picture was taken back when the engine was running, but since they'd chopped part of the smoke box off, and the stack had fallen down inside and a lot of stuff was missing. So they loaded it on up a flat car and shipped that thing out. Old hospital cars were shot, they weren't worth a darn. We scrapped them too. And then, we got the tank cars. But the story goes when old Joe went over there to look at that stuff and when he came over there on the side he had a heart attack when he looked at them. (laughter) Which ain't funny, but, of course he survived. But it was some junk.

JG: Well, Blair I appreciate your time, I see it's getting close to lunchtime so I won't keep you any more. And we'll go grab a bite to eat...

BL: I wish I had a pearl of wisdom for you here. Maybe I can think of something over lunch.

JG: Okie doke. Well, we can do that too. Alright, I'll turn the tape off.

END OF INTERVIEW