

MORGAN L. WATTS

Interview 166a

June 21, 2005, at The History Center, Diboll, Texas

Jonathan Gerland, Interviewer

Patsy Colbert, Transcriber

ABSTRACT: In this interview with Jonathan Gerland, former railroad welder and road master Morgan Watts reminisces about working for the Texas and New Orleans Railroad from the 1950's to the 1980's. Mr. Watts talks about the intricacies of welding tracks and platforms and bridges, recalls living in a boxcar, and the change from telephones to radios for communication.

Jonathan Gerland (hereafter JG): Today's date is June 21, 2005, first day of summer. And my name is Jonathan Gerland, and I'm with Morgan L. Watts and we are at the History Center and we are going to do an oral history interview. Mr. Watts, if we could just begin, tell me when and where you were born.

Morgan Watts (hereafter MW): Well I was born in Caldwell County, Texas, August 12, 1933.

JG: How did you get to working for the railroad?

MW: Well my brother was working for the railroad, he is a little bit older than me, and he went to work for the railroad as a welder helper. And when he got promoted to, when he made welder and took a welding job I took his place as a welder helper. That is when I started, October 2, 1951.

JG: And was working for what railroad?

MW: Texas & New Orleans.

JG: Texas & New Orleans. Where did you...where did you...where was the job?

MW: The job was at McQueeney, Texas. That is in Guadalupe County.

JG: And can you tell me a little bit about those early days?

MW: Well I was a welder helper on a bridge gang, the steel bridges. We had a lot of them back then and they usually had two welders on each steel bridge gang. And I started out as a helper. Well, the helper he chipped the weld and painted it after the welder got through with it. And he kept the welder supplied with his material. And after you got a little bit more acquainted with the job you did a little bit of the welding and a little bit of the cutting with the cutting torches. We would cut out the steel and the bridge gang would replace on the bridges, you know, like the plates and stuff like that. Of

course, some of it came pre-fabed already, but we did a lot of it ourselves right there on the job.

JG: Was the line pretty much dieselized by that time? Were there any steams running?

MW: It was just beginning to go diesel. We still had some of those steam engines, were still running.

JG: What is some of your memories of the steam engine?

MW: Well what I like to remember best about them, you could watch for the smoke if you were on a motor car, you'd watch for that smoke, and then you would know to get off the track. But when they went to diesel, you didn't have that smoke any more. And the whistle, I miss the whistle. I really liked the old steam engine whistle. Some of those engineers could really blow them.

JG: Any close calls with being on the track on the motorcars with any trains?

MW: Well, the closest was, I guess, I can't even remember what year it was, but I was out at Fort Hancock, Texas, out in West Texas, and of course you could see for several miles out there. And I knew it was about time for Amtrak, but I was going to try to make it in before he run, and the clutch just disintegrated on my motorcar. And my helper and I had to throw it off. We could see the headlight of the Amtrak coming. (laughter) And we had to get it off the track. Then we had to get the bridge gang back out there to put it back on the track for us. The next day they pulled it in.

JG: Now how long did you, were you a welder's helper and working up to section foreman?

MW: I worked 15, I worked 15 months as a welder helper and I got a welding job. And I welded until I went in service in '53. I came back out in '53, in '55 and I went back to welding. I welded until the late '70's or '80, I can't remember just exactly. But then I took an assistant road master job, or general foreman they called it. I quit welding then and took a supervisor job. And then I came up, I stayed on that assistant job until '86 and I came to Lufkin and took the road master's job here in 1986.

JG: And what was the road master's job in Lufkin? What, how much track...?

MW: I had from milepost 10, which is just this edge of Houston, to just this side of Shreveport. So I had...

JG: About 200 miles.

MW: 200, if I'm not mistaken it was 206 miles of main line plus all the sidings and the yard tracks to maintain. That is a pretty good, pretty good little run.

JG: Now the track by that time of course, I guess was all continuous welded, right?

MW: The majority of it, yes, just about all welded rail. Very little jointed rail we had left.

JG: Now did you do any of the welding of the steel, of the rails?

MW: Well yes, the tie ends I did when I was a welder. I did the tie end welding, the (unintelligible) and the thermax welds. That is what we did back then, that is what they called them.

JG: And can you describe what that is exactly?

MW: Well you put a mold, a...I'll say a casting, you put it over the two rail ends that you are going to weld. And you leave about, as near as I can remember, about an inch opening. And then you have a mixture, you pour it in this mold and you light it. You preheat your rail first with a big old torch. And then you put that powder in there and you light that powder and it burns. And it's got a little plate in the bottom of that, and it melted that plate and it poured down in that opening between the two rails and it fused together. And then, you had to let it cool just a little bit and then you knock the top of it off, the mold off. Then you take a chisel and a ten pound Mundy or a stretch hammer, then you cut that top part of that off and then you grind the rest down where it looks like one continuous piece of metal. It got hot. I have got the scars to prove it. But the rail came out in ¼ mile lengths and then they welded it together.

JG: Can you explain heat expansion and maybe why welded rail, well I know in the old jointed rail the key expansion, the sun kinks were a major concern certainly in the early days and even on some logging roads, even here around Diboll. And how does continuous welded rail figure in with that?

MW: Well what you do, when you lay rail, welded rail, continuous welded rail, you log down the temperature that you laid that rail down. And then you will know if you keep on your toes, you'll know whether or not you gonna need to go in there and de-stress that rail in the winter time or summer time, or you may watch for a pull apart in the winter time. You have to, because the heat – naturally metal expands in the heat and it contracts when it's cold. So if you logged it down and some time it didn't always, you couldn't check it close enough. And they had what they called rail anchors.

JG: When did you generally, when did you generally lay the rail, in the summer time?

MW: We laid it...in Texas you laid it all year round. Anytime, there wasn't no certain time. But now, if you laid it in the wintertime you really had to watch in the summer because it would expand. And you really had to make sure your anchors were set up close, right against your cross ties. And that was the track inspector's job, plus mine to check it out, you know, when you ride the tracks, to make sure the anchors were set up. If it looked like they were getting any movement then you would have your gangs go in

there and reset the anchors, you know against the cross ties. And always make sure you had plenty of balance on your ties too. Make sure it didn't kick out you know.

JG: There was no consideration for laying rail in the summer...I mean in the summer, you just laid it year round?

MW: No we laid it, 'cause like I could say, we logged it up. In fact I've still got my thermometer. It is a magnet thermometer. You'd put it on the side of the rail, on the web of the rail.

JG: So you would take your reading from that, the temperature of the rail not the air temperature.

MW: That is right, the temperature of the rail. You would leave it on there about an hour, you know, to make sure you was getting the right reading, you know.

JG: Now what was the fluctuation, when would you be concerned? You mentioned that you would log that temperature and then...

MW: Okay, say you, say you laid your rail, oh for instance 60 degrees. Well if that temperature started getting up in the 90's, pretty close to look at it. And you could ride the track and you could tell if it had little wiggles. We'd call them. And you know the rail would kinda curve a little bit, you could tell if it was getting too, have to go in there and take and cut out part of it and re-weld it again you know. So we had Korea rail pullers. Just put those hydraulic rail pullers on there and you could pull that rail. And that is what you call de-stressing. We'd cut it, you know, and pull it and de-stress it and then weld it back together and while you had your pullers on there. And that would take the stress out of it. And in the winter time, you got to watch when the temperature gets down in the teens, single digits, you really got to watch it for pull a-parts you know. If the rail has any kind of little fissure in there or anything it will pull it apart. But I run the rail detector pretty regular, I can't remember just exactly how often we run them, but it would detect a fissure in that rail.

JG: And how did the rail detector operate? I mean...

MW: It run right on the track, and if there was a...they had there sensors I guess you'd call it, on the little camera like deal, shooting on the rail. And it would shoot all the way through that rail, x-ray it, another words, so to speak. And if a little bitty fisher in there would show up it would beep. And he'd stop and go back. And the head man on the rail detector, they had special crews for this, he would get off with a hand detector and he would pin point it to right on the money. He could find any kind of little crack that you couldn't see with your naked eye. And if you didn't believe it was there, you could saw it and sometime it would be a little fisher that big around that you couldn't see with the naked eye. Saved us a lot of derail.

JG: So in '86 you moved to Lufkin and you were road master?

MW: Uh-huh. I worked as road master there until, I think my last day I worked was July 13th in '87. I went and had some tests run and they told me to...I couldn't work any more. My back and neck was all messed up. They said it was a risk, so I retired.

JG: So how many years of service did you have with the railroad?

MW: Actually I had 36 years total, but two years of that was in service, in the Army. So I actually worked 34 years, but as far as seniority wise I had 36 years.

JG: Can you tell maybe some of the interesting things that might have happened in your work? I think you and I were talking earlier about the Galveston Causeway.

MW: Yes I worked on the Galveston Causeway on the old bascule bridge. I worked on the...several of the turn bridges down in Louisiana. They have a lot of turn bridges down there. But that is the only bascule bridge that I know of, is in Galveston. But one of the most scary things was when Englewood yard, they had that big explosion down there. And I can't remember what year it was. I was welding then, and they had a little old minor derailment out there in the yard that morning, and I went out there to work it. And the gravity yard was not far from us, and they dropped a carload of butane out in the gravity yard. And it hit a tank car below it and when it went to couple up, the coupler jumped, some way or another got underneath it and that tank car coupler went into the tank car of butyldiane ruptured that tank. A switch engine came in, there were 27 tracks open and the spark from the exhaust of that switch engine ignited that butane. And you have never seen nothing like it in your life. It knocked me completely down and I must have been, I guess 6 or 7 hundred yards from where the engine set it off.

JG: And it was a diesel engine?

MW: Uh-huh, and we lost the engineer over that one. He didn't make it.

JG: But the engine was 27 tracks over.

MW: Yes, but what happened, that big old tank car and all that gas, it's heavy, it doesn't rise. It stays low, that gas is heavy, that butane. That is what they tell me. And it just settled down and it spread all through those box cars and the other cars, and just all over the yard nearly. And when it, it knocked me, well I was flat of my back and I could see pieces of burning wood out of those cars. It was I guess 30 feet in the air. I don't know, but I got out of there without a scratch and I'm thankful. If it hadn't been on a Saturday, there would have been lots of people out there got hurt. But it broke glasses in houses that were I guess a quarter mile away. And I lived about 10 miles from there and my wife said it rattled the windows at the house.

JG: Tell us a little bit about living conditions working for the railroad.

MW: Well when I first went to work we stayed in boxcars. They had them fixed up just like a trailer house, mobile home. And when I first started I didn't do any cooking, I was 18 and I eat in restaurants all the time. And then after I took a welding job, they had the commissary call. And you'd get three meals a day, four days a week, but on Friday you'd only get two meals, because everybody took off, go home on Friday you know, afternoon. And if I'm not mistaken it cost us a \$1.25 a day to eat there. That is three meals. I mean that was all you could eat. They served family style. They put it on the table. Had the commissary, the company had their own cook and they cooked in a wood stove. They would cut the wood, or the bridge gang would cut the wood for them. Spread it out to cook and that is where they cooked.

JG: And you were in the bridge gang, right?

MW: I welded on the bridge gang.

JG: You welded on the bridge gang. About how far were your sections at that time?

MW: Well I worked, my seniority, we went by seniority districts. My seniority district was anywhere in Texas and Louisiana that the T&NO covered. Of course later on it sold out I think it was, I can't remember now, but it was sold out to Southern Pacific, T&NO I think in '69 or something. But I worked from, my district was at Ysleta. From Ysleta Texas, that is this side, just east of El Paso to New Orleans, from Galveston to Dennison and Brown...

JG: And everything in between.

MW: Everything in between. Brownsville to Shreveport, that was the end of the T&NO in Shreveport. I welded in the bridge gang on bridges in Louisiana, Texas, of course I did a lot of the platform work. When they went to building the concrete platforms at these freight depots, we'd drive rail in the ground and put another rail on top of that and weld that to those rail posts, and then there was a concrete slab. They'd get the slab ready, and then fill it up with dirt and the concrete would be a platform for the depot. I welded a lot of them. I did a lot of them. Then I got away from the bridges, or most of it and went to welding just strictly on the tracks for the switches. At the switches I would weld the cross, where maybe another railroad would cross the Southern Pacific, well I would, if it was Southern Pacific maintenance that we crossed, I would weld it. Course they would wear down or get a fissure, or chip out, go in there and grind all the bad metal out and then fill it back up and grind it smooth it down. And you had to watch what you were doing and not cut out too much of it at one time because, you had to keep it open for change out.

JG: So you were on the move quite a bit.

MW: Yes, I really was.

JG: Now when were you married?

MW: I got married June 1, 1957.

JG: '57 okay. So when you moved around a lot, how often...did your wife move with you every time, or only if you were going to be gone a certain number of days? How did that work?

MW: Well when we were living in the boxcar, see my wife and I we were living in the boxcar.

JG: That is like company housing?

MW: Yes, about 2 years, 3 years something like that. And then they did away with the camp cars and started using trailer houses. So then I couldn't take her in the company trailer.

JG: So when you lived in the boxcars you just had your box car pulled?

MW: Yes, uh-huh. I just called the dispatcher and tell him to move it to, say if I was setting down here at New Caney, I'd tell them to move to Lufkin you know if we had to go to a job in Lufkin. We'd just get out and put all our stuff down in the boxcar. All the dishes out of the cabinets and, 'cause it was rough.

JG: Now where did she ride?

MW: Oh we would go in the car then. We'd go in the car. I'd take my car and her and...

JG: In an automobile, and then just pulled the boxcar.

MW: Yes they would take care of all that. And they'd just set it down and we'd go in there and set it all up again.

JG: And how long would you be at that particular spot before you might have to move again.

MW: Well sometimes you would stay 3 months, 6 months, something like that. You never really know. Depend on how large the job was that you were going to have to do there.

JG: How far would you venture from home, and home being the boxcar on the job?

MW: Ordinarily, ordinarily it probably wouldn't be over 5 miles.

JG: Oh okay.

MW: We would go in the motorcar see. Back then we didn't have any trucks or anything.

JG: Right.

MW: No highway vehicles at all. We went strictly motorcars. We'd load, now we had a tool car that we would put a welding machine and settling and oxygen bottles and they would ship our gasoline to us in 55 gallon barrels. And they would stop the work train, they'd call us, that is the way they usually delivered the supplies. And they would stop the work train and just, how they didn't blow up everything in the world but they would throw those barrels of gasoline out of that boxcar on the ground. And then we'd get them and roll them up to the doors, load them up in our tool car, set them up in there. Use an old hand pump, pump out 5-gallon cans full for the welding machines and the motorcars. And we heated with coal in the camp cars and that is the way they'd send the coal out for us to heat in the wintertime.

JG: Just drop it off.

MW: Throw it off.

JG: Now I know, your wife is not here of course, but when I visited with her, she was talking a little bit about some of those early days. Can you share some of that?

MW: Well, she thinks about mostly about was the cooking. Naturally a lady would. But she cooked on a two-burner kerosene stove and had a little oven. I finally found her a little oven and I got it for her that would set on top of the kerosene stove. Well the only way you could regulate the heat, you'd watch and if it started getting too hot, you set it off the stove a little bit, the whole oven. It was, I don't know, about 16 x 16 or something like that. It would hold a pie plate anyway. And then for refrigeration I bought a butane refrigerator that run on butane. And I had a...got me a 10-gallon butane bottle and kept the butane in. And if you'd get in places you couldn't get electrical outlet, well I had a power plant. And I'd crank that power plant up at night, and sometimes we would be watching television, I think she told you this, we'd be watching television and I'd have to go, it would run out of gas and I'd have to go fill it up with gas. But I wouldn't take nothing for it, wouldn't do it again at all. (laughter) But anyway...

JG: So what happened then after that life style quit of living in the boxcars? What was the transition there?

MW: Well I bought a home up in Luling, which is Caldwell County, the area I was born and raised. I traveled around and I just came in on weekends. And I had a chance, a job came open in Houston and I was welding in Ennis, I believe at that time. The job came open and I bid on it and got that one in Houston. We moved to Houston and sold our home in Luling and that is where I stayed until I took the job here as road master in Lufkin. Being away from home, that was tough on my wife and the kids, and myself too. But a lot of times I would drive a vehicle, my automobile to Houston and catch a train there. Cause they didn't have, at that time you couldn't ride Amtrak on your pass. And that was the only one that came through Luling, and it didn't stop in Luling. So I'd have

to go to Houston to catch the other train; that is where it stopped. And if I was working down in Louisiana.

JG: I'm just trying to think of some of the transitions that occurred during your career. I guess there were still a few cabooses in the last days.

MW: Oh yes, they started cutting the cabooses off just about the time I retired. And I guess, the biggest thing was when we got away from the telephones and went mostly radios, you know. We used to have our telephone we would hook up on the line, you and I talked about that. You'd hook up on the line, anywhere down the line we'd hook up there and call the dispatcher. Or you could even get on the message line and call anywhere in Southern Pacific, you know. If you could get the operator, a lot of time you couldn't get the operator. Just like and then they went to the radios. And that was a good safety feature really. Cause you could keep up with the trains a lot better.

JG: Everybody could hear everything.

MW: Right, right. And then they...

JG: Was the transition pretty smooth?

MW: Yes it really was. It was good and then, but one of the best things that they ever came up with, especially like up in here, this line from Houston to Shreveport was called the rabbit. But up here, the best thing, and some of that is not signaled, it is not signalized. Best thing is when they came up and divided everything up into blocks. About every 10 miles is a different block. Well you called the dispatcher and get time, working time in that block, he could not let nothing else get in that block until he talked to you and give him joint time with you or you released your time. That is one of the safest things they ever came up with.

JG: That is block signaling, is that what that is?

MW: No it's just laid out into block districts. I think the Lufkin block starts right out here just out of Diboll I believe. And then it goes about 10 miles and it started in to the, my train of thought left me. I forgot what the name of the next one was. Anyway the next one might have been the climax block seems like. And then when you get into that, before you could go into that next block you had to get permission from that dispatcher and get working time in it. And, I should have brought one of those books down here and showed you how you get your track time and then you release it. You had to call him and identify yourself and then you tell him that you were going to release your time at such and such a block, at such and such a time and he would repeat it and you had to tell him that was correct or not correct and repeat it again. It was kind of fool proof really.

JG: Where would the dispatcher be, how far away?

MW: Houston.

JG: Houston, okay.

MW: And up here the radio didn't have enough towers in here to really get good reception. To get that dispatcher, I've still got one of them. It was a little fork like deal, and you would hit it on like on the steering wheel of your pick up, and key your mike on your radio and hold it there.

JG: Like a little tuning fork.

MW: Tuning fork, that is exactly what it's called. And he would answer you; he'd hear it and he'd answer you. He'd come on to tell you, the dispatcher, you just said "rabbit discussion" and then you'd know who you was talking to.

JG: Now your crew, when you worked, typically how many would be in a welding crew?

MW: On the welding crew, a welder and a helper. And if it was a real big job they would bring in another welder and another helper.

JG: Now, how close did you work with other track workers?

MW: Well, sometimes I was by myself, just me and my helper. And actually what the helper was, he was just a look out really for you for trains 'cause when you put that shield down over your head you couldn't see nothing. And the welding machine might be fifteen feet from you on the truck and it would be running and you couldn't hear anything. So you had to have somebody watching for you. But, now sometimes I would be out there with the section gang if they had rails to cut with a torch and stuff like that, and laying switches, building switches and stuff like that. And then you'd have to, if you changed out a rail a lot of times the rail ends didn't match. Especially yard tracks, the rail end didn't match. Well you'd have to weld and build that other, the track, the rail that didn't match the full ball rail you'd have to build that rail up to match it with the weld. Sometimes it would take you a while and sometimes it didn't take you long. Sometimes it would just be high or low and sometimes it would be a lip on it where a train come through there he would derail. And you'd have to taper that out and then grind it down. But I worked a lot of derailments that when they would have derailments I would get called. Sometimes I'd go a week at a time my kids would never see me. I'd get in after dark and leave before they would get up in the morning.

JG: How many children do you have?

MW: Two, a boy and a girl. And our son he worked for the railroad for a while and then they started downsizing. He was in a train crew, he had just passed the conductors test and they started downsizing from Houston to San Antonio. In fact they run them all the way through Houston to San Antonio. They done away with Glidden, that is where he

used...when he first started he'd run to Glidden and come back to Houston. Well then he didn't have enough time so he got furloughed that time. He never did go back with them. He had a pretty good job, so. They asked him to come back. But he told them he wouldn't come back he had too much going for him where he is at now. And our daughter she lives in West Virginia.

JG: That is a ways away.

MW: Eleven hundred and twenty seven miles from her driveway to my driveway.

JG: Well, any other things that you can think of?

MW: Well I guess I could tell you, I fell off of one bridge. I was welding on a bridge at West Lake, Louisiana and I fell in the river. And they told me I didn't stay in there long enough to get wet. (laughter)

JG: Was it during the wintertime?

MW: No, it was in the summertime.

JG: Summertime.

MW: It was in the summertime. But, I just slipped and I fell. I didn't fall far. I fell about, I guess, 10 feet, right in the water. (laughter) But I had a lot of fun on the railroad, a lot of memories, good memories with the railroad. And I had a good bunch of people working for me up here on this division. When I retired they rented the banquet room. Did you know when K-Bob's was out there on 69?

JG: Yes, sir. Yes sir.

MW: They rented the banquet room out there and throwed me a retirement party. And, I felt real honored.

JG: There is not very many employees out of Lufkin now, is there?

MW: No there is not. Not a whole bunch. You know, I don't ever get back down there to see very many of them, once in a while. They change up so many of them, I don't even know them any more. I've been gone so long.

JG: That is what I was thinking. The ones that are there now, you probably...

MW: See it's 18 years next month since I worked.

JG: What is the fellow who is the train master now? His father worked for the railroad in Lufkin for a long time.

MW: You know, I don't know, I really don't.

JG: His father worked for T&NO and SP [Southern Pacific] for a long time in Lufkin. Now he is there, his name just failed me, I'm sorry.

MW: I can't even...I don't even know who is up there now. I never get down there.

JG: Do you know any of the short line people?

MW: I knew Mr. George Honea and the other guy out here. Well I knew...

JG: Charlie Foster or...?

MW: Yes, and I knew Butch McMillan. I think I asked you the other day if you had met him or if he had passed away before you came into the museum, The History Center here. But that was a real fine fellow. He and I were real good friends.

JG: What about Willard Conner? Did you know Mr. Willard Conner?

MW: No.

JG: He was a section man, road master for a long time.

MW: I didn't know him. I was thinking of somebody the other day that was on the A&NR. In fact he lived out there not too far from the yard. But I can't think of his name. But I see a few of them old railroad men, well I got two signal maintainers live right there in the same addition I do. I see them pretty regular. Just, they are always like it was when I was working, in such a big hurry you don't have time to stop and talk a lot.

JG: Now since you have retired from railroading, have you done anything connected with the railroad, any of your interest in railroading or anything?

MW: No I really haven't done anything with railroading. When I retired I started doing woodcrafts. And we did that for, we'd go to craft shows and I even took up this toile painting. I painted on wood and stuff. But then it got to where, that everybody had a houseful, you wasn't selling anything so we quite that. Now then we just, we go do a little auctioning. My wife's sister is an auctioneer and we go to the auction on Saturday night at Carthage. Put a few little things out there, just something to do.

JG: Yeah.

MW: Get out and meet people. You got to stay active.

JG: Well all right Mr. Watts. I sure appreciate you.

MW: Well I appreciate you asking me to come down.

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