



THE ALEXANDRIA ORAL HISTORY CENTER  
OFFICE OF HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA  
CITY OF ALEXANDRIA



# Oral History Interview

with

## Phelan Tyler

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**Interviewer:** Jennifer Henry

**Narrator:** Phelan Tyler

**Location of Interview:**

Archeology Museum, Alexandria, VA, 22314

**Date of Interview:** 09/17/06

**Transcriber:** Jennifer Cortner

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### Summary:

*Mr. Phelan Tyler talks about his experience working at Potomac Yard for the RF&P Railroad (Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac Railroad) from 1940 to 1981. He also reflects on growing up on Hume Avenue in the Del Ray neighborhood, where he attended elementary and high school and his after-school job at the Four Mile Run Service Station.*

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General	Childhood, School, Potomac Yard, RF&P Railroad
Places	Hume Avenue Del Ray neighborhood, Mount Vernon Elementary School, George Mason School, George Washington High School, Four Mile Run Service Station, Potomac Yard, Jefferson Davis Highway,

**Jennifer Henry** [00:00:02] Okay. I'm going to start with introductions. All right. My name is Jennifer Henry. I am the oral history volunteer coordinator at the Archeology Museum. And I'm here with Mr. Phelan Tyler at the Archeology Museum on Sunday, September 17th, 2006. And we're here to talk about his memories of working at Potomac Yard Railroad. Mr. Tyler, do I have permission to record this interview?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:00:34] Yes.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:00:35] And could you please state your name for the record?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:00:38] Phelan E. Tyler.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:00:38] Fantastic. I'm going to stop the tape, rewind it and just make sure the volume levels are appropriate.

**Speaker 1** [00:00:47] All right.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:00:48] Okay. So the first question I've got for you is simply, could you tell me where and when you were born?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:00:56] I was born on Hume Avenue, which at the time was not Alexandria, it was part of Arlington County. And on October 24th, 1919.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:01:12] Was it simply called Arlington? Or was there a name?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:01:17] My birth certificate showed Jefferson District in Arlington County.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:01:22] Interesting. And so you've been in Alexandria your entire life?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:01:29] Right.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:01:31] And let's see, where did you go to school as a child?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:01:36] I went to Mount Vernon Elementary School on Mount Vernon Avenue in Del Ray section.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:01:43] Okay. And was that a different section from Jefferson District?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:01:47] No, that was a part of Jefferson District.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:01:49] Okay. Okay. And then eventually, Arlington ceded over to Alexandria?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:01:55] Right. They annexed it in 1930, I think it was. Might have been 1932.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:02:04] OK. And let's see. So Mount Vernon Elementary is where you went to grade school. Did you continue on after Mount Vernon?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:02:13] Yeah, I went to a school, right next to it was George Mason. And then later I went to George Washington High School.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:02:23] Wow, I didn't know George Mason had his own school named after him. So that was like junior high school?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:02:30] Yes.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:02:30] Okay. You remember what street that was? It was right next to ---

**Phelan Tyler** [00:02:34] Right next door to the Mount Vernon Elementary School.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:02:37] Okay. And George Washington, right here in Alexandria.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:02:42] That was on Mount Vernon Avenue, but it was about 12 or 15 blocks south of Mount Vernon School.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:02:51] Okay. Was it all within walking distance to your Hume Avenue home?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:02:55] Yes

**Jennifer Henry** [00:02:57] So you walked to school? Your entire life?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:02:58] Mostly.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:03:01] Okay. So do you remember what your first job was, either while you were in high school or directly thereafter?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:03:09] I worked at the gas station after hours, after school hours.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:03:14] Which gas station was that?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:03:16] It was called Four Mile Run Service Station.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:03:19] That was near Four Mile Run, I presume?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:03:22] It was on Jefferson Davis Highway at Four Mile Run.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:03:27] Do you remember the name of the gas station?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:03:29] That was it, Four Mile Run Service Station.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:03:30] Oh Ok, you just told me. Okay. How long did you work there for? Just while you're in high school? Or did you continue there after high school as well for a little while?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:03:40] Very shortly. But not enough to say it was a job. I worked there 3 or 4 years, part time.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:03:50] And what did you do next for job-wise?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:03:54] I went to work in Potomac Yard for the RF&P railroad. (Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac Railroad)

**Jennifer Henry** [00:03:58] Excellent. So let's see. How did you make the decision that you wanted to apply for a job at Potomac yard?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:04:06] My father worked there. (laughs)

**Jennifer Henry** [00:04:09] So would you say then that you'd always had an interest in trains?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:04:14] Yes.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:04:17] And let's see. What did your father do at the RF&P?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:04:24] He was a train man.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:04:25] And what does that mean?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:04:27] It means he worked at actually the movement on the trains. And he also worked as the retort operator. That was up in the towers that control the speed of the cars as they rolled off the hump.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:04:40] Okay. Did he ever bring you to work with him when you were younger?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:04:44] Yes.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:04:45] And what do you recall about those experiences?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:04:51] Well, I was familiar with many of the people because they were neighbors of ours.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:04:57] All along Hume Avenue?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:04:58] Right.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:05:02] So what year did you first start working at Potomac Yard? Do you remember the year?

**Speaker 1** [00:05:07] 1940.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:05:10] 1940. And so let's see. How did you get the job at Potomac Yard? I know your father worked there. So did you simply put in an application and you're hired?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:05:20] Just put an application to the engine service supervisor.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:05:24] What made you choose an engine service to apply to?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:05:28] I was influenced by my father.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:05:34] Let's see. So I'm suspecting that you didn't, but did you have any prior railroad experience before coming to the yard?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:05:43] No.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:05:48] So when you first arrived and got your first job in the engine services, what was that job title?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:05:54] It was listed as locomotive fireman.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:06:00] What does that mean?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:06:01] That means I fired the boilers to keep the steam pressure up to move the engine.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:06:06] And how did you do that?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:06:07] With a shovel.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:06:09] A shovel and coal?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:06:11] Yeah.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:06:13] This means that you would travel up and down or on the tracks? Or was it in a stationary position?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:06:19] No, it moved on the tracks.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:06:22] From where to where?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:06:24] Within the yard itself, all yard tracks.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:06:29] What was the locomotive pulling around? With just moving railcars from one track to another?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:06:35] Yes. And assembling train cars for trains, southbound trains.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:06:44] Okay. So the locomotive would pull stuff up and back them up and hook them up to the ---

**Phelan Tyler** [00:06:50] When they used to pump cars, the cars would go down the hump on gravity, they'd go in different classification tracks. Then when the track was full or they were ready

to send to Richmond, the yard engine would come in and get the cars off one track and dump them over to the other until they made up the train.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:07:13] Who else was in the locomotive with you while you were --

**Phelan Tyler** [00:07:21] The engineer.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:07:21] Just the two of you?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:07:21] Yeah.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:07:21] How did you find working with the engineer? Was it ---

**Phelan Tyler** [00:07:24] I got along quite well with all of them.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:07:28] So there's some camaraderie there. Let's see. How long did you have this job as a fireman?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:07:37] I had about three years. And then I went in the Army.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:07:44] For ---

**Phelan Tyler** [00:07:44] During World War Two.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:07:44] And did they hold your position for you when you returned?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:07:47] Yes.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:07:51] And so you returned in what year? 45? What year did you return back to Potomac Yard after the war?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:08:00] I came back in December of 1945.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:08:04] And you were rehired as a fireman again?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:08:07] By the way, I worked in railroad in the Army.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:08:11] Oh you did? So what did you do while you were in the army? Fill me in.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:08:15] I was the engineer in India.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:08:18] Oh wow, so because of your experience at Potomac Yard, you were able to become an engineer.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:08:28] That's correct.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:08:28] Tha's exciting. And what did you think of working on the railroad in India versus Potomac Yard? What were the differences or similarities?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:08:38] It was quite crude over there.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:08:41] Okay. Do you think that prepared you well for your return? Returning back to the yard?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:08:47] Yes.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:08:50] And as a result of that experience, did they bump you up to a position into engineer when you got to the Yard?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:08:56] No, I came back and took my position on the roster. We work the seniority.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:09:05] Okay. Okay. Was that ok with you?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:09:10] I worked about a year. Then we have to take examination for promotion to engineer.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:09:15] And did you pass?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:09:16] Yes.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:09:19] So what year would that have been when you became an engineer?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:09:24] 1946.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:09:27] And as the engineer, what exactly were you doing?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:09:31] Well, I've worked as an engineer and fireman, whatever your seniority allowed.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:09:42] And do you remember what the wages were by chance of either of those two positions? Fireman or engineer?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:09:50] Yes, it was \$5.80 a day.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:09:54] A day. That sounds great. Let's see. Do you remember what shifts you worked? For either of those two positions?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:10:09] Most of it worked three shifts a day. But I was fortunate. I worked the daylight shift.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:10:15] (laughs) Very fortunate. So were there any additional promotional opportunities for you after you became an engineer?



**Phelan Tyler** [00:10:26] Yes, I was finally appointed as transportation assistant.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:10:30] And what does that mean?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:10:30] That is I worked as a supervisor over the engine service employees and the train.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:10:40] How many employees were you supervising then, do you think?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:10:49] Well, it's hard to say. It was 200 of them in that class. Okay. But you wouldn't supervise all them, you just supervise the crew at the time.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:11:01] Okay. Per shift.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:11:02] One at a time.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:11:02] And so is there simply one transportation, what was your title again? Transportation ---

**Phelan Tyler** [00:11:10] Transportation assistant.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:11:12] Assistant. There is just one person in that position.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:11:15] Yes.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:11:15] Okay. How many engineers do they have working on the tracks during each shift?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:11:23] Each shift?

**Jennifer Henry** [00:11:25] Was it just, you.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:11:26] Well, the eight, eight crew per shift.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:11:30] Wow. So eight locomotives were in progress per shift?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:11:38] Yeah. Each shift.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:11:40] Wow that's a lot. So let's see, since there were promotional opportunities in order to obtain promotions, did the Yard provide training opportunities, or you mentioned you took an exam. So were there study courses that you had to ---

**Phelan Tyler** [00:11:58] No it was mostly on the job training.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:12:02] So for a while did you shadow the previous or the existing transportation assistant before actually getting that job?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:12:14] I pretty much stayed in that until I retired.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:12:22] So, I think this is a map of the yard. (referring to map) Like, here's the round house, the machine shop. Where exactly would you have been while you were the transportation assistant? Where was your office located?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:12:42] My office was located right here next to the round house. (refers to map)

**Jennifer Henry** [00:12:47] Okay.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:12:48] But we worked the entire length of the yard.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:12:52] Okay. So were you out and about walking around, checking on people?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:12:57] Not walking, but riding engines.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:13:00] Okay. So you would hop on the locomotives and go ---

**Phelan Tyler** [00:13:03] As transportation assistant, as a fireman engineer, we worked all of these tracks.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:13:09] So you're constantly in motion.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:13:11] Right.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:13:11] So can you tell me, I'm not sure if it'll show on this map, but on this map, whereabouts your home was? You said it was on Hume Avenue. A rough estimate of where your house was?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:13:33] It was off this map.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:13:44] I can probably get us a map of Alexandria. I don't think these maps actually show, these maps don't actually show anything except for Route 1. So it was further, is that north or south of the Yard? Here's Jefferson Davis Highway. I don't know if it's still too ---

**Phelan Tyler** [00:14:46] It's right in here.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:14:48] Once again, off the map.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:14:49] Yes.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:14:51] So you were able to walk to Potomac Yard from your house?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:14:57] Well, all depends if I was coming from here, come in the yard here, I drove.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:15:04] Okay. Okay. How long did it take you?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:15:13] 20 minutes.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:15:13] Did you commute with any of your fellow coworkers?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:15:15] No.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:15:22] So my next question then is, after you arrived in the parking lot, you parked your car in the lot, what was your typical day as transportation assistant?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:15:35] We would report to the engine house office and read all of the instructions and orders that were put out since our previous shift.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:15:46] What kind of orders? Like what cars were needed?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:15:51] Well, track conditions.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:15:54] And who had written those orders? The previous transportation assistant who was on shift prior to you?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:16:02] The previous tour of duty.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:16:03] Okay. And then what? What next?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:16:09] Then we'd record a report to the engine and get the engine ready to be, work that tour of duty. Bring the cab up to get the steam up to working conditions.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:16:27] And what next?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:16:29] Then we would wait for the yard master to give us instructions on which cars need to be moved.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:16:38] Okay. And what would the rest of the day be, would entail moving those cars?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:16:46] It would be the same thing, work under the direction of the yard master and assemble the train to go outbound movement .

**Jennifer Henry** [00:16:58] So you were working the day shift and what were those hours? Is that like 9 to 5?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:17:03] You could start anywhere between 6:30 a.m. and 8 a.m..

**Jennifer Henry** [00:17:11] Okay.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:17:13] It was an agreement between the union and the company.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:17:16] Nice. But when would you usually arrive? What was your preference?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:17:22] 8 a.m..

**Jennifer Henry** [00:17:27] What time was the lunch break? Or could you make it any time you wanted?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:17:33] You were allowed the lunch break between four and a half and six hours after going on duty.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:17:40] Okay.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:17:41] You didn't have a lunch hour. You had 20 minutes.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:17:45] And so was there a lunch room or would you ---

**Phelan Tyler** [00:17:49] You'd usually take your lunch. You'd brown bag.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:17:52] You'd brown bag It. Did you have a preferred lunch that was your favorite? You remember? Is it something you looked forward to?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:17:59] No. Just anything to get me by till I got off duty.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:18:05] (laughs) And did you eat on the locomotive or ---

**Phelan Tyler** [00:18:07] Yes.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:18:07] Oh my god, almost while you were in motion.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:18:14] You'd usually eat before your 20 minute lunch break. And you could do what you wanted on your lunch break.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:18:19] Okay. And what would you do if you were on your lunch break and you'd already eaten?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:18:25] Go to the office where the crews reported.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:18:26] Where the people ---

**Phelan Tyler** [00:18:30] Shoot the breeze with the other people.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:18:33] So was there like a break room in the office that you could just go and sit and talk?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:18:40] Just talk.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:18:40] Or you just talk. It sounds fun.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:18:43] Depending on the weather conditions.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:18:45] Right.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:18:52] Sometimes you'd just stay on--(indecipherable).

**Jennifer Henry** [00:18:52] The entire day? If it was cold out or raining or something. Does it ---

**Phelan Tyler** [00:18:59] Well your engine cab was closed in.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:19:04] So kept the elements out. Right.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:19:07] When you wanted to shovel coal into the fire box you would open the doors and shovel the coal from the tender into the fire box.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:19:19] So when you were a fireman, was it sometimes chilly because you were constantly opening the door?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:19:24] Sometimes. But it wasn't unbearable.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:19:29] Did you have a uniform on during, for any of your positions?

**Jennifer Henry** [00:19:48] That's it, that's easy. And what about hats?

[00:19:48] We had little old caps known to be railroad caps.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:19:48] Did it have the logo on there or RF&P logo?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:19:51] No.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:19:51] Let's see, can you perhaps just describe for me the general aura of Potomac Yard? Like what kind of noises were heard throughout the day or during your shift or ---

**Phelan Tyler** [00:20:09] Yeah, there would be whistles blowing and horns blowing depending on the operation.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:20:17] Were there horns for the locomotive?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:20:23] What is that?

**Speaker 1** [00:20:24] Were there horns that you had to blow in the locomotive?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:20:27] You had the whistle.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:20:28] You had the whistle, okay.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:20:30] Steam whistle.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:20:32] When were you supposed to blow it or was it just constantly blowing? One that was in operation.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:20:38] You blew it at people in the way on the track. Or you'd blow it to pull a signal to the operating people.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:20:47] What would you be signaling to them? What would you be trying to tell them?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:20:53] Tell them you would be ready to move or ready to hump a train or ---

**Jennifer Henry** [00:20:57] Okay. Was it so many pulls?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:21:00] Yeah.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:21:01] Do you remember by chance how many pulls meant what? What indication like one whistle, one pull was ---

**Phelan Tyler** [00:21:14] They would assign to a us a certain number of blasts for each job so that when they blew the outside on for you to move, they would blow your designated number.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:21:32] So let's see. So we just talked about sounds. Do you remember any sense or smells that encompassed the yard? I don't know if coal smells or if all the fruit cars made it smell fruity when you were walking around the yard or ---

**Phelan Tyler** [00:22:03] You'll have to repeat that.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:22:04] Okay. Do you remember what kind of smells that encompassed the yard? If you were walking around, what you would smell?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:22:12] No.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:22:12] What about other people hanging around the yard? Were there ---

**Phelan Tyler** [00:22:15] We had security for us to keep unauthorized people out

**Jennifer Henry** [00:22:20] Wow. And was the yard enclosed in some fashion to prevent people from ---

**Phelan Tyler** [00:22:29] Yeah, that whole area was fenced in.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:22:32] Okay. And so there were several entrances that you could enter in?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:22:37] Yes there were authorized entrances.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:22:40] So what would happen when you would show up? Did you have a badge or something to show that you were an employee?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:22:46] No. You just knew who you were working with.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:22:58] So there was a security force, a police force that the Yard employed?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:22:58] Yes.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:23:02] What were the safety conditions like?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:23:05] Safety conditions? They were real acceptable. We had safety rules from a book issue. And we had safety classes periodically.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:23:20] Okay. And the classes, were they geared towards different departments? Or was it just general safety?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:23:29] No. Different departments had their own rules plan.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:23:33] Okay. Were there, or what were the consequences if safety rules weren't followed?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:23:42] We'd be suspended a certain number of days if you violate the rules.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:23:46] Who is overseeing the employees to make sure safety rules weren't violated.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:23:56] The train master, and the transportation assistant and the yard master.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:24:02] Do you remember any incidences where you had to suspend employees?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:24:12] If you found any of them under the influence of alcohol, we would fire them.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:24:18] That's a safety hazard, definitely. Let's see. If someone happened to be injured while on the job, what would happen?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:24:31] First thing we would do is get them medical attention. And if it was serious enough we would send them to the hospital. The company had an assigned doctor.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:24:45] I was going to ask you if there was. So a doctor on call who would be available to you.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:24:49] Right.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:24:49] And if someone had been injured, would they be reassigned to a different department if they couldn't ----

**Phelan Tyler** [00:24:58] No. They would either come back to their own job or go on retirement.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:25:03] Okay. Okay.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:25:09] Railroad company had a department that handled personal injuries.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:25:15] How many do you think the number of personal injuries was? A lot or a little compared to maybe other railroad companies?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:25:27] No it was moderate, it wasn't too bad.

**Speaker 1** [00:25:29] Sounds good. Let's see. Did you see, or do you think that the railroad workers and your fellow cohorts were a close-knit group?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:25:44] Yeah, we had a well, we do have a retirees group now that meets once a month.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:25:54] While you were working there, were there social gatherings for employees outside of working at the Yard?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:26:02] A very small amount.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:26:06] Let's see. What about company sponsored picnics or holiday parties?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:26:17] We had family days and family nights.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:26:21] What did that mean? Would they come to the yard to ---

**Phelan Tyler** [00:26:25] Well, in some cases, but we'd meet in an auditorium, or a school.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:26:30] Okay. Did your family like attending those events?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:26:35] Not too much.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:26:36] No? Do you recall many female employees working at the yard while you were working there, or did the numbers change over time?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:26:52] Changed over time. But we had female employees.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:26:59] Let's see. What kind of jobs? Would they be under your supervision, or were they in different departments?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:27:03] In other departments.



**Jennifer Henry** [00:27:06] You were in the engine services, right?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:27:07] Right.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:27:14] Besides your positions at the yard, what other jobs were available and how did they differ from yours? You said as a transportation assistant you were constantly moving around the tracks. Were there other positions that also moved along the tracks or ones that stayed mainly in the office?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:27:48] Each department had their own supervisors. A caliper department, a car department. And a track department.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:28:05] And did the supervisors stay in an office or were they also just like you - --

**Phelan Tyler** [00:28:12] No, they would circulate over the yard.

**Speaker 1** [00:28:16] Do you remember what positions were stationery positions?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:28:24] Most of the stationary ones were in the clerical deapment.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:28:27] Okay. That makes sense. And I'm guessing, although I'm not sure, like in the round house, that's where they would fix, fix places fix the machines ---

**Phelan Tyler** [00:28:41] That's where they would repair the engines.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:28:41] Okay.

[00:28:44] See this is a turntable. You'd put an engine on a turntable and turn it and put it in the stall in the brownout.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:28:53] Okay. And then machinists would work in the stall?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:28:57] Machinists, the boilermakers, each one of them had their own department.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:29:06] Cool. Let's see. Okay, so you just explained to me what the round house is. Can you tell me, I think you also kind of explained the hump to me. Could you explain it again for tape? What is a hump? Was it just a hill?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:29:27] The hump is a raised section of the track so that the cars can roll along gravity.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:29:34] And how do they get to that raised section? Is it connected to ---

**Phelan Tyler** [00:29:40] An engine goes around, you can call it around a train and shoves it to the hump. And when the train cars get to the hump or train man separates them, uncouples them, and allows them to run the gravity and the classification track.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:30:01] And if I remember correctly, how long did they keep humps in action?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:30:10] In operation?

**Jennifer Henry** [00:30:12] In operation.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:30:12] 24 hours a day, 7 days a week (inaudible) construction, a building where they put coal in it, and then when the engines had to be recalled, they tore through the tipple and the coal is allowed down through a chute and to the coal transfer of the locomotive.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:30:35] Okay. So you would see that in action when your were a fireman are on the engine?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:30:39] Yeah.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:30:43] And let's see, what happened in the classification yards? I think you you were actually the one who was making the main action, the classification yards? You were moving locomotives from one classification track to another, is that correct?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:30:58] The cars, not the locomotives.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:31:02] Okay. But the locomotive was pulling the cars.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:31:05] Well, in the case of humping, they were--(indecipherable)--but on the far end, they would be pull them out and dump them back to the other cars, depending on the classification.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:31:18] And that's what you were doing when you were there?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:31:20] Yeah.

**Speaker 1** [00:31:23] Okay. Let's see. Do you remember what kind of freight came through Potomac Yard? What kind of freight or goods?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:31:31] Everything.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:31:36] Let's see. Can you describe the changes that took place from when you first started working there?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:31:43] Well, in one period in late 1940, they converted from steam to diesel.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:31:52] Steam to diesel engines?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:31:53] Yes.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:31:55] And did you have an opportunity to therefore drive both?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:31:59] Right.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:31:59] Started off on steam, when you returned, it was diesel?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:32:08] Right.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:32:08] What about, say, like post 1950s, any other changes that occurred that had an impact?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:32:18] When?

**Jennifer Henry** [00:32:18] From the 1950s on. What other changes might have occurred besides the change to diesel? Were there any others? I don't know like computers ---

**Phelan Tyler** [00:32:37] Most of the track switches were operated manually and then they switched to automatic.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:32:48] Where you just press a button?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:32:48] Right.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:32:48] Did that make things easier?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:32:55] It made it more efficient.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:32:56] Okay. Not necessarily easier. (laughs) Let's see. What about the yard itself? Did it ever expand or was it always pretty much this?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:33:11] The length of it stayed pretty much the same, but the number of tracks in each different part of the yard changed and enlarged.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:33:21] Okay. So it expanded width-wise, essentially.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:33:25] Yes. The classification yard just had about 27 tracks at one time, and then it enlarged to 40.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:33:33] Oh my gosh.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:33:33] And this, the northbound classification yard changed from 25 to 50.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:33:41] So you were practically doubling the size.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:33:46] Right.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:33:46] And with the expansion in the number of tracks, so that means they needed to hire more employees, since you obviously had more freight coming through?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:33:53] No, it just made it easier to classify the cars into the tracks.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:33:58] Okay. Okay.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:34:00] Before that, in some cases, they would have put two classifications in one track and then they would have to pull that track out and reclassify them to get them in order for the outbound train.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:34:12] Okay. So the expansion in that case made things much easier?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:34:18] Right.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:34:21] Let's see. Do you remember any changes in the immediate vicinity of Potomac Yard, like development along Jefferson Davis (Highway) or were there housing complexes that went up near the Yard or did it stay mostly in this ---

**Phelan Tyler** [00:34:39] Yes, they built complexes on both sides of it.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:34:42] During your time there?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:34:44] And they're still building.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:34:45] That's true, they are. (laughs). Let's see. What about policy changes at the Yard over time?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:34:56] Pretty much the same.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:34:57] Okay. Do you happen to remember using the radios at Potomac Yard? Your radios?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:35:07] Each crew had a set of radios for each member of the crew and all of them on a different frequency.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:35:15] Each crew was on crew frequency. Did your frequency change day by day, or was it the same frequency every day for your crew?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:35:24] You would pick up your radio when you went on duty and you would take the assigned frequency on the radio.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:35:31] Okay.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:35:33] And that's so that you wouldn't be interfered with other people talking on the radio while you were moving.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:35:40] Do you remember any of the code words that you would use when you were talking? Or code numbers? Ten-Four. (laughs)

**Phelan Tyler** [00:35:50] Most of them were assigned by, the crews were assigned by numbers

**Jennifer Henry** [00:35:57] Okay. How many crews total? So like numbers one through eight or something like that?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:36:02] Yes.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:36:04] And your crew number, did that change every day as well?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:36:08] No, the crew number stayed pretty much the same.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:36:11] Do you remember any of your crew numbers?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:36:16] The actual members?

**Jennifer Henry** [00:36:18] The number, do you remember the crew number?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:36:22] There would be five crew members on each job.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:36:27] And do you remember the names of the guys you used to work with most frequently?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:36:33] A good many of them have passed on (laughs)

**Jennifer Henry** [00:36:37] Did the same crew work together for a number of years?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:36:42] No. You would get a different crew on every shift.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:36:45] Okay. Who assigned them, you to a certain crew? Was that someone above you, a superintendent?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:36:54] No. Your seniority allowed you to pick what job you wanted to go on regardless of who the other members were.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:37:04] So the transportation assistant, you were able to pick which job you wanted to go on or which crew?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:37:13] If you had the seniority.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:37:17] At some point, you must have reached seniority, right?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:37:21] Yes.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:37:29] So do you remember when the computers came into use at Potomac Yard?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:37:34] Yes.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:37:36] I'm not sure if it was in the 70s. Is that when it was or was it later or earlier?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:37:41] It was in the 70s.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:37:45] Did the computers help your job any, your job as a transportation assistant, did it affect --

**Phelan Tyler** [00:37:52] Not really.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:37:53] Not really. Because you're in movement, mostly on the trains. So when did you retire from Potomac Yard?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:38:04] 1980.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:38:06] And, at that time, did you receive any awards for your long time-service?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:38:15] Yes.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:38:16] And which award was that?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:38:20] They had a party and presented me with a certificate.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:38:25] How many years have you been there total?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:38:27] 41.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:38:27] 41. And is that when you join the Potomac Guard Railroad Retirees Association?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:38:36] Yes.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:38:40] Do you want to tell me anything more about the association? Had it been established for a long time by the time you joined, or was it a newly formed organization?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:38:49] It's 25 years old now.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:38:52] Yeah, that's right. So let's see. That means it was formed in just about the time that you joined it?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:38:58] Right. Right.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:38:59] Right. You're one of the for-runners right?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:39:01] I'm one of the charter members. (laughs)

**Jennifer Henry** [00:39:04] So what made you and your other fellow charter members decide to create it?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:39:09] Now certain (indecipherable) at that time thought it would be a good idea.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:39:15] Sounds like you agreed with them.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:39:16] Right.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:39:17] And it sounds like since it's still going strong, that was definitely a good idea. So what are some of the fondest memories you have of working at Potomac Yard?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:39:38] All of them were fine.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:39:43] Do you ever recall having a bad day at Potomac Yard that you want to share? Or a difficult day?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:39:50] Not really.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:39:51] Not really. What about a particularly humorous day or funny day or something funny happened?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:40:00] Can't think of any right now.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:40:03] Were things pretty much even then for you while you were on the job.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:40:07] Right.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:40:07] Even Stephen. What did you think about the Yard when it closed in 1992?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:40:16] I didn't like it.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:40:17] Didn't like it. Yeah. Did they have a closing ceremony or did the retirees association attend, like the last day of the yard or anything of that sort?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:40:30] I think they did, but I wasn't aware of it.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:40:36] And what are your thoughts about the Potomac Yard area today? I know you mentioned there's lots of construction going on there.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:40:46] Well, you can stop progress.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:40:49] That's true.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:40:50] Yeah, I'm in favor of it.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:40:52] Okay. Let's see. Do you think you miss working at the yard? Or have you missed working at the yard since 1980?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:41:01] I have at times.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:41:04] What about the people?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:41:06] Well, I've stayed pretty much in touch with them. Telephone or meeting them.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:41:10] That's good. And what else should we know about Potomac Yard that we haven't asked, I haven't asked you about? Is there something that comes to your mind that everybody should know about the Yard?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:41:30] No, all in all, they had a pretty good safety record and performance was good.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:41:38] And what about the company itself? I mean, from the time that you were working there? Or what would you say about it if someone during the time you were working there said, I think I want to work at Potomac Yard Railroad, what do you think?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:41:56] I'd tell them that's good choice. No I enjoyed working for the RF&P Railroad.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:42:05] Sounds like you did. Okay. I don't have any other questions. Unless there's something else you want to add.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:42:12] No. I'm glad I could go down here.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:42:16] Me, too. I really appreciate it. It was nice to talk to someone who drove a locomotive. Was that actually a hard skill to learn? The actual maneuvering and driving?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:42:28] No. When you have on the job training, it comes to you.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:42:33] Okay. So you spend time watching first?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:42:38] Right.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:42:38] And this is a random question, but is there like an actual steering wheel?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:42:42] No, the rails guide the wheels.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:42:45] Okay. So what are you doing, when you're saying in the, you're just making sure there's enough fuel, that it doesn't run into anything?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:42:58] I can't think of any.



**Jennifer Henry** [00:43:05] I can't think of any other questions either.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:43:06] All right.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:43:08] So I think this concludes our interview.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:43:11] All right.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:43:11] Thank you, Mr. Tyler.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:43:13] Okay.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:43:13] It was a pleasure.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:43:17] You had apprentices working under you while you were an engineer in a locomotive? Did you train up and coming firemen to become engineers?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:43:33] Yes. That was my last job, was instructing promotion of firemen to engineer.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:43:40] Oh cool, That's fantastic. Neat. And did you enjoy that experience, teaching the youngsters? What were some of the pointers that you gave to them that you thought they should know and when they were driving the locomotive?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:43:57] Well, you would teach them how to apply the air brakes.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:44:01] Okay. And air brakes, essentially the brakes are ---

**Phelan Tyler** [00:44:06] It's a little bit complicated.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:44:09] Does it require using your feet like pedals?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:44:11] No, when you use your hand with the lever.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:44:14] Oh okay, that does sound complicated. Is it like your left hand or your right hand or both?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:44:21] You usually use your left hand with the brake and the throttle.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:44:27] And what does the throttle do?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:44:28] The throttle is the thing that controls the speed of the locomotive.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:44:33] And you have to use both at the same time, throttle and brake?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:44:37] Sometimes.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:44:37] That that would be complicated. So did you have any words of advice to a fireman?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:44:49] Yeah, not to drink on the job.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:44:52] Definitely good advice and necessary. And do you have any advice today for anyone who's looking to work on a railroad?

**Phelan Tyler** [00:45:06] I really don't. It was good to me, but I don't know.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:45:14] Right. (laughs) That's true.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:45:14] They changed the working agreements and all, so I don't know.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:45:17] Okay. So you guys had a very good ---

**Phelan Tyler** [00:45:21] You used to run from Richmond to Potomac Yard, that was a day's work. But with the improvements of diesel and all, you'd make that trip in 3 or 4 hours. But you would get eight hours pay. But now they make your work eight hours.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:45:45] Oh wow. Making you get your money's worth or they get their money's worth

**Phelan Tyler** [00:45:47] But the pay is good.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:45:50] So it's a little give and take.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:45:51] It's a balance I would guess.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:45:54] Okay. Well, I think that's it.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:45:57] All right.

**Jennifer Henry** [00:45:57] That was a follow up question. Thank you, Mr. Tyler.

**Phelan Tyler** [00:46:01] All right.