

Interview with Verner Bump
Interviewer: Melvin Cox
1975

A: Back during the Depression Uncle Bud just worked two months out of the year and the whole family...I think I was paying \$10.00 a week room and board then...and the entire family lived off of my board money. Of course, Uncle Bud never quit smoking his Camels. You just wonder how people managed.

Q: Yes.

A: He had that pack of Camels or two every day and of course, Aunt Effie, if it wasn't for her they would never have made it. She could really manage. But anyway, I stayed out there, up there, until, oh, late 30's then I went out to the shop. They tried to get me to go to Louisville then and I wouldn't do it. Well then when World War II hit why I started to go on the road. I had an opportunity to and I could have, but old man Hartmann talked me out of it. During the War boy, why many a time I would get home: I worked from 7:00 to 3:30, and I would get called. They had what they called miscellaneous overtime board, first in, first out; and it was a tough job. Half of them guys would turn it down see, but many a time I would be home and not even undressed and they would call me back down to the shop. Maybe go back down there and have a fifteen-minute job but you got paid two hours and forty minutes for it. You know any time you were called out you got a minimum of four hours pay. Of course, some of them jobs, well they tried to get me to go to St. Louis one time to take that foreman's job over there, and boy that place. One of the boys just went over there here about a year ago. He, it's a promotion alright, but uh, it sure isn't worth it. The money you get out of it. Just like when they tried to get me to take that wrecker foreman's job; why, it would be just the same as in jail. You're subject to call 24 hours a day. When you're a supervisor, there's no extra pay to it see, it's just a salary job and that's it. Well, lots of the, well most of the time, the men make more money than the foremen do cause they're on time and a half from the time they leave here until they get back other than their regular eight hour assigned shift which falls in that area see, and if you went to a movie you had to call up and tell them you were going to a movie and then make arrangements at the ticket office for them to call you, in case a wrecker was called. The master mechanic called me down there one day and said, "What's the matter you're not interested in that foreman's job, that wrecker foreman's job?" I said, "shoot man, you can't never pin that on me. I'll tell you the truth, I'd go back to work as a mechanic rather than take that thing." He said, "I want to tell you just between you and I, I don't blame you."

Q: Did they ever have any trouble during the war thinking that somebody was going to blow up the tracks or cause wrecks?

A: No sir, not in this area. This is a pretty centrally located area, you know, with a lot of traffic through here. See, there's the Southern, the IC, the Big 4, C&E then and the L&N, five major railroads terminate or are in and out of this town. But we've never even had an inkling of anything. I guess it's just too far inland and a smaller city you know. And the people who are prone to do those things they pick on these big turn stiles and actually there was more business through here at times than there was some of the larger cities even though they weren't Chicago or something like that, that had dozens of railroads running through there. St. Louis has got a number. If they are going to get involved in something like that, they would pick a place that had more business or more railroads running into it. But as far as sabotage, why I never did even hear it mentioned around here to my knowledge. But boy during the

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War now just like when World War II started, I think I became 35 in August of the first registration which happened in October. What year did World War II start?

Q: '41 wasn't it, December?

A: They started registering for the draft in '39, I think. I know I didn't have to register on the first one because I was 35. But in the next registration I had to, and I was classified as 1A I guess. As far as I can remember. Being a railroad employee, you had quite a few exemptions and I never was even examined. I had one friend, but he was a younger man; he ended up in the war. Of course, I had made up my mind if I had to go, I'd go. Why I wasn't going to try to get exempted cause I worked for the railroad. I felt like if I had to go why I wasn't any better than the rest of them. But it was one of those things. Business was really, really flourishing. We got those freight trains in there by the dozen every week, freight and passenger. You know the funny thing about it was, you couldn't figure it out, they said it was to regulate, you know equalize the business. Maybe there would be a bunch of guys going from South Carolina down to the southern part of Texas; they would route them through here. In other words, they would make a triangle thing out of it and then they would route them down south. That's the way things operate, I reckon. The government was trying to, that was the story, they was trying to give every railroad an equal amount of business. And boy, those troop trains. I never will forget one time we had a train, I guess there was 60 to 70 cars in all; well let's see, I don't remember what outfit it was, they had a lot of tanks and jeeps and everything else on there. One boy wanted to sell me, I guess a 45, said I'll let you have it for, brand new, said I'll let you have that for \$10.00. I said I wouldn't give you fifty cents for it. If I had got caught paying him, I could have been prosecuted too I suppose.

Q: Was it hard to find a job in Evansville back then?

A: Oh no, jobs were plentiful. They had, you know, the shipyard here and there's a situation. That shipyard wasn't nothing, of course you wouldn't remember, but that was nothing but hills, holes and hollows. That water washed in from here to across the street and they spent thousands of dollars filling that all in, leveling it off, to put that shipyard in and heck, they had women working there. Several L&N boys that had been laid off during the Depression hadn't got back, worked there for a while. Why there was guys went down there and wouldn't hit a lick for a week: wouldn't do a dime's worth of work, just hibernate. I know Uncle Bud was telling about he was putting in some kind of heating system in there then, and he went down with some young fella and he would come in every morning, check in, and he wouldn't see him until quitting time that night. Of course, it was on material, you know, time and material. There wasn't any stipulated sum they could spend. And you know right now you go down to New Orleans, unless it's been changed in the last three or four years, you can see dozens of those LST's down there around Mobile and Whiteland just rusting away. Dozens of them. I used to go down to New Orleans at least once a year and boy you just wouldn't believe it. They made an awful lot of them. This town was a booming then. Boy these crap games and poker games and red-light district, they really flourished.

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Q: What kind of trouble, not trouble, did the Police Department and Mayor kind of go along with everything?

A: Oh yeah, everything was wide open. It was lots of money see, and they could afford to pay off. Of course, you are not supposed to say those things, but apparently, they happened. But gambling, there wasn't anything concealed about it. You didn't have to knock on the door to get in, just walk in and walk back to the games. Why right down here on Franklin Street, why pay days that blackjack game down there for example, they would have two or three tables going and rather than slow down the game, they would shuffle a double deck, two full decks to keep from losing time running one deck out. I had a friend down there; I think he got \$10.00 an hour for dealing. He would work, I think, an hour on and an hour off but he got straight time. In other words, if he was there six hours, - he made a lot of money down there. Why those poor guys that would come in there pay day night, week in and week out and lose every nickel they made. And they made good money down there then. Those jobs were all good paying jobs. And apparently, they did good work. It was expensive work, because there was so much loitering and gold bricking going on, that run the price of it up. It was a good thing for Evansville put that in, cause they had a shanty town down there and that was about it. A bunch of old tin and wood houses, and stuff like that, and they cleared all that area up. What it materialized into was Mead Johnson Terminal. They would never have put that in there if it hadn't been fixed before then, where they could install it at little cost. They might have put it in where they dock those boats, I mean put them out in the river you know. I don't remember just where they did put those boats in the river. It was just a big improvement. Apparently, they rippapped that along there, I don't know, because it is still intact. I never did get over in that area, but it was sure a good thing for Evansville. Why years ago, there at the end of Fulton Avenue they used, I've heard this told, but it was before I was ever around here, they used to do a lot of boat unloading, they would ship in a lot of railroad ties and stuff like that. Back in those days when this happened, they weren't creosoted ties, they were just plain old ties and they would get them in there by the thousands and ship them out of here and of course these five railroads that are here, they would buy them right here. It was a situation that Uncle Bud used to talk about, seeing those guys going up and down, said those guys would sing all day, grab a tie and go up the bank with it. Something to see. I'll tell you this thing has sure changed now. Just like the depot, who would ever dreamed there wouldn't be any passenger trains. I was talking to an express man Tuesday. Twenty or twenty-five years ago we'll say, why never would one ever thought there wouldn't of been an express company down there yet with the business they used to do. I've seen those trains come in there two or three baggage cars loaded to the roof with express, and all the cream and calves and all that sort of thing. And the mail, they ought to have been, the government paid enough for those full mail cars to have paid for the entire train. You take a full-sized mail car and practically all of them had mail cars on them. Well, in fact, in the winter months they had a regular mail train that's all they would carry mail and express from Chicago, well, it got to Nashville and it was divided up, one went to New Orleans and the other went to Atlanta. But it sure was nice, those trains. And the excursions, I don't know if you ever heard of the excursions or not, but you could go to St. Louis and back for a fourth of what a one-way fare is now. Two and a half, three dollars for a round trip. And I've seen them on excursion nights run them like one, they would run one to St. Louis in a hundred and two or three sections. Get every available coach they could find, rake and scrape. See the IC at that time had four trains running to Princeton, Kentucky, and some of the trains

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didn't run on Sunday and they would borrow all their coaches to put on the excursions. They could of made money at it, of course railroads don't want that kind of business. Slows up their freight you know.

Q: What was the purpose of the excursion? Anybody here just have a lot of money and didn't -

A: Mostly it was...seven or eight hundred people go on one, maybe a thousand, why three dollars a round trip, why that is three thousand dollars. They made money on them.

Q: Who thought that up? I mean was...

A: I don't know where that instigated, been that way years and years and years. It is just like these specials they have on these planes. They have overseas trips and stuff like Marilyn went on, cut rate, bundle package, why it's about the equivalent of these excursions. During the war why they would have specials. I can remember Chicago, Chicago Tribune I guess it was, ran six section train from Chicago down here through to Tennessee somewhere, maybe farther I don't know now: it's been so long ago. Like Mother's Day I remember they had six sections out of Chicago and mothers and friends going down to this camp to see these boys you know, those things are history for sure now.

Q: Did you have any trouble getting a house around here during the War?

A: Yeah, they was. The population here was, I guess 20,000 more than what it is now, maybe not quite that, but boy houses were at a premium; rent houses, apartments, just hard to find.

Q: What price did they rent for?

A: Well, see, I was buying a house when that came up, so I just don't know. They were in proportion to people's income at the time. Boy restaurants did a big business then. Like down here at the shipyard, oh they was people from 75 to 100 miles from here working there from all around. Everybody was working, Servel was going full blast and the shipyard and let's see, out there on 41 North where Whirlpool is now, what was the original...

Q: International Harvester wasn't it?

A: Well even before that, International Harvester came in there after the War.

Q: Republic?

A: Yea, Republic, guess that's what it was. Shoot, anybody could get a job then if he wanted it. I know one guy, ever since I've known that fella, he never had a job, so he got a job out at Republic, I guess. Let's see what did he...security man I guess, yeah, that's what it was, he checked people in and out you know there at the gate. He worked a week and said, "that's too confining for me." But anybody in those days who wanted to work could get a job, whether, why just like for example in these building trades you know. Well, if you had any experience at all you could get a union card. They were just, you know, needing that kind of help and they just lifted everything. I know there in the car department, whether you had ever seen a freight car or not, why you would be a mechanic in three months. Because there was such a shortage of labor and a high demand, and business was flourishing on everything, and they just didn't handle long trains like they do now. About a hundred car train is the limit now; and now it's nothing to see 150 cars you know. Back during World War II, the cars were smaller, they didn't have

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those huge cars. Now they got these 90-foot box cars, cars that haul automobiles, they run 89 feet I think and of course these roller bearings now make them so much easier to pull. They can...I know down there at the shop one time they had one of those new big roller bearing cars and there was such a slight incline on that track it would be impossible to see it, and Bob Irvin got up there to repair a hand brake; something wrong with the hand brake, he had about a twelve foot ladder up against the end of that car and all at once that ladder and that car started rolling, and I happened to be right there and saw it moving and he looked around; he thought someone was fooling with his ladder, and it was that car in motion so he came down real quick. I ordered one of the boys to put a chock under it. That was it. Ordinarily with a friction bearing it would never have moved. They will all be roller bearings in another few years. It's one of those things.