

WILLIAM RIDGE

Tape 1

February 23, 1981

William Ridge residence, 2209 Putnam Street, Terre Haute, IN

INTERVIEWER: Martin Plascak

TRANSCRIBER: Kathleen M. Skelly

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MP: This is an oral history project with William Ridge, 86 years old, an employee of the Terre Haute, Indianapolis & Evansville Traction Company for 45 years. This oral history interview is taking place on the 23rd of February, 1981, at 1:30 in the afternoon at the home of William Ridge. And I'm Martin Plascak.

Mr. Ridge, where were you born?

RIDGE: In the southern part of Indiana down in Pikesville, Indiana.

MP: And you're 86 years old?

RIDGE: Yes, sir.

MP: Tell us something about your parents.

RIDGE: Well, my dad was Thomas Ridge. He was an old Kentuckian. He was born and raised in Kentucky. And my mother's name was Eliza Ridge; she was raised down in the southern part of Indiana. And my Granddaddy Foster was an old steamboat engineer. He used to go New Orleans to Memphis, steamboat corn . . . him and his brother.

MP: What about your education?

RIDGE: Well, I never went to high school. I went to about 8th grade of the common school . . . was all the school I got.

MP: When were you married, sir?

RIDGE: Well, I've been married more than once.

MP: Um hm.

RIDGE: I married the first time in Vincennes. Her name was Ruth Price. Then we separated. Then I come up to Terre Haute and I married again -- another gal.

RIDGE: She was from Washington, Indiana. Her name was Lou Johnson. We lived together for several years and we separated. Then I married a gal by the name of Alberta Proffit. Ol' Bill Proffit -- everybody knew him. He was a carpenter and used to work for Oakley. And finally, we was living here then when she took to the ol' guy next door -- ol' Finley Coons. He run off and left his wife (she was an invalid) and they divorced. And they got married, him and her /Alberta/ did, and moved down on South 4th Street -- 4th and Washington. That's where she lives yet.

And then this gal I got now, she's from North Terre Haute. She was raised around North Terre Haute, and we've been married . . .

MRS. R: Forty-five years last December the 23rd.

MP: Forty-five years and how many children do you have?

RIDGE: Three.

MP: Three children. What are their names?

MRS. R: Billy, and Jack, and Ruth Ann.

RIDGE: Ruth Ann lives right across the street over here in this house. They bought that property over there off . . .

MRS. R: Chenault.

RIDGE: Chenaults.

MP: And your son Bill is a former policeman, and he is now the street commissioner, isn't he?

RIDGE: Yeah.

MP: Mr. Ridge, let's talk about your job career now.

How did you happen to get started with the old Terre Haute . . .

RIDGE: Traction Company.

MP: . . . Traction Company. I believe your first job was with the streetcars was it not?

RIDGE: That's right. Yeah, I started there on the streetcars. They was payin' 17¢ an hour then, here 12 hours a day, 7 days a week. And then that's how I come to go over on the interurban. The interurban was payin' 22¢ an hour, so I went over on the interurban and worked that. I worked Clinton, Paris (we used to haul a lot of freight out of Paris) and I worked at freight run from here to Indianapolis for a good while.

MP: How long did you work with the streetcars in Terre Haute? Do you remember?

RIDGE: You mean on . . .

MP: On the streetcars.

RIDGE: Oh, I expect I put in 10 years.

MP: Can you remember the dates? When was that?

RIDGE: Well, it was back in . . . I come here in /1917. And I was working North 19th up there in the . . . got shot there at 13th and Locust with a colored fellow. He got on at 13th and Wabash, was drunk, and he started talking vulgar language. I asked him to cut it out or get off so he went to the back end and sat down until I got to 13th and Locust. And when I got to 13th and Locust, he come walking up there and grabbed ahold of me and said, "Well, you son-of-a-bitch, I ain't afraid of you." And I just turned around and opened the door and knocked him out the door. Well, when I knocked him out the door, why he crawled over to that . . . there was a grocery store then there. That's where that pizza place is now. But he crawled over to that store, slid his back up the wall and pulled out a .38, /and/ started in shootin'.

So, he shot three times. The first time just missed my head and went over and hit the glass up above and went over and went in the drugstore glass, went through the transom at a drugstore and went inside, fell down on a table, and spinned around and scared the people all to death in there. So, when he started in shootin', the people toward the back end of the streetcar just knocked the back door down and run for that drugstore. And they got in there -- several of them -- and there was one colored fellow

RIDGE: in there. He was scared as bad as they was. He was tryin' to get in the clear, too. When he went a-runnin' in there, why they thought this was the guy that done the shootin' so they started turning over the tables and everything else, trying to hide. And the druggist got that stopped and slowed it down.

So, by that time, why, he shot me. He shot me through the door. He stood over there and shot back at the door. And I'd told the passengers, I said, "Now, get in the clear. He's gonna start in shooting." I'd seen him pull that gun out. So, he hit me on this side. The first shot just hit that bottom rib; and, boy, when a bullet hits a bone, it just . . . I don't know, it paralyzes. It just . . . I fell and as I fell, there was a little Jew sittin' there in the front seat, and he was getting up, trying to get out of there. And just as he got up on his feet, that nigger shot me. Why, I fell and I fell down and knocked this little Jew down on the floor and fell on top of him . . . or side of him. Then he run around the front end and shot down through the front end of the car -- just went down between our heads. So, he run then and old Mike Casey, a detective we had here . . . ol' Mike went up there that night at 11 o'clock . . . or it was 11 o'clock when he come in. He went up there in the evening and talked with this 'ol woman and found out where he lived at. He told her what he was gonna do. He said, "Now, I'm gonna come in here and sit down. And I'm gonna stay. I'll keep that door locked." And he said, "I'm gonna sit here."

He said, "When he comes up and knocks on the door or says something," he said, "you just sit still. I'll let him in."

So ol' Mike got up (it was around 11 o'clock when this nigger come in). He knocked on the door. 'Ol Mike told her, he said, "Ask who's there?" So, she asked, "Who's there?" And he said, "It's me, honey. Let me in." So ol' Mike he just got up and unlocked the door. Threw a gun in his face. He had this gun he shot me with and a pint of White Mule in his pocket when Mike got him.

But he'd shot a guy down in Kentucky. That's what

RIDGE: he was doin' up in here. They was a-huntin' for him. He shot a guy down in Kentucky with this same gun he shot me with.

MP: How'd the police know who it was?

RIDGE: Well, they know . . . I guess somebody told them what his name was and all about it because old Mike went right up there where he lived at, stayed until he got 'im.

MP: Do you remember the name?

RIDGE: The nigger's name? Ike Richards.

MP: And how'd that case turn out?

RIDGE: Well, he got 14 years in the penitentiary. They sent him 14 years to the pen, and I don't know /whether/ he come back here or not when he got out. You know, I never did see him any more.

MP: So, you were injured and taken to the hospital, I take it?

RIDGE: Oh, yeah, I was shot -- two holes. I was shot twice. He shot me through there; hit that rib, as I say, and then he lowered the gun down and shot me right through the top part of the bowels.

MP: How long were you in the hospital?

RIDGE: Oh, I was in there, I expect, not over 30 days.

MP: And this happened on a streetcar at . . .

RIDGE: Yeah, at 13th and Locust.

MP: When, sir? What year? Do you remember?

RIDGE: No. I don't remember what year it was now. It was in the paper. There was a big piece in the paper. I . . .

Mom!

MP: Well . . .

RIDGE: Pardon me, I'll see if she might have that paper

RIDGE: in there. I had a piece of paper where he'd done it.

MP: All right, Mr. Ridge. Let's talk a little bit more about the streetcars.

How many streetcars were there in Terre Haute when you started working? Do you remember?

RIDGE: Well, there was South 17th, North 19th, North 8th, East Locust, South 7th, South 3rd; that's about all of them, I think.

MP: Do you remember what some of the schedules were? How often did they run?

RIDGE: Oh, they run -- back there then -- every . . . you could catch one every 15 to 30 minutes.

MP: What about the fares?

RIDGE: Five cents.

MP: And was there a transfer then?

RIDGE: Yeah. They got a transfer. No extra charge for a transfer back there then. They gave you a transfer if you wanted to transfer to another streetcar.

MP: Where did the streetcars stop downtown?

RIDGE: Well, of course, we had a station back there. It was the old ticket office, and interurbans they pulled around there. They had a yard around there. They pulled around there in that yard and would park. They stayed there 'til they was needed again. They used to be . . . that yard used to be full of interurbans. Of course, once in a while we'd put a streetcar in there, if we had one we were gonna use or getting ready to take out. We used to take 'em out. They'd break down, and we'd take another car out to 'em. That used to be my job, too, at the old interurban station. I used to take cars out, bring the crippled ones in . . . give 'em to the guys on the route and bring the crippled ones back to the garage, the barn.

MP: And where were the barns located?

RIDGE: Out East Wabash, out there at . . . aaw, it's about . . . (voice drops to almost a whisper) let's see. What the hell street is that? It was on the north side of Wabash right across from where that there . . .

MRS. R: (low voice in the background) . . . where the old dance used to be out there . . . what was the name of that?

MP: Out near Wassell's?

MRS. R: Yeah.

MP: . . . and across from Abel and Creal, I believe.

MRS. R: Yeah, yeah. Right in there.

RIDGE: Yeah.

MP: Well, I believe one of those old car barn buildings is still standing, is it not?

RIDGE: Yeah, I think it's still there. I think that old one is still there, that they . . . what did they have?

MRS. R: Some kind of . . . /they/ had glass /or/ somethin' . . . made glass of some kind in there for a while.

MP: Mr. Ridge, you worked in the car barn, did you? Is that where the maintenance on the streetcars . . .

RIDGE: Yeah, that's where they done all kind of work in there. They had blacksmiths, and they had car builders and car repairs and everything. They had a private shop there that they worked on.

MP: What else did you do with the streetcar company?

RIDGE: Well, of course, as I say, I worked interurbans; and I worked on the snow plow when there used to come a big snow here. We'd have snows. When I first come up here, I started with ol' Bill . . . what was his name, mom? That run that there . . . had that place over there where he had all kinds of stuff? Bill . . .

MRS. R: Oh . . . he lived in Seelyville then.

RIDGE: Yeah. He had a place over there at Seelyville.
He had . . .

MRS. R: And his son. Wasn't it his son had that big . . .

RIDGE: Airplane?

MRS. R: . . . airplane place in Brazil?

RIDGE: Yeah.

MRS. R: Oh. What was his name?

MP: Did you ever What was the crew of a
streetcar? I believe there was a motorman

RIDGE: Motorman and a conductor.

MP: Were you ever a motorman or a conductor?

RIDGE: Oh, yeah. I was both; I worked both ends.

MP: On the streetcar?

RIDGE: On the streetcars, yeah.

MP: What'd the motorman do?

RIDGE: Well, he was up there in front, and he had a
vestibule up there that he stayed in, and nobody was
supposed to be up there with him. But he run the
streetcar and stopped it and picked up passengers
and started it and It had nine points. You
pulled it around and you throwed it off like that.
You fed it back around, and you had nine points on
it when it was runnin' full force. And I've worked . . .
I've worked on that, not in the shop, but

Oh, some of those ol' guys out on the line my
age now would . . . they'd have trouble, and I'd pull
up there on the switch, get off and go over there and
help 'em. I know there was an ol' guy that worked
up there . . . aaw, I can't think of his name; he
had a son that worked on a streetcar, too -- Ellis,
ol' man Ellis. He had a run ahead of me up there,
and I pulled up there at the switch, and he was down
at the end of the line. I seen that he was having

RIDGE: trouble, and I just went on . . . took my streetcar and went on down to him. And that had fingers in it. That motor had fingers in there that like that they come around and touched the other part of it, which give 'em more power. And I went up there and this ol' man Ellis has got one or two of these fingers bent down like that, and it wouldn't feed up any more. So, I just opened up the control box that had a lid on top, and I just took it off where you could see. And I seen what was the trouble; they was bent in like that. So, I just took and bent them back out where they belonged and straightened them up with these other points, fed her right up and went right on.

MP: What did the conductor do?

RIDGE: Well, he collected fares. He stayed on the back end there on them there closed cars. There was a fare-box back there, and they'd get on, and he'd give 'em change. They'd drop whatever the fare was. Used to be a nickel, and then it got to be 10 cents, then it raised to 15. But . . .

MRS. R: But the conductor used to just collect the fares, Bill. They didn't have them fare boxes then. And they rung 'em . . . had a cord they . . .

RIDGE: Oh, they had a summer car, sure. On a summer car, mama . . .

MP: Well, let's talk about that summer car in just a minute. But . . . so now we know a little bit about what the conductor and the motorman did.

How fast did these streetcars run?

RIDGE: Oh, they'd run (heh) . . . I expect 50 miles an hour. I don't know.

MP: Fifty miles an hour on city streets?

RIDGE: Yeah.

MP: How'd they operate? They were a . . . the streetcars hooked to a trolley line. How'd that work?

RIDGE: Well, that trolley went up there, and there was a wire that went along, and the trolley . . . they had a

RIDGE: split like that, and there was a wheel down here. And that wheel just rolled right on that wire. And it jumped off . . . when it jumped off, why, you'd have to go back there and get it and put it back on the wire.

MP: Who did that?

RIDGE: The conductor.

MP: How often did that happen?

RIDGE: Oh, a lot of times. I know one time, up /on/ North 6th Street, I was workin' the front end, and I had a conductor -- and he was an old man, too. What I mean is he'd been there several years, and he ought /to have/ had better sense. But his trolley jumped off and broke the rope. He got up there and caught a-hold of this wire and reached over like that and got a-hold of the trolley pole, and Christ, he was just . . . he was connected same as the other, and it like to killed him. He fell lose and fell down on the ground. But it burned both of his hands bad, but he never tried that any more. Christ, you take a-hold of that trolley pole and touch the wire, you've had it boy! There's a lot of shock there all over.

MP: So you had a lot of trouble with those trolley lines?

RIDGE: Oh, yeah. They'd jump off lots.

MP: I understand also that the kids played . . .

RIDGE: Kids used to do that.

MP: What'd they do?

RIDGE: Well, they'd pull the . . . they'd come along behind, and if you slowed up enough, they could get a-hold of the rope (the rope hung down). The rope tied right here. Here's the car, and there was a thing there that you tied the end of that rope in. They left it loose like that there, and it had enough swing that it didn't pull off. But if that jumped off, why you could just reach through that back window back there and get a-hold of that rope and pull it down and put it back on the wire and go again. But