

Oral History Interview with ALVA F. LYONS, Nov. 10, 1989 Durango, Colorado,
by Rae Haynes, for the Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College



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Today is November 10, 1989. This is the fourth in a series of tapes with Alva F. Lyons as narrator and Rae Haynes as interviewer.

[Editor's note: bracketed texts are comments made later by Martha Lyons McDaniel, daughter of Alva Lyons, when she edited the transcription in 1991. Center of Southwest Studies Professional Archival Intern Renee Morgan entered these notes in the transcription on February 6, 2008.]

HAYNES: In one of our earlier conversations, Mr. Lyons, we were just starting to talk about when you were drafted in World War I, and you were about to tell us that you tried to join the Navy, I guess after getting your draft board notice. Why was that?

LYONS: Morel Taylor and I were, of course, friends in school. His father was a foreman over at the Smelter on the upper level and my father, of course, and Mr. Taylor were very good friends also. So Morel and I decided that we wanted to join the Navy or join something to get into the war quicker than wait around for the draft. So we decided to go east where we thought we would have a better chance going across the water.

HAYNES: So you had not received your draft notice yet?

LYONS: No, we hadn't received any draft notice.

HAYNES: I see, so what happened in the East?

LYONS: Morel Taylor had relations [relatives] in St. Louis so he decided he would stay there because he didn't have enough money to make the trip to Philadelphia and

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back. I was riding on a pass, of course, so I didn't have to have very much money, and so he got a job there in a pharmacy right away. So I went on to Philadelphia and intended to contact my relation, that's my father's sister and family, and I never could get in touch with them. I don't know why, just I was a complete failure I guess in the way I tried to get in touch with them. I couldn't get the right streetcar that went out by their place and so when I come back I just didn't have time enough to stay anymore because I had to get back to Durango.

HAYNES: But did you actually talk to the Navy people while you were on the East Coast?

LYONS: No, I never talked to them, no.

HAYNES: So your idea when you left Durango was to join the Navy?

LYONS: Yeah.

HAYNES: But you came back without trying very hard?

LYONS: Yeah, yeah, we both came back to Denver and Taylor, he got a job in the pharmacy there in Denver and before we ever got to Durango, why I got my draft notice right there.

HAYNES: And that was 1918, you said?

LYONS: Yeah.

HAYNES: And how long did you have before you had to report?

LYONS: Well, I was supposed to report, I was about a week or so late, I was supposed to report at Fort Lewis in the state of Washington, but when I called the draft board they gave me instructions to go to Camp Funston in Kansas.

HAYNES: Camp Funston?

LYONS: Yeah, that was part of Fort Riley.

HAYNES: So you went there, you went there for your training?

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LYONS: For my basic training.

HAYNES: And how long was that?

LYONS: Well it didn't last very long because we were all lined up to go to rifle practice and they pulled me out of the ranks and told me that I was to catch the troop train that was already assembled to go to Fort Harrison in Indiana.

HAYNES: And why were you singled out for that?

LYONS: Well, that was a pretty desperate place there because they had too many soldiers there and not enough food allocated to that, so a lot of the soldiers including myself took the flu there and a great number of them died.

HAYNES: This was in Kansas?

LYONS: No, that was in Indiana, Fort Harrison, Benjamin Harrison, I don't know, I was delayed there for I guess two weeks or better and the soldiers on both sides of me, they carried them out one every night either way.

HAYNES: Dead, you mean?

LYONS: Dead, yeah, they died there with the flu.

HAYNES: How was it that you got pulled out of the line at Camp Funston and sent off to Fort Harrison and the rest weren't?

LYONS: Because railroad people were in demand overseas.

HAYNES: So they wanted you because of your special expertise?

LYONS: Yeah, yeah.

HAYNES: So then you recovered from the flu?

LYONS: I recovered from the flu and the minute I was released from the hospital, why I had to report for the train that was already set up there to go to the Atlantic coast

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and we went to a camp on Long Island.

HAYNES: Do you remember the name of that camp?

LYONS: I was just trying to think of that now, it just slipped my mind there for a minute, but we got paid there, I know that. We [inaudible] and most of the fellows gambled all their money away before we got on the ship.

HAYNES: And yours did you gamble your money away?

LYONS: No, I didn't, not me!

HAYNES: Did you get any more training there at Long Island?

LYONS: No, I never got any training at all, any more than I got at Camp Funston. I was on the transportation part and most of the other inductees were all carmen mechanists or clerks or the likes of that, operators, telegraph operators. Well when we finally landed at Liverpool, took a train to a camp, a little town outside of London, I don't know just where that town was now. We stayed there for two weeks, until we could get a boat across to France. Then we went from there to LeMans and those that were transportation people, we were divided up and went to La Rochelle which was a car-building plant. The reason we were divided up [was] because those that worked on the machinery, engines, such like they went to St. Lazaire and all the rest of that gang clerks, telegraph operators-went to the front to haul munitions from the, to the front.

HAYNES: They put the transportation folks into car building and the operational folks into transportation?

LYONS: Into transportation, yeah, I guess that's the Army way of doing things

HAYNES: I guess so, was [that] still 1918?

LYONS: That was still 1918.

HAYNES: And the war actually ended not long after you got there.

LYONS: It ended before we got there, because we were already getting on the boats and they never stopped us.

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HAYNES: So the war ended while you were still on the east coast of America, but they sent you over there anyway and you built cars, lots of cars?

LYONS: Yeah, we put out 125 boxcars every day from the trucks [inaudible] every morning why a trainload of those empties went out of there.

HAYNES: How many men does it take to build 125 boxcars?

LYONS: We had 3500 men, that was the 35th Engineers.

HAYNES: And how long, then, were you involved in this car building?

LYONS: Oh, until we were supposed to depart for the United States, that was, I guess we must have been eight and a half months there.

HAYNES: So was it 1919 then by the time you...

LYONS: ...1919 by the time I got into the fort at Cheyenne, Wyoming and that's where we were discharged from.

HAYNES: What kind of a boat did you cross the ocean on?

LYONS: I went over on a British boat or Canadian, it was the Empress of Britain and it was a pretty rough trip. We had too many men on board to start with, we had a lot of outhouses you might call 'em, privies on the various decks because there wasn't enough on the inside of the boat, and the waves during the crossing were so heavy they went over and washed those things off. Tore them right off the boat.

HAYNES: How long did the passage take?

LYONS: We were about 10 days on that boat.

HAYNES: Now are you talking about your trip to France or the one back from France?

LYONS: Well a...

HAYNES: On the Empress of Britain?

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LYONS: That was going to France. Coming back was the Orazabo [?], which was an American built boat manned by the Navy.

HAYNES: And about the same length of time?

LYONS: Just about the same length of time coming back, yeah.

HAYNES: About 10 days?

LYONS: Yeah.

HAYNES: Were the conditions more pleasant?

LYONS: Yes, they were very much more pleasant. We had plenty to eat and we had more freedom, we could go all over the boat. Where we were on the Empress of Britain, why we were practically restricted to the deck that we lived on and we were down, the deck we were on was E deck and that was below the water line.

HAYNES: On the Empress of Britain?

LYONS: Uh huh.

HAYNES: While you were in France, since the war was over, was there an opportunity to do any sightseeing or anything for pleasure, or was it just work?

LYONS: It was mostly work, however, we did have a little time while we were waiting for the transportation to arrive at Bordeaux, I think. We were billeted in some caves on a mesa and there was a little town there, I forget the name of the town, but we could go from where we were staying in these caves and go down and the people there why would always treat us to wine and we could buy extra food.

HAYNES: Was this mesa between Bordeaux and La Rochelle?

LYONS: Yes, yeah.

HAYNES: I wonder does the name of Blaye, mean anything to you, B L A Y E, does that sound familiar as a town name?

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LYONS: Well, it doesn't right now, it doesn't ring a bell.

HAYNES: We'll have to talk some later about- I've been in that part of the country.

LYONS: I don't know if that's on the Rhone River or not, is it?

HAYNES: On the Giron or Gironde River, I believe, but we'll get a map out and talk about that later. So, we've got you to Cheyenne, Wyoming and they've discharged you. What happens next?

LYONS: Well I come right back to Durango and go to work.

HAYNES: 1919?

LYONS: 1919.

HAYNES: Did you notice any changes in the town or the people that had come about as a result of the war, its effects on the townspeople?

LYONS: Well, no not particularly. I was young, of course, and if I'd a been older, say 10 or 12 years older why I'd [have] probably known a lot of the older people that had passed away, but I didn't pay any attention to that.

HAYNES: You mean the civilians who had stayed behind?

LYONS: Yeah, civilians, yeah.

HAYNES: How about folks your age. Did you lose any friends in the war?

LYONS: Oh, I had quite a few friends in the war, yes, soldiers.

HAYNES: But did any of them not come back?

LYONS: Well no, we had several in Durango that I knew that didn't come back after. Sheets, one of the Sheets boys, and we had one other man I forget what his name was now, that's why the [American] Legion post here is named Trujillo-Sheets Post No. 28

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HAYNES: Because those were [two Durango people killed in World War I]?

LYONS: Those were the two...

HAYNES: But they were not close friends of yours, either one of those men?

LYONS: No, neither one, no.

HAYNES: Did the war have any effect on the economy of the town, or the kind of businesses that were operating?

LYONS: I really don't think so, it wasn't only about in the '20s that we had a slight depression over the Smelter closed down and that put a lot of men out of work, coal miners were out of work, then we had a lot of strikes on the railroad in '21, the machinists and the car men went on strike, but none of the other brotherhoods went out on strike, they went out on their own.

HAYNES: What was the rationale behind these strikes, what were they wanting?

LYONS: They wanted more wages, you see we were under the control of the railroad administration, and we wanted to get back into private hands so they could work with the local officials or the president of the railroad.

HAYNES: And when did that...

LYONS: For wages and working conditions.

HAYNES: When was the railroad put back into private hands, after the war or did it take some time?

LYONS: It took a little time for it to do that. I think it was about a year after I got back. We got the eight hour day before, by the railroad administration and we couldn't work over 16 hours a day and we had a lot of other restrictions that we got that we had been trying to negotiate for years.

HAYNES: And this was before it went back into private hands?

LYONS: Yeah, that was the Railroad Administration itself.

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HAYNES: So when the Denver and Rio Grande got its railroad back, so to speak, then those things that you had gained remained in force?

LYONS: They remained in force, yeah. One of the things that we had was we got overtime, time and a half, you see, for overtime, over sixteen hours, we got overtime after eight hours. We worked on an eight hour day and those assigned jobs like on passenger trains and the like, they run 200 miles by the train crews for a ten hour day and the engine crews received their pay on a 100 miles a day, that was go from Durango to Chama that was a terminal for the passenger, the engine crew and then we took another engine crew to take the passenger train from Chama to Alamosa, those were all things, they all stayed there, but we had to be sure that the railroad didn't want to change it. They wanted to change of those things, they weren't happy with them.

HAYNES: And what happened then, the railroad wanted to change them back to the way they'd been before the war?

LYONS: They worked at it as long as they could but they didn't get any place with it.

HAYNES: So the employees kept the benefits that they had earned?

LYONS: Yeah, we kept all the benefits.

HAYNES: So this was 1921 or so?

LYONS: Yeah, about 1921.

HAYNES: And that was about the time that you were promoted to conductor?

LYONS: Yeah, in 1922 I was promoted to conductor, although I had run a freight train in, out of Alamosa in '21.

HAYNES: As a conductor?

LYONS: As a conductor, yeah.

HAYNES: Before you officially had the title?

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LYONS: The superintendent, everybody laid off, and I was the oldest man available so I took the train over.

HAYNES: We've talked on an earlier tape quite a bit about railroading in the '20s, but I think we didn't talk very much about your courting your wife, and I'm wondering when exactly you met her and where and under what conditions.

LYONS: Well I met her because she graduated with my youngest sister.

HAYNES: From Durango High School?

LYONS: From Durango High School and I met her [?] and it wasn't long till I got a local job here working just out of Durango. Why then I could pursue her a little more till I finally, we used to go to the dances together down at the Strater Hotel.

HAYNES: Now this is all after the war?

LYONS: This is all after the war.

HAYNES: About what year would you think?

LYONS: Oh, I was about '22, '21, '22. I was run over in Chama with a railroad car and my wife- or yeah my wife, the gal, my girlfriend or whatever you want to call her- had to come to hospital and see me. I laid in the hospital over at Mercy for thirty days while this foot mended up. I got it all wrapped up now here in a bandage.

HAYNES: So were you actually engaged or pretty serious at the time?

LYONS: No, no we weren't engaged.

HAYNES: But you were serious, you knew that...

LYONS: I was- I was serious. She wasn't quite so serious; she didn't want an old broken down railroader with a bad foot.

HAYNES: And she hadn't finished her education yet either?

LYONS: No, she hadn't finished her education. They [Mercedes and her sister] were

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going to the University of California at Berkeley, and, of course, I could get a pass there and that's what I did. I went there to visit all the time.

HAYNES: And then you went out there and worked for a year or two? We've got that on another tape.

LYONS: Yeah.

HAYNES: And married out there?

LYONS: Married there, yeah. [1924]

HAYNES: And then came back, started a family and then built this house. You mentioned going to dances at the Strater Hotel, what other kinds of social activities did you enjoy during your courtship?

LYONS: Oh, we used to play some cards with friends, bridge mostly and we continued that with all the veterans that I knew, we were all friends, some of them, a lot of them were business people in Durango.

HAYNES: So you continued this card playing even after you were married?

LYONS: Yes, we continued the card playing after.

HAYNES: Anything else you want to add about your courtship?

LYONS: Well, I don't think there's much more that needs to be said.

HAYNES: Obviously she got as serious as you were 'cause she said yes, right?

LYONS: Yeah, she said yes.

HAYNES: And it lasted a long, long time until just a few years ago when you lost her. [1986]

LYONS: Yeah.

HAYNES: Uh, I know that you did some other jobs besides the railroad from time to

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time when things on the railroad were slow and maybe for some other reasons and I would like to talk some about those. You told me once you were stringing some line up around Telluride for the [Western Colorado] Power Company.

LYONS: For the power company, yes, Colorado Power Company

HAYNES: And this was because you were sort of laid off at the railroad at that time, or what?

LYONS: Yeah, that's right.

HAYNES: Uh huh.

LYONS: Before that, of course, I worked for the telephone company because they had a snow storm here that broke a lot of the branches on the trees and tore the lines down, the telephone company was out of business so they hired all the local people who could do line work, and I just happened to be able to do some of those things, so I worked for the telephone company, but they never did hire me as a regular man. When all the lines were repaired they just let me go and I went back to the railroad again.

HAYNES: Well even when you were working for the power company or the phone company, you were continuing to build seniority in the railroad?

LYONS: Yes, I was continuing to build seniority all the time.

HAYNES: You also mentioned something before about building an airport up here on Reservoir Hill [later site of Fort Lewis College].

LYONS: Yeah, it was around 1937-in there. We had W.P.A. work all over town and Mr. Clay, who was the manager of the Western Colorado Company in Durango, and, knew I could do all these things so I was hired as one of the supervisors and one was to build the, gravel the runway and I took over the job of building the first golf course where the College was.

HAYNES: Now were these two things going on at the same time, the golf course and the airport?

LYONS: Yeah.

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HAYNES: The construction of both?

LYONS: Yeah.

HAYNES: Were you, you were actually drawing a pay check from the government then?

LYONS: Yeah, uh huh.

HAYNES: For this work and all the time still building up seniority with the railroad?

LYONS: Yeah.

HAYNES: How long were you involved in those projects?

LYONS: Well on the golf course it took longer because I was the secretary of the golf club and we had to do all the cleaning and one thing and another. It was sagebrush up there and fixed the ground so we could level it without causing bumps, we had a great big drag that we had, Jeffries, the jeweler down here, gave us a Ford tractor that we used up there to haul this thing behind it and level the ground, then we had sand greens and we got the oil from out here at Marvel on the Long Hollow where the oil wells were there.

HAYNES: So you didn't have grass out there in the early days?

LYONS: No, we didn't have grass.

HAYNES: Did you stick much to working on this project steadily or did you have to go back to the railroad intermittently during this time?

LYONS: Oh I was back at the railroad then all the time.

HAYNES: You were just kind of going back and forth?

LYONS: Yeah, yeah.

HAYNES: Just whenever the railroad didn't need you, you would go up there and supervise?

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LYONS: Yeah, yeah, that's right.

HAYNES: When would you think those projects were completed?

LYONS: Well we completed one up on the college here the first two months of summer.

HAYNES: When you say the first project, do you mean the airport runway?

LYONS: Airport runway and the golf course.

HAYNES: So this all transpired just in one summer?

LYONS: Uh huh.

HAYNES: And you got to get your hands dirty as well as doing some supervising?

LYONS: Sure. I didn't object to the hard work.

HAYNES: so you got to drive the tractor yourself?

LYONS: No, I didn't drive the tractor, had another fellow do that. In fact, Jeffries had a man who run that tractor cause he bought it back in good shape.

HAYNES: Oh, he had his own man.

LYONS: Yeah, he had his own man, but we had a lot of, Ray Williams that lived down here on the corner block here, he was the water man, the state water man and we surveyed the fairways, laid them all out on paper.

HAYNES: The golf course is a lot bigger now than it was then, right?

LYONS: Yeah after '37 when they got all the draftees back here and they had the...oh what did they call them, all these kids that couldn't find jobs

HAYNES: Youth Core, CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps].

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LYONS: Yeah, that's what I was trying to think, what was that?

HAYNES: CCC.

LYONS: Yeah, that's what, that's the CC camps.

HAYNES: Uh huh.

LYONS: And we had one here. When they come in they took over our golf course and built their buildings there.

HAYNES: Oh.

LYONS: So the city then had to get them to build another golf course and that was over on the east side of the runway between there and Goeglein Gulch.

HAYNES: Where the original golf course was, it's under the College buildings now?

LYONS: Under the College buildings, yeah.

HAYNES: And then the new one was built?

LYONS: That was the second one and when the College wanted the ground over there, when they moved from Hesperus into Durango why they wanted that ground so the city built another golf course where it is now. [Third site]

HAYNES: this was all taking place during the great depression there in the '30s. what changes would you say the depression caused here in the town, were a lot of people bad off?

LYONS: Well a lot of them were bad off. Yeah, there were a lot of families you know they had a hard time getting by, but there was a lot of work going on in the city and the railroad had plans for improvements on the railroad.

HAYNES: So they were able to...

LYONS: So that eventually, while it took several years, they had new engines. The 470s were on order and they arrived here in '23. Then we had more power to haul bigger

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loads. We got more ore out of Silverton also.

HAYNES: are you saying that jobs were created by the need to maintain the roadbed?

LYONS: Yeah.

HAYNES: I see, and that continued into the depression and that was good for the town since the railroad was paying these workers that might otherwise not have had work. Lots of businesses go bankrupt during the depression?

LYONS: I don't know that there were so many businesses went bankrupt. It never occurred to me that they did, they could have. The railroad was bankrupt, they went into receivership and they were in receivership for a long time, from 1920, 1909. After the railroad acquired the railroad back from the U.S. government, it was in a receivership right away.

HAYNES: And how long did that last?

LYONS: It lasted pretty close to 1940

HAYNES: So during the depression, even when the railroad was putting on these extra jobs, it was in receivership?

LYONS: It was in receivership, the receivers were doing the work.

HAYNES: I see. Let's talk a little bit about other means of transportation in and around Durango. Of course you didn't have automobiles back in the very, very early times that you can remember.

LYONS: No, we started getting automobiles for a few of the people that had money in Durango, like Dr. Ochsner, Harry Jackson and a few more, they brought these great big cars in here and run tm around for the first few years. It wasn't until 1921 or somewhere in that time when Henry Ford came out with the Model T that other people commenced to have cars, same way with Chrysler come out with a car, General Motors.

HAYNES: And these new fangled automobiles just ran on the same roads that the horses and the buggies and the wagons.

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LYONS: Yeah. well eventually the state highway department or they had a department anyway they developed and then they started improving all of these what had been county roads that connected county to county so they were state highways then and that made a difference so that you could get at least from Denver to Durango, go over to Cortez or into New Mexico.

HAYNES: But the roads were still unpaved?

LYONS: You couldn't go to Silverton, because there was no highway to Silverton yet.

HAYNES: But these state highways were not paved as yet?

LYONS: No, they weren't finished like they are now.

HAYNES: When did they get a highway to Silverton?

LYONS: They didn't get that until somewhere in the, was it '24? They had a road up, the county road you might say up to the county line, San Juan County line, then they had another, they had an old stage coach road that went down by the railroad into the canyon but that was abandoned after the railroad, took over in the '80s, then they had another road that went over Coal Bank, but it wasn't very much of a road.

HAYNES: Is that what they call the old Lime Creek Road now?

LYONS: No, the old Lime Creek Road is the one where the highway finally built eventually.

HAYNES: But there was a Coal Bank road even before that?

LYONS: Yeah, it was up a higher pass and they just didn't want to do all that work for some reason or other.

HAYNES: Did you spend much time up in that country, automobile travel, when you were a young man?

LYONS: Well, not when I was a young man, I didn't have a car until I was probably about '29, I guess, when I bought my first Ford or Buick. I had that for a long time. I

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could drive a car, of course, but I just didn't have one.

HAYNES: Well let's talk about, go back a little bit still talking about transportation, when you were a kid if your family wanted to take a Sunday outing, maybe go for a picnic some place, where would they go and how would they go?

LYONS: Most people, they would go to the Brookside Park over here on Main Avenue.

HAYNES: And they would get there by what means?

LYONS: By the streetcar, if they were in town by the street car. If they were out of town, they had to come in a wagon.

HAYNES: Brookside Park is where most of the folks went if they wanted some sort of an outdoor occasion?

LYONS: That was during the teens. See, while I was a kid, why that's where they had a picture show, the railway company, street railway company.

HAYNES: So that got some fares to take folks out to their picture show?

LYONS: Yeah.

HAYNES: There was an actual movie theater?

LYONS: Well it was outdoor movies, it was the first outdoor movies.

HAYNES: At the end of the line of the streetcar?

LYONS: No, that was about half way, a little more than half way. The streetcar had a single line from the depot to 32nd Street, but at the top of the hill where Park Avenue crosses there, they had a passing lane or sidetrack, it was really a passing lane so that two cars, one going and one coming, could pass there. That would give them a regular schedule to operate on.

HAYNES: That was a regular road, too, you had buggies and everything, later cars going right alongside the streetcar and so this picture show was about half way out to the

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end of the line. If a family wanted a longer outing, a more adventuresome outing, where might they have gone?

LYONS: Well they could go a lot of places, could go on the streams for fishing...

HAYNES: Right around town?

LYONS: Right around town, in the river here, the Animas River, or you could get over in the Florida River, or later on, why you could go clear to the Pine River and up to Vallecito [Reservoir].

HAYNES: And how would they get there?

LYONS: We always had cars to ride over there.

HAYNES: So you are talking about after the '20s?

LYONS: If you were a farmer and had nothing but a buggy or something why that's where you would go.

HAYNES: From the time you can first remember up until, say, you went away to college, how much traveling did you do personally, other than that connected with your work, in terms of pleasure travel? With your family or by yourself?

LYONS: I never traveled by myself while I was young, but the family did as a whole. My mother took all us kids and went to Idaho Falls to visit her brother and family.

HAYNES: And this was on the train?

LYONS: That was on the train all the way.

HAYNES: And you were about how old then? Because it was in 1913, that would be, I would be 15 I guess, 13 and three that would be 16. I was 16.

HAYNES: High school age.

LYONS: Anyway, when we come back, we had to go into Denver. In that same

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year, in September, we come back when we would go to school, the Knight Templar National Organization had a meeting in Denver and I stayed there with my father because he was the commander of the commandry in Durango.

HAYNES: Other than that trip up north, did you as a youngster or a teenager get to places like Cortez?

LYONS: No, no, not by rail, there was no railroad into Cortez; we could only go to Mancos or Dolores, Rico, Telluride or to Silverton. We could go to Farmington.

HAYNES: Now did you do this very often? I don't mean as a railroad employee, but before you went to work for the railroad.

LYONS: We never did very much, no. Most of my use of a pass or anything was we were members of a basketball team, so it was paid by the school district.

HAYNES: And you went to towns surrounding to play basketball?

LYONS: Yeah.

HAYNES: Where would that have taken you, which towns?

LYONS: Well we'd go to Mancos and Silverton, the only two places that had a railroad and a team big enough, it wasn't until 1916 that we had, finally, got a great big athletic meet in Durango here and invited all the towns-Aztec, Farmington, Silverton, all around the neighborhood here -where we had foot races, what else, throw the discus...

HAYNES: A track meet, I guess they call them.

LYONS: Jumping, pole vaulting, all that- all those things.

HAYNES: But you really didn't go to Cortez until after automobile travel?

LYONS: Yeah, until after we had automobiles, yeah.

HAYNES: So your travel was pretty much restricted to that which had rails running to it?

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LYONS: Yeah.

HAYNES: Well let's move up to World War II. You've told us on previous tapes that you were on the ration board here in Durango.

LYONS: Yes.

HAYNES: But you didn't explain exactly what that consisted of, what you had to do, what the board was trying to accomplish.

LYONS: Well they had a board here that was headed by one of the HERALD owners, and they got into trouble with that because of the issuing gasoline certificates that were illegal to people that were traveling and so they were fired I guess, you might say that and the new board was appointed. on this new board we had three railroaders, the agent, local agent and the W. L. Bruce who was brakeman and conductor, the same as I was, and we had a farmer out here, Mrs. Hiner's father, out here from Allison, we had a couple from Bayfield all on the different parts of the board which was divided up into, somebody handled the tires, somebody the gasoline, somebody the food stamps, somebody looked after the pricing, all those things.

HAYNES: And what was your responsibility?

LYONS: My responsibility, the board elected me a chairman, nobody wanted it.

HAYNES: Chairman of the whole thing, all those different divisions?

LYONS: Uh huh, and I held it until all during the war and several years afterwards on account of the price control, so we had to call a lot of people in and take them over the coals I guess. They got fined for overcharging.

HAYNES: How did these kinds of things come to your attention, some citizen complained?

LYONS: People complaining, yeah, well they had to make a report, like if you were selling hamburgers, you bought so much hamburger, so you had to have stamps for that, well the OPA general office in Denver could pick right out, they'd know right away that that fellow was making too much money, selling a lot more hamburgers, cause they had to put so much meat in there, he cut down the meat, Strater Hotel cut out the butter, so

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they didn't serve butter, that cost them a pile of money.

HAYNES: So that...

LYONS: So the clothing around was overpriced.

HAYNES: So you had to investigate these things and tell these businesses to...

LYONS: Well we didn't do any investigating; we had outside help with that.

HAYNES: And, so your personal responsibility was just supervising the people who served on these other boards?

LYONS: Yeah, yeah, I had to see that, take care of the office force and I had a manager that was, you might say, my secretary, you'd call him that. He was a linotype operator for the newspaper and he did all the paperwork, wrote all the letters, of course, I had to sign them, that was about all there was to it.

HAYNES: Did any of these board members get paid for this service?

LYONS: Nope, no pay whatever.

HAYNES: Strictly volunteer?

LYONS: It was strictly a volunteer.

HAYNES: And you were working full time for the railroad and running the...

LYONS: Running the ration board.

HAYNES: Did your wife ever see you during that time? It sounds like you were pretty busy.

LYONS: I guess she did, I came home to eat.

HAYNES: And that's all? They do sound like they were busy years though.

LYONS: They were very busy, yeah.

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HAYNES: Do you remember any other names of folks that served on those boards with you?

LYONS: Well I knew all the people that were on the board, yes.

HAYNES: I mean, can you tell us any names and specific...

LYONS: Well I doubt it right now, the Womers out here was one, and...

HAYNES: How did World War II affect the town of Durango? Lots of men from here, I suppose, served?

LYONS: Yes there was quite a few of them served from this area.

HAYNES: And did the war impact the town in other ways, other than what we talked about on this ration board?

LYONS: You know I really don't think it bothered the town very much. It probably bothered a lot of individuals, but not the economy as such. Like the American Legion built their building here and we were able to borrow the money to do it.

HAYNES: During the war?

LYONS: Well, the war was over, you see. When you are talking about the economy of the town, of course, it's, during the war why you were restricted. After the war, why...

HAYNES: Business as usual.

LYONS: Only a certain time why you could do things, more back to normal you might say.

HAYNES: Uh huh, and the railroad just continued rolling along as normal during World War II?

LYONS: Yeah.

HAYNES: Did you have restrictions, as you had had in World War I, on the railroad?

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LYONS: No, not necessarily, there's several things during this period of time was, the railroad was continuing, trying to get a change in the narrow gauge, they surveyed to build a standard gauge in from Alamosa, but they never completed the survey beyond Falfa up here, they didn't know how to get down into Durango without building a lot of railroad, too expensive. All this time the railroad was changing the prices of tickets, the fares, and to do that they had to go before the PUC and ask for approval, well that involved the employees, it also involved a lot of the people in town, particularly Mr. Camp who was the president of the First National Bank and while it was not my duty, I attended all the hearings, Mr. Camp was there.

HAYNES: Now you are talking about World War II?

LYONS: After World War II.

HAYNES: Directly after?

LYONS: Well yes, all this started in the '30s, first with the railroad buying up all the truck lines, all the bus lines and during World War II when they were sending all the draftees out by railroad, they said that they couldn't, they hauled them from Durango to Alamosa by their bus. I immediately contacted Senator Johnson who was a director at the railroad and told him that wasn't right, that they should be on the railroad and he agreed with me and put them back on the railroad. That's how we got involved with so much- Mr. Camp, and I did- when it finally come time to, the railroad was getting to abandon the entire narrow gauge in '51 or all the passenger business in '51, why we held a hearing in Durango, and I was the only one who had all the information and everything and I was the only witness.

HAYNES: You did testify...

LYONS: Against the railroad.

HAYNES: You did testify yourself?

LYONS: Yeah.

HAYNES: That took a little bit of courage, don't you think?

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LYONS: Well, I had the backing of the entire organization, both national and local.

HAYNES: You weren't concerned that you'd lose your job?

LYONS: No, no.

HAYNES: Because of the union?

LYONS: No.

HAYNES: The union, you knew, would protect your job?

LYONS: Yeah.

HAYNES: Is that right?

LYONS: Mr. Conley who was the man that held the investigation in Durango, the railroad lawyers got pretty tough with me because I was the only one called as a witness and we had another lawyer from Denver who was hired by railroad employees, a fellow name of Boyle, the county also had an attorney, that was McKelvey who was the county attorney, but they hired him on another salary. Well we attended hearings all over in Pagosa, down at Farmington, Durango.

HAYNES: To see how the people felt about this?

LYONS: Yeah, we went even as far as Alamosa and but all those things wound up at, while we didn't gain very much but we didn't lose anything either, like in Alamosa we lost, when they abolished the Santa Fe train why we lost five, two engineers, four engineers, four firemen, four conductors, four brakemen.

HAYNES: And you didn't want that to happen here?

LYONS: We didn't want it to happen, no, and we had a senatorial investigation in Alamosa over the business handled by the railroad between Alamosa and Santa Fe and we had the two senators, Johnson from Colorado and Chavez from New Mexico and Jim Feeney a conductor at Durango, was supposed to be the chairman in Durango and he had, I'd gathered all the information that was supposed to be in the hands of the Chamber of Commerce. Come to find out the president of the Chamber of Commerce we can't prove

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it, but he took all the evidence that we had correspondence and other things and filled the folder with newspaper so that when we went to the hearing in Alamosa all we had was newspapers.

HAYNES: Oh for heaven's sake.

LYONS: That was the kinds of things that we were up against.

HAYNES: Did you ever feel any threat from the railroad in terms of this work you were doing? Obviously they didn't like it. Were there ever any subtle hints that you should back off?

LYONS: Oh yes, we had a general manager that wanted to fire me for doing things and the general chairman of the organization told him, he said, well if you want to have everybody, if every member of, all the railroad employees, both transportation and those that worked in shops and one thing another at the various places, they'll all go on strike for Mr. Lyons. So he backed off.

HAYNES: And that's really the reason that you were able to continue your work, because he knew you had that... [Support]

LYONS: Yeah, Mr. Camp was very good because he kept the merchants and people in Durango that were members of the Chamber of Commerce on their toes. He told them what they had to do. He didn't mind doing that, and I went to Denver, I was appointed with Mr. Chattle and Elmer Decker out here as a cattleman to talk to the railroad about curtailing the service here. Well the railroad, of course, was in receivership: we had two receivers, Swan and, oh boy, it just slipped my mind, and McCarthy. So when we got to Denver, Mr. McCarthy told his story, the railroad story and when he was through, I objected to it. I told him, I said, that's a lie Mr. McCarthy, and I said we have your vice president here of contracts and I will ask him if he will tell you that it was your company, your general manager that was changing these jobs, doing these abandonments and not because we put in claims for violation of contracts. Well he beat on the desk but the vice president told him that he was wrong so we got, we were at that time hauling LCL stuff to Durango in baggage cars.

HAYNES: What's LCL?

LYONS: That's the local freight, you know, small freight, important. you know

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that's the biggest part of the freight business is having small pieces, not the carloads, we were making the carloads out of small pieces and they put the freight back in on the passenger cars and hauled it for about three months, then they decided they would haul it in trailers from Pueblo to Alamosa and draw the trailers to Durango. Well that was a violation, too, because the engine that they had on that passenger train down at Pueblo wasn't big enough to haul that train up the La Veta Pass so they got into trouble there and then they finally canceled all the passenger business.

HAYNES: I'm still marveling that you were, well, courageous enough to do what you did; nobody ever threw a rock through your window or threatened your family?

LYONS: No.

HAYNES: Or anything like that?

LYONS: I had a few of them throw rocks through the caboose, they even have that today. No, nobody ever bothered me. I was the, well in one way I knew too many people. They knew me, they knew my father...

[end of interview]

[Note: This audiotaped interview was transcribed by Catherine Conrad, Administrative Assistant for the Center of Southwest Studies, and was formatted and edited by Center Archivist Todd Ellison on April 4, 1996, and further on February 7, 2008, including conversion to PDF file format for online access on the Center of Southwest Studies website.]

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