



City of Alexandria  
Office of Historic Alexandria  
*Alexandria Legacies*  
**Oral History Program**



**Project Name:** *Alexandria Legacies-Potomac Yard Railroad Oral History Project*

**Title:** *Interview with Walter Cable*

**Date of Interview:** *December 10, 2006*

**Location of Interview:** *Walter Cable's House in Ashburn, Virginia*

**Interviewer:** *Amanda Ognibene*

**Transcriber:** *Susan McGrath*

**Abstract:** Walter H Cable, Jr., lived and attended school in Alexandria as a boy and continued to live in the city for much of his adult life. Both before and after four years of service in the United States Navy, his principal adult employment was with Potomac Yard, where he worked for forty-three years. He describes his Alexandria boyhood as well as operations and various positions that he held at Potomac Yard. He also briefly discusses his wood-carving hobby. He made a gift of his carving of Bruce Ball, a Chief of Police, to the Alexandria Archaeology Museum.

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| <b>Boyhood, First Position at Potomac Yard, U.S. Navy Service</b> |  |
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| Amanda Ognibene:  | We are here. It's December 10, 2006. I'm in the house of Mr. Walter Cable in Ashburn, Virginia, and Mr. Cable, do you want to speak your name for the record?  |
| Walter Cable:   | Walter H. Cable, Jr.   |
| AO:   | Walter H. Cable, Jr. All right then, we'll just start with some basic questions. Start at the very beginning. Where and when were you born?  |
| Walter Cable:   | Cincinnati, Ohio, October the first 1930.  |
| AO:   | And how long did you live in Alexandria?   |
| Walter Cable:   | I've been out here twelve years. The rest of the time I've been in Alexandria—various places.  |
| AO:   | When did you first arrive in Alexandria, and why did you come?   |
| Walter Cable:   | I was here when five years old, the flood run us out of Cincinnati.  |
| AO:   | And where did you go to school as a child?   |
| Walter Cable:   | I started in Lee School. That was the grade school—I guess [unclear] fifth grade or fourth grade and went to Jefferson and went to the seventh grade and went to high school at George Washington High School.   |
| AO:   | Okay, and what was your first job?   |
| Walter Cable:   | Oh, man, I've had a lot of 'em. I've carried every newspaper in Alexandria. I worked in grocery stores. I never was afraid of work—always looked to work.  |
| AO:   | Which papers did you work for?   |
| Walter Cable:   | I didn't work for 'em. I mean I delivered them.  |
| AO:   | Delivered them, okay.  |
| Walter Cable:   | <i>Alexandria Gazette, Times Herald, Evening Star—even the Advertising Journal.</i>  |
| AO:   | Then what attracted you to a job at Potomac Yard? How did you get the job there?   |
| Walter Cable:   | I went with a friend. He was looking for the job. I was working at a Foodland in the deli department—soon to be shipped to Baltimore [Maryland], but he wasn't old enough, so they asked me if I wanted the job, and I told 'em I'd take it, 'cause I didn't want to go to Baltimore.        |
| AO:   | Were you interested in trains at all as a child?   |
| Walter Cable:   | Not too much. I moved around quite a bit between two aunts. My mother died when I was young. My father went back to Cincinnati, and I'd live with one aunt a month and the other one another month. They had boys my age, so we got around town quite a bit—gittin' in trouble like kids do. |
| AO:   | What kinds of things?  |
| Walter Cable:   | [Laughter] Well, like one of 'em I broke his glasses—eyeglasses about four times—shooting BB guns at each other. I hit him in his chin with a spear. He was a li'l' bit slower than I was.   |
| AO:   | When did you first start working at Potomac Yard?  |
| Walter Cable:   | Well, I don't 'member what day. If you count forty-three years back. I worked there forty-three years.   |

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| AO:           | Forty-three years. Wow, all right.   |
| Walter Cable: | One year short of getting my retirement 'cause they closed up, but I can thank [Mr. McGinley] for the last two or three years. I'm sure he had a lot to do with keepin' it open. He was the superintendent of Potomac Yard.  |
| AO:           | Did you know anything about Potomac Yard before you took the job?  |
| Walter Cable: | I had an uncle—in fact, I lived with my grandmother about a mile from Potomac Yard—right close to the icehouse and the tracks, and I had an uncle who worked there, but I never knew what he did. He was always comin' and goin' in the house. I never even got to talk to him that much, but I have been out there to carry him a lunch, but I'd always have to go to the main office 'cause I didn' know what kinda work he did. He was probably out in the yard somewhere—outside walking up and down the tracks and all looking for different stuff.   |
| AO:           | Did you ever find anything interesting?  |
| Walter Cable: | Well, during the War we was always looking for stuff we could—like junk iron, scrap iron. We'd find bolts and nuts, all sorts of scrap along the tracks. Take 'em to the junk yard and get some money for it and collected glass by the bushel. They used to sell you—I forgot how much they'd give you, but it wasn't much money then. We did anything—the kids I hung around with—to try to make a little money. We didn't get rich, but we had fun. We hung around paper wharf down in Old Town Alexandria. There was a little dock next to it. This guy named Rusty Hayden [not sure of spelling] had ten rowboats, and they would let us have one if they didn't rent 'em all out on the weekend. We kept all cleaned out for him, and in the summer that's mostly where we hung out. |
| AO:           | On the river?  |
| Walter Cable: | Catch eels, put 'em in salt, cut 'em up in pieces, and we used that for bait, and set turtle traps across the river. We'd sell the turtles to the Chinese restaurants in town. We'd get about four or five dollars apiece for those.   |
| AO:           | Wow. That wasn't too bad back then.  |
| Walter Cable: | All of us got a job with the paper when the paper boats come in—called dolly boys. They bring out cranes with these two big rolls of newsprint paper on it, and they'd holler for us to push a dolly underneath of it. Some tractor would come up, haul it away to the warehouse. That was good money as a kid—that was about eleven dollars an hour.  |
| AO:           | Wow. That's still really good.   |
| Walter Cable: | I wasn't old enough. I had to get a work permit to do it. But, you know, it only lasted two or three days that they unload the boat. We'd just wait for the next one to come in, and we'd go over there. I've pretty much done all kinda jobs in town. Worked with an uncle or at least my cousin's grandfather. He had these old trucks that sold vegetables. He'd get up in the morning—three or four o'clock in the mornin' and drive all the way down to Fredericksburg [Virginia]. Bring 'em back and sell 'em in town, and I helped him, and my cousin helped him. That was pretty   |

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|               | interestin'.   |
| AO:           | Where did he get the fruit from? Was it from down South? Was it coming up on the railroad or—?   |
| Walter Cable: | I don't know where it come in. It's a farmers' market down in Fredericksburg where he got it. He evidently got a good buy on it to travel that far to get it every day. We also run into a guy from the government during World War II. Was a Southern Railway Police Office right down 'ere south end of Henry Street. Right across from it was just mountains of railroad ties that they just come from creosote place where they creosote 'em, and that was a terrible smell to get close to 'em. There was a certain kinda spider that hung out in there about half a dollar size and had a big yellow mark on it, and he said he'd give us fifty cents for every one we could get. We did it for about two or three weeks 'til we couldn't find any more. We'd put 'em in mayonnaise jars and put a top on it, and we finally asked him what are you doin' with these things. [Laughter] He said that they made gun sites and bomb sites with the web. That was interestin'. I'd like to had him around longer. Fifty cents was a lotta money in those days.  |
| AO:           | Yeah, not bad.   |
| Walter Cable: | We never had any trouble finding anything. Like I say, we hit all the alleys in Alexandria. We knew what would be in 'em. Always lookin' for soda bottles when you need money. Cash that in. Ten cent to get in a movie then, and you could buy a five-cent bag of popcorn over at the ten-cent store would choke a horse.   |
| AO:           | So where was the movie theater back then?  |
| Walter Cable: | That was the Ingomar [not sure of spelling]. That was the cheapest one—ten-cent-er. In the middle of Alexandria—all these on King Street. The middle one was the Richmond Theater. That was a fifteen-cent-er—little bit higher-class movies than was down here, and then all the way down the other end close to the Monument was Reed Theater. They played the deluxe movies. I think that was twenty-five cent or fifty. I'm not sure. So, these kids I was with—we just did everything like, say—my grandmother lived in John Robert Homes [not sure of spelling]. It was down by the icehouse and Potomac Yard and the high school, but they had wood stoves, and they cooked with wood stoves in that time. We would find wood everywhere down these alleys again. And we'd sell it to 'em twenty-five cents a bushel. Well, you see we, we were always lookin' for somethin' to sell. We'd get fruit out Beverly Hills by the old cannon. I guess that was Braddock Road that was up there. Big huge houses up 'ere with orchards in 'em. I guess they didn't care 'cause they never chased us out. We'd go up 'ere and fill up our baskets, pick 'em off the ground and save 'em the trouble. We'd bring 'em back down and sell 'em—all kinda stuff. It was saleable, we'd git it and sell it. |
| AO:           | Anything that wasn't nailed down. [Laughter] So did you walk to high school? Were you able to walk or did you have a car?  |
| Walter Cable: | Aw, yeah, it was only a half mile from the high school.  |

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| AO:   | Where did you meet your wife just out of curiosity?  |
| Walter Cable:   | Like I say, well, I joined the boys' club when I was small 'ere, and I hung out with a certain, you know, bunch of boys—ones that were interested in the same things I were, and they all lived around the area, and one of 'em bought a car one time and came over to Arlington where a sorority was. Somebody knew somebody in the sorority. That's where I met her. I bought the car later, and I went over by myself [unclear]. She tried to duck me for a long time. I think I finally wore her down. Then I went in the Navy for four years.   |
| AO:   | When was that? How old were you?   |
| Walter Cable:   | Well, I musta been, eighteen, nineteen—somethin' 'round 'ere. I was already workin' as a messenger at Potomac Yard—extra messenger. I was only workin' about two days a week. That was enough to buy gas for the car, so I didn't need more. [Laughter] But she had the first kid when I was over in Suez Canal, and every time I'd call home—she was livin' with her father and mother—he would always pick up the phone, and course, he wouldn't be charged. Like I called from Hong Kong sometimes. It would go to the post office station in whatever coast you was on. He was only charged from that. He wasn't charged from Hong Kong. Just seemed like every time I would call her, he would show up—answer the phone. Well, we got married and moved to an apartment. Then we bought our first house, which was, we found out later, was actually a chicken coop to start with. It had three bedrooms and a big-sized kitchen. Whoever had it had started a cinder block room added on to it, and I hooked up the chimney. Had a nice fireplace, and a beam of wood running right across the middle of that fireplace. I don't know what he had in mind. You couldn't put a fire in it. But it was something to move to. |
| AO:   | And where was this exactly? Do you remember the address?   |
| Walter Cable:   | It was in Annandale. Cherokee Avenue I think it was. My [unclear] was two blocks over. Cherokee, the one street my stepmother lived on. My father got married in Ohio again, and he came back. I lived with 'em for two years but she and I never got on too good to start with which later on we were best friends. That's when I told him I wanted to go live with grandmother. She had always let me do what I wanted.  |
| AO:   | What was her name?   |
| Walter Cable:   | Ruth Sperry [not sure of spelling]. I lived with her for thirteen years, and she never thought that I could do anything wrong no matter what happened.   |
| <b>Positions, Migration to Computer Operations, Accidents</b> |  |
| AO:   | That's nice to have. Let's get back to Potomac Yard for a little bit. What was your first job?   |
| Walter Cable:   | Extra messenger, and I stepped up to a clerk about, I guess, a year before I went in the Navy for four years. 'Course, they held my job for me until I come back. Then, I only knew the one clerk's job, and then I eventually just kept learning as much as I could 'cause being on the extra list you  |

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|               | could get out a lot more, and 'course you get a regular job, it's even better, but the only thing I stood for was twelve to eight shift. I guess out of forty-three years I musta worked thirty years twelve to eight, which I liked personally, but my wife didn't I'm sure.   |
| AO:           | So you never had to work the night shift or the early morning shift. That was just your—?   |
| Walter Cable: | That's what it is twelve to eight, twelve midnight 'til eight in the mornin'.   |
| AO:           | Oh, I thought that you meant twelve noon to eight p.m. You worked the night shift.  |
| Walter Cable: | Later on as some of the guys retired I got to step up to their jobs, and I worked some days late. I didn't work too much. I never really liked daylight after being on twelve to eight so much.   |
| AO:           | Oh, yeah, got used to it.   |
| Walter Cable: | Even now I think I wake up five o'clock every mornin'. I don't get [unclear] at three in the mornin', I'd still wake up at five.  |
| AO:           | So let's go through a typical day. When you say you wake up at when? When would you wake up?  |
| Walter Cable: | I'd get up about two or three in the evenin'. I never need more 'an five, six hours of sleep.   |
| AO:           | Then how did you commute? How did you get to Potomac Yard?  |
| Walter Cable: | Car. I think I lived eleven miles from it out in Annandale.   |
| AO:           | How long did it take you to get there?  |
| Walter Cable: | Not long, because when I was going there at night not much traffic. Comin' home in the mornin' everything was goin' towards Washington, and I was going in the opposite direction. So it was real good on that, and no trouble gittin' down 'ere even in the bad weather 'cause they always kept that 95 open.  |
| AO:           | What exactly did you do, or if you had a whole lot of jobs—?  |
| Walter Cable: | Well, when I came back, they had just started settin' up to take computers in. Before, they had these big, huge books, and every train that come in, every car had all the information written on it. You had to do it by hand, which took a while, but then the trains were smaller 'cause it was steam engines then. They might only carry fifty cars at a time then, but then when the diesels come in, they could carry a hundred and some. |
| AO:           | When did the diesels start coming in?   |
| Walter Cable: | I'll say, I came back from the Navy—musta been a coupla years after that. They could really haul some freight, and at that time I got in on the computer stuff. Learned to keypunch first, then I took the chief machine operator's job in the machine room. All the other people were outside, and they had a little room for the computers 'cause they had to be air-conditioned.   |
| AO:           | How big were these computers?   |
| Walter Cable: | This was a mainframe, National Cash Register. They first come out with 'em. They musta been ten foot long, four or five foot wide, and all of 'em just full of boards. Had about three of those in there. And when the trains come in, the keypunchers would git the weigh bills for the train, the   |

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|                      | <p>number-checkers, they would make a list—go down and make a list of what North to South or South to North, and then the [unclear] clerk would work 'em up, cut tracks on 'em that they were going out on. Keypunchers would put all that information on a card, and they'd bring the cards in the machine room, and I'd run 'em through sorters and all sorts of stuff 'pending on what you wanted to do with 'em. Had to make a lot of reports from 'em, change reports, stuff they come in daylight lookin' for.</p>  |
| <p>AO:</p>           | <p>What exactly were on these reports? Was it just what was coming in and what was going out?</p>   |
| <p>Walter Cable:</p> | <p>Initial number of the car, what kind, what it was loaded with, who it's goin' to, where it came from, company, state. Lot of information went on 'ere. They did a lot a abbreviatin'. Everybody had to learn the code whatever it was. I liked that job. I worked that for, I think, longer than any other. Then I come outside and worked front of the yardmaster. He had bills filed away, and when he had a train going out, he'd give 'em to me in track order, and I'd pull the cards on 'em to match it, and give to the machine operator, and he'd book the train out and put the bills with it, and the conductor, when he left, he would take a copy of the train sheet plus the weigh bills, and they eventually just got everything automatic. They had the retarders used to ride cars down by hand and brake 'em with the wheel on the back of the car. Lotta people got hurt, whatever. Somehow when I come to Potomac Yard the first time, the main office had a big board up, one arm so much money, one leg so much money—scorecard—which I didn't know what the hell I'm gittin' into. 'Course, I worked inside.</p>   |
| <p>AO:</p>           | <p>Were you ever there when somebody got hurt?</p>  |
| <p>Walter Cable:</p> | <p>Yeah, but I never actually seen 'em. They was always finding these hobos ridin' up and down South to North. They'd git in these gondola cars would be logs and telephone poles in 'ere and when they hid in the bottom if they were up here the poles would shift and crush 'em to death. I remember three of 'em that I was working when they found 'em. Course, the guys up in the tower kinda looked out to see if there was in 'ere when they were shifting those open cars. Lotta ways of gittin' hurt on 'ere. When they couple the trains—make sure everything is all coupled—one guy got his leg hung in between a coupler. I think he eventually lost that one. They were dangerous jobs. When I first went out there, that's when they were ridin' down, and these guys was just ridin' [unclear] cars, and I think they was payin' by the car. I don't know for sure, but I assume that's what it was 'cause I just listen some of these old-timers tell me about this, and they git enough money to buy a bottle a wine or somethin' [laughter], head across the street, and they'd come back half loaded, and that's where a lot of 'em were gettin' hurt. But they put these automatic retarders in. They'd know what the weight of the car is, and they know just how much pressure to put on it to make it roll down real easy. They'll hit with a bang, but it's not real bad. Automation really speeded things up. We always thought that it was goin' to cut off our kind of jobs, but it</p> |

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|               | didn't. Fact, it put on more jobs, I think. We were worried about it as clerks when they got the computers in 'ere, but we soon found out it didn't work that way.   |
| AO:           | So how did you get trained to work on these computers? Was it kind of on the job training or did they—?  |
| Walter Cable: | On the job with whoever was in there was the computer operator. It wasn't real, real hard. I think the hardest job out there was the yardmaster job. I mean to some people it may not be, but it was to me. I tried it for about six months, but it just wasn't in my heart to be a yardmaster.  |
| AO:           | What does a yardmaster do?   |
| Walter Cable: | You had a lot a responsibility where your engines are, where they're goin', and stuff like that. And I have an old guy watching me. He's the trainmaster up in the tower. He just sits and watch every move you make, and he'll ask me an hour ahead a time, "What are you gonna do next?" I said, "I don't know; wait for the shift." But he was good, the best one out there that I know of, 'cause if you did something wrong, he'd chew you out, but he'd come down later on and explain to you what you did wrong. Lot of 'em wouldn't do that. But it just wasn't my game. I wanted to be a clerk. I was happy with all the clerk jobs I worked 'cept for number-checker. I found out that would be dangerous job. I was just walkin' down 'ere at night writin' numbers and initials. I checked the icehouse one time, and they pull these cars in they got doors on top of each car, where put ice, and icehouse platform we just drag these five-hundred-pound chunks a ice and let 'em slide in the hole. Every now and then they'd miss one, and it would come about five feet from the [unclear] on the ground. That got me to thinking after that. I never liked checking the icehouse, and the same way on the Southbound. They had a parking lot between the passenger tracks and the regular tracks. As you get up North, it just goes in and you right next to it, and if you're on the wrong side and a passenger train comes in 'ere, you don't hear him 'til he's about six foot from you, and he's doin' eighty miles an hour. I just hang on that ladder to keep from gittin' sucked into it. I never checked on that side anymore. I always went on the other side. |
| AO:           | Were there a lot of people on the night shift?   |
| Walter Cable: | Quite a few.   |
| AO:           | Was it a busy time?  |
| Walter Cable: | Yeah, it was then. That was 'specially in perishable season—git a lot a oranges and stuff like that or watermelon up from the South.   |
| AO:           | And when was that? During the summer?  |
| Walter Cable: | In summertime, yeah. When I was checking numbers, I had a regular checking numbers job on the Northbound and had a little shack down by the icehouse where all the carmen, inspectors, when the train come in, they have to get out and inspect, but they didn't come in but certain times. I would go down there and sit in that little shack. It was good in the wintertime. They had a wood stove in 'ere. But those old guys sit around tellin' old stories about that place. That was real interestin'. Wished I had  |

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|                           | a tape recorder then.  |
| <b>Smuggling, Traffic</b> |  |
| AO:                       | What kind of stuff did they tell you?  |
| Walter Cable:             | Oh, like a boxcar was registered as a load of beans, canned beans, went in the bottom and they hit hard and the door slid open and just beans spilled out, and inside was just a outer coating of beans. The rest of it was whiskey. Somebody tryin' to sneak some whiskey somewhere I guess, but they said everybody outside in the yard started markin' off [unclear] crates of that stuff and burying it in the yard. [Laughter]  |
| AO:                       | Was that during the [19]20s? Was that during Prohibition?  |
| Walter Cable:             | Naw, I'm sure they were shippin' it illegally though. Even found a car in one. Somethin' was loaded, you know to cover it up, spill out and big Cadillac or somethin' in 'ere. Somebody tryin' to ship it to Canada for free. All kinda stuff like that. I can't even remember half of it. I'd sit down there 'til the train come in.  |
| AO:                       | How often would the trains come in?  |
| Walter Cable:             | On the midnight shift we'd git 'em least an hour apart. They had certain trains going out, and they'd try to git 'em trains up here to meet that going out. Sometimes that's what made it interestin'. It was different every time. You might get two trains in at one time. Then you gotta hurry up. You gotta git those bills up 'ere ready and get ready, book that train 'fore the other one leaves. That was another thing on the yardmaster. One day I worked down North [unclear] yard, and the guy that trained me said, "You're not worried these guys know what they have to do when these trains go out. They'll take care of you." Every time I'd call on the radio, nobody would answer me. They always had a spot over there they called the dead spot. They might not even be in it, but they wouldn't talk to you. Anyway, there was one train, I think it was a EC5, supposed to be out at two or three in the mornin.' Didn't get out 'ere 'til eight o'clock. Superintendent called me and says [laughter], "You know somethin'; I never heard of that train leavin' that time of the mornin'. Do you know what happened?" I said, "No but I think somebody did somethin' to me." Said, "If you ever find out, let me know, will you?" After that day, I just wouldn't work it anymore. |
| AO:                       | Did you go back to the computer job?   |
| Walter Cable:             | Went back to my clerk's job. Well, I always had the clerk's job. I was just doin' that extra, but I'd a never taken one if it come up regular. Five kids—I needed all the money I could make. I even worked after my railroad job. At night I'd work up 'ere at Giant as a cashier. I worked for them two or three years until it got the best of me. That was too much work.  |
| AO:                       | Must have been exhausting.   |
| Walter Cable:             | Lotta of mouths to feed.   |
| <b>Benefits</b>           |  |
| AO:                       | Yeah, that was a big family. What were the benefits of working at the Yard? Did they have like health benefits, were there unions?   |

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| Walter Cable: | Well, the clerks had the best deal. One year, I guess every contract comes up, most of 'em go for the money. This one year we didn't go for the money. We went for the health benefits—free health benefit, and all the yardmen and conductors, what have you, they laughed at us for givin' it away, but we ended up with the best deal. Years down the road they had the insurance creep up on 'em just every time, and we would argue that we'd go on strike if we didn't get ours. That was always part of our new contract—free insurance. And I never paid for—well, I paid twenty percent of what—like I went to the hospital for something. But then I never really paid for any insurance until I retired—Medicare—and I kept the United Health Care from the railroad part. My wife was on that, so we still have that 'less they come up with something better, then I'll get rid of that. Right now, Medicare pays for whatever they cover, and then anything left over United Health Care has to pay it—even my deductibles or anything. But I pay them about three thousand a year and actually only getting about half of that unless I go to a hospital for something—one of those expensive operations. But I can't see anything with this stuff they just come out with, the prescription drugs, is ridiculous—every donut hole. We made it through this year. I had to buy one—it cost me two hundred and two dollars—and one of hers was two fifteen. Normally, they are about eighty dollars or, if you get generic, it's only four dollars. They've gone up on my prescription with Aetna now, forty dollars, but then we get anything generic free. They can't charge us for it. So we're going to stick with that another year until we find out somethin' changes. |
| AO:           | So were the clerks unionized?   |
| Walter Cable: | Yeah.   |
| AO:           | Were most of your friends or your—were they all clerks or did you have friends out working in the yard or—?   |
| Walter Cable: | Well, I knew a lot of 'em. Fact, some of 'em I'd say good mornin' every mornin' when I leave. Saw 'em for years, and never knew their names. And I had one guy come up my office one night; he was a car inspector. He would call me every night and tell me what cars that were [unclear]. I'd know to pick' em out. I'd never seen him before, I don't know, for thirty years. Then he come up, and I recognized his voice, but I hadn't recognized his face. He said, "I been talking to you for a long time. I thought I'd come up and see what you look like."   |
| AO:           | How did the radio system work? Did you have call numbers?   |
| Walter Cable: | Talk to them to control it, but like I say, they pull a dead spot on you lot a times. I don't know whether they just playing games with you or what. But they really said there was one spot in that yard that the radios wouldn't work, and a lot of 'em had these hand radios with the holsters that they carried around with 'em—in case the yardmaster was outside on the yard, he could talk to anybody. I never had to worry about radios in the office as a clerk. They had yardmaster in 'ere and he'd tell me what he wanted.  |
| AO:           | You said you worked there until it closed?  |

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| Walter Cable:                                 | Yeah, I had one more year to go to get my full retirement. They offered me to either to go down Jacksonville and work for a year, or they'd buy me out—twenty-five thousand. Wasn't a whole lot but I took it anyway. I didn't want to go down there for a year. My wife was working for a big printin' company out in Manassas [Virginia]. She got a good retirement on hers, and she had her own hospitalization until she quit, and I've been carrying on mine all the time, so that's what we are still using now.  |
| AO:   | Did you work with computers up until it closed?   |
| Walter Cable:                                 | Yeah. No, last year I was a crew dispatcher. I hated that job too. See, you got trainmen got certain rules, and brakemen certain rules, everybody got different rules. I didn't know 'em, and you gotta call 'em in order. Somebody marks off sick you gotta figure out which rule they go by. I only messed up one time though, but I didn't have that many mark off sick on me. You git a little letter from the front office on it. See, they have to pay 'em time and half or somethin' if they got mis-called. Everything worked by seniority. When I was young, I could've really used the money. I couldn't get the doubles, the overtime, because certain ones—not real old—but took most of it. They'd throw you a bone every now and then, but as I got older, I got a lotta chances at it too. |
| <b>Railroad Terms, Operations, Retirement</b> |   |
| AO:   | When you say a train was 'called,' what does that mean?   |
| Walter Cable:                                 | Like he'd call for ten o'clock or one o'clock in the morning. You gotta wake his crew up. There was a bunkhouse in the yard which they used for a long time. Engineer and the brakemen and all would sleep in 'ere, but then they found it cheaper to take 'em down to, I think it was, Marriott Hotel. It's 'bout five or six miles from the office, and they had a messenger that had to drive a van down 'ere to pick 'em up. I think they had to give him an hour and half call—time to get ready, get somethin' to eat.  |
| AO:   | So once you got the train put together basically, you'd call down there?  |
| Walter Cable:                                 | Naw, they knew—well, lotta times we did have the train all ready, but lotta times they knew they had another train to add to it. If he knew he was called at one, he'd have to call him an hour and a half early. Then you'd have to notify the messenger to pick him up. It was all a pretty good system there for a while. I don't know why they closed. I think they wanted to go in the real estate business—all that land down 'ere. One time they were gonna put the Redskins football field there. Old Town Alexandria wouldn't go along with it. They said it would be too much congestion. They had the subway run right by it. Wouldn't had to go through all that. Now they got that shopping center down there, and they got more traffic than they can handle every day.                     |
| AO:   | What do you think about that, the shopping center? Do you—?   |
| Walter Cable:                                 | I only been down there once or twice. I get the same thing out here—different shopping centers. I live in a good location here. I got grocery stores two or three miles in the radius. She just sits up there and reads the papers and finds out where the sales are, and that's where we go.   |

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| AO:                       | It's a good plan.   |
| Walter Cable:             | I got a li'l' freezer in 'ere, and we just stock up. Right now we're trying to sell and go right here to this Del Webb fifty-five and older community. No grass to cut—nothing but play time. We got in on the bad end of the housing market as usual. The house I sold—I musta had it on the market almost a year before I sold it and moved out here, and I had a price that I wanted to git so I could pay for this place. I did. Now we're tryin' to sell this for a price, and I can pay for that one. I don't want to have no mortgage. |
| AO:                       | Did you have, when did you—you said you lived in Alexandria, right?   |
| Walter Cable:             | Yeah.   |
| AO:                       | So when, when did you move out? Right before you came here to Ashburn or—?  |
| Walter Cable:             | Oh yeah. We lived in here—we've been here twelve years. I was in the other place for, I guess, six or seven years—something like that. I used to pay sixty dollars on my mortgage over there. These kids out here they go nuts when I tell 'em that. Some of these are paying fifteen hundred dollars and over, but they make a helluva lot more money than I did. I'd have to work 'bout two days, two and a half days for some of 'em, but what they do, I don't think they are being overpaid.   |
| AO:                       | Well, you know, inflation—  |
| Walter Cable:             | Some of them are pretty smart though. This is a good street. I like this street.  |
| AO:                       | Yeah, it's a nice street.   |
| Walter Cable:             | I'll come back at different times like Halloween and Christmas. Only the place we want to move is only about five miles that way. But we go over there every Thursday and play this what they call Mexican Train with dominoes with 'em. They are building a huge clubhouse. Since we've got a down payment on the place, it's all ready. All I got to do is sell this, and I can move in it. They let us come over there and hang out like we're already there. They're not selling anything either. [Laughter]                              |
| <b>Co-Workers, Unions</b> |   |
| AO:                       | Did you ever hang out with your work colleagues from the Yard?  |
| Walter Cable:             | Oh, yeah. Not too long 'cause a lot of 'em liked to drink the beer. I'd get off at eight o'clock in the morning, and I'm ready to head home. I've stayed a coupla times with 'em—noontime. One time I don't 'member how I got home. I had a big ol' Volkswagen camper and windy day and I was going down 95. I couldn't keep that thing steady because of the wind. 'Nother time I—they took me to one of my co-workers' house down 'bout halfway from my house. Let me sleep 'til 'bout noon 'fore they'd let me go. I couldn't handle it.   |
| AO:                       | Where'd you used to go?   |
| Walter Cable:             | In Del Ray there was a place. I can't 'member the name of it now, but they had the union meetin's up 'ere all the time.   |
| AO:                       | How often were the union meetings?  |
| Walter Cable:             | Once a month, but they were a mess half the time, 'cause you'd be   |

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|               | discussin' somethin' at the start of the meetin' and the rest of 'em are talkin' and not payin' any attention, and they'd come over and they'll ask the same questions that were already answered, and whoever was in office usually had things going his way far as work rules go. [Laughter] I took a job as secretary/treasurer, so I wouldn't have to pay any dues. [Laughter]   |
| AO:           | And when were these meetings—what time of day? Were they before—   |
| Walter Cable: | They'd be at night. I think seven or eight o'clock—somewhere around there.   |
| AO:           | So you went before your shift.   |
| Walter Cable: | I kept the records. They offered me a job as a chief inspector—check books with all the secretaries in the area, but they wanted me to move to Kentucky. I didn't want to go there. I said I can get to Kentucky from here. It was right good pay and a pretty good job.   |
| AO:           | How long were you in that position?  |
| Walter Cable: | Oh, I guess the whole time I was a clerk. I figured it was one good way I wouldn't have to pay the dues. It wasn't a whole lot of money then, but it was to me. I'd do anything to make a dollar as long as somebody would give me a chance to work. I never was afraid of work.   |
| AO:           | And what kind of things did you discuss in the meetings?   |
| Walter Cable: | What?  |
| AO:           | What kind of things did you discuss?   |
| Walter Cable: | Well, somebody would have a complaint on what the company was doin' to 'em or the bathroom didn't have an air vent in it—anything. And I think one time the superintendent used a worker off the yard to cut his grass or somethin'—heard about that. Half of it was dumb as the devil, but to some 'em it was serious stuff. I used to hate to sit up 'ere and listen to 'em argue on a lotta that stuff 'cause it didn't make sense. |
| AO:           | Was it ever your job to go to the superintendent and explain people's complaints or—   |
| Walter Cable: | No, that was left up to the representative. We had a representative. If you had a complaint, you went to him so that he would take care before meetin' time and explain what come out of it.   |
| AO:           | Did you find people with the same jobs in the same unions—would they hang out together or was there a lot of—  |
| Walter Cable: | No, the clerks all usually hung out. Lotta 'em knew the trainmen because they lived probably next to 'em down in Woodbridge or somewhere like that.  |
| AO:           | They were all neighbors?   |
| Walter Cable: | But I never knew too many of 'em real well—just from work. Like I say, I'd greet 'em in the mornin—couldn't remember their names. I'm bad on names, I tell you. Like I been goin' over every Thursday playin' this Mexican Train. I see 'em people every night. Take me six months 'fore I remember their names.   |
| AO:           | Everybody should wear nametags.  |
| Walter Cable: | My next-door neighbor here—it almost took me a month to remember his name. I just find it hard to remember for some reason.  |

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| AO:                         | I'm the same way. I know. Did have you have a break in the middle of the day? What was your break schedule like?  |
| Walter Cable:               | We never had a regular lunch hour. It was called twenty minutes. You'd usually take it when there's nothin' goin' on—no trains in—but you had your choice of takin' it whenever. If you took it at a time a train come on, yardmaster could tell you to stop and get with it, but you couldn't complain, because you were actually gittin' paid for eight hours. They were givin' you twenty minutes. So that wasn't too bad.   |
| AO:                         | Did you bring your lunch?   |
| Walter Cable:               | I brought a lunch all the time, and I think that's where I got in trouble with my blood sugar, 'cause a lot—well, I'd work twelve to eight. I'd stop by Giant most every other day and take a dozen cinnamon rolls in or somethin'. If they didn't eat 'em, I would. Lot of 'em would have cakes and stuff, and they'd say, "Leave 'em for Cable," and I'd eat 'em most times. [Laughter]   |
| AO:                         | Was there a break room where people could go?   |
| Walter Cable:               | Well, they'd usually eat around the space 'less they'd want to talk together. They'd all pull their chairs together. They had a regular lunch room over in the bunkhouse, but nobody ever go over 'ere 'cause you had to be quiet—people sleepin'. They were just in cubicles with beds in 'em—curtains for doors. The whole top was open. You had to be quiet around 'ere.   |
| AO:                         | Did you have a separate office with a computer in it?   |
| Walter Cable:               | Yeah, it was a room, I guess, 'bout the size of this. It was all glassed in. They had to have a air conditioner set a little higher than it was outside, and it had to be running all the time.   |
| AO:                         | Was that in use until you left?   |
| Walter Cable:               | Yeah.   |
| AO:                         | Did the computer change at all?   |
| Walter Cable:               | They got in a little trouble 'bout the last year there, because they got all these programs in Richmond [Virginia] together and come up here for about a week to watch what we do. They had intended, I guess, to cut off some more work. I don't think they all got together down 'ere because when they broke the system in up here, they got behind and behind everyday. Stuff kept being piled up, and you'd come to work, and you'd have to start working on some other day, and they finally got it straight—caught up so they didn't have a chance to cut anything off anyway 'cause they closed the whole place up. They had trouble where they started with one program that handled this part of the program and another one this one—'bout five of 'em. One of 'em's on vacation and you got trouble; can't do nothing 'cept bring him back. They went about it, I think, wrong way. They have more brains than I got. |
| <b>Women and Minorities</b> |   |
| AO:                         | Were there many women working at the Yard when you were working there?  |
| Walter Cable:               | Yes. Well, most of 'em was daylight working front office. We had, I   |

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|                         | guess, about three of 'em—two of 'em were black, and we never had any trouble. We all worked together.   |
| AO:                     | About minorities? Would you say they were—   |
| Walter Cable:           | We never had any complaints. I think one of 'em went on to Jacksonville with 'em. One girl was a little touchy. You had to be careful what you said around her. She'd make up something and use it against you. Then when the boys found out, they started teasin' her a little more, but I never got in on that.  |
| AO:                     | Were there women on the night shift too?   |
| Walter Cable:           | Yeah.  |
| AO:                     | Working as clerks?   |
| Walter Cable:           | One of 'em had a regular job and the other one working extra force. This one girl down 'ere working regular—keypunch—man, she could really type.   |
| <b>Cargo, Accidents</b> |  |
| AO:                     | What kind of stuff came into the Yard when you were working there? What was the kind of cargo they had on the trains?  |
| Walter Cable:           | Like I say, they carried poles, lumber, bricks.  |
| AO:                     | Was that stuff that was headed to the North? You worked on both, stuff going North—  |
| Walter Cable:           | They was going both ways. That's what I never would understand. They'd send bricks this way, and they'd send bricks that way, but they were different places and different kinda bricks. Lotta stuff like that. In fact, they had the Washington-Old Dominion, which goes by here, and it's now a bike path, but it used to go out to Percyville. [possibly Purcellville, Virginia] They'd come back every mornin', and that's where I parked my car or close to it, and they lift these bricks out with these handles that'll squeeze 'em out a dozen at a time, and if they drop, then they don't bother with 'em. They just go to the next, and when they get back of those empty cars, they just kick 'em out on the ground. I used to stop and load my trunk and take 'em home. I asked the detective was anything against it. He said no, as long as you get 'em off the ground. I coulda done enough to build me a house if I'd done it long enough. I made a patio outta one. Every now and then they'd have a tank car like it was loaded with concentrated orange juice and it'd spring a leak. They'd pull it over on the side right by the office, and everybody's tryin' to find jugs to git as much as they could. [Laughter] But you can't drink that stuff 'less you mix it with water—strong taste. |
| AO:                     | Were there any other kind of accidents like that that you remember?  |
| Walter Cable:           | I 'member they had that Cuban P-38 hit a airliner over by the airport, and it came right down near a stock pen in a swamp area down 'ere. We all run down 'ere to see if we could do anything, but police were there ahead of us and told us we didn't want to go in 'ere. They didn't want us to see what it was. I guess there was body parts and everything in 'ere. They had another one—it was a car with nuclear waste to different places. One of those derailed and turned on its side. They told us to stay in the office,  |

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|                      | don't come out—radiation. We wanted to go home. We didn't want to hang around here.  |
| AO:                  | When was that? Do you remember?  |
| Walter Cable:        | Oh, that's been twenty years or more when they first started hauling that stuff away.  |
| AO:                  | Where was it going?  |
| Walter Cable:        | I don't know where they'd take it. They got it from these electricity plants. It's only good for so long and then it's spent. They load it in these cars that are—I'm sure they are lined and all. But nothin' ever come of it. They had to wait and get these people from D.C. to come over and inspect it, and they got it up on the track and haul it on out of here. But we all made a big deal of it that night. We didn't wanna stick around here.   |
| AO:                  | I'm running out of questions of my own, but I see you've taken some notes, so—   |
| <b>Reminiscences</b> |  |
| Walter Cable:        | I've pert-near told you a little bit about all of it. 'Cept I did have one incident when I was a kid down on paper wharf. We used to row over—in the middle of that river there is what they call flats—sand, black sand, and at low tide you only got about that much water on it. We'd go over 'ere and play football on the weekends, and the Wilson Line used to go up and down 'ere, and some woman fainted 'cause she saw us. She thought that we were walkin' on water. It was in the newspapers the next day.<br>[Laughter]  |
| AO:                  | When was this?   |
| Walter Cable:        | That's when I was a kid.   |
| AO:                  | I might try to look that up in the newspaper.  |
| Walter Cable:        | I swam across that river many times. We'd have races. We'd use the rowboats that he'd lend us. We'd go all over, and we'd get ready to come home—we're too tired. We'd hide one of the oars and wave the other one—get somebody come by an' tow us over—stuff like that. They had a big sand dune over there. It was actually dangerous what we did, but it was one little area that was almost like quicksand. You could go down, but you'd soon hit the bottom when you got to 'bout here, and we used to mess around with that kinda stuff, which was dangerous. I've dove off that railroad bridge that run across from the coal power plant over to Maryland-side, and I'll never do that again. I [unclear] busted my head open. |
| AO:                  | Were you with your friends?  |
| Walter Cable:        | We'd just do crazy stuff like that on a bet—who can do it, or who'll do it first. Occoquan got a bridge and we dove off of that. I was down 'ere when I was married and we went to a festival or somethin' down 'ere, and we got there at low tide, and there's a ledge. If I'd a hit that thing it woulda killed me. I just happen to dive in the channel. I didn't know anything about it. All kinda stuff like that we did.   |
| AO:                  | Do you still stay in touch with these people that you used to hang out with?   |

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| Walter Cable: | I just got in contact with one. His name is Billy Roland [unsure of spelling]. Had an article in the paper.  |
| AO:           | Do you think he would be willing to give an interview? Do you know?  |
| Walter Cable: | I doubt it. He's kinda fussy. But I called him up, and he wanted to see me, so I went down and located him. He goes to somethin' like a county clubhouse or somethin'. They had a swimmin' pool, and he took me down 'ere. We went swimmin', talked about old times a little, and he's telling me about all the other friends that he'd got in touch with. Most of the ones I worked with twelve to eight are gone—passed away.  |
| AO:           | I guess, you're involved with the Potomac Yard Retired Employees Association. That's how we got your name.   |
| Walter Cable: | I haven't been to any regular meetin's—only been to a couple of 'em. We had a granddaughter stayin' with us, and she isn't out of it, but she's—somethin' wrong with one side of her brain. She's, looks slower reactin'. We raised her from a baby 'cause her mother couldn't take her and the other ones she had. They all lived here when we moved out, but they moved out, and she stayed with us the whole time. She's just movin' out now—where her bedroom was. She keeps comin' back and forth gittin' some of the stuff out. We've pretty much raised her. We got ten grandchildren—four great-grandchildren and another one on the way. [Laughter] |
| AO:           | Wow, that's quite a large family.  |
| Walter Cable: | Yes, like Christmas time and stuff like that, it really gits you, but we've all settled down now. We only buy for the kids—Christmas presents or somethin'. Got too much for the rest of 'em.  |
| AO:           | Do you have a really good memory of working at the Yard? Like one really good story? Was there a bad day or a good day you want to share?  |
| Walter Cable: | They was all good days for me. That stuff never bothered me. They were late, that's why I liked it because it was always different. I can't think of any bad days I had 'cept one. That was at home when I had a tree fall across my driveway. I marked off sick, and telling to him [unclear] believe the story. I took a picture of it and had to bring it back and show it to him. We always had a bowling league and golf at Potomac Yard. I never was any good at golf, but I loved to play the game.   |
| AO:           | Did you play very often? Where'd you play?   |
| Walter Cable: | I haven't the last few years. They used to have a tournament. In fact, I think they still do once a year. But they got one out here, but it's too expensive out at this place. Go over here to Lansdowne it cost you two hundred and fifty dollars.  |
| AO:           | Oh, yes. It's expensive. Bowling did you say too? Did you ever go bowling?   |
| Walter Cable: | It was duckpin bowling. I've only bowled a coupla regular tenpin games since that league folded.   |
| AO:           | Who was on the league with you? Remember?  |
| Walter Cable: | Usually anybody in Potomac Yard. We had a mixture of all.  |
| AO:           | Okay, so it was just whoever showed up could play?   |

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| Walter Cable: | You had regular teams you played each week. They would shift different teams. I had a picture 'round here, I guess, in my folder. This is some of that stuff like we'd dress up for Halloween. I had this on with a skirt and my face all painted up, and I scared the devil outta my grandkids when they come in. They wouldn't come in the house. She's [Mrs. Cable] a Redskin fan. She got a bunch of autographs from different players she come in contact with—with the print company she work with—got autograph pictures. |
| AO:           | Lot of stuff here.   |
| Walter Cable: | Here's a thing I won with a [unclear] captain's choice, second place   |
| AO:           | All right, 1970. Okay, is there anything else that I'm forgetting that you want to talk about?   |
| Walter Cable: | No, I don't think so.  |



*Hand-carving of Bruce Ball, by Walter Cable*

**Carving Hobby**

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| AO:           | Oh, actually do you want to tell us a little bit about your carving?   |
| Walter Cable: | Well, like I say, I started with fish—the little cedar trees in the woods here. All these houses—we were the only street here when I first moved in. All these others been added. That was all woods. But I get the round ones, and I made a string of three on a—bought these metal fishing hooks stringers. I put three on 'ere. I sell 'em for five, ten dollars. I made four hundred dollars the first year I did 'em. |
| AO:           | And you said this one's the superintendent?  |
| Walter Cable: | No that's the Chief of Police, He doesn't look like that, but I just had the idea of makin' an ol' timey bowler hat, and I think he did smoke a cigar, and I put that in 'ere. I don't know whether he is still livin' or not. I   |

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|               | haven't heard anything that he's passed away. He was a big guy.  |
| AO:           | What was his name?   |
| Walter Cable: | Bruce Ball [not sure of spelling]. I think that was my first totem pole. I have another one my neighbor bought from me, and he also bought a Civil War quilt from me that his father was interested in the Civil War. These things I made. I got half my family fightin' over who's gonna git them. All have got—I musta made least three or four hundred carvings. Neighbors come over, they want this or that. They're just a lotta fun. I got a big deck on the back, and it had little cracks in it for water to git through, and I'd sit there and carve all day, and at the end of the day I'd just sweep 'em right down in 'ere. I got the biggest gerbil whatchacallem—not gerbil, but they look like gerbils. I had a big population 'round 'ere. I finally had to git someone to wire traps and set 'em—peanut butter—and I was catchin' two, three a day, carrying 'em down the road and lettin' 'em go in the woods. Caught seventy-two one year, one summer. I haven't seen too many of 'em lately. We got rabbits runnin' around the neighborhood now. |
| AO:           | Well, if that's all you have, I'm going to say, "Thank you," and I'll stop the tape here.  |
| Walter Cable: | Okay. [End]  |