

Shaw, Judith: Railroad Street ^[1]

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Judith Shaw: Railroad Street

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 4/10/2005. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

Judith Shaw was born and raised in New York City, but every summer of her childhood she visited her father's hometown of La Grange, 75 miles east of Raleigh. She loved the little town that calls itself "the garden spot." As soon as she arrived, she would take off her shoes and run across the street to play with her cousins. She also loved listening to her Southern relatives' stories, especially those about her great-grandfather, a legendary railroad man named Eugene Jim Shaw.

Judith Shaw never forgot those summers or those stories. Last year she finally decided to leave New York and move to La Grange. Now she is teaching part time at local schools and collecting stories about her great-grandfather for a series of children's books. At her apartment, we talked about her great-grandfather, the historical importance of railroads, and a yearning for home that reaches across the generations.

A historical note: African-American porters and train personnel like Judith Shaw's great-grandfather were a fixture on railroads for a century after the Civil War. Pledged to "service, not servitude," the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, which she mentions, was organized in 1925. It was the first black labor union to sign a collective-bargaining agreement with a major U.S. corporation.



Judith Shaw. Photo by Chris Seward, 2005. To request permission for further use, please contact the News & Observer.

"Since I was a child, I have always heard the story of my great-grandfather, Eugene Jim Shaw. We would come down and visit my father's mother in the same house that Eugene Jim Shaw had lived in. My father would walk us through the house. My great-grandfather was born in Sampson County in 1880, and in 1900 he came to La Grange. He always had this desire to work for the railroad. He was just fascinated by trains. He was lucky enough to get a job on the railroad and work there. He also worked as a porter on the Shoofly. That happened after he lost a thumb on his right hand when he was coupling two cars together. He would help people on and off the train, carry their bags, clean up the compartments. He talked to everybody. He didn't care what color you were or whether you had money. He didn't care anything about that. He was friendly to everyone. And everyone -- black people, white people, whoever -- called him Mr. Shaw. When he was a porter, my great-grandfather always announced the station. That was what got him noticed, because every time the train pulled into a station, he would give a little history about the station. He'd yell something like, "We're pulling in now. He said La Grange was the most beautiful place that he had ever seen. During that time, there were gardens and flowers all up and down Railroad Street. In fact, if you talk to some of the old-timers, people traveled into La Grange just to see



Eugene Jim Shaw, legendary railroad man in La Grange. Back then, it was a different life. For example, my cousin and her mother lived in Goldsboro. On Sunday morning, they would take the Shoofly into La Grange and go to church. Working on the Shoofly was an extremely big thing. If you were a porter, a switchman or a fireman, that was like being a doctor or a lawyer in the African-American community. Otherwise you were working in the fields, picking cotton, doing so. But my great-grandfather was the first in the black community to have indoor plumbing, first one to have an indoor bathroom, first one to have an automobile, first one to have a big home. He was considered wealthy. And he cared about other people. This story was told me since I was a child, but it wasn't spread around. We had to keep it a secret. But when the train came through La Grange, he used to throw coal out of the train for people to heat up their houses. For some people, that coal was also carried news to the people. There was a store, Branch's store. Branch's store was a place where a lot of the black men went to get information. Even though my great-grandfather got around and spoke to people, he was really a family man. He was kind of a loner. But he did go to Branch's. They would say, "Jim, what's happening with the union? What's going on in Morehead City?" He was very active in the union that was starting among railroad workers. It was an extremely difficult union to get started, and it had to be kept very quiet. It was a volatile time to try to start a union. Even the talk of a union could get you killed. I have just always had a feeling about this town. When I first came back, I stayed three or four months in the same house where my great-grandfather and great-grandmother lived. It felt like home. Ever since I was small, I had a feeling that I

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