

## **George Mortimer Pullman: Builder of Hotel Rooms on Wheels**

**By Stanley Turkel, MHS, ISHC**

When young people ask their parents “What is a Pullman car?”, they often receive a reply, “a railroad car you sit down in to have a meal on a train.” Though a good reply, the full story of the invention and widespread usage of the Pullman car is much more interesting. You must go back to the development of the railroad sleeping cars by earlier pioneers than George Mortimer Pullman.

It seems that sleeping cars appeared on American railroads some twenty years before Pullman remodeled the two Chicago & Alton Railroad coaches into sleeping cars in 1858. The first two companies to introduce sleeping cars were the Cumberland Valley Railroad in 1836 and the New York & Erie Railroad in 1843. Twenty years later, such cars were in wide use but they were uncomfortable and difficult to convert from day coach use into sleeping cars for night travel.

George Mortimer Pullman was born on March 3, 1831 in Albion, N.Y., outside of Buffalo, the third of ten children of James Lewis and Emily Caroline (Minton) Pullman. Lewis Pullman worked as a carpenter and as a building-mover. He invented a machine for transporting buildings on wheels for which he received a patent in 1841. His sons followed in his footsteps and emulated his example.

After Lewis Pullman died on November 1, 1853, the twenty-two year old George, the eldest unmarried son, took over the responsibility to support the family. Soon thereafter, George decided to give up the cabinet-making business and concentrate on the building-moving business. In 1854, George secured a contract with New York State to move twenty or more buildings back from the new right-of-way along the Erie Canal near Albion. However, by 1857, as a business recession occurred, he visited Chicago in search of new projects and ultimately secured the contract to raise the Matteson House, one of Chicago’s better-known hotels and the largest building elevated to that time. This job was part of the project to raise portions of Chicago’s business district by eight feet in order to build a sewage system.

Pullman was successful and built a solid reputation after raising a number of blocks of bricks and stone buildings including the massive Tremont House, a six-story brick hotel on an acre of ground.

Even before he left New York State, George Pullman showed enthusiasm for the fabrication of railroad sleeping cars. One of his close friends and neighbors in Albion, former State Senator Benjamin C. Field, had joined his partners in building and operating several sleeping cars.

In connection with both his cabinet shop and building—raising business, Pullman was familiar with uncomfortable sleeping accommodations on canal boats and railroad trains. Pullman and Field formed a partnership and secured a contract from the Chicago, Alton and St. Louis Railroad to develop a more comfortable sleeping car. While the two remodeled Chicago and Alton coaches were accepted by the public, the Civil War prevented more radical designs from being built. In 1864, Pullman had a new car built in Chicago at a cost of \$20,000. and called it the “Pioneer.” It was a vast improvement over any car then in service with springs reinforced by blocks of solid rubber. In order to gain a head start on his competition, George became a master of public relations with the following masterstrokes: a) used the word “palace” to describe his sleeping and dining cars b) invited kings and queens to use his personal car c) installed a printing press in the baggage compartment of the first all- Pullman transcontinental trip in order to publish dozens of self-praising newspapers. The tycoon Andrew Carnegie was so intrigued by Pullman that he became his largest investor.

In April 1865, after President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, his body was transported by the so-called “Lonesome Train” to Springfield, Illinois for burial. From Washington, the funeral train bearing his body started west by slow stages. Across the country, mourners lined the tracks and wept when given the opportunity to look upon “Father Abraham” for the last time. By the time the cortege reached Chicago, Mrs. Lincoln collapsed. When arrangements had to be made for her return directly to Springfield, Pullman made his new Pioneer sleeper available.

In 1867, George Pullman went even further in his market penetration. He recognized that the typical meal on a train consisted of hard tack beef, stale coffee and doughnuts so hard that they were called “sinkers”. Many travelers packed a portable lunch at home or purchased one at the

station. One major exception was the Sante Fe, Atchison & Topeka's association with the Fred Harvey Houses and the "Harvey Girls".

Pullman created and introduced his first hotel on wheels, the President, a sleeper with an attached kitchen and dining car. The food rivaled the best restaurants of the day and the service was impeccable. A year later in 1868, he launched the Delmonico, the world's first sleeping car devoted to fine cuisine. Both the President and the Delmonico and subsequent Pullman sleeping cars offered first-rate service which was provided by recently-freed former house slaves who served as porters, waiters, chambermaids, entertainers, and valets all rolled into one person.

Pullman realized that if his sleeper cars were to be successful, he needed to provide a wide variety of services to travelers: collecting tickets, selling berths, dispatching wires, fetching sandwiches, mending torn trousers, converting day coaches into sleepers, etc. At first, Pullman hired white men but they were neither trained nor disposed to do the grunt work of janitor, shoe shiner, maid, waiter, porter, bellhop and valet. Pullman found that the former house slaves has the right combination of training, acquiescence, size and color. He favored "the blackest man with the whitest teeth." While Pullman was called a racist who "does more than any other organization in the world to make the negro a beggar and a grafter" wrote the New York Press in 1911. "More negroes are demoralized each year by the Pullman Company than are graduated by Tuskegee, Hampton and some other negro educational establishments." Truth is that Pullman was way ahead of his time. He became the biggest single employer of blacks in the country and the job of Pullman porter was probably the very best job that a black man could get in the post Reconstruction era. Later, Robert Todd Lincoln, son of President Lincoln (who succeeded George M. Pullman as president and served until 1911) had to appear before a Congressional Commission to explain Pullman's hiring policies. He testified that, "the old southern colored man makes the best porter on the car. He is more adapted to waiting on passengers and gives them better attention and has a better manner."

Wealthy white travelers called the Pullman porter "boy" or more often "George" like the practice of naming slaves after slavemasters. Porters were thought to be "owned" by George Pullman.

Author Larry Tye said it best:

“Whether George Pullman knew his passengers were calling his porters “George” is unclear. That he would not have cared is certain. It was not that he was mean, or more coldhearted to black employees than to white. He believed he owed workers nothing more than a job, and when business slackened, even that was not ironclad. He hired more Negroes than any businessman in America, giving them a monopoly on the profession of Pullman porter and a chance to enter the cherished middle class. He did it not out of sentimentality, of which he had none, but it made business sense. They came cheap, and men used to slave labor could be compelled to do whatever work they were asked, for as many hours as told.”

By the middle of 1869, Pullman’s Palace Car Company owned more than seventy cars and soon thereafter acquired the Detroit Car and Manufacturing Company where they manufactured their own vehicles. Pullman continued to expand and struck leasing deals with the Pennsylvania Railroad company and the Hannibal and St. Joseph and North Missouri Railroad companies. By 1870, Pullman was manufacturing sleeping cars, drawing room cars, hotel cars and dining cars. The hotel car had two drawing rooms each furnished with a sofa and two large easy chairs that converted to two double and two single berths at night. Each hotel car had a large kitchen which prepared fine food that compared favorably with the best restaurants of the day. The wonderfully compact eight-foot square kitchen contained a specially-designed three-tiered range which permitted baking, broiling and boiling. Every inch of space was carefully designed for storage of kitchen equipment and supplies along with storage space for meats, vegetables, wines and condiments. From this kitchen, the cooks were able to produce 250 meals per day.

The Detroit Commercial Advertiser of June 1, 1867, commented:

“But the crowning glory of Mr. Pullman’s invention is evinced in his success in supplying the car with a cuisine department containing a range where every variety of meats, vegetables and pastry may be cooked on the car, according to the best style of culinary art.”

Hotel cars named “Western World” “City of Boston” and “City of New York” costing more than \$30,000 each were put into service between Chicago and eastern points. However, in 1869 the Pullman Company received nationwide publicity when the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific track laying crews met. In May, 1870 the first through train from the Atlantic to the Pacific crossed the United States. The Pullman cars provided a level of comfort never before experienced. Magazines and newspapers extolled the marvels of the journey to the Pacific Ocean as “a six day’s sojourn in a luxurious hotel, past the windows of which there constantly flowed a great panorama of the American continent; thousands of miles in length and as wide as the eye could reach. Illustrated magazine articles which appeared telling the story of a trip to California had as many pictures of Pullman interiors as they had of the big trees or the Yosemite valley. The effect of all this was far reaching. The great Pennsylvania line abandoned its own service and adopted the Pullman, and many other lines made application for inclusion in the Pullman system.”

On June 13, 1867, George Pullman married Harriett (Hattie) Amelia Sanger, the daughter of Mary Catherine McKibben and James Y. Sanger, a builder who helped construct railroads and the new Illinois penitentiary at Joliet. During the next eight years George and Hattie had four children: Florence (1868), Harriett (1869) and twin sons George Jr. and Walter (1875).

The Pullman’s lived with ostentatious display of wealth in the years that followed. They built a mansion on Prairie Avenue in Chicago which contained a bowling alley and billiard room. They made their first recorded visit to Long Branch, N.J. during the summer of 1871, where they visited with President Ulysses S. Grant and his wife, Julia. In 1874, they summered at their new house Fairlawn, just west of Long Branch, N.J. It was reported that the Pullman’s traveled on a private train from Chicago to Long Branch carrying four children, twelve servants, three vehicles, and an assortment of trunks and other luggage. The train also contained a stable car which had space for five horses, carriages, berths for grooms and hostlers. Every summer, the family would visit Pullman’s mother in the Thousand Islands in upper New York State. Subsequently, Pullman acquired an island (which, of course, he named Pullman Island) in Alexandria Bay and built several cabins on the property for his immediate family’s use. In actual practice, Pullman traveled incessantly on business all over the United States and often to Europe.

In 1880 Pullman purchased a site of 3500 acres near Lake Calumet some 14 miles south of Chicago on the Illinois Central Railroad. Pullman designed and built a model town for his employees which grew to 12,000 inhabitants. With demand exploding for his sleepers, Pullman decided to build the largest factory to mass produce them. With the vast influx of immigrants to the Chicago area came tuberculosis and cholera, crime, prostitution and drunkenness. George believed that if he built a company town without saloons and agitators, his workers would be forever loyal to the Pullman creed.

Pullman City had its own shopping center, a savings bank, theater, church, schools, parks and playgrounds. It also had a library of 8000 volumes and the luxurious Florence Hotel (named after Pullman's daughter). It attempted to furnish laborers with the best homes under the most healthful conditions and favorable surroundings in every respect.

A reporter for Harper's Magazine in 1885 wrote,

“Very gratifying is the impression of the visitor who passes hurriedly through Pullman and observes only the splendid provision for the present material comforts of its residents. ....One of the most striking peculiarities of this place is the all-pervading air of thrift and providence... Contrary to what is seen ordinarily in laborers' quarters, not a dilapidated door-step nor a broken window, stuffed perhaps with old clothing is to be found in the city. The streets of Pullman, always kept in perfect condition, are wide and finely macadamized, and the young shade trees on each side now ornament the town, and will in a few years afford refreshing protection from the rays of the summer sun!”

But as admirable as the physical qualities of Pullman City were, the shortcomings were so overwhelming as to plant the seeds of its own destruction. In short 1) the leases on all residences could be terminated on ten days notice 2) no resident could own their house 3) no independent newspaper was tolerated 4) the one church building was unoccupied because no denomination could pay the rent and no other congregation was allowed 5) no town meetings with free discussion of local affairs was tolerated 6) strikes were regarded as the chief of social sins 7) mutual insurance associations or charitable organizations were discouraged because the Company feared that word would circulate that there were poor and needy people in Pullman.

During the 1880's Pullman entered a related business: providing side-tracked sleeping cars in lieu of hotels to political delegates and convention attendees. For example, Pullman supplied 125 cars for the Grand Army of the Republic's reunion in San Francisco plus fifty-three cars for the GAR's event in Los Angeles. In addition, Pullman supplied fifty-five cars to Boston for the Grand Sovereign Lodge of Odd Fellows and 200 cars for the Knights Templars in St. Louis.

By 1890, the Pullman Palace Car Company reached the zenith of success:

- 2135 vehicles operating on 120,686 of the approximately 160,000 miles of railroad track in the United States
- Pullman sleepers accommodated 100,000 people a night, more than all the nation's top notch hotels combined.
- 10,680 people living in Pullman City
- 12,367 workers on the payroll with earnings of more than \$6.2 million per year
- 286 second-class cars in operation

In the spring of 1893, a financial panic in the United States signaled the start of a four year depression which caused a severe decline in business activity. During the 1880's and 1890's many walkouts occurred at various Pullman factories. Like other contemporary business executives, Pullman was adamantly opposed to labor unions and any form of collective bargaining. He used whatever means he could, including spies and spotters on the railroads, in the factories and in Pullman City. Union organizers supporters regularly lost their jobs and their homes. In August, 1893, Pullman cut costs throughout the company and reduced wages across the board by nearly a third. But he did not reduce the Pullman City rents thereby putting workers in an untenable situation. After a meeting on May 7, 1894 between American Railway Union and Thomas Wickes, Pullman Company's second vice president, three members of the grievance committee were discharged. Workers were furious and under the guidance of the American Railway Union, declared a system-wide strike on May 11, 1894. In short order, the strike turned ugly and violent. Pullman used his political influence to get public officials to call up two thousand federal troops, four thousand Illinois militia, five thousand deputy marshals and the entire Chicago police force. The predictable outcome resulted in brickthrowing mobs overturning freight and Pullman cars which turned Chicago into a fiery inferno.

The Pullman strike finally ended after the summer of 1894 with the following consequences:

- twelve people were killed
- the strikers were the big losers who had to end the strike with no concessions and no jobs
- Eugene Debs, Clarence Darrow and Jane Addams emerged with enhanced reputations
- President Grover Cleveland gained a reputation as a strike breaker.

The strike revealed and heightened awareness of the racial intolerance in both the Pullman company and the American Railway Union. In Pullman City, only a handful of black factory workers were given leases but none to Pullman porters. Black men worked as waiters in the Florence Hotel but few at the Calumet, Illinois manufacturing facilities. The constitution of the American Railway Union started that members must be “born of white parents.” No Pullman porters were invited to join the strike.

On October 19, 1897, George Pullman died of a massive heart attack at age sixty six. Pullman had earlier stipulated in detail exactly how he wanted to be buried in order to prevent possible desecration by disgruntled former employees. Author Liston Edgington Leyendecker described the tomb as follows:

“His body lay in a lead-lined box that was wrapped in tar paper and coated with an inch of asphalt. The casket, lowered into a pit thirteen feet long, nine feet wide, and eight feet deep, rested on a concrete flooring eighteen inches thick. Once it was properly positioned, workers filled the space surrounding the casket with concrete to its upper lid. They then built the enclosing walls up to one-half inch above the asphalt coating on the coffin and placed eight heavy T-rails transversely across the top. After the rails were bolted together by two long rods, more tar paper was placed on top to prevent the flow of additional concrete into the half-inch space between the rails and the asphalt surrounding the coffin. Covered by even more concrete, the rods lay like a “wall of stone and steel” between Pullman and would- be grave robbers.”

The process took two days and emulated the burial of the pharaohs of ancient Egypt.

The image of a wealthy capitalist using the economic depression to browbeat his employees into submission was probably inaccurate. But this image stuck to Pullman for the rest of his life. Despite his extraordinary accomplishments as pioneer of the assembly line and mass production; his conception and creation of a model company town, and his revolutionary creation of a “hotel on wheels” which revolutionized overnight travel, Pullman lost status, reputation and personal health.

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