

# THOSE PULLMAN BLUES

BY DAVID D. PERATA

WHEN ABRAHAM Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation Act in 1863, the United States had made little provision for the future employment of the freed slaves. As a result, former slaves who left the plantations found few opportunities other than those

*This article forms the Introduction to Those Pullman Blues: An Oral History of the African-American Railroad Attendant, the first oral history centering on the unique experiences of black porters and railroad attendants during the heyday of railway travel.*

*The author, David D. Perata, is a freelance writer and photographer. During the 1980's, he worked as a porter on Amtrak's long-distance trains, where he met many of the workers whose reminiscences inspired the book.*

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*Those Pullman Blues can be ordered at your local bookstore. Signed copies may be obtained by sending \$34.00 to: A. Philip Randolph Museum, 10406 S. Maryland, Chicago, IL 60628 (Illinois residents add 8% sales tax.) Price includes priority mail shipping. A soft cover, edited scholastic version of the book will be available sometime in 1998.*

to which they had become accustomed: manual labor in the fields and factories or domestic positions as cleaners, cooks, and servants. The new-found wealth generated by the Industrial Revolution increased the availability of such jobs, but the choices available to the African American would remain unchanged for decades.

The railroad sleeping car was being developed at this same time and, within a few short years, would provide the free African-American male—and to a lesser extent, the free African-American female—with new employment opportunities. The organization that pioneered this innovation and that would employ almost exclusively African Americans for nearly a century was the Pullman Sleeping Car Company.

George M. Pullman, the man who would change the course of railroad and labor history forever, was born in 1831. He began life as a poor farm boy whose only skill related to car building he had learned while employed at his brother's woodworking shop in New York state. Pullman acquired his first taste of wealth and prosperity at the age of twenty-two, when he acquired a contractor's license and began moving houses for the Erie Canal Project, then under way in Chicago.<sup>1</sup> It was at this time that George Pullman had occasion to travel on what then passed for a sleeping car. His inability to sleep (no sheets, blankets, or pillows were provided) fully clothed on a hard bunk sparked his idea of providing a better arrangement for the traveler.<sup>2</sup>

By 1858 he had made good on his plan,

*Below: The Southern Pacific Lark, an all deluxe, first-class Pullman overnight train running between Los Angeles and San Francisco, 1942-43.*



joining forces in New York with Benjamin C. Field, who held the patent rights to the Woodruff sleeping car. The Woodruff Company was one of a handful of eastern firms engaged in building and operating sleeping cars, a novel idea during a time when the function of the railroad was evolving beyond that of providing only simple locomotion and crude accommodations for passengers and freight. Pullman and Field began operating sleepers on the Chicago and Alton Railroad in 1858. These early cars amounted to no more than remodeled coaches outfitted with bunks. One of these cars was the now-infamous Number 9, which made its maiden run in September 1859 and has been credited as George Pullman's first sleeping car.<sup>3</sup>

By 1863 Pullman could foresee the completion of a transcontinental railroad and the enormous potential for sleeping car routes it would represent. He began in earnest to acquire as many sleeping car contracts out of Chicago as possible, even buying up entire companies whenever the opportunity arose. But it did not take Pullman long to also figure out that if new markets were to be tapped on the scale he envisioned, sleeping cars would have to be refined to encourage general ridership. He decided to build his own cars from the ground up rather than relying on rebuilt day coaches or equipment manufactured by other firms. In 1864, using a small building on the Chicago and Alton property as his workshop, Pullman assembled the finest carpenters, pipefitters, varnishers, upholsterers, and other tradesmen the Chicago area had to offer. He then personally supervised the construction of his first major breakthrough in sleeping car design: the Pioneer.<sup>4</sup>

The Pioneer was constructed in 1865 for \$20,000, at a time when the average coach sold for about \$4,500.<sup>5</sup> The additional cost was largely due to its lavish interior decoration. Although previous sleepers were equally gaudy, the Pioneer rose to historical prominence in part because it was Pullman's first car built at his own plant.<sup>6</sup> In addition, railroads of this era had not yet set dimensional standards for passenger cars. George Pullman's Pioneer, built by his own standards, was taller and wider than the conventional car of the period.<sup>7</sup>

Had it not been for an uncanny stroke of fate, the Pioneer might have gone the way of a grand mechanical orphan, useless for interchange over rail lines with limited clearances. After the assassination of Abraham Lincoln on 14 April 1865, transportation was needed to carry his body and the funeral party from Washington, D.C., to Springfield, Illinois. It has been reported that the Pioneer was included in the Lincoln funeral train and that platforms and bridges all along the train's route had to be altered to accommodate its oversize dimensions. It is estimated that this single event, which gave George Pullman valuable publicity for the vast operational empire that would follow, shaved fifty years off the time it would otherwise have taken the railroads to make these changes.<sup>8</sup>

With the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, the Pullman Palace Car Company—the new company name—extended its route miles into

every major city and many small towns across America. By the end of 1881, the organization's earnings were estimated at nearly \$3 million, and it had more than eight hundred cars in operation across the United States and Canada.<sup>9</sup>

For all the accolades and nostalgia that have surrounded George Pullman and the Pullman Company over the years, it must be recognized for what it really was: a finely tuned, big-money operation more interested in profits than in employees. The company's philosophy adhered to the strange dichotomy of values held by its founder. George Pullman was a deeply religious man who, on the one hand, was the morally forthright, benevolent patriarch who built a 3,600-acre Utopian-like town for his 12,000 employees at Lake Calumet, Indiana. Appropriately named Pullman, the town had its own churches, schools, mercantile stores, post office, library, and erecting shops for the building and maintenance of sleeping cars.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, George Pullman was a shrewd businessman with an insatiable appetite for control and power: he paid his employees poor wages while controlling their income, rent, commercial trade, and social lives. His attitude toward the African-American working class was no less parochial: keep the black man doing what he has always done, and pay him as little as possible to do it.

These practices eventually burst the idealistic bubble over the company town of Pullman. Workers often lived in poverty through the company's manipulation of both their income and living environment; the ensuing tension erupted into the Great Pullman Strike of 1894. Led by the labor activist Eugene V. Debs, this strike was the first attempt to organize all shop crafts associated with the railroads and the Pullman Palace Car Company. Pullman, however, refused to recognize the newly formed American Railway Union, and in the end twelve people were killed as federal troops attempted to break up the strike.<sup>11</sup> The Pullman Palace Car Company's unwillingness to negotiate with its labor force would become the company's hallmark for years.

After George Pullman died in 1900, the company was reorganized under a new corporate title, the Pullman Company. Rail traffic between 1900 and 1910 tripled; the year 1913 saw rail profits of more than \$19 million.<sup>12</sup> The Pullman Company reached its peak in

*Below: Exterior of Pullman car. Right: Women being served tea in Oriental Limited observation-lounge car; circa 1924. Far right: Interior of the parlor car of the Australia, built in 1892.*



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the 1920s when 35 million passengers per year slept between Pullman sheets, and the company became the largest single U.S. employer of African Americans, with more than nine thousand porters.<sup>13</sup>

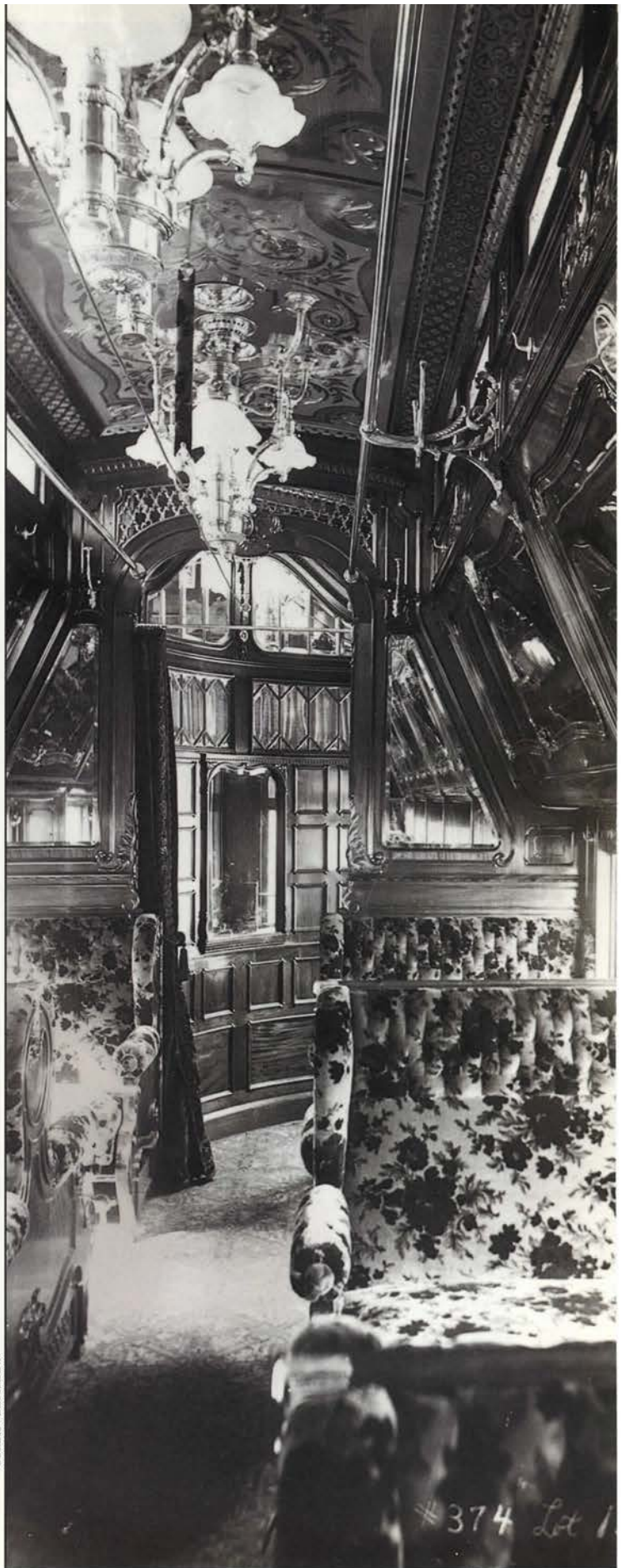
Given George Pullman's attitude toward the African American and toward labor as a whole, it should come as no surprise that the labor pool from which he hired service personnel for the Palace sleeping cars in 1870 was the ready-made work force of recently freed slaves.<sup>14</sup> There were no special job requirements beyond the domestic skills to which so many African Americans had been confined. For many, becoming a Pullman sleeping car attendant was simply a transfer from the plantation to the railroad. Indeed, whether Pullman fully realized the implications of his actions or not, he in effect sentenced thousands of African Americans to another 100 years of servility aboard the nation's railroad cars. The railroads not only had access to a constant supply of employees but conveniently retained the plantation racial infrastructure, redefined in a manner now acceptable to the general public.

The Pullman sleeping car brought African-American "servants" into almost every American town through

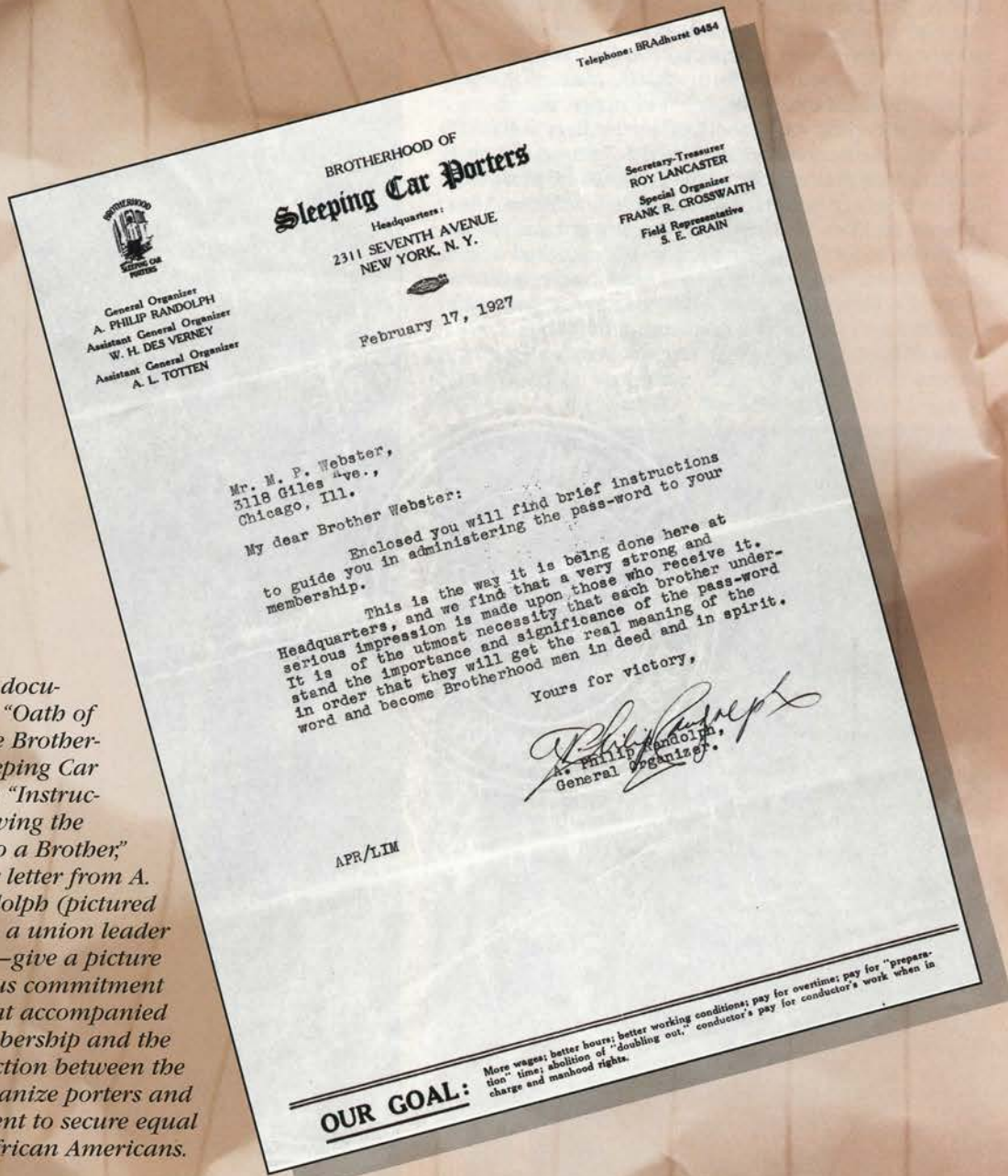


ST. CROIX HISTORICAL REVIEW

CORBIS - BETTMANN



# Membership Oath and Password Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters



These 1927 documents—the “Oath of Fealty to the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters,” the “Instructions for Giving the Pass-word to a Brother,” and a cover letter from A. Philip Randolph (pictured opposite) to a union leader in Chicago—give a picture of the serious commitment and risk that accompanied union membership and the deep connection between the effort to organize porters and the movement to secure equal rights for African Americans.

Documents courtesy of the Chicago Historical Society. The two documents to the right have been re-typed to improve their legibility but are not changed in substance.

**INSTRUCTIONS FOR GIVING THE PASS-WORD TO A BROTHER**

- 1.... Read the oath aloud to the applicant. He must answer "I DO" after each point in the oath is read. (There are 9 points) After the last point has been read and the applicant repeats the words "SO HELP ME GOD," then give him the pass-word with your right hand and his clasped in the act of shaking. Your left hand and his should extend straight downward by your sides clenched, fist-like.
- 2.... After you have given him the pass-word, then give him a short talk as follows:
- 3.... "Today you have been given the pass-word of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the largest Negro trade union in the world. It is more than a union; it represents the most significant effort ever made by our race to advance. It holds out to the Negro boys and girls of the future their brightest hope for a man's chance in the struggle to live."
- 4.... "The word **SOLIDARITY** is one of the few words in the English language that is inextricably bound up with the history of the human race. In the dawn of man's career, surrounded on every side by danger in the form of animals which he did not understand, it was only thru the unconscious practice of **SOLIDARITY** (solidly united) that these dangers were overcome. Also, when man began first to enslave his fellow man, the one word that those who were enslaved needed to know the meaning of and practice, was **SOLIDARITY**. It is also the word that the rulers and oppressors of men have feared, and still fear, because they know that if the oppressed and enslaved peoples understood the meaning of **SOLIDARITY** and practiced it, the end of their rule-ship would follow."
- 5.... "Especially is this true of the race to which we belong. During the centuries that we have been slaves in this country and in other countries, if, as an enslaved race we had learned the meaning of **SOLIDARITY** and practiced it, we would have been able to free ourselves long before economic conditions forced Abraham Lincoln to issue the famous Emancipation Proclamation."
- 6.... "Therefore, in choosing **SOLIDARITY** as our pass-word we have a word that is of tremendous significance to us both as Pullman porters and as Negroes. Guard this word and practice its meaning and no power on earth can defeat us."

**OATH OF FEALTY**  
to  
**THE BROTHERHOOD OF SLEEPING CAR PORTERS**

- I do hereby, in the presence of God and my brothers, solemnly swear:-
1. That I will abide by the rules laid down for the establishment, growth, and maintenance of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and maids;
  2. That I will always and at all times act in such a manner as to secure its best welfare;
  3. That I will work faithfully and well, giving all that is best in me for the physical, mental, moral and spiritual growth of this Organization;
  4. That I will hold inviolate all deliberations of the Advisory Committee, giving out only such information as the executives consider politic for its victory;
  5. And further, I hereby solemnly and truthfully declare that I will never criticize or disparage in any way, openly, officials and brothers of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, but will bring whatever cause there may be for dissatisfaction before the proper tribunal for adjustment, abiding by and adhering to the decision reached;
  6. That no desire for personal aggrandizement, ambition, petty jealousy, or bribery shall swerve me from my allegiance to the Brotherhood or weaken my support to the cause of justice and freedom for my Union, my race, and my class;
  7. That in the event of my severing my relations with this body, for any cause whatever, the knowledge gained while within the ranks will be held sacred and never be given out except by the sanction of the proper authorities;
  8. Recognizing that organization is necessary for the amelioration and final emancipation of labor in general and the Negro in particular, I unswervingly and unselfishly herewith dedicate my body and mind to the high and noble mission of constructive, militant and fearless advocacy of the principles and policies of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters; and
  9. I therefore, of my own volition, upon my honor as a man, a worker, and a Negro who has pride of race, pledge, in the interest of generations of Negro boys and girls yet unborn, my undying fealty to the letter and spirit of the Brotherhood, so help me God.



the vast system of railroad passenger trains. For the price of a Pullman ticket, even a common man could be waited upon and pampered in the grand manner of the privileged southern gentry. White America's willingness to preserve antebellum attitudes provided George Pullman with a ready market for his services. The rail's going public may not have consciously demanded white tablecloths, fine china, sparkling silver, and black servants, but they easily become accustomed to such amenities through Pullman's adaptation of plantation hospitality.

**I**N 1924 the Ku Klux Klan boasted nearly four and a half million members; over 1,000 Negro lynchings had taken place since 1900. "By being raised up in a segregated environment," recalled Julius Payne, a long-time Pullman employee, "you knew [racial discrimination] was going on. You resented it, but you could not change it individually. All you could do is get yourself in a lot of problems. The easy way to deal with it was to stand your ground to a certain level and gracefully get away from it."<sup>15</sup>

Like Julius Payne, successful black employees developed certain psychological skills to help them handle abusive passengers so as to diffuse explosive situations before they escalated into threats of violence. In doing so, however, they were forced to swallow their pride for the sake of their job. Those who reacted emotionally were usually fired.

Norman Bookman, another seasoned Pullman veteran who worked every class of service from sleepers to private cars, offered an example of such restraint:

One time a man was riding with us on the Lark. He was talking and they were discussing politics, and they were saying, "Well, there's so many niggers in San Francisco and so many niggers in L.A.," and so on. The woman with him looked up at me—I didn't say anything. I'd fixed them a little hors d'oeuvres, you know. So I didn't say anything till the next morning.

[The train] came in, and she was with him. They were not together. And I said, "Pardon me, I'd like to ask a question if I may. What did I do wrong last night? I've been up all night wondering what was done wrong. I thought I was giving fair service."

Then he started apologizing for having made the mistake in saying those words, and he wanted to give me a little piece of change for it. I said, "Oh, no, you don't owe me nothing."

But now, you see, I could have put it another way or jumped in that night. They're all drinking, and it could have been an embarrassing thing, or he could have gotten angry, or maybe I got angry and cussed him out, or something else. So you learn to handle these things this way.<sup>16</sup>

Even though the Pullman porter was a national figure and entrusted with generations of young and old alike, the unenlightened traveling public still regarded the Negro as having his proper place both on and off the trains. He was socially acceptable in his working environment, owing to his servant status, but that acceptance did not often carry over into civilian life once he stepped down from the steel vestibule. For example, many women thought nothing of undressing in front of the porter, almost as if he were invisible. It is doubtful that a white woman would have ever undressed with a white hotel bellboy present. Thousands

of mothers entrusted their children to the porter's care while they went off to socialize in the club car or eat in the diner. How many mothers today would do the same? By contrast, relations between black porters and male passengers were sometimes not so trusting. Most of the confrontations between black train personnel and white male passengers were fueled by the latter's excess liquor consumption in the club car. In Pullman Company advertising of the era, the body English between the porter and his white male passenger always suggested dominance by the passenger.

The Pullman Company capitalized on the folkloric images of the maternal Negro mammy and the docile black servant to establish the porter as an extension of the notorious plantation hospitality of an earlier era.

**T**HE AFRICAN AMERICANS who worked on passenger trains were employed by either the Pullman Company or the individual railroads. According to a report by the Department of Labor in 1926—in what is generally regarded as the peak decade for the railroads—20,224 African Americans worked as Pullman and train porters, the largest category of black labor on U.S. railroads. The Pullman Company had sole control of the thousands of its employees who provided the sleeping and café/buffet car service offered on every railroad in the nation, whereas each railroad handled a much smaller personnel roster confined to commissary points along its own lines.

Railroad on-board service employees who did not work for the Pullman Company included coach and parlor porters, cooks, chefs, bartenders, and dining car waiters. Only the chefs and cooks, who were fairly well insulated from the traveling public because the kitchen was off limits to all but the dining car crew, seldom experienced racial discrimination while working aboard the trains. But as one black chef observed, passengers ate food prepared by black hands who would have otherwise refused to shake that same black hand off the train.

The coaches did not require the porters to experience as much intimacy with passengers as did the sleepers, which by their very nature exposed porters to most every facet of the human condition, good and bad. Although a coach full of children or complaining adults could prove challenging, for some porters the chair cars were far less stressful than the sleepers.

A railroad dining car on the crack trains was like a restaurant open all day, serving breakfast, lunch, and dinner; on a train with five hundred people aboard, each meal often ran right into the next. Southern Pacific waiter Alex Ashley describes the dining car crew's life on the railroad's new streamliner, the Shasta Daylight, in the early fifties. After departing from Oakland's 16th Street station at 8:22 A.M., the train arrived in Portland, Oregon, nearly 16 hours later:

We started seating in 16th [Street] Station—train loaded—and you know, I didn't sit down till I got to Portland? That's facts. Didn't sit down! We pulled into Portland that night—people still at the tables eatin'. Didn't have time to eat, just grab us something and started walkin'. You get into Portland around eleven o'clock at night. You get over to the hotel around twelve o'clock. You get to bed—look like before you get to sleep good,

they're waking you up five o'clock in the morning to get back on this train, see. No, you could never get a good full night's sleep.<sup>17</sup>

The Pullman porter was undoubtedly the most universally recognized of the African-American employees who worked aboard America's passenger trains. The quintessence of the Pullman Company's vast operation, he represented the basic building block around which the entire premise of first-class accommodations revolved. On the thousands of rolling hotels that operated each day for the company, the porter served as innkeeper, maid, waiter, bellman, electrician, and entertainer, all embodied behind one compulsorily smiling face.

There were four classifications for Pullman onboard personnel: busboy, sleeping car porter, café/food service attendant, and private car porter. All four types of

positions required bed-making skills, an ability to handle the public, and a working knowledge of the assortment of air-conditioning systems and car types that Pullman operated. Cooking classes were mandatory for those entering food service.

The Pullman busboy worked on the buffet and café cars that ran either as a supplement to railroad-owned and -staffed dining cars or as the sole source of meals on smaller runs. He was given the basic sleeping car porter training in addition to training in food handling. The title "busboy" is somewhat of a misnomer, for he also waited on tables and reset them.

The sleeping-car porter attended only to the sleeping car and associated duties. He set up the car while in the yards, greeted passengers, and settled them into their rooms, making sure that their every need was taken care of while they were on board. He was also

## The Pullman Blues Tour

On February 9th of this year, author David D. Perata and retired Pullman porters Virgil and Babe Smock embarked on an eight-day whistle-stop railroad tour to honor the accomplishments of A. Philip Randolph, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and all of the African-American men and women who sacrificed to make this part of American history possible. Sponsored by the A. Philip Randolph Institute, the NAACP, and Amtrak, among others, the Pullman Blues Tour's vintage private rail cars dating from the 1950's began rolling in Oakland, California, and made scheduled stops at Los Angeles, Kansas City, St. Louis, and their ultimate destination at the historic Pullman district in Illinois, where George M. Pullman had built his vast company town in 1880.

At each stop, the cars were uncoupled from the rear of their Amtrak train and parked for viewing near the station. The tour afforded the public a first-hand look at a beautifully-restored Southern Pacific Art Deco-styled

lounge car that fed and entertained the entourage on their trek across the country, along with a sleeping car that had once been assigned to the famous streamliner, the *Sunset Limited*. At St. Louis, three hundred people walked through the cars, talking to the Smock Brothers and sparking many memories for those old enough to recall the elegance of what is now referred to as the "Golden Age of Railroading."

Ceremonies were organized in every town, and civic leaders and local union officials spoke about the tremendous struggle for unionization and the importance of Randolph and the porters. Virgil and Babe Smock recalled stories from their combined forty-seven years of Pullman service, and author Perata urged the assembled crowds to pass along this history to the children lest the same mistakes be made again in the future. "Randolph's twelve-year struggle with the Pullman Company, which he and the Brotherhood ultimately won, is a lesson in determination and focus against seemingly insurmountable odds," Perata commented.

National Public Radio, whose staff accompanied the tour from St. Louis to Chicago, produced a twenty-minute "Tour Special" on their national *Weekend Edition* program, and newspapers and local TV news carried the story from San Francisco to Chicago.

The great success of the Pullman Blues Tour has spurred an ongoing interest in this historic labor movement, and plans are in the works for a PBS documentary based on the book.



THE DALLAS MORNING NEWS/KAREN STALLWOOD

*Felix Anderson, age 91, pauses at Union Station in St. Louis, where he had come to meet former Pullman porters in connection with the Pullman Blues Tour.*

responsible for monitoring the cars' air-conditioning and heating systems, making the beds and cleaning the rooms, shining shoes, pressing suits, mailing letters and telegrams, and bringing meals into rooms on request. Of all the employees on the train, his psychological skills were perhaps the most highly developed, owing to the extreme intimacy of the Pullman car.

The café/food service attendant was instructed in very much the same manner as the busboy but was also taught to prepare meals. He often doubled as the porter in those cars that contained rooms as well as a buffet section.

The private car porter, the cream of the Pullman

men, worked on special cars and assignments, such as serving presidents, visiting dignitaries, entertainers, charter groups, and the like. The Pullman Company handpicked private car porters, usually veterans with years of service, for their exceptional expertise in all phases of Pullman operations.

Rendering service, reinforced by proper etiquette and decorum, was at the core of the Pullman philosophy. It is this dedication to service, with pomp and circumstance, for which the Pullman porter is still remembered. The cars themselves were designed with service in mind. Each room contained porter call buttons, individual room temperature controls, electric



COURTESY OF THE SMOCK FAMILY





*The Smock Family, circa 1937. Left to right: Babe, Virgil, George, and father Garrard.*

fans, shoe lockers for the porter's traditional nightly task, and numerous other amenities. It was the porter, of course, who was expected to make sure all these systems ran smoothly.

To ensure that porters adhered to a uniform standard of service, the Pullman Company devised a mind-boggling array of rules and regulations on everything from how many inches to fold back a bedsheet to the proper way to pour a bottle of beer. Norman Bookman underscored Pullman's strict adherence to its 127-page manual: "They wanted you to do it like they wanted it, and they didn't force it on you. Whatever was done—whatever instruction was given—they would go over it again and again. And when you said, 'Okay, I understand it,' you signed that you understood certain things. There was no way you could go and say, 'I didn't understand that.' You signed it!"<sup>18</sup>

The making of a Pullman porter was a gradual process; few young black men came off the street with sufficient polish and poise to work on the Pullman cars.

Young men of good stature and with a clean-cut appearance were picked for the extensive training program. Each man's background was thoroughly checked, even to the extent of asking questions about him in his community, such as, "Does he have any bad habits?" or "Is he a big drinker?"

Once the applicant passed the initial test, he underwent a fourteen-day instruction period in the yards that covered all the fundamentals of the Pullman operation. Then, he received further training, depending on the job category to which he was assigned.

Norman Bookman recalled his advanced classes:

If you were an attendant, you had to take cooking and bar courses. Now, we used to have a head chef out of Chicago. He would take a steak, and this is all he would do the whole period of time—he would determine which is the best place to puncture a steak, where not to puncture a steak, and so on. And he would give you reasons after it was over. He could take your pastry and crumble it like that and tell you where you've done wrong. But we'd go through whole classes without anybody saying one word until it was over. Then we'd say, "The waiter leaned in too close, his coat would probably drag in his soup," or something else, and all of the operations were really thorough.<sup>19</sup>

After such classes were completed, the new porter was sent on a student trip with at least two veteran porters. These were most often short overnight runs to put theory into practice with actual passengers. During his first six months, the new porter was on probation, and only after that time was a decision made as to his suitability. Once fully hired, the new porter was sent out on the road on his own, largely left alone to acclimate himself to the job.

The relationship between the Pullman conductor and the porters was similar to the old plantation relationship between the overseer and the slaves: A white man was a sole authority figure over a predominantly black crew. In fact, some white conductors openly referred to the porters as "their boys" and could be extremely possessive of and protective toward them when confronted by outsiders.<sup>20</sup>

There were actually two conductors on most passenger trains: the railroad conductor and the Pullman conductor. The railroad conductor, the supreme authority on the train, controlled all train movements, oversaw ticket collecting in railroad-owned cars, and handled problems with passengers. Directly under him was the Pullman conductor, who was in charge of all Pullman employees and the passengers in the buffet, café, and sleeping cars. The Pullman conductor's jurisdiction was limited to Pullman-operated equipment. The Pullman conductor on his own had the power to bring the terminal superintendent into any disciplinary actions against Pullman employees. Such power over mostly black employees invited discrimination and trouble. Although the conductors were a benevolent lot as long as the black crews towed the line, the fact remained that authority was always white, resulting in many abuses of power.

For instance, "The trainman could say he didn't like who the porter was, and he would be called in about that," according to Jewel Brown. "The conductor said, 'I don't want him in my crew. He's a little darker than



the rest of 'em. I want another one a little lighter than him.' The superintendent's wife, I've known her to do such things as that. 'Why don't you get him out and put another one in there and make 'em all the same color?' Those were the types of things that were perpetrated on the employees because they had no redress."<sup>21</sup>

Inspectors and spotters were the other nemeses of all-black train crews. Arriving on trains unannounced, it was impossible to tell who they were unless a particular inspector was widely known to the train crews. The inspector was a company official who boarded the train at any point along the line to ensure that standards and rules were being observed. Inspectors had a great deal of power over employees, and like some conductors, some inspectors certainly used their position to vent personal prejudices. The spotters were paid civilians who spied on the train crew and reported on their behavior. Pullman Company spotters were allowed to set up situations to trap a porter. Many were of a sexual nature: Female spotters, for example, would attempt to lure unsuspecting porters into their drawing room. Other traps were designed to catch an employee suspected of stealing money or supplies.

Pullman porters were subject to a merit/demerit system, with marks going on their permanent record. Merits could be issued for passenger letters of praise, good manners, or cleanliness. Demerits were issued for acts as inconsequential as stepping on a seat cushion, to make an upper berth. Whether or not such violations were officially noted largely depended on the personality of the inspector.

*This page: Members of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters proudly display their banner at a 1955 ceremony celebrating the organization's 30th anniversary. Right top: Randolph at the head of the 1950 Convention March. Opposite: Cartoon from the Black Worker.*

THE 1920s were banner years for the Pullman Company, and it was no coincidence that its black employees were tired of the tyrannical working environment and ready to organize. C. L. Dellums, a Pullman porter and fourth international vice president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, recalled that,

When I went to work for the Pullman Company in January 1924, they paid \$60 a month. If you worked all the calendar month, you might get \$60, but the odds were 10 to 1 that you'd never get \$60 while you were a young porter. Now, once you were there long enough to have enough seniority to hold a regular run, as long as you didn't miss a trip during that calendar month, you'd get your \$60. But the runs were not regulated. The company set up their runs the way they wanted to set them up. Let's say one porter might have a regular run from Oakland to Seattle. You'd total up the number of hours that he was actually on duty in an ordinary 30-day month, and he might work 300 hours. Then there might be another porter working right out of the same place, let's say running to Chicago, and he might work 350 hours. Both of them would get the same \$60.<sup>22</sup>

Those porters without enough seniority to hold a regular run were on the "extra board": being on call at any time of the day or night to report for a run. The older men with years of service were at the top of the seniority roster and therefore commanded the best runs, with a few days off in between. But if the sign-out



CHICAGO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## BON VOYAGE ...



man, who issued porters their assignments, didn't like a particular porter, he could keep him doubling out for as long as he wished, with little or no time between.

The Pullman Company avoided paying additional hours to the extra-board porters by establishing the "P.M. time" rule: the company would not begin the porter's pay on P.M. time. For example, a porter would normally have to report at least two to three hours ahead of his train's scheduled departure to ready the car and receive passengers. If the train was to leave at midnight, no matter how many hours before midnight he had reported, his time card did not start until 12:01 A.M. Later the rule was modified somewhat so that time cards started when the train actually moved. But again, the hours of preparation before departure and after ar-

rival amounted to thousands of gratis hours received from porters each month.<sup>23</sup>

Overtime pay was practically nonexistent. The porters were required to put in 400 hours or 11,000 miles each month, whichever occurred first, before overtime kicked in. Then a porter would be paid an additional 60¢ per 100 miles. The catch was that most porters spent the better part of the month trying to accumulate those 400 hours—leaving little time for days off, let alone overtime.<sup>24</sup>

Porters were also frequently mistreated by district superintendents, who ran them on the road for long periods of time and doubled them back out with no time to clean up or rest. Reportedly, even office boys harassed porters. And conductors and platform agents were notorious

for using their power to coerce porters. In a letter to C. L. Dellums dated 27 May 1941, Brotherhood first international vice president Milton P. Webster cited the case of a Pullman platform man who habitually accused porters of drinking on the job—even some individuals who did not drink. "It seems, so the story goes, that he comes into the car and makes some inquiry about the work, and if the porter says anything in defense of himself this fellow yells at him, 'You must be drunk.'"<sup>25</sup> Similar stories are legion among porters. Certainly there were decent supervisors, but the overwhelming majority of white Pullman managers still regarded the Negro as his subordinate. By the early 1920s, the porters were fed up with such abuse.

**B**LACK PORTERS had been trying to organize themselves since the early part of the century, but their political impotence and low social standing had undermined their efforts to unionize against the powerful Pullman Company.

The first national attempt at organization was made in 1912, when the porters circulated petitions amounting to little more than a plea to the company for whatever they could get in the way of a raise. The Pullman Company obliged with a token \$2.50 per month raise, bringing the porters' salary to \$27.50 per month.

Pullman did voluntarily double the porters' salary in 1917 to \$45 per month, but solely to offset the keen wartime competition for manpower. Shortly thereafter, the Pullman Company was put under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Railroad Administration, and the \$45 per month salary was raised to \$47.50, the same rate paid to office boys. Subsequently, the monthly rate was raised again to \$60, but even that was a poor income for a long, tiring, back-breaking job. The Department of Labor announced in 1926 that \$2,000 per year was necessary to maintain the average American family "in a decent living." With a base salary of \$720 a year (excluding tips), the Pullman porter was paid far below that sum.<sup>27</sup>

Passenger tips provided the only real means by which a porter could earn a respectable living on the

Pullman cars. Tipping was a time-honored tradition that served not only the porter's interests but his employers as well. The Pullman Company counted on the passenger to pay the balance of their porters' salary through tips. Without tips, a porter would never have been able to support a family. Naturally, with so much at stake, porters devised innumerable ways to get money out of passengers' pockets.

The art of soliciting generous tips, however, was a source of controversy. Referred to as "Uncle Tomming," kowtowing, hustling, and an assortment of other degrading terms, the tipping tradition was more than a matter of rewarding an employee for good service. Because the porter depended on tips for a living wage, he was forced to solicit gratuities any way he could—hence the reputation of the cunning, sly, sharp Pullman porter. In the eyes of many porters, they became beggars to their white clientele. Malcolm X, the black nationalist spokesman and dissident, worked briefly for the New Haven railroad as a dishwasher and later as a sandwich man, selling food in the coaches of the Yankee Clipper, which ran from Boston to New York. In his book *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, he speaks of the relationship between black train employees and white passengers: "We were in that world of Negroes who are both servants and psychologists, aware that white people are so obsessed with their own importance that they will pay liberally, even dearly, for the impression of being catered to and entertained."<sup>28</sup>

Eventually, however, the additional money made in tips by African-American train employees was too great to overlook. When a Pullman porter revealed to the *Saturday Evening Post* how much he received in tips on his runs, the Internal Revenue Service immediately made all porters report their tip income and set a minimum that every porter had to claim on his return.

The year 1918, however, held considerable promise for what was thought to be a new era in freedom of speech for the Pullman porters. The War Labor Board mandate giving porters the right to engage in collective bargaining through representation of their own choosing boosted morale among the men.<sup>29</sup> In July 1919 two small groups of porters from New York and Chicago joined forces to form the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters Protective Union.<sup>30</sup>

The Pullman Company watched this development with keen interest. The company was uneasy about the numerous wildcat groups that had been springing up across the country; unchecked, these could have proved to be a great source of trouble for Pullman. Taking advantage of the confusion caused when too many organizations claimed to represent the porters, Pullman formed its own in-house union to satisfy the requirements of the War Labor Board's mandate and offset future organizing attempts. This new union was called the Pullman Plan of Employee Representation; its officers were handpicked for their loyalty to the company.<sup>31</sup> The Pullman Porters Beneficial Association was a sister organization. Its function was to gain further control over the porters through crude sickness and death benefits while keeping the porters amused with extracurricular activities to distract them from pursuing more meaningful issues. Benefits were actually drawn from the porters' yearly dues. In effect, the

porters were paying out sick benefits to themselves.<sup>32</sup>

The two organizations served Pullman well for a number of years until the porters recognized the subterfuge. They wanted a bona-fide labor union, separate from the company, through which they could effectively bargain. Pullman once again rose to the occasion by calling the Wage Conference of 1924.<sup>33</sup> It was the first joint conference held under the Pullman Plan of Employee Representation. The porters chose representatives from around the country who they felt would best convey their needs to the company. The major issues were paring down the 400-hour work month to 240 hours and restructuring overtime regulations. But the Pullman Company had been hard at work intimidating porters by threatening to dismiss anyone who voted for the 240-hour month. The majority of porters might have welcomed the idea, but few were willing to risk their jobs fighting for it.<sup>34</sup>

Ashley Totten, secretary-treasurer of the Brotherhood and a Pullman porter before his dismissal on company-fabricated charges, reported that one porter-delegate told the convention: "I hope that these delegates who are asking for the 240-hour work month realize they are playing with fire. I am going to do what the management wants me to do, and I think if everyone would follow this advice, we would do well." The majority of the delegates followed this misguided porter's advice, and the conference amounted to no more than a well-orchestrated smoke screen by Pullman, which threw the porters another \$7.50 per month bone.<sup>35</sup>

The dismal outcome of the 1924 Wage Conference was a turning point for the handful of porters who were trying to organize a union. They realized that the power to fight the Pullman Company would not come from the rank and file. A leader would have to be found, someone who was forceful, had strong convictions, and remained unmoved by threats of dismissal. The search led to a Harlem soapbox orator by the name of Asa Philip Randolph.

A. Philip Randolph had gained a reputation as a radical and a troublemaker. His newspaper, *The Messenger*, began publication in 1917 and lasted eleven years. *The Messenger*—and *The Black Worker*, its successor—was Randolph's pulpit from which he reached thousands of black workers and citizens throughout the country regarding all the controversial issues of the day.<sup>36</sup> Randolph was subsequently branded "one of the most dangerous Negroes in America" by then-acting U.S. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer.<sup>37</sup>

The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters was officially launched on 25 August 1925. Five hundred porters gathered together in New York City to hear Randolph lay the groundwork for the organization.<sup>38</sup> Response to the meeting was immediate: the next day more than two hundred porters applied for membership. Soon, New York City claimed a strong Brotherhood affiliation, but success there would have to be repeated throughout the country before the Brotherhood could make any attempt to claim official representation of the Pullman porters. In October, Randolph embarked on a national barnstorming tour to reach porters in every corner of the Pullman system. He later recalled: "Hundreds of meetings were held.