



Empire of hospitality

The greatest name in rail travel wasn't a railroad at all

By Joe Welsh



Pullman's progress

1838

First known U.S. operation of a sleeping car, Richard Imlay's *Chambersburg*, on the Cumberland Valley out of Harrisburg, Pa.

1840s-'50s

Railroads and concessionaires operate sleeping cars over an expanding network

1859

George M. Pullman and Benjamin Field rebuild coaches 9 and 19 of a Chicago & Alton predecessor into sleepers at Bloomington, Ill.

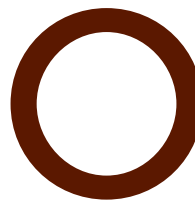


Great Northern

Whether hosting a family on vacation in the West (above, in a double bedroom) or moving troops during wartime (below, in 10 heavy-weights eastbound on Union Pacific near Hermosa, Wyo., on October 10, 1951), the Pullman Company stood for quality service.



Richard H. Kindig



ne of the most famous businesses in American history, the Pullman Company served the United States travel market from 1867 to 1968. Al-

though it was an integral part of American passenger railroading for more than a century, Pullman was not a railroad. It owned no tracks aside from those at its shops. It possessed no powerful mainline steam locomotives or road diesels and it ran no trains itself. Instead, Pullman built, owned, or leased a large fleet of passenger cars—mostly sleepers—that it provided to the railroads under contract. It was the railroads that handled the reservations and carried you from place to place aboard your Pullman car. Pullman was essentially a giant hotel company.

In the four decades between incorporation and March 1907, when Pullman built its first steel car, the company grew from an obscure business enterprise to an American institution. Railroads that focused their attention on moving trains tended to rely on other companies to feed and care for their first-class customers. One of many sleeping-car companies which sprang up in the mid- to late 1800's, Pullman did not invent the product it offered; it just perfected it. At the same time, Pullman's ruthless business practices ensured its supremacy. By 1899 when it purchased its last major competitor, the Wagner Palace Car Co., for a then-whopping \$36 million, Pullman stood alone as a virtual monopoly, controlling almost 90 percent of the railroad sleeping-car service in North America, a share that would increase in the decades to come.

Pullman's business timing couldn't have been better. Between 1867 and 1907, the American railroad network ballooned from 39,000 route-miles to 229,000. The sleeping car, which had once been a curiosity, was now an essential element of rail travel as routes got longer and the public expanded its horizons, routinely traveling overnight to far-flung destinations.

The first decade of the new century



Pullman's sleeping car No. 9

1863

Pullman and Field order from C&A's shops a new sleeping car, later named *Pioneer*, of substantially improved design

1867

Incorporated as Pullman's Palace Car Co. on February 22

1868

First Pullman dining car enters service, on the Chicago & Alton

1870

Begins building its own cars after acquiring Detroit Car & Manufacturing Co.



Pullman-Standard

Sleeper-lounge-observation car *Isabella*, built for the Pullman Company's exhibit at the 1893 world's fair in Chicago, epitomizes the art of wood-car construction during the Gilded Age.



CLASSIC TRAINS collection

Heavy armchairs, leaded glass, and high ceilings characterize a 1920's-era Pullman parlor-lounge car used on the Wabash; a Pullman conductor and attendant stand ready to serve.

would be the best in Pullman's history. Between 1900 and 1910 the company's traffic tripled and its assets doubled. Profits peaked in 1910. The company had no funded debt, and its net earnings on operations were above \$13 million annually. By 1910 Pullman's fleet comprised some 4,300 sleeping cars (including more than 600 "tourist" sleepers for budget-minded travelers), more

than 600 parlor cars, 25 dining cars, and 34 private cars. Essentially all were of wood construction, the standard since railroading's inception, but Pullman was about to embark on a massive program of building safer, more substantial steel cars that would come to be known as heavyweights.

As the country prospered and railroad traffic soared in the 1920's, Pull-

man's fleet expanded rapidly. By the end of the decade it operated a vast fleet of 9,801 cars, staffed by an army of 10,500 porters, attendants, and maids. During the high point of travel in the 1920's, Pullman carried as many as 39 million passengers per year, a number equal to more than one-third of the population of the United States.

Pullman's job was to maintain and distribute its cars wherever needed by its client railroads. The company's wide-ranging services now extended to Mexico, Canada, and virtually every corner of the United States. At one time, for example, it was possible to board a Pullman in West Yellowstone, Mont., and end up in Florida without ever leaving your car as it was handed off to a succession of railroads en route. Even moderate-sized intermediate communities received their own Pullman service via an innovation known as the set-out sleeper. At a reasonable hour, patrons could board or alight from a Pullman car picked up or set out at their local station. With passengers asleep in their berths, the only suggestion that their journey had begun or ended was a gentle tug as their car was added to or removed from a train bound for the big city in the middle of the night.

Hospitality infrastructure

Managing and operating this far-flung enterprise required a significant corporate infrastructure. The company essentially had two main functions: operating its fleet and building cars, both for its own use and for numerous railroads. In the early 1880's Pullman built a massive car manufacturing plant and model community for its employees. Called Pullman, it was located 15 miles south of downtown Chicago beside the Illinois Central main line. Operations in the company's 20th century heyday were carried out at both the headquarters facilities in Chicago-land and in a hierarchy of zones (later called regions), which were divided into smaller districts, which in turn were divided into agency offices located at the terminals of most of the passenger-carrying railroads in the U.S. and at some locations in Canada and Mexico.

1874

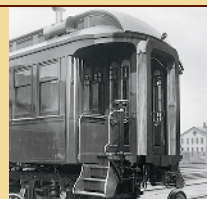
Pullman launches parlor-car operations

1881

Opens new main car shops and utopian town for employees near Chicago called Pullman; begins building freight cars

1887

Pullman's H. H. Sessions develops the vestibule; PRR's *Pennsylvania Limited* becomes first all-vestibule train



1894

A strike at the Pullman, Ill., plant is met by police and troops; 12 workers die in the incident, a landmark in labor history

1897

George M. Pullman (right) dies; Robert Todd Lincoln succeeds him as company president



Florida East Coast

Pullmans went everywhere rails did, even to sea with the *Havana Special* on Florida East Coast's Key West Extension, abandoned in 1935.

Here the company cleaned, maintained, stocked, and staffed the Pullman fleet. Commissary (food provisioning) services were often provided in cities with Pullman district offices.

Routine maintenance (ranging in frequency from daily for some items to bi-monthly for others) was performed by Pullman employees in more than 300 railroad coach yards around the country. Cars entered shops—Pullman had six scattered around the country—for major repairs every 30 to 36 months. Besides Chicago, the shops were at Buffalo, N.Y., Wilmington, Del., Atlanta, St. Louis, and Richmond, Calif.

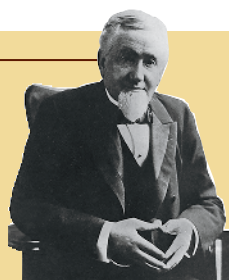
What made Pullman a success was its organization and attention to details. This was a company that could smoothly keep thousands of guests, railroad cars, and employees in nearly constant motion, night after night, long before

the age of computers. Pullman excelled at minutiae because it had to. For example, in the 1920's, to ensure that each berth had a full set of crisp sheets, Pullman laundered 284 million pieces of wash per year at a cost of more than \$3 million. (No wonder Pullman called itself "the world's greatest housekeeper.") Pullman maintenance was also known as second to none. The company was renowned for the cleanliness and reliability of its rolling stock. The equipment *had* to work with minimal attention, for a car might find itself at some remote outpost like Key West, Fla., or Walla Walla, Wash., with little or no support services available.

Likewise, the employees had to be trusted. Many were out on the road for multiple days and sometimes with little direct supervision. Each Pullman-operated car had a porter (in sleepers) or

attendant (parlor or lounge cars). On trains with more than one Pullman, the company provided a conductor to collect tickets covering the space passengers occupied and to manage the cars and porters. (The train conductor handled payment for the cost of transportation, which went to the railroad.) In situations when there was only one Pullman sleeper in a train, the porter acted as a Porter in Charge and no Pullman conductor was aboard.

To the family traveling across the country for three days by Pullman or the executive of a major company en route overnight to a business meeting, the on-board employee *was* the Pullman Company. Recognizing this, Pullman trained its conductors, porters, maids, and car attendants to a fault on how to greet passengers, how to correctly pour a drink, how to properly



1899

Pullman absorbs its last major sleeping-car competitor, the Wagner Palace Car Co.

1900

Reorganization as The Pullman Company

1907

Builds prototype all-steel car, the 12&1 *Jamestown*; steel-car production begins in 1910, ending the wood-car era

1917-20

World War I prompts government control of Pullman operations (but not the manufacturing department)

1920

Era of steel, or "heavy-weight," cars in full swing; Pullman employs 22,886 people, has 175,000 railcar accommodations



Richard H. Kindig

UP's *City of Portland*, built by Pullman-Standard, departs Cheyenne in 1939 with the first lightweight sleeping cars in its articulated consist.



In the 1940's, Pullman marked the transition from heavyweight to lightweight rolling stock with a subtle change to its "Travel and Sleep in Safety and Comfort" emblem.

waken a sleeping passenger, and so on. It was this remarkable quality and uniformity of service, largely provided by African-American men, that was the company's greatest asset to its passengers—and its most lasting legacy.

To the railroads, Pullman provided economy of scale. To meet heavy seasonal demands, Pullman maintained a national pool of sleeping cars which could be shifted to handle demand for travel to Florida in winter and to the West in the summer. Pullman also excelled at supplying equipment to handle

special moves and unexpected events. In addition to providing cars for special train service, on short notice Pullman could create hundreds of extra hotel rooms on the ground in "Pullman Cities" when the likes of a convention exceeded a community's ability to handle the demand for hotel space. Had the individual railroads been forced to maintain their own fleets and personnel to meet this sporadic demand, it would have cost them a fortune.

Signs of decline

This orderly world in which Pullman was a primary provider of transportation in the United States began to collapse with the advent of the Great Depression. Between 1929 and '32, Pullman lost 40 percent of its business. Suddenly the great company, which had once enjoyed a virtual monopoly in its market, began to lose money as people shifted to less-costly means such as railroad coaches and private automobiles—or stopped traveling altogether. To get them back, Pullman air-conditioned and rebuilt hundreds of its cars and began the process, albeit slowly, of streamlining its fleet with new "lightweight" cars to attract the riders lost.

The railroads and Pullman were indeed having some success at improving their ridership when World War II intervened in 1941. As in the First World War, Pullman and the railroads were swamped with demand. It was estimat-

ed, for example, that 125 million passengers including troops traveled 98 billion miles in Pullman cars during the conflict. At war's end, more than 5.5 million veterans would reach home in a Pullman car between November 1945 and June 1946, many in a fleet of 2,400 cars Pullman built quickly during 1943-46 for the purpose of moving troops. The boxcar-like troop sleepers were Spartan in appearance and appointments, but each had a porter who provided the fighting men with standard Pullman service ["Troop Cars," Winter 2001 CLASSIC TRAINS].

Other changes were in the wind. As a result of a 1944 Federal anti-trust decision against the company (a suit triggered by carbuilding competitor Edward G. Budd Manufacturing Co. in 1940), Pullman was ordered to divest itself of either its manufacturing arm or its operating arm. The choice was easy: Pullman kept the lucrative manufacturing business, which would be busy churning out freight and passenger cars for railroads worn down by war traffic.

The operating company was put up for sale and eventually purchased by a consortium of 57 (later 59) railroads. The "new" Pullman operating company retained a fleet of more than 2,800 heavyweight cars and 6 lightweights for pool service. The rest of the cars in Pullman service were sold to the railroads, leased back to the new Pullman

1922

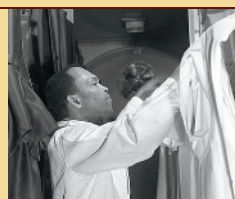
Pullman acquires Haskell & Barker, the nation's largest freight-car builder

1924

Manufacturing department reorganized as Pullman Car & Manufacturing Co. (PC&M)

1925

Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters organized, a key advance for African Americans



1927

The Pullman Company, parent of the operating and manufacturing concerns, reorganized as Pullman, Inc.

1927

Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul, last big road with its own sleepers, turns them over to Pullman (other latecomers: CofG, 1925; GN, 1922)

operating company, and continued to be operated and maintained by Pullman under contract. Likewise, new cars were owned by the railroads and leased to Pullman. On many cars, the change was signaled by the replacement of PULLMAN on the letterboards with the owning railroad's name.

Air and auto competition

The new Pullman operating company found itself battling both the automobile and a rapidly expanding competitor: the airliner. The inroads of autos and planes, combined with post-war wage and price inflation, proved a deadly combination for the labor-intensive railroad passenger industry. In response, Pullman and the railroads accelerated the pace of modernization begun in the 1930's by introducing thousands of streamlined passenger cars. But Americans, tired of being cooped up by wartime gas and tire rationing and now having disposable income to burn, bought new cars themselves—37 million of them between 1946 and '54.

Then, in 1956, Congress authorized the Interstate highway system, a move that would change the way millions of Americans traveled in the late 1950's and 1960's. Now travelers would have a fast, smooth highway to travel on and a new Howard Johnson's Motor Lodge or Holiday Inn often waiting at the end of their day on the road. Meanwhile, airliners were evolving into bigger, faster, more comfortable conveyances until the revolutionary Boeing 707 jetliner of 1958 dramatically upped the ante.

Pullman realized that it was losing customers once again. Patronage had been declining steadily since 1946, with the exception of the Korean War years of 1951-52. In 1946 Pullman had operated 5,500 cars; a decade later the number had been cut by more than half to just over 2,600 cars. Overall, Pullman ridership had dropped by more than 4 million during 1950-55. More importantly, with one exception (1948), Pullman's average annual operating expenses would exceed its operating revenues as a company every year from 1946 to 1968, when its U.S. operations ended.



John F. Urwiller

Pullman's strong-arm tactics with CB&Q over the *Denver Zephyr*, an attempt to blunt Budd's future sleeping-car sales, led to federal anti-trust charges and the break up of Pullman.

In a poignant 1956 address, Pullman Vice President, Operating, George Bohannon summed up the situation, saying, "All it would take to put us back on the profit side as far as our own accounting is concerned would be one or two more passengers per average car [per] day." Pullman would never get the chance. Seeking to attract more customers, the company had conducted a detailed marketing study in 1953. It found that, even prior to the advent of

the Interstate, 70 percent of total inter-city travel occurred by auto; bus accounted for 18.1 percent of the trips; rail coach 9.8 percent, the airlines 1.4 percent, and Pullman just 0.7 percent. The devil was in the details. Well before the appearance of reliable, fast jet travel in the U.S., 60 percent of business people, Pullman's prime customers, already preferred the speed of a prop airliner to the reliability and comfort of a Pullman car for business trips. Just

1929

Air-conditioning installed on sleeper *McNair*; by 1936, more than 2,300 Pullmans had a/c; by 1942, nearly all did

1930

Acquires Standard Steel Car Co.; car-building arm renamed Pullman-Standard Car Manufacturing Co.

1933

P-S builds experimental aluminum sleeper-lounge-observation *George M. Pullman*, a step toward the era of lightweight cars

1934

Builds the first streamliner, UP's M10000, followed by *City of Portland* M10001-M10002 with the first lightweight sleepers

1936

Builds articulated *Advance* (sleeper) and *Progress* (obs), then sleeper *Forward*, the pattern for hundreds of lightweight cars



Progress and Advance



Pullman-Standard; Krambles-Peterson Archive

A 1950 Pullman-Standard rendering shows the interior of a double-bedroom/lounge/observation car to be built for the Chesapeake & Ohio.



Pullman-Standard

P-S stylists helped make America's postwar streamliners the best trains in the world. Here, an illustrator uses an airbrush to produce artwork of dining-car ware for SP's *Shasta Daylight*.

24 percent of business people rode in Pullmans, while 12 percent preferred the automobile.

The economics of the operation were stacked against Pullman. Where revenues exceeded expenses on a particular Pullman line, the operating railroad kept 75 percent of the profit and Pullman got the remainder. But when expenses exceeded revenues, the railroad was required to make up the deficit to Pullman. This latter fact, coupled with the fact that the railroads owned Pullman, explains why Pullman service shrank so fast when profits dried up in the 1950's and '60's—to avoid payments to Pullman, railroads were eager to discontinue money-losing sleepers.

The problem was particularly acute on Pullman lines serving marginal markets. In 1957, for example, the Lackawanna Railroad, which offered Pullman service to a number of smaller communities in upstate New York, lost nearly \$186,000 on these operations.

1936

Budd builds 10 sleepers for CB&Q's *Denver Zephyr*; when Pullman tries to block future orders, Budd complains to Justice Department

1937

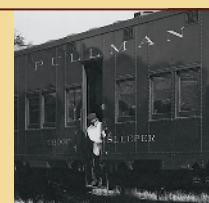
Pullman introduces the roomette, most popular accommodation of lightweight era

1940

Justice Department sues Pullman, Inc. under Sherman Anti-Trust Act

1941-45

WWII brings record traffic; government halts civilian passenger-car construction, has Pullman build and operate troop sleepers



1944

Anti-trust suit ends with court order for Pullman, Inc. to shed either its carbuilding or operating arm

Not a single Lackawanna Pullman line of the seven in operation on the railroad that year made a profit.

Losing the numbers game

By the time jets began entering service in 1958-59, challenging even the best trains to the biggest cities, the die was cast. For example, in the new jet era the average flight from Philadelphia to Chicago took a little over two hours. Despite wonderful first-class service, the same trip in a Pullman took 14½ hours. For Pullman's primary customer, the businessman, there was little doubt which way he'd travel—time was money.

Like Pullman, the private railroad passenger industry itself appeared headed for extinction. As embattled carriers continued to terminate trains and Pullman services, the cost of the massive support organization necessary to operate the Pullman fleet was spread out over fewer and fewer remaining car lines. In 1956 the last Pullman parlor car service ended; the remaining parlor services were provided by the railroads themselves. As its sleeping-car demand declined and costs rose, New York Central, one of the country's largest railroads, dropped Pullman sleeper service altogether and operated its own cars to save money beginning in 1958 [see pages 66-71]. It was a downward economic spiral with no way out.

But despite the challenges, Pullman refused to compromise its standards. On those trains where Pullman sleepers still ran, it was possible to enjoy a level of first-class service that far exceeded that available at a motel next to the Interstate or on board a 707. By the late 1960's, the speed of the airplane and the convenience of the highway had defeated the private railroad passenger train. The numbers told the story. In 1945 Pullman operated more than 5,500 cars; by December 31, 1968, when it closed its doors to passengers in the U.S. and Canada, it ran just 425. By mid-1969 Pullman would go out of the business of providing car maintenance in the U.S. and Canada after 102 years of service. Pullman service in Mexico would end in late 1970.



Milwaukee Road

Among P-S's most distinctive postwar creations were six Milwaukee Road "Skytop" sleeper-observations, designed by Brooks Stevens. MILW itself built four similar parlor-obs Skytops.

A lasting legacy

Looking back from the perspective of nearly 40 years of hindsight, it is possible to summarize what was most significant about the Pullman Company. While it has received well-deserved attention for its social impacts on the country, largely for the role of the Pullman porter in the racial equality struggle, Pullman also was significant for its place in the history of American transportation. A symbol of an earlier, more relaxed time, Pullman epitomized the level of transportation quality that can be achieved when a determined group of people put their hearts and minds into a job. It is safe to say that Pullman provided the finest and most reliable travel experience that was (or will be) ever available to the average American for a reasonable fare.

To sum it all up, the history of the Pullman Company marked the best effort of a great American company to offer a transportation service where "First Class" meant so much more than an extra inch of seat width on a five-hour flight to somewhere. ■



Al Langley Jr.

Upholding a century-old tradition of service, a Pullman conductor and porter wait for their guests beside a UP sleeper assigned to SCL train 50 at Augusta, Ga., on April 7, 1968.

1947

Pullman, Inc. sells its operating division to a group of railroads, while P-S churns out postwar streamliners and freight cars



1956

P-S builds its last sleeping cars, for Union Pacific, until Amtrak's 1978 order for Superliner sleepers

1958

NYC ends use of Pullman services, first road to do so in decades; others follow, or contract for partial Pullman service

1968

Ends U.S. passenger operations on December 31; remaining sleeper routes run by railroads until Amtrak

