

How did George Mortimer Pullman impact the railroad industry, labor, and American life in the 19th century?

George Mortimer Pullman was an influential industrialist of the 19th century and the founder of the Pullman Palace Car Company. His innovations brought comfort and luxury to railroad travel in the 1800's with the introduction of sleeping cars, dining cars, and parlor cars. Like other industrialists of the period Pullman built a company town near his factory to accommodate his workers' housing needs. He advertised it as a model community which offered his workers modern amenities in a beautiful setting. By 1890, the Pullman Palace Car Company was operating 2,135 railroad cars on approximately 160,000 miles of track in the United States with a work force of 12,367 employees. Unfortunately, the economic panic and depression of 1893 interrupted Pullman's ambitions when his workers initiated a strike demanding higher wages and better working conditions. This labor conflict grew into a national crisis causing violence, destruction of property, and even death for several strikers.

Activity One: The Pullman Cars

Someone once said that "necessity is the mother of invention." That is perhaps true in the case of George Pullman who, having made a long uncomfortable railroad journey earlier in his life, determined that railroads needed to provide more comfort and luxury for their passengers. Pullman improved the existing sleeping car and continued to explore other opportunities to make railroad travel a unique experience for those who could afford it. Pullman's original design, appropriately named "The Pioneer" was not immediately successful. The model was too wide for the existing platforms and bridges of the time and railroad companies did not want to make costly adjustments to accommodate it. However, after the assassination of President Lincoln, a Pullman Sleeping Car was hired to transport his body from Washington, D.C. to Springfield, Illinois. Immediately, the railroad company responded by making necessary adjustments to its tracks and platforms. Other railroad companies followed suit so as not to miss out on the opportunity to carry the now famous Pullman car on their tracks. This was the break that Pullman needed to introduce his sleeping car to the American public.

Documents:

Photograph of Pullman's first sleeping car, "The Pioneer" built in 1863.

Source: Chicago Historical Society

<http://www.chicagohs.org/history/pullman/gif/01sleep.jpg>

Image of Lincoln's Funeral Car.

Source: The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.

http://www.mrlincolnandnewyork.org/upload/funeral_car_train_large.jpg

Photograph of Pullman's Palace Car.

Source: Clark University

http://www.clarku.edu/activelearning/images/history/richter/pullmancarA_230.gif

Article: Report of June 18, 1869, published in June 28, 1869 - Newspaper of the George Mortimer Pullman Excursion - Title: "Across The Continent"

Source: The New York Times

http://cpr.org/Museum/Newspapers/New_York_Times/1869-06-28.html

The "Transcontinental"

A newspaper published daily by W.R. Steele aboard the Pullman Hotel Express, an eight-car train built by the Pullman Company to take passengers from Boston to San Francisco.

Source: Central Pacific Railroad Museum

http://cpr.org/Museum/Trans-Continental/_trans-continental-04.html

Questions:

1. How important was railroad travel to Americans in the 19th century?
2. What changes did Pullman make to improve travel on the rails?
3. Describe the parlor cars that Pullman designed.
4. Who do you think benefited from Pullman's innovations? Who do you think was excluded from these opportunities?
5. What evidence is there in the New York Times article to indicate that Pullman was a shrewd businessman?
6. How does the reporter react to his experience in the Pullman sleeping car and dining car?

Activity Two: The Pullman Company Town

Pullman, Illinois, appropriately named for its founder, was perceived by many as a model factory town, famous for the beauty of its landscape and the amenities provided to its residents. Pullman's goal was to keep his workers happy and morale high. However, according to historian H.W. Brands in *The Reckless Decade*, "the reality of Pullman was something else. The company owned all the land and buildings in the town; it was at once employer and landlord for five thousand workers and their families...The green lawns and tree-shaded gardens were for impressing visitors; workers lived in tenements much like those found in ordinary industrial towns across the country." The *Chicago Tribune* (1888) warned, "Pullman may appear to be all glitter and glory to the casual visitor but there is a deep, dark background of discontent which it would be idle to deny."

Read the following account of life in Pullman's Company Town and answer the questions that follow.

Documents:

Ely, Richard T. "Pullman: A Social Study." *Harper's Magazine* 70 (February 1885): 452-

466.

<http://www.library.cornell.edu/Reps/DOCS/pullman.htm>

Testimony of Frank W.T. Glover to the U.S. Strike Commission

Source: Chicago Public Library Collection

http://www.chipublib.org/003cpl/hf/pullman_strike6.html

Questions:

1. What did a typical Pullman home look like?
2. What did it cost live in a Pullman home? How did this compare to rents for homes outside the company town?
3. What public buildings did Pullman provide for his workers?
4. How does Ely describe the community as a whole in terms of its appearance and architectural style?
5. Why does Ely describe the ideal of Pullman as "un-American?"
6. Do you detect any bias in Ely's descriptions of life in Pullman's town?
7. How would you describe the testimony of Frank W.T. Glover?
8. What insight does Glover provide about housing in the Pullman Company Town?

Activity 3: The Pullman Strike

In response to the Panic of 1893, George Pullman lowered wages, eliminated jobs, and increased the number of hours required of the workers at his factories. At the same time, he refused to lower rents in his company town or prices in his company store. A strike erupted when his employees walked off the job demanding higher wages and better working conditions. This boycott grew in number of participants and in severity and became one of the most serious labor revolts in American history involving both the Pullman workers and eventually the American Railway Union led by Eugene Debs. Railroad traffic was virtually paralyzed, and despite the advice of Governor John P. Altgeld, President Grover Cleveland called in federal troops to force the workers to return to their jobs

Documents:

Testimony of Jennie Curtis on August 16, 1894

<http://www.museum.state.il.us/exhibits/athome/1850/voices/curtis/jennie.htm>

Testimony of Theodore Rhodie (U.S. Strike Commission Report)

http://www.chipublib.org/003cpl/hf/pullman_strike5.html

Testimony of Jane Addams from the U.S. Strike Commission Report

http://www.chipublib.org/003cpl/hf/pullman_strike8.html

"For the Further Benefit of Our People" George Pullman Answers His Strikers

<http://www.historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5306/>

Testimony of Nelson A. Miles from the U.S. Strike Commission Report
http://www.chipublib.org/003cpl/hf/pullman_strike7.html

Frederick Remington's sculpture of the striking workers
<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6769>

"Incidents of the Great Strike at Chicago, 1894
Source: Leslie's Illustrated Weekly 1894
http://www.chipublib.org/003cpl/hf/pullman_strike2.html

Excerpt from the autobiography of Frank A. Leach Recollections of a Newspaperman
<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/features/timeline/riseind/railroad/strike.html>

Secondary Source: "Three Weeks that Shook the Nation & California's Capital"
By Edward H. Howes, Professor Emeritus, History Department, California State University, Sacramento
<http://www.californiahistorian.com/articles/pullman-strike.html>

Questions:

1. According to the testimony provided by the workers, what were the most important causes of the Pullman Strike?
2. How does Pullman justify his wage cuts and the rent charged in his company town?
3. Is there general agreement among workers regarding their experiences? Are there any contradictions or inconsistencies?
4. How did the actions of the troops impact the strike? What emotional responses do the images create?
5. Is violence ever justified as a means to an end? What other strategies could be employed?
6. What did the testimony of workers reveal about the role of the American Railway Union in this conflict?
7. What message did this strike and its outcome send to organized labor?

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