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**From:** Gregory Brown [REDACTED]>  
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**Subject:** Greg Brown's Weekend Reading and Other Things.. 04/23/2017

DEAR FRIEND.....

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Pullman Porters

Ordinary Men, Extraordinary History: from Servitude to Civil Rights

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Web Link: <https://youtu.be/6yoYSk=Cp5M> and <https://www.facebook.com/gordon.cyr/s/posts/10154059446712134>  
<<https://www.facebook.com/go=don.cyrus/posts/10154059446712134>>

They made beds and cleaned toilets. They shined shoes, dusted jackets, cooked meals and washed dishes. Yet the Pullman porters created history in the face of adversity and racial prejudice. Over time, many of these porters were able to combine their meager salaries with tips. They saved and put their children and grandchildren through college, which helped them attain middle-class status. They helped form the foundation for the black middle class, and became instrumental in the civil rights movement.

Many people credit Pullman porters as significant contributors to the development of America's black middle class. In the late 19th century, Pullman porters were among the only people in their communities to travel extensively. Consequently, they became a conduit of new information and ideas from the wider world to their communities. Many Pullman porters supported community projects, including schools, and saved rigorously to ensure that their children were able to obtain an education and thus better employment. <=span>

Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall and former San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown were descendants of Pullman porters. Marshall was also a porter himself, as were Malcolm X and the photojournalist Gordon Parks. And my father was a Pullman Porter for several years to help pay for his education, as well as my older brother Jimmy who was a porter and retired when it merged into the larger union.

In their home neighborhoods, to be a Pullman Porter was considered a prestigious position. The job offered a steady income, an opportunity to travel across America, and a life largely free of heavy physical labor, rare for blacks in that era. Historian Timuel Black recounts, "They were good looking, clean and immaculate in their dress, their style was quite manly, their language was very carefully crafted, so that they had a sense of intelligence about them ... they were good role models for young men."

When a 'Pullman Car' was leased to a railroad, it came "equipped" with highly-trained porters to serve the travelers. The cars were staffed with recently freed slaves, whom Pullman judged to be skilled in service and willing to work for low wages. Soon, The Pullman Rail Car Company was the largest employer of blacks in the country, with the greatest concentration of Pullman Porters living on Chicago's South Side.

Prior to the 1860s, the concept of sleeping cars on railroads had not been widely developed. Chicago engineer, entrepreneur and industrialist George Pullman pioneered sleeping accommodations on trains, and by the late 1860s, he was hiring only African-Americans to serve as porters. In 1867, Pullman revolutionized rail travel when he introduced his first "hotel on wheels," the President, a sleeper with an attached kitchen and dining car that became known as Pullman Cars. A year later in 1868, he launched the Delmonico, the world's first sleeping car devoted to fine cuisine.<sup>C2</sup> The Delmonico menu was prepared by chefs from New York's famed Delmonico's Restaurant.

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Pullman believed 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. After the Civil War ended in 1865 Pullman knew that there was a large pool of former slaves who would be looking for work; he also had a very clear racial conception. Pullman believed that former house

slaves of the plantation South had the right combination of training to serve the businessmen who would patronize his "Palace Cars."

He was aware that most Americans, unlike the wealthy, didn't have personal servants in their homes. Pullman also knew the wealthy were accustomed to being served by a liveried waiter or butler, but to staff the Pullman cars with "properly humble"; workers in uniform was something the American middle class had never experienced. Hence, part of the appeal of traveling in sleeping cars was, in a sense, to have an upper class experience.

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To enhance that unique selling proposition, the company exclusively hired African-American freedmen as Pullman porters. Many of the men had been former domestic slaves in the South. Their new roles required them to act as porters, waiters, valets, and entertainers, all rolled into one person. From the very start, porters were featured in Pullman's ads promoting his new sleeper service. Initially, they were one of the features that most clearly distinguished his carriages from those of competitors, but eventually nearly all would follow his lead, hiring African-Americans as porters, cooks, waiters and Red Caps (railway station porters). Pullman became the biggest single employer of African Americans in post-Civil War America.

While the pay was very low by the standards of the day, in an era of significant racial prejudice, being a Pullman porter was one of the best jobs available for African-American men. Thus, for black men, while this was an opportunity, at the same time it was also an experience of being stereotyped as the servant class and having to take a lot of abuse. Many passengers called every porter "George", as if he were George Pullman's "boy" (servant), a practice that was born in the South where slaves were named after their slave-masters.

The only ones who protested were other men named George, who founded the Society for the Prevention of Calling Sleeping Car Porters George, or SPCSCPG, which eventually claimed 31,000 members. Although the SPCSCPG was more interested in defending the dignity of its white members than in achieving any measure of racial justice, it nevertheless had some effects for all porters. In 1926, the SPCSCPG persuaded the Pullman Company to install small racks in each car, displaying a card with the given name of the porter on duty. Of the 1,000 porters and waiters then working for Pullman, only 362 turned out to be named George. Stanley G. Grizzle, a former Canadian porter, titled his autobiography, *My Name's Not George: The Story of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters*. Porters were not paid a livable wage and needed to rely on tips to earn enough to make a living. Walter Biggs, son of a Pullman porter, spoke of memories of being a Pullman porter as told to him by his father:</=pan>

"One of the most remarkable stories I liked hearing about was how when Jackie Gleason would ride ... all the porters wanted to be on that run. The reason why? Not only because he gave every porter \$100.00, but it was just the fun, the excitement, the respect that he gave the porters. Instead of their names being George, he called everybody by their first name. He always had like a piano in the car and they sang and danced and had a great time. He was just a fun person to be around."

The number of porters employed by railroads declined as sleeping car service dwindled in the 1960s and as railroad lines went bankrupt due to competition from the airlines. By 1969, the ranks of the Pullman sleeping car porters had declined to 325 men with an average age of 63.

#### Duties

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A porter was expected to greet passengers, carry baggage, make up the sleeping berths, serve food and drinks, shine shoes, and keep the car tidy. He needed to be available night and day to wait on the passengers. He was expected to always smile; thus the porters often called the job, ironically, "miles of smiles".

According to historian Greg LeRoy, "A Pullman Porter was really kind of a glorified hotel maid and bellhop in what Pullman called a hotel on wheels. The Pullman Company just thought of the porters as a piece of equipment, just like another button on a panel – the same as a light switch or a fan switch." Porters worked 400 hours a month or 11,000 miles, sometimes as much as 20 hours at a stretch. They were expected to arrive at work several hours early to prepare their car, on their own time; they were charged whenever their passengers stole a towel or a water pitcher. On overnight trips they were allocated only three to four hours of sleep — and that was deducted from their pay.

It is not widely known that in the early 1900s, the heyday of luxury travel, the more luxurious trains also had African-American Pullman maids to care for women's needs, especially women with children. They were expected to assist ladies with their bath, be able to give manicures and dress hair, and assist with children. "It didn't pay a livable wage,

but they made a living with the tips that they got, because the salary was nothing," says Lyn Hughes, founder of the A. Philip Randolph Pullman Porter Museum. The porters were expected to pay for their own meals and uniforms and the company required them to pay for the shoe polish used to shine passengers' shoes daily. There was little job security, and the Pullman Company inspectors were known for suspending porters for trivial reasons.

## Characterization

Historian Timuel Black recounts Pullman porters' saying, "They were good looking, clean and immaculate in their dress, their style was quite manly, their language was very carefully crafted, so that they had a sense of intelligence about them ... they were good role models for young men."

According to Larry Tye, who authored *Rising from the Rails: The Pullman Porters and the Making of the Black Middle Class*, George Pullman was aware that as former chattel slaves, the men he hired had already received the perfect training and "knew just how to take care of any whim that a customer had." Tye further explained that Pullman was aware that there was never a question that a traveler would be embarrassed by running into one of the porters and having them remember something they had done during their trip that they didn't want their wife or husband, perhaps, to know about.

Black historian and journalist Thomas Fleming began his career as a bellhop and then spent five years as a cook for the Southern Pacific Railroad. Fleming was the co-founder and executive editor of Northern California's largest weekly African-American newspaper (Free Press); in a weekly series of articles entitled, "Reflections on Black History", he wrote of the contradictions in the life of a Pullman porter:

"Pullman went on to become the largest single employer of blacks in America, and the job of Pullman porter was, for most of the 101-year history of the Pullman Company, one of the very best a black man could aspire to, in status and eventually in pay. The porter reigned supreme on George's sleeper cars. But the very definition of their jobs, of their kingdom, revolved in contradictions. The porter was servant as well as host. He had the best job in his community and the worst on the train. He could be trusted with his white passengers' children and their safety, but only for the five days of a cross-country trip. He shared his riders' most private moments but, to most, remained an enigma if not an enemy."

In 2008, Amtrak became aware of The Pullman Porters National Historic Registry of African American Railroad Employees, a five-year research project conducted by Dr. Lyn Hughes, for the A. Philip Randolph Pullman Porter Museum, and published in 2007. Amtrak enlisted the APR Pullman Porter Museum, and partnered with them using the registry to locate and honor surviving Porters through a series of regional ceremonies. Amtrak also attempted to locate