

Special
Railroads, Smithsonian Recognize Pullman Porters

The nation's major railroads joined with the Smithsonian Institution Wednesday night (February 15) to recognize the legacy of Pullman Porters with a lecture and reception at the Smithsonian's Museum of American History.

“The first Pullman Porter began working on the rails before the Civil War even began,” said Edward R. Hamberger, president and CEO of the Association of American Railroads (AAR), which sponsored the event. “At their peak, there would be more than 20,000 of them, working as sleeping car porters, as dining car waiters and chefs, as lounge car attendants. Their contributions not only to the railroad industry but to society were immense and long-lasting.”

The AAR helped make possible the museum's major transportation exhibition, “America on the Move,” which looks at how transportation has shaped American lives and landscapes from 1876 to the present. The exhibition includes the story of the Pullman Porters.

The event was keyed to the debut last weekend of a television documentary on the history of the Pullman Porter, “Rising from the Rails,” which was broadcast on cable channel WGN. The documentary was based on the book, “Rising from the Rails: Pullman Porters and the Making of the Black Middle Class.” Larry Tye, the book's author, delivered an hour-long lecture on the legacy of the Pullman Porter as part of the event.

Hamberger paid tribute to the role porters played in developing a black middle class. “At a time when most middle class jobs were closed to African-Americans by a racist society, Pullman Porters had a degree of economic stability and respect that most others were denied. They became one of the building blocks of the black middle class.”

He noted that the Pullman Porters also gave rise to one of the 20th century's first great civil rights leaders, A. Philip Randolph, who founded the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the nation's first black labor union.



“In 1941, Randolph led a march on Washington to protest governmental hiring practices that excluded African-Americans from federal employment and federal contracts. As a direct result of that march, President Roosevelt changed those practices,” Hamberger said. “Twenty-two years later, Randolph was one of the leaders of the 1963 Civil Rights March on Washington in which Dr. Martin Luther King delivered his immortal “I Have A Dream” speech.”

Also speaking at the event was John Johnson, chief of executive operations at the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

Johnson said the evening had special meaning for him, “because until his death in 1954, I was raised in the home of my great uncle who was a porter for the L&N Railroad, in a rural town in southern Kentucky . . . Jobs working for the railroad especially with a porter classification were about the best jobs black men could get at that time.”

Four former Pullman Porters were honored at the event as representatives of the thousands individuals who at one time held those jobs. They are of James Kearse, who worked as a Pullman Company waiter between 1944 and 1961; Philip Henry Logan who worked as a porter from 1958 to 1978, outlasting the Pullman Co. itself, which went out of business at the end of 1968; Robert J. McGoings who joined the Pullman Co. in 1938 and retired from Amtrak in 1980; and Joseph Strowder, who was a Pullman waiter from 1939 until 1969.

Mr. Kearse and Mr. Logan were present at the ceremony. Mr. McGoings and Mr. Strowder are deceased and were represented by their son and widow, respectively.

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