

Pullman Cars & Lincoln

As the train pulls into Normal, Illinois, you may be searching for some clue as to the origin of this town's name. During the 1800s, teacher training colleges in the U.S. and abroad were called "normal schools." Illinois established a teacher's college in the village of North Bloomington in 1857, and later the growing town around the school was named "Normal." The twin cities of Bloomington-Normal have other interesting history as well. This is home to the Pullman Company of luxury railroad car fame, and both the towns and Pullman were significant to the Lincoln family.

Abraham Lincoln made a speech in Bloomington which is considered pivotal to his political career. During the 1856 Illinois State Republican Convention, Lincoln was asked to speak. Although 40 reporters were present, the speech was so captivating that after the first few minutes all pencils were still as listeners sat spellbound by Lincoln's eloquence and power. At the end of the 90 minute speech, the hall rocked with applause and the diverse factions of the Republican Party rallied around an anti-slavery platform to defeat the Democrats in upcoming elections. Because no transcript of the speech was published, the inspiring oratory became known as "Lincoln's Lost Speech."

As Lincoln was making a name for himself, George M. Pullman was starting a railroad car manufacturing shop nearby in Bloomington. The Pullman Company name would become synonymous with luxury rail travel. The Pullman Pioneer, one of the first sleeping cars, was constructed at the Bloomington shop. The company trained stewards to provide unparalleled service on the train cars to compliment the plush carpeting, draperies, upholstered chairs, libraries and card tables.

Unfortunately, the Pullman Sleeper was too wide for most rail lines, so the company struggled to sell the cars. When Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, Mr. Pullman offered free use of his sleeping car for the presidential funeral procession. Railroads hurriedly altered bridges and platforms to accommodate the wide car so that it could be added to the procession for the final Illinois leg of the journey to Springfield. The publicity gained from this use of the sleeping car boosted Pullman's business, and purchases of sleepers and dining cars boomed.

George Pullman died in 1897 and Robert Todd Lincoln, son of Abraham Lincoln, became company president. The company continued to diversify and serve the railroad industry for nearly another century, ceasing production after building the Amtrak Superliner cars in 1982. Many of the Superliners have been refurbished and are still in use today on long-distance Amtrak routes. In fact, you may be traveling in Pullman style right now!

Source(s):

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