

THE GRIOT



Preserving
African American
History in Maine

University of Southern Maine

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From the Editor's Desk...

I love Gladys Knight and “Midnight Train to Georgia” is my song. Everything stops when I hear those notes begin, and before I know it, I am singing backup and chiming in, “I’ve got to go, I’ve got to go...” Maybe that is because I like to travel. With good weather, a good sense of direction, and good music, even the 10-hour drive to visit my parents can be pleasurable. And there’s something miraculous and yet cosmopolitan about flying. The miracle is that a huge metal bird with so many people and so much carry-on baggage violating the “size wise” guidelines can get so high above the ground. The cosmopolitan aspect is that you can get a fairly decent meal out of a camper-sized kitchen cruising at an altitude of 33,000 feet—in first class anyway.

Now, trains intrigue me. I have never been on one, but they seem so dignified, especially in old movie footage that conjures up images of a “hotel on rails” with dining cars, smoking cars, sleeping cars, and the like. My father was a lumberjack in the interior of British Columbia before he married, so I grew up hearing animated stories about train rides through the Canadian Rockies. My mother, on the other hand, will tell you about the valleys and steep drops that lurked outside her window as those same trains wound through Alberta and British Columbia. Rail service is going to be restored between Boston and Portland, with possible completion by late 1999. This promises to

fulfill my dream of riding the rails. It is also likely to give “leaf-peepers” another way to get to Portland.

Nostalgia and romanticism aside, the railroad has long been a symbol of national unity and industrialization in the United States, with some of the earliest networks of railroads found in the Northeast. For the state of Maine, the Boston and Maine Railroad represented a link to other major markets in the region.

A lesser-known aspect of the history of the railroad during this century is that it was also a reflection of the country’s investment in a racial hierarchy that kept African-American men and women in well-defined positions of servility. The Pullman Company, which operated many rail lines across the country, including the Boston and Maine Railroad, was one such entity. As a Pullman line, the Boston and Maine formed part of the stage on which the story of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the largest union of African-American railroad porters, was enacted. Working collectively to improve the representation of porters and maids, the Brotherhood worked to improve wages, working conditions, and job security. This edition of *The Griot* profiles A. Philip Randolph, the Brotherhood, and the March on Washington movement.

Maureen Elgersman, assistant professor and faculty scholar for the African American Archives of Maine, University of Southern Maine Library

Next Issue:
African American
Portraiture as
Historical Text

A Place in Time: A. Philip Randolph (1889-1979)

Born the son of an African Methodist Episcopal (AME) preacher, A. Philip Randolph would become one of the most important leaders in 20th-century African-American labor history. Moving from his home in Crescent City, Fla., to Harlem in 1911 as a young man of 22, Randolph was taking the first step in a life-long career of serving the interests of the African-American working class. In New York City, Randolph attended City College while his friend Chandler Owen attended Columbia University. Randolph and Owen, both inspired by the writings of Karl Marx, became members of the Socialist party in 1916. They soon saw America’s racial problems as being intrinsically tied to the imbalanced distribution of wealth produced by its capitalist system. Racism, crime, prostitution, and other social ills, were, according to Randolph, the products of a populace that was not sharing the financial fruits of its hard labor. If wealth was distributed in a more egalitarian fashion, Randolph continued, many of those social problems would be abated or even disappear.

While Randolph certainly was a man of the people, he moved in circles with some of the most elite African-

Americans of his day. Harlemites with such famous surnames as McKay, Garvey, Walker, and Vander Zee were joined by a lesser-known Caribbean-derived entourage that included W.A. Domingo (Jamaica), Hubert Harrison (St. Croix), and Cyril Briggs (Dutch West Indies). These men were frequently in Randolph’s company, probably had some influence on his Black working-class consciousness, and would contribute in various ways to the writing and philosophy of the Black press of the 1920s. A man with a considerable following, Randolph seems to have remained somewhat removed from the trappings of Black leadership; he had no real interest in even owning a house of his own and never did.

One of Randolph’s most important investments was his commitment to publishing *The Messenger*, a socialist newspaper that he began with Chandler Owen in November, 1917. A broader reincarnation of *The Hotel Messenger*, a paper that Randolph started the year before in support of African Americans working in the city’s booming hotel industry. *The Messenger* soon became a significant periodical in the Black press. While contemporaries like

Booker T. Washington publicly endorsed racial accommodation and W.E.B. DuBois posited a new dialogue about the Veil, double consciousness, and unreconciled strivings in African-American life, Randolph remained clearly focused on the working class. *The Messenger* was considered by the U.S. Justice Department “the most dangerous of all Negro publications.”

Left to right: Bayard Ruston, A. Philip Randolph and Gerald Talbot, in Washington D.C., 1975.

Clearly striking a nerve, Randolph was accordingly labeled “one of the most dangerous Negroes” of his time. *The Messenger* ceased publication in August

of 1928, due to dwindling support and the antisocialist character of post-World War I America.

In August of 1925, Randolph organized the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP) to represent the interests of African-American workers in the railroad industry, most immediately those of the Pullman Company—the national railway company that had built incredible financial success on the service of Black porters, and was, at one time, the largest single employer of Blacks in the nation. Pullman's success was no coincidence since porters were required to be on call at all times from the train's departure to its arrival, and were expected to attend to all patrons' needs with the deference required of their station. Duties included, but were by no means limited to, serving meals and drinks, making beds, carrying luggage, and even shining shoes. There was virtually no job security since porters and maids could be dismissed based on a patron's complaint. Wages were also complicated, for porters were required to pay for their uniforms and meals. Porters in 1934 made an average of \$16 dollars a week against an average national manufacturing wage of just over \$19 dollars.

Porters held prestige in the African-American community. Their stately uniforms and their opportunities to travel across the country gave them a worldliness far removed from the experiences of much of the community. But being a porter also took emotional fortitude, since being away from family and friends meant missing important events in the life of the community. The Ladies Auxiliary of the BSCP was a critical link in the success of the organization. Porters' wives organized meetings and secretly maintained their husbands' memberships, if necessary. Initially spurned by the American Federation of Labor (AFL), the BSCP eventually received full affiliation from the AFL and full recognition as the bargaining agent for porters and maids by the Pullman Company. The BSCP dismantled in the late 1960s; Randolph had remained its president for more than 40 years, and was instrumental in establishing brotherhood chapters or affiliates in Canadian cities like

Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg, Calgary, and Vancouver.

A much lesser known aspect of Randolph's public life is his role in the "March on Washington" movement. Before the March on Washington in 1963, the Selma-Montgomery March in 1965, Million Man March in 1995, and Million Woman March in 1997, there was the plan for a 1941 march on the American capitol. Randolph wanted as many as 100,000 African Americans to go to Washington, D.C., and demand Blacks be employed in federal defense industries. Reputed to have been fearful of such a demonstration, Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802 forbidding all government departments, agencies, and contracting agencies from administering their respective programs with discrimination based on race, creed, color, or national origin. The United States Marine Corps, for example, would begin enlisting African Americans for the first time since being established in 1775. The order also established a Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) to ensure compliance, but it remained ineffective. Like other civil rights legislation of this kind, the terms of the order lent itself to safeguarding American workers outside of the Black community, especially European immigrants.

In similar fashion, the 1963 March on Washington was instrumental in the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and its creation of the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission (EEOC). Randolph acted as chairman of the August 1963 march, and was highly involved in maintaining the order of the event. Randolph did offend some African-American women by leaving them out of co-sponsorship roles in the organization and ceremony of the march. Women's groups, including the National Council of Negro Women, rallied against this slight, and Myrlie Evers, wife of NAACP leader Medgar Evers, represented Black women. Despite the triumph of the day, Evers and Randolph must have come to that platform with similar feelings of loss: Evers' husband was assassinated in front of his Mississippi home in May of 1963, and Randolph's wife, Lucille, died in April of 1963.

A. Philip Randolph died in May 1979. One of the most important Black and working-class leaders of the 20th century, he was making civil rights advances before there was any notion of what most people understand the civil rights movement to have been.

Bibliography:

- Anderson, Jervis. A. *Philip Randolph: A Biographical Portrait*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc., 1972.
- Chateaubert, Melinda. *Marching Together: Women of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998.
- Pfeffer, Paula F. A. *Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990.
- Santino, Jack. *Miles of Smiles, Years of Struggle: Stories of Black Pullman Porters*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989. [Also on videocassette].

Spring Courses

HTY 394, "Black Women in the Americas: Canada, the U.S., and the Caribbean." Prof. Maureen Elgersman. A comparative topics course dealing with slavery, work, women's/civil rights, and feminist writing.

HTY 399, "History of the Caribbean: From Columbus to Calypso." Profs. Maureen Elgersman and Alfred Padula. Study of Caribbean history and culture; compressed video.

Call 780-5239 for more information on either course.

Calendar

Thursday, October 29: "Remembering a Life the Way it Really Was," Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, USM Libra Distinguished Visiting Professor, Harvard University, 7:00 p.m., Gorham High School, Performing Arts Center, Morrill Ave., Gorham. Reception follows.

Friday, October 30: "Recognizing and Honoring Individual Lives in the African-American Community," interactive discussion group with Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and community members, 8:00 a.m., Woodbury Campus Center, Rooms A, B, C. (Continental breakfast available.) Call 780-5054 for more information.

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