

“The Pullman Porters: A Lasting Legacy”
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February 4, 2018

I watched a movie last week called, “Ten Thousand Black Men Named George.” It was something I had ordered through Netflix. I don’t even remember what led me to get it, and it sat around for a while, for that “right time.” The film tells the story of the thousands of men who worked as Pullman Porters on sleeping railway cars, and effort to organize them a union in order to demand fair salaries and better working conditions.

Starting in 1925, it took over 10 years for the organizer A. Philip Randolph to form the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and to have it officially recognized. It was a process that was often frustrating and incredibly daunting in the face of fierce opposition from the Pullman Company. At the beginning, A. Philip Randolph had his doubts. But after a few days of working “undercover” as a porter himself, Randolph’s commitment and perseverance were absolute and unshakable. I think that’s what carried him through –knowing what was at stake for the porters, their families and really, the dignity of the African American people.

When the movie ended, I sat back, once again astounded that one of the pivotal pieces of American history is not routinely taught to all Americans. And on the other hand, I’m grateful that I now have a greater understanding of the story of the Pullman Porters and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, as the union was called.

A few reasons why we need to know about this chapter in history:

- Pullman was one of the major employers of African Americans for over 100 years --from the time of emancipation through the 1960s.
- The formation of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters was the first successful attempt to organize black workers, to ensure a living wage and abolish unfair working practices – and there were a lot of them.

- Because of unionization, these men and their families made a major contribution to the development of the black middle class. Almost all children of porters went to college.
- It was A. Philip Randolph and the Pullman Porters who established the commitment to nonviolent resistance and it was Randolph's work that led directly to the March on Washington in 1963, where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his "I have a dream" speech.
- It was also A. Philip Randolph who convinced Dr. King to get involved in the civil rights movement at all! You'll hear more about that story in a few minutes, toward the end of the film.

Because the Pullman Porters experienced demeaning and insulting behavior every day, the ones who lasted were experts at reading their white passengers. They had to know where the line was. How much disapproval or resentment they could risk showing. And the best of them, like Frank Rollins, were absolutely brilliant in their creative ability to respond to the offensive treatment in a such a way as to maintain their dignity and integrity without escalating the situation.

My original idea was to simply tell you the story of the Pullman Porters, but my second thought was that I wanted you to be able to hear the stories from some of the porters themselves. And I also found the video I'm about to show you, which brings the story to life in what I think is a very compelling way. So let's watch.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b885Mr4-PZg>

African American history is American history. For all of us to know the truth of African American history is a step toward healing this country's troubled soul.