Pullman Porter Blues: Pullman Town

Pullman Town, 1894

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On the south side of Chicago, the neighborhood of historical Pullman moves more like a small suburban town than the hustle and bustle of the city of which it is part. Resident and history buff Arthur Melville Pearson states, “for those looking for a genuine sense of community, this is ideal. Here in Pullman, whether it is over the back fence or sitting on the front porch, we are up close and personal.” Both a Chicago and national landmark, and contender as a national park, the area between 111th and 115th streets just west of Lake Calumet hasn’t changed much since it was first built by George Pullman to house the factory workers for his Palace Car Company. Looking to overcome the general problems of the Industrial worker-manager relationship, Pullman imagined a town where clean living and a strict moral code would enhance his workers’ productivity. Originally lauded, Pullman’s controlling paternalistic view would spell the ultimate downfall of what was named the Pullman Social Experiment.

Basing his plans on European company towns including Essen, Germany, and Saltaire, England, Pullman bought 4,000 acres of prairie just south of Chicago; only about 600 of those acres were used for the factories, town, and housing. The town was completed in 1884; however, the first families began moving in as early as 1881.

Voyeuristically philanthropic, Pullman ran the town with expectation of an average 6 percent return on the cost of building and maintenance. Employees were not allowed to own

their homes; therefore all housing was rented from the Pullman Palace Car Company. While each home had uncommon amenities for the period such as indoor plumbing, gas light, even steam heat, the company set the fees for resources including water and gas at much high rates than normal. Pullman sold gas at $2.25 per thousand cubic feet when Chicago was charging $1.25 per thousand cubic feet. In addition, the company chose what types of retailers were allowed to set up shop in the town and at what prices they could sell their goods. The sale of alcohol was not allowed in town, although one could purchase liquor in nearby communities. The town had no community government; rather a town agent managed the community. The agents, even the members of the school board, were always staunch supporters of Pullman and company policy. Emblematic of the paternalistic idea, Pullman played god to his employees.

Envisioned as a utopia for Pullman's skilled white factory workers, non-Pullman white employees lived in the town as well. Contrary to popular belief, Pullman porters were not part of Pullman's social experiment. Porters resided in an area north of Pullman town and were not allowed to live with the factory workers. Population density constituted one of the greatest problems for Pullman town. Governing bodies never controlled population size and the town grew from its initial 1,800 residents to 12,000 by the 1893 recession.

Pullman's controlling policies, combined with the economic strife of the recession, ultimately caused the experiment's downfall. In response to the economic decline, Pullman cut wages and hours of its employees, yet despite the urging of Chicago officials, he did not lower rent prices or sale prices of goods. By this time, Pullman employees constituted two-thirds of the resident population, having been given preference over other renting applicants. Unfortunately, residents owed more than $70,000 in back rent, preventing the company from evicting them. Originally a utopia, Pullman quickly fell in destitution. A powder keg, Pullman workers went on strike in May 1894, later supported nationwide by the American Railway Union via a boycott of Pullman cars on lines in 27 states west of Chicago. Although it reached national headlines, the strike and subsequent boycott were ultimately crushed by September. Conditions were no better at the company or in town; Pullman even cut the number of employees at the factory to 600. Officials were concerned about Pullman citizens after the area was annexed into the city of Chicago in 1889. They asked George Pullman for funds to provide aid for the failing town. Refused, Chicago officials turned to state aid for help. Although triumphant at suppressing the strike, Pullman's experiment was deemed a failure. The Supreme Court would condemn paternalism and declare the establishment of the model town as a violation of the Pullman charter. Pullman died five years later, and in 1907, housing was divested to private control.

Today, the name Pullman encompasses both the historic area and the neighborhoods of North Pullman and West Pullman. Despite its initial makeup, Pullman has become more diverse. While a fire in the early '90s took out the administrative building and clock tower, more than 95 percent of Pullman's original buildings are still intact. The neighborhood strives to revitalize some of the unused older buildings. The south side of the Chicago is constantly deemed as a haven for crime and danger, but residents don't see that in their little area of Pullman. Although not directly connected with the Pullman Palace Car Company, many employees still lived in the town after the factories closed in the 1950s. A picture of the past today, Pullman serves as a reminder of one of the most disastrous social experiments in labor history.