

Pullman
AMERICA'S FIRST
CHAIR OF 1910



Altoona, Pennsylvania Railroad, blanket on facing page. J. David Inghis collection

A publicity photo from the late 1940's shows a mother and her daughter snug under their blankets in connecting double bedrooms.

Woolen wonders

Pullman's blankets were emblematic of the company's commitment to service

By Robert Klara



The rich color of Pullman's Cordar-series blankets of the streamlined era is evident in this example. The "9" below the emblem indicates that it was produced in 1944.

the early sleepers ran with blankets from the latter's department store.

Whatever their lineage, the blankets of the wooden-car era were unquestionably first-rate. A brief summary of blanket types, compiled by Purchases and Steers Manager B. N. Lewis shortly before Pullman's liquidation, relates that the earliest blankets were 100 percent wool and woven thick, featured PULLMAN embroidered in the blanket's center, and ranged in color from light rose to tan to green. Lewis also noted that some were "believed to be of Austrian manufacture." He then falls maddeningly silent.

Fortunately, most head-scratching ends with the heavy-weight era. Pullman completed its first all-steel sleeper in 1907—a year that also proved critical for its woolen blankets. From that point forward, the company would procure all blankets via contracts with American mills, and all would be wearing a wholly standardized product.

Unsurprisingly, Pullman officials applied the same militaristic standards to its contracts as the company's founder had to his employees. Wise to the loom owner who failed to heed mandates such as "Blankets shall be of specified quality, known as firsts, uniformly woven, and free from shoddy, locks, noils, waste, and other impurities."

The contractors, however, had local incentive aplenty to follow instructions. For instance, a purchase order placed on December 29, 1926, with Springfield Woolen Mills commissioned 3,000 blankets, for which Pullman paid \$6.75 each. By March 1927, Pullman was back with another request: 2,000 more blankets, please, and the following summer, the company ordered still another 2,000. These orders

appear on three lines of a single purchase card, of which there were hundreds. Pullman continually placed orders with mills everywhere—from Orr Felt Blankets of Piqua, Ohio, to Chatham Blankets, Inc. on West 40th Street in New York City.

The juncture at which Pullman contracted its weaving work is critical for another reason: It was here that the company saw an opportunity to fix its

Most every great corporation can be embodied by a signature product—an instantly recognizable emblem of its standards and consistency. For Campbell's, it's a red-labeled soup can; for Ivory, the snow-white bar of soap that floats. And for the Pullman Company—bygone hotelier to the rolling millions, dispenser of domestic comforts at 80 mph—that item is the wool berth blanket.

Not the sleeping-car itself? Yes, they are emblematic too, but, think of it this way: While Pullman may have been in the liberal business of selling uppers and lowers, compartments and roomettes, what it was really selling was a night's sleep—as good, if not exactly as familiar, as you could have in your own bed. And no item (perhaps with the exception of a teddy bear) whispers "sleep" better than a blanket.

Because this is Pullman, however, we speak of no ordinary blanket. These artful throws were probably the most carefully crafted, handled, and protected articles of bedding in America. And for good reason: The blankets did some of Pullman's most effective advertising simply by virtue of their being luxurious and beautiful. It was no accident that manuals admonished porters to position blankets with the PULLMAN name in plain view of customers.

The history of Pullman has been frequently, and deservedly, told. Yet any mention of blankets invariably falls into the footnotes. That second-class treatment is undeserved for many reasons. The complexity of the blankets' care and use underscores the larger and even more Byzantine workings of the great Pullman system. The blankets confirmed Pullman's good taste (in turn

assuring passengers of theirs). The blankets exemplified industrial design at its best—and race relations at their worst. They also, of course, kept millions of passengers warm as they slept. What other relic of the railroading age can boast as much symbolic weight? Indeed, if it's true you can know a man by his work, you can know Pullman by its blankets.

One need only regard the varnished interiors of the Gilded Age sleepers to see that the Pullman experience was not an idea so much as an aggregate. Each and every component of a Pullman sleeper—from the cut-glass chandeliers to the brocade seat cushions—spoke of luxury, and even items as seemingly perfunctory as blankets were, from the very beginning, part of that ethos.

And part of a mystery: While we know that blankets were *de rigueur* in the earliest Pullman sleepers, we know little of their origin. The *Tales of Pullman*, a guidebook-like document published at the time of the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, boasts that in 1893, Pullman's upholstery shops produced 4,000 pieces of bed linen daily for sleeping-car duty. Yet the book says nothing about whether people in George Pullman's industrial utopia—which included a knitting mill on 106th Street—also made blankets. Retired Chicago railroad executive and historian George Edgar believes that Pullman did—although not for long. "As sleeping cars became more refined," Edgar says, "better grades of blankets and linens were required, and in larger quantities than the Pullman shops could supply." Edgar also posits that, as George Pullman was friendly with Marshall Field, some of

Pullman sold sleep, and no item whispers 'sleep' better than a good blanket.

PULLMAN

PROPERTY OF
THE PULLMAN CO

The Pullman CO

The Pullman CO

The RFC Pullman CO

Pullman's Chocolate-series blankets bore rectangular legs; upper left version was used 1907-27; upper right, 1927-32. The circular emblem debuted with the Cedar series in 1936.

are not only much of what make Pullman blankets popular to collect, they are likely the most misunderstood bit of lore in railroadiana. Any search of the auction Web site eBay will turn up an example. "Brown wool blanket with 'Pullman 17,'" enthuses the seller. "Blanket was made in 1917." Wrong. A Pullman Chocolate blanket numbered 17 would have been made in 1923.

Pullman began numbering its blankets during the first year of contracted production: All 1907 blankets bore the number "1." Each subsequent year's blankets wore an ascending, corresponding number—1908 blankets had a "2"; 1920 blankets a "14," and so on. The numbers provided a quick idea of how long a particular blanket had been in service. (Not that the system was foolproof—in 1928, one wool blanket in a tier and some 800 blankets bearing the number 28 instead of the correct 22.)

Though savvy enough to recognize that quality blankets were a cornerstone of Pullman's marketing—ads showing customers slumbering blissfully beneath blankets became a thematic staple, so effective that the Chesapeake & Ohio expropriated a Pullman blanket for its mascot, Chessie the kitten, to slumber beneath—Pullman officials never seemed to understand that wearing the company's name into the blankets made them more attractive to steal. In 1923 alone, 140,000 pieces of linen vanished from sleepers each month. Then the brass had an idea.

Beginning in 1927, mills were told to drop the lone Pullman name in favor of

PROPERTY OF THE PULLMAN CO. A frame of inverted bow corners replaced the more curvaceous outline, although Pullman left its numbering system intact; all 1927 blankets bore the number "21." Perhaps, officials hoped, the verbatim ring of "property" would cause "organized linen thieves" (as one official termed them) to think twice. It did not.

With the dawn of the lightweight era, Pullman struggled with a new variety: the traditional Chocolate blanket series might look sturdy aboard new, streamlined cars. Hence in 1936, the "Cedar" series debuted—solid, rose-colored blankets that wore THE PULLMAN CO in *italic*, inscribed in a circle slashed through by five stylishly raked lines. What the Cedars lacked in festivity they made up for with suggestions of modernity.

The new series also reset Pullman's blanket odometer; Cedars loomed in 1936 bore a "1." The Depression had halted the Chocolates in 1932, year 26 of the series. To confuse matters further, some Cedars carried the traditional diction to numbers. Inside or atop the circle one might see a

"D" or an "RFC," the number remained down at the circle's base. A Cedar bearing "D" and "6," for example, signified that the Defense Plant Corporation had paid for the blanket in 1941, while an "RFC 8" would indicate a blanket loomed in 1943 and paid for by the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. Even rarer was the letter "S"; found only on Chocolate-series blankets, it apparently denoted that the blanket was

assigned for use on the relatively small fleet of Pullman-operated private cars.

While what fragments remain of Pullman blankets records speak almost solely of Chocolates and Cedars, there was, in fact, a final variety. When a blanket had grown threadbare and tattered beyond repair, it found its way into a vat of cobalt dye; the hideous, blue-brown result was then tossed to porters. "The blanket that the porter used was forbidden for passengers to use," notes author and historian Arthur Dubin. "And the porter would stretch out [beneath it] on the leather couch in the men's room." Small scraps of worn blankets were issued to porters as shoeshine rags.

It is telling that of the many prize-winning Pullman blankets that the Smithsonian Institution could have displayed in its transportation exhibit, curators chose a porter's. Blue, frayed, patched like shanty roofs—these particular blankets were proof that, for some Americans, traveling in Pullman "style" meant shining shoes, stooping for tips, and answering to the universally reviled "George."

A Pullman's fine crew, so too did its cache of blankets. In 1923, the company estimated it owned a staggering 374,000 of them. The procedural complexities required to keep Pullman's sleeper fleet personally stocked with clean blankets for the mild eyes of today—and Pullman did it all without computers, of course.

Clean, paper-wrapped blankets awaited their trains in yard storerooms. A porter preparing his car for a run in, say, 1952, had not only counted his allotted pallet of blankets at the stock room, checked his count against that of the clerk, and filled out Form 93,9150, but had already long before memorized the 31 pages devoted to the proper way of making up berths—including the placement of blankets (two to a bed; one folded atop the sheets and a second rolled and placed at the foot).

Individual stores managers saw to it that the bed sheets were laundered after each run (even before the great influenza epidemic of 1918, linens were routinely pulled up and left to hang outside the car windows for a purportedly disinfecting "sun bath"). Pullman washed its blankets monthly, however, and it was the system's General Storekeeper himself who supervised it, dispatching long lists of cars whose blankets were due for soap to the appropriate districts. Pullman operated its own laundries in major cities like New York and St. Louis; elsewhere, the company contracted with private ones—all instructed to have the soaps ready at any hour.



To fight germs, sleeping-car bedding was given "sun baths," as demonstrated in this August 1906 photo of a wooden 12-section/11-drawing-room car at the Pullman plant in Chicago.

Ordinary laundries had little hope of qualifying for Pullman duty. Those chosen had to own a Hunter Cloth Washer—the only machine in which Pullman permitted its precious blankets to swim. Measuring 9 feet high and 7 feet long, the Hunter swallowed 54 blankets at a time. Using a Singer Chain Stitching Machine and 4-ply Bibb Twine, laundresses sewed blankets together into six chains of nine blankets each, and then fed it all into the rolling studs. Following a spin in the extractor, the blankets dried in the fresh air and took a trip through the pressing machine before being folded, wrapped, and trucked back to the railroad yards.

In 1955, a letter from M. F. Morrissey, Chief Special Agent of Pullman's Special Service Department, went out to Chicago police officials, bemoaning that Pullman was "again experiencing a great number of linen and blanket losses." Morrissey implored cops to look for lifted linens on their regular rounds and even furnished helpful tips: "The missing blankets . . . have found their way into cheap hotels, tourist camps, rooming houses, brothels, and some private homes."

Had Morrissey been writing his letter today, he most surely would have included e lay among the lurking spots. Hindsight tints this otherwise humorous letter with melancholy: a decade and a half after it was typed, the Pullman Company itself, like so many of its iconic blankets, would disappear. Say what you will about the morality of theft (and it is true that many blankets were purchased legally at Pullman's liquidation auction in 1970, it's much of the reason why so many Pullman blankets survive the decades that Pullman itself could not).

It is also why we know one last detail



This 1912-vintage Chocolate blanket is still serving its original function—on a sleeping car, but on author Klarr's own bed.

about the blankets that would never have turned up in the files. They're heavenly to sleep beneath—pleasingly coarse without being scratchy, sufficiently heavy without being smothering, airy enough for a summer's night yet a faultless guard against any winter chill. This writer happens to know these things because he sleeps beneath his Chocolate standard every night. It's a No. 6—seven years the Dottie snail, L. L. Bean boots debuted in Maine, and Teddy Roosevelt tried to regain the presidency as a Progressive candidate. Its rail mileage is probably in the millions, and it still does its job as well as the day it was made.

If that's not a testament to Pullman excellence, what could be? ■

Just as on a high-class limited, each bunk in a World War II-era troop sleeper was made up with two standard Pullman blankets.

corporate image in the public mind by giving the blankets a consistent and beautiful design that would become a company signature. Standard on all heavyweight cars between 1907 and 1932 was the "Chocolate" blanket, featuring a dark-brown houndstooth pattern on a lighter brown background. A quarter of the way down the blanket's 98-inch length, looms wore PULLMAN in ornate four-inch letters, gridded by an arabesque frame.

Such might be all there is to say about Pullman blanket design, were it not for the presence of a 16-inch numeral that stood sentry beneath the Pullman name. Offering no outward explanation for their existence, these numbers