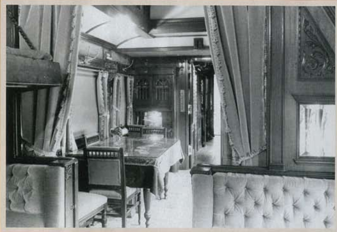
While the exact number isn't known for certain, it's believed the dining room—shown in this 1890 view—could seat eight at its richly carved table. When not in use for meals, the table and chairs could be moved to other locations in the room to suit the social occasion. Note the intricate pattern in the plush wool carpeting underfoot and the leaded-glass doors of the cabinets flanking the service doorway. *Interior of private car Oriental taken by Pullman Company photographer, c. 1890.*

A Movable Mansion

The splendor of Austin Corbin's Oriental stops visitors in their tracks, even as it rests gloriously on its own.

BY ROBERT KLARA

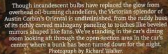


This 1958 view looks forward into the dining room from the car's open-section area (where the bunk on the left has been lowered). To the right of the dining room's wall cabinet is an open door that led to the service area. There, the Oriental's own chef prepared meals on the kitchen's cast-iron stove. It was common for Victorian-era private Pullmans to stop en route to pick up fresh meats and produce from local purveyors.

Sometime during the year 1889, New York industrialist Austin Corbin commissioned what was—and remains—one of the most unusual Victorian residences in the United States.

It was a refuge of mahogany paneling and tufted velvet, of marble and leaded glass. It had a veranda, staff servants and, like all proper retreats of the time, it had a name: Oriental.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF THE ADIRONDACK MUSEUM.



Though incandescent bulbs have replaced the glow from overhead oil-burning chandeliers, the Victorian splendor of Austin Corbin's Oriental is undiminished, from the ruddy hues of its richly carved mahogany paneling to touches like beveled mirrors shaped like fans. We're standing in the car's dining room looking aft through the open-section area in the car's center, where a bunk has been turned down for the night. *Photograph by Richard Walker.*

And where was this home located exactly? Well, that is where things get tricky. It was, permanently at least, nowhere. Spotted often in Philadelphia, it made appearances in New York, Washington and as far west as Bloomington, Indiana. Such geographic wizardry was possible when your domicile was scarcely 10 feet wide and mounted on 12 flanged wheels—when, as in Corbin's case, Oriental was your personal railroad car.

Trainmen called them "private varnish," and between 1882 and 1910, the Pullman Company built a mere 146 of them. Completed in 1890, the Oriental is not only an unusual survivor, it may be the best-preserved private Victorian railroad coach in existence. It owes its salvation to New York's Adirondack Museum, where the car has reposed since 1958, an example for 70,000 annual visitors of how Gilded Age magnates chuffed from New York City to their woody retreats in unqualified splendor.

"Most of the car is absolutely pristine," chief museum curator Laura Rice says. "Since it arrived it's been the visitors' favorite."

Rolling Retreats

"Private cars mattered because they were really the only way Americans could see how the rich lived," observes John R.

Top: After purchasing the Oriental, the museum faced the Herculean task of getting the car up to its remote campus in the Adirondack Mountains. Since the nearest railroad tracks ended at Tupper Lake, New York, the car had to be trucked for the last 34 miles. Its wheels removed for the five-day trip, the car makes its plodding way in this photo from early 1958.

Right: An easy way to spot private railroad cars in the Gilded Age was to look for ornate grillwork, often wrought from bronze, enclosing the rear vestibule. Though the Oriental lost its resplendent grille to a modernization effort, this 1890 photograph taken at the Pullman Car Works south of Chicago shows what the original looked like. It also shows the large plate-glass windows that graced the car's observation lounge. *Interior of private car Oriental taken by Pullman Company photographer, c. 1890.*

Stilgoe, who teaches history at Harvard University. Though fin de siecle Americans were fascinated by the rich, he adds, "the typical American might not approach the mansions and estates in which the very wealthy lived. But private cars roamed everywhere—typically at the ends of fast trains. Anyone on a station platform might look at them, and even gaze in their windows."

Few sights could match those behind the panes of the Oriental, whose hardwoods alone cost $1,109.61 (this at a time Americans were fortunate to take home $10 a week). When Lot 1703—as the car was known while it took shape in Pullman's barns outside Chicago—rolled off the line five days after Christmas 1890, the invoice totaled $60,000. As president of both the Long Island Railroad and the Elmira, Cortland & Northern, Corbin could part with money like that. It bought him an awfully nice train car.

Pullman's army of craftsmen had fashioned a baronial interior, festooning every mahogany panel with rosettes, ribbons and fruitwood wreaths. Chandeliers swung from a clerestory ceiling accented with hand-painted oilcloth. Even the hat hooks were silver. Though the car was only 69 feet long, Pullman's genius for interior architecture conceived it as a Parisian apartment, complete with staterooms, a formal dining room and a lounge. Within his rolling manse, Corbin click-clacked throughout his steel-ribboned kingdom, uncorking wines with the car's very own walrus-tusk corkscrew and entertaining swells, including President Grover Cleveland, to whom Corbin gave a lift to the 1893 inaugural.

When Corbin died in 1896, the Louisville & Nashville Railroad purchased the Oriental for the use of its president, August Belmont, Jr., who went on to build New York City's first subway in 1904. It was Belmont's wife, Eleanor, who remarked that "a private railroad car is not an acquired taste; one takes to it immediately"—though her approbation might also have referred to the couple's other private Pullman—a tiny car called the Mineola that scurried beneath the streets of Manhattan.

Long, Strange Journey

When Belmont's tenure ended in 1903, the car—which he'd renamed The Louisville—passed through the hands of various L&N officials. If its grandeur faded during this period, it was a fate preferable to the scrap yards, the last stop for many other private cars. A 1933 remodeling stripped the Oriental of its

Right: This 1958 view looking aft from the dining area showcases the magic worked by the craftsmen of Pullman's cabinetry shop, including Doric pilasters flanking the partition, acanthus brackets and scrolled triangular spandrels below the retracted bunk beds. Through the forward doorway is the corridor, which, after bending to the right, led to the staterooms and the observation lounge. Note also the bell rope in the upper-right corner; a tug on it signaled the engineer to stop the train.

Far top right: An early view of the Oriental's dining room, showing the intricate leaded-glass windows on the transom board and up in the clerestory roof. These windows were removed during later renovations, as were the car's original chandeliers. Though Corbin's private car was lit by oil lamps, Pullman company records suggest that it was also wired in anticipation of electric lights, a technology not yet perfected for railroad-car interiors in 1890.

Far bottom right: Among the Oriental's most interesting features was its "open section" that allowed the car to accommodate overnight guests who could not have a stateroom. Two pairs of facing bench seats miraculously became four single beds after an attendant rearranged the upholstered planks below and, above, lowered bunks from their wall niches. This view shows the port-side section in daytime mode with the bunk retracted and a card table set up below. Note the circular lock switch that released the bunk from its niche.

Hotels on Wheels

A Brief History of the Pullman Company

BY ROBERT KLARA

In the years following the Civil War, technological advances permitted trains to traverse greater distances than ever before. But when those stretches grew long enough to warrant nighttime travel, railroads faced a problem: The respectable citizen could not be asked to sleep in a coach seat. Having improved on the crude wooden-bunk cars of the day, George M. Pullman approached the railroads with his own plush, fully staffed sleepers—and a contract.

Despite the need, most lines initially opposed the perceived extravagance of Pullman's service. But Pullman saw an opportunity in lending one of his early models for use on Abraham Lincoln's funeral train, and the widespread public exposure to the opulent car created immediate demand. By 1895, 2,556 Pullman sleepers were thrumming across the nation's nearly 127,000 miles of track. "It is like one vast ubiquitous hotel," said a Pullman pamphlet of the time.

The standard Pullman sleepers at the turn of the last century couldn't match the princely trappings of private cars like the Oriental, though they were spacious conveyances that promised a smooth ride and relative privacy. Most Pullman passengers slept in a "12 & 1"—or some variation of it—which denoted 12 open-section berths and 1 private bedroom. By day, a berth consisted of two plush, upholstered bench seats that faced each other, laid out in rows on either side of a central aisle. As evening approached, the porter would "make down" the berth by assembling a lower bed from the seat's removable panels, then pulling down a bunk-style upper bed from its wall niche above the windows. A long curtain cordoned off the accommodations.

"Travel by Pullman" was an American staple until 1969, when years of competition from airlines and interstates finally forced the company to close its doors after 102 years.

Above: Arranged like an intimate study, the Oriental's observation lounge—located in the rear of the car, just inside the car's open platform—featured a settee against the bulkhead from which passengers could gaze through the vestibule windows and marvel at the spectacle of receding tracks. This photo was taken by a Pullman company photographer shortly after the car's completion in 1890.

brass beds, velvet drapes and crystal. Workmen returned in 1947 to add air-conditioning ducts and imprison the car in a shell of riveted steel. Still, by the time the L&N mothballed the car in 1957, the majority of its interior had, miraculously, been left untouched.

Meanwhile, Adirondack Museum founder Harold K. Hochschild was scouring the country for any of the private Pullmans that had once brought tycoons to the Adirondacks. There were no cars to be found. When he chanced on the Oriental, Hochschild learned the car had never actually journeyed further north than Saratoga Springs. But he sensed this would be his only chance.

The L&N routed the car to Tupper Lake, New York—as far north as the rails went. There, on February 6, 1958, a crew of 10 contractors removed the Oriental's wheel trucks and used a crane to hoist the car onto the back of a logging rig for the 34-mile trip to the museum's grounds. Two successive blizzards had socked in the roads with snow, forcing the movers to hire every plow they could find to clear the way. The trip took five days.

The only restoration the Oriental underwent had taken place en route from Nashville. On a siding in Weehawken, New Jersey, the car regained its luxurious upholstery and curtains, cut and sewn to period specifications. The seamstress' work was exquisite; it was also, regrettably, inaccurate. "A scrap of mossy-green velvet had been found, and the cavalier assumption was made that that had been the decorative color," relates museum conservator Doreen Alessi. Shortly afterward, a letter arrived from Pullman that set the record straight. "We now know that the interior was a 'special red.'" she says.

The museum's curators make no attempt to hide this error from visitors, though it's safe to say the visitors aren't overly troubled; they're too busy sinking their heels into the wool carpet and inhaling the musk of wood polish and velvet draperies that museum marketing director Susan Dineen likens to "the smell of an old library; the whole thing is redolent of an upper-class drawing room.

Which is, of course, just how Austin Corbin wanted it. And were the railroad baron to somehow return to his private car today? "He'd recognize it immediately," Rice says.

"It's all still there, just as it was."

An editor and freelance writer, Robert Klara writes frequently about architecture, urbanism and railroad history from his home in New York City.

For more information

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or visit www.adkmuseum.org.
Adirondack Museum, P.O. Box 99, Route 28N/30,
Blue Mountain Lake, New York 12812.
Museum hours: Daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Open May 23—October 19. Closed September 5 & 19.

With his unparalleled mastery of the interior layout, Pullman managed to install the wing of an estate inside a railroad car that's just under 10 feet wide. This contemporary view of the dining room conveys the Oriental's effortless blending of grand scale with fine touches. The hat hooks over the windows are sheathed in silver. At right, the richly woven tablecloth is original to the car. *Photograph by Richard Walker.*