

Pullman Strike left Twin Cities at standstill

On July 3, 1894, area residents flocked to the Chicago & Alton Railroad on Bloomington's west side. They came to support striking railway workers and to gawk at more than a dozen abandoned freight and passenger trains that had not moved since their crews walked off the job a few days earlier. The trains—still packed with passengers and freight!— were lined up at the rail yard adjacent to the C&A Shops complex, while others were strung out along sidings and the west side Union Depot.

In an age when America moved by rail, the C&A train yard and depot were normally two of the busiest and most bustling places in all the Twin Cities. Instead of the cacophonous clamor of hissing steam and screeching metal, an eerie stillness fell over the west side. "Altogether it was the sight of a lifetime," remarked *The Pantagraph*.

The "great Alton tie-up," as it became known, was the result of sympathy strikes for Pullman Palace Car Co. factory workers, who on May 11 staged a walkout at industrialist George Pullman's company town south of Chicago. Beginning June 20, labor leader Eugene V. Debs and the American Railway Union (ARU) orchestrated a boycott of trains carrying Pullman rail cars. The strike then spread like prairie fire from Chicago, crippling railroad traffic throughout much of the Midwest and East Coast.

Local railway workers were already upset with C&A management for firing two brakemen and a conductor. On Thursday, June 28, ARU organizer W.C. Lynch came to Bloomington with orders to "tie up" the Chicago & Alton Railroad. Crews then began abandoning their trains as they reached Bloomington, assisted by the ARU tactic of deploying striking workers and their supporters directly on rail lines to further bottle-up locomotives and rolling stock.

Although the ARU didn't have a particularly large presence in Bloomington, this industry-wide union received the support of the operating crafts, such as the Order of Railway Conductors, the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen, and to a lesser extent the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen. By Friday, June 29, abandoned trains began piling up in the C&A yards.

Three days later, on July 2, the administration of Democratic President Grover Cleveland (with Bloomington's own Adlai E. Stevenson I as vice president) obtained a court injunction prohibiting the ARU from involving itself with the strike. Debs and other ARU leaders were eventually arrested, convicted and jailed. Cleveland then followed the injunction by dispatching armed troops to protect railroad property and get the trains running once more. Violence erupted in Chicago and elsewhere as striking workers and their supporters waged pitched battles with federalized troops, state militia and local law enforcement.

Locally, the Pullman strike spread to other railroads. By July 3, Illinois Central freight traffic was coming to a standstill, with operations tied up in a Gordian knot to the north in Freeport and to the south in Clinton. Freight traffic had also come to a halt on the Cleveland, Cincinnati, Chicago and St. Louis Railway (popularly known as the “Big Four”), one of two east-west lines that passed through the warehouse district south of downtown Bloomington.

Railroad agents worked with local commission merchants in a mad scramble to unload time-sensitive freight moldering in rail yards and along sidings. One major concern locally, especially olfactory wise, was a 20-car “meat train” carrying pork from the Fowler Packing Co. of Kansas City and destined for the East Coast and then Liverpool, England, by way of transatlantic steamer. At one point railroad officials were able to get these cars “re-iced,” and by the end of the strike only five of the twenty carloads of packed pork were lost to spoilage.

On the evening of July 3, a massive crowd gathered at Union Depot and the yards complex. “There could not have been less than 4,000, and the Front Street and Locust bridges were jammed with people overlooking the scene,” noted *The Pantagraph*. “Bloomington never saw such a sight.”

The tie-up left 14 Pullman cars and an estimated 1,000 passengers stuck in Bloomington. The chairman of the local ARU mediation committee walked through each stranded Pullman coach and sleeper to chat with passengers and determine who, if anyone, needed assistance. Flyers were distributed to these unfortunate rail passengers inviting them to local Fourth of July festivities planned for the old eastside fairground.

Generally speaking, area residents were sympathetic to the striking railway workers, if for no other reason than the general mistrust and dislike many held for Gilded Age fat cats like George Pullman.

“There is a strong current of feeling against great trusts and monopolies like the Pullman Company, who are endeavoring to preempt the earth and make slaves of the common people,” argued *The Leader*, a Bloomington newspaper which, like *The Pantagraph*, supported the Republican Party, though its politics were more progressive and reform-minded than its establishment competitor. “While nominally a strike against the Pullmans,” continued *The Leader*, “this industrial disturbance is simply a surface indication of the public wrath against the monstrous amassing of power in the hands of a few.”

Sixty-five deputy U.S. marshals—“and they mean business,” observed *The Pantagraph*—played an instrumental role getting stuck trains moving again on Bloomington’s west side. They were

led by U.S. Marshal W.B. Brinton of Tuscola, who was fresh from a contentious three-month United Mine Workers general strike that began in April.

Brinton and a number of his deputies, unafraid to flex the “strong hand of Uncle Sam,” showed they meant business by first escorting a ten-car train out of the Twin Cities. “His deputies were everywhere and several times drove the crowd back from the engine,” reported The Pantagraph. “Catcalls, hisses, groans, derogatory remarks and curses filled the air, but away went the ten cars, including two of mail and baggage.”

Locally, the strike’s back was broken on Saturday, July 7, when C&A Superintendent Willis Gray met with the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen at James Costello’s saloon on the west side of the courthouse square. Afterward, both the engineers and firemen promptly announced that their grievances with the C&A were settled, and as such they were ready to return to work.

The Bloomington Trades and Labor Assembly was quick to condemn the “treacherous” firemen and engineers for their “lack of brotherly feeling and good judgment.” By the evening of Sunday, July 8, rail traffic was back to its pre-strike schedules and rhythms.

Although the Pullman Strike of 1894 was a deadly serious affair, there were times when a lighthearted observation was in order. Warned The Pantagraph during the height of the tie-up: “Two cars of beer for this city are sidetracked somewhere and the supply of some kinds is getting low. This news will affect different people very differently.”