

# This Train Is Bound for Glory The Story of America's Chapel Cars

## CHAPTER ONE



The chapel cars of the Russian Orthodox Church that were constructed to carry the sacraments and services of the church to the thousands who lived and worked along the route of the Trans-Caspian and Trans-Siberian railroads were the inspiration for thirteen American chapel cars. [Courtesy of Stephen G. Marks]

Online Version, 2010

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In Memory of my husband and co-author  
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## Chapter 1

### *The Church-on-Rails Concept: Nothing New Under the Sun*



The beautiful design of the Russian Orthodox Trans-Siberian chapel cars with their gilded icons and vaulted arches and ceilings brought the sacraments of the church to those who worked on and lived by the railroad. [Steven G. Marks]

If the railroads had abetted in the creation of a spiritual wasteland along the newly laid tracks west, then the railroads needed to be part of the solution. One of the first to come to that conclusion and to visualize a possible solution to the spiritual deprivation along the rail lines was Boston W.

Smith. Known to almost everyone as “Uncle Boston,” he had responsibility for Baptist Sunday school work in Minnesota.

In a Minnesota town along a new rail line in the 1880s, Smith met a lady who appealed to him, “Uncle Boston, won’t you help me start a Sunday school?” He immediately gathered together a library of Christian books and Sunday-school papers from the American Baptist Publication Society and took them to her. She then ask her skeptical husband for use of his buckboard, and she

scoured the prairies for ten miles around, stopping at every claim shanty to ask, "Would you like to come to Sunday school?"

About twenty excited children promised to come. Many others wanted to, but their parents forbade them or other problems stood in their way. The thought then occurred to her, "*Where should the school be held?*" They had no place in the town larger than her claim-shanty of two small crowded, dirt-floored rooms, so here she decided to hold it.

Soon the school was so large that on nice days they met out of doors. Parents sent their children to get free reading material, as they had no papers and few precious books, and the books and papers that the publication society gave the pupils drew people from all parts of the country. As the weather became frigid, there was nowhere to hold the school, and so it had to be abandoned until spring. Smith knew the same scenario was being repeated all over his vast missionary territory.

A few years later at St. James, Minnesota, G. H. Herrick, a Sunday school superintendent in that district, also found himself without a place to conduct Sunday school. He made a request of the railroad company that a passenger coach be sidetracked in town; the company responded favorably, and for an entire winter a Sunday school was conducted in that passenger car. In that car, Smith wrote that a Sunday school was organized that grew into a flourishing Baptist church. More importantly, Uncle Boston said, "I at once dreamed that the day would come when a missionary car would be built for the purpose of carrying the gospel to new communities."

### *Earlier Chapels On Wheels*

Smith was not the first to conceive of a church on wheels. Perhaps one of the first churches on wheels was the "little ark," a wooden box on wheels, set on the road of Kilbaha Beach at the mouth of the Shannon River in Ireland. A priest said Mass there for the people who walked miles to attend. Built by the priest in 1852, the box was only 6 feet long, 5 feet wide and 7 feet high. It was raised on four wheels so that even those kneeling at the outskirts of the crowd could follow the Mass.<sup>1</sup> Another chapel on wheels was the coach Pope Pius IX, the longest reigning pontiff in the history of the church, reportedly used while traveling through the Papal States during his reign in the 1860s. An inno-



**Worshippers surround one of the Russian Orthodox Chapel Cars that traveled the Trans-Siberian Railroad in the 1890s. [Steven G. Marks Collection]**

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<sup>1</sup> Julia R. Doyle, "The Evolution of the "Church on Wheels," *Extension*, November, 1911, 15, Catholic Church Extension Society Archives, Chicago.

vative man, he set up a commission to introduce railways into the Papal States in 1846. The coach was fitted for administering the sacraments and receiving guests, as well as for the comfort of the Pope.<sup>2</sup>

The earliest church on rails probably was the train of three [some say five] Russian Orthodox church cars which moved in the late 1880s with construction gangs first along the Trans-Caspian Railroad, which links the Caspian Sea to Tashkent, and then along the Trans-Siberian Railroad. Like the settlers of the American plains and prairies, the people who lived in eastern Siberia existed in an environment that could be described as bleak, and their situation was parallel in many ways to the plight of those living along American western routes.

Steven G. Marks, author of *Road to Power*, records the account of railroad engineer L. N. Liubimov.

The conditions of life wear especially hard on people of the “educated class’ arriving here from European Russia, who yearn for their distant homeland. The oppressive feeling of solitude and dissatisfied spiritual needs, in conjunction with an unfamiliar climate, ruins the nervous system and engenders an irresistible desire to escape from the region once and for all. Add to that the almost daily murders, committed for the most part by fugitive hard-labor convicts, . . . and the frequent funeral processions; one can easily imagine that life for the Vladivostok resident is not sweet. For this reason, [as] nowhere else, it seems, do they seek to drown their sorrows in spirits in such measure as in this dreary city. Here they drink to the utmost from morning until late at night and end up either suicides or insane . . . and to make up for it all, there is an abundance of drinking houses, taverns, and houses of pleasure.<sup>3</sup>

Like others in America, there were those in Russia who had serious forebodings about what a transcontinental rail route would do to their way of life. They feared the settlers and exiles, people of easy money, shady characters, and swindlers who would come in on the trains. “They and the mass of their kind will crop up from both ends of the empire, grabbing trade and industry into their hands. The railroad will give birth to a period of speculation of the most roguish type ever to have a place in society.”

These alarmed Russian regionalists must have received reports about what was happening along the American transcontinental lines. They felt that the industrial fever of railroad promoters and other speculators would destroy the healthy traits of Siberian life. As with the American transcontinental railways, the Siberian railway, which became the longest continuous rail line in the world, was to fulfill Russia’s version of Manifest Destiny—to develop the resources of Siberia and to constitute a new commercial route for rapid travel and exchange of products from East and West.

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<sup>2</sup>Eamon Duffy, *Saints and Sinners: A History of the Popes*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997), 222.

<sup>3</sup> Steven G. Marks, *Road to Power: The Trans-Siberian Railroad and the Colonization of Asian Russia, 1850 - 1917* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), 13-14.

Some Russian churchmen saw the Siberian spiritual wasteland and determined to do something about it. The *Spirit of Missions*, a brief from the *London Church Review* reported, "A traveling church will be put upon the Trans-Caspian railway shortly to provide occasional services for the Russian officials of the line and the settlers scattered about. Externally the church resembles an ordinary railway carriage except for a cross over the roof and a little belfry at the entrance. Inside, however, it is beautifully fitted up for the service of the Orthodox Church, with a carved wooden altar and accommodation for seventy worshippers. The Priest and his assistants travel in a tiny coupe attached to the church-carriage.

Nicholas Faith in his study of the railway and religion, points out that the faith of many people in England, Scotland, and Wales put them at odds with the railways, especially with the practice of running trains on Sunday. After a disastrous Sunday accident of 1842 in Versailles, France, and another Sunday tragedy in the Clayton tunnel just outside Brighton, England, twenty years later, "plenty of people rushed about proclaiming the accidents as a judgment of God." According to Michael Robbins in *The Railway Age*, it was the absolute need for mail trains to run on Sunday which broke the resistance of the Sabbatarians in both Scotland and Wales.<sup>4</sup>

Similar battles were fought in the United States. In Galesburg, Illinois, the railroad was the blunt instrument that broke the power of the Sabbatarians. The first Sunday train was boarded by the impressive figure of President Blanchard of Knox College, who was told to "go to hell" when he ordered the engineer to take the engine back to the roundhouse. That seemed to be the end of the Galesburg crusade.

### **The Harris Chapel Car**

At the same time Boston Smith was dreaming of a Baptist gospel train car that would hold services on Sundays as well as on other days of the week, the following item appeared in *The National Car-Builder*:

Edwin A. Harris, of Fitchburg, for twelve years a railroad conductor, connected with the Railroad Men's Christian Associations, has for about nine months traveled among railroad men holding religious meetings. Mr. Harris proposes to build and equip a mission car to be called "Bethlehem," and has already procured from the Jackson & Sharp Co., of Wilmington, Del., a plan of the proposed car, estimated cost of which is from \$10,000 to \$13,000. The proposition is made to churches and individuals to subscribe to a fund of \$18,000, . . . for the construction and equipment of a mission car to be used in evangelistic work among railway men.

The car is to be constructed after models suggested by railroad men, and is arranged that it furnishes a room for meetings and is also supplied with cooking and sleeping apartments for those engaged in the work. It is to be built to run over any ordinary gauge railroad. It is designed as a convenient headquarters for mission work among railway men, for the distribution of Bibles and reading matter, and is to be manned by workers of practical railway experience . . . a car commissioned in this service, stopping in the railway centers . . . may

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<sup>4</sup>Nicholas Faith, *The World the Railways Made* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, Inc., 1990), 269-70

be an efficient auxiliary to the agencies already established.

Subscriptions may be sent, or plans and circulars giving further particulars will be furnished, on applications to E. A. Harris, Fitchburg, Mass.<sup>5</sup>

Whether such a car ever was constructed is unknown, and whether Smith saw that news item is also unknown, but Harris had the plan, from need, to design, to effect.

### *The First American Chapel Car*

It would be Episcopal Bishop William David Walker of North Dakota who first took the chapel car concept, produced a chapel car, and put it into service. On a trip to Russia in the late 1890s, Bishop Walker saw the Russian Orthodox chapel cars on the Siberian Railway. Although Bishop Walker never mentioned it, he had also no doubt read in the *Spirit of Missions*, his denominational publication, about a chapel car suggested by a Reverend Edward Abbott.

Like Harris, Abbott had a scheme whereby a missionary bishop might make the most of his itinerary in an extended jurisdiction where towns were springing up along railways but where facilities for holding services were poor.

... as there are directors' cars, paymasters' cars, and construction cars, so there might be a Bishop's car in which he and his wife (he must be childless) might live and move from place to place. The car should be fitted up so that it may be readily converted into a chapel and the people in the village gathered in for worship and counsel. The idea is novel, but not revolutionary, and in a country of magnificent distances and quick development, the conditions are such as to require modern methods. There might be stranger things than for a Bishop to occupy a moving palace, a home and chapel on wheels.<sup>6</sup>

That article, if Bishop Walker saw it, plus his view of the Russian Orthodox chapel cars, would have caused some wheels to whirl in the bishop's head. In April 1890, while Smith was still out gathering support for a Baptist chapel car, Bishop Walker had contracted for such a car to be built by the Pullman Palace Car Company in Pullman, Illinois, and took possession of it in early November 1890. Called the *Church of the Advent, the Cathedral Car of North Dakota*, Walker's car was the first American chapel car put in service. The Baptist car, contracted in August at the Barney & Smith Car Company shops in Dayton, Ohio, would not be completed until the spring of 1891.

In 1904, after his Cathedral Car had been out of service and sold and he had left North Dakota, Walker visited the Baptist chapel car *Messenger of Peace* at the St. Louis World's Fair. He told missionary Joe Jacobs about his experience.

I was on a tour around the world and while crossing Siberia I noted on Sunday morning that an extra coach was attached to our train and upon reach-

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<sup>5</sup> The article from *Boston Herald* appeared in *The National Car-Builder*, October, 1883.

<sup>6</sup> *The Spirit of Missions*, February 1889, 49.

ing the next town the train was held there while the people attended Mass. Curious to know how this service was conducted, I entered the car and stood with others while a Greek Catholic Priest said Mass. This over, the train moved on to the next town where a similar service was held, and so through the day.

Living as I did then in North Dakota, I thought how convenient an arrangement like this would be for me to conduct confirmation services and organize churches on that frontier. Upon my return to America I made known my plans to some wealthy friends and it was not long before my dream was realized, and I began work in the great Northwest with the first chapel car that was ever built in America. When I left that Diocese for Buffalo I left to my successor the car, but he made little use of it. Your Boston Smith and Wayland Hoyt gathered their ideas from me, just as I had done from the Greek Catholics and I am really delighted to see that you Baptist have greatly profited by an Episcopalian idea.<sup>7</sup>

Some Baptists were not gracious about the fact that Bishop Walker had beaten them to the draw. The editor of the *Pacific Baptist*, Reverend Charles Woody, published what might be considered an uncharitable account of the *Church of the Advent, Cathedral Car of North Dakota*, although there was some truth to it.

. . . the Episcopalians had a cathedral car running in Minnesota and North Dakota six months before Evangel entered upon the scene. Did the Baptists borrow the idea from the Episcopalians or did the Episcopalians divine or anticipate it? There are some who believe that Bishop Walker caught the idea from descriptions of a Sunday school gathered in a freight car by Uncle Boston and given by him in many places and reported in many papers, east and west, sacred and secular.

At any rate, while the idea was brewing Baptist brains, Bishop Walker hurried his plan into execution and out came a gaudy car, with flanging steps, proud cupola and painted pictures of saints and sinners. The hit of that car was not very satisfactory. Before going in its first tunnel, the steps had to be knocked off and before passing under the first bridge, the spire had to be taken down, and after running awhile in Dakota, the car was stowed away in Fargo for months.<sup>8</sup>

As Bishop Walker was sharing his experiences with Jacobs in the chapel of *Messenger of Peace*, the Baptist paper *The Word and the Way* provided more details of the Russian Orthodox cars, which were still in service. "The cost per car is 30,000 rubles or about \$18,000. The interior of each coach is modestly furnished. Light is furnished by means of tallow candles and a wood stove furnished heat. At one end of the car is the kitchen and at the other end the sleeping apartments. A priest and two assistants occupy the church on wheels. On top of the car are bells that are used to call the worshipers to service. There is nothing new under the sun."

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<sup>7</sup> *Missions*, September 1912, 657.

Although perhaps there is “nothing new under the sun,” the chapel car concept revolutionized the missionary operations of at least three denominations and, by their novel appearance and approach, drew thousands of Americans into a unique religious experience and a better way of life.