

# THE PALIMPSEST

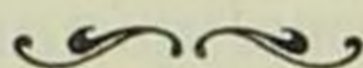
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## America's Freedom Train

Attorney-General Tom C. Clark was deeply disturbed. A wave of "lawlessness and cynicism" was abroad in the land and subversive forces were carrying on "their disruptive game of setting one group of Americans against another." Something had to be done to rebuff disloyalty at home. Some symbol, some slogan, some device had to be found to rededicate the faith of Americans in their free institutions.

Suddenly Mr. Clark had an idea. Why not build a train to carry through the United States the two sets of "contrasting elements" that were at work in the land? On one side of the corridor would be some of the monumental documents of American history; on the other, certain sordid relics of Hitler's wretched Reich would be displayed. The result, it was argued, would shock Americans into a deeper sense of the glory of their inheritance.

Meanwhile, unknown to the Attorney-General,



similar thoughts had been germinating in the minds of a group of advertising men under the leadership of Thomas D'Arcy Brophy. The basic idea involved a plan of activity under some such heading as "Selling America back to the Americans." After many preliminary meetings, a large number of "top executives of the communications industries" met in the Attorney-General's office in December, 1946, and clarified the ideas that had been evolving within the two groups. The joint body approved the suggestion of a train display, and considered many of the proposed details for its actual integration. As time went on the proposal for a "contrast" exhibit was given up in favor of a wholly affirmative approach. At other meetings, basic plans and purposes were advanced and refined, and on February 14, 1947, a group known as the American Heritage Foundation was officially incorporated, with Thomas Brophy as president, and Winthrop W. Aldrich as chairman of the Board of Trustees. The three vice-presidents were William Green of the American Federation of Labor, Philip Murray of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, and Robert G. Sproul, president of the University of California. The large body of Trustees is composed of leaders from the nation's chief political, business, professional, labor, educational, and religious groups.



All thought and energy were now concentrated on giving final form to the great idea on which many top-flight citizens had been so arduously working. On May 22, 1947, a conference was held in the White House "for the purpose of organizing the American Heritage Foundation program and inaugurating the Freedom Train." The gathering was under the sponsorship of the Attorney-General, and President Truman sent a message to express his gratitude for the launching of the "highly important" project. "There is need today," he declared, "for a dramatic reminder to our people of the American heritage which they enjoy."

The Conference addressed itself to the definition of the objective sought, and the formulation of the plan whereby it would be achieved. "We propose," it was agreed in regard to the first, "to utilize all media of communication, education, and community action in a national program that will emphasize and dramatize the common heritage of every American — our system of democratic government based on individual freedom. Through a national program of rededication to its ideals and institutions, we seek to give meaning to the American heritage, vitality to its spirit, and validity to its historic mission. Thus may the American body politic be immunized against subversive



propaganda and strengthened for the constructive tasks ahead."

The course of action, it was agreed, should involve the dispatch of the Freedom Train bearing a precious freight of documents, and speeding through the land like a modern Paul Revere to arouse the people to a sense of danger while stirring their pride in the glory of the national heritage. The communities visited, and those contiguous to them, would be urged to plan a Rededication Week preceding the arrival of the Train. City governments and civic organizations were to be urged to appoint a series of special days such as a Veterans' Day, Inter-faith Day, Labor Day, Commerce and Industry Day, School Day, Bench and Bar Day, etc. On these occasions it was hoped that the groups concerned would prepare appropriate exercises to demonstrate their loyalty and devotion to the benefits and blessings bequeathed from the past to Americans of today. Committees were to be set up in the communities to prepare publicity, organize speakers, raise the necessary expenses, and do all that was locally necessary to receive the Freedom Train with dignity and joy, and draw from it understanding and inspiration. Great stress was laid on the enduring impulse that the unique experience could impart. The Attorney-General wrote to the Conference to



say that "community rededication" should be a "major phase" of the program.

The appropriate decision was reached to start the Freedom Train's epochal journey from Philadelphia on September 17, 1947, the 160th anniversary of the adoption of the Federal Constitution. Several railroads combined to provide the locomotive, coaches, Pullman and baggage cars. Designing and reconstruction were carried out in the Wilmington, Delaware, shops of the Pennsylvania Railroad under the supervision of Edward H. Burdick who had built displays for the government at the Chicago Century of Progress and the New York World's Fair.

In August, 1947, the Train was sent to the War Department's yards at Cameron, Virginia, for the installation of the display cases and documents. The interiors of the coaches were fitted with steel bulkheads to form a series of bays. The windows were replaced by steel panels. The exhibits were set between two half-inch sheets of special plastic. This is an ideal substance because it is clearer than glass and absorbs less ultraviolet light which deteriorates ink and paper. The cars were specially lighted and air-conditioned, and virtually fire, water, dust, burglar, and shock proof. By September 17, the Freedom Train, a sleek and lovely composition of red, white, and blue coaches, cars, and



Pullmans, under the care of Walter H. S. O'Brien, twenty-seven United States Marines, a document specialist, and an operating and maintenance crew, rolled north from Virginia into Philadelphia.

The cost of producing this assemblage was, of course, impressive. The reconstruction of the train alone involved \$175,000. Carrying charges of personnel, and hauling costs (required by Interstate Commerce Commission regulations), were calculated at \$80,000 for the projected journey. It was early agreed that the costs involved should not be paid by the government, but by private citizens, in glad and grateful patriotism. At the outset, large business firms and labor unions made substantial donations, but it was later decided to broaden the base by suggesting a system of community quotas, though agreement on this was not a requirement of gaining a place on the Train schedule. The minimum quota was set at \$1,000, graded upward according to population.

For a while, this request for community contributions occasioned some misunderstanding and even resentment, but these difficulties soon subsided in the face of the reflection that a cost so nominal was followed by a privilege so great when the treasures of the Freedom Train were displayed. By this arrangement, the American Heritage Foundation, now under the direction of J.



Edward Shugrue, was assured of operating with financial success. It was estimated that \$1,350,000 would be required to cover the operations of the Train and the Foundation during the nation-wide pilgrimage. Of this amount over \$800,000 had been raised and spent by the end of the first seven months.

After appropriate ceremonies at Philadelphia and a hearty send-off, the Freedom Train proceeded to New York. The adopted schedule provided for an itinerary extending through thirteen months, and embracing all the States of the Union. It was so planned that the fall and summer would be spent in the North and the winter devoted to the South. The total journey was designed to cover 33,000 miles, in the course of which more than 300 cities were to be visited. To arrange the route and timetable, the railroads of the United States worked as a unit. Fifty-two companies were involved, integration being promoted by the American Association of Railroads. As finally decided, the historic Train was to be open to the public at each layover from 10:00 a. m. to 10:00 p. m. The run between exhibit points was to be accomplished between 1:00 a. m. and 10:00 a. m., the average daily distance being 110 miles.

Apart from the inevitable difficulties arising from an undertaking so immense and detailed,



problems of a social sort have not been absent. In addition to the problem of finance, a measure of discontent developed when it was realized that visitors could not climb aboard the Freedom Train without delay or inconvenience. Double lines of citizens several blocks in length slowly advancing upon the famous vehicle became a familiar sight in the stop-over communities. Complaints at the consequent delay were heard at least occasionally. But these diminished as reflection made it clear that such a situation was unavoidable in cities of large population, at least in terms of the schedule on which the Train was operating. Then, too, the thought gradually settled in the public mind that in order to make possible the appearance of *one* of the great documents in the collection — the Declaration of Independence — heroic men of long ago had pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor; had toiled and fought and waited for years following 1776; and for its sake had endured that bitter winter at Valley Forge.

One problem of a distressing nature arose out of the insistence on race segregation in certain southern cities. The officials of the American Heritage Foundation firmly refused to recognize this tradition in connection with the Freedom Train. In overwhelming measure the people of the South saw its incongruity in the presence of a shrine con-



secrated to human freedom and American liberty. Only two southern communities remained unyielding, and in these instances, the projected visit was canceled.

As the multitudes of patient and devoted citizens have mounted the Freedom Train and passed through its corridors, they have looked upon a spectacle more inspiring to the American eye than the dazzling display of royal jewels in the Tower of London. Among the immortal parchments are the Magna Carta through which Englishmen seven centuries ago asserted their rights and reduced the powers of a despotic king; Americans have always loved this towering monument along the path of freedom, for it is part of their own inheritance also. Here, too, is the Mayflower Compact with its ringing opening sentence: "In the name of God, Amen." Also present are writings from the pens of Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, Adams, Hamilton, and Lincoln. Among the literary treasures are the Federal Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 which declared that "schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged."

There are, in addition, tangible symbols of perilous fights in which freedom was defended or advanced: the Log Book of "Old Ironsides," affectionate name for the frigate *Constitution*; the



pennant of Commodore Perry when he sailed his ship into Japanese waters in 1854; the flag that was raised over Mount Suribachi on Iwo Jima; General Eisenhower's personal five-star general's flag, and the banner that flew at the masthead of the battleship *Missouri* when the Japanese surrendered in Tokyo Bay.

On his passage through the Freedom Train, it soon becomes obvious to the citizen that he cannot hope to read all the documents in this unexampled collection. Not only is it impracticable to take the time to attempt this in the course of his visit, but the variety and length of the hundred-odd items, and the presence of so many other persons, makes it quite impossible. Realization of these facts diminished the measure of early criticism of a too-rapid scrutiny of the great exhibit. It is enough, in the short time that can logically be apportioned, to gaze with silent admiration at the matchless scene; to experience a mood of reverence; to spend an unforgettable moment among these documents of our liberties.

Leaving the Train, the visitor is invited to sign a pledge of rededication to the privilege and responsibility of America's splendid heritage. The thoughtful citizen will then resolve to do what his relatively brief visit could not accomplish — seek out the great documents in public or college libra-



IN CONGRESS, JULY 4, 1776.

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America.

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A SYMBOL AND DOCUMENT OF FREEDOM



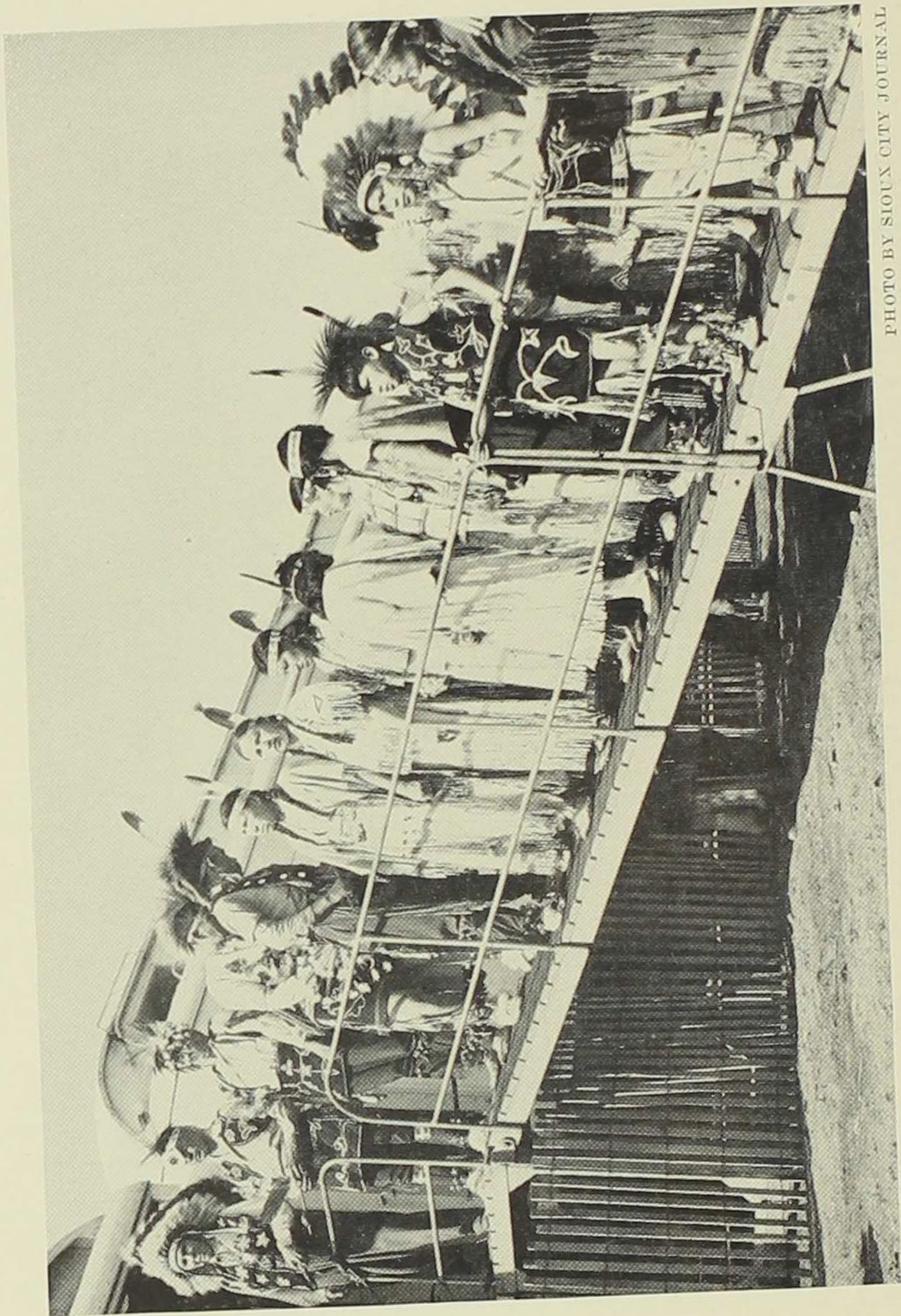


PHOTO BY SIOUX CITY JOURNAL

WINNEBAGO INDIANS BOARD FREEDOM TRAIN AT SIOUX CITY



ries, and read and ponder them carefully in the days and years ahead. At this point the American Heritage Foundation will assist him materially through its abundant literature. Among its publications is an official book, edited by Dr. Frank Monaghan, Director of the National Society of Archivists, and containing facsimiles of all the documents in the Freedom Train collection accompanied by clear explanatory matter.

Another basic publication of the Foundation is *Good Citizen*, a seventy-two page brochure prepared by Leo Burnett of Chicago, with assistance from the American Bar Association and other sources. As the preface declares, the booklet is "for everybody who really wants to be a 'Good American.' It describes the 'working tools' of good citizenship and tells you how to use them." In simple yet striking language it discusses the rights, privileges, and obligations of citizenship. In the closing section is an inspiring page sketching for Americans the legal points of contact between religion and government. Here, also, are the first ten amendments to the Federal Constitution which comprise the Bill of Rights, some famous patriotic pieces, both prose and poetry, and instructions for using and displaying Old Glory.

In the course of its epic journey through the length and breadth of the land, it is estimated that



3,500,000 persons will pass through the corridors of the Freedom Train and stand before its precious symbols and documents; that 45,000,000 persons will be touched by it indirectly through participation in the weeks set apart by the communities visited for rededication plans and exercises. From millions of citizens in the hundreds of cities not included in the present schedule has gone forth an urgent call for later consideration, and the American Heritage Foundation is seriously considering continuance of the historic tour through an additional year.

The passing of the Freedom Train is an important event in American history, and a permanent residue of patriotism will be left in all the regions affected by its visit and display. Its abiding consequence will be to clarify the people's perceptions of the grandeur of the nation's past, the majesty of its present, and the glory of its future, and to lead Americans to resolve again with their beloved Lincoln that so far as they are concerned, "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

HARRISON JOHN THORNTON