
A BRIEF HISTORY OF RAILROAD CHAPEL CARS

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Abstract

The paper describes an interesting episode in railway history. In the second half of the 19th century, to grant small communities spread on vast areas of the land access to religious services, railroad chapel cars were built and operated, mostly in Russia and in the USA. A different, specific case was a railroad chapel car built in 1856 for the private use of Pope Pius IX during his travels which was coupled to his train. The paper deals also with the motivations behind and reasons for the appearance, details of construction, equipment and decoration of those cars, as well as describing differences in operational principles. Sections are illustrated with historic photographs and drawings. Important threads of the work refer to models of missions, bond between religion and state, as well as with labour migration. The paper ends with results and summary, containing thoughts on the role of railroad chapel cars and their modern counterparts.

Keywords: railway, railroad car, chapel, church

1. Introduction

The most important principles of functioning in society are related to the maintenance of contacts and interpersonal relationships. In this way, basic social ties are established. Very often, the way to maintain these bonds is to perform certain activities or rituals either daily or periodically among a habitual group of people. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, “Sunday in the full sense of the word is the day of the liturgical assembly in which the faithful gather to hear the word of God and to share in the Eucharist” [*Catechismus Catholicae Ecclesiae*, par. 1167, Vaticanum, 1997]. Participation in the Sunday Mass therefore represents, for the majority of the faithful, both the fulfilment of the spiritual need of communion with God, the confirmation of their belonging to the community of the faithful, and the fulfilment of the requirements of canon law: “On Sundays and on other holy days of obligation, the faithful are obliged to attend Holy Mass [...]” [*Codex Iuri Canonici*, Can. 1247, Vaticanum, 1983]. Long-term inability to participate may be caused by numerous reasons, such as poor health, or a voluntary or involuntary stay in a place without access to the stationary structures of the Church. For a long time, the Church authorities, recognising the seriousness of this issue, have tried to mitigate it by organising

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the broadcast of the liturgy via the mass media (radio, television, Internet) and earlier - by carrying out missionary activities which can develop according to different models and organization systems, as described by Schreier in [1]. Other Churches and congregations adhere to the same principle of allowing regular participation in worship.

For many centuries, the only type of journey that could disrupt the weekly rhythm of visits to a place of worship was a sea journey. It was only in the second half of the 19th century that the railway network developed sufficiently to enable to journeys lasting several days without interruption. It was then that the idea arose, initially in Russia, and later repeated in other countries, mainly the United States, to use specially adapted railway carriages for liturgical purposes. A separate case, intended for the private use of the Pope, was the vehicle built for Pius IX.

This article describes the history, construction, fixtures and fittings of such chapel carriages, parallel with their human-related aspects, specific role and function, as well as their modern counterparts.

2. Pope Pius IX's train

The initial period of railway development in Europe occurred during the pontificate of Gregory XVI (1831-1846). This pope was an opponent of the development of railroads - a document published in 1846 shows that he considered the railroad to: "increase the poverty of the population, threaten the security of states and, internally, to be harmful to entrepreneurs and facilitate the smuggling and introduction of foreign goods" [2]. His successor in the Holy See was Pius IX, whose record-length pontificate (1846-1878) essentially spanned most of the period of the emergence of the basic railway network in Europe. He also consented to the construction of railway lines on the territory of the Papal States [2]. Pope Pius IX used a train built in Paris in the years 1856-1858, which was composed of three carriages. Two of these, built for the Roma - Civitavecchia line, were based on two-axle frames and connected by a convenient passage. The first carriage, with three windows, was called the 'Sala del Trono' and housed the throne room with an axially set throne on a platform, and long couches placed with their backs to the windows. Part of the car was occupied by a private apartment, consisting of a vestibule, bedroom and bathroom. The second car, 'La Balconata', preserved its division into three parts and contained a loggia with a roof supported by posts, and a wide staircase with a balustrade placed in the narrowing of the floor. As in the living room, the loggia housed a raised throne, armchairs and sofas. Both carriages were styled in a similar way, with rich gilding on a dark blue background. Their external shape, despite the used decorations, remained relatively simple, with vertical walls and a slightly rounded roof. The motifs used, such as spiral columns, cartouches, coats of arms and friezes, directly alluded to the architecture of the Vatican. The purpose of occupying almost the entire car with the loggia was its representative role, because due to the lack of platforms at stations typical of the era, this meant

the Pope stood about 1.5 m above ground level, so when giving blessings, he could be seen from a distance, despite any large crowd.



Figure 1. Chapel car of Pope Pius IX, built 1856, [Getty's Open Content Program, photo by Gustave le Gray].

The third car, 'La Cappella', built for the Rome-Frascati line, was based on two 2-axle bogies, a pioneering solution at the time. Its exterior clearly differed from the other two, as the central part of the vehicle was significantly raised and provided with a large arched window. The roof profile, with its scaled covering, also stood out from the rest of the vehicle. The richly carved exterior walls, dominated by three full-size figures of angels and corner griffins (by Godin), cartouches and many other ornaments, were made of copper with gilding and silvering (Christofle), which is now patinated in dark brown shades. The interior design of the carriage, finished with luxury materials, included, among others, oil paintings (Gerôme and Godin), which in adjacent canvas depicted the Holy Trinity and Pius IX blessing locomotives and steamships [2, 3]. In the cars described above, the lack of catering facilities may seem surprising. The explanation of this fact is that the Pope would engage in relatively short journeys, for example Rome-Velletri, a distance of about 50 km. It is also known that the exterior of the car changed over time: initially, the space between the angels was adorned with a colourful, almost two-metre-high representation of the Pope's coat of arms; above the arched windows in a carved frieze, there were six round portraits of the apostles; the corners of the central part of the roof were closed with figures of symbols of the Evangelists' animals; while a gold tiara rested on a pedestal above the car door. A view of the carriage with these, unfortunately not preserved, decorations is shown in Figure 1.

3. Orthodox chapel cars in Russia

The expansion of Russia reached the shores of the Pacific Ocean in the 17th century. To keep control of these areas, it became crucial to obtain and maintain ice-free seaports. In 1860, the construction of a port began in Vladivostok, while in 1898 Russia leased the Liaotung peninsula, on which Dalian (then Port Arthur) is located, from China. To ensure the connection of these places with the rest of the country, it was decided to build a Trans-Siberian railway with a length, depending on the variant, of over 9,200 km. The construction works were carried out in the years 1891-1916, but the route was opened in stages. Due to the great distance, the total journey time from Moscow to Vladivostok for the fastest train is currently 6 days [4]. Local communities located along the line, in many places consisting only of the train station and a few adjoining houses, often did not have large enough churches to accommodate all the passengers from the train. In that period before the October Revolution, it was unthinkable to consider Church and state in Russia as independent beings. This point of view, represented already in philosophical works by M.A. Bakunin, B.N. Chicherin as well as A.I. Herzen and others, is thoroughly described in a paper by Batorova et al [5]. Even with vast support from the state and multiple donators, the Church wasn't able to expand its premises and facilities as quick, as the railway network. Therefore, temporary solutions, similar to missionary activities from earlier centuries, were necessary. First on the Transcaucasus Railroad, a chapel carriage was introduced, which became operational in 1883. However, information on this early example is very scarce, basing only on a single page from a commemorative publication [*Podvizhnoi sostav Zakavkazskoi Zheleznoi Dorogi 1871-1886 (Rolling stock of the Transcaucasus Railroad)*], anon., ca. 1895, 34], showing three dimensioned views of the car as well as a short table with basic data like total cost (7305 rub. 70 kop.) and weight of the vehicle (18 133 kg). Information on later cases is wider available: in 1895, on the occasion of the birth of Grand Duchess Olga, the first child of Tsar Nicholas II, a carriage - chapel for the Trans-Siberian Railway (Figure 2) - was built and equipped. According to *Vsyemirnaya Illustratsiya (All-world Illustrated)*, which contains thorough and detailed information of the specimen, is also mentioned the earlier vehicle prepared for the Transcaucasus Railway [6].

Following the description, the car was painted with blue varnish and finished on the outside with gilded teak strips. Over one end of the vehicle there was a low, wide bell tower topped with a cross, in which there were three bells in two arches. The interior, designed by architect von Baumgarten, could accommodate 70 participants and was finished with oil paintings and bas-reliefs on the surfaces between the nine windows. The final part of the carriage was fenced off, in accordance with the Orthodox canon, with a richly decorated iconostasis. The vehicle's ceiling, raised in the middle with an oblong skylight, was lined with oak panels varnished alternately in blue and yellow.

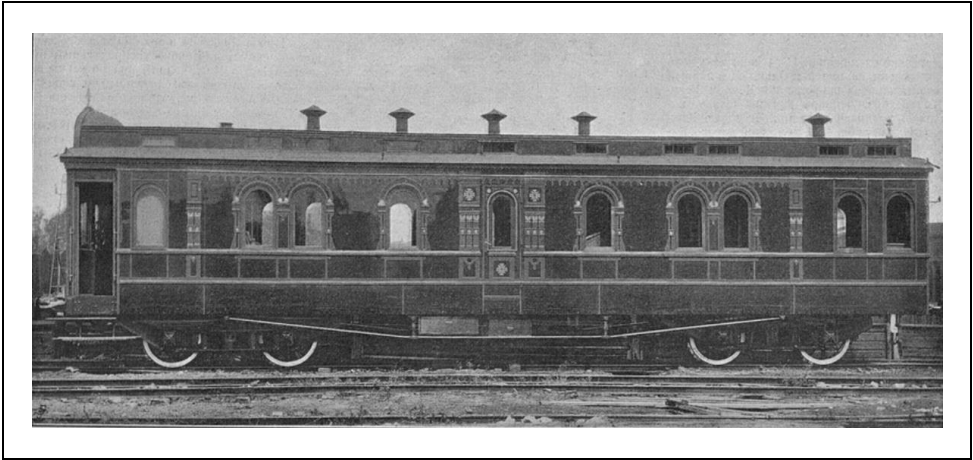


Figure 2. Orthodox Church chapel car for the Trans-Siberian Railway, built 1895, [6].

In following years, similar carriages were built, intended to run on the longest railway lines in Russia. However, soon after the outbreak of the Bolshevik Revolution, these were destroyed or rebuilt for other purposes for ideological reasons. This fully corresponds with abrupt change of Church-state relations in USSR in bright contrast with earlier Russian Empire, as described in work by Batorova et al [5]. The collapse of the USSR and following economical, political, religious and social changes had their deep reflection also in forging of a ‘Russian world’ concept, as proposed by P.G. Shchedrovitsky and expanded by S.N. Kocherov, as described in details in a work by Makarova et al [7]. Only after the collapse of the USSR was the tradition of chapel railway cars returned to, in two ways. The first was the use of carriages withdrawn from railway use as temporary chapels before the final places of worship were built; the second was the construction of mobile chapels. Stationary carriages were and are located in many locations in the former USSR, including in Baranavichy, Bogorodsk, two in Nizhny Novgorod, Kansk, Voronezh, Chernomorsk and Khabarovsk. Mobile chapels, able to travel on railway lines, returned mainly to sparsely populated parts of the country. In 2020, the Zabaikalska Metropolitan Area celebrated services in an Orthodox carriage travelling between Zabaikalsk, Daurya, Borzhia, Yasnogorsk, Olovnaya, Mogocho, Chernyshevsk, Shylka and Karymskaya stations [<https://pravoslavie.ru/130113.html>, accessed on February 2021]. The mobile chapel is also part of the so-called health train that houses cars for specialist doctors, including ophthalmologists, paediatricians, ENT specialists as well as an X-ray laboratory and a pharmacy. This train was established as a community project, as a result of cooperation between Russian Railways (RZhD) and the authorities of the Krasnoyarsk Region [8].

4. Chapel cars in the USA

The United States of America in the mid-19th century had a similar problem with its west coast as Russia had with its east. The breakthrough in its

settlement only occurred as a result of two events: the California Gold Rush and the completion of the transcontinental railroad. The gold rush began with the discovery of gold nuggets in the rivers of the Sierra Nevada foothills in 1848 and continued until about 1855. It is estimated that about 300,000 people moved to California, turning the sleepy settlement of San Francisco, amongst others, (200 inhabitants in 1846) into a flourishing, dynamic city (36,000 inhabitants in 1852) [9; <http://www.census.gov/population/documentation/>, accessed on February 2021]. As a result of the rapid development of the west coast, the need quickly arose to set up a transcontinental rail link to replace the unreliable, dangerous and easily looted stagecoaches. As the rail network from the East Coast stretched all the way to Council Bluffs in Iowa at the time, there was approximately 3,000 km of the route to be built. As a result of President Lincoln's 1862 Pacific Railway Act [*Pacific Railway Act*, Jul 1, 1862, US Statutes at Large, vol. 12, 489], the construction work was split between three companies and funded by government funding, bond issues, and stocks. The tracks and stations were laid out on a total area of 6,400 acres, donated by the Federal Government. Construction was completed in 1869.

The settlements that emerged in the then Wild West were characterised by rapid development, often without any plan or provision of basic resources nearby: the production of food or drinking water. In addition, most of the buildings erected at that time were treated as provisional, temporary structures, the vast majority of which were made of wood. It happened many times that a given place was completely abandoned when the reason for its construction was no longer present, e.g. the mine deposit was exhausted, the felling of the woodland in the vicinity had been completed, or no more gold nuggets were to be found in the river. Due to the strict, Spartan scope of meeting the simplest needs of life, these towns focused on providing their residents and numerous visitors with food, accommodation and supplies of basic tools. Due to the fact that in the areas of pioneering settlements the social group of single men was highly prevalent, there was also a relatively rich range of provision of alcohol, prostitution and gambling, which at the same time offered the possibility of quick earnings. At this stage, religious, cultural and health needs were met only to a very limited extent.

Very similar social processes are still observed in the world today. As for 2017, global count of migrants surpasses 250 million mark, more than 160 million of them are labour migrants. Therefore, the condition of labour migrants constitutes an important concern for churches worldwide. Basing on the example of the Catholic Church, dignity of working people as well as their rights and specific needs were underlined, among others, by Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Laborem exercens*. In general, theme of labour is repeated in his different messages and papers at least from 1979 to 2003, as collected by Modrzejewski and Raczyński in paper [10].

The development of American network of dioceses and parishes was also hampered by the fact that there was no dominant state religion in the US, as opposed to Russia at that time. Thus, the relatively few groups of the faithful

(the Protestant denominations alone were divided into no less than 12 basic groups) remained scattered over huge areas of the country. There was a pressing need to significantly increase the mobility of priests plying between dispersed congregations, until a permanent structure was established. For example, back in 1906 Rev. E.W. Burluson of Minnesota reported, “We only have 20 priests in an area of nearly 71,000 square miles, for some 600,000 inhabitants” [11]. The answer to this challenge was the rapid development of the railway network.

The history of chapel carriages in the USA began in 1890. After a trip to Russia, William David Walker, bishop of the Episcopal Church from North Dakota, stated that in the conditions of the American, sparsely populated interior, a solution similar to that on the Russian railways would work well. After raising some money, in April 1890 he ordered a chapel, fully equipped for long journeys, from the Pullman Palace Car Company, which was built and collected in November of the same year. At the same time, a similar car was built by the Barney & Smith Car Company for the Baptist Church, which was completed in the spring of 1891 [11, p. 51]. In the following years, individual churches ordered several chapel carriages, the characteristics of which are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristic features of railroad chapel cars in the USA.

No.	Church	Car name	Built	Description
1	Episcopal	Cathedral Car of North Dakota	1890	60ft long
2	Episcopal	Chapel Car of Northern Michigan	1891	Converted, serving town of Ontonagon after great fire
3	Baptist	Evangel	1891	Retired 1930 in Rawlins, WY
4	Baptist	Emmanuel	1893	Added to National Register of Historic Places, 1976
5	Baptist	Glad Tidings	1894	Dismantled 1930 in Flagstaff, AR
6	Baptist	Good Will	1895	1998 due for restoration
7	Baptist	Messenger of Peace	1898	Restored 2012
8	Baptist	Herald of Hope	1900	Used as office in Quinwood after 1947
9	Baptist	Grace	1915	On permanent display at Green Lake since 1946
10	Catholic	St. Anthony	1907	Refitted from 1886 Pullman
11	Catholic	St. Peter	1912	Displayed 1915 at Panama-Pacific Expo in San Francisco
12	Catholic	St. Paul	1915	Largest, at 86 ft in length

Relatively quickly in the case of the Emmanuel carriage, the original concept for the interior of the vehicle was modified. More emphasis was placed on providing social facilities, adapted to suit extended occupation by the priest (often with his wife). This space took up from about 1/3 to almost 1/2 of the

length of the entire carriage. On the example of the Saint Paul car, whose plan is shown in Figure 3, the range of layouts and furnishing included:

- an open platform, covered with a roof that protruded a long way out;
- space for the faithful with 14 rows of pews and a central passage, at the end of which there was a cot, organ and bookcase;
- an altar rail with kneelers across the entire width of the carriage;
- an altar with an altar piece, placed axially in the carriage, in front of a narrow wall with a passage in one wall of the carriage and a confessional at the other, three chairs to the sides;
- a study with a writing desk on the central wall behind the altar, two folding tables, one of which, together with the sofas opposite, could be converted into the lower level of a bunk bed;
- the chaplain's bedroom with a bunk bed identical to the one in the office, a toilet and several cabinets;
- a corridor connecting the office with the kitchen, bypassing the bedroom;
- a kitchen with a stove, sink, fridge, and standing and hanging cabinets;
- a second open, but roofed platform.

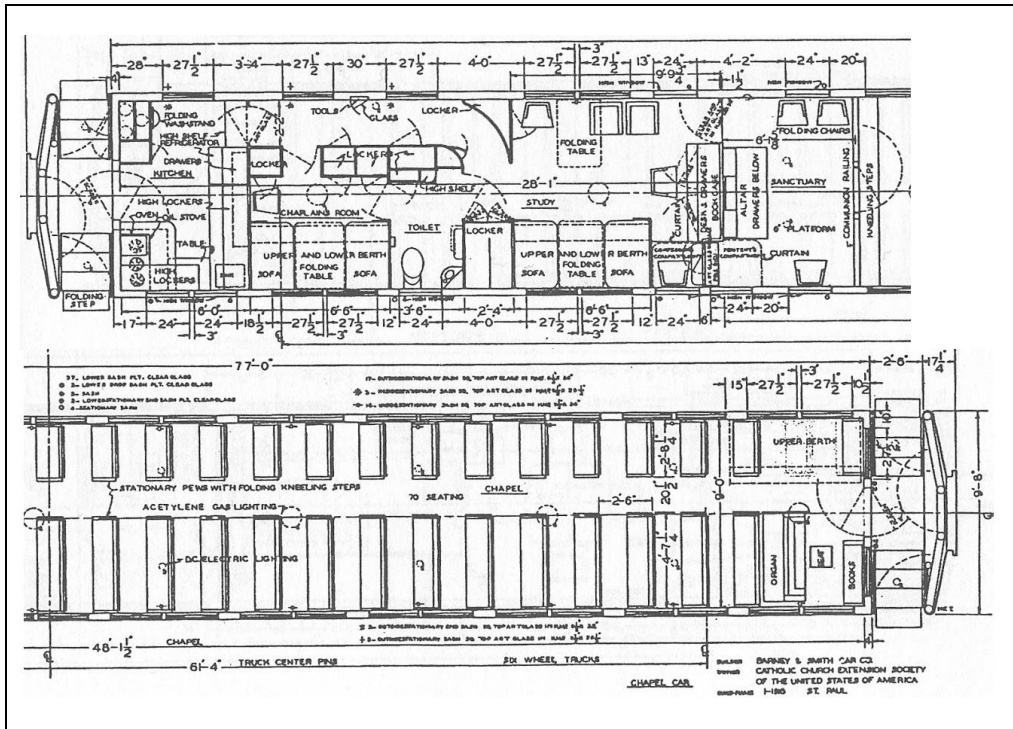


Figure 3. Floor plan of Saint Paul chapel car from 1915 [Railway Age Gazette, Apr 16, 1915, 825].

Chapel carriages performed well as temporary places of worship. Relatively quickly, however, their touring functions were discontinued; instead,

they were used in a stationary manner and moved to a new location after the construction of a permanent church. They completed their missions in several ways: the Cathedral Car of North Dakota was demolished in 1901, and the remaining materials were used to build a farm building next to the bishop's residence; the Evangel and Glad Tidings carriages were dismantled and built into permanent churches; the Herald of Hope was turned into a stationary office and demolished after several years; most chapel cars ended up in various types of museum collections [11, p. 44-45, 87, 125].

5. Conclusions

This period of the building and use of the chapel carriages to meet the religious needs of small, dispersed communities or groups of travellers is interesting evidence of ingenuity and adaptability to adverse environmental conditions. Their use peaked in the period 1890-1930; however, the second wave of use of former passenger carriages converted into stationary churches has been noted since the 1990s and continues to this day. Nowadays, the importance of railways has decreased, giving way to road and air transport. However, pastors have not ceased in their efforts to reach out to the travelling faithful. In this sense, the railroad chapels belong to a common group along with churches and motorway chapels, especially popular in Germany and Austria (German: *Autobahnkirche*), and numerous chapels at railway stations and airports around the world.

The two ways of using these carriages, i.e. regular circuits of a given fragment of the railway network, and moving the car to a new station after a few months or years after building a permanent house of prayer, prove that the method of their use is very flexible. It is also worth emphasising the assumed temporary use of this solution, which was particularly strong in the countries of the former USSR after its collapse and the subsequent restoration of religious freedoms [5].

As stated in the already mentioned pioneering work by Schreiter [1], and later summarised and compared between various authors by Bučko et al [12], modern missions may take different approaches and utilize multiple tools and techniques. Schreiter observes that from the beginning of 19th century to today, three general models defined by following metaphors may be named: expansion, companionship and reconciliation. Usage of railway chapel cars without any doubt fits the definition of expansion, as the dioceses and confessions were trying to reach out into new areas and collect new followers. Bučko et al [12] emulate the encyclicals *Redemptoris missio* and *Slavorum Apostoli* by Pope John Paul II to conclude that expanding Church is a bearer of culture, able to incorporate and accept valuable aspects of local cultures. In this understanding, usage of railway chapel cars can also be treated as a signpost of civilization, emerging in the areas previously uninhabited or sparsely populated, yet with significant development potential. While the pre-revolutionary pastoral activity on the Trans-Siberian Railway can be easily compared to a pilgrimage, by

definition it was missionary activity in the USA. This is indicated by the extensive social part of most of the chapel carriages, allowing the clergyman to remain for long periods beyond the reach of civilisation. A characteristic feature of the chapel carriages was also the lack of specific design features, thanks to which they could be converted into passenger or office carriages, and vice versa – the extent of the vehicle's fittings determines its adaptation to a religious function.

Chapel carriages count also as one of the symbols of their time, bound tightly with rapid global expansion of railroad network. Slightly preceding other important inventions applied to spread the God's word, radio and later television, they place themselves in a long row of initiatives, actions and measures from public sermons in the Middle Ages, through the invention of print and much later general literacy of societies, to recent mass media and Internet. Current trend, addressed personally to millions of smartphone owners, seems to utilize dedicated mobile applications and software. In conclusion, the above-mentioned inventions and techniques cannot be directly compared in terms of their e.g. effectivity or reach, however they should be included into one family as serving the same general purpose.

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