



## Conversations in Transit

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Published: October 30, 2012 | Last modified: May 18, 2013

Permalink: <http://239days.com/2012/10/30/conversations-in-transit/>

HAD ‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ ARRIVED in America fifty years earlier, and been unable to take advantage of the size and efficiency of 1912’s railway networks, his journey across America would have been almost impossible.

The Overland Route, later known as the First Transcontinental Railroad, was only completed in 1869, when the last spike was hammered into a railway tie at Promontory Summit, Utah. Until then, American pioneers had to cross the western frontier in wagon trains pulled by donkeys, cows, and horses — much as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had had to travel during his family’s exile. But the trek across the Iraqi desert from Baghdad to the shores of the Black Sea had taken three long months in 1863, and the distance from New York to San Francisco was three times as far.

Once it became possible to travel long distances on America’s trains, railroad companies introduced dining cars so their passengers wouldn’t have to stop for meals. Berths in the sleeping cars, which had been invented by George Pullman and were manufactured by his company, could be rented at an extra cost to ensure a good night’s rest. In a standard Pullman car, the seats facing each other on the floor could be extended to make a bed, and beds resting on hinges could be pulled down from the ceiling at night.

But the trains that carried ‘Abdu’l-Bahá through the rugged country, from where he watched the sun rise and set many times from his passenger car, were still a long way from the smooth rides on Amtrak today. One railway passenger of the period, who traveled west to San Francisco, recounted having to hold herself in her compartment over the rough patches of terrain so she wouldn’t be tossed into the aisle.

Nevertheless, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá often declined the luxury of a bed. When he departed Denver for Chicago, he chose not to reserve a sleeper for the night. “It is not a matter of our reluctance to pay one dollar,” he explained, “but of our unwillingness to be dependent on bodily comfort. We must be equal to the hardships of traveling like a soldier in the path of truth and not be slaves to bodily ease and comfort.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá was just as busy when riding the trains as he was while off them. He met a wide variety of people on trains, many of whom had seen his picture in the newspapers and approached him to converse.

On Saturday, October 28, while en route to Denver, a vendor came by. Mahmúd-i-Zarqání recounts that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was looking at some ore specimens when a few curious children gathered nearby. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá beckoned them to come closer. “What shall I buy you?” he asked. “He spoke to them with more love and kindness than the most benevolent father,” Mahmúd wrote, “and bought each child various items costing about a dollar.”

There had also been a company of Greek men heading east to fight in the Balkan War, and the next day, October 29, Mahmúd wrote that more than fifty Turkish men were heading in the same direction to face them on the battlefield. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá spoke to the Turks about universal peace and the unity of mankind, Mahmúd wrote, after which he ordered them tea.

On the afternoon of October 30, a Sufi, who followed a mystical tradition in Islam, approached ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and asked if he could sit next to him and listen in. After listening for a brief period the Sufi declared: “All are from God,” a basic idea in Sufi theology. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá responded: “Yes, this is true, but one man is so exalted that others bow down before Him and He is adored by them like Christ or Moses, who called people to the oneness of divinity and who became the cause of the education of a nation, while another is so degraded that he bows down before dust and worships ants and serpents. Are these two one and the same? No, certainly not! Divine Manifestations are a different creation.”

That evening, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá decided to reserve sleeper cars for his whole party. “We slept in our seats last night and that is enough. Let us not suffer any more hardship.” His secretaries suggested that they stay in their seats and only ‘Abdu’l-Bahá get a sleeper, but ‘Abdu’l-Bahá refused: “No, we must share equally.” Six sleepers were reserved that night.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá had been particularly happy that day. “Now we are going again toward the East,” he said. “We have no more work to do in America.”

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### **FOOTNOTE / ENDNOTE:**

Caitlin Shayda Jones, “Conversations in Transit,” *239 Days in America*, ed. Jonathan Menon and Robert Sockett, October 30, 2012, <http://239days.com/2012/10/30/conversations-in-transit/>.

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY:**

Jones, Caitlin Shayda. “Conversations in Transit.” *239 Days in America*. Edited by Jonathan Menon and Robert Sockett. October 30, 2012. <http://239days.com/2012/10/30/conversations-in-transit/>.

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Menon, Jonathan, and Robert Sockett, eds. *239 Days in America*. <http://239days.com/>.

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