

# Election Campaign “*Whistle Stop*” Trains

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When did you last see a presidential candidate speaking to a crowd from the rear platform of a “*Whistle Stop*” campaign train? Not this time, not last time; maybe “W” in Ohio, very briefly, in 2000, I am not sure? Actually, there have been none, that we can recall, in the grand tradition of Truman, 1948, since the Lady Bird Special of October, 1964, now 48 years ago.

What happened to this grand tradition of presidential politicking which appears to have originated well prior to the Civil War, e.g. James Buchanan 1856, and was very much a staple of the every-four-year national election season until the mid-1960’s? Among the answers one might suggest that: (a) the Nation evolved from a limited number of big cities connected by a necklace of main rail routes with small towns like beads on a string, to (b) a sprawling urban nation with more people located off the “main line” than on it – population almost doubled, (c) the railroad route network shrunk by about one-third, (d) more “efficient” communications technology arrived and was quickly deployed by the political campaigns, (e) the trains were increasingly difficult and costly to arrange and operate, and the political “yield” was apparently deemed to be modest, and finally, (f) the railroad companies were greatly relieved to be rid of the costly nuisance, which disrupted normal operations, generated far more expense to these private companies than they received in compensation, and the crowds presented major liability issues.

We will always recall the 1964 Lady Bird Special, a 19-car train, which originated in Washington on October 6 and terminated in New Orleans four days later, having traveled 1,628 miles through eight southern states (LBJ baled off in Alexandria), during which the First Lady was said to have given 47 speeches, on behalf of the President, in the same number of towns, to an estimated 500,000 people. There are many reasons why we recall this grand tour by Mrs. Johnson, the primary one being that little RF&P, and a fine officer by the name of Ed Martin, had responsibility for coordinating rail-related arrangements all the way to New Orleans. While Ed and the RF&P had lots of help from the big roads, little RF&P was the “originating railroad” and drew the short straw. [There was also a rough stop in Richmond, which is another story!]

Former president Harry Truman is said to have advised the Johnsons to undertake the Whistle Stop tour of the South, allegedly saying: “*there are a lot of people in this Country who don’t know where the airport is, but they do know where the depot is...*” That cannot be said of the population today. And there is a public/private angle as well. For more than a century the private, tax-paying, railroads shouldered the burden of campaign trains, and the like. Now it falls upon tax-consuming F.A.A., and F.H.W.A.,

states, and local municipal authorities, many of which are beginning to question: “why should we bear all this extra expense?” Railroaders remember yet; they can feel the pain!

Transportation policy is a complex thing, often made more so by the politicians we elect. Would that we could get them to assume more responsibility! # # # #