

A Golden Era of Commuting

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Summer's gone and no songbirds are singing...well, it may not be that bad, but the lazy, hazy days of summer are definitely over. Now that school buses are making their daily rounds and vacationing commuters are back on the Metro North, one's thoughts turn to the commuting experience. Earlier this year, the library's Local History and Genealogy Librarian, Carl White, wrote in his blog about the Gentlemen's Bar Car and referenced one of the Oral History Project's interviews. That interview, "**Commuting: the 5:11 G.B.C.**" (Greenwich Bar Car) was about the express train that left Grand Central at 5:11 p.m. and before dropping off its passengers in Greenwich, Cos Cob, Old Greenwich, and Riverside, kept them happy in the converted Pullman car with camaraderie, cards, and cocktails. The interview, conducted in late 1991 and narrated by Robert G. Pearson, refers to the period of the late fifties as "a golden era of commuting" and goes on to describe the bar car as having upholstered chairs, paneled walls, and being "elegant looking." While there was no air-conditioning, there was an "icing system," a makeshift arrangement that blew air over the ice to keep the car cool. He includes in his interview anecdotes of high jinx and high times, including one about the old car's demise, when it was replaced with a newer, more plastic version. As consolation, the railroad allowed the regulars to paint a name on the new car – "The V: XI G.B.C," the 5:11 Greenwich Bar Car.

A second Oral History Project interview, "**Bridge Playing Among Commuters**," conducted in 1993, is narrated by Peter Carlson, Sr., who focuses on a particular kind of card game, Ghouli bridge. While Mr. Carlson doesn't seem to be familiar with the Greenwich Bar Car, he is certain about one thing: he along with many others were regulars on the 5:11 express, and they played Ghouli bridge – because it's fast. According to Mr. Carlson, Ghouli bridge is just like regular bridge, but "you don't shuffle the cards....you just slapped the cards together, cut them, and dealt them." And the cards were dealt three or five at a time. It is described as a raucous game resulting in big hands played for a six or a slam bid.

One of our Oral History Project volunteers with knowledge of the bridge players on the 5:11 tells of a tense game ending as the train pulled into the Cos Cob station. An exultant Declarer, having made his doubled, redoubled bid, snatched a khaki raincoat off the hook and leapt out of the car as the doors were closing. The remaining players, gathered cards, briefcases, etc, and then one of them realized that the khaki raincoat now remaining on the hook was not his, realizing also that the Cos Cob departee had taken the wrong raincoat, in which were the car keys of his Riverside friend. This being before the advent of cell phones – how did they resolve the mix-up? The conclusion remains a mystery.

Last season on *Mad Men* we watched a tortured Peter Campbell taking the train from Manhattan to his unhappy home in Riverside. Maybe if he had been in the Gentlemen's Bar Car on the 5:11 out of Manhattan or if he had engaged in a rousing game of Ghoulie and Ghoulie, he might have been a more jovial fellow.

Note: both interviews referenced above are available through the Greenwich Library's Oral History Project.