

The Hot Spot

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The dining car may be the most popular car on the train, but the smoker car was where all the men, smokers or not, sat down to escape the hectic hustle and bustle of the train.

The men who sought refuge in the smoker car were an interesting lot made up of smokers and non-smokers who were there avoiding their wives, pretending to smoke, or – even more bizarrely – trying to cure an illness.

In the 19th century there was a pervasive fear about spreading disease, especially small pox. In a satirical article from the *New York Times* in 1881 the author suggests that as many as twelve of the sixty seats in the smoker car were taken up by people suffering the first stages of small pox.¹

There were many medical breakthroughs during this period of time, and one belief was that smallpox was spread through “vapors,” which were inhaled into the lungs and infected the body. It is possible that, as the author of the article says, “[o]f late years it is understood that physicians have discovered that an atmosphere impregnated with tobacco smoke is almost certain to cure smallpox in the stage of disease prior to eruption.”² So that the heavier vapors of the smoke could overpower the vapor that caused smallpox. According to this satirical writer, the doctors of the time would prescribe for the patient to ride in the smoking car for a while in order to breathe as much smoke as possible.

Though this may have been a prescription earlier in the century, it is more likely that the author was commenting on how many rude non-smokers (!) there were taking up the valuable space in the smoker car. By the



time the article was written in 1881, a new belief called “germ theory” was on the rise and “vapor theory” was in decline.



(Interior of smoking car; donated by Herbert Russell)

The unknown author of this tongue in cheek editorial gives us a window into the popular smoker car and the overcrowded conditions on the trains in the late 1800s. The smoker car was the hot spot on the train for relaxing with your friends or making new ones, but the underlying feeling of the message here (so contradictory to today’s): **NO NON-SMOKERS ALLOWED!!**

Special thanks to Dr. J Connor and Dr. P Twohig for their input on medical practices in the 1800s.

¹ -- “The Smoking Car Mystery” *The New York Times*. August 27th 1881

² -- Ibid.

Next month's E-Bulletin will feature a person of interest for African-Canadian History Month. If you of any stories or information about the life of Jim Bird please contact us.

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