

SOUTHERN CALLS

PRESIDENTIAL PASSINGS

Written by Bob Boetticher Sr.
Chairman, National Museum of Funeral History

PART THREE OF OUR
8-PART SERIES

*From the Golden Gate
to Marion, Ohio . . .*

THE WARREN G. HARDING FUNERAL TRAIN

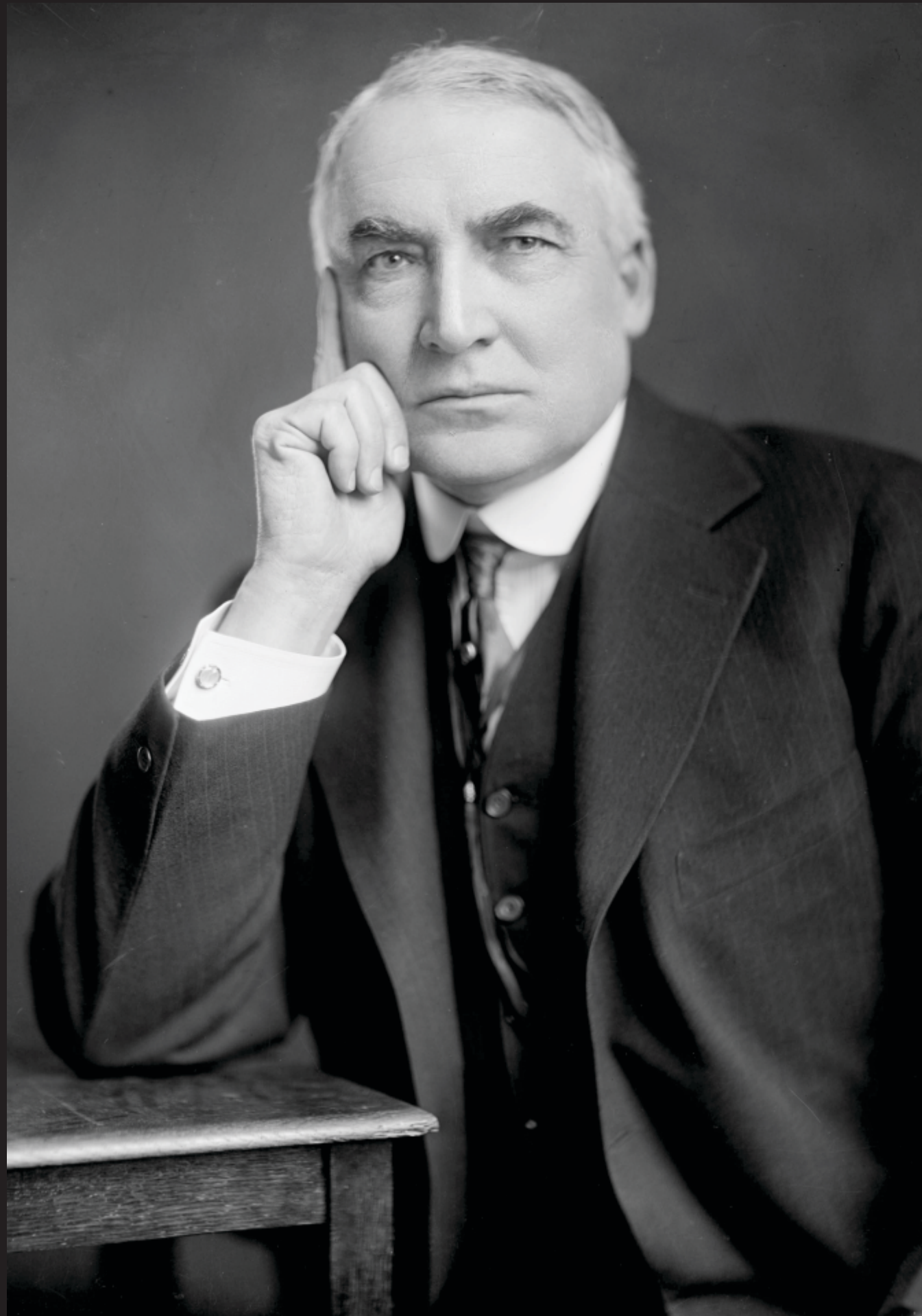
A 15,000-mile “voyage of understanding” train tour that started in Washington, D.C., on June 20, 1923, presented an opportunity for the president of the United States to reconnect with the American people and to recuperate from health issues. Warren Gamaliel Harding arrived in San Francisco after a long train trip, checked into the Palace Hotel and retired to the presidential suite on July 29, 1923. Later, he was resting in bed, and Mrs. Florence Harding was reading to him a magazine article titled “A Calm Review of a Calm Man,” by Samuel G. Blyth. She stopped at the end of a paragraph and placed the magazine down on her lap, when the president said, “that sounds good; go ahead.” Those were the final words spoken by the 29th president, who died moments later at 7:30 p.m. on Aug. 2, 1923.

On explicit orders from Mrs. Harding, the president’s body would not leave the hotel until it was taken directly to the waiting train the following day for the trip back to Washington, D.C. Word was sent to N. Gray & Co., which dispatched embalmer J.W. Frederick and funeral director W. J. Thorne to prepare and dress the body. They placed Harding’s body in a 9324 solid bronze electroplated casket with bent glass sealer and a Celanese satin interior.

Approximately 50 people gathered in the presidential suite on Aug. 3 for a short service officiated by Rev. James W. West. At the conclusion, he raised his hand over the casket and said, “God is our refuge and strength.” Mrs. Harding slightly nodded her head and said “amen.”

The bronze casket was taken down to the street level of the hotel and placed by joint military honor guards in a motor hearse waiting outside for the funeral cortege to the Southern Pacific Station. The presidential train that carried Harding to San Francisco was now turned into a funeral





train draped in black bunting and greenery. The train was made up of 10 Pullman cars: a combination car; six compartment Pullmans; a private car, "Demonte"; Harding's personal private car, "Superb," built by the Pullman Company in 1911; and a dining car. A Mogul 2-6-0 steam locomotive commonly used to haul freight cars would be changed out regularly throughout the five-day, cross-country journey to the nation's capital.

The casket was placed aboard the rear Pullman, "Superb," and Mrs. Harding, the president's cabinet and staff boarded the train along with 16 enlisted soldiers and sailors, casket honor guards commanded by Capt. Holdron.

The conductor holding his pocket watch, now reading 7:15 p.m., waved the all clear to the engineer, and the locomotive, with smoke bellowing out of its stack, started chugging out of the black-draped station for the journey to Washington, D.C.

Fearing an accident, Mrs. Harding banned excessive speed, so the train was limited to 50 mph through the open country and only 10 mph in the cities and towns, which caused the railroad to be concerned about delays. Mrs. Harding spent part of her time in her private railroad car compartment, gazing out the window and watching the changing landscape in solitude.

As the train glided along, its first mishap was in Chappell, Nebraska, on Sunday, when a tire came off the driving wheel of the locomotive. The funeral train continued to be dogged by bad luck – a brake beam broke near Chicago.

The train rolled slowly into the Windy City of Chicago, where thousands of mourners wishing to pay their respects lined both sides of the track, along with the members of the American Legion, who honored the president with a salute. The police failed to hold them back, and frequently the crowds blocked the track, forcing the slow-moving train to make jerking stops to avoid hitting them. After 45 minutes, the train again headed eastward down the track and into the still of darkness with only the beam from the large brass light of the engine illuminating the track.

In many towns, onlookers climbed telephone poles, trees and to rooftops of black-draped buildings to catch a glimpse of the funeral train. Throughout the long journey, the bowed figure of Mrs. Harding could be seen in the rear-lighted funeral car, sitting in silence next to the flag-draped casket of her husband.

The funeral train's engineer, A.W. Foss, stopped the train for 20 minutes in Willard, Ohio, where 19,000 people had stood silent since dawn and where Abigail Harding, the president's sister, was waiting. She boarded the train and



joined Mrs. Harding in her private car. The train was already nine hours late, and the delay annoyed Mrs. Harding, who wanted to return to Washington by afternoon.

At a stop in Glenwood, Ohio, B&O's 4-6-2 locomotive No. 5052, built in 1911 by the Baldwin Locomotive Works in Eddystone, PA, the heaviest passenger steam engine, was coupled to the special funeral train to continue the journey over the mountains to Cumberland, MD. A fresh crew boarded the train, included engineer C.E. Beltz, fireman G.W. Hartzell, Conductor E. Zerfoss, Brakeman J.F. Drumheiser and Baggage Master T.H. McGuire.

In McKeesport, Pennsylvania, Harry Fitzgerald, a member of the Sam Black Post #59 Grand Army of the Republic, was in charge of other veterans standing guard on the tracks waiting for the special train. He fondly remembered that when he was a young Marine in 1865, he had escorted the funeral train of Abraham Lincoln from Camden Station to the Calvert Street Station in Baltimore in 1865.

The funeral train arrived in Washington, D.C., on Tuesday at 10:22 p.m., nine hours behind schedule. The engineer pulled back the reverser handle with his right hand and slowly backed the funeral train in so "Superb," containing the flag-draped casket, was the first car to enter Union Station. It stopped in front of President Calvin Coolidge, other dignitaries and thousands of onlookers who jammed into the station where they had been waiting for hours for this moment.

The bronze casket was lifted through a small door, which was cut into the side of the rail car because the rear car door was not wide enough. The casket was taken by simple cartage to the White House, where it was placed in the East Room.

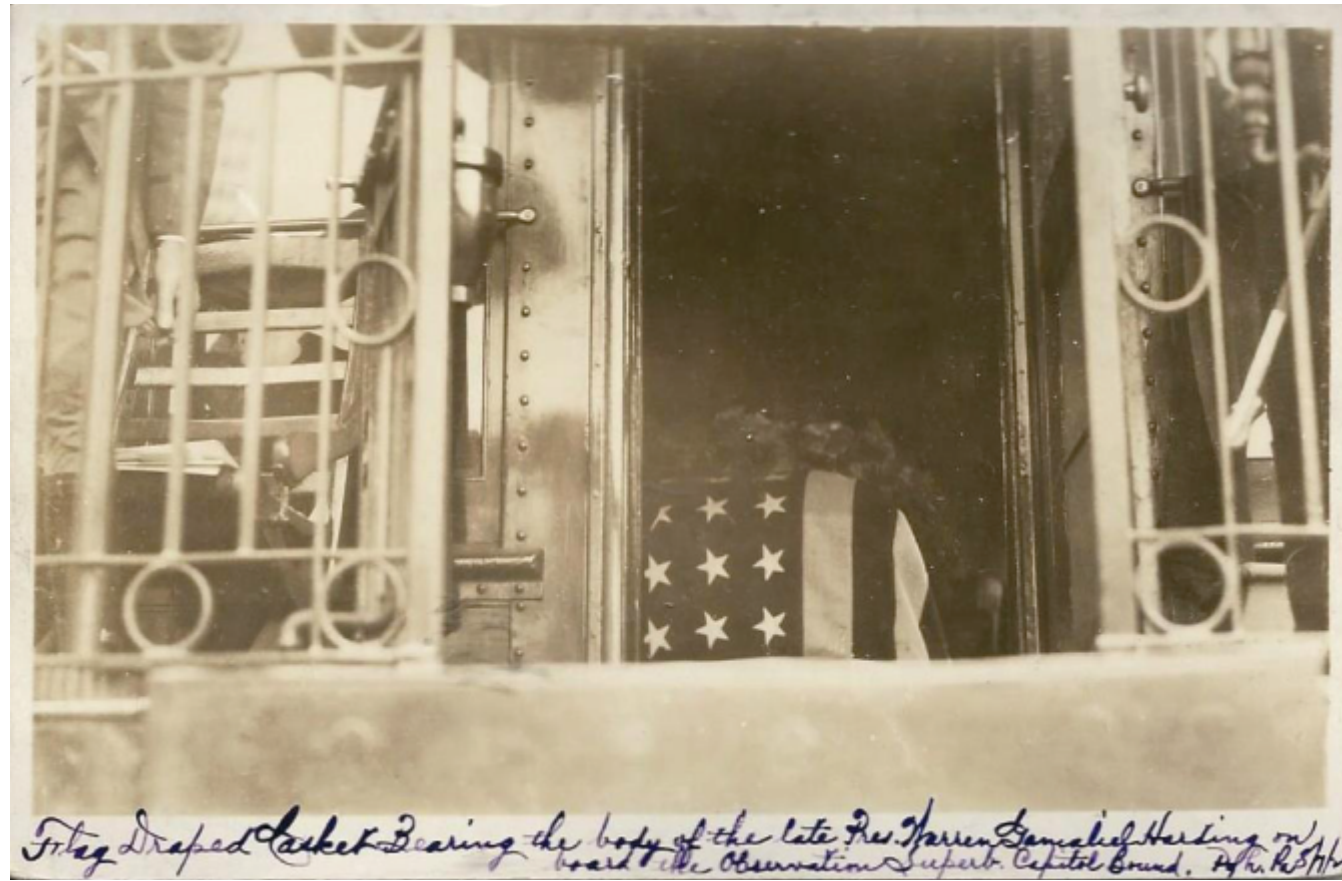
On Wednesday morning, a caisson with six matching black horses carried the casket to the Capitol rotunda for the state funeral service at 10 a.m. Afterward, a long, somber funeral cortege left the Capitol for Union Station and proceeded down Pennsylvania Avenue, where throngs of mourners were standing in silence, many of them bowing their heads in sorrow.

After the casket was secured in the "Superb" car, Mrs. Harding and her party boarded the train along with conductor R.E. Smith, the son of W. H. Smith, who was the conductor on the McKinley funeral train from Pittsburg to Canton, Ohio, in 1901. Engineer George W. Read, who was related to the president by marriage, pulled the black-draped special train slowly down the track for the journey home to Marion, Ohio, at 6:06 p.m., under cool gray skies at sunset.

The funeral train slowly pulled into the Pennsylvania Station for a 16-minute inspection stop at 6:17 a.m., after



CAPTIONS



traveling all night through the countryside and mountains. The crowds of mourners who had assembled on the platform in the chilly morning air could smell the heavy floral fragrances emanating from two large baggage cars carrying floral emblems which had been placed on both sides of the cars from virtually thousands of organizations from around the country. Representatives from the government botanical gardens in Washington were assigned to the baggage cars to preserve the flowers during the trip to Marion.

The special funeral train, with steam hissing slowly, rolled out of the station at 6:33 a.m., now one hour and three minutes behind schedule. Along the route, men, women and children placed coins on the top of the track rails, waiting for the funeral train's heavy steel wheels to smash the coins into flat shapes as a keepsake of their martyred president.

As the special funeral train, pulled by two large, black-draped locomotives, slowed to approach the Rockville Bridge across the Susquehanna River above Harrisburg, a veteran railroad leverman named S. Hoover, age 71, pulled the rail switch that sent the Harding funeral train along the homeward route to Marion. He had stood at this same position twice before, first as a young man for the funeral train of Abraham Lincoln and 36 years later for the President William McKinley funeral train.

The funeral train arrived in Canton, Ohio, and, out of respect, it stopped for one minute at the hometown of President McKinley, who was assassinated in 1901.

After a 14-hour trip, and two hours behind schedule, the funeral train arrived at Marion Union Station at noon to the tolling sound of a church bell. An ornate gray motor hearse carried the casket down the tree-shaded street between lines of many friends and neighbors to the home of Dr. George T. Harding, the late president's father. A brief funeral service took place the next day, at 3 p.m. on Aug. 10 at the Marion Cemetery. Dr. Harding followed his son's flag-draped casket to the temporary receiving vault, repeatedly muttering the words, "My boy; my boy; my boy."

The Pullman "Superb," the private rail car that carried the body of President Harding, was donated to the Southeastern Railway Museum in Duluth, Georgia, in 1969, after a 20-month restoration.

CAPTIONS

