

The Train to Mt. McGregor

by **Chris Mackowski**

Posted on June 17, 2019

It was a sweltering day 134 years ago on June 16, 1885. The mercury teased the 100-degree mark, and for Ulysses S. Grant, the heat flowing back from the locomotive only made it worse. Add to that the storm of soot and smoke and steam swirling back, too. Because of the heat, Grant had to travel with the windows of the passenger car down and the



heavy plush curtains pulled back so he could get the stifling air to circulate, but as a result, he could not block the maelstrom of ill vapors from the engine; the best he could do to weather the unpleasantness was to sit with his back toward the locomotive so smoke and ashes wouldn't blow in his face. He'd had smoke enough already, as it was.

I think of that long, hot, uncomfortable ride. Grant, already suffering from the final stages of terminal throat cancer brought on by too many cigars, knew discomfort well, but this ride served as one final gauntlet to run. At the end of the journey, the cool, fresh air of a mountain retreat awaited—but he had to get there, first.

I'm not sure why, but I often think of Grant and that train ride, from New York City northward along the Hudson River to Saratoga Springs and, from there, onto a private car that took him up a winding path to the top of Mt. McGregor in Wilton, New York. It took six hours to chug the 180 miles north, then another hour to make the "12-mile jolt" to the top of the mountain.

"The absolute urgency of his immediate removal became so apparent," wrote a reporter for the *Albany Evening Journal*, "that it was determined on as a last chance of prolonging the patient's life by getting him out of the malarial and oppressive atmosphere of New York up into the balsamic breezes amid the pines."

The train ride seemed designed to inflict an eleventh-hour taste of that "oppressive atmosphere" Grant was escaping rather than offer a preview of the fresh air ahead. At some point, someone drew a heavy curtain alongside Grant to keep off the sooty breeze, which, a reporter said, "cooled the car to a degree of delicious comfort," the ash and smoke notwithstanding.

Grant sat quiet for most of the ride, occasionally asking for a sip of water, although too much of it burned his throat like molten lead. Every so often, he or one of his doctors would swab the back of his throat with a solution of cocaine water to numb the pain. "The general's face is pale with an expression

unspeakably sad....” wrote the reporter. “[H]is eyes were downcast and his lips pale and compressed as if with long-suffering pain.”

Along the way, throngs of people greeted the car as it chugged past. Grant’s illness had played out publicly in the newspapers over the previous weeks, and so, as he made his trip north, well wishers hoped to catch a quick glimpse of the general and pay their respects as he passed. “[T]he windows of the factories along the tracks were filled with workmen watching for a sight of the hero of the war,” wrote the reporter. “Hats were raised, but no one shouted or made any demonstration but one of silent respect.”

At West Point, the corps of cadets turned out and saluted as the train steamed by. Grant, who’d remained silent for most of the trip, raised his drooping head a bit and said, faintly, “West Point.” “Then he sank again into silence,” the reporter wrote, “calling up the memories, no doubt, associated with this historic spot and his historic life.” Grant had begun there as a reluctant cadet, but “On the whole I like the place very much. . . .” he eventually wrote to a cousin. “There is much to dislike, but more to like....” As the train passed, he must have certainly felt a swirl of emotions and memories, although no record of his thoughts exists.

Grant sat in a well-padded leather armchair, with his feet propped up in an identical chair in front of him. In the heat, his back must have been hot on the leather. How he must have perspired. He might have actually stuck to the chair and had to peel himself out any time he stood. The sound of that! When he transferred trains, his entourage had a difficult time moving the chairs because of their size, bulk, and the slipperiness of the leather.

At the top of the mountain, a sign awaited Grant at the train station: “Welcome to our hero.” A wooden walkway led up the hillside toward the hotel and the small cottage nearby where Grant would stay. Gamely, Grant waved to the assembled crowd when he disembarked and tried to make the walk. He stumbled, started to collapse partway up the walkway; his escorts caught him and carried him the rest of the way to the cottage.

So exhausted was he by the trip that it took five days for Grant to resume work on his memoirs—the project that had enlivened him during these last dark, painful months. He had come here to die, he thought, but first, he had come here to finish the memoirs. This has weighed on him, too, during the long hot trip north from the city. He had to finish the memoirs.

The next few weeks would be fraught.



If the story of Grant's financial ruin and his subsequent effort to write his way out of those dire straights, all while dying of throat cancer—if that all serves as the last act of Grant's life, then the train ride to Mt. McGregor opens the last scene of the last act. Grant will spend six weeks on the mountain. He will write, he will suffer, he will finish, and he will die.

On some level, he knows most of this as he makes that train ride. The only questions, I suppose, are whether he'll finish and how long he'll last. Will he ever come down off the mountain alive?

It was a sweltering day on June 16, 1885. But, I imagine, it wasn't just the heat that oppressed him.

*Read more about the last chapter of Grant's life in **Grant's Last Battle: The Story Behind the Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant** by Chris Mackowski.*

Today, the site of Grant's death, **U. S. Grant Cottage Historical Site**, is operated by the Friends of Grant Cottage.

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Tagged as **Grant Cottage, Grant's Last Battle, Grant's Memoirs, Mt. McGregor, railroads, trains, Ulysses S. Grant**

2 Responses to *The Train to Mt. McGregor*



James F. Epperson says:

June 20, 2019 at 12:53 AM

I have read your book, and several others, on Grant's last years. I always have to re-learn how brief a time he was on Mt. McGregor. For some reason there are neurons in my brain that insist it was several months longer!

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Chris Mackowski says:

June 26, 2019 at 10:40 AM

I hope you enjoyed the book, Jim. I know Grant's time there does seem like it lasted longer, but it was an intense few weeks, so it's not surprising that time seems suspended there!

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