

HISTORY WORKSHOP

The Department of History

Tuesdays ~ 12:30-1:30 pm ~ 203 Munroe Hall

Understanding My Father's Work: Ingredients for a Legacy of Social Justice

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April 16, 2019

12:30-1:30 pm

203 Munroe Hall



There are many surprises when one visits the Hildene, the Lincoln Family Home in Manchester Vermont. On the property, one encounters a Pullman Car, the Sunbeam, one of the wooden cars that was actually produced during the time that Lincoln was president of the Pullman Company. Near the Sunbeam is a commentary about the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Pullman Porters. Inside the Sunbeam, one of the luxury cars for rich people who traveled with their guests accompanied by a porter and a waiter, is a more complex story. Pullman Car Porters were poorly paid, but they provided the foundation for the Black middle class. What does this mean? Does such an explanation mask the human agency necessary to make changes in a racist social order?

My father, Leonard Russell Higginbotham, was a Pullman Porter in the 1920s and 1930s, long before I was born. As I was coming of age, Leonard did other service work as a bartender, a hotel waiter and finally driving a cab. Growing up, Leonard did not talk much about his early life, but he did periodically teach some life lessons. I am researching the history of the porters and my father's work life to understand the resilience and resistance such men displayed in their employment. My goal is to understand the legacy service workers passed on to their children. In doing so, it focuses on the thinking and action of these working-class players. In their work, they gained skills in navigating and negotiating within a continually shifting racial environment and used those skills to aid their own children.