



by Robin Roberts • Co-anchor, Good Morning America

Whistle-Stop America Voices from the Train



The Good Morning America team—Chris Cuomo, Diane Sawyer, Robin Roberts, and Sam Champion—on the rear platform of the Whistle-Stop Tour '08 train that took them around the country.

I'll tell you the truth—when the idea of doing Good Morning America for an entire week from a moving train first came up, my response was “what?” quickly followed by “how?”

I knew the “why.” Our audience told us why, in emails, letters, postings on our Shout Out message board. They were hurting and, in this all-important election year, they needed our help in being heard. They were relying on us to listen and get them answers. That profound trust galvanized us and we all were eager to get going.

There were a few things we had to learn first. How do you pack for a train trip? No ball gowns, granted, but would it be cold, hot, or somewhere in-between? Would Diane Sawyer be able to get all the Diet Coke and Red Bull she needs to keep going? (Yes.) Would Sam Champion—in the gulf to cover Hurricane Ike—make it back for part of the trip? (Yes, thank goodness.) Will Chris Cuomo even fit in his sleeping berth? (No.) And would I be able to walk on a moving train? (Yes, thanks to our train attendant Sweet Lou Drummeter, who taught the whole GMA crew the “duck walk.”)

And what would we do between stops? It turned out that spontaneous dance parties were popular (alas, the duck walk didn't help me here) and Sam and Chris had marathon Monopoly games, which they played by rules that the Parker Brothers would have frowned upon but left the rest of us rolling in the aisles.

Sweet Lou called “All aboard” on September 14, 2008, as GMA's Whistle-Stop Tour '08 pulled out of the station in Worcester, Massachusetts. Our first broadcast was from Stockbridge, Massachusetts, a beautiful, historic town nestled in the Berkshires. This is where Norman Rockwell painted our vision of the American dream, where small towns thrived and parents saw to it that their children's future was secure. We visited Joe's Diner in the nearby town of Lee, said by many to be the inspiration for Rockwell's famous painting of a boy and a policeman sitting at the counter. It's called “The Runaway,” and we recreated



The cast of Good Morning America assembles outside Joe's Diner in Lee, Massachusetts during the joint ABC News/USA TODAY “50 States in 50 Days” initiative.

that moment with a local policeman and a little boy from town.

As we traveled west from Massachusetts to Niagara Falls, southwest along Lake Erie to Pennsylvania and Ohio, and then south to Maryland and West Virginia, finally pulling into Union Station in Washington, D.C., we saw two Americas from our train windows: the beautiful, ever-changing landscape, and the harsh reality facing the people living in towns along the tracks.

We saw the leaves turning in Massachusetts, a double rainbow over Niagara Falls, corn as far as the eye can see in Ohio, the Blue Ridge Mountains of West Virginia and the Capitol Dome, a beacon in the night sky.

Just as breathtaking was the landscape of faces greeting us along the way—cheerleaders, youth groups, families, and senior citizens, all sharing their smiles and their spirit. Their energy kept us going. They wanted us to love their hometowns as much as they do (and we did).

But another America greeted us, too: the America facing hard times. As the train rumbled on the tracks, the rumbling of trouble from Wall Street had begun, a crisis that was already part of the lives of the people we were about to meet.

In Massachusetts, Diane went door-knocking, going right up to people's homes to find out their concerns.

Frank Algerio said, “Health care. You know that's huge for me right now.” Diane caught Richard Bonito just before he jumped in the shower. He's worried about energy costs, with a cold Northeastern winter on its way. For 30-year-old Nicky Vaughn, with friends in the service, it was the war, “it's time for us to leave, leave Iraq.”

In the days that followed, the proud people of Rome, New York, once known as Copper City, expressed worry about jobs now that the factories have closed



(above) Robin Roberts talks to Paul Camrye of Palmer, Massachusetts, an 89-year-old who shared troubles he had kept secret from his family until the interview. (below) All aboard for the "Whistle-Stop Train Tour" on Good Morning America



Diane Sawyer interviews Senator Hillary Clinton on board the Whistle-Stop Tour '08 train.

down. In Niagara Falls, parents watched their children leave home for better opportunities as their Canadian neighbors thrive. And in Ohio, generations of the Lipps family have worked their farm but one of their sons, 13-year-old Jason, doesn't see himself following in the family tradition.

We heard heart-wrenching stories from people yearning for answers—

people who want to work, pay their bills, and make a better life for their children. We saw concern in their eyes.

There was pain in the eyes of Paul Camrye of Palmer, Massachusetts, the 89-year-old gentleman who shared his troubles, troubles he had kept secret from his family.

"We're suffering. We're suffering. I owe the oil bill from last year," he told me, as tears welled up in his eyes. "My taxes are not completely paid up. This never happened to me before, and I really don't know what I'm gonna do about it. It's just not...it's not the same life that I've always had."

This WWII veteran, who lived through the Great Depression, emotionally shared his hardship. Americans saw their grandfathers, their fathers and even themselves in his eyes. And even though they are facing

tough times themselves, Americans gave back.

Viewers called, they emailed, they demanded that we help them help Mr. Camrye. With the help of Catholic Charities of Atlanta, much-needed funds have been raised to help this lovely man attend to the bills that caused him so much worry. I returned to Palmer to visit Mr. Camrye a couple of weeks after our trip. He was beaming with gratitude and told me, "A smile improves your face value."

And that's when I realized that the two Americas—the country of beauty and the country of heartache—are inextricably linked. No matter where they're from or what troubles they're facing, Americans are bootstrappers and neighbors, able to find a way

through tough times together.

I had the privilege of introducing Linus Scott, 97 years young, to America. Mr. Scott was a Pullman Porter for 38 years, one of thousands of African American men, many of them recently freed slaves, who worked as attendants on the Pullman sleeping cars. They carried bags, served meals in the dining car, and answered passengers' every need, traveling on the train for weeks at a time, away from their families. Mr. Scott put four children through college and one through medical school on \$68 a month plus tips. And yet, with so much at stake, Mr. Scott and his fellow porters were at the forefront of the civil rights movement, making sure their children would have greater opportunities.

And in Niagara Falls, we met young J.T. Robertson. This 12-year-old train enthusiast wanted to share his love of the rails with his friends, so he collected bottles and cans to buy tickets for those who couldn't afford to take a

ride on his favorite local attraction, the Arcade & Attica steam train in Arcade, New York.

But he was devastated when he saw that physically challenged children couldn't ride the train because the 100-year-old equipment couldn't accommodate wheelchairs. J.T. wrote to Extreme Makeover: Home Edition for help. It was our great joy to introduce J.T. to the show's Ty Pennington, Michael Moloney, and Paige Hemmis, who helped make J.T.'s dream a reality. Now, the steam train is accessible to all, thanks to a young boy who wanted to share his passion.

We invited the candidates to stops along the Whistle-Stop Tour to convey your concerns, fears, disappointments, and hopes. We asked presidential candidates Senator Barack Obama and Senator John McCain your tough questions and pushed for the answers you needed. Senator Hillary Clinton climbed aboard to tell us how she would support the Democratic ticket.

And I think she would have accepted Diane's invitation to join the pajama party if there weren't 90 people sharing such close quarters.

And so, my thanks to you, who urged us to come to your hometowns, who got up very early in the morning to cheer us on, who shared your personal struggles and your triumphs, and who continue to give to others even when you're stretching to make ends meet. Traveling on the train, as Americans have for more than 170 years, the landscape just an arms-length away, and being able to shake your hands, give you hugs, and see your beautiful faces up close, reminded us all how blessed we are to be invited into your homes every morning. ●

