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Early Days of the Subway The Role of Constructive PR

When New York's first subway, the Interborough Rapid Transit Company (IRT), entered its second decade of operation in 1914, it faced many new challenges. Chief among these were completing construction and expanding service. The IRT also faced competition from a rival system, the Brooklyn Rapid Transit Company (later changed to Brooklyn-Manhattan Transit or BMT). To help address these issues and gain public support for its business interests, the IRT hired Ivy Ledbetter Lee, one of the leading public relations specialists in the country, in 1916.

The Subway Sun
World's Largest Railroad
NOVEMBER 15, 1916

A Job and a Welcome to Our Men

2,426 Interborough men are in Uncle Sam's service. When they come home they will find not only a hearty welcome -- but their jobs.

And our more recent employees will also be retained. The war so reduced our forces that there will

be work for men old and new, -- even more.

Thanks to the women, it has been possible to keep up this service during the war; and we shall need them even after our men return.

We believe the great riding public appreciates their service as fully as we do.

INTERBOROUGH RAPID TRANSIT COMPANY
Maurice C. Keady
President

Ivy Ledbetter Lee graduated from Princeton University in 1898, and then worked as a finance and business reporter for several major newspapers, including *The New York Times*. In 1903, Lee entered public relations and opened Parker & Lee, a pioneering PR company that represented such major industrial clients as the

Ivy L. Lee Papers, Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library

Chrysler Corporation, Western Union Telegraph Company, and the Columbia Broadcasting System.

As impressive as his professional credentials were, what set Lee apart from his contemporaries was his deep concern with providing

"fact-based" constructive publicity — which he distinguished from news, advertising, and propaganda.

Under Ivy Lee's direction, the IRT took an innovative approach — communicating directly with its passengers through pamphlets, brochures, and posters "to establish a close understanding of its work and policies." The most famous and influential products of Lee's campaign were two concurrently appearing poster series, *The Subway Sun* and *The Elevated Express*. Between 1918, when the first issues appeared, and 1932, when the IRT declared bankruptcy and entered receivership, *The Subway Sun* and *The Elevated Express* were New York City institutions, entertaining and informing millions of subway commuters during the First World War and through The Great Depression.

Continuing its celebration of the Subway Centennial, the New York Transit Museum is opening a new exhibition featuring the work of Ivy Ledbetter Lee (1877-1934), considered the father of public relations. The exhibition, *The World's Safest Railroad: How Ivy Lee Promoted New York's Subway System, 1916 – 1932* will be at the New York Transit Museum's Gallery Annex in Grand Central Terminal from August 10 through October 24, 2004.

The exhibition presents 15 original posters exhibited here for the first time and more than 45 high quality photographic reproductions of other early work by Ivy Lee for the IRT. By focusing on themes that covered public safety, system improvements, suggested travel routes, subway etiquette, testimonials from celebrities and, occasionally, in response to government requests, public service announcements, the work in the exhibition provides a rare insight into the daily life and character of New York City's first subway system



Ivy L. Lee Papers, Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library

Posters were used to announce the introduction of coin-operated

turnstiles, "a change which revolutionized the daily habits of millions of people," according to Lee; to explain the need for a fare raise in the 1920s, and to extol fast and direct train service to baseball games at Yankee Stadium and the Polo Grounds. Designed to resemble the front pages of newspapers, *The Subway Sun* and *The Elevated Express* announced the opening of the 42nd Street shuttle between Grand Central Station and Times Square; asked riders to please not block the doors, and urged them to visit New York City's free swimming pools. As the subways became more crowded the IRT also used these posters to promote their "Open Air" elevated lines as a more comfortable alternative.

These works have never before been exhibited since they were originally pasted up in the windows of IRT subway and elevated cars more than seven decades ago. Ivy Lee's work with the IRT ended after the company went into receivership in 1932. Today, almost 90 years later, Lee's idea of communicating directly with passengers through pamphlets, brochures, and posters — and many of the same themes: public safety, system improvements, travel advisories, subway etiquette, and public service announcements — can be found in the MTA New York City Transit's *Subtalk* and *Bustalk* posters series.

The New York Transit Museum Gallery Annex at Grand Central Terminal is open Monday – Friday 8 a.m. to 8 p.m.; Saturday – Sunday 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Closed major holidays. Admission to the Gallery Annex is free.

For additional information, contact the Museum at (718) 694-1600 or log onto <http://www.mta.info/mta/museum>.

On **August 21, 2004, at 1:30 p.m.** Transit Museum Senior Curator Charles Sachs will present an illustrated lecture about the exhibit exploring in further detail Ivy Lee's promotional campaign for the IRT subway, the early days of publicity, and how Lee's public relations campaign was specifically designed to entice New Yorkers to ride the new subway system.

The lecture, to be held at the New York Transit Museum in Brooklyn Heights, is free with paid Museum admission. The Museum is located at the corner of Boerum Place and Schermerhorn Street.