

Celebrating Charlie's Birthday

"These are the times that try men's souls. In the course of our nation's history the people of Boston have rallied bravely whenever the rights of men have been threatened. Today, a new crisis has arisen. The Metropolitan Transit Authority, better known as the MTA, is attempting to levy a burdensome tax on the population in the form of a subway fare increase. Citizens, hear me out. This could happen to you!"

So began the campaign song for Walter O'Brien, who ran for mayor of Boston fifty years ago this summer. His supporters had been searching for an issue that would boost their candidate – not an easy task in a city that four years earlier elected James Michael Curley to his fourth (non-consecutive) term as mayor while under indictment for mail fraud. Curley's conviction and five month incarceration in a federal penitentiary (served during his term) was having little impact on his supporters this time around, either. Worst of all, O'Brien's progressive politics had led some to peg him as a communist, the kiss of death in a country just beginning its obsession with "the red menace."

One hope for O'Brien's quixotic campaign seemed to be the issue of city finances. The tax base been decimated by large numbers of abatements granted by Curley, making it almost impossible for the city to maintain, repair, or build new infrastructure. Businesses and residents were fleeing in great numbers to the suburbs where new schools, highways, and other amenities awaited, further eroding the city's coffers. Things got so bad that in August 1947, the Legislature took control of the region's trains, subways, and busses from the city and handed them to the new Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA).

When, in the middle of the 1949 campaign, the MTA announced a fare increase that included an extra nickel upon exiting at certain stops, O'Brien and his supporters realized they had an issue upon which they could build a campaign – a new tax that would unfairly impact working Bostonians who relied upon the subway to get to work. Jacqueline Steiner and Bess Lomax Hawes set to work on a campaign song. They wisely focused on the travails of one man, whom they named Charlie, to represent the entire working class. The song's lyrics explained:

*"Well, let me tell you of the story of a man named Charlie
On a tragic and fateful day
He put ten cents in his pocket, kissed his wife and family
Went to ride on the MTA...*

*Charlie handed in his dime at the Kendall Square station
And he changed for Jamaica Plain
When he got there, the conductor told him "one more nickel"
Charlie couldn't get off of that train*

*Well did he ever return, no he never returned
And his fate is still unlearned (what a pity)
He may ride forever 'neath the streets of Boston*

He's the man who never returned...

At the end of the song, the campaign made it's pitch for votes:

*Now you citizens of Boston dontcha think it's a scandal
How the people have to pay and pay
Fight the fare increase, vote for Walter O'Brien!
Get poor Charlie off the MTA!"*

As clever as it was, the song did little to enhance O'Brien's credibility and he, Curley, and two other lesser candidates lost to the surprising John Hynes, the Boston City Clerk who had been made temporary mayor during Curley's incarceration. (This was Curley's famous "Last Hurrah." Though he tried three more times he never won back the office he cherished.) Walter O'Brien moved back to his home state of Maine in 1957 and became a school librarian and a bookstore owner, passing away in relative obscurity in 1998.

Though O'Brien's campaign song would later become one of the most famous in the world, fame would elude the former candidate himself. A few years after the election, at the height of the Red Scare, Will Holt recorded the number as a pop song for a local record company, but the deluge of protests from Bostonians who felt that the song made a hero out of a local "radical" forced the record to be hastily withdrawn. In 1959, ten years after O'Brien's campaign, the Kingston Trio recorded a version of the song that would reach number 15 on the Billboard Top 40 chart. To avoid the same fate as the earlier version of the song, the trio changed O'Brien's first name to George.

Despite the obfuscation, the Kingston Trio's song was, for many of us non-New Englanders, our introduction to Boston. Years before I knew the difference between the Common and Public Garden, I could recite the words:

*Charlie's wife goes down to the Scollay Square station
Every day at quarter past two
And through the open window she hands Charlie a sandwich
As the train comes rumblin' through.
("The MTA Song," ©1956 Atlantic Music Corp. ©renewed 1984)*

In 1976, like many first-time visitors to the city, I visited the Scollay Square station (since returned to its original name but then known only as Government Center) and, like so many before me, wondered why Charlie's wife didn't hand him a nickel instead of a sandwich so he could have gotten off that train.

David Kruh is the author of **Always Something Doing: Boston's Infamous Scollay Square**, the second edition of which is due this fall from Northeastern University Press.