

Forced From First Class, Emma Coger Fought for Equal Rights and Entered History

The decision is planted on the broad and just ground of equality of all men before the law, which is not limited by color, nationality, religion or condition in life. This principle of equality is announced and secured by the very first words of our state Constitution, which relate to the rights of the people, in language most comprehensive and incapable of misconstruction, namely: "All men are, by nature, free and equal;" Art. 1, § 1. Upon it we rest our conclusion in this case.
~ Supreme Court of Iowa. Emma Coger v. North Western Union Packet Company

She made a scene. She could have simply left when told to, but she refused. She made a scene. She should have known better.

Her name was Emma Coger, and the reason you've never heard of her is that her story is so old hat that it shouldn't be news at all. But it is.

Emma was 19 years old and a teacher--middle school, sixth grade, maybe seventh, not much older than her students. History doesn't say whether or not she was on the road to be a master teacher. What's essential background material--is her age, her occupation, and her race.

She was what people called, 150 years ago, "a quadroon"--1/4 African American, which meant, pigment-wise, she was a good bit white.

"What happened?" you're saying.

Emma Coger purchased a first-class breakfast ticket on a Mississippi River steamer, the S. S. Merrill, bound for Keokuk, Iowa to visit friends for the weekend. The clerk gave her a scribbled ticket with special instructions because Emma was to eat in one of the designated places Blacks, along the railing or in the back with the help. The clerk kindly returned a half-dollar.

Emma Coger got mad. She'd never been denied the dining room before, so she asked a white man to buy her a ticket for lunch. He did. No problem, no scribbles.

Thus, when dinner was served, Emma Coger took a chair in the elegant dining room, at which time two white women sitting beside her grew even more pale.

Emma wouldn't move. the two snarled at the indignity they were suffering with a black woman sitting with the proper ladies. They left in a huff.

One of the appalled women was the captain's wife. Thus, the captain heard about the foul disgrace and came to the aid of the clerk who'd also failed by that time to get Emma Coger to remove herself from the chair. Ms. Coger was definitely making a scene.

Things took a bad turn. The captain demanded. She refused. Often. Tempers rose. The captain grabbed Emma, and Emma grabbed the tablecloth and took it with her so plates and silverware crashed to the floor. In short, Emma Coger made a scene right there beneath the chandeliers, and you just can't have a scene in first-class.

When she returned home, Emma Coger was determined to sue. Her case was brought to court in Iowa in February of 1873, eight years after the Civil War.

The S. S. Merrill's company lawyer claimed Emma Coger had cut loose and swore like a drunken sailor, even used that very bad language before the Iowa Supreme Court. Can you imagine? Look it up. You'll see.

Emma claimed not. "I never, never use bad language," she told the court in her defense, "and do not recollect of doing it on that occasion. I was angry because I was refused, and the way I was spoken to."

Emma Coger won big. Swearing was immaterial, the court said; "the sole question was," and I quote: "Had the defendant as a common carrier of passengers the authority to establish and enforce regulations denying individuals of color of the privileges and rights of white persons?"

The court said no. And more.

It cannot be doubted that she was excluded from the table and cabin, not because others would have been degraded and she elevated in society, but because of prejudice entertained against her race, growing out of its former condition of servitude, a prejudice, be it proclaimed to the honor of our people, that is fast giving way to nobler sentiments, and, it is hoped, will soon be entombed with its parent, slavery.

Emma Coger was awarded \$250. She gave it to her lawyer. She wasn't after money, she said; she sued "to vindicate the rights of my race, and my character of womanhood."

Here's the story—all about dignity and justice: Emma Coger wouldn't take it, so she made a scene. Praise be, I say. Praise be.

That's a story to make your day.