

# Amtrak Excursion 2014

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## Introduction

After riding Amtrak's *Empire Builder* to Minneapolis to help son Troy move, I thought it would be fun to take a longer trip—in a sleeping car—and talked with Pam about it.

She agreed, and we started thinking about where to go.

## San Diego

We have longtime friends in San Diego and Pam's maid of honor is in Idaho so those were opening thoughts. Nephew Tim is in Portland, and we wanted to see him, too.

Decided to head to Southern California and then to Oregon and Idaho.

Pam suggested spending a few days in Yosemite while traveling north through California.

That turned out to be a great idea.

It was a looping trip that would take us about 5,500 miles through 12 states and a national park.

Planning started in November 2013 and we settled on a Wednesday, April 30, 2014, departure and Monday, May 12, arrival back.

These dates agreed with the schedules of the people we would visit.

## Arrangements

Checking with Amtrak, I learned about a service called [Amtrak Vacations](#), which I initially thought was part of the government rail system but learned is an independent travel agency.

Kerrie LePagel, marketing manager for the company, replied in an e-mail: "We are Amtrak's national vacation provider which is to say that we are their official tour operator and we work in partnership with them to promote their long distance train travel. There are other companies out there that also provide Amtrak vacation packages but Amtrak Vacations has the national partnership agreement directly with Amtrak."

AV's Joanne, a friendly and competent east coaster, took care of the connections from our start on the *Hiawatha* in Milwaukee to our return on the *Empire Builder*; she also booked our bus trip to and from Yosemite and our accommodations in the Lodge at the Falls.

I reserved a room at the Ace Hotel in Portland and another at The Davenport in Spokane for one night each, otherwise we slept and showered on trains or at our friends' homes in San Diego and Idaho.

## Preview

Overall, everything went well.

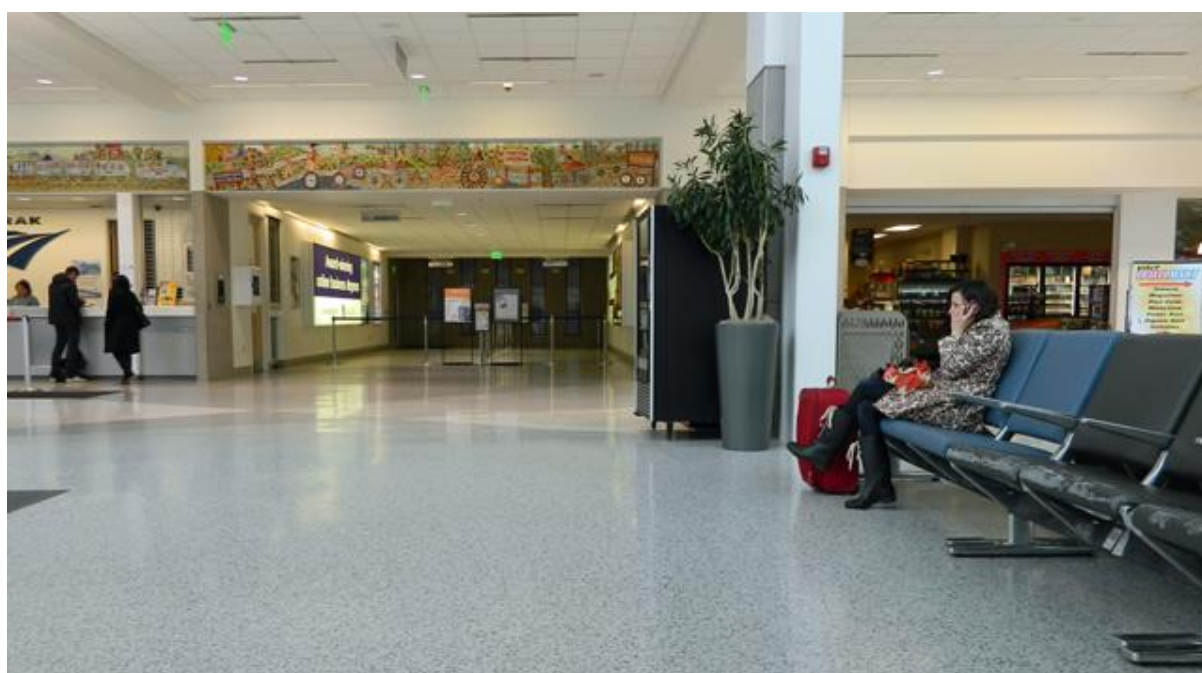
Naturally there were a few bumps and the unexpected and slightly unpleasant along the way.

Nothing terrible, though, except the on-board marijuana bust.

This story has two sides: personal and public. Mostly I'll write about the public.

First stop was Milwaukee's Intermodal Station.

### 1. Milwaukee & Chicago



Milwaukee Intermodal Station.

### ***Hiawatha***

Boarded the *Hiawatha* out of Milwaukee on-time at 11:00 a.m. and were in Chicago's downtown Union Station by about 1:00 p.m.

The *Hiawatha* runs between the cities about every two hours; it's a commuter train and plain.

There are plenty of bathrooms but no lounge car or vending machines.

### **Union Station**

Union Station is a grand old place and we easily found our way to the waiting area for the *Southwest Chief* which would take us to Los Angeles.

And *wait* we did. Our 3:00 p.m. departure time came and went without a word from Amtrak.

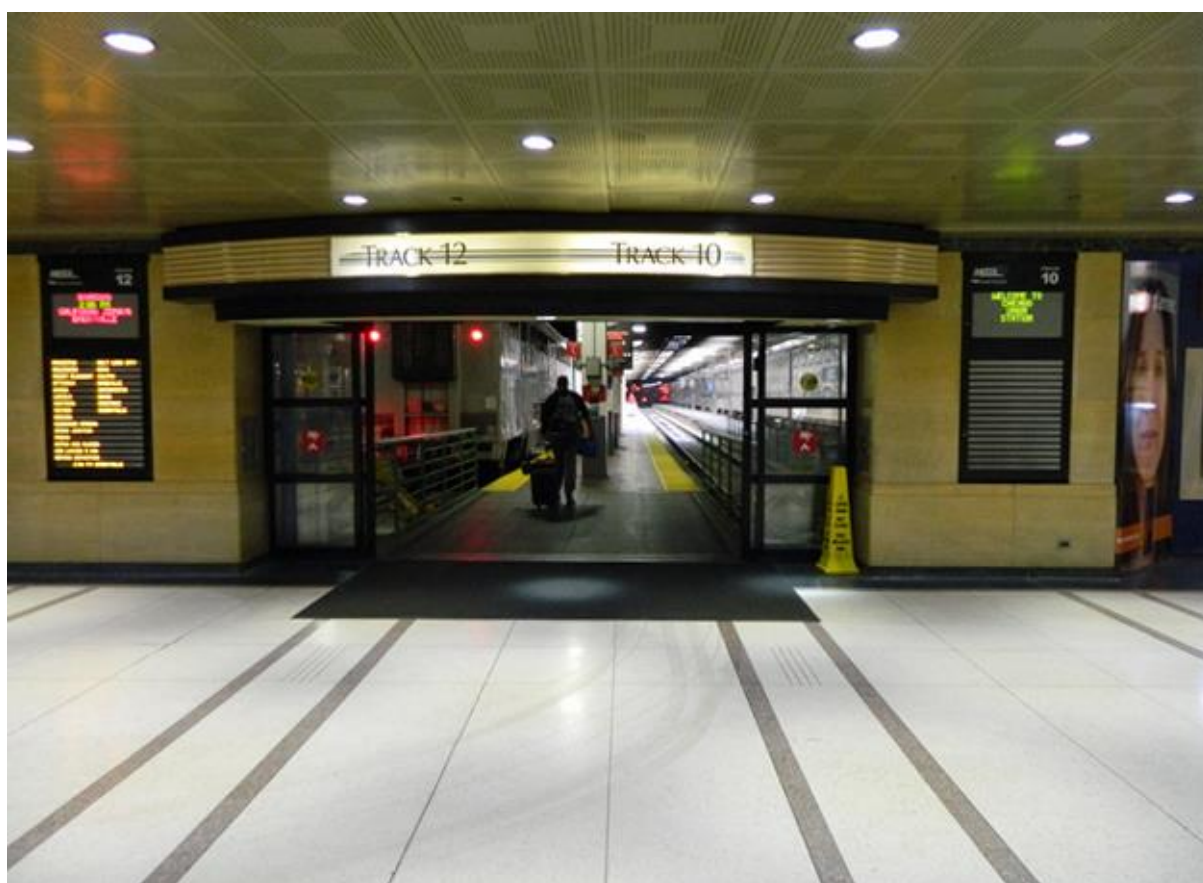
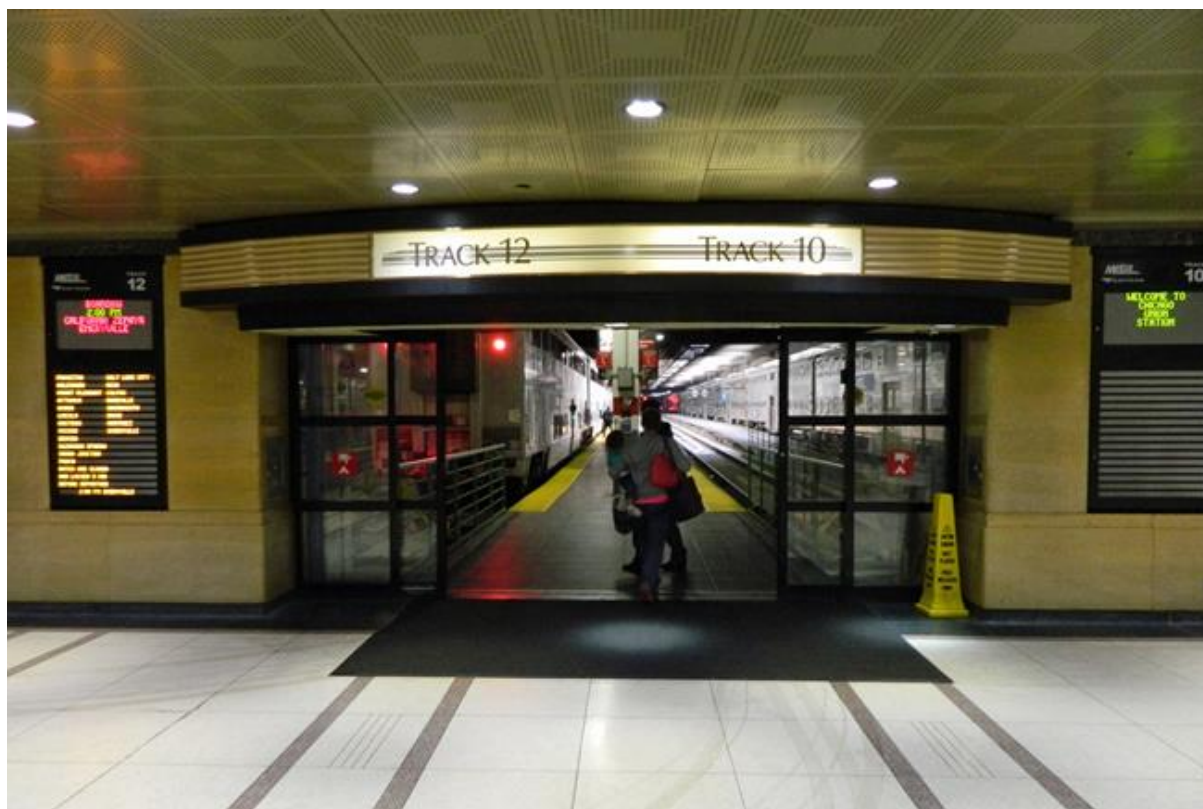
Around 4:00, an Amtrak representative announced that our train was delayed due to equipment problems. "Equipment" is what rail personnel call just about everything connected with trains, including locomotives.

The voice also said our train wasn't on the right track.

During our trip we would experience various delays, most associated with equipment, but not Amtrak equipment.

The waiting room was overflowing and finally at about 6:00 p.m. our train to California was ready, and we descended to the boarding area.









## **Boarding**

We walked the pathway shown above until we encountered a conductor who asked for our tickets and directed us to a double-decker car near the rear of the train. Sleeping car attendant Vincent was waiting.

He helped carry our luggage up the winding stairs to a deluxe bedroom on the second level. It's about six by eight feet with a bathroom in the middle and a small sink near the door into the passageway.

On the wall toward the back of the car is a couch that becomes a single bed and above it, a fold-down cot.

A sliding door with a curtain is on the passageway side; curtained windows line the outside wall.

## **Compact**

At first, I couldn't figure out where the shower was but soon found it directly above the toilet; a closet-sized room serves as bathroom and shower.

Our deluxe bedroom was well-planned, clean, comfortable.

## **Rolling west**

Vincent said he's been on the job 24 years but doesn't look a day over 35.

During his public address announcement he mentioned he's from California and followed a nostalgic "All aboard!" with, "We're going home!"

Soon after we were visited by a dining car attendant who said dinner would be at 7:00.

### **Dinner**

Amtrak seats strangers together for meals to use space better, and it's a lot of fun.

Our companions the first night were a husband, 89, and wife, 84. They wed in 1995, and both were in second marriages. He was spry enough to carry their luggage up to the sleeping car's second level.

### **Observation car**

Afterward we found seats in the observation car which was our living room while aboard trains and watched the world roll by through big windows.

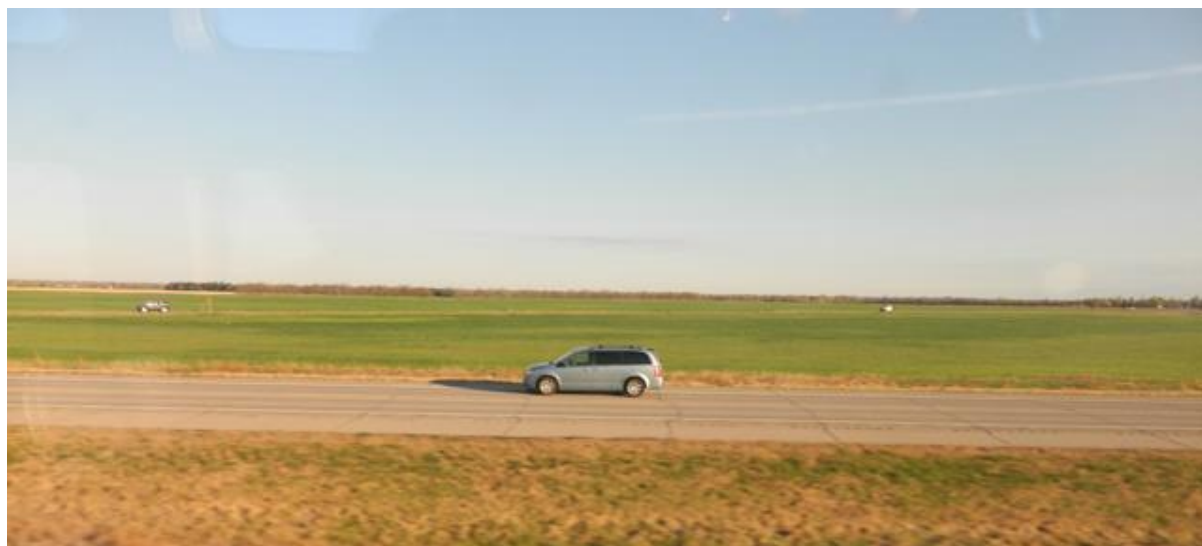
Saw a huge array of blinking red lights on the dark prairies southwest of Chicago. Must have been 50 or more. Deduced they were warning lights for wind turbines.

When we returned to our bedroom, Vincent said he'd prepare the beds which involved folding the upper down and moving cushions around on the lower.

My uneasiness about heights post-cerebral hemorrhage resulted in Pam taking the upper, at least for the first night. Getting to it is a bit of a climb up a small ladder. Beginning the second night, I took the upper.

Got to bed later than usual.

## **2. Plains**



## First morning

Woke at about 6:30 a.m.

Pam was looking out the window, and I asked what she saw.

"Cattle."

Sleeping accommodations are tight but comfortable and the gentle sway of the car lulled me to sleep. Slept well. The train stopped at least once for a half hour or maybe longer. No explanation.



Vincent.



Wind turbines were a common sight across the country.  
But nowhere near as common as freight locomotives and cars.





Observation car.

### **Modern conveniences**

Took a seat in the observation car with a cup of coffee and began wondering whether I placed a receipt for parking on the dash as a sign near the Milwaukee Intermodal Station parking lot's automatic pay station instructed.

Paid for 13 days but couldn't remember if I had just dropped the slip in the cup holder between the seats or put it where it was supposed to be.

Later I used my iPhone to call the lot and reached a woman who assured me she would have someone put a sign on my car to let checkers know I had paid.

"In any case," she said, "we wouldn't tow your car."

### **Old-fashioned passengers**

There were quite a few Amish in Union Station yesterday afternoon and some are on our train.

An elderly man and woman are sitting toward the front of the car. She's wearing a white bonnet and he, a black vest and French blue shirt. A man alone in similar dress is nearby.

Amish women cover their hair in a Muslim sort of way. Guess the eroticism is too much for a godly man to resist.

An ungodly man is completely immune.





## **Backyards**

Traveling by train, a number of commentators have observed, takes passengers through the backyards of America.

Sides of houses and buildings not visible from the street are visible from the tracks.

On our trip, it quickly became apparent that many Americans use their backyards to store conglomerations of junk, a lot of it rusting steel associated in one way or another with vehicles and machinery.

"There's gold in these piles," people must think.





### **Familiar names**

Stopped in Dodge City, Kansas. Tourist town. Home of Boot Hill. Statue near Main Street of Wyatt Earp.

Reminds me of how stupefied we Boomers (and our extended families) were by 50s westerns. *Cheyenne, Have Gun Will Travel, Rawhide, The Lawman, The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp*, and many more; most brought to our black and white Philcos, Zeniths, etc. by cigarette commercials.

### **Delay**

Asked Vincent about the long stop last night, and he sad it was "due to a crew change."

Already three hours behind schedule and now another hour. *But, we're not in a hurry and the scenery's great.*





### **Tornado alley**

Texted the above iPhone photo to Jim in San Diego: "This is the Kansas Dorothy was referring to. Dust Bowl country."

Jim: "Nice dirt road! I'll give you a call later on. I want to talk about the train from LA to SD. Does it stop at Solana Beach?"

## Plains



## On loan

*The Heartland Flyer's Big Game Train* normally carries fans to and from "the annual Red River Rivalry football showdown between the University of Oklahoma Sooners and the University of Texas Longhorns,"\* according to a website maintained by *The Daily Ardmoreite*, Ardmore, Oklahoma. Must have been borrowed due to a shortage of equipment on the *Southwest Chief* run.







## Twenty-First Century

A well-dressed, at first somewhat shy woman in her early fifties was seated with us for lunch.

She took a while to warm to the situation but eventually said she's a radiologist like her father and was traveling with her elderly mother in a deluxe bedroom like ours. They were heading to LA and then taking a cruise ship to Vancouver.

We talked enough in the brief span of having a salad and coffee to learn that she was frustrated by the current health care system and not necessarily happy with Obama's attempts to fix it, though she applauded his willingness *to try to do something* rather than nothing like his predecessors.

By the the end of lunch, she was comfortable enough to let us know she is a lesbian who will wed another medical professional this summer in Vermont, the first state to legalize gay marriage.

*Completely twenty-first century.*



Combination shower-toilet in our Deluxe Bedroom; probably it's a more efficient experience for some than for others.

## Colorado



### Rocket city

Last night we had dinner with a couple from New York who now call San Bernardino, California, home. He was an engineer who said he had spent part of his career working on weaponry.

Claimed to have met JFK and Wernher Von Braun in Huntsville, Alabama, during the early 1960s when the city was known for pioneering rocketry work.

### Amish

The elderly Amish couple I'd seen in the observation car was seated across the aisle.

Our dinner companions sat with them the night before. *Sure wish we would have been paired with them!*

We have Amish families in Western Wisconsin, and when I was a teenager, I would sometimes drive my mother, who grew up on a farm, to the Monroe Clinic in that part of the state.

She enjoyed stopping at Amish farms to buy homemade goods, but even more she liked talking with the Amish. Mainly, I now know, because they reminded her of how things were when she was a child in the early 1900s. She was born in 1906, spoke German, and probably could



understand the Amish language, which Wikipedia describes as "Pennsylvania German, also known as 'Pennsylvania Dutch.'"\*

Stupid teen that I was, I always waited in the car. My mother, who liked sayings, regularly reminded me that: "The best thoughts come too late." Indeed.

The San Bernardino wife said the Amish couple had four daughters, six sons, and a bunch of grandchildren.

They were heading west with an ill granddaughter.







### **Another modern tale**

Lunch today was with a gay man in his late 30s or early 40s who said he had worked in the Richard M. Daley (mayor from 1989 to 2007 [his father Richard J. Daley was mayor from 1955 to 1976]) administration in Chicago. He was visiting California to attend a gay wedding. Pam later saw him sitting in the observation car doing needle point. *Completely twenty-first century.*





The deluxe bedroom's upper panel and bench seat fold down.

### **Friday**

Woke well before dawn; train was stopped. Looked out and saw the Flagstaff, Arizona, depot.

Many boarded. A psychic-tarot-card reader parlor was visible across the street.

It was hard getting back to sleep. When I looked at my watch again it was 5:00 a.m. Walked to the observation car with a cup of coffee (free to deluxe bedroom passengers).

### **Irritations small and large**

A woman was expressing major dissatisfaction to the conductor about what was going to be our five-hours-plus late arrival in LA.

He listened patiently and calmly explained that there wasn't a thing he or Amtrak could do about it.

On the way back to the sleeper car for my second cup, I spoke with Vincent and a dining car attendant.

They knew all about the unhappy woman. Evidently she complained a lot.

Life's too short.

Told them about Great Grandma Bertha's: "When you have your health,



you have everything." Another adage I heard from my mother many, many times and only realized the simple truth of years later.

The lady, who appeared to be in her mid- to late-sixties, was reading *Rolling Stone*.



Sunrise, Arizona.





## **Barren**

Rolling through the rocky dessert of western Arizona at 6:18 a.m.

The train is curving around a landform I guess because one minute the Sun is to my right, the next to my left.

## **"Get your kicks"**

Just stopped somewhere on the western edge of Zona not far from Highway 66; various signs promoting this connection are visible in the distance.

Must have hitched through here in December, 1971, and January, 1972.





Deluxe bedroom, note jump seat and shelf. Nicely designed.



Checked on Solana Beach and discovered the train indeed stops there.

Vincent said it might make sense for us to get off at the Fullerton Station, which is southeast of LA.

He thought we could catch the *Pacific Surfliner* south to San Diego at 12:59 p.m. but we didn't arrive until 1:15 and the 12:59 was on time.

Amtrak's agent said the next train, the 3:30, had been canceled so we had to wait until 4:39 before we could head south.



Fullerton, California, southbound boarding platform.

### **New friends**

Several passengers who had been on the train from Chicago waited with us at the Fullerton Depot and pretty soon we were carrying on like old friends.

A single grandmother in her fifties, who lost her husband a few years earlier to Alzheimer's, talked about the mom and pop grocery they operated; incredibly, one couple had spent time in Whitewater, Wisconsin, where Pam and I met.

Our group was rounded out by a retired oil geologist from southern Illinois.



## Heat

Temperature was a bit of a shock.

Texted Jim in San Diego: "Who turned on the heat?"

Jim: "Sorry about the 90s."

"Feels good, Jim. Just wish I hadn't put the trapdoor long johns on this a.m. I was able to take the parka off."

## Look before you sit

"Pam just sat down in spilled choc milk. She's not a happy camperette. On her way to the lav with new shorts."

Jim: "Some of the best chocolate milk you could sit in comes from Fullerton."

## Parade of commerce

Freight trains rolled east while we waited, each loaded with containers from Asia.

They land at the Port of Los Angeles or the Port of Long Beach, first and second, in annual container traffic.\*

The *Pacific Surfliner* came right on time and we headed south. Soon the train's namesake was visible to the West.







Amtrak depot, Friday evening, Solana Beach.



Sunset, Torrey Pines State Park.



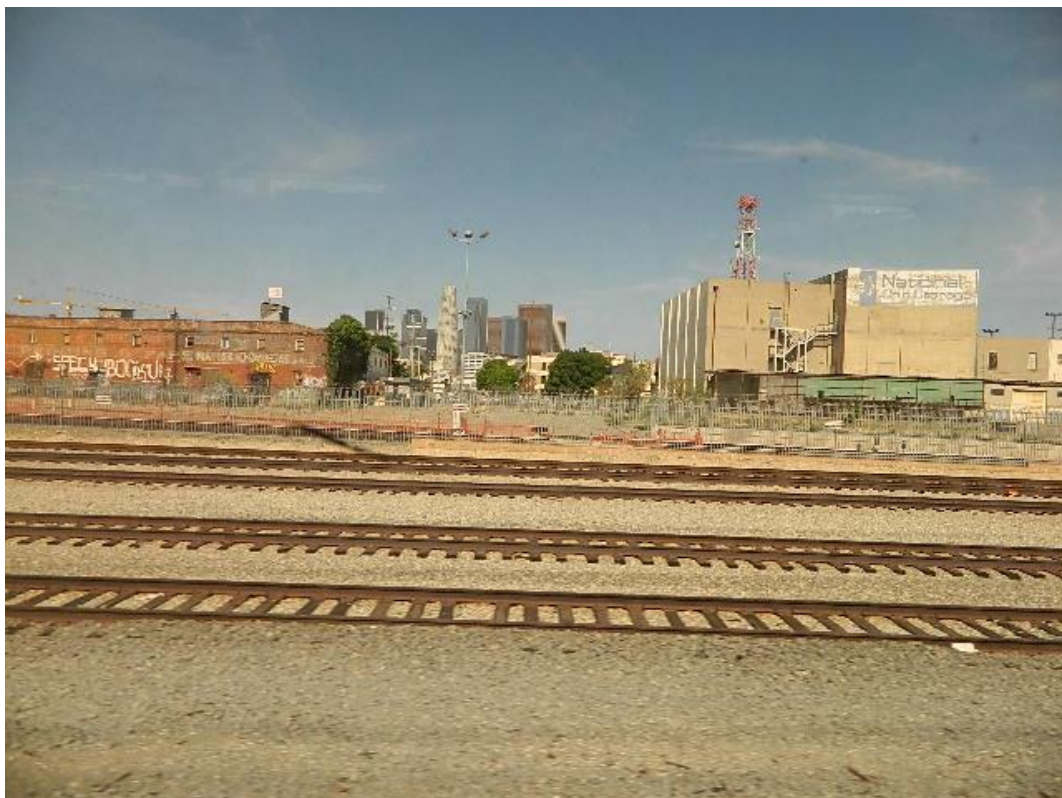
Sunday morning, Solana Beach.





Heading north, Sun low in the east.

\*[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Port\\_of\\_Long\\_Beach](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Port_of_Long_Beach)



Rolling north into Los Angeles on the *Pacific Surfliner*.





LA depot.







Rolling out of LA., on the bus.



North of LA, on the way to Bakersfield. Comfortable and cool. High rolling hills; ears popping.





Heading to Yosemite.



Highway 41, Coarsegold, California; about 65 miles to go.





One-lane bridge. Lights control traffic on both sides of the river.



Nearing Yosemite, approximately 410 miles from Solana Beach.

It was dark when we arrived at Yosemite.



We checked into Lodge by the Falls, deposited our suitcases, and went to a park restaurant for dinner.

When we returned to our second-floor room, the phone was ringing.

A woman with an Indian accent explained that our tour of Yosemite would start the next morning in the lobby at 9:00. It was part of our package.

She said we should look for Glenn.



First view of Yosemite Falls, 5:30 a.m. Monday, May 4.

### **Glenn?**

Got to the lobby on-time but didn't see Glenn, and no one at the desk knew who he was.

### **Tex**

Pondered this while looking at the lofty falls, and my cell phone rang.

Brother Bob was calling with the sad news that longtime friend Stan—whom everyone called Tex—had died in Chicago. Cancer.

The planet lost one good and enlightened Earthling. He was a hard worker, progressive thinker, and talented accordion player.



### **All you need is cash**

Unable to locate Glenn, I called Amtrak Vacations and spoke with Brenda who gave me the local tour company's number.

I was concerned because people at the Lodge By The Falls tour desk said only all-day tours visited the sequoias in Yosemite's Mariposa Grove, and we wanted to see the giant trees.

The woman I spoke with the night before answered. She said we were scheduled for a four-hour tour that didn't include the sequoias.

We could go to the sequoias for \$200 more, she said. It seemed like highway robbery, but we didn't have a choice. I checked and it was too far away to reach on rental bikes, and there were no rental cars.

The tour desk people even called some contacts they had on file but came up empty.

We decided to pay the \$200 and soon Glenn arrived. He was a California native and familiar with the park; now retired, he spent his career with the long-gone Bell System.

### **Genesha**

He picked us up in a mini-van owned by the tour company. It had a



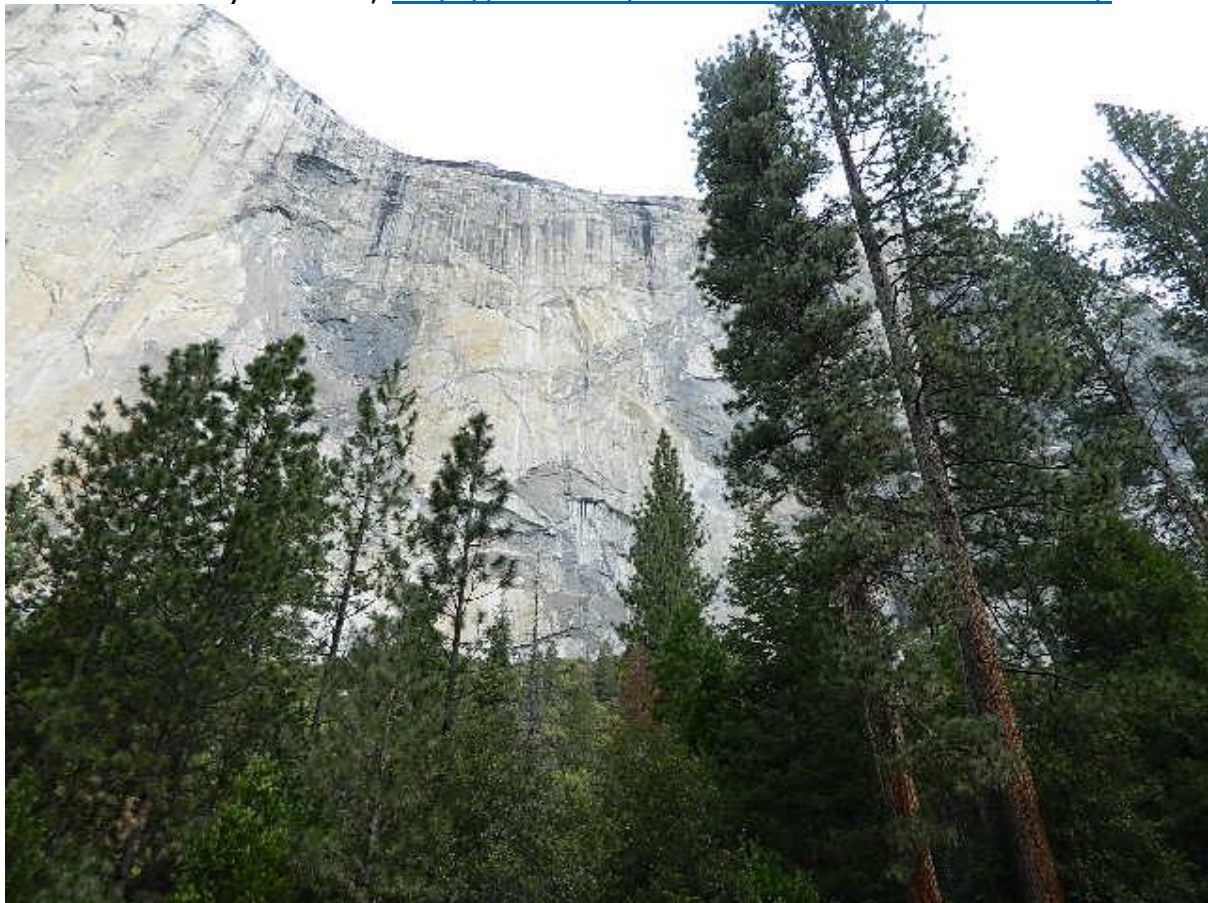
statue of the Hindu elephant god Ganesha on the dash.

Glenn called it a Buddha, but long-time friend Anand, of Pune, India, celebrates Ganesha's birthday every year, so I recognized the deity.



Dashboard Ganesha.

Courtesy of Julia, <http://www.myinternationaldepartures.com/>



El Capitan

## Climbers

As we drove along, Glenn pointed out the rock climbers' campground: a gathering of colorful nylon pup tents and counter-culture-looking mountaineers.

Soon after, he pulled over near El Capitan and began scanning the gray-tan expanse with a pair of Bushnell binoculars.

He was looking for climbers, but Pam spotted them first with unaided eyes.

There were two groups about half way up the cliff, almost invisible against the wall of stone.

Glenn said the ascent takes days and climbers often sleep "hanging from the wall"—*like bats*, I thought. Hard to believe people are batty about their precious lives but each to her or his own.

## Impermanence

Next we stopped at Bridal Falls where the water flow is so wispy the wind sometimes blows it back over the precipice and the feature disappears.

Yosemite Falls, the one near our lodge, also vanishes by the end of summer when the water supply dries up, Glenn said.

## Don't look down

Roads around the park are narrow and curving, and dramatic drops are visible here and there from both sides of the car. Reminds me of Bolivia. Glenn drove slowly and carefully, trying hard not to make Pam carsick.

Occasionally we saw small streams that plunged forcefully into the Merced River, Yosemite Valley's main waterway. The river was named by Spanish soldiers; roughly translated, merced means "mercy" in English.







## **Sequoias**

Wound our way to the Mariposa Grove where the giant trees stand silently as they have for many hundreds, even thousands of years.

In addition to girth and height, their color is a striking characteristic. A mellow and unexpected orange-red.

Sequoias abound in the grove. General Sherman, the largest, is about 275 feet tall and 36 feet in diameter.\*













Snow plants in early May.



## Free-thinking radicals

"Snow Plant is the free-thinking radical of wildflower society, eschewing photosynthesis altogether in favor of a symbiotic relationship with underground fungi. As a result, the entire aboveground section of the plant is free to be a traffic-stopping bright red. Snow Plant's mushroom-from-Mars good looks, accented by its ability to grow in dark, shady spots where other flowers dare not tread, make it one of Yosemite's most arresting sights.

"Habitat: Humus-rich, shady areas from 4,000—9,000 feet. You can find it along Highway 41 near Glacier Point Road, along Glacier Point Road itself, and along Tioga Road near Crane Flat."\*

## Identification

I'm a freethinking radical myself, so maybe that's why I immediately liked them. They grow to a height of 12 inches, but my shot captured these during the early days of their lives.



Leaning against the top of a fallen sequoia.





### **Glacier Point**

We had lunch at Glacier Point (above) where the views are deep and wide. Subtle colors against the cloudy, gray-white sky; rock reflecting shades of purple.

### **Yosemite**

Our guide said the word Yosemite is Native American and refers to a grizzly bear with a gaping maw; it was suggested by the site's soaring walls and deep valley, according to Glenn.

What must the first human visitors have thought when they saw this?

Native Americans lived here for thousands of years. Now they're nowhere to be seen, and tourists hardly think of them.

It's as if we European-Americans have always inhabited this continent and the natives attacked us.

Just as it's as if Mexicans are invading California—not the other way around. Everyone, however, is either an invader or the progeny of invaders.



## Alcohol and the US government

Drinking a Miller Lite in the *Southwest Chief's* Sightseer Lounge, it dawned on me that the federal government is now in the business of *selling* alcohol.

Naturally, the bars and restaurants in Yosemite National Park sell beer, liquor, and wine—the Yosemite gift shop even has a colorful display of intoxicants in convenient pint sizes, including Fireball cinnamon whiskey.

The name and apparently fire-breathing satyr-dragon graphic on the bottle attract attention and promote its probable impact on drinkers.

*Fireball* whiskey retailed to citizens of age by the US government.

### Irony

It's one thing to profit from the taxes alcohol generates but another to sell it *officially* just as it was once *officially* prohibited. And not that long ago.

"Perish the thought!" some might say, but eventually a whole range of other drugs will be available here, too.

After all, the federal government is already selling the worst—alcohol and nicotine—and taxing them to boot. *Double income.*

And just as it is normal for the government to sell alcohol now, it will be normal for it to sell loose or rolled marijuana and then....

Step right up.

\*From <http://www.yosemitehikes.com/wildflowers/snow-plant/snow-plant.htm>:





Snow near Glacier Point, early May.



On the trail to Yosemite Falls.









Water is mainly mist when it arrives here after a long, tumbling fall.

### **Ahwahnee**

Spent our Yosemite departure day taking in the sights, including a cemetery not far from the lodge.

Also visited the ritzy Ahwahnee Hotel where huge, Xanadu-like, walk-in fireplaces warm the mountain air.

The Ahwahnee was built in the 1920s and designed to cater to the "affluent and influential traveler" according to a Yosemite history.\*

That is, *not us*. Room rates start at around \$500 a night.

### **Dress code?**

The Ahwahnee Dining Room has a dress code: "Proper attire is kindly requested for dinner. Gentlemen are asked to wear collared shirts and

long pants. Ladies are asked to wear dresses, skirts, or long pants and blouses. Children over the age of four are asked to dress accordingly."

We didn't stay for dinner.

Like many thoughts not held by the religious, there is no certainty as to the meaning of the word Ahwahnee. Some think it is a native word that means mouth, which fits the supposed grizzly roots of Yosemite.

### **Natural**

Later, we took a shuttle bus to the Visitors Center where the emphasis is on the park's geology and the people who lived here for thousands of years before Europeans arrived.

A nearby theater screened a Ken Burns' film. It was an excellent overview of the park but full of completely inappropriate references to "spirit" and "god."

*Yosemite's splendor couldn't be more natural.*

### **Fond farewell**

At 4:00 p.m. we boarded the bus out.

Ribbony cascades created by the steady rain fell from the walls.

Clouds swept over the tops and sides of the Mesa-like surroundings and made me think of the Smokey Mountains.

We began a long descent to the city of Merced.



Merced station.

Photo by Pedro Xing. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

([http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Merced\\_station\\_2387\\_06.JPG](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Merced_station_2387_06.JPG)  
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## **Waiting**

Reached Merced at about 7:00 p.m., and had to wait until 9:15 for the train to Sacramento.

Station was functional, practically empty, about half a mile from the closest business.

## **Hanging out**

Two groups walked in and out. One was a trio of late-teen guys looking for something to do. Two Hispanics and a European-American—all smokers. They seemed familiar to the depot manager who had an angry exchange with the bigger Hispanic kid.

## **Women**

The second group comprised three late teens or early 20s lesbians. Two were a couple—at first I thought the slim, dark one dressed in black with chrome chains and slicked back hair was a man.

But, later, when she swaggered by, I noticed small breasts through her camouflaging clothing.

Her love interest was a buxom blond who displayed a lot of cleavage, pin-up style. Later I noticed them smooching torridly against the depot wall as a train approached.

The third member had a classic tomboy look. She wore jeans and a dumpy sweatshirt; had messy, blond-brown hair; and looked angry.

Pam developed a problem with her eyes and called a cab to take her to Walgreens. Fortunately it had her prescription in a database so it was as if it was just down the street.

Lesbians, bored youth, *national* Walgreens. Completely twenty-first century.



Merced station.

Photo by Pedro Xing. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

([http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Merced\\_station\\_2387\\_05.JPG](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Merced_station_2387_05.JPG)  
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## Coach

Our train to Sacramento was on-time, and a smiling conductor helped with our bags.

For the short duration of this leg, we sat in coach seats, which are plenty comfortable and ten times better than anything you'll find on a plane.

A young mother with her small daughter and son sat near us.

Both kids were asleep in one train seat when we boarded, but the daughter woke and was overtired for the rest of the trip. Mom was patient and loving. When we got to Sacramento, Pam and I watched the kids while she collected their luggage.



We walked a ways through the Sacramento depot's lower recesses and eventually found the train to Portland known as the *Coast Starlight*, got aboard, and were able to sleep about five hours.



Wednesday morning in Oregon.



## When religion ruled the world

Had breakfast with a friendly retired couple from Portland. The husband was a former restaurant owner, and she had been a middle school teacher. He was a guitarist, owned a Fender Stratocaster and Telecaster, and played a Gibson J-50 on loan from a friend.

Progressives, all, we talked about Wisconsin's currently Dark Ages politics.



## Greenery

Oregon plants along the tracks look like they'd grow well in Wisconsin, but the Cascades in the distance make it clear we're a long way from home.

*Lush.*

Rolling through here is like being in a green tunnel. Conifer and deciduous trees down both sides of the track.

We've disappeared into five tunnels, some fairly long.

At the moment, we are waiting for freight trains to clear the rails ahead.







## Portland

Text to Tim in Portland: "Coming at you. Hope to do a little picking. Staying at the Ace Hotel, but just one night. Leaving Thursday. Uncle Ted."

Tim: "Welcome to Oregon!!"

"Be there soon. Only about 1/2 hour away. Will call when we get to the Ace."



Got to the Ace Hotel (above) in a cab that had a sign on the inner back door that said: "Support local businesses, pay cash." I paid cash.







Platform beds, unusual decor, felt right at home, highly recommended. Thanks, Tim.





## Octagon

Thursday morning Tim picked us up, and we headed east along the Columbia River. Scenery was spectacular. We stopped at Vista House (above) where sweeping views were the main attraction.

"Vista House was built between 1916-1918 by Multnomah County as a comfort station and scenic wayside for those traveling on the Historic Columbia River Highway, which had been completed in 1913. It is also a memorial to Oregon pioneers. It was formally dedicated on May 5th, 1918.

"The graceful octagonal stone structure towers 733 feet above the Columbia River, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and in the National Geographic Society's 2001 *Save America's Treasures* book."\*







## Hidden elevator

Rest rooms in this elegant way station are on the lower level and reached by a curving staircase. A few feet behind the reception desk, however, the floor rose to reveal an elevator for the handicapped. *Civilization*.







Dripping Pacific Temperate Rain Forrest.



Latourell Falls.





### **Earlier out**

On the way back to Portland, Pam noticed that our tickets indicated the *Empire Builder's* departure was 1:40 p.m. not 4:20 p.m., as printed on our itinerary.

We went straight to Union Station, and the earlier time was confirmed by an Amtrak clerk.

She said that the *Empire Builder* departure time had changed some months earlier. I don't think we were notified, but I might have missed an update or forgot to note it.

### **Portland depot**

Union Station dates to the 1800s but has many 20th-century neon signs, including on the four-sided tower clock. Above two of the faces appear the words, "Union Station" in neon blue; "Go By Train" in yellow is above the other two.

Because we had higher-priced tickets we were able to wait in the Metropolitan Room, which is reserved for sleeping car passengers.

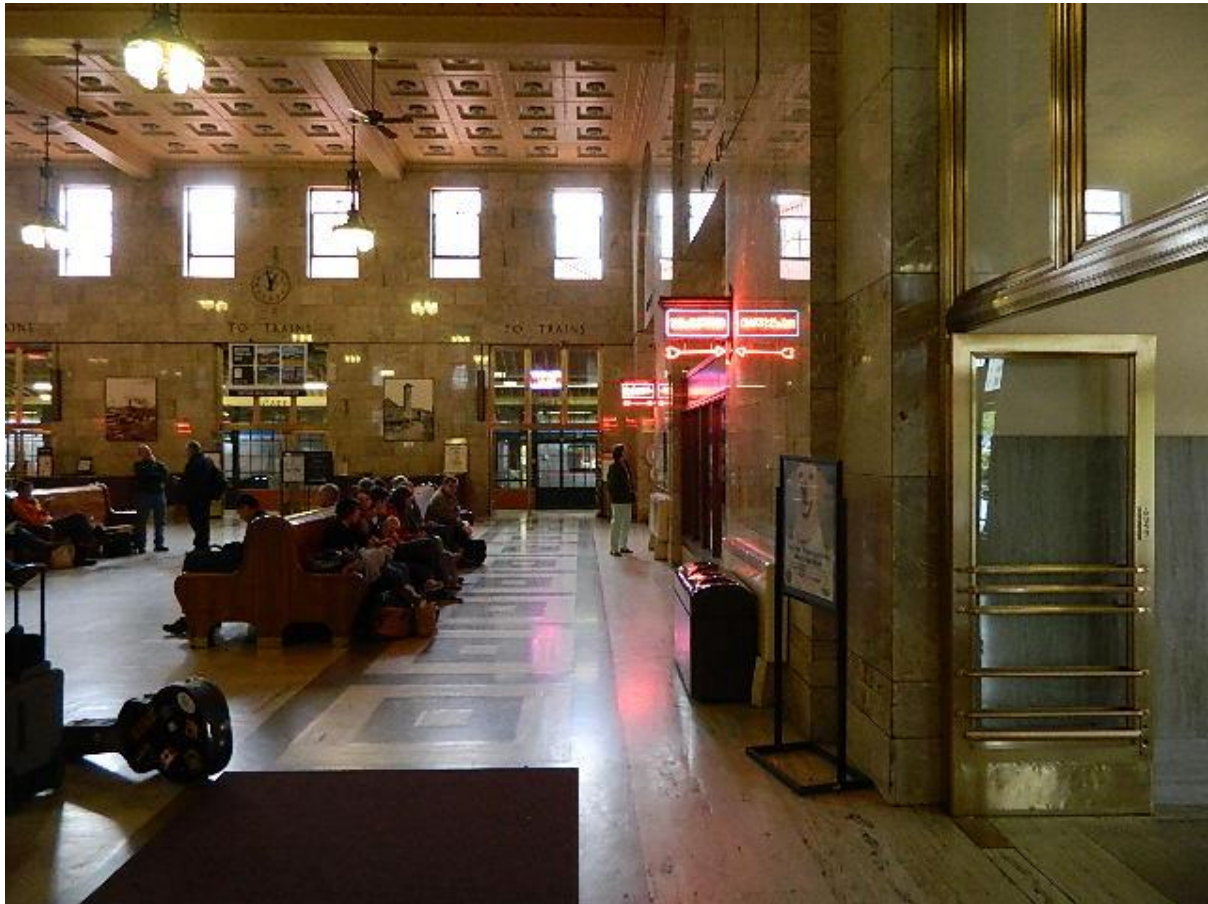
### **Amish**

Two Amish couples waited with us. They were dressed the same as the ones we saw in Chicago: neat, plain, rich French blue and the whitest white and blackest black.

They appear to smile easily, and the women, in particular, seem friendly and interested in the world.

The men, young bucks in their 20s, have classic, bowl-over-the-head haircuts that must be shaped by amateurs; they also wear suspenders and straw hats.

If humans were created in the image of god...











Observation car, rolling out of Portland in the rain.



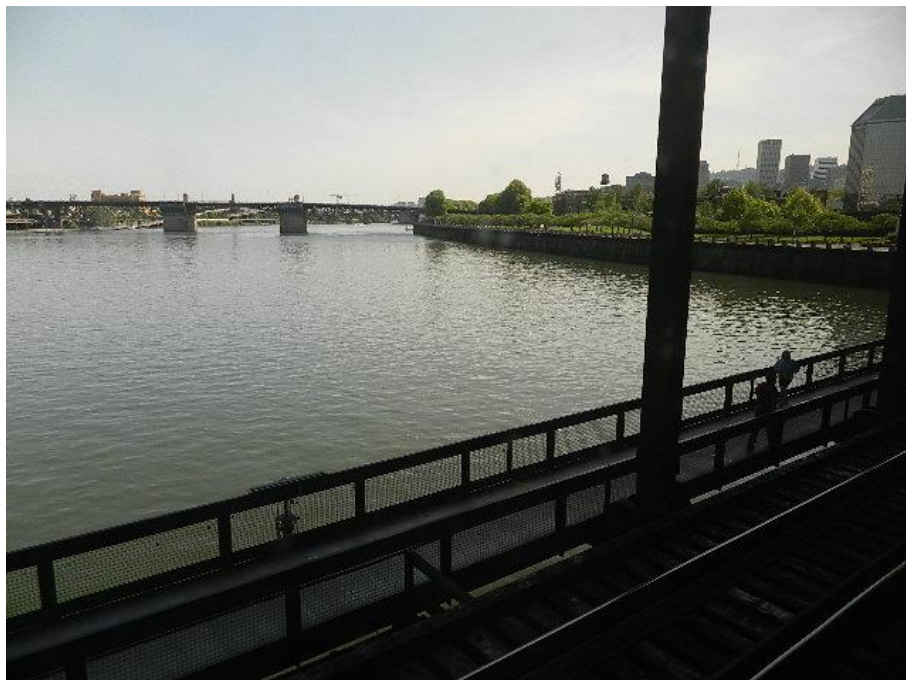




## **Bridges**

Portland spreads from the banks of the Columbia and Willamette Rivers and is linked by bridges, each with a story.

The city has many new and architecturally interesting buildings and has preserved earlier structures. Downtown streets feature numerous neon signs from the middle decades of the Twentieth Century. It's a cool place.







## Rolling Into Washington



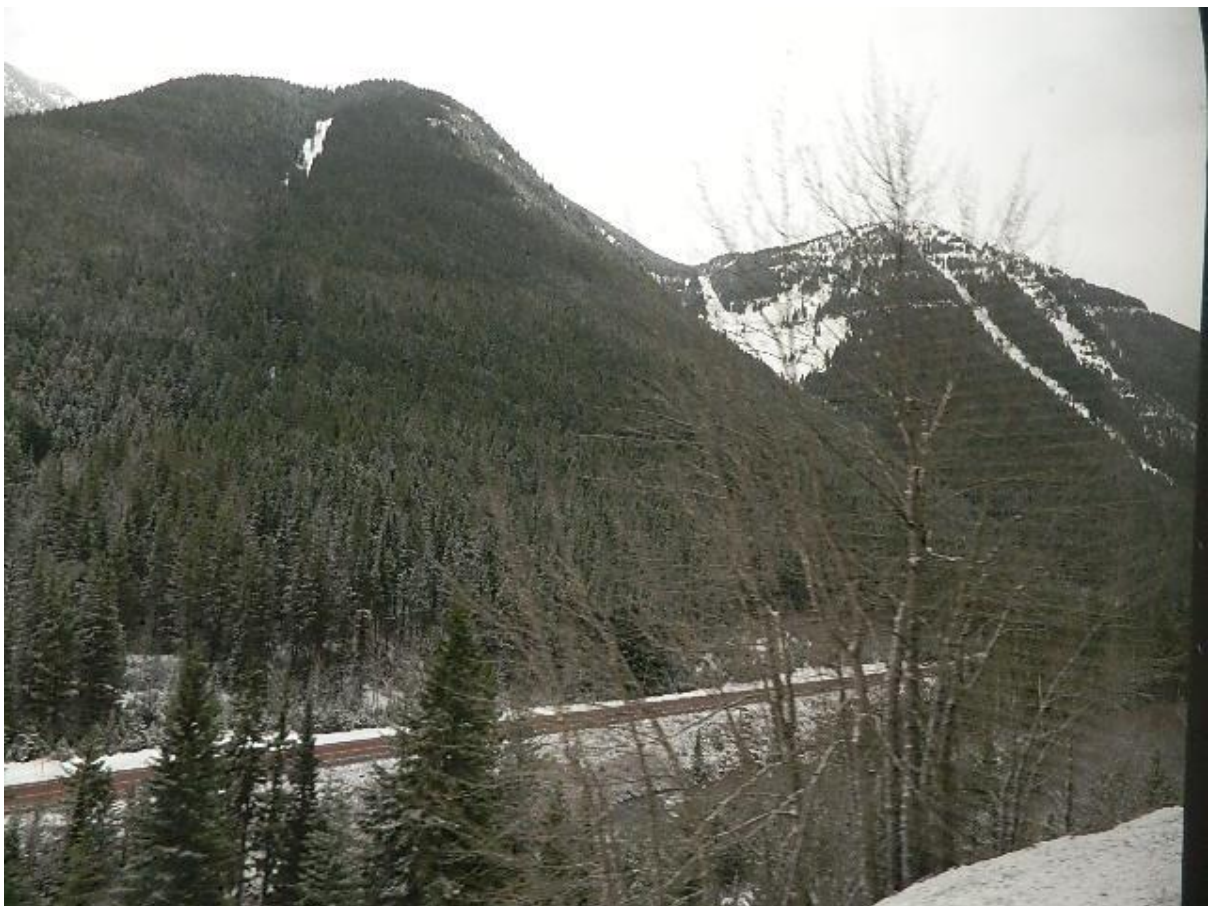
















The mile marker indicates the distance to Spokane.



## Swank

Made it into Spokane at about 9:00 p.m. Thursday night. Took a cab to the Davenport Hotel. Built in the early 20th century. Victorian opulence. Beautifully restored. Highly recommended.







### **Cloud 9**

Walked into our room; radio playing jazz, bed turned down.

Pam looked around and said: "What's this place costing us?" Started thinking maybe I didn't check the price when I booked it, and the rent was \$1000 a night.

Landed at the hotel's Peacock Lounge where two stuffed namesakes hang from the ceiling.

The next morning, two newspapers were outside the door along with the bill—a very reasonable \$170.00.



## 20. Spokane to Idaho and Back



The symmetrical Davenport.





Spokane.

### **Friday morning**

Walked to the Enterprise rental car office and picked up a Chevrolet Impala; had reserved a small car but none was available so we were given the boat at the same price.

Hadn't been in a Chevy in many years and it reminded me of times gone by. Big, bulky, not very comfortable.

Hasn't GM learned anything from the Japanese?

Picked up Pam and headed to Coeur d'Alene, about 50 miles east of Spokane.



Lake Coeur d'Alene, Idaho.

### **Bleak**

Next afternoon we drove back to Spokane and arrived at the all-but-abandoned Amtrak Depot about 7:00 p.m.

Down-and-out, scruffy types came and went. Some twitched and looked like they were on meth. A group of scraggly women entered the ladies room and stayed for more than a half hour.

One security guard was responsible for the whole building; said he was an ex-Marine. There are a million stories in the city. Took my wallet off my belt and it put it in my pants.

Decided to move to a seat nearer the Amtrak counter when it finally opened.

### **Refund**

An Amtrak clerk named Cassandra told us she could reduce the price of our tickets by \$400. Pam followed her instructions when we returned and received a \$500 check from Amtrak. It had something to do with the fact that the sleeper we were assigned out of Spokane was more toward the end of the train than the one we paid for. Didn't know that location made a difference but I suppose it's not surprising.

Finally got aboard around 11:00 p.m. and were asleep in minutes.





Cassandra.



**White May**

Woke to snow in the hills and fields of western Montana.

Just passed through a small town that appeared to have non-tribal casinos. Dumpy little places advertising keno and poker.

This section of track is particularly bumpy, and we're being tossed and jostled more than usual.

Over the past little while, for the first time, the landscape is beginning to look like Wisconsin with trees and brush along the fence lines.

**Strangers**

Continue to meet interesting people in the dining car.

At breakfast we sat with an African-American woman who looked 25 but told us she had 21- and 17-year-old kids.

An oil industry employee traveling to a job also joined us. He said petroleum workers often use Amtrak because it offers the best rates.

**European tourist**

One day we had lunch with a young man from Germany who loves America and traveling by train. Spoke nearly perfect English and had visited this country numerous times. He was employed in a successful family business and appeared to have plenty of money.

His jovial personality and kind demeanor made me wonder, as I have so many times, how his ancestors were taken in by the despotically evil Adolph Hitler, who brought them destruction, death, disability, and shame.





Lead cars are visible at the head of the bend.









### **Stopped**

Big Sky country with Canada just beyond the horizon. Made good time for a while but then power cut out and we coasted to a halt.

The conductor announced we were having engine trouble and technicians were working on the problem.

A follow-up announcement informed us the locomotive would be swapped for another—two are in front—and we would be on our way.

This process would take about 25 minutes, the conductor said, but actually it was more like 90.

### **Rolling**

But it worked and we were off.

Coach cars are at near capacity today.

Various passengers have told us they take the train because it is cheaper than flying and they don't have automobiles.







## Imbibing

Heavy drinkers on the train today. One tall, pasty-faced man in his 40s or 50s with long, thin hair started early and drank for hours. In the morning he was in the observation car talking with a slender man wearing a baseball hat and small earrings.

Later I saw him with a raven-haired woman who appeared to be in her late 40s. She was slim and attractive. They had an animated conversation that went on for hours. I was sitting a bit away but heard snatches now and then. The man kept drinking and appeared to hold his liquor well.



## Friends

In the late afternoon I visited the lounge for a beer. The attendant was absent, and a number of people were ahead of me in line, including the man with earrings who had been drinking all day and the oil field worker we had breakfast with.

Pretty soon we were talking like old friends and having a good old time.

Finally, the attendant returned, and I bought a beer and went to our deluxe bedroom to play my guitar.





### **Alcohol's okay—in fact we'll sell it to you—but...**

After dinner, I visited the observation car and encountered the man with earrings I'd met in the lounge. He remembered me and introduced himself as Steve.

He told me that the woman with black hair I had seen earlier had been busted and removed from the *Empire Builder*.

Evidently she smoked pot on the train or the platform during one of the station stops. Steve told me she used a carburetor, and one of the Amtrak people caught the scent or saw her and called the police who were waiting at the next Montana depot.

They came aboard, searched her, and found a glass pipe and pill bottle filled with pot. She was arrested and taken away, Steve said.

Shocking, crazy, still—*tragically*—normal in America.

### **Jail**

Steve was distraught because they were longtime friends. She was a teacher, he said. Now she's sitting in jail because of marijuana, a mild drug that is legal in Washington, where she lives.

I used my iPhone to check marijuana laws in Montana. They are harsh. Possession of even a joint can put you behind bars; paraphernalia can get you jail time and a \$500 fine.



## Edgy

Steve was traveling to visit his parents in North Dakota but would need to head west again as soon as he could. His plan was to borrow a car, return to Montana, and bail his friend out. He didn't have much money or a credit card and was hoping his mom would help.

I looked up some hotels in the town where she was imprisoned and gave him the numbers. He was still a little high on alcohol and out of the blue confided he was a heroin addict who was trying to kick it.

Alcohol is truth serum.

## Addict

He had a vial of methadone with him, he said, and drank it all when his friend got busted. He thought it too might be illegal in Montana and was afraid he would be searched and busted, too.

Now he was concerned about how that much methadone would affect him and, thinking ahead, he knew he would go into heroin withdrawal in a few days.

He might have taken a normal dose and deposited the rest in a trash receptacle but that's not how addicts think.

Seemed like a decent guy and it's pathetic that we live in a society where people get thrown in jail for having drugs—I mean *illicit* drugs. They can have all of the *government-approved, legal* drugs they want: Alcohol,



caffeine, nicotine—no problem. In fact, two of the three can be bought and used on the train!

I gave Steve a card and he said he would contact me and let me know how it all came out but I haven't heard from him.

### **Conflict?**

Before hitting the sack Sunday night, I noticed a group of young bucks at the head end of the observation car who were drinking heavily.

One booth away sat a group of ZZ-Top-bearded Amish men with pudding-bowl hair cuts and the plain and simple uniforms of dark slacks, French blue shirts, and black vests. I was concerned that the drinkers, as they became drunk and maybe rowdy, would clash with the Amish but thankfully it didn't happen.



### **North Dakota**

Had a steak last night and went to bed around 10:00 CST. Food on the train is excellent. Some complain, of course, but I think Amtrak does a great job and eating as you roll along is fun.

Slept well and rose at 5:00 a.m. Walking to the observation car I noticed the coach cars were emptier than the day before when most seats were taken.

## **Inebriation**

More drug-related news. The passenger who was tossing 'em back yesterday with the ear ringed heroin addict and the woman who got busted fell after we went to bed and cut himself badly enough to require transportation to a hospital at the next Amtrak stop.

## **Drizzly**

Monday morning is gray and rainy in North Dakota. It's discouraging to notice that we seem to be going slower than cars paralleling us on a nearby highway. Have to think this train doesn't have the same power two operating engines provided.

It might take longer to get home. Pam is somewhat on a schedule because she is babysitting Grandson Gus tomorrow.

## **Personnel**

Amtrak people are variable; most are conscientious and excellent but not all. The woman staffing the lounge took overlong breaks yesterday and was late again this morning.

The attendant in our sleeping car is ex-military and has no qualms about letting passengers know he hates his job and wants to be anywhere else. He's from Chicago, he said, and doesn't like to travel.

## **Veteran's preference**

I've noticed that, in general, a lot of government workers are ex-military. Must have a leg up on ordinary candidates. It is fair? *It's the sort of affirmative action the right wing likes!* I spent two minutes looking into this and quickly discovered the hiring advantage is called veteran's preference.

A US Department of Labor website states: "Veterans who are disabled, who served on active duty in the Armed Forces during certain specified time periods or in military campaigns are entitled to preference over others in hiring for virtually all federal government jobs."\*

So much in the United States revolves around the "offense" department and congresspeople—Democrat and Republican—want to make sure troop levels never fall below the number needed to maintain world dominion.

The military naturally wants to offer as sweet a pie as possible to recruits.





Fargo, North Dakota.

### **In a pinch**

Spent a lot of time in Fargo, North Dakota. Later our grumbly sleeping car attendant mentioned to Pam that we acquired a third locomotive, this time, he opined, a "rust bucket"

Indeed, it was a freight engine, not a locomotive designed for passengers.

The attendant said an Amtrak locomotive can pull the train at about 80 mph but the freight engine can only do 60. He added that Amtrak equipment is "antiquated" and the mechanics and other locomotive maintenance staff "incompetent."

### **Legal downer**

Clearly disgruntled, he told me several times that he wanted a new job. He was sick of the delays and long hours and even complained about the food. He said FDA requirements forbid crew members from bringing their own. Probably this is related to management fears Amtrak's comestibles will be contaminated.

He was a whiner from the get-go, though, so his credibility is low.



I was surprised to see young Amish men smoking pipes.



## **Delayed**

Leaving Minneapolis, we again came to a halt, backed up several blocks, and stopped again.

Then the train lost nearly all power. Most of the lights were out and the AC stopped working.

I was thinking that maybe this would lead to another long delay while a fourth locomotive was found. It was a relief when, after about 15 minutes, we were on our way again.

All these delays kept stacking up and it was announced that we wouldn't make it to Milwaukee until around 8:00 p.m.—we were scheduled to arrive at 2:15.

## **Another unhappy passenger**

A passenger in the observation car was incensed because this meant he might miss his connection to Madison.

He vented at the conductor, arguing that he wanted Amtrak to put him up for the night and that he might sue if it didn't. That's ambitious!

## **Paul Ryan**

Attributing the blame for faulty equipment to poor funding, I overheard the conductor say: "Half the people in congress want us to prosper, and the other half want us dead."

Wonder which half is which?

Fellow Janesvillian Paul Ryan is a leader of the anti-Amtrak half.

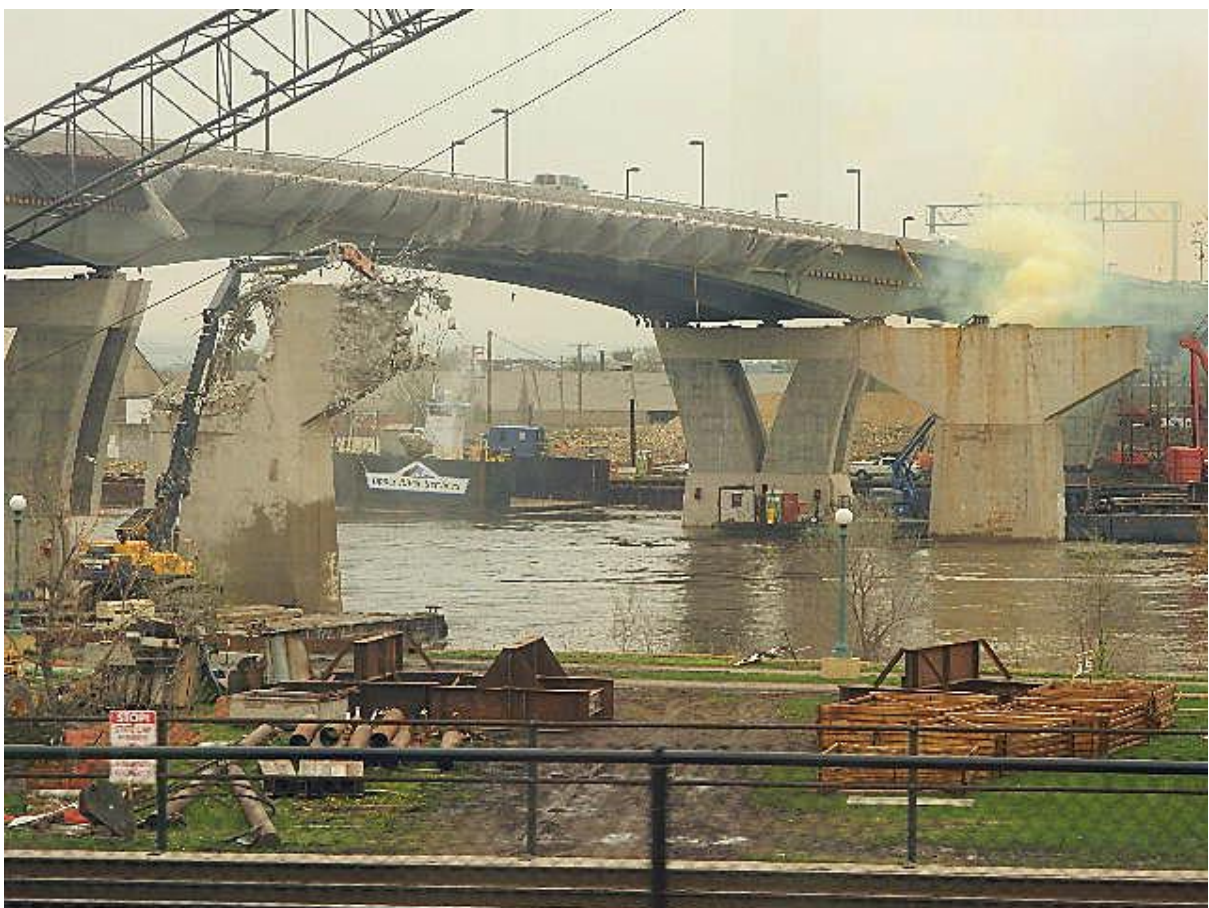
A story about Ryan's 2014 Budget plan at the National Association of Railroad Passengers website begins: "The National Association of Railroad Passengers warned that Wisconsin Rep. Paul Ryan's proposal to zero out Amtrak's operating grant would cripple train service for tens of millions of Americans across the nation."\*

We have sacrificed much...on the altar of the automobile.

\*<http://www.narprail.org/releases-statements—letters/passenger-group-stands-in-opposition-to-ryan-budgets-plan-to-cripple-amtrak>



Demolition of Twin Cities area bridge.







Gloomy Midwestern day.





## 25. Home



South of the Twins Cities.





Mississippi.



## **Waiting for freight**

We rolled fairly smoothly home from Minneapolis and only experienced a few more delays waiting for freight trains.

An absurdity, really, people waiting for freight?

Various Amtrak people and passengers told us freight companies own the rails and aren't enthusiastic about sharing them with Amtrak.

## **Free food**

After the sleeping car passengers had dinner, the consistently friendly and efficient Amtrak food service staff announced that it would have free food for coach passengers just to use what was left and reduce waste.

*Great idea!*

The coach folks took full advantage.

Three Amish men about my age took seats near me in the observation car and other than their attire looked ordinary enough. As far as I could tell, they never glanced my way.







### **Back to where we started**

Finally returned to the Milwaukee Intermodal Station at about 10:00 p.m. I was happy to be back and eager to get off the train.

*Eight hours of delays and our unfriendly sleeping car attendant got to me.* Despite his crappy attitude, I gave him a small tip. He acted surprised. Probably he doesn't get many tips but as someone who once received tips as part of my compensation, service has to be even worse than what he provided before I stiff someone.

The conductor announced we should exit to the left and take the tunnel to the station, otherwise we might wind up "like Wile E. Coyote on the electrified tracks."

A long ramp led down to the tunnel and a second took us up to the station on the other side.

### **A good place to be**

*Home sweet home.* As I wrote in a script many years ago: "Home is a good place to be."

I walked to the car quickly, completely alone in the well-lighted station parking lot.

There on the dash between the steering wheel and windshield—exactly

where the sign said to place it—was the parking receipt I feared I had left between the seats.

Memory is often a poor servant—especially at my age.

But my memories of our excursion will be positive, I know, and lasting, I hope...

## **Training**

Traveling by train (enthusiasts call it "training") is mostly fun and always illuminating.

It's the nation and people slowed down—things it has in common with bicycling, canoeing, kayaking, walking, and other activities that encourage observation and contemplation.

"Trainers" see parts of the country and meet people airline passengers and motorists miss, and they do it in a leisurely, carefree, congenial, comfortable way, training from town to town, city to city, state to state, region to region.

At seven miles up, things look pretty much the same out a plane window.

But out a train window, where the closest objects are only feet away, details are clear and differences easy to discern.

## **Not for those on a tight schedule**

However, don't "train" *if you're in a hurry*.

A jet flies from Chicago to LA in just over four hours.

The *Southwest Chief* takes almost three days to transport passengers the same distance *if it's on schedule* and that's asking a lot given Amtrak's second-fiddle chair when it comes to right of way on the tracks.

*(Congresspeople and freight company employees should hide their faces in shame at this ridiculous reality. Coal moves ahead of living, breathing naked apes?)*

## **The trip**

Like Marshall McLuhan's almost-never-heard-today 60s pronouncement, "the medium is the message," when it comes to excursions like the one we were on, transportation *is* the trip, it *is* the vacation.

There is something extremely satisfying about riding, talking, eating, imbibing, sleeping, meeting people, and taking in passing local color through a train's big windows.



Overnights with friends and relatives in places like San Diego, Portland, and Coeur d'Alene are happy sojourns in a highly enjoyable, rolling narrative.

## **Illusion**

Amtrak's low-class status and embarrassing, hat-in-hand relationship with congress is due to America's addiction to automobiles.

I like cars but too much depends on them in the US. Granted, they are convenient in ways mass transit will never be.

*But, the price is steep.*

They are loud, polluting, dangerous, and astonishingly wasteful. They have taken away more than they've given.

Like a lot of things, cars are an illusion.

## **Not reality**

The situation reminds me of the Lennon line: "And you think you're so clever and classless and free."

We *think* we've gained a lot through the car, but that's just thought, not reality. Mass transit is safer and in every way more sensible, pleasurable, and economical.

I'm not comfortable with Amtrak subsidies, but they would be unnecessary if energy prices forced us to reduce our dependency on automobiles and more people took trains, buses, etc.

I think it would be great if some sort of mass transit conveyance stopped every few blocks everywhere in the country. Walking to bus or train stops would be good for everyone, and people would get to know one another instead of just staring through windshields at taillights or at others who are staring through windshields.

## **All aboard!**

Get a feel for how things might be!

Take a train excursion! Relax. Have a great meal, meet new friends, fall asleep in your undulating berth.

Tomorrow you'll be well down the track, in a new place, in the midst of a whole new experience, with an entirely different frame of mind. At least, that's what happened to me.

