



# Railway & Locomotive Historical Society, Inc.

## Southeast Chapter

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## WESTBOUND ON AMTRAK'S OREGON TRAIL

By Lyle Key

When my *alma mater*, the University of Tennessee, scheduled a “home and home series” with the University of Oregon several years ago, my wife and I began planning a trip to Eugene, Oregon and the Oregon coast for September of 2013. The two football teams were pretty evenly matched when the games were scheduled, but by the time last September rolled around, Oregon had developed into one of the best teams in the nation and Tennessee’s team was one of the worst. Nevertheless, I decided to go ahead with the trip and take advantage of the opportunity to ride Amtrak’s *Empire Builder* from Chicago to Portland. My wife wasn’t interested in the train ride and opted to fly out and meet me at the Portland airport.

After flying from my home in Nashville to Chicago I rode the CTA from the airport to the Loop. Upon arrival at Union Station, Amtrak personnel directed me to the Metropolitan Lounge for sleeping car passengers. The Metropolitan Lounge was very pleasant with paneled walls, comfortable easy chairs, and complementary soft drinks and coffee. It was fairly large, but the available seats filled up in the early afternoon and created a “standing room only” situation. Happily, the crowd started to thin out as the afternoon departures began for long distance trains. Amtrak’s *Empire Builder* would leave Chicago on its westbound run on September 10<sup>th</sup> with two locomotives, a baggage car, and ten Superliners. The four Portland cars (a *Sightseer Lounge*, two coaches, and a sleeper) were on the rear of the train with my



The head end of the *Empire Builder* during our service stop in the “ Magic City ” of Minot , North Dakota . Note the second diesel unit, #465, which is an EMD F59PHI, built in 1998 for service on Amtrak’s Cascades running between Vancouver and Eugene-Springfield. It was a surprise to see it on the *Empire Builder*.

*Southeast Limited*



Top: The middle of the train was spotted beside the former Great Northern passenger station in Minot during our service stop. Above: My *Superliner* sleeper bound for Portland was on the rear end of our train. Note the yellow step boxes beside the doors in the middle of the passenger cars. Gregory, our sleeping car attendant, is the person in the blue shirt who's standing on the platform to the right of his co-worker.

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sleeper on the very end. The baggage car would go to Seattle along with the dormitory car, two coaches, two sleepers, and the dining car. The sleeping car attendant introduced himself as “Gregory” over the car’s intercom, and he told us that he would be bringing around some chilled champagne after we left Milwaukee.

Departure was right on time at 2:15 PM, CDT, and we headed north over the old Milwaukee Road. Unfortunately, the fast timing that once characterized Milwaukee Road’s *Hiawatha* fleet is a thing of the past. My old *Official Guide* for April of 1955 showed that the *Afternoon Hiawatha* was scheduled to leave Chicago at 1:00 PM, CT, and arrive in Minneapolis at 7:45 PM, CT, for a running time of 6 hours and 45 minutes for the 421 mile trip. We won’t get into Amtrak’s Midway Station (roughly midway between St. Paul and Minneapolis) for the Twin Cities until 10:31 PM, CDT, so it will take our train 8 hours and 16 minutes to run off 418 miles.

Back in the days when train travel still was popular, the Chicago – Twin Cities market was quite valuable and awfully competitive. Today, Amtrak’s *Empire Builder* is the only passenger train that operates between Chicago and Minneapolis/St. Paul, but back in April of 1955, travelers between those cities had choices of different routes and different trains including Burlington’s *Morning Zephyr* and *Afternoon Zephyr*, Chicago and North Western’s *Twin Cities 400*, and Milwaukee Road’s *Hiawathas*.

Shortly before we arrived in Milwaukee, a female Amtrak employee came through the sleeper to take reservations for dinner in the diner. Since I skipped lunch, I selected the earliest seating at five o’clock. The *Empire Builder* pulled into Milwaukee at 3:40 PM, CDT, and departed right on time at 3:55 PM, CDT.

After we left Milwaukee, Gregory brought around some small chilled bottles of champagne. We might not have been running as fast as the old *Hiawathas*, but one had to admit that this was a nice way to begin a transcontinental train ride! Most of the old westbound main line had been removed west of Milwaukee with some segments left in place as passing sidings. It was sad to see the abandoned portions of the old right-of-way going back to nature since Milwaukee Road once had double track almost all the way between Chicago and the Twin Cities.

We met our eastbound counterpart at Watertown at 4:45 PM, CDT. It had a similar Amtrak consist, but there were three private cars on the rear. The last car had a dome and a rear platform and while I couldn’t see its name, I think it was the *Sierra Hotel*.

From my standpoint, the economy rooms on a *Superliner* sleeper essentially are enclosed sections since they don’t have toilets and sinks. On the positive side, however, each *Superliner* sleeper does have a shower, and as veteran train travelers know, showers weren’t available on the old Pullmans except in a few deluxe rooms.

At Portage, we met an eastbound Canadian Pacific freight and then both trains sat in Portage for about 30 minutes. The westbound *Empire Builder* then moved out and engaged in some fast running to the next stop of Wisconsin Dells. We left Wisconsin Dells 27 minutes behind schedule.

Despite the attempts by some members of Congress to micro-manage Amtrak’s dining car service, I enjoyed an outstanding steak dinner and excellent service in the *Empire Builder*’s diner. The tables were covered with real table cloths, the food was served on real china, and we enjoyed eating it with real metal flatware instead of with plastic knives, forks, and spoons! My tablemate was a man who was returning to his home in Seattle after visiting family members in Philadelphia. By the way, I have to admit that it’s nice to get complimentary meals in the dining car as a sleeping car passenger!

Even though the train seemed to move along pretty well after sunset, we weren’t making up much of the 30 minutes we lost in Portage. I turned in early at 8:30 PM, CDT, as we rolled along beside the Mississippi River. When I woke up at 6:15 am, CDT, we were running an hour behind schedule across the wide open spaces of North Dakota. In my opinion, the *Superliners* aren’t as accommodating as the Pullman cars they replaced. The big cars ride well, and the showers are a nice addition, but I suspect the people who designed the *Superliners* were told to squeeze in as many berths as possible and that they didn’t travel on trains very often. For instance, the *Superliners* don’t have the handy little pouches where Pullman passengers could store their small personal items while they slept. Also, the *Superliners* have two small restrooms on the lower level and just one on the upper level, and they remind one of the tiny unisex restrooms that one finds on airplanes. The old Pullman cars had individual toilets and sinks in the private rooms and relatively large restrooms for the passengers travelling in sections. The larger restrooms recognized that most people like to use the sinks and the toilets at about the same time every morning!

By the time I shaved, showered, and got ready to head for the dining car for breakfast, the female dining car steward



Top: The *Sightseer Lounge* would be the first car in the consist of our train from Spokane to Portland. Middle: The interior of the *Sightseer Lounge* on the second day out of Chicago. Below: At Williston, the center of North Dakota's oil boom, passengers on the *Empire Builder* could see a Great Northern Mike on display with a Northern Pacific caboose.



announced over the train's intercom that she had a full dining car and was working on a waiting list. I grabbed a cup of hot coffee in my sleeper, put my name on the waiting list, and then repaired to the *Sightseer Lounge* where I visited with a couple from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The man of the family worked for Norfolk Southern and its predecessors for 42 years going back to Penn Central. After about 30 minutes, my name was called, and I returned to the dining car for a nice breakfast of pancakes and sausage.

After breakfast, we had a 30 minute service stop in Minot, North Dakota. Several of us got off to take pictures, and quite a few people took advantage of the long stop for a smoke break. The Amtrak route guide says that just like Birmingham, Minot is known as the "Magic City." It apparently sprang up almost overnight as soon as Great Northern announced its route across North Dakota. When I returned to my room in the Portland sleeper, I found that Gregory had made up my bed and left a copy of that day's *Minot Daily News*.

We left Minot at 10:18 am, CDT, and proceeded at restricted speed over the former Great Northern track to the west. BNSF was doing extensive track work in western North Dakota and eastern Montana, and we would continue to run slowly – with a few bursts of track speed – until early afternoon.

By the time we left Wolf Point, Montana at 2:16 PM, MDT, we were running 2 hours and 35 minutes late, and I was beginning to get concerned about getting to the Portland airport in time to pick up my wife who would be flying out from Nashville. We lost still more time west of Glasgow, Montana waiting for a meet with our eastbound counterpart.

At 2:45 pm, MDT, Gregory announced that he and the other sleeping car attendants were hosting a wine and cheese tasting party in the dining car for sleeping car passengers. It was a fun event, and I sat at a table with folks from Philadelphia and Virginia Beach. I met people from Great Britain, Texas, Maryland, Florida, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and Michigan, and many of them rode trains to Chicago to connect with the *Empire Builder*. Several people at the wine and cheese party won bottles of wine by answering trivia questions – all of which stumped me!

The train stopped in Havre, Montana while I was having dinner in the diner, and we were stopped right beside a former Great Northern 4-8-4 (a Northern). Lots of passengers were taking smoke breaks on the platform and taking pictures of the old steam locomotive with their cell phones. The Northern looked like it could use some TLC, especially in the form of green paint to cover the old paint that had faded to a very non-descript shade of light green in the bright Montana sun. The route guide informed us that Havre was the county seat of Hill County which was named after Great



**The wine and cheese tasting party for sleeping car passengers was held in the dining car.**

Northern founder James J. Hill. (Continued)

The sun was setting as we departed Shelby, Montana at 7:34 pm, MDT. I noted that we were 2 hours and 12 minutes behind schedule. I asked Gregory to turn down my bed at 8:30, MDT, so that I could turn in early. I soon went to sleep and then woke up during the stop in Spokane. In Spokane, the train split with the seven Seattle cars up front heading more or less due west and with our four cars on the rear going to Portland behind a single diesel unit.

I dozed off again after we left Spokane, and by the time I woke up, we were on the former Spokane, Portland & Seattle line in the Columbia River Valley. The diner went to Seattle, so the sleeping car passengers bound for Portland picked up box breakfasts in the *Sightseer Lounge*.

The ride down the Columbia River Valley was very scenic, and since it was a crystal clear morning, we got several good looks at Mt. Hood. Around Wishram, I spotted a UP freight on the south bank of the river while we were headed west along the north bank. The UP line once was the route of the *City of Portland*, a beautiful armor yellow domeliner that ran between Chicago and Portland.

The old Burlington/Great Northern/SP&S *Empire Builder* left Chicago at 1:00 pm, CT, on day one and arrived in Portland at 7:30 am, PT on day three. Thus Amtrak's scheduled time of 41 hours and 55 minutes for the 2,255 mile run via Milwaukee is only slightly slower than the old *Empire Builder's* 40 hour and 30 minute schedule for its 2,260 mile operation. The Amtrak train is carded for an average speed of 53.8 mph while its privately operated predecessor was scheduled to make the Chicago to Portland run at an average speed of 55.8 mph.

We arrived at Portland Union Station at 10:55 am, PDT, and I was pleased to see that we were only 45 minutes late! Now I would have plenty of time to pick up our rental car, check into our bed and breakfast, and meet my wife's flight at the Portland airport at 4:30 pm, PDT. Some of my friends had told me that the *Empire Builder* was Amtrak's best train, and I was impressed by its friendly and efficient crew, the complimentary meals in the *Amtrak* dining car, the chilled champagne Gregory gave us as we began our journey, and the wine and cheese tasting party for sleeping car passengers. All in all, it was a great trip – especially considering that it was in September of 2013!

### **Southeast Chapter Trip to Paterson, GA**

On Saturday, November 16, 2013, a group went to Paterson, GA, to visit the Progress Rail Services locomotive manufacturing facility. They met on the street in front of the CSX building at 7:30 AM, carpooled and left there at 8:00 AM for Paterson. On view were narrow gauge locomotives for Tasmania and various units in the process of being rebuilt. Lunch was at the Blueberry Hill Café. After lunch, they went to visit the Folkston Georgia Railroad Museum and then on to Barry Baines' home.

### **More on Tasmania**

As information, the Tasmanian Railway which was unusual in its period, track, and motive power. It was the first railway in Australia, a five-mile line laid with wooden rails which connected Taranna on Norfolk Bay, the shipping station, with Deep Bay. This was in Tasmania, then called Van Diemens Land. The motive power for trucks or passenger cars was a gang of convicts who sometimes did the double journey, with its considerable gradients, twice in the day.

The deviser of this line was Charles O'Hara Booth, who took over command of the convict settlement at Port Arthur in 1833. The line was built as a link in the route by land and sea thence to Hobart, the capital. The last 1-1/2 miles of the journey was probably the most popular with the convicts, for this was a downhill stretch where they could climb aboard and let the truck have its head. Speeds of 40-50 MPH are said to have been registered on this stretch.

— *Unusual Railways* by R. G. Wilson and J. R. Day

### **Announcements:**

February 13th, regular Southeast Chapter meeting date.

Golden Spike Model Train Show, Feb. 22, Prime Osborn Center, Jacksonville, FL

March 13th, regular Southeast Chapter meeting date.

April 10th, regular Southeast Chapter Meeting date.

April 12th, Golden Spike Model Train Show, Volusia County Fairgrounds, Deland, FL

May 8th, regular Southeast Chapter Meeting date.

June 5-8, R&LHS Convention, Ely, Nevada, home of the Nevada Northern Railway.