



**Railway & Locomotive Historical Society, Inc.**  
**Southeast Chapter**  
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**[www.rlhssec.org](http://www.rlhssec.org)**

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## **8,816 Miles on Amtrak**

By Jim & Ann Smith



*Essex, Montana. Mainlines on left, helper shop & plows in center and the Izaak Walton Inn on right.*

Some time ago my wife, Ann, saw a video about Amtrak's Coast Starlight train that runs between Los Angeles and Portland/Seattle. She thought it would be an interesting rail trip so we put it on our "Bucket List". This year we decided to ride that train. Instead of flying, we found a "house sitter" who could take care of our pets. That way we could start our Coast Starlight journey at Jacksonville, FL which is close to where we live. On April 28th, we boarded Amtrak's Silver Star, scheduled to leave at 10:57 PM. The train was late, so our departure was at 12:31 AM - THE ADVENTURE BEGINS!!

Right off, Ann noted that Amtrak seats are much roomier than on an airplane...much more leg room. Since we were tired from a long day we settled in and quickly went to sleep! The next morning we had breakfast in the diner. It's always fun to watch the scenery go by and chat with fellow passengers in the dining car. We encountered some heavy rain that slowed us down. We arrived at Washington, DC at 4:40 PM and caught a 5:40 PM MARC commuter train that runs to Martinsburg, WV. Before boarding we had time to look at the renovation being done at Union Station. Our train was a true "local" - it stopped at 16 stations in route to Martinsburg!

*Southeast Limited*



*We are entering one of four tunnels on the Magnolia Cutoff. Note the notched sides that will allow "high containers" to go thru the tunnel. It also makes it look like a cats ears. Yes, Chessie the cat lives on...*

We spent five days visiting friends and relatives. On May 5th we left on time (5:45 PM) on board the Capital Limited and soon enjoyed seeing the Potomac River as we headed toward the Magnolia Cutoff and then on to Cumberland. THIS IS WHAT TRAVEL BY TRAIN SHOULD BE...ROLLING RIGHT ALONG - ON TIME- THROUGH BEAUTIFUL COUNTRYSIDE THAT IS LUSH AND GREEN ALONG THE RIVER - HOW RELAXING!! Tons of leg room, a great view, wonderful meals; we may never fly in an airplane again...

We saw a number of trains handling just one commodity: coal, autos, stone and yes, 100 car oil tank trains. Even Ann noted that "freight traffic is alive and well"! The four tunnels along the cutoff now have "notched" corners to allow trains to handle high double stack containers. It makes the tunnel portals look like they have cat ears - who knows, maybe Chessie still lives! Shortly after we left Cumberland it got dark, but I could tell when we were going up Sand Patch grade because our engines really worked at getting us over the 4,475 foot summit. We again slept well in our coach seats.

The next morning we woke up at Toledo. As we left the station we passed a freight train that had a Norfolk Southern Heritage diesel, #8099, painted in the Southern Railway's green and white scheme. It looked good and brought back memories of going to college on the Southern's Crescent from Baltimore, MD & Lynchburg, VA. From Toledo to Chicago we traveled on the Norfolk Southern. Like CSX, NS was also moving a lot of freight trains.

Our arrival at Chicago was nearly on-time. It was here that we discovered the pleasure of going First Class! We had a roomette for our trip to Los Angeles, which allowed us to use Amtrak's Lounge. We were VERY impressed. After checking our bags we walked around Chicago, returning to Union Station after lunch and just enjoyed relaxing in the lounge. It's really nice that you can safely leave your luggage and go sightseeing. The lounge offers free internet access, newspapers, sodas, snacks, and a dining car menu for your departing train, and clean restrooms. Later in our trip we visited Amtrak Lounges at Los Angeles, Portland, and Washington, DC - they were all inviting areas as waited to board our train!



*"Nothing could be finer than dinner in the diner"! My wife, Ann is looking at the menu as we go west to Chicago.*

At 3:00 PM we left Chicago on the Southwest Chief. Our car attendant showed us all the amenities offered in a Roomette. We opted for an early dinner seating and again enjoyed eating in the diner. One BIG advantage of going First Class is that the cost of your meals is included in the ticket price. If you always eat "top of the line", you'll have to walk length of the train at least 20 times a day so you don't gain weight! We really enjoyed talking with the different people we met in the diner. It was like talking to folks at a B&B!

That evening we also discovered the "uniqueness" of two people riding in a Roomette... You



*The Roomette. The right photo is aimed at a mirror. The seat on the right is the “backward” seat. Note that the space from the seat to the curtain is only about one foot! The left photo shows what a Roomette looks like with the beds down. Note the door frames (aluminum) on each side.*

soon realize that Roomettes are: small, little, tiny, and petite!! I think they make them that way so you don’t get too upset over the small, little, tiny, and petite restrooms you have to use in the superliner car because there are no toilet facilities in Roomettes. Technically speaking, a Roomette is 3’6” wide and 6’6” lon. Getting in to the top bunk is a challenge the first time - you almost have to be lying down to get into the bunk. We soon learned that getting dressed is difficult for two people to do - so for the rest of the trip one person would get dressed while the other went to the bathroom. We learned that we could close the upper bunk by ourselves which increased space for dressing. But remember that roomettes are First Class - you can have coffee in the morning, fruit drinks in the afternoon, get a daily newspaper, bottled water, have the beds made up and returned to the normal two seats by the car attendant.

The Chief’s route was over the old Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway (which we had never ridden) now operated by the Burlington Northern Santa Fe, or BNSF. Yes, this is the railroad owned by Warren Buffett’s Berkshire Hathaway Company. The BNSF’s CEO often comments that he only has ONE stockholder to keep happy! We saw a lot of engines painted in the old Burlington Northern green and white colors. We also saw a number of ATSF engines painted in the “war bonnet” red and silver paint scheme. But these engines really looked sad, the bright red color had faded. So much so that they were practically PINK and it really made them look old. The BNSF has a lot of different paint schemes for their engines and on a trip this long you’ll get to see them all!



That night we slept in our roomette through Missouri and Kansas and woke up in Colorado on the 7th. We could see some of the 14,000 foot mountains as we headed south. Soon we began climbing up Raton Pass and went through a tunnel at an elevation of 7,834 feet. As soon as we came out of the tunnel we were in New Mexico. Then we went down the pass to the town of Raton. As we left the small town we saw lots of wild deer running through the scrub brush. We noted that the red rock hills and mountains were interesting, but the small towns just looked poor. Homes weren’t kept up and most backyards had become a personal junk yard. There weren’t any lush green farms like we saw in Illinois, just lots of red rock and sand...



*We have gone down Raton Pass and are now rolling along New Mexico’s red mountains and tumbleweed sagebrush.*

We continued on to Albuquerque where we had a smoking AND “shopping” stop, along with a crew change. Yes, I said shopping because there were a number of local Indians selling turquoise bracelets, earrings, and other jewelry along with colorful Mexican handbags and scarves, etc. I bought a bright multicolored handbag for Ann.

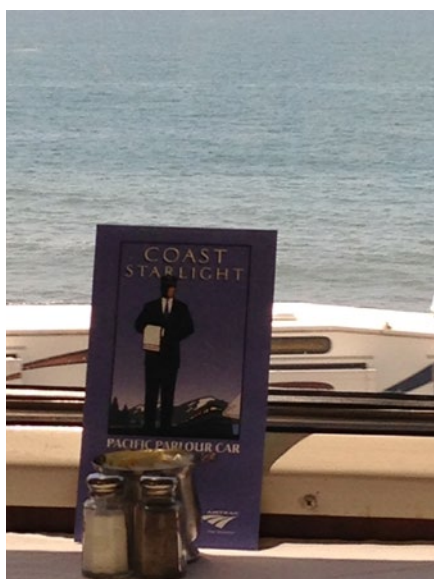
We spent our second night in a Roomette and woke up at the top of



*Los Angeles Station*

Cajon Pass on the 8th, as we headed down to San Bernardino and Los Angeles where we arrived only 15 minutes late! We took some time to walk around the LA station which was both beautiful and busy - hundreds of commuters and Amtrak riders use this terminal everyday. After exploring the station we walked to the Miyako Hotel in an area called Little Tokyo. We checked our bags and spent most of the day sightseeing in Hollywood. That night we had a unique Japanese dinner and we enjoying a night sleeping in a BIG bed and taking a shower that didn't move! The next morning we took the Metro back to the station and waited in another nice Amtrak Lounge until we were called for our train. The Coast Starlight left at 10:10 AM with engines #92 and #515. We encountered some delays due to train congestion; surprisingly caused by meeting Metro commuter trains. However, we were soon back on schedule.

The Coast Starlight train in real life was better than the video that prompted our trip. Especially the "Pacific Parlour" car that is operated just for First Class Passengers (yes, a "u" has been added to the normal spelling of "Parlor" - just to make it special.) The car was originally built for the Santa Fe's El Capitan which was an all coach train that was double deck passenger cars. Five Pacific Parlour cars were rebuilt from coach cars and they are only used on the Coast Starlight. These cars are easy to spot in the train because they are about three inches lower than Amtrak double deck cars. This also means you have to be careful going to/from your sleeper to the First Class car because you encounter that three inch "step" in the vestibule. Ann and I spent most of our daylight time in this car! It had sections for a bar, six tables for eating meals, a snack area and six very comfortable lounge chairs that rotated 360 degrees. Downstairs the Parlour car has a movie theater showing a 'G' film at 3 PM and a 'PG' film at night.



*We are now on the Coast Starlight!  
It is a great ride, with lots of it by  
the Pacific Ocean.*

We really enjoyed the scenery of California and Oregon! Coastal California is truly EVER-changing! Mile after mile we went by LARGE farms that used huge water sprinkling systems. As you go north there are lots of vineyards! Then we enjoyed our 2 1/2 hours riding along the Pacific Ocean. When the Coast Starlight went inland from the ocean we liked seeing the rolling hills as we left San Luis Obispo. We arrived at Oakland a little late and left a LOT later due to a woman who thought she was turning onto a road at Jack London Square, but actually turned onto OUR track. No one was hurt, but they had to get a wrecker to get the car off the track. We left around 11:00 PM, an hour and a half late, but we couldn't blame Amtrak for that delay.

The next morning I got off at Klamath Falls at 8:00 AM during a crew



*Seattle, Portland & Spokane # 700  
along with a very large crowd!*

change and walked into the station. There was a man with a table in front of him full of Amtrak brochures, kids paper hats, etc. It dawned on me that it was May 10th - National Train Day. Upon our departure, we noticed that the farther North we went, the cooler it got... Our weather changed from cloudy to rain, then to sleet and finely big snow flakes. For us it was a treat to see SNOW; after living in Florida 30+ years, we hadn't seen any snow in a long time. Soon the large pine trees along the right of way were covered with snow. We went through a few snow sheds and saw all this Winter Wonderland at 80 mph! We really enjoyed the experience. Too soon we went through a tunnel and there was NO snow when we came out. In a few miles the sun came out! We enjoyed seeing the snow, but more important, I didn't have to shovel any of it!

Soon we arrived at Portland where a large crowd of people were looking at the National Train Day exhibits, booths, and two large locomotives on display. The station was "jumping", with lots of people listening to a band, watching clowns, and viewing lots of static displays. The main attraction was the Seattle, Portland & Spokane, #700, which is a large 4-8-4 that was under steam. You could go up some steps and look in the cab. A sign announced that the whistle would be blown on the hour and half-hour. We heard it and it was great! The other engine was an Alco PA, originally built for the ATSF. It is being rebuilt into Nickel Plate unit #190. The next day we saw the #190 rolling along behind the engines of an eastbound freight as it went to Spencer, NC, for a special passenger engine meet.

This night was spent in Portland and we enjoyed our dinner at an unusual restaurant called Huber's that literally serves "Turkey all the Time"! We highly recommend it! The next morning, Mothers Day, we rented a car and drove to Tillamook and then went along the ocean to Astoria, OR. As we went into town we got on the wrong road and ended up crossing the four mile long Astoria-Megler Bridge connecting Oregon and Washington. We returned to town in time to ride the last trolley of the day through the Astoria. The trolley, #300, was built in 1913 for the San Antonio Traction Company and has been restored by local Astoria volunteers. With no overhead trolley wires, the trolley uses a motor/generator that is pulled behind it, and pushed on the return trip. That night we stayed at the Riverwalk Inn and the next morning rode the motel's tandem bike along the river. Our next stop was the unique Astoria Column built in 1926. It's special art work traces the town's history. We had great weather and could see for miles! Then we drove back to Portland to catch our next train.

We left Portland at 1:40 PM on the Empire Builder. We were able to see, in daylight, the entire distance the train travels along the Columbia River - approximately 220 miles! From Portland we "coached it" to Essex, MT. Our four car train got bigger when it connected with the section from Seattle at Spokane, WA. The switching crew did a good job - because we slept through it all!



*Riding the Astoria trolley. Everyone is sitting on one side looking at the Columbia River.*

Early the next morning on the 13th, we arrived 30 minutes late at the Izaak Walton Inn located between the East and West entrances to Glacier National Park. Essex was created as a helper station for Great Northern many years ago. It's still assisting BNSF freight trains over the Continental Divide at the summit of Marias Pass. Truly, the Izaak Walton Inn is a rail fan's paradise! The Empire Builder no longer unloads in front of the hotel, but at a platform built especially for this purpose about 50 yards from the entrance. We were met there by the hotel van and driven back to check in. Although we were way in advance of check-in time, our room was ready, so we were able to move our things into the room before heading to the hotel's Dining Car restaurant for breakfast. Our meal was very good--and with a view of the tracks!



*This the hotel's "living room", with lots of railroad and skiing artifacts.*

During our 45 minute breakfast we saw three 102 car oil trains go by! Most of the tank cars are brand new and have no graffiti! Later, while looking at the various cabooses you can stay in, we saw a grain train, a container train and a mixed train (with a lot of wood cars covered by white paper). We explored the hotel and studied some of the old photographs lining the walls...this place is definitely a rail fan's dream! The eastbound Empire Builder arrives in the early morning, and the westbound Empire Builder arrives in the late evening...and there are MANY freight trains throughout the day. However, there is no grade crossing near the hotel, so the trains do not blow their horns during the night. Much of the decorating in the rooms is done using railroad spikes: coat rack, TP holder, towel racks, lamps, door knobs, etc. We walked across the elevated bridge to explore the hotel property on the other side of the tracks. This is where many of the ski trails take off and where the hotel has placed cabooses that are used as motel rooms. Back on 'our side' of the tracks, we explored the Great Northern F45 diesel engine (in a blue & white paint scheme) built for the ATSF. It has been gutted and put to use as a motel room that sleeps 2 or 4 people for \$269 to \$329 a night - depending on the time of year. It really was quite amazing use of space and nicely decorated with full kitchen, etc. Tonight we had dinner in the restaurant's Inn. Note, there is no Wi-Fi at the Inn, other than in the basement lounge, but that served our purpose just fine.

On Wednesday, May 14th, we rented a car for the day so that we could explore Glacier National Park.



*A railfan's delight! Great weather too!*

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*Goat Lick trestle is not to far from the hotel and yes, it's named after Rocky Mountain goats who actually lick certain gray rocks for nutrients - think of it as a big salt lick. The center loco is Canadian Pacific and the BNSF has leased a lot of them.*

Our first stop was at Goat Lick, a ‘bald’ mountainside where goats often congregate to lick the minerals; there were two out that morning. We were also treated to seeing a container train crossing a trestle near the Lick. As we drove along, we passed several snow sheds. We would be travelling on these tracks the next day, so it was interesting to see them from the road. Our second stop was at Maria’s Pass - the Continental Divide (5216 ft.). We continued on to East Glacier Park. The main hotel was closed...it is only open June thru September! We drove on beyond East Glacier, in search of a well-known trestle for Maria’s Pass...we were successful in our search, but we didn’t get to see a train crossing the trestle. We headed back toward Essex and on to West Glacier. The views of Lake McDonald were outstanding! The Going To The Sun Highway was closed due to snow; there were many roadside waterfalls created by glacial melt/runoff. We hiked the Trail of the Cedars, a nice one plus mile walk that was mostly flat. We concluded our beautiful day in GNP driving back to Essex and had dinner in the restaurant at the Inn.



*The Great Northern Railroad created Essex to have helper engines push train over Maria’s Pass. Here are two helpers that will be used later in the day and some snowplows waiting for Winter.*

On Thursday we were up early to be ready to meet the Empire Builder at 5:55 AM.. We settled our bill at the front desk and then were driven to the train platform...arriving just as the train arrived! As we began our eastward journey, we rode through beautiful countryside--on the tracks near the highway we had driven the day before. We went over the bridge we had looked at and after awhile bid farewell to the mountains of Glacier! I walked to the back of the train as we arrived at Shelby, MT. I could still see the East Glacier mountains 72 miles away!

As we headed east through Nebraska we saw THREE brand new oil loading facilities. Like large coal mines, the site reminded me of the Indy 500 racetrack - big and oval. Empty trains come off the mainline and go around the oval and through a loading building. The train continues around until all 100 cars are loaded. New engines are added, along with two “buffer” cars and the 102 car train, is ready to go. We passed two more loading ovals being constructed as we headed east. We had time to walk around the Great Northern 4-8-4 steam engine #2584 at Havre, MT during our station/crew stop. Soon it was time to back into the itty-bitty Roomette for another good night’s sleep.

On Friday the 16th we were one of the first trains to stop at the newly renovated St. Paul - Minneapolis, MN train station. We then ran along the muddy Mississippi River for quite a distance... much different from the crystal clear glacial waters. As we neared Illinois, the land area again became fertile farm land! Everything was very spring-green. Our arrival in Chicago was several hours late, so it was very good that we had planned an overnight in the city to insure we wouldn’t miss the Capitol Limited to Washington.



*View from the Izaak Walton Inn at Essex, MT. Note the new bridge on left so patrons & skiers don’t have to walk across BNSF’s mainline. It is a great photo location. On the right is a red cabooses you can rent.*

On Saturday we had a good day walking around the Windy City. Our first stop came after a cab ride to



*Snow at the California / Oregon border as we go 80 MPH in a winter wonderland.*

Union Station where we dropped off our luggage in the First Class Metropolitan Lounge. We walked from Union Station via Jackson Street to Grant Park at Lake Michigan. The amphitheater area was filled by people participating in Exercise in the Park. Along the Lake Michigan walkways, several thousand people were walking for Autism Awareness! Lots of trees in bloom; not a bright and sunny day, but a good day for all the walking we did. After a lunch downtown we returned to the station to enjoy the restfulness of the Metropolitan Lounge... which our weary legs, feet, and knees appreciated. The Capitol Limited left Union Station about 30 minutes late due to a mandatory 8 hour crew rest period. But we had a nice dinner, again chatting with people we met in the diner.

On May 18, we continued to run about 2 hours behind schedule and the diner was only serving one meal...

you could choose either breakfast or lunch. However, we eventually made up time so we were only a little late arriving in DC. We checked in at the Acela Lounge to leave our luggage (nice...second only to Chicago) and then walked to the Capital Building. We returned to the station and began our final leg of our trip home on the Silver Meteor.

We arrived back in Jacksonville on Monday, May 19th, having travelled 8,816 miles on Amtrak going through 25 states & DC -- FL - GA - SC - NC - VA - MD - WV - PA - OH - IN - IL - IO - MO - KS - CO - NM - AZ - CA - OR - WA - ID - MT - ND - MN and WI! We both enjoyed the fantastic trip and decided we should

## **2015 Election Notice**

During the October meeting there was discussion regarding the election of chapter officers; Chairman, Vice-chairman, Secretary/Treasurer for 2015. Note that we have combined the office of Secretary & Treasurer. A partial slate of officers was discussed, but we need to hear from any “out of town” members who might be interested in running for office. If you want to be a chapter officer, please contact Chairman Bill Howes (no later than November 13th) at our chapter mail address: P. O. Box 600544, Jacksonville, FL 32260-0544. If we have three people running for three offices, they will be installed using the Acclimation by Proclamation process.

### **SOUTHEAST CHAPTER OFFICERS**

<b>William F. Howes Jr.</b>	<b>Chairman</b>
<b>Arthur L. Towson</b>	<b>Vice-Chairman</b>
<b>Stephen J. Vertescher</b>	<b>Secretary</b>
<b>Robert L. Van Nest</b>	<b>Treasurer</b>

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