

Spring Break Amtrak Trip
March 12-19, 2010

Day 1 – March 12, 2010

In November, the Iowa State Railroad Club discussed the idea of taking a train trip for our spring club trip. Before Christmas break, we had booked tickets for a trip from Osceola, Iowa; to Sacramento, California; to Seattle, Washington; and back to Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota. In Sacramento, we would visit the California State Railroad Museum. In the end, a total of ten people went on this train trip. Participants from the club included Cliff Cessna, Brian Bauer, Ben Hucker, Nathan Smith, and Patrick Johnson. The other five participants were invited along. Ben and Cliff are currently taking a class in Railroad Engineering (CE 515) and the professor, Dr. Reg Souleyrette, expressed interest in going on the trip. As it turned out, Dr. Souleyrette and his family (wife Rosemary, two children Jackie and David, and mother-in-law “Grandma” Ruth) went on the trip as well.

We departed Ames just before 6:00PM for Osceola, Iowa, where we were to catch the westbound Amtrak train #5, the California Zephyr, with a scheduled departure of 8:09PM. We arrived at the Amtrak station just after 7:00PM to find it completely packed. Several dozen people (close to 100) got on the train, most of them headed to Colorado, presumably for a spring break ski trip. The train arrived about 25 minutes late and made two separate stops to load passengers, first the sleepers, then the coaches. We finally departed at 8:49PM, 40 minutes late.

Due to the limited availability of sleepers, Nathan rode in coach on this train. The rest of us rode in sleepers. A man by the name of Boushaib was the car attendant in our Superliner I sleeper car. Immediately after boarding, we were told they were doing last call for dinner in the dining car. Although we had all eaten before departing Ames, those of us in sleepers decided to go ahead and take advantage of the free meal.

The evening special was bison meatloaf with steamed vegetables and mashed potatoes. Two of us had this delicious entrée while the other two had a cheese ravioli with steamed vegetables.

After dinner, we all congregated in the Sightseer Lounge car to socialize. Meanwhile, Reg set up his laptop to work with software that synchronizes GPS with Google Earth. When within reach of 3G signal, he can precisely track the location of the train, which is pretty cool.

We all stayed up until our arrival into Lincoln, Nebraska, where Cliff’s dad met us to say hello, even though we arrived some 20 minutes late at 12:30AM. Upon departure from Lincoln, we all retired to our rooms (or seat) for the night.

Day 2 – March 13, 2010

We all roused shortly before arriving in Denver at 6:55AM – some took the opportunity to shower at this point since the train was moving slowly or stopped. Denver is a service stop on the California Zephyr, so once freshened up, we stepped outside to stretch our legs and get a breath of cool, fresh air. Before the train departed, we went to the dining car to have breakfast. The train departed right on time out of Denver at

8:05AM as we finished our meal. The various entrees included French toast, egg quesadilla, or bacon and eggs, most served with “breakfast potatoes” and/or biscuits.

Because we would be immediately climbing up into the Rocky Mountains, we found and claimed a booth in the Sightseer Lounge car to sit and watch all the beautiful scenery passing by outside while taking countless pictures. The vast majority of the morning was spent at the same booth, with some shuffling around to go charge camera batteries and visit with fellow travelers. We finally abandoned the booth to get lunch. We made it easy on our server by all ordering the Angus steak burger with cheddar cheese. While eating lunch, we passed through Glenwood Canyon and saw where a rockslide took out a small portion of Interstate 70 just a few days before.

As we came into Grand Junction, Colorado, the Assistant Conductor announced over the train’s Public Address (PA) system that we would be held up there for a while. Union Pacific is in the process of replacing the jointed rail on the line west of Grand Junction and work crews had the right to the track until 6:30PM. We were scheduled to leave at 4:10PM. With two and a half hours to kill, we walked around and took pictures of the station and visited the small gift shop inside. Eventually dinner time rolled around and we began eating just as we departed Grand Junction at 6:31PM. The menu was virtually the same as the night before (as is to be expected). The bison meatloaf and oven-roasted chicken were the entrées we chose. New York-style cheesecake, Reese’s peanut butter pie, or Haagen Dazs ice cream were the dessert choices – all very delicious.

The rest of the evening was spent in our sleeper compartments, entertaining ourselves with electronics and watching the very rare passing of a streetlight in the middle of the deserts of Utah.

Throughout the day, the weather was constantly changing. Denver was a crisp 35 degrees and sunny. The next stop at Winter Park (at a much higher elevation) had snow on the ground and was just a little colder. Glenwood Springs was warmer, but cloudy. Grand Junction was a pleasant 50 degrees and sunny when we arrived. But by the time we left, the sun was nearly down and clouds started to move in. Shortly after we returned to our rooms, lightning could be seen outside, which illuminated the wet pavement in towns as we passed through. By the time we were readying ourselves for bed (10:00PM), snow could be seen floating to the ground outside.

Day 3 – March 14, 2010

By morning, our train was running about 3 hours behind schedule (mostly due to the wait in Grand Junction). For breakfast, we all had French toast and either bacon or sausage. After breakfast, we planted ourselves in the lounge car to watch the passing scenery which, in Nevada, consists of sagebrush and the occasional shack-like outbuilding.

Eventually, deserts gave way to mountains as the train approached Reno. We rolled past Union Pacific’s yard there before descending into the “trench” that underpasses the city. The trench was completed in 2005 as a collaboration between Union Pacific and the City of Reno to eliminate grade crossings and congestion in downtown. This included creating a lower-level of the train station for access to the platform for Amtrak trains stopping in the “biggest little city.”

At Reno, two volunteers from the California State Railroad Museum boarded the train to provide historic commentary on the route up and over Donner Pass to Sacramento. The train follows the Truckee River all the way to Truckee, California. It was along this stretch of track where our lead locomotive, Amtrak #117 “lost water pressure” and effectively broke down. Meanwhile, we were eating lunch in the dining car, curiously looking ahead around the curve to see why we were stopped. We limped into Truckee (right behind what appeared to be Union Pacific’s westbound “Salad Shooter”) and were told that we would get a Union Pacific locomotive attached to our train to help us over the pass and on the rest of the way to the train’s ultimate destination of Emeryville, California.

Truckee is the base where UP stations their snow fighting equipment to keep Donner Pass open during the winter. The entire locomotive fleet here consists of EMD GP38-2’s. Union Pacific #567 was brought out to help us over the mountains. About an hour later, with a huge plume of blue smoke denoting the coldness of the GP38-2, we trundled on out of Truckee, climbing ever higher into the Sierra Nevadas. In all, at this point, we were running 5 hours and 2 minutes late.

As we ascended the grade, it became very apparent why UP needed a full army of snow fighting equipment nearby. Although Truckee had no snow, just a few miles away on the pass, there were several feet of snow on the ground, some of which had apparently been pushed away from the tracks by wheel-loaders to make room for any additional snowfall that might occur. The views along this route were truly something to behold and with each turn, tunnel, and snowshed, one could only wonder how in the world Theodore Judah, chief surveyor for the Central Pacific Railroad, could have ever envisioned this to be the optimal route for the transcontinental railroad nearly 150 years ago.

We finally descended into California, arriving in Sacramento at 6:30PM, some 4 hours and 20 minutes late. Our hotel here was the Vagabond Inn, just two blocks from the station. After checking in, we met up with the Souleyrettes to venture into the Old Town district of Sacramento to find supper. We ate at the Round Table pizza with Dr. Souleyrette while the rest of the family went off to a Mexican restaurant. Upon returning to the hotel, some club members took advantage of the heated outdoor pool and spa to relax before going to bed.

Day 4 – March 15, 2010

We had breakfast at the hotel this morning and by 10:30, we made our way over to the California State Railroad Museum, a short two-block walk from our hotel. Opting to forego the guided tour (geared primarily toward kids), we did our own self-guided tour of the museum.

We were all very impressed with the exhibits at the museum. They were well-presented and quite informative. Some exhibits such as the sleeping car, dining car, and railway post office (RPO) were staffed by volunteers who provided an in-depth discussion of the functions of each car and how things would have worked when they were in service. The guide in the dining car notified us that many of us were wearing “unacceptable” attire to be in the dining car. He said, “T-shirts were definitely not allowed. No matter how much writing you put on a t-shirt, it is never acceptable to wear in a place like this.” The dining car had over a dozen different dinnerware sets on display from a variety of railroads,

many of them worth thousands of dollars. The Pullman sleeping car was equipped with a rotating cam underneath the car that lifted it every so often to provide a very realistic sensation of the car swaying as if it were going down the track.

Southern Pacific #4294, the only surviving cab-forward steam locomotive out of the total fleet of 256, was in beautiful condition, both on the outside and in the cab. A museum volunteer in the cab was there to answer any questions that visitors might have about it. On the upper level of the museum, they had a collection of a variety of model trains, ranging in size from Z scale up to 1½-inch scale live steam. Some toy trains they had on display dated back as early as the era of the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869.

Eventually, we got hungry and meandered to a row of restaurants along the Sacramento River. We then briefly returned to the museum to look at some of the equipment they had stored outdoors and to have a look around the gift shop. We asked about getting in to see some of the equipment they had in the shops, but due to safety concerns, they said such arrangements would need to be made in advance and they, unfortunately, couldn't do anything for us that day.

We wandered around Old Sacramento for a while before returning to the hotel to rest up and meet back up with the Souleyrette family in a room they booked for a second "night" to use as a home base until our train's midnight departure. After dinner at the Denny's next door, we went back to the room to kill time before heading to the station around 11:00PM. The Coast Starlight arrived a few minutes before midnight and departed at 12:28AM. On this train, the sleeping cars were of the newer Superliner II fleet, and our rooms were in the cars named "Connecticut" and "Pennsylvania." Without much delay, we all went to bed for the night in our sleeping accommodations, as prepared by our car attendant Louie, who turned out to be the best one on our entire trip.

Day 5 – March 16, 2010

We woke up in southern Oregon, just outside Klamath Falls. After breakfast in the dining car (eggs, bacon or sausage, breakfast potatoes, and a biscuit), we decided to take in the scenery of the passing mountains from the Pacific Parlour Car, a car unique to the Coast Starlight. The car is an original Atchison Topeka & Santa Fe hi-level lounge built by the Budd Company in 1956. Amtrak owns five of these beautifully-restored cars – just enough to run one on every Coast Starlight trainset and have a spare on-hand to rotate them out for servicing.

Cliff struck up a conversation with a gentleman who was a self-proclaimed railroad historian and has written several articles on various railroad topics, some of which have been included in publications such as Trains magazine. He was very interested in the club and our trip, as have been many of the people we have talked to along the way. His background and knowledge of railroad history provided lots of interesting information and conversation.

Along the way, we got to see the site of the massive landslide that took out two sections of the Union Pacific line in 2008 – over 3,000 feet of track in total. The slide was easily distinguishable due to the lack of dense forest at that particular spot. In Portland, the train stopped for about an hour, so we all got off and walked around the station and platform area. Here, we saw the four-car Portland section of the Empire

Builder awaiting its late afternoon departure as well as the arrival of a southbound Cascades train with its Talgo trainset. It was also around this time that the weather began to turn stereotypical for the Northwest – cloudy and drizzly.

After running on-time for the entire trip, the padding in the train's schedule allowed us to arrive into Seattle King Street Station at 7:59PM, 46 minutes early! We got a taxi from the station to take us to our hotel a couple miles to the north. The rest of the evening was spent relaxing in our room, or in the spa at the hotel.

Day 6 – March 17, 2010

After breakfast at the hotel, we checked out at 11:00 and had about 4 hours to kill before needing to head for the train station to catch the Empire Builder. The Space Needle was just a few blocks away, so we walked there to take pictures and walk around the park that was the site of the World's Fair in 1962. We then made our way to the famous Pike Place Market to see all it had to offer (and get out of the drizzly rain that had moved in).

Once the rain subsided and the sun began to peek through, we wandered back toward the hotel, stopping to look around at an army surplus store. At 3:00, we got a taxi to the station and twiddled our thumbs until the train rolled in, ready for passengers around 4:20PM. For this last leg of the trip, all of us were in the same sleeper car, this time a newly-refurbished Superliner I.

On the way out of Seattle, the train followed right along the edge of Puget Sound for several miles. We passed by the USS Abraham Lincoln aircraft carrier, which was docked in the sound. At Edmonds, we turned east to head into the Cascade Mountains of Washington. Before dark, we were weaving around between tall, rocky peaks that were covered in snow and surrounded by forest at the bottom. That evening, we all gathered in the Souleyrettes' bedroom compartment to play cards until we got too tired to continue.

Day 7 – March 18, 2010

Just before daybreak, we rolled into Whitefish, Montana. Patrick and Cliff braved the chilly morning to walk around on the platform and try to get some pictures of the Great Northern NW3 #181, which is on display next to the station. After that, we made our way to the dining car for breakfast, this time having pancakes with blueberries in sauce.

Leaving Whitefish, the train heads for Glacier National Park, and runs along its southern border. Also, this line was featured in Microsoft's Train Simulator computer game as the "Marias Pass" route between Whitefish and Shelby. Riding along on Amtrak, one can easily find landmarks and businesses that are featured in the game.

After winding around through the mountains and crossing the continental divide, the Empire Builder spends most of the rest of the day flying across the high plains of central and eastern Montana at 70-79 mph. Shelby and Havre, although just over an hour apart, are extended stops for the train, which allowed us to get off and walk around. At Shelby, nearly 60 school kids (all around ages 8-10) got on for a field trip to Havre, where they would have a little over an hour to tour an "underground mall" there before catching the westbound Empire Builder #7 back to Shelby. Needless to say, this turned the coach cars

into nothing short of a zoo. In order to get to the lounge car from the sleepers, we had to navigate through two coaches full of them. Once they got off, the train seemed deserted. Throughout the day, we noticed an older gentleman (60's or so) wearing a suit who was always sitting in the booth at the end of the dining car, facing toward the center of the car as if watching the crew. We were confused as to what he was doing, so Cliff sat down and talked to him to find out. He said he was the Operations Supervisor for the Empire Builder, which basically meant he was in charge of seeing that everything is going well. Based out of Spokane, about once a week, he takes a trip out on one leg of the Empire Builder (Seattle and back, Portland and back, or Chicago and back) to oversee the crew and talk with passengers about their trip. If there are any complaints about service or a particular employee, it's his job to address the issue. Otherwise, he just checks up on things, which is what he was doing on this trip.

After our last supper on the train, we gathered in the lounge car to play cards until we were ready for bed. At one table, the game of choice was Cribbage. At the other table, a game called "Pounce" was played.

As we left Minot, North Dakota, we followed BNSF's secondary mainline toward Grand Forks, which was by far the roughest piece of jointed rail we had traversed on the entire trip. It was with constant vibration and bouncing that we attempted to get some rest. We would have to be in the dining car first thing at 6:00AM if we wanted to have breakfast before our arrival into Minneapolis sometime after 7:00AM.

Day 8 – March 19, 2010

When we went to the dining car for breakfast, there were only two other tables occupied. As we ate, we watched the outer suburbs of the Twin Cities pass by our window. We also saw the northern terminus of the NorthStar commuter line. At one point, we even pulled into a siding to let a NorthStar train pass us on its way into Minneapolis.

As we rolled in, we passed a couple of familiar places from past Railroad Club trips such as Northtown Yard and the building where Milwaukee Road #261 used to be stored. Now, just the tenders and a few assorted passenger cars sit outside the building. We arrived into Midway station at 7:25AM, 20 minutes late. We arranged for a charter van to pick us up at 8:00 to take us back to Ames, but thankfully, it was already there and waiting when we stepped off the train. By 7:35, we were on the road and by 11:15, we were back in Ames.

By and large, the trip was a great success. We had very few problems along the way (aside from those beyond our control such as the locomotive breakdown), which made everything go smoothly. While the trip did take lots of planning and coordination, it was well worth the extra effort and hopefully the Club will be able to take another train trip at some point in the future.