

Railfan's Diary
Home to Virginia from Seattle, the Long Way
Or
He Definitely Has Too Much Free Time on his Hands!

by Jim Mixer

Part I--

Five years ago, Lolly and I flew out to Seattle to see my oldest relative, then 90, and we came home to Northern Virginia on the Empire Builder and the Capitol Limited, with late February weather conspiring to turn a three day, three night trip into five days and nights, though Amtrak took good care of us and we enjoyed the journey. With my uncle now 95, it was time to visit him again, though Lolly couldn't make this trip. So, on Wednesday, October 26, I flew via United from Reagan National Airport in Washington to Chicago and then Seattle. I had traveled extensively on both United and Continental during my working career, and often earned elite frequent flyer status, but that had ended when I retired. Then, Continental merged with United. Lolly and I flew a United round trip to Houston after the merger; little did I know that this put me over the one million lifetime mile mark with the merged airline. A few days later, I received a package by FedEx with a Lucite memento and the news that I had been awarded Gold status for life!! We don't fly much anymore, and when we do, we go the cheapest way, often Southwest or one of the start-up carriers. But I found I could fly to Seattle for \$210 on United, and my Gold would enable me to upgrade to First Class 48 hours before travel if space was available. And it was!! So I enjoyed a great trip west, featuring comfortable seats, lobster mac and cheese served on china, with linen napkin and real metal cutlery, plus several gins and tonic for good measure. The only surprise was that they have removed the at-seat TV screens, so to watch movies you have to have previously installed a free app on your smart phone or laptop in order to get the free entertainment via Wi-Fi. I hadn't done this, so reading had to suffice as my entertainment. But it was an easy and enjoyable trip. My visit with my uncle and his family finished two days later, on Saturday I started the journey home at Seattle's King Street Station. Because I wanted to ride two trains and routes I had not previously ridden, the Coast Starlight and the Southwest Chief, I was headed south rather than east. And in order to spend lunchtime in Portland with my first Exxon boss, I caught the first Cascade (Talgo) train of the day at 7:25 AM.

As I strode into King Street, the morning Cascade to Vancouver was loading, and so was my train to Portland. One checks in at a kiosk near the track gate to receive a train check, and the agent adorns it with a peel-and-stick seat assignment from a page of Staples brand stickers. I headed to seat 9 in Car 7. My train was headed by a "cabbage" ex-F40PH control cab 90250 and pushed by F59 465. In between were two business class, a dining table car, a bistro car, another business class car in coach service, four coaches, and a baggage/transition car, "Mt. Baker."

I settled into my leather coach seat, and the train departed on time in pre-dawn darkness. The Talgo cars are short, about the size of buses; my coach had 32 seats in 2 and 2 configuration; business class is 2 and 1. Our train was about a third full out of Seattle; I counted about 110 when I walked the train, and a group of 50 got on at Tacoma. Some of the restrooms are pie-shaped with a large curving door and can accommodate someone in a wheelchair. Cars are connected by an articulated passageway rather than vestibules, end doors slide open as you approach. Like the 1950's experimental Talgo Aerotrains and Train X, the Cascades are low-slung and there is a single axle between the passenger cars—defect detectors were reporting 22 axles for our 14-car train! Unlike the rough-riding 1950's Talgos, the Cascades ride well and have been successful, operating in state-supported service between Vancouver, Canada, Seattle, Portland, and Eugene OR.

My Cascade followed water most of the way. The Olympic Mountains were visible occasionally to the west, but clouds and rain obscured Mount Rainier and other mountains I might have seen to the east. What I didn't see in scenery was made up for by trains—in the 3 hours 40 minutes to Portland, we passed or overtook 19 freight trains and a Cascade headed toward Seattle. There was some talk of trains standing all night (one engineer referred to it as a "rough night") for whatever reason there were a lot of trains on the railroad that Saturday morning. The line sees both Burlington Northern Santa Fe and Union Pacific traffic. In the Seattle suburbs, Sounder commuter trains also polish the rails. A speed limit sign I saw said 75 for passenger trains; the trip duration is identical to the Great Northern/Union Pacific morning Seattle-Portland pool train in 1955, an average of 51 MPH including stops. About 50 passengers boarded at Tacoma, which is one of the Native American names for Mount Rainier. We passed through Winlock, which claims to be the Egg Capital of the World, and Kelso-Longworth, which claims to be the

Smelt Capital of the World. After Vancouver, WA, where Willie Nelson began his recording career, we crossed arms of the Willamette and Columbia Rivers and entered Oregon. Sadly, the view of Mt. Hood was obscured by clouds. I also noticed something on this line I hadn't seen elsewhere: switch machines are protected by low three-sided concrete block walls. I am not sure what they are designed to protect against, but they would protect against cargo falling from a train or a car toppling over in a low-speed derailment. They might protect against an errant maintenance-of-way-vehicle.

I detrained on-time at Portland and was met by my first boss at ExxonMobil; after taking a trolley to his place, he and his wife gave me a brief walking tour of Portland. It is a renewed city and now known for its accessibility by a new network of streetcars, Tri-Met MAX light rail, and dedicated bike lanes. We visited Powell's City of Books, which is an amazing multi-story collection of new and used books; its railroad section was particularly impressive. Then it was back to Portland's Amtrak Station, which like Seattle's is an impressively renovated reminder of when railroads dominated the inter-city travel market. The Metropolitan Lounge for sleeping car passengers is very nice. Out its windows which look out onto the train shed area, I could see the Portland section of the Empire Builder with its one unit, Sightseer Lounge, two coaches, and sleeping car. Soon it was time to board the southbound Coast Starlight, and we were called by individual sleeper because there is significant day use of room by passengers getting off at Portland, and each car is only loaded when the attendant is finished straightening up any just-vacated rooms. Our train had two units, a new baggage car, transition-dorm sleeper, three sleepers, diner-lounge, diner, Business Class coach (one of five Superliners rebuilt as "family coaches"), Sightseer lounge, and two more coaches. I was disappointed to see a Superliner diner-lounge substituting for the ex-Santa Fe hi-level lounge which normally serves as the "Pacific Parlour car" lounge for sleeping car and Business Class passengers.

Despite the 2:25PM departure time, Portland passengers get a final lunch seating, so after moving into Roomette 4 of Car 1130, I enjoyed an Angus Burger, the first of quite a few Amtrak meals I would enjoy during my five day sojourn. This was followed by a wine tasting for sleeping car passengers in the Pacific Parlor Car stand-in; formerly free, \$7 is now charged, but it's a reasonable fee for several glasses of wine, along with cheese and crackers. Around Salem, we were passed by the northbound Starlight and a northbound Cascade. At the stop at Albany, Amtrak's route guide pointed out that this town supplies 95% of our nation's grass seed and is the rare metals capital of the world. Today was my day for world capitals! Eugene is the westernmost city in the Amtrak system and birthplace of Nike, and it came 12 minutes late, after which I went downstairs for a shower. Dusk around 6 PM brought hills and the climb into the Cascade Mountains; the views of lakes and mountains must have been spectacular from the full dome lounge and extra-large coach windows of the Southern Pacific's streamliner Shasta Daylight. We went through the first of 22 tunnels on this stretch of track. The memory came to mind of climbing into the Blue Ridge west of Charlottesville in 1972 in a darkened dome on Amtrak's then-James Whitcomb Riley, when I decided to ask my future wife Lolly for a date.

The Pacific Parlour Car offers a signature drink in a souvenir mug, so I enjoyed a Moscow Mule before heading to what was announced as "the dining room" rather than the "dining car." One of our meets was a "saw-by," so all sidings are not long enough for all the freights on this line. I enjoyed a good fish dinner, deciding to go for steak the next night. I turned in about 11:00PM, with the train about 20 minutes late. It was a smooth ride overnight, and when I awoke about 5:30AM, I discovered we had arrived at my stop, Sacramento, about an hour EARLY, and soon, Alfred was knocking on my door with that news. There was plenty of time to dress and get packed up; as I went downstairs, a passenger was waiting to go upstairs to occupy Roomette 4. As my Mom used to say, "hot sheets!"

I stepped off to see a short train with "California Cars"—state owned double-decks with configurations different from Amtrak Superliners. I was getting off here rather than staying on the Starlight all the way to Los Angeles because I wanted to catch the Southwest Chief tonight at 6:10PM, and the Starlight doesn't arrive until 9:00PM; I didn't want an overnight in LA, and I had already ridden the ex-SP Coast Line but not the line down then San Joaquin Valley. I was booked on a 7:25AM Thruway Connection bus from Sacramento to Stockton, where I could pick up a San Joaquin to Bakersfield and another Thruway bus arriving LA at 4:15PM. A friendly woman driving a golf cart offered me and my luggage a ride to the station, and I mentioned my plans. She then advised me that my early arrival would permit me to catch one of the two (of seven daily) San Joaquins that originate in Sacramento rather than Oakland, so after a fast ticket change, I was on #702, which departed on time at 6:35AM, the scheduled departure time of the Starlight. Train 702 was led by Control Cab coach Mount Shasta, followed by food service car

Angel Island, coaches Humboldt Bay and Parejo River, and pushed by Amtrak 176. We had a light passenger load, but quite a few boarded and got off at the ten stops we would make before a noon arrival at Bakersfield.

The San Joaquins use the BNSF ex-Santa Fe line which used to feature the Oakland-Bakersfield Golden Gate Streamliners, which advertised that their timing with a bus connection to LA was faster than the through SP line, as is true today. It is a hot railroad, with frequent freights, intermodal, auto-carrier, and manifests, with big power. I assume the parallel ex-SP Union Pacific line is busy, too, since UP has rerouted most freight off the longer Coast Line. Around Fresno, I noticed some railroad construction and wondered if it is the first segment of the California-sponsored (with Federal \$\$) high speed route. I find it hard to believe that this line will come to full fruition, but reportedly there is some construction of dedicated right of way in the Merced-Fresno area. One critic has noted, rather succinctly, "It will cost too much, take too long, use up too much land, go to the wrong places, and in the end won't be fast or convenient enough to do that much good anyway." California subsidizes nearly all of the medium distance trains in California. Since Amtrak began, the state has started up the Sacramento-Oakland Capitol Corridor with 15 weekday trains, some reaching north to Roseville or south to San Jose. As mentioned, there are seven San Joaquins. Where Amtrak began with two LA-San Diego San Diegos, there are now twelve, with five reaching north as far as San Luis Obispo. Will the high speed line really be put into service, and will California be able to afford the subsidies it will need? I read a report that the Merced-Bakersfield portion will be built by 2019. Time will tell; count me as a skeptic. The track used by the San Joaquins is mostly straight, it is in great shape, much with concrete ties, and we flew along. Single track but with high-speed sidings and good dispatching. We waited for our time at most stations. We met a northbound San Joaquin. The land outside is lush valley farmland, an American breadbasket (or fruit basket). A few of the farms are solar ones. The California cars are clearly a generation newer than Amtrak's Superliners. Stairs are long and straight rather than the tight ones with corners found on Superliners. There is even an elevator in the food service car, though it is for cargo. My guess is any future Superliners will have elevators for people in order to be fully accessible. Coaches are roomy upstairs and down, and some seats are facing, with tables between. All cars have Wi-Fi and power outlets. Restrooms are huge, wheelchair accessible, like the ones I found on the Cascades. Truly a 21st Century long-haul train!

Arrival at Bakersfield was a bit early, and waiting for us were five connections. Not trains, unfortunately, but Thruway Connections to Santa Barbara, Torrance, Indio, San Pedro, and Los Angeles Union Station. My bus was nearly full; as I made my way through the crowd of transferring passengers, I wondered whether California might one day put trains on the ex-SP line south of Bakersfield to Los Angeles.... I munched the lunch I had purchased in the café on the San Joaquin and enjoyed some spectacular mountain scenery during the 2 2/3 hour ride. Dense freeway traffic suggested the need for a passenger rail route here—either the existing UP or the terribly expensive new high speed route which will require lots of tunneling.

Los Angeles Union is one of the truly great stations in the United States, blending Spanish and Art Deco styles. Opened in 1939, it was the last of the great "union stations" built to serve multiple railroads. I strolled across the street to the colorful historic district which marks the site of the original village, El Pueblo de Nuestra de la Reina de Los Angeles, founded in 1781. On my way to the street I encountered a Christmas video shoot of a youth choir singing Christmas carols my glimpse of Hollywood while passing through town! Visible in front of the station is the LA City Hall, made famous as the home of the newspaper The Daily Planet in Superman and as itself in Dragnet. Palm trees accentuate images I took of Union Station. There is a new, modern annex for commuter trains, trolleys, and buses on one side of the station. After my short walk, I relaxed in the spacious and comfortable Metropolitan Lounge, enjoying televised football and rooting for my Fantasy Football team members. After having Wi-Fi on all trains since Seattle, I would be "going dark" for two days until Chicago, so I made my last email contacts.

To be continued--



Gracious interior of King Street Station, Seattle.



Talgo dining table car.



Talgo Bistro car.



Talgo accessible restroom.



Talgo at Portland, led by ex-F40 "Cabbage."



Portland Union Station.



Gracious interior of Portland Union Station.



Portland streetcar.



San Joaquin "California Car" Food service car.



California Car coach (stairs at left).



California Car coach.



Author starting this article aboard the San Joaquin.



San Joaquin at Bakersfield.



California Car exterior.



Los Angeles Union Station.



Gracious interior of Los Angeles Union Station.