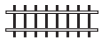
North Dakota

across on the hi-line



On a snowy March afternoon in 2008, I drove five hours from northern Michigan to Columbus, a town of 4,500 on the Crawfish River in south-central Wisconsin. By the luck of its location on Canadian Pacific tracks, this little town is served by the Empire Builder, the long-haul train that runs between Chicago and the cities of Portland and Seattle. I booked a roomette—an economy sleeper on the second level of the double-decker Superliner car. After I settled in, the attendant stuck his head in, "You know how all this works?"

I did, but I had been prepared to listen to an orientation of sorts. Instead, he just looked at me expectantly, so I just nodded.

"Good," he said, appearing relieved. "Let me know if you need anything."

No demonstration of the air controls in the room, nothing about the location of the ice bucket, the free juice and coffee, and no explanation of dinner reservations or wine tasting—all the perks of traveling first class. Over the next two days, he was around but not really friendly or helpful. All I can say is, he wasn't the best Amtrak attendant I encountered in my travels—or the worst.

The conductor came by and punched my ticket, noting my first destination—Essex, Montana.

"Staying at the Izaak?" he said.

"For a couple of days, then I'm on to Seattle."

"You a skier or rail fan?"

"Skier mainly."

As we passed the frozen lakes of the Wisconsin Dells, I arranged the essentials—notebooks, radio, binoculars, MP3 player, a novel, and a road atlas. I poured a coffee from the communal urn down the hall and took a *Milwaukee Sentinel* from a stack of newspapers. Now I was on train time. A thousand miles to sit back and relax.

Afternoon turned to evening; darkness fell quickly over the bare woods and snowy fields. At La Crosse, we went over the Mississippi River and headed north on the Minnesota side.

I always take late dinner reservations. Then, if the company is good, I can sip another glass of wine or linger over a coffee, chatting with my tablemates. The staff doesn't need the table, so they don't try to rush you off.

Dining cars practice community seating. No one sits alone, and whom you break bread with is the luck of the draw. This night, the attendant brought over a lumbering, middle-aged man with a cookie-duster mustache. He reached a meaty hand across the table, "Hi, I'm Mort."

Mort Berkowitz's New York accent was unmistakable. He didn't look at the menu, but ordered a glass of red wine and the flat iron steak—rare. The flat iron is the most expensive item on the menu, and since meals are included in the price of a sleeper, those in the know always go for the best. I had a steak, too.

Mort was on a two-week business trip. He had boarded the Lake Shore Limited at Penn Station and was on his way to Seattle for business, and then on to L.A. aboard the Coast Starlight. His wife would fly in for a few days, but Mort was coming back across the country alone on the train. He was a veteran, having crossed the Rockies four times on the California Zephyr and once on a Canadian train.

"I love the train," he said "Here you have the time to kibitz with strangers. I meet people I never would in the city."

Berkowitz has an office on Times Square where he manufactures political buttons. He was going west to meet with vendors and using train time to conjure up new button ideas.

He slipped one across the table with a picture of a grinning Chelsea Clinton saying, "Don't Tell Mamma. I'm voting for Obama." There was one of McCain as Methuselah and a button depicting George W. Bush with the caption "The Flaw in the White Conspiracy Theory." When we exchanged business cards Mort pulled out two—one said "Your Republican Campaign Headquarters" and the other, "Your Democratic Campaign Headquarters."

"I'm really a Democrat, but when it comes to buttons, I'm an equal opportunist. I'll make and sell them to whoever is paying."

We compared notes on Amtrak. He lamented the decline in food service, the substitution of plastic plates for dinner china, the move to eliminate dining cars and observation lounge cars with the new Cross Country Diner, a kind of combination car that doesn't offer much space to sit back and socialize with other passengers.

"Across Amtrak, the level of service is really uneven. It depends on the disposition of the onboard service chief of that train," he explained. "If that person is people-oriented, you have a great experience. But just as often you can end up with a surly Amtrak waiter who isn't very pleasant."

Sleeping car passengers tend to get better treatment but they pay a premium. Depending on the time of year and the route, roomettes can run between $100 and $500 extra. Like airline seats, the fewer left, the higher the price.

I had spent many a night sleeping in the coaches in my adult life and would do so again in the coming months, but not on this chilly winter evening. I returned to my sleeper, put on pajamas, wrapped myself in the blankets, and left the curtains open to the land.

Before dawn, I took my laptop and stagger-stepped my way through the rocking coaches. The passengers resembled a litter of puppies snuggled together for warmth. A mother snored with her little girl against her chest, both their mouths agape. Beneath blankets and winter coats, young women sprawled across their boyfriend's laps, their arms and legs jutting into the aisles.

At mid-coach sat a straight-backed heavy-set fellow in bib overalls. He held no book or magazine, wore no ear phones, had no distraction of any kind. The windows were still black with the night. His palms on his knees, he looked forward in a thousand-yard stare. He seemed to be waiting out this train ride. Maybe he was a farmer or a truck driver whose back hurt, or he was accustomed to his own bed and just wanted to get home. I nodded to him but he looked right through me.

In the empty lounge, I sipped coffee, wrote, and watched the day come on. There was no sun, no red line on the horizon, just a diffuse brightening, as if an artist had used a no. 2 pencil to shade in the sky and differentiate it from the snowy prairie. We were crossing the Red River valley, which is not a valley at all, but the bottom of ancient Lake Agassiz. Ten thousand years ago when ice sheets melted, Agassiz sprawled wider than all the Great Lakes combined. Today, its dry and fertile bed is some of the flattest land anywhere in America, a place where you can experience the curvature of the earth by watching, as you approach a town, the slow rising of grain elevators from the horizon. It was all geometry—the sky hemispheric, visible out both windows. Roads scored into the land, and shelterbelts—each tree lovingly planted—running off to vanishing points. Somewhere out there, I could believe, was the edge of the world.

The lounge eventually filled with passengers buying juice and sweet rolls at the café. I went up to the dining car for a sit-down breakfast. Dining-car stewards bemoan the decline in dress and decorum of passengers. In the heyday of trains, people washed up, shaved, brushed their teeth, did their hair, and put on clean shirts before coming down for a meal. A few still do, but a lot of folks stumble in, still wiping sleep from their eyes. So I wasn't surprised to see a young couple come into breakfast wearing matching flannel pajama bottoms decorated with cupids and love hearts. She carried a baby and her nursing blouse was half unbuttoned. He sported a buzz cut, a sleeveless Semper Fidelis T-shirt, and muscled, tattooed arms.

At breakfast, I sat with Gary and Linda Wagenbach of Northfield, Minnesota,

who were on their way to Washington to visit a son. She's a retired college administrator; Gary's a biology professor on sabbatical.

Their family-sized bedroom in the lower level of the sleeping car had windows on both sides, and they'd spent the hour before breakfast watching for birds. From the dining car windows we could see all around us tufts of grass and brush sticking out of frozen prairie potholes, which would be lush with snowmelt in spring. But even now there were birds on these plains, and as the train rushed along they shot from their hiding places like so many BBs from a scattergun.

"Partridge?" asked Linda.

"Hungarian, I think," replied Gary.

We passed vast snow-covered fields whose furrows formed a rippled texture beneath the snow cover. Along fencerows sat piles of rocks and fieldstone, a harvest no doubt of many years of spring plowing.

A thin bespectacled man with white hair and a thick mustache curving down to his upper lip slipped into the seat next to mine. Trygve Olson told us he had boarded the train at Fargo and was going to Idaho.

"Do you know if this is durum wheat country?" Gary asked.

Olsen nodded, "Yes it is. Back in the valley, it was red wheat, but not here. It's drier."

"Are you a farmer?" I ask.

No, an art professor at Minnesota State–Moorhead on spring break. He and his wife planned to get off around 2:00 a.m. when the train stopped at Sandpoint, Idaho, hang around the station for a couple of hours, and then catch the eastbound back home. Last year, Olson rode the train to the Mississippi Delta and stayed just a day before returning.

"Trains are a way for me to refocus. I like to zone out on the landscape," he said.

Gary observed that train trips induce a type of resting wakefulness. "It's like camping in the woods," he added. "There's not a lot to do and that's the whole point. Meals are a big event. You spend most of the time looking out the window. It's hypnotic."

Olson draws editorial cartoons for the *Fargo Forum*, and was well versed on North Dakota politics and economics. Over omelets and railroad toast (French toast, actually), we talked about the oil boom in the Badlands, which was being overrun with drilling rigs and transient roughnecks. The previous fall some North Dakota farmers ran low on diesel fuel and couldn't bring in all their grain, so the state was planning to build a refinery near Bismarck to process its own crude. In this land of populism, grange halls, and farmer cooperatives,

where there is suspicion of big business, Wall Street, and the Chicago Board of Trade, it was not a surprising move. North Dakota still operates its own bank, the only state-owned depository in the nation.

It was out here on the Plains and on the farmsteads of the Midwest that a populist backlash against American railroads took hold more than a century ago. In the closing decades of the nineteenth century—what Mark Twain dubbed "the Gilded Age" of robber barons and banking magnates—the railroad industry was the most powerful force in the country, more formidable than government, which set no rules for business behavior during this period of laissez-faire capitalism. Railroads and financiers acted badly because there was no one to stop them.

Organized on a military model and based on martial discipline, nineteenth-century railroad companies took no prisoners. Many of the top officers had come out of the Civil War and were expert in moving goods long distances and controlling large groups of men. They put together sprawling, sophisticated business organizations not yet seen anywhere else in the world.

In prior years, American businesses had largely been capitalized by wealthy individuals and families, but railroads needed enormous resources for land, infrastructure, labor, and equipment. When they couldn't raise it ethically, railroads floated worthless stock, promoted agriculture in western lands unsuitable for farming, corrupted politicians and institutions, and bypassed towns unwilling to pay bribes or buy stock. They took land for railbeds, and, when there was no competition, charged outrageous prices to haul goods. Among farmers who had no other way to get their crops to market, the railroads made few friends.

The animosity came to a head in the financial panic of 1873 that politicized the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry, which had been founded years earlier as a sort of agrarian Masonic Order. Its purpose was to spread scientific practices to farmers and provide them with an intellectual and social life. Grangers generally had eschewed politics and religion, though they promoted co-ops and other mild forms of socialism.

Grangers wanted cheaper transportation to markets, and when they saw that government was controlled by the big railroads, they began running their own candidates for office. By 1875, the number of grange halls in America had soared from 3,000 to 21,000. When the grange-backed politicians gained control of several state legislatures—Michigan, Illinois, and Minnesota—they began passing "granger laws" to regulate the shipping rates that railroads could charge farmers and established state railroad commissions to act as watchdogs.

Railroads fought back in courts. Though there were conflicting court decisions and precedents set throughout the latter decades of the nineteenth century,

the Supreme Court generally upheld as constitutional the right of government to regulate private businesses that serve the public interest.

A railroad wasn't just a business; it was a business that had a public responsibility. Railroads functioned as natural, or technical, monopolies, meaning it was difficult, even impossible, for them to compete against one another by lowering prices. Rarely could a railroad afford to build and maintain an infrastructure parallel to a competitor. One railroad tended to win out in a region, and when competition was removed, the survivor became monopolistic and set prices accordingly. And because they ran goods and people across state lines and were critical to the country's well-being—they were the only real national transportation network for decades—they could not be allowed to operate unfettered.

Although the grange movement led to government regulation of railroads and to the establishment of the Interstate Commerce Commission, the ICC didn't get its teeth until the Progressive Era and the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt. Eventually, government came to control railroads to an astonishing degree, and by the mid-twentieth century, their regulations, coupled with broad government antipathy to the railroads, would nearly crush the industry and contribute to the demise of passenger service.

As we rolled west, past Rugby, North Dakota—proclaiming itself as the geographical center of North America—the land got higher and drier. Fields morphed into rangeland that sprouted cattle rather than crops. What had been a gray day turned brilliantly blue. I sat in the sightseer lounge car with its big windows and watched the shortgrass prairie—snowless and brown—reel by in a mesmerizing monotony. Sometimes, the train paralleled U.S. Route 2—the east-west motor route across the state's northern tier—but mostly the train veered off into a landscape absent cars, billboards, and towns. Out there, the eye locked onto small details—two deer bounding from a copse of trees, derricks puncturing an oil patch near Stanley, and curtains fluttering from the broken windows of an abandoned homestead.

We passed intermodal trains racing east, their shipping containers stacked two high. As a result of the nation's trade deficit, a lot of these containers return to Asia empty or are filled with recyclables. We buy their stuff and send them our garbage.

The train pushed west, past Havre, Glasgow, and then to Shelby, all fifty miles or so from Canadian border, thus this rail route carries the moniker the Hi-Line. All the Dakota cold was now behind us, replaced by strange, Chinook-like warmth flowing down from the Continental Divide. Most of the passengers joined the smokers on the platform at Shelby and reveled in the sunshine and mild air.

A pack of semi-inebriated grandmothers exited a coach at Shelby and crossed the street to the Oasis Bar and Casino, a weathered, wind-blasted establishment displaying a big "Welcome Amtrak" sign. It looked like a shitkicker of a place with four-wheel-drive pickups in the parking lot and rangy ranch dogs pacing back and forth in the truck beds. One grandmother—who actually wore a shirt saying grandma—stood as lookout, listening for the "all aboard" shout. Her companions crowded the bar, threw back shots, and stuffed bottles of beer in their purses. Only first-class passengers are allowed to bring liquor aboard.

Back on the train, with the Rockies rising up on the horizon, the first-class passengers filled the dining car for a wine tasting—cheese and crackers and glasses of two reds and two whites from Oregon and Washington vineyards. I sat with Mort and a rail fan I met back in Shelby. He lived in Seattle and was headed home after visiting Civil War battlefields in Virginia.

Mort cocked his thumb at the dining-car steward, who was reading aloud from the back of a bottle before pouring out samples.

"Are you listening to this guy?"

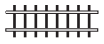
The steward, no wine connoisseur and apparently farsighted, too, held the bottle up at eye level and squinted hard. He stumbled so badly over the lingo on the labels that Mort finally waved impatiently for the bottle and took over the presentation.

Afterward he confided, "When the guy pronounced Sauvignon 'sav-in-jon,' I couldn't take it anymore."

The last time I saw Mort he was in the hallway outside the roomette of Trygve Olson, the art teacher and political cartoonist. They were passing buttons back and forth, giggling.

Essex, Montana

at the izaak walton inn



After Cut Bank, the mountains closed in and cut off the sun. I packed my gear as the train climbed through the black forests to the Continental Divide at Marais Pass. At 5,213 feet above sea level, Marais is the lowest railroad pass through the Rockies, and its existence enabled the Great Northern Railway to open up the country's northern tier—from the Iron Range in Minnesota to the fruit growing valleys of Washington—to settlement and development.

James Jerome Hill, a one-eyed tycoon from St. Paul who was nicknamed the Empire Builder, assembled the Great Northern in 1889 from several smaller roads and used those to construct the Hi-Line route across the continent. The railroad promoted the establishment of Glacier National Park and underwrote the construction of massive resort hotels. It chose a Rocky Mountain goat as its symbol and, during the height of passenger service ran a luxurious streamliner train, the Empire Builder, named after Hill.

The little hamlet of Essex is a flag stop; there's no station. Unless someone gets on or off, the train doesn't stop. I detrained ("detrain" is a great railroad term) with Ron and Ila Erickson of Bethel, Minnesota. The warmth of lower elevations was gone; we were back in winter. The snow banks stood head high and big flakes floated down. The Izaak Walton, a three-story wooden structure, glowed warmly beneath the black, scalloped shapes of the mountains.

As a chauffeur loaded our bags into a shuttle van, we watched the Amtrak pull away.

"Those lights on the side," Ron said. "They'll change when the train is about to go forward. See . . . the conductor is radioing the engineer, and now the lights change."

The train crept forward, and a line of faces peered down at us from the coaches.

"You a rail fan?"

"Engineer," he said. "Retired."

Early in his career, Erickson had worked in Whitefish, Montana, and crossed the Continental Divide more than forty times behind the controls of a locomotive. In retirement, he operates the Hustle Muscle, a vintage diesel engine for the Great Northern Railway Historical Society back in St. Paul.

As we rode over to the inn, Ron told me he testifies as an expert witness on derailments and other railroad accidents. I told him about my grandfather and the boiler explosion.

He sucked in his breath. "My God, when one of those explosions happened, they were just huge. Those engines ran at extremely high pressure."

Inside the inn, it was easy to see why rail fans love the place. Bedspreads, lamps, iron railings, stained-glass windows, and napkin holders all bore the Great Northern's image of Rocky, the mountain goat. A length of welded rail serves as the foot rest in the bar. Old diner menus, yellowed route maps, rusty lanterns and oil cans, advertising posters from the 1950s, and black-and-white photographs of derailments and monumental snowstorms line the walls of the hallways. Near the hotel, four cabooses have been converted into cabins.

I had taken a trackside room, which was comfortable but utilitarian—after all, these were crew quarters for railroad men. Even today, there are no phones or televisions. Cell phones don't work either. The Izaak is all about unplugging. You ski, watch trains, read rail-fan magazines in the lobby in front of a fire, or eat in the restaurant. There's really nowhere else to go.

I had skied at the inn years ago, and remembered shouldering skis and threading our way in front of idling locomotives and around standing cars to reach the trails on the far side of the tracks. It was a dangerous arrangement, which the BNSF and state of Montana rectified by building a steel pedestrian bridge.

The bridge is the catbird's seat for rail fans. Small openings had been cut along the bridge's wire mesh sides for fans to poke out a camera and telephoto lens. The next morning I went out there to see the arrival of the eastbound Empire Builder. A big, bearded fellow puffing on a pipe was already pacing on the bridge. When he saw me, he staked out one of the openings, which offered the best angle to shoot the train and the inn.

The train came in quick, announcing its arrival with a whistle.

The Empire Builder was pulled by GE Genesis Locomotives, built for the long-haul passenger market. The Genesis styling—a sheath of rectangular sheet metal that looks somewhat aerodynamic—was at first disconcerting for some rail fans who longed for the traditional snub nosed look of a diesel-electric locomotive.

Amtrak trains often run with two locomotives, but it's not because the train needs that much motive power—the railroad terminology for locomotives—to pull the loads. The additional engine is more for protection in case one or the other fails on a long trip. It also helps generate the electricity required to run the onboard systems—air-conditioning and heat, light, refrigeration and microwave ovens, toilets and showers, and outlets to power all those DVD players, cell phones, and computers that passengers bring along.

Diesel locomotives do not have mechanical or hydraulic transmissions like diesel-powered cars and trucks; the massive diesel engine turns a powerful alternator to supply high current to electric motors mounted on the axles. The world's fastest trains—including Amtrak's Acela—get their power from overhead wires, eliminating the need to carry fuel or heavy generators. But long-distance lines lack the overhead wires to accommodate that kind of electric service.

Diesels were first introduced in the 1920s by the American Locomotive Division (ALCO) and its partner, General Electric. But it was production and marketing aplomb by General Motors that made diesel engines part of the American scene and led directly to the demise of steam power.

In 1930, General Motors purchased Electro-Motive Corporation, a manufacturer of gas-electric cars, and began building diesel engines to pull lightweight stainless-steel car bodies made by the Budd Company in Philadelphia. Their most famous early creation was Burlington's Pioneer Zephyr, which in 1934 ran the 1,015 miles from Chicago to Denver in just thirteen hours, five minutes, averaging 77.6 mph and topping out at 112. People turned out by the thousands to watch it fly by their towns; radio networks tracked its progress live. Railroads embraced the technology, and fast, diesel-electric trains appeared on several routes. It was the beginning of the streamliner era.

World War II interrupted everything as GM retooled to make tanks, airplanes, and other armaments. Railroads concentrated on moving millions of soldiers and huge amounts of raw materials and arms across the country, which they accomplished with steam power. At war's end, there were still 40,000 steamers in existence and hundreds of thousands of people in the nation—pipe fitters, boilermakers, and shop mechanics—employed in their operation and maintenance.

But the railroads were worn down by the war service, their equipment and physical plants in need of investment and replacement. Diesel offered them the opportunity for a huge leap forward when they came to retool.

First, diesels were all-purpose, more fuel-efficient machines that could be run as units. If you needed more power, no need for a bigger locomotive, simply add a unit. Maintenance costs were reduced. Diesels were built of components that could be swapped out in the shop. No need to have a small army of boilermakers and pipe fitters to fashion and custom-fit parts. Steam engines required fuel every 100 miles, water every 50 miles. Diesels didn't. Diesel locomotives had a lower center of gravity and thus could handle curves better. They provided high torque for pulling uphill and high horsepower under several ranges of speeds. They could pull longer trains, and longer trains meant fewer crews and reduced labor costs. And there was dynamic braking. Using the same principle

of "regenerative braking" now common in hybrid and electric automobiles, the engineer could switch the motors on the locomotive's axles into generators and convert the force of a moving train into electricity.

As well, an engineer could reduce the electricity going to the traction motors and slow the train—an essentially frictionless braking system that reduced parts wear. Dynamic braking had been available on electrified tracks before but never on the open road. It was a great safety feature, especially in places like the Rocky Mountains.

The major steam manufacturers—the Baldwin Locomotive Works in Pennsylvania and the Lima Works in Ohio—improved their trains to compete with the new diesels and sheathed them in art deco coverings to make them look more modern. Some steam-powered passenger trains—such as the Hiawatha of the Milwaukee Road—sped along at 100 mph.

But it was to no avail. GM purchased the Winton Engine Company, which built gasoline and diesel engines, and in 1941 merged it into Electro-Motive to create the Electro-Motive Division (EMD) of General Motors. GM produced and marketed its new machines with the competitive strategies and economies of scale it brought to the automobile industry. While manufacturers of steam locomotives had produced customized machines for each railroad and allowed railroads a hand in the design, GM mass-produced its engines and didn't offer many options beyond the paint job—which in itself was a remarkable idea. Railroads shifted away from the flat black and gray of the steamers and experimented with color and designs that identified their brands.

GM also used its muscle and its ability to extend easy credit terms to convince railroads that had electrified their infrastructures and were already running powerful electric locomotives, to tear down their overhead electrical wires and run diesels, instead. Later, this made those railroads less able to compete efficiently against trucks and automobiles by limiting their ability to run high-speed trains. At the time, it seemed like a good economic decision because diesels were a cheaper alternative to building or maintaining an electrical infrastructure. The same rationalization held true for electric trolleys. Many cities turned to buses rather than replacing older trolley systems and lines.

While other countries kept or added to their electrified infrastructure networks, America dieselized. There are few electrified lines in America today.

GM went after the end customer, too, by running image-building ads in consumer magazines. Under the slogan "Better Trains Follow General Motors Locomotives," the ads touted the absence of smoke and steam to obscure the passenger's view, and smoother acceleration and braking at stations that didn't jerk passengers around. Steamers were just old news, and passengers wanted

modern trains. Millions of soldiers and citizens had come out of the war with bad memories of riding crowded, worn-out trains.

The changeover to diesel-electrics was stunningly swift. The last steamer was made in 1949. By 1960, steam engines were all but gone. Nearly 500,000 railroaders lost their jobs because water and fueling stations and steam-engine repair shops were no longer needed. The Lima Works and Baldwin Locomotive Works, manufacturers nearly a century old, did not survive the transition. General Electric and GM came to dominate the diesel industry. Later GM spun off EMD as an independent company.

The future may be bright, especially for GE, which has now surged far ahead of EMD in units produced. Diesel-electrics in the future will incorporate hybrid technology, biodiesel fuels, and regenerative braking to capture energy and recharge batteries.

But it is the electrified grid, now only installed on the Northeast Corridor, that offers the ultimate power option for running really fast trains. As more freight and passenger trains are needed in America, experts predict a return to electrification in high-traffic corridors. And if that electricity is generated by a cleaner technology rather than a coal-fired power plant, environmental benefits will accrue.

Back at the inn, I rented a pair of skis and spent the afternoon on groomed forest trails. It was mostly quiet in the woods except for the periodic sound of diesels powering up on the track or whistles echoing back and forth between the valley walls. When I came back across the pedestrian bridge, I found Ron Erickson, leaning on a railing, looking down at two idling BNSF locomotives. A mile-long string of low-slung well cars, designed to hold two shipping containers one atop the other, trailed behind. Out of sight, a pusher engine positioned itself at the rear of the train. The locomotives in front were powerful enough to pull the cars over the pass, but on the uphill climb, the combined weight of the cars would put too much stress on the couplings and the train could pull apart, Erickson explained. Better to push it over than pull.

"It can be a dicey bit of coordination; the crews need to talk to each other," he said.

I glanced over at the hotel. Pacing along the tracks, puffing his pipe, was the rail fan I'd seen earlier. He had a scanner in his hand, listening to the crew chatter. Minutes later, the diesels gave out a throaty roar and the train began to move between the mountains.