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**RIDING  
THE ZEPHYR**

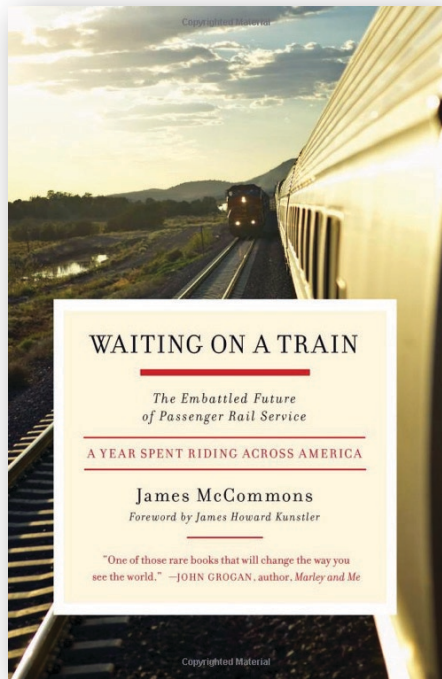
An excerpt from

**WAITING ON A TRAIN**

The Embattled Future of Passenger Rail Services

By **JAMES McCOMMONS**





## THE AUTHOR

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## THE BOOK

**WAITING ON A TRAIN: The Embattled Future of Passenger Rail Service**

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# RIDING THE ZEPHYR

An excerpt from

## WAITING ON A TRAIN

The Embattled Future of Passenger Rail Services

By JAMES McCOMMONS

**T**he odyssey began in early 2007 when I got a magazine-writing assignment that would take me from my home in Michigan's Upper Peninsula to Seattle, Washington. I could have flown, but I asked the editor if she would pay for a train instead. Sure, she agreed, if the cost didn't exceed a jet. It was a bit more, but I made up the difference because it was a chance to climb aboard a long-distance train again.

I also wanted to bring along Kelly, my oldest son, then thirteen, to introduce him to the landscapes of the West and to train travel, too. He barely remembered the trip we had taken from Toledo to Harrisburg when he was five, and I had not been on a train since.

When we boarded the California Zephyr at Chicago's Union Station that March, I didn't know this one trip would encompass so much of the promise in, and the trouble with, passenger-train



**When we boarded the California Zephyr at Chicago's Union Station that March, I didn't know this one trip would encompass so much of the promise in, and the trouble with, passenger-train service in the United States today**

service in the United States today. Having ridden Amtrak for some thirty years, I knew we would likely encounter some poor service, missed connections, long waits, and run-down equipment. Still, the train offered great scenery, the camaraderie of fellow passengers, a reprieve from driving or flying, a great safety record, and an exotic experience.

So few intercity passenger trains run today that most Americans have never boarded one. Amtrak doesn't come through their town, or it comes just once a day – perhaps in the middle of the night – or every other day. Rarely is the train on time, and more recently, it's often been filled and with no available seats. Where I live in the Upper Peninsula is isolated, and no matter how great a renaissance rail may undergo in this country, I don't expect a passenger train will come that far north again for a long time.

Until 1969, the Chicago and North Western Railway's Peninsula 400 ran

between the Upper Peninsula and Chicago, making the trip in about six hours, an hour quicker than I can drive it doing the speed limit. But no more. The nearest railhead for a passenger train to me today is Milwaukee, 273 miles to the south. There, I could pick up the Hiawatha, an Amtrak success story. Making seven trips daily to downtown Chicago and back, the Hiawatha is a corridor train between major cities that are too close for efficient air service and connected by a deteriorating interstate highway filled past capacity.

The departments of transportation in Illinois and Wisconsin subsidize the Hiawatha service and have spent millions building stations and helping the Canadian Pacific expand its track system to accommodate both freight and passenger trains. The DOTs want to lure some commuters off the roadways, and also give people another mode of travel. The trains run on time. They are clean, filled with passengers, and increasingly popular since gas prices skyrocketed in 2008.

We boarded the train at the Amtrak station near Milwaukee's airport, Mitchell Field, having left our automobile in long-term parking. Commuters jammed the Hiawatha, tapping on Blackberries and yakking on cell phones. An attendant wheeled a cart down the aisle, and I bought a coffee and opened a newspaper. Frozen farm fields rolled past the window. Now, all we had to do was sit back and ride – first to Chicago, then to Sacramento by sleeping car, and then, after a few days in California visiting a childhood friend, north through the big woods and Coast Ranges to Seattle. Thousands of miles, eighty-plus hours on the rails, a panorama of western landscape, and a melting pot of human characters to encounter along the way – the trip guaranteed adventure. I told Kelly, “By the time



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we get home, you'll know you've been somewhere.”

I had pulled him from school for ten days. He carried a knapsack of comic books, an iPod and Game Boy, school texts, and a thick folder of homework. But he was too excited that morning for algebra and instead peered out the window looking for the Sears Tower and Chicago skyline.

At Union Station, we checked our bags at the Metropolitan Lounge, reserved for first-class sleeping-car passengers, and went upstairs to the Great Hall with its Romanesque columns and hard, wooden railroad benches.

Because of its central location in the Middle West, Chicago has long been a railroad town. At one time, the city had five railroad terminals, but Union Station was the busiest. In the 1940s, it handled more than 300 trains and 100,000 passengers a day. Today, it's still busy, with commuters riding Metra and a few thousand passengers traveling on one or another of Amtrak's 50-odd trains that run in and out of Union Station each day.

The Great Hall was cut off from the regular flow of passengers when Amtrak remodeled the station in 1989 and moved its waiting areas and lounges below-ground. Amtrak constructed the comfortable, classy Metropolitan Lounge for first-class passengers, but herded its coach passengers into the unimaginatively named Lounges A and B, which are frequently jammed with passengers and luggage, and claustrophobic in comparison to the airy, cavernous Great Hall. Veteran passengers flee to the hall and wait up there for their trains, but unsuspecting newbies, who want to stay close to the boarding areas, miss one of America's great indoor spaces.

Kelly and I sat on the benches, tilted

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our heads back and looked at the winter light filtering through the overhead skylights. Homeless people slept on nearby benches, their faces and hands obscured beneath soiled jackets, sweaters, and blankets. They resembled long piles of unwashed laundry. They smelled, too. Train terminals offer refuge during the day, and in my travels I encountered homeless lying in Oakland's Jack London Station, sleeping upright in the art deco chairs of the L.A. terminal, and squatting in corners of New York's Penn Station. Kelly's sad expression and stolen glances at those men were disquieting. What could I say?

We boarded the train as an ice storm whipped into the city, jamming up rush-hour traffic on the Dan Ryan Expressway and delaying flights out of O'Hare and Midway. Sleet pelted the train as it gathered speed through the western suburbs and onto the frozen cornfields of northern Illinois.

After the conductor punched our tickets, we walked forward to the dining car and ordered dinner. While we ate, the storm morphed into a full-blown mid-western blizzard. Looking into the blur of snow, I told Kelly stories about other train journeys.

His mother, Elise, and I, were once aboard a train traveling from Detroit to Chicago. The locomotive stalled for hours in a sweltering cornfield. And there was that cold night we spent riding across Kansas when the heat failed in the sleeping car. As compensation, the sleeping-car attendant brought us bottles of red wine, which we drank in sleeping bags zipped up to the neck.

In the early 1970s, Amtrak ran the "Rainbow Trains." The consists – a technical term railroaders use as a noun to describe the composition or arrange-



**In 1978 on the Sunset Limited in west Texas, I watched cooks working over smoky stoves fired by charcoal briquettes. The air-conditioning and exhaust fans had broken down, and the dining attendants threw open the windows at the ends of the car to clear the smoke**

ments of the locomotive and cars – were a hodgepodge of old, hand-me-down equipment inherited from a dozen different railroads. The toilets, known as "holes in the floor," flushed right onto the tracks, and you could watch the wooden ties rushing by underneath. In 1978 on the Sunset Limited in west Texas, I watched cooks working over smoky stoves fired by charcoal briquettes. The air-conditioning and exhaust fans had broken down, and the dining attendants threw open the windows at the ends of the car to clear the smoke. Heat from the Chihuahuan Desert blasted through the windows, and I ate with an old railroader who reckoned the engineer had the train running 95 to 105 mph.

I was in college then, on my way to Arizona to drive an elderly aunt and all her belongings back to a retirement home in Pennsylvania. In the lounge car, I met Sigrid, a blue-eyed, freckled blond running away from a possessive boyfriend in Florida. A friend had gotten her a job in California on a sprawling farm in the San Joaquin Valley, where she was to stand at the row end of a broccoli field and vector in crop-dusting planes.

"I'll need to wear an aluminum suit with a mask. You know, because of the pesticides. And I have to wave these flags to signal the pilot."

"Those are semaphores," I said, remembering a vocabulary word I'd picked up in an English class.

During a fueling stop in El Paso, we stepped onto the oven heat of the railroad platform and took pictures of one another standing outside the stucco-covered station. We drank cold beer in the lounge car as the train ran through Deming and Lordsburg.

In Arizona, right at dusk, we reached the ranching town of Benson. I was the

only passenger getting on or off. The conductor looked me over and said, “Young man, this will be easy. We’re going to slow the train to a crawl – but not stop. When I say ‘now’ – you step off. Take a big step forward and then turn around and I’ll toss your knapsack.”

When I caught the pack, he gave me an approving nod and then windmilled his arm at the engineer leaning out from the locomotive. The train throttled up toward Tucson. These days, Amtrak employees aren’t allowed to step on or off moving trains, but back then a lot went on, including running trains 100 mph over tracks rated at 50. Nowadays with global positioning systems on every locomotive and central dispatch – where a person thousands of miles away can track a rolling train like an air-traffic controller – there’s less freelancing.

When I looked up, Sigrid had her face pressed against the back window of the train. She waved good-bye. A dust devil scurried along the tracks. My aunt was nowhere in sight. I glanced across the street to a feed store where some good old boys sat on a bench regarding me as another long-haired curiosity.

Sigrid got smaller and smaller and then disappeared into the desert. And I knew I should have stayed on the train. Even now, I wish I had.

When the Zephyr with my son and me aboard crossed the Mississippi at Burlington that night, it was snowing hard. For a time in central Iowa, we paralleled Route 34, and I peered over to see cars spun out in ditches and tractor trailers creeping along. On a portable radio, Kelly tuned in the AP news, and we heard that airports in Chicago, Detroit, Minneapolis, and Des Moines were closed, thousands of passengers sprawled in the concourses, and the effects on air traffic were rippling



**That evening, we turned out the cabin lights and gazed out at snowdrifts piling up in the empty main streets of small towns. Pickup trucks sat in driveways and television lights flickered from the windows of passing farmhouses**

across the nation.

It mattered not at all to the Zephyr. The tenor of the locomotives seemed to deepen. It built up speed and sliced into the storm. That evening, we turned out the cabin lights and gazed out at snowdrifts piling up in the empty main streets of small towns. Pickup trucks sat in driveways and television lights flickered from the windows of passing farmhouses.

All evening, our train braked into stations right on time. The conductors and attendants hustled folks aboard and we sped away into the countryside. This was how a train was supposed to run – on time, efficient, and with only enough “dwell” in the stations to get folks off and on. The countryside reeled past. We were making progress.

Kelly changed into his pajamas, boosted himself into the upper bunk, and I latched the safety netting to catch him if the train made a sudden jerk. He was tired and giddy. A few hours out of Omaha, the train punched through the back side of the storm and into the clear skies of the Great Plains. Muted light of a full moon filled the cabin, and I sat up to see black, treeless land rolling away and the red line of dawn on the eastern horizon. The attendant had a coffee pot going and a fresh stack of the Omaha World Herald.

In the empty lounge car, I read, drank coffee, and watched the day come to light on the plains. Mornings are always magical on a train – going to sleep in one town and waking up hundreds of miles down the line. When the Zephyr pulled into Denver that morning, we were five minutes early.

Day two also went well. The train climbed the Front Range and plunged into black tunnels that emptied into magnificent snowy valleys. Along the Color-

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do River, we watched deer and elk bound away from the tracks. A historian gave short lectures over the speakers about characters like Doc Holliday, the tubercular dentist, gambler, and gunslinger who succumbed in a Glenwood Springs sanitarium. In the evening, the train descended the western slope, running along arroyos and beneath red buttes saturated by the setting sun.

But that night, in the Union Pacific yards outside of Salt Lake City, troubles began. While most passengers slept, the train idled for nearly four hours blocked by freight trains and hampered by switching problems. Behind schedule and out of sync with oncoming traffic, the Zephyr was at the whim of Union Pacific dispatchers in Omaha. Time and again the next day we were shunted onto sidings to make room for eastbound freights that rolled past laden with shipping containers off the docks of the West Coast.

“Get out of the way because here come all your Game Boys, microwaves, and cheap Wal-Mart crap,” a conductor grumbled.

We’d gotten jammed up in a supply line that stretched all the way back to Asia. The big railroads love this “hook and haul” business, in which goods coming off container ships are put on trains and hauled cross-country. At the time, before the great economic downturn in the late months of 2008, this stream of stuff produced by cheap labor abroad, sold by big box stores, and fueled by consumer credit seemed endless. The shipping containers sported logos in Chinese characters and English – Maersk, China Shipping, and Cosco. Other trains pulled triple-decker car carriers loaded with Daewoos, Nissans, and Toyotas.

No matter what these trains hauled, the Zephyr – filled with nearly three



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hundred people – pulled over to let them pass, sometimes waiting at a lonely siding for thirty minutes. Such stops mystify the Europeans who ride the trains.

“We’re stopped because of a bloody freight train?” one told me. “Unbelievable.”

In 1971 when Union Pacific and other freight railroads turned their passenger operations over to Amtrak, they agreed to give passenger trains preference over freights. It frequently doesn’t happen that way – sometimes because dispatchers purposefully sideline passenger trains, but more often because the existing infrastructure is just overwhelmed by too many trains. The truth in America is freight matters more than people, and nearly all the track belongs to the big railroads not to Amtrak.

Amtrak pays incentives to the freight railroads to deliver its passenger trains on time, but those payments are miniscule as compared to the profits earned by hauling freight. In other words, the incentives don’t provide much incentive.

In 2007, the Zephyr arrived in California on schedule only about 20 percent of the time, the next-to-worst performance in the Amtrak system. By summer 2009, when the recession cut freight traffic by nearly 25 percent, thus loosening some of the bottlenecks, and the big railroads made a political decision to do a better job of delivering Amtrak trains, the on-time performance of the Zephyr improved to nearly 60 percent.

“The other railroads hate Amtrak – just hate us. We’re in the way,” the conductor told me. He was being impolitic. It’s rare to hear Amtrak officials be as blunt. Passenger trains and freights run on a shared right-of-way, meaning they are on the same tracks. Outside of the Northeast Corridor, Boston to Washing-

ton, D.C., and a few other places, Amtrak doesn't own any track. It is a guest, and the freight railroads are the reluctant hosts.

American freight railroads are not now the overregulated, bankrupt basket corporations they were in the 1960s and '70s. They have several competitive advantages over the other transportation modes – air, road, and water – when it comes to hauling coal, grain, chemicals, and consumer goods, and their business has thrived in recent decades.

Stand on a hillside in the open country of Wyoming's Red Desert or the Mojave Preserve in southern California, and run your eyes along the length of a mile-long freight train loaded with 200-plus shipping containers and you get a sense of the efficiencies. Known as intermodals – because the containers are easily moved between ships, trains, and trucks – these trains are greener than trucks and good at moving items across the continent. The problem has been a lack of rail capacity. In the merger mania that permeated the industry after deregulation in 1980, the railroads ruthlessly gobbled one another up, combined operations, abandoned redundant and little-used routes, and ripped out tracks. Today, most of the country's rail infrastructure is controlled by only seven major railroads, also known as the Class 1 railroads, categorized by generating more than \$250 million in revenues annually. Most of the country is divided up by the big four: BNSF, CSX Transportation, Norfolk Southern, and Union Pacific. Smaller shares, but still big pieces, are taken up by Canadian National, Kansas City Southern, and Canadian Pacific. As well, there are regional railroads and short lines.

Much of this contraction was, from a corporate and efficiency point of view,



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necessary and good management, but there also were boneheaded decisions that realized short-term gains without looking ahead. Critics say the railroads got so good at downsizing, they forgot how to grow. Since the 1960s, nearly half of the nation's rail infrastructure was abandoned or removed.

The freight railroads could use those tracks. And even though they are spending more than \$3 to \$4 billion a year to restore and improve the tracks, it's not enough to keep pace. The Great Recession has offered some breathing room, but gridlock on the railroad will likely return when the economy picks up, unless government steps in and also invests in infrastructure.

With all the delays, it took us all day to cross Nevada. In Winnemucca, the Zephyr got stuck behind a slow-moving freight, and we made just fifty miles in three hours. Then, because we'd been unable to reach Reno before federal safety rules required a new crew, we stopped in the desert for ninety minutes until another crew was driven out from the city.

And it got worse. The dining car ran out of food, the lounge out of beer. Passengers who had missed connections or were fretting about relatives waiting for hours to pick them up barked at the crew. The chagrined workers threw up their hands, almost as if to say, "What did you expect from Amtrak?"

Veteran riders of Amtrak's long-distance trains just assume the train will be late. They don't book tight connections. They tell friends and relatives to call ahead and check arrival times. And they try to stay patient. Yet even by Amtrak standards, our progress that day had been ridiculous. It reached absurdity in Sparks – just outside of Reno – where Amtrak tried to hook on a private railway



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car of gamblers bound for San Francisco. The car wouldn't couple, and every time it bumped the Zephyr, the automatic brakes engaged on the train and threw passengers against the seats and walls.

We finally crossed the mountains into California at midnight, and when the Zephyr inched into Sacramento sixty-two hours after leaving Chicago, it was fifteen hours late. It was an ignominious end to a trip that had had some transcendent moments.

### SACRAMENTO

All you got now is Amtrak

**F**or the next two days, we stayed at a motel across the street from the station. Sacramento is a railroad town, and we heard the whistles and rumbles of the trains day and night. On Sunday, we walked downtown to mass at the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament and on the way back passed the palatial home of Leland Stanford, one of the politically powerful "Big Four" who had built the eastbound section of the transcontinental railroad. As California's governor, Stanford made sure the railroad received massive land grants and public funding, actions that were as corrupt as they were bold.

He later founded Stanford University, became president of the Central Pacific and a big stockholder in the Southern Pacific. He lived the lavish lifestyle of the railroad baron. It was folks like Stanford who made railroads indispensable to life in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and who made the railroads one of the most hated institutions in the land.

"Railroads were like the tobacco companies, big oil, and child pornographers all rolled up in one. They were considered



**Amtrak's food is better than the airlines, but it's all plastic plates and microwave food – nothing like this," he sniffed. "You'll never see any of this again. Just won't happen. All you got now is Amtrak"**

to be bastards that needed to be kept under the government's thumb," John Hankey remarked. "What went on during the 1800s poisoned the atmosphere for the next century."

Kelly and I walked into Old Sacramento to see the California Railroad Museum with its detailed dioramas and massive artifacts – steam locomotives, passenger cars, and the refrigerator cars that first hauled Central Valley produce to the eastern United States. Steeped in nostalgia for the golden age of railroading, the museum displayed an old and elegant dining car, fitted out with silverware and china plates. After World War II, the Union Pacific and Santa Fe ran fast "streamliner" trains with dining cars like this one, fine appointments, and grand names: Super Chief, El Capitan, and the California Zephyr.

In the back of the dining car, a grumpy docent stiffly unfolded from his chair and came toward us, hands in his back pockets and chest pushed out, ready to answer some questions.

Kelly told him we'd come out from Chicago on the Zephyr.

"Zephyr," he said. "That is what they call it, don't they?"

I said it wasn't quite like a Zephyr. We were fifteen hours late into Sacramento.

"Doesn't surprise me; it's always late," he said.

He told us he had ridden the streamliners as a young man, and now he occasionally takes Amtrak's Coast Starlight to L.A.

"Amtrak's food is better than the airlines, but it's all plastic plates and microwave food – nothing like this," he sniffed. "You'll never see any of this again. Just won't happen. All you got now is Amtrak." He spoke it like a slur.

In the bookstore, there were baseball

caps, hundreds of books, toys – many emblazoned with the emblems of bygone railroads, swallowed up in mergers, gone defunct from lack of traffic – all the trivia a rail fan, a model railroader, or a child could lap up. There was little of Amtrak to be seen, and it certainly wasn't celebrated, yet it's now the only intercity railroad in the United States.

On our last day, we caught the city's new light-rail train up to Folsom to have dinner with friends before returning to the station to pick up the Coast Starlight to Seattle. Sometimes, these light-rail systems, powered by electricity rather than diesel, can be built on old right-of-ways previously traversed by trolleys before they were ripped out in favor of city buses. But when a city has to retrofit rail into suburbs and commercial strips designed around the automobile, it's an expensive, tedious process. Sacramento opened its first light rail in 1987 but it took twenty more years until the line reached the train station where residents can connect up with Amtrak.

We boarded the Coast Starlight that night at 1:30 a.m., the train being ninety minutes late from L.A. We rode coach, slept in our seats, and awoke when the train stopped in Dunsmuir and then climbed a grade near Mount Shasta, passing rock fields of basalt extruded eons ago from the caldera. A fresh snow lay like frosting over the black rock. Rain drenched the forests all the way north to the Oregon border. Even though we pressed our faces against the windows as we passed over trestles in the big woods, we couldn't see their supports



**When are we again going to have a decent passenger-train system in this country – one that moves people efficiently between major cities and provides Americans with a true alternative to airplanes and automobiles?**

below but only the frothy rivers over which we passed. North to Eugene and then Portland, the valleys were wide, fecund, and green, but shrouded in winter fog. Masses of snow geese rose off lakes and irrigation canals and swirled into the sky. We reached Seattle in twenty-one hours traveling 828 miles. I covered my story for the magazine and we got on a flight back to Milwaukee, leaving Seattle just as a Pineapple Express – a warm and wet Pacific weather front – drenched the Northwest.

All during the flight, I kept thinking about the train. And the questions I'd been asking myself for two or three decades – probably every time I got off a train – came back stronger than ever.

When are we again going to have a decent passenger-train system in this country – one that moves people efficiently between major cities and provides Americans with a true alternative to airplanes and automobiles?

What happened to the passenger-rail system that existed decades ago – the one remembered only through museums or in the reminiscences of our oldest citizens? Why was this system allowed to fall apart and be discarded in favor of other modes of travel?

And why has Amtrak not gotten any better? Sure, its toilets don't flush onto the track anymore, but some of its equipment is now older than the run-down stuff it inherited from the other railroads back in 1971. How did Amtrak end up as the nation's only intercity passenger service? And would those freight railroads ever consider running passenger trains again?

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