

Celebrating America — Past, Present, and Future

THE SATURDAY EVENING POST

Founded A.D. 1728 by Benjamin Franklin

A stylized illustration of a high-speed train in a cityscape. The train is white with a red and blue stripe, moving from left to right on tracks. The background features a city skyline with various buildings, including a prominent tower with a circular observation deck. The sky is blue with stylized white and yellow clouds. The artist's signature 'G. GUSTAFSON '10' is visible in the lower right of the illustration.

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5 Classic
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Waiting on a Train

By James McCommons

In a throaty roar, the *Capitol Limited* rumbled out of the train sheds of Chicago's Union Station right on schedule. My seatmate, Jon, was a chatty computer programmer from Cleveland. After the conductor punched our tickets, we went up to the observation-lounge car for a snack and conversation. Ours was one of those pleasant encounters of train travel: good talk with a stranger, time to linger over coffee, and the panorama of America going by the window.

The evening sun tinged the smoke a reddish-gray as it curled up from Gary's steel mills. Indiana corn fields, ragged with last year's stubble and damp with winter runoff, awaited spring planting. In eastern Ohio, night came on and the land went black. Blinking red crossing gates, the sodium lamps of main streets, and the window glow of farmhouses streamed past the window. Intermodal freight trains—double stacked with scores of shipping containers—rushed by the opposite way. After Toledo, I went back to my coach seat, wrapped myself in a sports coat, and slept to Pittsburgh, the bump and sway of the rails a familiar balm.

In the previous year, I'd ridden 26,000 miles on Amtrak trains, researching a book on the future of

passenger rail. This coach seat to New York was a freebie earned from all the miles racked up on my Amtrak Rewards card. I could have flown, as most Americans do on business trips, but I wanted "train time": the opportunity to unwind, read newspapers, write on my laptop and zone out on the landscape.

Only 2 percent of Americans have ridden an intercity passenger train, not a surprising statistic considering the median age of the population is 37 and American railroads gave up passenger trains in 1971, when Amtrak was created by Congress. Since that time, Amtrak has provided only a bare-bones national network, so for most Americans, a train isn't a travel option. Finally, that may be changing.

Railroads and passenger trains are poised to expand in ways unimaginable just a few years ago. The \$4-per-gallon gas crisis in 2008; the meltdown of the domestic auto industry; jammed and crumbling highways; stressed airports; a renewed focus on infrastructure improvements; the drive for a greener, more efficient economy; and the awarding of billions in federal stimulus dollars for high-speed trains all bode well for rail transportation. Even the big freight railroads, who own nearly all the nation's rail infrastructure, have signaled a new cooperative attitude regarding passenger trains. They know that when the Great Recession is over, business will bloom again and they'll need government help to expand the infrastructure—not just for passenger trains, but for the intermodal trains that are surely taking market share from the trucking industry.

Warren Buffett, perhaps the country's most respected investor and one with an expansive time horizon, sees American railroads as an industry with a bright future. Last fall, he and his investment company, Berkshire Hathaway, plunked down \$26.7 billion to acquire Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway (BNSF), the nation's second biggest railroad. It already owned about one-third of the company's stock.

Buffet, the so-called Oracle of Omaha who promotes value-investing, called the purchase "a huge bet on that company. It's an all-in wager on the economic future of the United States."

A rail renaissance is underway. "Last century was the automotive century. I think the 21st is fixing to be the railroad century," says Gil Carmichael, a former federal railroad administrator and the founder of the Intermodal Transportation Institute at the University of Denver.

Making it happen will require investment. Since the 1960s, the nation lost nearly half of its rail infrastructure as railroads consolidated, removed tracks, and abandoned whole routes. Still,



OPPOSITE PAGE: PHOTO © PAUL FREYTAG/CORBIS; THIS PAGE: PHOTO BY JAMES MCCOMMONS



On Pennsylvania's Keystone Corridor, Amtrak made high-speed upgrades, including welded rail and trainloads of concrete ties.

150,000 miles remain, and these tracks run from city center to city center.

Carmichael and others are promoting Interstate II, or the Steel Interstate, a plan to double and triple track 20,000 to 30,000 miles of existing freight right of way. The tracks would be grade separated—meaning intersecting roads would run under or over rather than across the tracks. Intermodal freights could run 90 mph, passenger trains up to 125 mph, and heavy coal and grain trains could go their own slow speed. Initially, power would come from diesel locomotives, but eventually the corridors could be electrified, getting juice from greener sources, such as

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—Frank Busalacchi, passenger rail champion



wind, solar, and biomass plants. Nuclear power is back in the mix, too. “No leap in technology is needed to electrify trains. We know how to do that. The right of ways are already in place—we just need to expand them,” Carmichael tells me. “Putting billions into a rail corridor program would create jobs and build for the future.” Some states are already ahead of the curve in this regard. In 2006 Amtrak and the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation spent \$145 million to lay welded rail, put in concrete ties, straighten curves, erect an electrical infrastructure, and create a high-speed service on what’s known as the Keystone Corridor.

But nationwide, improving transportation infrastructure—whether it’s a rail line, a canal, airport, or highway—seldom comes quickly, cheaply, or without controversy. Congress created the National Surface Transportation Policy and Revenue Study Commission to recommend where the country should concentrate its resources in the coming decades. At first, the commission wasn’t going to consider rail, reasoning there wasn’t enough data to compare it to highways.

Then, Frank Busalacchi, a commission member and head of Wisconsin’s Department of Transportation, formed a separate “passenger rail working

Railway Timetable

1826: Granite Railway, first commercial railroad in the U.S., opens in Massachusetts. The horse-drawn freight hauler quickly attracts tourists who catch a ride.

1827: B&O Railroad is chartered to run passengers and freight from Baltimore to the Ohio River. Horse-drawn at first, B&O soon switches to steam engines.



1830: First American-built steam engine, *Best Friend* of Charleston (South Carolina), begins regular passenger service, carrying 141 riders six miles. Destroyed in a boiler explosion—another first—a year later.

1840s-1860s: Railways expand from 3,000 to 30,000 miles of track in the U.S. Railroads supplant canals as the primary mode of long-distance transport.

1869: “Golden spike” driven at Promontory Summit, Utah. Transcontinental Railroad is complete.



Thanks to overcrowded highways and airports, states are investing in trains, and more people are riding them.

group.” He gathered experts, held public hearings, and even got some commissioners to board a train. In its final report issued in early 2008, the commission called for spending \$225 billion annually on infrastructure, including \$8 billion to \$9 billion each year on intercity rail.

“Those commissioners who thought trains were old fashioned got their eyes opened. When you look out 50 years with perhaps 100 million more citizens, it’s clear you cannot meet the transportation requirements of this country with just air travel and highways,” says Busalacchi. There has to be investment and a shift to more mass transportation by rail.

Without rail, the study estimated the country will need nine new airports the size of Denver’s and a doubling of the current 49,000-mile interstate highway system.

At 5 a.m., the *Capitol Limited* dropped me and a handful of passengers in downtown Pittsburgh, where we had a two-and-half-hour wait before boarding the *Pennsylvanian* to New York. The station was chilly; food came from vending machines, and outside the city was still asleep. I walked a few blocks but failed to find a restaurant for coffee and breakfast.

If I’d been in Germany or a dozen other First-World countries running



national rail systems, my connecting train would have waited across the platform or arrived within minutes. The station would be busy with people, restaurants, and newsstands.

It used to be that way in America. We had grand terminals and the best rail system in the world, built in the 19th and early 20th centuries by privately owned railroads that were subsidized by government through land grants, easements, legislation, and generous loans. Railroads made modern life possible and knitted together a disparate people and sprawling geography, said John Hankey, a historian and former curator of the Baltimore and

Ohio (B&O) Railroad Museum.

“Good transportation is that important. By nature, we ought to be five different countries. The reason we aren’t is the railroad,” he says.

But railroads also were monopolies, big corporations wielded by tycoons and Wall Streeters. Their errant ways and fearsome reputation lead to heavy government regulation. When automobiles and cheap oil came along, federal and state governments saw no need to help the private railroads. Instead, they poured billions into subsidizing roads.

The decline in train ridership was well underway by World War II, when military research and develop-



1913: Grand Central Terminal, world’s largest train station, opens in New York.

1920: Rail travel reaches its peak, carrying 1.2 billion passengers.

1920s-30s: The Great Depression bites into railroad profits and ridership.

1934: Fast, efficient streamliners arrive as the Union Pacific *M-10,000* and the Burlington *Zephyr* revive flagging passenger service.

1940s-60s: After World War II, cheaper auto and air travel means fewer passengers; railroads focus on freight, or go bust.

1971: Amtrak takes over passenger rail, but even in the energy crisis, ridership declines.



2009: Government stimulus package leads to rail revival and infrastructure improvements—paving way for bullet trains.

FROM RIGHT: PHOTO BY JAMES MCCOMMONS; PHOTO BY PETER ADLER

ment in aviation—again funded by government—led to the emergence of commercial aviation. But the stake in the heart of the privately run passenger train was the interstate highway system. Those wide, concrete swaths with nary an intersection or stoplight beckoned us to hit the roads in tens of millions of gas guzzlers churned out by Detroit.

For the average American, cars versus trains became a simple process of substitution, even an expression of freedom. No longer captive to a big organization like the railroad, we could go where we wanted, when we wanted.

“We’re Americans. We don’t like to be restricted. We embraced the automobile. It would have been denying our nature not to,” Hankey says.

At the time, trains seemed passé, a relic of another age. Abandoned by passengers, their freight business decimated by trucking, railroads were in terrible shape. In 1970, the

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nation’s largest railroad company, the Penn Central, went bankrupt and shook the country’s financial system. Other railroads would follow unless government acted.

To avoid nationalizing the industry, Congress came up with Amtrak, an entity that would relieve the railroads of their passenger trains. In return, the railroads agreed to give Amtrak priority over their routes, but even today passenger trains frequently are shunted to sidings to make way for freights. Sometimes, it’s because there’s just one track and not enough room for all the traffic out there. No surprise then that Amtrak has a long history of poor time

performance and marginal service on shared right of ways.

The problems really go back to the beginning when Congress gave Amtrak two mandates—run a nationwide system and create efficiencies that would turn a profit. Amtrak has never made a profit, and in its 39-year history has lurched from one financial crisis to another. To stay solvent, it’s needed about a billion dollars a year in subsidy.

In terms of government dollars going into the transportation modes, that’s a drop in the bucket. But more importantly, profitability of passenger trains was a ridiculous notion to begin with, says William Withuhn, former curator of Transportation at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History.

“We’ve been hearing since 1971 that if Amtrak was reformed, got new equipment, or got rid of certain trains and routes, it would make a profit. It’s all a crock,” he says. “Passenger trains do not make a profit. Neither do roads or airports. That’s not the purpose of transportation. It’s national cohesion; it’s about moving people where they need to be. The reason America doesn’t have a world-class passenger rail transportation system is because it hasn’t paid for it.”

When the *Pennsylvanian* left Pittsburgh shortly after dawn, it took nearly five hours to reach Harrisburg (2 hours longer than driving the Pennsylvania Turnpike), but finally I had breakfast and a couple of newspapers to read. And for the first time, I traveled over the famous Horseshoe curve near Altoona, which was built in the 1850s to climb the Alleghenies. At the state capital, the *Pennsylvanian* switched out its diesel for an electrical locomotive, shook off the doldrums and cranked up to 100 mph. It wasn’t like the TGV I’d ridden in France, but it was a fast train—a demonstration of what can happen with investment. Trains aren’t just rapid but regular on this corridor—14 times daily each way—and frequency is what builds ridership. It’s the mantra I heard from rail experts everywhere—dependable, frequent, and fast service on corridors 100 to 500 miles long (distances too close to fly and too

Making Connections

As America tries to resuscitate its passenger rail system and build high-speed networks, it will need the expertise of Europeans who never abandoned their rail mode and have made 160-mph trains everyday options for travelers.

But there is an important concept that isn’t so high-tech: connectivity.

This past winter when I rode trains for 50 hours across France, Germany, Britain, and the Low Countries on a frenetic two-week trip (journalistic research for me), I never waited long or walked far to make connections from jets to high-speed and regional trains, subways, trams, ferries, and buses. It was seamless, with one mode just steps away from another. In America, I’ve spent \$40 on a taxi just to get from the airport to the train depot or the bus station. In Europe, as in very few places in America, trains go to the airports.

And because it was winter during my trip, I noted that the train stations (with the exception of restaurants, shops, and ticket offices) weren’t heated. Passengers on the concourses

In Europe, trains like Amsterdam’s ICE run reliably and quickly, at speeds of 160 mph.

weren’t sitting—there weren’t very many seats anyway—but rather standing with their luggage, staring up at the big board that announced arrivals and departures.

As someone who has spent many hours marking time and catching naps on hard, wooden benches inside American train stations—frequently because trains are behind schedule—it was odd not to see a huge, warm waiting room full of people... waiting.

It soon became clear. Why heat a cavernous space for passengers who really aren’t waiting, but simply pausing momentarily before making their connections? —JM



Majestic Pennsylvania Station saw millions of passengers every year. Torn down in 1964, its destruction heralded the end of the golden age of rail. But a new age may be dawning.

inconvenient to drive) are the sweet spots for rail.

Like Pennsylvania, a few state DOTs subsidize Amtrak service between their major cities, even going as far to purchase their own trains because Amtrak is too cash strapped to provide equipment. Washington has put \$100 million into the Amtrak Cascades corridor between Portland and Seattle. Wisconsin subsidizes the Hiawatha service between Milwaukee and Chicago and plans an extension to Madison. Illinois will soon have 110-mph-Amtrak service between Springfield and St. Louis.

California's efforts dwarf all others. In the past 20 years, it has invested \$2.2 billion in corridor trains and created a network of feeder buses and light rail that extends Amtrak service to 80 percent of its residents. In January 2010, it received \$2 billion of stimulus money to begin building a 200-mph-train from Los Angeles to San Francisco. Florida received \$1.25 billion for a high-speed train from Tampa to Orlando. Both will run on new right of ways separate from Amtrak and the freight railroads. If these investments between the states and federal govern-

It took 22 hours to cover the 900 miles from Chicago. In the 1930s, the Pennsylvania Railroad's Broadway Limited did the same run from Chicago to New York's Pennsylvania Station in 16 hours.



ment continue, America may see its first true bullet train in 10 years and an Amtrak system that fulfills its promise. There may even be an Interstate II.

In Philadelphia, I switched to the Acela, currently America's fastest train. Capable of 200 mph, the Acela averages just 80 mph on the Northeast Corridor between Boston and Washington, D.C., because of curves, a patchwork electrical system, and tunnels that go back to the Civil War. The corridor infrastructure needs billions in rehabilitation to make it truly high-speed.

Still, more than 100 trains move along it each day, and Amtrak captures half of the air/rail market between the big East Coast cities where trains never went entirely out of fashion.

My Acela crossed the Delaware River into New Jersey, ran through the gritty streets of Trenton, and blew by the auto traffic on I-95. In the Meadowlands, the Manhattan skyline and a bright, full

moon rose up on the horizon.

It took 22 hours to cover the 900 miles from Chicago. In the 1930s, the Pennsylvania Railroad's *Broadway Limited* did the same run from Chicago to New York in 16 hours. And it didn't arrive at a charmless, utilitarian Penn Station complex, but at Pennsylvania Station, a gem of Beaux-Arts style architecture, and truly one of the great buildings of New York.

They tore it down in 1964 in the name of urban renewal, another casualty of a country that allowed its passenger rail system to go to seed.

As the preservationists said then of Pennsylvania Station—never again. ❧



For more journeys and insight, read James McCommons' book, *Waiting on a Train* (in bookstores), or check out saturdayeveningpost.com.