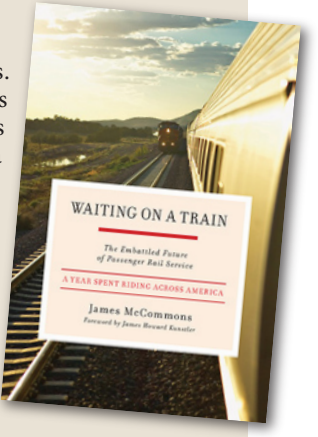
>> RECOMMENDED READING

Riding across America

Waiting on a Train: The Embattled Future of Passenger Rail Service
By James McCommons. Chelsea Green Publishing, P.O. Box 428, White River Junction, VT 05001; 802-295-6300; www.chelseagreen.com; 6 x 9 in.; softcover; 304 pages; $17.95.



In a way, over the past year, the entire country has been waiting on a train. With the dramatic announcement by the Obama administration that it would invest over $8 billion to jump-start the growth of passenger rail in the United States, many Americans believe that a better rail system is just around the corner. These individuals should read James McCommons' well-written and entertaining book "Waiting on a Train." In a volume that is part travelogue, part interviews, the author recounts his experiences riding 26,000 miles on American passenger trains during a pivotal year: 2008. Along the way, he interviewed some of the most knowledgeable people in the country seeking answers to the question, "Why is America currently a third-world nation when it comes to passenger trains?"

The answer appears through the author's first-person perspectives on a host of Amtrak's trains and talks with much of the current brain trust of American passenger railroading, the people in the trenches who do the job every day, and their passengers. McCommons sums up Amtrak's schizophrenia well, from the feeling of contentment one experiences while riding a train when the journey goes well to the sheer misery of being trapped on a bad train with a bad crew — and paying to be there. He also exposes the differing personalities of the states and freight railroads who will play a pivotal role in any resurgence of the American passenger train.

The take-away lesson from this book is that the current American passenger system is weak with skeletal, sometimes poorly run service, and it lacks vision for the future. The author finds that to create a new American passenger train system, you will need to build on the bright spots such as railroads like BNSF and states such as California, North Carolina, Washington, and Wisconsin, and finally, get out your checkbooks. "If this country wants a robust, well-functioning train system, it will have to pay for it. There's no way around that," McCommons says. — *Joe Welsh*

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