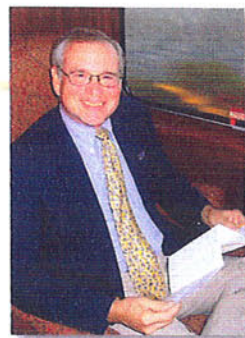


## Still Waiting (on a train)



“Finally, you found something upbeat to write about,” a lifelong friend and faithful reader said to me in response to my last column, about National Train Day in Philadelphia. He claimed to be only kidding, sort of, but in spite of that I’m sure he had a point. As I begin this installment, I’m going to try for two in a row.

One subject that may help me here is a new book, Chelsea Green Publishing’s *WAITING ON A TRAIN*, written by James McCommons. As McCommons did for his book, the publishing company (now located in White River Junction, Vt., a lucky town that still has a passenger train) chose a name with multiple meanings. This small publisher was founded—some 25 years ago, placing it well ahead of the curve in its intense interest in the environment—in Chelsea, Vt., and was in fact located on Chelsea Green. However, with its focus on “the politics and practice of sustainable living,” Chelsea Green Publishing is “green” at heart and at root and sees itself as a sort of hub for environmental thinking and activity.

*WAITING ON A TRAIN* aims to be a number of different things, an aspiration tipped off by its double- or even triple-entendre title. On the most obvious level, it means (as I take it) waiting at the station to board a train—appropriate, since this book is in part a train-travel narrative, with tidbits of history scattered throughout his narrative as a garnish, well chosen and relevant.

(I hear echoes too of “Waiting for a Train,” the classic hobo song by Jimmie Rodgers, the “Singing Brakeman,” but perhaps that’s only my personal take.) A second meaning—fully intended, I confirmed in a telephone conversation with the author—is waiting literally on a train, a late one, “waiting on a siding for a freight to clear, or waiting to crawl into Chicago,” in Jim’s words. The third meaning, alluding to the area where this book really shines, is the waiting we passenger train enthusiasts and habitués and supporters have been doing for decades, hoping for improvement in the sad state of passenger railroading in America.

The book’s genesis was a cross-country trip McCommons made in 2007 with his then-13-year-old son from Chicago to Seattle (via the *California Zephyr* and *Coast Starlight*) to complete a magazine assignment. Though the trip had some

magic moments, the CZ limped into Sacramento 15 hours late: not good. This led McCommons, a long-time if on-and-off Amtrak rider, to ask himself (as so many of us so often have), “Why hasn’t this gotten any better?” This question led to a book proposal, book contract, and now a book (with a November publication date) that attempts to, if not answer, then at least elucidate this complex question.

In the course of 2008, on a sabbatical from Northern Michigan University, where he teaches journalism and nature writing, McCommons criss-crossed the country—by train, of course—interviewing a wide variety of individuals who might help him answer his grand question. They included railroad historians, politicians, representatives from the freight railroads, Amtrak officials, heads of rail advocacy groups, a union leader, officials from regional passenger rail authorities, representatives from the Association of American Railroads, and directors of state departments of transportation with particular interest in passenger rail. Virtually every organization was willing to talk to McCommons. The one exception, his book recounts, was Union Pacific, which we frequent riders know as infamous in its failure to handle Amtrak trains in a timely fashion. (This is admittedly an aside, probably with little or nothing to do with the issues at hand, but I was intrigued by *Newsweek*’s “green” ranking—in a late September issue—of America’s 500 largest corporations, four of which are railroads. At number 159, BNSF showed up quite well, and CSX not bad at 204. Norfolk Southern was not so good at 338, while UP’s rank of 439 was genuinely dismal.)

“I do like riding trains, but I am not a railfan,” McCommons writes early in the book. Certainly he’s not a “foamer,” though he ungrudgingly recognizes the knowledge that enthusiasts have and his willingness to tap it. He had no intention of preaching to the choir—you and me—but rather had the general public in mind as he wrote. He admits that he had little knowledge of railroading before undertaking this project, so it’s not surprising that some errors of idiom and fact did slip into this book, and this may be jarring to those of us who are fans. For me, however, they don’t blunt the book’s central thrust. (Unless backed up by fact-checker of *The New Yorker* quality,

any of us who put words into print stumble on occasion.)

Of course, 2008 was an interesting, volatile year to be out and about poking at America’s rail future. Gasoline prices were soaring, the country was in economic meltdown, and by year’s end we would have elected the first unabashed pro-passenger-rail president and vice-president in all the years of Amtrak’s existence. By then, also, Amtrak was belatedly beginning to tout its green benefits. As McCommons writes, Amtrak travel consumes 17 percent less energy per passenger mile than air travel and 21 percent less than car travel. Even more impressive, the train’s carbon footprint is 60 percent smaller than the automobile’s and 50 percent smaller than the airplane’s, again on a per-passenger-mile basis. These numbers, along with rail’s many other environmental benefits, make *WAITING ON A TRAIN* an appropriate part of Chelsea Green’s list.

McCommons’ accounts of his Amtrak travels give the book a narrative momentum that provides a frame for his multiple interviews. (Ironically, McCommons lives in Marquette on Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, an area unserved by Amtrak. Milwaukee, 273 miles away, is his nearest station. As he points out, up until 1969, the Chicago & North Western’s *Peninsula 400* could have taken him to Chicago in six hours, besting today’s highway time.) Those of us who frequent Amtrak’s trains will alternately smile and wince in recognition as he recounts his experiences. Diners running out of most menu items. The failure of the Cross Country Café to function as intended, and so on, and on. I don’t agree with all his assessments, but most seem on target.

I asked Jim if any of his dozens of encounters and interviews had left him with especially positive feelings.

“Gene Skoropowski,” he said, referring to the executive director of the authority that runs California’s Capitol Corridor trains, served by the much-praised bilevel “California Cars.”

“This was a touchstone for me,” he continued. “Gene helped me understand that it’s all about network, it’s all about frequency, and it’s all about investment. I was impressed with him, but also with what he has accomplished.”

Eventually I asked McCommons the big question, the one I myself have so much trouble answering, after a summer when, driving around the Northeast, I encountered highway after highway (and ones that I remembered as being pretty workable before) grooved for repaving, posted with big green signs telling me that this was the American Recovery and Rejuvenation Act at work—while I waited to see any improvement or increase in Amtrak service. That big question is simply, how good should we, as lovers and supporters of passenger rail, be feeling right now?

"We could be on the edge of something new," McCommons answered, but he too acknowledged that we'd have to wait and see. "Is Amtrak going to move from survival mode to advocacy?"

So why did *WAITING ON A TRAIN* make me feel upbeat? Primarily, I suppose, because it underlined how much groundwork has been laid around the country for a passenger rail renaissance. Many individuals wearing sundry hats have been thinking and planning and promoting. Now that there does seem to have been something of a sea change in our government's attitude toward passenger rail, perhaps some of these ideas may become realities.

One telling detail, I thought, was McCommons's two visits to the Association of American Railroads—one early in the project, one near the end. He found that the landscape had changed dramatically and that the freight railroads, for a variety of reasons, both political and financial, were suddenly in a somewhat cooperative mode regarding passenger rail. Improvement in on-time train handling had already been noted. Now, with \$8 billion in stimulus money for high-speed rail out there, the freight railroads now see that what's good for the goose could also be good for the gander.

Not that there still aren't developments to keep us on edge, one being the legislation, proposed by Senator Roger Wicker, a Republican from Mississippi, as an amendment to the transportation and housing appropriations bill and approved by the Senate in mid-September, requiring Amtrak to permit guns to be included in checked luggage to receive its appropriation. A similar but somewhat less restrictive bill has been introduced in the House.

While I might personally be disheartened by our country's snowballing obsession with guns—the loaded ones that we may now carry in national parks (to what possible end?), the ones turning up at political town meetings—the issue here is that, unlike airplanes' cargo holds,

Amtrak baggage cars are not secure. To make them secure, I'm sure, would take plenty of money that Amtrak could better use on other things.

Another time when Congress meddled in a micro-managerial way with Amtrak policy, it dictated what Amtrak could spend offering food service. That misguided initiative was what led to those Cross Country Cafés, the diner-lounge conversions from Superliner diners that many retrospectively have judged a mistake. Though the new cars' design was

in addition to the freight railroads' new posture—I'll look ahead to the proposed order for 130 "Viewliner II" cars, a mix of 25 sleepers, 25 diners, plus baggage cars and baggage-dormitories. A request for proposals is out, with a Dec. 1 deadline, and Amtrak is hoping to place an order in 2010. Meanwhile, rebuilds of sidelined cars—so far a Superliner II lounge, an Amfleet I all-table food service car, and two Amfleet II coaches—continue to trickle out of Bear and Beech Grove, financed by funds from the AR&R Act.

Canada's version of the stimulus program, the Economic Action Plan, is also helping passenger rail, to the tune of C\$407 million, of which C\$20 million will go toward renewing 21 P42 locomotives and 78 HEP1 Budd stainless-steel cars, built for and still used primarily on the *Canadian*.

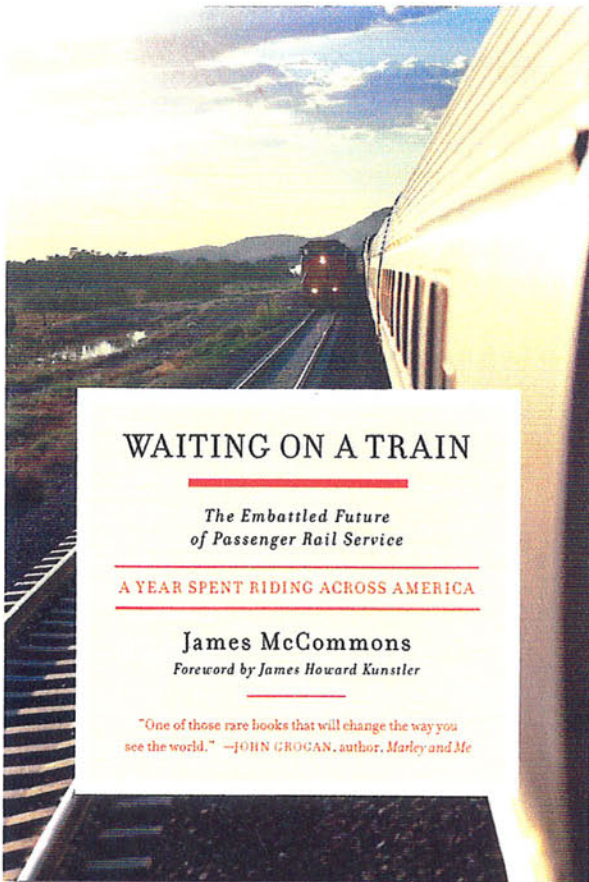
"This is allowing us to do work now that has been needed," according to Catherine Kaloutsky, a VIA spokeswoman, "but for which we had no funding." Cosmetic enhancements will include new and brighter carpeting, wall designs, and upholstery; renewed electrical systems are part of the program, along with some mechanical upgrades. This work, done at VIA's Montreal Maintenance Centre, will create 58 new jobs. Forty *Manor* sleeping cars will be first up, followed by 9 diners, 13 *Skyline* domes, and 13 coaches. Conspicuously missing from this list are the gems of the car fleet—the *Park*-series dome observation sleepers. This is because, in an additional initiative, eight of these cars, along with four *Chateau* sleepers, are slated for total remodeling that will make them wheelchair-accessible. By the time this magazine is in your hands, the details of this program will most likely have been released.

"This is the first time any of these cars have been touched since they were rebuilt with head-end power in 1990," Kaloutsky said. I also asked her about the rebranding of most train names—only the *Canadian* and *Ocean* escaped—accommodations, and service levels.

"It's been received very well," she said, singling out the substitution of the word "cabin" for "bedroom." "Now when people board the train they're not surprised at the small size of their rooms."

"That name is known around the world," Kaloutsky said, in explaining why the *Canadian* was spared. The *Ocean* also has a long history, of course. When I asked about the *Chaleur* to Gaspé, she acknowledged some ambivalence about the loss of that name.

Will a rose by any other name smell as sweet, as Shakespeare suggested? We'll have to await ridership figures to know for sure. **PA**



the result of a thoughtful process—focus groups, questionnaires, design and testing of a prototype—and they are, in my opinion, aesthetically attractive, they simply haven't worked as intended. The idea, informally referred to in-house as "Chiligans," was to replicate the informal, anytime dining vibe exemplified by Chili's and Bennigan's, which had proven popular with the public, and reduce crew costs at the same time.

This didn't pan out, and (I've heard) the cars have become unpopular with crew as well as passengers. Rather than the entire car's being available for snacks and drinks as well as full meals, tables at the long end seem to have reverted to being treated as a traditional diner and the few in the counter end as a lounge, often used by the conductor for an office and by attendants as a social area.

Whoops. Upbeat, I promised, so—