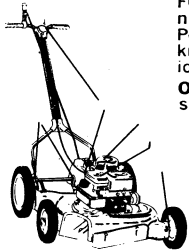


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Off the Beat

On a slow train through the 20th century

*"Yet there isn't a train I wouldn't take,
No matter where it's going."*

—Edna St. Vincent Millay

Some years ago there was a hearing in Boston to determine whether passenger service on the Boston and Maine Railroad should be discontinued. One of the examiners asked the protesters in the crowd how many had come to town by train. None had.

Now let me speak. I came by train. I come and go by train all over North America. I have been at least seven times across the continent and back by train. At its best the train is a wonderful way to go. Amtraking can be fun. The train is a great decompression chamber after a hectic meeting. It has a restaurant and bar, so the necessities of life are provided as one glides across the scenery. (If the tracks are good one glides. West of Denver they tend to be; east of Denver—well.)

And what scenery it is. The train provides a feel for the country and memories that jetsetting can't match—climbing up the passes—Donner, Marias, Raton, the Moffatt Tunnel, El Cajon—rolling across Wyoming on a snowy Sunday morning in February or across Montana on a day in June, the sheer endlessness of Texas,

waking in Florida to palms and orange trees on a January morning, coming down the west slope of the Cascades on a foggy summer morning.

Amtraking has its drawbacks too. The tracks and springs are often bad, and sleep becomes difficult. One must get used to being late. The following story is, I swear it, true: The Broadway Limited was nearing Chicago one October morning. It was, for a wonder, on time. Some miles east of Gary it stopped unexpectedly. The conductor came through the cars asking for a wire coat hanger: "That's what we need to get this thing going again." Someone gave him one. A few minutes later we started off. I never found out what he bound up with the wire; I was afraid to ask.

But the purpose here is not to berate Amtrak for its remediable deficiencies nor to praise it for its amenities, but to bring up a single scientific fact. To move freight and passengers across land there is no more efficient way than steel wheels on steel rails, and there is not likely to be until and if linear induction motors get off the ground—which may not be for 50 or 100 years.

Three things are floating around the news: chronically that Amtrak needs money; recently that the Government plans a massive abandonment of rail lines, and lately in the April 15 Washington Post Colman McCarthy, one of our most perceptive social commentators, points out that one of the most severe problems of rural America is that public transportation is virtually nonexistent there.

These three things come together in what I propose: A massive reconstruction and refurbishment of our rail system with the understanding that it will carry the overwhelming majority of our freight and passengers for the foreseeable future. Talk about Manhattan



From the back of the train: Washington's Union Station recedes toward the horizon, and it's three days and nights rolling to the shores of San Francisco Bay.

projects, this is one we need. It is no use to wait for a new technology to prove itself. It took a hundred years to build our rail system; it would take equally long to replace it with a new technology. And it is dangerously juvenile to base plans on the hope that large new reserves of oil will be discovered.

Amtrak is a Band-Aid. We need a massive investment in tracks and equipment to provide both adequate long-distance passenger service and local and branch-line trains to feed it. One of the most melancholy aspects of train travel is passing the boarded-up stations of small towns where the train no longer stops. Improvements in passenger (and freight) service might help make small towns and rural areas viable alternatives to our overswollen metropolitan areas as living space for our people.

For that and other reasons it is criminal folly at this point to abandon railroad lines.

To make the point, I think, two myths need to be punctured. The first is that of speed. We need jetplane speeds for some things. If your Orthodox Jewish uncle dies in New York and you are in San Francisco, you had better jet if you want to make the funeral. Otherwise telegraph a box of fruit to the shiva and stay in California. But most jetsetting is attributable to ego inflation and the massage-parlor atmosphere of the airplane (fly me, indeed!). Before there were jet planes, all the country's business was done by train and done quite well. Most of it still could be. Present deponent can testify to that, having years of experience at it.

The second myth is profitability. We keep hearing that rail lines should be profitable—that is the justification for the proposed abandonments. Why? When were they ever? The history of most American railroad corporations is a long tale of bankruptcies, receiverships, bondholders' foreclosures and trusteeships. A country's basic transportation system should be justified by the economic and social services it provides, not by profit to private investors. The most important of those services would be making it convenient for us to live in a wide variety of environments. We are perilously close to the point where tract houses in Fairfax County or Nassau County or San Mateo County are the only option. Heaven forbid!

Modern technology produced two supremely beautiful artifacts: The full-rigged ship and the steam locomotive. And before I am accused of acting solely out of nostalgia for the perfume of bituminous smoke (to which I freely admit), I will make my point: If we still had a fleet of clipper ships and our old coal-burning locomotives, the Arabs might not have us in so tight a vise.

—Dietrick E. Thomsen

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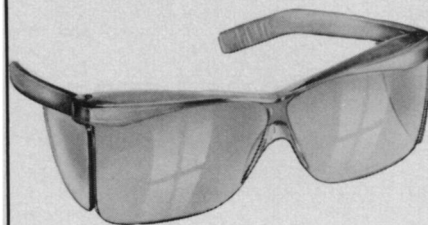
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