

# LETTERS

## Slow train through the 20th century

Dietrick Thomsen's recent article on the present state of the passenger trains (SN: 5/3/75, p. 294) deserves to be widely circulated. His observations concerning the recent plans to abandon large segments of trackage in the country (euphemistically referred to as "tree-pruning") once again point out a fact that students of technology have long known: the true Luddites are not the ignorant masses who are afraid of all technology; on the contrary, the finest machines of our civilization are destroyed by proponents of a new technology, in this case, the auto-superhighway and the jet plane. It is this latter group which seeks to destroy the best of what we have built over the past century.

As far as his proposed fleet of clipper ships goes, there are serious plans for such a fleet. With a minicomputer to help set the sails, with weather and location provided by satellite . . . who knows?

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Dear Mr. Thomsen: Your nostalgic piece on the demise of luxury travel by rail jogged many pleasant memories, particularly since I had just been browsing through the glorious 1971 reprint by Kalmbach of the 1941 Edition of the S&B Locomotive Cyclopaedia. One is indeed tempted to suspend critical judgment and to feel that a return to those good old days might solve many of today's problems.

In all honesty, we must admit that much of what we remember so favorably from those trains of our youth has faded from the scene, probably forever, and no mere transfusion of funds into the railroads can serve to restore it. Forgetting for the moment the creature comforts and personal services supplied, just what was it we liked about rail travel? We were grateful for the flexibility; the trains would take you almost anywhere if you were patient and determined. They would deliver you to clean, safe depots located conveniently in the center of the prosperous and safe downtown districts of our major cities. High iron on the major links was maintained with high-speed Pullman service specifically in mind. The whole country was dotted with isolated but bustling little country towns which poured life into the lines. What with automated ballast laying gear, welded rail, lasers and hydraulic jacking, we could straighten out some of that track again but you and I know only too well that it will not be done except for lines that have substantial potential for unitized freight traffic. We cannot turn back the clock to revitalize those dying country towns which even the buses are beginning to ignore. Our palatial depots are gone for good. Downtowns are ghettos.

I fear that neither you nor I shall live to see these trends reversed. Simply to reestablish any substantial portion of the original rail network would entail the destruction of vast quantities of tract housing and other development, to say nothing of the fearsome

problems involved in snaking the rights-of-way under or over all of those new super-highways. Cities sprawl now; will people ever again wish to be dumped off in a central slum when they really are trying to get to a suburban motel, to an airport, or to the bus depot? . . .

William J. Russell Jr.  
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Mr. Thomsen made many good points in his article "On a slow train through the 20th century" and touched on some of the imponderables: Why, indeed, do we need to move ever faster?

I, too, would prefer to travel on the ground rather than fly but I would like to make a couple of comments that seem to me relevant to progress in this area. The first concerns the efficiency of the steel wheel on the steel rail. This is efficient, indeed, but only in a limited sense; i.e., when the vehicle is in motion. The same low friction makes it very inefficient for trains to start and stop.

This ultimately results in the railroads' being the most inefficient of all public transportation: Five percent net utilization vs. on the order of 25% for trucks and planes. This was of little consequence when population centers were relatively smaller and more concentrated. For better or for worse, most of us now live in "megalopolis," and the problem of transportation of both people and goods involves an extremely interlaced network. To satisfy our needs requires flexibility that the trains cannot provide. The very efficiency of a train going from New York to Chicago or San Francisco makes it very inefficient in trying to serve the ribbon from, say, Washington to Boston. It cannot stop and go and it cannot reach the many points that have to be served along such a corridor.

A secondary but related drawback of the steel wheel on a steel track is the poor suspension of the vehicle and damage to the roadbed. In combination, these factors cannot be overcome unless changed and I think the railroads have, unfortunately, demonstrated that they are not the vehicle we need.

My second comment concerns profitability. In investigating the possibilities for better transportation in the United States, we have come to the conclusion that it may, in fact, be possible to have a profitable ground transportation system operating on tracks; which is another way of saying that for the investments we now have in transportation and need to put into a new system, and with the revenues which we now find it worthwhile to pay the carriers to provide the transportation we get, there should be a profit for the right company or institution operating the right network.

The words you used couldn't describe any better what we propose—a massive reconstruction of our rail system. We add that the present rails and wheels are not technologically adequate in certain ways. The track is too narrow and should be eight feet wide; the wheels should have rubber tires and be compatible with roads; and each car should move on its own, not as a part of a "train." These are not new technologies and I couldn't agree more that we cannot wait for new technology. But with these changes in the technology, a high speed ground transportation system for this country is possible. As you rightly state, it is a

massive job; we estimate it will require an investment on the order of \$75 billion. But we need the service and we certainly have the money. The real problem: How do we organize ourselves, first to decide that this is the way to go, and second, to act?

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The American economy might consider riding Dietrick Thomsen's "slow train through the 20th century" (SN: 5/3/75, p. 294), but running the railroads at a loss is not possible. This is assured by the principle of "stealing from Peter to pay Paul and Uncle Sam." No enterprise can be run at a loss! Each \$1 for material and \$2 for labor must be paid for by \$3 from somewhere—ultimately the consumer's pocket (plus tax). What is not collected in fares and fees will be taken under the gun by the government as taxes and slipped to the bureaucracy under the table. It is a perfect example of juggling the books to delude the American taxpayer. Mr. Thomsen, the problem is not profitability. There are profitable railroads in the United States. The problem is inefficiency and featherbedding bureaucrats.

Bruce Nappi  
Bloomfield, Conn.

I was pleasantly surprised to see the article concerning American railroads, although I'm not convinced that it should be classified "Off the Beat." Mr. Thomsen's mention of passenger service on the Boston & Maine was especially interesting, because I live at the new terminus of one of the B&M's recently truncated lines. Twenty-five miles from Boston, a high school student, and too young to drive, I wished to enrich my education by taking organic chemistry at a local college. The B&M Railroad made it all possible by bringing me directly from my home in Acton to Suffolk University in Boston. This service, so aptly provided by the train, is invaluable in extending the benefits of the urban center out into the suburbs. Perhaps a little publicity will make people realize that CommuterRail is a positive element in our standard of living, not a degenerate system soon to be swept away by the march of progress.

David J. Boothby  
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Dietrick E. Thomsen is absolutely correct. When time is not a crucial factor rail travel across land is the way to go.

To revive the railroads, the federal government should acquire and upgrade all roadbeds in the country, including signaling and control equipment, and the stations. The government would then allocate routes to the various railroad companies in much the same way that air routes are allocated to the airline companies. Thus relieved with the burden of roadbed upkeep (which is the first thing dropped at budget cutting time) the railroad companies could concentrate on running the trains. After all, the airlines do not own the air, or the airline terminals, and the trucking companies do not own the interstate highway system.

Readers, write your congressman today.  
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