

My Trip to Lynchburg November 1999

My employer, the County of Union, NJ sent me away to the Ericsson training facility In Lynchburg, VA to take training courses for a trucked radio system the County Purchased. Since my job requires me to maintain this equipment, I felt it was a good Opportunity for me. The only downside to it was that it required a two-week absence from home and family. When I first learned I was going, I asked for and received Permission to ride the train in lieu of driving down. I had already driven to Lynchburg in 1986 to take training on the Mastr Delta and Phoenix radios, which General Electric Manufactured at that time. General Electric sold their two-way radio business to a European company Named Ericsson a few years ago. Anyway, I was reluctant to Drive an 8 hour trip, even with a partner, so the County honored my request, and I Got to go the BEST way, on a train, namely Amtrak #19, The Southern Crescent.

A brief digression is in order here. Train #19, the Southern Crescent was even into The early years of Amtrak one of only TWO trains not taken over by Amtrak. A clause [NOT Santa!!!] was written into the original Amtrak creation legislation That allowed the individual railroads to continue to operate their inter-city passenger trains ON THEIR OWN, with a very limited subsidy. Only TWO railroads decided to do this. One was the Denver Rio Grande & Western [DR&GW] And the Southern. This was a task of Herculean proportions, since the government was dangling the proverbial carrot right under the nose of the railroaders...."We'll run these money-losing Pain-in-the neck, revenue guzzling passenger trains, and let you run the freight where The real money is." To say no to an offer like this took a giant of a man, the president Of the Southern Railway, Mr. Graham Claytor.

Claytor was a railfan who LOVED trains especially, passenger trains. Under his aegis, The Southern railway restored, and operated steam engine #4501 and ran it all over The property, much to the delight of area rail fans. He PERSONALLY ran the locomotive many times, since he was a qualified locomotive engineer. So, when Amtrak, known then as railpax, wanted to take over HIS train, he said no. This didn't come as a big surprise to anyone, since Claytor was a man of principle, And he knew that if Amtrak got a hold of the Crescent, they would destroy all The class he worked to build into that train. Of course, there were other passenger trains on the Southern, but none got the attention the Crescent did. Claytor led by example. He often rode to and from his Office on the Crescent, and REQUIRED his managers to do the same. If there were Any defects in the equipment or service, they were to be reported to Mr. Claytor, PERSONALLY. There is the story of Mr. Claytor riding home one night, and he Found a stuck door leading from a coach to the diner. He simply stuck his business Card in the handle, and it got fixed at the NEXT stop.

In addition to the attention of Graham Claytor, the whole railroad snapped to attention When this train left Washington. Dispatchers moved everything out of the path of the Crescent and the on-board crew from conductor to engineer to Pullman porter were Among the best crews on the railroad. If you couldn't keep the Crescent on-time, You would be asked to bid in a freight job. No sane person stood close to a piece Of track the Crescent was running on, especially if it was a couple of minutes late.

Today's Crescent:

To make things brief, we'll just say here that eventually Graham Claytor retired, became The president of Amtrak for a time [Many of the good things Amtrak does right today Are the result of his leadership.] His successor, L. Stanley Crane bit the bullet, and gave The Crescent to Amtrak to operate. That brings us to Sunday afternoon, October 31, 1999. Halloween.

With baggage packed, and ducats in hand, I and my partner, Art, boarded the southbound Southern Crescent at Newark. En route to New Orleans, LA we were met on the platform by our car attendant, who assigned us to seats, 45&46, which were on the left side of the train. At this point, the Train consisted of E-60 electric engine #607, a sealed baggage car, a working baggage Car, 2 viewliner sleepers, a diner, a lounge car, 4 long haul coaches. The autumn-leaf Splendor that is central New Jersey at this time of the year provided a constantly Changing tapestry of reds, yellows and gold as we raced southward. A brief stop was made to pick up passengers at Trenton, after which we passed the famous "Trenton Makes" bridge that connects Trenton, NJ to Morrisville, PA. There are large illuminated letters on the side of the bridge that announce: "TRENTON MAKES...THE WORLD TAKES", thus it's name. Trenton was, at one time, a manufacturing center for many well-known companies, Lenox china, among them. But the Trenton of today's glory is gone, and mere survival remains the unsettled issue, so a friend of mine says the bridge should read instead: "WHAT THE WORLD REFUSES....TRENTON USES" We raced along the cars on PA route #73, looking as if they were in reverse. A low, Steady hum from the wheels under coach 1941 signaled that we were nearing the century-mark. Before I knew it, we were passing over the Schuylkill River Bridge, [Pronounced SKU-KILL] and the Philadelphia Zoo, [from whence the largest junction on the old Pennsylvania Railroad is named: ZOO interlocking] and gliding to a stop on track #6 at 30th St. Station in Philadelphia. The car attendant warned people to stay on the platform, because they could get lost upstairs. Since I had 40 minutes, and had been to 30th Street hundreds of times, I went up to get the newest SEPTA timetables, and to Soak in the majestic splendor of the place. This is one of railroadings greatest cathedrals, Built by the Pennsylvania Railroad in 1931, it's massive ceiling soars to over 98'

Massive Doric columns support the structure. Huge chandeliers illuminate the waiting Room area, which is the size of a football field. Amtrak wisely restored the place to its original splendor, instead of letting a private developer wreck the place as was done to Pennsylvania Station New York by the Madison Square Garden folks.

Engine Change...Surprise

I returned to the platform to see our E-60 pass me on the adjacent track. Hmm... What's going on here? The overhead catenary system that powers electric trains goes All the way to Washington, DC. Were we having trouble with our "motor" as the crews Refer to electric engines? I soon found out that we were getting our Diesel engines early. Amtrak is having trouble keeping the E-60 fleet running [it is their oldest electric locomotive], and to pull our train that picked up additional baggage cars in Philly would Have required a couple of AEM-7's that Amtrak employees refer to as 'toasters', so, since we were going south of DC anyway, we got the TWO diesels early.

Before we knew it, we made a stop at Wilmington, Delaware to pick up additional southbound travelers. The Crescent has 'stop restrictions' so that local passengers Are not carried between New York and Washington, DC. The first place you can get off is Alexandria, VA. After leaving Wilmington, we proceeded to the diner for dinner. The Crescent is one of only a few long-haul trains that still carry a FULL diner [where meals are prepared and served on board] As is the case on most Amtrak trains today, the menu consisted of specialty dishes from places along the route of the train. The menu tonight revealed an interesting Cajun veggie dish, which I eschewed in favor of an 8 Oz prime-rib in horseradish sauce Served with smashed potatoes, veggies, and hot buns. I also chose a glass of white Zinfandel as a sort of pre/with dinner drink. A glass of wine hits the spot with a meal like that. While we were waiting for our food to arrive, a lady was seated at our table. She explained that she was a retired High School teacher, en route to Atlanta, GA to see her husband. When I asked her if she was divorced, she told me that the two of them were indeed married, and the arrangement of her living in Connecticut, and him living in Georgia, and seeing each other a couple of times a year was a good deal for both of Them ...Hmmm. Maybe I can talk my wife into a similar arrangement! [JUST KIDDING!!!]. We were well into our dinner when we glided to a stop in Baltimore.

I was hoping it would be light enough to see the Gunpowder river, where the deadly Amtrak wreck took place on January 2, 1987. A Conrail freight line known as the Columbia and Port Deposit branch crosses in to the mainline north of here at a Perryville, MD. The day of the wreck, Amtrak's northbound Colonial enroute to Boston was lined through the switches, and given a 'Clear' signal to proceed. Coming up from Baltimore's Bay-view yard was a Conrail Caboose hop Consisting of 3 engines and a caboose. The signal from the branch was set at 'STOP' [red] for the caboose hop. He was supposed to follow #94 north, but instead ran thru the signal, across the switches, coming to a stop right in front of #94. Train #94 was full of people returning home from holiday visits. So full, in fact that it was powered by 2 AEM-7 Electric engines. In anticipation of picking up lots more people in Philly, the conductor had closed the first two coaches, and in doing so saved countless lives.

Train 94's Lead AEM-7 crashed into the freight engines at an estimated 135-MPH. The Lead locomotive disintegrated, crushing the engineer to death instantly in the cab.

Beside a couple of other fatal injuries several people were critically injured. The second engine wasn't found until the next day, propelled by momentum into the woods several hundred yards away. It is estimated that enough energy was created at the instant of impact to light the entire city of New York for 2 days.

In the ensuing investigation by the NTSB, it was determined that Ricky Gates, the engineer of the Caboose Hop, was watching a football game on a portable TV, and Also high on Pot. By the time he realized what had happened, he had passed the red signal at 'Gunpow'interlocking, [Definition: Interlocking: a series of signals and switches So interconnected that establishing a route for a train will automatically set signals at 'stop' for conflicting routes, and not allow conflicting routes to be established over a route already cleared.] Put his train in emergency, and finally stopped in front of onrushing #94. Gates saved his own life by jumping clear of the wreck seconds prior to Impact. He never touched a locomotive throttle again. As a direct result of this wreck there is now mandatory drug/alcohol testing of all train and engine crews, and better Supervision too.

Our arrival in the Nation's capital is on time. I can tell that we are headed for points South, as the scanner I'm listening to reveals the outbound crew's southern drawl. Voices heard also inform me that we have a lady running our train tonight. Southern was One of the pioneers in hiring women in train and engine service. This was my first trip South of DC by rail, and I was enjoying it. We left the capital behind and ducked under the Potomac river, passed POT yard...[Named for the river, *not the drug!*] and glided to a stop in Alexandria, VA. Two teenage girls detained here who were playing a board game called "guess who" where the object is to guess the name of the other players 'person' by a process of elimination. "Does your person wear glasses" if the other player answered 'no' you would flip down all your people who wore glasses.... you get the idea.

Our next stop was at Manassas, VA, and Culpepper, VA followed by Charlottesville, We got another engine-crew here. The line has some rather stiff downgrades just south of Charlottesville. I could smell The pungent aroma of brake shoe smoke

as the train battled gravity down the mountain. At 11:15 we came to a stop at Lynchburg's Kemper street station. After offloading My baggage, I walked to the station, pausing to watch the Crescent's markers disappear Into the night.

Although this train today is only a shell of it's former self I really enjoyed the trip down. I look forward to the trip Back. Thanks for the memories, Mr. Claytor.

Going Home!!!

It's difficult to believe that the almost 2 weeks spent away in Lynchburg has past. Although I'm glad I'm going home, that signals the end of my work-away-from-work 'vacation'. The training was productive and enjoyable, and the peace away from the pressures that the normal routine proved quite refreshing. So, as the alarm clock rudely awakens me from a short, but restful sleep at the odd hour of 2:00 A.M. I ruminate on the past two weeks away. I'm thankful for the new people I've met, for all the walking I Got to do [I was a pedestrian for the duration of the trip, save for a few rides] .

Well, reality check! Time to do the last minute packing, checking for any missing items, And check out of my hotel. While we're on the subject of packing, I basically did the two-week trip with 3, [count `em 3] pieces of baggage. A wardrobe to carry my suit, shirt and pants, a small canvas bag for most other things [weight 35 Lbs.] and my laptop. That's IT. It's amazing how most guys can pack so lightly. While at the hotel, I met a lady on the elevator, whose luggage was larger than a steamer trunk that one would say, take on a trip on the Titanic! The only way she could push this thing around was that it had wheels. I don't think, from the size of the thing, which I could have even picked it up. Curious as to why she had so much luggage, I asked her how long she was staying. The reply...TWO DAYS!!! I ask the clerk to order me a cab to the station to arrive at 3:45 A.M., but the cab shows up at 3:15 instead, no problem, since I'm waiting for his arrival anyway. The cab ride was nice, and we even passed the Fort Ave. Ericsson building on the way to the Kemper Street Station. At this point, I'm wondering if there will be anyone at the station, since the last several days of beautiful sunny 70-degree weather have been replaced by a cold, chilly drizzle. Since the Crescent in these parts is a nocturnal visitor, the station IS open, and is much more comfortable than sitting outside on the platform in a chilly rain. I am able to check my large bag, which weighs nearly 35 pounds, but I can't check my wardrobe that has my suit as well as some of my other clothes. Knowing that #20 will probably be full this morning would make it difficult to find a place to stow my luggage in the overhead. The ticket agent informs me that #20 is about 30 minutes late and that about 20 other brave souls are expected to get on #20 for the ride to point's north this morning.

Kemper Street Station at 4 A.M. is a very quiet place. It's heyday long past it sits as a Quiet monument to days gone by. Days where the Crescent wasn't the only train calling here, and taking the train someplace wasn't considered grounds for commitment to the local mental hospital. The station, built in 1912 has seen better days. A large piece of plaster has fallen from the ceiling, exposing the lathwork underneath. The paint on the walls has faded, but the place is clean, the ticket agent, friendly, and there is a large amount of information posted here for those who don't know the 'drill' on taking trains.

The phone has rung a few times, people calling to see how #20 is doing, time-wise. Its Amazing how many people get to public transportation at the last minute. It's now 4:45 And I'm still the only one here [besides the ticket agent]. Granted, I get to airports and train stations TOO early, but one I'm in 'queue' so to speak, I can relax. Well, the place is starting to come to life! 4 others have showed up. The time: 5AM.

At Trackside

I decide to brave the morning chill, and head for the platform at 5:40. It IS cold, and The light drizzle falling amplifies the chill. At about 5:50, a northbound NS freight roars thru, breaking the nocturnal silence, but where is #20? At 6.04, I finally see people heading to the platform. Another NS freight, this one southbound races by, at the end Of the train his marker disappears into the morning chill. No sign of #20, and it's now 6:05. Finally, at 6:10, my scanner picks up the dragger at MP 174 announcing the imminent arrival of #20. Attempting to get a good [window] seat, I race ahead of the crowd, to get on the warm coaches. I expected to be put into a car full of people, but to my surprise, the crew kept these coaches open for boarding Lynchburg and north. No sweat at all getting the seat I wanted, they didn't even ask. So, I settled into my window seat in coach #25038.

Since the diner was already open, I headed up for breakfast. Lots of breakfast offerings to choose from, and all very reasonably priced. I stuck with my old standard of eggs, home Fried potatoes, sausage, coffee and a glass of tomato juice. Between the time I ordered and my food arrived, the dining car was starting to fill, so the steward sat a young lady Named Laurie with me. She introduced herself, saying that since we were eating together, that we should at least know each other's names. She was traveling north to Maine to Visit with her Mom, and then they are driving back to South Carolina where she is coming from today. It makes my heart sing to meet people like her. Some folks are just naturally likable, and I count her in the same league as Nancy Hall, my teacher at Ericsson for the last two weeks. People like these two have restored my hope that This world is not full of grouchy dislikable people. After my meal, I return to my Seat, and just enjoy the view from my

window. There is great beauty in these rolling Hills and farmlands of Virginia. I always thought that Virginia was a goner, scenery wise, but is indeed very beautiful.

We make our stop At Charlottesville, and depart 1 hour off the advertised, proving true The old adage: "Late trains get later" We did have quite a bit of station work there Which didn't help. There is a dreary look to the countryside as the land wakes from It's slumber. The fog today is just blocking the sun, leaving the ground clear. Leaving Culpepper, VA, I take a snapshot of the station name that has the Amtrak "pointless Arrow" logo. Our arrival at Charlottesville is over an hour late. We consume the better part of 10 minutes here, unloading a handicapped passenger. Our crew has used some very good judgment in their loading of the train. At Lynchburg, they opened a coach just for people boarding north of there, so that we wouldn't disturb sleeping passengers whom Boarded earlier in the trip. At Charlottesville, our coach is only 50% full. Since other Amtrak trains stop at Alexandria, there is a stop only to discharge passengers restriction there.

We approach the Nation's capital in daylight, and you can see the Capital dome as you go over the Potomac River bridge, passing abandoned 'RO' tower, we now enter the tunnel That will bring us off the freight line into Union Station.

Beehive!!!

This is a busy place! As we come to a stop on track 26 on the lower-level, car-inspectors Begin the required brake and other tests to make sure we have operational air brakes. We Lose a sealed baggage car from the rear of the train here, so we are now a 13-car train. A metroliner is leaving on the adjacent track for New York, and there is the usual stampede of passengers as departure time draws nearer. Our new crew is on the Platform, directing people away from the Crescent toward the metroliner, but one Errant passenger slips on our train anyhow.

The metroliner eases away, and....WE ARE STILL HERE! It amazes me how much time we lose here [almost 15 minutes]. I know that the schedule has padding in it, but there is no way we'll be in Philly before noon, an assumption that later proves true. With Diesel power still in charge, we finally depart DC almost an hour off the advertised. A observant trainman notices that the lady sitting in front of me got on in DC, and asks Her if she was headed for New York. She answers in the affirmative, and the trainmen Says she'll be back to direct her shortly.

Now that we're on some good track, and the Metroliner far enough ahead we accelerate Toward Baltimore, FINALLY approaching 90MPH. But, that is short lived as we slow to a crawl approaching the tunnels in Baltimore. We aren't following anything, so why the slow speed? A question that is still un-answered. At Baltimore, the trainman tells the lady In the seat ahead of me that she'll get to New York sooner, by detraining here, and getting on Train #174 that is following us. In my mind I think that the trainman is just humoring her, but in the end I'm sure she beat us into the City by at least an hour.

We leave Baltimore, after only a brief stop, but, approaching Wilmington, we unexpibically slow way down again. I'm asking myself at this point why the dispatchers Are giving a train like this such a hosing. Sure, It's NOT the metroliner, but we are still a 100MPH train that is 45 minutes late! If the guy running our train had any class, he Would have been on the radio, driving the dispatcher nuts with questions about the Slow signals he was getting. Either our engineer was a very patient man, or just plain didn't care.

City of brotherly love:

We pass the little SEPTA whistle-stops approaching Philadelphia: Naaman, Trainor, Marcus Hook, Darby, Glenolden, Sharon Hill, then.....Guess what? We slow to a crawl Again! I can see how someone who doesn't like trains would be annoyed by something like this. Hmmm, I'm tempted to write Amtrak an e-mail and ask them myself. We finally arrive on track 7 at 30th Street, and though tempted to go upstairs in search of timetables that were not available on the trip down, decide to stay on the platform and watch the engine change instead. Our two diesels #51 & 824 are replaced by E-60 Electric #602. I walk back along the train to record our consist; Baggage cars # 1223 & 1253; Dorm #2521; Viewliner sleepers: *Spring View and Stream View*; Diner 8505; 28000 Lounge *Miami Club*; Amfleet II Coaches # 25059; 25087; 25109; 25038; 25144; And sealed baggage car # 1425. It is nearly 1PM before we get our Head-end power and the heat and lights flash back on. At this point, I notice #174 on an adjacent track, arriving, then leaving. Well, I guess the trainman wasn't humoring the lady she put off in Baltimore after all. We finally depart, and then follow #174 north. We finally accelerate to track speed passing Bridesburg. At least, from here we run in the 90's.

Since I travel to Philadelphia on the train regularly, I feel that I'm home, even though I'm not, I am in familiar territory. We stop at Trenton, then head for Newark. Surpassingly, the schedule was so heavily padded that we arrived in Newark only 20 minutes off the advertised at 2:06 PM. Just think, If the Crescent were handled like it should have been, We would have been early into Newark, instead of late.

In years past, the railroads took the punctual operation of their passenger service as a Matter of pride. I won't deny the fact that safety must be the determining factor in Any railroads operations [We DON'T want accidents] But, Amtrak would Be well advised to at least try to operate the Crescent like the great train it was In the days of the Southern, by living up to the slogan stenciled under the entrance doors of its locomotive cabs: *A SAFE TEAM ON TIME.*

As I watch the Crescent depart for Penn Station New York, I am thankful for the Chance to explore new territory, and for the chance to travel again by train, still the BEST way to go.

Stephen E. Thorpe

11/14/99

Photo Vignettes.....Appropriate credit is given...I Didn't take these pictures, they ARE NOT from the same year as my trip.

[30th St. Station, Inside](#)

[Washington DC, Tunnel exit southbound...Train will soon cross the Potomac River.](#)

[Washington, DC AEM-7 Electric Locomotive](#)

[Kemper St. Station, Lynchburg, VA](#)