

SPRING ON THE EMPIRE BUILDER

- story and photos by **Bill Johnston**

If you had ever thought of taking one of Amtrak's best "name trains" then give the *Empire Builder* a try. A fellow WCRA member and I decided to do just that as it was one route that I had always wanted to take but never found the time. The opportunity presented itself late in March so it was off on the early morning train to Seattle just prior to the welcome announcement that this service would be continued into the summer months.

There was no need to check in early for this *Amtrak Cascades* service as few passengers seemed to board in Vancouver and the US customs clearance is quick and efficient. Arrival at Pacific Central Station by 6:00 AM for the 6:40 departure seemed more than adequate. Once under way breakfast in the Bistro car is basically micro-waved snacks but the coffee is good. A brief stop is made at Blaine to check passports. South of the border the many stops took on a good number of passengers. Some passengers were going on this train to Portland, Oregon. Arrival in Seattle on time at about 11:00 AM gives plenty of time for a downtown walk-about and a lazy lunch.

Returning to King St Station by 16:00 is early enough for boarding *The Empire Builder* for its

16:40 departure. The 7-car train (baggage, 2 Superliner day coaches, diner and 3 sleepers) heads north to Everett before turning east following the Skykomish River up into the Cascade Mountains. Dinner is taken as the train climbs into the mountains and plunges through the almost 8 mile long Cascade Tunnel. A brief stop in picturesque Leavenworth and a longer stop in Wenatchee gave my car attendant time to make up the Superliner Roomette ready for bed. The timing is good on this portion of the route because the scenery is not that great and one awakens next morning in the heart of the Rockies. During the night (shortly after midnight) the four-car Portland, Oregon section is added to our train in Spokane for the rest of the trip to Chicago.

Whitefish, Montana is the first morning stop, with a chance to breathe the cold, clear mountain air. The frosty station platform is busy with baggage carts, passengers coming and going, and smokers gasping for that first drag in hours. Heading east again the scenery, as we wind our way through Marias Pass, is spectacular.

Most of the day is spent crossing Montana with comfortable stops in Shelby, and at about 13:30, in Havre. An impressive Great Northern S-2 locomotive is preserved here.

It is Havre where the time-keeping goes awry. We are to hook up a dead locomotive behind our 2 Genesis units, for Chicago, but it seems the hookup is difficult so we sit for over an hour

waiting to get power back into the train. The generous wine and cheese party in the diner helps the frustration factor and over 90 minutes late we are again underway through desperate looking little villages with their ill-kept mobile homes, rusting farm machinery, boarded up shops and dusty streets. Most of the snow is gone except for the ditches and north facing hills. The few rivers crossed are running full and like the surrounding countryside are brown and muddy. We are in North Dakota as the sun sets under a darkening clear blue sky. During the night I awake as we approach Fargo. A dozen people board here wrapped up in their parkas against the biting wind.

As the train leaves the station it immediately crosses the flooded Red River which, 2 days earlier had just reached its crest. Sandbagged buildings and flooded parks and parking lots are noted before drifting back to dreamland. Not far from Fargo we cross into Minnesota and awaken to a beautiful clear day and pass Minneapolis before arriving in neighboring St. Paul for a half-hour stop. It's too cold to get off the train and besides, breakfast with a second cup of coffee takes precedence in the warm, almost-empty diner. The first four hours out of St. Paul are interesting as we cross the raging Mississippi River a few times as it heads south and east.



The river's lock system and levees, even here, are keeping the river in check as it is now in full flood. We cross the great river for the final time over many bridges between islands into

Wisconsin at LaCrosse, a brief station stop. From here it is mostly eastbound to Milwaukee.



Wisconsin looks better kept and more prosperous than the states to the west. Even the grass here is starting to turn green. The last major stop is Milwaukee, where we are now only 30 minutes late. Leaving the station we turn south toward Chicago. Glimpses of Lake Michigan are seen off to the left and soon we are in Illinois with its industrial landscapes and endless suburbs. For the last few miles we poke along behind a commuter train before arriving in Union Station about 40 minutes off the timetable. Chicago is cool, clear and to no-one's surprise, windy. A trip home on Air Canada the next day finishes off a nice break from the wet coast.

The daily *Empire Builder* service is well used with lots of local traffic for the day coaches and almost full sleeping accommodations. Travellers from all over the states, New Zealand, and Britain were encountered. While the *Coast Starlight* gets good reviews for its meal service and other amenities the "Builder" is every bit as good, if not better. Servers and car attendants were excellent. Operating crew are well dressed and the custom of the conductor and others in uniform removing their caps as they go through the diner and past guests is a welcome tradition that has not died. *The Empire Builder* should be your next train experience.

West Coast Rail Tours can book packages on this and other Amtrak trains. We can combine train travel with air or cruises, so give us a chance to quote your next "trip of a lifetime".