

Glenwood Springs, Colorado December 28, 1994 – January 2, 1995

Wednesday, December 28 – Los Angeles Union Station

All aboard! No, nobody actually called that out, at least not that I could hear; instead there was just a low-key announcement on the train intercom in the car requesting visitors to step back out onto the platform. And at precisely 10:55 – on the nose, on time! – the Amtrak *Desert Wind* glided out of Union Station, leaving Claire and Ken waving at us from the platform.

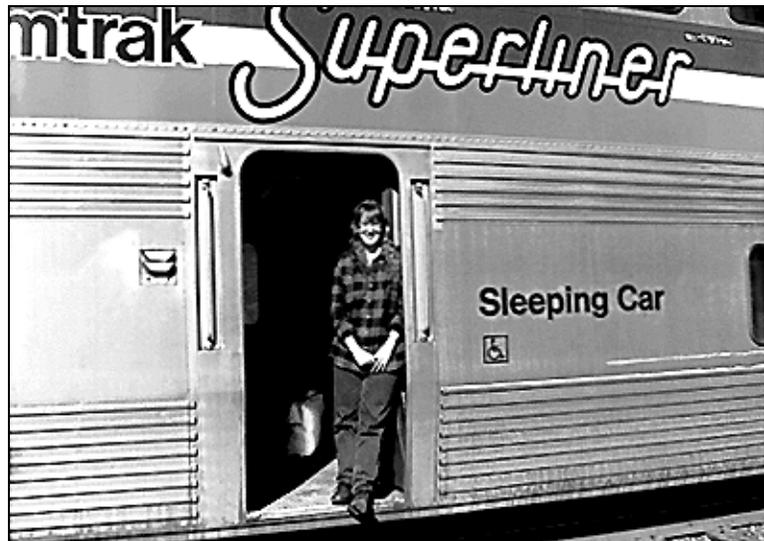
Taking an American train in the west was something new for us. Well, mostly new. Robert had been on commuter trains on the east coast (Conrail); I, of course, had fond childhood memories of the *Sunset Limited* and the *Super Chief* (now *Southwest Chief*) lines to Texas/Arkansas. And the two of us did take the *Alaska Railroad* from Anchorage to Denali and back in 1989. But this was our first train trip together, in the west, on a scenic route via Las Vegas and Salt Lake City to Glenwood Springs, Colorado.

Why Glenwood Springs? Well, we were inspired by Michael Palin's *Around the World in 80 Days* BBC travel series a few years ago; Glenwood does have the world's largest outdoor hot spring, after all. Being between Aspen and Vail, Glenwood would appear to be blessed with spectacular Rocky Mountain scenery and have fewer people there to get in the way. And conveniently enough, the train stops there. So as Michael did before us, we decided to ride the rails to Colorado. Perhaps this little trip journal should be subtitled "Robert and Liza's Great Railroad Journey of 1994"!

The early part of the trip certainly lived up to expectations. We were greeted by Ralph, our sleeping car attendant (aka "porter"). Ralph helped us settle into our small but comfy economy bedroom (formerly "roomette") with its wide seats and big picture window. The train skirted around downtown, through Santa Fe Springs, Fullerton, Yorba Linda, Santa Ana Canyon, Corona and Riverside to San Bernardino. We enjoyed somewhat overcooked bacon cheeseburgers for lunch in the dining car while viewing the scenery of the Cajon Pass, which, incidentally, included the twisted remains of a freight train wreck a week earlier.

No Railroad Hell between the cars this time¹, the non-tip vases on the dining car tables had silk flowers in them instead of real, and the utensils were stainless instead of the heavy silverware they used to use. Despite the changes, it still seemed so familiar.

Back in the compartment, we viewed high-desert scenery, while a bottle of chilled



Liza on the sleeping car at one of the Desert Wind's stops, somewhere in Nevada.

¹See Liza's *Arkansas Travels* for more on Railroad Hell.

champagne and a box of See's chocolates loosened our tongues and helped relax us considerably. And we were already so enamored of train travel that we pored over our Amtrak schedule to see what other trips we might take (the *Coast Starlight* to Salem, Oregon seems like a winner).

It was dark by the time we reached Las Vegas, around 18:00. The glittery lights of the Strip glowed for miles, and as we cruised by we could pick out all the major casinos: Excalibur, Treasure Island, Stardust, etc. The dark bulk of the Luxor pyramid with a lone searchlight on top was impressive. The Vegas station was downtown, the real, old downtown, at the Union Plaza hotel/casino. If one were so inclined, one could dash off the train and gamble for ten minutes. Not us, though; gambling's not for either of us (Lotto excepted) and we didn't want to risk missing the train.

A fair number of people disembarked in Vegas, but an equal number seemed to get on. The sleeping car (the only one until we meet up with the *California Zephyr* in Salt Lake City) was about 3/4 full.

Once underway again, we went to the dining car for our 18:30 dinner reservation. We enjoyed a yummy dinner; Robert had fettucine puttanesca, and I had stuffed trout. Good company at the table, too! Richard was a gentleman in his late 50's on his way back to Washington DC via Chicago. Jennifer was a Colorado resident, about our age, returning from a holiday visit with relatives in California. The four of us shared train stories over our tasty meals.

Following dinner we retired to our compartment, had our beds made up by Ralph, and did our best to sleep. I took the upper berth while Robert had the lower (he assured me we'd switch on the return trip). It was reasonably comfortable up top, although a bit confined. The rocking motion of the train more than made up for any perceived discomforts. Good thing the web restraint was in place; a few curves at night had me rolling toward the edge. I dreamt of Luci falling off the upper bunk so many years ago.

Thursday, December 29 - Amtrak to Glenwood Springs

My first awareness of Thursday was the 04:00 stop in Salt Lake City, where the *Desert Wind* met and merged with the *California Zephyr* out of San Francisco. Metallic banging noises and abrupt movements were the main clues as the cars were coupled to form the much longer train that would wind its way to Chicago. A few hours later we awoke for real to see the last stretch of snowy Provo Canyon, and headed for the dining car for breakfast. We shared the table with a nice older couple from Nebraska, all the while soaking up the scenery passing by us outside (including pronghorn antelope and black-billed magpies).

Following breakfast, back in our re-converted compartment, we passed the tiny town of Thompson, Utah. Thompson is a flag stop normally, but about a week ago the westbound *Desert Wind/California Zephyr* was stuck there all day due to the freight train wreck in Cajon Pass. The conductor mentioned this on the intercom; it seemed the enforced stay in Thompson made a big impression on him and the train crew!

Outside Thompson, the tracks began to follow the Colorado River. Between Salt Lake City and Denver, the train is said to pass through 51 tunnels, ranging in length from 62 feet to 6.2 miles, as it winds through 10 canyons. The first canyon we traversed, Ruby Canyon, was gorgeous; red, red rocks, geese in the river, mule deer on the banks, eagles in the trees. One great rock formation looked much like the Three Sisters formation in the Australian Blue Mountains², and indeed the

²See Liza's *Australia - October 1994* for details.

guide on the intercom said it was a Pre-Cambrian formation, the likes of which can only be found in Utah, Brazil and Australia. Not much snow on this stretch, but there were plenty of icy bits in the river, and it was very cloudy; photo ops out the window were not to be had. We passed another freight wreck outside Ruby Canyon, this also from last week, which had required busing of westbound passengers to get around the mess. Hopefully we would be luckier on our runs out and back.

A quick lunch (not that we needed it, but it was included in the fare) with a couple from Illinois, and we rolled into Glenwood Springs, on time!

A driver from the Hot Springs Lodge met us at the train station alongside the Colorado River. A short drive over the river (across the only bridge) and we were at the lodge. The world's largest hot spring was just across the street, and it was enormous. We planned to hit the spring/pool on Saturday. We racked up some local phone charges checking out some of our options – dogsledding, hot air ballooning, sleigh rides. Alas, most everything was too expensive (\$185/person for dogsledding, \$175-195/person for ballooning), completely booked through January 2nd, or both. So instead, we decided to do our own, more low-key adventuring: arranged to rent a car for Friday to explore Glenwood Canyon and then drive either to Vail or Aspen, and planned a day of local hiking, biking (maybe), hot springs and vapor caves for Saturday.

We took a walk into the town center to window-shop and lose ourselves in a couple of bookstores. The town was very appealing, cozy, like Whistler Mountain in British Columbia, or an alpine village in Switzerland, with lights in the trees twinkling in the light snow. Enjoying a caffe latte while strolling was nice, too. We later smelled some outrageous garlic bread (or something containing loads of garlic) outside the Italian Underground, a small and highly recommended restaurant; we resolved to hit that on New Year's Eve.

Dinner from a nearby Pizza Hut, and we collapsed in our room to read and watch television, gearing up for the next day. Robert perused his *Birders Guide to Colorado* while I burned through *Road Fever*, a travelogue by Tim Cahill that describes a breakneck driving trip from Tierra del Fuego to Alaska.

Friday, December 30 – Glenwood Springs

I had to keep asking myself what day it was; between the train ride and a general lack of day clues on television, it was hard to keep track of time. It was indeed Friday; this was the day we had the rental car so we could explore a little farther afield from Glenwood Springs.

After a regrettably large breakfast (huge buttermilk biscuits with gravy and hash browns), we drove east on I-70 toward Denver, first stopping at the Hanging Lake rest area/trailhead. We walked along in the very fresh snow (got about 4-6 inches last night) looking for birds and generally enjoying the pristine beauty and quiet of Glenwood Canyon. Literally the only sounds to punctuate the silence were faint noises off the interstate as cars disappeared into a tunnel, and the occasional rumble of a freight train making its way into Glenwood Springs. (There's something indescribable about a massive locomotive chugging along in the snow.)

We next got back on the interstate, and after backtracking west for a few miles (no eastbound onramp at Hanging Lake), we continued east to Vail. Vail lies about 60 miles from Glenwood Springs, and about 2000 ft higher, so it was a little over an hour to get there. But it was all on the interstate, so at least the road was good. And the scenery was spectacular. The closeness of Glenwood Canyon with its red rock formations, steep cliffs, and pinyon-juniper vegetation

opened up to a broad, U-shaped glacier-carved valley flanked by rocky mountains. Through it all flowed, more or less, the Colorado River; in parts it was iced over pretty well.

Vail was larger than I thought it would be. The “village” part was a pedestrian zone and was pleasant enough, a lot like Whistler Mountain. Lots of rich-looking people were strolling about in the fashionable ski-wear, as only the rich ski-elite can do. Princess Diana was on the slopes yesterday, but there was no sign of her today; I’d think she wouldn’t be hard to find, she’d be the woman surrounded by bodyguards and photographers. Her presence or lack thereof led to the best newspaper headline of the day, in the *Vail Valley News*: “There is absolutely nothing about Princess Di in this paper today.”

One item I found interesting: apparently Vail is a vacation “mecca” for wealthy Mexicans. We spoke briefly to three from northern Mexico; I thought they were from Spain, myself. We took photographs for them, but didn’t have the nerve to ask whether the peso’s recent pounding (down 40% in the past week and falling) hosed them too much.

Lift tickets were running at \$48 in Vail. Good thing we weren’t planning to ski.

We parked ourselves at a trendy coffee shop for some latte and cafe au lait³, and Robert munched a hot soft bavarian pretzel from an outdoor stand. Then we scooted out of our parking structure, squeezing by with about one minute to spare on the 90 minutes free parking. I drove back to Glenwood Springs, where I got Robert to join me in the Hot Springs Pool. The discount coupons from the lodge brought the price down to \$4.25 each.

The pool was about two city blocks long, and in the chill air you could see vapor rising eerily along the entire length. The pool was divided into a small (1/3 the length) therapy pool with a water temperature of about 105°F, and the larger pool at about 90°F. Both are fed by a natural spring at about 124°F and are cooled by adding plain, cold water. The water smelled very sulphurous at first but we quickly got used to it. We hopped back and forth between sections a couple of times; I swam the whole length and back, which completely wiped me out. I finally succumbed after about 35 minutes and had to get out. The air temperature was in the 40’s but after parboiling in the pool, the walk back to the hotel in wet clothes, through the snow, was actually pretty comfortable.

We wrapped up the day by driving up to the Sunlight Bavarian Inn at the local Sunlight ski area. Nice atmosphere there; it seemed to be a real “local” place and lacked the ritzy pretentiousness of Vail. A band was playing in the pub that was just our speed, lots of Eagles, Steve Miller, Beatles, etc., and they had Paulaner beer on tap, too. A yummy dinner in the upstairs restaurant followed: baked brie in puff pastry with raspberry sauce, apple slices and grapes, then *Jägerschnitzel* for Robert, and German sausages for me. The service was very slow; the power had apparently been out all day until shortly before we arrived, but a fire in the dining room and mellow Christmas music kept us relatively relaxed and content.

Saturday, December 31 – Glenwood Springs

New Year’s Eve! The last day of 1994. We started the year out at Whistler Mountain, British Columbia, and it seemed appropriate that we were finishing it in a similar snowy, mountain setting. One thing that Colorado had over British Columbia on this day – blue skies! It was incredibly clear in the morning, with another four inches or so of powdery snow on the ground.

³The difference? Latte is made with espresso and the steamed milk is more foamy. Cafe au lait is made with plain coffee and hot milk, less foam. Given cups of equal size, cafe au lait costs less and gives one more to drink than latte.

The rental car was due back in the morning, and after a kind of lazy start to the day, we zipped back along the interstate into Glenwood Canyon so that I could try to get some good photographs. I took a bunch at the "No Name" rest stop where it was *damn* cold, then we drove back to the Ford dealership from whom we'd rented the car. Ford was way out in West Glenwood Springs, on Storm King Road. Storm King was where the terrible fires were last summer and several firefighters died. With the winter snowfall, it was difficult to see just what had burned.

Breakfast - more of a brunch, really - followed in town. We walked up to the Pioneer Cemetery and saw Doc Holliday's grave; the inscription on the headstone read "He died in bed". Guess that was a compliment to someone who had been in his share of gunfights. Slipped on an icy sidewalk and banged my knee (sigh, it's always something).

We made fruitless attempts to rent bicycles...wimps! no snow rentals...then finally gave up and went walking instead, past the Yampah Vapor Caves (the source of the hot springs) along the Glenwood Canyon trail. The trail followed the interstate, where we had driven in the morning, for about 1-1/2 miles, then crossed over the interstate into a cold little canyon presumably leading to No Name. It was getting pretty chilly by then, though, so we headed back.

Dinner was at the Italian Underground, and we spent the remainder of 1994 in our rooms, quietly watching a bad repeat of *Saturday Night Live* on tv. Local beer chilled in the sink served as our champagne as we said farewell to 1994 and looked ahead (albeit sleepily) to 1995.

Sunday, January 1, 1995 - Glenwood Springs to points West

Ah, the vagaries of rail travel! Our *California Zephyr/Desert Wind* was delayed several hours getting to Denver due to a broken rail a little to the east. Our departure time was thus pushed back from 14:50 to 18:45. This left us with pretty much a full day, a sunny cold, crisp day at that, with no real plans.

We went to brunch at the Hotel Colorado, a "toe-tapping New Orleans brunch" as proclaimed by the ads, blissfully unaware of the delay at that point. We had some really good food: Basin Street eggs with andouille sausage sauce, yams, bread pudding with a buttery sauce to die for. Back at the hotel, after arranging for a "late" checkout (14:30 as opposed to noon), Robert called the Amtrak station across the way.

"Yes, I wanted to check the arrival time of the westbound *California Zephyr*?...six o'clock?...Ok, thanks."

"Six???" I said. The delay itself did not surprise me, but the amount of the delay did. Somewhat. Well, maybe not too much. We're talking about American railroads, after all; they're not exactly the Swiss when it comes to punctuality.

"Yeah, she said they just got into Denver 20 minutes ago, broken rail east of there," Robert explained.

Hmm. 18:00 was optimistic, as far as I could see. But heck, who takes the train to be somewhere on time? You take it to relax and enjoy the scenery. So what's a few hours. About the only worry was making sure Claire would know about the delay for our pickup; Robert called her to fill her in.

Since we'd already arranged for the "late" checkout, we stayed in the room until about 14:30 watching football on tv (Cleveland vs. New England, Cleveland won), walked over to the station,

deposited our bags in a convenient locker (after taking what ought to be a good photo of Robert outside the station, with a freight train on the tracks and awesome sunlit mountains behind him). We then took a nice, frigid walk to Two Rivers Park. Not much bird activity there, save for a couple of Dippers. And once the sun dropped behind the mountain peaks, brrrr!

And we still had three hours to kill at that point, as we'd heard the train's arrival had slipped a little more, to 18:30 So we bopped over to the Hotel Colorado and parked ourselves in the lounge to kill time, er, linger over coffee while watching more football (Vikings vs. Chicago; Chicago won).

By 17:30 we were back at the station, with only one hour left, so we stayed there and kept ourselves occupied. (Sitting in that station was a lot more enjoyable than I remembered a similar stay being in Newton, Kansas). There were a fair number of people in the station, some odder than others. A fruitcake headed for Berkeley was earnestly telling a little girl that she *could* be a conscientious objector and refuse to dissect animals in biology class. Sigh. (Dissection was not my idea of a fun day, and I do remember being upset at a shark's being chloroformed to death for absolutely no good reason in front of a group of USC engineering honors students on Catalina Island (back in 1982 when I worked for the director of the group, Professor W. V. T. Rusch). But to make a general stand against vivisection and science? I don't think so.)

At any rate, the *Zephyr* finally made its appearance at 18:40; the headlight on the locomotive was a welcome sight in the chilly darkness as we stood on the platform. Our car was at the very end, a long walk down in the dark, where we were greeted by Ralph, our attendant on the outbound leg of the trip.

"If it isn't Rob and Liza!" he called out. "I've been waiting for you two!"

"Hey there Ralph, how're you doing?" I asked.

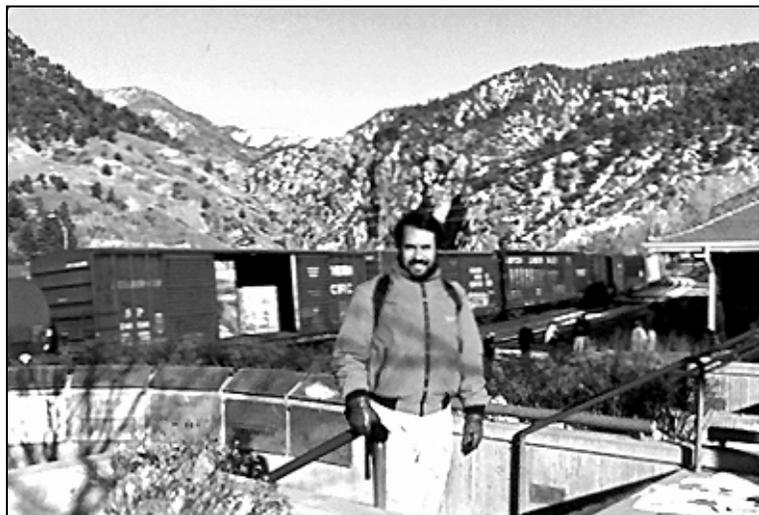
"Fine, fine. Hey, how long you two been married?" he asked.

"Eleven years," Robert answered.

"Eleven? Somebody told me you were newlyweds!"

"Well, it seems like it," Robert replied. Without coaching, even! I was definitely impressed.

We settled in, and enjoyed a beer (Breckenridge Oatmeal Stout) while waiting for our 21:00 dinner call. At dinner we shared a table with Dale and Kirsten, a couple from Denver on a first anniversary trip to Vegas. They both work for Burlington Northern, and they filled us in on how freight rail is doing (BN has more work than it can handle, not enough locomotives to keep up with



Robert at the Glenwood Springs Railroad Station.

demand). BN may also merge with or acquire Santa Fe, although that deal might get blocked by the government as being in violation of anti-trust statutes (a similar deal involving Union Pacific last year was halted). Kirsten also gave us a rundown on how one gets to be an engineer; one basically starts out as a brakeman, then conductor, then up to engineer, with some heavy-duty exams along the way. It's not a job for dummies – a good thing, too, you wouldn't exactly want Beavis and Butthead running megatonnage down the tracks.

I set my watch back an hour in anticipation of crossing back into Pacific time at the Utah/Nevada border sometime that night. Robert, ever the pragmatist, decided to wait until we actually crossed the state line.

Monday, January 2 – Amtrak to Los Angeles

It took me awhile to get to sleep the night before, despite the fact that I had the roomier bottom bunk. Maybe that was because I kept the curtain open all night and could see the stars. Eventually the train's rocking did me in. I woke up briefly to find the train stopped, and the intermittent banging told me we were in Salt Lake City, breaking the *Desert Wind* off from the *California Zephyr*.

When I next woke up, the early pre-dawn light was struggling in the window. I got my glasses, and Robert hung his head down from the top bunk to look outside. We were approaching a town.

"Is that Milford?" he asked.

"I don't think so; Milford is probably another hour away," I replied, looking over the timetable.

Robert climbed down. "You know," he said, "this looks like the area around the Great Salt Lake."

"But we've been moving awhile. We couldn't just be here, could we?"

"That looks like the Wasatch range just back there," Mr. Geography continued.

I put on something resembling presentable clothing and wandered out into the sleeping car aisle for the coffee I'd been smelling for the past 45 minutes. A better-dressed woman was out there doing the same. "Do you happen to know where we are?" I asked.

"Well, we just left Salt Lake not too long ago..."

"What?"

"Yes, we were parked there almost all night. We won't be in Vegas until three o'clock."

Uh oh. We were supposed to be in Vegas at 08:00. That meant we were now seven hours late instead of four! Making our arrival in Los Angeles, ooh, 22:20. Heavens. I didn't care so much for myself, but did feel badly for Claire. Robert had at least called her, so she had a clue that we would be late, and hopefully she'd check with Amtrak to confirm the real arrival time.

"Well, Robert, you were right," I told him, explaining what I'd heard. His watch was still in the proper time zone, too, unlike mine. That figured.

"This way we get to see the part of the Great Basin we missed on the way out, and would have missed last night." Righty-oh, that's exactly what we did in the morning. With my watch in the wrong time zone, we had breakfast, indulged in train birding (Golden Eagles, Prairie Falcons, Rough-legged Hawk, Great Horned Owls, Red-tailed Hawks), and watched the flat sagebrush landscape sail by.

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"I could use a cold drink," I said, looking at Robert's feet; he had his shoes off in the compartment.

"Me too," he answered. Neither of us moved.

"I'll rub your feet..." I offered.

"You're trying to bribe me."

"...and hug you, and generally treat you nice..."

"There is a lounge car," he mused out loud.

I looked at him. "Of course, I'd treat you nice even if you *didn't* get me a drink."

"Ok," he sighed, and put on his shoes. What a guy!

A few minutes later, he pitched back into the compartment with a can and two cups of ice. Kind of a controlled fall into the seat. And he poured.

"Thanks, cutie, you take good care of me." I said.

Robert burped in reply. Then he looked very concerned as I popped the top of my pen and began to write.

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We hit Milford at 10:30 Mountain time, only 6.5 hours late .

Ralph, our attendant, tiredly explained over the intercom why we were so far behind schedule. "When our three cars were being pushed from the *Zephyr* to our engine and dining car, one of the wheels on the middle coach came off the track. Technically a derailment. This caused something of a logistical logjam in Salt Lake City...we were underway at seven a.m."

Wow. We were asleep; I knew the cars were being pushed around, but had not a clue what was happening. (And our three hour extra stay in Salt Lake hosed other trains pretty well.) No wonder Ralph looked exhausted. I wonder how they fixed it; did they wake people up? Lift the coach?

Vegas ETA was 14:00. With luck we would hit Los Angeles by 22:00, maybe 21:30.

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Best sign spied on the route, on a Union Pacific "6 Man Bunk Car": "DO NOT HUMP UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES".⁴

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Amtrak operated its first train on May 1, 1971. So Lee's first trip when he was 18 months old was not Amtrak, but his disappearing act in 1974 was.

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18:00, Barstow. It would take another four hours to get to Los Angeles. Because of the delay, Amtrak gave everyone on board a complimentary dinner from KFC. I talked to Ralph earlier about the derailment in SLC, to find out how it got fixed. It didn't. They left the car where the wheel slipped (at a worn switch), moved the people and baggage to another car, and sent us on our way. Not much Amtrak could do about the rail conditions; at that juncture, it was really Union Pacific's problem.

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As I write this last paragraph, we're still not home, not for three more hours. Generally I'd have to say this has been a great experience. Our compartment afforded us much privacy, yet we were able to socialize at mealtimes with our table companions, people who seemed to enjoy train travel much as we did. We've seen parts of the country from our window that you couldn't see from the highway, and we're so relaxed! Bummer to have to go to work tomorrow. We're both pretty revved up thinking about future travels and how we might work train transportation into the picture. Definitely, as the Amtrak slogan goes, "There's something about a train that's magic". We'll be back aboard.

⁴I later found out from Lee that this meant the car should not be rolled over the railyard "hump" to decouple it from adjoining cars.