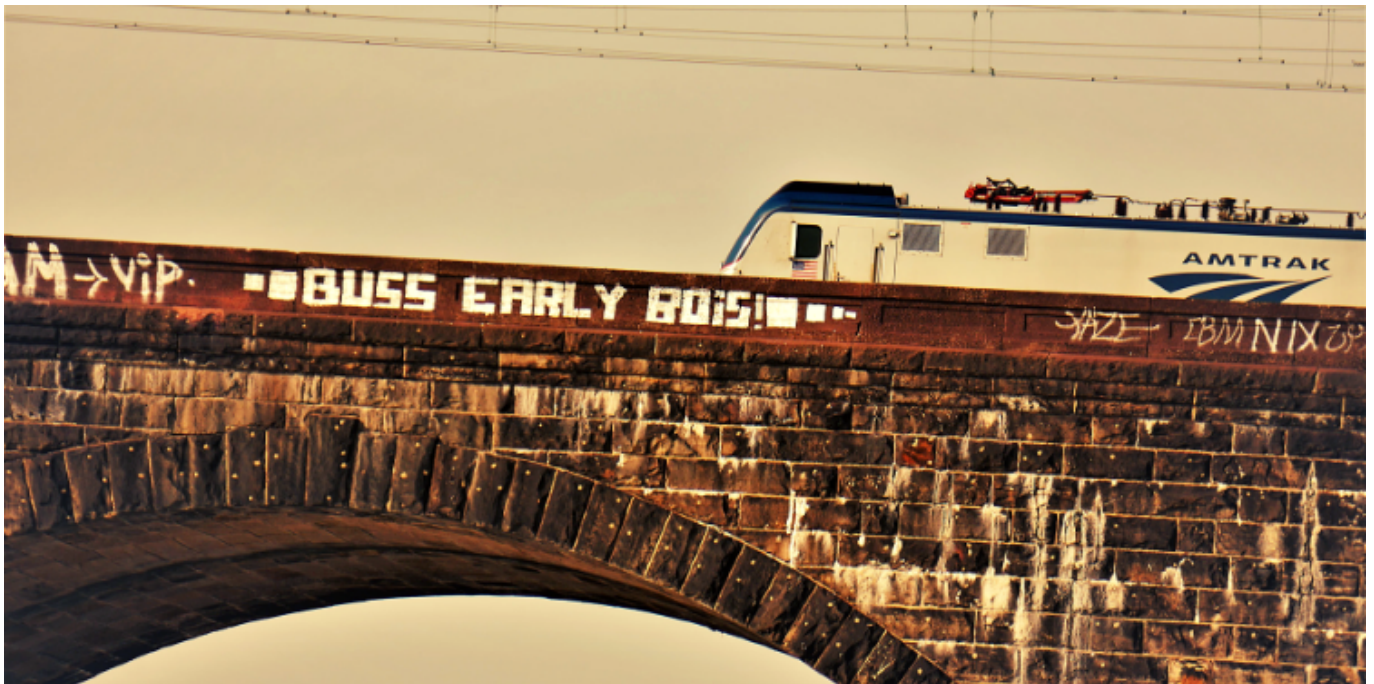


What a Long, Strange Amtrak Trip It Was



A group of nearly 200 passengers were stranded this past week on an Amtrak train near Oakridge, Oregon for some 36 hours. I could surely sympathize.

My own experience with a day's long Amtrak journey into a long Amtrak night (and yet another day) came in May of 2014. It began, as all such stories do, with an octogenarian's trip to Zambia and a broken leg.

My mother – inveterate church lady and life-long doer of good deeds – had decided during the winter of 2013 that there remained, within her gracefully aging person, plenty of charitable deeds and United Methodism available to share. Mom thus conceived the notion of accompanying a church group to Africa, where she was planning to dig wells for clean water, as I understood it.

So, in the spring of 2014, the almost-84-year-old matriarch of our family set off for Zambia, where I believe that her offers

of well-digging may have been politely declined, and she was put to work making meals, as well as cleaning up about the volunteer quarters. One evening, she went outside to empty the trash, tripped, broke her leg, and was transported two hours in the back of a pick-up truck to the nearest medical facility that could place her leg in a cast.

Mom being Mom, her do-gooder efforts were undeterred by the accident. (I mean, when you think of St. Lawrence, grilled slowly to his death, or Bartholomew skinned like a fat hare, well, then what is a fractured tibia, after all?) Mother returned to the work site, where she remained until the regularly-scheduled flight back home, confined to a chair, and teaching some of the local ladies to crochet – a craft that Mom says they loved learning.

Yes – I will eventually reach the Amtrak part of this tale. The story, like the train trip itself, is a meandering one. Just keep reading...

Eventually, Mother and her broken leg returned to the Midwest, where she admitted to a bit of fatigue and some pain. One of my brothers, one sister, and I all converged in Indiana to check on Mom, take her to doctors' appointments, make sure the house was cleared for a senior in a leg cast, and pretend great interest in an inexhaustible supply of photographs featuring African waterfalls, Methodist missionaries, and local women contending with messy skeins of yarn. Our visit coincided with the second Sunday in May, and my brother observed drily that *some* people would obviously go to just about any extreme to make sure that they lured their children home for Mother's Day.

Yes, I'm getting to the part about the train. This is called "suspense." This isn't me just rambling on. It's deliberate literary uncertainty and the building of excitement. Didn't your middle-school English classes teach you *anything*?

So. The train trip.

Well, I needed to return from Indiana to the East Coast somehow, right? And, this having been an unforeseen, last-minute trip, the return-trip would also be last-minute, and the applicable plane fares would be ruinous. Nope, not my style.

I decided to take Amtrak. Much cheaper. Maybe the travel time was a wee bit longer, but I would save money. No worries.

My brother would drop me off on his way back to his own home, and I would ride neatly back to Massachusetts by train. Easy, right? Pack a few sandwiches and a good novel and I'm all set.

What A Long, Strange Trip It Was...

Little bro dropped me off at about 6:30 p.m. for the train scheduled to depart at 12:22 a.m. (Turns out that it's sort of a "suggested" or "theoretical" or even a "mystical" 12:22 a.m., as opposed to anything within measurable hours of the actual time stated.) So, there I was, pitiful and forlorn, sitting between two rather sad little suitcases, on the steps of a deserted train station in Elkhart, Indiana. (The station isn't open that far before a train departs.)

After the station opened, I did enjoy an interesting and lengthy chat with the station caretaker in Elkhart, a very intelligent, retired (semi-retired) man who opens the station for a few hours a night, three or four days a week. Or for more than a few hours, if the trains run late. We discussed the station's art-deco architecture, Elkhart, musical instruments (the manufacture of which was once Elkhart's dominant industry), RV's (another Elkhart industry), architectural revival, Mennonites and the Amish, manufacturing in general, Gennett musical recordings, etc., etc. Trains, of course... and train delays, of course.

My train eventually left at nearly 3 a.m., and the passengers

included me, one professor-ish passenger who enjoyed talking about first lines of famous books, and one odd, three-person family, including a father who was 29, who described at length his roots in Puerto Rico, and who told the rest of us that he had six children already, fathered upon multiple mothers, and that he wanted yet more children. (I told him that scientists have figured out, you know, what causes babies to be born... I don't think he understood the joke.)

The family seemed to be headed to Erie to attend the funeral of a relative of the father's whom he had met never (*no*, whom he had met once, he then said—his stories changed often), but who (this deceased relative—*no*, *uncle*) had specially requested that he (Multiple-Baby-Daddy-Guy) attend his funeral. Baby Daddy speculated that the decedent was bequeathing him a house, even though he mused aloud that he couldn't think why this should be so. (I certainly could offer no insight on this hypothetical legacy.)

Oddly enough, the mother of this little group was a fiancée who seemed quite rational. And, of course, she/they had a baby in tow. (And they also had about three times the number of allowable suitcases – having apparently sold everything non-portable in Elkhart, planning to move to Erie by train. On spec.) She did assure me that her baby would be “the first Puerto Rican President.” (Well, why not? Go, Baby!) They didn't have a physical train ticket among them. The dates of their tickets (as putatively reserved but not yet paid for) were wrong. They had purchased their tickets weeks ago. *No*, they had bought them by phone just yesterday. Endless drama was to be heard on their end of the station's one piece of technology: a black rotary-dial telephone.

Baby-Daddy Guy boasted/explained to me numerous times that the first thing he was going to do, when he got off the train, was take his 15-month-old son to the zoo. The boy had never been to the zoo. Fifteen months old, said Dad in wonderment, and never been to the zoo! He “deserves” to go to a zoo, and there

is one in Erie. (Daddy had looked it up. This was elucidated in detail.) So that was the first plan for when they got off the train. The very first thing they would do. (Okay, if it were me, I might think about housing and a shower... But, hey, I guess the kid is really into giraffes. And, after all, the poor little guy has waited all of 15 months for a trip to see caged exotic animals in Pennsylvania.)

The station caretaker kept us updated as departure delays accumulated...

The train finally arrived at nearly 3 a.m. The train's conductor was apoplectic with the ticketless family, but eventually let them and their absurdly excess luggage, minus a clear ticket, and at what he clearly thought was the wrong price, onto what turned out to be a very crowded train.

The train encountered numerous further delays as we made our way northeast. Freight traffic. Rocks on the tracks. A signal "blackout." A few simply mysterious delays.

And... one two-hour stop for what was at first euphemistically described as "a trespasser on the tracks." Turns out that is how the Amtrak personnel describe an apparent suicide-by-train. Yes, appallingly, our train had run over someone who had deliberately placed him or herself onto the tracks. (Pity the crew members driving the train!)

That was awful and unsettling. Even worse were the passengers who loudly complained about the *time* this was costing *them*. And who could think of nothing else. At least the snake-tattooed skateboard lad, who was by that time sitting next to me, was a decent kid; he turned to me and asked softly, "Can you *believe* these people? I mean, some guy is *dead*, and they're whining about their appointments!"

Go, Skateboard Dude!

I made note of the passengers – stranded not for 36 hours, but

for many stressful hours, all the same. This single Amtrak train carried, in addition to the future First Puerto Rican President (and noted Giraffe Enthusiast): a group of female Amish sightseers; Grossly Obese, Disgusting, Malodorous, Greasy, CPAP-Using White Guy, who atomized Axe Body Spray intermittently; Fishbowl Glasses Guy, who smoked with unsuccessful secrecy in the bathroom; Urbane Black Izod Guy who dominated the car with incessant, loud complaints and obnoxious vows that he would “get a lawyer” and “sue” and that “by tomorrow” he would “own [expletive-ing] Amtrak!” (into which bluster he easily and frequently drew the odd bedfellow, Obese Smelly White CPAP Guy, also apparently convinced that Amtrak’s eight-hour cut into his rich and demanding life would form the basis of a lucrative cause of action sure to set him up financially).

There were also with us two very pleasant-seeming people across the aisle from me, who spoke only Spanish (did not understand any of my English, nor French, nor German, nor the 18 words of Russian that I know) – so I was trying to explain to them, using only the pathetic fragments of Spanish that I have picked up while substituting for middle-school language classes, plus words I was more or less making up by trilling the R’s of French words, that the train would be stopped for two-three hours because of “el suicido.” (They seemed, naturally enough, to think that I had mis-translated, and asked “aqui? aqui?” Not believing that I meant “here.” Surely not!) Then they saw the sheriff’s cars and medical van. They nodded sadly) I cursed the dying battery on my cell phone. The long wait for the train had drained the power from the nifty electronic tool that I might otherwise have used as an *ad hoc* bilingual dictionary.

At least I knew that my darling husband, bless his heart, would be waiting for me at the final station. Of course, it turns out that he had to hang around for an extra 45 minutes, because we were not allowed to dis-embark from the train until

the New York-bound cars had de-coupled from the Boston-bound cars. (Why this should be so, when the *entire* train, all cars, had to pass through the station, was never made clear.)

Naturally, I wrote an email to my family to describe this long, strange trip. Several siblings said that it made for a good anecdote. One sibling suggested I stick to airplane travel in future.

My mother said that the very best course of action to take, were I ever again stranded with a group of people in need of diversion and direction, was to teach them all to crochet.