



Growing up with Amtrak

Joining the new endeavor in 1972, our corps of young employees found an atmosphere of adventure and entrepreneurship

By Bruce Goldberg





Photo, Walter A. Peters; button, Bruce Goldberg collection

An all-star consist on train 84, the *Meteor*, northbound at Sanford, Fla., about 2:30 p.m. on September 8, 1972, amply illustrates Amtrak's "rainbow era." Led by an RF&P E8, an SCL E7, and an Amtrak-painted E8, the consist includes cars from SCL, PC, NP, SP, and UP. Note the cars of Auto-Train Corp. at the new private carrier's shop at the left.

The man across the aisle from me on a *Metroliner* skimming north from Washington, D.C., in April 1972 was studying promotional materials for Washington-based Allegheny Airlines, so I asked him, "Excuse me. Do you work in marketing for Allegheny?" I figured an airline might be a good place for my first job out of college if nothing came from my interview earlier that afternoon with Auto-Train Corp., the firm that ran the Virginia-Florida passenger train on Seaboard Coast Line.

He replied that he'd been vice president of marketing for Pan Am, but now held the same position with Amtrak.

"Oh! You must be Harold Graham," I said. I had followed Amtrak closely, and my knowing his name piqued his interest. The result was an impromptu two-and-a-half-hour job interview on my way back to New Jersey. A few weeks later, I began my career with the then-one-year-old company as part of the

first group of directly hired Amtrak employees at Penn Station in New York.

Forty years ago Amtrak represented an exciting new endeavor, and the prospect of getting in on the ground floor attracted a corps of young employees who found an atmosphere of adventure and entrepreneurship. Some made it a career and now are at, or near, retirement age. Others stayed only a short time. For many of us, though, Amtrak shaped our futures, and memories of the early years remain strong.

Trains worth traveling again?

Amtrak's first advertising boldly claimed, "We're making the trains worth traveling again," but of course not much had changed. The trains still ran with old equipment, often mixed, from members Penn Central, Seaboard Coast Line, Burlington Northern, Santa Fe, Union Pacific, and others. Aging air-conditioning systems failed regularly.

Tracks
Are Back!



Passengers still bought tickets from agents employed by the various railroads. The crews on board still worked for the railroads, too, not Amtrak. The offices had no computers—not even for space reservations. Trains still ran late. Passengers still missed connections. Employees who were rude to customers in April '71 remained rude after May 1.

Many of Amtrak's early executives had come from airlines, then considered the gold standard for customer service (oh, how times have changed!). They wanted Amtrak to offer airline-type service, and deployed their own



Top, J. David Ingles; above, Monty Powell

Amtrak made a literal breakthrough (in Chicago) by introducing through Milwaukee–St. Louis trains in November 1971. The *Abraham Lincoln*, behind a GM&O E7 and a Milwaukee E9 (top), leaves Milwaukee June 3, 1972. The six French RTG Turboliners made a splash; running as Chicago–St. Louis train 301, a Turbo (above) stops in Bloomington, Ill., on October 11, 1973.

customer service “management” to the front lines. During 1971 and ’72, Amtrak hired a corps of energetic, but inexperienced, young people as Passenger Service Representatives (PSR’s) to ride long-distance trains out of New York, Chicago, Miami, and Los Angeles and to work as Passenger Service

Agents (PSA’s) in major stations.

I was among them. On the trains and in the stations, we were readily identifiable by our red jackets. When things went wrong, which happened frequently, station personnel or on-board crews were happy to point disgruntled passengers toward the “redcoat.”



Bruce Goldberg

Have a problem? The “redcoats” stood out!

Amtrak wrestled with big operational problems, but the company also was aggressive, introducing new trains, new routings, and trying new ways to conduct an old business. When new timetables came out, you never knew what you’d find. Consider some of the innovations in 1971-72: through coaches and sleepers from Boston to Florida; a second daily Chicago–Los Angeles train; short-haul trains running through Chicago Union Station; a transcontinental coach and sleeper via Kansas City.

Instead of snack cars, some Northeast Corridor trains gave passengers a chance to sit down to a full dining-car meal (which I regularly did on the Boston–Washington *Merchants Limited* during my 30-minute trip home from New York to Metropark, N.J.). In Penn Station, a passenger lounge was opened in former restaurant space on the lower level. To relieve confusion when boarding the Florida trains, check-in and issuance of boarding passes began in the main waiting room an hour before departure. (The end of this practice may have been hastened, in the name of labor peace, the day an inbound crew was late and two Amtrak PSA’s began collecting tickets without a conductor.) Refurbished cars presented a new



J. David Ingles

An early Amtrak innovation was the Chicago-L.A. *Chief*, on a 40-hour card opposite the *Super Chief*, shown westbound in Cajon Pass in June 1972. It lasted only until September.

image and received new interior configurations to test different service concepts, although mechanical issues still plagued them.

Amtrak took a more aggressive marketing approach, too. For the first time, rail tickets could be purchased with a general credit card. The first nationwide fare tariff was printed so agents all over would have the information they needed. A single phone number began to handle reservations in Chicago, and soon the nationwide 1-800-USA-RAIL toll-free line—still in use today—would be established nationwide.

A sense of mission

Besides the excitement of working for a new company, most of us also felt a sense of mission—to save the passenger train. There was an *esprit de corps*, exemplified by an anecdote from Warren Kalbacker, a Penn Station colleague. Working north on the *Silver Star*, he was standing in a Dutch door coming into Washington, and while passing Amtrak's headquarters, he saw employees on the upper floors—who had spotted his red coat—waving at him! Naturally, he waved back.

Although we became members of the "Amtrak family," we weren't always welcomed to the "railroad family." At Penn Station, many PC employees saw us redcoats as a threat to their jobs; few saw Amtrak as the last opportunity to save what was left.

Seaboard Coast Line folks were among the most helpful, not surprising since SCL remained so pro-passenger that it seriously considered not joining



Top, J. David Ingles; above, Charles B. Porter; timetable, author's collection

SCL, whose *Everglades* for Jacksonville, Fla., clears Alexandria, Va. (top), in April 1971 on RF&P, was a reluctant Amtrak joiner. It even issued its own initial timetable for "operating under contract" NRPC trains (right). By April 1973 (above), a lot of Amtrak's 197 E units were repainted; this is ex-SCL E8 524 (*née* FW&D 9981A), at Clearwater, Fla.

Amtrak. We PSA's operated from the SCL office on Penn Station's lower level; SCL provided station customer service for the three daily Florida trains, and also staffed the trains with a passenger agent (paid by Amtrak) all the way to Florida. The SCL veterans told us not only what we needed to know about the railroad, but also taught us "the code"—little tricks to cut through resistance and the regimented railroad culture.

Besides handling unhappy passengers who discovered Amtrak's advertising was better than its product, we developed a routine of being on the platform for certain arrivals and departures. *Metroliner* service dated from only 1969, but it was Amtrak's most important product in both image and revenue generation. Although the service was usually trouble-free, one of us was always on the platform, just in case.

The overnight streamliners out of New York also got our attention. We walked each train after it was spotted at the platform, checking for problems, and made sure each was stocked with timetables, postcards, and stationery. The three Florida trains still enjoyed a robust market of snowbirds in winter and Orlando attraction traffic in summer, and ran 15 to 18 cars. The *Silver Meteor* to Miami was the leader with two diners, a video-equipped mid-train lounge, a sleeper lounge [including the ex-Seaboard Sun Lounges—see DREAM TRAINS 2, 2010] and mostly refurbished equipment. The *Champion* to Tampa and St. Petersburg lacked the *Meteor's* amenities and had a slower schedule, but it carried large crowds to





Orlando and Florida's Gulf Coast. The *Silver Star* was the workhorse, with coaches, sleepers, a diner, and a lounge, but as the day's first Florida train from the Northeast, it was popular.

The *Montrealer* began operating in September 1972 from Washington and immediately became a popular way to reach Vermont ski resorts. Its "Le Pub" lounge, which had a piano and a weekend entertainer, exuded *après-ski*. The *National Limited* to Pittsburgh, St. Lou-

is, and Kansas City, on the other hand, exuded all the wrong things—the least desirable equipment, poor on-time performance, and only a lone diner-lounge to visit on the scheduled 27-hour run. A journal entry by Warren Kalbacker for August 2, 1972, states, "Sent out a #31 not fit for human habitation." Unfortunately, that was not rare.

Southern Railway did not join Amtrak, but at Penn Station, we added to a Boston–Washington train well-maintained

through coaches and sleepers for its *Southern Crescent* to New Orleans.

Our Florida trains were the strongest long-distance revenue-producers out of New York, but the *Broadway Limited* to Pittsburgh and Chicago was the chosen star of the fleet—perhaps by necessity. By late 1971, yellow Union Pacific cars, stainless-steel SCL stock, and red-stripped Southern Pacific sleepers had come east to replace the worn-out PC equipment, and soon Amtrak



David C. Warner; brochure, author's collection

The *Silver Meteor* and *Silver Star* have remained premier Amtrak services. On April 19, 1977, the southbound *Star* rolls into Kissimmee, Fla., behind three-year-old SDP40F's.





Robert P. Schmidt

MoPac E8's, having taken over for PC E8's at St. Louis, ease the New York-K.C. *National Limited* into Kirkwood, Mo., January 2, 1972.

applied its red-white-and-blue livery to the newcomers, a cosmetic if not mechanical refurbishing. By Amtrak's first anniversary, the *Broadway* was running with all-redone consists, pulled by silver-and-red GG1's and E8's. Dinner in the diner was still special, and it was not unheard of for New York day-shift PSA's to hop on board to North Philadelphia after work to enjoy the featured \$3.60 rib-eye dinner.

The train's 4:55 p.m. departure during the height of rush hour still had a special aura. Train announcer Dan Simmons' calls for the *Broadway* always had some panache, carrying a tone of greater importance than the rapid-fire barking of PC's Trenton locals and North Jersey Coast runs, or Amtrak's Philadelphia "Clockers" and Washington conventional trains, and even the *Metroliners*. Amazing by today's standards, Amtrak ran the *Broadway* with just two trainsets, turning the cars in seven hours (or less time when late) in both New York and Chicago following its 17-hour overnight run.



Art Peterson, Krambles-Peterson archive; timetable, author's collection

With Amtrak emblems replacing the PC "mating worms," coach 810 leads four-car *Metroliner* 113 into Metropark, N.J., August 25, 1974.

Variety was the bane of life

During the early years, Amtrak trains featured a dizzying array of equipment. Leg-rest coaches, previously uncommon east of Chicago, became a fixture nationwide on overnight trains. It was not unusual to see 44-seat UP or SP coaches mixed with 52-seat non-leg-rest SCL cars. The inherited long-distance coaches had two large restroom lounges, giving passengers a roomy place to wash and change clothes.

Unlike today's Viewliner and Superliner sleepers, standardization was not a hallmark of the inherited fleet. While 10-roomette/6-double-bedroom cars were most common, there were also 10&5's, 11-bedroom cars, a 7-bedroom/2-drawing-room car, and two Slumber-coach groups of different capacity. The *Broadway* had ex-Rock Island 8&6's that were refurbished and given names related to New York, Pittsburgh, and Chicago such as *Central Park*, *Golden Triangle*, and my favorite, *Wrigley Field*. On occasion we saw Canadian National sleepers with open sections (berths with curtains) on the *Montrealer*, replacing a defective Amtrak car that had to be repaired in Montreal.

"Conventional" Northeast Corridor trains (*i.e.*, locomotive-hauled train, not Metroliner M.U.'s) were not all that uniform either. Before the Amfleet cars arrived in 1975, NEC trains sported a mix of former Pennsy *Congressional* coaches ("Congos"), New York Central coaches off the New York-Albany-Buffalo "Empire Service," and an occasional pinch-hitting long-distance coach or lounge. Most cars had seen better days.

Almost every Corridor conventional train had a parlor car, ranging from former PRR Congo parlors with 29 swivel seats and a drawing room to a

variety of New Haven styles, including baggage-parlors and a few 39-seat cars with a two-and-one seating configuration that would become standard on the Amfleet "Am-clubs." One pair of parlor cars on the popular Philadelphia-New York-Springfield, Mass., *Bankers* had been refurbished with living-room-type seating.

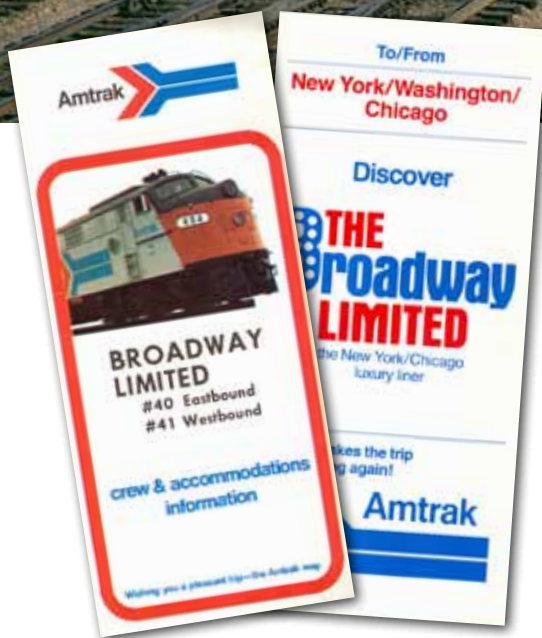
Whenever a newly refurbished car came through Penn Station, it gave us PSA's reason for hope. It was late August 1972 when the first completely refurbished NEC train came through, and it looked great. Alas, its snack-bar coach, 3952, was dead with no lights or air-conditioning! Hope for the future versus the reality of the present—such was Amtrak in the early 1970s.

For the mechanical department, the non-standardized or "rainbow" fleet caused parts distribution nightmares. It was impossible to have all critical parts for literally hundreds of different car varieties everywhere on the system, often making it impossible to fix problems away from a car's home maintenance base. The variety caused issues. I have more than a few memories of being surrounded by angry customers and a frustrated car attendant of a sold-out Florida train who found that instead of the assigned 10&6 sleeper, an all-bedroom car had been substituted. This made it impossible to give everyone their reserved accommodation.





J. David Ingles; timetables, author's collection



Amtrak's "chosen star," the *Broadway Limited*, was targeted for the first total cosmetic makeover by May 1, 1972, but on May 21st, two unrepaired UP cars dent the "all-Amtrak look" as No. 40 leaves Chicago. Former B&O sleeper-lounge *Dana* adorns the rear, and in the old PRR coach yard, some ex-N&W cars, including a *Blue Bird* dome coach, await repainting.

supposed to make a *Silver Star* trip to Miami with an SCL passenger agent to see how the railroad vets handled customer-service issues, including coordination with the conductor when problems arose with seating assignments.

Fond memories from these trips are what stick with many of us four decades later, overshadowing memories of frustration in trying to get perpetually defective equipment fixed, handle irritated passengers, and keep our sanity while doing so. Among them: Watching the front end of the *Broadway* loop around Horseshoe Curve from the 18th car, former B&O 5-bedroom/observation-lounge *Dana* on the rear; seeing the Coast Guard sailing ship *Eagle* berthed in New London, Conn., the lights glowing in its rigging as the *Merchants* paused at the station; hitting a Sunshine State platform from the *Star* after dawn, the sun having just risen, and smelling that warm Florida air.

We would see notable people pass through Penn Station. William F. Buckley, Chief Justice Warren Burger, the Baltimore Orioles, and Australian tennis pro Yvonne Goolagong were among those who boarded *Metroliners*. Soviet diplomats going between New York and Washington preferred private drawing rooms on conventional parlor cars. On

the *Broadway* we saw singer Ella Fitzgerald; Martha Mitchell, wife of attorney general John Mitchell; composer Dmitri Shostakovich; and comedian Jack Benny, who was on the train from Chicago after a storm closed O'Hare.

There were occasional special trains. For President Nixon's second inauguration, three 18-car specials of ex-New Haven coaches were chartered by The Women's Strike for Peace. The steam heat was no match for the day's bitter cold, though, and within a half hour, all three trains were rolling refrigerators and the passengers sounded anything but peaceful! My two colleagues and I, each aboard one of the trains, understood their anger—we were cold too.

Warren Kalbacker remembers his passenger agent training trip on the *Silver Star*. "On the trip back, the situation just kept deteriorating. First one coach went hot and dark, then another, and another. What do you do when there's nowhere to put people? I felt like giving away airline tickets. Ironic, since on the trip down, I had torn from the bulkhead of a Congo coach in the consist an ad for TWA's new service to Florida! A few months later on the *Broadway*, we had a coach that was so cold I had to help a mother move to a warmer car by carrying her baby."

It's possible that the first "gasoline crisis," in 1973, helped save Amtrak, as our ridership exploded. Rather than risk being unable to fill their tank on a trip, or pay fares that were rapidly rising in step with fuel costs, people turned to the train. To its credit, Amtrak, even with a threadbare network, wasn't shy about promoting itself as a driving alternative.

To Chicago, Boston, Miami

Although our group was assigned to Penn Station, we often got to substitute for an ill or vacationing PSR on the *Broadway* to Chicago or on a two-day loop to Washington on a *Metroliner*, then up to Boston and back to New York the next afternoon on the refurbished *Merchants Limited*. We all were

Chicago comparisons

Chicago, as the hub for most of Amtrak's long-distance network, had a large PSR base that covered the *City of San Francisco* (now *California Zephyr*), the *Empire Builder*, the *Super Chief* (now *Southwest Chief*), the *Broadway*, and the *Floridian*. Scott Hercik, an early Chicago PSR, remembers the contrasts provided by two of those trains.

"Even though the Santa Fe eventually withdrew permission for Amtrak to use the *Super Chief* name, saying the train didn't live up to Santa Fe standards, I thought the train was exemplary. The crews still took great pride in providing the best possible service, the equipment was classic Santa Fe, and generally everything worked fine all the way from Chicago to Los Angeles and back," Hercik recalls. "The train included the private Turquoise Room in the dining car, the epitome of class. It just didn't get any better than that train."

At the other end of the spectrum was the Chicago-Miami *Floridian*. Hercik's strategy? "The only way to survive trips on the *Floridian* was to treat each as an adventure. It seemed like each time you were assigned to it, the train was on a new schedule. Two days and one night en route, next time two nights and one day. You never knew if you'd be derailed somewhere in Indiana due to deteriorated track. You knew, though,

that by the end of the run, the heating or 'a/c' would fail in several of the cars."

Like most of the Chicago PSR's, Hercik was in a *Floridian* derailment. Many occurred at slow speed, but Hercik recalls going on the ground in Indiana at about 60 mph. The two SDP40F diesels stayed on the rails, but all the cars derailed. "I was sitting in the lounge car when suddenly my Coke was flying toward the ceiling, which was off to my left! Thankfully nobody was hurt too badly," he remembers. "It was just another *Floridian* adventure."

In those years, Amtrak employees traveling on business were expected to use the train, at least one way, even cross-country. Hence for me, a 1974 training session in Spokane, Wash., meant several days of riding the *Broadway*, the *North Coast Hiawatha* to Seattle, and then back to Spokane on the *Expo 74*, an Amtrak entrepreneurial effort to capitalize on the world exposition in that city—although the train's schedule certainly didn't seem optimal. It was the first of a dozen cross-country trips for me that eventually covered all

the coast-to-coast routes. To this day, the images of descending the mountain into Butte, Mont., remain vivid.

The drum

The trains were not the only "classic" thing at Amtrak in those days. So was the reservation and ticketing system. Hidden from the public behind the Penn Station ticket office was one of several reservation offices. Each office controlled the reserved space on certain trains, so, unlike today, it was not unusual for an agent to have to "wire for space" from another reservation office, just as the individual railroads had to do in pre-Amtrak days.

Metroliner reservations and tickets were handled by a rudimentary computerized system, but for everything else there was "the drum." In a set-up similar to that pictured in Summer 2010 CLASSIC TRAINS [pages 72-73], about two dozen agents sat around a two-tiered metal carousel, about 15 feet in diameter with numerous compartments on each tier that held decks of cardstock diagrams showing the accommodations in each parlor car,



Art Peterson photo, Krambles-Peterson archive; bumper sticker, author's collection

As seen from a SEPTA M.U. car, a typical "conventional" (non-*Metroliner*) Northeast Corridor train, the *East Wind* from Boston, is D.C.-bound near Brill Tower in Philadelphia August 28, 1974, behind PC GG1 4932. A 1975 bumper sticker featured a GE P30 diesel and Amfleet cars.



Top, Joseph H. Hunter; above, David C. Warner

The *Empire Builder* is a rolling billboard for Burlington Northern and predecessors as it curves through Pewaukee, Wis. (top), on October 16, 1971. On September 14, 1973, the *City of San Franciscos* meet in Cheyenne, Wyo. New Amtrak No. 457 (silver block) adorns 5's second unit.

sleeper, and reserved coach on trains for which New York controlled space.

The drum rotated about once a minute, and agents kept callers on the phone until the diagrams for the desired train reached the agent's position. The agent would remove the diagrams, find space in one of the coaches or sleepers, write the reservation information on the card, and then on the next drum rotation, return the diagrams to their slot so another agent could access that train. Among the information in each entry were the passenger's name, origin, destination, and identification for the agent who had made the booking. Remember earlier when the SCL people taught us "the code"? When it came to reservations on the Florida trains, the code of "NP2800" assured that even if your pass didn't allow it, the conductor would not question your occupying a bedroom suite!

Amtrak's first attempt at a computerized reservation system involved trains for which Chicago controlled the space. The New York "res" office had just one computer terminal to access the Chicago-controlled trains. The "system" was

just an electronic diagram, so the agent still had to search for an open space. At least with the computer, it became impossible to assign a Pittsburgh–New York customer a seat occupied by a Chicago–Harrisburg rider who still had 250 miles to go when the train stopped in Pittsburgh. Nothing prevented this type of error on the paper diagrams.

Moving on

Amtrak's early years were a time to decide if you wanted a railroad career, and if so, begin preparing for the next step. At first, Amtrak was more of a management organization than an operator. The railroads still ran the trains, which was often evident. My *Silver Star* familiarization trip was cancelled because a snafu had resulted in my not yet receiving my Amtrak pass. Without it, the railroad conductor could tell me to pay a fare or get off, even though I was working for Amtrak and in uniform. When we traveled on business, since the diners were run by the railroads and not Amtrak, we had to pay for our meals and get reimbursed.

In time, Amtrak began taking over

functions from the railroads, and opportunities for advancement mushroomed. In my first year with Amtrak, I saw Penn Station peers move into customer service management, the mechanical department, on-board services, and become quality control "service inspectors" traveling all over the East inspecting trains and stations.

After 10 months at Penn, I was offered a service inspector position. Less than a year later, I moved to headquarters when Amtrak took over the mail, baggage, and express operations from the railroads. (Personally, it was a good move but bad timing—I got the new job right after renting an apartment in New Jersey, and a week before my wedding.) After a year in Washington I was off to Baltimore as a general supervisor, and then to manage the mail and baggage operation when Amtrak took over the Northeast Corridor from PC in 1976. In the early years, the only constant for those staying with the growing company was a parade of new opportunities.

For others, growing up with Amtrak proved a springboard. Hercik became director of rail operations for the State of Michigan, went back to Amtrak years later, and now is the transportation and international trade coordinator for the Appalachian Regional Commission. Kalbacker left to pursue a successful freelance writing career, but his Amtrak roots still show when he takes the *Lake Shore Limited* from New York to Chicago to visit his editor.

After five years, I used my Amtrak experience to get an analytical position at the Civil Aeronautics Board that proved to be a springboard back into Amtrak's marketing department. In a way, I came full circle as I ended up being responsible for revenue and ridership development on the same Northeast Corridor and overnight East Coast trains on which I'd first learned the passenger railroad business.

From the beginning, everyone felt that new equipment would be the key to Amtrak's success. Indeed, the Amfleet in the East and the Superliners in the West set the stage for what were probably Amtrak's glory days. When my colleagues and I joined Amtrak in the early '70s, the future of the passenger train was still in doubt, but by the mid-'80s Amtrak had become an integral part of the U.S. travel landscape. With the fleet consisting of equipment either built, or

More on our website

For detailed rosters of the cars and locomotives Amtrak acquired from member railroads, first published in *TRAINS* in the early 1970s, go to www.ClassicTrainsMag.com



David C. Warner

Some roads wouldn't sell Amtrak their newer passenger diesels, but the units, under lease, served the national passenger carrier for several years. Two SP SDP45's are still the *Coast Starlight's* normally assigned power on August 8, 1973, as No. 14 heads north near Concepcion, Calif.

rebuilt, under Amtrak, ridership grew and service reliability got up to levels the first group of Amtrak executives could have only dreamed about.

Now, as Amtrak turns 40, there's a bit of *déjà vu*. Amtrak's car fleet that was new in the late 1970s and '80s is now older than the 1,200-car fleet Am-

trak selected in 1971. Even the *Acela Express* trains are said to have reached the midpoint of their lifespan. But despite problems caused by aging equipment, better times may be coming. The federal seed money for a new high-speed and intercity rail program holds some hope, just as the *Metroliners* and

Amtrak did four decades ago, of a new era for U.S. intercity passenger rail service. And now just as then, there will be a new group of young people who will have the same chance we did 40 years ago, to grow their careers as they continue America's long history with the passenger train. ■



Refurbished Amfleet business-class coach 21708 interior, Amtrak; brochures, author's collection



The 492 Amfleet cars in 1975-76 marked the true emergence of Amtrak as "its own railroad."