



Streamliner curtain calls

On the Southern and the Rio Grande, the traditions of the great trains lasted beyond May 1

By Karl Zimmermann

On May 1, 1971, when Amtrak was born, most American railroads that previously had operated long-distance passenger trains breathed a sigh of relief. All they had to do was join, pay a fee (part of which they could recoup by selling rolling stock to Amtrak), and then say goodbye forever to passenger-train-generated red ink. There were, however, a few mavericks.

Six railroads eligible to join Amtrak—the Denver & Rio Grande Western, Southern Railway, Rock Island, South Shore Line, Reading Company, and Georgia Railroad—said “Thanks, but no thanks,” each for its own reasons. These decisions to say no, particularly those by Southern and Rio Grande, offered some tasty opportunities for the tradition-minded rail traveler to experience a few more rail journeys in pre-Amtrak style. Being of that ilk, I cashed in more than once.

When Amtrak was lining up its routes, one of the most coveted was a variation on the old *California Zephyr*’s, to run on the Burlington Northern from Chicago to Denver, the Rio Grande on to Ogden, Utah, then the Southern Pacific (rather than the original CZ’s Western Pacific) to Oakland. This would have created a through train via Ogden, replacing the across-the-platform transfer to SP’s *City of San Francisco* that had been in effect since a tri-weekly train—

called “California Service” by BN and *Rio Grande Zephyr* on the D&RGW—had replaced the *California Zephyr* in March 1970, when WP had been given permission to discontinue its leg of the train.

In late winter 1971, Amtrak inked in a reborn *California Zephyr* traveling over the Rio Grande, with all the wonderful Colorado and Utah mountains and rivers and canyons that implied. Then negotiations hit a snag, with the railroad objecting to some of the terms of Amtrak’s standard contract. In particular, the D&RGW was unwilling to cede the right to control passenger operations over its mountainous, scenic, single-track line. “Scenic” probably made the railroad as nervous as “single-track,” since it was not entirely unreasonable for the Rio Grande to fear that Amtrak would want to run more trains over a line that many travelers would rate as America’s most beautiful. Certainly the expectation that the tri-weekly service it would be obligated to continue could be upped to daily was plausible.

Perhaps the realization that Union

Pacific, D&RGW’s well-endowed, multi-track competitor to the north, seemed to be getting away scot-free ranked. And the \$1.6 million Rio Grande would be required to pay to join Amtrak was a further disincentive. At the 11th hour—April 26, specifically—negotiations broke down. Amtrak’s *California Zephyr*, almost immediately renamed the *City of San Francisco* and by summer 1972 the *San Francisco Zephyr*, would run its central leg over the UP, heading north from Denver to Cheyenne, and then on to Ogden.

This move of the Rio Grande’s was unpopular, particularly in Colorado, where press and citizenry alike deplored the lack of through service. While the Ogden and Denver departure times were coordinated with the arrival of Amtrak connections in those cities, D&RGW’s longer, slower route caused a substantial misconnect at the other end.

A Grande ride on the RGZ

Whatever the merits or demerits of the Rio Grande’s decision, for me and like-minded others it was surely a cloud that had a silver lining, and I enjoyed multiple rides aboard this stainless-steel time machine before, on April 24, 1983, the Rio Grande finally joined Amtrak. I’d known the *California Zephyr* well, but my first encounter with the *Rio Grande Zephyr* didn’t come until August 13, 1974, when—with my wife,



D&RGW train 17, the *Rio Grande Zephyr* for Salt Lake City, climbs toward Soldier Summit west of Kyune, Utah, in September 1977.



The *Southern Crescent* is about 30 miles into its New Orleans–Washington run as it crosses Lake Pontchartrain on an April 1978 morning.



Hoang Chi Cook

Seen from inside diner *Silver Banquet* in 1976, the customary F9A-F9B-F9B set leads the *RGZ* toward the Big Ten curves above Denver.



Karl Zimmermann

Tour groups could swell the *RGZ's* consist to as many as 10 cars, as was the case on author Zimmermann's first ride, in August 1974.

Laurel, and our young daughters, Jennifer and Emily—I boarded the train at the stately D&RGW depot in Salt Lake City, Denver-bound. The consist that day was entirely unexpected: 10 cars in all, roughly twice as long as usual.

From the rear: the gem, Vista-Dome sleeper buffet-lounge-observation *Silver Sky*; diner *Silver Banquet*; *Silver Aspen*, a 48-seat flat-top coach, rebuilt in the 1960s from a 16-section sleeper; Vista-Dome coaches *Silver Pony*, *Silver Bronco*, and *Silver Mustang*; *Silver Shop*, a Vista-Dome dormitory buffet-lounge; *Silver Pine*, another flat-top coach; and *Silver Colt*, another Vista-Dome coach. These cars were all that remained of the Rio Grande's CZ fleet, as the railroad had sold its six sleepers to the National Railways of Mexico and its sole baggage car to the Algoma Central.

The first car in our consist was combine No. 1230, one of two built in 1950 as baggage-dormitory-chair cars for D&RGW's overnight Denver-Salt Lake City *Prospector* and the only *Prospector* cars the railroad retained after that train's discontinuance in 1967. Pullman-Standard cars in an otherwise all-

Budd *RGZ* consist, they had fluted stainless-steel sheathing below the window line. As with all *Prospector* cars, their upper panels were painted in the railroad's distinctive Aspen gold. Early in the *Rio Grande Zephyr* era, these had been repainted silver to better blend with the Budd cars, but that color apparently didn't adhere well, and when we rode the gold was back. Although the dormitory wasn't required for the *RGZ's* daylight run, the combine did serve three purposes: baggage, conductor's office, and overflow passenger space. Power for our train was a black freight Geep and the road's two remaining F9B units in their traditional gold and silver. Missing was F9A No. 5771, the point locomotive of choice.

Why the plethora of cars (including six domes, one more than the CZ carried in its glory days)? Actually, the abundance was the result of the previous day's westbound passenger count of 300-plus, swollen by two large tours. Although such groups were a critical piece of the *RGZ's* business, they did have a downside: operators often booked only the eastern Denver-Grand Junction portion of the run, where the most famous scenery lay. (In fact, the D&RGW would try, unsuccessfully, to discontinue the train west of Grand Junction.) And, in truth, the 14-hour Denver-Salt Lake run without any privacy into which to retreat could be a bit much for travelers taking the train ride as an excursion as much as for transportation.

Well, *almost* no privacy. The railroad did sell the three double bedrooms and the drawing room in *Silver Sky* as day space, and—mindful of how tiring the trip could be for our two- and three-

year-old daughters—I'd grabbed the drawing room. This proved a good acquisition, though I at least would spend the lion's share of time in *Silver Sky's* dome. But when No. 18 (the *RGZ* kept the CZ's old numbers, 17 and 18) slipped away from the Salt Lake station at 7 a.m., we were comfortably settled in our spacious digs.

Not for long, though, since breakfast in *Silver Banquet* called. My notes, sadly sketchy, tell me only this: "Diner—food exceptional, service excellent, fast and friendly." Naturally, I'd been hoping to find sweet remnants of the *California Zephyr* (which I'd last ridden in July 1969) aboard the *RGZ*, and by and large I wasn't disappointed. Of course, it wasn't the same train. CALIFORNIA ZEPHYR had been removed from the letterboards (but car names and line numbers survived in the Art Deco font carried by all of Burlington's *Zephyrs*). No *Zephyrettes* making en route announcements and calling dinner reservations. No "Vista-Dome Views" route-guide pamphlet. No neon tailsign aglow with the Golden Gate Bridge (no tailsign at all, in fact). *Silver Shop*, the buffet-lounge that on the *RGZ* generally served as back-up car for the diner and dome-obs, had lost its Cable Car Room motif—appropriately, since the train had nothing more to do with San Francisco, and the same thing could have been said about the tailsign. The Russell Patterson mural in the under-dome cocktail lounge of *Silver Sky* was gone, but Mary Lawser's fine bulkhead murals aboard the Vista-Dome coaches survived. CZ headrests remained in the coaches as did CZ linen in the diner, plus some silver, pencils, and order pads.





Two photos, Karl Zimmermann

The *Crescent* would change power at Peachtree Station, Atlanta, resulting in a smoky show as its four elegant E8's notched out after hours of idling. Here's No. 1 departing in late 1977 with fresh engines and the Atlanta–New Orleans dome car on the rear.

and Louisville & Nashville through Montgomery and Mobile. (Cars of both trains had been handled between Washington and New York by the Pennsylvania Railroad.)

The South is known for tradition and hospitality, and that surely was reinforced by my experiences on the *Southern Crescent*. Aboard the train in late December 1977 after its southbound departure from Washington, I slipped back once again into the streamliner world of the late 1940s. Porters wore white starched coats and traditional badged hats. Conductors dressed in vested dark-blue suits lifted tickets. The color palette in the sleepers still ran to pastels, in contrast to the jazzy purples and oranges that Amtrak had been applying to its décor.

In each room was a remarkably voluminous packet that included a letter from the president, a “welcome aboard” brochure, a timetable, a route guide, an excellent history of the train, a compen-

All in all, the diner was heartening, with menus little changed from the CZ days. *Silver Banquet* was fragrant with the good smells of breakfast when we entered. Our choices included all the old standbys, freshly cooked: eggs any style, griddle cakes, ham, bacon, sausage patties, even steak, with all the expected accompaniments. Dinner would feature “Boneless Rocky Mountain Trout, Saute, Lemon Butter,” always the train’s signature dish. There was also roast beef, chicken breast, and steak.

Silver Banquet was wonderful, but *Silver Sky* was even better, and we spent many hours in the dome watching the best of the American West scroll by. Or, for a change of venue and perspective, we camped in the two rearward-facing love seats in the observation lounge.

I’d revisit the *Rio Grande Zephyr* twice more, in 1978 and again in 1981. Two years later it was gone, the last of the Amtrak hold-outs, leaving nothing but fond memories—and, happily, a daily Amtrak train on its nonpareil route across Colorado and Utah. It outlived Rock Island’s *Rockets* and the *Southern Crescent* by more than four years.

Hospitality on the *Crescent*

Since the *Southern Crescent* was more in my back yard than the *RGZ*, I was able to log eight trips aboard it between May 1, 1971, and February 1, 1979, when Southern Railway finally threw in its lot with Amtrak.

Car names are wonderful, and the *RGZ*’s “Silver” monikers in the Burling-

ton tradition were special, with the *Rio Grande*’s cars being intriguingly themed: *Silver Sky* offered vast vistas, *Silver Banquet* fine meals, *Silver Shop* a coffee-shop ambiance. Horse names were for Vista-Dome coaches; tree names flat-top coaches. All CZ cars had names, while the Southern followed the typical practice of naming only sleepers, and almost all of the ones I traveled aboard were in the most common of all configurations, 10-roomette/6-double-bedroom, and named in the “River” series. Either Southern had a knack for picking romantic, intriguing, euphonious names from among the waterways in its region or else I just got lucky, but in the course of the 1970s I tucked in between crisp sheets aboard *Seneca River*, *Yadkin River*, *Tombigbee River*, *Shenandoah River*, and *Rappahannock River*.

The *Southern Crescent*, the most famous but not the only train Southern Railway carried into the Amtrak era, dated from 1969, when the railroad merged two flagship trains running between New York and New Orleans (the “Crescent City”): the coaches-only *Southerner*, on the more direct, all-SR route through Birmingham, and the *Crescent Limited*, a luxury train of long standing, once all-Pullman and extra-fare, operated in conjunction with the Atlanta & West Point, Western Railway of Alabama,

Three menus, Karl Zimmermann collection





A *Crescent* porter stands by the steps of his sleeping car at Birmingham in February '74.

dium of Southern's newspaper ads on the theme "Avoid the Strain—Ride the Train," a 30-page booklet of customer commendations (as well as a pencil and postage-paid form so we could add to them), a separate brochure of raves in the press, a statement of the company's corporate creed, and a decal.

Washington Union Station was where the *Southern Crescent* came together, when the through sleepers and coaches from New York were added to a consist that included a Budd-built 48-seat dining car and more coaches (also Budds) and sleepers, all Pullman-Standard. On that occasion in 1977 I'd booked a double bedroom from New York for my family, but in Washington we moved to what was then the premium sleeping-car space in America: the master room aboard 2-drawing room/1-master-room/buffet-lounge *Crescent Moon*, one of four such cars built for the *Crescent* in a 1949 re-equipping. Most of the cars that ran on the *Southern Crescent* in the 1970s were of this vintage.

There was one important exception, and we'd encountered it on a 1976 trip to Atlanta when our double bedroom had been in *Pacific Garden*. This Amtrak car, a Budd 10&6 of UP heritage, was serving as the New York-Los Angeles though sleeper, billed as the "Transcontinental Rail Cruise." It began operating in 1970 in a trade-off with the Interstate Commerce Commission, a quid pro quo for permission for Southern Pacific to reduce to tri-weekly its Los Angeles-New Orleans *Sunset Limited*



Two photos, Karl Zimmermann

Also dressed in traditional railroad garb, a conductor punches tickets aboard Salisbury-Asheville, N.C., train 3, the *Asheville Special* remnant that the Southern ran until July 1975.

and Southern its New Orleans-Birmingham segment of the *Southern Crescent*.

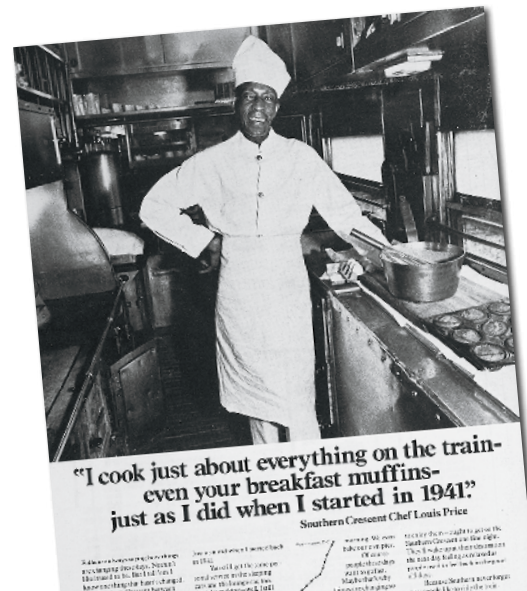
The master room really was a special space, and by 1977 Southern was touting it as such: "One of a kind! Luxury for two! Comfort for three!" A sofa and two chairs made down into an upper and two lower berths. The large toilet annex included a shower. "The only premium accommodation of this type in America—IN THE WORLD!"

The only bad thing was that the car operated only Washington-Atlanta, and with No. 1's 7:20 p.m. Washington departure and 8:40 a.m. Atlanta arrival, and No. 2's similar schedule northbound, there was little time to enjoy the room's daytime configuration. Though at its longest the *Southern Crescent* connected New York to New Orleans, significant shuffling of cars at Washington and Birmingham (later, Atlanta) was the norm. In 1977 coaches operated New York-Atlanta and Washington-Atlanta and, tri-weekly, New York and Washington to New Orleans. Ditto sleepers, except that the tri-weekly New York-New Orleans sleeper ran on to Los Angeles. This was a lot of switching for a flagship train with just one set of endpoints and was certain testimony that the Southern was not eager to run up car-miles unnecessarily.

The last piece of this mix-and-match was the dome car added between Atlanta and New Orleans on the days the train ran the full route. The first dome came into the Southern fold when subsidiary Central of Georgia in 1968 ac-

quired from Norfolk & Western a dome-parlor built by Pullman-Standard for Wabash's *Blue Bird*. CofG used the car on the Atlanta-Savannah *Nancy Hanks II* until October 1970. Southern then transferred it to the *Southern Crescent* and replaced it on the *Nancy* with another ex-Wabash dome, a coach built by P-S to an ACF design in 1958 for the *City of St. Louis* pool. Upon the *Nancy's* demise at the start of Amtrak, Southern moved the now-surplus dome to its Nos. 3 and 4, the Asheville-Salisbury, N.C., remnant of the *Asheville Special*, which once carried Pullmans for Washington and New York. Nos. 3 and 4 connected at Salisbury with the Washington-Charlotte *Piedmont*, another responsi-

***Crescent* chef Louis Price smiles from his galley in a 1976 TRAINS magazine ad.**



"I cook just about everything on the train—even your breakfast muffins—just as I did when I started in 1941!"
Southern Crescent Chef Louis Price

bility that SR had continued to shoulder by not joining Amtrak. The *Piedmont* came off in November 1976.

In July 1975 the North Carolina Utilities Commission allowed Southern to drop 3 and 4, on the condition that the road operate summer and fall-color weekend excursions, called the *Skyland Special*, from Asheville to Old Fort, a three-and-half hour round trip that covered the most scenic part of the line. This service diminished in frequency and ended entirely after the Southern joined Amtrak, on February 1, 1979.

Names behind the trains

Some names linger as central to the legacies of these maverick trains, these late-joiners of Amtrak. For the *Rio Grande Zephyr*, it's Leonard Bernstein, the CZ dining-car steward who became the director of passenger and dining-car services in the RGZ era. For Southern's trains it of course is W. Graham Claytor Jr., the railroad's president from 1967 until 1977, when he left to become Secretary of the Navy. During 1982–93 he would serve as Amtrak's president, arguably its best ever. Claytor was a hands-on leader, both of Southern and Amtrak, and a frequent presence on the trains. After ruthlessly cutting SR passenger trains in the 1960s, he championed the *Southern Crescent*, decreeing in 1972, for instance, that the E8's that powered it would be repainted in the Sylvan green made famous by the railroad's Ps-4 Pacifics. Both locomotives were featured on the train's stylish dinner menus. Claytor's successor at Southern, L. Stanley Crane, was at the helm when the road joined Amtrak.

One other name haunts my memories of the *Southern Crescent*: Louis Price, the elegantly dignified chef that the railroad featured in a magazine ad, posing in his galley. The headline was a quote from Price: "I cook just about everything on the train—even your breakfast muffins—just as I did when I started in 1941." The text continued in his voice: "Folks are always saying how things are changing these days. Nothing's like it use to be." Price said that if the *Southern Crescent* had changed, it was for the better. "I'm one of the chefs on that train," the ad continued, "and I can tell you that the dining car still has tablecloths, silverware, flowers and those heavy plates."

On December 2, 1978, Price was up early preparing his bran muffins on No. 2 when, at 5:30 a.m., near Shipman, Va., seven cars, including the diner, derailed. Price was among the six fatalities.

Less than two months later, the *Crescent* became an Amtrak train. ■

Four others who stayed out



Art Peterson, Krambles-Peterson Archive

ROCK ISLAND was the other big railroad that, like Southern and Rio Grande, elected not to join Amtrak. For the destitute RI, however, it wasn't really a matter of choice. Although its two daily intercity train pairs (Chicago–Peoria and Chicago–Rock Island) took a little off the bottom line each day, the road could not afford the up-front Amtrak entry fee. So, the *Peoria Rocket* and *Quad City Rocket* bumped along, sometimes carrying dome and observation cars for Butterworth Tours, but more often looking like the *Peoria Rocket* departing Chicago on September 13, 1975 (above). The *Rockets* hung on until January 1, 1979, when a state subsidy ended; the Rock itself quit the following year.



Art Peterson, Krambles-Peterson Archive

SOUTH SHORE LINE service was (and is) mostly commuter in nature, but its 88-mile Chicago–South Bend, Ind., runs made the road, known as "the last interurban," eligible for Amtrak. (Though the Amtrak law excluded commuter-type services, the ICC's 75-mile definition of "intercity" trains was generally followed.) When South Shore applied to end all service in 1976, Indiana formed a commuter agency to keep the M.U.'s rolling, as seen here at Fisher, Ind., in January 1981.

READING COMPANY ran publicly supported electric and diesel commuter trains on six lines out of Philadelphia. It also fielded the weekday Philly–Newark, N.J., remnants of the *Crusader* and *Wall Street*, which were considered intercity. The Newark trains quit on July 31, 1981, replaced by a short-lived connecting service at West Trenton. In May 1973, the RDC's for train 5619 pull into PC's Newark station, which the trains used after 1967.



Larry Eastwood



J. David Ingles

GEORGIA RAILROAD ran daily-except-Sunday mixeds on its 171-mile Augusta–Atlanta main line and on three branches totaling 135 miles. A coach was provided on the main (left, in 1975), caboose seats on the branches. Hardly anyone rode, but the company feared losing its state tax exemption if the lines went freight-only, which they would have under Amtrak. So, Georgia stayed out. Successor Seaboard System got permission to end the mixeds in April 1983.