

AMTRAK'S early

The 1970s were a pivotal time for America's rail passenger service. As the decade began, the name "Amtrak" had not yet been heard of, just the working title "Railpax," as plans came together to quasi-nationalize the intercity passenger-train network. This mainly was an effort to relieve the railroads, particularly Penn Central, of the burden of providing passenger service. By the end of the decade, boosted by the 1973 "gasoline crisis" that, to the surprise of many critics, stimulated Amtrak ridership, the National Railroad Passenger Corp. (the company's official name) was well on its way to establishing a corporate identity.

I was in my third year in the Business College of my hometown University of Cincinnati when Amtrak began, and I thought I should give the carrier some badly needed advertising help. I bought classified ads in the college newspaper that told students of the destinations available. Some ads gave sample fares, and all provided Amtrak's toll-free phone number. I never spent more than \$2 on any ad, but I also never knew whether my efforts brought any students to Cincinnati Union Terminal.

As a junior, it was time to think about a career, so I wrote Amtrak for an employment application and attached some of my Amtrak ads. A few weeks later, the mail brought an application, plus a "thank you" letter from Amtrak President Roger Lewis. He said the grass-roots support of Amtrak in the company's first year had been unbelievable. Under separate cover he sent a 12-foot-long cloth banner with the Amtrak logo, and a coffee mug. This was all fun stuff for a young train supporter!

Two years later, in 1974, after I'd graduated and was working on the Mississippi River steamer *Delta Queen*, I got a call from Amtrak. Soon I was hired as a sales representative, and went to Washington, D.C., for orientation. Our field sales force consisted of about 75 people nationwide. It was our job to increase revenues from travel agents, most of whom regarded the long-distance passenger train as an alien mode of transportation. Further, the agents were spoiled by an airline industry that wasn't yet deregulated. Air fares were stable, and air travel in general was still considered glamorous. The agents also enjoyed the new automated reservations and ticketing systems the airlines were designing for them.

Selling Amtrak was so different from selling air travel that many travel agents shied away from recommending rail. I realized early on that training would help overcome some of their fears. Our young Marketing Department was still assembling a library of equipment images. Most of the photos available were

slides of East Coast subjects, including the Metroliners, major stations, and the United Aircraft Turbo trains. Being based in Chicago, I decided to fill the gap in Midwest and Western coverage by taking my own slides, mainly of car interiors.

Most of the images on the following pages are not what I would necessarily have shown in a travel agent training seminar, because few agents would care about the latest locomotives. But as an employee (and railfan), this is how I saw my company, and I didn't see many employees photographing Amtrak in those early years.

Although Amtrak would later improve by almost every standard of measure, in the early 1970s it seemed the only thing we could hang our hat on was the *promise* that things would get better. The carrier had no choice.

As Amtrak nears its 50th anniversary, the employees who were there during those early years are either in other jobs, retired, or deceased. But there is a certain brotherhood and *esprit de corps* among those original employees. I still look back on the '70s as the best decade to have been with Amtrak.



In November 1975, a representative scene faces us at Amtrak's former Pennsylvania Railroad diesel shop area in Chicago. From left, a French Turboliner leaves for St. Louis; new SDP40F 644 partially hides behind E8 329; and E9 412 is at right. The two E units are both former Union Pacific locomotives.

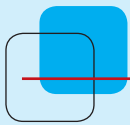
After hiring on in 1974, I witnessed many changes,
highlighted by the company's first new cars and locomotives

BY DENNY HAMILTON • Photos by the author

years

FROM THE INSIDE





THE NIGHT BEFORE AMTRAK



At 6:40 p.m., the last eastbound Chesapeake & Ohio *George Washington* departs the famed Art Deco Cincinnati Union Terminal for the nation's capital behind two E8s of partner Baltimore & Ohio. Ironically, C&O had inaugurated the train exactly 39 years before, on April 30, 1932.



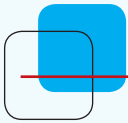
The final *James Whitcomb Riley*, a three-car vestige of New York Central's finest Mid-western streamliner (and NYC's last named train), has arrived from Chicago on Track 2, and now the clock ticks down to 11:25 p.m., when N&W's *Pocahontas* for Norfolk will become CUT's last pre-Amtrak departure. In the cab of GP9 515 on Track 3 are engineer William A. McCoy and fireman T. J. Nichols, veterans who were working at the end of N&W steam a dozen years before.

Until May 1, 1971, Cincinnati Union Terminal still hosted 18 passenger trains a day, but many were just shadows of what they had been. Remarkably there were still three sleeping-car lines, on Penn Central (ex-PRR) from New York, C&O from Washington, and N&W from Roanoke. Counting NYC/PRR and B&O/C&O routes as historically separate, six of the Queen City's seven Class I roads, all except Southern, still terminated trains at CUT.

To record the landmark day in my hometown, I skipped my classes to be at CUT on Friday, April 30, 1971, contacting officials in advance for permission to be on the property. I spent the entire day at the Terminal, from early morning through late

evening. Cincinnati always had been an origin/destination point, but Amtrak made it into a run-through city, with one train each way between Washington and Chicago via C&O and Penn Central's ex-NYC Big Four Route.

The service kept two pre-Amtrak names, being the *James Whitcomb Riley* west of Cincinnati and the *George Washington* east of there. (The train kept the old pattern of utilizing Illinois Central trackage rights between Kankakee, Ill., and IC's Central Station in Chicago, shifting to Union Station on March 5, 1972, when Amtrak consolidated all its Windy City trains there.) Cincinnati Union Terminal's balloon track north of the depot was used to reverse the Amtrak trains' direction.



TURBOS: AMTRAK'S FIRST BIG INNOVATION



One of the French-built RTG Turboliners speeds across the Elgin, Joliet & Eastern diamonds at Rondout, Ill., on a run from Milwaukee to Chicago in February 1978.

The French-built RTG Turboliners, delivered in two batches, were Amtrak's first big news splash, with two 5-car train-sets debuting in 1973 on the Chicago–St. Louis run. A slightly negative side effect was that they displaced an early innovation Amtrak made in November 1971, with trains running *through* Chicago between Milwaukee and St. Louis. The Turboliners, in my opinion, never got the respect they were due. They were the

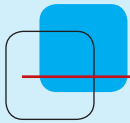
first new passenger cars for Amtrak. In 1975, four more sets arrived, allowing for Turbo service from Chicago to Milwaukee and Michigan points. The trains weren't without mechanical problems, especially when they were new, but they were bright inside, swift, and the customers loved them. That they were fixed consists which couldn't easily be expanded to accommodate more business was one factor in their ultimate demise.



An RTG Turbo northbound from Chicago nears Rondout on the Milwaukee Road main line in July 1976. If a Turbo was unavailable, a train of conventional cars, sometimes with dome coaches, would substitute.



In 1976, U.S.-based Rohr Industries built seven similar RTL-model Turbo trains for New York state. Contrasting with a French RTG Turbo at the right, a Rohr train, just in from California, stands at Amtrak's Brighton Park shop, 5 miles southwest of Union Station at the former GM&O coachyard site. A Brighton Park employee told me it had arrived.



WHEN AMTRAK RAN ALCO PAs



D&H 18 keeps company at the Milwaukee Road's Western Avenue shop in Chicago with Amtrak E9 407. But for my momentary "mental blackout," I could've run the Alco back and forth as several MILW shopmen had just done. At least I had the sense to have my picture taken next to that distinctive PA nose!

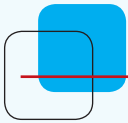
In summer 1975, railfans across the country were in for a reunion with the beloved Alco PAs of the Delaware & Hudson, whose four ex-Santa Fe units were handled, one at a time, by Amtrak between Albany-Rensselaer, N.Y., and the Morrison-Knudsen shop in Boise, Idaho, where they were rebuilt into "PA4" units. They were to power the New York State-funded New York-Montreal *Adirondack* on the D&H portion of its run. A friend in our operating department gave me a heads-up that D&H 18 would be arriving in Chicago on the *Empire Builder*. The unit was cut in behind the Amtrak power, however, so I decided to go see it at the Milwaukee Road's Western Avenue shop, home to our E units serving on Milwaukee trains and the

Empire Builder. Upon arrival, I saw George W. Hockaday, a D&H road foreman of engines, supervising some enthusiastic MILW hostlers as they took turns running the Alco back and forth on a lead track. Soon Hockaday leaned out the cab window and asked me, "Sir, are you next? Wanna take her for a spin?" I didn't want to wreck that beautiful machine, so I said, "No thanks!" I've regretted that decision ever since!

I've never been big on locomotive cab rides, but I did want to see the PAs again, so I wrote to Marv Davis, D&H's chief road foreman of engines, and got permission to ride in the cab of a PA on the *Adirondack* from Rensselaer to Montreal. I chose to ride in autumn, and it was a spectacular experience.



At Whitehall, N.Y., on my October 1976 north-bound *Adirondack* ride, there was time to step down from D&H 17's cab to photograph our train, which north of Albany-Rensselaer included an Amtrak ex-Wabash dome coach.



GLIMPSES OF THE CORRIDOR



Northeast Corridor variety is on display at the engine terminal next to Philadelphia's 30th Street Station in October 1976. E60s 966 and 957 stand out amid several black Amtrak GG1s.

Over the years I made many trips to Amtrak's headquarters in Washington for various reasons, and I enjoyed seeing the changes that were happening in the Northeast Corridor. The railroad went from a Penn Central property to Amtrak ownership, so, unlike in the rest of the country, passenger trains were king there. It was remarkable to see the venerable ex-PRR GG1s survive all the way through the decade, highlighting the equipment variety.

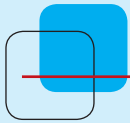


A Metroliner crosses over at Bowie, Md., in December 1977. Developed by the PRR and several suppliers, the multiple-unit cars would be succeeded by locomotive-hauled Amfleet consists, then by today's Acela trains. It was always fun to spend some time on the Corridor with my camera when at Amtrak headquarters on business.

The Gs' longevity was due in part to the tendency of their intended replacements, the General Electric E60 motors, to derail at high speeds. Amtrak brought in two locomotives from Europe for testing. One, a Swedish Rc-4a designated Amtrak No. X995, would be one of the most influential locomotives ever on the Corridor. This little engine packed the power of a big GG1, and it would prove to be the sire of Amtrak's 54 AEM7 units that would last until 2016.



Swedish Rc-4a demonstrator X995, on loan for testing and shown southbound at Baltimore in October 1976, was the precursor of the successful fleet of AEM7 electrics built by Swedish firm ASEA and America's EMD.



A CHANGE IN DIESEL POWER

Amtrak's first new diesel road power, the EMD SDP40E, was a personal favorite. Introduced on the Chicago–Los Angeles *Super Chief* on June 22, 1973, the six-motor “cowl” units were long and powerful, and they were the very face of Amtrak during the early years. Basically a freight locomotive with steam generators, they unfortunately are best known for their short service lives owing to being involved in several minor derailments. Some railroads banned them, although studies never pinpointed the exact cause of the problem; in fact, similar F45 models had long careers hauling freight on the Santa Fe and Burlington Northern.

One time at a meeting in Washington, one of our sales reps asked an executive from the operating department, “What’s wrong with the SDP40s? Can’t we fix them?” His answer was rather curt: “There’s nothing wrong with the SDPs that good track wouldn’t cure!” With an attitude like that, it’s no wonder some roads started banning the big units from their property. Let’s just say that general track conditions on many freight roads in the 1970s were less than top-notch.

Amtrak had to address the loss, though, and its answer was the F40PH, a shorter, four-axle unit with head-end-power equipment providing electricity to the train for lighting and climate control. It was the go-anywhere, pull-anything locomotive, and it was just what Amtrak needed. Numerous commuter agencies, VIA Rail Canada, and other passenger roads also lapped up the popular F40, which came to be *the* passenger diesel of its era and still serves many carriers, though not Amtrak.

Gil Reid, a noted railroad artist, devoted Pennsylvania Railroad fan, and personal friend, painted F40s for a dozen Amtrak corporate wall calendars starting in 1974. He could nail an F40 from any angle better than any other artist. Referring to their dependability and ubiquity, he once told me, “You know, these engines are the Pennsy K4 of our day!” That was quite a compliment coming from a PRR fan!

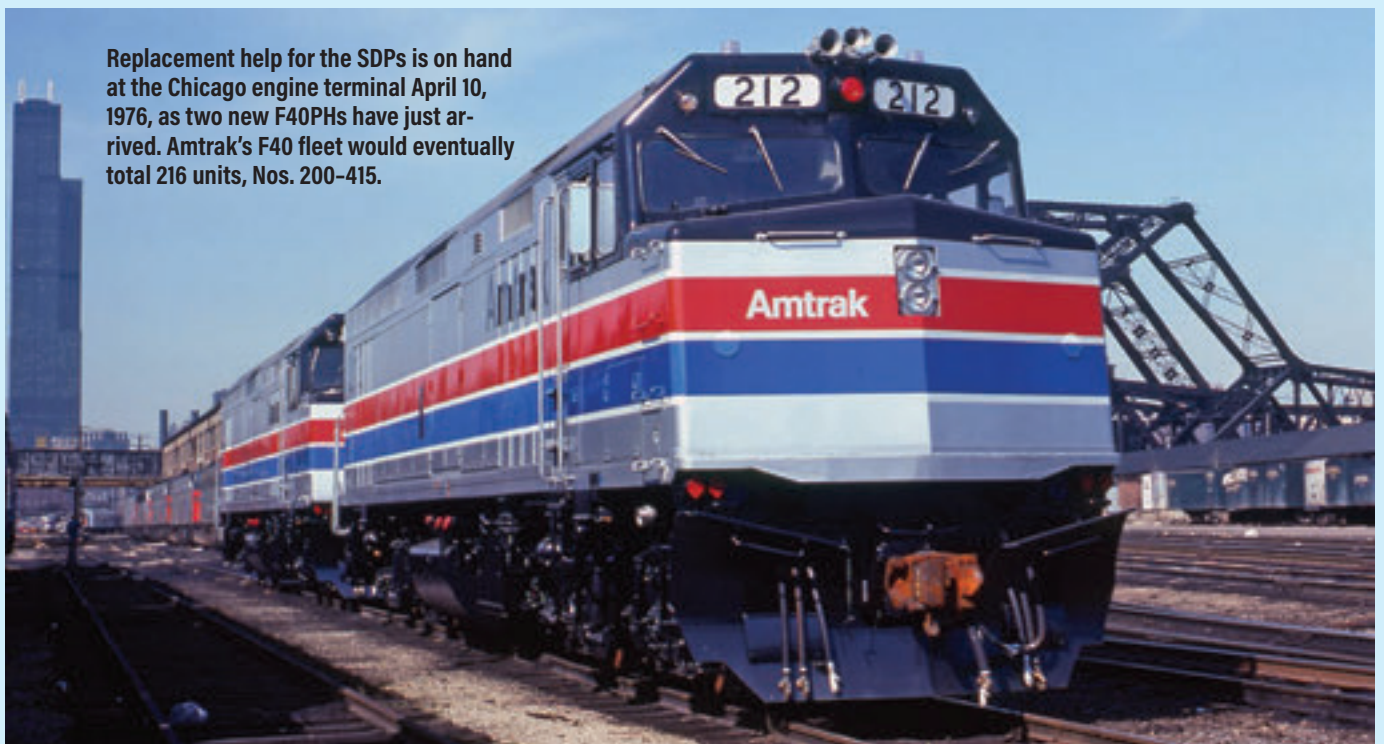


SDP40F 596 and a sister lead train 40, the New York-bound *Broadway Limited*, out of Chicago Union Station in November 1975. Amtrak received two orders totaling 150 SDP40Fs, Nos. 500–649, during 1973–74, but by the early 1980s their Amtrak careers were over.



During their brief service life, the SDP40Fs could be found coast-to-coast on virtually all long-distance trains and many short-hauls. In November 1974, the Florida-bound *Silver Star*, behind SDPs 549 and 548, makes its first station stop behind diesels at Alexandria, Va., having come from New York to the nation’s capital behind a GG1.

Replacement help for the SDPs is on hand at the Chicago engine terminal April 10, 1976, as two new F40PHs have just arrived. Amtrak’s F40 fleet would eventually total 216 units, Nos. 200–415.



THE BLACK HAWK, MY SHORT-DISTANCE FAVORITE



Led by 402, an ex-Baltimore & Ohio E9, the eastbound *Black Hawk* eases to a stop at the historic Illinois Central depot in Galena, Ill., in June 1976.

The *Black Hawk*, a state-supported train under section 403(b) of the Amtrak legislation that operated between Chicago and Dubuque, Iowa, beginning in 1974, was my favorite short-distance train during the late 1970s. The schedule, typical for many such trains, was into the big city in the morning and back to the hinterlands in the evening. Although well-suited for day trips for shopping or afternoon baseball games in the Windy City, the schedule did not allow a full business day there, and that was a weakness. The train's charm was in its rural northwest Illinois service area, with enthusiastic, grass-roots support from Rockford, Ill., and the friendly Illinois Central Gulf train crews. For railfans, the variety of equipment Amtrak assigned to the *Black Hawk* was another attraction.

Initially, the train utilized Budd RDCs, a rarity in Chicago, and then Amtrak's former-Chicago & North Western 1950s intercity bi-level coaches. Then came my favorite *Black Hawk* makeup, two ex-NYC round-end coach-observation cars bracketing a lounge car. Railfans nicknamed it the "Dubuque Crusader" after the Reading Company's 1937 train, whose five-car consist had a round-end obs car on each end to eliminate the need for turning at terminals. (The "shape" of the train inspired another nickname: "Silver Sausage.") When large groups were scheduled out of Rockford, the train also utilized ex-Santa Fe Hi-Level coaches. The *Black Hawk* later got Amfleet cars, which it carried until it was discontinued in 1981.

The *Black Hawk* heads into the setting sun west of Perryville, Ill., nearing Rockford 6 miles ahead on a July 1976 evening. A single E8 is in charge of a three-car *Crusader*-type train with a round-end observation car on each end.



In October 1975, three RDCs pass Amtrak's main Chicago coach yard as they deadhead from Brighton Park into Union Station, where they will reverse direction and depart as the *Black Hawk* to Dubuque.

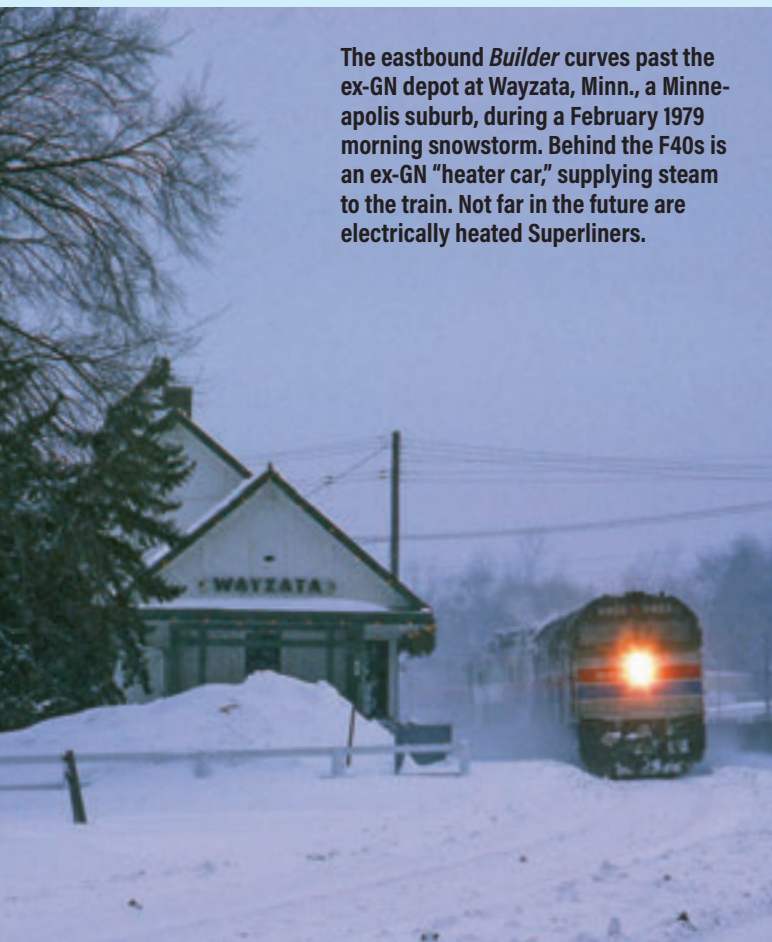




THE EMPIRE BUILDER, MY FAVORITE LONG-DISTANCE TRAIN



Glacier Park, Mont., is an important stop for the *Empire Builder*, whose two new SDP40Fs are stopping at the GN-built depot on June 12, 1975.



The eastbound *Builder* curves past the ex-GN depot at Wayzata, Minn., a Minneapolis suburb, during a February 1979 morning snowstorm. Behind the F40s is an ex-GN "heater car," supplying steam to the train. Not far in the future are electrically heated Superliners.

I was glad to be assigned to the Minneapolis-St. Paul area during a big transition time for the *Empire Builder*. Launched by the Great Northern in 1929, the famous Chicago–Seattle/Portland train carried on after the Burlington Northern merger. Amtrak retained the *Builder*, but immediately shifted it from the former CB&Q between Chicago and St. Paul to the Milwaukee Road in order to serve the large city of Milwaukee.

When I moved to the Twin Cities in 1978, the *Builder* was still a steam-heated domeliner, but the following year Amtrak's new Superliner cars began to appear, and the service would be the first western long-haul train to be converted. In October 1979, Amtrak ran two display trains on the *Builder's* route. The first ran from Chicago to the Twin Cities, and the second from there to Seattle. At each station, the train lingered for a few hours to allow local citizens to inspect the new equipment. I felt privileged to be a participant in the launch of these cars. I never felt Amtrak had done enough to publicize the rollout of the Amfleet cars in 1975, but they did it big for the Superliners. The train would transition from an E-unit-hauled domeliner to having new F40s plus a steam-heating generator car in front of the traditional cars (as at left) to a Superliner consist.

Also in 1979, travel agent Gayle Schroeder, from Winner, S.Dak., attended an Amtrak seminar that I conducted in Sioux Falls. One year later we were married, and we'll mark our 38th wedding anniversary in August 2018. It all happened because the 1970s were the best years to be at Amtrak! 📌

DENNY HAMILTON, who left Amtrak in 2000, served several subsequent employers in sales, including Kalmbach Publishing Co. He retired as Marketing Manager for a Milwaukee advertising agency. This is his fifth article in CLASSIC TRAINS.