

THE CALIFORNIA ZEPHYR

Defining what a passenger train can be

Story by Bob Johnston

AT 75



Born on March 20, 1949, three railroads cobbled together what would become a lasting travel inspiration and envy of other U.S. lines as “The most talked-about train in America.” It lives on under Amtrak.

The U.S. intercity passenger rail landscape 75 years ago, for the most part, catered to the same need for speed and convenience demanded by travelers today. Fast streamliners between major cities were scheduled to compete for business travelers at a time when fledgling commercial airlines operated puddle-jumping prop planes derived from their wartime counterparts. The nation’s highway system, with few exceptions, offered no stoplight alternatives.

ORIGINS

The Chicago, Burlington & Quincy had its share of flashy speedsters on two main routes out of Chicago to the Twin Cities and Denver. Named for Zephyrus, the Greek god of the west wind, stainless-steel diesel streamliner *Zephyr* No. 9900 shook up the status quo with its pioneering dawn-to-dusk run from Denver to the Windy City — 1,015 miles in 13 hours, 5 minutes on May 26, 1934. The Burlington parlayed the earliest *Zephyr*’s reputation on those competitive rail corridors in 1936, when it introduced two seven-car daytime *Twin Zephyrs* between Chicago and Minneapolis and the 12-car overnight *Denver Zephyr* from Chicago to the Mile High City.

The same year *Zephyr* No. 9900 made its flashy debut, the Denver & Salt Lake Railroad completed a 40-mile connection between its stub-end line through the recently completed Moffat Tunnel to the Denver and Rio Grande Western’s circuitous Salt Lake City-Pueblo-Denver main line. The initial trackage rights agreement into Denver over what became the “Dotsero cutoff” evolved into an outright merger under the D&RGW banner in 1947.



A Zephyrette hostess poses with the Burlington’s Denver, Colo., passenger agent on Sept. 5, 1967. Famed for providing exceptional customer service, Zephyrettes handled everything from dining car reservations to passenger emergencies. Three photos, Bob Johnston

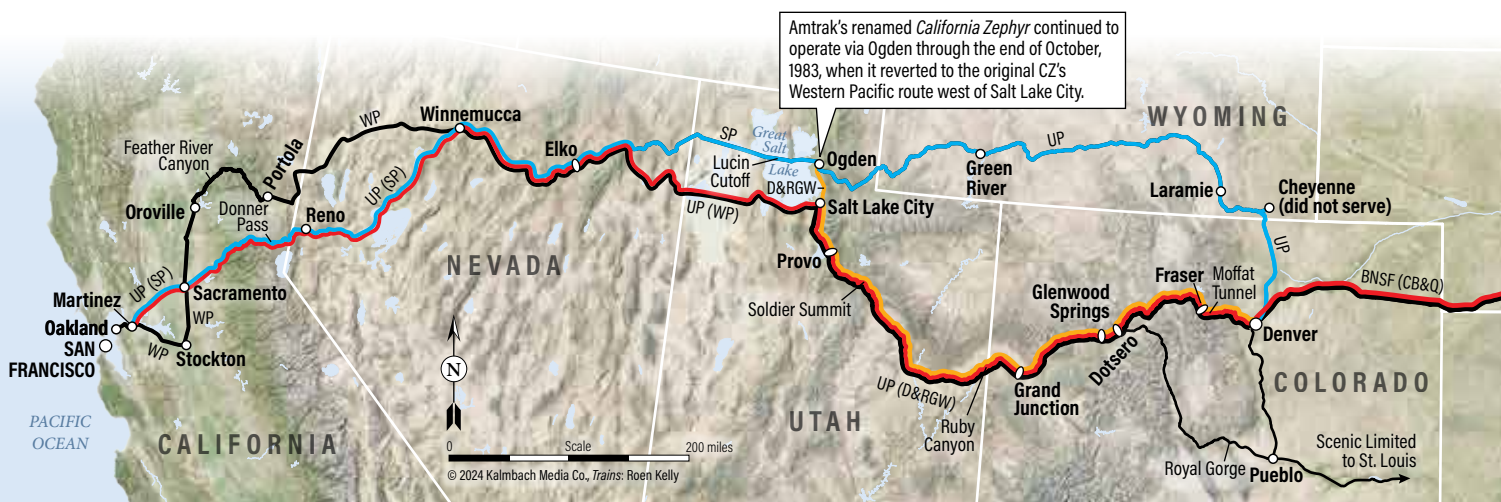
Early in the 20th century, the Rio Grande had, of necessity, developed friendly connections with Western Pacific at Salt Lake City and the Missouri Pacific at Pueblo, Colo., to compete against Union Pacific-Southern Pacific for transcontinental freight and passenger traffic. Beginning in 1915 and operating through the Royal Gorge west of Pueblo, the WP-D&RGW-MP *Scenic Limited* linked St. Louis and Oakland, Calif. Completion of the cutoff and 1939’s Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco created an opportunity for a new partnership with the Burlington east of Denver for a Chicago-West Coast train.

Launched initially to only coincide with the San Francisco event, the *Exposition Flyer* attracted enough passengers to continue through World War II years as a formidable alternative to the Chicago & North Western-Union Pacific-Southern Pacific Overland Route, which bypassed Denver and did not directly serve Salt Lake City.

Meanwhile, a diesel locomotive cab ride on one of his company’s newly minted locomotives over the Rio Grande through Colorado’s Glenwood Canyon on July 4, 1944, by Electro-Motive Division Vice President Cyrus Osborn was fortuitous. He allegedly remarked to the engine crew, “Why can’t passengers have a view like we have?” and later sketched his idea for providing that vision to travelers on a napkin. Osborn took the drawing to the Burlington, which at the time was focused on completely renewing its streamliner fleet. From the EMD executive’s plans, the company constructed a squarish glass-topped “Vista-Dome” on top of an existing stainless steel Budd Co. coach. The car debuted on a *Twin Zephyr* out of Chicago in December 1945.

SEEKING A NICHE

The Burlington wasted no time or expense incorporating domes into all of its



postwar *Zephyr* renewal plans, and the three *Exposition Flyer* partners agreed in October 1945, that immediate replacement of its tired heavyweight equipment was necessary. An order was placed with Budd for six 11-car *California Zephyr* trainsets, with ownership of the new rolling stock split among the three roads according to route mileage. Since scenery was envisioned as the primary marketing attraction, each train had five Vista-Domes: three dome coaches, a lounge car for all passengers whose dome was to be used exclusively for sleeping car patrons, and a unique bullet-ended observation-lounge-sleeper. The tail car also contained a drawing room with shower — a first — and three bedrooms. While the *Flyer's* heavyweight consist included upper and lower berths among every sleeping car configuration, the new *Zephyr* initially would have only one 16-section car and three 10-roomette, 6-double-bedroom sleepers. From the outset, one of the 10-6s was a through car operating to and from New York alternate days on either the New York Central or Pennsylvania Railroad.

Another necessary alteration was the schedule. With lightweight streamlined equipment and fewer stops, timings could be tightened by about six hours. The westbound *Exposition Flyer's* early afternoon Chicago departure was moved a few hours later but the eastbound run out of Oakland needed to be switched from 6:30 p.m. to 9 a.m. so as not to miss daytime views through California's Feather River Canyon and Ruby Canyon west of Colorado's Grand Junction.

INNOVATION

Dome coaches began arriving on the property in 1948 and drew assignments on the *Exposition Flyer*, whetting travelers' appetites. Then, following a San Francisco inaugural ceremony on March 19, 1949,



On Sept. 9, 1967, the westbound *California Zephyr* with four dome coaches up front begins its slow trek around Williams Loop, east of Keddie, Calif., on Western Pacific's Feather River Route through the Sierra Nevada mountains in northeastern California.



The Western Pacific routinely executed a motive power swap after the *California Zephyr* exited the Feather River Canyon at Oroville, Calif., north of Sacramento. At Oroville, the Feather River exits the Sierra Nevada and flows into California's Central Valley.

the first *California Zephyrs* departed Oakland and Chicago the next day.

The train's short- and long-term impact cannot be underestimated. Its accessible-to-all domes garnered immediate public and media praise. The scenery and on-board diversion they offered established a real difference among long-distance trains. Santa Fe's *Super Chief*, Baltimore & Ohio's

Capitol Limited, and Missouri Pacific's *Colorado Eagle* would soon gain a single dome each. But it took Union Pacific, Great Northern, and Northern Pacific flagships about five years to join the party with add-ons to lightweight consists already ordered. Only the GN's *Empire Builder* and NP's *North Coast Limited* dome capacity approached that of the CZ.

Onboard, the new train featured "tape-recorded music" and "controlled radio reception," though these elements were routinely available on other streamliners of the era. Each *California Zephyr*, however, also featured a "Zephyrette" hostess who pitched dining car meal reservations as a conversation starter, helped families get settled, offered public address system commentary, sent telegrams, and dealt with passenger emergencies. Burlington Supervisor of Passenger Train Services Velma McPeck had originated the position on pre-World War II *Zephyrs* and reinstated it only on the California train in 1949. The young women made it a point to personally greet passengers and also provided continuity and esprit among operating and on-board service employees.





After the westbound *California Zephyr* arrived in Denver on the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy, its E units were cut off and a switcher dragged the train through the wash rack, then backed it into Union Station yard. A switchman maintains a look-out from the observation car. Steve Patterson

Word-of-mouth and numerous magazine articles created demand that quickly outstripped available space; the *Zephyr's* combination of unique equipment, on-board service, and scenery indeed made “The most talked-about train in America” a valid advertising slogan. Its widespread popularity clearly influenced Canadian Pacific’s design choice to order — in 1953 — more than 170 stainless steel cars from Budd to launch the *Canadian* in April 1955, though CP eschewed the CZ’s dome coaches. VIA Rail Canada continues to operate that equipment today after compression testing showed the 70-year-old cars remain sound.

Sold-out accommodations had prompted the *Zephyr* host railroads to add six 6-double-bedroom, 5-compartment sleeping cars in 1952; additional Burlington stainless steel coaches and sleepers often augmented each train during peak periods for the next two decades. By 1964, public disdain for curtained berths and affinity for private rooms resulted in the conversion of the open section sleepers to 48-seat chair cars placed in front of the three coach domes seasonally as needed.

TRANSITION

Although the *Zephyr* remained a crowd pleaser through the 1960s, its slower schedule meant it never benefited from U.S. Mail Railway Post Office contracts providing revenue on many routes. That business virtually disappeared in September 1967 when the USPS switched delivery to air and trucks. The previous year, Western Pacific had sought to extricate itself from the operation by petitioning the Interstate Commerce Commission for discontinuance. The case was compelling, since every labor, equipment, and facilities expense connected with passenger operation could be eliminated if WP’s only train disappeared. After several years of ICC denials, which the agency justified by saying the train was “unique,” the WP was allowed to drop its portion of the *Zephyr*. The last runs departed March 20, 1970.

Nevertheless, the train maintained its service quality — complete with the *Zephyrettes* — to the final curtain.

But that was not the end. *Zephyr* coaches, sleepers, diners, and lounges lived on, continuing to run three times per week for the next year. The D&RGW extended the

Denver-Salt Lake City *Rio Grande Zephyr* to and from Ogden, Utah, on a modified schedule that connected to Southern Pacific’s *City of San Francisco* for an across-platform transfer. East of Denver, newly merged Burlington Northern ran the equipment as a “California Service” extension of a Chicago-Omaha daytime train previously named the *Nebraska Zephyr*.

Despite its recent demise and even in a debilitated state, the *California Zephyr's* 21-year trajectory made a compelling case for preserving a long-distance passenger rail network as Department of Transportation officials weighed options for the government-sponsored takeover that would become Amtrak.

The Penn Central bankruptcy had triggered a sense of urgency in the East where urban areas depended on multiple daily frequencies, but the *Zephyr* arguably had pioneered a land cruise concept that also provided rural mobility. It stood as a well-run and well-patronized example of a service that succumbed to the same headwinds as eastern trains without suffering downgrades and service shortfalls that PC inflicted. And any eastern bailout would



Eastbound *Rio Grande Zephyr*, train No. 18, is in colorful Ruby Canyon on the Colorado River on Oct. 10, 1971, having crossed into Colorado from Utah a few miles back. The 25-mile-long canyon is one of the scenic highlights of “The most talked-about train in America.” Steve Patterson

ers migrated east to replace worn out rolling stock. Meanwhile, the *Rio Grande Zephyr* gained a mystique among locals that rivaled its predecessor’s reputation. On Amtrak’s increasingly homogenized system, cars and locomotives began losing their identity to variations of the red, white, and blue scheme, but the RGZ’s individuality and unwavering customer service standards continued to stand out.

While the national carrier gained the wherewithal to modernize its fleet with Superliners, new locomotives, and head-end power, increasing maintenance costs and the difficulty of stimulating patronage west of Grand Junction, Colo., encouraged Rio Grande management to drop its remnant and allow Amtrak to take over the route. An April 1983, mudslide at Thistle, Utah, temporarily delayed the planned switch from the Union Pacific. The *Rio Grande Zephyr*’s last hurrah occurred on April 24 as a truncated train from Grand Junction to Denver. Once a tunnel was completed and D&RGW tracks at Thistle

repositioned, Amtrak’s version of the *California Zephyr* to its rightful rails through the Rockies on July 16, 1983.

REINVENTION

The RGZ route takeover happened at a fortuitous time in Amtrak history. W. Graham Claytor Jr. became company president in 1982, after a series of route-killing Carter Administration budget cuts just as a new fleet of Superliners began arriving. The former U.S. Naval Secretary and Southern Railway president relished his role as the new sheriff in town, one capable of standing up to similar Reagan Administration entreaties. Claytor appreciated and understood what it took to run a good passenger train: spotless equipment and gung-ho employees capable of delivering a quality transportation product and exceptional customer service.

He had a great deal to work with. The two-level Superliners ordered in the mid-1970s on former president Paul Reistrup’s watch efficiently accommodated many more passengers per coach and sleeping car than the *Zephyr*’s old single-level equipment. When properly staffed, diners with kitchens below provided plenty of capacity to comfortably handle anyone who wanted to eat. Glass-topped Sightseer Lounge cars, inspired by similar Budd-built lounges for Santa Fe’s 1956 *El Capitan*, combined ceiling to near-floor windows upstairs with a downstairs cafe. This provided a focal point for scenery viewing that, with the later addition of tables, morphed into one of the most pleasant rail interior spaces on any continent. Superliner lounges preserved

need political support of the entire country. There certainly were other well-run passenger trains at the time, but the *California Zephyr*’s absence illustrated how real the negative impact of wholesale train-offs might be.

So it was no surprise DOT strategists chose to continue what the Burlington and Rio Grande had preserved of the original *California Zephyr* through Denver rather than the Union Pacific’s Overland Route as May 1, 1971, drew near. Alas, D&RGW management found the price of joining Amtrak to be too steep, so the Denver-Salt Lake City portion was abruptly shifted to the UP days before the takeover date. The *Rio Grande Zephyr* would continue to soldier on with its dome coaches, observation lounge and dining car as a triweekly day-time train through the Moffat Tunnel and over Soldier Summit. Amtrak also initially operated three times per week west of Denver via Laramie, Wyo., and Ogden as the *Denver Zephyr* or *City of San Francisco* until settling on *San Francisco Zephyr* in 1972.

During this “*California Zephyr* in exile” period, the train’s Western Pacific cars were sold off — many to Mexico and the new Virginia-Florida Auto-Train Corp. startup, while Burlington-owned domes and sleep-



The tail sign on the *California Zephyr*’s Vista Dome Observation Lounge, photographed at Chicago Union Station. Bob Johnston

AFTERNOON RITUAL: CHECKING THE ZEPHYR

WORKING FOR THE BURLINGTON ROUTE at Chicago Union Station as an assistant passenger agent during the summer of 1967, one of my duties was making sure each long-distance train was spotlessly ready to accept passengers after it backed in from the coach yard. Had carpets been vacuumed properly? Were car line numbers accurate after a last-minute equipment swap? Were the washrooms clean? (We did have a recurring problem with baby cockroaches on a dome coach normally assigned to the *Kansas City Zephyr*).

The highlight of those afternoon trips through the *Empire Builder-North Coast Limited*, *Denver Zephyr*, and *California Zephyr*, however, was passing through their dining cars. Walking in, the aroma was always different depending on the train and it usually prompted an obligatory cracker snatch from baskets already set on tables. Cooks and waiters were understandably busy for the *Builder's* lunch service (it left at 1:15 p.m.) and the Denver train's dinner (5 p.m. departure), but there always seemed to be a surprising beehive of activity in the *California Zephyr's* kitchen, even though it was carded out at 2:30 p.m. Roasts were being placed in ovens, vegetables sliced, and soups getting stirred. The crew was pleased someone from management was taking an interest in their handiwork — with a camera, no less. A labor-intensive operation? No question; it was a different era in food preparation. Yet here were skilled employees with plenty of pride making sure the meals they put on the table were just as memorable as the train and scenery their customers had paid to ride. — *Bob Johnston*



A proud cook displays a pie ready to bake in the *California Zephyr* kitchen's oven. Three photos, Bob Johnston



Amtrak's *Zephyr* climbs Colorado's front range on June 5, 2016, with three sleeping cars, a transition sleeper, three coaches, a dining car, a Sightseer Lounge, and a baggage car.

key elements from the original CZ's many bubble-top Vista-Domes, albeit while losing forward-facing viewing.

The fleet also paved the way for significant western route expansion that survived drastic cuts in 1979: through cars from the *San Francisco Zephyr* at Ogden traveled to Seattle as the *Pioneer* and to Las Vegas,

Nev., and Los Angeles as the *Desert Wind*. The junction point for the three trains shifted to Salt Lake City with the 1983 move to the Rio Grande. Increased patronage of all three trains, driven in part by the *California Zephyr's* scenic draw, dictated that the *Pioneer* begin operating through Wyoming starting in



An engineer climbs into the cab of Amtrak's westbound *California Zephyr* on June 5, 2016, after checking on the second unit at the Fraser-Winter Park, Colo., station. The *Winter Park Express* seasonal ski train stops at a heated platform several miles to the east near the west portal of the Moffat Tunnel.

1991 to instead join the Chicago-bound train at Denver.

Amtrak's CZ and extensions became the backbone of the company's western operations into the 1990s until another round of politically forced cost-cutting weakened its western appendages just as a second batch of Superliners began arriving. In response to a misguided consultant's assertion that costs would be saved by running long-distance trains less than daily, Amtrak management reduced the *Pioneer* and *Desert Wind* to triweekly departures and



for a time from 1996 to 1997, the *Zephyr* itself was cut back to four times per week alternating with the *Wind* west of Salt Lake City. Economies of scale delivered previously by combining three daily trains disappeared when fewer revenue-producing days were pitted against a weeks' worth of route costs. The two triweekly trains' performance weakened to the point that they both got the axe on May 10, 1997. Those routes can now be reactivated only after consultants gobble up another batch of study money for capacity modeling leading to infrastructure investment demands.

TODAY

After the *California Zephyr* resumed daily departures in 1997, the train briefly continued to enjoy the benefits of enhanced onboard service during the period

when individual product line managers assumed responsibility for generating revenue and managing expenses. Budgets were available to regionally brand, market, and promote Amtrak's *Zephyr* as Chicago-based manager Lee Gleysteen saw fit. Recentralization and a Northeast Corridor orientation ushered in by Amtrak President and CEO George Warrington discontinued the program.

For the next 20 years under presidents David Gunn, Alexander Kummant, and Joe Boardman, the *California Zephyr* steadily increased annual ridership from 347,856 in fiscal 2005 to 417,322 in 2016. It typically has ranked third in both categories behind *Auto Train* and the Chicago-Seattle/Portland, Ore., *Empire Builder* among all long-distance trains.

During that same 20-year span, ticket

revenue jumped from \$35.1 million to \$51.9 million.

Numbers held steady for the following three years until 2020's COVID-19 pandemic, though Amtrak began including seasonal *Winter Park Express* January-March weekend results in the train's reported totals. Even with that delivery inflating the outcomes, the *Zephyr* only carried 328,458 passengers in fiscal 2023.

The main culprit: lack of capacity. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic in the peak spring-through-fall season and holiday periods, each *Zephyr* was assigned three Superliner coaches and often three Superliner sleeping cars plus a transition sleeper. Only two coaches and two sleeping cars ran throughout 2023 and into the current year. As a result, the train experienced frequent and prolonged sellouts. With limited



Conductor Brad Swartzwelter brings coffee to engineer L.C. Owen as the eastbound *California Zephyr* stops at Fraser-Winter Park, Colo. Three photos, Bob Johnston

CONDUCTOR SWARTZWELTER: ON THE CASE

PERHAPS FEW PEOPLE are in a better position to evaluate how today's *California Zephyr* operates — its strengths and weaknesses — than Amtrak Conductor Brad Swartzwelter. Most of the year, he works Monday-Tuesday and Thursday-Friday out-and-back journeys from Denver to Grand Junction, Colo., but from January through early April he works Friday through Sunday *Winter Park Express* round trips. Swartzwelter helped make the case to Amtrak management for the seasonal service, which is sponsored in part by the Winter Park Resort.

A *Zephyr* ride with Brad is always informative, as he often provides route descriptions in the train's Sightseer Lounge. "Operating responsibilities come first, but I try to give customers an idea of where they are and what they're seeing. It's nowhere near as in-depth as what the National Park Service Trails and Rails docents delivered," he tells *Trains*. Amtrak stopped subsidizing the nationwide volunteer program in 2018 but has since reinstated some of the former perks.

"Our cafe lounge car has at least as much popularity as the original *California Zephyr* domes," Swartzwelter said. He urges passengers on every trip to rotate back to their seats or accommodations to give everyone an opportunity to enjoy the view, at least changing places at the train's usual Fraser-Winter Park fresh air stop. "The beauty of the *Zephyr* today is that it remains a poster child for what a scenic land cruise can be," he adds.

Swartzwelter has not been shy about expressing his ideas for improvement, having spearheaded the effort within the company to get management on board with the *Winter Park Express* venture. He has also suggested — as long as additional capacity can be provided — establishing a premium coach class with preferred access along with sleeping car passengers to Sightseer Lounge seating.

When *Trains* asked for his views about distributing onboard service duties, he praised the employees that previously and currently work the train, while acknowledging there is room for modernization of craft divisions and work rules, and adding, "Let's look at ways to negotiate common sense labor relations and compensation so that we all benefit."

The conductor joined Amtrak in Seattle in the late 1990s and transferred to the Denver area as an assistant conductor. He was promoted to a junior conductor's slot on the *Zephyr* in 2011, and through seniority finally attained the No. 1 conductor position in 2021. "It's by far the best job I've ever seen in railroading — like the kid who dreams of going to outer space and then becomes an astronaut," Swartzwelter says, though he is slated to retire in October 2024.

"The one thing that could keep me here is if they said we need a supreme leader of the *California Zephyr* to operate it the way it should be from start to finish."

It's hard to imagine anyone better suited for such a job. — *Bob Johnston*



Amtrak's eastbound *California Zephyr*, led by a pair of F40PH locomotives followed by a Material Handling car and two heritage baggage cars, crosses Southern Pacific's 5,603-foot-long, vertical-lift bridge across the Carquinez Strait, adjacent to San Pablo Bay, on Feb. 16, 1990.

space available, coach and sleeping car passengers booking passage through the *California Zephyr's* traditional mid-route magnet between Denver and Grand Junction prevented other long-distance travelers from using the train at all. An extra coach was also previously added (accompanied by regional advertising) to accommodate San Francisco Bay Area-Reno, Nev., weekend tourists. For this summer, Amtrak spokesman Marc Magliari tells *Trains* the company expects to restore the CZ's transition sleeper, but as of early 2024 there are no plans to add a third coach.

Despite the capacity constraints forcing lower ridership, demand remains strong. Again with the *Winter Park* results included, the CZ's 2023 ticket revenue set an all-time annual record at \$56.4 million, so fewer passenger have been willing to pay higher prices. With more capacity, that number could have been even higher.



Operationally, the train's punctuality has been repeatedly challenged by Union Pacific freight train interference, primarily in eastern Nevada. Mudslides and other track obstructions have also caused serious delays on the former Rio Grande portion. Overall timekeeping stands at a dismal 27%. Poor on-time performance adds costs when the eastbound *Zephyr* is so late that connections are missed at Chicago, but built-in recovery time permits early arrivals if there are no en route delays.

THE FUTURE

Most of the characteristics that made the *California Zephyr* an instant success 75 years ago are still in place today. But enabling the train to reach its full potential demands recycling some elements from its past that made it successful. No, the Zephyrettes aren't coming back, but the on-board service quality control they once provided shouldn't be overlooked.

Amtrak has dramatically expanded the number of executive positions in Washington, D.C., over the past few years, but if the company is serious about providing a unique transportation product everywhere, it's time to create a cadre of hands-on man-



It's showtime in the Sightseer Lounge west of Denver as passengers jockey for position on June 5, 2016, and conductors urge passengers to take turns enjoying the view.

agers with revenue and expense responsibility who ride the trains and know its customers. This job simply can't be done from headquarters; managers need to be in the field every day.

Of course, there will be push-back. It may be a heavy lift for top level executives unfamiliar with the *California Zephyr's* unique attributes and history. Labor organizations might argue positions

such as these are reincarnations of previously unionized "train chief" supervisors. But that would be incorrect, as these would clearly be management positions with a small staff charged with stimulating business at every community along the route, watching costs, and monitoring performance.

At 75, today's *California Zephyr* would be a perfect venue to try out the concept. **I**

