

“Somebody’ll die on you, for sure!”

A prediction from a Santa Fe veteran gave a rookie coach attendant on Amtrak’s *El Capitan* in 1971 some pause

By Chuck Larrabee

Following my graduation from high school, in summer 1971 I hired on with the Santa Fe Railway as a “second trick” yard clerk, working the afternoon/evening shift in the freight yard in my hometown of Albuquerque, N.Mex. From my earliest years of riding Santa Fe trains from Albuquerque to visit my grandparents in Iowa, Santa Fe had had an allure for me that I couldn’t shake.

Working in the yard could be tough and dangerous, but having made all those trips east, I wondered if I could land a job on what had by then become the single passenger train through Albu-

querque. Santa Fe was providing contract labor to the brand-new Amtrak on its *Super Chief-El Capitan* on the traditional Chicago–Los Angeles route. (As before Amtrak, the train, still numbered 17-18, was combined, with the Hi-Level “El Cap” coach section forward of the *Super Chief* section with its diner, Turquoise Room dome lounge, and sleeping cars at the rear, all behind “Warbonnet” F7s.) The engine, train, and on-board service crews still were Santa Fe employees working under Santa Fe rules, and as had been the case before Amtrak, chair-car attendants still changed out every few hundred miles.

So the minute I returned home from college in December ’71, I called Duane Schnaubert, my supervisor who had hired me for the freight yard job, and told him I was looking for work. By that time, Santa Fe had implemented new technologies for tracking freight cars, and there was less need for clerks.

“Go talk to Parker,” Schnaubert said. “I think they’re going to need extra help on the passenger trains over the holiday.”

Parker was secretary to the trainmaster, and for a reason now lost to me, he was in charge of hiring *El Capitan* chair-car attendants who were based in Albuquerque and ran to La Junta, Colo., and back, a 346-mile, 7-hour trip each way.

I told Parker I had a month off and was interested in working on the passenger trains. “Well, I’m not sure,” he said. “We’re going to be short-handed, but I’m just not sure.” He hemmed and hawed some more, then told me he’d have to check with the trainmaster, Mr. Shafer.



Parker went into the office and closed the door. About 10 minutes later, Parker came out and said, "We're going to hire you, but Mr. Shafer wants to talk to you."

Shafer was a tall man, and somber, a lifelong Santa Fe railroader. He ushered me into his office and shut the door.

"I'm going to hire you," he said, "but you should know that the only white guy we hired as a porter didn't last." I assured him I wanted the job, and that I knew most of the Albuquerque-based attendants from my previous summer.

"Let me know if you have any trouble out there," he said. "I will," I replied, but I knew there wouldn't be any "trouble" . . . and as it turned out, I was correct.

Parker told me I'd have to make three two-day "student trips," unpaid, before I'd be qualified to handle the job myself. I begged him to schedule the trips back-to-back, as I wanted to get started and six days would eat into my earning time over Christmas break. He gave me a uniform chit, issued me some keys, scheduled me for a physical at the local Santa Fe hospital, told me to pick up my uniform the next day, and said he'd schedule me out starting the day after that.

Learning the ropes

The following day I went to Simon's Department Store ("No wait — no delay — every uniform guaranteed a perfect fit!") in downtown Albuquerque, the official outfitter of Santa Fe uniforms.

"I need a chair-car attendant's uni-

form," I told the clerk.

He twittered. "Really," he said. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," I said, "I start my student runs tomorrow."

"Porters only get two tan porter jackets and a hat," he said, using the common term for the job in that era. "You have to supply black pants, black dress shoes, white shirts, and a tie." As I recall, he had the right size jackets in stock and a hat that then (and to this day) fits me a bit too small (so much for the "perfect fit"). He carefully counted out just enough shiny Santa Fe buttons for one uniform. I gave him the slip of paper from Parker, and that took care of the three jackets, the hat, and the buttons. I went to Sears and bought the rest of the required uniform.

Parker dutifully scheduled me for six straight days of student runs, selecting senior porters on each run who would act as my teachers. The first day was Albuquerque to La Junta, then an overnight in La Junta and back to Albuquerque on the second day. The regular job entailed two days on, then one day off, 365 days a year excluding vacations.

My mother drove me to the Albuquerque station about noon on my first day. She had taught me to launder and iron my own uniforms, pants, and dress shirts. ("I'm not doing that for you after



Author at work in 1972.

every trip," she said, "and besides, you need to know how to iron.")

I don't remember which veteran attendant coached me on my first student trip, but the details are etched in my mind. First, checking the rulebook for recent rules changes and initialing the page. Then, synchronizing our watches to the big official Santa Fe office clock (attendants

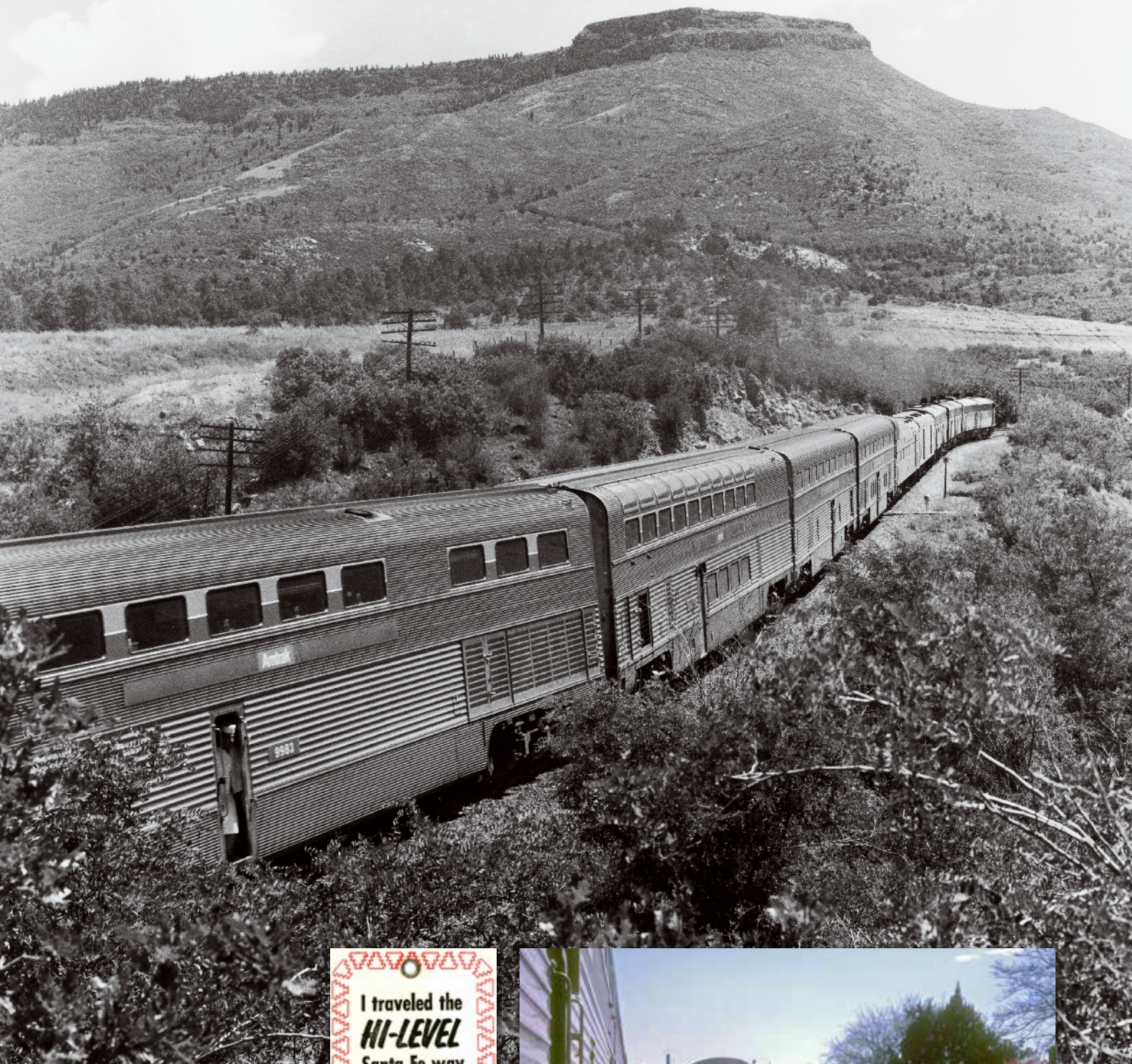
didn't get "Railroad Approved" watches; I had to buy my own, later). Next was starting the timesheet with two pieces of carbon paper. I still have all my timesheets — the first two pages were submitted to the timekeeper, and the third was kept by the employee "to keep a record . . . you don't know when the company might try to screw you," according to one porter.

Santa Fe coach attendants had another piece of paperwork to fill out: the pillowcase form. The railroad issued the porters a sheaf of paper pillowcases that could be easily draped over one arm. As I recall, pillows — which on the Hi-Level coaches were stored on each car — were

With a mix of recently decorated Amtrak cars and unchanged Santa Fe stock, the *Super Chief-El Cap* negotiates the double horseshoe near Blanchard, N.Mex., on August 11, 1972.

Chuck Larabee





Amtrak's westbound *Super Chief-El Capitan*, renumbered from 17 to 3 in November 1971, musters about 15 mph (top) as it climbs Raton Pass near Wootton, Colo., on August 7, 1972. Coach passengers boarding at Albuquerque (right, in April 1969) will get a luggage tag for larger bags left on the lower-level shelves.

Top, Tim Zukas; tag and photo, right, Chuck Larrabee



rented for 75 cents to the traveler “for the duration of your voyage.” The porter was responsible for turning in the 75 cents for each rental, inventoried on the pillowcase form, and the railroad would rebate 25 cents as a commission in a subsequent paycheck.

Here’s an anecdote on that: Years after I quit the Santa Fe, I got a registered letter from the railroad, sent to my parents’ home in Albuquerque. Some auditor in faraway Topeka had discovered that I’d not been paid \$18 in pillowcase commissions from 1972! I signed the form and sent it off, and several weeks later a check arrived for the \$18!

The senior porters who taught me on my two student runs were proud of their jobs, and I had not a whiff of “trouble.” They were friendly, personable, and good with passengers, as you’d expect from a road that came close to not joining Amtrak and provided high-quality service right up to, and beyond, May 1, 1971.

These veterans taught me the basics: For boarding passengers with heavy bags not needed up at their seats, we’d attach a tag (“I traveled the Hi-Level Santa Fe way!”) for storage in the lower-level baggage racks. This was done on the platform, as passengers were not allowed to tote these big bags on board with them — that was my responsibility. Once all his passengers were on board, the porter carried the heavy bags onto the train, placing them on the shelves next to the vestibule (the layout is virtually the same as on today’s Amtrak Superliners).

Attendants carefully guided the passengers onto and off the train. The porters taught me to very carefully cup my hand under the elbow of detraining passengers, in order to catch them if they slipped. “Be extra careful with the lady passengers,” one attendant told me, “they don’t like to be touched.”

I was taught to keep an eye on the conductor during longer stops. Once he stepped off the train and started to look at his watch, that was the time to start ushering your passengers back on board. “Conductors don’t like it if you wait until ‘All Aboard’ to get your people back on the train,” I was told.

Once the train left the station, the attendant went to his car’s upper level to make sure his new passengers were settled into their correct seats and to wait for the conductor to collect their tickets. The train still was all-reserved, by seat.

The conductor was, of course, “god” on the train. His word was final. He had the highest seniority, and each one car-



Amtrak’s *Super Chief-El Cap*, having met a westbound Santa Fe freight, leaves Canyoncito, N.Mex., at the foot of Glorieta Pass, on April 16, 1972. Today, the rails here host no freights.

Steve Patterson

ried himself with a calm, all-knowing demeanor. Santa Fe’s conductors demanded and got respect.

The attendants helped the conductor lift tickets by filling out the “hat checks” that we’d place above each seat to indicate where each passenger was disembarking. White checks indicated the end of the run, Chicago or L.A.; red checks were for passengers getting off within your district; green checks were for people disembarking beyond your district but short of the train’s final destination.

For passengers getting off the train

“Die on me?” Railroad superstition? My first trip was rattling from the start.

along the way, the routine was clear: 20 minutes or so before the stop, the attendant would find his passengers, making sure they were in the car and ready to get off. If they were elsewhere, and this happened a lot, the attendant had to dash off to the diner or lounge car to fetch them.

The attendant was also responsible for getting the claim stubs of the bags stored on the lower-level shelves, and placing the bags in the vestibule. They had to be removed from the train before the passengers were allowed to step down or new passengers were allowed to board.

Either before or during longer stops such as Albuquerque, the attendant was

to clean up around the seats of the departing passengers, remove the soiled pillowcases, and return the pillows to the storage areas and replace the paper headrests so the seat area would be “nice” for passengers who were boarding.

Attendants were also responsible for sweeping out the cars every couple of hours with a carpet sweeper, and for cleaning the bathrooms.

Both attendants I trained with told Parker I’d done a good job and said I was ready to go on the payroll after only two runs. Parker was desperate for the help, so I signed up on the extra board.

A frenzied start

On my student trips, the only hint of any possible difficulty came close to the end of my second training run, when the attendant I was working with, a man named Ponds, told me, ominously, “On your first paying trip, somebody’ll die on you, for sure.”

“Die?” I said. “I’m not sure I want anybody to get sick, let alone die on me.”

“Nope,” he repeated confidently, “your first trip, somebody’ll die on you, for sure. It always happens.”

I paused. Railroad superstition? It put an edge on what was to be, two days later, my first trip in charge of a coach, all by myself. I hadn’t considered somebody “kicking the bucket” during my trips. I knew the trains, the routine, but my first paid trip was rattling from the start.

For some reason, when the eastbound *Super Chief-El Cap* arrived in Albuquerque, most of the passengers on my assigned car seemed to be getting off. “Go-



The last Santa Fe *Super Chief-El Cap* enters New Mexico's short Apache Canyon on Saturday, May 1, 1971. The next day's first Amtrak No. 18, however, will look about the same.

John C. Lucas



About 950 miles and 15 hours away from La Junta, where the author would begin his return leg of coach-attendant work, Amtrak's *Super Chief-El Cap* slows for passengers at Joliet, Ill.

J. David Ingles

ing to a convention, or something . . ." said the inbound attendant as he turned the car over to me.

Having most of the car get off meant that most of the 68 seats would be get-

ting filled here as well. I adroitly tagged the big bags with the Hi-Level baggage tags and handed them to the passengers. After I had gently guided the new arrivals on board, I turned to the huge pile of

bags on the platform. Then I heard the conductor yell "All Aboard!"

I scrambled, tossing and throwing the bags into the vestibule. I was scared to death the train would start to move, with me still loading luggage. I piled the bags into the doorway, grabbed the stepbox, and boarded the train.

The conductor came down the platform to my door and looked at the pile I'd made in the vestibule. "Are you done yet?" he said. This was conductor Anderson, who I'd learn was one of the drollest and most respected conductors on the run, always with a toothpick in his mouth.

"Well, then," he said, "I guess we can go." He waved the highball, climbed aboard, shut the door, and we were off.

I was in charge of my own coach, and I was proud. I knew this line, I knew what to do, and I had 60-some people to

take care of. When Conductor Anderson came back through, I helped him pull tickets and put up the hat checks. I pointed out the direction to the lounge car and dining car to my passengers and told them the first call to dinner would be at 5 p.m. I checked the bathrooms every hour or so, making sure they were spotless, and with an ease that I learned to perfect, tapped the bottom of the paper-cup dispenser next to the drinking fountain with two fingers to see if it needed refilling. I was master.

Trouble ahead

Later in the afternoon, I sold pillows, and also noticed that it was beginning to snow. By the time we were beyond Lamy and rolling past the Glorieta station, it was really coming down. As we climbed Glorieta Pass, the snow was getting very heavy and was piling up. Then the train began to slow down. As it turned out, we were following a freight that was having unspecified engine trouble.

Mr. Ponds, who had offered the ominous prediction about my first paying trip, was aboard. He came to my car to see how his greenhorn was doing. We sat in the last two seats on the right-hand side of the car, reserved for attendants.

"It's all under control, Mr. Ponds," I said.

"Good," he said, "at this rate it's going to be a late night. We'll be late . . . and with this much snow, who knows when we'll get into La Junta. Don't expect much sleep if number 17 [the westbound train that would return us to Albuquerque] is on time."

Just then, a blood-curdling yell came from the stairs in the middle of the car.

"Help! Help me!" a woman screamed.

Ponds and I stood up, and the woman, still screaming, ran down the center aisle of the coach at us, waving her arms.

"My God! My God!" she yelled at the top of her voice. "There's a dead woman in the bathroom! Help! *Heeeeeelp!*"

Ponds told me to wait where I was, that he would check the bathroom. He took off, went down the stairs . . . and was gone a terribly long time.

The other passengers were silent, and I had the wailing woman sit down in our seats. Some passengers came to console her, and I crept to the top of the stairwell. There was no sound from downstairs. We were still slowly traversing Glorieta Pass and it was snowing hard and beginning to get dark outside.

"What's going on?" I heard hushed voices behind me, "What do you think



By the time the train reached Las Vegas, the storm had become a full-fledged blizzard. The coroner's work was quick, and the ambulance soon left on the empty, snow-covered streets.

Robert Hale

happened?" Then Ponds appeared at the bottom of the stairs. "Go get Anderson," he said, "there is a dead woman in the ladies' bathroom."

I ran to get the conductor. He was sitting in the small office downstairs in the first coach. He grabbed his radio, and I ran behind him as he hurried back to my coach. He and Ponds disappeared downstairs, into the bathroom.

I could hear the radio crackling.

Anderson came back to the stairs. "Chuck, tell the people we've had a death on the train. Everything will be OK.

"Everything will be OK. You just need to be up here, with the people."

We'll be taking her off of the train in Las Vegas [New Mexico, our next stop]. You just need to be up here, with the people."

As we crept through the snowstorm, I talked to the passengers in my coach.

There was an empty seat, and people nearby remembered who had occupied it. Everyone was quiet. Some people got up and left, to go to the lounge or to another car where the restrooms were still accessible.

One of the brakemen came and went, and a couple of minutes before we arrived in Las Vegas, Anderson came to me and told me to gather the dead woman's belongings. She had a small suitcase in the luggage rack over her seat, and a light sweater. She had taken her purse

with her to the bathroom, which was how Ponds and Anderson identified her.

"Older lady," Ponds later told me, "probably going to see her grandkids in Chicago for the holidays." He had found her, sprawled halfway in and halfway out of the small room. "She must've known she was sick," he said. "She got the door open and just flopped out onto the floor."

At Las Vegas, the coroner met the train, but his work was quick and they wrapped her up and put her in an ambulance. In what was now a blizzard, I handed her suitcase and sweater to the ambulance crew.

"You got any passengers getting off here?" Anderson asked me.

I temporarily panicked. "I forgot to check!" I said.

My hands were shaking, in part from the cold and in part from what had happened. I quickly pulled my carefully handwritten manifest out of my pocket and looked it over.

"No, no, no Las Vegases, they're mostly going on to Chicago."

"If you say so," he said, yelling "All Aboard!"

I will always remember handing over the small suitcase and sweater of the elderly woman whose fate I crossed that night to an ambulance crew that had been called out on a bitter cold and snowy night before Christmas, and the train pulling away from the Las Vegas station, the ambulance with its emergency lights flashing, heading through the empty snow-covered streets into town.

And echoing in my mind were Ponds' words to me from three days before: "Your first trip, somebody'll die on you, for sure!" ■