

How to make yourself the “dumbest (epithet deleted)” on the railroad

A locked door almost ended two trainmen’s careers

Despite rumors that Amtrak would eventually take over the employment responsibilities for on-board employees, the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe continued to provide waiters, cooks, lounge car, and coach attendants for Amtrak trains over the railroad’s routes until 1974. Amtrak assumed control of operating crews (engineers, conductors and brakemen) east of Needles, Calif., in August 1987.

By summer 1973, I had worked the December holiday and summer breaks since I was first hired in 1971 and held the seniority to bid on a regular job working as a coach attendant between Albuquerque and La Junta with two days on and one off.

By then, the equipment assigned to the train (then still called the *Super Chief*) was showing a lack of maintenance, and the vintage locomotives — in particular aging EMD F units — were frequently failing, causing major delays and slow-downs. In 1973, rumors circulated among crew members that Amtrak’s newly delivered EMD’s SDP40F locomotives would

be assigned to the *Super Chief* starting that summer.

One day, train 3 arrived in La Junta with two of the brand-new units! Behind the locomotives was a recently refurbished deadhead diner, the usual baggage/dormitory car, and the regular summer consist of standard and hi-level equipment that had been AT&SF’s combined *Super Chief/El Capitan* in the years before Amtrak.

Crew members were excited to see the two SDP40s on the head-end of No. 3. Our conductor was F.J. Nelson, a longtime Santa Fe conductor with a reputation for taking his responsibilities seriously and not having much of a sense of humor. He always had a toothpick in his mouth, and he’d take it out and point it at you when he wanted to emphasize something he was talking about.

The news soon spread through the crew that Mr. B.O. Bernard, superintendent of Santa Fe’s Colorado Division, would be riding the train from Raton to Las Vegas, N.M., to check out the new locomotives.

After we left La Junta and I had completed checking my assigned coach, I was talking to the head-end brakeman when he said, “I’d sure like to go up and see those new locos.”

I replied, “So would I!”

The brakeman was young and filling in for a more senior employee. He didn’t have an official uniform, but was wearing a coat and tie and was as much of a greenhorn as I was. We agreed with a wink and a nod that I’d come up to the baggage car after we left Trinidad and “see if we could get in.”

After the stop at Trinidad, I identified the four or five passengers getting off my coach in Raton. After the conductor finished his rounds, I snuck up to the baggage car. It was hot, so I took off my uniform jacket and helped the brakeman shove aside a stack of heavy third-class mail sacks that blocked the door out of the baggage car. Once this was done, we walked through the deadhead diner and

Amtrak train 3, the westbound *Super Chief*, passes the curves at Ribera, N.M., on July 4, 1973. Two photos, Chuck Larrabee



went through the door at the far-end and climbed into the nose of the trailing SDP40F. The door to the diner closed behind us.

The brakeman and I took our seats in the rear-facing SDP40F's cab. I swear the cab had a "brand new" smell to it! The diesel engines hummed quietly and efficiently behind us as we admired the view of the steep climb up to the top of Raton Pass and the long train behind us. This was highly risky, but who was to know we were even there? The engineer and fireman were always extra busy going over Raton Pass and they were unlikely to come back to the cab at the opposite end of the second unit.

I checked out and marveled at the sparkling clean engine compartment, and the brakeman and I enjoyed the ride, perching on the springy seats in the cab. After we went through the tunnel, we had about half an hour until the next stop at Raton. The brakeman said, "Well, we'd better get back."

So, we reversed our trek, climbed out the locomotive door, and...

The door to the deadhead dining car was locked!

The brakeman cursed and pulled and



The westbound *Super Chief* with two EMD SDP40F units passes Rowe, N.M., in July 1973.

pushed at the door handle, then slammed it with his boot heel. No luck. We were stuck.

"Oh, ____!" the brakeman cursed, "What are we going to do?"

"We gotta get back!" I said, "I have passengers getting off, and Mr. Bernard will be there in Raton!"

But we were stuck. The brakeman kicked the diner's door several more

times, mostly out of frustration, but it wouldn't open. He nervously tried several of the keys he carried with him, but none of them fit the lock. I was feeling panicked but stayed silent, a sense of doom coming over me.

We climbed back up into the cab, and my heart pounded as we descended Raton Pass. I saw my railroad career suddenly as a short-lived adventure.

What could we possibly do? Our stupidity got us imprisoned just to see the new locomotives.

The brakeman came up with an idea, and it was our only way out.

“As we’re coming into Raton,” he said, “we’ll climb down the ladder on the outside of the cab – on the side away from the station – and run back and jump back on the train. No one will ever see us!”

“Oh great!” I said, “Sure nobody’ll see us?”

“You got some other idea?” he said.

I was in complete despair. I had left my uniform jacket in the baggage car, and there were passengers in my coach to round up and get off at Raton!

As we got close to the Raton station and started to slow down, I climbed down the outside ladder first (I had further to run to get to my coach), and the brakeman was right above me. The train was still going at a pretty good clip when I jumped off as soon as we were over the brick station platform and I thought I

could make it. It was a miracle I didn’t fall and break something in the jump! I ran back to my coach as the train ground to a halt.

I opened the door on the high-level coach and climbed aboard. Several passengers standing in the vestibule waiting to get off were startled to see me, and they couldn’t figure where I’d come from since the train had been moving at a pretty good clip.

“Raton, Raton,” I yelled, “Everybody going to Raton, this way out!”

I walked over to the other side of the vestibule, and opened the door as the train came to a stop. Grabbing the step-box, I put it on the platform and carefully counted the passengers as they got off. As far as I could tell, all the people I was responsible for left the train.

No one got on my coach at Raton, so the minute Nelson yelled “All Aboard!” and waved the highball, I closed the vestibule door and ran upstairs, dashed through the high-level coach ahead of

mine and retrieved my uniform jacket from the baggage car. I moved so fast I was back in my coach by the time Nelson showed up to collect tickets.

Nelson looked down at his ticket pouches and manifest and didn’t look at me for what seemed like an eternity.

“Larrabee,” Nelson said, “Superintendent Bernard asked me why you weren’t wearing your uniform at Raton.” My heart leapt into my throat. I didn’t know what to say.

“Don’t tell me,” he said. “I told him you were probably taking a nap.”

He went on his way.

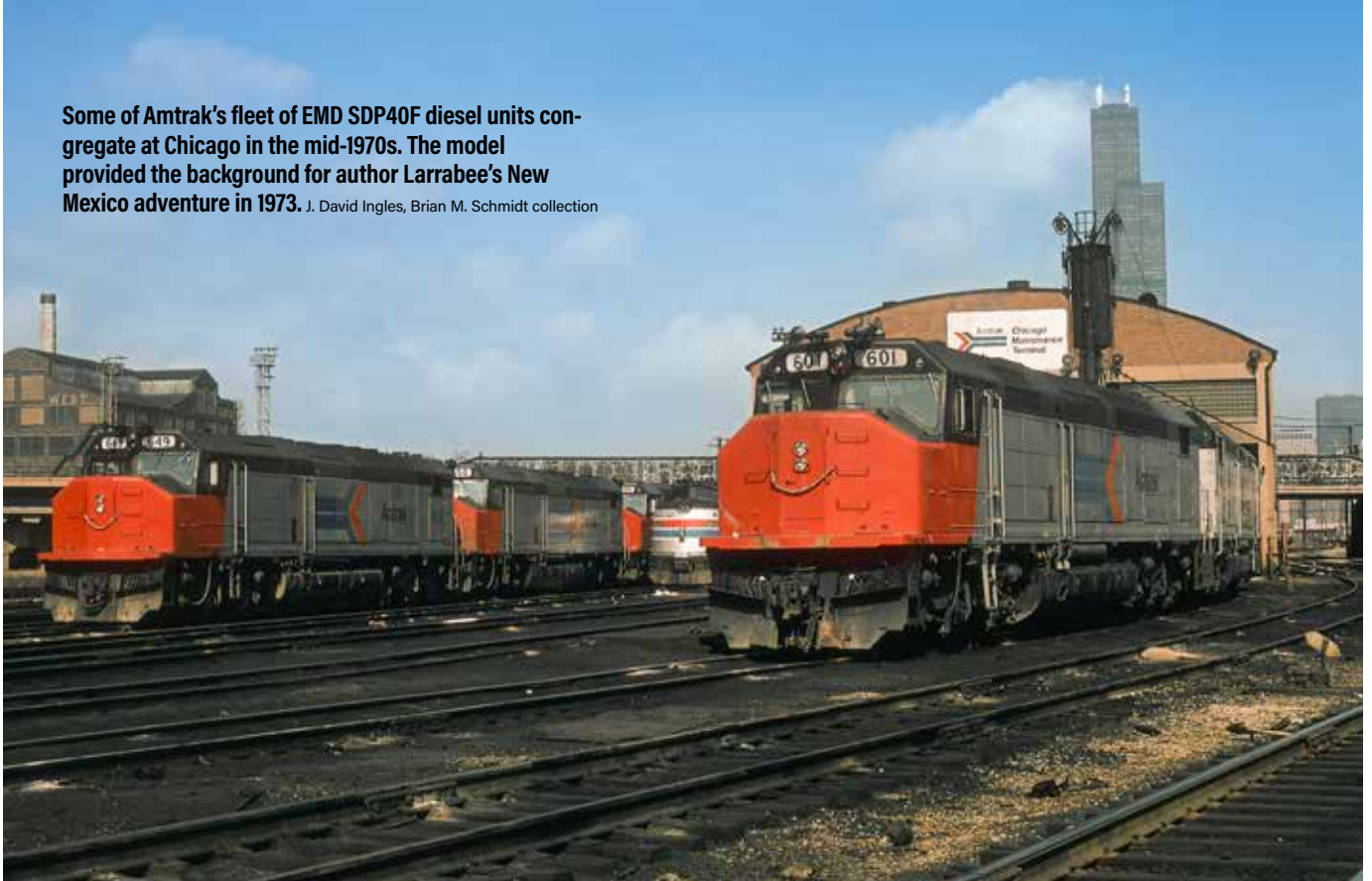
I was stunned. I felt doomed. I wasn’t wearing my uniform at the stop, and now Superintendent Bernard thinks I was taking a nap?

It’s a long trip from Raton to Las Vegas, and I tried to keep my mind off what had happened. I cleaned the restrooms and took the carpet sweeper down the aisle two or three times. Then, the headend brakeman showed up in my coach.

“Conductor Nelson wants to talk to us,” he said. My heart started pounding

“Raton, Raton,” I yelled, “Everybody going to Raton, this way out!”

Some of Amtrak's fleet of EMD SDP40F diesel units congregate at Chicago in the mid-1970s. The model provided the background for author Larrabee's New Mexico adventure in 1973. J. David Ingles, Brian M. Schmidt collection



again, and I slowly walked behind the brakeman to the first coach and down the stairs to the conductor's office. I felt like a third grader who'd been called to the principal's office.

"Close the door," Nelson said. There was a very long silence. Nelson twirled his toothpick in the front of his mouth.

"My man here told me what happened," Nelson said, pointing to the head-end brakeman and my accomplice in crime.

There was another long silence while he stared at the two of us.

Then he got angry.

He yelled, "You two are the dumbest [epithets deleted] I know on this [epithet deleted] railroad!"

Another long pause. He stared at us with an angry look.

Then, he broke out in the heaviest guffaw and laugh I had ever heard come out of anyone on the railroad! He laughed heavily and laughed some more for what seemed like a very long time. Then he paused. "Next time you two want to do something that stupid, do me a favor, and don't do it with Mr. Bernard waiting for us at the next stop! OK?"

Nelson couldn't stop laughing, and the brakeman and I started nervously laughing as well. I was so scared I didn't know what to do.

"You lucked out today," Nelson said, "Bernard didn't have time to ride down

to Vegas with us, and he didn't seem to care you were missing your uniform Larrabee." Another pause. "Get back to work, you two!" Nelson yelled, and we took off.

Nothing ever came of the incident, although I thought for sure conductor Nelson or Mr. Bernard would write me up for an infraction. I was also amazed at how quickly the story of how the brakeman and I got stuck in the new locomotive on Raton Pass made its way through the rest of the operating crews. "Sure sounded like a dumb thing to have happen," they'd say, "Lucky you didn't get your a** fired!"

And every time I rode with Conductor Nelson after that, he'd always shake his head when he saw me at the beginning of a run.

"Are you planning anything stupid today, Larrabee?" he'd ask.

"No, sir!" I'd tell him.

"Good!" he always replied loudly.

Then, he'd walk away, laughing.

CHUCK LARRABEE was hired by the Santa Fe Railway in December 1971 during the winter break from his freshman year at college as a chair car attendant in the early days of Amtrak working between Albuquerque, N.M., and La Junta, Colo. His adventures as a new hire were described in his article "Somebody'll die on you for sure!" published in the December 2015 issue of Classic Trains.