



LEFT Seaboard Coast Line's northbound *Silver Meteor* approaches Delray Beach, Fla., in 1969.

ABOVE Evidence of past glory at Newark Penn Station in January 2024, as the author and his wife, Laure, await their departure to Florida aboard Amtrak Train 97, the *Silver Meteor*. BOTH, KARL ZIMMERMANN; SAL BROCHURE, KARL ZIMMERMANN COLLECTION

SILVER METEOR

now and then

by Karl Zimmermann

Mid-afternoon, January 23, 2024. With my wife, Laurel, I was at Newark Pennsylvania Station waiting to board Amtrak's Train 97, the *Silver Meteor*, our wheels to Florida. This wasn't our first time boarding the *Meteor* there; we'd done the same thing roughly 55 years earlier — same train, nearly the same hour, probably same platform, but a different operator: Seaboard Coast Line. It was a relatively new railroad then, created by the marriage of Seaboard Air Line and Atlantic Coast Line on July 1, 1967, not that long before that first *Silver Meteor* trip, on March 23, 1969.

Seaboard Coast Line, 1969

SCL's *Meteor* was pure Seaboard in every important way, all fluted stainless steel. Our sleeper, *Fort Lauderdale*, in which we occupied a commodious compartment, a bit larger than the far more common double bedroom, had been built by Pullman-Standard for SAL, as was the train's feature car, 5-double bedroom-buffet lounge *Sun Beam*. Like sisters *Sun Ray* and *Sun View*, it had been renamed by SCL, from *Palm Beach* (the others were *Miami Beach* and *Hollywood Beach*). Exclusively for Pullman passengers, these cars were special, with Florida-inspired

murals, table lamps made of driftwood, and seashell-patterned carpeting. Dome car-wannabes (Eastern clearances largely prohibited the real thing), they were literally unique, with skylights and exceptionally broad and tall windows. In my notes at the time I wrote of an "overall feeling of brightness and airiness." All of these details evoked Florida and its beaches. (There were a few domes operating in the East: five low-profile Baltimore & Ohio cars. Three had been built for the stillborn Chesapeake & Ohio *Chessie* streamliner, and by 1969 were in service on SCL's *Florida Special*.)

The other cars important to us were both built by The Budd Company: the 48-seat diner and the tavern-lounge observation car, patronized principally by coach passengers. (The first *Silver Meteor*, Budd-built and inaugurated February 2, 1939, was a luxury all-chair-car train.) For one thing, this obs car was a long walk from the Pullmans, which were marshalled at the front of the train. As I noted rather snippily in my journal, "The observation car had unfortunately been reupholstered in a tacky plastic fabric." But from trackside the car was a splendid punctuation mark, with its distinctive

tailsign featuring a meteoric swoosh. In the dining car things were predictably pre-Amtrak *comme il faut*: linen, china, heavy hotel-grade silver.

Actually, we'd taken a train roughly a year earlier, on March 16, 1968, from Newark to Florida — Delray Beach, specifically, as our destination would be the next year too — and the ride was even more rarified, on the *Florida Special*, appropriately train numbers 1 and 2. This seasonal, once-Pullman-only train came from the Atlantic Coast Line side of the recent marriage. As Florida's high season was low season elsewhere, particularly the

Rocky Mountain West, SCL could cherry-pick some interesting equipment. Among the four observation cars required to protect this service were a much-revered pair, Pennsylvania Railroad's *Mountain View* and *Tower View*, 2-master bedroom, 1-double bedroom-buffet lounge-observations, delivered by Pullman-Standard in January 1949 for the *Broadway Limited* and recently dropped from that consist. (The other two were no slouches either, drawn from among the eight *Royal-series* 5-double bedroom-buffet lounge-observations built by Pullman-Standard in 1950 for the *Crescent* and *Royal Palm*.) My par-



ABOVE: A Pennsylvania Railroad View-series observation car built for the *Broadway Limited* carries the northbound *Florida Special's* illuminated drumhead sign at Delray Beach, Fla., in March 1968.



LEFT: A trio of E units — one in full Seaboard Coast Line paint, the other two retaining their Seaboard colors with new SCL numbers and logos — leads the *Silver Meteor* in 1969. BOTH, KARL ZIMMERMANN

RIGHT: Seaboard Coast Line's brochure promoting the *Florida Special's* 1969 season. KARL ZIMMERMANN COLLECTION

ents, our hosts for the trip, were in master bedroom B, and Laurel and I in double bedroom A. The master bedroom had a radio and four chairs (just the right number for us), which made down into two lower berths at night.

The dining car featured candlelit dinners and ended with finger bowls, by then an unusual amenity, especially on trains. The paper liners carried a Seaboard Air Line heart logo — "Through the Heart of the South." (I'm sure SCL didn't miss the one I took home with me to preserve,

which I did.) The meals were extravagant. *Table d'Hote* dinners started with the obligatory dish of midget gherkins, ripe olives, and celery greeting diners when seated, then marched on through a choice of starters, five main courses, a variety of potatoes and vegetables, salads, breads and desserts. The tab ranged from \$4.25 to \$5.85, depending on the entrée selected: roast prime ribs of beef, au jus; baked tender capon, sage dressing; roast leg of young lamb, mint jelly; from the broiler, top choice sirloin strip steak, mushroom

welcome aboard
the fun train
1969
FLORIDA SPECIAL

we have a
fabulous trip
planned for you

FLORIDA SPECIAL
First trip from New York December 13, 1968; from Miami December 14. Last trip from Miami April 13, 1969; from New York April 15.

SOUTHWARD READ DOWN		NORTHWARD READ UP	
PCNR No. 107	AVES No. 100	(Station Standard Time)	AVES No. 100
DEPT	DEPT		DEPT
11 15 AM Lv	NEW YORK (Penn. Station)	Av	4 15 PM
11 31 AM Lv	NEWARK	Av	4 03 PM
12 17 PM Lv	TRENTON	Av	3 15 PM
12 46 PM Lv	NORTH PHILADELPHIA	Av	2 45 PM
12 56 PM Lv	PHILADELPHIA (City Center)	Av	2 36 PM
1 25 PM Lv	WILMINGTON	Av	2 07 PM
2 25 PM Lv	BALTIMORE	Av	1 06 PM
3 30 PM Lv	WASHINGTON	Av	12 00 No.
3 47 PM Lv	ALEXANDRIA	Av	11 36 AM
5 50 PM Lv	RICHMOND (Broad St. Station)	Av	9 40 AM
7 45 PM Lv	ROCKY MOUNT	Av	7 15 AM
8 03 PM Lv	WILSON	Av	6 45 AM
9 05 PM Lv	FAYETTEVILLE	Av	5 45 AM
10 35 PM Lv	FLORENCE	Av	4 30 AM
10 45 PM Lv	CHARLESTON	Av	4 20 AM
12 05 AM Lv	SAVANNAH	Av	2 45 AM
1 45 AM Lv	WILMWOOD	Av	1 15 AM
5 35 AM Lv	WINTER HAVEN	Av	7 52 PM
8 55 AM Lv	WEST PALM BEACH	Av	5 45 PM
9 20 AM Lv	DEERFIELD BEACH	Av	5 19 PM
9 30 AM Lv	FORT LAUDERDALE	Av	5 09 PM
9 55 AM Lv	HOLLYWOOD	Av	4 55 PM
10 20 AM Lv	MIAMI	Av	4 43 PM
11 15 AM Lv	MIAMI	Av	4 15 PM

RECREATION CAR SLEEPER PS 30 SLEEPER PS 21

Florida Special menu



caps; and fancy Florida lobster tail, drawn butter. Predictable, sure, but still pretty mouth-watering. Breakfast and luncheon were their own feasts.

Laurel and I returned to Newark a dozen days later, again on the *Florida Special*, in a compartment in PRR's 4-compartment, 2-drawing room, 4-dou-

Welcome!

We are delighted that you chose the new Seaboard Coast Line Railroad for your trip.

It is a pleasure to have you aboard, and we want to do everything we can to make your journey enjoyable.

Our representatives are at your service and we hope you will let us know if there is anything we can do to add to your pleasure and comfort.

We look forward to the privilege of serving you often.



ABOVE Front and back covers of a 1968 *Florida Special* menu. KARL ZIMMERMANN COLLECTION

BELOW On the author's 1968 trip to Delray Beach, Fla., former Seaboard coach-lounge 6501 brought up the rear of SCL's north-bound *Silver Meteor*. It was one of three similar cars built for the train in 1940.

KARL ZIMMERMANN



ble bedroom *Andrew W. Mellon*, built in 1948, by American Car & Foundry, as *Imperial Brink*, a somewhat odd name. (It was one of roughly two dozen sleepers renamed in 1956 after Pennsylvania merchants and industrialists for use on *The Pittsburgher*, a premier Pittsburgh–New York City overnighter. The car initially honored H.J. Heinz, but he apparently was dumped after a month for Mellon. There's probably a story there.)

What a consist ours was! There were four coaches, two diners, seven Pullmans, a recreation car, 6-double bedroom-buffet-lounge *Pass-a-Grille Beach*, and *Royal*-series obs *Royal Canal*, owned by Louisville & Nashville. (Southern, Western Railway of Alabama, New York Central, and Florida East Coast also contributed to the observation-car pool for the *Crescent* and *Royal Palm*.) I especially remember the step-up to the raised observation area for enhanced viewing, reminiscent of the *20th Century Limited's Hickory Creek* and *Sandy Creek*. I remember *Pass-a-Grille Beach* for its banks of window-facing seats and as the place where Laurel charmed the porter into giving her a Pullman Indian Tree-pattern butter chip, on which he had delivered lemon wedges for our Bloody Marys. Fashion shows were a touted feature of the recreation car, but we didn't attend.

—continued on page 46



ABOVE The Sun Lounge aboard SCL's *Sun Beam*, built by Pullman-Standard for Seaboard Air Line in 1956. On March 24, 1969, the 5-double bedroom-lounge car retained its original decor, with seashell-patterned carpet, driftwood lamps, and photomurals of Florida scenes.

RIGHT The *Silver Meteor's* feature cars, *Sun Beam* and its two sisters, offered expansive side windows and skylights in their Sun Lounges. BOTH, KARL ZIMMERMANN

BELOW The illuminate *Silver Meteor* tail sign on an SCL Budd observation car in 1971. ROGER PUTA





ABOVE: Passengers walk the platform beside Pullman sleeper-lounge *Sun Beam* (renamed by SCL, though the car's letter board hadn't been changed) during a *Silver Meteor* stop in 1969.

LEFT: SCL's northbound *Silver Meteor* approaches Delray Beach in 1969.

BELOW: PRR *Tower View* trails the southbound *Florida Special* as the train passes its northbound running mate on Penn Central on March 29, 1968.

FACING PAGE TOP LEFT: The northbound *Silver Meteor* (at right) and the southbound *Silver Star* meet at Boynton Beach, Fla., in March 1969.

FACING PAGE TOP RIGHT: Viewed from a dutch door, SCL's northbound and southbound *Silver Meteors* meet in Florida in 1969.

FACING PAGE BOTTOM: Amtrak's northbound *Silver Meteor* makes an unexpected stop near Delray Beach on April 7, 1974, while crew and SCL track workers confer.

ALL, KARL ZIMMERMANN



TIME TO	1 ST STOP	TRK	LINE	TRAIN	STATUS
3:01 BOSTON	NEW YORK	1	1	1	ALL ASGARD
3:15 WASHINGTON	PHILADELPHIA	2	2	2	IN LMB
3:16 TRENTON	NEWARK AIRPORT	3	3	3	IN LMB
3:21 NEW YORK	NEWARK AIRPORT	4	4	4	IN LMB
3:21 RICHMOND/MAN	NEW YORK	5	5	5	IN LMB
3:23 NEW YORK-SEC	METROPARK	6	6	6	IN LMB
3:25 JERSEY AVE.	SEC AUGUS	7	7	7	IN LMB
3:29 BOSTON	NEWARK AIRPORT	1	1	1	IN LMB
3:36 MIAMI	TRENTON	2	2	2	IN LMB
3:39 SOUTH AMBOY	NEWARK AIRPORT	3	3	3	IN LMB
3:45 NEW YORK-SEC	SEC AUGUS	4	4	4	IN LMB
3:48 TRENTON	METROPARK	5	5	5	IN LMB

WELCOME TO NEWARK PENN STATION
FIRST CAR AND LAST CAR ON NJT TRAINS ARE QUIET CARS



Amtrak's *Silver Meteor* in 2024

So in January 2024 we were back at Newark Penn, where we had boarded *Mountain View* and *Fort Lauderdale* so many years ago, and after a few minutes we had to wonder why we were there, instead at the Metropolitan Lounge in the glamorous, spacious, still relatively new (opened on January 1, 2021) Moynihan Train Hall at New York Penn. The reason was proximity to the northeastern New Jersey town of Oradell, my once and current home, which is why so many train journeys over the decades have begun there. I don't remember what the Newark station was like when we began our late 1960s journeys there, but since local journalist Edward Higgins wrote, just two months after our *Meteor* trip, that "during the small hours of the night it is a monstrous place," I'd guess it wasn't lovely.

The station is not only an engineering triumph, integrating the ex-Pennsylvania Railroad main line, the city subway, local buses, and the Hudson & Manhattan Railroad "Tubes," but an Art Deco gem, designed by Lawrence Grant White, of the storied McKim, Mead & White firm, designers of New York City's tragically lost Pennsylvania Station and other landmarks. The Newark station, among the firm's last projects, formally opened on March 23, 1935, and much of its elegant ornamentation does survive, particularly in the main waiting room: globed chandeliers; a dozen medallions on the walls depicting historic and then current modes of transportation; a metallic interlocked PRR logo over the front entrance, and substantial wooden benches of black walnut, adorned with PRR keystones.

In the mid-1980s the station was treated to a thorough and heartening restoration, which Ted Scull and I covered in the September 1986 *Passenger Train Journal*, but over time the shine dulled, and the addition of a coffee shop/snack bar did nothing for the room's aesthetics. That's gone now, and it appears that another restoration is in progress. One bench is boxed and carries a large sign — "Newark Penn Station: Reimagining an Icon." But I think it's been that way for awhile.

A section was cordoned off for Amtrak passengers, but it was unmonitored, and numerous of our fellow bench-sitters I'd guess weren't going anywhere, on Amtrak, NJ Transit, or PATH. We watched the Solari board change, slap-slap-slap, but when "3:38 MIAMI SILVER METEOR AMTRAK 97" clattered into view the status showed "DELAYED." Just that, no time estimate. Automated Julie could shed no light, nor could the ticket agent, nor the Amtrak app. Five minutes? Five hours? We feared the worst. We'd requested a red cap (the red cap?), who took us up to the platform early as he had to meet another train. He did unlock a heated waiting area adjacent to Track 3 for us.



When the notification changed to "ARRIVING," the red cap reappeared on cue and took our bags to our bedroom in a nameless Viewliner I sleeper. The other sleeper was Viewliner II *St. Johns River*. I love railroad-car names (you've probably guessed that already) and felt a twinge of envy, though perhaps I shouldn't have. When we left Newark only 45 minutes down I felt as though we'd dodged a bullet.

When 97 pulled in it was clear it hadn't been washed in donkey's years. Its windows were opaque with grime — another reason to regret our not choosing to depart from New York Penn, where we would have had a 50-50 chance of our room being on the platform side. Then I could have done some cleaning myself, as is my wont. Perhaps the frigid weather that January week was a possible excuse, but the *Lake Shore Limited* consist I rode to Chicago about four months later in the warmth of May again suggested that Sunnyside Yard in Queens, where trains in and out of New York are serviced, had stopped washing long-haul trains.

Our sleeper attendant, Patrick, a 27-year Amtrak veteran, was efficient and conversational. I mentioned that three years ago Laurel and I had managed to book on purpose a bedroom in a Viewliner II sleeper, then new, on the *Meteor* from Savannah to New York. Even after enlisting help our car attendant couldn't get the lower berth down and we were shunted off to an open bedroom in a Viewliner I.

"When I bid jobs," Patrick said, "my first priority is to get a Viewliner I. The beds are balky on the IIs. The attendant in the II car here often has trouble and gets me to help her."

Dinner in the diner *Albany* was next and, opaque windows aside, that was a pleasant surprise, first because the tables were adorned with pairs of fresh roses, red and white. The *Silver* trains, *Meteor* and running mate *Star*, are the only Am-

trak Eastern services to offer the "Traditional Dining Menu," originally restricted to the Western long-hauls, rather than the "Flexible Dining Menu" I'd experience on the *Lake Shore*. Laurel and I both chose the "Certified Angus Beef Flat Iron Steak," also described as "Signature," cooked rare. One steak was tender and delicious, one tough. We shared and didn't go hungry. Other entrées were pan-roasted chicken breast, Atlantic salmon, and pasta primavera.

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After dinner we chatted with two couples from Boston at the table across who were headed for a Carnival cruise. It was their first Amtrak trip and they were loving it so far.

"All the porters have been wonderful," which was good to hear, obsolete nomenclature aside. Patrick was wonderful too. We asked him why there were only a dozen people in the diner, surprising to us as we think Viewliner II diners very attractive.

"This is a quiet time," he said, "between the holidays and spring break, periods when there's typically a third sleeper. Now pretty consistently 9710 is a Viewliner I and 9711 a Viewliner II." I mentioned that lots of passengers seem to prefer dining in their rooms.

"It seems like Millennials don't like sitting with strangers," Patrick added, which echoed Amtrak's justification for switching to "Flexible Dining." Sitting with others wouldn't have been a problem in tonight's half-empty car, and we would have welcomed tablemates, since for us diner conversations are among the pleasures of Amtrak travel.

The overnight journey, on the other hand, was not a pleasure, as our sleeper was the quintessential rattletrap. That's a universal problem for the Superliner and

Viewliner bedrooms that open up into suites, as the partitioning walls slap and bang. Aware of that, I'd brought along half a clothespin as a wedge. Too small, but when wrapped in a wash cloth it brought some relief, though it was a restless night. Breakfast was tasty, but the roses had wilted and the opacity of the windows was far more evident in the morning. (To the crew's credit, fresh flowers were in the vases by lunchtime.)

"Touring," said one of the three women who looked into our room shortly after we'd left Jacksonville, where they'd boarded for an hour hop to Palatka, casing the train for a possible long journey. They were favorably impressed. "I grew up in Anniston, Alabama," one said. "We heard train whistles all the time. My father was doctor for the Southern, so we sometimes traveled on passes."

And that's pretty much that. It's a long day, riding the length of Florida, without many scenic highlights. I'd briefly gone to bat with Laurel for choosing the *Silver Star*, which adds some daylight riding time in the beginning (and a free lunch!) and still would get us to Fort Lauderdale a few minutes earlier than the *Meteor*, but she wanted no part of the roughly three-hour desultory diversion back and forth to Tampa, and my counterarguments were weak. (SAL's *Silver Meteor* also served the West Coast of Florida, St. Petersburg, but by splitting off a section at Wildwood, no backhaul.)

Early evening, 6:40PM to be exact, about 35 minutes behind schedule, January 24, 2024, and Laurel and I were in Fort Lauderdale. No finger bowls in the diner this trip but steaks, an excellent crew, and fresh roses. It had been a long time since we'd dined among roses on Amtrak. 🌹

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