

An Amtrak Adventure

Eric Bruton
April 27, 2004

In 1998 it was necessary for me to attend a seminar at a merchant marine training center in Fort Lauderdale, Fl. I was recently reminded of this adventure while reading the entreaty work by William Least Heat-Moon's, Blue Highways. Heat-Moon took to the back roads of America to find a place where change did not mean ruin, where time, men and deeds connected. I, on the other hand, saw my trip to Florida as a great opportunity to ride the rails through back country unseen from the speeding windows of my car.

I had often driven the 600 mile trip to Fort Lauderdale from Wilmington alternating my rhumb line between highway US 17 and US 74-76 to I95. I had grown so accustomed to the trip that Charleston, Florence, Savannah and even Jacksonville seemed like the outskirts of home. When I would arrive in Savannah, returning home from a trip to southern Florida, I often thought, "well, it won't be long now," despite the six hour drive that still lay ahead of me. I don't mind the drive, even at night.

I have flown to Fort Lauderdale too, but while it is faster it is the least civilized way to go. On the plane one is reduced to reading in a cramped cheap seat, looking at the back of the person in the seat in front, eating some peanuts and herded around the airport like a cow in a feed lot. Commercial airline travel is OK for someone who can't do any better but it is the joy of ever changing scenery that I crave on a trip. Something new to look at was what I wanted when I decided to take the train to my seminar.

A little over two months prior to my trip I signed on to the Internet to visit the Amtrak web page. The round trip fare from Rocky Mount was, a very reasonable, \$96.00 for a coach seat. I wasted no time digging out my credit card to purchase the ticket, on line.

I could have boarded the train in Florence which is also about a two and a half hour drive from Wilmington. The ticket price is the same for both boarding stations. The deciding factor was that I have a daughter living in Rocky Mount with whom I could visit and with whom I could leave my car. It would mean a slightly longer ride on the train but this would be an adventure. At the time of the reservation the added time was not a factor. The day of the trip I drove up to Rocky Mount early and had a very nice visit with Jamie before she dropped me off at the station.

The scheduled boarding time in Rocky Mount, NC was 5:08 PM. At 5:06 I looked along the track to the north to see the bright headlight of the engine. At that moment the train must have been approaching a highway crossing as the wonderful sound of the air klaxon announced to the world that it was appropriate to stop, look, and listen. Waaaaaaaaaaaaa, Waaaaaaaaaaaa, Wa, Waaaaaaaaaaaaa the deep rumbling throaty horn transformed the road crossings into parking lots. The great silver beast continued to announce its presents, its voice growing louder and higher in pitch as it rolled through town making a perfect stop alongside the passenger platform of the station, only two minutes late.

A dark blue suited conductor stepped down from openings between each of the three coaches and placed a well worn stool on the passenger platform for the passengers to step on as they descended from the train. Four people got off.

All along the platform loud speakers crackled and the voice of the station ticket agent blared in monotones that were barely understandable, "All aboard train 933, Ammmmmtraaaaaak service to Floooorence, Charleston, Savaaaaannah, Jacksonville, Tammmmma, and Miami, booooooard. All aboard." I was the only boooooarding passenger. I slightly tripped on the stool then regained my footing as I climbed into the tail of the beast, baggage in hand. As I slipped into my seat I glanced at my watch. 5:12 PM. I was impressed. As I adjusted the back of my seat I noticed that the train was already zooming south along the main line ribbon rail. I was amazed.

It was a smooth ride. The seats were two across on each side of the car, like those in the first class section of a jet liner and I could stretch out without touching the seat in front of me. There were plenty of vacant seats in this car so I, for no good reason, chose a window seat facing east. Maybe it is because I am drawn to water. Anyway, in short order the train soon slid under I-95 and I was able to see cars and trucks heading southward like us.

Anyone who has driven on an interstate highway might be able to confirm that no matter what the posted speed limit is, traffic usually moves at a speed ten miles per hour faster. This of course, causes the type A's of the world to achieve normal cruising speeds of twenty or thirty miles per hour over the posted speed limit. I think this is due to their need to excel. There is a very little known law of physics that states, the speed of a vehicle in which one is being transported is inferior to the speed of another vehicle. This simply means that a body doing, say, 90 miles per hour will soon be passed by a body doing, for example, 95 miles per hour. This is referred to as Bruton's fifth law of motion. I bring all of this up because the train was moving faster than any of the traffic

on I-95. This section of the highway is a 65 miles per hour zone. I would guess that traffic was doing 70 mph and the train must have been traveling at seventy five or eighty miles per hour, leaving all the traffic behind. I began to think I might have to modify Bruton's law when a brand new shinny black Jag with New Jersey plates blew past the train like it was standing still. Ah, the fifth law of motion remains a true law of nature.

Shadows from the old iron wire, cross-armed telegraph polls were perceptively longer now as the day moved on to twilight. The train had, ever so subtly, moved away from the interstate and was beginning to slow as it entered a small town. On the equipment box for a road crossing gate I read, "Selma, NC No. 1." Magically, the train had been switched off of the main line to a siding whose swaying rails click and clacked into the center of town. As the train smoothly came to a stop on a broad sweeping curve of track, I could see a story book train station with ragged people leaning against it, hands in pockets and cigarettes dangling at the corners of mouths. A brown family with small children boarded and chose to sit in the car in front of mine. I do not know how old this station is but when my car rolled past the station I saw a historic marker beside it. I could not read the sign. I think this station could have been the northern most stop on the Wilmington and Weldon Rail Road back in the 1860's. This little rail line would later become the mighty Atlantic Coast Line Rail Road in the early twentieth century and then the Seaboard Coast Line in the 1970's.

As the train moved out of town I saw men, switchmen, dressed in the traditional denim overalls standing at their post waiting to throw the great and heavy arm that would set the tracks for the next train scheduled at that intersection. The setting sun crossed back to the right side of the train as we gently curved back onto our southern

path. Soon the clicking, clacking and swaying of the old rails gave way to the smoother quieter ribbon rails of the main line. Night was speeding toward us as fast as we were rolling on to our destination.

From Selma to Florence, South Carolina, the rail bed ran through forests and fields. These were part of the foothills and occasionally clay colored sandy banks rose up from the rail bed above the height of my window. Arlo Guthrie's hit song, "City of New Orleans," played in my head. "Night time on the City of New Orleans," and "dealing cards with the old men in the club car," I remembered that I had not eaten yet. You can walk in a rail car on the main line. There is no seat belt to keep one fastened to the vehicle in case of turbulence. I was free to walk about. Off to the club car I went.

The club car was set up like a small diner, counter in the middle, booths and small tables where the floor space would allow them. There were already twenty or so people sitting around eating hamburgers, cheese sandwiches, hot dogs, drinking sodas and beer. I perused the menu and immediately understood how they could sell me a round trip ticket for such a good price. Everything seemed expensive. Still, hunger makes a man do crazy things. I am no exception. I ordered what seemed like the best deal on the menu, 2 White Castle Burgers (\$3.25), a diet coke (\$1.75) and a bag of chips (\$1.75). I was hungry and since I had never had a White Castle Hamburger, I was really looking forward to the experience. I handed the waiter \$6.75 and waited for my dinner. My order was ready quickly. The bell went off on the microwave and the waiter pulled the steaming hot cellophane package out to a paper saucer. As he shoved the stuff toward me across the counter without the slightest trace of emotion, he looked toward the tip jar that the food just missed on its way to my stomach. My tip for

him was a genuinely heart felt thanks for doing your job. (And, by the way thanks to the union for making your job pay better than any other land waiter's job.) Have you had a White Castle Burger? It is a canned biscuit with a half dollar sized piece of meat on it. I looked back at the tip jar and wondered if I had misunderstood its purpose. Maybe I was supposed to take a dollar out of the jar with my order. I steamed over that dinner at a table for one in the corner of the club car. Arlo was gone from my head. I vowed to eat the biggest steak I could find before getting on the next train.

Back in my window seat I gazed at the night flying by. Surprisingly the contours of trees, embankments and fields still could be made out, less dark than the night. I remembered that the moon was just past full and probably rising at that moment. The night was clear here, just north of Florence, S. C. Occasionally, the lights of a farm house twinkled in the distance but here on the south bound Amtrak the outside world rolled alone new, undisturbed and peaceful.

The train stopped in Florence where about twenty new passengers arrived in my car. They settled into the vacant seats quickly as the train moved off toward the next stop. The seat next to me was still vacant. Although it was still only about 8:00 PM, the gentle rocking motion of the train, comfort of the seat and the reduced lighting that the conductor had adjusted after the stop, all came together to wrap me in the arms of Morpheus.

About two hours later, the conductor walked through the car softly announcing the train's arrival in Charleston. As one might expect, this station was a more modern, well lit, facility built to accommodate large numbers of passengers in the days when the city was a major military town. It must have been located in the North Charleston area

because the station was in one corner of a large freight yard that could not have been accommodated in the downtown area. Switching engines pulled and pushed boxcars, hopper cars, tank cars and the new darling of rail freight, intermodal cars up and down adjacent tracks. At this station there was a large number of passengers going and coming. My car filled up fast and this time, I received a traveling companion in the seat next to me.

He was a young fellow just out of Air Force boot camp and stationed at the Charleston Air Base. He had a week of leave and was heading down to Savannah to visit his parents. He spoke well of the Air Force and I was reminded of my first year out of Navy boot camp. We chatted as the train rolled across the Ashley River and headed south toward Savannah. I told him about my career on the water as the rail paralleled highway US 17, and again, the train left the highway traffic behind. He told me about his hopes for the future and I shared my Navy experiences while the moonlit country side rolled past the window. It was all friendly but of course, shallow meaningless conversation. When the train arrived in Savannah he got up, gathered his small soft sided hand bag, the kind carried by military men in civilian clothes, and departed. We had killed the time of the short trip, not exchanged names nor had we established any kind of bond. We were manly men just killing time.

In Savannah another large number of passengers departed and a new load occupied the seats. Mrs. Vivian Hernandez found her way to my vacancy. She was a talkative elderly lady of about 86 years young, to put it politely. She had been living with her daughter for the last six months while she recuperated from some kind of surgery. In less than five minutes she had drug out pictures of her family. With a well practiced

flip of her wrist a flat plastic snake with pictures of daughter, son-in-law, grand kids, and family dog unfolded from her wallet. Thirty minutes out of the station I had heard about her experiences on the Marial Boat Lift as a young woman and how hard it had been to start a new life in Miami, but it was all worth it. I was going to tell a little about myself, but she didn't seem interested. I began to dread riding with her all the way to Fort Lauderdale. After several attempts to get a word in edgewise, I was able to explain that I had had a long day and was very tired. She understood and stopped talking. I flipped the recline button on my seat, turned my face to the window and drifted off to sleep.

I am not certain what caused me to stir from the leaned-back setting sleep that had come over me. Maybe it was the lights from the rail yard or the distant sounding of the klaxon. It could have been the stirring of the debarking passengers as they gathered their things in the dark rail car in preparation for their arrival in the station. Most likely, it was the gripping, cramping pain that had begun to rumble around in my gut.

On the other side of the window glass there was a surreal orange glow that barely cut through the darkness in the foreground of the night. Shadowy figures walked and carried baggage toward a modern looking building with a sign in big letters, "Welcome to Jacksonville, Fl." Most of the passengers were leaving the car here and I hoped that Mrs. Hernandez would move to a seat that she could have all to herself.

I flipped the button to raise the back of my seat. Big mistake! I sat up too quickly and realized immediately that the world was spinning out of control. I closed my eyes but the images in my mind continued to careen around the inside of my skull as though it was the Charlotte Motor Speedway. Sweat rolled off of my forehead and something

just was not right with my stomach. The memory of the White Castle burgers made me cringe. I knew that I had to leave my window seat and make my way to the little room behind the big room.

I stood up and stepped over Mrs. Hernandez's sleeping, outstretched legs and nearly fell on her as I moved out into the aisle. I was weak as dishwater. I collapsed into the vacant seat across the aisle. The indirect orange light slowly flashed from on high through the window as the train slowed to a stop in front of the station. I closed my eyes for a second but the cramp motivated me to try again to move to the water closet.

Thank God it was not occupied. I flung the door open like a mad man on a mission. (I truly was.) I prepared myself to get well. I had just settled down for therapy when the lights went out in there. No, I had not passed out. They had uncoupled the engines from the train to hook up a fresh fueled piece of machinery for the rest of the trip. It was profoundly dark in that small space. It was quiet too. Not the slightest sound of ventilation could be heard. This was significant because, in the mean time, a great evil spirit had slithered into the area. The good news was that I was feeling better. Now, I have no way of knowing your familiarity with train cars, but the facility I was in had walls of stainless steel. Everything was recessed into the wall to make it appear modern and maybe easier to clean. I felt around the walls in the dark and discovered a small counter with a tiny sink in it but the water faucets were nowhere to be felt on the counter. I continued to feel around in the logical places for the paper. Alas, I began to think this was the train company's contribution to the paperless society. I had been in the darkness now for about ten minutes and because it was so quiet outside I began to wonder if the other passengers had been taken off the train for some reason. I was

getting desperate. I reached over and cracked the door just enough to let in a little of the reflected, subdued lighting from outside the car, thinking that it might reveal the hiding place of the paper. I had just renewed my search when someone near the door said, "my God, what in the hell is that terrible odor." I heard Mrs. Hernandez sleepily say, "I think it is the exhaust from the engine." I quietly pushed the door closed and sat in the still darkness once more.

From outside the car I could hear the rumbling of train engines moving back and forth. There were men laughing and calling to each other in unintelligible words. I wondered if the demon that had been hold up in the compartment with me had somehow escaped to freedom, off of the train. Someone tried the door handle to my dungeon but, of course I had locked myself into this hell. Finally, I felt the jerky move of the car as the new engine coupled to the train. About three minutes later the lights came on the little space. The fans started blowing fresh air toward me and I found the little stainless steel flap that hid the roll. I glanced at my watch as I stepped on the hot water pedal on the floor in front of the sink. I had been in the darkness for twenty minutes, but I was feeling fine. As I opened the door to return to my seat all of the remaining passengers seemed to be still asleep. I quietly sat down in the seat across the isle from Mrs. Hernandez and watched the new group of characters come on stage for act two of the great train adventure. One of the new passengers didn't even select a seat before she went into the stainless steel power room. She must have gone in there to pray 'cause I heard her exclaim, "Jesus," as she quickly flung the door open to claim her seat in the coach.

A little after One o'clock in the morning the newly configured, newly passengered train began to roll out of the Jacksonville station. Night and quiet once again wrapped around the cars and from somewhere outside the car I could here the great air horn warning motorist that a train was near the crossing. I wondered how many people who live near the tracks could get a full nights sleep with the rumble and horn so close by. I flipped my recline button on the seat across the isle from Mrs. Hernandez, turned toward the window and could not get back to sleep.

My memories went back to three years of my childhood in Palatka, Florida. I was in the third fourth and fifth grades in that little north central farming town. The house we lived in was about a block from the main line of the, then, Atlantic Coast Line Rail Road. Most of the time I never heard the early morning trains that rolled up and down the track. Sometimes I would be awaked by the horn of a freight train slowly click – clacking along the track. Even at that young age I wondered if there might be hobo men hiding in boxcars, off on some continuing adventure to another rail yard, in another season, in another time. I wondered if this trip would pass my old house. It did, an hour and a half later. I smiled and drifted off to sleep, a child again.

Somewhere during the early morning hours the train left the main north – south line and headed over to Tampa. I awoke as the sun was just rising and the train was slowing down to enter the main part of town. Arlo once again came to mind, “good morning America. How are you.” In Tampa the station is on a short rail spur that requires the train to slow to almost a walking pace. After my experience in the club car, I decided to have breakfast in the dining car which was connected just ahead of the club car.

This car was more like the dining cars of the romantic rail road period. There must have been about twenty five tables in there, each festooned with a white linen table cloth, (under glass), a fancy little vase with plastic flowers (no need to water these babies), and the finest stainless steel flatware. I thought about my cocoon of last night and hoped that these utensils were not recycled from some dead rail coach of the past. A dark brown waiter in white coat said, "good morning, sir," and handed me an upscale looking menu. With his left hand he poured coffee from a silver carafe into my blue rimmed cup with the initials SCL on the side. I was pleasantly surprised to see that I could have two eggs, bacon and grits for \$3.55. I ordered biscuits to go with it just to see if they would be canned. Before he disappeared he handed me a fresh copy of the Tampa paper. I was a happy man. He returned shortly with my order perfectly cook. The biscuits were freshly hand made. I buttered them as the waiter refilled my coffee cup. I eat a wonderful breakfast as the train rolled through the northwestern swamps bordering Lake Okeechobee. By the time I left the \$5.00 tip on the table we were crossing the rail bridge at Moore Haven Lock, a section of the Fort Myers to Lake Okeechobee waterway. I have been through that bridge many times before on tugs pushing barges of freight.

Before there were trains there were boats hauling freight in south Florida. The waterway system was a natural, inexpensive way to transport vital goods that opened the southern frontier. By the time I was piloting tugs along these waters, barge traffic was virtually nonexistent. I feel privileged to be among the small group of captains to carry freight through Moore Haven Lock. But this train had cleared the bridge and the past was gone forever.

From Moore Haven the train switched to a rail that ran to the southeast to Bell Glade where we sat on a siding for about fifteen minutes waiting for a north bound Amtrak to pass. I chatted again with Mrs. Hernandez. This time it was mostly about her late husband, her life at South Beach and the quaint art deco building where she lived. When we rolled again it was due east and by nine o'clock the train rumbled into West Palm Beach.

From here to Fort Lauderdale the train was a local. We stopped in every community on the southeast coast. Each stop boasted a beautiful, modern, pastel colored station with coconut palms. Sign boards with legendary city names like Lake Worth, Delray Beach, Boca Raton, Pompano Beach, and finally, Fort Lauderdale announced the stations.

I stepped off of the train in a cloudless sky. It was 11:30 AM. The temperature must have been eighty. I found a cab and loaded my gear in the trunk. The taxi headed off to the school and the train, with Mrs. Hernandez, headed on down to Miami.