

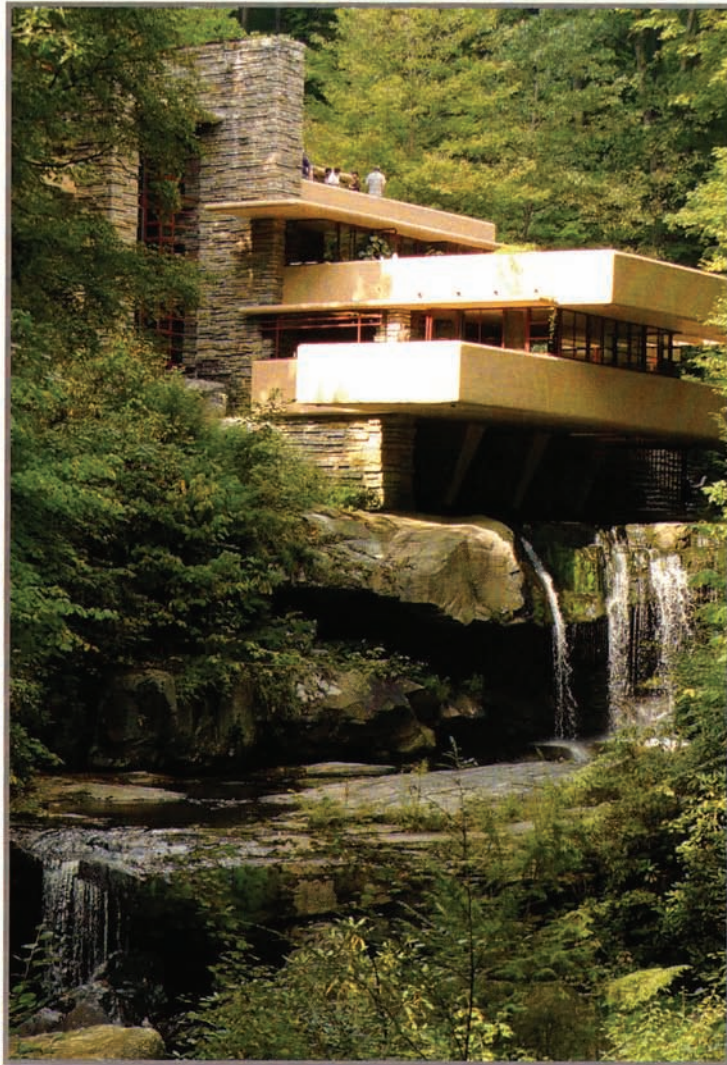
Bob's Toot-Toot Blog



These "Toot-Toot" blogs — and their accompanying photographs — chronicle my AMTRAK travels during September and October, 2009. Over a period of 30 days, I crossed the United States three times and took many connecting trips in between. This is the story of my journey, and the spirit of adventure it continues to inspire.

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# Hitting the Rails

Friday, September 04, 2009



Well, it's about to begin. Bob's big adventure. Let's see what happens next. I'm dipping my toe in the world of blogging. It feels like making your way down a long dark hall. Touching the walls a lot. Bumping into things. Occasionally stumbling. Anyhow, it's a start. For the uninitiated, I am off on a sabbatical, hopefully a time of rejuvenation and, perhaps, discovery. Much of the time will be spent on trains that take me across the United States and, periodically, stopping to visit longtime colleagues and friends. As part of the adventure, I'll be engaged in a series of Life Coaching sessions. So far it's been a fascinating experience. Interesting first assignment. I am asked to list the people I most admire and the attributes/reasons I selected them. Family members past and present top the list, followed by a couple of close friends, and three professors, one each from the three schools I attended — Whittier, Columbia and Cal. Then people I've worked with over the years. A terrific editor, a great reporter, a late, lamented chairman of Chevron. The theory is that if you can identify the attributes that make these folks special to you those same attributes will form your core values (too corporate sounding? my coach calls them Standards of Integrity). Here's the key, sez coach: If they weren't your SOI's, you

couldn't recognize them in others. I think of them more as aspirations and they include: Living in The Moment (Spontaneity); Serving Others (Selflessness); Never Giving Up (Determination/Commitment); People Enlarger (my mom was great at this); Honesty; and Fearless Creativity. The next step is to list these on a card and look and think about them frequently. Embed them in your conscious, right? Anyhow, as it happens I have picked up an assignment from The New York Times to write about Marietta, OH, my first stop. My coach wants me to think about this as a multi-level experience. On the one hand, I will be functioning as an author, sharing what I find through the article, basically your standard journalistic gig. On the other, I'll be beginning an adventure, a journey of self-discovery, and an opportunity to practice those SOI's or Life Intentions, as the coach also calls them, on my list. The goal: to achieve self-growth. A disquieting thought: What about all the millions of the world's people who would come up empty if asked to write such a list? What, in other words, if you had no one to admire? Could that be a reason our globe is such a mess? Anyhow, welcome to the meanderings of a madman train rider. I hope it isn't too boring. Introspective writing isn't my long suit. Oh, yeah, and I am also trying to revise my novel and survive — and pay for — a whole bunch of ripping and tearing at home (ever try installing forced air heating in a 100-year-old house?). So a busy time is about to get busier. Toot, toot!

Posted by rcyeager at 05:01PM ()

## Back Home in Marietta

Sunday, September 13, 2009



Could Marietta, Ohio, be the town that time forgot? A place where friendly mid-westerners seem so free of the cynicism of the coasts? Where historic homes and buildings are uniformly preserved without a "Preservation District" or even requirements for demolition permits? Where the millions needed for a hospital expansion are raised solely through local donations? Enjoying dinner in the garden of the Buckley House, a majestic Federalist home built in the first years of the 19th Century. The soaring song of Crickets fill the air, a symphony heard only in the waning days of Summer. Across Front Street and along the banks of the Ohio River, sternwheelers are beginning to line the docks below the Lafayette Hotel in preparation for the big weekend festival. Some 100,000 sternwheel enthusiasts expected, hard to think where they will fit in a town of 15,000. I interview Charlotte, the president of the Chamber of Commerce, a Marietta native who spent 17 years in the canyons of Wall Street, working for the International division of Manufacturers Hanover Trust. She and her husband — who'd met at Marietta College — couldn't wait to get back here, and finally did. Charlotte invites me to the weekly Marietta Rotary Club luncheon, held this week in a handsome retirement community just out of town. Seems like the room is full of people who could be on my Life Coaching list. Service to Others, Commitment, People Enlarging skills seem to be in evidence all around the room. One of the speakers is a dapper 92-year-old who is planning to drive to California. Another a stylish lady with a swoop of silver hair, impeccably turned out and still wearing high heels - at 88! I interview another guy, a transplanted Baltimore lawyer who's restoring a theater, built to Broadway standards he proudly proclaims. The place



opened with the premier of Mary Pickford's silent "Daddy Long Legs" in 1919 . Huge job, costing millions, but it will be an old style big theater when finished, capable of showing full-scale live performances as well as films. It's funny how big city people find themselves finding themselves in a little place like this. In the afternoon, Judi and I drove up to Lookout Point across the Ohio River. Incredible view with huge billows of midwestern clouds. You look back at Marietta and see the prominent buildings, including the big Congregational Church, the first church west of the colonies, where Linda Steelman — met her at the Rotary lunch — is minister. Lush foliage and forests frame the



two rivers that embrace the town like watery arms and, crossing them, the three local bridges that take you back into what was once the Old World to the East. A Life Coaching challenge presents itself on the way back to our country inn in the West Virginia woods, when I discover I've misplaced my credit and AAA cards. Normally, this would have led to a lot of pointless outrage and self-recrimination.



But I seem to be working through it, not letting it upset the balance of the experience; I figure I'll just plow on with my Debit card and, well, miss out on all those Triple A discounts. Maybe this stuff is working, or at least helping. The visit winds down with a bang, literally. The Saturday night finale for the Sternwheel Festival is a spectacular fireworks show, attended by thousands of folks from southern Ohio and West Virginia. Maybe the best I've ever seen with drizzling, dazzling, spiraling rockets exploding in the night sky over Marietta's red brick buildings and streets. Francis Scott Keyes would have been proud.

Posted by rceager at 01:20PM ()





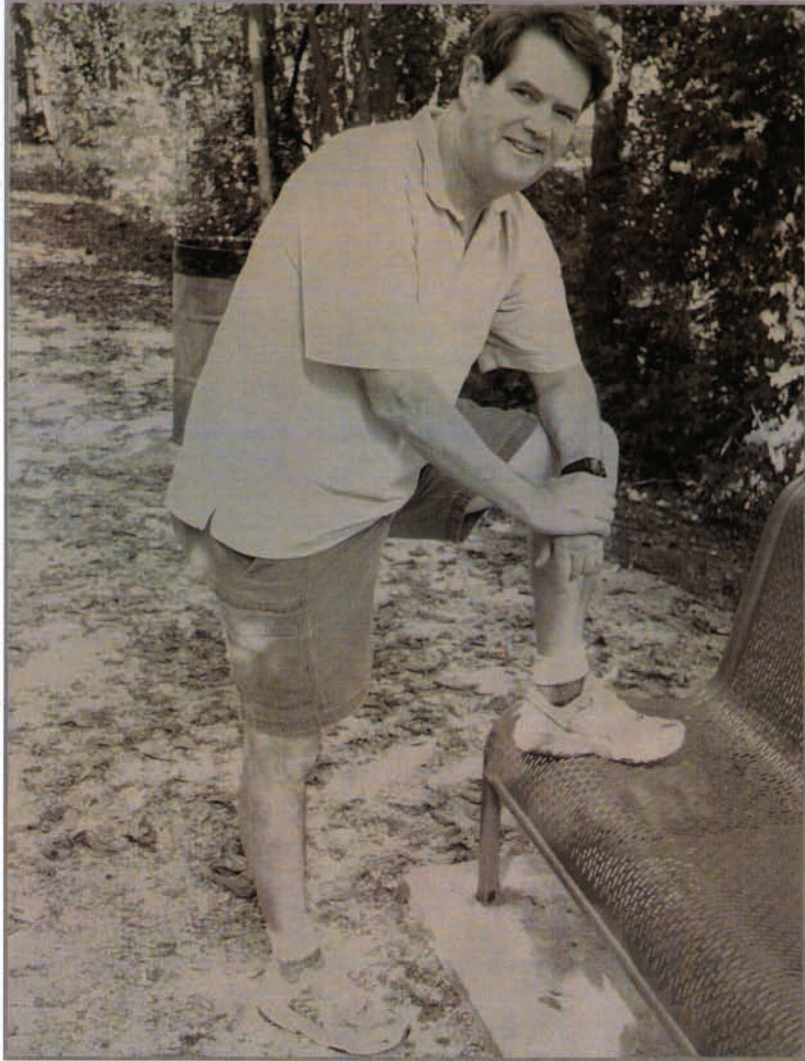
## In the land of the farmer's Dells

Sunday, September 20, 2009



6:35a.m., Indianapolis. Rolling. Dark, comfortable car old enough to have covered metal slots where ashtrays used to go. I'm aboard The Cardinal, out of New York and via the Eastern seaboard, West Virginia and Ohio. Packed with humanity. Somebody coughs, not near me. A kid talks quietly to his grandmother. On the rails at last. Marietta's been top of mind the last couple of days, even though we left on Sunday. I've been hunched over in my

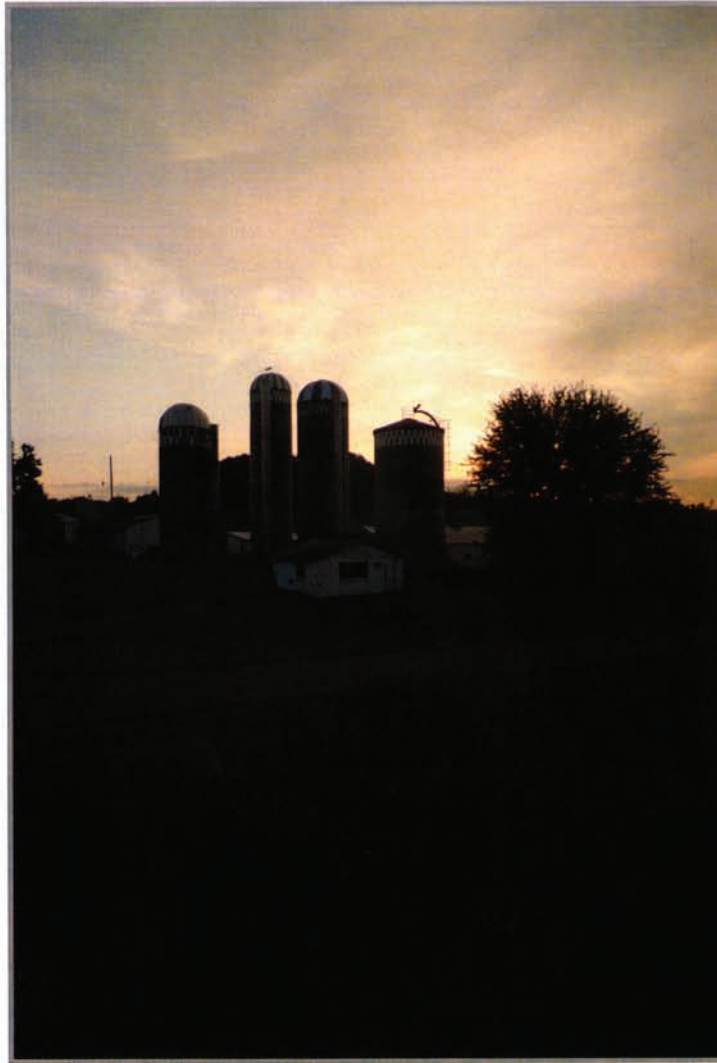
Indianapolis hotel room putting together the *Times* story. Think it's getting close. Saw my cherished friends Dennis and Terry. Dennis is taking his camera into uncharted terrain, abstract landscapes. Hope he shares these one day soon; he's the best lensman I ever worked with. As for Terry, what a guy — great brain and even better sense of humor. We walked a beautiful leafy trail Thursday afternoon, then joined Francesca for dinner at their lovely home. Reconvened for drinks Friday night. Lots of talk about the health care stuff, about which Terry is very wise having spent so many years at Lilly. Listening to him buttresses my fear that whatever these clowns come up with will be a perfect storm of soaring costs and taxes and bad medicine. High point of past few days was our trip to Falling Water, the majestic house Frank Lloyd Wright designed in the forests outside



Pittsburgh. It's just an incredible thing to see, for sure one of the 20th Century's greatest examples of creative genius. When he did it, Wright was 70 and pretty much washed up. Falling Water put him back on top for good. Life coaching. Thinking about this stuff. Am I seeing any change? I feel calmer, maybe better balanced. Less ready to fly into anger or descend into the dumps. But could that just be my imagination? Besides, it doesn't seem to have much to do with People Enlarging or Living in the Moment or Fearless Creativity. Still it's good to think about these things, really think about them. Maybe trying to write the *Times* article in a hotel room is fearless. Maybe it's just the train. Hearing that clack-clack-clacking somehow reassuring. Miles of going-brown cornfields going brown. White farmhouses. Horses grazing. Endless. The real power of America. Leaving the hubub of Chicago terminal. Train slides from Illinois to Wisconsin. Really pretty. Long, undulating fields and more white farmhouses - why are they always white? A picture-perfect horse ranch, magnificent black stallions loping across corrals. Rimmed with yards and yards of fencing. Gotta be a rich cowboy there. The Empire Builder is a real step up from The Cardinal. Cars look newer, the dining car is twice as big and there's a beautiful lounge car. Meet a nice guy named Kevin, from New Hampshire. He's the chief IT officer for an East Coast restaurant chain called Friendly's. They're a longtime family-owned outfit that's been taken over by private investors. Vampires. They suck the blood out of these



companies, then sell them to other vampires. Kevin's been with Friendly's forever and it's eating him alive, but he's a mountain climber and hiker (did Mt. Rainier, 4,000 ft up and 9,000 ft back in a day!) and he says that helps keep it all in perspective. Some loud people in the car too, hammered, but they can't take away from the beauty of what 's gliding by. We go through the Wisconsin Dells, named after the ancient sandstone formations that stack the banks of the state's eponymous river. The foliage is giving us a preview of what it will look like in a couple of weeks. Edges of leaves blaze in the dying sun. Pretty dining car with linen and fresh pink carnations at each setting. By coincidence Kevin and I wind up at the same table with an odd couple. He's a small, dark skinned Mexican named Jose who looks to have a lot of Indian in him, and Susan is a large Very White woman who went to Bennington. "I was their quota girl from Idaho" she says. They seem happy; differences really can be balancing. Night falls. The sun drops in a big orange ball. We're in Minnesota. Posted by rcyeager at 10:49AM ()



## Last Tango

Wednesday, September 23, 2009

*Plus ca change.* Everything changes, everything stays the same. Beside me in the lounge car a man in his 70's reads a novel on his new Amazon Kindle. It's the first one I've actually seen and it's pretty nifty. Only a little larger than my increasingly prehistoric Day-Timer. The device contains works by Shakespeare, an abridged Oxford dictionary, and the current issue of the *New York Times*. Outside our lounge car window, meanwhile, thick bolts of rolled hay — giant chestnuts to get farm animals through the winter — dot the fields of every state we pass. Probably could have seen the same thing 100 years ago. Minnesota fades long in the night. Morning brings Montana, and a part of the state I've never seen. Flat forever. Forlorn, hardscrabble little towns with rusted-out pickups and peeling-paint homes. A three-deep square of Juniper trees surround the largest house in one town. Planted, maybe, to block out the views. In front of another place, there's a weathered, horse-drawn wagon. Looks like it's still in use. A divided highway parallels the train tracks. You can count the vehicles you see in an hour on one hand. Most are long-haulers. Sitting in the lounge car is like watching a big movie of



America scroll by. Winter sneaks across Montana's eastern plains, tossing cold raindrops against our windows. The clouds billow up, sludge gray mountains pitched against a flat, unbroken landscape. Hours pass and we're approaching Glacier National Park. We skirt the edge of the Rockies, slabs of white and dark chocolate in a back-lit sky. I have dinner with Joe and John David, launched on a father-son adventure before dad gets too old (he looks about 75). For three weeks, they're riding long-distance trains and hiking national parks. They've just finished up at Glacier and are heading to Vancouver to tour some park there. John David's divorced and doesn't seem happy about it. Night is fitful, the penalty for not being able to upgrade to a sleeper — all were booked. At breakfast, I meet Victor, one tightly wound dude. Angry about having to board the train in Spokane at 2:45 a.m. but, as it turns out, even angrier about something else. Victor has one of those every-which-way haircuts younger guys seem to like, and his life seems to be going every-which-way too. He talks fast, banging the words out like an old teletype machine. I learn a lot in just a few minutes. Victor is around 40 and just lost his job as a mortgage banker with BofA. Bright. Speaks several languages and learning Chinese. His personal economic recovery plan is to move to China and teach business English to Chinese junior executives. But there's a twist. Victor's also a tango instructor. He claims the tango's entire purpose is the seduction of women and he knows, he says, a lot of lady tango dancers. So what he really plans to create is a kind of business-English-tango-escort service for Chinese men who want to meet girls. Victor says his wife, an aspiring actress, is not keen on this idea, and I'm not sure she knows much beyond the business training executive summary. But Victor has a grip of steel when he shakes my hand. I can tell he is determined. As soon as his elderly parents move to the railway in the sky, he'll stop taking the 2:45 from Spokane. Then it's a quick move to the Big Easy in the East and let the music begin. Ole! We're in Washington now, winding through the Cascades. Pretty snow country. West Skymosh elementary schools with metal roofs over outdoor basketball courts. Bright and sunny. It finally dawns on me as we pull into Seattle. The Life Coaching is doing something. Because Fearless Creativity isn't about writing the

piece for the Times in a hotel room. I've done that before. It's about writing this damn blog. We're in King Station, Seattle's beautiful old terminal that's undergoing restoration (yea, toot-tooters!). The ride on The Empire Builder is over.

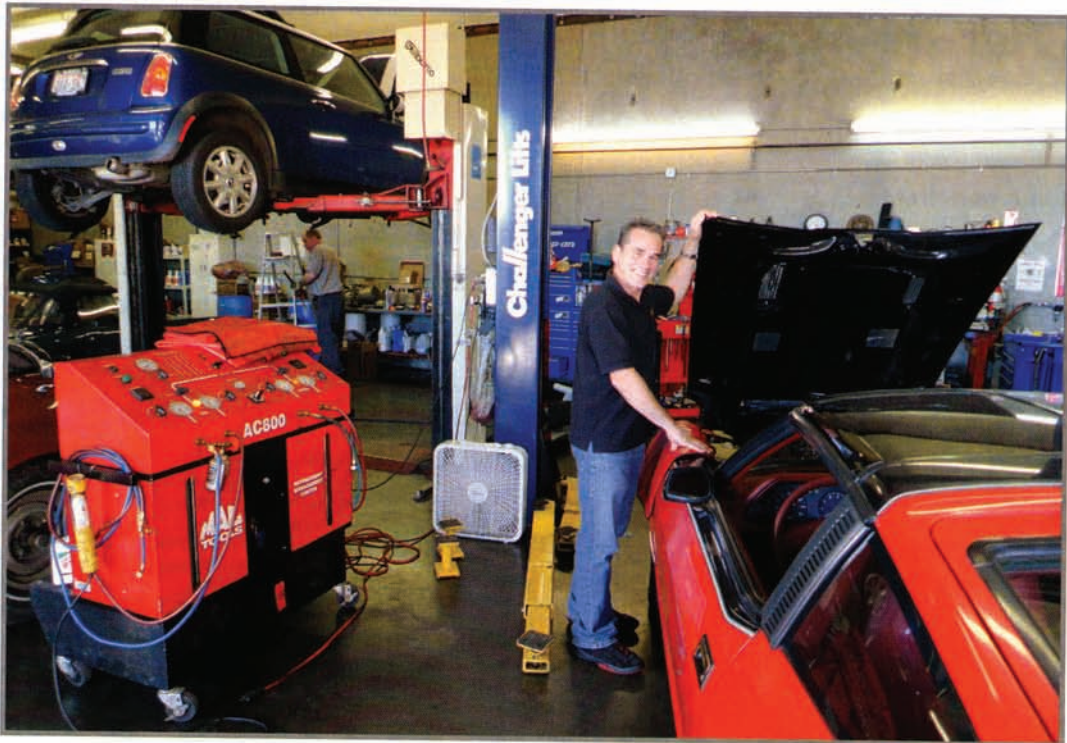
Posted by rcyeager at 02:17PM ()

## Starlight wrap

Saturday, September 26, 2009



Rolling into Tacoma, for years Oakland to Seattle's San Francisco. Now spiffing up, not just the town that Weyerhaeuser built. I'm seeing Pete, my bud from the Italian Car Guy Tour, class of '01. Pete's the original wild and crazy guy. Race car driver, owns a modified Porsce 911 turbo, along with a couple of Beemers and two other Porsches. I admire Pete a lot. On his own hook, he's built his auto repair shop from the ground up. This afternoon there's a Bentley, a super-pristine 911, a one-owner



280Z and an Austin Mini high up on the rack. Each one has a story. Cars people care about come to Pete. We split to a trendy Mexican restaurant and Pete flirts with every doll in the place. That's just how he is, catnip to the girls. Always hustling. Short, with dark curly hair, long eyelashes and a flashing smile, he makes them laugh and they love it. Pete's almost 50 but looks years younger; his current girlfriend is 33, the one before was



29. We wolf down dinner — we're both starving. We go to Pete's house, shove aside some boxes and push the monster red Porsche, with its fat, swooping spoiler and tires as wide as alligators, into the street. 350 horsepower from 3.2 liters, 0-60 in less than four seconds. To ride in it you're trussed up in a five-point harness that crosses both shoulders, comes up between your legs and buckles in a heavy lock at your stomach. Pete kicks over the engine, which growls like an angry bear. No mufflers, just little flapping lids at the ends of the tailpipes. We scream into the night. The next day I hop onto the Coast Starlight, hop off at Eugene, Oregon. It's my first train with a Parlor Car. Nice touch. It's actually a restored 1950's dining car. Today Amtrak uses it to hold wine and cheese tastings and show movies. I'm meeting Phil, my first editor at my first real job — the *Napa Register*. We haven't seen each other in 35 years. Phil's 80 now, a widower, but in very good shape, trimmer than when I worked for him. Still has that quick wit and twinkle in his eye. Phil is one of the few I know who made the jump from the editorial side to the business side. He then went on to oversee a flock of small dailies and weeklies, and is now a revered emeritus of the Oregon Newspaper Publishers Association. Another Napa friend, a very bright guy who worked in advertising, wound up as board chairman of the whole shebang. Phil tells me Dick just retired to a villa in Mexico. So it's a lunch of updates. The bright girl reporter who married a creep, dumped him and became a nun.



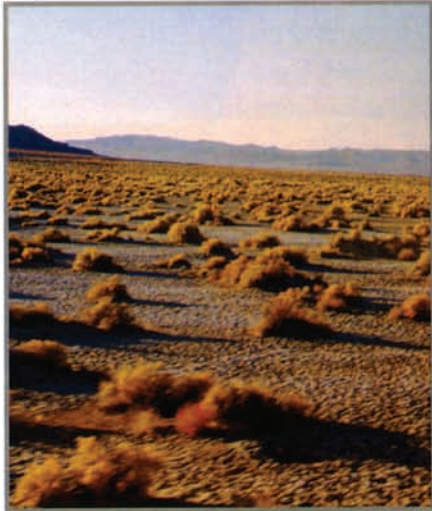
The nasty city editor who finally went too far, grabbing scissors and cutting off the tie of the backshop foreman during a dispute — Phil had to fire him. There were others. Pretty reporter Mary who kept getting married and divorced. Frank the sports editor with a bad back. Our mutual friend Cal, a talented shutterbug. Old friends and train rides. They seem to go together. Back on the Starlight, I'm starting to wind down. At dinner, the energy is flat. The captain puts me in a group of four, a couple, myself and another guy. Nobody talks. I'm tired. I don't think I like these guys. The couple have a tiny baby who I know is going to start screaming. Suddenly my People Enlarging light goes on. I break out with the introductions, something I rarely do — I'm a hang-backer from way back. Now the young couple bubble out with all kinds of stuff. They're from Newcastle, England, traveling with their seven-month old daughter. We catch their excitement about seeing the America's northwest. They keep talking about how cheap everything is — wasn't there a time, centuries ago, when people said that about Europe. Anyhow, nice people. And the kid never peeps. New friends and train rides, the two go together. Another thing strikes me. Though forbidden on airplanes, cell phones connect long-distance train travelers with people they're close to. Family members, spouses, girl- and boyfriends, friend-friends. And suddenly I realize there's a word you rarely hear on other forms of public transportation that I'm hearing a lot on trains. It's corny, but there it is. The word is "love." Oregon slides by in the darkness. Sacramento comes up at first light. Then Davis, Martinez, and on. We're almost home. This leg's a wrap.

Posted by rcyeager at 03:44PM ()



## Back on the Rails

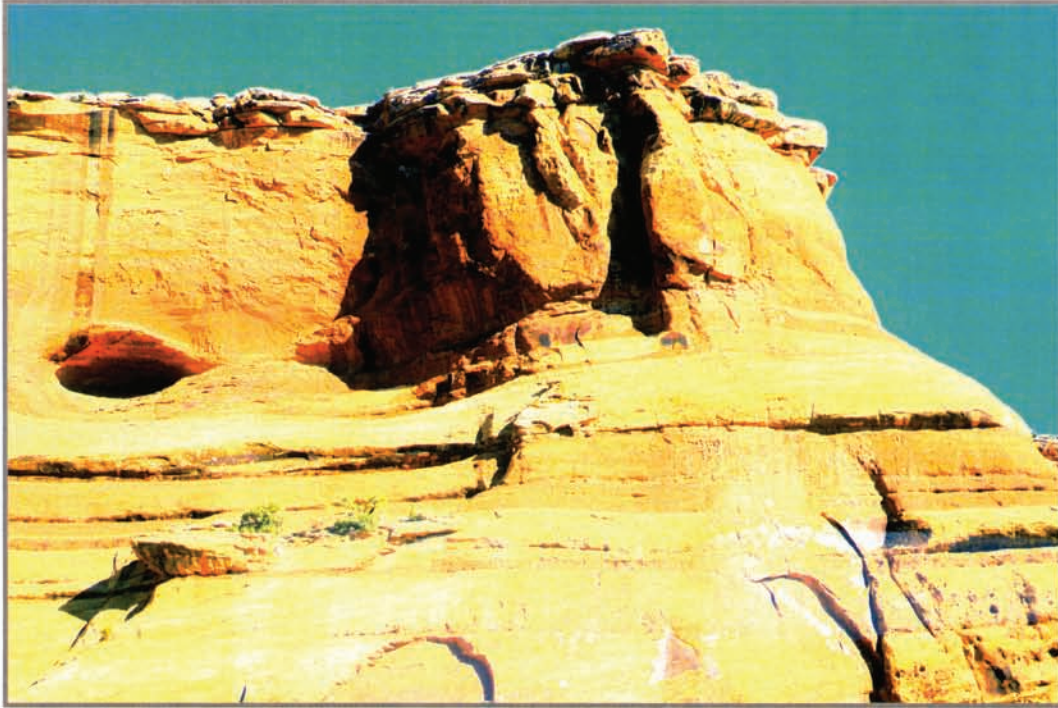
Saturday, October 03, 2009



California Zephyr, Day 1, Sept. 30. About as beautiful a fall day as you could hope for, the kind of yellow-bright sun you see in October when all the summer dust and pollen have settled out of the sky. They say the Empire Builder is Amtrak's most beautiful train ride, but they might be wrong. It just might be the Zephyr. The Z cuts through the crimson adobe, scrub forests, and stark white clay of the Sierra foothills, crawls along 1,000-ft ridges that rise above Bear River, and then eases into Truckee, maybe the most made-over mining town out West. Truckee used to be a town of burned-out gold-panners and ski bums. Now it's so cutesy it squeaks. How many miles have I racked up? I



figure the Empire Builder and the Zephyr at about two grand each. Throw in 1,000 miles from Chicago to New York and I will easily pass 5,000. Gotta tote up the shorties too. The hop on the Cascades from Seattle to Tacoma and the Starlight run from Tacoma to Oakland. Before this is all over, I'll figure it out. The lounge car seems subdued. No screaming kids or loud drunks. Not yet anyway. A lady rancher prattles in a loud voice about her sheep and goats. The woman has gray hair, white around the fringes, and a round pink face that seems as if it might belong to a member of her herd. Perhaps this is why she calls them "girls" and "boys" and the ewes "moms." "I keep a lot of the girls, the ones I like," she says. "Most of the boys go to market." "You seem to have gotten very close to your animals," says one listener who grew up on a farm. "How did you get into this?" "My husband wanted lamb chops," she replies, "and one of the girls I brought home was pregnant. It went from there." Night falls slowly. The desert softens to a sepia tone, like somebody gradually turning down a reostat. Dinner is uneventful. With four guys, the talk collects around hunting, a wasting disease that's killing deer in Colorado, and bugling season for elk. Eric, a large man with white, freckled skin and small eyes is a tour guide



at Alaska's Denali National Park. He was a Park Ranger before that. He knows pretty much everything about our national parks. Everybody's talking about the Ken Burns specials. Maybe some day he'll do one on the railroads. Later, looking out the window, I can't imagine anywhere could be this dark this long. At night, America's vast visual silences tell you how big she is. An acrid smell of straining diesel-electric motors seeps into the coaches as we climb the Rockies. Up, then down again, in the blackness. It's like Disney's Space Mountain. Why are we going so slowly? My ears pop and I know. After miles of trackless desert, we're gradually climbing into the Rockies. The rail curves and the locomotive's powerful headlight plays against a mountainside. Outside, on the Interstate a few miles away, blinking emergency lights. Something has happened, a highway accident at 0h-dark-100, in the middle of nowhere. Then the lights slip away and darkness returns. The next day it's all-Rockies all the time. Tumbling water, teeter-tottering rocks, towering flat-top mountains. The fall colors are a special treat. There's no real way to wrap it all up in words. It's just too magnificent. Romance of the Rails, truth telling time. If you can, get a sleeper. So far I've been stuck on the coaches, which are beautiful during the day but hellacious at night. I mean, how can you sleep in a chair? I've been lucky so far in getting two seats to myself, but coming out of Denver they stick an overweight, handicapped guy named Ken in the seat next to me. It'll never work, he's big and I'm big. Nice guy, as it turns out. He and I have already kidded, me promising not to kiss him in the night, and he really is a good guy but what are you going to do? We can't sleep together in upright seats. Ken tells me he can't sleep sitting up and heads to the lounge car. So sleeping in the coaches is very iffy, and Amtrak hasn't come up with anything to solve it. What the hell, I'll tough it out. I've tried to upgrade to a sleeper, but they're booked solid. I meet a blur of sleeper car couples riding the rails for the first time. It used to be people who rode trains were a) too poor to fly or b) too afraid to fly. These days nobody flies because they want to so a lot more train riders are people with flexible schedules and well off enough to pay for the sleepers. It all boils down to time and money. If you have both, you'd rather have a sleeper than fly. My guess is a lot of today's

sleeper car money is yesterday's first class airfare money. Anyhow, the sleepers are jammed and I can't get one. Dawn comes up and we're on the far side of Nebraska, then moving into Iowa, through towns like Creston, Osceola and Ottumwa. Lots of silos and green fields, and white, lapsed farmhouses that look 150 years old. Breadbasket country. Lose this and we lose our national gut. So who knows what this journey is all about? Maybe the train is a way to escape life and experience it at the same time. Maybe it's just a chance to see America one more time while it's still here the way we remember it. Iowa confields stretch to a horizon of gloomy gray clouds. They're shutting down the dining car. Chicago lies ahead.

Posted by rcyeager at 12:38AM ()

## New York Leg

Thursday, October 08, 2009



Chicago layover, nearly six hours. Sitting in the big Greco-Roman waiting room. Feels like the size of a football field, all white tile and marble and 100-foot ceilings. Four great fluted columns at each end and in this vast space just a dozen or so huge oak pews, big enough for a reunion of sasquatch. Sound echoes the way it does in the great cathedrals of Europe. In fact, that's just what this is: a cathedral of trains. At 9 P.M. sharp, we board the Lakeshore Ltd, a full-service train, but an eastern one, so it's built tighter than the Zephyr and the Empire Builder. Smaller seats, more compact dining room, no lounge car. I pass a fitful night, but I'm getting tougher and more able to contort my bod into sleepable shapes. We see first sunlight in PA. The scenery again delights; along Lake Erie somebody spots the first turning of maple leaves. At breakfast, I meet Ken and Karen, making their initial trip since their boys got out of the house. Allison, next to me, is a young woman trying to build a life and getting a late start. She's a yoga instructor and math tutor — I briefly wonder if I should introduce her to Victor, the tango-teaching

mortgage banker. Probably not; somehow I can't see her with a rose clamped between her teeth. Allison's lived in CA since her twenties but her family is all on the east coast. So she's shipped everything she owns by rail and will be looking for a place to live in Manhattan. "I'm 37, don't have a husband but I want to feel like I have a family again," she says. She'll be starting in New York with nothing but the clothes on her back – Allison sold all her furniture on Craig's List because Amtrak won't ship it. Scenery really is stunning: leaves turning, lakes so big you think we're cruising alongside the ocean, handsome upstate New York farms. Here's one for you, about Living in the Moment — or not. In Washington DC train station a couple of years ago a man with a violin played six Bach pieces for 45 minutes. During the time he played some 2,000 people passed through the station, most of them on their way to work. About 20 people dropped money in his violin case, for a total of \$32. Less than 10 people stopped to listen. When he ceased playing, nobody noticed, nobody applauded. He simply packed up his case and walked away. Turns out the whole thing was an experiment by the *Washington Post*. The musician is one of the most famous violinists in the world, his instrument valued at nearly \$5 million. A few nights later a full house of folks in Boston paid \$100 a ticket to hear him play. So what to make of it? Take the train, or whatever the train in your life may be, do it now, before it's too late. Always stop to listen. Toot-toot! New York notes: Fabulous Manhattan weather ... poke around Bergdorf's, see a gorgeous vintage Rolex I shouldn't (and don't) buy ... visit my lifetime friend Randy B, one of the best qualified people I know to lead a seminar on A Life Well-Lived ... great conversation as always but Randy's coming down with something so we wrap up early in Little Italy. Next night solo dinner at Rossini's off Park Ave ... fun to think of Frank and Dean and the two Sammies (an inside The Pack line, the other Sammy's last name starts with a "G") coming here, which they did. Visit with the *Times* editor who is handling my piece and it turns out we share an obsession for old cars and know some of the same characters. Nice guy ... connect with agent I'd love to work with on the novel and he sounds encouraging. Don't know why I should feel upbeat though ... everything about print publishing is so bleak and Conde shuts four big titles, including *Gourmet*, on Monday just to prove it ... *Times* guy grim about finances there ... train to Connecticut to see Terry, my longtime editor at *Reader's Digest* and the best I ever worked with ... Upper East Side lunch with Judy D, forever journo buddy and colleague, now freelancing for the *Journal*, *Forbes*, the *Times*, and others ... work that's getting tougher to come by. Whomever I talk to, and wherever the conversation turns, it's hard to escape one consistent undercurrent. The pain from this still-souring economy is creeping closer, not receding, and you sense it's different this time, not just another cyclical swing, no matter how many "saved or created" jobs they try to spin. It's hurting people I know, friends, colleagues, my own family — people whose smarts and talent had always immunized them before. Taking the train is a great antidote for this universal downer. You see the strengths and possibilities of America. Most of what you see either has to do with our still vast natural resources, or with producing or making things that people actually need and can use. Like food. And timber and steel and energy. The questions lingers: Can we still be that country?

Posted by rcyeager at 11:18AM ()

## Motor cars and chocolate bars

Monday, October 12, 2009



**Back** in Philly and back on The Cardinal, the train where Toot-Toot started almost a month ago. This time, however, I'll be aboard for almost the entire route, which begins in New York and curves in a smiley-face arc through Philly, Baltimore, Washington DC, Charleston, Cincinnati and Indianapolis before ending in Chicago. Spent four days in



Hershey, chocolate capital of the U.S.A. I didn't come for the bars and kisses, although both taste better here than anywhere else. I'm drawn by what is formally known as the annual fall meeting of the Eastern Region of the Antique Automobile Association of America. Car people call it, simply, "Hershey" and everybody knows what they mean: the world's biggest show and flea market for



antique American cars and parts. I've dreamed about coming here for years. It's where you go to look for a gearbox for your Graham-Paige or a left front headlamp for your 1932 Essex. I can't believe what I see. A Stanley Steamer owner showing a small crowd how he refuels his 1911 roadster. A bright blue 1948 Tucker, the only convertible version of that transformational auto ever made, pops out of a time capsule under a portable white canopy, never sold or registered and with zero miles on the clock. A wood-framed 1926 General Motors "House Car" — somebody calls it the first Winnebago — looks boxy and awkward in a crowd of sweeping, full-skirted fenders and impossibly lavish bonnets. What really blows you away, however, are the hundreds of flea market vendors covering miles of pavement in the Hershey fairgrounds. Most are selling parts, a few brandishing the prized "NOS" sign for New Original Stock. Some are pros, but the majority seem to be folks who just threw a bunch of stuff in the camper and headed to Hershey. There's lots of memorabilia, the real deal and the repro. The former can be pricey: an inch-long, ultra-rare Tootsie Toy fire truck (with chief), \$325; vintage gasoline pumps, suitable for living room or den, \$1,000 and up and up; rusty oil cans with original painted logos, in the hundreds. And some just plain junk junk too — old wooden fishing poles, broken toy guns and deputy sheriff badges from towns you never heard of. Aside from its eponymous product, Hershey's sweetest surprise is its price. After years of watching entry fees, hotel

rates and restaurant prices spiral out of sight at California's fancy car weekend in Carmel, the car show that chocolate built is refreshingly inexpensive. Entry to just about everything is free. That includes the acres of vendors, auctions at nearby Hershey Lodge, time trials at the race track and even Saturday's big concourse show. Food, most of it hot dogs, hamburgers, kettle corn, gyros, and the like is reasonable too. One thing that isn't cheap is the majestic Hotel Hershey, whose terraced, hillside visage overlooks the fairgrounds like a medieval castle. Built in 1933 by Milton Hershey for his wife, the Mediterranean-style structure ranks among the state's grandest hostelries. A recent multi-million renovation included the building of a fabulous spa. On offer: chocolate baths and cocoa rubs and just about anything else legal that combines steam, massage and chocolate. The place attracts clientele from New York, Philadelphia, and around the globe. I am pretending to be a guest in the hotel, whose \$350-plus rooms sold out long ago. Every night I have dinner in the bar, and every morning I drive to the parking lot from my el cheapo Best Western digs 10 miles away. I discretely ease myself into the premises through a side door and then present myself at the hotel entrance for the free shuttle ride to the car show. My little ploy, suggested to me by a car guy I met at the bar, has saved miles of walking. It works so well for the whole show that even the shuttle drivers think I am staying here. Everywhere you look, you see so many beautiful cars you wonder where we lost our way. Stately Packards, Cords and Deusys seem to stand there, mocking today's anemic designs. What happened to the magnificent shapes that were the great ships of our highways? One vehicle, especially, tugs my heartstrings. It is a Cadillac limosine, identical — except for the sliding chauffeur's glass — to a 1948 9-passenger sedan I owned in my teens. Folding jump seats and mohair upholstery. Walnut window sills and hydramatic tranny. Doors that click dead-shut like a Rolls. Metal fenders so stout your fingers hurt if you brush one with your hand. Fast as night on fat whitewalls. I paid \$250 for my Caddy. This black beauty can be yours for \$78,000. Then it's over. Long drive back to Philly. Back aboard The Cardinal a woman named Melinda sits next to me. Turns out she's a radio reporter from Connecticut. Does environmental stuff for those non-profit FM stations. She's like out of central casting. Skinny. Short hair. No makeup. Radcliffe. Goes mountain climbing and river rafting and biking and walking and camping. Eats organic. She's doing a story about how the coal mining industry is blowing the tops off mountains to get the coal. According to Melinda under the Bush Administration the companies were blowing the tops off mountains like you'd blow the foam off a beer. Boom! Pollution everywhere. Boom! Ruined environment. It's not hard to tell where Melinda's heading with this. But a funny thing happens. A sprightly lady across the aisle who's lived in West Virginia all her life starts telling the other side of the story. How the folks around here depend on coal for their livelihood. How they're reclaiming the land on top of the mountains for schools, housing, etc., which is a good thing because West Va. has practically no flat land. How the companies are a lot more careful about the environment than they used to be. And how much safer it is to mine coal this way than to send men down into the ground. The lady's voice is grandmotherly kind, friendly and authoritative. Suddenly Melinda is confronted with reality. She's basically not a bad egg, and she's struggling after finding out something she didn't expect. The fact is we need coal *and* it is dirty stuff. Somehow her NPR universe will have to at least acknowledge that or be dishonest. And that's when we'll know what kind of reporter Melinda really is. The kind who wants to help the world understand, or the kind who just wants to drive an agenda. Melinda gets off in Prince, West VA. She's going to camp overnight and then go after her story. As for us, we're moving on. Through the Alleghenies and on toward

Chicago. Toot-toot!  
Posted by rcyeager at 09:55AM ()

## Taps for Toots

Thursday, October 15, 2009



So it's finally come, the Last Toot. Pulling out of Chi Town on the Sunset Chief to L.A. By the time this leg is finished, I will have ridden nearly 9,000 miles in just under 30 days (I left Indy on Sept. 19 and arrive in Los Angeles Oct. 17). Indy-Chicago; Chicago-Seattle; Seattle-Tacoma; Tacoma-Eugene; Eugene-Emeryville; Emeryville-Chicago; Chicago-New York; New York-Philly; Philly-Chicago; Chicago-L.A. Amtrak's USA Rail Pass has proven it's a cheap way to move people, or at least this person. I figure my \$575 pass works out to about seven cents a mile. (It could have been less: I still have three "segments" left.) Maybe that's why so many people are riding the rails; and why again I struck out trying to upgrade. *USA Today* says 2008 was Amtrak's second busiest year ever. During the 12 months ending Sept. 30,





more than 27 million passengers rode the rails. And something else: in my month of travel on 10 trains, every single one has arrived and left on time. Maybe it's just luck, but how many airlines can say that? It's been an unforgettable experience. Marietta, Ohio was the perfect prequel. Literally the jumping off point for our nation's westward expansion and my jumping off point too. Getting back in touch with what our country looks like, a sense of America's people and what makes them tick. What a liberating gift when there's no job to do or stairs to paint or dog to take out. There's just you and the train and the next town. It's gotten the writing juices flowing again. *The Times* was a good kick-start because it was real paying work with a deadline, personal and professional. [caption id="attachment\_53" align="alignright" width="150" caption=""] [/caption] But I knew I had to finish the story before I hit the rails, or risk diverting my attention from the experience. The blog has been an entirely new kind of writing, a different challenge. And I think I got some good work done on the novel. The Life Coaching fits in too, in an evolving way. All in all, a productive time. The Southwest Chief probably doesn't measure up to The Zephyr or the Empire Builder when it comes to scenery. However, it's still a beautiful ride. And, like those other trains, The Chief offers a chance to interact with a broad swath of humanity. At breakfast I meet Chris and Izzy, an Amish couple from Lancaster, PA, in their late forties. Izzy has dark brown eyes and hair; she wears a black bonnet and full-length skirt. Chris has gray eyes, a pointy white wizard's beard and one of those skull-cap bald spots on the top of his head. He wears a gray vest over a white shirt with black slacks. At first I feel very awkward, I've never met an Amish person, much less shared a meal with them. But then Izzy speaks right up and we all get introduced. I suspect even the Amish would call Izzy plain, but her personality sparkles like her unbiblical name, not at all what you'd expect from the distaff side of an Amish couple. Chris has a problem, which he identifies in a hoarse whisper that hangs in the air in a terrible way. He has cancer. They are going to San Diego and then on to Tijuana for further treatment (he's been there once already, in March). I find myself wondering if he's getting some kind of apricot treatment. I also wonder what will happen to Chris and Izzy under national health care, whether religious groups like the Amish even want to be covered. Will they be arrested if they don't get insurance for religious reasons? Later, I see them sitting close together in [caption id="attachment\_54" align="alignleft" width="300" caption=""] [/caption] the lounge car. Not talking, just being close. Still later Izzy is sitting alone and I pass Chris back in the coaches. He's huddled under a blanket on a hot day, looking cold as death. Outside, some pronghorn antelope put on a show. One races alongside, first trying to outrun the train and then cutting behind us to safety. I glimpse his animal's eye, wide and wild and frightened. On either side of the train, New Mexico's adobe canyons flow around us like a parting Red Sea. Of course, one of the best things about the trip has been seeing old friends and colleagues again, in one case for the first time in decades. the two Terry's, Dennis, Phil, Randy, Pete, Judy. How lucky I am to know them and in so many cases have worked with them. Actually, there's an epilogue to this album of reacquaintance; it's coming up right after this Last Toot. For the first time, I'm going to attend my high school reunion. I feel a certain trepidation. We all know how these things go. Inevitably, they turn out to be creepy grotesqueries, terrifying and morbidly fascinating at the same time. Like visiting one of those musty old wax museums except you faintly recognize the statues. One thing is certain, however, there will be people and stories, just as there have been along America's rails. Thanks for reading. One last time now: **Toot-toot!**

Posted by rcyeager at 04:52PM ()