



Amtrak's Coast Starlight swings from holiday fantasy to cold reality

[by Jim Farber]

"All aboard," the conductor cried out. I ran up to him.

"Well," he said. "Are you coming?"

"Where?" I asked.

"Why to the North Pole of course," was his answer. "This is the Polar Express."

- From the book *"The Polar Express"*



It was exactly two minutes before the stroke of midnight, Christmas Eve, when Amtrak's

Coast Starlight lumbered into the Emeryville, Calif., station, just north of Oakland. It wasn't hissing steam or squeaking metal the way the great locomotive does in Chris Van Allsburg's classic children's book "The Polar Express." But it was the train that would carry us north, not as far as the North Pole, but through the snowy peaks of the Cascade Mountains and beyond to the verdant valley of the Willamette River in Oregon.

Biting the bullet (economically speaking) we had booked a deluxe sleeping car room and a smaller roomette to accommodate the five members of our family: myself, my sister Lucy, my brother-in-law George Mattingly, and their two sons: 18-year-old Keith and 13-year-old Dylan. And it wasn't long after the train pulled out, that we had all changed into pajamas (just like in the book) and were busily decorating our little Christmas Eve house on wheels.

When we finished, five gaily colored stockings hung from coat hooks, a shimmering red garland draped across the window, a large red bow festooned the luggage rack, and a tiny living Christmas tree (replete with a snowman) sat happily on the shelf below the window.

Outside, the lights of towns and villages flickered in the distance as the Polar Express raced northward.

I have always loved traveling on trains and was lucky enough to have been a child during the golden age of American rail travel. Though the memories have become more like dreams, I can still remember the great silver, orange and black steam locomotive of the Coast Daylight, the thrill of traveling from Los Angeles to Chicago aboard Santa Fe's ultimate streamliner, the Super Chief, then onto New York aboard the 20th Century Limited.

Aboard the Polar Express the children eat candies with "nougat centers as white as snow" and drink steaming mugs of cocoa. Our original plan was to celebrate Christmas Eve on the train in a similar gourmet fashion, munching on delicious chocolaty desserts and drinking bubbly glasses of champagne. But because our train was more than two hours late, the tasty cakes and delicious champagne were consumed long before we left for the station.

It was well after 1 a.m. by the time we had the room decked out in holiday fashion, the boys snuggled away in their beds, and the stockings stuffed to overflowing. At that point we were quite content to call it a night and let the gentle rhythm of the rails lull us to sleep.

Soon there were no more lights to be seen. We traveled through cold, dark forests, where lean wolves roamed and white-tailed



rabbits hid from our train as it thundered through the quiet wilderness. ... We climbed mountains so high it

seemed as if we would scrape the moon.

Late in the night I awoke and, discovering that I was not about to fall back to sleep, decided to leave my perch in the upper berth and settle in the compartment's comfortable chair. In that gently rolling solitude I watched the train slowly snake its way through the deep meandering river gorge. The full moon shined and its radiance turned the snow on the pines a ghostly white. Occasionally an isolated cabin would pass by, its roof covered in snow, Christmas lights blinking in the windows. When the track turned sharply I could see the engine, its great headlamps cutting a bright swath in the distance. Behind the full length of the train was visible, set off by softly glowing blue lights positioned at the corners of each car.

After many a yawn, I climbed up the ladder and snuggled into my cozy little bed. Because of our late departure, dawn found us traveling along the slopes of one California's most scenic peaks - Mount Shasta. And it was at this most serene and picturesque of moments that the boys came rampaging into the compartment intent on Christmas booty. It wasn't long before they had transformed



their stash of stocking-stuffers into a blizzard of shredded wrapping paper and discarded bows. The serious gift opening, they were told, would have to wait until we arrived at the home of our relatives (the Cormack clan) in Corvallis, Ore.

After the mayhem of the stockings, Christmas morning passed by at a leisurely pace. When we made our way to the dining car for breakfast, we found it festively decorated with garlands, tinsel and sprigs of pine needles. I complimented our server, Miriam, for Amtrak's effort. She made it clear, in no uncertain terms, that, "Honey, it was the employees who did that. And they spent their own money." The effort, I assured her, was appreciated.

There are definite perks that come with riding first-class on Amtrak. All meals are included in the cost of a sleeping car ticket. In the case of the Coast Starlight, sleeping car passengers also enjoy their own private parlour car - a superbly renovated remnant of Santa Fe's last generation of streamliners, the El Capitan. Fitted out with overstuffed revolving chairs and comfortable couches, this vistadome car evokes the elegance of bygone days. It's the type of car where Dashiell Hammet's sophisticated sleuths, Nick and Nora Charles, would have smoked cigarettes and sipped martinis.

Keeping with the holiday spirit, our train, in fact our very car, came with its own resident Scrooge. He was our porter and went by the name of E.T. Clearly annoyed about having to work and wait on passengers during the Christmas holiday, he proved himself every bit as gruff and cantankerous as Dickens' miserly curmudgeon.

Crossing from California into Oregon, the train began the long gradual climb into the Cascade Mountains. Glistening lakes, pine-covered hills and, now and then, small towns passed by the window. The mood was jolly in the parlour car, with conversations coming

and going in a congenial manner that you will never find traveling in a jet at 40,000 feet. Logically, the principal topic was train travel. The consensus was, that despite its problems (most notably chronic lateness) there's still no more congenial way to travel than by train. (This premise would sorely be put to the test before our trip was over.)

By mid-afternoon we had begun the long twisting and turning descent into the Willamette Valley. A few hours later we disembarked at the small station in Albany. Late though the train was, the greetings from our waiting relatives were warm and heartfelt. Soon all the bags were packed away, and we were headed for Christmas dinner and presents.

Oh that the return trip had been as successful. But instead, we found ourselves aboard the Polar Express' evil twin - the Bi-Polar Express.

It all began well enough. The southbound Coast Starlight was only about 40 minutes late arriving. Lots of hugs were exchanged and joyful goodbyes waved. Soon we were back in the parlour car sipping martinis and watching the last reddish glow of the sun as it set below a phalanx of threatening storm clouds. After the long climb out of the Willamette Valley, the train pulled into the tiny railroad town of Chemult, Ore. We had just finished dinner in the dining car when, with a gentle clunk, the train came to stop. The lights flickered on and off. They flickered on and off again. Then the power died completely. And it did not come back on. The entire train went dark.

When the Polar Express could go no farther, we stopped and the conductor led us outside.

"There's a problem with the electric generator," the conductor said, projecting an air of confidence as he made his way through the car. "We should have it fixed any moment."

Many moments, and many sputtering attempts later, we were still sitting in the station. It was dark, snow was falling, and our situation was not improving.

"May I have your attention, please," came the crackly voice of the conductor over the train's emergency intercom system. "We have not been able to fix the generator. And we've decided to go on to Klamath Falls where we have repair facilities. Since we have no electricity, please do not use the bathrooms. And I'm sorry to say the diner is now closed." An hour or so later we limped into Klamath Falls. The porter (not E.T.) came and turned down the beds. And we all turned in, assuming the train would be under way sometime soon. With the electric heating system out of commission, and snow piling up on the roof, the temperature in the train began to drop. Jokes about the Donner party began to make the rounds.

Sleeping fitfully, I often convinced myself that we were moving. But in each case it turned out to be the rumble of a freight train passing by. As a rule sleeping cars are more heavily insulated than coach cars, so the frosty temperature outside was held somewhat at bay. That was not, however, the case in the coach cars. At some point in the night the conditions became so unbearable, the decision was made to evacuate the passengers and cram them all into the tiny (though warm) station. By morning people huddled on benches and curled up in every corner, wrapped in stiff gray blankets trying to sleep. That's when Amtrak called in the Red Cross.

About 4 a.m. the conductor came through and announced that buses were coming up from Eugene, Ore. No, he did not know when they would arrive. But yes, the sleeping car passengers would be taken off first. He was followed by the porter who handed out green glow sticks, which did not shed much light on the situation.

Visions of the Titanic came to mind, along



with guilty thoughts about upper-class privilege. I suddenly knew what it felt like to be offered a place in the lifeboat. Later, with the train all but abandoned, I went back into the parlour car. My breath hung in the frigid air. Everything seemed frozen. The Coast Starlight had become a ghost train.

When I ran into the conductor, I asked why they had not simply brought up another engine in the night to replace our crippled one? He responded with a dry, exasperated laugh.

"We don't have any extra engines," he said, clearly frustrated and tired. "We're lucky to get by with the ones we have."

And he was gone. Two hours later the two buses arrived, and the mood was not entirely friendly when we realized the first people to board were the train's crew, who appeared to be jumping ship. Back in the station the last of the coffee and doughnuts had been dispensed, the bathrooms were out of toilet paper, and the Red Cross volunteers were preparing to leave.

When our bus finally pulled away I could see faces looking out from the steamy windows of the station. More guilt. The driver said it would take us about six hours to drive to Sacramento, where he assumed we would be able to catch a train to complete our journey.

The train gave a sudden lurch and started moving. We were on our way home. The Polar Express let out a loud blast from its whistle and sped away.

By the time we finally arrived back in Emeryville, aboard a hodgepodge of a train Amtrak managed to assemble in Sacramento, more than 24 hours had passed since our departure. Compared to most disasters, our breakdown was unfortunate, but little more than an uncomfortable inconvenience. But it did put a sour ending on what had been a

very sweet trip.

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