

Westward Ho!

Utah, California, & Colorado

2018

[UPDATE: January, 2024—As I gradually go back over my old travelogues, I'll be leaving the original text intact but adding additional comments in boldfaced enclosed in brackets to expand on what was originally said. I may also add some additional photos to enhance the original travelogues.]

This is a trip I've toyed with taking for at least a decade. I've planned different variations on it, sometimes considering travel by myself and sometimes with my late sister Margaret. This summer was the time it would finally happen. I'd be making a series of hops on Amtrak's California Zephyr train, stopping in Salt Lake City, Sacramento, Glenwood Springs, and Denver—with time in each to explore the area and make a few side trips. Most of the things I'd see would not be the main tourist sights, but I was still looking forward to the trip immensely.

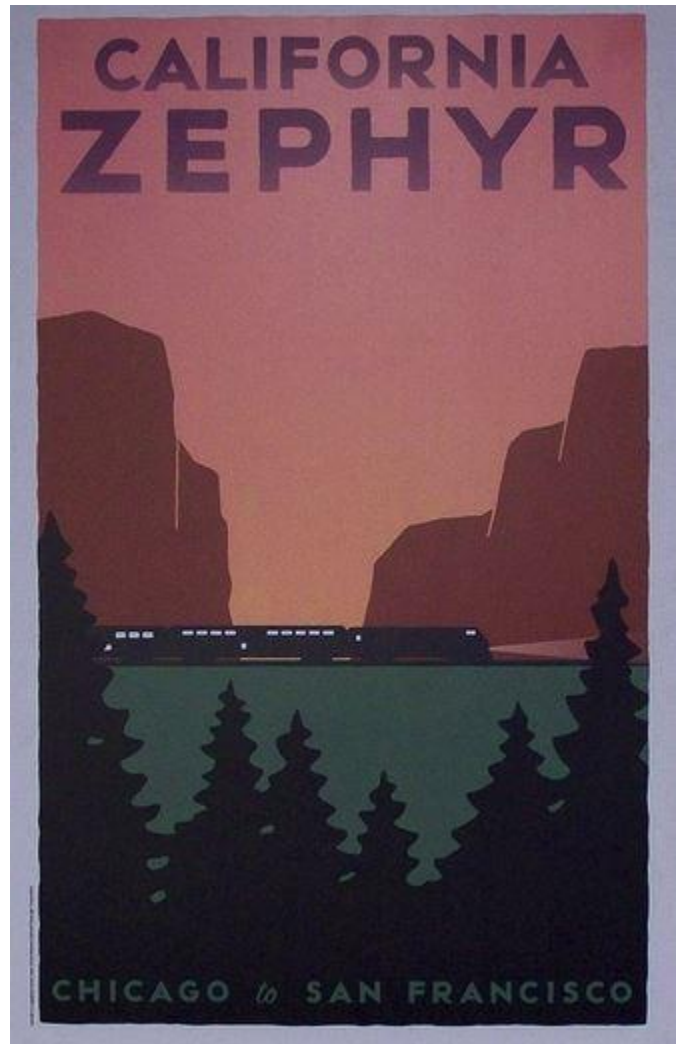
Sunday, July 29, 2018
Algona, Iowa to Lincoln,
Nebraska via Mt. Pleasant

I'm writing this installment while heading west across southern Iowa on the train. Today has already been a long day, so I'm going to see if I can sum things up a bit before I start to forget things.

[I think this may have been the first travelogue I attempted to write in real time, something I've done numerous times since. Before that I'd keep just keep notes, first in a physical notebook and then online in Google Keep. I still use Keep when I can't get to my computer, but writing as I go (particularly when I'm on a train or plane) seems to work better. One issue, though, is that it breaks up the narrative, with frequent switches between past and present tense.]

As I do pretty much every Sunday, I read at church this morning. Today's was an unusual service, because we were serenaded by the Cornbelt Chorus barbershop group. They sang three gospel songs and did a very nice job with them. Unfortunately it was a bit embarrassing that there were nearly as many people singing as there were watching. There were fourteen barbershoppers, plus a photographer, and we had just nineteen in church this morning. That's the lowest we've had in quite a while, and I'm not sure why attendance was so bad. **[Since this was written a number of elderly people in the congregation have passed away. Sadly, these days nineteen would be relatively good attendance.]**

Aside from the music, the most memorable part of the service was what would have been the children's sermon if any children had actually been present. The minister chose to present it to the group as a whole, and I'm glad he did. He had brought in a jigsaw puzzle to make the point that all of us are pieces in God's great puzzle. I may well use that idea for morning prayer at school at some point in the future.



I stopped very briefly at home and then set out in my car right at 11:15am. There's tons of construction all over Iowa at the moment, so I had to choose my route carefully. I ended up sort of making stair-steps down to Des Moines, following highways 18, 17, 3, and 65, before turning off on old highway 20 near the truck stop everyone calls "Boondocks". Each time I turned it was to avoid a bit more construction. Eventually I made it to Interstate 35. There was also some construction on it, but I made it down to Ankeny without any real problem. **[I couldn't begin to count the number of times I've driven between Algona and Des Moines. While the shortest route is to follow U.S. 20 and I-35, I've often taken other routes just for variety. None of these is really a "good" route, though.]**

My first stop of the day was at the Shoe Carnival store in Ankeny. I had gotten an e-mail theoretically celebrating my birthday (which is still months away) that gave me a \$15 discount on any purchase. So I bought some nice brown dress shoes that were only \$39 to begin with, and I was happy to pay just \$25 for them. I'll probably wear them to church as soon as I get home. **[I still have those shoes, and I often wear them to church. Pretty much all the shoes I own were bought at Shoe Carnival at one time or another.]**

My plan was to have a late lunch at Tasty Tacos, a Des Moines institution that serves puffy tacos similar to what I'd had a few years ago in San Antonio. The Ankeny location appeared to be closed, so I drove on to a second location on Euclid Avenue in northeast Des Moines. Apparently the entire chain is closed on Sundays (though there was nothing on their website to indicate that), because there was no one at the Euclid location either. **[The Tasty Tacos website does now indicate they're only open Monday through Saturday. I've since visited one of their locations, and I really didn't care much for the tacos. They're very greasy, and there's not a lot of flavor to them.]**



Highway 163 near Monroe, Iowa

I killed about half an hour but never did have lunch. I just made my way back to the freeway and continued southeast from there. Highway 163 (which the entire route from Des Moines to Burlington is now numbered) really is a gorgeous drive. It's got to be one of the prettiest roads in Iowa. I particularly liked that the median and shoulders were full of wildflowers, which made it feel like I was driving through a nature reserve. There was Queen Anne's lace everywhere, plus purple vetch and goldenrod—not to mention a dozen or so flowers I don't know the names of. The crops are doing much better in southern Iowa than up north as well. There was a wall of corn towering above my car and lush hills covered in beans.

[Whenever I drive this stretch I think of the times I'd drive it when I was younger. At the time highways 163 were some of the worst roads in the Midwest—bad two-lane roads that went straight through every town. Modernizing the route took half an hour off the driving time between Des Moines and Oskaloosa, and probably another half hour between Osky and Mt. Pleasant.]

My gas tank was nearly empty when I got to Mt. Pleasant. I'd intentionally planned it that way so I could take advantage of Hy-Vee fuel saver points. Unfortunately I'd emptied out my wallet prior to this trip and left my Hy-Vee card at home. Fortunately the gas in Mt. P. was just \$2.59 at full price, a dime less than it is in Algona.

After buying gas I drove to the Amtrak station and parked. I got there right at 4pm, which was about two hours before the train was due to depart. I spent the time walking around Mt. Pleasant. The Amtrak station is right by the old junior high, which now has a second addition and is almost completely unrecognizable as the school I went to years ago. Between there and downtown is a neighborhood of lovely old Victorian homes, most of which have been beautifully restored.

Downtown Mt. Pleasant is definitely struggling. (When I was driving into town, it appeared the west side of town was as well—though there is something in the old



The latest addition to the north of Mt. Pleasant Junior High

Blue Bird bus factory now.) There are lots of vacant storefronts, and most of what is occupied is either professional offices or marginal businesses like antique shops and tattoo parlors. The buildings are all freshly sandblasted and look lovely, but there's just not much going on. **[Each time I go there, Mt. Pleasant looks more and more like a southern town. Signs all over the south direct people off the bypasses to "historic downtown wherever", and those historic centers look a lot like Mt. P. Sadly the businesses have all moved to suburban strips, leaving downtown a pretty but empty shell.]**

Since I'd missed out on lunch in the Des Moines area, I'd hoped to have a late lunch or early supper in Mt. P. (I hadn't eaten either breakfast or lunch at home, so I was getting rather hungry.) Unfortunately the two places that looked most interesting (a pad thai place and a nice Mexican restaurant) were both closed on Sunday, as was almost everything else downtown. I stopped by Dairy Queen (which has been remodeled, but is still an impossibly small building and serves only ice cream) and got a blizzard. Then I walked around some more. I walked north past the Methodist church I'd gone to when I was a kid (which proudly announces that they're handicap-accessible these days, something that would be partially funded by memorial money from my parents) and then up past Iowa Wesleyan College. I turned onto Winfield Avenue and walked past where our mother's old friend Joyce used to live. Then I headed back down Broadway toward downtown. Since it was just about the only option, I decided to stop at Subway for dinner. I picked up a six-inch ham and cheese sandwich, and that will very likely be the cheapest meal I have on this whole trip.

I'd called Amtrak's "Julie" (the voice mail information system) while I was walking, and at the time the train was listed as arriving on time. By the time I got back to the station, though, it was listed as 13 minutes late. It had apparently arrived on time in Burlington, but for some reason it departed there twenty minutes late. **[While the "Julie" phone system still exists, I haven't used it in years. It's quicker and easier to find train status information on the Amtrak cell phone app.]**

The Mt. Pleasant station has been nicely restored outside. It's an old brick building (like pretty much everything else in Mt. P.), and they've sandblasted the walls and done work on the brick plaza in front of the place. Unfortunately, the renovations haven't extended to the inside. The Mt. Pleasant station looks pretty similar to the one in Princeton, Illinois, which I've used many times. Princeton, though, has been cared for much better. The floor in Mt. P. is badly cracked, and every surface in the place is filthy. There's no air conditioning, and they'd set up an oscillating fan that was supposed to be white but was more a dark gray from layers of dust.

Eighteen passengers boarded at Mt. Pleasant today. Several of them had just finished riding RAGBRAI and had bicycles as their checked luggage. I suppose they'd probably gone east to Omaha or Creston, done the ride, and were now heading home from eastern Iowa. It did make for an interesting group.

The train arrived about 15 minutes late. A couple waiting next to me said it looked like a short train, but that really wasn't true. There were two engines, a baggage car, four sleepers, a diner, a lounge, and three coaches. I boarded the next-to-last coach, and since my ticket was for the lower level, I just headed straight for the seating area. Unfortunately the whole room was full of single people who were sitting in double seats. I annoyed a young black man from Chicago by sitting next to him, but there really weren't many other options. I happened to notice he was ticketed to Ottumwa, and I was hoping I might end up by myself for a while after that. So far that's proved to be the case. **[I've wished for years that Amtrak would assign seats with tickets on long-distance trains. I've had assigned seats on trains in Canada, Europe, and New Zealand, but on Amtrak it's almost always first come, first served. The only trains with assigned seats on Amtrak appear to be the high-speed Acela trains that run along the Northeast Corridor.]**

The guy I sat next to and his friend who was seated across the aisle were certainly popular people. Their cell phones wouldn't stop—with calls, texts, Snapchat tidbits, etc. When they got actual phone calls, they spoke in a black dialect that was all but impossible for me to understand. They also seemed to have very little concept of just where Ottumwa was—which seemed strange, given that it was their destination.

Before this trip I'd downloaded the Laura Ingalls Wilder books to my Kindle, and I spent quite a while this evening reading through *Little House in the Big Woods*. I was motivated to buy the Kindle version because the American Library Association was having a hissy fit about Wilder's writing, because she supposedly presents negative stereotypes of African-Americans and Native Americans. I don't recall ever reading about a black person in the *Little House* books (I'll be interested to see as I re-read the books if there are any), and her portrayals of Indians are exactly what you'd expect of a woman of her era. No, it's not as a politically correct modern treatment, but it's not supposed to be that. She's giving the recollections of a pioneer girl, and really her treatment is surprisingly balanced coming from that perspective. At any rate, reading through Wilder's books made a good way to pass the time. It's been years since I've read them, and it's kind of fun to look through them once again. **[The *Little House* books had just become available on Kindle when I bought them as e-books. For more than a decade Wilder's estate had not allowed electronic versions of her books to be distributed. I'm really not sure why that is, since except for the page layout the e-books are identical to the originals.]**

The best description of the trip so far would be "uneventful". We stopped at Ottumwa (where nobody at all boarded, though about a dozen people got off), Osceola (by far the busiest stop so far, presumably since it's straight south of Des Moines), and Creston (where about ten people got off and four got on). I'm still by myself, and I will be until at least Omaha. In front of me is a couple that's visiting their kids in Ft. Collins, Colorado. They'll be getting off tomorrow morning in Denver. Across the aisle from me is an enormous black woman who's going to Grand Junction, Colorado. There's another seat tag for Grand Junction and a couple for Omaha. In this car, I'm headed the furthest west.

So far the car has been very quiet, and I'm hoping that might mean I can get some halfway decent rest. The door at the front of the lower-level seating room doesn't work for some reason. I was afraid that might make it very loud with people coming and going to the bathrooms, but so far at least it's been no big deal. Let's hope that continues—knock on wood. **[While I'd recommend a sleeper to anyone who can afford it, as a budget alternative, the lower level on Superliner trains is almost always better than the upper level for sleeping. The bulk of the passengers downstairs are people who either can't or don't want to navigate stairs. That means it's heavy on elderly folks, who tend to be quieter than many other travelers. There's also only about a dozen seats on**

the lower level of each car, versus sixty or so upstairs. People claim the views are better on the upper level, but I really haven't noticed much difference between them.] They've been making fairly routine announcements on the P.A., but that's about it. Interestingly, the diner has been calling dinner reservations 15 to 30 minutes in advance of what they are scheduled for. I've been on trains where they didn't get to them until half an hour or more after the scheduled time, so early is definitely a good thing.

I won't be going to the diner on this train, and with the possible exception of coffee tomorrow morning, I won't be heading to the lounge either. I brought along a bunch of food and drinks with me. My at-seat bag was actually quite heavy when I boarded, but I'm hoping that when I get to Salt Lake City, I can stuff it inside my main suitcase. I've been drinking apple and cranberry juice and snacking on bread sticks with cheese dip. That will probably be my lunch tomorrow as well. It's not exactly haute cuisine, but it is filling. **[I have to be more careful with what I eat since being diagnosed with diabetes, so the juice and breadsticks wouldn't be on the menu today.]**

Something that's been kind of annoying on this trip is that there are huge areas even in Iowa where my cell phone gets no reception. Since there's no wi-fi on the western Amtrak trains, that means the phone is pretty much worthless. I was expecting no cell service in the mountains, but you'd think the signals could get through the corn fields. I remember a similar issue when I went down to see Steve earlier this summer, though. I suppose southwest Iowa must have a cell provider that doesn't get along with mine.

They announced night stops shortly after Creston and told us quiet hours would be from 10pm to 7am (though they didn't specify whether the latter was Central or Mountain time **[It would be Mountain, as times on Amtrak are always given in the local time zone you're passing through at any given time.]**). We raced across far west Iowa and reached Omaha right on time, shortly after 11pm. I turned off my computer there and attempted to get to bed. I did manage to doze a bit, but was aware when we got to Lincoln around midnight.

Monday, July 30, 2018

Lincoln, Nebraska to Salt Lake City, Utah

I've definitely had more restful nights than this one. First, the large black woman across the aisle snored loudly all night long. It seemed as if each time I was just about to actually get to sleep, she'd let out a particularly prodigious snore. I'd managed to get fairly comfortable in my seat around Omaha and did while I was aware of stopping there and at Lincoln and Hastings, I slept more than I was awake. Unfortunately, at Holdridge (smack dab in the middle of Nebraska) a family boarded that is heading to Glenwood Springs. While they had tickets to sit upstairs, apparently the top level is entirely full, because they seated them down here until we get to Denver. The father is seated next to me, his son and daughter are in aisle seats across the aisle, and his wife is about three rows forward. Of course I was wide awake when they boarded, and I basically haven't slept since. The kids are actually very well behaved, but the dad sprawled out so he took about a seat and a half—and given that I'm far from a small person myself, that's not a good thing. I've mentioned before that something I dislike about Amtrak is that there are no center armrests, which does make it easy for people to take more than their share of space. I wish they'd have the same sort of arm rests you see on airplanes. **[From various online forums this seems to be the consensus of most travelers. The newer regional trains do have center armrests, but they still don't have them on long-distance trains.]**

Being awake, I noticed a rainstorm around 4am near McCook, Nebraska and a lovely sunrise as we made our way into Colorado. My seat faces backwards, so I can't really see the mountains yet, but the sunrise really was quite striking as it came up over foothills we'd already passed. As we neared Fort Morgan it was very foggy, and there were large pools of water near the tracks and on the roads that let me know they'd had a lot of rain recently. I also saw what looked like it might be tornado damage. A semi was overturned on a straight stretch of highway, and scrap metal and wood were scattered all over the landscape. I hadn't really noticed anything that looked like tornado damage when I drove past Pella yesterday **[There had been a big tornado in Pella the previous week.]**, but I do wonder if they hadn't had a twister near Fort Morgan.

Right now the family is having breakfast in the diner. I took the opportunity to go to the bathroom, clean up, and dress for a new day. We were about an hour behind schedule at Fort Morgan, but Amtrak's website (which I can check, since there is good cell service in eastern Colorado) says we should be making up much of that by Denver. That actually might be true, since right now we're sailing along faster than traffic on the interstate. **[In double-tracked rural areas where there's not freight interference, Amtrak trains typically go at 79mph.]**

I opted not to go to the diner today, since it's ridiculously overpriced when you're travelling in coach. I don't need to pay \$8.50 for pancakes or \$13.75 for an omelette—with all the extras priced a la carte on top of that. I did get some coffee and a cinnamon roll in the lounge. That alone was \$5.25, and it's likely to be all I'll be buying on this particular train trip. The cheese and breadsticks will have to suffice for lunch and dinner. **[Amtrak stopped allowing coach passengers to eat in the diner during COVID, and only began to let them eat there again late in 2023. Today they're charging a flat rate to coach passengers who eat in the diner. Breakfast costs \$20, lunch \$25, and dinner \$45. That includes sides, beverages, and desserts, so it's not quite as expensive as it seems. I don't have any long-distance train trips planned in the coming year, so it will be a while before I check out the diner offerings again.]**

Walking to the lounge car confirmed that this train is entirely full. The entire upstairs of this car is people ticketed to Denver, as is most of the car in front of that. There's a few Glenwood Springs and Grand Junction passengers, but mine is the only seat tag I've seen for anywhere west of that.

It's 7:15am Mountain Time now, and we're in Denver, though not yet to the station. We've slowed to a crawl in an industrial area, so hopefully we'll be downtown before too long.

It's about 8:30 now, and we're sitting on the platform in Denver. We actually were in the station area by 7:30, but we had to wait nearly half an hour before we could pull into the station because of freight traffic. Denver is a service stop, where they cater the food, wash the windows, etc., so they schedule fifty minutes here before departure. I'm not sure if we'll use all that time (which would mean we'll still be about an hour down) or if we'll pick up a little bit.

We seem to have traded passengers, but are still a very full train. While tons of people did exit at Denver, people have been trickling on board for as long as we've been stopped. The car attendant implied that the lower level would continue to be full, and a number of handicapped people did board. The family did move upstairs, and while I was temporarily next to an obese elderly gentleman who spoke only in grunts, at the moment I appear to be by myself again. We'll see if that continues, but I'm not holding my breath.

One thing that's nice about the Denver station is that there's wi-fi, which has allowed me to get a bit of work done. I uploaded some stuff for the school and church websites, and I also read Paul's weekly letter. **[I wish they'd update the Superliners to provide wi-fi. I'd think they could make it work with the same sort of satellite technology they use on airplanes, and I wouldn't be upset if they charged for it like the airlines do. I don't think any sort of wi-fi plans are in the works, though.]** I was also pleased to see that the commuter train I'll take when I get back to Denver is just on the next track, so it should be a fairly easy transfer.

While on the wi-fi, I googled Colorado tornado and found that there was indeed a major tornado near Brush (just north of Fort Morgan) this morning. The metal I'd seen was apparently from planes, because a dozen planes were destroyed in an airport hangar there. Fortunately we missed the weather itself, but that probably was what slowed us down.



Front Range – west of Denver, Colorado

We left Denver right at 9:00, and were heading up into the mountains now. This part of the rail line is all switchbacks, and most of it is a single track. Because of that we had to wait for clearance from the dispatcher to proceed, which means we're now about an hour and a half behind schedule. We paralleled a light rail line much of the way west from Denver. I really wish we could have followed the light rail tracks, because they have an exclusive right of way.

The mountains just west of the city are honestly kind of ugly, with just bare grazing land. We've increased elevation, and now it's a pretty alpine forest. We just went through the first of twenty-seven tunnels we'll pass through before reaching the Great Divide. There's sixteen more tunnels on the west slope. Moffat Tunnel at the Divide is about 9200 feet high. That's actually lower than a lot of Colorado passes, but considering the railroad dates back more than a century, it's still pretty impressive.

It's very hazy out, which the conductor tells us is due to forest fires. While it's California we've been hearing about, they've apparently also had some bad fires in the Colorado mountains. The ones in the Rockies haven't threatened cities, which is why they've been less newsworthy.

On the way up to the pass we went by what looks like a freight train permanently parked on a siding. It's a bunch of hopper cars filled with rocks. They're parked there to provide a windbreak. Apparently the winds on the pass can frequently exceed 100mph. Fortunately today it's not nearly that strong. We also went past an enormous dam that created the reservoir from which Denver gets most of its water.

One slight issue with being in a downstairs seat is that the view isn't quite as vast as it is upstairs. It's still gorgeous, though, and it's kind of fun to cross all the little creeks right at water level. I happen to be on the north side of the train on this trip, and if I can, I'm going to try to be on the opposite side when I come back. It's definitely pretty in all directions, though.

I can tell we're at a high elevation. I just got out one of the packs of pretzels and cheese dip, and it was puffed up from the reduced air pressure. I remember when I was a kid and the packs that film cartridges came in would do it.

It's 11:00 now, and we're in the Moffit Tunnel, which is 6.2 miles long (or an even ten kilometers if they chose to go Metric). This is the one point on the trip where they require people to stay in the car they are in, forbidding them to move between cars. That's because diesel fumes build up inside the tunnel, and opening the doors between cars would send those throughout the train. I can get a few whiffs of the fumes anyway, and it's definitely best to keep them to a minimum.

The woman across the aisle is snoring again. That almost makes sense in the tunnel (which is, of course, pitch black), but she actually slept through much of the scenic area as well. She's nothing, though, compared to a woman in front of me who keeps complaining about what a long, long trip this is. She joined the train at Denver, so she's only been on board two hours. The woman is headed to Idaho, so I assume she's taking the train to Salt Lake City. That means she's got a lot more hours ahead of her. She said that next time she thought she'd take a bus. I actually looked into that, but the bus (which, coming from Denver, requires a connection in Cheyenne) actually takes longer and costs more than Amtrak. There is a bus that follows I-70, but it ends up in Las Vegas rather than Salt Lake City.

Now we're stopped in Winter Park, the first big ski resort west of Denver, with an elevation of about 8,600 feet. The surrounding peaks are high enough that I can see a definite tree line. There are a few patches of snow at the top of them, and here at the base it is only 61 degrees at 11:15am, with a high of 70 expected this afternoon. I wish that was the weather I could expect further west. Unfortunately Salt Lake City is expecting a high of 99 today, and it's supposed to be over 100 in Sacramento.



**Website view of the California Zephyr
Gore Canyon, Colorado**

there really wouldn't be much to see. Almost all the trees here are conifers. There are some aspens, which I think turn yellow, but you wouldn't have the bright color from maple or oak you'd see further east. Instead of fall, I think it would be fun to come out here in winter. I'm no skier, but I think the snow-covered mountains would be beautiful.



**One of the red rock canyons of the Colorado River
single dining car to serve all those people, so it would take a long time to get through them all.]**

There was no question but that I'd snack instead of having lunch. Every adult entrée is \$12.50, and the choices are basically a salad or a burger. It does come with chips, but it darn well better at that price. Those who oppose Amtrak's subsidy point out that they lose tons of money on food service, and those prices are as high as they are thanks to anti-train Congressmen. Those same Congressmen are the reason there's fewer options on the menu than there used to be. In fact, on a lot of the Eastern trains they've eliminated the diner all together. Food itself isn't the real expense, though. The issue is that the food is served by veteran railroad employees who earn union wages and have a cushy retirement fund instead of the sub-minimum wage waiters you see at standard restaurants. **[By contrast in Canada and New Zealand the food service personnel on trains were mostly college kids who were looking for a fun seasonal job.]** Mind you, I don't fault the employees one bit for negotiating a good living. The Congressmen, though, miss the point. Every form of transportation gets a subsidy. The rail opponents never complain about the "free" roads and airports our taxes build, though. It's only trains they're against.

It's a quarter to three now, and we just got into Glenwood Springs—still right at an hour late. Amtrak's website says we'll make it on time to Salt Lake City, but it tends to be overly optimistic. **[That's almost always true when you look up arrival times for more distant destinations. I suppose they want to make sure boarding passengers are there on time, but invariably they'll imply that trains will make up the time they're down.]** We're supposed to get in at 11:05, but I'm assuming it will be after midnight. It was at least a fairly quick stop at Glenwood Springs, which is unusual since it's both the busiest non-urban station on the route and also a smoke break for the crew.

We've paralleled I-70 ever since entering the Glenwood Canyon, and I think we'll continue to follow it all the way to Utah. It's interesting that even on arrow straight sections the speed limit on the interstate is 65mph. On the cantilevered area through the canyon,

It's about 12:30 now, and we're headed through the Gore Canyon, a place that is only accessible by rail or kayak. It's really spectacularly beautiful.

West of the canyon is the confusingly named Azure Valley. I assume it's the river (the Colorado) that's supposed to be blue, since nothing else around here is. The mountains themselves are orange, and about all that grows on them is gray-green sagebrush. It's quite a bit less attractive than the canyon. This is apparently a big area for recreational boating, and the conductor warned us of something that's become a tradition here. The boaters apparently watch for the train and then pull down their pants and moon it as it goes by. It's probably a good thing I'm not on the river side of the car. (Update: I just saw a guy mooning the train, so I can confirm it does happen.)

A woman in this car said she'd love to take this train in fall foliage season. The problem with that is that there are some aspens, which I think turn yellow, but you wouldn't have the bright color from maple or oak you'd see further east. Instead of fall, I think it would be fun to come out here in winter.

We've made our way into the Glenwood Canyon, which I remember both from childhood and from a trip Margaret and I made years ago. You can tell here why the Colorado River has that name. While there's still lots of trees, the underlying rock that makes up the canyon walls is deep red, presumably from iron deposits. Colorado simply means "red" in Spanish (though it's a fancy word as opposed to the everyday "rojo"), and all its canyons (even down to the Grand Canyon) are that color.

They started lunch at noon in the diner, and it sounds like it will be going until three. They don't typically take reservations at lunch, but at 12:10 they announced they were full to capacity and were starting a waiting list. They later announced it was a "very lengthy" waiting list. By 1:30pm they'd only gotten to the eighth party on the list, and at 2pm they were paging #15. **[I assume the sleepers were as full as the coach cars. There's just a**

it's only 55. The train averages about 50mph over the mountains (though the rail route is longer than the interstate), and we're moving about the same as freeway traffic in the flat area approaching Grand Junction.

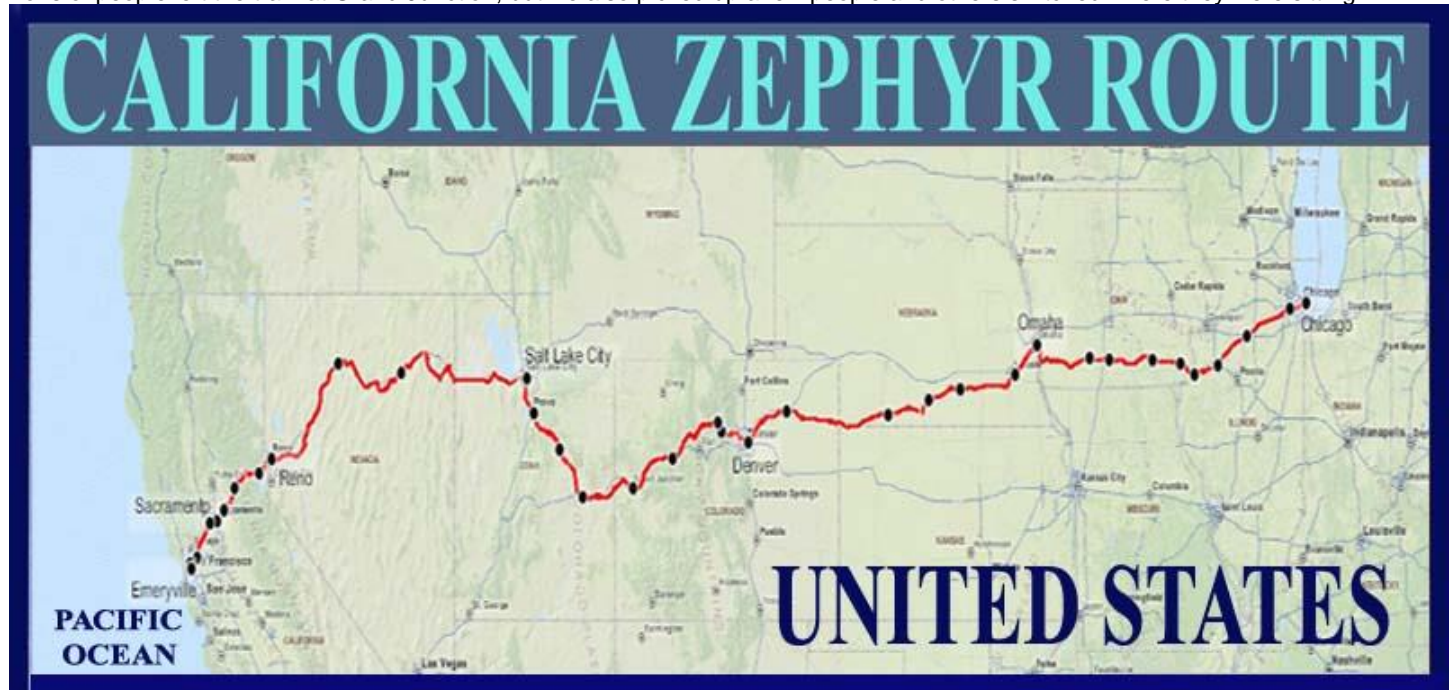
While there was almost no population at all between Denver and Glenwood Springs, the area we're going through now seems pretty generally settled. The area between Glenwood Springs and Grand Junction is a broad valley that is irrigated farm country. There appears to be a lot of truck farming (small fields of vegetable crops), and the area is known for its orchards and vineyards. It actually looks a lot like California, so it makes sense the crops would be similar. Supposedly they also grow ornamental trees for use in home improvement, though I can't say I've seen any of those farms. The land that's not farmed around here is honestly very ugly. It's much drier than it is further east, and without irrigation all that grows is sagebrush.

The town names around here give you a clue to the history. We just passed through Coal Ridge, and there's also towns named after silver, copper, and even uranium. I gather there's not much mining done these days, but that was why most of the towns were founded.

While I was driving yesterday I happened to be listening to a CD set of Peter, Paul, & Mary's hits (which, by the way, was the motivation for choosing the font that the titles for this travelogue are in). Because of that several times today the song "500 Miles" (which is, of course, set on a train) has been going through my head. Glenwood Springs would actually be 1233 miles from Chicago (where the Zephyr starts), and the distance to Algona would be fairly close to that as well. When I reach Salt Lake City tonight I'll be at mile 1608, and Sacramento is mile 2353. The furthest away I'll be will probably be in Silicon Valley, which would be right at 2500 miles as the song says "from my home".

The conductor just came in to check on the car, and one of the passengers is definitely talking his ear off. The guy is an old geezer who has apparently been coaching college track for fifty years. He and his wife live in suburban Denver, and they're taking the train across the mountains to Grand Junction to spend their anniversary there. (I'm not sure what the particular attraction of Grand Junction is, but they seem to be enjoying sightseeing on the way. He volunteered his whole life story to the conductor and then had question after question both about the conductor's job and his personal life. The conductor (a jovial black man who's nearing retirement age) took it in stride, though he did try several times to cut the guy off. Eventually he got a call on his walkie-talkie. I doubt it was anything urgent, but it was a convenient excuse for him to get away. **[There are quite a few people—particularly elderly folks—who like to spend their time chatting with the crew on trains.]**

It's right at 5:00 now, and we just arrived at Grand Junction, slightly less than an hour late. It appears to be a needlessly long stop, though, so I'm betting we'll be a full hour behind by the time we leave. (...And indeed, that's exactly what we were when we left.) Tons of people left the train at Grand Junction, but we also picked up a few people and others switched where they were sitting.



I thought at first there was a "Christmas in July" theme on this train, because it sounded like Carols, both in English and Spanish, were coming over the intercom. I heard "Silent Night", "Frosty the Snowman", and "Campana Sobre Campana". Then I realized it wasn't the intercom they were coming from, it was my Kindle. I'd actually put those songs on there a year and a half ago when I spent Christmas with my sister at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester. It made nice background while we passed the time. I'd obviously never deleted them, though, and somehow the Kindle managed to accidentally get set into music mode and was serenading me and the whole car. It was definitely a bit embarrassing, and of course I shut it off as quickly as I realized what was up. **[I actually still have the carols on my Kindle to this day, and in fact I listened to a couple of them last Christmas. Listening to .mp3s is about all I use the physical Kindle for these days. If I want to read an e-book I'm much more likely to just use the Kindle app on my cell phone.]**

We changed conductors at Green River, and the new one said we should be on time at Salt Lake City. I do hope that's true, but I'm not holding my breath. He also apologized for the poor condition of the tracks between here and the Utah border (the next twenty

miles). That stood out, because overall this has been a very smooth ride—honestly one of the smoothest I've been on. The section we're on now is indeed a bit bumpy, but it's nothing compared to the City of New Orleans. What's weird is that this rough section is in the flattest land we've been through since Nebraska. **[It's not really terrain that makes for rough tracks; it's the priority the freight companies give to different stretches of track.]**

It's about 6:30 now, and we're well into Utah—not that I'd say that's a good thing. This is true desert country, where even the sage has trouble growing. I suppose some would say it's starkly beautiful, but it's definitely not my kind of landscape. Strangely much of the land is fenced, so I suppose they must do some grazing. I can't imagine how many acres would be necessary for a single head of cattle, though.

I've filled time on dull stretches like this by reading more of Laura Ingalls Wilder. I finished *Little House in the Big Woods* this morning and am now most of the way through *Little House on the Prairie*. (They are children's books, of course, so it's not exactly challenging reading.) It's almost certainly *Little House on the Prairie* that had the librarians in fits. There are lots of stories of Indians in the book, as well as one account of a doctor who happened to be black. The doctor actually saved the Ingalls family's lives, but he is described in the words of a small child who had never before seen a non-white person.

The stories of the Indians (and of course nobody used the term Native Americans back when Mrs. Wilder wrote her books) are also told through the eyes of a little girl who is discovering something new. The descriptions have that "noble savage" air that is certainly not politically correct, but which is how a young Laura would likely have seen them. Different Indians are described as doing positive and negative things, and she also describes a wide range of reactions that different white people have toward them. Laura's mother makes some remarks that are more than a bit racist, but her father wants to be friends with the Indians. At the end of one chapter, Laura herself makes a fascinating remark. Pa explains that the government is making the Indians move further west to make room for white settlers. Laura then says to him, "But Pa, I thought this was Indian Territory. Won't it make the Indians mad to have to—" at which point her father cuts her off and makes her go to sleep. That's a surprisingly enlightened comment for a girl of this era to make. I'm certainly not saying that 19th Century race relations should be our model today, but we can't just gloss over the past either. I think the library association might do better to come up with discussion questions that can help kids learn from the book, rather than just boycotting it.

[It's fascinating to re-read the previous paragraphs at a time when people at the opposite end of the political spectrum have been trying to censor books. I have no time for the conservative book bans either. I will say, though, that banning books is what I expect conservatives to do. It seems a bit hypocritical when people on the left call for book boycotts.]

About 7pm we got to Green River, still an hour down. This is one of the rattiest towns I've seen anywhere. There are some places that you can say saw their best days long ago, but I'm not sure Green River ever had any good days. It's about as bleak as the countryside.

It's 8:25 now, and we're in Helper, Utah, two stops from Salt Lake City. The town is located right before the rail line climbs a pass over the Wasatch Mountains into the Salt Lake basin. The name comes from the fact that in the early days of railroading they'd add "helper" engines to the trains so they could make it over the pass. **[I can remember my father telling the origin of the town's name when we went through there on a camping trip years ago.]** Helper looks like a much more substantial town than Green River, and the surrounding mountains are much more attractive.



Website picture showing Green River from the highway, which if anything looks nicer than the view from the train

From here it's about two hours to Provo, at the south end of the Salt Lake metro area. It appears they have the schedule padded a bit between there and Salt Lake City itself. They schedule over an hour for the trip, but commuter trains making several stops do it in right at an hour. Right now Amtrak's website has us arriving in Salt Lake City seventeen minutes late, and that may actually be right.

We were still an hour late at Provo, and while the last fifty miles seemed like the longest, we really sailed right along. We passed through endless suburban sprawl that probably looked its best at night. The most memorable feature was the moon—a big, nearly full, pink-colored moon that shone brightly in the east all the way through that stretch.

We got to Salt Lake Central Station at 11:30pm, just twenty-five minutes late. (Apparently something slowed the train down again after that, though. I just checked, and it was nearly two hours late reaching Elko, Nevada, the next stop west.) I walked the length of the platform and then past the commuter rail and light rail platforms to get to the street. The hotel I was staying at would be just a block from the station as the crow flies. Unfortunately that route is fenced off, so I had to go the long way around. When I looked on a map, it appeared to be a three-block walk. It ended up being even more than that, because they were doing construction on the street beside the hotel. I was a little bit worried about this hotel, because some who had stayed there described a large number of homeless people in the neighborhood. The hotel is one of several attempts to gentrify what has traditionally been Salt Lake City's skid row. The place is literally across the street from a homeless shelter run by Catholic Social Services, and I probably did see a dozen or so bums. They didn't say a single word to me, though, and I made my way past with no problem. It was actually less of a problem than getting to some places I've stayed in downtown Chicago. **[The reviews I'd looked at in researching this hotel were from Tripadvisor. While I like that site, I always take the reviews with a grain of salt. Even the nicest places will have some scathing reviews, often due to picky little issues that would mean nothing to me. On the other hand I've seen Motel 6's and Econolodges that get five stars. A lot of times people's reviews are skewed by what they think the place is worth relative to its cost, and there are a few people who I think would never be satisfied by anything.]**

I'd prepaid for this room, specifically so I would have a place right by the station. Check-in took longer than it probably should have, but eventually I made my way up to the sixth floor and down the maze of corridors to my room. I should actually say to my **suite**. The hotel is the Homewood Suites (a Hilton brand intended for long-term stays), and my accommodations are among the largest I've ever stayed in. The entry leads into a combination kitchen and living room that alone is larger than many hotel rooms I've been in. The bedroom is similarly sized, and there's also a huge bathroom. Everything is brand new and spotless. One of my favorite features of the place is that above the beds are paintings of mountain scenery. It really is a lovely hotel.



Homewood Suites – Salt Lake City

After breakfast I left my bag at the hotel desk (and indeed the little bag did fit inside the big one—with a bit of coaxing). Then I set out for the day. Annoyingly I found that the street by the hotel that was closed last night was open this morning. I made my way to the Old Greentown light rail station, fumbled with their vending machine a bit, and bought a day pass for the SLC transit system. For a place the size of Des Moines, Salt Lake has a surprisingly large transit system. The TRAX light rail network was originally built to shuttle people around when the city hosted the 2002 Winter Olympics. It's been expanded several times since then, and today three different lines connect large parts of the city and suburbs. It was obviously built quickly and cheaply compared to other systems, with stations and vehicles that are mostly utilitarian. It does the job, though, and the trains seem to run full all day long. **[Utah stands out as a “red” state with good public transit. Other places would do well to look to them as a model.]**

I first rode the blue line east a couple stops to City Center station. City Center is located at a downtown mall centered on the store that used to be called Zion's Cooperative Mercantile Institution, a department store founded by Brigham Young and run for more than a century by the LDS Church. In 1999 the church sold the store, and today the ornate building houses a Macy's. The mall has many other stores, and overall downtown Salt Lake City seems fairly active. There's lots of new apartments, and it seems to be much livelier than the downtown areas of most midsized cities. **[It's certainly livelier than Des Moines or Omaha, for instance.]**

The people in downtown Salt Lake are also among the best dressed I've seen anywhere. The men are all in neatly pressed white shirts with ties. It's the sort of thing businessmen wore back in the '50s—and, of course, also what

Tuesday, July 31, 2018

Salt Lake City Area, Utah



Mormon missionaries wear. The women are equally formal, and many people of both sexes wore jackets—on a day with highs over 100 predicted.



LEFT: Macy's in the original Zion's Cooperative Mercantile building



RIGHT: Mormon Pioneer Memorial Monument at the original Latter Day Saints Cemetery Salt Lake City, Utah

Something else that stood out was that Salt Lake City is a very white city. You do see all ethnic groups here. (The second largest group would be Hispanic and/or Native American, followed by Polynesians, followed by east Asians, with just a tiny minority of black people.) At least three-fourths of the people are "Anglos", though, which is quite a bit higher than most cities these days. The lack of blacks particularly stood out. Almost all the service workers are Hispanic or Native (it's honestly hard to tell the difference, and the construction workers are either white or Polynesian. There are, by the way, quite a lot of Pacific Islanders here. That makes sense, given that the Latter Day Saints made a big push for missions in Polynesia. **[In Utah it's often Pacific Islanders who do the jobs that black or Hispanic people would elsewhere in America. I saw lots of Polynesian construction workers and custodians, for instance. I thought back to Salt Lake City this past summer when I again saw Pacific Islanders in those jobs—this time in Auckland.]**

I waked past the ZCMI/Macy's building, the impressive Zion's Bank building, and a number of office and apartment buildings. I also snapped the obligatory pictures of the Mormon temple and of Brigham Young's homestead (which has the look of an old Southern plantation and where the LDS President still lives). I then turned east on 1st Street and made my way to a tiny park buried in the plaza of an apartment complex just east of downtown. The park is primarily a small cemetery, and it happens to be where Brigham Young and his principal wife are buried, along with about a dozen others of the original Mormon pioneers who came west in handcars. It's a lovely little park, but it is really weird to have the place surrounded by apartment towers. Young's grave is almost incidental to the place. The main monument is to the composer of the traditional Mormon hymn "All Is Well" (also known as "Come, Come, Ye Saints"). I basically went to the park on a whim (I found it in a search for free things to see in SLC), but I'm glad I went there.



Rental scooter abandoned mid-block

An interesting thing I saw downtown were scooter rental facilities. These were similar to the bike share stands you see in lots of cities, where people slide a credit card to unlock a bike and then return it to another stand. They have those in Salt Lake, but they also have places where you can rent scooters, those little platforms with wheels kids rode around with in the '60s. I have no idea why people would want those, and I never did see anyone actually using them. I must have seen half a dozen lines of scooters available to rent, though. **[These have expanded to other cities in the past few years. They still seem kind of strange to me, though.]**

Next I took the red line to the east end of the city. I got off at Stadium station, which is on the campus of the University of Utah. Just east of that station is the cauldron that housed the flame when Salt Lake City hosted the



2002 Olympic Cauldron University of Utah

Olympics. My original intent had been to take a UU campus shuttle from there to my next destination, but I couldn't figure out where to board the free shuttle. So instead I walked about two miles, almost entirely uphill, until I finally reached the Natural History Museum of Utah.

While it's a bit of a chore to get to, this is really quite a nice museum. The building itself is worth the visit. They call it the Rio Tinto Center, since it was donated by the mining company of that name. **[While it fits in well with names in the American Southwest, Rio Tinto is a British company that took the name when they bought out a mining company formerly owned by the government of Spain.]** It's literally built into a mountain right at the east edge of the city, and different levels have outdoor plaza areas where you can look out over both the city and the mountains. The whole thing is powered by solar energy (a lot of stuff around here seems to be), and the architects designed it to blend in with the landscape as much as possible. Inside there are five floors of exhibits that cover a broad scope of science. The place is famous for its numerous dinosaur skeletons (almost all of which were found in Utah), but they do a nice job of incorporating all aspects of science. There are exhibits devoted to biology, physics, geology, chemistry, and meteorology. It's all designed so that it can be explored at many levels. Kids can get a broad overview while having fun, and people who want to know more can pause longer and read through things in detail.

Something that's kind of interesting is that two issues that get a lot of conservative Christians in a tizzy are no big deal to Mormons. Those are evolution and climate change. Both received detailed, honest coverage in the museum. I knew from going through their website ahead of time that this was true, so I explored Mormon views on those issues. The LDS view on evolution is actually very similar to what my father believed—that evolution was the method God used in creation and that the “days” of creation refer to epochs rather than twenty-four hour periods. The church is also very concerned about conservation and ecological stewardship, so it's not really surprising that they acknowledge climate change and support efforts to minimize it. It's actually more surprising that Rio Tinto was willing to let the museum display that exhibit.



Entrance to the Utah Museum of Natural History, with the Wasatch Mountains in the background

[I really don't get the issue conservative Christians have with science. They, of course, will tell you that they're defending the literal truth of the Bible, yet they'll never acknowledge the many contradictions that come up in the Bible itself. I also don't understand why conservatives are so preoccupied with the Old Testament, while at the same time they go against the words of Jesus himself.]

There are two other big attractions at the east edge of Salt Lake City. I wasn't particularly interested in seeing their zoo, but what did sound interesting was This Is the Place State Heritage Park, which is at the place where Brigham Young announced the end of the trek and declared the location of their settlement. I knew roughly where the park was, but not exactly. So, I went to Google Maps and asked for directions to there. It wasn't really surprising that walking was listed as taking less time than the various transit options, since this is a part of SLC that is not well served by transit. Both the buses and light rail end their routes at the university. East of there service is skeletal at best.



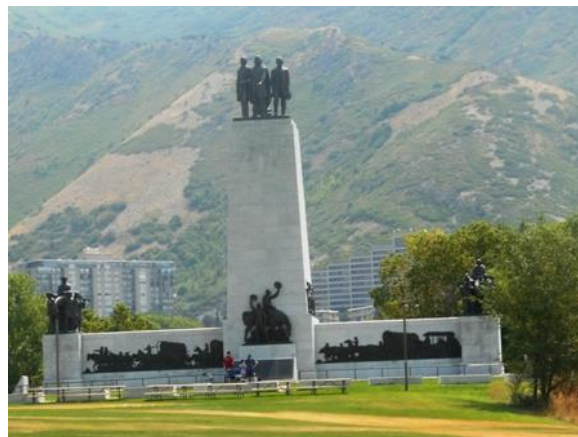
**“Selfie” on a walking path
Eastern Salt Lake City, Utah**

The walking directions were fascinating. They didn't take me along streets (which was okay, since a lot of the streets don't have sidewalks), but instead on a system of walking paths. While I was the only one using these on a hot summer day, there is a very pleasant network of gravel trails all over eastern Salt Lake. They're nicely shaded by trees and afford very nice views of the mountains. The trails dumped out in a nature reserve that had its own system of paths leading in all directions. I apparently misunderstood Google's directions, because I became hopelessly lost there. However, I did eventually find what appeared to be a casual path other visitors had worn that led down to a street. As it turned out that street was the entrance to This Is the Place park, so I was exactly where I wanted to be.

They do a living history thing at the park, and if I'd had both lots of time and money, that might have been interesting. I actually passed on the admission, though, when I realized I could get close enough to photograph the big heritage memorial by taking a trail that was technically outside the park boundary. As a bonus I also saw a nice monument to the Pony Express riders who passed through the area. So I saved twenty bucks but still had a nice time.

I wanted to get back downtown, so again I went to Google Maps. Most of the walk on those trails had been downhill, and I didn't really feel like heading back up them. The alternative was to walk to a bus stop at the corner of two streets I don't remember and then take a bus from there. Unfortunately there were no directions on how to get to that corner, and I was unable to find it. I think in retrospect that I probably should have headed a bit further east (toward the zoo), but that again would have been rather steeply uphill.

It certainly didn't help that the streets in eastern SLC are not well signed at all and that the same street can go by multiple names. That second fact is unique to Salt Lake City. Officially the city follows a strict grid of streets numbered north, south, east, and west from Temple Square. Major streets typically have names like 900 East or 1300 South. In common practice, though, people refer to them as 9th Street and 13th Street, sometimes with and sometimes without the directional suffix. Moreover, especially away from downtown, streets will go by a name in addition to the number. For instance, the street where my hotel tonight is located is called both Decker Lake Drive (which is what all the actual people call it) and 2200 West (which no one uses, but which appears on some signs). Most of the streets in eastern Salt Lake City had both names and numbers, and that may have caused part of my and Google's confusion.



Pioneer Heritage Monument
This is the Place Historic Park – Salt Lake City

I basically gave up and just started walking towards downtown. The walk to my next destination was about four and a half miles, but it was mostly level or downhill. In the process I got a nice taste of residential Salt Lake City. The homes here are mostly from the '50s and '60s. They're small and on tiny lots, but they all seem to be immaculately cared for. Apparently they sell for \$300,000 – \$500,000. That seems absurdly high to me, but it actually makes this one of the cheaper markets in the country. Closer in there are a lot of apartments as well. I checked, and two-bedrooms go for anywhere from \$900 to \$1,700 here. I can't imagine paying even the low end of that, but people on the coasts would think that the high end was cheap.

Something kind of strange about the streets in Salt Lake City is how wide they are. For a city that was planned a century and a half ago, the streets are ridiculously wide. It was easy to install light rail downtown, because even the minor streets are four lanes wide, and many are six. A lot of those are lined with century-old buildings, so presumably the streets were that wide when they were dirt. Even in residential areas, the wide streets are common. The main one I followed (900 South) was painted to have two extra-wide car lanes, plus a bike lanes in both directions. That stood out because today was trash day. Most people put their trash bins right in the bike lane. The garbage truck drove along collecting the stuff, and cars managed to pass it with no problem. Bikers wove in and out of all the lanes as if there were no paint at all.

Bicyclists, by the way, are very common in Salt Lake City. This seems to be a rather young city overall, and many of the people seem fitness conscious. They also seem to enjoy displaying their physiques in form-fitting bicycle pants **[rather a contrast with the conservative dress of the downtown businesspeople]**.

I made one stop on my long walk. I could tell I was getting seriously dehydrated (thanks to a cloudless sky and temperatures a high today of 97), so I stopped at a 7—Eleven to get a drink. I ended up getting some peach juice. I'd never seen that for sale before, but it was delicious.

I had lunch today at a place called Chuck-a-Rama, a regional chain of buffets. I always enjoy checking out regional chains, though I doubt I'll be rushing back to Chuck-a-Rama. Something there made me quite sick. I overate, of course (it was a buffet, after all), but I really do think I got a touch of food poisoning from something there. Even tonight my stomach isn't quite right, and I've got a touch of diarrhea. Aside from that, I really can't say I cared a lot for the food at Chuck-a-Rama. They had an enormous selection of salads and desserts, but they struck me as the sort of thing you'd see at a funeral dinner. There was lots of variety, but much of it lacked flavor. The same applied to the main courses. It was like they were preparing things for the old folks' home. Even Mexican and Asian selections were virtually tasteless. The best thing I had was a lemon chiffon with mandarin oranges that was called salad, but might as well have been a dessert. **[While I said "funeral dinner", really it seemed like the sort of food you'd get at a church potluck. I've never cared for such food, and I always wonder a bit when people rave about potlucks.]**

I walked a couple more blocks to a light rail station and then headed back to the Homewood Suites to claim my bag. From there I walked up to the Planetarium station and took a blue line train south to Central Pointe, which is in a big rail yard just south of the city limits. There I transferred to the green line, which I took west to Decker Lake station. The station is right next to Maverik Center, which was the ice hockey venue at the 2002 Olympics. (Maverik, by the way, is a Utah-based convenience store chain that now also owns all the Pilot and Flying J truck stops. **[Maverik recently bought out the Kum 'n' Go chain in Iowa, and I personally think it's a good thing that they'll be retiring that unfortunate name.]**) South of there is a long line of hotels and restaurants that were probably originally built to serve Olympic fans but now cater to visitors in general. The hotels appear to get cheaper the further you go from Maverik Center. The ones right by the arena and light rail station go for \$150 – \$200 a night. On the other hand the Sleep Inn I'm staying at (nearly a mile south of the station) is just \$59. **[It's about twenty bucks more than that in 2024.]**

That walk from Decker Lake station to the Sleep Inn seemed particularly long this afternoon, because the diarrhea and upset stomach from Chuck-a-Rama were starting to kick in. I struggled to keep things both up and down. It was also extremely hot, and I honestly felt I might collapse as I walked. (One of the top stories on the news tonight was about a hiker who died of heat exhaustion, so it's not all that far off.) I did make it, of course, but it was not a fun walk.

I checked in and headed straight up to my room. Before I even took off my sunglasses, I raced to the toilet. Then I dug out some Pepto-Bismol tablets (something I always have with me when I travel), and I also downed several cups of ice water. I then spent about an hour and a half just relaxing, and finally I felt halfway human again.

It was now time for dinner. While there's tons of places right by the hotel (and that's likely what I'll do tomorrow), my plan was to go to another local chain, a place called Arctic Circle. There's no Arctic Circle in West Valley City (where the hotel is), so I'd need to make an excursion.

In addition to light rail, West Valley City is on a bus rapid transit line, and the stop for that was much closer to the hotel. I walked down to the Decker Lake MAX stop. It's almost identical to the A-Line bus stops they recently installed in the Twin Cities. They call it a "station", but it's basically just an over-sized bus shelter with a vending machine inside. I didn't need to use that machine, since I'd already bought a day pass. The bus stop wasn't unpleasant, though. In fact it's just about the nicest thing along a rather seedy street. 3500 South is lined with pawn shops, payday loan places, bail bond dealers, motels with both hourly and weekly rates, and places that advertise \$4 breakfasts and 50¢ tacos. The Sleep Inn is fine (old, but well kept), but honestly the neighbors at the homeless shelter last night were probably more pleasant than those in West Valley City. **[It appears that in the past few years a lot of those down-market businesses have been replaced by big box stores and Asian and Middle Eastern restaurants.]**

3500 South didn't improve much as I headed east, and I was glad when we reached the Millcreek light rail station. My light rail ride would take me through four SLC suburbs (South Salt Lake, Millcreek, Murray, and Midvale). I'll be interested to see other suburban areas, because nothing I saw tonight was anywhere I'd want to live. It seems to be evenly divided between mobile homes, tiny cheaply built single family houses, and tacky apartments or condos. The prices are only slightly cheaper than they are in the city proper, and they seem far less worth it. I saw an amazing number of homeless people in the Salt Lake suburbs, far more than I saw in the city proper, and there seem to be lots of others who just marginally get by. I'm pretty sure those businessmen I saw with the white shirts and ties this morning don't live in the near south suburbs. It would be interesting to find just where they do live.

I took the train south to Midvale Center station, which is at 7800 South and State Street (sometimes also called East Temple) in a ratty neighborhood of gun shops, second-hand stores, and used car dealers. The back of pretty much everything seems to be covered with graffiti, and the front is caked in grime. It was not exactly an appetizing setting for my dinner.



Arctic Circle Restaurant – Midvale, Utah

The Midvale Arctic Circle was a trip to another era. The restaurants Arctic Circle features on their website look like pretty generic suburban fast food places. The one in Midvale, though, reminded me of the McDonalds we used to stop at in Joliet when we'd travel from Michigan back to Iowa. It also had a lot in common with the old Dairy Queen in Mt. Pleasant. The place was tiny, and while they'd added an enclosed area in front of the counter, you obviously used to order at a walk-up window. There were picnic tables outside where you could eat (not all that appealing on a torrid day), and they'd also added a drive-through window—and it was amusing to watch modern vehicles try to maneuver through the tight turns it involved.

[Arctic Circle has since closed this location. They've got a new restaurant in Midvale about a mile east of here that on Google Street View looks a lot like a Culver's. The building next to the Trax station is still there. These days it houses a locally owned joint called M & C Burger.]

What I ordered at Arctic Circle (though I'm not positive it's what I got) was a barbecue bacon cheeseburger combo that included a small order of fries and a milkshake made with fresh Utah raspberries. The best part by far was the shake. It was thick enough to eat with a spoon, and the fresh berries were absolutely delicious. The fries were also pretty good. Arctic Circle claims to have invented a substance called fry sauce (which in New Orleans they'd call remoulade—it's basically a mixture of mayonnaise and tomato sauce). They gave me two cups of the sauce for my small fries. I only used one, but the fries did indeed taste good when dipped in the stuff. The burger was by far the worst part of the meal. The box had "BBQ" written on it, but I certainly didn't recognize anything I'd call barbecue sauce. I also didn't identify cheese. In fact it was a very dry burger. There was plenty of bacon, but weirdly the bacon had very little salt in it. It was like someone had taken a bunch of pork loin, sliced it up really thin, and fried it without seasoning. I don't think I even knew it was possible to make low salt bacon, and it's certainly nothing I'll ever seek out. Finally the burger had some shreds of lettuce on it, but they looked like they'd been sitting out in the heat too long. They may have some good entrees at Arctic Circle, but this was definitely not one of them. Since I wasn't feeling all that well anyway, I didn't feel a need to finish the burger.

Back at the hotel I worked on this travelogue and watched *Chopped* on TV. I must say the celebrity chefs' dishes looked a lot better than anything I had today.

Wednesday, August 1, 2018
Salt Lake City Area, Utah

I was purposely up early this morning. After showering I made my way down to the breakfast room right at 6:30. Breakfast was adequate at the Sleep inn, though nothing special. My favorite part was that they had little mini waffles, which I far prefer to the big ones. **[I really wish this was an option at more hotels.]**

I actually stopped for more breakfast right after leaving the hotel. Across the street is a place called Donut Boyz that serves gourmet doughnuts. These are basically just standard raised doughnuts that are decorated with flavorful toppings. They were very good, though. I had a German chocolate doughnut and a Dutch apple pie doughnut, and both were better than anything they had on the hotel buffet.

Once again I took the MAX bus down 35th Street to the Millcreek TRAX station. There I caught a blue line train which I took south to the next-to-last stop on the line, Kimball's Lane. Yesterday I commented on how dumpy the close-in suburbs look. Things rapidly improve further south. Sandy and Draper, down at the south end of the blue line, look a lot like Ankeny. It's not Beverly Hills, but it is very comfortable middle class living.

As I passed through Sandy I couldn't help but think that Chip Beall, who runs the national quiz bowl tournaments we go to, lives there. I actually wish he'd choose a site somewhere in the Mountain Time Zone sometime. I enjoy the cities where the tournament typically is, but it's always nice to try something new. **[The teams that come to nationals mostly hail from the East and South, so it's unlikely they'll be picking anywhere like Salt Lake.]**

At Kimball's Lane I boarded bus #811. The bus I boarded was kind of weird. It was higher than most city buses, more like a tour bus. It also lacked the exit door in the middle that most city buses have, so you had to both enter and exit at the front. Route 811 makes a couple stops in Draper, then turns south on Interstate 15 and runs express into Utah County, an area that used to be separate cities but is now the south end of the Wasatch Mountain megalopolis. There it runs along city streets and is a regular local route in places like Orem and Provo.

[They've redesigned the bus routes in the Salt Lake suburbs, and bus #811 no longer exists. It would still be possible to do the trip I did this morning (though the bus number is now #871), but you'd have to transfer to a different bus (#850) to get to Orem or Provo. Something that I find fascinating is that these are considered local buses and have the same fares as you'd find in Salt Lake City itself—even though the routes are far longer.]

I got off in Lehi, which is a VERY nice suburb about halfway between Salt Lake City and Provo. This area looks more like West Des Moines than Ankeny. Everything here is brand new or under construction, and it tends toward "McMansions" and luxury condos. Lehi also has handsome office parks, in contrast to the more seedy industry further north. They bill themselves as "Silicon Valley East", and the bulk of the industry is computer-related. They apparently invented the flash memory drive in Lehi, and they still make them there today. It's also where Adobe software is headquartered, and—unsurprisingly given Mormon priorities—it's the home of Ancestry.com.

My destination was a place called Thanksgiving Point. This place was founded as a non-profit organization by the guy who developed WordPerfect software (another Lehi company). He sold his company for a billion dollars and acquired land for a variety of uses. There are multiple museums, a lovely public golf course, and the place I was going—Ashton Gardens. (The WordPerfect founder was named Alan Ashton). It was quite a hike to get there, but Ashton Gardens was definitely a highlight of the trip.

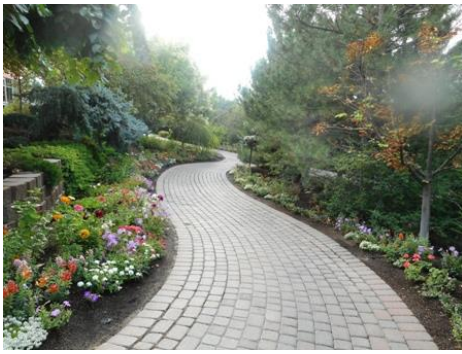
When I first went online to scout out things to see, the \$20 admission seemed a bit steep. It's easily worth that price, though, and I'm sure it truly is a non-profit. The place is almost unbelievably vast. It covers fifty acres, and pretty much all that land is use. I couldn't begin to count how many thousands or even millions of flowers, trees, nor how many other plants there are in the place. There's a true army of gardeners and landscapers keeping everything beautiful, and the facility itself features top-of-the-line construction.

There are fifteen different huge formal gardens, all connected by flower-lined brick paths. Many of the gardens represent styles from around the world, and others are designed to highlight specific landforms. One is modeled on the garden described in the book *The Secret Garden*. Another is called the "Light of the World" garden, and it features plant displays integrated with bronze statues that portray stories from the Bible (and also the Book of Mormon). I spent nearly two hours exploring the place, and I didn't dawdle. It really is wonderfully done.

After seeing the gardens, on a whim I decided to stop at a Starbucks for a cup of coffee. It's interesting that while technically the LDS church forbids caffeinated drinks, there seem to be coffee bars everywhere in Utah. I ordered a small dark roast coffee. The clerk said there would be a short wait for that, but that they had blond roast ready now. I said that was fine. What I wasn't expecting was that he would then give me my coffee free because I was so accommodating. I certainly wasn't going to complain, though. **[This is one of two or free times in my life I've stopped at a Starbucks. I've never cared for barista drinks, and while the free cup I got here would certainly balance things out, on the whole Starbucks seems very overpriced.]**

I made my way to the Lehi train station (which is actually where the bus had stopped earlier). Lehi is on a line called FrontRunner that most people call a commuter rail line. It might also be thought of as a modern version of the old interurban trains. FrontRunner runs along the Wasatch Front, that is along the edge of the mountains. It connects Provo, Salt Lake City, and Ogden (three of the four biggest cities in Utah—the fourth being West Valley City, where my hotel is), plus about a dozen suburbs in between. It's a better service than most commuter lines in America. Trains run at least hourly all day long, with more frequent service at rush hour. They go fast, too—faster than the traffic on I-15. It's more than a hundred miles from Ogden to Provo, but even with stops the trains cover that in exactly two hours. They also move a lot of people. Every stop outside of Salt Lake City is a park-and-ride, and all the lots I saw were nearly full. The trains I took today were at midday, but those moved plenty of people. It's definitely been a success, and it's a good addition to their transportation network.

[Salt Lake is one of very few places that has decently frequent regional train service even at midday. Even in Chicago and Los Angeles many of the commuter lines only run toward the city at morning rush and away in the evening. There are often no trains heading against the rush hour flow, and at midday it can be three hours or more between trains.]



Various views of
Ashton Gardens
Thanksgiving Point – Lehi, Utah

I took the train down to Provo, following the same route I'd taken in on Amtrak a couple days ago. I could see things today, though—not that there was anything too exciting to look at. It really is just run-on suburbia all the way. **[It's that linear development that makes the Wasatch Front ideal for a regional rail line.]**

The Provo station is about five blocks south of the city's actual downtown. It's in an area that obviously used to be quite seedy but is rapidly being gentrified. Right now there's sleazy motels and pawn shops right next door to elegant condos and trendy restaurants.

The focal point of downtown Provo is their Mormon temple. I'm not sure that before I went to Hawaii I was even aware there was more than one Mormon temple. I just always sort of assumed the one in downtown Salt Lake City was the temple. In fact there are dozens of LDS temples. Every place of size in Utah has at least one (in fact there are two in Provo), there's temples in major cities all over America, and there are also temples wherever you find Mormons around the world. The downtown Provo temple is absolutely gorgeous. It looks like a colonial building you might find in Boston or Philadelphia, though the golden angel atop the central spire assures you it's Mormon. Honestly I think the Provo temple looks better than the one in Salt Lake City.



FrontRunner train at Provo, Utah
(Notice the mountains are everywhere in the Salt Lake area.)

Among the ceremonies that happen in Mormon temples are weddings, and there were at least four different couples getting married in downtown Provo on this Wednesday afternoon. The families were all taking photos on various porches, and everyone seemed to be in a festive mood.

I walked about a mile and a half northeast from downtown Provo to my next destination, the BYU Arboretum (also called the botany pond). It's a lovely miniature forest that separates the main campus of Brigham Young University from the off-campus area of Provo. The campus is mostly on a hill above the city, and there are rather steep trails leading through the arboretum. I got quite a workout, but I really enjoyed hiking through this lovely park.

Again I put my next destination into Google Maps. At first I thought this was going to work really well. The BYU campus is almost all closed to cars, and the map app had me cut through it on a range of different footpaths. I certainly wouldn't have figured out such a route on my own. Unfortunately this all fell apart when I got to the edge of campus. In retrospect, I think the program wanted me to cut across a parking lot, but it didn't really make sense. Then the location finder got off just a bit, so it was telling me to turn after I already should have turned. At any rate, I ended up going far out of my way, probably adding two miles to my trip.



Downtown Provo Temple

I did eventually get where I wanted to go. That was the Creamery on Ninth East. If you make an acronym out of that, you get CONE, which gives you a clue as to the treat I had there. For nearly as long as the college has existed, BYU has had an on-campus dairy that's essentially provides internships for business and agriculture-oriented students. They produce ice cream and other dairy products, and they operate a snack bar and convenience store where BYU students can charge purchases to their campus accounts. They take cash, too, and the public is also welcome to buy things. I had a single scoop of marionberry ice cream, and it was fantastic. The ice cream itself was smooth and silky like gelato, and the fresh fruit flavor was truly delicious. **[Quite recently I found out that Iowa State has a similar on-campus creamery. It would be interesting to stop there at some point.]**

I caught a bus (#830, I think) back to the Provo station and took the train back to Salt Lake City. My next visit was to Olympic Legacy Plaza, an open space in the middle of a bunch of warehouse buildings that was renovated to be the place where they presented medals at the 2002 Olympics. The place where the three-tiered podium was had been transformed into what they call Snowflake Fountain. The name comes from the fact that they mixed in white bricks with traditional red bricks to create a snowflake pattern in the plaza. It's one of those fountains that randomly sprays jets of water upward. Kids have fun running around either trying to avoid getting splashed or purposely getting wet.

The Olympic plaza is part of what they call the Gateway complex. All those old warehouses were turned into a tourist-oriented mall. The place is obviously struggling these days. It probably has more empty space than actual tenants. There are some interesting shops there, though. I went into one that sold nothing but unusual kinds of soft drinks and candy. I bought four bottles of unusual pop, which I enjoyed drinking in the evening.



**Green line light rail train at Arena station
Downtown Salt Lake City**

industrial buildings have been converted into apartments that go for thousands each month.

I made my way back to the hotel. On the train back I happened to overhear a guy who was calling the "If you see something, say something" number to report crimes. The issue he was concerned about is that he had seen people smoking on a train platform. That technically is a crime almost everywhere these days, but it's not exactly the same as assaulting someone or threatening to blow up the train. This guy went on and on about it, though. It was really kind of interesting to hear his call.

I had dinner at another local chain, a place called Greek Souvlaki whose name basically tells you their menu. There was one next to the sea of pawn shops by the hotel, so it was an easy place to go. The food was good, and the combo plate I ordered was certainly generous. I got a big skewer of chicken and vegetables, rice, fries (and, of course, the obligatory fry sauce), a Greek salad, and pita bread. Since I hadn't really had lunch, it was kind of nice to have a big dinner.

Next I took a streetcar (which is the exact same vehicle they use for the light rail trains, but just a single car) to a neighborhood known as Sugar House, named for a sugar refinery that was located there a century ago. Today this is the trendiest place there is in Salt Lake City. It's full of art galleries, music clubs, and gyms, new age meditation centers, and old

Two of the people on the streetcar were in wheelchairs, and one of them had been yelled at by a person who was exiting the car and felt she was blocking his path. The guy was wrong to yell at her, but she just wouldn't let things go. She was threatening to sue

the Utah Transit Authority for putting her in this position. I can remember a time not too long ago when disabled people couldn't take trains or buses at all. I think she should be thankful for how far things have come, rather than demanding that everything be just as she feels it should be. **[Over the years I've seen a lot of disabled people who have been—as we'd say in the post-COVID world—"Karens". While I'm all for standing up for one's rights, being ugly about it is never going to win any friends.]**

I was in Sugar House to see a relic of an earlier era, the Deseret Industries store. Deseret Industries is the Mormon-country equivalent of Goodwill. It's a thrift store, and their Sugar House location is absolutely immense. The place had obviously once been a big discount store, and it still has that look and feel. Unlike some thrift stores, Deseret Industries keeps this place immaculate. The stock was neat and orderly, the floors and walls were clean, and all the people—both shoppers and employees—were pleasant. I picked up a couple shirts, and if I lived anywhere near Salt Lake, I'd have been tempted to get a lot more.

"Deseret", by the way, is a term that appears in the Book of Mormon that means "honeybee", and it's in no way related to "desert". The term is absolutely everywhere in Utah. It was originally proposed as the name for the territory that became the state of Utah (and also parts of Colorado and Nevada), but Congress rejected the Mormon name and instead named the territory after the Ute Indians. The name lives on, though, in fixtures such as the *Deseret News*, a daily that circulates throughout Utah and Idaho. The honeybee is Utah's official insect, and their state highway signs feature beehives. There do appear to be a lot of bees in Utah, though I never found any that tried to attack me.

I went back to the hotel and spent much of my time repacking my stuff. This would be my last night at the Sleep Inn, so again I had to be prepared to travel.

Thursday, August 2, 2018

West Valley City, Utah to Ogden, Utah

It occurred to me when I woke up this morning that Salt Lake City must be fairly far west in its time zone. It was just barely light at 6:30am, while I'm used to having it bright and sunny at that hour in summer.

I watched the morning news on TV. The weathercaster was obsessed with the fact that it had rained overnight. That's apparently quite unusual since this is, after all, desert country. **[The bulk of Utah's precipitation comes in winter, usually in the form of snow.]** There were puddles all over the sidewalks this morning, and while it was a bit cooler, it was much more humid today.

The breakfast spread was identical to yesterday, but it seemed less appealing. The worst part was that the eggs were swimming in water. I just picked at a couple of things and left. I had a much better breakfast at a coffee bar called Beans & Brews down the street from the hotel. I think I was the only person in the place who ordered just standard black coffee, and the clerk seemed a bit surprised that I would have anything so plebian. I also had a ham and cheese croissant, and it was far superior to anything on the hotel buffet.

I took the MAX bus over to West Valley Central, which also happens to be the terminal station on the green line. I didn't take the train, but instead transferred to a local bus (#509). The bus ride was an interesting experience. First different posted schedules gave three different times we were supposed to depart, and we ended up leaving at none of them. When we thought we would be leaving, the driver got out and went over to talk with someone who happened to be smoking near the train platform. I thought this might be another law enforcement issue, but it turned out the person he was speaking with was a UTA employee. Apparently the bus had some mechanical problem, and he needed to have the guy look at it. He spent about five minutes doing nothing in particular and then gave the bus his blessing. We started on our way, but after we'd gone about a mile west, the driver came on the P.A. and announced, "Sorry, folks. I took the wrong route. We have to go back." We headed back to West Valley Central and started out again on a slightly different route. There was someone waiting at one of the stops we'd otherwise have skipped, so it was probably a good thing he made the detour.

Almost all of Salt Lake City's buses take very round-about routes. **[That really stood out, particularly since most of the area has long, straight major streets.]** This one headed west for about four miles, turned north, headed back east even further than it had gone west, turned south a bit, went back east, and then headed straight north. I was glad I'd scoped the route out ahead of time, or I'd have had no clue where we were going. The bulk of the route was past junky industrial areas, but there were also some run-down single family homes and lots and lots of apartments. The whole Salt Lake area is full of apartments. It reminds me of Coralville.

I got out at about the 1000 south block of 900 west after having been on the bus about half an hour. My first destination of the day was just north of there. I was headed to the International Peace Gardens. Completely unrelated to the same-named place on the North Dakota—Manitoba border, this attraction is an obscure city park in Salt Lake City. It was built in stages between the 1950s and 1970s and features separate gardens representing places around the world—almost every European country, Canada and Mexico, a couple Caribbean islands, several Asian countries, Australia and New Zealand, and the entire continent of Africa. (Aside from Mexico, Latin America is conspicuously absent.) Most of the gardens were donated by rotary clubs in the countries they represent, while some others were donated by Salt Lake City residents with ancestors in the various countries. Though not nearly as lavish as the Ashton Gardens, they really are quite lovely. I especially enjoyed the Asian gardens, which featured streams and covered bridges and pagoda-topped structures. **[While I'm in no way a gardener myself, I love visiting gardens when I travel. I've been to formal gardens in many different cities, and Salt Lake had some of the nicest I've seen anywhere.]**



**International Peace Gardens
Salt Lake City, Utah**



The Peace Gardens are part of the Jordan River Parkway system, which extends throughout the city and suburbs. Since the Mormons thought Utah was the promised land, it's appropriate that they named the source of their water the Jordan. It's honestly not much of a river (the East Fork of the Des Moines River in Algona is quite a bit wider), but it does supply more than a million people in the metro area with sufficient water.

I walked a couple blocks north and a couple blocks east to my next destination, Welfare Square. This is the LDS Church's principal home charity. It's amazing just how many things they do here. The headquarters and warehouse for Deseret Industries are located at Welfare Square, where they sort through all the donated goods. They also have a cannery, a dairy, and a bakery—all of which supply a network called the Bishops' Storehouses, which are basically food pantries sponsored by the church that are available to anyone (Mormon or not) who needs them. There's also a homeless shelter and job training facilities. The whole complex covers about four city blocks, and it really is quite impressive. I'd planned to go to a visitor's center at Welfare Square. Unfortunately they've apparently changed things recently, and instead of staffing the visitor's center, they run tours by bus that leave from Temple Square downtown. That would be more accessible to most visitors, but it was kind of annoying to have walked there on my own and then only seeing the outside of things.

The bus I'd taken runs every twenty minutes at rush hour but it is only every forty minutes most of the day. **[The trains in the Salt Lake area are frequent, but the buses often aren't.]** I knew it would be quicker to walk to the train than to make a connection by bus—and, honestly, Welfare Square wasn't the most pleasant place to be waiting around anyway. I walked about a mile east to the 900 South light rail stop, the first stop south of downtown.

I caught a northbound train and got off at City Center. I found out that the mall there is actually called City Creek Center, because it has an artificial creek running through the middle. I was also intrigued to find out that the place is owned by the LDS Church. That actually makes sense if you think about the history of the Macy's store I described earlier. The church also owned several other retail establishments, and those combined buildings were refurbished to make the modern mall.

While the mall features all the same stores you could find anywhere, I decided to go to one that is unique to Salt Lake City. That is another LDS institution, Deseret Books. For my Methodist friends, this would be the Mormon equivalent of Cokesbury. While they do sell some secular items (like postcards with Utah sites), mostly they feature religious books and supplies. I didn't buy any of those, but it was interesting to browse through them.



**Mormon Temple
Salt Lake City, Utah**

were wearing raincoats and carrying umbrellas. I wonder if any of these people could cope in a place like New Orleans.

I took a train south to Millcreek, the east end of the MAX bus line. I'd noticed a local fast food chain called Apollo just outside the station, so that's where I had lunch. I had a ham and cheese sandwich and a strawberry shake, both of which were really very good. Oddly there was a cup of fry sauce on my tray even though I hadn't ordered any fries. The stuff does seem obligatory in Utah. **[I'd bet there are people who dip sandwiches in fry sauce, which is probably why I got a cup of it.]**

I took the MAX bus back to the hotel and picked up my bags, which I'd left in the employee break room. The rain had stopped, and since it was easier to deal with the bags on a train than on a bus, I walked up to Decker Lake station with them. While I walked I noticed that my suitcase was difficult to wheel along the sidewalk. While I was waiting for the train, I looked closely at it and noticed that two of the four wheels had worn down to where they were basically just dragging rather than rotating. I could turn the bag upside down and use the other wheels. That was annoying, but it would at last get me by.

I took the green line through downtown to the Guadalupe/North Temple station. That station provides an easy transfer to the FrontRunner trains by just going down an escalator. Unfortunately, before I could do that, I had to buy a ticket (since the long-distance trains have a different fare structure than the light rail), and in the time it took to do that, I missed a train. At this time of day there was a full hour between northbound trains, so I had a long time to kill on the platform. **[It was probably because I had the bag with me that I didn't go and check out the neighborhood. These days I'd likely not have had to wait, since (like most transit agencies) UTA has shifted its fares to a smart card. Their aptly named Farepay card works on buses, light rail, and also the regional trains.]**

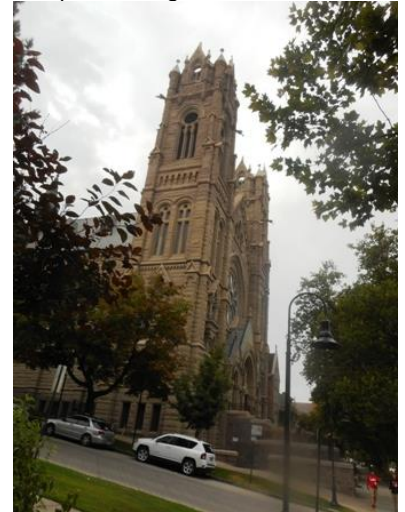
For about ten minutes I was literally the only person on the platform. I considered getting out my computer and killing time working on this journal. I'm glad I didn't, though, because before long a far too friendly young man approached me. He was dressed in gym shorts and a tank top and carried a skateboard. He had a dazed look and slurred his words a bit. I tried hard to ignore him, but he put on quite a performance that I'm sure was intended to try to get me to part with some money. "They just took everything," he began his sob story, and he proceeded to say that his girlfriend, her mother, and her brother had each taken half of his stuff. (That adds up to one and a half, of course, but I don't think he knew he was talking to a math teacher.) He went on and on trying to get me to feel sorry for him, while I just grunted a few non-replies and scrolled through things on my phone. Eventually he shifted topics, saying "How did it come to this? Do you think it was the drugs?" That led in to the history of what probably really did lead him to become the upstanding citizen he is today. I still didn't really respond, and he eventually made his way up the escalator. The one good thing about his visit is that twenty minutes passed on the countdown clock while he was there.

There was a construction area right next to the station, where they were erecting even more apartments. A truck and a crane were part of the construction, and both made that high pitched beeping you often hear as a warning. I couldn't help but think of my late sister Margaret. She was extremely sensitive to loud noises and particularly those that were high pitched. She would have gone absolutely insane waiting an hour on that platform.

The FrontRunner train arrived, and I boarded. The trains have three levels, and since I was hauling luggage, I didn't really want to go upstairs. The only seat available on the bottom level was intended for handicapped people, but as long as no one in a wheelchair

Next I went over to Temple Square, which is right across the street from the mall. I just wandered around outside, read a few signs, and snapped some pictures. "Heathens" can't go inside most of the buildings, and the main one I could have visited (the tabernacle, as in the Mormon Tabernacle Choir) can only be visited on a guided tour. I knew from when I'd come here as a small child that those are heavy on conversion appeals, and I wasn't up for that. It was nice to wander through the park, though.

Next I walked about another mile east. My destination this time was another religious building, the Cathedral of the Madeleine, seat of the Catholic Diocese of Salt Lake City. Catholics are much more welcoming about their places of worship than Mormons are. The cathedral is open for visitors and private prayers all day long. It's a fairly small church for a cathedral, and it appears the congregation is mostly Hispanic. It is a gorgeous building, and I was glad to have seen it.



Cathedral of the Madeleine

It had been sprinkling on and off all morning, and when I left the cathedral there was a light but steady rain. It was slightly annoying, but certainly not any real problem. For the locals, this was obviously heavy rain though. Everyone seemed to be hunkering under awnings, and lots of people

came, it was perfectly fine for me to sit there. The only real problem with that seat was that it basically had no view at all. While I'd see everything between Salt Lake City and Ogden twice more, I definitely didn't see it on this trip.

The Ogden station is at the west edge of the original city (though the place has expanded far to the west recently), and I had to walk about half a mile to my hotel in the heart of downtown. Again I towed the suitcase upside down. It was annoying, but I did make it all right.

I got to the desk and was told the room I'd reserved wasn't ready. They were able to re-assign me to another, though, and it was a perfectly nice room. In fact, I had a lovely view of the mountains out my window. I was staying at the Hampton Inn—Downtown Ogden. Like a lot of urban Hampton Inns, this was an old commercial building that was converted for use as a hotel. The rooms are oddly shaped and quirky, but that sort of adds to the charm of the place. Hampton Inns always have top-notch amenities, and this came across as a very nice hotel.



**ABOVE: Exterior of Lindquist Field
RIGHT: View looking from home plate toward the
Wasatch Mountains and the Ogden Temple**



I had made the trip to Ogden primarily to see a baseball game. Seventeen years ago, the summer after he graduated from high school, my friend and former student Brad Nelson played for the Ogden Raptors. He had started with the Arizona Brewers, the lowest level of professional baseball, but he was soon promoted to the standard rookie team in Utah. Starting the following summer I'd follow Brad through all the different levels of baseball. I'd visit all his other home stadiums and many "away" parks as well. I'd never been to Ogden, though, and I really wanted to see the park and complete my collection. When I saw the Raptors were starting a home stand tonight, spending a night in Ogden was an easy decision to make.

Lindquist Field in downtown Ogden is a far better park than Brad played in when he was promoted to Beloit, Wisconsin the following summer. **[Pohlman Field in Beloit is no longer used for minor league baseball. Today it is just used by the local high school and youth teams. Beloit's team is no longer called the Snappers, either. They are now the Beloit Sky Carp (one of the dumbest team names I've ever heard), and they play at a park built in 2021 called ABC Supply Stadium, which is named after a roofing company.]** It [that is Linquist Field in Ogden] was built in the '90s and is showing its age a bit today, but it would have been nearly new when Brad played there. The exterior is red brick, and the inside is painted in aqua and green. Like most baseball parks, the field faces northeast. In Ogden this makes for a spectacular view. The beautiful Wasatch Mountains frame the entire outfield, and right at dead center is the gold-topped spire of the Ogden Mormon Temple.

I'd bought a ticket online, but I realized after I left that I'd left that ticket at home. So, I went online again and bought a second ticket. It's a waste of twelve bucks, but I've spent money more foolishly on other occasions. I suppose buying two tickets here makes up for all the free tickets I got from Brad over the years. The ticket was at the will-call window, and I got it scanned and entered. **[These days I probably wouldn't have had the problem of leaving a ticket in the hotel room, since most tickets now are electronic with a barcode scanned from a cell phone.]**

Concessions at Lindquist Field are expensive. The prices are nearly as high as they charge in Des Moines and at big league parks. I bought a bag of peanuts and a hot dog, each of which was \$5. I decided not to have anything to drink, because even with the "Thirsty Thursday" discount, the cheapest pop would have been four bucks. **[While I couldn't find their current prices online, I'd bet everything costs at least a dollar more in 2024.]**

While the day had been muggy and drippy, it turned into a beautiful night for baseball. You get an idea of how dry it is here from the fact that after rain during the day they had to water the field heavily before the game. It looked at first like there wouldn't be much of a crowd, but by about the second inning the place was probably three-fourths full (I'd bet about 2,500 in attendance).

The pregame festivities were extremely disorganized, and it certainly didn't help that they had a very bad announcer. I've been announcing our football games at Garrigan for years, and I've done a bit of baseball too, so I know good and bad announcers when I hear them. This guy kept making personal comments. He also was clearly unprepared and was too stupid to turn off his microphone while he was getting things together.



**Major leaguers who played at Ogden in 2001
(from the 2018 Raptors official program)**

Apparently the reason for the closure was that an arsonist had lit a propane tank and thrown it into the stadium yesterday morning. The guy had been caught, but the fire destroyed thousands of dollars in merchandise and also caused a major clean-up headache. I'd also noticed that their concession menu was severely abbreviated, and I wonder if some of that stuff might not also have been damaged in the fire.

[I put the all-time roster of major leaguers who played at Ogden above, and looking at it again brings back memories. I think I met all of Brad's teammates at one time or another, and I certainly heard their names on lots of broadcasts of minor league games at different levels. While all six of the guys on the list made it to the majors, only one of them really made it big. That was J.J. Hardy, who happened to be the best man at Brad Nelson's wedding. Hardy spent thirteen seasons as a big-league shortstop, playing for the Brewers, Twins, and Orioles. He finally retired from baseball after the 2017 season. It's interesting that he was the Brewers' second-round draft pick in 2001, while Brad was their first-round pick. It's also interesting that what ended Hardy's career was a wrist injury, the same thing that kept Brad from achieving his potential in professional baseball.]

The fans at Lindquist Field are very much an "in" group. It's not an easy place to watch a game if you're not a regular home fan. There are tons of weird little traditions that you're just supposed to know and follow along with, and they seem to look at you strange if you don't. The fans are loud and vocal, and they definitely do support their team. They also tend to yell at the opponents and the umpires—not in a vulgar way, but very sarcastically. They actually made an announcement saying this was specifically prohibited, but I don't think that had much effect.

The main special activity they did before the game was a recognition of the players' host families. Ogden (which, by the way, is now a Dodgers' affiliate rather than with the Brewers) has volunteer families with whom the players live. (People in Algona will know that there's a similar program for the Bancroft Bandits who play in a summer college league.) The host families are important for several reasons. First, the rookie players earn almost nothing. While some potential stars (like Brad) get big signing bonuses, the majority don't. The salary ends up being significantly less than what guys could make working in fields like construction or even retail sales. Moreover, the rookie league season is only two and a half months long, and there's almost no landlords who want to rent for that short a term. The host families definitely are an asset to the team, and they deserve to be honored.

After the host family recognition they had five different ceremonial first pitches, all of them honoring various sponsors of the team. Then there was the National Anthem, which was performed by a group of five elementary students who were barely audible—and that's probably a good thing.

One unexpected announcement involved the fact that the souvenir shop at the park was closed. I had noticed that, though I figured this was probably a good thing as it would keep me from spending money stupidly.



J.J. Hardy, in an Orioles uniform

The game was honestly kind of boring. I of course didn't know or really care about anyone on the field, nor is Ogden a hometown I'd root for. I may have seen some future Dodgers, but the vast majority of the guys I saw will likely be gone long before the majors. They had a section in the program that included all the guys who ever played for Ogden who made it to the majors—including Brad, of course. It's telling that while the Raptors have a roster of about 30 – 40 guys in any given season, it's typically from one to four who actually make "the show". (2001, when Brad was there, was the single biggest entry, and there were still just six major leaguers that year.) What's more, a lot of those—like Brad—get the call, but then fizzle out in the big leagues.



Dodgers official with a radar gun

One of the most interesting parts of the game was watching a bunch of other people in my section. They were player development officials from the big league organizations (the Dodgers and the Angels, whose rookie league team the Orem Owlz were facing the Raptors tonight). These are the people who make the decisions as to which players are promoted and which are cut. They carried radar guns, and they were constantly typing stats into laptop computers. From their point of view the score of the game is irrelevant; it's those stats that matter. **[I remember seeing guys like this in Beloit all the time. There are fewer and fewer of them as guys make their way to the higher levels of the minor leagues.]**

The game moved very slowly, and it was tied at 3 midway through the fourth inning when I decided to leave. It was already after 9pm at that point, and lots of other people were also making their way to the exits. Apparently the Raptors ended up winning, but my bet is the park was virtually empty by the time the ninth inning came around.

Friday, August 3, 2018
Northeastern Utah

I was up again around six this morning. The first thing I did was to check online to see how the train I was due to leave on tonight was doing. It was still in central Nebraska and already about two hours behind schedule—not a good sign. Except where there's padding in the schedule (like between Provo and SLC), once trains get behind the issues just keep compounding. I prepared mentally for a very late night this evening.

As is always true at Hampton Inns, the breakfast this morning was excellent. I had a western omelette, seasoned home fries, and a delicious fruit salad. I could have had almost anything else I'd wanted. The spread really was vast.

I dragged my bag to the station and caught a southbound FrontRunner train. Today I happened to sit in the bike car. In that car they removed half the seating from the lower level to make room for a bunch of bicycle racks. It appears they can hold about a dozen bikes at a time, and there were five in use on this morning's train.

I'd gotten my stuff together quite hurriedly this morning. Unfortunately I think in the process I left two things in my room. One was a T-shirt I'd gotten at a thrift store in Rochester when my sister was in the hospital (a shirt that supports the University of Montana, of all things). That was certainly no big deal. Much more important is that I think I left my old sunglasses. I'd gotten new glasses this summer, but the sunglasses weren't what I was expecting. I'd ordered photo-gray glasses that darken when exposed to light. They did have that property, but they were also no-line bifocals—which I had not requested or expected. I'd tried them a couple of times, and the constantly changing lenses made me queasy. I'd brought the new glasses along on this trip, but so far I'd just been using my old sunglasses. I hadn't realized I didn't have them around until I was already on the train, though. There was no great value to the loss, but I certainly wasn't looking forward to having to use the new glasses.

I rode the train to North Temple station, got out, and put on the photo-gray glasses, which I'd end up wearing all day. **[I never did get comfortable with the no-line bifocals, though, and I've never bought them again.]** This morning I would be renting a car, but I'd actually arrived in Salt Lake City just a bit too early for that. So I killed a bit of time by riding the green line out toward its northern terminus at the airport. I just rode out there, turned around, and headed back in towards downtown. It was interesting to see another part of town. Northwest Salt Lake City is much older than the southern part, dating from the '50s and '60s. There's industry, a mixture of mostly cheap-looking housing, and every sort of strip business you could imagine. I'd actually considered staying at some motels in this area, and if I were to return (which really isn't that likely), I might. Reviewers complain that it's a bad neighborhood. That may be true by Salt Lake City standards, but I've certainly stayed in worse—and all the hotels here are much more convenient to the light rail than those further south.

I went to the Courthouse station at the south edge of downtown and walked three blocks west to the downtown Salt Lake location of Enterprise car rental. I probably could have gone to the train station (which is also about three blocks from Enterprise) and had the rent-a-car people pick me up there, but this was really more convenient for me. I'd priced car rentals at other locations in the area, but the downtown Enterprise location was much cheaper than anywhere else. Including all the various taxes and fees, my one-day rental was about \$35. The same thing would have cost around \$75 in Ogden and over \$100 at the airport.

There was a little bit of complication getting the car. I'd reserved an economy model, but apparently they had none of those in stock. The guy first offered me a complimentary upgrade to a pick-up truck, but that was the last thing I wanted. I've never driven a pick-up in my life and I certainly didn't want to learn about them while renting. After a bit of back-and-forth, he offered a small SUV, again at the same price I'd booked (it's supposed to be three classes more expensive). I ended up with a Hyundai Santa Fe with Idaho plates. This is similar to the Chevy Traverse we have at school, which I rather like driving. From my point of view the mileage was horrible, but it definitely beat a pick-up truck.

[While economy is always a booking class for rental cars, I've found that the vast majority of locations never have them in stock. I care about gas mileage when I drive, but I guess there must be more people who care about the roominess of their vehicles. I think every time I've rented a car I've gotten something bigger than I reserved—often just one size larger, but still not the smallest size. I've never been charged for an upgrade, but I don't think I've ever gotten the vehicle I wanted.]

Enterprise does all their paperwork electronically these days, at least at the Salt Lake City location. The clerk had a tablet computer on which I had to check "no" repeatedly and sign my name. (There was actually surprisingly little pressure to get upgrades, prepaid gas, or insurance.) Then he scanned my credit card with a chip reader that was built into the tablet. I didn't even get a paper receipt, but he assured me everything would be e-mailed to me.

I made my way to Interstate 15 and set out northward, heading back towards Ogden. I-15 is ten lanes wide through most of that stretch (eight local lanes, plus toll express lanes). It was the end of rush hour, but traffic still seemed to move along pretty smoothly in both directions. It helps that it's not a one-direction commute. Both housing and jobs are spread throughout the Wasatch Front (which is what most locals call the metro area). Many people live quite some distance from where they work, but the traffic isn't all headed downtown like in some cities.

It surprised me that Utahans mostly obeyed the speed limits. In the urban areas the limit was either 65 or 70, and once I got north of Ogden it was 75mph. Traffic moved at those speeds or even slightly slower. It was actually pretty relaxing to drive. Even in the urban areas it was much less stressful than I expected

I made my first stop in the town of Huntsville, which is a suburb just north of Ogden. There I encountered a common feature of Utah interstates that took a bit of getting used to. At many of the exits they have traffic on the minor roads cross to the opposite side of the road, so that for a time everybody is driving on the "wrong" side of the road. The purpose of this is to avoid congestion when traffic has to turn left to enter the freeway. I'd seen this once before, at the 34th Avenue exit by the airport in Bloomington, Minnesota. **[There's also a similar exit in West Des Moines now.]** It is confusing to novices like me, though—and especially so when you want to go straight on the side road rather than entering the interstate.

I stopped at a Maverik convenience store in Huntsville, where I picked up some coffee and a cinnamon roll. The parking was awkward, and I actually took advantage of the fact that the rental vehicle was equipped with a back-up camera. It actually had just about every kind of electronics imaginable, though I didn't bother checking out any of the others.

It was awkward to get back to the interstate at Huntsville, so instead I followed US 89 north for a few miles and re-joined I-15 a couple exits north. An advantage of doing that was that I avoided the awkward mess of spaghetti where Interstates 15 and 84 come together. The destination signs here were for Pocatello and Idaho Falls, so my rental car must have felt right at home.

I turned off at Brigham City, the last place of size before the Idaho border. I followed state highway 13 west to the town of Corinne, which appears to have little besides a Wal-Mart distribution center. There I picked up state highway 83, which I followed past irrigated fields and scrubby pastureland. Soon we got too far from a water source for irrigation, and there was little around at all—just

bare white ground with a few tumbleweeds. There are mines here, but little else. Signs warned that there were no services for 30 miles. That sounds bad, but there are places in Iowa where the same is true. We just don't put up signs about it in our area.

My destination this morning was a place I'd wanted to see since I was a child: Golden Spike National Historic Site, the place where the first transcontinental railroad was finished. I'd always thought of this as Promontory Point, but it's actually called Promontory **Summit**. The point of the same name is a little peninsula that juts into the Great Salt Lake quite a ways to the south. The summit is actually a pass through barren mountains that are about as close to the middle of nowhere as you can get. (I wrote that sentence while traveling through central Nevada, which is every bit as bleak.) Today a highway exists mostly to access the mines, but it also conveniently serves the national historic site.

While Golden Spike draws far less visitors than parks like Zion **[Utah's biggest attraction]**,



LEFT: Replica of the original Golden Spike
RIGHT: Selfie at Promontory Summit (with Ogden Raptors cap)
Golden Spike National Historic Site, Utah

there were a surprising number of cars in their parking lot this morning. I think it's just close enough to civilization that you can make an easy side trip there. It really does mark an important place in American history, too. I spent about an hour in the visitor's center area. They have a good film and a nice little museum. There are also reconstructions of the locomotives that came from opposite directions and met in the middle of the Utah desert. (That made me wonder how far those engines had to back up to clear the single track for real trains.)

The original gold spike that was driven here in 1869 was immediately removed and replaced by an iron spike that would actually stand up to the weight of a train. Governor Stanford took that spike back to California, and it is now on display at the university that bears his name. Various other commemorative spikes were driven for various milestone anniversaries, and they have those on display in Utah. Right now they're planning the 150th anniversary celebration for the transcontinental railroad, and there likely will be yet another commemorative spike driven next summer to mark that occasion.

Interestingly this site is no longer on an active railroad. About thirty years after the original transcontinental railroad was opened, the Union Pacific built a much shorter route that went straight west from Ogden on a causeway right in the middle of the Great Salt Lake. That route is still in use today, as is a second causeway (which the California Zephyr follows) that clips the southern end of the lake by Salt Lake City.

I considered doing a bit of hiking at Golden Spike. There are several trails that follow cuts and fills and explain how the railroads were built. It was brutally hot, though, and hiking just didn't seem very appealing. I did buy the trail guide, and it has some interesting information in it. **[I also picked up a bronze reproduction of the golden spike. It's one of the dumbest souvenirs I've ever gotten, but it's still on display today in front of my living room TV.]**

I drove back to Brigham City and stopped at a very nice Wal-Mart store there. I wanted to replace my suitcase if I could. The vast majority of Wal-Mart's luggage was sold in sets—with a huge trunk, a standard suitcase, and a carry-on all packaged together. **[I've never really understood the concept of matching luggage sets, but that seems to be how the majority of bags are sold.]** I had no need for multiple bags, but I did manage to find a wheeled duffel that was sold on its own. It's poorly constructed (this is Wal-Mart luggage after all), but hopefully it will hold up through the rest of the trip. I spent a while transferring the stuff from my old bag to the new one, and then I left the old bag next to a trash can by the cart return area in the parking lot.

I went just a couple exits south on I-15 and came to Willard Bay State Park. While the place charges a hefty admission (twenty bucks—which is geared mostly to people who want to spend the day at the beach), it was still a nice place to stop. The place is quite unique. They dammed off part of the Great Salt Lake to contain fresh water. The fresh area is called Willard Bay. It's mostly used for irrigation, but it also makes a pleasant recreation area. At one point there was a road that actually went on top of the dam where you could see between the fresh and salt water areas. They don't let you drive there anymore, but I was able to walk on the edge of the dam and see both the lake and the bay. That really was quite interesting.

I again followed US 89 for a while. This time I headed down to the town of Pleasant View. While Brigham City is arguably part of the metro area as well, for statistical purposes Pleasant View is where it begins. It's mostly developed from there down to Provo, and Pleasant View is also the northernmost extent of the UTA transit service area. If I'd wanted to, I could have taken a chain of city buses all the way back to Salt Lake City. It probably would have been hours before I got there, but in theory it's possible.

I stopped at a Shell station in Pleasant View, where I bought a cup of Fresca. That took almost comically long, because the two clerks were busy arguing with each other. Apparently Utah's main supermarket (Smith's, which is owned by Kroger) has a rewards program similar to the Hy-Vee fuel saver deal. The Smith's rewards work at Shell stations, and the argument was whether they could only be used for fuel or whether you could use them for other items in the convenience store as well. What led them to debate this was that the cash register apparently prompts the clerks to ask whether customers have a Smith's card for all purchases, but when a customer wanted to use his for a food purchase, it didn't generate any discount. The clerks got into quite a heated argument over this, and it was a good five minutes before one of them was willing to check me out.



**Rented Hyundai Santa Fe
Golden Spike National Historic Site, Utah**



**Hiking on the dam at Willard Bay
Great Salt Lake, Utah**

I drove back to Ogden and turned east on Interstate 84. This afternoon I made a loop into the mountains. It was just a little joy ride, but it really was quite fun. I took I-84 east almost to the Wyoming border and then headed back southwest on I-80. Both of the interstates cross very rugged passes—not all that high, but full of tight switchbacks. The surrounding mountains are really quite pretty, and it made for a pleasant drive.



Entering the mountains on Interstate 84 near Ogden, Utah

I stopped briefly at Kimball Junction, which is right below the famous resort of Park City. This is one of the biggest ski areas in the country in winter, and it's also home to the Sundance Film Festival. I was originally planning to go to Park City itself, but it was clear from the volume of traffic in Kimball Junction that the place was best avoided on a weekend. It would likely have taken a full hour just to go a few miles up to the top of the mountain.

At Park City the freeway widens to six lanes, and it soon becomes eight at the outskirts to Salt Lake City. There was construction through this stretch that I happened to hear about on the news. They're installing an overpass for wildlife. I'd seen those before in Alberta and in Washington state. It's been shown that when options to avoid traffic exist, deer and other wildlife use them. It's actually a good thing that I didn't make this journey earlier in the week, because on Tuesday the westbound lanes of I-80 were entirely closed. They offered two detours, going by way of Ogden or Provo, and those added 90 minutes to the trip across Utah.



The completed Parleys Canyon wildlife crossing over Interstate 80 in eastern Utah

I exited at State Street (US 89) in Salt Lake City. Between the wide boulevard and well synchronized lights, I just sailed northward. The interstate is at about 2500 South, and I didn't stop at all until I got to 900 South. I made a couple of stops in the downtown area, but even where the light rail crossed my path, it was easy to get through.

It's important to return rental cars with full tanks of gas, since otherwise they'll fill it at an exorbitant rate. I'd almost forgotten this, though conveniently there was a Phillips 66 station right across from the Enterprise outlet. The price was steep, but it was typical for what I'd seen in Utah. I paid \$3.05⁹ a gallon. I put about eight gallons in it. Unfortunately I didn't keep track of how many miles I drove, so I can't say for sure whether the mileage was good or bad.

The check-in people at Enterprise seemed surprised that the vehicle was in pristine condition. They acknowledged that was the case, though, and my rental was finalized at the rate I'd booked, with no additional charges. Again I got no paperwork, but everything was e-mailed promptly and correctly.

It was late afternoon now, but unfortunately my day was far from over. My train (the same one I'd arrived on) wasn't scheduled to arrive until 11:05pm, and I knew it would likely be quite a bit later than that. The Amtrak station in downtown Salt Lake City doesn't even open until 10pm, so I had nearly six hours to kill before I could even settle in and wait there. So I had to entertain myself until then.

Since I'd transferred stuff to the new bag quickly, it was unbalanced. I did manage to get it to roll it over to Courthouse station, though. There I caught a red line train, which I rode over to 900 East, near the Chuck-a-Rama buffet I'd been to a couple days earlier. Right by that station I'd noticed a Hawaiian shaved ice stand, and I thought that might be fun to check out. This was a very popular place on a hot afternoon.

Hokulia [which I was surprised to find in writing this revision is a nationwide chain that is based in Lehi, Utah] is a very authentic shaved ice place, exactly the same as they have in the islands. They shave the ice directly from a big block, flavor it with a wide range of syrups, and offer assorted bases and toppings. I ended up having one of their featured items, which was three different flavors that were all colored green (apple, kiwi, and lime). I got it with a “snow cap”, which means condensed milk is poured atop the mound of ice. It was most delicious. **[It was indeed tasty, though it's another of those things I'd have to pass on with diabetes.]**



**Website view of a snowcap
Hokulia shave ice**

Human customers weren't the only ones enjoying shaved ice. Utah is known as the beehive state, and there were a ton of bees swarming around the little stand. They basically ignored all the customers, but any time the syrup from someone's snow-cone dripped on the ground, they'd make a bee-line (literally) for it. I almost got the feeling they liked high fructose corn syrup better than their own natural honey. **[That line made me google the question of whether bees actually eat honey. It turns out they do. Essentially they make honey and store it to use at a later time when carbohydrates are needed.]**

I rode back to Courthouse station and waited there to change trains. While I was waiting a group of junior high aged kids made their way down the platform distributing sheets of bubble wrap to all those who were waiting. They were apparently part of some camp where there was a challenge to photograph as many people as they could popping the bubble wrap to relieve stress. I'm not sure where the other groups went with their bubble wrap, but the kids we saw were certainly smart to go after a bunch of bored people on a train platform.



Popping bubble wrap at Courthouse station

I checked Amtrak's status while I was waiting and found the Zephyr was 4½ hours late getting into Glenwood Springs. The estimate for Salt Lake City was not quite so late, but it would still be arriving in the wee hours.

I rode over to Salt Lake Central station and again caught a FrontRunner train. Something that's amazing compared to other commuter systems is just how cheap FrontRunner is. That's particularly true when the fare is combined with a light rail day pass. I'd paid \$6.25 for a day pass, and I'd already more than covered that value in TRAX rides. In Utah, though, the day pass also provides a discount on commuter rail fares. FrontRunner normally charges a base fare of \$2.50, plus 20¢ for each station you pass through. If you have a day pass, though, the base fare is waived. Tonight I was going from Salt Lake City to Farmington, which are about twenty miles apart. A similar trip on Chicago's Metra would be about five dollars each way. Tonight I got a round-trip ticket for just \$1.20, which is a pretty amazing deal. **[As of 2024 the FrontRunner fares have gone up to \$5.00, plus 60¢ for each station. The day passes have gone down to five bucks, but they no longer work on FrontRunner.]**



**Website photo of Station Park
Farmington, Utah**

offices. Such places market themselves as regional “all in one” destinations that create a “pedestrian friendly, townlike experience”. I've seen them in many places since encountering this one in Utah. They appear to be international, too, since I most recently saw them in wealthy suburbs of Wellington and Auckland.]

The Farmington station is adjacent to an extremely pretentious shopping development. They call it the Station Park Mall. It's not really a mall, though, so much as a fake downtown located in the suburbs. It's surrounded by an enormous parking lot and lots of people come by train, yet the stores face onto a maze of streets on which cars are allowed to drive. The buildings are all new construction, but they mimic Old World architecture. I saw a similar place years ago in Miami, and I suppose the fact that they have this set-up in Utah means their winters must be pretty mild. **[In the parlance of real estate developers, Station Park is what they call a “lifestyle center”. It's one of the few categories of retail development that is actually growing in the 21st Century. Though entirely built and leased by a single developer, it is indeed supposed to resemble a downtown, and the pretentious architecture is one of its biggest selling points. Only the first floors of the buildings are used for retail space, with the upper floors occupied by professional**

While I did a bit of window shopping, nothing in the elegant stores really interested me. Mostly I'd come here to have dinner. I went to a place called Habit Burger, which is a small chain based in Santa Barbara, California. **[Not long after this Habit Burger was acquired by Yum Brands, the parent company of Taco Bell, KFC, and Pizza Hut. They've since expanded throughout the west and also on the east coast. They've yet to enter the Midwest market, though.]** I again ordered a barbecue bacon cheeseburger. Unlike at Arctic Circle, though, this burger did have both barbecue sauce and cheese, and it really was quite tasty. On a whim I ordered

a unique side dish, tempura green beans. That's exactly what it sounds like—fresh green beans battered and deep fried. Basically they take something healthy and make it a high-fat food. They make it even more unhealthy by adding a dipping sauce. They were certainly weird, but not bad at all. Rounding out my order was blueberry mint agua fresca, basically a lemonade-like punch made with those flavors. That was outstanding. **[I don't mention prices here, but in 2024 the burger costs \$8.29. That's pricey, but no more than something similar would cost at a place like Five Guys.]**

After finishing my meal at Habit Burger I decided to get a peach shake at Chick-Fil-A for dessert. It's a good thing I wasn't really in any hurry, because that took forever. It was twenty minutes before I finally got my shake, and in the process I'd missed a train.

By the time I made it back to the station there was just a short wait for the next southbound train. By the time I got back to North Temple it was already getting dark out, though the Amtrak station still wouldn't be opening for more than an hour. I killed time by riding the red line to the opposite end from the university—the one part of the Salt Lake rail system I hadn't been to. I really didn't see much. That appears to be very new residential area (mostly apartments and condos), and there just wasn't much to look at after dark. **[I was surprised at how many apartments there were in the Salt Lake area. I suppose the result of how young many of the people there are.]**



Absolutely empty interior of a red line light rail car at about 10pm Friday night (Salt Lake is NOT a late night town.)

stopped completely for about two hours while they cleared that from the tracks. The eastbound train didn't have an official reason for the delay, but the station attendant told what she'd heard on the radio about it. Apparently a passenger had become drunk and abusive, and that person had to be ejected from the train in the middle of Nevada. There was a delay while they waited for a sheriff to escort the passenger off the train.

Salt Lake Central Station is definitely not the crown jewel in the Amtrak empire. It's a small cement block structure painted a dull gray color. Inside there's a ticket area covered with bulletproof glass. The waiting room features sets of ugly gray seats connected in groups of four that would look familiar to my brother Steve. **[These were nearly identical to the seats in the visitation rooms at the federal correctional facilities Steve had been in.]** There are sixty-four of those seats in all, crammed far too close for comfort. There are also two vending machines (an expensive pop machine and a surprisingly cheap snack machine), a rack of brochures for random destinations (like Ottumwa), and a couple of frames with posters for promotions that expired years ago.

[Salt Lake City has a lovely new intermodal station that serves Trax, FrontRunner trains, and Greyhound. I think because the trains come overnight, Amtrak doesn't use the new station, instead being banished to the old "Am-shack" south of there.]

Most of the passengers fit this setting well. They appear to get a lot of marginal travelers at Salt Lake City, the sort of people you'd be more likely to imagine taking a bus than a train. There were a number of people who seemed one step up from homelessness, including one who was told by the conductor that his ticket was invalid. The vast majority of SLC passengers were traveling with traditional cardboard tickets, rather than home-printed tickets or e-tickets on their phone like "normal" people do these days. Three or four actually bought walk-up tickets just tonight, which seems very risky on a long-distance train.

For the vast majority of people this would be their first Amtrak trip, and they were unfamiliar with how things work on the train. One woman was expecting to have to go through a metal detector like you'd find at an airport, and for many people the whole point of taking the train is to avoid experiences like that. Another woman was moving and taking the train to her new home. She brought nine enormous boxes with her. Amtrak has a very generous luggage allowance, but nine boxes is still three too many. The woman didn't

I again checked the train status while I was waiting on the Jordan Valley light rail platform. Different sources said it would be in at either 2:00 or 2:30am. Obviously I'd have a long wait at the station.

I got to the station about 10:30pm, and I settled in for that wait. When I arrived there were about half a dozen other people waiting. Most noteworthy among them were two women, one Caucasian and one Asian, who were talking to each other in Chinese. The white woman looked remarkably like my cousin Ceil who lived in China for several years. It's pretty rare to encounter any Americans who speak Chinese, so seeing someone who did and also looked like a person I knew was very odd indeed.

The woman who looked like Ceil was headed for San Francisco, while the Asian girl was actually there to board the eastbound train. Both trains were badly delayed, and the station attendant spoke with those women about the reasons for the delays. The westbound delay was mostly due to excessively hot weather. Rails expand when it gets hot, and for safety the trains must go at a reduced speed when that happens. In addition, they'd encountered a rock slide in Colorado, and the train was



Amtrak portion of Salt Lake Intermodal Station

seem to understand that after four checked items and two carry-on items, she'd have to pay to transport the rest as freight. (What's more the clerk was being very kind in not actually measuring or weighing any of her boxes, which I'm pretty sure didn't strictly follow the rules.)

I kept checking the train's progress. That was actually a bit of a challenge, because the online form asks for the day the train was due in, and of course it defaults to the current date. Everything I was checking, though, was technically due in yesterday, so I had to keep changing that date. I was delighted when I discovered the Zephyr had finally left Provo about 1:30am. That meant it should make it to SLC by 2:30, and indeed it did. To keep things as orderly as possible they had all the people leaving the train in Salt Lake exit the platform before they let boarding passengers on. I was the only person who had booked a sleeper, and the car attendant very quietly led me aboard. He wanted to leave my bag in the lower-level storage, but I still had things strewn about in no particular order and wanted it with me. It's a bigger bag than usually goes into a roomette, but with just one person in here, it fits fine.

The room was already made up for night when I arrived, so I basically just climbed into bed and collapsed. That's the main reason I'd booked a sleeper to begin with, and I was very glad to have it for this leg of the trip. Salt Lake is a lengthy service stop, and I was aware when we left right at 3am. I also heard frequent whistles for a while. **[Sleepers are almost always near the front of a train, which means the train whistle can be annoying.]** I did manage to get a bit of sleep, though.

Saturday, August 4, 2018

Salt Lake City, Utah to Sacramento, California



Desert scenery in north central Nevada

I didn't get a lot of sleep last night, but I basically did feel refreshed when I awoke. That was around 6:00 Pacific Time, or roughly four hours after we'd left Salt Lake City. It was light out, notably lighter than it had been in Utah at the same hour. The weather app on my phone indicated that we were in Nevada, and the desert scenery appeared to confirm that. I toyed with the idea of trying to sleep some more, but the more I thought, the more awake I was. Around 6:30 we reached Elko, about 3½ hours down.

About 7:15 they announced that the diner was open, and I was among the first to make my way there. I ate with a family from a village near Dundee, Scotland—a middle aged couple and their teenaged son. They had flown into New York and were taking a variety of trains all over the country before heading to Orlando for a friend's wedding at Disney World. While our conversation was a bit forced, they were a fairly pleasant group with whom to share a meal.

I ordered scrambled eggs for breakfast. I'm not sure that was the best choice, since they were the sort of folded over egg crepe you often get on fast food breakfast sandwiches. The eggs came with a choice of grits or potatoes (I of course selected the latter) and a croissant. Sleeper passengers can also order a side of meat at no additional charge. I chose bacon, and the three crispy strips were quite tasty. The Scottish boy asked if he could have two sides, since he wanted both bacon and sausage. The waiter's initial response was that there would be an additional charge for that. However, part way through our meal, he slipped a little paper plate with two sausage patties in front of the boy. You also get beverages for free when you travel in sleeper, and I chose coffee and cranberry juice. The juice was served in a huge glass, what they normally use for pop. It was two or three times the amount of juice I'd normally expect.

I spent most of the day writing yesterday's account in this journal. There wasn't much I missed by doing so. Nevada was every bit as ugly as I remembered. Even the "wet" part in the Humboldt Sink looked dry and forlorn.

We did make good time heading across Nevada. Toward mid-morning my phone showed we were in Fernley, a place I know only as the site of a warehouse many of my purchases on Amazon come from. Fernley is apparently an eastern suburb of Reno, and we made our way through the city for the next half hour or so.

They've changed the routing of the train through Reno. When Margaret and I went through here years ago, the train made two stops—one was a service stop in a yard in Sparks (just east of Reno) and the other was right across a bunch of streets in the middle of downtown. We didn't stop in Sparks at all today, and they've built a new trench through downtown, which keeps both passenger and freight trains from blocking traffic. The bad news from a train passenger's point of view is that you no longer have the opportunity to photograph the famous "biggest little city in the world" sign. **[As you can see in the picture at right, you really see almost nothing of Reno from the Amtrak station.]**

The scenery changes quite abruptly at Reno. Just a few minutes later we entered California, and we were in the heavily forested Sierra Nevada Mountains. While I liked the canyons in Colorado, to me the Sierras are the highlight of this trip. The views around every bend are absolutely breathtaking.



Amtrak – Reno, Nevada



Sierra Nevada Mountains near Truckee, California

Several people commented on how smoky it is here. That's the result of the fires further north. The Coast Starlight train has had part of its route cancelled because of those fires, and a number of highways are closed up in the redwood country. The smoke from those fires collects in the valleys further east, and it gets trapped much like smog does. It does make everything look hazy, but that's actually kind of cool.

To my mind you'd be hard-pressed to find anywhere that can beat California for natural beauty. While it does have some ugly deserts and dull agricultural land **[not to mention some rather grim cities]**, the mountains, forests, and coastlines are spectacular. There's also amazing variety in a comparatively small space. The railroad has mile markers just like you'd see on a highway, and it's weird to think that these rugged mountains (the same ones that trapped the Donner party in 1846) are just 150 miles from the coast.

I had lunch while we went through Truckee, California, the drop-off point for Lake Tahoe. The lunch menu was very limited today, as it often is on the second day of an Amtrak journey. I had a hamburger, which was good but not memorable. Desert is included with sleeper tickets, but the only option they had was a flourless chocolate cake. I would have called the extremely rich dish fudge rather than cake, but it wasn't bad. Given a choice, though, I'd order almost anything else for dessert.

My dining companions this noon included a recently retired veterinarian who had spent his whole career in West Virginia, even though he seemed to have nothing good to say about that state. There was also a woman who works as a public defender in Tallahassee and her son, who will be starting high school this fall. They seemed surprised that I was a teacher.

We've been crawling ever since Reno, though I think it's standard speed for this leg. It's now about 3pm, and we've just reached Colfax, which is essentially the western edge of the mountains. That puts us right at three hours late. Technically Colfax is part of the Sacramento metropolitan area, though you'd be hard-pressed to call anything about the place "metropolitan". I know there's a bit of padding in the schedule west of here, so it will be interesting to see just when we reach Sacramento.

As we neared Sacramento I couldn't help but notice the number of homeless people in the area. Sacramento seems to be a city of haves and have nots. As we came into the city we passed palatial homes surrounded by cement walls. Outside those walls were squatters' camps with tents, wrecked old cars, or sometimes just blankets piled under a tree. It really was sad to see this contrast.

We got into Sacramento Valley Station at about 4:39, two hours and fifteen minutes behind schedule. Considering how far behind it was yesterday, that's an amazing improvement. It meant, however, that I wouldn't really be doing much of anything today. That was all right, because honestly Sacramento on a weekend seemed rather rough and unappealing. **[While I'd find things I liked in Sacramento, overall I found it a very challenging place to visit. It's honestly just about my least favorite among the American cities I've visited.]**

Most places I go I enjoy riding public transit. Here, though, the light rail seemed to be something that only the destitute take. A lot of the people today didn't seem to be headed anywhere in particular. They were riding to get out of the heat (101° this afternoon) and into air conditioning. It may well be different on a business day, but on Saturday afternoon the train was rather creepy.

It certainly didn't help that there were homeless people hanging around at two stations I was at today, and the walk from the train to my hotel I passed a group of people camped under an overpass and another woman who was just sitting by a freeway entrance doing nothing in particular. Two different people asked if I had cigarettes, and one asked if I had a light. Even if I had, my response to these people still would have been no. There's no way I'd have wanted to invite a conversation with them. **[I always feel a bit guilty that my general attitude toward homeless people isn't more welcoming. I fail to understand, though, why someone would**

choose to live under a freeway or at a light rail station when places like California offer lots of social services that would give them cleaner, safer places to spend their time.]

I said earlier that Salt Lake City's light rail came across as cheaply built and very utilitarian. That wasn't really a negative comment, just an observation. Sacramento's transit system, though, makes Salt Lake City's seem luxurious. The whole system here is old and dirty. They don't have actual elevated platforms, so the stations are basically just little plazas with tracks in the middle. On the trains you have to press a button to open the door. One time today I pressed it and nothing happened, and the train just went on before I could get out. I ended up going to a different door to get out at the next station. I encountered at least two vending machines that had been vandalized (the glass touch screens had been smashed with a heavy object, rendering them inoperable), and there's trash strewn all over everywhere in the stations. Trains are also very infrequent, just every half hour on weekends and even at their most frequent just every fifteen minutes. **[While I was able to use transit in Sacramento successfully, I definitely didn't enjoy it. It's just about the worst urban transit I've seen anywhere.]**

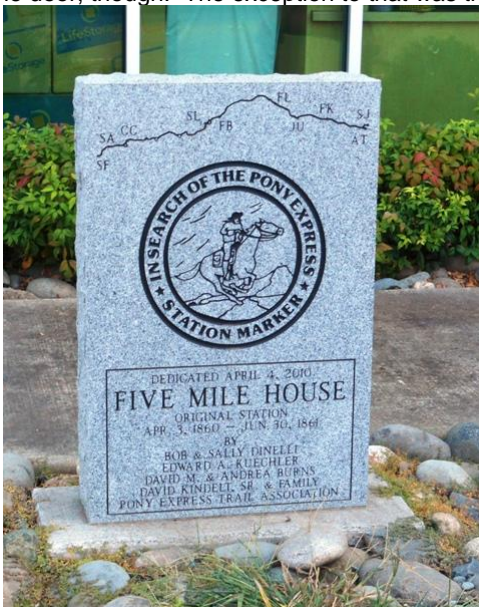
I will say that Sacramento Rapid Transit is serious about collecting their fares. In all the time I was in Utah, I was asked for proof of fare payment exactly once. Just today, though, I've been asked three different times to show my ticket. That may be an effort to keep the homeless people off the train, since I did see the cops ticketing a number of people. What becomes of them after they receive tickets, I have no clue. **[My bet is absolutely nothing. There's a very good chance most of these people provide false names when they are ticketed.]**

There was one other interesting incident when I took the train from the Amtrak station out to the hotel. Somewhere downtown a car had parked in the lane that is reserved for the light rail trains, blocking the path so the train couldn't get through. The driver called a dispatcher, who in turn called the police. Before anything could be done, the car owner showed up. The driver politely asked him to move his car immediately. The guy did move it, but he proceeded to swear at the train driver in the process. **[This is the biggest issue with light rail, and one I've encountered in other cities such as Portland and Boston. Better rail systems are fully separated from traffic, and while buses also run on the street, they can generally pass obstacles such as improperly parked vehicles. Light rail, on the other hand, has to rely on people obeying the rules.]**



The place I'm staying tonight is called the Good Nite Inn. That's a chain of budget friendly motels with locations all over California. When I priced things, I found Sacramento was a very expensive city. This place is about a third the cost of anywhere that might be better, so while I looked at many alternatives, I ended up staying right here. The neighborhood, as I mentioned earlier, is a bit iffy, but the place actually seems perfectly decent. It's an older place, but mostly well kept up. It reminds me of an old Super 8, though in a very urban location. The room is actually surprisingly large, and it appears to be clean. My view is of a mini storage place, but I don't know that anywhere else in this neighborhood would be a whole lot better. There's a Comfort Inn next door, and it honestly doesn't look much different than this place. It costs \$155, while I'm paying \$70. I can't imagine the Comfort Inn is worth more than double what this place is. This will probably be the worst place I'll stay on this trip. I knew that ahead of time, though, and it's perfectly acceptable.

I settled into my room and then took the train one stop west to College Greens station. There's a shopping center there that from the station looks nice. Almost every store and restaurant had people begging outside the door, though. The exception to that was the 99¢ store, which was left alone because they had a very prominent security guard.



**Five Mile House marker
Sacramento, California**

I bought snacks at the 99¢ store that I'll take along on the next leg of the trip (when I'll be back in coach again, and hence not getting free food). I also had dinner at a Hawaiian barbecue place. The chicken platter was good, though there was impossibly much meat—far, far more than I wanted to eat ... and that was the "small" size. As is always true with Hawaiian food, it came with rice and macaroni salad, which were amusing but not really good or bad. This plate also came with cooked cabbage, which I really didn't care for. The meal was as much for the entertainment value as anything, though, and at least it didn't make me sick.

On the way back to the station I stopped at what's probably the most significant point of interest in the neighborhood. The light rail station by this hotel is called Power Inn. That's named after Power Inn Road, and looking at the transformers in the background, you might figure the name came from the electric company. In fact Mr. Power was a person who operated what in 1860 was called Five Mile House. This was the first stop eastbound for Pony Express riders after they left the terminal in downtown Sacramento. The inn is long gone, but today there is a historical marker in front of a mini-storage facility (a different one than is outside my window) recognizing the history of the place.

Back at the hotel I did some laundry in the sink tonight and got the stuff I'd thrown into the duffel bag better organized. In the process I found that I did indeed have the T-shirt I thought I'd lost. **[I still have that shirt, and I wear it fairly often.]** I did not find the sunglasses, though, so they probably are gone for good.

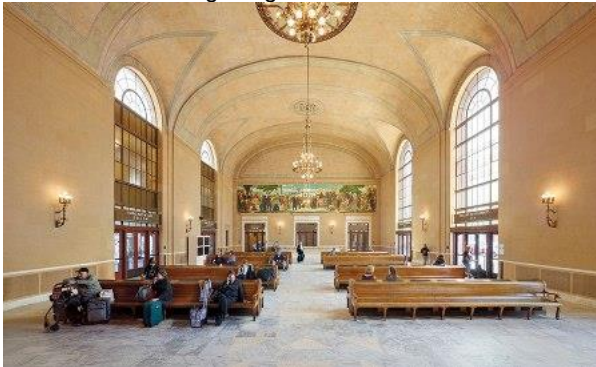
Sunday, August 5, 2018

Sacramento & Silicon Valley, California



Today I ended up spending most of the day on trains to see just single attraction. That was more or less what I'd planned, though.

I was up around six and left the hotel around 6:30. The Good Nite Inn doesn't serve breakfast, so I stopped at a Chevron Station with a convenience store called The Extra Mile. I picked up a cup of coffee there and then continued to the light rail station. I bought a ticket and before long caught a train downtown.



Website view of the interior of Sacramento station

For a relatively small depot, Sacramento Valley Station is really quite nice. It was apparently restored a few years ago, and they did quite a nice job. The place has one large waiting room with sixteen large wooden benches and plenty of additional space to congregate, deal with luggage, etc. There's a fairly large ticketing hall, clean restrooms, vending machines, and well-displayed information on upcoming trains. They display the appropriate tracks well ahead of time, so you can go out and wait whenever you want to. That's important here, because the tracks are quite a hike from the main part of the station.

I was here to catch a train called the Capitol Corridor, a commuter train run by Amtrak that runs roughly hourly between San Jose and Sacramento. The train also serves Oakland, Davis, and a number of San Francisco suburbs, and twice daily service is extended northward to Auburn at the edge of the mountains. The service isn't cheap, but it does provide a good connection.



It was noteworthy that this was train #727, like the old jet planes. Long distance Amtrak trains have low numbers (the California Zephyr, for instance is 5 and 6 in opposite directions), while local services have high numbers. The numbers also give you a clue as to where the train is located. I most often take trains in the 300 range, which are based in Chicago, while those in the 700s are in California.

They began boarding about fifteen minutes before our scheduled departure, and we left right on time at 7:45. I had a nice window seat for what would turn out to be some very picturesque views.

Those views would have to wait, though, since the first part of the trip runs through the heavily agricultural central valley. They grow almost anything you could imagine in California. I saw what were apparently

walnut and almond trees, citrus fruit, grapes, lettuce, tomatoes, peppers, and more easily recognizable corn, soybeans, sunflowers, and rapeseed (Canola). They also raise lots of livestock. I saw a feature on TV last night that showed California farmers protesting President Trump's new tariffs on imported goods, which have in turn attracted in turn have made the Asian countries impose counter-tariffs on American agricultural products they import. We have the exact same issue in Iowa, though our farmers don't seem quite so vocal about it.

Something unique on the Capitol Limited is that they issue printed receipts for seat checks rather than the colored strips of cardboard Amtrak normally uses. The conductor scanned my ticket, and a little portable printer she was carrying printed out a slip that said "GAC" (the code for my destination) in big, bold letters. That certainly looks more official than the traditional method.

On a train like this you get a taste of just how multi-ethnic California is. This morning I'd bet about a third of the riders were white Anglos, a third were Hispanic, and a third Asian. There were a few black people, though not many (far fewer than I'd see going around Sacramento). **[I love the ethnic diversity of places like California. There are many other Americans who see that as a negative, though.]** At Davis a group of about thirty elderly women, many of whom spoke only Chinese, boarded. They were headed to Emeryville, where they'd connect with a bus to take them in to San Francisco.

Sitting right behind me were an older Hispanic woman and her high school aged grandson. The woman lived in Sacramento, and the boy was visiting from Mexico. He had enrolled in an intensive English-language study program. Grandma insisted on talking to him only in English, though the kid obviously would have preferred to speak in Spanish. “No,” said the woman. “English is important. English will take you far. You can find all the information you need with English, and you can do any job you want with English.” Grandma also provided a running tour commentary of all the sights we passed. Some were interesting, while others (like the enormous oil refinery at Martinez) were not my cup of tea.

Past Martinez we had one of the nicest views there is on Amtrak. We followed the shore of San Pablo Bay, an inlet of San Francisco Bay. The tracks go right along the shoreline, and the elevation app on my phone said we were at 2 feet above sea level. It’s a rocky shore rather than beaches, which means the only people we saw were occasional fishermen. It’s really quite beautiful.



San Pablo bay near Richmond, California

That beauty ends rather abruptly at Richmond, a suburb where if I’d wanted I could have caught a BART train into San Francisco. Through Richmond, Berkeley, Oakland, Hayward, and Fremont, we again saw countless homeless people. The Bay Area has one of the highest rates of homelessness in the country, and that was certainly evident along the train tracks. Just like in Sacramento, there were beautiful subdivisions on one side of a wall, with tent cities set up on the other.



Tents by a subdivision wall – Oakland, California

It’s really hard to overstate just how many homeless people there are in California. I suppose part of that is because it’s comparatively easy to be homeless here. You can’t really have a tent city in Minneapolis or Chicago, because you couldn’t make it through the winter in one. **[I’ve seen tents in Midwestern cities in summer, but very few homeless people brave the cold months.]** When the weather is always mild, though, year-round camping becomes an option.

The real reason for the homelessness is a huge lack of affordable housing. Modest-looking pre-fab homes go for a million dollars in the East Bay area and for better than half a million in Sacramento. One-bedroom apartments are over \$4,000 a month in San Francisco, around \$3,000 a month in the East Bay, and \$2,500 a

month in Sacramento. There’s very little public housing around here, and it’s all but impossible to get into what does exist. I read in the *Sacramento Bee* that almost 40,000 people had applied to be part of a lottery for a wait list for public housing that was limited to 7,000 applicants. Those 7,000 can expect to find subsidized housing within about three years. In the mean time they’re stuck with whatever they’ve got, and of course there’s 33,000 people who didn’t make it on the wait list to begin with. **[I should note that while affordable housing is in short supply in California, there is a pretty good availability of temporary shelter.]**

Besides tent cities behind lovely housing developments, the East Bay is mostly industrial. Something that makes urban California look worse than its eastern and Midwestern counterparts is that almost all the industry is in pre-fab metal buildings—the sort of thing you might see in small towns in the Midwest. There’s very little brick here, which means the factories and warehouses don’t look nearly as substantial as they do further east. **[I do find metal buildings to be among the ugliest structures there are. I commented in my write-up on New Zealand that cheap metal construction often spoiled what was otherwise a truly gorgeous country.]**

Taking up miles along our route was the Oakland container port. Here huge ships loaded with containers bring in all those imported goods we’re now placing tariffs on. The containers are transferred to either trains or semi-trailers to make their way across the country. While it’s not as large as the port in Los Angeles, the Oakland port certainly seemed unending.

There’s an interesting site at the south end of San Francisco Bay. The train runs past salt evaporation ponds. These are operated by Morton and Cargill, and for more than a century they’ve produced a large part of the salt America uses for everything from the kitchen table to de-icing roads. The ponds turn different colors as the salt concentration gets higher and higher, and the colorful pools are quite a sight. Apparently they’re phasing them out because of environmental issues, but for now they’re still going.



Wikipedia picture of the San Francisco Bay salt ponds

I got off the train at Great America station, which is in the city of Santa Clara. The station is just outside Levi's Stadium, where the NFL's '49ers play. They're called the San Francisco '49ers, but even in good traffic the stadium would be more than an hour outside the city. There's also a big amusement park nearby (which is where the station name comes from), but the reason I'd come here is that it was a convenient place to transfer to the area's light rail system.



**Light rail train at Lick Mill Station
Santa Clara, California**

The South Bay cities have a transportation network operated by VTA (the Valley Transportation Authority). Mostly they run buses, but there is also a skeletal light rail system that connects San Jose, Santa Clara, and Silicon Valley towns like Cupertino, Sunnyvale, and Mountain View. I waked over to the Lick Mill light rail station (immaculate compared to anything in Sacramento), waited about fifteen minutes, and caught a westbound train.

Perhaps VTA's light rail is busy at rush hour. That's certainly not the case on Sunday. They only run trains every thirty minutes, and we had just a single car rather than an actual train. The car was about half full. Most of those were Latino people on their way to service jobs, and the rest were mostly young Asian professionals whose destinations were places like health clubs and organic grocers. It's not exactly surprising that the population of Silicon Valley is heavily Asian, from both the eastern and southern parts of the continent. It's also an extremely young area. Pretty much everyone appears to be in their 20s and 30s. The atmosphere is a lot like a college town.

[VTA ridership apparently ranks 24th in North America, with about 12,000 riders on an average weekday. That's about a third of what both Salt Lake City and Minneapolis have on their light rail systems and roughly the same as Sacramento. Much smaller cities like St. Louis and New Orleans have significantly more riders than San Jose.]

Silicon Valley (traditionally the Santa Clara Valley) does not appear to have homeless people, nor anyone who's remotely close to being poor for that matter. The poor people live in San Jose and take the train or bus to their service jobs. In the valley itself the homes aren't particularly nice (small stucco ranch houses on tiny lots or boxy townhouse condos from the '80s), but they go for a million bucks or more each. People snap them up because they're close to their jobs and because they're a bargain compared to the \$2 – \$3 million that similar places go for in San Francisco. The truly middle class live further out. Both trains and freeways connect Silicon Valley to places like Livermore, Gilroy, and Stockton—which can make for commutes of two hours or more each way.

The tacky houses do have manicured lawns, and there are also some nice parks throughout Silicon Valley. There's pretty standard strip business, most of which fairly old, but decently maintained. More than anything else, though, what I saw in Silicon Valley was industrial parks. This area has been a center of science and technology since the 1930s. Many of the companies here are older than I'd imagined. Several began making components for ships in the Depression era, and they became big while working on military contracts during World War II. In the '50s and '60s they shifted to consumer goods like TVs and stereos, and since the '70s computers have been king.

I passed numerous corporate headquarters that were right off the light rail route. Others (like Apple) aren't particularly transit friendly, but are just a short drive away. In addition to the headquarters, there are branches of companies headquartered in other states or countries. If a company works in the technology field at all, it almost certainly has a facility somewhere in the valley. I saw Intel, Yahoo, IBM, Honeywell, Microsoft, Hewlett—Packard, Boeing, and literally dozens of others. Some actually manufacture things (most notably microchips, which are made of silicon—hence the name), but most either design electronics or work on software. The buildings are mostly simple cement block structures, but they are invariably surrounded by neatly manicured lawns with statues and fountains.

I rode to the end of the line at Mountain View station. While there's no mountains particularly viewable from Mountain View, it is a pleasant suburban town. Today the place is best known as the headquarters for Google. The main Google campus is about two miles from the station, but the company has buildings all over town. I passed two of them while walking this afternoon, and if I'd wanted I could have seen half a dozen more.



**"Historic" adobe
Mountain View, California**

Right next to Mountain View station is a building that a bronze marker describes as "the historic adobe", which is the oldest surviving structure in Mountain View. That "historic" building dates to 1934, and while it is built of adobe (i.e.: clay bricks), it was built as a modern farm house. It looks remarkably similar to the somewhat newer stucco houses nearby. The city restored it and today rents it out for wedding receptions and similar events.

I walked a little over a mile north from the station, crossing the enormous Bayshore Freeway (U.S. 101) in the process. Theoretically I could have taken a free circulator bus (underwritten by Google) to my destination, but that bus runs infrequently and covers a very circuitous route.

My destination was the Computer History Museum. This institution was started in Boston in the 1960s but moved to Silicon Valley when it became clear that California was the real home of the computer. Its primary benefactor is Microsoft founder Bill Gates, and he obviously provided sufficient funding for them to do everything well. The place is absolutely enormous, and it's honestly one of the best museums of any sort I've been to.



**LEFT: Hollerith punch card sorter used for the US Census
(the product that started IBM)**



**RIGHT: Inca quipu counting strings
Computer History Museum – Mountain View, California**

The primary exhibit is called "Revolution", and it traces the history of computers from ancient times to the future. I believe there were eighteen large rooms in this exhibit. Most of what they have on display is actual hardware rather than replicas, so you can see everything from quipus (the knotted strings the ancient Inca people used for counting) to Charles Babbage's original difference engine (arguably the first computer) to the Jacquard loom that first used punch cards and pioneered "digital" thinking to the enormous SAGE mainframe that searched for Soviet missiles in the '50s to modern cell phones that are essentially pocket-sized computers. They explain the basics of mechanical and electronic computing, how components are miniaturized, different methods of human interaction with machines, memory devices, networking, the internet, and views of the future from various points in the past and present. Everything is explained in a variety of ways. You can just look at the objects, read brief explanations, watch videos that show the devices being used (or sometimes work with them yourself), or read detailed technical descriptions. It's set up really well so that different people can focus in on what each of them finds important. **[This really was very well done. I like museums where there's a choice as to the amount of detail different visitors want to take in.]**



Tape-based computer memory from the 1960s

A small part of the Revolution exhibit told about the history of Google and Wikipedia, two of the biggest and most important sites on the internet. It showed exactly what goes on behind the scenes when you search those sites, which I found fascinating. It also looked into how Wikipedia is able to keep its information both neutral and accurate, even when people are constantly trying to vandalize pages on controversial subjects and how Google is able to keep the top results from being spam (an issue that led to the demise of many other search engines).

There are several smaller exhibits at the Computer History Museum as well. One of the most interesting shows the vast array of things we don't really think of as computers that are in fact computers. Medical imaging, crash test dummies, and talking toys are just a few of those. Another exhibit looked at autonomous vehicles, including self-driving cars and drone aircraft. Yet another looked at the evolution of digital music, with everything from player piano rolls to .mp3 players. Finally there was a lab where we could

look in on old computers that were being restored. While I spent many times as long coming and going as I actually spent in the museum, it really was a fascinating place, and I'm very glad I made it part of my trip. **[I'd spent a lot of time planning how to get to the computer museum, and I was really looking forward to it. Many times I've been disappointed by attractions, and it was nice that this one lived up to and really went beyond my expectations.]**

There's a café in the museum, but it was serving overpriced, pretentious food with cute, computer-related names. I really didn't feel like spending \$20 for a salad of tofu, berries, and walnuts. So I stopped instead at a Taco Bell that was right at the exit off U.S. 101 by the museum. While Mountain View is an expensive town overall, this particular Taco Bell was cheaper than many I've seen in Iowa. Their "cravings menu" really was a true dollar menu, which meant I could stuff myself for about four bucks. In fact, I actually got more food than I ordered. In addition to the tostada, chicken quesadilla, and caramel apple empanada I ordered, they also put a bean burrito (another dollar item I wasn't charged for) on my tray. Between all that and a "value" sized slush, it really was a very filling meal.

As is the case at many urban fast food places, this one had restrooms with a keypad on which you had to type a code to enter. I'd used the toilet at the museum, so I didn't need to get in there. I was intrigued, though, to see a very clean-cut middle-aged white guy walk up to the counter, ask for the code, use the restroom, and then leave without buying anything. I don't think I'd have had the guts to do that.

I walked back to Mountain View station. In addition to the light rail terminal, Mountain View also serves CalTrain, a commuter train that runs up and down the San Francisco Peninsula. For variety as much as anything, I'd opted to take CalTrain this afternoon. Service is frequent on business days, but much more sparse on Sundays. I'd arrived not long after a train departed, and I had a fairly long wait before the next one.

I filled most of the time reading the *San Jose Mercury News*, which is the main local paper for Silicon Valley. It was from their Sunday real estate section that I got the housing prices for the area. The *Mercury News* was the first newspaper in the world to have a website, and I can remember reading articles from them clear back in the mid 1990s. Today they still offer a very good print edition. **[Surprisingly, the print edition is still going in 2024.]** It's a paper that compares favorably with almost anything in the country.

The Mercury News

I was also very impressed with the *Sacramento Bee*, which I bought daily when I was here. Oddly, the *Bee* has different prices, depending on where you buy it. I bought one copy at a 99¢ store, and it cost what the store's name implies. I bought another copy at a convenience store, and they wanted two bucks—also for a weekday paper and both stores were in the city of Sacramento. Unlike a lot of papers these days, the *Bee* still seems to get a lot of advertising, so my bet is the actual cost of buying the paper isn't where their profit comes from. It's still weird that the cover price varies, though.

Both the *Bee* and the *Mercury News* had very balanced, unbiased news reporting. Their editorial pages, though, were an odd combination of liberal and business-oriented. While that's a combination you don't usually think about, that's precisely what California politics is. There are few people less popular in California than Donald Trump. They hate both his anti-immigration policies and his anti-trade policies, and they make fun of the fact that he can't put ten words together to make a coherent thought. The editorials were all anti-Trump, and there was certainly no one supporting him in the Letters to the Editor.



Clipper card

That's not to say there aren't Trump supporters in California, though even the Republicans here tend to call out the President on his racism. There was an interesting op-ed piece in the *Mercury News* that was written by the vice chair of the California Republican Party and was criticizing the President for failing to see the whole picture when it came to immigration. They noted that migrant workers were essential to the state's agriculture and that many of those same migrants were now volunteering to fight wildfires—which happened to be occurring in the state's most heavily Republican counties.

It was kind of weird that while I was waiting for CalTrain two different people came up to ask me for directions. One was actually looking for the light rail platform, so it was convenient I'd come in that way. The other wanted the platform to San Francisco but was actually on the one for San Jose. I directed him to the correct one, and he just barely made it across before a northbound train came. It seems as if everywhere I've traveled I've had people ask me for directions. Fortunately I'm usually able to help out.

Something that's kind of nice about transportation in the Bay Area is that numerous different transit organizations (including VTA and CalTrain) all use the same smart card for fare collection. It's called Clipper and is primarily associated with BART, the subway system that connects San Francisco and Oakland. With the same card, though, you can pay regular fares or buy passes for literally dozens of different transit companies. That would make things much more convenient for people who commute over long distances and use multiple forms of transportation. At Mountain View they also accepted Clipper to pay for commuter parking, I'd

gotten a Clipper card ahead of time (as well as similar cards for Salt Lake, Sacramento, and Denver), and while I certainly didn't use it much it did make a nice souvenir. If I lived here, it would be very handy indeed. **[By contrast the transit systems in New York City and suburban New Jersey recently introduced incompatible smart card systems.]**

I rode CalTrain down to the main rail station in San Jose. I'd debated about trying to see a couple of things there, but honestly there wasn't much that intrigued me. San Jose has the standard art and children's museums you'd find in any large city, but there's nothing that would be considered world class. There's also not much of the quirky stuff I always enjoy discovering when I travel. Probably the most interesting thing I came across while preparing for this trip was a statue honoring the famous "black power" salute from the 1968 Olympics. The athletes involved both went to San Jose State University, which is why they are honored there. I'd done more than enough walking for the day, though, so I decided I didn't need to add three more miles just to see a statue.

The Capitol Corridor is what Amtrak calls an "unreserved" train. Technically I'd bought a ticket to depart San Jose in the 5:00 hour. I'd gotten there in time to leave at 4:10, though, and my ticket worked perfectly well on the earlier train. The first part of our trip (past the salt ponds and through the southern East Bay suburbs) was uneventful. That changed, though, once we got to Oakland. They announced that we'd be picking up more than 150 passengers at Coliseum station. Apparently the Oakland A's had a day game today, and it had just gotten out. The train was overwhelmed with loud, often drunk fans, and most of them were headed all the way to Sacramento.

The seat next to me actually wasn't filled at Oakland. However, when we reached Emeryville a high school kid sat down next to me. He had apparently been visiting a friend in San Francisco, and he'd taken a bus across the Bay Bridge and made it just in time to catch the train. He paid cash for a ticket on the train. They charged him \$29. Booking in advance, I'd paid less than that for a trip that was about twice as long as his. I'd think he could have saved money by just going to the Amtrak website on his phone while he was taking the bus across the bay. I'm sure it would have cost more than booking ahead of time, but he wouldn't have had a supplement for paying on board.

Aside from being crowded and loud, the trip back to Sacramento was uneventful. We arrived slightly ahead of schedule, just after 7pm. Another person asked me for directions on the light rail platform at Sacramento Valley Station. Hers was the easiest question of the day, because there's only one way you can go from there.

I caught the train back to Power Inn. The car I rode in tonight had an interesting advertising wrap on the outside. It was an anti-drug ad that showed two rather generic looking high school aged kids, an Anglo boy and a Latina girl. The caption said "I have a future. I choose not to use." Then in larger letters it said, "Don't do marijuana." I don't know who sponsored that ad, but there were several train cars and buses that featured it. California is of course one of the states that recently legalized marijuana (though the kids in the picture likely wouldn't be old enough to buy it legally). The free papers in Sacramento and the Bay Area were full of ads for "dispensaries" where cannabis products could be purchased legally, and lots of people sported T-shirts with leaf or "420" designs. It was interesting to see these ads that were fighting that image.

There was an interesting article in the *Bee* about the dilemma parents face when they are trying to raise children while they (the parents) are using drugs. Of course the situation really isn't that much different from parents who drink but then want their kids to be teetotalers. People have been saying, "Do as I say, not as I do" for generations, and it's no less hypocritical with marijuana than with beer.

Before returning to the hotel, I stopped for dinner. I went to El Pollo Loco ("the crazy chicken"), a chain based in Mexico that has locations all over California and in several other states along the southern border. **[There used to be a few El Pollo Loco locations in Chicagoland as well, but those have gone out of business.]** This particular El Pollo Loco was right next to the mini-storage place with the pony express monument. I had a salad for dinner—lettuce, corn, black beans, peppers, shredded marinated chicken, and a white Mexican cheese. It was supposed to come with an avocado dressing, but I passed on that and just topped it with salsa. It really was very tasty.



Website view of
El Pollo Loco chicken salad

Back at the hotel I just relaxed and watched some TV. It was kind of nice to have an evening to just do nothing.

Monday, August 6, 2018

Sacramento, California

I watched *Good Day, Northern California* on TV this morning. By far the biggest story was the wildfires which had grown into the biggest natural disaster in the state's history. Dozens of highways were closed, hundreds of homes and businesses were destroyed, and tens of thousands of people had been evacuated.

There was literally no escaping the fires in Sacramento today. While the city itself wasn't burning, what we did have was smoke—and lots of it. While that made for a lovely red sunrise, it also pushed the air quality well into the "unhealthy" range. Its location at the north end of the Central Valley made Sacramento a prime target for smoke. Three different fires blew their smoke here from the surrounding mountains. The valley trapped it, and it just built up into a thick haze. The exact same thing happens from car exhaust and industrial pollution in Los Angeles and Palm Springs. I could tell that the smoke in Sacramento wasn't just smog, though. It smelled like a camp fire, and for a moment I could imagine roasting wieners and marshmallows. That smell never dissipated all day long, though. It was everywhere in the city, and if anything it just grew stronger. My eyes watered much of the day, and I coughed repeatedly. I saw old Asian women walking around wearing surgical masks, and it occurred to me that they might be the smartest people around.

There are places where “early to bed, early to rise” is the motto. The adage would apply in Salt Lake City, but Sacramento is definitely not such a place. There were a number of things I wanted to see here. One, however (the State Museum of California), was only open Tuesday through Friday, and the rest were open banker’s hours. I’d awakened at six this morning, so I had tons of time to kill before things would open at 10. So I bought my transit day pass and set out exploring.

Something kind of interesting today was that each time I walked to the Power Inn light rail station, I’d pass a crew that was installing a red light camera at the corner of Folsom Boulevard and Power Inn Road. It’s a more complicated process than I’d ever thought it might be, and it took them all day to install the thing. It was kind of interesting watching the work progress.

There were indeed a lot more passengers on the light rail at rush hour than there had been on the weekend. It was still a rather low-end mix, though. There were still a lot of homeless people, and there didn’t appear to be many people with “good” jobs who rode the train. Mass transit is obviously not the choice of California’s government workers and lobbyists. **[By contrast I had seen well-dressed people on the trains in Salt Lake City, and a lot of government employees in Minnesota take the light rail to their jobs in St. Paul.]**

Like many of the trains I’d take in Sacramento, this one had the destination of “Folsom”, and of course I couldn’t get the old Johnny Cash song about Folsom Prison out of my head. Folsom Prison is indeed in the Sacramento suburbs, though the prison is about four miles east of the end of the light rail line. **[Theoretically passengers could connect to a bus that goes to the prison, and I’d bet quite a few family members do that when they visit inmates.]** I only rode about two-thirds of the way out to Folsom. I got out at Zinfandel station (as in the wine), which is in the suburb of Rancho Cordova. I’d originally thought about getting a hotel near this station. I’m glad I didn’t though. It would have been a LONG train ride from anywhere, and while the buildings were newer, there were just as many homeless people here as there were by Power Inn.

There was another 99¢ store by the Zinfandel station, so I made that my first destination of the day. Today I mostly bought juice that I’d be drinking on the train. They had whole liters of juice for 99¢. This chain is a California institution, and they really do have some nice bargains. I honestly wish they’d expand eastward. **[I’ve seen 99¢ stores in Arizona and Texas, but nowhere remotely close to where I live.]**

When I got back to Power Inn, I happened to see a homeless woman sleeping on the ground behind one of the benches where passengers were supposed to wait. She wasn’t disturbing anyone, nor was anyone bothering her. She’d obviously been there all night, and she was sound asleep at 8:30 in the morning. It does amaze me that no authorities came along to send her on her way.

I had breakfast this morning a Wendy’s near the hotel. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen a Wendy’s that served breakfast. This one did, though, and the food was good. I had an artisan bacon sandwich—which meant bacon, fried egg, and white cheddar cheese inside a very nice crusty roll. It came with homestyle potatoes, the sort of things they call hashbrowns in Chicago. I also got coffee and orange juice, and it really was a good breakfast. **[In the past few years pretty much all Wendy’s have started serving breakfast again, but I don’t think I’ve had breakfast there since this trip.]**

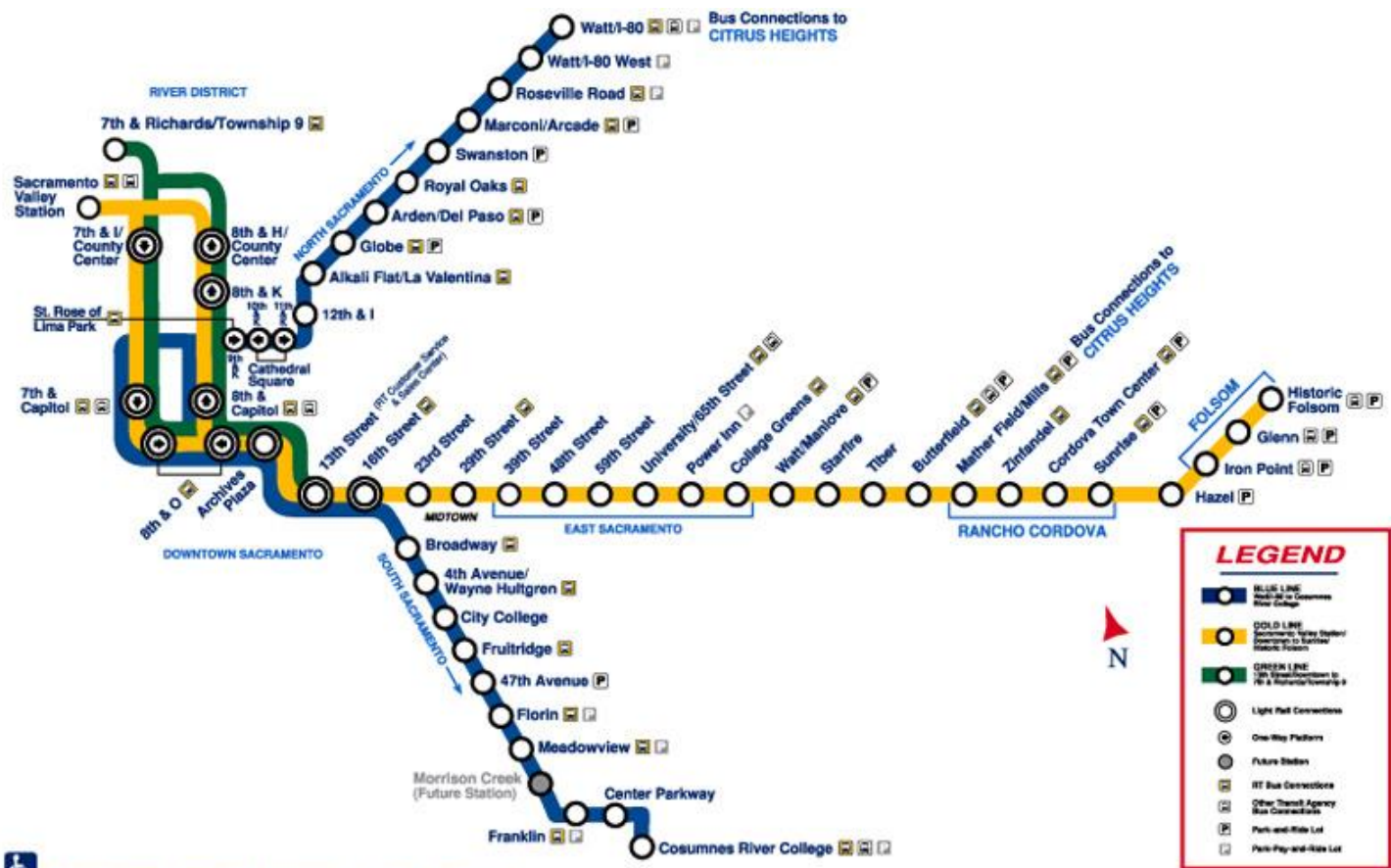
I encountered another homeless person at Wendy’s. She was an elderly black woman with obvious mental issues. The woman ordered nothing but French fries. There was a wait for them, so she went to use the restroom before eating. She was very concerned, though, that no one else should eat her fries. She reminded the clerk that she had paid for them, and she wanted to be sure they were there when she came back. They were, of course, but she certainly made quite a production of it.

The other homeless woman had left the light rail station when I got back there about a quarter to ten. There was still a sleeping bag on the ground behind the bench, though, and a couple of plastic bags that I’m pretty sure held many of her possessions.



ABOVE: Power Inn Road & Folsom Boulevard
BELOW: Homeless person sleeping at Power Inn Station
Sacramento, California





All light rail stations are wheelchair accessible, except 12th & I southbound



**Textile factory at Sutter's Fort
Sacramento, California**

every 19th Century craft was represented here, and they sold the goods they made to other settlers who came to California. Hoping to expand his business, Sutter built a sawmill a little ways upstream from Sacramento. That site, Sutter's Mill, was where they made the discovery that led to the 1849 California Gold Rush.

I've toured several other forts before, and this one wasn't a lot different from any other. Part of it is set up as living history, and I did see a cooper explaining his craft. Coopers traditionally make barrels, though the guy pointed out that anything that can be made of wooden slats and metal hoops is the product of a cooper. This could be anything from a beer stein to the redwood hot tubs that were popular back in the '70s (which I suppose are basically just big barrels). The guy actually works professionally as a cooper, mostly using more modern techniques than he employs at the fort. Today there's a big business in making decorative rain collection devices that people then use to water their lawns.

I exited at a convenient time to catch bus #30, which stops right outside the fort. My day pass worked on both trains and buses. To use it on a bus, I was supposed to scan the card horizontally so that a reader would sense the magnetic stripe on its back. I tried that four times, but it didn't register. Eventually the driver just waved me back.

The buses in Sacramento definitely don't attract a better class of passengers than the light rail. A couple of my fellow passengers were headed to a soup kitchen, and they discussed what today's menu was likely to be. Another was a handicapped woman who was

I caught an inbound train and rode to 29th Street. This is in Sacramento's Midtown neighborhood, the most trendy and gentrified part of the city. It's a lot like Chicago's near north side, St. Louis' Central West End, the Uptown neighborhood in Minneapolis, or Sugar House that I'd just visited in Salt Lake City. Sacramento's version is rougher around the edges, and—oddly—it's also whiter than its Midwestern counterparts.

I spent about fifteen minutes walking through Midtown before reaching my next destination, Sutter's Fort. This is a re-creation of the first settlement in what is now Sacramento. The original fort stood in a flood plain on the bank of the American River, while the replica was built on higher ground by the California State Park Commission.

The history of this fort is fascinating. What is now Sacramento was originally settled as New Switzerland (actually called Nueva Helvetia) in the 1830s by arrangement with the governor of Mexico. The Swiss businessman who established it (Johann or "John" Sutter) came here by way of Hawaii, and most of Sacramento's first settlers were in fact Polynesian. While there were defenses installed, the fort was mostly designed to be industrial. Almost

headed to a free clinic. There were also a couple of teenagers who looked like they were stoned—definitely not the models for those anti-drug ads I'd seen earlier.



**Protestors in front of the California State Capitol
(I have no idea what they were for or against.)**

in California, and you have to pay for the heavy bags stores are allowed to give out. What you do see is tons and tons of fast food trash, broken glass, car parts, and an amazing amount of articles of clothing (shoes, T-shirts, etc.) that are just littered all over everywhere. I'm not sure I've seen anywhere in America that looked more like a Third World city than Sacramento.

Sacramento is easily one of the ugliest cities I've ever been to. Even the civic boosters here would be hard-pressed to describe the place as beautiful. Downtown was mostly renovated in the 1970s, and it features that austere concrete that was a trademark of that era. There are some nice plazas in front of those buildings, but the overall effect is why "brutalist" architecture has that name. There's graffiti absolutely everywhere in Sacramento. I expect graffiti in back alleys or along the railroad tracks, but here it was often on the front of buildings that faced onto main streets. Someone had even tagged the side of the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament.

The city is also filthy. Part of that I'm sure was because of the smoke from the wildfires, but there just seemed to be a basic grunge all over everything. I saw dog feces almost everywhere I went, and according to articles I read a lot of the homeless people also do their business in the open air. On top of that, there's litter absolutely everywhere, though it's different trash than you see some places. California is serious about its deposit law, so you don't see beer cans or pop bottles. You also don't see plastic bags. They've banned disposable bags

I rode the bus downtown and then walked a long way to my next destination. I was headed to a spot right on the river west of downtown. The Sacramento riverfront is separated from most of the city by Interstate 5 (the Golden State Freeway), and getting from one side to the other is no small accomplishment. What probably could have been about a ten-minute walk took more like half an hour.



California Automobile Museum vehicles

LEFT: 1923 REO fire truck

CENTER: 1943 military Jeep

RIGHT: 1977 AMC Pacer

BOTTOM: 1974 powder blue Plymouth Satellite

(Governor Jerry Brown's official state car from his first term as Governor)



My destination was the California Automobile Museum, and I suppose it makes sense that such a place would not be particularly friendly to pedestrians. This is an enormous complex located in a warehouse across from the city animal shelter. While it was a chore to get to, I was very glad I came. It's really quite a nice museum. I've been to a number of car museums in different places, but this one was probably the most inclusive. It featured all types of cars from all different eras. In addition to

true antiques (Model T's, Stanley Steamers, and the like), they featured classics like the AMC Pacer and even newer cars like a Ford Escort and a Toyota Camry. There were good explanations about why the different vehicles were significant. It really was all quite interesting. **[A car museum I visited in New Zealand last summer is probably the only one that would come close to this one. The California Automobile Museum really is top notch.]**

After seeing the museum I headed back downtown and again caught the light rail. This time I took the blue line north from downtown. The blue line is the oldest of Sacramento's light rail lines, and it appears to have an even lower-class clientele than the gold line. The blue line connects a park-and-ride on I-80 at the north end of the city with a community college at the south end. On the way it passes through an endless string of bad neighborhoods. While preparing for this trip I happened to come across a YouTube video called "Florin Light Rail", which is a song by a Sacramento hip-hop artist (PH7 X Chuuwhee). He describes the bleak neighborhood by one of the south side rail stations, but I got the feeling that a lot of what I passed through heading north was similar.

Most noteworthy on this trip was the area around a station called Alkali Flats. The name of that station kind of tells you that this is definitely not the nicest neighborhood in town. In fact it's the real "skid row" for a city that seems to have down and out people all over town. The most prominent feature in Alkali Flats is an enormous complex called Loaves and Fishes that apparently provides "transitional" housing and food to thousands of people each day. The place appears to cover about ten square blocks, and really does look like a ray of sunshine in the middle of the gloom. **[There were actually several similar places in Sacramento, but I got the feeling a lot of the homeless people consciously chose not to partake of their services.]**

I went a couple stops north of Alkali Flats, getting off at the Arden—Del Paso stop. This is a neighborhood that's trying hard to become hip and trendy, but hasn't made it there yet. There's a lot of galleries and music clubs, but there's also lots of pawn shops and dollar stores. It reminded me a lot of much of Milwaukee Avenue in Chicago or Lake Street in Minneapolis. The fact that they were signing people up for free government-subsidized cell phones outside the station tells you that this neighborhood has got a long way to go before it truly gentrifies. **[The free cell phone program is apparently still going. I saw a sign-up table for it by a train station in the Chicago suburbs last Christmas.]**



Website image of "Sweet Baby Cheesus"

[A quick Google search revealed that Queso King's no longer operates a physical restaurant. They went out of business during the COVID pandemic. Today they apparently sell grill cheese out of a food truck, and they also license some of their products to a handful of trendy coffee bars.]

I'd come to Arden—Del Paso to have lunch. I'd read about a place called Queso King's that served gourmet grilled cheese sandwiches using fresh, local ingredients. (Sacramento bills itself as "America's farm to fork capital," so "fresh and local" are big buzz words here.) It sounded interesting, and it turned out to be tasty. Queso King's serves both savory and sweet grilled cheese options, all of them unique. I chose to have one from each category, and they had very opposite cutesy names. On the savory side I had the "Hot as Hell" sandwich, which the menu said featured jalapeno jack, habanero cheddar, and Memphis chicken. It also had a compote of onion and pepper, and it did indeed have quite a kick. My sweet selection was the "Sweet Baby Cheesus", which included Havarti and fontina cheese, together with a jam made of wild local berries. I wasn't sure how the sweet jam would go on a grilled cheese sandwich, but it actually did work pretty well. It was a bit pricey for what it was, but it did make for a unique lunch.

I took the blue line back downtown and then took a different route (Capitol Street, which leads to the Tower Bridge) across I-5 to the riverfront. Just north of here is the area they call Old Sacramento or "Old Sac". The collection of buildings dates to the mid-1800s, which—with the exception of the missions along the coast—is old for California. They really market Old Sac as a tourist attraction, and I can picture families with young kids having some fun here. It's kind of like spending the day in the village at Old Thresher's. Mostly, though, I found it boring. The bulk of the stuff was also expensive, which kept me from doing a lot there.



Pony Express Monument
Old Sacramento

I did photograph the monument that marked the end of the old Pony Express trail. I also went to the Wells—Fargo Museum, a one-room space that does a surprisingly good job of telling the history of that company.

Just north of Old Sacramento is the California Railroad Museum. This is also run by the state park commission, and it really is a fascinating attraction. It's as much a history museum as it is a transportation museum. What they really do is use the railroad to tell about the history of California. A huge part is about the building of the transcontinental railroad, and having just come across the Sierras, it was fascinating to learn in detail about that. They tell all the jobs of people who worked for the railroads in their golden years, and they explain the contributions of railroads in modernizing the country. Of course there are also tons of classic train cars, and it was interesting to look through all of them.

After I'd finished the museum I followed yet another route under I-5, which took me back to the Amtrak station. There I boarded a gold line train which very quickly became crowded. Something weird about the light rail cars in Sacramento is that they have extremely little seating. The seats are mounted very far apart. In fact, they could easily get an extra row of seats between the existing ones. That makes it convenient for handicapped people, people with bikes, or the homeless people who wheel shopping carts right on board the trains. It does mean that the trains rapidly become crowded, though.

Something else that stood out on the Sacramento trains was their recorded announcements. Every city does these differently. In Salt Lake City the announcements appear to have been recorded by a college-age female intern. While she spoke clearly, she had a very hesitant voice. Sacramento also has a female voice, but it's much fuller and deeper. What really stands out about the Sacramento announcements, though, is how frequently they make them. I assume there's some sensor in the tracks that signals the recording, but it's almost literally every block that she'll say "The next station is ... Power Inn" or whatever. That same recording will play four or five times between stations. Then when you actually get to that station, she doesn't actually announce that you're there. Instead, she'll say "This is a Historic Folsom-bound train. The next station is ... College Greens".

I rested up a bit at the hotel and then set out again. I went back to almost the same place I'd headed this morning. I'd seen on a map that there was a Walgreen's between the Zinfandel and Cordova Town Centre stations. The map made it appear closer to the latter station, so that's where I headed. I ended up walking back west about six blocks, and Walgreen's ended up being almost adjacent to Zinfandel.

I just missed a train while leaving Walgreen's, and in the evening that meant I had a thirty minute wait for the next one. The people at Zinfandel station were relatively pleasant, but the station itself was disgusting. There was vomit all over one of the benches with empty vodka bottles littered nearby. I wondered if the two were connected. There was also a wide range of food waste littered all over, and various animals came up to peck at it, oblivious to all the people in the station.

The trip back was not one of the more pleasant I've been on. An obese black man sat at the end of the car, and he wouldn't shut up for anything. I tried hard to ignore him, as did a high school aged black boy across the aisle from me. A Latino family pretended they couldn't understand him, even though they'd been speaking perfectly good English earlier. Less lucky was a young Hispanic woman on her way home from work. While her clothes could be described as too tight, she did not deserve the sexual harassment she received from this guy. She fared well, though, compared to a thirty-something long-haired white guy who brought a bicycle in the train car. The car had hooks on which bikes could be anchored. (They have similar things in Minneapolis, and people use them all the time.) When the white guy placed his bike there, the black guy seemed to think it was the funniest thing he had ever seen. He went on and on trying to provoke the guy. I'm pretty sure the white guy could have easily punched out the black guy, and pretty much everyone else in the car would have applauded him for it. To his credit, he didn't, though.

The provocation stopped quite suddenly when a police officer boarded at one stop. I mentioned before that in Sacramento cops frequently patrol the cars asking for tickets. Lots of people do still seem to ride without paying, and they become very adept at slipping out of cars whenever a cop shows up. This guy looked like Bugs Bunny zipping out of a cartoon scene when he saw the officer come on board.

Another passenger on the train was an African man who seemed to speak French but had limited English skills. He was looking for a place he could transfer to a bus, though it wasn't entirely clear where he was going. (He mentioned four possible bus route numbers.) He asked the officer for directions, but his vagueness and lack of English skills made for an awkward conversation. The guy seemed certain that he could catch the bus he wanted at Power Inn station, but I could confirm there were no buses anywhere near there. I do hope he eventually got where he needed to go.

When I got back to Power Inn station the homeless woman who had been sleeping there this morning was setting up her bed behind the bench. As I made my way down the steps to street level, there were a couple of people over on the handicap ramp who were clearly smoking marijuana (which is still illegal in public places in California). I heard swearing in the distance, which I guess is typical in Sacramento.

Part of the reason I'd gone to Walgreen's was in search of a brand of ice cream bar called It's It that is apparently big in the San Francisco area. Walgreen's stocks them, but this particular location was out of them. On my way back from the station I stopped at a Shell convenience store, but the only ice cream they had was Ben & Jerry's. I thought I'd try the Chevron station where I'd gotten coffee yesterday, but after 7pm the place is unattended and only allows pay at the pump sales. That seems awfully early for a convenience store to close, and it certainly added to my opinion of how rough a place Sacramento is.

The swearing I'd heard turned out to be a young couple who were fighting in the parking lot at Wendy's as I made my way past. I'm not sure I'd ever seen a man and a woman literally punching each other, but they were definitely going at it. Their language would also make a sailor blush. It's definitely not what I'd expect on a Monday night.

Of course my guard was up as I made my way back to the Good Nite Inn. It pretty much always is when I'm in urban settings, but Sacramento was something else all together. Oddly, though, the hotel was very quiet, with nothing unusual at all. A family was swimming in the pool, and people were getting ice and buying pop from the vending machine. **[I should note that while the parking lot was fenced, there was no unusual security at the Good Nite Inn. It would have been fairly easy for the chaos of the neighborhood to spill into the hotel. Fortunately it didn't.]** I made it to my room without incident, settled in, and had a pleasant, restful night.

Tuesday, August 7, 2018

Sacramento, California to Elko, Nevada

I wasn't in any particular hurry this morning, so of course I was again wide awake at six. Today I had breakfast at a McDonalds that was across U.S. 50 (a major freeway) from the hotel. While it was a chore to get there, my breakfast was good. As a bonus, there was another Chevron station right next to McDonalds, and they had the It's It ice cream sandwiches in stock. I bought one, as well as today's *Sacramento Bee*, and then made my way back to the hotel. The ice cream was good, but I don't know that it was anything I'd bother buying again. What was unique about it was that they'd coated the ice cream sandwich in chocolate, so it's sort of two treats in one. Honestly the feeling of having finally found it was better than the ice cream sandwich itself, though.



I finished packing my bag, and I thought I'd done it much more carefully this time. The bag was still very unbalanced, though. I think that's mostly the tall, narrow shape of the duffel. By walking very slowly to the light rail station, I was able to make it work. I slowly wheeled it up the handicap ramp (which was conveniently free of drug abuse this time), and I also used the special mini-ramp they have to get onto the train more easily.

Boarding the train at the same time I did was a woman who was the spitting image of my Aunt Alaire. She also used the mini-ramp, in her case with a three-wheeled walker similar to what Alaire uses to get around. Her mannerisms were also similar to Alaire's. It was really fascinating to see.

It turned out that woman was headed to jury duty, and she got off at the County Center station, one stop before the end of the line. I continued to Sacramento Valley Station, and I think I was the only passenger left on the train when we got there. My suitcase wobbled badly as I crossed the street to the Amtrak station, but I did make it there all right.

I'd placed my small bag inside the big duffel, which is probably part of the reason it was so unbalanced. I took out the small bag (which was mostly food and drink for the train ride), and it turned out it was heavier than the big bag. I went to the ticketing desk and checked the big bag, since everything I needed for the trip was in the little one. When I get to Colorado, the two should be more similar in weight. **[While I've rarely taken advantage of it, one of the best things about Amtrak is their generous checked luggage policy. While airlines charge \$35 for even a single checked bag (and sometimes for carry-on bags as well), Amtrak lets you check two large bags for free—provided the stations you're travelling between are staffed.]**



My Amtrak baggage claim check

I had about two hours to kill before the train would leave. I spent one of those writing on this travelogue. Then around 10am I made my way out to track #5. I was glad to get there early, because before long a huge crowd formed on the platform. They officially called the train for boarding at 10:30. That confused some people, because there was no train there yet. However, it's a long way from the station to the platforms in Sacramento, and I'm pretty sure they just wanted everyone out there so they could board quickly when the train did arrive.

Train #6 showed up in Sacramento at 11:09, just a couple minutes late. It took quite a while to board everyone, but we still left in pretty good time. We had an uneventful ride all the way to Reno. The only really noteworthy thing was that there was obviously **MUCH** more smoke in the Sierras than there had been when we came westward. Even mountains that were fairly close appeared blurry, and at times I could smell smoke through the air conditioning in the car.

I'm once again in a lower level coach seat. Also in the car is an elderly couple going to Provo, a separate old lady who headed to Grand Junction, a scruffy thirty-ish guy headed to Denver who has been sleeping the whole way, and a girl and her grandmother who are headed to Lincoln, Nebraska.

... And then there's the two girls who boarded in Reno and are headed for Elko, Nevada. It turns out that Elko (which we should get to around 9:00 tonight) is the home of several state institutions. These girls are headed there on court orders to go to a drug rehabilitation clinic. One of them has apparently been there before, and the other has heard all about it from her friends. I gather one of the girls also works as a prostitute, which seemed to scandalize the other one. They both seem like fairly typical college-age girls. It would be interesting to know what led them to where they are today.

We've mostly been making good time so far, doing about the same as the traffic on I-80. The exception was when we were stopped by a freight train somewhere in the middle of nowhere east of Reno. There are few places more desolate than Nevada. I'd hate to be truly broken down there, because there's utterly nothing (not even sage brush, really) for miles around.

We reached Elko early, around 9:20 Pacific Time. I set my watch ahead there, since we'd be crossing the Utah border overnight and entering the Mountain Time Zone. No one replaced the rehab girls, so the car was pretty quiet and empty overnight.

Wednesday, August 8, 2018

Elko, Nevada to Glenwood Springs, Colorado

Technically the day probably changed closer to Wendover, on the Nevada/Utah border. I went to sleep at Elko, though, and I actually slept surprisingly well. The train runs for about four and a half hours without stopping between there and Salt Lake, and since I knew I wouldn't get a seat mate in that time, I was able to sprawl out across two seats. The motion of the train did sort of rock me to sleep, and it was pretty decent rest.

I woke up when we got to Salt Lake City, both because the train stopped and because there were bright lights shining through the windows at that point. SLC is a service stop, so we were there about half an hour. It surprised me that it was right on time (about 3:30am) when we left.

There were constant lights between Salt Lake and Provo, so I slept in quick bursts on that stretch. I fell asleep again as we left Provo and continued to sleep pretty much until sunrise, around 6am. At that point I put on my glasses and watched the sun come up over the mountains. It really was quite pretty with the rock formations in silhouette.

We reached Helper, Utah, right on time at 7:37am. That surprised me a bit, because I'd noticed at least three different freight trains while I was watching the sunrise. We slowed a bit for them, but never came to a full stop. I suppose time for some freight encounters must be included in the schedule. **[Generally if an Amtrak train is running on time, it will take priority over freight trains. However if the passenger train gets even a little behind schedule, the freights will take priority and slow it down even more.]**

There are six people in the lower level room now. The girl from Lincoln is sprawled across the seats where the elderly couple had been. We picked up one new passenger at Salt Lake City. She's a large middle aged woman who reminds me of my mother (that is, of course, what my mother looked like when she died—since she'd be in her 90s if she were still around today). The lady who's headed to Grand Junction appears to have lost something. She's been searching under her seat and all over the floor. I have no clue just what she's looking for.

The guy headed to Denver certainly should be well rested when he gets there. He's been sprawled across two seats most of the way from Sacramento. He's got a sleeping bag and a blanket with him, so he certainly should be warm. In contrast, the grandmother from Lincoln has a battery-operated portable fan blowing on her. The fan has a clip at the bottom, and she attached it to the top of a walker she has with her. While it's a little on the chilly side in here, I'm actually okay with her having the fan. I like having the air circulating rather than stagnant.

I saw a fascinating sight just now as we headed through the middle of the desert in Utah. At this point the train tracks are not near a road or houses or anything else. Even so, just sitting out in the middle of nowhere was a plastic children's swimming pool. How or why it got there, I have no clue.

... Fast forward a couple hours. It's about 9:15 now, and we're near the Utah/Colorado border. It's much prettier here, as we're going through a red-rock canyon. So far we continue to be right on time. In fact we made it to Green River, Utah, about ten minutes ahead of schedule and just sat on the platform until the set departure time. I actually wouldn't have minded being a little late getting to Glenwood Springs, since then I could have immediately checked into a hotel room. Hopefully they'll at least let me leave a bag once I get there.

I've spent much of the morning reading more of Laura Ingalls Wilder on my Kindle. I've progressed to *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, where the family finally moves to South Dakota. It occurs to me that sometime I should go out and see the stuff in DeSmet again. I haven't been there since I was a kid, but it's only about three hours from Algona. **[It's really more like four hours away, but that's still not all that far. I haven't been back there, though.]** It's kind of amusing in the book that Iowa is referred to repeatedly as a center of culture and modernity. I suppose by the standards of its day, it was that. Even today it's much more Midwest, while the Dakotas seem like the West.

We made it to Grand Junction about half an hour early. This is a service stop, so it means we'll be here for almost forty-five minutes before setting out east again. There's a little shop inside the station here, and nearly everyone on the train (myself included) went in there to have a look around. Most bought local peaches, but I picked up some postcards and an ice cream bar. The place is horribly overpriced, but going in there did make a nice diversion.

The old lady across the aisle from me left at Grand Junction. It turned out she'd lost a faux pearl earring, and unfortunately it wasn't found until after she got off. Replacing her was a college kid in a "Concordia football" T-shirt. He's headed to Lincoln, and I heard him specifically asking the attendant if he could switch to a lower-level seat. Lincoln is a night stop, so that would allow him to get the most sleep he can. While theoretically it's designed for people with mobility issues, quiet does seem to be the motivating factor for better than half of the people traveling on the lower level. **[I noted earlier that that's my biggest motivation for sitting there.]**



**Moose sculpture in the courtyard
of the Best Western Antlers
Glenwood Springs, Colorado**

We left Grand Junction right on time at 10:23. The conductor made an amusing announcement as we set out. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "Any visitors on board should have detrained some time ago. If you are on board now you are headed for Glenwood Springs." Before he finished that blurb, the wheels started moving, so hopefully there were no visitors on board. **[Such announcements are actually fairly common on Amtrak, though I don't think I've ever seen anyone on board who shouldn't have been. I have been aware of people being left behind when the train pulled out, though.]**

We were still essentially on time when we got to Glenwood Springs, shortly after noon. I had to wait about ten minutes for the checked baggage to be delivered. Once I had it, I needed to make my way to my hotel. I was glad to have scoped things out a bit when we passed through here a week ago, because I had a pretty good idea where I wanted to go. The station platform is in a trench, but stairs lead up from there to street level. On the street there is an elevator (also steps, but with luggage I chose the elevator) that leads to a long walkway that crosses both the Colorado River and

Interstate 70. The walkway dumps out at a traffic circle, the main outlet of which is old highway 6, which is where most of the lodging in Glenwood Springs is located. It was easy enough to find the hotel, but I got very sweaty walking there in 95° heat. **[There are several hotels that are quite a bit closer to the station, but they cost an arm and a leg. Glenwood Springs is a resort area, and the expensive places cater heavily to Amtrak passengers.]**

It was just 12:30 when I got to the Best Western Antlers. I wasn't sure if they'd have a room available yet, but I figured it was worth asking. As it turned out, they did have a room, so I went there and cooled down. I also took a shower and just spent an hour or so relaxing. Then I set out again.

I walked to a bus stop just west of the traffic circle and waited there with an Amish family from Ohio who had also come on the train and were also staying at the Best Western. Like me they were there because it's just about the most affordable place in a rather expensive resort town. It's also a fairly decent hotel. It's an old ma 'n' pa place, but it's been kept up decently and obviously does what has to be done to maintain the chain franchise. I certainly wouldn't hesitate to stay at the Best Western if I were in Glenwood Springs again. **[I often will price Best Westerns when I travel. I rarely stay at them, though, because they're usually more expensive than other options. In Glenwood Springs the only cheaper places were much further, not really a practical distance from the train station.]**

The city operates a circulator bus called Ride Glenwood Springs. You can ride all day for just a dollar. It surprised me that they used full-size buses for this service, since on the whole ride I took there were half a dozen riders at most. The Amish people took the bus to 14th Street, where there's a supermarket and a Walgreen's. I kept riding to 27th Street, which happens to be by a Wal-Mart at the south edge of town. I wasn't interested in Wal-Mart. Instead I was there to transfer to another bus. There's a big busway at 27th Street that's operated by the Roaring Fork Transportation Authority, an organization that serves several counties on the west slope of the Colorado Rockies.



**LEFT: South Glenwood bus station
RIGHT: VelociRFTA bus
Glenwood Springs, Colorado**

The bus I was catching was what RFTA bills as "the first rural bus rapid transit service in America", and that's actually a good description of what it is. They call the bus the VelociRFTA. That's obviously a parody on velociraptor, and they use a green dinosaur for the bus logo. The VelociRFTA service runs between Glenwood Springs and Aspen, with service every 20 – 30 minutes from the pre-dawn

hours to late evening. The route is about 45 miles long, and it takes right at one hour to cover the distance. Today that was about the same speed as car traffic on state highway 82, which connects the two towns. In ski season and when there are events of any sort, the bus goes much faster than most traffic. The bus can pass traffic on the shoulder (like express buses in the Twin Cities do), and it only makes a dozen stops on the route. There's also a local bus that stops that takes about double the time between Glenwood and Aspen, plus local circulators in all the communities en route. **[The speed is good, but what really sets this bus apart from anything else you'd find outside a major city is its frequency. Most of rural America doesn't have bus service at all. In the places that do have it, you can usually expect a wait of at least an hour (and sometimes two or more) between buses. Every twenty minutes is often enough that you can rely on the service. I wish more places would offer something like that.]**

As you'd expect, a good part of their clientele is tourists. In summer they cater to bicyclists, and in winter they serve skiers. Tourists aren't their primary customers, though. The main purpose of VelociRFTA is to get people to and from work. Tons of people work in both Glenwood Springs and Aspen, but most of them don't live in either of those places. They live in places like Carbondale, El Jebel, Willits, and Basalt. Basically they live where they can afford it and work where the jobs are. The bus stops at park-and-rides that serve all the towns between the big resorts, and pretty much all those lots were full. There are also connecting local buses that serve those towns and other nearby communities. There were lots of people taking the bus, but the vast majority didn't go the whole way.

The view from the bus is absolutely gorgeous. Glenwood Springs is at 5,600 feet, and Aspen is at 8,000, and the vegetation changes as you get higher. The mountains around Glenwood are mostly red stone covered with brush, while in Aspen they're granite covered with trees. There's beautiful wildflowers in the ditches the whole way, and it was just a very pleasant ride.



The main place I went in Aspen was the John Denver Sanctuary. This is a pleasant garden attached to a city park that features trails along the Roaring Fork River that leads past trees, flowers, strange

John Denver Sanctuary – Aspen, Colorado

metal sculptures of wildlife, and rocks engraved with both lyrics from John Denver songs (including, of course, "Rocky Mountain High") and inspirational quotations from a wide range of famous people. There is apparently another tribute to Denver near the Snowmass ski resort just outside Aspen where the musician actually lived. The park in Aspen was quite sufficient for me, though.

The John Denver Sanctuary is essentially surrounded by Rio Grande Park, which has all the features you might expect in a wealthy community's city parks—countless soccer fields, for instance, and an air conditioned tent theatre. Aside from the memorial, probably the most interesting part of Rio Grande Park was their skateboard ramps. These were extremely popular with skaters of all ages, and some of the guys were very good—way better than the skaters you see in Algona. They did jumps and spins that really did seem to defy gravity. It was kind of fun to watch for a while.

Aspen offers tourists tons of opportunities to part with their money. Very few of them interested me at all. Indeed the only thing I bought was some overpriced frozen yogurt that—strangely—claimed to be dairy free. I didn't know it was possible to make yogurt without dairy. I do wonder what's in it. This was one of those places where you serve yourself and then pay according to weight. I got a small amount of coconut yogurt and a small amount of kiwi-lime-raspberry yogurt, and then I put a spoonful of blueberries on top of that. My serving filled less than half of the bowl they provided, but it still cost more than six bucks. It was tasty, though, and I suppose I should feel good that I didn't get the \$14 serving the woman in front of me had.



John Denver Sanctuary – Aspen, Colorado

I took the VelociRFTA back to 27th Street in Glenwood Springs. The Ride Glenwood bus was slow in coming, so I instead transferred to another RFTA bus that took me somewhat closer to the hotel. Then I walked the last part of the way. I never did see a Ride Glenwood bus. There's likely a good reason for that, which is that traffic was horribly messed up in Glenwood Springs today. That's because Interstate 70 was closed due to a brush fire just west of town. They detoured everything to old highway 6, and the back-ups were ridiculous. I thought I'd left the fires behind in California, but once again I can smell wood smoke in the air. Apparently 2018 is the driest year on record in Colorado, and they list the fire danger here as extreme.

As I walked back to the hotel I passed three marijuana retailers, a business that seems to be even more of an institution in Colorado than in California. In California there was at least a bit of discretion in such places, but here they have huge neon signs and names like "The Green Joint". I'd think that would make it rather difficult to take a family vacation in Colorado these days. While it would be interesting to see just what they had for sale and what it cost, of course I passed on that. It certainly is amusing to see all the dope shops, though.

Legalized drugs are apparently big business here. Two of the newspapers I picked up had articles on area communities that were enacting local sales tax on marijuana. (There's apparently state tax already.) The town of Snowmass was expecting millions in income from their new tax, so perhaps those rumors of what "Rocky Mountain High" was really about were right after all.

[Recreational marijuana is now legal in exactly half of U.S. states, representing nearly two-thirds of the population. Among those are deep red states like Missouri and North Dakota. Many other states have approved medical marijuana. One of those is Iowa, and I've seen dispensaries in Des Moines, Waterloo, and Fort Dodge in the past year. I have no idea what the law in Iowa actually says, but it wouldn't surprise me if quack doctors were willing to prescribe THC products for basically anything that ails you.]

I had dinner tonight at a Qdoba restaurant located on the traffic circle down the street. Qdoba has locations nationwide. They're based in Colorado, though, so I could stretch things and say I was eating local. I'd never been to a Qdoba before. It's a lot like Chipotle (which also happens to be headquartered in Colorado), but there's a wider variety of bases for your Mexican food—it's not just burritos and bowls. I had a salad with adobo chicken and a wide range of other toppings, plus some chicken tortilla soup on the side. It tasted excellent and seemed fairly reasonably priced. I think the closest location to me is in Des Moines, so it's unlikely I'll be going there again any time soon, but I certainly wouldn't pass them up in the future. **[Apparently there's one in Albert Lea, Minnesota, which would be significantly closer than Des Moines. I've not been there. However, I just might stop at one in Winnipeg when I'm there this coming Easter.]**

Thursday, August 9, 2018

Glenwood Springs, Colorado to Aurora, Colorado

While the bed seemed comfortable, for some reason I did not sleep at all well last night. I think there may be something in the air here that I'm allergic to, because I was and am stuffed up horribly. I tossed and turned all night, and honestly I got better sleep on the train the night before.

I also woke up with a bad backache this morning. I did something to my back shortly before the trip, but it was better when I left. Things hurt badly again this morning, though. Most likely I crunched things up wrong while trying to sleep in the train seat the previous

night, and it was just now setting in. Whatever the reason, moping wouldn't do anything to cure it. I took some ibuprofen, which is what I always do for such things, and hopefully it will clear itself up before too long.

Breakfast was chaotic. This is an enormous motel (spread out through half a dozen different buildings), and everyone seemed to be eating at the same time. Most of the people were very pushy and didn't seem to even realize others were nearby. That's an attitude I've gotten the whole time I've been in Glenwood Springs and Aspen, from both the tourists and the locals. It's kind of "every man for himself", and common courtesy goes lacking.

Since this is one of the pricier places I'm staying, I made sure to eat a full breakfast—not that I cared a lot for most of it. The best part were their scrambled eggs, which I think might have actually been made on an actual stove rather than reheated in a microwave. Unfortunately the only meat they had to go with that was sausage, and the only fruit they offered was canned fruit cocktail. I did have a waffle, and of course juice and coffee. Most of the guests put flavored syrup in their coffee, but I passed on that.



Adventure Glenwood tramway

I took a walk, which helped my back a bit. Mostly I walked west from the hotel. The most interesting thing I saw was an areal gondola that led up to the top of the mountain north of Glenwood Springs. I think it would have been fun to go up in the gondola, and I actually found the entrance to check it out. Unfortunately it is part of an amusement park (Adventure Glenwood) that is located at the top of the mountain, and you can only access the gondola with an admission to the park as a whole. My bet is that they could probably charge five or even ten bucks for just the gondola ride and take in a lot of additional income. Since I had no interest in the park, though, they didn't get any of my money.

I made my way back to the hotel and basically just killed some time. Mostly I watched the Little League World Series on TV. A team from Des Moines was playing, which actually made things halfway interesting. I also got all my stuff re-packed for my next train trip.



**Glenwood Springs Amtrak station
(taken from the pedestrian overpass)**

As I walked to the station it became clear that one of the wheels on the duffel had broken just like the ones on the suitcase it was replacing. I certainly hadn't expected this cheap bag to last any length of time, but it would have been nice if it had just made it through this trip. Even expensive luggage seems to have cheaply made wheels, though. They always seem to be the most vulnerable part of the bag. **[The bag I've used most recently is one Margaret bought in Calgary years ago. It has four pairs of double wheels, and so far they seem to be doing all right. It won't surprise me if those break at some point, though.]**

I managed to get the duffel to the station, and I pried out the part of the wheel that had broken off. That made the wheels even more unbalanced, but it did allow the thing to roll—albeit slowly and only on smooth surfaces. As long as I can get it back to the check-in desk at Denver station tomorrow, I'll be fine—knock on wood.

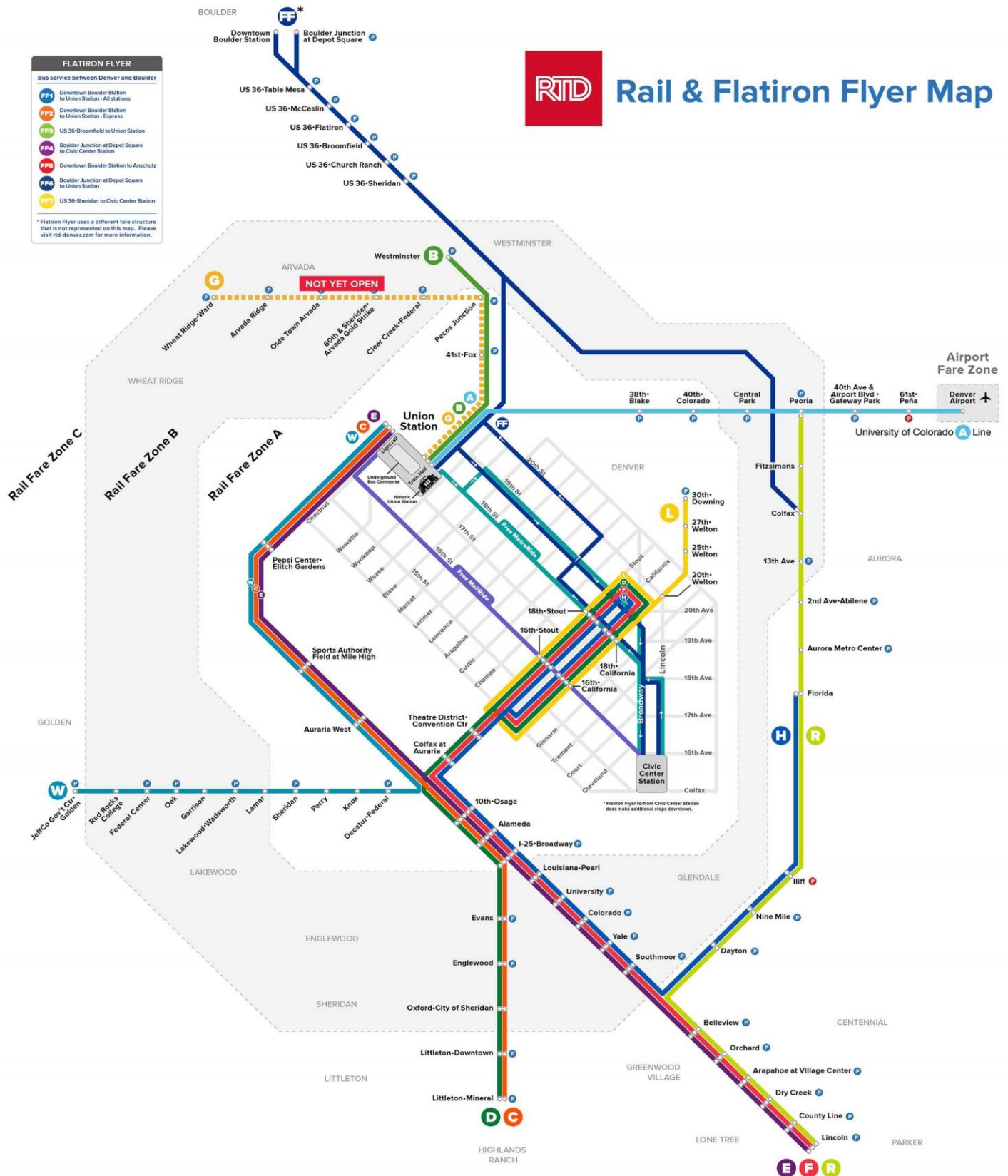
There were signs all over the Glenwood Springs station that said passengers should check in at the ticket desk. When I attempted to do that, though, they told me checking in was only necessary for groups that needed to be seated together. As a party of one, I'd just be thrown in wherever there was space.

Since no check-in was necessary, I had more than an hour to kill at the station. I went back to reading Laura Ingalls Wilder. I'd progressed in the series to *The Long Winter*, which was always one of my favorite books growing up. The hardships that the pioneers endured are both amazing and inspiring.

While the station is physically small, Glenwood Springs is one of the busiest Amtrak stations there is. About 200 people boarded the eastbound California Zephyr today, and presumably there would be a similar number headed west a couple hours later. Keeping the process moving was the Glenwood Springs station manager, a woman who should be a drill sergeant. She barked orders to get everyone lined up on the platform well before the train actually arrived. Many of the passengers were elderly. They moved slowly, but she saw to it that they moved. It was rather entertaining watching her.

The train was about five minutes late arriving, but it took quite a while to get all those people on the train. We ended up leaving about twenty minutes late. Since this leg would not be an overnight trip, this time I had a ticket for an upstairs seat. The car attendant was handing out seat assignments as we boarded, but when I got to the top of the stairs, I found an elderly couple was seated where he

had assigned me to go. There appeared to be a vacant seat across the aisle, so I asked the woman in the window seat if she'd mind a companion and just sat down there.



(Note that the Denver rail map is not even remotely close to scale.)

The old people were something else again. Their names were Mary Lou and Joe, and they told several different people they were not married. I gather both are widowed, and they were traveling together as a way to get to know each other. They both spoke loud enough for everyone on the train to hear, though I don't think either of them was hard of hearing. They were clueless about how various things on the train worked, and they seemed surprised that others (like both the woman next to me and me) did know the routine. They also seemed to constantly be fighting with each other in a friendly way, almost as if they had been married for decades. I'd

completely forgotten about this couple, and I broke out laughing reading this while putting together the revision. They really were quite a twosome.]

Aside from the entertainment the couple provided, the trip eastward was mostly uneventful. The scenery really is gorgeous, but of course I'd seen it while heading west at the start of this trip. Besides the couple, the other passengers were quiet and not really noteworthy.

There was one thing that definitely did stand out, though. About halfway through the trip a certain odor passed through the car. Someone apparently had been smoking marijuana in one of the restrooms downstairs. First the car attendant and then the conductor came on the intercom with very stern announcements. They noted that smoking of any sort was prohibited on Amtrak and that even though this was Colorado, Amtrak is a federally-run train and federal law prohibits marijuana use. The car attendant made his way through the car rather obviously sniffing around trying to figure out who had done this. I don't think they caught anyone, but they repeatedly pointed out that if they did, the guilty party would be immediately escorted off the train.

Given that this is Colorado, it's really kind of stupid that they'd smoke dope on the train. Those dispensaries sell lots of different forms of marijuana. One of the main things they advertise are "edibles", which are eaten rather than smoked. I remember friends making brownies with dope in them when I was in college. These days, though, they apparently put the stuff into commercially made chocolate bars and gummy bears. I'd think if someone wanted to indulge on the train, those would be the way to do it. Of course, nobody ever said pot heads were the smartest people on the planet.

We stayed about twenty minutes down all the way across Colorado. There's apparently a buffer in the schedule by Denver, though, because we got into Union Station about fifteen minutes early, right at 6:15pm. Almost immediately I caught a commuter train that was on the next platform. That train is designed to shuttle people to and from Denver International Airport. I only took it about halfway there, though. I got off at Peoria station and transferred to a light rail train.

[Technically the commuter trains and light rail are different in Denver, but there's really not much different about them. They use essentially the same vehicles, both travel well away from the city center, and both run at about the same frequency. I really don't know why they distinguish the different types of rail.]

The last time I was in Denver (other than passing through on a train) their light rail system was sorry at best. It's come a long way, though. Today there are half a dozen rail lines that run all over the metro area. The trains run fairly frequently well into the evening, and they appear to be heavily used.



Foundation for a Better Life message at a bus stop in Aurora, Colorado

I took the R-train just two stops south to the Colfax station in the suburb of Aurora. While it's suburban and almost all brand new, this is not a particularly nice neighborhood. To get from the station to the hotel I had to cross under I-225 and then walk about half a mile east. There were people begging at the off ramps on the freeway and also at the traffic light on one of the major cross streets. I just ignored them, and they ignored me. My biggest problem was lugging the crippled bag all that distance. It was fine on the sidewalk, but the driveways and cross-streets were all rough asphalt, and the wheels didn't want to roll on that surface at all. I did eventually make it, though.

Something that stood out in the Denver area was that many of the bus stops and rail stations had their ad boards covered with inspirational messages similar to some I'd seen on earlier trips to Calgary and Toronto. These are sponsored by a non-religious, non-political organization called the Foundation for a Better Life. The bus stop closest to my hotel had a sign that said "Fear is contagious, so is hope." That's certainly an important message these days, when everyone seems to want us to be scared of everything. According to their website (passiton.com), they support the values of kindness, humility, love, honesty, caring, friendship, dedication, and charity. It's not at all clear where the organization gets its funding, but I don't know that it should matter. Those values are certainly worth supporting, and I think it does make life better to have such messages around.

I'm staying tonight at the Comfort Suites—Anschutz Medical Campus. (Whenever I see that, I think the name of the hospital should be Auschwitz, but it's apparently named after one of the wealthiest families in Colorado.) The medical center is a former VA hospital that was recently sold to the University of Colorado. It's just on the other side of the interstate and is the real reason they built a light rail station in this particular location. The hotel is brand new (open less than a year), so of course everything is pristine. It's probably my favorite of all the places I've stayed. It certainly helps that this is a freebie, a point redemption from stays I'd made earlier.

[The previous two paragraphs actually kind of go together. After digging a bit deeper, I found that the Foundation for a Better Life (the organization that produces those inspirational signs) is fully funded by the Anschutz Foundation. The Anschutz family is actually from Kansas and originally made their money by buying ranchland. The second generation then bought out

the Rio Grande Railroad and also invested heavily in oil drilling. They are also own several newspapers and TV stations, and they are the primary owners of a number of sports teams ad even the entire league running professional soccer. It's unsurprising that in addition to inspirational advertising they also contribute heavily to more traditional conservative causes.]

For dinner tonight I went to yet another pseudo-Mexican place. This time it was Del Taco, a chain that's all over the West and is the main competitor of Taco Bell. It was fascinating that most of the customers at the Aurora Del Taco were Latino, since even the restaurant itself wouldn't pretend that their food is authentically Mexican. It's perfectly good for what it is, though, and it's also cheap. I had two chicken quesadillas, two ground turkey hard-shell tacos, and a miniature strawberry shake. Each of those items was a dollar, so the total was just \$5, plus tax. The quesadillas were really quite tasty, but the real stand-out was the shake. It was made with real strawberries, and the tiny size was just enough to make a nice treat. **[While I mostly totally avoid shakes these days, I've always wished fast food places would offer a "mini" size. Instead most have gone to a single size that's really more than what I want.]**

Back at the hotel I mostly just relaxed and watched a bit of TV. In particular I watched *Forensic Files*, which is probably my favorite show these days. I love to play sleuth as I follow the classic crime stories.

Friday, August 10, 2018

Aurora, Colorado to Somewhere in Nebraska

The morning news today had two interesting stories on it. First, today was the twenty-fifth anniversary of Pope John Paul II visiting Denver for World Youth Day. I remember a bunch of people from Garrigan going to that, and it is an event they still remember today. The second was more recent news. While I was walking past the bike trails in Aspen Wednesday, one of the people who was there was Lance Armstrong. In fact he crashed his bike on a trail at Snowmass and had to be admitted to the hospital. I'm pretty sure I didn't see the famous (or perhaps infamous) cyclist, but my ears certainly perked up when the story came on.



[What I didn't realize when I originally wrote the previous paragraph was that the cycling star actually lived in Aspen. The picture at right is of the mansion he owned at the time. He listed it for sale during the COVID pandemic, asking \$14.5 million for the place. It's unclear who if anyone bought the place. Many other results that came up when I googled "Lance Armstrong Aspen" imply that he had a rather serious drinking problem. Apparently multiple times he hit parked cars on his bike while drunk, and he tried to blame the damage on his girlfriend. I must say what little respect I had left for Armstrong went down after reading more about him.]

They had a very nice breakfast at the Comfort Suites. I particularly enjoyed crispy bacon and eggs, but I also had a nice pastry. Almost anyone should have been able to find something they liked, since there were waffles, yogurt, hot and cold cereals, various breads, and a wide range of fruits. My only complaint would be that their juice was watered down, but they did have strong, flavorful coffee.



Canopy and "papel picado" lamps
Colfax light rail station
Aurora, Colorado



I separated my bags into the big duffel (which was actually the lighter of the two) and my carry-on (which was heavy, mostly with electronics). When the duffel was lighter, it was much easier to roll, and I made it back to Colfax station with no problem. I took the elevator up to the platform, and unfortunately only then did I realize that there were no ticket vending machines on the platform. I had to go back down to a plaza at street level, buy a day pass, and then head back up to the platform. Of course I missed a train in that time, not that I was in any particular hurry.

I took the R-line back to Peoria station and transferred to the A-line. I found that the Denver RTD was very eager to check tickets on the A-line (which connects the airport and Union Station and carries a lot of tourists), but not once did I encounter a ticket check on any other train line.



**Signs saying the Amtrak baggage area should be open and saying that it is closed for train servicing
Union Station
Denver, Colorado**

I got to Union Station around 8:45. Unfortunately the westbound California Zephyr was still on the platform then, which meant the entire Amtrak staff at the station was busy dealing with that train. I ended up waiting almost a full hour while they first dealt with luggage for a tour group that had been on that train, then distributed checked luggage to the other passengers, and then dealt with assorted paperwork. Finally they opened up to deal with passengers not associated with that train. I checked my duffel to Mt. Pleasant and then left the other bag in storage for the day. It cost \$10 to store the bag, but I really didn't want to drag it around all day long. By the time I'd finished it was nearly 10:00.

I caught a light rail train southward at Union Station. It struck me as odd that when I boarded there were four people already inside the car. Union Station is the terminal, so that should be the first place people board. We went south a couple stops, and the recorded announcement said, "This is an E-Train for Lincoln." One of the women who had been on when I boarded exclaimed, "Lincoln! I don't want to go there! Where's Union Station?" Apparently her group had been talking and just tuned out the announcements. When they got to the end of the line they just went around the loop beyond the station and headed back the opposite direction.



View of downtown Denver from a rail platform

I rode south to the Louisiana/Pearl station. This station is one of the few (possibly the only one) in Denver that is underground. When I reached the surface I was in a rapidly gentrifying old neighborhood full of coffee bars and health food shops. My destination actually was one of those coffee bars, though I didn't have coffee there. I went to a place called Duffeyroll, which is supposed to have the best cinnamon rolls in Denver. While I haven't tried any others, I could easily believe Duffey's are the best. They're flaky and slightly crispy on top, and they're flavorful without being too sweet. They sell their standard sized rolls for \$3.99. I actually got a half dozen mini-rolls (just a couple bites each—kind of like the things our mother would make with leftover pie crust years ago), one of each flavor they had. My plan was to enjoy them throughout the day, but I must be honest and say I downed six bucks worth of mini-rolls in one sitting—and, of course, I'd already had breakfast at the hotel. Oh, well!



ABOVE: Mural on a building near 38th & Blake Station
BELOW: Legal marijuana dealer on Brighton Avenue
Denver, Colorado



After enjoying my morning snack I went back north, transferring to the A-train at Union station and riding up to 38th & Blake. This is in an industrial area north of downtown that's slowly in the process of transforming itself into an up and coming neighborhood. In Denver the evidence of that was that I passed six different marijuana dealers in the immediate vicinity of the station, including one that advertised THC-infused beverages. There also putting up tons of boxy apartments that are presumably designed to appeal to pot users, as well as stores such as Whole Foods and lots of mini-storage.

I walked past the construction about a mile north of the station. My destination was a place called the Forney Museum of Transportation. They claim to feature all forms of transportation, though I didn't notice any boats or anything related to pedestrians. If it has wheels or wings, they probably do have it on display, though, and there's even some snowmobiles as well.

I can't say this was my favorite of the museums. In some ways it tries to do too much. I'd probably have liked it better if I hadn't already seen the very nice automobile and railroad museums in Sacramento. While Forney has a good collection of both cars and trains, it just doesn't compare to museums devoted exclusively to each of those. It was a nice place to visit nonetheless, though. Probably the most interesting things I saw here were a helicopter (which I don't think I'd ever seen up-close before) and a horse-drawn hearse. **[The Forney Museum definitely didn't leave a lasting impression. I wouldn't have remembered it all without re-reading this, and even with it I couldn't tell you any more than what's revealed in the paragraph.]**

I was about to pass out from the heat by the time I made it back to the station (and that's only a minor exaggeration), so I spent nearly an hour just riding around on the train. I rode back over to Peoria station, which happens to be where the Denver Airport used to be before they moved it much further out of town. Everything near Peoria is brand new, and it's certainly an eclectic assortment of development—everything from the county jail (a vast complex) and a rescue mission to a super Wal-Mart and those same boxy apartments they were building by 38th & Blake. A lot of the land is still undeveloped, too. In fact, between there and Colfax, the area the light rail runs through is mostly rural.

I rode on the R-train all the way through Aurora. Perhaps the strangest sight I saw was the Century Theaters, where six years ago twelve people were killed and seventy injured in what was then the biggest mass shooting in America. It looks like any other mall cineplex. Since I didn't leave the train, I don't know if there's any memorial to the victims there or not. **[At the time there was no formal memorial, though apparently people placed signs honoring their relatives on the perimeter of the parking lot, and flowers were regularly placed in front of those signs. On July 20, 2022, the tenth anniversary of the massacre, the city unveiled a formal memorial (shown at right) that interprets the dead and injured in the form of birds. It looks like a nice tribute, and it might be interesting to go back to Aurora one day and see it in person.]**



I continued south to Belleview Station, which is in suburb of Greenwood Village, south of the city of Denver. At one point I'd considered staying at a hotel near this stop, so it was interesting to see the place. The area around here is called Denver Tech Center. It's a vast office park with a maze of winding streets and a few high-end condos and hotels. The only places I've been that looked much like this were in New Jersey.

I'd come to Denver Tech Center to have lunch. I went to a place called Larkburger, which is a local chain with locations in various upscale areas. I actually didn't have their namesake sandwich. Instead I ordered a chopped kale salad with adobo chicken as well as parmesan truffle fries, blood orange soda, and a strawberry shake. The salad was enormous—a vast pile of kale, plus cucumbers, carrots, onions, edamame, and cilantro. It came with a truffle vinaigrette and was really extremely tasty. The parmesan truffle fries were also outstanding, and so was the blood orange soda (which, by the way, was clear pop). The strawberry shake, on the other hand, was a waste of money. It reminded me of the shakes our father used to get at McDonalds when I was a kid. Del Taco's shake was much better. **[Larkburger apparently restructured their chain in 2019. They closed most of their restaurants and redesigned the others to be less like fast food and more like a family restaurant. The remaining restaurants were rebranded "Lark Spot", and most of them closed during the pandemic. Today they have just two remaining locations.]**

There wasn't really time to do much of anything else, so I wandered a bit more on the light rail, this time riding west toward the suburb of Lakewood. I can't say Denver as a whole is terribly interesting. It's very spread out and really looks a lot like Salt Lake City. The main difference is that the mountain views are better in Utah. Here there's only mountains to the west, and in many cases there's houses and even industry climbing up the hill and spoiling the view. **[Whenever I've been there Denver has struck me as a place that should look nicer than it does. If you're looking for mountain views, though, you'll find much better in Los Angeles, Seattle, Vancouver, or Calgary—in addition to Salt Lake.]**

Almost all the light rail lines in Denver have bike trails that parallel them. Not many people were biking today, though, since it was about 95° out. I'd thought of doing some hiking at one point, but it really didn't seem appealing given the weather.

The train ride back downtown was yet another time that people asked me for directions. An elderly Hispanic woman and her granddaughter had announced while we were riding that they wanted to get off at the Auraria stop. Unfortunately there are two stops with that name, and the route we were on did not go to the stop they wanted. What they actually wanted to do was change for a train that would go to Aurora. Unfortunately there were two options for getting there, and coming from the west side of Denver, both require two transfers. Grandma didn't seem to want to take the A-train, so her other option was to head down to Belleview and catch an Aurora-bound train from there.

I offered more directions once I got to Union Station. Someone who was heading to the airport couldn't figure out how to get to the A-train. It is a little bit complicated, since the A-train is on the "big train" platforms where Amtrak arrives, and the light rail lines are about two blocks west of there in what was once rail yards. There's a long underground concourse (which also serves as the main downtown mixmaster) that leads from one part of the complex to the other. Once you know how to make the connection, it's really quite easy, but it isn't just instantly obvious.

I claimed the bag I'd left for the day at Union Station and was intrigued to see a number of bags besides mine that were now checked to Mt. Pleasant. Amtrak's luggage tags are color-coded, and the red "MTP" tags were easy to recognize. I sat at a bench and wrote a bit on this travelogue. I happened to be sitting near a pizza vendor, and it made me glad I was in sleeper tonight and would be getting free food. The stand was charging from \$10 to \$14 for single slices of pizza. They were big slices, but nothing is worth that much.

Around 6pm I headed out to Platform #4, where the train was scheduled to arrive. They had two separate tape lanes on the platform for sleeper and coach passengers. I was in a sleeping car tonight, so I made my way to the very front of that waiting area. The train arrived just a couple minutes after I went out to the platform. Since Denver is a service stop, it would be quite a while before they actually began boarding, but it was still good to be at the front of the line.

Some other passengers in line were talking about the fact that there is a meteor shower that should be visible tonight. I'll be interested to see if we can actually see it, though western Nebraska ought to be both clear and dark. **[I didn't see any meteors; indeed there's only a couple of times in my life I've seen them.]**



California Zephyr backing up on Platform #4
Union Station – Denver, Colorado

They started boarding sleeping car passengers right at 6:30. The car attendant seemed surprised that I knew where my room was. It happens to be the same as it was on the train from Salt Lake to Sacramento, though—just past the stairs on the top level, right across from the attendant's room. This room seems warmer than the equivalent room on the other train. I think there may be a problem with the ventilation. It's tolerable, but a bit annoying.

There's a family in two rooms just down the hall with a girl who I think is autistic. She seems quite bright, but her speech is slurred and she makes odd noises from time to time. They're from Galesburg, Illinois and are apparently headed home after visiting family in Denver. Pretty much this entire car changed occupants at Denver, and most are headed to in-between destinations rather than to the terminal in Chicago.

The car attendant almost immediately told me and the others who had boarded at Denver to go to the diner for dinner. Unfortunately, when we went there (it's just the next car back), the steward in charge snapped at us that they weren't ready and they'd make an announcement when we should come. We told that to the car attendant, and he galloped off to the diner and apparently had words with the steward. Almost immediately we were told to go back there, and we were seated immediately.

My dining companions tonight were odd. Next to me was a woman from Fort Collins, Colorado, who was visiting her sister in Chicago. That brief introduction is pretty much all she said through the entire meal. The evening's entertainment, though, was provided by a couple seated across from us who happened to be traveling in coach. They didn't speak to anyone but each other and the waiter. They ordered coffee, and between them they put ten little cups of cream into their cups. The woman said she wanted to order dessert. The choices were cheesecake and a flourless chocolate cake—the same ones they had on the train out to Sacramento. She chose the chocolate. When it came she took a single bite of it and put it down. Then both of them left without paying. Coach passengers are supposed to settle their bill before leaving, and I have no idea what repercussions they will face for not doing so.

I chose chicken breast for dinner. (I could have had steak and crab—also included at no additional charge—but the chicken sounded most appetizing to me. Instead of potato I had a brown rice blend, and there were also French style green beans. A nice salad and dinner rolls were also included. I chose the cheesecake for dessert, and it was delicious. The food in the diner really is quite good. It's just not worth the cash prices they charge for it.

We left Denver right on time at 7:10pm. The route out of town took me right past the Forney Museum I'd seen earlier today. We picked up speed fairly quickly and have been sailing past the wheat fields of northeast Colorado. It's about 8:30 Mountain Time as I write this, and it's getting dark fast. The attendant is supposedly going to make the bed up at 9:00, so I suppose this is about as good a place as any to call it night.

Saturday, August 11, 2018

Somewhere in Nebraska to Algona, Iowa

I slept quite soundly last night, though with the heat I never even put a sheet over me. Even so, I didn't see one bit of the meteor shower and was unaware of most of the night stops. I did wake up briefly at one (Hastings, I think), and when we stopped in Omaha shortly before 6am I needed to use the restroom and decided I might as well get up.

Breakfast began at 6:30, and I was there just a few minutes after that. This morning I had a cheese omelette, potato chunks, a croissant, and coffee and cranberry juice. In the sleeping car they have a coffee pot running throughout the morning, and I've been refilling my cup. I can't say it's particularly good coffee (brew from a big urn rarely is), but it's adequate.

I was hoping the car attendant would make up my room while I was at breakfast, but the bed was still down when I got back. I had to get his attention while he was passing through the hall around 7:45. He then took quite a while to make things up, but now it is back to two chairs facing each other.

This morning I finished *Little Town on the Prairie*. There's no way I'll make it through *These Happy Golden Years* before we get to Mt. Pleasant, but getting seven out of eight books read in my spare time on this trip isn't too bad—even if they are children's books. It's about 9:30 now, and it appears we're about forty-five minutes behind schedule now. They were doing work on the tracks between Creston and Osceola, which is where we lost the time.

While the mountains were beautiful, I must say it's good to be back into familiar scenery. Southern Iowa is where I grew up, and I love the rolling hills and all the trees through here. While it's obviously drier than it is further north (indeed some of the corn looks very brown), it still looks like prosperous country. There was a gentle fog this morning, and that was much more pleasant than the wildfire smoke I'd encountered through much of this trip.

We stopped again right before the Ottumwa station, and now we seemed to be parked semi-permanently in Ottumwa. I assume we're waiting for a freight train to pass, since we've been here far too long even for a smoke stop. Everything from here to Chicago is at least double-tracked, so there should be space to accommodate all the trains. I don't know what the deal is. We're now more than an hour behind schedule. I've got less than an hour to go (once we finally start up again), and at this point I'm getting a bit antsy for the trip to be finished.

They just told us that the reason for the delay was a "medical situation on the platform". I have no idea what that means, but obviously it was serious enough to keep us here. When they made that announcement, they said we would be moving shortly, but it's

been at least ten more minutes, and we're still parked here. It is weird how one little thing can cause such a delay.

... We're about an hour and forty-five minutes down now, and still stopped in Ottumwa. The whistle just sounded, though, so hopefully we'll be going shortly. I went downstairs to look out the windows on the platform side of the train, and I did see an ambulance there. According to the car attendant, a woman fell while getting off the train, and they had to call EMTs to assist her. If she had been ticketed to Ottumwa, we could have just gone on. She was just going out to have a smoke on the platform, though. Since she was ticketed further on, though, we had to wait until they'd finished with her and given her clearance to re-board the train. All that took another forty-five minutes.

... We are moving again now, and hopefully if things go well, we're only about half an hour from Mt. Pleasant. I do wonder, when medical issues such as these happen, who foots the bill for the ambulance. My bet is that Amtrak has some sort of liability insurance that covers it, but the woman should probably have been more careful stepping off the train as well.



**Ambulance by the Amtrak platform
Ottumwa, Iowa**

Amtrak has gotten much better in telling passengers the reason for delays. I still remember the first trip Margaret and I took by train, when we were six hours late getting to Boston, and only the vaguest excuses had been given. Delays are still inevitable for a railroad that doesn't own the tracks it runs on, but they do seem to do a better job of explaining them now.

We got to Mt. Pleasant about 11:20, about an hour and a half behind schedule. I claimed my checked bag quickly and was pleased that my car started right up. I stopped very briefly at Aldi and Wal-Mart in Mt. P., and then was on my way home. Since I'd come down through Des Moines, I decided to head back via Avenue of the Saints. I drove straight through, with only a very brief toilet break at the new Love's truck stop in Floyd. Mostly the trip was easy, but there were a couple of moments that induced panic. One was on Interstate 380 by North Liberty, when someone who had been traveling southbound made a U-turn in one of those little gravel patches where cops park during speed traps. This is one of the busiest stretches of highway in Iowa, and it nearly caused a chain reaction collision. The other issue was up by Mason City, where a motorcyclist kept shifting from lane to lane without signaling. Fortunately I made it past both of these idiots safely.

It was going on five when I got home. A sad thing I discovered on my arrival was that the fish that some students had given me last Christmas had died. I had hooked up an automatic feeder to the fish bowl, but apparently something went wrong with it. I can't say I'm horribly grief-stricken. While I appreciated the thought, it really was quite a chore caring for it. **[At a recent inservice at school we were to choose the groups we worked with by the number of pets we had. I was one of just two people who had no pets. Indeed that fish was the closest thing to a pet I ever did have, and I really don't have any desire for anything else.]** More bad news was that I discovered my toilet was leaking. I'll have to call the landlord about that soon.

On a happier note I was pleased that the mail I'd had stopped while I was gone had been properly delivered today. **[It seems about 50—50 whether that happens or not. As often as not I've had to go to the post office and pick up mail, even when I've told them to deliver it.]** Among the things I received were my recently renewed teacher's certificate and driver's license. Of course there was also lots of junk mail and more bills than I cared for. Those would come anyway, though, and I should be able to get everything in order shortly. **[I get very few bills in the mail anymore. I still owe as much as ever, but these days pretty much everything is billed and paid online. That was especially nice when I took a lengthy trip to New Zealand last summer and could settle the bills in real time from halfway around the world.]**

Another bit of good news was that I checked online and found out that today was the day many of my Hy-Vee fuel saver points would be expiring. I grabbed my card and headed to Casey's, putting in every drop I could at \$1.49⁹ a gallon (a buck twenty less than the pump price). I wish I had that card with me when I put in even more gas in Mt. Pleasant at the start of the trip, but at least I wouldn't be forfeiting any of the points.

By the way, the cheapest gas I saw on this trip was in southeast Iowa. Denver was about the same as it is here (in the \$2.65 – \$2.75 range **[interestingly, the exact same price it is in 2024]**), but everywhere west of there was over three bucks a gallon. I even saw places in California that were over \$4, though all of them had less costly competitors.

I spent Saturday night and most of Sunday going through my pictures and inserting them into this travelogue. I also watched the *Jeopardy* tournament of champions, which I'd recorded while I was gone. **[This was before our cable system "improved" their service. For many years even after the switched to a lower-grade digital version I could record programs on an old VCR. Now they require a digital video recorder, and since that's only available for lease at an additional fee, it means I never record anything anymore.]** Almost immediately I'll need to begin getting ready for school. I did have a restful getaway, though, and hopefully it will be a good school year.

Wrapping Things Up

I'm going to throw a few questions that occur to me here.

What did you like the best?

There's a lot of things I liked, but my favorite of all was probably the Computer History Museum in Mountain View. Other highlights would include the Ashton Gardens in Utah and both the automobile and railroad museums in Sacramento. Aside from specific attractions, the gorgeous mountains, particularly the Sierra Nevada near Lake Tahoe, will be a main memory from this trip. **[I still find all of those memorable today, and I'd probably still rank the computer museum at the top.]**

Beyond attractions, I always enjoy eating when I travel, too, and I had some very good meals on this trip. Particularly memorable was the breakfast at Duffeyroll in Denver, my dinner at Habit Burger in Utah, and the unique grilled cheese sandwiches at Queso King's in Sacramento.

What did you like the least?

I was truly appalled by the open homelessness and poverty I saw in Sacramento and the Bay Area. I've seen bums in many cities, and occasionally in rural areas as well. Northern California took things to a completely new level, though. I was shocked by the vast numbers of people living in the open, often right next to extremely wealthy homes. There really is no excuse for this in 21st Century America. **[Sadly I'd see even worse homelessness a couple years later in Portland. We really need to address the root causes of this—make good affordable housing available and be sure everyone can work for a living wage. Our politicians say we're the greatest country on earth, and we need to show that by how we treat people.]**

I was also prudishly bothered by the legal marijuana shops in Colorado and California. There really isn't much difference between those and liquor stores (and the potheads I've known in my life have generally been more pleasant than the drunks). I'm old fashioned enough that it just seems wrong to be selling drugs so openly, though.

As is always true when I go to such places, I didn't care for the desert scenery. Finally, I didn't care for the overall dumpiness of the cities I visited. While Salt Lake was redeemed by its gorgeous mountain setting (probably the nicest natural surroundings of any city I've been to anywhere), all of the western cities seem to feature uninspired architecture, tacky construction, and a thick coating of grime. They could take lessons from places like Chicago and Minneapolis.

If you could move to one of these places, where would it be?

Can I go with "none of the above"? If I were to choose a western city to move to, it would almost certainly be Los Angeles. It's more attractive and livelier than anywhere I visited on this trip, and the people there come across as friendlier. **[That's definitely true. Aside from Chicago, L.A. is easily my favorite city.]** If I were forced to choose among the places I went on this particular trip, I'd probably pick Denver. While there were a lot of things I didn't like about the Mile High City, there is a lot to do there. There's also a fairly diverse city, and the people seemed reasonably friendly. **[Looking back on it, I'd probably pick Salt Lake ahead of Denver. It's not nearly as pretentious of a place.]** I might also choose one of the small towns I went through on this trip. In particular Truckee, California seemed like a nice town in a gorgeous setting. **[It could be fun to make Truckee the destination of a trip at some point.]**

What are religion and politics like out there?

Since "out there" covered a wide range of places, there are multiple answers to that question. Utah is, of course, majority Mormon and one of the reddest states in the country. **[Actually as of 2020 the Mormons are no longer the majority in Utah.]** That said, it's a surprisingly inclusive and accepting place. There's a very active gay community in Salt Lake City, for instance. I also went past an enormous mosque on the light rail, and I saw lots of Muslim women in traditional dress. I got the feeling that the Mormons are perfectly accepting of those who follow other religions or no religion so long as those people reciprocate the acceptance. Most of Utah is indeed Republican, but they're not at all enamored with Trump. Their politics is a mix of old-school family values and small government libertarian. I actually don't disagree with much of that. Unfortunately that's not what most Republicans at the national level stand for these days. **[It seems like the Republican Party has only gotten more extreme in the intervening years. It's like there's no moderate Republicans at all these days.]**

Sacramento is almost a parody of what people think of when they picture goofy California politics. You may know from national news that California has open-party primaries, with the top two candidates of either party ending up on the general election ballot. Sacramento is one of the places where the final election almost always has two Democrats facing each other. The politicians are proud liberals, supporting all the causes that make more moderate people skeptical of liberals. Sacramento, for instance, declared itself a sanctuary city for illegal immigrants (though for those who think that might contribute to its homeless problem, it should be noted that pretty much no one on the street is Hispanic). **[I made the same observation this past Christmas in another sanctuary city, Chicago. There are homeless people there, though far fewer than in Sacramento. Almost everywhere I've been the bulk of homeless people are old white men, the sort of people who look like they should be voting for Donald Trump. There's a few black people among the homeless as well. The Hispanic people aren't homeless; they're working poor—people who do all the jobs other folks don't want to do.]** There's also a general attitude that throwing money at things will solve problems, without worrying about how efficiently that money is spent.

As for religion, Sacramento and the Bay Area came across as just about the most a-religious places I've been to. There are remarkably few churches there, and I don't think I saw any non-Christian houses of worship. I didn't even see any eastern or New Age shrines. The few churches I saw were mostly small and in disrepair. My feeling was that people here are a-religious, not anti-religious, by the way. In spite of what some of the conservatives would like us to believe, even in California no one is actively fighting against religion. They just don't care.

Colorado seemed to have a combination of brand new Protestant mega-churches and century-old Catholic churches. I saw one synagogue in Denver and an Asian temple in Aspen. A lot of the marijuana dealers also call themselves new age houses of worship, though I find that hard to take seriously. My sense was that the vast majority of Coloradans are Christian, though my bet is attendance is fairly low outside of Christmas and Easter.

Politically Colorado is a swing state that has mostly gone blue in recent years. I got the feeling people here take politics seriously. They care a lot more about the message than about the person or the party. I wish more of the country would feel that way. **[Amen.]**

How was the train?

Mostly very good. I do find the train to be just about the most relaxing mode of transportation, and in rural areas it shows off our country at its best. I'd assumed my trains would be late, but most of them ran pretty close to schedule. The only train that was seriously delayed was the Salt Lake to Sacramento leg, and aside from the long wait to board, that was no big deal. I think I was wise to break up the trip into shorter segments rather than going all the way out to the West Coast in one hop. One night on a train is perfectly tolerable, but two in a row really is stretching it.

For others looking at traveling overnight on Amtrak, I'd strongly recommend booking a lower-level coach seat. It's **much** quieter than the main level at night, and there's a better chance of being able to get two seats together that you can stretch out in. (On eastern trains that don't have two levels, consider booking in business class overnight.) It's also always worth pricing sleeping car accommodations. Sometimes they're exorbitant, but other times (like the two legs I booked in sleeper on this trip) it's only a little higher than the coach fare. Meals are included with the sleeper fare, and that also helps in determining the relative value.

[While the vacation I'm planning for this coming summer will mostly be driving, I'll definitely be taking Amtrak again in the future. I did a trip similar to this one a couple of years later, heading east instead of west. Again I stopped along the way to break things up and did some legs in sleeper and others in a seat. Paul and Rachel are taking the Canadian train across Canada this spring. I'd love to do that, but I also think it might be fun to break that up into a series of shorter trips, getting out at various places along the way.]

Which of the cities had the best local transit?

Let me start with which was worst. That would be Sacramento. The lines are skeletal, the trains are infrequent, the vehicles and stations are dirty, and the riders are (as my students would say) "sketchy". The bus network goes to some places the trains don't, but for a city of its size, transit in general is pretty pathetic in California's capital. They could take lessons from the vast and constantly growing network in L.A.

Both Denver and Salt Lake had their plusses and minuses, though I'd probably have a slight preference for the Utah system. I liked riding Salt Lake City's trains more, and their buses seemed better integrated in the network than Denver's. The issue in Utah, though, is that they roll up the sidewalks at night. Most transit stops running between ten and eleven at night, and it's infrequent after six. It's also good that I wasn't in Salt Lake on a Sunday, because the FrontRunner trains and most buses don't run at all on Sunday, and light rail service is extremely limited. Denver runs their trains into the wee hours and has a pretty good weekend schedule. The trains themselves are old and rickety, though, and the stations are filthy and badly located in respect to their neighborhoods.

I also rode trains in San Jose and Silicon Valley, but I can't say that either CalTrain or VTA impressed me much. VTA is certainly clean and sparkling, but its service (at least on Sunday) is too infrequent to be practical. CalTrain is infrequent, expensive, and also has dirty old trains. **[They apparently recently replaced all their rolling stock, so the last comment is probably no longer true.]**

I must also give high marks to the Roaring Fork Transit Authority in Glenwood Springs and Aspen. I know of no place with a similarly low population that has such good bus service. In most of Iowa all that's available is an on-demand bus designed for handicapped people or maybe a couple of scheduled routes that primarily carry old people to Wal-Mart or to their doctor's appointments. RFTA honestly has better bus service than you'd find in Des Moines, and because it's good, people use it. It would be interesting to know what their subsidy is, but it's certainly clear that the residents of Aspen are getting more for their tax dollars than the residents of Sacramento.

What didn't you see - you'd have liked to?

There's really too many to name here. I could have easily lengthened this to a month-long trip (though I'd never have been able to afford it) and still not seen everything. **[I had almost the same reaction when I got back from my trip to New Zealand—and that was a nearly month-long trip.]**



Arches National Park on a Utah license plate

If I'd had another day or two in Utah, I'd have liked to head south and check out the famous national parks there. While I saw a lot of landforms similar to what's in Zion, Arches, or Bryce Canyon, it would be good to see those particular famous parks.

Because of the days I was in Sacramento, I wasn't able to get to the California State Museum, which at least online looks fascinating. If I ever travel to northern California again, I just might make a stop in Sacramento exclusively to see that museum.

I also would have liked to have scheduled another day in Denver. It's been decades since I've been there, and there are a lot of interesting things to see and do there. I really didn't see anything at all downtown on this trip, and it would be good to focus on that for a day. If I go back to Denver

I might also check out the craft brewery in Aurora that two of my former students operate (Dry Dock, owned by Kevin DeLange and Michelle Reding). There just wasn't time for that on this trip, though. **[Their brewery appears to be going strong; if anything business just increased during COVID.]**

Finally, it would be fun at some point to visit some of the other computer nerd attractions in Silicon Valley. I enjoyed going past the headquarters of all the big technology companies. Many of them have visitors centers and/or offer tours, though, and if I had the time, it would be fun to hop from one to another and see those.

I don't think there's ever been a trip I've taken where I wouldn't have wanted to see more. I think that's a good thing, though. It's always good to have a reason to go back.