

# NEW YEAR IN ARIZONA

## TUCSON 2025-26

**SATURDAY, DECEMBER 27, 2025**

**ALGONA, IOWA TO CHICAGO, ILLINOIS**

I did not sleep well last night and was up before 6:00 this morning. I took down and put away most of my Christmas decorations and did some general cleaning around my apartment. Then, around 9:30 I packed up my car and set off eastward.

We'd had fog over Christmas, and it continued to be damp and foggy today. Indeed there were places where it seemed like I was driving in the white-out of a blizzard. It was not a particularly enjoyable drive, as I clutched the steering wheel and constantly scanned whatever I could see in front of me,

My first stop was in Garner, where I had breakfast at Hardee's. Shortly after that I stopped at a Kwik Star in Clear Lake. With a quarter redemption from frequent guest points, I paid \$1.97<sup>9</sup>. That's not bad, but it was actually more than I paid at Christmas in southern Iowa. In Ankeny Casey's had gas for \$1.88<sup>9</sup>—and that was without any special deals.

As I headed north on I-35 and then east on I-90 I was reminded of a couple years ago when I was supposed to fly out of the Mason City airport at Christmas. The fog then was similar to what it was today, and there was basically a zero chance that the inbound plane would land. That year I ended up driving over to Chicago instead of flying, following the same route I was taking today, and in similar conditions.

The fog was especially bad around Rochester. Much of the time I couldn't see traffic on the other side of the highway at all, and about three times I rapidly came up on cars on my side that were traveling slower than normal. Many cars didn't have their lights on, which was just inviting accidents to happen.

Fortunately I didn't hit anyone, and—as had been true on that trip eastward a couple years ago—the fog lessened when I went down the cliff to the Mississippi River bridge. I was a bit worried about the bridge, since the temperature was exactly 32 and the pavement was quite wet. Fortunately they'd treated it so nothing was frozen.

I made it to LaCrosse, Wisconsin about 1pm. I stopped at a Walgreen's there to get a few snacks for my train ride and then had lunch at a McDonalds (a quarter-pounder with bacon). I took a back way (George Street) to LaCrosse station, which was quite a bit easier than following the main highway. When I got to the station there was almost no parking available, but I was able to nab a spot right by the entrance (directly next to their handicapped parking). They require that you display a parking permit to park at the station, so I went inside and spoke to the attendant. He asked my name to confirm that I actually was taking the train and then gave me the permit.

Amtrak's Borealis has only been operating for a couple of years. It's a second daily service between Chicago and St. Paul, supplementing the frequently late Empire Builder. I'd read that the service had exceeded ridership projections, and today's trip appeared to confirm that. The train featured three double-decker Superliner coaches and an engine at either end. The conductor repeatedly announced that it was sold out, and that did indeed appear to be the case. While a bunch of people got off at LaCrosse, at least as many boarded. All the window seats had already been claimed, and there were no seats together where couples could sit. At every station about the same number of people boarded as got off, and at Milwaukee they'd oversold and had to seat people in the café (which was the lower level of the car I was in).

Train 1340 left LaCrosse right on time at 2:17pm, and the train stayed on time all the way across Wisconsin. The view from the train is mostly forest—trees with bare branches standing in the snow. While the fog was much lighter than it had been in Iowa and Minnesota, it still gave a rather eerie feeling. The sun set by the time we'd reached Columbus (just north of Madison), so except for city lights in Milwaukee and Chicago it was dark the rest of the way.

This is honestly a rather boring train trip. I spent most of it reading in the Kindle app on my phone. I was reading a book called

*This Way Up* that is about cartography and in particular gives numerous examples of bad maps. That did make five hours go more quickly.

For most of the run, the Borealis travels at 80 miles per hour, which is what the big intercity trains do in the western United States. The exception to that is in the Milwaukee area, where we travelled at 35mph for about half an hour. We sped up again south of Milwaukee, and I was pleased when we entered Illinois at 6:30pm. From the border to Chicago we were mostly on Metra express tracks, which were otherwise empty on a weekend. We sailed along and reached Union Station about five minutes early at 7:15pm.



The Borealis arrived on the through track clear at the east end of Union Station, the same track the Empire Builder uses. With just three coaches, it seems absurdly small on that massive track. I made my way through the station fairly quickly and was particularly pleased that they'd finished a construction project that had covered the interior in scaffolding for more than a year. I exited to the north of the Great Hall.

On my way to my hotel I stopped briefly at the Naf Naf Grill (a Middle Eastern fast food chain) where I picked up some chicken shawarma for supper. From there I walked north and west a few blocks (probably half a mile from the station) to my ultimate destination, the Hampton Inn—West Loop/Fulton Market. This hotel shares a brand new building with a Homewood Suites. The lowest three floors are a parking ramp, and reception is on the fourth floor. After checking in I took the elevator up to the 23<sup>rd</sup> floor (actually 22<sup>nd</sup>, since there is no floor #13). The room is fine, if a bit too ultra-modern. My biggest complaint would be the TV, which is designed to be used with streaming services rather than cable or satellite TV.

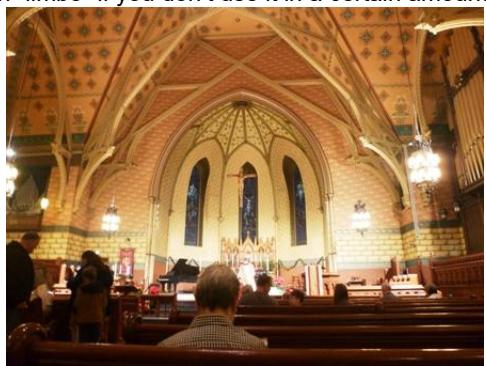
While I was typing on this letter, I was amused to get a text from St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Algona, saying that tomorrow's service was cancelled. I'd heard on the radio that the fog was supposed to be followed up by snow and high winds, and presumably that had happened. I of course wouldn't have been there anyway, but it is nice of them to send the message. The weather forecast for Chicago tomorrow is rain, but it does appear that the temperature will be well above freezing, so snow is not at all likely.

## SUNDAY, DECEMBER 28, 2025

### CHICAGO, ILLINOIS & THE AMTRAK TEXAS EAGLE

While I actually slept fine last night, I was still up quite early (around 5:15am). I filled some time by enjoying some Keurig "Dunkin' Donuts" coffee and listening to WBBM news radio. I went down to breakfast about 6:30. It was decent (which is generally the case at Hampton Inns), though the eggs were surprisingly flavorless.

The prediction for rain today was spot on. It's only three blocks from the hotel to the nearest 'L' station, but I got thoroughly soaked in the quick dash over there. I'd bought a CTA day pass ahead of time, which at \$5 is one of the best values in transit there is. I wasn't positive it would work, though, because the CTA's Ventra app showed my card as "suspended". Fortunately when I tapped the card on the turnstile it opened, and when I checked later the app changed the status of my card to "active". Apparently they put the card in "limbo" if you don't use it in a certain amount of time.



St. James Cathedral

I made my way up to the Clark & Division red line station, where I stopped at a twenty-four hour Walgreen's. I often use a heating pad when I sleep, but I'd left mine at home. I wanted to pick up another I could use on the trip. The purchase also allowed me to use up a bunch of Walgreen's points I'd accumulated.

I then headed south to State & Lake and dodged pouring rain as I made my way south to St. James Episcopal Cathedral. I arrived just in time for what they call their "family mass" at 9am. I'd been to this cathedral once before, for a Christmas Eve service a few years ago. It was packed on Christmas Eve, but that definitely wasn't the case today. There were about three dozen people, including the three four clergy and five laypeople who were participating in the service. The cathedral probably seats around 400, so it was very empty indeed. In fairness I should point out that this is one of three services the cathedral does on weekends. I suspect their 11:00 "solemn mass" is better attended.

The service was odd, but it was really quite nice. They had children reading scripture and leading the prayer of confession, and during communion another child asked the sort of "why do we do this" questions you might hear at a seder meal. The homily (given by the acting Bishop of Detroit, who is originally from Chicago) was essentially a children's sermon, though it did a nice job of addressing

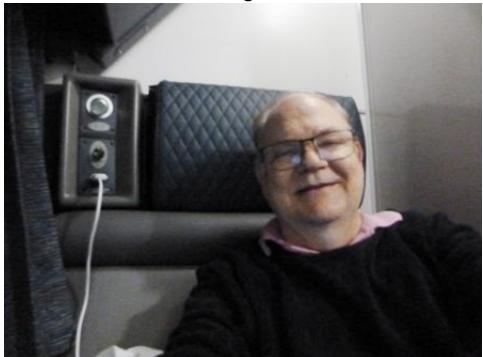
the readings of the day. The music was folk-style (including a version of the creed set to "Greensleeves"), which the kids seemed to enjoy singing. For communion (which is, of course, an open sacrament for Episcopalians) they had everyone present gather around the altar for the consecration, which did make things feel more special.

I made my way back to the Clinton green line station and was pleased that the rain had let up enough that I could stay reasonably dry heading back to the hotel. Unfortunately in the time it took to go up to my room, get my bag, and check out, the rain started up again. It was accompanied by thunder and lightning, and both I and the bag got absolutely soaked by the time I was back at Union Station.

My train westward wouldn't leave until after lunch, so I wanted to get something to eat. That turned out to be surprisingly complicated. I first thought of going to Lou Mitchell's, a historic diner that's just a block west of Union Station. After leaving my bags in the Metropolitan Lounge, I went over there, only to find that there was a long and rather confusing line to get in. While I was already soaked, I didn't really feel like just standing in the rain for an unknown amount of time. So I made my way down to the blue line station, from which I hoped to reach other options.

Unfortunately there was apparently some issue with the blue line trains this afternoon. An absolutely unintelligible announcement crackled on the station speakers twice in the twenty-five minutes I waited on the platform at Clinton station. In that time three westbound trains arrived, but even after the last of those came, it still said there would be an eight-minute wait for an O'Hare-bound train. I gave up on the blue line and made my way back up to street level. I thought about catching a bus. I'd just missed the one I wanted, though, and there would be an eighteen-minute wait until the next one. The rain had temporarily let up, so I decided to just walk. The exercise would probably be a good thing before two long days on the train.

My intent was to head to the Loop location of Nando's, the African chicken chain that I'd first encountered in London years ago. On the way there I passed a number of Italian restaurants, and that's what I had for lunch instead. I ended up at Luke's, a hole-in-the-wall place that serves a bit of everything. I had an enormous portion of lasagna and some minestrone. It certainly wasn't the best lunch I've ever had, but I've had far worse. On the way back to the station I also picked up a small bag of caramel corn, which I'm munching as I write on this travelogue.



Obligatory "selfie" in Room 3

At about 1:15pm they announced that the Texas Eagle was ready to board. However, as is often the case at Chicago Union Station, there had been some miscommunication, and after employees walked us out to the platform entrance, we just stood around for about ten minutes until they unlocked the gate. It was also weird that the car I was supposed to be on was #2130, but the actual sign on the car said #2230, which was a number on the northbound train. The attendant assured me it was the correct car, so I hauled my stuff upstairs and found Room #3, which would be my home for more than two full days.

We departed right on time at 1:52pm. As we crawled across the city the attendant made announcements about the train and the conductor came around to scan tickets. I noticed after she scanned mine that it was actually the leg from LaCrosse to Chicago I'd displayed on my phone. Apparently the QR code works for the whole trip, though.

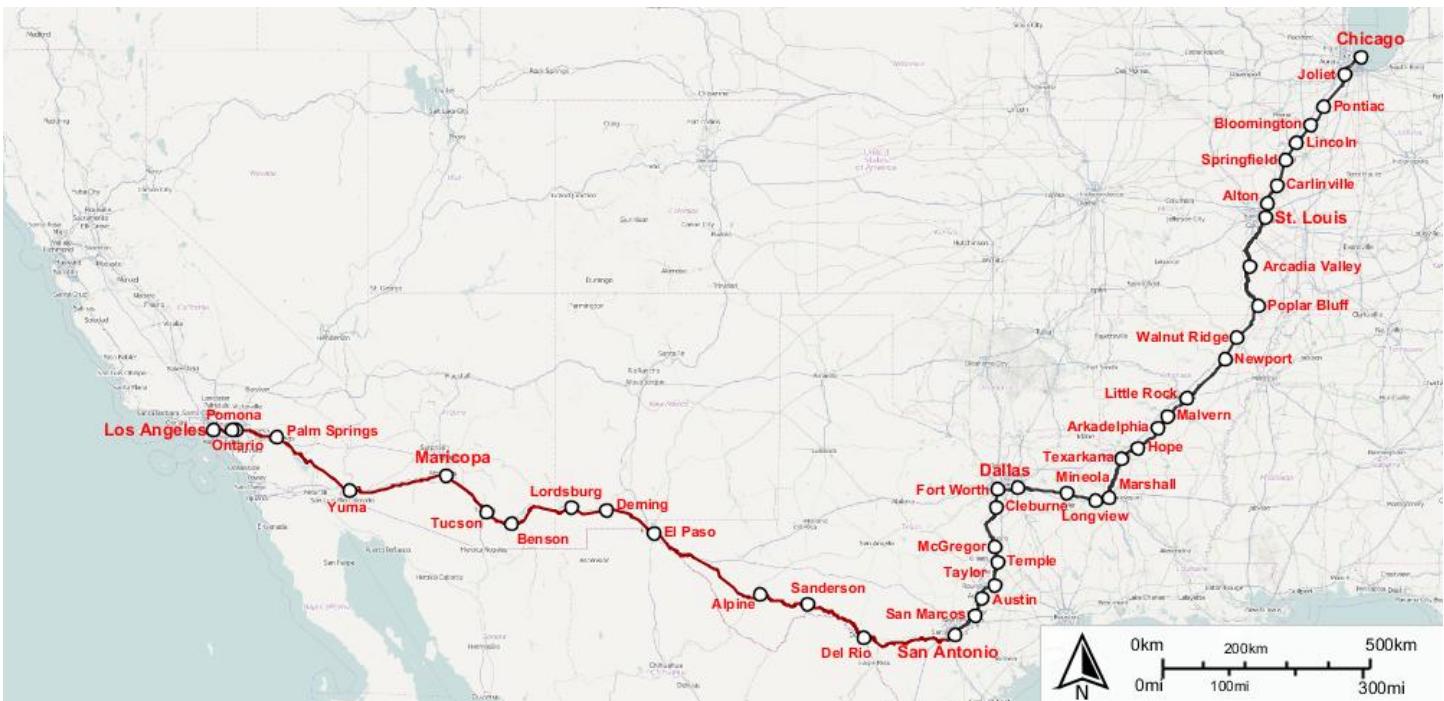
While I had taken this route out of Chicago before, it was definitely not familiar. We wove through residential and industrial areas on the southwest side, making our way out to the Midway Airport area. Then we followed the Heritage Corridor, with the tracks right next to the Illinois and Michigan Canal. The canal is extremely important in Chicago's history. Connecting Lake Michigan to the Illinois River, it provides a navigable shipping route from the Great Lakes to the Mississippi. More importantly, though, Chicago gets its drinking water from Lake Michigan, and the canal allows their sewage to drain downstream of the water intake. Other Great Lakes cities (most notably Milwaukee) have had issues with their water intake becoming polluted. While Chicago's waste may be a problem for people in Peoria and St Louis, it's not an issue for the city itself.

The Texas Eagle makes some, but not all, of the stops on the Lincoln Service, the state-supported train that connects Chicago, Springfield, and St. Louis. The first stop southbound on the Texas Eagle is Joliet, where we picked up a bunch more passengers. Between there and the Bloomington—Normal the tracks have been upgraded to support higher speeds. That means that instead of the 80mph we did yesterday (and would do further south on this train), we were going 95. This part of the route parallels Interstate 55, and I must say it was kind of cool to be going quite a bit faster than the cars and semis. It's also kind of fun that each time we reach a major town the interstate loops around it, and we instead parallel historic route 66 into the town center. We slow down slightly in the towns, which means when we rejoin the interstate we end up passing the same traffic over and over again.

Our first lengthy stop was at Normal, which is right in the middle of the Illinois State University campus (formerly the state normal school, from which the town gets its name). We were about fifteen minutes late at that point. That's about what trains on the same route have been running the past few days, and most of them have made up time south of St. Louis. Hopefully we will as well.



Tree in the Great Hall  
Chicago Union Station



### Route of the Texas Eagle, most of which I'd do on this trip

The Superliners are the oldest cars in Amtrak's fleet, dating back to when I was in high school. One disadvantage of that is that they don't have wi-fi, which the newer trains that run east of Chicago do. The good news is that—at least on the generally inhabited first half of the route—I can use my travel cell phone as a wireless hot spot. That's actually worked quite well. In addition to downloading the route map above, the signal was good enough to upload the sermon broadcast that my old church will have on the radio next Sunday. (I go through about fifteen years of archives each week and choose something appropriate to the season.) I'm sure I won't be able to do that when we get to west Texas, but it works great in Illinois.

On this dreary day the sun set around Lincoln, Illinois. It's stopped raining, but it does appear to be quite windy out. Not far south of Lincoln (and still north of Springfield) we stopped on a siding, waiting for a freight train to pass. Our government pays an incentive to freight railroads to give passenger trains the right of way. All the railroads pocket that money, but pretty much none of them let it affect their scheduling.

The stretch through southern Illinois was mostly uneventful. The most noteworthy thing was dinner. The northern part of the Texas Eagle doesn't have an actual dining car. Instead it has a café that serves the "flexible dining" menu I've had on eastern trains. Shortly after Joliet the attendant came around to take orders. He gave people a choice of eating in the café at 5 or 6pm or having their meals delivered. Since I've never been a fan of eating with strangers, I chose delivery, expecting the food would come at one of the times I'd mentioned. Both five and six o'clock came and went, though, and no food was delivered. I finally got my dinner shortly after 7pm, while we were stopped in Alton, Illinois. The beef paprikash (basically stew over pasta) was really quite tasty, as was the butter cake I had for dessert. The side salad, on the other hand, was served warm (nearly the same temperature as the main dish), as was my can of Diet Coke.

The stop in Alton was memorable for other reasons. We were actually scheduled to get there at 6:08pm, and we were officially 39 minutes late arriving. After we'd dealt with all the boardings and disembarkations, the conductor announced that we'd be stopping in Alton "for a few minutes" because a wind storm had left downed power lines on the track south of us. That stood out, because a surprisingly large number of the boys I teach have gone on to major in power line maintenance at community colleges. To no one's surprise "a few minutes" ended up being more than an hour. We were nearly two hours late when we finally left Alton.

After I'd finished dinner (and while we were still waiting for the power line to be repaired), I decided to make up my bed. On all the Amtrak trips I've done, I've never made up a bed myself before. It's not easy, but it's not overly complicated, either. The two chairs that face each other have bars that say "pull to recline" and pedals that say "push for bed". Basically you activate both of those at the same time, and you also push hard on the back of the chairs. They come down and lock in the lowered position. The mattress and other bedding are stored overhead. I'm glad to have figured it out, and given how long it took to get dinner, I think it was good to be proactive in getting the bed set up.

The train crawled all the way from Alton to St. Louis. I think it goes slowly anyway, but I'm sure they used extra caution where the downed lines had been. We did get some lovely views of the arch and the new I-55 bridge as we made our way there. It was ten to nine when we finally got into the station. Gateway Station is right across from the arena where the Blues play hockey, and I know from past trips that there are some nice downtown views from there. That wasn't the case tonight, though. We parked so my window looked out at a big concrete shell that houses the elevator that leads up to the station lobby.

As we were stopped in St. Louis a special train passed on the next track. The whole thing was decked out in Christmas lights, and passengers appeared to be enjoying drinks at lounge tables as they rode along.

St. Louis is a major stop for the Texas Eagle. For those who care about such things, it's a smoke break. The reason there's time for that is that they remove a car from the train here. One coach just shuttles between Chicago and St. Louis, basically supplementing the Lincoln Service. They remove that coach (which requires shutting off the power) and also service the rest of the train. The regular timetable schedules 35 minutes here. They went a bit faster tonight, but it was still a lengthy stop.

As I typed the previous paragraph I could hear the attendant making up the bed in the room next to mine (#5). I could feel it, too. When the bed next door snapped together, it literally shook the wall that my pillow is resting against. I'll likely turn out my lights as soon as we leave St. Louis. It's two full hours to the next stop (Arcadia, Missouri), and perhaps that break will be an opportunity to get to sleep.



**Billboard by Gateway Station in St. Louis  
"Stand together – Love each other"**

## **MONDAY, DECEMBER 29, 2025**

### **AMTRAK TEXAS EAGLE**

I really slept quite well overnight, which is not always true on a train. While rough tracks made for a very rough ride, I wasn't aware of any of the stops in Missouri beyond St. Louis. I finally woke up when we were stopped at Little Rock, and that was mostly because I had to use the restroom. I rested a bit ore west of there, but woke up fully as we were nearing Hope, President Clinton's boyhood home. It was roughly 7am at that point, the official end of quiet hours, so the conductor and attendants started making loud announcements over the P.A.

The only real issue with sleeping was that it was a bit chilly overnight. The heat and air conditioning never work well on Amtrak, and on this train, things seem colder than they should be. I used both the blankets that were provided for both the lower and upper bunks, and I was still glad I had that heating pad to provide some additional warmth.

It was unsurprising that we'd gotten further behind during the night. According to the conductor freight trains had delayed us (the perennial issue on Amtrak), and we were now 2½ hours behind schedule. He suggested we'd make up a bit of that time in east Texas and also assured people that had bus connections that their buses would wait for the delayed train.

I started the day in slow motion. First I managed to change into fresh clothes in the impossibly narrow area between the bed and the room door. Then I stored away the bedding and returned the seats to their daytime position. I shaved, took my prescription medication, and checked my blood sugar (which was essentially normal—surprising, given that yesterday was a very carb-heavy day). Then I headed down to the lower level of the sleeping car.

All Amtrak sleepers are equipped with showers. Hardly anyone uses them, but I've taken advantage of them multiple times. It's especially nice to have a shower available on a trip like this one that includes more than one night on the train. It took a long time for the water to heat up to an acceptable temperature. Once it did, the shower was perfectly adequate, though. Indeed I've had hotel showers that were far worse.

I also used the bathroom downstairs. There is a single restroom on the upper level of the sleeper. There's a whole bank of them downstairs, though. That means there's almost always one available, and it's likely to be cleaner than the upstairs facility.

Once I'd completed what my brother Paul would describe as "the morning routine", we were approaching Texarkana. I made my way to breakfast just as the train was coming to a stop. That let me explore the layout of the train. My sleeper is at the very back of the train. It and a coach in front of mine will be joined with the Sunset Limited at San Antoino to head westward. In front of those cars (which are officially numbered train #421) are three more coaches (part of train #21). Beyond there is a lounge and café car, and I was surprised that after that was an actual dining car. There are two more sleepers beyond the diner that are also part of train #21. All of the front part of the train stays in San Antonio and returns to Chicago the following day, with only those back two cars heading on to Los Angeles.

Given that they have a diner available, I'm not sure why they use the flexible dining menu on this train. (Presumably it's just cheaper for Amtrak to cater that.) They operate the diner like on most trains, though, seating people across from strangers at tables of four. I was actually one of just three at my table, seated across from an absolutely silent couple from suburban Dallas. All of us had apple crepes for breakfast. The reheated crepes look horrible, but they are decently tasty. I also had coffee, and I got a bottle of cranberry juice to take back to the room. It surprised me that the attendant didn't take down room information, which they usually do on Amtrak. I suspect coach passengers could have wandered in and eaten free if they'd wanted.

The Texarkana station is located right on the state line. It's in the mostly abandoned heart of a very rough little city. The station itself doesn't appear to have had proper maintenance in decades, and many of the surrounding buildings are literally falling apart. As in most southern cities, the actual business in Texarkana has entirely shifted to suburban strips, and no one seems to care about resurrecting the city center.

I mention the state of downtown Texarkana, because my view at breakfast was of a homeless encampment that has been set up and beneath outdoor stairs at the end of the platform. Politicians talk as if homelessness was just a big city or "blue" state problem. It clearly exists on the Arkansas—Texas border, though.



**Police at a crossing  
Queen City, Texas**

Oddly, with all those stops, we actually have made up a bit of time. As I write this we're about to stop in Marshall, Texas. It's shortly before 10am, and we're almost exactly two hours late.

I'd forgotten just how wet east Texas is. It borders Arkansas and Louisiana, and to my eye it looks more like those states than what I generally think of as Texas. We've mostly gone through forests this morning. Much of it has been flash pines, the same trees I remember from my grad school days in Mississippi. We've also passed lots of deciduous trees, some of which have dropped their leaves and some that still have them.

I'm sure the local people think it's cold here. The temperature is 38° in Marshall, and they're expecting a high in the low fifties this afternoon. That's roughly the same as the temps were in Chicago yesterday, but it's bright and clear instead of rainy and foggy. Today in Chicago it's in the 20s and snowy, so I guess it's good I got out of there when I did.

The stops on Amtrak always seem to take longer than they should. Marshall, Texas (which is between Dallas and Shreveport) is not a smoke break, but we still stopped there for about ten minutes. By contrast, the bullet trains in Japan stop for about a minute at each station, yet they manage to get hundreds of people on and off in that time.

We were back to being 2½ hours down when we made another long stop at Longview, Texas. Much of this was filled with repeated announcements from the coach attendant reminding people riding alone that they needed to clear the seats next to them to make room for boarding passengers. This is a perennial problem on Amtrak and one that always annoys me. They could solve it by having reserved seats (which trains in both Europe and Asia do), but instead they just let passengers fend for themselves.

I filled much of the morning revising the review guides for the semester tests I'll be giving when school starts up again. Later on I'll be rewriting the tests themselves. That will be trickier, since I have to shorten them quite a bit, as the periods we're giving the tests in this year are half the length they were in the past.

I also spent some time doing the daily quizzes on the *Stuff* site that is a consortium of New Zealand newspapers. I've been doing those since well before my trip down under, and over the years I've gotten a number of ideas for the quiz bowl tournament we host. Unfortunately I can't say there was anything of particular interest in today's quizzes, though.



**Mineola, Texas**

We lost more time beyond Texarkana. First we pulled off on a siding to let a coal train pass. Not long after that we were stopped for quite a while in Queen City, Texas, where up ahead I could vaguely see the flashes of police vehicles. It turned out that they had caught two girls smoking marijuana and had kicked them off the train. These days smoking anything on Amtrak is prohibited, and of course smoking a controlled substance only makes things worse.

We then made a lengthy stop right next to a cemetery in the town of Jefferson, Texas. The conductor announced that just ahead our tracks (owned by Union Pacific) crossed tracks owned by Canadian National (which had presumably bought out some other company), and a CN crew was working on the cross tracks. We had to wait about twenty minutes before things were clear. I'm not sure how far that puts us behind schedule. There's nothing I can do about it, though, and the interruptions do break up the trip a bit.

Oddly, with all those stops, we actually have made up a bit of time. As I write this we're about to stop in Marshall, Texas. It's shortly before 10am, and we're almost exactly two hours late.

I'd forgotten just how wet east Texas is. It borders Arkansas and Louisiana, and to my eye it looks more like those states than what I generally think of as Texas. We've mostly gone through forests this morning. Much of it has been flash pines, the same trees I remember from my grad school days in Mississippi. We've also passed lots of deciduous trees, some of which have dropped their leaves and some that still have them.

I'm sure the local people think it's cold here. The temperature is 38° in Marshall, and they're expecting a high in the low fifties this afternoon. That's roughly the same as the temps were in Chicago yesterday, but it's bright and clear instead of rainy and foggy. Today in Chicago it's in the 20s and snowy, so I guess it's good I got out of there when I did.

The stops on Amtrak always seem to take longer than they should. Marshall, Texas (which is between Dallas and Shreveport) is not a smoke break, but we still stopped there for about ten minutes. By contrast, the bullet trains in Japan stop for about a minute at each station, yet they manage to get hundreds of people on and off in that time.

We were back to being 2½ hours down when we made another long stop at Longview, Texas. Much of this was filled with repeated announcements from the coach attendant reminding people riding alone that they needed to clear the seats next to them to make room for boarding passengers. This is a perennial problem on Amtrak and one that always annoys me. They could solve it by having reserved seats (which trains in both Europe and Asia do), but instead they just let passengers fend for themselves.

I filled much of the morning revising the review guides for the semester tests I'll be giving when school starts up again. Later on I'll be rewriting the tests themselves. That will be trickier, since I have to shorten them quite a bit, as the periods we're giving the tests in this year are half the length they were in the past.

I also spent some time doing the daily quizzes on the *Stuff* site that is a consortium of New Zealand newspapers. I've been doing those since well before my trip down under, and over the years I've gotten a number of ideas for the quiz bowl tournament we host. Unfortunately I can't say there was anything of particular interest in today's quizzes, though.

At 11:30 an announcement was made that it was lunchtime. I really didn't want to walk all the way to the diner to eat with strangers again, so I pressed my call button to ask if I could have lunch delivered. The attendant (a young black woman named Anastasia) seemed annoyed that I'd pushed the button and said someone from the diner should be coming around to take orders. After about fifteen minutes she came back and with a huff said "I guess I'll take your order myself." She certainly did nothing to increase her tip.

While ordering lunch we made a brief stop in Mineola, Texas. Unlike Texarkana, this appears to be a lovely little town that's gone all in with historic preservation. It reminded me a lot of Princeton, Illinois, the place I most often begin my Amtrak journeys. Next to the station was a little park with a gazebo and an old caboose that had been decked out with Christmas lights. While the downtown businesses were mostly craft shops and the like, it was still easily the nicest town

we'd been through today. Indeed, it's a place I wouldn't mind coming back to and spending a bit of time in the future.

We paralleled U.S. 80 as we made our way westward toward Dallas. This is unquestionably a Texas highway, a gash of concrete with access roads on both sides and frequent, ridiculously short exits. I don't really understand Texas' obsession with access roads. They're absolutely everywhere in the state, and they really do seem like accidents waiting to happen.

Lunch finally came as we neared suburban Dallas, and it turned out to be one of the nicest meals I've had on Amtrak. I had their vegetarian option, which was a commercially packaged Greek salad with balsamic vinaigrette. I also got another of the butter cakes and a Diet Coke. It was just the right amount of food—and very tasty.

Nearly an hour before reaching Dallas we entered the endless string of suburbia that is the North Texas Metroplex. While Dallas itself is not unpleasant, I'm just not a fan of run on suburbs, and that's what most of this area is. In addition to taking up more space than it needs to, the region doesn't seem to have sensible zoning. There are McMansions right next to mobile homes, all mixed in with factories, warehouses, fast food strips, and salvage yards. There are homeless camps under the overpasses and trash-strewn empty lots that just seem to have been abandoned. To my eye it's easily one of the ugliest places in America.



**Skyline view – Dallas, Texas**

Express commuter train parked on the next track. There was also some sort of construction project on the platforms, though it seemed that the crew was mostly standing around rather than actually working.

The stop in Dallas is scheduled to last twenty minutes, but we were on the platform much longer than that. A couple of times they announced that we'd be leaving shortly, but nothing actually happened. The Amtrak app kept updating with later and later departure times, but no explanation was given. We finally left Dallas at 2:37pm.

As we pulled out of Dallas we passed a familiar sight. The train went right next to the old Texas School Book Depository, from which President Kennedy was shot. It's one of the few old buildings in downtown Dallas, but it's been freshly sandblasted. Not long after that we passed Parkland Hospital (now part of the Southwestern Medical Center complex), where the President died. Then it was back to the same mish-mash of development I'd seen east of central Dallas.

We reached Ft. Worth at about 3:25pm. There's a bit of padding in the schedule between Dallas and Ft. Worth, so we made up about half an hour of time. Ft. Worth is a crew change point, and there's 45 minutes scheduled for the stop. I thought we might be making up more time when at 3:45 they announced a "last call" for passengers leaving at Ft. Worth. We just sat around until 3:59, though. At that point we just pulled forward a bit and stopped again next to an old warehouse that is now home to the Ft. Worth campus of the University of Texas—Arlington. Eventually the conductor said we were getting fuel and a mechanical check, which he said was related to "that incident". I have no clue what incident he was referring to, but obviously we'd be even more delayed.

At 4:16 I got a text from Amtrak that vaguely said the delay was due to "municipal services" in the area. Earlier I had seen a police car and fire truck near the station, so perhaps that was somehow related. Meanwhile TexRail and TRE commuter trains regularly went in and out of the station, though. I'm not sure why they weren't affected, but we were. A little later I got another text that said we had resumed travel, when in fact we were still stopped. We finally started rolling again at 4:39pm, only to pull forward a bit further and stop yet again.

Around 4:45 they announced that complimentary snacks and water were available in the lounge car as an apology for the delay. While as a sleeper passenger I really didn't need the snacks at all, I figured I'd go and check them out. They had pre-sealed packages, each of which included three tiny bags—one with dehydrated "brownie bites", the second with gummy candies that resembled miniature fruits, and the third with little pretzel twists. Each package also had a wet wipe in it. The free water was in those mini-bottles you might get on a very short flight. Theoretically passengers could take multiple packages of snacks, and I saw people carrying as many as four. One was certainly sufficient for me, though, and I didn't bother with the water.

While I was getting my snacks, we actually started moving for real. We set off at 4:52pm and were soon back into suburban sprawl. We're now estimated to get into San Antonio after midnight, though according to Amtrak we'll still leave there on time. That actually may be accurate, since I know the Sunset Limited schedule is padded in many places.

Both in Mesquite and then in Dallas proper we passed parking lots for school buses that had been tagged with graffiti so that they looked almost like old New York subway cars. The lots had razor wire around them, and it made me wonder just how the vandals were able to get to the buses.

Even more than most cities, our arrival stood out with the contrast between the seedy wrong side of the tracks and the gleaming skyscrapers downtown. It does seem to be a city of rich and poor, with not much in the middle.

While we were stopped in Dallas a couple of DART light rail trains came and went, and a Trinity Rail

Express commuter train parked on the next track. There was also some sort of construction project on the platforms, though it seemed

that the crew was mostly standing around rather than actually working.

While the route from Ft. Worth to San Antonio is not one I'd been on in a train before, I have driven through the area on I-35. That's probably a good thing, since it rapidly got dark as we headed south, so I wouldn't be seeing much. As it turned out, though, we'd take a much different route. Instead of parallelling the interstate, we headed through a very rural area west of Waco, an area remote enough that it didn't even have cell service much of the time.

The first stop south of Ft. Worth was at Cleburne, Texas, and that stop took far longer than it should have. First, we actually had to make three stops. There's no real platform at Cleburne, and the paved boarding area they have is less than the length of one car. They stopped to let people off from a sleeper at the front. Then people in coach got on and off. Then an elderly woman with a walker boarded my sleeping car. She could not negotiate the step to get into the car, so the conductor had to get out a special lift raise her and the walker up about six inches. They did things as efficiently as possible, but the stop ended up taking about ten minutes.

I again had asked to have dinner in my room. Around 6pm I saw the car attendant going around to other rooms with bags of meals. She never stopped by my room, though. I waited patiently until around 6:45 she finally hesitantly knocked and asked if I'd eaten yet. It turned out that the diner staff had written the wrong room on my bag, Room "C" instead of "3". There actually is a Room C on Superliner sleeping cars, but it's a much larger and more expensive room with an ensuite bathroom. The couple in that room hadn't ordered anything to be delivered. The attendant went back to the diner, only to be told the label was correct, so she went room by room to figure out where it was supposed to go.

The delay meant that my butter chicken was very cold when I finally got it, though at least this time the salad wasn't warm. The accompanying roll was good, and this time I got the Peruvian brownie (whatever that's supposed to mean) instead of the butter cake. It was probably the worst meal I had on this trip, but I still ate cleaned my plate.

When I got enough cell service to download anything, I began reading from my Kindle again. This time it was a book called *Prairie Fire* which claims to be a biography of the real Laura Ingalls Wilder. I think that even as children we knew her stories of pioneer life were romanticized, and it will be interesting to see just what this book makes of that. The part I read tonight mostly gave background, going into Laura's New England ancestors who had lived in poverty for generations. It also noted that the sequence of the books isn't really correct. While Laura was born in Wisconsin, the Ingalls family moved to Kansas (where *Little House on the Prairie* is set) when she was just a toddler. After failing at establishing a permanent home in Kansas, they moved back to Wisconsin, where the memories recorded in *Little House in the Big Woods* take place.

While I was reading a woman knocked on the door of my room. She thought I was the car attendant (who uses Room #1, though I think she was elsewhere at the time), and she apologized when she saw I wasn't. What she wanted was for me to open a bottle of champagne she had with her. It was a bit tricky, but I did manage to get it open. Hopefully she enjoyed her little celebration.

I made up the bed around 8pm but just lay in bed and read as we made our way through central Texas. The part of the journey that stood out most was coming into Austin from the northeast. The railroad goes right past the stadium where the Round Rock Express (a AAA team Brad Nelson was on) play. In fact the team's logo is an old-fashioned train. I remember watching Brad play in Round Rock and seeing an Amtrak train (which would have been much closer to on time than today's) beyond the outfield.

Austin is a lovely city at night, particularly at the holidays. There are Christmas lights everywhere—not just in public places, but in the windows of homes and apartments all over the city. While it's a much newer city, it actually reminds me of Chicago in that respect.

I stopped reading on the Kindle app at Austin and put my phone away. It was about 10pm at that point, and we were just over three hours late. I dozed off between there and the next stop, San Marcos. Then I dozed off again until I was aware that we were going very slowly with bright lights shining in as we made our approach into San Antonio.

We got into San Antonio 1t 12:29am. We'd made up a bit of time, but we were still 2 hours and 13 minutes behind schedule. They do a lot of work in Sian Antonio. Many people join and leave there, and it's also where they join the through cars on the Texas Eagle with the Sunset Limited. It's also the main service point before the train heads west into the desert. I fell asleep again in the middle of that, but I was hoping they might be able to get through things a bit quicker than normal today so perhaps we'd make up a little time.

## **TUESDAY, DECEMBER 30, 2025**

## **AMTRAK TEXAS EAGLE TO TUCSON, ARIZONA**

I was up shortly before seven, and I honestly didn't know if we'd made up time or not. There was no cell service at all, so I had no way of telling where I was. I'd eventually find out that we'd left San Antonio right on time at 2:45am. We stopped in Del Rio while I was asleep and were already well into west Texas. In fact we made it to the next stop in Sanderson ahead of schedule. It's weird to go from three hours down to early, but I noted before that the Sunset Limited schedule was padded.

The shower was in use when I went downstairs, so I passed on that. I did head shave, brush my teeth, and otherwise clean up in the restroom, though. I also changed into more presentable clothes to get ready for the day.

The configuration of the train changed overnight. My car is still at the rear, but it's facing the opposite direction. Because of that, after tearing down the bed, I chose to sit in the smaller of the two facing seats, the one that has steps that lead to the upper bunk next to it. It's still perfectly adequate, and I'd prefer to sit facing forward. The coach attendant just made an announcement that in a few minutes he's be turning the seats in the 421 coach around so they'd also be facing the right way. I didn't even know the coach seats could be rotated, but it would be annoying to ride backwards all day.

There are now two engines and a luggage car at the front of the train. Behind them is one sleeper from New Orleans, the diner and lounge that were originally on the Sunset Limited, two New Orleans coaches, and the coach and sleeper that transferred from the Texas Eagle. The train seems quite a bit less crowded today than it was yesterday. When I went through the coaches, the vast majority of rows seemed to have one person sprawled across two seats.

I had breakfast in the diner, this time seated across from two Hispanic women (a middle-aged woman and her mother) who had come from Houston. They were pleasant, but we barely spoke all through the meal. It annoyed me that many other tables were completely empty, but they still insisted on seating me with strangers.

The food on this train definitely improves beyond San Antonio. Like most western trains, the Sunset Limited serves Amtrak's "traditional dining" menu rather than the airplane food they serve in the East. It's all cooked to order, and it's served with metal cutlery and cloth napkins. There are even nice touches like flowers on the table. I had their signature breakfast, which is French toast. It was beautifully presented, topped with berries and a mint sprig and with whipped cream and syrup on the side. I also got a side of crispy bacon, plus coffee and cranberry juice.

The sun was just starting to come up at breakfast time. When I looked out the window it looked like there were patches of snow on the ground. That actually could have been believable, since yesterday there was a blizzard warning for El Paso and southern New Mexico. It was about 45 degrees out this morning, though, and it turned out that I was just seeing the sand or clay on the ground beneath the desert vegetation. As it got brighter, it was clear the ground was beige rather than white. Later in the day thought I saw snow-capped mountains, but I'm pretty sure that was also just desert soil.

Our speed varies a lot as we make our way across west Texas. On flat stretches we go a full 80mph, while it's more like 45 in more hilly areas. The line doesn't seem to get a lot of freight traffic, so we haven't had to pull off on sidings to let other trains pass.

I've been through west Texas twice before. Once was on a train trip from New Orleans to Los Angeles with my sister Margaret, and the other was when I drove down to the Big Bend country during COVID. Both of those trips were in summer, and it intrigues me that the landscape seemed wetter then than it does now. It looks very desolate, and while there is a stark beauty to it, it's not at all what I'd call "pretty". There are some nice mountains, though.



Landscape between Sanderson and Alpine, Texas

The car attendant changed at San Antonio. While Anastasia had served car 2130 since Chicago, now my attendant was a young woman named LaShanda. Normally I tip the sleeper attendant when I finish a journey (which is customary, even though they are decently paid), but obviously I won't be able to tip Anastasia. Given that she was less than pleasant in bringing my meals, though, I don't know that I'm all that bothered by that.

We got to Alpine, Texas, shortly after 10am, almost twenty minutes early. Alpine is also a designated smoke break, so today we had nearly half an hour before the train would set off again. I decided to step off the train for a bit to enjoy the cool morning air. While I waited for the train to pull forward so people in the rear cars could get off, the car attendant was dealing with another issue. An elderly woman in one of the downstairs compartments had locked herself in the room. That would actually be surprisingly easy to do. The mechanism is complicated, and it would be difficult for someone with limited strength to get it unlocked. Fortunately when I came back from my little walk around the platform, her door was open.

I stayed overnight in Alpine on that road trip to Big Bend. It's a very pleasant town, both the largest and nicest place for a long distance in any direction. There are lots of tourist-oriented businesses, and they have murals painted on buildings all over town that honor the local heritage. I snapped a few pictures, but I won't bother including them here since I've had photos of Alpine in previous travelogues. It is a place worth checking out if you happen to be in west Texas, though.



Lock on a Superliner roomette

After we left Alpine a man from the diner came around to take reservations for lunch and dinner. This time I didn't opt to eat in my room, since getting reservations allowed me to choose the times I preferred. In particular it allowed me to have dinner before getting off the train in Tucson. My reservations are for lunch at 11:45 and dinner at 5:30—both on Mountain time.

Shortly after eleven we passed through but did not stop in the grungy, forlorn-looking town of Marfa. There's a large art community in Marfa. In the write-up I did of the trip Margaret and I made on the Sunset Limited I mentioned the fake Prada store that's actually an art installation set in the middle of the desert. I missed the store on this trip, probably reading the Laura Ingalls Wilder biography as we passed it. What I did see, though, was a weird art exhibit made of shipping containers set at various angles. It was actually a surprisingly interesting sight. We also passed what looked like a big inflatable airplane. I don't know if that was supposed to be art or some sort of actual transportation.



Shipping container art installation – Marfa, Texas

The couple were very talkative and pleasant to eat with, though the man didn't say more than five words the entire meal.

I had a grilled ham and cheese sandwich for lunch. The menu just called it a grilled cheese, but it came with ham as well. There were chips on the side, and I also got iced tea. For dessert there was the same choice of butter cake or brownie from the flexible dining menu. Instead of just being in a plastic package, though, they were presented on plates with whipped cream on top.

While we ate the train passed through some badland washes that the woman at my table described as "a little grand canyon". It might be what the famous landform looked like millions of years ago. Most of the land around here seems quite barren, but as we neared El Paso we passed mile after mile of pecan trees. (I had to google that they were pecans.) They apparently call these "orchards", though I've never heard that term used for anything but fruit before.

Visiting with the couple at lunch I learned the details of the "incident" that delayed us in Ft. Worth yesterday. It turned out the train had hit a pedestrian. The station in Ft. Worth is at a transit center that serves buses and commuter trains. A woman was apparently trying to cross from a bus to the commuter train platform and didn't realize an Amtrak train was coming. I gather she was injured, but not killed. Hopefully she'll be all right. I must say it surprises me a bit that she was able to cross the tracks when a train was coming. Most places with light rail or commuter trains have crossing gates at stations precisely to prevent this kind of accident.

El Paso seems to stretch on almost as far as Dallas. Overall, I'd say it's a nicer looking city, though. Sometime I'd like to come back to El Paso (likely by plane rather than train) and really see the place.

The El Paso station is located right near the tripoint where Texas, New Mexico, and the nation of Mexico all come together. It's hemmed in by two elevated highways. U.S. 85 separates it from the Rio Grande, and Interstate 10 separates it from New Mexico. Interestingly there's yet another elevated freeway just across the border in Juarez, Mexico. The weather app on my phone actually said I was in Sunland Park, New Mexico, even though I was essentially in downtown El Paso.

Several times the train staff announced that a highlight of El Paso was Juanita, the burrito lady. While she apparently also owns a physical restaurant, Juanita makes a point of being on the platform each time the train arrives. She does quite a business, too. I watched her sell more than a hundred burritos this afternoon—probably closer to 200. If hadn't have just had lunch, I might have bought one myself. At \$3 each, they're a good deal, but she's also taking in a good amount of money from her sales.

I did have a snack this afternoon. I stopped in the lounge car and picked up a

The railroad parallels U.S. 90 through here. While the highway carries very little traffic, it's designed to be quite a bit busier than it is. The speed limit varies between 70 and 75 mph, and every few miles they have passing sections that make it a four-lane undivided road. Something that stood out was that almost all the signs are written in words; they don't have the symbols we're used to seeing up north for things like "merge left" or "deer crossing". The signs don't look weathered, so presumably they've been put up fairly recently—intentionally with words rather than symbols. I suppose that's part of the "English only" push, which is big in Texas—in spite of (or perhaps because of) the fact the state has a large number of Hispanic residents.

I went to lunch partway between Alpine and El Paso (which are three and a half hours apart, with no stops in between). My cell phone still said it was almost 1pm Central Time, but the diner had switched to Mountain Time. This time I was seated with three other people. There was a retired couple originally from Chicagoland who now live in Tucson and also a thirty-something man from Missouri.



Juanita, the burrito lady

cheese and cracker tray. While the price has gone up since I last got one, they've improved the quality, too. Instead of little slices, they now have big chunks of cheese in several different varieties. It actually felt like it was worth the \$7 I paid.

We left El Paso right on time at 1:50pm Mountain Time, having spent roughly 38 hours to cross Texas. Almost immediately we entered New Mexico. In southeast New Mexico the old Southern Pacific Railroad (for which this part of the United States was acquired in the Gadsden Purchase, and now owned by Union Pacific) runs right next to the Mexican border. While President Trump never did build the "wall" he promised, he did reinforce the already existing border fence. It's now topped with razor wire. The railroad runs very close to the border fence. In fact for quite a while there's just a narrow gravel road between the tracks and the border. Border Patrol trucks run along that road, making it very evident where you are.

We turned north from the border and then made a lengthy stop to fuel up the train. It seemed we were stopped forever, and I wondered why they couldn't gotten the fuel in El Paso, rather than making two lengthy stops back to back. I'd probably felt too good about getting back on schedule after yesterday's delays, because the refueling stop seemed to take forever. After about twenty minutes the car attendant explained that we had to wait for a couple of freight trains in front of us to fuel up before we could. Half an hour later I heard her grunt, "Man! This is taking way longer than normal." At one point I felt more hopeful when I took the brakes off. Unfortunately we then backed up about a car length and stopped again. Then, about fifteen minutes later, we backed up still further.

We finally started moving forward at 4pm, after losing about an hour and a half. The conductor made an announcement to explain that the issue had been that they were servicing restrooms in two cars that had been plugged when people tried to flush things that shouldn't go down a toilet. Apparently even after all that time they were still plugged, with what the conductor described as "something bigger than a roll of paper towels". Well, at least we were moving again.

I continued reading the Laura Ingalls Wilder biography. It goes through the remainder of her childhood, which is more or less as she described in the later books. Then it goes into excruciating detail about the many tragedies that faced Laura and Almanzo in the early years of their life together. Laura gave an abbreviated account of these in *The First Four Years*, a book that was published unedited after her death. This book is much more detailed, and it appears there was just one tragedy after another.

We stopped in Deming, New Mexico at 4:55pm, about an hour and fifteen minutes late. In my Statistics classes I teach about a man named W. Edwards Deming, an Iowan who introduced modern quality control methods to Japan, leading to that country's postwar industrial revolution. While I thought of him as we stopped in the New Mexico backwater (not that there's much water to back up here), the place of course has nothing to do with him. Instead it took the maiden name of the wife of a railroad tycoon.

Deming is certainly not one a station Amtrak boasts about. The "station" looks like a city bus stop, just a small shelter with a bench inside it. I don't think Deming actually has city buses, though, and the shelter has a train station logo painted on its side. Three people got off there, two of them from my car. They were college girls who it appeared were being picked up by parents. The third person (also college age) came from one of the New Orleans coach cars, and he went to a car that had two kayaks tied to the roof.

At Deming I noticed a sign on Interstate 10 that said "TUCSON – 212", the first sign I'd seen for my destination tonight. While we appear to actually be going faster than the freeway traffic (probably 80mph), the timetable says it will take us longer to get to Tucson than the three hours it will probably take the cars.

I was among the first people in the diner for dinner tonight. I sat with a couple from Grand Rapids who were making a big loop around the West on Amtrak to celebrate their fiftieth anniversary and with an overly made-up old lady from Tucson who had been visiting her daughter in Houston. The dinner companions were fine, if no one I'd personally choose. The food, however, was excellent. I began with a nice salad of mixed greens with a mini-wheel of brie on top. After that was a flatiron steak cooked a proper medium well (as I ordered) and topped with a lovely red wine sauce. On the side were garlic mashed potatoes, quite elegant green beans, and little spheres of carrots. Finally there was a blueberry cheesecake for dessert and iced tea on the side. If I'd have travelled in coach, they'd have charged \$40 for the meal. It's probably not worth that, but it was lovely as an included extra.

During dinner we stopped in Lorsburg, New Mexico, which seemed a lot like Deming. By the time we finished we were nearly to Benson, Arizona. I got some coffee from an urn they have in the sleeping car to top off the dinner.

I spent most of the evening reading from the Kindle. The chapters I had now expanded on *On the Way Home*, following Laura and Almanzo after they left South Dakota. The part that Laura left out of her books is that they first moved to the Florida panhandle, where pretty much everyone in the family became sick and they continued to live in poverty. They also lived briefly in Louisiana, where others in the Wilder family had settled. Eventually they moved to the Ozarks and established their permanent home in Mansfield, Missouri.



Border "wall" – Sunland Park, New Mexico  
(The windows on the train got dirtier after they theoretically "cleaned" them in El Paso.)

Another thing Laura doesn't really mention in her writing is that Almanzo was partially paralyzed by a stroke he suffered early in their marriage. He was not able to do serious farm work after that and mostly made money in Missouri driving a delivery truck.

The approach into Tucson seemed to take forever, though I'm sure it seemed longer than usual because I'd been on the train for 57 hours. (The Texas Eagle is Amtrak's longest single train, and I'm glad I wasn't going all the way to Los Angeles.) We finally arrived at 8:55pm, fifty-five minutes behind schedule. I made my way through the maze that leads from the platform to the station and eventually out to the street. From there I actually did end up going the right way, but I thought I'd made a wrong turn. Eventually I got my bearings and walked a few blocks through downtown Tucson. Tucson is a college town (it actually looks and feels like Iowa City), and even on a Tuesday night during holiday break all the bars were hopping. I'd originally considered a hotel closer to the station that is also one of the city's big music venues. I'm glad that I switched to a couple blocks off the main drag.

Eventually I arrived at the Hampton Inn—Downtown Tucson. Like the place in Chicago, this shares a newly built building with another chain hotel (in this case Home 2 Suites). It took surprisingly long to check in, but eventually I got my key and made my way up to Room 625. It's a very nice hotel, though I will only be here for one night. As it gets closer to the new year, I'll be moving to an even quieter (and more importantly cheaper) place by the airport.

## **WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 31, 2025**

### **TUCSON, ARIZONA**

I was up around 6:15 this morning and slowly got ready for the day. The breakfast was one of the more limited spreads I've seen at a Hampton Inn, but I did enjoy some mini omelettes.

At about a quarter to eight I left my bags at the hotel desk and then set off. I walked north two blocks and east two blocks to the corner of 6<sup>th</sup> and Congress, the south entrance of the Ronstadt Transit Center. While a mural in an alley by the transit center features Linda Ronstadt, the Tucson native who was one of the biggest vocalists of the '70s, the transit center actually honors her grandfather, Federico Ronstadt, who among other things established the first public transit (mule-drawn streetcars) in the city. The Ronstadt family also operated a hardware store from the 1880s to the 1960s on the block where the transit center is located.



**Sunrise over the mountains  
from Room 625 at Hampton Inn—Downtown Tucson**

I found the bay for bus #4 and had just a short wait until my bus arrived. Transit in Tucson is entirely fare-free, so I just boarded without buying a ticket, tapping a card, or putting coins in a farebox. Probably because of the lack of fares, a lot of people on the margins of society seem to ride the buses all day long. They weren't dangerous in any way, but they did provide some local color.

I'd take three different buses and a streetcar (much more modern than those from Grandpa Ronstadt's day). In the process I saw a lot of Tucson, and most of what I saw looked alike. While its setting is nice, most of the city is not in any way beautiful. Transit in Tucson tends to run along what urban planners derisively call "stroads". (The word is a combination of "streets" and "roads" and refers to extremely those extremely wide arterial strips you find in every American city.) Bus 4, for instance, mostly runs along a monstrosity that is literally called "Speedway". I saw lots of fast food, convenience stores, oil change places, strip malls, liquor stores, cannabis shops, big box discounters, motels, urgent care centers, ambulance-chaser lawyers, car washes, and seedy apartments. It was like highway 6 in Coralville, but on steroids. Apparently in the 1970s *Life* magazine named Speedway "the ugliest street in America". From what I saw, it hasn't improved much.



**Tucson Botanical Gardens**

Route 4 theoretically serves the University of Arizona, but the institution's buildings are actually a couple blocks to the south. I had to cross Speedway at a point where it was eight lanes wide. The pedestrian light has a countdown timer that allows 37 seconds to cross the street. There was a handicapped woman trying to cross in the opposite direction, and she only made it halfway across in that time. The traffic on Speedway had the right of way for 83 seconds before she could cross the rest of the way.

I got off the bus and walked north on Alvernon Way, a somewhat smaller street that combines strip businesses with rather surprisingly nice-looking homes. There was construction all along Alvernon, which I think reduced its traffic a bit. I walked about a mile north to my ultimate destination, the Tucson Botanical Gardens.

It's not really surprising that a botanic center in Tucson primarily features desert plants. They actually had sections with dry land plants from all over the world. Something I learned here was that while there are succulent plants on every inhabited continent, cacti (plants with needles) are only native to the Americas. There are also major differences between North American and South American cacti. The majority of cactus plants from Brazil and Peru have trouble growing in Tucson

because (believe it or not) it gets too cold for them. While the summers typically have highs over 100, it can get down to freezing in winter—which doesn't happen in the tropics.

There's a large area at the botanical gardens that explains how native people used various desert plants. They also have a butterfly garden, and there's an exhibit that recreates the garden from artist Frida Kahlo's home in Mexico City. The gardens were easily my favorite of the things I saw today, and if anyone who reads this happens to end up in southeast Arizona, I'd recommend you go there.

I walked to the bus stop nearest to the botanical gardens, which is at Alvernon and Pima. I waited for about ten minutes staring across the intersection at a place that called itself "the cannabis superstore". I suppose it shouldn't be surprising that legalizing previously controlled substances would lead to selling them in superstores. A few drops of rain fell as I was waiting, but not enough to matter.

I caught bus #5, which takes a diagonal route mostly through residential areas. It's a very mixed bag of housing—everything from modern townhouses to brick bungalows from the '50s to mobile home parks. Things seem more colorful here than in Phoenix (where everything is brown fake adobe), which makes Tucson more attractive to my eye.

I got off at the University of Arizona, where for many years one of my former students had helped to keep the Wildcat athletes academically eligible. (Before that John Mosbach had the same job with the University of Southern California Trojans, and now he lives in Cedar Falls and keeps the UNI Panthers eligible.) I'd come to the U of A campus to visit the Arizona History Museum. Unfortunately when I got there I found that the place was closed between Christmas and New Year's. I was annoyed that there had been nothing on their website that indicated that, just a piece of paper taped to the door. I did have a pleasant walk around the campus, but I learned nothing about Arizona history.

From the university I caught the SunLink streetcar, which slowly took me back downtown. I got off at Church Street, where they were in the midst of setting up for the Taco Bell—Arizona Bowl New Year's Eve Bash. A crew was unloading porta-potties and stocking them with toilet paper as I walked by. Other people were fencing off the area with orange plastic that bore the name of a company called "Desert Barricades". I suppose this must be like a miniature version of what it's like in Times Square before the big night.

The back of the celebration area led to a public plaza by the Pima County Courthouse. The tiles of the Mexican-style plaza match the beautiful dome atop the courthouse, which is in Spanish colonial style. It's really a lovely little park.



**LEFT: On the SunLink streetcar**  
**RIGHT: Dome of Pima County Courthouse**

My destination this time was the Presidio, the site of the Spanish fort that 250 years ago became the first white settlement in Phoenix. (Native people have inhabited the area for at least 4,000 years.) At first I was disappointed. Much of the Presidio neighborhood consists of restored homes from the early 1800s that have been repurposed as tacky, tourist-oriented businesses. It comes across like New Orleans, but made of adobe.

What saves the area is the Presidio Museum, which is where I learned the Arizona history I didn't get at the university. It's a private museum, and I got the feeling they get by on a shoestring budget. Nonetheless, it's really quite well done. They explain many eras of Tucson's history, and they highlight the many different ethnic groups that have contributed to the place. Tucson was founded by the Spanish as a fortress town. The Spanish got along well with the local natives, the Tohono O'odham. The fort was built to defend against the Apache who wanted to expand from their home further north. The museum is on the original site of the fort, but most of the actual building is a recreation based on archaeological discoveries.

The museum discusses life among people at all social levels in colonial Spain. It then goes into detail about how things changed when Tucson became part of the Republic of Mexico, how it changed again when the Gadsden Purchase ceded the area to the United States, how the railroad changed it, how the area changed when Arizona became a state, and how things changed with the late 20th Century migration to the Sun Belt. It really was quite fascinating.



Typical mural in downtown Tucson

closed on New Year's Eve. I ended up having lunch at the other downtown hotel I'd considered. The Congress Hotel was built in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century and is famous as the place John Dillinger was arrested. Their restaurant, the Cup Café, was doing a booming business at lunchtime. The only immediately available seating was at the bar, and I could only sit there because I was a party of one. It was actually kind of fun to sit there and watch the bartender, who also served as a barista and a waiter. He was in perpetual motion and definitely earned everything he made today.

The Cup Café doesn't serve Sonoran hot dogs. Instead I opted for French onion soup and what they called a Cubano. That was a loose and very Southwestern interpretation of a Cuban sandwich. While it did have ham and shredded pork, I don't think anyone in Miami has ever put jalapenos and grilled onions on a Cubano. Fortunately I don't have my brother Paul's stomach, so I was able to enjoy a flavorful, if not very authentic sandwich.

Next I went to the Southern Arizona Transportation Museum, which is located inside and next to the old Southern Pacific Depot where I'd arrived in Tucson last night. This is mostly a museum honoring the legacy of the Southern Pacific Railroad. They go through the Gadsden Purchase, the Chinese laborers who built the railroad, the effect the railroad had on Tucson and other places it served, the era of racial segregation on passenger railroads (with artifacts like the different dishes used in white and black dining cars), the downfall of passenger service by private railroads and the creation of Amtrak, and then Southern Pacific's ultimate dissolution in 1998. Out back they have an old steam engine you can look at up close. I passed on that because it would have required running gauntlet of half a dozen old geezers who wanted to share their railroad stories. The place might not be worth a steep admission, but it was certainly worth a stop given that it was free.

I took the streetcar to Mercado San Augustín, which was a bit of a disappointment. It's basically a shopping mall filled with stores that sell artisan handicrafts. Much more interesting was St. Augustine Cathedral, which is a lovely modern building in Spanish colonial style. It dates to 1968, but it looks like it could be as old as the city. It was also interesting to see the public Christmas tree they had set up outside the parish center. It was surrounded by dozens of poinsettias, and both the tree and the wall behind it were festooned in bright flowers of all kinds. In a climate like Tucson's, you can have flowers outdoors at Christmas, and they make a beautiful way to celebrate the season.

The cathedral was right across the street from the Hampton Inn, so it was my final sightseeing stop downtown. I reclaimed my bags and made my way back to the Ronstadt Transit Center. There was a bit of a wait for the bus I wanted, and I filled the time by getting a scoop of ice cream from a place called the Screamery. The girl at the counter was cold and indifferent, but the ice cream was pretty good.

This time I caught bus #25, which mostly runs south of downtown along another

I spent quite a while walking around downtown Tucson. The most noteworthy feature of the area is murals. There are over a hundred murals on various buildings throughout the downtown area. They're in many different styles, but most of them are very well done. Nobody lives in downtown Tucson, and there's not a lot of office buildings—just a few regional banks and communication companies. That makes it a fairly low-rise downtown where most of the businesses are bars and restaurants—the downtown you'd see in a college town rather than in a city of half a million. All the art also gives it a college town feel, but it does make it quite lively.

Part of the reason I walked around downtown was that I was trying to have a traditional Tucson dish for lunch. The Sonoran hot dog is sort of the southwestern equivalent of the Chicago dog—tons of vegetables and sauces atop a humble wiener. There were a couple of places that specialize in Sonoran hot dogs, but I found out they were



Mural recreating tourism from the '50s on the wall of the Southern Arizona Transportation Museum



St. Augustine Cathedral

big strip called Park Avenue. Near its southern end it turns and follows another street (Tucson Avenue) to the airport. My hotel tonight was right at the next-to-last stop on line #25, the Country Inn and Suites—Tucson International Airport. While it was no small accomplishment to make my way across the street to the hotel, once I got there, the room was very nice. I'm in a true suite with a separate living room and bed room, and there's also an extra sink above the microwave and mini-fridge. It's about \$85 a night. Tonight the Hampton Inn wants more than double that, so it wasn't a hard decision to move down by the airport.

For dinner this evening I walked up to another strip (Valencia Avenue) and went to a local chain called Eegee's. I thought the first syllable was pronounced "egg", but the word is actually pronounced like the plural of the "for example" abbreviation—e.g.'s. I assume the name must come from the founder's initials. Eegee's sells subs (which they call "grinders") and frozen fruit beverages. (The place apparently started out as an Italian ice stand.) I had one of their warm grinders, another Cuban sandwich. The ingredients in this one were certainly more authentic (ham, shredded pork, Swiss cheese, pickle, and mustard), but the odd thing was that the sandwich wasn't pressed. It was pretty good, though. I also had a small cup of their "holly berry" frozen beverage—basically a raspberry slush. That surely put me way over my daily carb limit, but it was a nice treat.

Back at the hotel I filled the evening just watching TV in the background while working on this travelogue. There are actually two TVs in the room, and of course I had to try them both out. I will say I like the controls on these much better than the ones at the Hampton Inn. I noticed it began to rain fairly heavily, so it's probably a good thing I didn't have any evening plans.

## **THURSDAY, JANUARY 1, 2026**

### **TUCSON & NOGALES, ARIZONA**

While it rained on and off all day, I mostly kept dry and things basically went as planned. I ventured outside of Tucson today, and it ended up being a pretty interesting day.

I got to bed before the new year arrived to the Mountain Time Zone and was up this morning right at 6am, which is pretty much when I get up on school days. I got ready for the day fairly slowly, because the hotel staff had let me know that while they'd serve a continental breakfast from 6am, hot foods would only be available after 7:00.

The breakfast wasn't too bad. I had decent scrambled eggs, some sausage, and a waffle. There were quite a few other offerings as well, and I may try something different tomorrow.

I finished breakfast around 7:15 and then went to the bus stop across the street. Then I checked the app and found that it would be more than 45 minutes before the next bus would arrive there. There are two routes that serve the stop, but they both run hourly and come within five minutes of each other.

Since it would be a long time until the bus came, I decided to walk to my destination, which was the airport car rental center. While it's somewhat easier to access than other airports, TUS still isn't particularly pedestrian friendly. Tucson Avenue has sidewalks, but they end right at the entrance to airport property. Fortunately traffic was light, and I was able to make my way around the parking barriers and on into the terminal.

I went to the Avis desk because I had a reservation with that company. The woman there punched a few keys and told me, "Oh, you're a preferred guest. I can't deal with you." She sent me into the parking ramp and said I should speak with the man there. "...And he'll probably give you an upgrade," she said.

There was no one at the Avis booth in the parking ramp when I arrived, but eventually a young Latino man showed up. He punched some buttons that I'm pretty sure the woman inside could have done. Then he got out a different key from what he was originally holding and told me I'd been upgraded to an SUV. I told him I really didn't want an SUV; I really preferred the economy car I'd reserved. I think he was annoyed that I wasn't a fan of his generosity, but eventually he gave me the keys to a gray Honda Civic with California plates. I'd done the paperwork online, so all I had to do was swipe a credit card, and I was on my way.

I realized I'd left my camera at the hotel, so I made a brief stop there. Then I set out for the day. I had scoped out my first destination (Saguaro National Park) earlier, and it seemed pretty straightforward to get to. So I set off east on Valencia Road, knowing that after about fifteen miles I'd have to turn off toward the park.

Valencia Road had a lot of construction, and it was annoying that the Civic had a sensor that noticed every time my tires touched the line at the edge of the road (which was often, since there were barriers on the left side, where there would normally be a striped line. One of the school suburbs has a similar feature. It makes the driver's seat vibrate if you wander to the edge of your lane. The Civic didn't just vibrate, though. It applied the brakes and automatically turned the steering wheel toward the road. If I were driving carelessly, that might have been all right, but frankly I'd rather go over the shoulder stripe than hit a barricade.

I drove for what seemed like an awfully long time, and I never saw a sign to turn off for the national park. I'd purposely been looking for brown signs, but basically all I saw were the entries to various housing developments. I knew I'd gone too far, so I pulled off, figuring I'd now get directions from Google Maps. Unfortunately at this point I was in a dead zone with no cell service. So I turned around and was soon relieved to see a sign that said the national park was 9 miles away. (There had been no such signs the other way.) I saw a couple more distance signs, but just like in the other direction, there was no sign telling me where to turn off. After going 10 miles, I pulled into a grocery store parking lot and did manage to bring up Google Maps. I scoped out the directions on there (finding that Old Spanish Road was the place I needed to turn) and then also turned up the sound and had the phone read me directions as I drove. I confirmed that indeed there was no sign at Old Spanish Road. It may have been removed as part of the construction, but I'd think they'd at least put up a temporary sign.

I made it to the park entrance right at 9am, having spent more than an hour on what should have been about a twenty-minute drive. There was construction at the park entrance, too, and it blocked off many of the spaces in the visitors center parking lot. There was literally nowhere to park when I arrived, so I just headed out into the main part of the park.

Last fall I bought a senior national parks pass. For \$80 it gives me (and any guests riding in the same vehicle) unlimited access to every National Park Service property in America for the rest of my life. I visited two different locations today, and those alone paid for half the value of the pass.



Saguaro National Park honors the enormous cactus species it was named for. (The "g" in the word "saguaro", by the way, is pronounced with a glottal stop that basically sounds like a swallowing sound.) While it's only been an official national park since 1994, it's been managed by the park service under different classifications since the 1920s. When the land that is now the park was first acquired, much of it was referred to as "the cactus forest", and photos from the era show the giant plants growing just a few feet from each other. We now know that the saguaros that were here in the 20s were very old plants, near the end of their lives. They had produced what amounted to saplings, but the young cacti were mostly killed by cattle that grazed the area. By the 1970s the vast majority of the saguaros in the park had died. The government banned grazing on national park property (something the current administration would like to allow again), and the regulation seems to have saved the plants. While it's not the forest it was in the '20s, today there is a healthy ecosystem with saguaro, other cacti, and various other plants that thrive in the desert.

Mind you, it was a bit hard to think of the place as a desert today. They'd gotten heavy rain last night, about two inches throughout most of southeast Arizona and up to seven inches in some places. At higher elevations the precipitation fell as snow, enough that some of the mountains were snowcapped this morning. All that water made even the spikiest plants look green and vibrant. It made puddles on the trails and filled the washes in the low areas. I really have no interest in experiencing the heat that permeates Arizona in summer, but it was interesting to see a wet desert in winter.

I did the full loop road (a one-lane, one-way road that was originally built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s), stopping at all the major overlooks. I also hiked a couple of trails (short ones, not the trails that go through the backcountry for miles and miles). Then I capped off the morning with a quick visit to the visitors center, since there was a single parking space available there as I exited the park. It's a lovely place to visit, and it was particularly nice to experience it in unusual weather.



I made my fourth pass down Valencia Road and drove almost to where my hotel is. I stopped for lunch at a Waffle House. The place was packed, so I ended up sitting at the counter like I did yesterday. Here half a dozen employees worked hard to get all the orders out as quickly as possible. I had a ham and egg combo that ended up having more food than I really wanted to eat. At \$13.50, it was pretty good value compared to most things these days. Waffle House isn't haute cuisine, but it was tasty.

My next destination was a short drive away, just southwest of the city of Tucson. The San Xavier division of the Tohono O'odham Reservation abuts the city of Tucson. Right after entering it I passed a gleaming modern complex that was an odd combination of a casino and a hospital. I then crossed I-19 and found myself on the main part of the reservation. It reminded me of the Navajo reservation where my brother Steve used to teach. Just like up by Gallup, the road lined with pedestrians, though of course neither the state nor the

Tohono O'odham nation bothered to install sidewalks or even add a proper shoulder. The town of San Xavier (which uses the Spanish pronunciation hah-bee-air, by the way) also reminded me of the Navajo reservation. Its only real business is a general store that also seems to be the social center of the town. The main difference is that the buildings are packed much closer together here than they are in Navajo towns.



St. Xavier Mission

My purpose for coming here was to see the Mission of San Xavier del Bac. The mission predates the presidio in Tucson and has been ministering to the natives here since the year 1692. The current church building dates from 1783, and it continues to serve as an active house of worship today. The church is staffed by Franciscan friars, and both Franciscan and Dominican sisters serve the adjacent school and the other needs of people on the reservation.



Unfortunately the façade of the church is under restoration, so it was covered by scaffolding and a picture of what it's supposed to look like. One of the two towers is also being restored. The restoration efforts are mostly funded by marketing the place as a tourist attraction. They have a little museum that explains the history of the church and the plans for its restoration.

I thought there was mass going on inside the church, but it turned out that they just had the sanctuary open for prayers on New Year's Day, and quite a lot of people (mostly from the reservation) were starting 2026 with prayer. The organ was playing, and a nun sang songs about Mary (which makes sense, since January 1<sup>st</sup> is her main feast day). I was intrigued in the back to find the exact same calendar that St. Cecelia's in Algona gave out to their members, though of course the advertising was different here.



Signs on Interstate 19

After seeing St. Xavier Mission I headed south on I-19. This road is unique because it's the only interstate in the United States to use distances measured in meters and kilometers. The highway was built during the Nixon administration, and at that time the Metric system was considered the wave of the future. Unsurprisingly, President Trump has claimed that this is un-American and that the highway's measurements should be changed to feet and miles. The Arizona Department of Transportation is fighting against the change, since it would cost the state millions of dollars to replace all the signs. Interestingly, while the distances are Metric, the speed limits are in miles per hour—generally 75mph in open areas and 65 when it's urban.

It kept rained on and off as I drove south. I seemed to be taking my sunglasses on and off and alternating between running the wipers at full blast or on the lowest intermittent setting. For some reason it seemed as if there were no traffic when it was dry, but the volume picked up whenever the rain started. It doesn't help that Arizonans go far over the speed limit in good conditions but then slow way down for rain.



Old mission at Tumacácori

I took Exit 34 (as in 34 kilometers from Mexico) and headed east to the old highway, which now serves as an unnumbered access road. Between there and the next exit was my destination, Tumacácori National Historic Site. This preserves the site of a mission that was founded by the same Jesuit (Fr. Kino) who established San Xavier and about a dozen other missions in what was then the northern extent of New Spain. Franciscans took over the mission, tore down Fr. Kino's church (only a foundation remains today), and built a much more elaborate church. After Mexican independence, Spanish priests were ordered out of the country, and no one local wanted to replace the Spaniards who served Tumacácori. The site was abandoned for nearly 200 years. The shell of the Franciscan church (San José) still stands. The park service has restored its façade, but the interior and most of the rest of the building are in very rough condition. There are also ruins of a convent and a cemetery, and they reconstructed various out-buildings in the style of the era. One interesting feature is an orchard that includes trees that were planted by the Jesuits in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century.

From the historic site it was a short hop down to Nogales, that is the American town of that name rather than the much larger Mexican city on the other side of the border fence. I didn't really see anything in Nogales, but I did go shopping at a place called D.D.'s Discount. Apparently this is a national chain, owned by the same company that operates Ross Dress for Less. I'd never seen them anywhere else, though. I spent quite a while browsing at D.D.'s, and I ended up buying a shirt for \$6.99 that will be one of my main souvenirs of this trip.



all over the country. The officers here were pleasant, and they didn't seem to be racially profiling people.

I made a quick stop at a rest area that was built on the site of one of the earliest ranches in the area, one that dates to when it was part of Mexico. There was a nice display on the history of the area—including ranching, mining, light industry, and even the space program.

I got back to the hotel around 3:30pm, rested a bit, and got some more work done on this write-up. Then around 5:30 I set off for my last bit of sightseeing in Arizona. The Tucson Botanical Gardens hosts what they call "Lights Up!" on evenings in the holiday season. I've seen similar things in other places, starting years ago with ZooLights in Portland. At the botanic center they strung Christmas lights around all the trees and buildings, a tunnel of lights visitors can walk through, and a trail through the place lined with plastic luminarias. The price varies with demand. If I'd wanted to go on New Year's Eve, it would have cost \$175, but things were much more affordable a day later. Lights Up! was interesting, but I'm glad I went to the gardens during the day as well. Pretty much none of the

It was interesting that parked next to me in the D.D.'s lot was a pick-up with a Sonora license plate. It was pouring rain, so I didn't snap a picture of it, but I'll include a picture from Wikipedia of a plate that looks essentially the same. I'm also going to include an example of the most common style of Arizona plate. Like Iowa, Arizona has many different plate designs, but the purple mountains and turquoise sky is the most popular.

I couldn't have crossed the Mexican border if I'd wanted to, since my passport was at home. From what I could tell, cheap shopping was the main thing of note on the American side of Nogales, so after hitting up D.D.'s I went back to I-19 and headed north.

About twenty miles north of Nogales there's a permanent border patrol checkpoint on I-19. I'd been through a similar stop in west Texas on my trip to the Big Bend country, and the procedure here was similar. As each vehicle approaches, the officer gives it a quick once over. Almost everyone (myself included, and also including most another car from Sonora that was in front of me) are waved right through. The border patrol has the right to pull people over and inspect their vehicles if they think there might be human trafficking, though. Checkpoints like these long pre-date ICE and all the questionable stuff they've done in cities



**Lights Up! at the Tucson Botanical Gardens**

to me that if we really wanted to "make America great again", we'd find a way to provide affordable housing for everyone who needs it. Way too many folks are slipping through the cracks these days.

On the way back to the hotel I stopped at an Arco station at the corner of Valencia and Tucson, since it's imperative that rental cars be returned with a full tank of gas. Gas in Tucson is generally more expensive than it is back home, but the prices were all over the place. Up by the botanic center a Chevron station wanted \$3.19 a gallon, while at this Arco I paid \$2.36. Almost every station has a higher price for credit cards than for cash, usually 15 or 20 cents a gallon more. I was assuming I'd pay the credit rate (which was \$2.49), but my Discover card was declined at the pump. I found out later that Arco actually doesn't accept Discover, so that was probably the reason. Since I had no idea how much gas the car would take, I gave forty bucks to a guy I'll "Apu" in honor of *The Simpsons*. It turned out the tank was entirely full after \$14.

I also picked up a couple of bottles of pop and a really bad-looking personal pizza at the Arco station. When I went to the counter, Apu told me that he couldn't ring up the pizza because it was past its expiration, but if I wanted to eat it, I could have it for free. I'm pretty sure it had been sitting in the warmer all day, and it was badly dried out. I wasn't going to complain about a free dinner, though. It also surprised me that the "2 for \$4.50" Pepsi products rang up at exactly \$4.50. There's apparently neither tax nor a bottle deposit on pop in Arizona.

Back at the hotel I confirmed with the hotel desk that they do indeed have an airport shuttle. The girl told me all I needed to do was to show up at the desk with my luggage fifteen minutes before I need to go. After getting that settled, I enjoyed my stale pizza and got caught up on this letter. Eventually it was time to head to bed.

## **FRIDAY, JANUARY 2, 2026**

### **TUCSON, ARIZONA TO BLOOMINGTON, MINNESOTA**

I was up again at 6am. After preparing for the day I drove the Civic back to Tucson Airport. I'd gotten a message that I should use the app to return the car, but that generated an error. The Avis return people were pleasant and efficient, though, and I got things taken care of painlessly.

I'd timed the return so I could catch the city bus back from the airport. I only had about a five-minute wait after returning the car, and I ended up being the only passenger on bus #25 when it left. The ride was only a couple minutes, and once again it was completely free.

Back at the hotel I had breakfast. Today they had industrially fried eggs, the sort of thing that a fast food place might put into a breakfast sandwich. I actually kind of like those. I also had a small blueberry muffin.

When I got back to my room I had a message from Delta Airlines that my flight this afternoon would be delayed. The delay is less than an hour (at least at this point), but it's still annoying to have more time to wait around. The message suggested that I could change my itinerary, but mine is the only direct flight from Tucson to Minneapolis; anything else would require a transfer in Atlanta or Salt Lake City. Transfers always complicate things, and I'd rather avoid them if possible. So I'll probably be spending the afternoon reading on my Kindle at the airport.

I spent much of the morning editing my semester tests, primarily to make them short enough to fit into a standard period rather than the extra-long testing periods we had in the past. Some things were easy to delete, but there were others that took some doing to make sure all the key concepts were covered in a shorter format.

plants were visible at night, and that's really the point of a botanic center.

Driving to and from the botanical gardens I headed up Alvernon Way. While it's sort of a straight shot, the route is weird because in both directions Alvernon literally exits itself and crosses underneath the road that you'd be on if you continued straight (Golf Links Drive).

Two other things stood out about the drive. One was that drivers in Tucson almost never use their turn signals. They actually had changeable signs that suggested that using blinkers should be a new year's resolution, but few people seemed to take that up. Also memorable was that there seemed to be homeless people begging at every other corner. Sadly this is often true in cities with warm climates. There were tons of beggars in Charlotte last Christmas, and exit ramps in New Orleans are full of them as well. It seems

Shortly after ten I checked out of the Country Inn and Suites and had the desk clerk call the shuttle (which they actually contract with a parking service next door). The guy came quickly, and we had a chat about the differences between Midwestern and Southwestern weather on the way to the airport. A sign in his van said "good tip – good karma". I can't say I gave a good tip for a five-minute ride, but I did give him a small one. Hopefully the karma will at least be in the positive direction.

I stopped at one of Delta's check-in kiosks at the airport. I'd already checked in online, but I wanted to print out a boarding pass. I opted out of paying \$880 more to fly first class, but then the machine offered me the opportunity to check a bag for free, presumably because it was a very full flight. That's quite a deal, given that the normal cost is \$35. I printed out and applied an "MSP" sticker and looped it around my wheeled bag. I then had to have a woman at the counter inspect my idea and finally take the bag to a TSA drop point. That's a rather convoluted process, but I did get rid of my bag.

The line at security was both short and fast-moving. In fact, the special "pre-check" lane seemed to be moving slower than the regular one I was in. They didn't require that liquids or electronics be taken out for screening, which sped things up a lot. Apparently my shoes set off the body scanner, so they had me take them off and send them through the x-ray. Even with that delay, though, it seemed like I was through security in no time.

Tucson International Airport is physically about the same size as the airport in Des Moines, but I'm pretty sure TUS handles more flights than DSM. Pretty much every airline has morning and afternoon flights to all its hubs. (I'd have taken the morning flight to Minneapolis, but it left at about 6am.) American offers somewhat more frequent flights to Phoenix and L.A. Interestingly, this "international" airport doesn't offer service to any other country—not even Mexico. The worst thing about the airport from my point of view (as someone who had lots of time to kill) is that there are two concourses, but there's no connection between them past security. That meant I was stuck with the limited shop and restaurant choices on Concourse B.

I had lunch at the airport outpost of El Charro, a Mexican restaurant that has operated in downtown Tucson since 1947. While they make a big deal about being "local", there's also a sign that says this location is "proudly operated by the Delaware North group" and gives an address and phone number in Texas. My quesadilla with carnitas was tasty, but it later on it seemed to upset my stomach and digestive system—not really what I wanted right before flying.

After lunch I still had about four hours until my delayed flight would be leaving. For about half of that time I parked myself in a seat right by the entrance to the concourse and did a bit of people watching. Tucson gets a lot of military people flying in uniform, a higher percentage than at any other airport I've been to. There were also lots of people who—like me—were finishing their holiday vacations. What I didn't see were many business travelers.

Among the more interesting things I saw was a middle-aged man who was decked out from head to toe in Iowa Hawkeye gear. The Hawkeyes' bowl game was a couple days ago in Tampa, so I'm not sure why he'd be dressed as such a super-fan in Arizona. I also did a double-take when I saw a college kid (who ended up boarding my flight) in a T-shirt emblazoned with "Burrow" on the back. When he turned around I could see it was a Cincinnati Bengals shirt, honoring their frequently injured quarterback, Joe Burrow.

I also worked on my computer and managed to finish revising the rest of my semester tests. I'm actually done with them earlier than I have been most years, which is probably a guarantee we'll be goofing up the schedule again due to weather.



Some of the Saguaro Series – Tucson International Airport

onians would complain about single-digit temperatures, it certainly beats the fog we had when I left.

As a flight to Atlanta was boarding, I made my way to Gate B-2. At about the same time I got a notification that my flight would be leaving earlier than they'd originally predicted. Presumably at this point the aircraft is on its way to Tucson, so that should be accurate. Interestingly, the status in the app changed from "delayed" to "behind schedule". The latter must mean a brief tardiness, as opposed to a longer one.

In the area where I was sitting they had a series of paintings on the wall. They were all of saguaros and done by the same local artist. Each one was done in the style of a different famous artist, though, and it was fun to see the collection of them together.

Right now the weather back home looks decent at least through tomorrow—knock on wood. It looks like there could be snow on Sunday, but it's just cold and clear until then. While Tucs-

There were lots of families with children waiting to board for Minneapolis. That made me glad it's not an overnight flight. Some of the kids were already screaming, just waiting at the gate. I hate to think what it will be like when the pressure starts to change.

They repeatedly announced that Delta's carry-on policy (which is pretty much the same as all major airlines) is that passengers can bring one "full-size" carry-on and one smaller personal bag. The gate attendant suggested that if anyone had more than that, they should gate check any additional items. That stood out because an Asian man who was in line in front of me had no less than four carry-ons, three of which were essentially full-size. He just walked down the jetway without anyone saying a word.

The incoming flight to Tucson had tons of handicapped people on it. I think they hauled nine wheelchairs out the jetway, and getting those people off the plane delayed our boarding. We boarded about fifteen minutes after their revised time, at roughly the time their first "late" announcement said we would. While we were waiting for the handicapped people to get off, I got an overpriced bagel from a stand by the gate (also operated by Delaware North). That was a wise choice, because it definitely helped calm my digestive system.

Since I had anything but a top-tier ticket on this flight, I was in boarding group #6. My seat was 23-F, and of course when I boarded 23-D and 23-E were already occupied. I decided it was probably good that I had checked the bag—particularly given it was free. When the boarding door closed at 3:05pm, the woman in the middle seat asked if she could move up to Row 15 to sit with her husband. The flight attendant implied that was impossible, because Row 15 was in the "comfort plus" section. She went up there anyway, and no one stopped her. I thought the middle seat would be empty throughout the flight, but a kid who was seated was seated separately from his mother moved there so he could be with her. He was both well behaved and comparatively small, so I couldn't complain.

As we were welcomed aboard, we were told that the reason for the delay began early this morning. The plane started its day in New York, and it was apparently a pause for de-icing that initially got it behind schedule. These days airlines keep their planes on the ground for only the briefest possible times, so once it was behind, it stayed that way.

The pilot announced that we were "number one for take-off". However, after pushing back from the gate, we waited on the tarmac for quite a while. It wasn't until 3:25 that we were finally in the air. We took off at a very steep angle. I suppose that's because there are mountains just beyond the runway, and we needed to make sure we cleared them.

I can't say I cared a lot for this flight overall. The service was minimal and indifferent. (My complimentary offerings were a can of Diet Coke and a cookie.) The announcements were extremely loud, and there was a girl a couple rows back who cried through the entire flight. They made repeated announcements that there was free wi-fi on this flight. I followed the directions to connect, and my phone said I had internet access. Any time I attempted to do anything that required internet access, though, it didn't work. It also seemed like the air wasn't circulating properly, to the point that I'm not sure we were getting the right amount of oxygen. By the time we landed, I had a bad headache.

We landed at 7:07 Central Time, about ten minutes after we were originally scheduled to land. We fairly quickly circled the terminal, but then we stopped just short of Gate C-2. Ground crew trucks (luggage, catering, etc.) were circulating on a roadway in front of us, and we had to wait for them to finish before we could proceed to the gate. We didn't actually get to the gate until 7:19.

The woman on the aisle asked if I had a connection. She was concerned because someone a few rows behind apparently had a tight connection to the B-concourse. While I can relate to missed connections, having spent the night at O'Hare a few years back, I checked, and this guy was over-reacting. His flight to Cleveland wouldn't leave until 8:42. He might not have time to get a bite to eat, but he could easily get to the gate.

I went through the jetway at 7:28pm and made my way to baggage claim. I got to carousel #11 and waited ... and waited ... and waited. A woman made repeated announcements that there were "problems in the back", without specifying what those problems were. It was a zoo, with passengers from four different flights waiting for bags at this carousel and equivalent numbers at all the others. Bags from Tucson finally started coming off the conveyor at 8:05, and I grabbed mine at 8:10pm.

While I was waiting for luggage I noticed that there was a voice mail from a number in the 651 area code on my cell phone. I figured it was probably a spam call and that I would delete it. It turns out that 651 is the area code for St. Paul, and the call was from the Amtrak manager at St. Paul Union Depot. I was ticketed to take the Borealis back down to LaCrosse tomorrow, but apparently the train wouldn't be running due to mechanical issues. The man's message told me there would be bus substitution that should run on approximately the same schedule. I can't say I was happy about that (perhaps it was karma for the bad tip I left the shuttle driver), but there was little I could do.

I took the airport tram to the parking ramp where the light rail station is located and made my way down to the platform. I missed a train while I was buying a ticket and had to wait 12 minutes for the next one. The trip was uneventful until we got to 30<sup>th</sup> Avenue, the next-to-last station. There the train went out of service without explanation, and we were told we had to wait on the platform for the next train to continue to Mall of America. The wait was only about five minutes, but it was very chilly on an open air platform in single-digit weather.

My reservation was at the Fairfield Inn—Mall of America. This is two blocks from the transit center at the mall. The Twin Cities have had quite a bit of snow this winter, though, and while some of the sidewalks were clear, others had barely been touched. There's also no real entrance to the Fairfield Inn from 24<sup>th</sup> Avenue, the street that runs to the mall. It was more of a chore than I wanted getting there.

Since the Mexican lunch I'd had a bagel and the cookie on the plane. The Fairfield Inn has one of those "shops" by the desk where you can buy various snacks and drinks. None of their food looked terribly appetizing, though. (The best was probably macaroni and cheese.) Worse, the only diet pop they had was Dr. Pepper. They had Pepsi and Mountain Dew, but not the sugar-free versions of either of those. I decided the bagel was my dinner and I wouldn't worry about eating until breakfast.

When I took off my shoes at the hotel, my feet were badly swollen. That didn't happen on the much longer flights to and from Japan last summer, but it happened flying back from Tucson. Fortunately as the evening progressed, the swelling went down, but I do wonder if something was amiss with the plane's pressurization system.

I watched a bit of TV but went to bed around eleven. While I hadn't really done much, this was still a very long day.

## SATURDAY, JANUARY 3, 2026

### BLOOMINGTON, MINNESOTA TO ALGONA, IOWA

I slept in comparatively late this morning, not getting up until after 7am. The room I was assigned was designed for handicapped people, and because of that it had an extremely complicated shower. I did eventually manage to figure out how it worked, and it actually had pretty decent pressure. The pressure in the sink was the worst on this trip, though. I had to keep rinsing and rinsing my toothbrush under hot water to get rid of the residual toothpaste. That seems to defeat the purpose of the low-flow fixture.

Breakfast this morning was one of my least favorites. The food and drinks were divided into stations that were it was hard to see what was there. Once I did check everything out, the offerings weren't that great. The best thing they had was fruit cocktail, and the coffee was decent. I also had an English muffin with butter. They had a big sign proclaiming "fresh, cage-free eggs". Perhaps they were cage-free, but they were still a watery mess of scrambled eggs that had been sitting on the warmer too long. The only meat they offered was coins of bratwurst—very Minnesota, but not something I've ever cared for. They didn't even have the waffle bar you find at most midrange hotels.

While eating breakfast I heard the disturbing news that the U.S. military had bombed Caracas and essentially kidnapped Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and his wife. While I certainly wouldn't argue that Maduro has been good for Venezuela, no war has been declared, nor has there been any real reason given for the attack except for President's claim that Venezuela is home to drug traffickers. Even if that's the case, it's also true of dozens of other countries—including, of course, the United States. This comes across as invading another country on a whim, and that's just wrong. Of course, it's not like the President seems to care about right and wrong in his personal life, so why should we expect him to act morally as a leader.

I had a flurry of e-mails this morning. Some of them contradicted each other, but the most recent confirmed the voice mail—I'd be taking a substitute bus service rather than a train today.

I left the hotel right at 9:00 this morning and dragged my bags through the snow back over to Mall of America. There is a bus that goes directly from the mall to Union Depot in St. Paul. I've taken it before when I've seen plays and a hockey game in downtown St. Paul. Today, though, I had some time to kill, so I took the long way there. In the process I checked out a couple of lines in the Twin Cities' new network of express buses. One of these was completely new to me. The B-line opened last summer and runs along Lake Street on the south side of Minneapolis and then on Marshall and Selby streets in St. Paul. It has about half as many stops as the 21 bus that it replaced (meaning some residents have to walk a bit to get to the bus stop), but it comes quite a bit more frequently. Both the buses and the stops are also nicer than what they used to have. They've also added bus lanes on part of the route, which cuts a bit of time, particularly off of longer journeys like the one I made today.

Something I couldn't help but notice on my bus rides was how much nicer an older, established urban area like the Twin Cities looks compared to an upstart like Tucson. The Twin Cities are certainly not an urbanist paradise, but tidy homes that have been around for a century just look nicer than sprawling cul-de-sac developments. Even the business strips in the Twin Cities seem to have more thought put into them, and both Minneapolis and St. Paul have far more impressive downtown areas than anything in the Southwest. I enjoyed visiting Tucson, but you couldn't pay me to live there.

It was about 10:30 when I arrived at Union Depot. This is a grand old station that was abandoned in 1971, and for four decades Amtrak served the Twin Cities from the Midway rail yard, which is in an industrial area roughly equidistant from both downtowns. Both St. Paul and the state of Minnesota pumped a lot of money into restoring the old station, and Amtrak moved back there in 2014. They've also consolidated the Twin Cities' long distance buses (Greyhound, Jefferson Lines, and Megabus) there, and there's a station on the green line right rail right in front of Union Depot. It's not as grand as the old stations in other cities, and the main hall is mostly empty

except when they rent it out for weddings and similar events. It is a pleasant station, though. Indeed, it reminded me a lot of the one in Tucson.

It was a bit confusing figuring out where or when I was supposed to board the substitute bus. Adding to the issue was that most of the Amtrak employees were busy boarding passengers on the Empire Builder (which was running 2½ hours late) when I arrived. Eventually I went down to the basement, which oddly is where the Amtrak ticketing office is located. (It does connect directly to the parking ramp, which is probably why they located it there.) The woman there told me we'd leave through Gate A and that there would be multiple buses. An Amtrak employee would direct passengers to the correct bus.

I knew that—unlike on a train—there would not be food on the bus, so I wanted to get something to either eat an early lunch or find something I could take with me. There's a restaurant at Union Depot that says it's open all day, but for whatever reason, it was closed. I ended up going to a Farmers' Fridge vending machine. I've seen these in transit hubs elsewhere. They sell salads and sandwiches that are supposedly made of fresh, local ingredients (though how fresh and local they are when there's snow on the ground is anybody's guess). I bought a Southwest salad packed in what looked like a canning jar made of plastic. I intended to have it for lunch, but unfortunately it didn't come with a fork, nor were there any forks available anywhere else that I could see. I also got a package of cheese chunks, which did manage to sustain me through the bus ride.

Similar to when I rode a substitute bus instead of the Lake Shore Limited, they had one bus that ran express to the ultimate destination and another that made all the stops along the way. (My bus would actually go to Milwaukee, where passengers bound for stops along the lake could transfer to the Hiawatha train.) At 11:30 they announced that they were ready to board passengers bound for Chicago, and at 11:40 they started boarding the slow bus. My bus had the logo of the Treasure Island casino by Red Wing. It mostly carries seniors on day trips, and this would be the first time the driver (a very portly old man) had driven it east of LaCrosse.

The bus probably ended up being more comfortable than the train would have been. By skimming off the Chicago passengers (who actually took two different buses), ours had a comparatively light load. I had a whole row to myself, while on the train I'd almost certainly have been sitting with someone else. The legroom wasn't great, but it wasn't as bad as some buses I've been on. There was wi-fi (which there isn't on the Borealis), and the driver played an oldies station on the radio to entertain us.

We pulled out of Union Depot at 11:52am, about five minutes after the train was scheduled to depart. The driver essentially forced his way onto I-94. We entered from the left and very soon had to exit to the right onto U.S. 61. He was pretty clearly used to that maneuver from taking old folks to play the slots in Red Wing.

While most of highway 61 has a 60 or 65-mph speed limit, it also has a ton of roundabouts that slowed the bus down to nothing. (I think there were five roundabouts in Hastings alone.) Because of that the bus trip took longer than the train would have, and we were about fifteen minutes late when we made our stop at the Red Wing depot. No one got on or off in Red Wing, but for some reason we waited there for fifteen minutes. We made another lengthy stop in Winona, though at least there a couple of people did board.

LaCrosse is definitely a major stop for Amtrak. About half the people on the bus were headed there, which is more than were headed to Milwaukee. There were about two dozen passengers who got on at LaCrosse to go further east as well.

They'd obviously gotten both snow and ice in LaCrosse over the last week. There were about two inches of snow all over my car, with ice beneath it. I spent about five minutes scraping off the windshield and the rear window, and I ran the defroster for over an hour before the ice was completely gone.

I left LaCrosse at about 3:15pm. My original plan had been to spend the night in Rochester, but I'd purposely made a reservation I could cancel on the day of the stay. Since the weather seemed fairly good (cold and windy, but otherwise fine), I did just that. The roads in eastern Minnesota weren't the best. Most of I-90 is blacktopped, and there were some icy patches. They also hadn't really plowed the shoulders at all in Minnesota. I've travelled on 90 when it was worse, though—particularly back when Margaret was at Mayo. I'd also say it was way better than driving over to LaCrosse in the fog. Between Rochester and Austin there seemed to be a line where they'd gotten less snow, and the roads were fine after that.

I made a quick stop at a rest area just west of Austin. While traffic had been fairly heavy on I-90, the only person besides me at the rest area was a janitor. I stopped again for gas at Casey's in Clear Lake. The pump price was \$2.23<sup>9</sup>, though their sign said \$2.43. Then I fought a string of headlights along highway 18. I got home about 6:30 and proceeded to eat the Farmers' Fridge salad. It was good, but it would have been better as lunch on the bus rather than supper at home.

... And so concluded my New Year's getaway. Since I'm near the end of a page, I'll dispense with a Q & A section. Suffice to say my favorite thing was probably Saguaro National Park, and I also enjoyed the botanic center and all the murals and other artwork. My least favorite was the endless suburban sprawl without a real city at the center. It was a fun little trip, and now it's time to get back to work as I start 2026.