

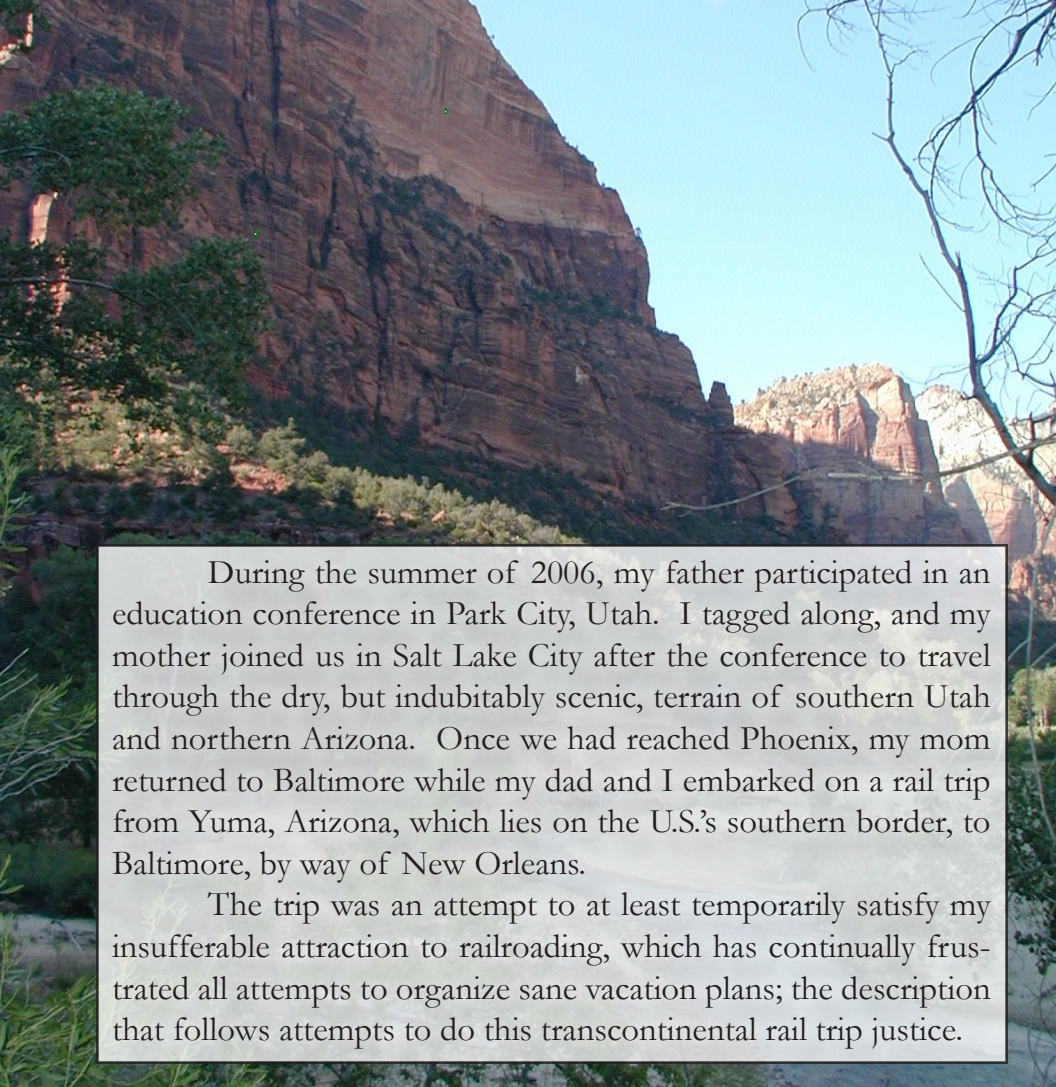
PHOENIX

TO BALTIMORE

BY SAUL WILSON

INTRODUCTION





During the summer of 2006, my father participated in an education conference in Park City, Utah. I tagged along, and my mother joined us in Salt Lake City after the conference to travel through the dry, but indubitably scenic, terrain of southern Utah and northern Arizona. Once we had reached Phoenix, my mom returned to Baltimore while my dad and I embarked on a rail trip from Yuma, Arizona, which lies on the U.S.'s southern border, to Baltimore, by way of New Orleans.

The trip was an attempt to at least temporarily satisfy my insufferable attraction to railroading, which has continually frustrated all attempts to organize sane vacation plans; the description that follows attempts to do this transcontinental rail trip justice.



PHOENIX

TO YUMA



I awoke on the morning of 19 July 2006 in our stuffy, overheated Phoenix hotel room to find my mom departing for the airport, and after a brief return to the fitful sleep that seems like the best use of one's strength at temperatures over 90 degrees Fahrenheit, I finally managed to activate myself to the limited extent necessary to check my e-mail and munch on a sugar-roll breakfast. Next, my dad and I squeezed ourselves and our luggage into our rental car and drove through downtown Phoenix, past Valley Metro's light rail construction, to the state capitol, which we managed to enter with a curious lack of interference from any high-tech security barricades.

The street grid—so simple and straightforward on the map—put us through a harrowing challenge in our attempt to reach westbound I-10, but we eventually succeeded, traveling on that freeway to State Route 85, which we utilized to reach I-8 and Gila Bend through lush, roasting farmland. Proceeding westward, we paralleled the Union Pacific—formerly Southern Pacific—right-of-way we were to return on later that day as we inched toward Yuma.

Upon reaching our desolate destination, we began a frantic search for lunch in a town that seemed to include restaurants only as a begrudging, and hidden, concession to necessity. After the rejection of an organic restaurant, which stubbornly refused to serve honest meat although it did serve Portobello steaks, our expedition resulted in the selection of a small café. There, our repast consisted of a refreshing turkey and guacamole sandwich with a serving of salsa and chips.

An exhausting walk through the excessively warm town followed, during which we observed the general emptiness of the place. Even the main street—a pedestrian plaza in the midst of a conversion to a normal road—was deserted, although we managed to find a chocolate ice cream for dessert in a family run shop, whose proprietors seemed cool towards the unusual distraction of customers.

Our appetites thus satisfied, we commenced our trip to the California's Cadiz Dunes Wilderness, where my dad had suggested we spend our day. After a protracted drive, lengthened by confused navigating along unfrequented roads, we—the only tourists for miles around—observed the great sight. Returning back to Yuma over the same road, we made a trip to Yuma's widely-spread suburbs to return the rental car to Avis. A couple who worked there kindly offered us a ride to the train station, during which they reminisced about eastbound trains that had arrived up to eight hours late in Yuma (these, like ours, had originated a mere 251 miles away in Los Angeles). Nonetheless, we cheerfully debarked at the station – more accurately described as a Union Pacific staff depot with rundown, but oversized, passenger facilities – and dragged our luggage through a short, decrepit underpass to the large, underutilized island platform on which our train was due to arrive.

We continued our repeated calls to Julie, “Amtrak's automated agent,” whose questions we could soon anticipate: a normal phone call would follow roughly this pattern “Train status! Yes! [Confirming that yes, we did want to know the train status] Two! [The train's number] Yuma, Arizona! Wednesday! [The day of the week].” Then she would kindly tell us that the train was an hour and nine minutes late. The next barked command: “Get details!”—this would draw a rather cursory and obsolete explanation that the train was between Ontario and Palm Springs or Palm Springs and Yuma as of a time quite long before the call.

Once we had settled in, we munched on chips and drank our quickly warming water, until we decided that our supply could not last forever, and I was dispatched to seek further provisions. After a lengthy tour around the downtown (during which the only people I sighted were a rather comical collection who appeared to be karate students), I was unable to find anything, so my dad took his turn; he later returned with a gallon bottle of water and a giant cup of ice.

YUMA

TO EL PASO



We continued our wait for the *Sunset Limited*, watching three westbound freight trains pass through and exchange crews at the Union Pacific depot. Meanwhile, one eastbound train, which had been sitting on the tracks for hours, finally departed. Through all this, we were the only ones on the platform, although at 20:32, just as our train rounded the corner, over an hour late relative to its 19:24 scheduled departure, a couple arrived to retrieve their daughter from the train.

While I fumed about my camera's failure to photograph the train as it arrived, we boarded and quickly inquired where we could procure dinner. We were told that the diner was closed, but that the conductor would try to persuade the chef to reopen for us. He did, and we settled down to pleasant meal, with the careful guidance of our popular but often confused waiter, Bobby. Despite the disappearance of the salad—the chef had rushed to throw it out—we were able to order our dinners: I requested the Lamb Shank and my dad chose the Beef Ragout, “slowly simmered” beef with “natural pan gravy.” Two lamb shanks—“delicately seasoned with honey and lemon”—arrived quickly, and we decided to accept them; as it turned out, this was no mistake—they were scrumptious.

Only one problem developed: biting into his meal, my dad chipped off a substantial part of one of his teeth. Disgruntled, he told the waiter, who told his boss, who told the conductor, who came running to settle the matter. She offered to remove him at Maricopa, Arizona (the near-midnight stop that has substituted for Phoenix for a decade), and procure a dentist, but he responded that he was not in such great pain. We therefore settled in for dessert: cheesecake with strawberries for me and Mississippi Mud Cake (“Coffee bathed chunks of chocolate cake and rich chocolate ganache drizzled with rivers of milk and dark chocolate.”) for my dad.

After dinner, we examined the lounge, which we discovered was not the normal Sightseer Lounge, but rather a small room at

the bottom of a coach. Our beds' lure grew, so we returned to our car and waited for our attendant to finish his dinner and make our beds up for the evening. That completed, we turned in for the night, and awoke the next morning to find our selves approaching El Paso, Texas, a town directly across the Mexican border from Ciudad Juarez, which could be seen a mere thirty feet from the train.

Breakfast's strong attraction—typical of any meal—finally drew us out of our rooms and to the dining car, where we were seated with John from Houston, Texas, who was returning from a trip to the Grand Canyon. He had embarked in Tucson, Arizona at the unpleasant hour of 02:00 with his wife and grandchildren and seemed to be enjoying the trip. Focusing, however, on the most important matters of life, my dad ordered the Bob Evans dish—which involved scrambled eggs with potatoes and sausage mixed in and French toast on the side—while I decided on orange juice and the quiche—with which came a decent portion of hash browns.

Our breakfast consumed, we found that the train was sitting on the platforms at El Paso Union Station. Thanks to our late arrival, we stayed only five minutes or so, rather than the scheduled forty-five, but that nevertheless provided enough time to capture a few photographs of the grandiose station.

Much of the morning was spent reading USA Today, brought on board at El Paso, doing some math under my dad's instruction, and typing up this story. My dad and I decided to take turns occupying the neighboring room—we were in room 11 on car 0230, and room 12 was vacant—for the duration of its emptiness. Meanwhile, we booked lunch for 13:00.

After some confusion over when and where we would convert to Central Time from Mountain Time—the diner converted before we crossed the official boundary—we sat down for lunch across from a San Antonioan couple, who were returning from escorting their high school-aged son to Los Angeles. Under Bobby's

EL PASO

TO BEAUMONT



control again, I ordered the beef burger and my dad settled on the chicken sandwich. I tried to escape right after ordering so as to see the Alpine train station, at which we were stopped (in good Amtrak style, we arrived twelve minutes early but departed twelve minutes late), and did manage to exit the dining car after Bobby informed me that the food would be coming “anytime.” Unable to find an open door, I returned to continue what became a rather lengthy wait for food. My dad and I split both our dishes while discussing with our company trains, education, and the lack of air-conditioning on the upper level of our car—thankfully, we were on the lower floor. Desert consisted again of cheesecake and Mississippi Mud Cake.

We returned to our rooms; I read *The Great Society* Subway by Zachary Schrag before meandering around the train. Following a brief smoke stop at Del Rio, Texas—where walking so much as an inch off of the platform was strictly prohibited by the conductor—dinner was the next attraction. We were seated with two characters: a man going to Arkansas from his Malibu, California, home and a woman returning from California to visit her family in Texas. Both were in coach, and the man was having particular trouble sleeping; he certainly let it be known that he wasn’t looking forward to the nine-hour layover in San Antonio before his Texas Eagle departed. Together, we had great fun laughing at Bobby, who yet again had the misfortune of being our attendant. He cheerfully marched back and forth between the small kitchenette and our table, explaining that if he gave the woman her desired baked potato, he might be caught by the chef, who does not like him much; finally he brought the baked potato, proudly announcing his thieving abilities so loudly as to alert a waitress, who inquired whose potato it was. His response: “It’s my mother-in-law’s!” And thus the dinner progressed.

Again facing an important life decision, I requested the cheese ravioli with rice pilaf and mashed potatoes, while my dad ordered the Beef Ragout (again) with broccoli and mashed po-

tatoes. Both arrived—as ordered—and we happily consumed them; dessert consisted of chocolate cake and strawberry sauce on cheesecake. Again, Bobby gave us the entertainment we so lacked due to the absence of a Sightseer Lounge: upon asking his origin, my dad was able to discern that he was from Manila in the Philippines. But he soon returned to say that he’d been in Hong Kong, married a woman to legalize himself but been removed nonetheless, gone to another county and had the same experience, and so on and so forth. Once that became tiresome, we returned to our room and tried to remain awake until San Antonio; this eventually failed, so we went to bed.

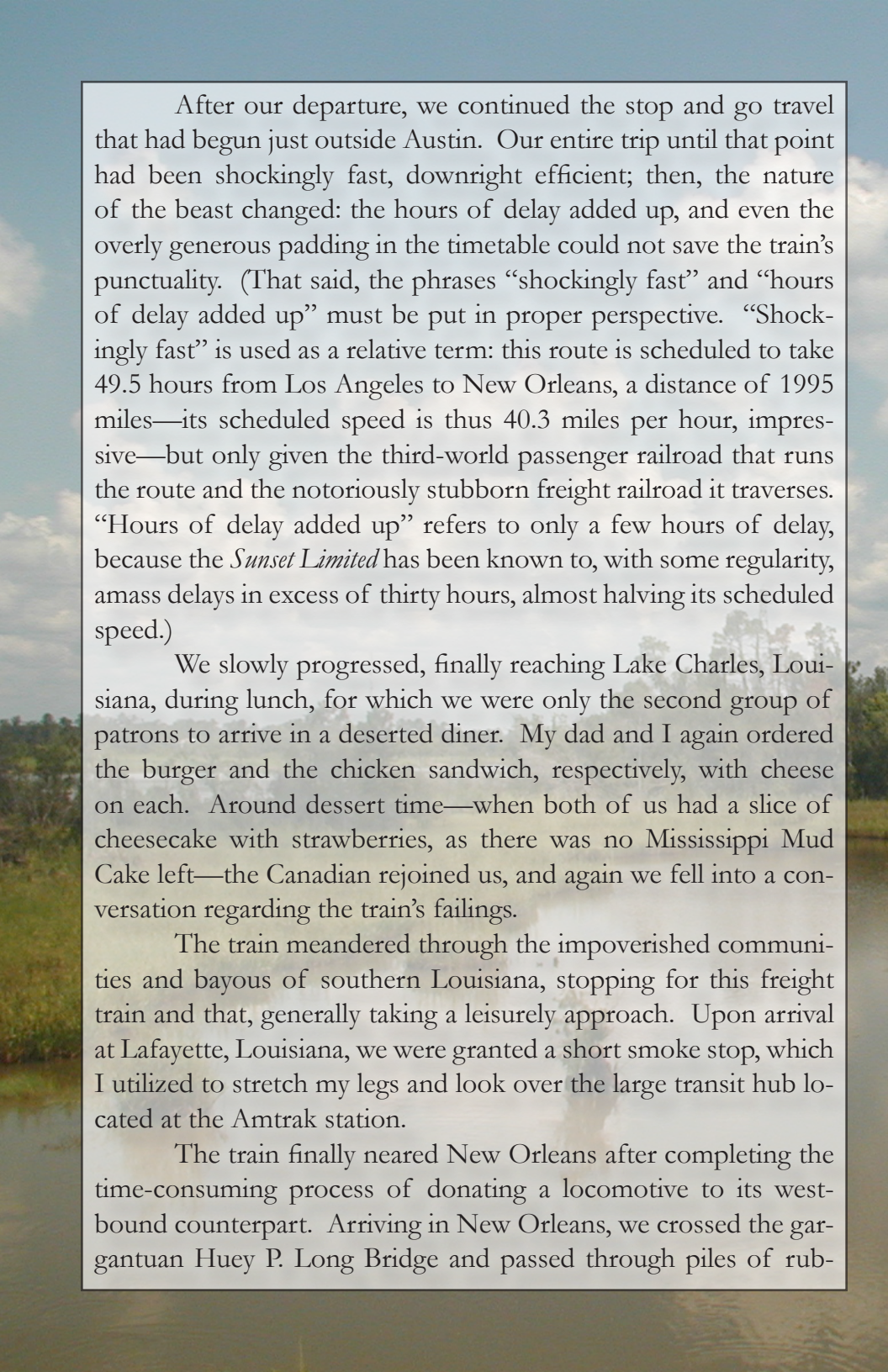
Upon awaking, we found ourselves arriving in Houston, and we hurried to detrain during the brief smoke break. After a few photographs and a brief venture into the train station on my part, the train departed only an hour or so late—practically punctual. We returned to the diner—effectively our home—and found ourselves in the company of a Canadian utilizing the North American Rail Pass and a Louisianan going to rent a place in Lafayette, Louisiana. The former was rather upbeat, it seemed his nature to be so; but all agreed: the *Sunset Limited* was badly managed. The Louisianan had tried to upgrade to a sleeper—and, from observation, we knew, as did the Canadian, that there were plenty of spare ones—but the conductor had told him it was impossible. Fuming from the uncomfortable ride in coach, he was clearly unimpressed with the service. Moreover, since we had departed Houston, only one waitress and one chef were left in control of the entire dining car; this was actually reasonable, however, for a commensurate number of passengers remained. The train was practically ours alone after Houston.

The next smoke stop was Beaumont, Texas, our last stop in that state and a location near the landfall of Hurricane Rita, the storm that had so terrified Houston in 2005. The station proved rather unimpressive; its primary service appeared to be as a crew-change location.



BEAUMONT

TO NEW ORLEANS



After our departure, we continued the stop and go travel that had begun just outside Austin. Our entire trip until that point had been shockingly fast, downright efficient; then, the nature of the beast changed: the hours of delay added up, and even the overly generous padding in the timetable could not save the train's punctuality. (That said, the phrases "shockingly fast" and "hours of delay added up" must be put in proper perspective. "Shockingly fast" is used as a relative term: this route is scheduled to take 49.5 hours from Los Angeles to New Orleans, a distance of 1995 miles—its scheduled speed is thus 40.3 miles per hour, impressive—but only given the third-world passenger railroad that runs the route and the notoriously stubborn freight railroad it traverses. "Hours of delay added up" refers to only a few hours of delay, because the *Sunset Limited* has been known to, with some regularity, amass delays in excess of thirty hours, almost halving its scheduled speed.)

We slowly progressed, finally reaching Lake Charles, Louisiana, during lunch, for which we were only the second group of patrons to arrive in a deserted diner. My dad and I again ordered the burger and the chicken sandwich, respectively, with cheese on each. Around dessert time—when both of us had a slice of cheesecake with strawberries, as there was no Mississippi Mud Cake left—the Canadian rejoined us, and again we fell into a conversation regarding the train's failings.

The train meandered through the impoverished communities and bayous of southern Louisiana, stopping for this freight train and that, generally taking a leisurely approach. Upon arrival at Lafayette, Louisiana, we were granted a short smoke stop, which I utilized to stretch my legs and look over the large transit hub located at the Amtrak station.

The train finally neared New Orleans after completing the time-consuming process of donating a locomotive to its west-bound counterpart. Arriving in New Orleans, we crossed the gargantuan Huey P. Long Bridge and passed through piles of rub-

bish, still littering the streets a full year after Hurricane Katrina had moved northward. We passed the infamous Super Dome and backed into the New Orleans Union Passenger Terminal.

We detrained and requested a cab; one driver turned us down because his trunk was too full of garbage, while the next happily accepted us, our luggage, and our request for a tour around town. The second driver—who claimed to have been in the business for thirty-five years—decided that we ought not see the "dangerous" flood-ravaged areas (which was one of our primary reasons for going to New Orleans in the first place); instead, he gave us a tour of the French Quarter while expounding his theory that the levees had been exploded (rather than failed) during Hurricane Katrina. He finally delivered us to the Hilton GardenInn, where, learning that there are two Hilton GardenInns in New Orleans, we discovered quickly that he had taken us to the wrong one.

Following a short cab ride to the proper hotel and after checking in there, we decided to take a walk down Bourbon Street. That famed street, which definitely has the appearance of a thriving brothel and pornography store, was quite a bustling tourist attraction, especially as compared to the neighborhoods that fill the rest of the city. After perambulating about in search of food, we settled on Café Beignet, replete with jazz band, where I had a chicken and sausage gumbo and my dad consumed red beans and rice; we complimented the meal with the eponymous specialty of beignets, which are small squares of fried dough sprinkled generously with confectioners' sugar.

We returned to our hotel and slept until early the next morning—six o'clock—when we prepared to catch our next train, the *Crescent*, to complete our return to Baltimore. My dad had accumulated a sizable collection of bug bites on the *Sunset Limited*, which were beginning to itch, so he vainly sought something to soothe them. Having failed, we embarked on the short taxi trip to the train station.

The train was sitting on the platform, but patrons were

NEW ORLEANS

TO ATLANTA



not yet allowed to board, so we sat down in the Magnolia Room, reserved for sleeping car passengers. There we met two passengers whom we had seen on the *Sunset Limited*; they and my dad discussed bug bites, which they had managed to amass, too.

We boarded the train when instructed to do so, and the trip commenced pleasantly enough, albeit two minutes ahead of schedule. Our Viewliner sleeping car attendant, far more attentive than his *Sunset Limited* counterpart, gave us a brief “Welcome to This Viewliner” speech in which we learned that breakfast would come at some later time. My dad and I ventured towards the Lounge Car as the train traveled between rows and rows of flooded and destroyed houses, then across Lake Ponchartrain and through Slidell, Louisiana. The Lounge Car attendant evicted us from her car, saying that she wasn’t prepared for customers.

After we had returned to our car, the diner began serving breakfast, and we joined the people in the compartment across the hallway from us at a table. The man, Matt, was a bouncer in training to become a math teacher, which piqued my dad’s interest, while the woman, Jackie, was a graduate student in clinical psychology. I ordered the Southwestern Omelet, and my dad settled on the Bob Evans (again).

A short stint in the now-open lounge car preceded our arrival in Meridian, Mississippi, a smoke stop with a massive station (the town’s mayor once served on the Amtrak Board of Directors) where a decent number of people boarded. Lunch followed; we were seated with Evelyn and Josh, a tenth grader; the former was from Meridian, while the latter was originally from the same town but had moved to Atlanta, and they happened to know each other. Lunch conversation followed the normal model: a discussion of trains and why each of us was on board. I ordered the pizza, while my dad ordered—and found quite distasteful—the quiche. Dessert consisted of the normal slice of cheesecake with strawberry topping.

I returned to the lounge car, where I looked out the win-

dow and eavesdropped on the many loud conversations being held at neighboring tables. Josh and Brett – a very short thirteen-year old from Hammond, Louisiana – joined me from time to time, as did Julie, a fourteen-year old from Lafayette. All (except me) were very bored by the train trip, although some of them later warmed to it.

The group disbanded for the Birmingham, Alabama smoke-break, where Brett and his brother, Patrick, disembarked. The station in Birmingham was sizable, and many people were utilizing it; it had become obvious by this point that the *Crescent*, unlike the *Sunset Limited*, was not a sub-standard luxury service, but rather a true transport service.

I returned to the lounge car, where I listened to one of the two Rails and Trails representatives that were on board describe briefly the history of Birmingham. These two, who worked for the National Park Service when on the train, had boarded in New Orleans and would ride to Atlanta, where they planned to debark; the next day, they would return to New Orleans.

We continued our travels through kudzu-infiltrated forests until dinner, where we were seated with Kathy, a traveling nurse returning to her home in Atlanta. Over a dinner of roast chicken with carrots and rice pilaf, for me, and chicken fried steak with carrots and mashed potatoes, for my dad, we discussed the advantages of being a traveling nurse. Kathy, then working in New Orleans, said she typically worked on three-month contracts, under which she was typically paid more than the permanent staff.

After a dessert of cheesecake with strawberry sauce, I returned to the lounge car, where I attentively eavesdropped on the conductors’ scanners. Apparently, a signal had broken or a dispatch board had gone dark or a freight train was coming (everyone seemed a little confused), so we were forced to sit still. Then, finally, we sluggishly moved forward until the next signal; through this process we gained nearly an hour of lateness, and finally arrived in Atlanta roughly two and one half hours late. I got off

ATLANTA

TO BALTIMORE



the train to stretch my legs, only to be caught up in a herd of oncoming passengers, who rushed down from the concourse. One hundred people must have boarded; the train was certainly full by the time we departed, much later.

I retired to bed in room six of our Viewliner sleeper, car 2011, known as Patriot View. Again on the upper bunk, I watched as we pulled out of Atlanta past MARTA stations and into the suburbs before dozing off.

I awoke for the first call to breakfast, but decided to put off that matter, and so went back to sleep. I came back to consciousness only minutes before the “third and last call to breakfast—If you want food, come now!” So my dad and I went running and caught a table with Dick and Rheba, a couple from Florida who

ran an antiques shop. They were headed for New York to catch the Queen Elizabeth II for England, where they were planning to purchase \$50,000 worth of antiques for shipping back to their store in Florida. I ate the French toast with turkey sausages and my dad had the Southwestern Omelet – they had sold out of his favorite Bob Evans.

We spent the morning traversing the rolling farmlands of Virginia, before we entered the Washington suburbs and crossed the Potomac. At Washington Union Station, we exchanged our diesel locomotive for an electric one, and—after a lengthy lay-over—departed for Baltimore along the familiar Northeast Corridor.

