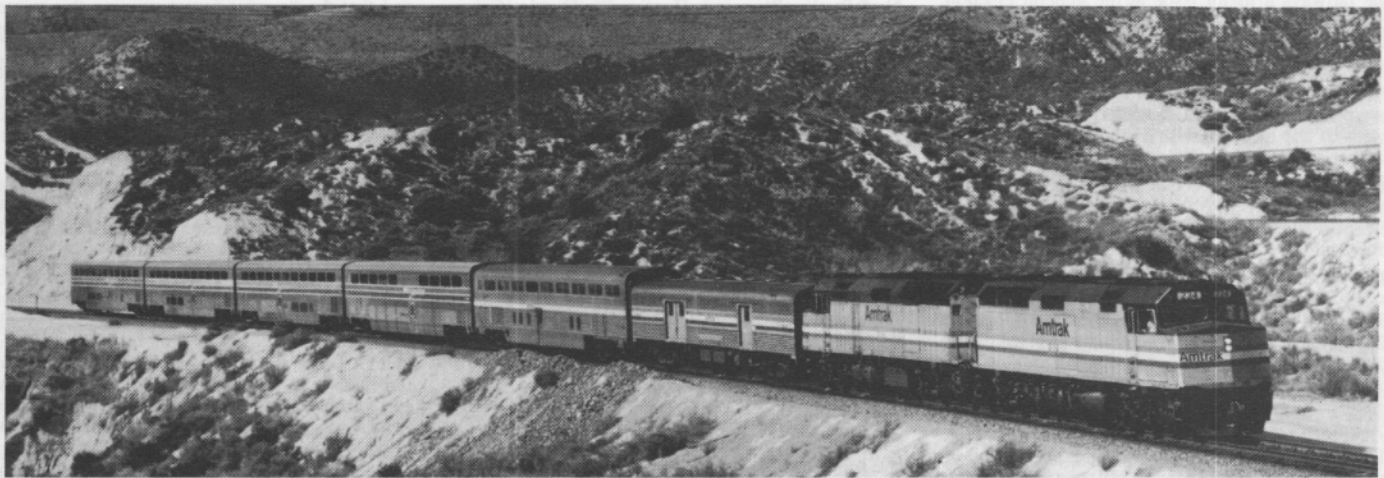


One helluva way to go



Amtrak allows you to see America in grand style and safety. 45,000 each year are killed on American roads

By JOHN BARFIELD

Attempts to re-establish a meaningful rail passenger service in America have been bedevilled by an annual battle over cash.

But this year the Amtrak network celebrates its 20th birthday, despite a lifetime of crises as successive administrations tried to cut public spending.

Although it still has to stagger through from year to year with no long-term guarantee of adequate resources, it now seems inconceivable that the American public will allow Amtrak to die.

The administrations, particularly Reagan's, have continually tried to ditch Amtrak, labelling it an expensive and unnecessary "welfare programme".

Even now President Bush has shown himself basically against funding for both Amtrak and mass transit rail. No-one in the White House has been sympathetic to Amtrak since its inception in 1971.

The people's representatives in Congress, however, have consistently come to Amtrak's aid and there is an ever-increasing body of opinion throughout the nation ready to defend the public's right to get back on track.

It was pointed out to the then Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger in 1986 that the annual subsidy to Amtrak would run the Pentagon for only 21

hours. Amtrak is the public name for the National Railroad Passenger Corporation which is organised as a private company. The US Secretary for Transportation, however, has a seat on the board and the government contributes a fifth of its total operating costs, while also providing additional capital funding.

New York State has also contributed £93 million to upgrade track to 110 mph as a way of reducing road congestion.

Over £1.5 billion has been invested by Amtrak in the North-East corridor between Washington and Boston and in 1991 a new commuter service began between Washington and North Carolina.

By European standards, the Americans still have a helluva way to go. They have nothing remotely like our high-speed trains or the French TGV. There has been only limited electrification, between Washington and Boston.

But Amtrak now operates 250 inter-city trains a day and carries 40 million passengers a year, 22 million on its inter-city services and 18 million on commuter trains. The public are increasingly returning to the habit of train travel.

Amtrak ordered 140 new Superliner coaches in 1991 and has plans for 150 mph trains on the North-East corridor. California has recently voted £1.9 million for better trains.

This is in contrast to 1958 when rail had only four

per cent of the inter-city market. By 1988 the Amtrak board was able to give the go-ahead for some extensive equipment investment, using property as collateral. Property now contributes £24 million a year to Amtrak's finances.

Another major landmark was 1986 which saw RAILPAC, a Californian organisation similar to RDS, going national and another organisation, the United Rail Passengers Association, set up by a Jacksonville businessman.

The dangers of relying on individual state funding were exposed in 1984 when the Silver Palm service from Tampa to Miami was withdrawn because Florida withdrew its cash support. Only by resort to the courts was a partial reprieve obtained for the service.

In 1985, the Gulf Coast Limited was withdrawn when Florida, Alabama and Missouri withdrew their cash aid.

As in Britain, roads devour the whole "sack of grain" given to transport as a whole.

"Roads get the grain and the rest of transportation gets the sack," said Amtrak president Alan Boyd in 1979.

■ A 200 mph Texas triangle high speed line costing £3.2 billion is to be built linking San Antonio, Austin, Fort Worth, Dallas and Houston by 1998. Sixteen other high-speed rail projects are being considered.

A computer-aided plea for help

By TREVOR JONES

I was appointed computer officer for the society earlier this year and apologise for continuing delays in keeping the computerised membership up to date. I would be pleased to hear from anyone, preferably south of London, who has suitable equipment and would like to help.

The membership is held across four single-sided floppy disks processed by MicroP software (DATASTAR, INFOSTAR [in the WORDSTAR family, though WORDSTAR is not needed]) on an IBM-compatible.

Frank Hastilow (our membership secretary) should shortly have the RDS computer to help his front-office work, meanwhile I use my own computer. I have also written some BASIC programs to produce membership lists superior to those available by the standard software.

Printing the whole membership in BASIC takes

about 2 hours 30 minutes on my computer, but using system software only about 1 hour 20 minutes.

Address labels are produced both for the quarterly Railwatch and, on request, for various branch newsletters. I think some of this work could be shared by the expedient of sending disks between different computer owners, although clearly one person must be responsible for holding the master-file of about 2400 membership records.

Information of general interest:

Frank Hastilow receives all membership renewals, and banks the money, then periodically forwards the paperwork to me for processing on the computer. Because the process is mostly manual, mistakes can occur; computer errors may be notified direct to me, but general membership matters should go to Mr Hastilow.

Also, because of holidays and other commitments,

big delays can occur in updating the files. Furthermore our 15 branches are only occasionally notified of changes, so will inevitably be using slightly out-of-date lists for a time.

I hope to develop a system of giving each branch a full branch membership list once a quarter. But members must accept that all this is done by voluntary officers in their spare time, who do take holidays and have other commitments in life.

One point queried by several members is why the surname comes before the forenames or initials. Our files were set up in that way to enable alphabetical lists to be produced. This could be changed but would for now be too much work whilst I'm doing the system on my own. If someone else could do the routine renewals updates, I could concentrate on developing the system; or vice-versa. Contact me at 67 Guildford Park Avenue, Guildford, Surrey GU2 5NH