

Deterioration of intercity passenger service in Southern Montana and Southern North Dakota since the discontinuance of Amtrak service in October, 1979:

October 6, 2019 marked 40 years since the last scheduled passenger trains traversed Southern Montana and Southern North Dakota. Amtrak's *North Coast Hiawatha*, which served 16 stations in Montana and North Dakota (mostly along the I-94/I-90 corridor) was discontinued in 1979 as a result of politics, budget concerns, aging equipment, and apathy.

Amtrak was created in 1971 to relieve America's railroads of the burden of money-losing passenger trains. Passenger trains began to be unprofitable as the government continued to tax railroads while subsidizing competition by building Interstate highways and airports. Today in the United States, the only transportation infrastructure in the private sector are freight railroads. Truckers, buses, automobiles, barges, ships and other watercraft, and airplanes all operate on infrastructure built and managed by a government entity. Such unfair subsidization to the competition became untenable in the 1960s, which led the government to create Amtrak to maintain a modicum of rail passenger service.

Initially, the route used by Amtrak's *North Coast Hiawatha* in Southern Montana was not part of the Amtrak system. But through the "urging" of then-Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield of Montana, rail passenger service was reinstated on the route in June of 1971. However, Mansfield retired from the Senate, and Amtrak remained a chronically underfunded entity by Congress. By 1979, many of Amtrak's "Long-Distance" passenger trains were threatened with extinction.

Amtrak never had the means to properly promote the *North Coast Hiawatha*. This, its conglomeration of mostly-1950s-built equipment and tri-weekly operation doomed the train and four other Long-Distance services in the Fall of 1979.

While some did vehemently oppose the cessation of rail passenger service to many of the state's major cities, the outcry wasn't enough to save the train. And besides, by then Montana had much less political clout in Congress (when Mansfield retired), and alternatives to the three-times-per-week passenger train were abundant: Interstates 94 and 90 were nearly complete across the state where Greyhound was running four daily Chicago-to-Seattle buses (both express and

those stopping at even the smallest communities), and Northwest Orient Airlines was still operating three or more daily flights from Chicago and/or Minneapolis/St. Paul to the Pacific Northwest with stops in Fargo, Bismarck, Billings, Bozeman/Belgrade, Helena, and Missoula, as well as Spokane. Other air carriers at the time, such as Frontier and Republic, offered additional intrastate and interstate service to cities served by the *North Coast Hiawatha*. Considering the rural nature of Montana and North Dakota, intrastate transportation was quite good, as was service to nearby states.

But things change. Deregulation of the airlines in 1978 resulted in movement toward a “hub-and-spoke” system, rather than point-to-point which had previously been used. Northwest Orient began focusing on flights out of its hubs (Minneapolis/St. Paul and Detroit, and later through merger with Republic Airlines, Memphis) in the 1980s at which time Big Sky Airlines began service between Billings and Spokane, serving intermediate locations such as Belgrade, Helena, and Missoula. Big Sky declared bankruptcy in 2007 and ceased operations in 2008 with the only routes being assumed by other carriers were Essential Air Service flights out of the Billings hub to places like Miles City, Glendive, and Sidney. In North Dakota, air service was mostly relegated to and from hubs at Denver and Minneapolis/St. Paul.

Today, with the exception of Essential Air Service from Billings to Havre, Glasgow, Wolf Point, Sidney, and Glendive, it is not possible to fly commercially between any two Montana airports. Additionally, one cannot fly commercially from any airport in Montana to an airport in an adjacent state or Canadian province. For instance, a traveler from Billings to Missoula must travel via a hub airport, such as Minneapolis/St. Paul, Denver, Salt Lake City, or Seattle/Tacoma. As a result, intrastate air travel in Montana is cumbersome, expensive, and sometimes not as fast as driving.

Likewise, in North Dakota, the only intrastate flights are between Devils Lake and Jamestown courtesy of Essential Air Service and an annual subsidy of \$6.5 million for these two airports alone. Other than Delta Air Lines’ service to their hub at Minneapolis/St. Paul in the adjacent state of Minnesota, no through air service exists from North Dakota to any bordering U.S. state or Canadian province.

Bus service today is no better. Greyhound maintained its 3-or-4 daily trips on Interstates 94 and 90 through Southern Montana and North Dakota until the early 2000s. But revenue from package express plummeted when such shipments began moving by the augmented networks of UPS and FedEx. Most intercity bus service

in Montana and North Dakota has perished as a result. Jefferson Lines now provides the east-west bus service through Southern Montana and North Dakota with two buses daily west of Billings, and one east of Billings. (Jefferson Lines also operates one daily bus between Billings and Minneapolis through northeast Wyoming and South Dakota.)

The quality of bus service available today is much different than 40 years ago. In 1979 – the year the *North Coast Hiawatha* was discontinued – Greyhound served 73 North Dakota and Montana communities between Fargo and the Idaho border. Today, Jefferson Lines serves but ten. Notable cities where buses no longer stop include Steele, Mandan, Medora, Beach, Forsyth, Laurel, Columbus, Big Timber, Livingston, Belgrade, Deer Lodge, and Superior. Additionally, buses are prone to delay due to unrealistic schedules. The lone bus from Miles City to Billings has to average 70 MPH to make its schedule; the average speed from Billings to Missoula over two major mountain passes and with a rest stop at Butte is 60 MPH. These timings allow little wiggle room for Montana’s famed inclement weather or road work.

So, in the 40 years since Amtrak service was discontinued through Southern Montana and Southern North Dakota, transportation alternatives have devolved significantly. Yet, it could have been different.

The loss of the *North Coast Hiawatha* in 1979 was not the end of intercity rail passenger service in North Dakota and Montana. The *Empire Builder* route across the states’ Northern Tier – serving Whitefish, Glacier National Park, Havre, Glasgow, Williston, Minot, and Grand Forks continued - though it, too, suffered a degradation of service in the late 1970s. Preserved as the lone Chicago-Seattle passenger train at the beginning of Amtrak on May 1, 1971, the daily *Empire Builder* was reduced to a four-day-per-week operation in 1977 and to three-days-per-week in 1979, largely as a result of political, funding, and aging equipment pressures which led to the demise of the *North Coast Hiawatha* and other Amtrak trains.

But the *Empire Builder* – a strong performer even in pre-Amtrak days – proved what a passenger train can be if service was improved: Later in 1979, the train became the first to receive Amtrak’s new long-distance Superliner equipment; in 1981, the train gained a section to Portland from Spokane to complement its Seattle terminus; In 1982, the train earned mail contracts from the postal service and regained its daily operation. By the 1990s, the train was regularly outperforming all other Amtrak long-distance trains in total ridership. In 2005, the

train received refurbished equipment and upgraded amenities. By 2008, ridership peaked at over 554,000 riders – half again as many annual patrons as the second-place (for long-distance trains) *Silver Star* (between New York City and Miami), and since has consistently been Amtrak's most-ridden long-distance train most years since. In the first half of the 2010s decade, the *Empire Builder* was integral in providing a way to access abundant employment in the burgeoning Bakken Oil Boom at Williston, Stanley, and Minot.

What could be the primary takeaways of intercity passenger transport in Southern Montana and Southern North Dakota over the past 40 years? Obviously, the big one is America's chronic lack of a transportation plan, especially with regard to the inevitable changes. Losing rail passenger service might have been inconsequential in 1979, but such is not the case today. Amtrak opponents throughout its existence have often berated rail service "because people can always take the bus." At least some bus service exists – albeit much inferior to 40 years ago. But throughout North America, long-distance bus routes are disappearing. One can no longer ride an intercity bus across Canada, or between Reno and Salt Lake City on busy Interstate 80. In 1979, bus service operated along the Amtrak *Empire Builder* route across Northern Montana and Northern North Dakota; all has been discontinued. There is no guarantee that the skeletal service which remains will continue in perpetuity. As Chambers of Commerce in places like Billings, Bozeman, and Missoula pat themselves on the back for landing non-stop flights to far-flung places like Dallas/Fort Worth, Los Angeles, and Newark, no effort is being made to reinstate intrastate air service within America's fourth-largest state.

In 2003, the State of Montana commissioned a study on the "Economic Benefits of the Amtrak *Empire Builder* to Montana." The study determined that the presence of the service created \$19 million of economic stimulus to the state of Montana (or \$26.5 million in 2019 dollars; Montana is only one of eight states served by the train, so the overall benefit of the train would so multiplied). In 2009, an Amtrak study about reinstating the *North Coast Hiawatha* estimated that the train would rank 5th in ridership amongst the existing 15 Amtrak long-distance trains. Based on these two studies, a logical conclusion would be that a *North Coast Hiawatha* – were it still around – would be well patronized and provide economic benefits akin to that of the current *Empire Builder* – including travel comfort, service to smaller communities, service to national parks, fuel efficiency, improved safety over automobile travel, and improved access to transportation by the mobility-impaired.

But the *Empire Builder* – as well as all long-distance trains – face formidable challenges in the near future. Unlike in the 1979, most in Congress now look upon

Amtrak favorably (or with less hostility); like in 1979, funding is insufficient and equipment is aging to the point that continuing service could be unsustainable. Additionally, the current administration in Washington, D.C., senior Amtrak management, and many on the board of directors of Amtrak openly opine that long-distance trains should not have a future in the United States. On the bright side, this conflict has brought the underfunding of Amtrak and its equipment needs to the forefront where it was previously languishing in apathy.

Therefore, the time is now upon us to fix the problem of Amtrak long-distance trains through Congressional oversight to create a rail passenger service that serves more of America and more of America better! In addition to new equipment for trains like the *Empire Builder*, the economy will be stimulated further by obtaining rolling stock for additional trains (and/or additional capacity) on some existing routes as well as on additional routes such as a *North Coast Hiawatha*. Currently, grass roots local campaigns exist in Missoula and Livingston to revive intercity rail service with one of the biggest challenges financially being new equipment. Currently none is available and manufacturing capability is very limited. A ready supply of attractive, dependable equipment must be seen as equal in importance to establish new service, along with any infrastructure upgrades and capital for operations.

Most importantly, the United States needs a current, cohesive, and balanced transportation policy to ensure adequate public transportation that includes ALL modes of transportation. As the last 40 years have taught us: Without a plan to navigate change and adjust travel options accordingly, odds are that transportation infrastructure in North Dakota and Montana will look as different in 2060 as 1979 looked compared to today. And since transportation options have deteriorated significantly since 1979, we can ill afford to exacerbate the situation in the next 40 years.

With the *Empire Builder* as a roadmap of how passenger trains benefit Montana, it's time to look back on what we should have learned over the past 40 years, and correct the mistake that was the cessation of rail passenger service across Southern North Dakota and Southern Montana.

Read Down

(Local Time)

Read Up

The North Coast Hiawatha

9		Train Number		10	
Departs Chicago Daily— Departs Minneapolis Mo We Sa		Frequency of Operation		Arrives Minneapolis We Fr Su— Arrives Chicago Daily	
Miles		Type of Service		Miles	
10 30 a	0	Dp... CHICAGO, IL (Union Sta.) (CDT)...	Ar	8 20 p	
10 53 a	17	..... Glenview, IL.....	d	7 53 p	
12 05 p	85	..... MILWAUKEE, WI.....		6 50 p	
1 13 p	150	Ar..... Columbus.....	Dp	5 26 p	
4 10 p		Ar { MADISON (via Greyhound Lines) }	Dp	12 15 p	
12 15 p		Dp { Columbus..... }	Ar	9 30 p	
1 13 p	150	Dp..... Portage ⊕.....	Ar	5 26 p	
1 40 p	178	..... Wisconsin Dells.....	e	4 56 p	
1 58 p	195	..... Tomah.....		4 36 p	
2 41 p	240	Ar { La Crosse, WI..... }	Dp	3 54 p	
3 20 p	281	Dp { Winona, MN (Rochester)..... }	Ar	3 15 p	
3 27 p	281	..... Red Wing ⊕.....		3 08 p	
3 57 p	307	Ar { MINNEAPOLIS ⊕..... }	Dp	2 38 p	
5 00 p	370	Dp { St. Cloud (former NP Sta.)..... }	Ar	1 34 p	
6 20 p	421	..... Staples.....		12 30 p	
7 00 p	421	..... Detroit Lakes, MN ⊕.....	Ar	11 45 a	
8 15 p	486	Ar { FARGO, ND..... }	Dp	10 15 a	
9 22 p	551	Dp { Valley City ⊕..... }	Ar	9 00 a	
10 18 p	613	..... Jamestown.....		7 52 a	
11 20 p	662	..... Bismarck.....	e	6 40 a	
11 35 p	662	Ar { Mandan ⊕... (CDT)..... }	Dp	6 25 a	
12 50 a	721	Dp { Dickinson, ND (MDT)..... }	Ar	5 12 a	
1 35 a	755	..... Glendive.....		4 37 a	
3 15 a	857	Dp { Miles City ⊕..... }	Dp	2 31 a	
3 30 a	863	..... Forsyth ⊕.....		2 20 a	
3 40 a	863	Ar { BILLINGS..... }	Ar	2 10 a	
4 40 a	963	Dp { LIVINGSTON..... }	Dp	11 30 p	
6 45 a	1068	..... (Yellowstone Nat'l Park).....		9 25 p	
6 55 a	1068	Ar { Bozeman..... }	Ar	9 15 p	
8 10 a	1147	Dp { BUTTE..... }	Dp	7 51 p	
9 07 a	1192	..... Deer Lodge ⊕.....		7 05 p	
11 00 a	1293	Ar { Paradise, MT (MDT)..... }	Ar	5 25 p	
11 15 a	1293	Dp { Sandpoint, ID (former NP Sta.) (PDT)..... }	Dp	5 10 p	
1 20 p	1409	..... SPOKANE, WA.....	Ar	3 10 p	
1 45 p	1409	Dp { Ephrata ⊕..... }	Ar	2 50 p	
2 30 p	1434	..... Wenatchee.....		2 00 p	
2 35 p	1434	Ar { Everett..... }	Ar	1 54 p	
4 40 p	1529	Dp { Edmonds..... }	Dp	11 35 a	
4 45 p	1529	Ar { SEATTLE, WA (King St. Sta.) (PDT)..... }	Ar	11 30 a	
5 23 p	1568	.....		10 39 a	
6 50 p	1647	Ar { Missoula..... }	Dp	9 20 a	
7 00 p	1647	Dp { Paradise, MT (MDT)..... }	Ar	9 10 a	
8 40 p	1718	..... Sandpoint, ID (former NP Sta.) (PDT).....	Dp	7 25 a	
9 45 p	1837	Ar { SPOKANE, WA..... }	Ar	4 15 a	
11 10 p	1904	Dp { Ephrata ⊕..... }	Dp	3 00 a	
11 40 p	1904	..... Wenatchee.....	Ar	2 30 a	
2 05 a	2023	Ar { Everett..... }	Dp	11 50 p	
3 20 a	2075	Dp { Edmonds..... }	Ar	10 35 p	
3 30 a	2075	Ar { SEATTLE, WA (King St. Sta.) (PDT)..... }	Ar	10 25 p	
6 50 a	2196	.....		7 00 p	
7 15 a	2211	Ar { Missoula..... }	Dp	6 35 p	
8 00 a	2229	Dp { SEATTLE, WA (King St. Sta.) (PDT)..... }	Dp	6 00 p	
Arrives We Fr Mo				Departs Mo We Fr	

SERVICES

The North Coast Hiawatha

Chicago - Seattle

ALL-RESERVED TRAIN

Complete Dining and Beverage Service

Dome/Lounge Service

Sleeping Car Service

Parlor Car Service—Chicago-Minneapolis

Coach Service—Complimentary pillows and blankets available on request

Baggage Service—Checked baggage handled (except at Valley City and Mandan)

At left: A sample *North Coast Hiawatha* schedule from 1975.

The name *North Coast Hiawatha* was derived by “combining” the names of a predecessor train on much of the route, the *North Coast Limited* (west of Minneapolis/St. Paul) and the *Hiawatha* (east of Minneapolis/St. Paul).

Note that between Bozeman and Missoula, the train operated via Butte. Any reinstated service would need to instead run via Helena; the rail line east of Butte over Homestake Pass has been out of service since 1983.

The *North Coast Hiawatha* route shown here currently has Amtrak service provided by the *Empire Builder* between Chicago and Fargo and between Sandpoint and Seattle.