

STEAM TRAINS L. A. TO BOSTON IN ONLY 3 DAYS!

Forrest Whitman

A reader tells me she is tired of the horror show called the evening news. Maybe she'd like to take a history break. Transcontinental steam trains caught the attention of the country back in the gilded era. Why not read some of that tonight?

That's fun history to read. There were predictions of coast to coast travel in under four days. In 1889 one such trip did almost happen. When Rudyard Kipling told that story his book was an immediate hit. His "Captains Courageous" is fun to read again.

Getting cross country in a steam train and making record time was obviously a battle of male egos. Which railroad baron could do it the fastest? But there had to be economic reasons for the speed race too. Why did Gilpin's biggest investors, the gold and silver barons, take fast trains to Chicago or New York or San Francisco? Why did our early financiers like Evans, Moffat and Tabor do it?

Clearly there was an advantage to those who were there early when western land and mine deals came up. Plus each was part of a group. Each railroad and land baron had his special friends. Some were politicians, some bank executives, some smaller speculators. Jay Gould probably could not have bought half the rails in the west just on his bank account. He needed to get home and rustle up the money.

Jay was not exactly part of an organized group, nor were the others. Financiers and railroad moguls met with bankers in a loose fashion. The agreements were real. Gould never did put his own name on the Denver South Park and Pacific even though he got control early on. Secrecy was the name of the game and fast deals had to be made. That "group" met in Chicago or New York and it was important to get there fast.

In "Captains Courageous" we see some incredible railroading based on real trips. I enjoyed rereading it this week. Even though he uses an involved writing style, Kipling is still a good summer read.

The Kipling story is based on a couple of fast train debuts. Listen to how he enthuses: 40 M. P. H.! Only 2 and ½ minutes to change out engines! 3 minutes for watering and 2 for coaling. A Division Super on each train. 16 locomotives to use! None of the fast transcontinentals were that fast in the change over but at least three came close.

That's the kind of train Rudyard Kipling envisioned in 1897. It was loosely based on the Gould gold train. Three others made spectacularly fast runs. All of those runs served the rail magnates who cobbled together the western rail map. Eventually only the "big three" Gould, Hill, and The Santa Fe's Davidson (maybe even Evans, but never Palmer) were left as the leaders. Those fast trains were the marvel of their time.

Not till 1893 did any steam locomotive go past 100 mph pulling a regular consist. That was the New York Central. It ran over a groomed road bed along the Hudson River. The Flying Scotsman of British rail was fast too. It rolled out of Scotland nearly hitting a

hundred. Today it takes exactly four hours to go from the capital of Scotland to the Capital of Britain by rail.

The rivalry between the Scotsman and pesky airplanes went on and on. The trains won and still do. The trains were lovely to look at also. They were built aerodynamically. That's why they had such rounded front engines and swept back cabs. Their burnished metal positively glowed. In the end an English A4 Mallard went 126 mph setting a steam record never beaten on rails between London and Edinburgh.

The New York Central and the Pennsylvania R. R. held an almost century long race to get from Broadway NYC to Denver. Standing on the Englewood platform in Chicago was a treat at about 5 P. M. The 20th Century Limited came down one side and the Pensy limited the other side. Both were headed for the east coast and fast. As a young man I got to stand on that platform as they rushed by. The roar and the speed were thrilling!

The question remains: economics aside, why so much speed? Some authors offered a romantic answer. These rail barons wanted to beat their rivals to take their sweeties to that special table at that special restaurant. Consider the Palmer House in Chicago. For New York elegance there was del Monico's or Sardis or the Metropolitan.

In Kipling's novel speed was needed to re-unite a "captain courageous" and his wife with their son. They had given up the young man for dead and rushed across North America when they heard the news that he had survived.

Today many a pundit decries the huge divide between our American political leaders. Possibly the "free from facts and only me!" shouters (once in the bar car) would notch down the rhetoric. We need to get them to be "captains courageous for America." Kipling wrote his novel about that on a nice steam train. Summer would be the right season to get our loudly battling leaders to a comfy passenger train lounge. Could fantasy reading come true?