



THE PEOPLES JOURNAL

AMTRAK'S \$16 MILLION 'RIP OFF' ...

Frank Browning
Pacific News Serv.

Just a few years ago thousands of eager vacationers used to board the C&O railroad's crack George Washington in New York for a genteel half-day ride to this mountain resort. They dined with linen and silver on a feast of wild game as the train swayed softly along lush Appalachian valleys up to within a few hundred yards of the old Greenbriar hotel.

Today, weel-heeled vacationers still visit the Greenbriar, but they seldom arrive through the stately train station next door. There is a train, but the elegance of yesteryear has given way to the proximate comfort of a recently upholstered cattle car.

The disgruntled comments of train riders who remember the glory of the old George Washington, and scores of other trains like it, have been the daily fare of Amtrak officials since the quasi-governmental corporation started business in 1971.

Amtrak executives acknowledge that its train's inconvenience, discomfort and tardy schedules are responsible for cutting into passenger patronage, and ultimately for adding to the company's mushrooming annual deficit--up to \$406 million last year.

Most Amtrak agents and officials simply grin and bear passenger complaints, contending the situation will improve once the company can buy new equipment to replace the 40-year-old cars used by most trains.

But one man at Amtrak has taken a different view of why passenger trains are so slow and uncomfortable. He is L. Fletcher Prouty, a former Air Force colonel who for 20 years helped the CIA run its secret global airline system until, in the early 70s, he began to blow the whistle on many of the agency's covert operations. Then he went to work for Amtrak.

"You know, finding out how passenger train service was ruined in America wasn't very different from uncovering CIA operation," Prouty says. "It takes the same kind of instinct for finding cover-ups and rip-offs."

**TODAY'S
RAILROADS,
AMERICA'S
GREAT
UNTAPPED
RESOURCE.**

Sometimes Prouty even refers to Amtrak's dilemma as "one of the biggest unreported scandals in America--the \$16 billion rip-off." For \$16 billion is what he says it would cost to bring back the comfortable, efficient passenger system he claims has been systematically and consciously destroyed by the private railroad corporations of the United States. "Do you ever wonder why our schedules are often slower now than they were 30 or 40 years ago?" Prouty asks rhetorically. "Do you ever wonder why it sometimes feels like you'll be thrown out of bed whenever the train takes a bend faster than 35 miles an hour?"

What Prouty found was that all through the fifties the major railroad lines undertook reconstruction of their tracks that virtually eliminated the possibility of running smooth, high-speed passenger trains over them.

"Poor track maintenance is part of our problem," Prouty admits, but more important, he says, was the decision by the railroads after World War II to opt for super long, heavy, slow-moving freight trains.

"What did that do?" Prouty asks. It meant that on curves which had a very steep super-elevation designed for the old high-speed passenger trains, the slower freight trains would derail--actually fall off the track into the curve."

"The use of longer, heavier and higher freight cars is continuously being increased, and this required the American railroad to lower the maximum super-elevation being placed in curves," testified R.E. Tew, assistant chief engineer of the Seaboard Coast Line in hearings before the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) several years ago. His comments were echoed by most technical witnesses who appeared before the ICC.

Says Prouty, "All that technical jargon means that today when one of our passenger cars goes around the bend, it can no longer slide up into the elevated curve smoothly as it was designed to do, but instead bangs against the rail sideways until the turn is completed. No amount of fancy suspension equipment can change that, make the ride smoother or allow us to run the train faster."

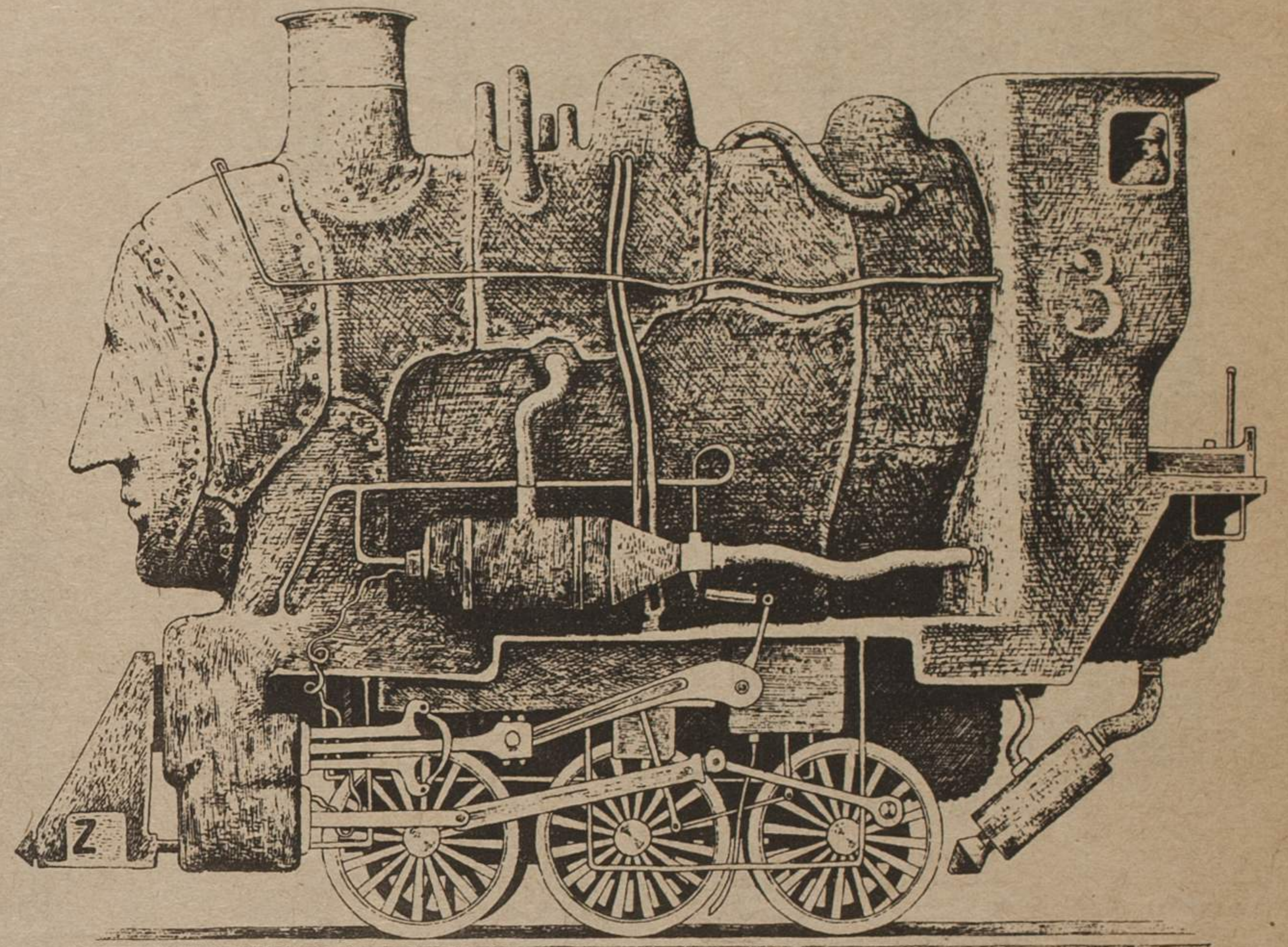
Since nearly all the trackage in the United States is still owned and maintained by the private railroads, Amtrak has no power to upgrade the track for faster traffic. For that reason, Prouty says, Amtrak may never be able to offer fast, comfortable service equal to what passengers had in the 1930s.

Amtrak's performance has come under increasingly sharp congressional criticism, the latest in an unpublicized report issued by the Government Accounting Office (GAO) last June.

Noting that Amtrak had spent over \$34 million in incentive payments to private railroads since 1974 to improve on time performance and maintenance quality, the GAO charged that the only improvement had resulted from "a more liberal definition of 'on time' and because of loosened schedules."

"The \$34 million in incentive payments had little effect on performance," the report concluded. GAO faulted Amtrak for altering schedules to provide longer running times, measuring on time performance only at final destinations and not at intermediate stops, and relying on private railroad records for calculation of its incentive payments.

Typical of the GAO's criticism is a recent run between Los Angeles and New Orleans that arrived 45 minutes to an hour late at most stops but pulled into New Orleans 15 minutes early because the schedule allowed the train over four hours to travel 145 miles.



Drawing by Erik Hillerd

... and the LAWRENCE CONNECTION or murder on the Lone Star Express

By Jolene Babyak

Two news items surfaced back-to-back mid-November that concerns Lawrence a great deal. One was that Sales and Marketing Management magazine ranked Lawrence 25th among the 25 fastest growing "officially recognized Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas". Though Lawrence petitioned to be included in the SMSA, this does not diminish the fact that it is central to the Kansas City-Topeka-Emporia corridor, and with Clinton, is likely to balloon in population within the next 5 years.

The second item is that Lawrence may lose the only passenger train service, the Lone Star Express, within as short a time as 6 months.

Amtrak, according to an official spokesman, is "going to try to dismantle lines in the midwest and keep running 120 trains in the northeast corridor at the expense of the long haul trains in the midwest."

They have already planned to eliminate the Floridian January 19th, which serves areas from Florida to Chicago, and some time after that they will eliminate the Southern Crescent, serving Washington D.C. to New Orleans.

IT CAN HAPPEN HERE. Despite our somewhat dubious rating of 25th fastest growing metropolitan area in the country, we may lose our

one passenger service train, serving people to and from Houston, Ft. Worth, Wichita, Emporia, Lawrence, Topeka, Kansas City, up to Chicago.

The Lone Star Express is the only passenger train serving Lawrence, and one of two in the state.

Hearings will begin, said the local Amtrak official, sometime after the new year.

You can help however, by sending letters of protest to the following officials. Write your letter, and send copies to others. We need this service, not because we're growing, but because we use it.

Write to:

Secretary of Transportation
Brock Adams
Dept. of Transportation
Washington D.C. 20520

Senator James Pearson
5313 Dirksen Senate O.B.
WDC 20510

Sen. Bob Dole
4213 Dirksen Sen. O.B.
WDC, 20510

Rep. Larry Winn
2336 Rayburn House O.B.
WDC, 20515