

*A Collection of Newspaper
Columns 2019-2022.*

The View from the Back Row

By Benny J. Hornsby

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A Collection of Columns From

THE
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2019-2022

THE VIEW
FROM THE
BACK ROW

Benny J. Hornsby

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1

LAST TRAIN SMOKING

I would walk a mile to ride 100 yards on a train. Trains have long been the inspiration for song writers, poets, and lost souls like me. I was raised in a house about 50 yards from the railroad tracks, and I grew up to the daily rhythm of the passing trains. I can remember sitting on the back porch at night in the 1950s, watching the passing trains glow like sheet metal in moonlight, listening to the lonesome whistles, and writing postcards home in my mind from imaginary places at the end of the line. When I left for boot camp in San Diego at 17, my choice to ride would have been a train, but the Navy put me on a bus instead.

When I graduated, a bus was all I could afford to get me cross country to my first ship in Boston, which was fitting out to go overseas. I remember getting off for a rest stop in Tucson, Arizona, with the turned-back cuffs on my dress blues vividly displaying the embroidered golden eagles I had sewn on to make myself look like a salty sea dog. Although I had been warned to be on the lookout, I wasn't quick enough to avoid the Navy Shore Patrol who pulled me aside, whipped out a razor, and made me cut my eagles off as non-authorized uniform items. Luckily, they didn't confiscate them, and I had sewn them back on before we got to El Paso. After my first payday onboard ship, I went downtown to Boston's poor sailor's version of London's High Street and bought myself a set of tailormade gaberdine bellbottoms, complete with a zipper in the pants, hiding behind the traditional 13 buttons. This jumper had fire-breathing dragons on the cuffs, and in my mind, I was too hot to handle and too cold to hold.

It wasn't until a long time later that I got to ride a train. I came back to San Francisco from my first around-the-world cruise and hadn't saved much money. I caught a hop out of Travis Air Force Base to Naval Air Station, Quonset Point, Rhode Island, on the only plane

headed east with a vacant seat. I then caught the first train southbound and smoking to Pennsylvania Station in New York City where I caught the Crescent for the trip to Hattiesburg.

It seemed like everyone on the train was eating fried chicken out of brown paper bags. I can still smell it. Exactly 1,260 miles later, at 1621 p.m., we rolled into the Hub City on time. I grabbed my sea bag, walked up the hill to the Coney Island; had a hot dog; hitchhiked to Lumberton; and walked the rest of the way home. I had been gone for three years, day for day; had 10 days leave; and nobody was home.

Although I never got on one until later in my life, growing up around trains and the tracks greatly influenced me. For example, when I was 8 years old, I held the world's record for walking the farthest on a single rail without falling off, well over a mile by my calculation. Of course, no one knew about the record but me. The railroad crossing about 100 yards from my house was where my uncle killed himself, and when my father shot himself nearby, I always figured it was when a train was passing to muffle the noise. Two Roman Catholic nuns were also hit by a train in their car and killed at this crossing when I was a child.

One of my earliest childhood memories, at about five or six, is listening to my old Silvertone radio late at night, tubes glowing in the dark; and hearing the mellow voice of John R, disc jockey for WLAC, Nashville, Tennessee, pushing records for Ernie's Record Mart, 179 Third Avenue, Nashville, Tennessee. I don't remember the name of the song, but even today I can hear Muddy Waters singing:

Well, there's two trains running
Neither one going my way.
One runs at sunrise
And the other just fore day.

When John R. went off the air about 11 p.m., I'd switch over to XERF, in Ciudad Acuna, Coahuila, Mexico, just over the border from

Del Rio, Texas, and one of the original 250,000-watt, clear channel “Border Blasters” for some ranchero music. I always wondered what happened to birds that landed on their antenna. I figured they got fried. Later, I saw that happen when sea gulls would land on the broadcast antenna of ships I was on. A few years afterwards, in the mid-60s, XERF was the station that Wolfman Jack made famous, but I was long gone by then. If you listen close, you can still hear him howling.

I was raised in a wide spot in the road called Piatonia, just north of Lumberton. It was founded in 1883 as a flag stop on the New Orleans and Northeastern Railroad, which intended to build a town there. As a child, I played in the foundations of the train station, commissary store, and several residences on the other side of the tracks from my house. Unfortunately for Piatonia, a major sawmill was built in Lumberton around 1900; the train began to stop there instead; and Piatonia faded into the pines. “Piatonia” is a Choctaw word for “the train doesn’t stop here anymore.” That’s not true; I just made it up, but that is close to the name of a play by Tennessee Williams, *The Milk Train Doesn’t Stop Here Anymore* (1962), which was a flop on Broadway. I thought it was pretty good, but what do I know?

When you travel to other countries, you begin to see how far behind we are in the utilization of train travel and how much we depend upon the automobile. While there are many reasons for this – wide expanses of open territory, cheap gas, the need to see what’s on the other side of the hill, etc. – how long will our travel habits be sustainable in this “carbon neutral” world we are told that’s coming? President Biden, who rode the train from his home in Delaware to D.C. daily while he was a Senator and Vice President and earned the nickname “Amtrak Joe” because of his obvious love of rail travel, has allotted the not insignificant sum of \$80 billion dollars to overhaul and improve our rail system. Unfortunately, I read where Amtrak already has some \$35 billion in deferred maintenance that needs to be done before the rails and bridges are safe.

Although the United States has the largest and most extensive network of railroads in the world, totaling some 160,141 miles, followed by China, Russia, and India, over 80% of it is dedicated to freight service, leaving Amtrak with far fewer miles for passengers. This imbalance is a major obstacle to improving passenger service nationwide, especially outside the heavily traveled northeastern corridor. Simply put, the railroads don't want to slow down or reroute their lucrative freight trains. For example, the famous Sunset Limited passenger train, which ran from Florida to California, has been shut down along the Gulf Coast since Hurricane Katrina, despite promises of significant subsidies from the states of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Florida. These three states see renewed passenger service as a boon to tourism. The holdout state, Alabama, supported by successful lobbying from the railroad which doesn't want passenger trains on its tracks, sees the trains as a threat to business conducted by the city and port of Mobile. The issue has been under study for years, but Biden's infusion of infrastructure money, if it happens, might break something loose.

One can't help but wonder if Alabama's objections might somehow be related to the horrible crash of the Sunset Limited on the night of 22 September, 1993, when a tugboat made a wrong turn on the Mobile River; then hit and displaced the Big Bayou Canot rail bridge by about three feet, causing the train to derail and plunge into the water at 70 mph. 47 crew and passengers were killed, the deadliest train wreck in Amtrak's history.

I've ridden trains all over the world, but I want to briefly tell you about just two of my favorites: the one across the isthmus of Panama, and the route down the French Riviera, the Cote d'Azur, to Rome. If you were to ask the average high school junior, boning up for the standardized history test they must take later this month, "What year was the transcontinental railroad completed?", they would probably tell you - 1869. They would get it right, but it's wrong. The answer is 1855, and the railroad ran, not across the United States, but from Colon on the Atlantic, to Balboa on the Pacific in Panama. The line was built

by the United States, primarily to service passengers and freight headed from the eastern United States to California for the Gold Rush which started in 1849. It is estimated that between 5,000 to 10,000 workers died during its construction, primarily from tropical diseases, the same ones that plagued workers on the Panama Canal half a century later. In fact, the Canal runs parallel to the railroad. It's only about 48 miles long, and I had the opportunity to ride it across rather than on a ship through the Canal which I had done several times before. I like this ride because of the flora and the fauna – lush jungle on either side, monkeys hanging from the trees, beautiful birds, etc.

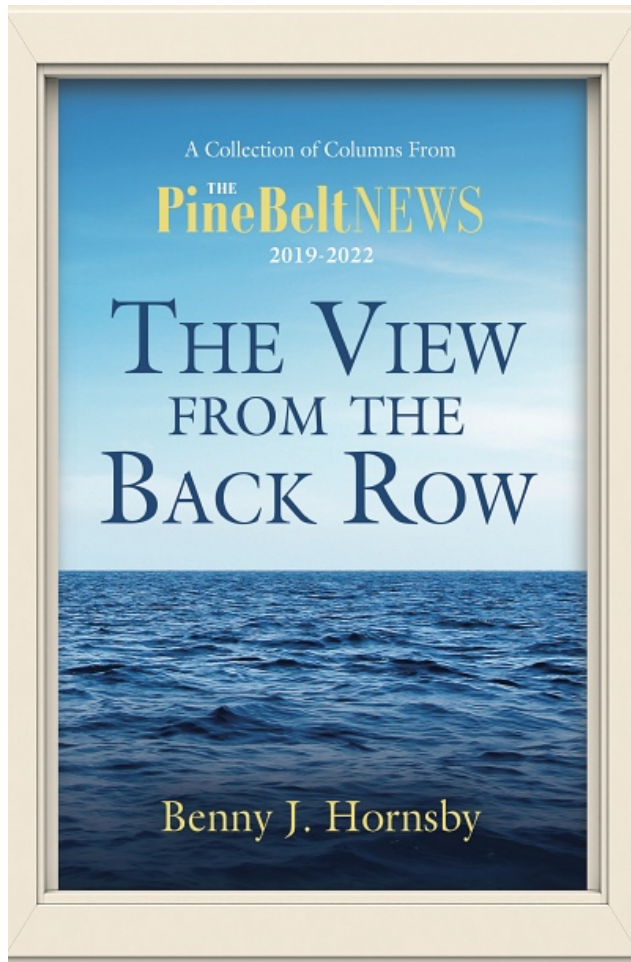
The route along the Riviera, on the Mediterranean coast in France and Italy, is most beautiful from Toulon, where I once spent six months in a French Navy shipyard, and Saint -Tropez on the west, to Menton at the France-Italy border. When you cross the border at Ventimiglia, where you always must change trains, it's now called the Italian Riviera, and you pretty much hug the side of mountains most of the way to Rome. When I was first living in France, we would ride the train down to Cannes and try to score some tickets to the film festival, but we were never successful. We did see Brigitte Bardot once, however. Heading back west, you come to Antibes, which is where Napoleon landed in March of 1815 after his exile on the island of Elba. From here, with about 1100 loyal supporters, he marched on Paris and routed King Louis XVII, at least for a time. Not far from here is where he uttered the famous words: “Soldats, me reconnaissez-vous? S'il en est un parmi vous qui veuille tuer son Empereur, me voici” (“Soldiers, do you recognize me? If there is one amongst you who wishes to kill your Emperor, here I am”). Of course, the soldiers, mostly former members of his old army, followed him on to Paris, and then all the way to Waterloo.

I lived in Nice, the next big town down the track toward Italy, for three years, and I was privileged to return one summer four or five years ago for language school. I took my family, and the first free weekend I had, we loaded up on the train and went to Rome. Every time I pass Pisa, not far from the Eternal City, I think not of the

Leaning Tower, which is very interesting (I once ate a pizza atop the Leaning Tower of Pisa), but I think of the poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who lived there before she died in Florence, and who summed up in her magnum opus, *How Do I Love Thee (Sonnet 43)* how I feel about trains:

I love thee with a passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints.

I don't know about you, but when my time comes, I hope I can catch the last train smoking.



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