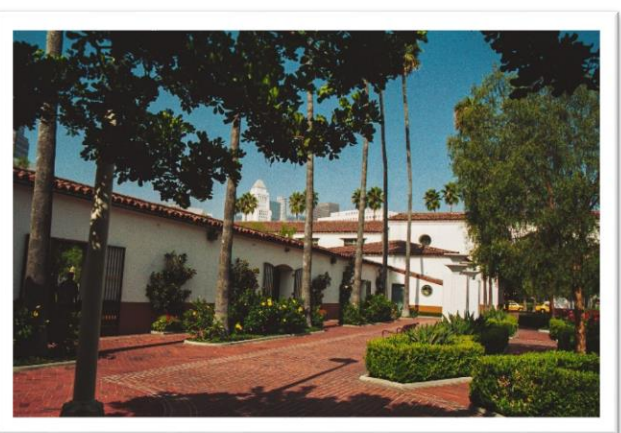
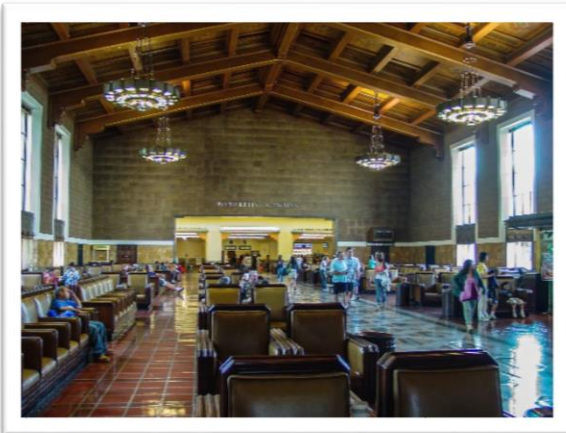


The Dakotas – Heart of the Northern Plains

(Part 1 – Los Angeles to Fargo by Train)

In early August of 2005, after another very successful Esri International User Conference, I took a two-week vacation to North and South Dakota. It was a large part of America I had only travelled through a few times, never stopping to explore the region. On this trip I was determined to get to know the area as much as possible in two short weeks. My trip began by the Metrolink train to Los Angeles Union Station where I would board the Amtrak “Coast Starlight” train to Portland – the first leg of my journey. Union Station in the heart of downtown Los Angeles is classic old “Mission style” architecture, with gorgeous colorful ceramic tile everywhere. The old 1930’s style furniture in the huge waiting hall sit beneath a beautiful high vaulted wooden ceiling. Outside the station is a lovely garden and courtyard with a large fountain. Children were throwing coins into the fountain, and right after they left, an old man with a long white beard “fished” out the coins!



Shortly afterwards, boarding was called for the train on track 7. But when I got there what I saw was an “old” Amtrak train. As I walked down the platform, I couldn’t find car #1432 or anything that looked like a sleeper car! Instead, there were a bunch of old coaches and a scene of pandemonium. An Amtrak conductor saw my confusion and told me to go to the last coach and see the attendant. She gave me a seat assignment in one of the coaches and said that this train was a substitute with no sleeper cars or first-class seats – and, there was no dining car, just a snack bar! But she assured me we would pick up

the “Superliner” train in Oakland later tonight. I found my seat and once the train pulled out of the station, the conductor came on the intercom to apologize and explain that the original Superliner train was stuck behind a Metrolink train that had struck a dump truck on the track near Oxnard! So, to stay on schedule, Amtrak made a quick decision to substitute the old train. While it was disappointing to everyone, it was the right decision. In addition, all first class (sleeper car) passengers would be reimbursed later for the inconvenience, as well as receiving a \$10 voucher for the snack bar. Meanwhile, under beautiful blue skies, we rolled past deep orange grass covered rocky hills in the Simi Valley. At that moment there was an announcement the snack bar was open, which created a “stampede”. So, I decided to sit and wait for the “dust” to settle. As we approached Santa Barbara, I made my way to the snack bar and joined a short line. Just behind me was a very loud-mouthed woman who continually “bitched” about the whole experience! Finally, I had enough of her bitching and told her to tell it to the conductor, because nothing she could do would change things! At last I was able to order a small pepperoni pizza and a couple of cold Budweisers. And while I waited for the pizza, I discovered a small first-class seating area on the other side of the snack bar – totally empty, with nice comfortable leather seats, and quiet! Unfortunately, it only lasted for an hour before the loud-mouthed woman and her entire family discovered it! Still, it was a lot better than where I had been seated in the old coach. The views of the Pacific Ocean along the coast from Santa Barbara to San Luis Obispo were spectacular. Later in the afternoon, as the train headed north towards the summit of the Coast Range and into the Salinas Valley, I went back to my coach seat.



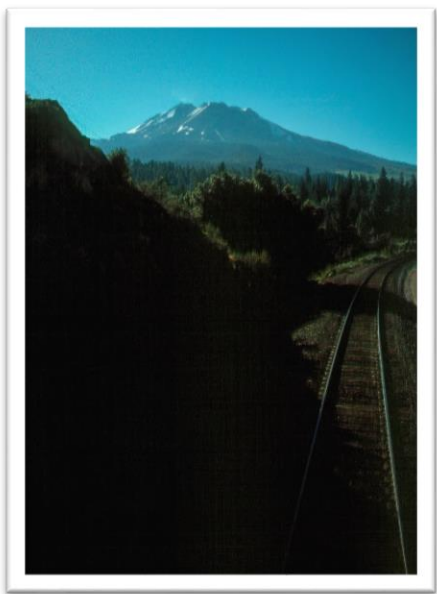
There I found myself across the aisle from a young family with a cute 7 year-old daughter travelling by train for the first time. Her dad leaned over and told me how they had gone through all the books, games, videos, and snacks in the first two hours – and they still had over 10 hours before we would arrive in Oakland! Just about that time, she leaned over and said “Dad, why didn’t we fly”? (He had no answer!)

It was a lovely ride through the Salinas Valley where mile after mile of massive fields of produce, orchards, and vineyards covered the landscape. The brilliant golden hills of grass formed a sharp contrast to the deep green fields.

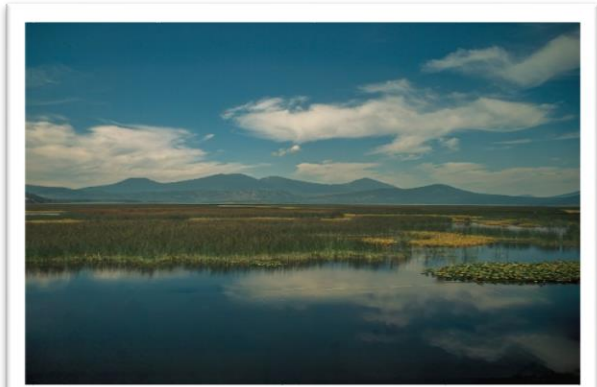


As we approached the town of Salinas, the coastal fog began to roll in, turning the sunset a gorgeous pink glow. As darkness fell upon us, I had a hamburger and Budweiser from the snack bar for “dinner”! Then I headed upstairs in the old dome car, which was softly lighted and quiet. Seated across the aisle from me was an old grey haired man who covertly mixed his own rum and coke drinks as he watched the DVD movie “Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory” while overlooking the computer of a man and his young daughter seated in front of him. A couple of times the father had to restart the DVD player. After the movie finished, the old man leaned over and asked the young man what he needed to buy to be able to watch movies on his boat in Bellingham, Washington. The young man was very patient as he tried to explain the technology. Finally, the old man asked what the young man had done with “the little white thing” to get the movie started again when it had stopped unexpectedly. (He was referring to the “cursor” on the computer screen!) Somehow, at that point, I doubted the old man was destined to have his own computer!

As the hour approached 11pm, we finally arrived in Oakland and were fortunate to have the new Superliner train waiting for us on the same platform. I quickly found my room (#5) upstairs in car #1432, and our porter, named Faizal, had it prepared for bedtime. As the train pulled out of the station, I decided to have a beer in the Pacific Parlor Car, reserved for sleeper car passengers. Quietly we headed into the dark night and the beginning of a long journey north! When I returned to my room, the gentle swaying of the car and the soft sound of the wheels on the steel rails lulled me into a deep slumber. Early the next morning, I awoke to a view of the beautiful forests of northern California around the lumber town of Dunsmuir. I washed up, combed my hair, and made my way to the dining car where I had a hearty breakfast of eggs, bacon, hash browns, toast, and coffee. As I looked out the window, the first sight of snow-covered Mt Shasta came into view, shining magnificently in the bright sunshine. After breakfast, I joined several fellow passengers in the Pacific Parlor Car to sit quietly and marvel at the gorgeous landscape of tall trees, clear mountain streams, and snow-capped peaks. Mt Shasta remained in our view for almost two hours, enabling me to take some beautiful photos of the awesome mountain that dominated the entire region.

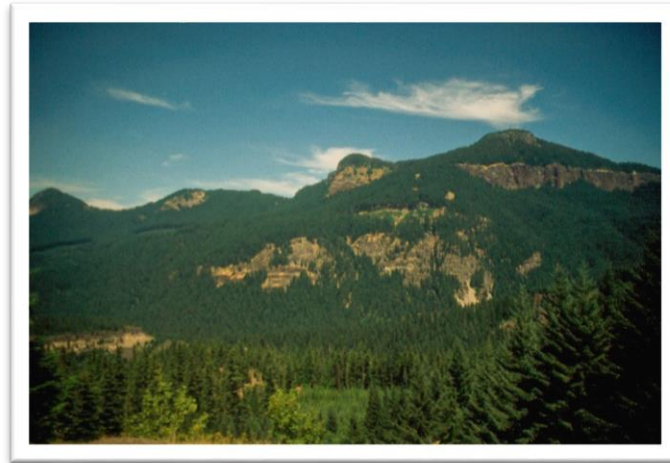


Later, as we approached the Oregon border, the landscape slowly became drier and more open with large expanses of golden grasslands – the result of Mt Shasta’s “rain shadow”. Gradually, the forest became more open with huge Ponderosa trees on the slopes above beautiful golden meadows. It wasn’t long before the rugged peaks of the Cascade Range came into view before we arrived in Klamath Falls, Oregon. After a brief stop in Klamath Falls to change the locomotive crew, we rolled along the shore of Upper Klamath Lake, giving us beautiful views of the huge lake with its large population of white pelicans, herons, and geese, all within the National Wildlife Refuge.



By this time, the train was running almost two and a half hours behind schedule, and it wasn’t long before the conductor confirmed the delay, announcing that passengers connecting with the Empire Builder train in Portland would be transferred to a bus in Chemult for travel to Pasco, Washington in order to make their connection. Not wanting to take the bus, I asked the conductor if I could “rebook” my ticket for a stopover in Portland and take the Empire Builder tomorrow. At first, he said he doubted any rooms would be available on tomorrow’s train since there was only one sleeper car from Portland to Spokane where the train joined with the other section coming from Seattle. But 30 minutes later, he came back and said luckily enough he was able to book the last room on tomorrow’s train from Portland. He then gave me a reservation confirmation for “Room H”, and said I was especially lucky because the room was for the handicapped, so it had a lot more space and its own toilet and shower!

Upon leaving Chemult, the route west took us up through the dense forests of the Cascades to the summit at Willamette Pass.



Once we were over the summit, the train slowly descended the steep, forested slopes to Eugene. From there we proceeded north through the heart of the fertile Willamette Valley with large fields, orchards, and vineyards everywhere. Lunchtime soon rolled around, and I made my way to the dining car where I was seated at a table with three other people. (By the rules of the dining car, one has no choice but to share a table, each of which seats four people) Since all meals are included as part of a sleeping car ticket, I could order anything from the menu. So, I chose the lemon spiced roast Alaskan salmon with wild rice, roasted corn, and fresh steamed green beans. I shared a half bottle of California chardonnay with my seat mate, a lady from LA who was travelling with her young teenage daughter “Margaux” and a young cousin “Mariah”. Both of the young girls finished two huge portions of roast chicken, as well as two large bowls of ice cream covered in chocolate and strawberry sauce for dessert! They were cute and full of fun and adventure on their first time aboard a train. (I loved sharing the table with them)



Following lunch, I found a seat in the Pacific Parlor Car and watched the beautiful landscape pass by the window. Across the aisle from me a young man sat next to his elderly grandmother, easily in her late 80's or early 90's. I watched as he took out a deck of cards and asked if she knew how to play “Stump the Wizard”, a game he had played in college. She had no clue, so he took out a small book about many different card games and asked her to pick one. She replied that it didn't matter, so he chose one at random and began to read the instructions. As I listened, the rules became more and more complicated, until after several minutes, he stopped and asked if she understood, to which she responded “No”! At that moment, he looked at her and said, “neither do I”. They ended up playing poker! (What impressed

me the most was his “patience” in dealing with his grandmother, though he was perhaps only 19 or 20. But it was very obvious he really cared about her – so nice to see!)

As we approached Salem, Oregon’s capitol city, sleeping car passengers were invited to a wine tasting in the Pacific Parlor Car. Over the next hour, we enjoyed three premium California wines, along with a nice selection of Oregon cheeses. For me, the highlight was the Pinot Noir from Parker Estates, owned by film actor Fess Parker and featured in the movie “Sideways”!



Around 7pm we pulled into the historic and recently restored Union Station in Portland – three and a half hours behind schedule. In the station I saw a flyer about the historic “Mark Spencer Hotel” downtown. So, I took a taxi to the hotel and checked into a nice room overlooking the Willamette River. Then I walked to the historic Multnomah Hotel, a classic old luxury property now part of the Embassy Suites collection. I had a couple pints of “Mirror Pond Pale Ale”, from one of Oregon’s finest craft breweries, as I sat at the beautiful old bar in the hotel’s “Portland City Grill and Steakhouse”. After that I walked back through Portland’s old Chinatown district to the Mark Spencer Hotel.



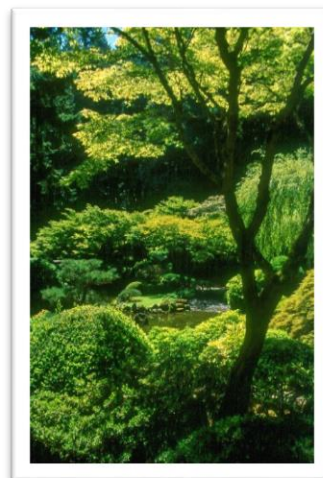
The next morning, I was up early, only to find that despite having a kitchenette in the room, complete with a coffeemaker, there was NO coffee to be found anywhere in the room! Later, downstairs in the breakfast room, I finally had my morning coffee, along with a nice apple and cheese turnover. Meanwhile, an old man sat nearby with his family and talked constantly about his kidney problem –

loudly! After breakfast, I embarked on a long walk around downtown, where many of the historic old buildings were in the process of restoration. One area in particular, known as “Pioneer Courthouse Square”, was a lovely open block paved in old brick. It had a small amphitheater and a beautiful cut stone waterfall. And in one corner of the square was an elegant new Starbucks, designed in the “art Deco” style with dark metal and glass accents. I couldn’t resist having a double tall latte as I sat in the warm morning sunshine and watched families enjoying the lovely weather. Later, I walked along the riverfront and passed an old steam sternwheeler tug named “Portland”, now part of the Maritime Museum. Upriver to the south, were two massive old steel railway bridges spanning the river, one of which now carries the new electric trolley system linking downtown Portland with surrounding neighborhoods to the east.



As it became close to mid-day, I walked back to the hotel, packed my bags, and stored them with the front desk. As I was about to walk out the door, I overheard a couple saying they were headed to “Jake’s Crawfish Restaurant” for lunch because it had been recommended as one of the best and most famous restaurants in the city. So, I quickly decided to give the place a try. Surprisingly, it was just around the corner from the hotel. I chose a table outdoors in the warm sunshine and was served promptly by a very “spiffy” waiter in a starched white coat and black tie! The menu offered an extensive selection of fresh shellfish and local seafood, but what immediately caught my eye was “Crawfish Etouffee”, a very traditional Creole dish from Louisiana. It was prepared perfectly in a spicy brown Cajun sauce, along with chicken and peppers. Perched on top of the dish was a whole boiled crawfish! It was served with steamed rice and hot sourdough bread – definitely a “to die for” meal! After finishing the dish, the waiter “insisted” I try a small serving of the Chef’s specialty, warm “Three Berry Cobbler” topped with vanilla ice cream – amazing! (For sure, Jake’s is a must when visiting Portland)

After lunch, I still had a couple of hours before I had to be at the train station, so I hiked up the hill above downtown to beautiful Washington Park, where the International Rose Garden was spectacular. Every color of the rainbow was out in full bloom, and in the distance, a man played lovely Irish music on a hammered dulcimer – mesmerizing! Just beyond the rose garden was the Japanese Garden a quiet, peaceful retreat from the city. And the view of downtown Portland with snow capped Mt Hood shining beyond was simply awesome!

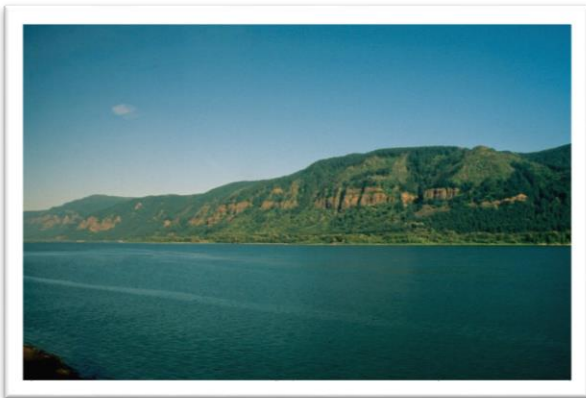


But soon it was time to head back to Union Station where I was invited to wait in the “Metropolitan Lounge” – a nice, quiet place reserved for first class sleeping car passengers. A half hour later, we boarded the train, the famous “Empire Builder” bound for Chicago. Shortly after departure, our porter, named Charles, introduced himself and explained the layout of the train, which included the “Sightseer Lounge Car” at the front of the train.

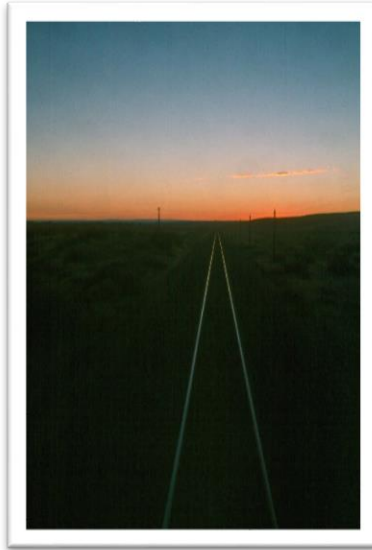


About 30 minutes later, as we crossed over the Columbia River into Washington State, Charles came to my room with a delicious cold dinner of sautéed shrimp, spicy Asian noodles, fresh fruit salad, and a half bottle of chilled Champagne – a really nice touch! The cold dinner was provided to sleeping car passengers because there was no dining car until we reached Spokane at midnight to join the section of

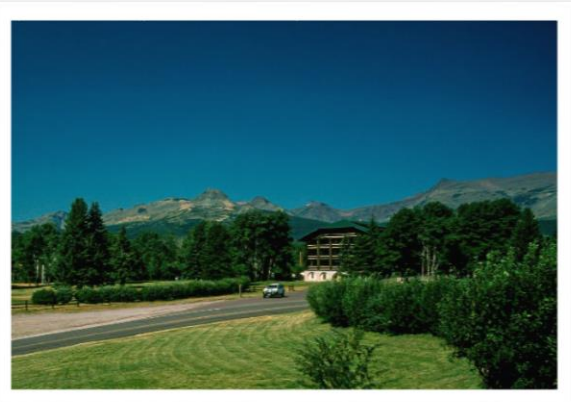
the train from Seattle. After dinner in my room, I went to the lounge car where I was joined by a guy named Bill as we passed through the gorgeous scenery of the enormous Columbia Gorge.



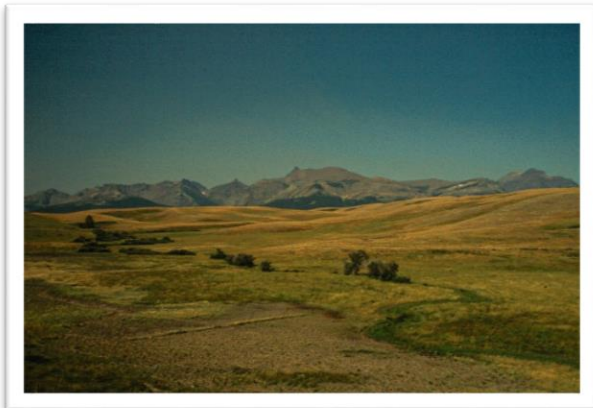
Slowly the landscape changed from the dense forest of western Oregon into the golden grassland of eastern Oregon. At one point, as the train rolled along following the river, we watched the amazing acrobatics of windsurfers racing up and down the river. The abundant waterfowl were wonderful to watch as well. And all the while, Bill had his ear to his radio scanner listening to the “chatter” of the train crew. Every once in a while, he would “report” that we had 28 axles on the train, or one of the locomotives was overheating. He was a true “train buff”, and on this trip, Bill and his wife were taking the Empire Builder from Portland to Chicago, then the City of New Orleans from Chicago to New Orleans, and on to Los Angeles with the Sunset Limited. Finally, from Los Angeles they would return to Portland aboard the Coast Starlight. All of this travel by train would take up Bill’s annual two-week vacation. Bill was a really nice guy who knew literally everything about the railroads. He also built railroad cars for a company in Portland and pointed out many of the freight cars we passed along the way that were built by his company – Gunderson. (I really enjoyed spending the evening with Bill) As we pulled into the tiny town of Wishram, Washington, the conductor announced a short five minute “smoke stop”, along with the caution that everyone must remain beside the train and be ready to board as soon as the whistle blew – failure to do so would result in spending the night in Wishram where there were NO hotels or restaurants! (A very bad experience indeed) From Wishram, there was a short stop in Pasco before heading to Spokane.



I bid goodnight to Bill and returned to my room, just as Charles had finished making up my bed for the night. As the train continued northeast to Spokane, I fell asleep quickly, and in fact, I missed all the activity in Spokane as the two sections of the train were joined for the journey to Chicago. I awoke early the next morning and enjoyed a delicious breakfast of ham and eggs with potatoes toast and coffee in the Dining Car as the train rolled through the beautiful forested mountains of northern Idaho and western Montana. Slowly the train climbed to the summit of Maria's Pass, following the southern boundary of Glacier National Park. The views of rugged snow-capped peaks under the deep blue sky were nothing short of spectacular. And it was especially nice that my room had windows on both sides of the sleeper car. Near the top of Maria's Pass, we stopped at the famous "Isaac Walton Inn", a beautiful old log structure built by James J. Hill, the owner of the Great Northern Railroad in the late 1800's as a way to encourage tourism from the eastern United States.



As we proceeded eastward, the train slowly coasted down the gradual slope of the Rocky Mountain Plateau from the forests and rugged mountains into the much flatter and drier landscape of eastern Montana – a land of brilliant golden wheat fields and grassland. Behind us loomed the massive peaks of Glacier National Park – a spectacular geologic formation! As we rolled on to the east through Montana, I returned to my room and took a shower, my first aboard a train, and one that was speeding down the track at 70 mph! (Actually, it was quite pleasant, despite a few times of "bouncing off the walls" – but it felt great to be clean again)



As lunchtime came, I joined some folks from Reno, Nevada who were travelling to a family reunion in Grand Forks, North Dakota. Amazingly, we all ordered the same thing – a delicious corned beef and swiss cheese sandwich, followed by a tasty slice of key lime pie. I spent most of the afternoon in my room listening to music on my headphones while watching the beautiful late summer landscape of the northern Great Plains roll by my window – so peaceful and relaxing. I noticed many farmers in their fields harvesting vast areas of golden wheat with monstrous combines!



Short stop in Shelby, Montana

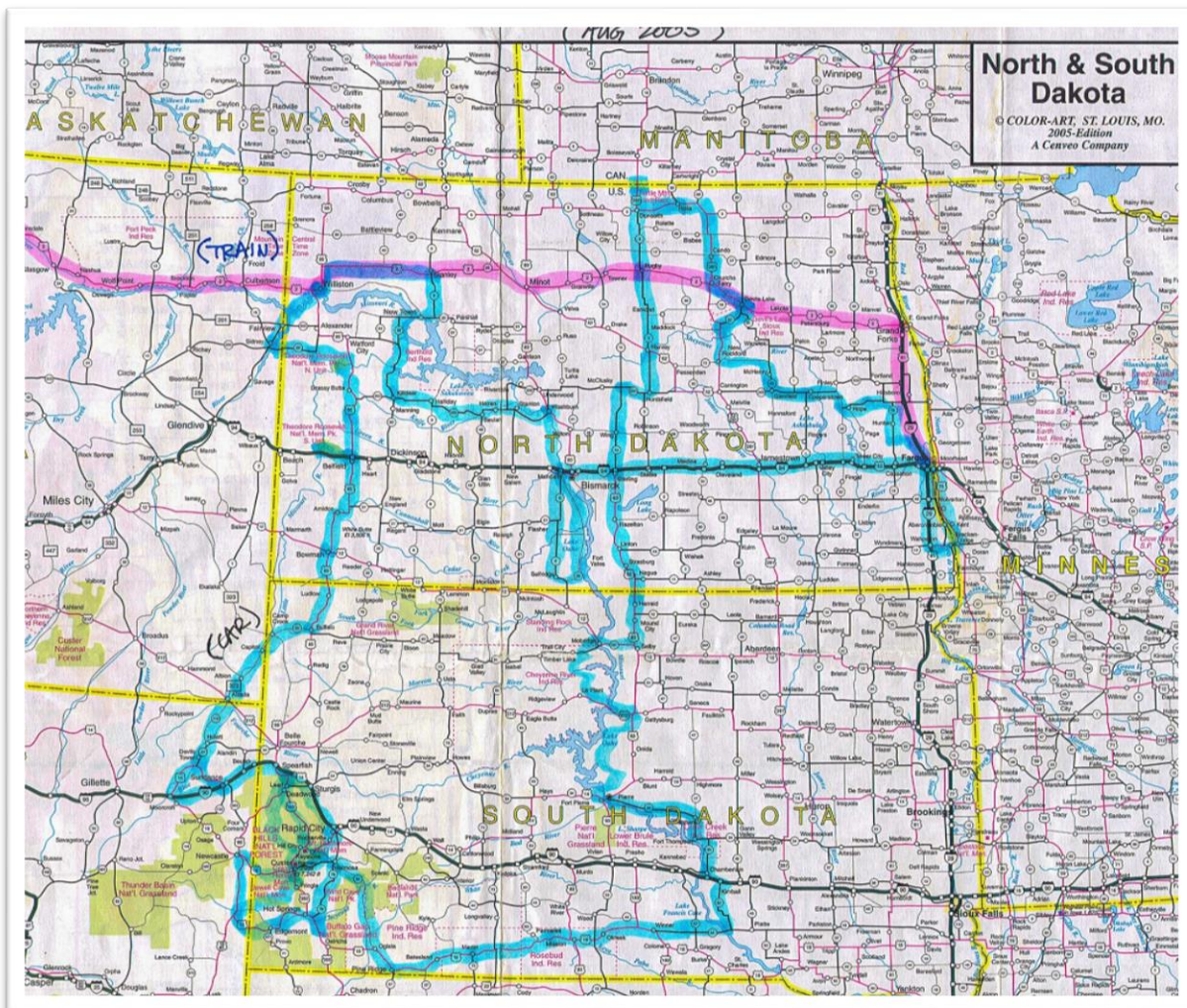
Then at 3:30pm, sleeping car passengers were invited to the dining car for a wine tasting. I joined Bill and some folks from Illinois to sample four Washington state wines, all of which were excellent. The dining car steward did a great job of introducing the wines and informing us of what to look for in each of them. As the train rolled past Glasgow, Montana we tasted some remarkable wines, “14 Hands Chardonnay”, “Snoqualmie Chenin Blanc”, “Columbia Crest Shiraz”, and “Chateau St Michelle Cabernet Sauvignon”. Some of the passengers knew wines and which ones they favored, but many passengers were probably experiencing their first wine tasting! However, we all enjoyed the enthusiasm of the Amtrak crew that served us!



As the train continued its journey east across the plains and wheat fields of eastern Montana, I spent more time listening to music in my room and enjoying the view of the beautiful landscape. Soon it was time to head to the dining car for dinner, where once again I was joined by Bill and an elderly couple from Portland. I chose the “Cajun seared Catfish filet” – really delicious! Meanwhile, Bill told us a lot about the many long freight trains we passed as they waited on the sidings, allowing us to pass. (Bill was a virtual encyclopedia of trains) By the time I left the dining car, we were crossing the border into North Dakota, with a gorgeous sunset behind us. Since I had to be up in the middle of the night (2am) to depart the train in Fargo, I turned in early. As Charles finished making up my bed for the night, he handed me a couple of warm chocolate chip cookies – nice touch! Soon I settled into a quiet slumber. Suddenly, about 2:30am, I was awakened by the conductor as we approached Fargo. I quickly got my stuff together and headed downstairs to get off the train – but, I found the door was locked! So, I dragged my bags back upstairs and ran through three more cars until I found an open door! And just as I stepped off the train, the conductor shouted “All Aboard”! (If I had not been able to get off the train in Fargo, the next stop would have been Minneapolis, almost four hours later) Now that I was in Fargo, I took a taxi to the Holiday Inn where I had reserved a room before I began the trip. I checked into the hotel and quickly “resumed” my slumber for the rest of the night. The next morning, I awoke to find the day cloudy with some light rain. Then I picked up a rental car from Hertz and began the next part of my journey through North Dakota.



Stay tuned for Part 2 – “Fargo to the Black Hills of South Dakota”, and all the beautiful, amazing country along the way!



August 6 – 20, 2005