

Waiting on a Train: The Embattled Future of Passenger Rail Service

After spending years as a traveling journalist on many modes of transportation across the country, James McCommons decided to take a year travelling exclusively by trains to encounter the full scope of passenger rail in America. Along the way, he rode nearly all of Amtrak's routes and met with many of the most prominent leaders, advocates, officials in passenger rail today, but also interacted with scores of riders.

McCommons translated that year of train riding into a thoughtful and comprehensive look at the current state of passenger rail in this country in *Waiting on a Train - The Embattled Future of Passenger Rail Service* (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2009), which received the *Library Journal* Best Book Award for 2009, and was a finalist in *Forward Magazine's* 2009 Book of the Year Awards. Focusing on portraying that reality in an unvarnished form, McCommons is objective, well-informed and open-minded to Amtrak's troubles and successes, making for interesting and enlightening reading. McCommons took some time to discuss his book, as well as his other observations on how Americans travel by rail today.

RAIL Magazine: What has been the reaction to your book?

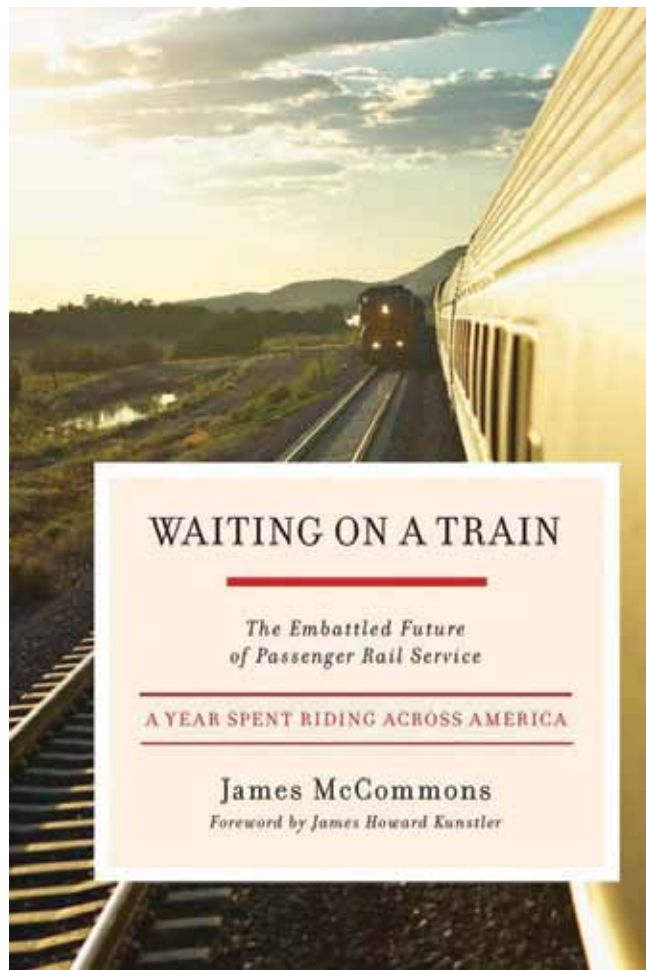
McCommons: The reaction has been interesting. It was named a Best of 2009 by the *Library Journal*, so I've been talking to a lot of people at libraries recently. And the crowds that have been coming out have not all

been rail fans, but also just people who are curious about rail, and young folks, too. A real nice mix. And this general audience doesn't really know how we got Amtrak or much about rail history, for that matter. They're interested in high-speed rail, but they tend to know that we're not going to have that overnight. Like the book, the talks tend to be mix of history and the future for rail. I've even got some emails from the folks at Amtrak, who said I did a pretty good job. Overall, the reaction's been good.

RAIL Magazine: What set you off, initially, on this rail journey around the country and where or when did the idea for a book emerge?

McCommons: I'm a magazine writer and I've been looking for a book project. I've been taking Amtrak since 1975, off-and-on. And every time that I'd recently boarded a

train, I began to wonder why things really hadn't changed all that much since the 1970s, why hasn't it gotten any better? And then I realized that was a central question that could really drive the book. Traveling around on the train just made sense because I know the kind of conversations you can have along the way with passengers and employees. I learned a lot from these conversations. People tend to have these interesting conversations about energy and transportation and rails versus roads, for example. Another key to the book was that I had to really think about connectivity -- I didn't want to rent cars -- so that became a challenge that I chronicled in the book, too. Good transportation is about connections and not just about trains. On a recent trip to Europe I rode a lot of trains and in terms of connectivity, I typically only had to walk a few steps from train to transit. It was seamless.



RAIL Magazine: The tag phrase of your book is: *The Embattled Future of Passenger Rail Service*. What did you mean by that phrase?

McCommons: I just don't think we've figured out rail yet, as a nation. I don't think we even know how to talk about it. As I got toward the end of the book, I came to some conclusions, but I tended to be more descriptive than prescriptive. It does the educating, but it doesn't say exactly what to do. As for embattled, well, look how long it's been since the decline of the passenger rail industry in the 1950s. Here we are a half century later and we're still arguing about it.

RAIL Magazine: During your year of rail travels, what did you find most pleasantly surprising?

McCommons: The clear answer is the corridor-based trains, in places like California and the Pacific Northwest, as well as train service in states that have invested in it all surprised me in how well they are doing. Amtrak can do a good job when given the resources and where it has relationships with the freight railroads that own the track and where it has slots in which to operate. I got on the California cars, and I'd heard a lot about them – and they were gorgeous. It was interesting to see those places where passenger rail was really working, and where there are leaders who have the big picture viewpoint. In riding places where rail worked well, and talking to passengers on those routes, I often heard people say, "Why don't we have more of this?"

RAIL Magazine: What about your travels did you find most disappointing?

McCommons: The fact that we are still in this push-pull situation between Amtrak and the freights on shared right away, it just really hasn't worked – most due to a lack


of investment. The trip I took on the Texas Eagle was real illuminating on this issue. You can't get between the third and fourth largest cities in the country on train. You have to get off the train in Longview and walk over and get on a bus. It just struck me as one of the most pathetic examples of how we undervalue our passenger rail system. From stations in disrepair to the lack of good connections, that's what I found disappointing. Another thing that really bothered me was this notion of profitability and everyone always calling it money-losing Amtrak.

RAIL Magazine: Since the book was released, President Obama and his administration released their first round of high-speed – we like to think of it as higher speed – rail grants. What did you make of this development and what do you think it portends for passenger rail's future?

McCommons: I certainly wasn't surprised where the money went, because it went to the states that had been investing on their own. The states that come off well in the book are those that were ready for this federal investment. In the big scheme of things, it's not much money, but

it's a start. But I think the real game-changer is going to be the next transportation bill and that's what I do a lot of talking about when I discuss the book with groups of people. I hope that what this rail investment signals is a new direction. I've come to see that many people don't really understand that transit and rail are a big part of what they too often call the highway bill.

RAIL Magazine: If we made you Secretary of Transportation, what three recommendations would you make, having travelled the nation on passenger rail, to improve the system?

McCommons: First I'd make intermodalism paramount at all levels and particularly in the planning processes. Folks need to be talking with one another. Second, this country needs to come up with a dependable, regular, annual way of flowing investment into the rail network – freight and passenger. Lastly I'd say that the government needs to develop some type of plan that allows for the future growth of passenger and freight rail in concert with one another and for shared infrastructure. 

James McCommons

