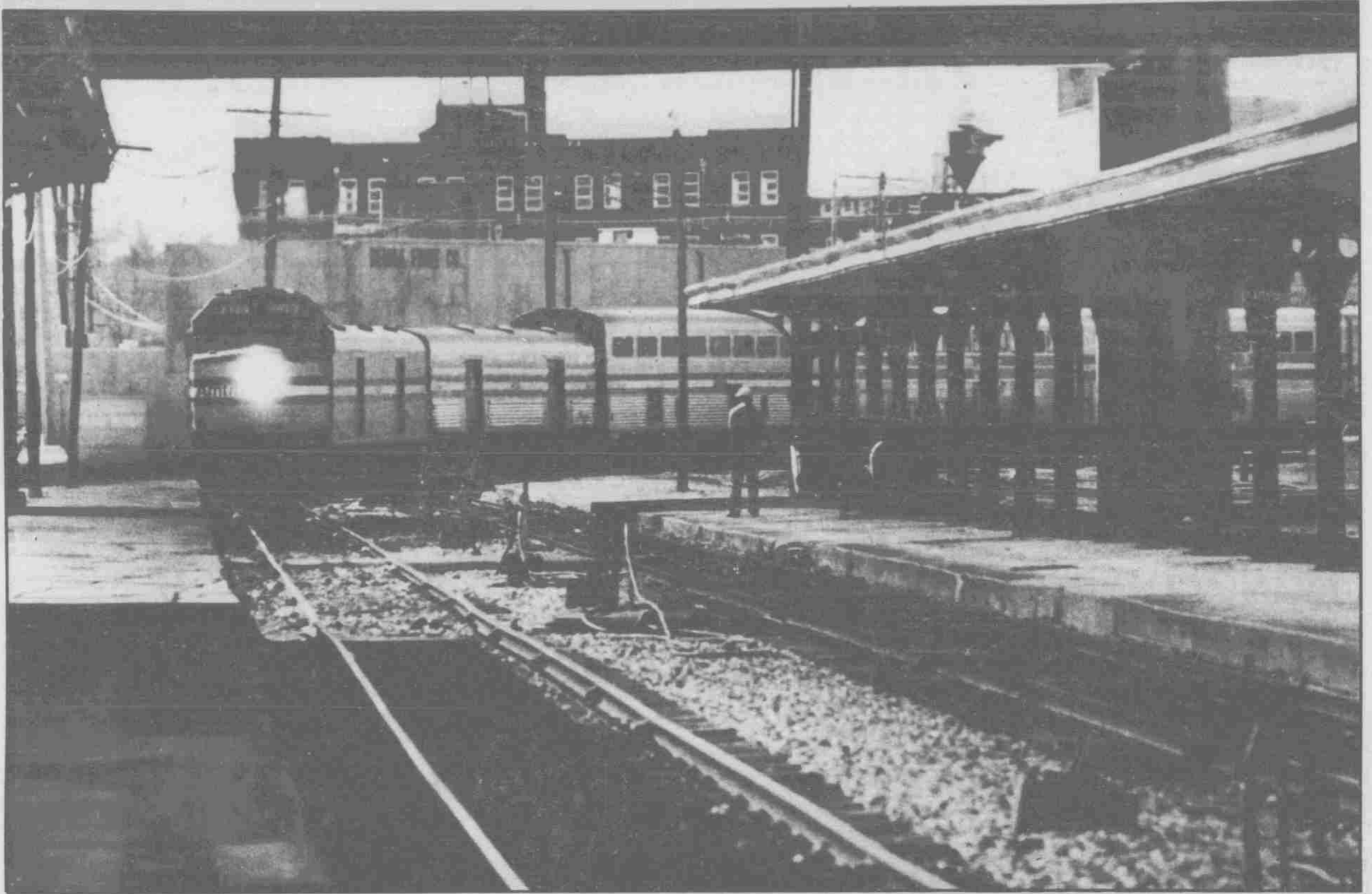


Arts & Entertainment



Mark Davis/Daily Nebraskan

Amtrak's California Zephyr pulls into the Lincoln train station. More photos on Page 22.

America by train Passenger mourns loss of unique Amtrak service

Analysis By
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For some, an Amtrak train ride is an addictive form of travel filled with mad adventure.

For others, trains are a last resort.

But if a traveler has a week or two for relaxation, trains are unique and inexpensive.

As travelers slide through the backyards of the nation, they see the world from a different perspective — that may mean straight down a cliff or at the edge of vast bodies of water.

Train fares are fairly inexpensive. Travel from Lincoln to anywhere from Canada to Mexico between the Rockies and the Mississippi is \$150 for a round trip. Round trips to either coast and back cost only \$250. And those coasts stretch from Southern California to Washington and from Maine to Florida. Despite being unique, passenger trains have had little success.

When President Richard Nixon signed the Amtrak Act in 1971, he formed one large quasi-public corporation from the broken-down services of failing and bankrupt passenger rail runners. At first the travel was unreliable and unpleasant and only desperate people rode trains.

But things started to piece together, and as Amtrak acquired new cars and refurbished the old ones, people started riding trains, again.

Now as Amtrak attempts to beat the odds that have almost killed the rail industry, Congress has thrown Amtrak's budget on the chopping block to cut.

By the time Amtrak dies, people will begin to realize the ramifications of being the only nation in

the industrialized world without a passenger-train system. The only remaining U.S. train system will probably be in the northeast corridor on the east coast where many people ride the train.

Until Oct. 21, when the executioner's ax is sharpened, passengers can still catch a train to most parts of the United States.

Dave, my semi-paranoid traveling companion, and I jumped the California Zephyr — the same train that derailed a couple months ago in Colorado and the same train that derailed enroute to Lincoln that day, belating our trip on the long haul to unknown destinations.

We were heading to Chicago so we could catch a train south to warm weather and a spring break excursion to Texas. I was sitting in a nearly empty coach looking out the window and thinking about the times I had put coins, rocks or anything that needed to be flattened on tracks. I was feeling a certain amount of fright.

When we reached Omaha, I got off the train. I wandered around for awhile, but I was still in Nebraska and not in the mood for exploration. I noticed a trainsman who looked very relaxed, so I started a conversation.

He said he had been an Amtrak employee for more than a decade and had yet to experience a derailment of any consequence: I simmered into an uneasy calm.

I guess there was a certain look to my sweaty sunglassesed face that said "sedative" because this trainsman asked me if I had any smoke. Realizing that he didn't mean my stale cigarettes, I shook my head and got back on the train with a fresh batch of paranoia brewing in my brain.

I noticed a lot of people who work and ride trains walk quietly through

the cars with their eyes sinking into their sockets. One baggage man told me that drug use is common among train employees, so much so that straight employees are sometimes loners on board.

The trainsman who asked me for some smoke said a little pot is always appreciated, especially when the train is playing catch-up after a derailment like the one that had just happened or the one that happened in that remote Colorado pass.

"Trains used to be high class and very comfortable until people started buying cars and taking airplanes."

But the problem also exists in businesses that place people in union jobs, traveling on boats, trucks or trains. In comparison to other forms of traveling in America, trains are probably as safe as any.

We were about four hours from Chicago when Dave and I decided to try the lounge car.

Lounge cars are notorious for their unique atmosphere. It always sounds like a business luncheon without food in the lounge car. If you spend any time there, which most people do, you will inevitably be sucked into deep, extended conversations with any and everyone that is within speaking distance of you.

As I was slamming down my first

beer, I noticed an old man sitting in the seat across from me. He was small but he had a rough look to his face. He had thin, white hair, thick brows, a shaggy moustache and liver spots thick enough to look like a deep tan from a distance.

He was the last person I expected to converse with, but in a short time we both knew where we were going and where we came from.

Somehow the old man knew this was my first train trip. I told him that I had taken a short train ride on an antique train when I was young, but I didn't remember much. He said that when he was very young he crossed a major portion of the continent on a covered wagon.

He said he was young, but he still could remember the inconsistent swing of buckets strapped to the side of the wagon. Every once in awhile, he said, they would stop the wagon and grease the axle with something his mother had told him to keep his hands out of.

"Trains are much more comfortable," he said. But he went on to say that he had been riding trains for a long time and that trains aren't what they used to be either.

"Trains used to be high class and very comfortable until people started buying cars and taking airplanes," he said.

The old man headed back to his coach as we rolled into Chicago. We had a 24-hour lay-over because our train going south only made the trip three days a week.

We checked into a \$60-a-night hotel and prepared to catch up on some spending. From our room, we had an inspirational view of a torn-down building, the loading docks of a post office, and the inner industrial city. We slid into some cool duds and fat wallets and caught a cab to Rush Street. While

riding through the area, our cabbie asked if we were from out of town. After telling him we were from Nebraska, he gave us some advice. As we were pulling up to a bar on Rush Street, he said, "Don't leave this block."

We cruised all the popular bars, but I wasn't impressed with the Saturday night crowd. It was probably because the bars charge too much for beer and everyone was sober.

The next morning we woke up to a stiff breeze and a cold shower in downtown Chicago. It was a foggy Sunday morning, the streets were vacant, and only the distant cries of drug dealers could be heard.

We walked through the dirty streets, watching fat pigeons peck at their Sunday dinners, and a gauntlet of dealers lined the street to sell their wares.

As we walked through the streets, a couple of the dealers approached us and as we talked to them my curiosity started to get the best of me.

I followed a couple of guys into a bar just off one of the main streets. I was the only white person in the bar. It suddenly became very quiet. Except for the raspy sound of an old juke box, the only thing I could hear was my heart beating.

I stayed for a while and before long I was approached by a hairripped man wanting to sell me some pot. He also wanted my wallet. So I quickly left.

I ran most of the way back to the train and again I found myself in the lounge car, not quite remembering when I got on the train and not quite caring.

Dave came over to our table (I had met a nice Texas woman) with an older man and a book called "Man and Plants" and soon we were all playing

Continued on Page 21