

The Little Engine That Might

By Dennis Payton Knight

The great passenger trains that once interconnected the towns and cities in the once Wild West came about because of the Pacific Railroad Act. The legislation, signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln in 1862, spurred the construction of a railroad and telegraph line from Omaha to the Pacific Ocean, to “secure to the government the use of the same for postal, military and other purposes.”

The massive grant of public lands to two railroad corporations, the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific, included a four hundred foot swath for the right-of-way, plus ten square miles of public land for every mile in alternating sections on each side of the railroad, nearly 6,400 acres of land for every mile of track. There were later grants to the Northern Pacific and smaller railroads, and by 1872 over 175 million acres of real estate had been given, an area one tenth the size of the continental United States and larger than Texas.

It was smart economics to use public resources our government had in abundance, promoting development and employment. As a result, for over a century, passenger trains employing crews of engineers, firemen, conductors, brakemen and porters carried folks in style with the finest in dining and Pullman cars with deluxe sleeping accommodations, all at a tidy profit.

Hauling freight was more profitable, however, and less labor intensive. By the middle of the twentieth century, with the success of airlines, interstate highways, and waning promotion by the railroads themselves, travel by train diminished. Railroad executives already wanted to dump the service, and government regulators abetted the demise, changing routes in the name of efficiency so that fast, popular rail service was transformed into slow, unpopular service.

Soon, it seemed passenger rail service in the United States was coming to an end, and Congress in 1970 created, at President Nixon’s behest, the National Railroad Passenger Corporation, which became known as Amtrak. It was a politically expedient way to give passenger service a “last hurrah”, but, according to a *Fortune* magazine expose in 1974, the industry and the Nixon administration secretly agreed Amtrak would be shut down after two years.

Amtrak was created as an expediency to get the railroads out of a business they no longer wanted, but it has hung around for forty years, poorly funded, providing a modicum of passenger rail service to the interior of America, and a little more in the urban corridors on the coasts. Ironically, only last week, concurrently with a disastrous derailment in Philadelphia, members of Congress were about to meet to discuss yet more cuts to Amtrak, but that’s another story.

I don’t want the real estate back, but I believe the railroads still have a moral obligation to either provide directly, or from the resources we granted them two centuries ago, fund thriving rail passenger service in our country. Our chances may have been compromised in an earlier generation, and it’s an uphill climb, but we’ve got to get this little engine fired up. If you will take the throttle, I will shovel the coal like my dad once did on the Union Pacific. Can we do it? I think we can, I think we can.