

Growing Up on the *Empire Builder*

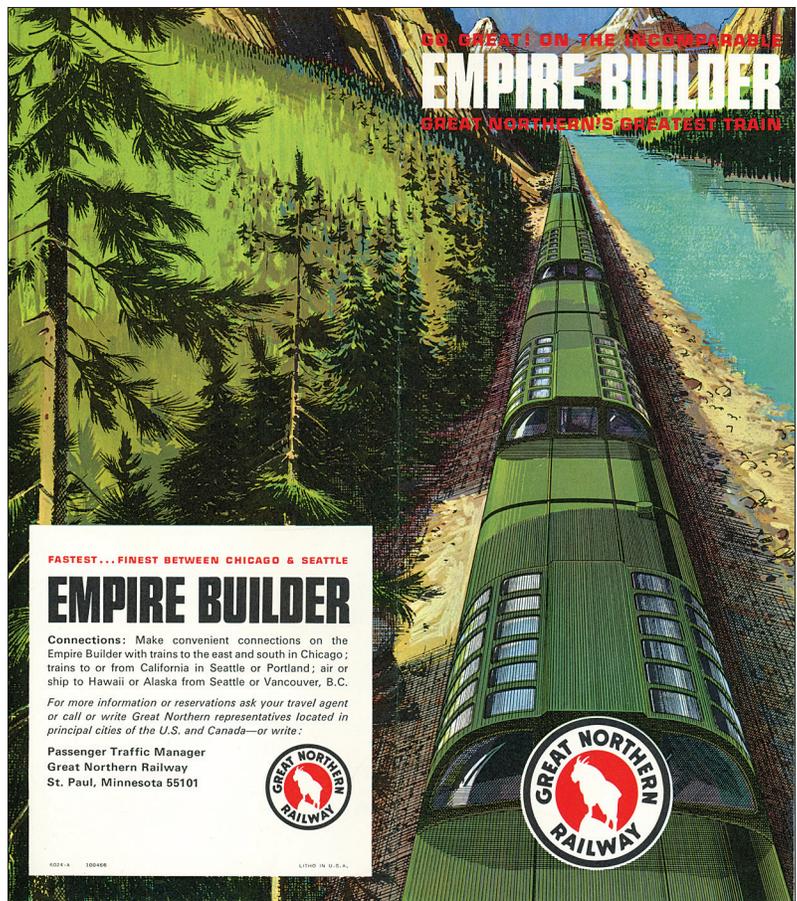
JOHN W. DIERS

John Diers' article is reprinted with permission from the publishers of TRAINS magazine, with minimal style adaptations. The original first-person story titled, "A night on the Builder," ran in their August 2021 issue. Images have been added.

Snowflakes dusted the driveway in front of St. Paul Union Depot as my father's car rolled to a stop at the foot of the broad stairway leading to the entrance. He opened the trunk, and I grabbed a small suitcase and a camera bag. We exchanged farewells, and I turned to march up the stairs. Reaching the top, I tugged at a well-worn door handle and stepped through an overheated vestibule into the lobby. I took a deep breath. Like all railroad depots, it smelled busy. That, along with the faint echo of hundreds of heels on the terrazzo floors, the steady murmur of voices in the great hall, and the train announcements, confirmed the comings and goings of people and commerce. I walked past the Traveler's Aid Desk, glancing briefly at Minnesota's first locomotive, the 4-4-0 *William Crooks*, on display in the lobby, scanned the ticket counter where two clerks were coping with a line of Christmas travelers, then headed for the corridor to the concourse. My destination was track 17 and Great Northern train 31, the *Empire Builder*.¹

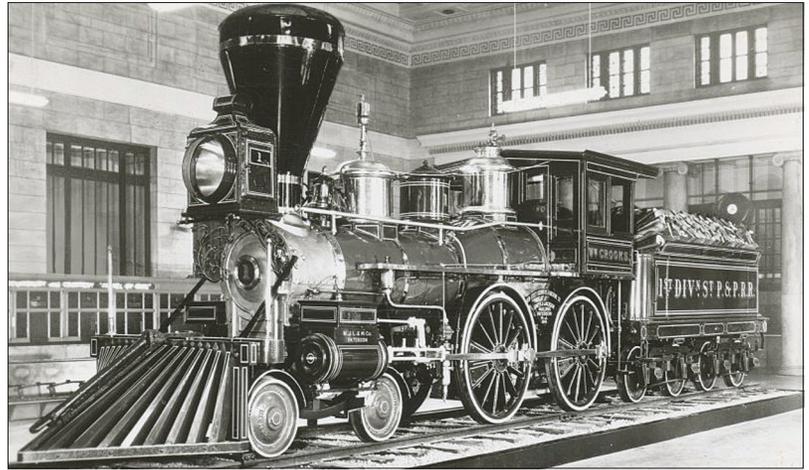
I had just turned twenty-one years old. I was a senior at the University of Minnesota, and this was a birthday present to myself. For the past five years, I had made a point of riding as many trains as I could, knowing they would soon be gone and the experience lost forever. I had saved some money for this trip and, with a little help from my parents, purchased a first-class ticket and a bedroom on the *Builder* to Seattle with a return via Portland on the Northern Pacific's *North Coast Limited*.

The *Builder* had just arrived from Chicago, completing its 427-mile run in just under seven hours. Declining business had forced the Burlington to combine the *Builder* with the *North Coast Limited* between Chicago and St. Paul, resulting in a huge train that stretched the full



This foldable, color brochure produced in St. Paul by the Great Northern Railway in the mid-1960s touts its formal dining car and less-expensive ranch car option, along with domed seating areas for breathtaking views of the passing countryside and a variety of sleeping compartments from which to choose—depending on budget. *In 1966 Empire Builder brochure, courtesy of Ramsey County Historical Society.*

distance of the longest platform at St. Paul Union Depot. It was left to terminal forces to make two trains out of this behemoth, adding additional coaches and sleepers to both trains to accommodate passengers boarding in the Twin Cities. The rumbling noises beneath the concourse served notice that this transformation was well underway.



The *William Crooks* (built 1861), the first locomotive in Minnesota (St. Paul & Pacific Railroad), served as a passenger train from 1862 to 1897. James J. Hill with the Great Northern Railway had it restored in 1898 and used it for his personal train. It was featured at special events around the country over the next fifty years and eventually placed on exhibition in the St. Paul Union Depot in 1954. Today, it resides at the Lake Superior Railroad Museum in Duluth. Both images courtesy of Ramsey County Historical Society.

John Diers began his adventure aboard the *Empire Builder* in the parking lot of the St. Paul Union Depot, across from the Minnesota Knitting Mills on Fourth Street.

There were other arrivals and departures that night. One of them, the *Gopher*, Great Northern's afternoon connecting train from Duluth, had just slipped beneath the concourse, engine bell ringing and train brakes squealing as it came to a halt. There was a bang from a parting air line, as a carman cut the power from the head end, followed by a rumbling as its E7 pulled ahead and stopped, awaiting switchmen to line the route back to the roundhouse. Meanwhile, passengers began filing up the escalator, some of them destined for the *Empire Builder*.

Promptly at 8:15, an announcement echoed through the concourse:

Your attention please. Great Northern train No. 31, the *Empire Builder* for Minneapolis, Willmar, Breckenridge, Moorhead, Fargo, New Rockford, Minot, Williston, Wolf

Point, Glasgow, Havre, Chester, Shelby, Cut Bank, Whitefish, Troy, Spokane, Ephrata, Wenatchee, Everett, and Seattle now boarding on track 17.

I grabbed my suitcase and camera and filed through the door to the escalator and the tracks below into a world of cold drafts, swirling steam, and strange hissing sounds and groans, punctuated by the occasional shouting of a switchman or car knocker. The coach passengers headed toward the head end, where, in the distance, the Railway Post Office crew was busy transferring a pile of mail sacks from a baggage cart. My bedroom space was in car 316 near the rear of the train. A trainman directed me to the left as I alighted from the escalator. Looking up, I couldn't believe what I saw, for on the tail end was *Cathedral Mountain*, one of Great Northern's Mountain-series observation cars. These cars were bumped off the *Builder* in the mid-1950s and reassigned to the *Western Star* when the *Builder* acquired its full-length Great Domes. I asked the trainman about it, babbling something about this being the best car on the railroad and how I'd ridden a sister car, *Appekuny Mountain*, on the *Western Star* some years before. He replied that the regularly assigned dome was bad ordered² in Chicago, and the protection car was in Seattle, forcing the last-minute substitution. He was an old hand

A bird's-eye view of the St. Paul Union Depot train platforms in the 1950s. Dayton's Bluff can be seen in the background. Courtesy of Ramsey County Historical Society.



and looked a little puzzled at my excitement. I'm sure he thought, "Railfans."

I walked about a hundred feet to the open vestibule of my car—numbered 1383—the six-roomette, five-double-bedroom, two-compartment sleeper *Inuya Pass*. A smiling white-jacketed Pullman porter greeted me and

inquired about my space. He then took my suitcase, and I stepped aboard, turned left, and walked down the hushed corridor to bedroom D. I was a little nervous and double-checked the ticket, then hung up my coat and headed toward *Cathedral Mountain*, which was just behind my sleeper. Opening the door, I felt a rush of

Travelers in warm coats gather in the St. Paul Union Depot concourse while waiting for their train. Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.



THE INCOMPARABLE EMPIRE BUILDER

Every day, each way: Chicago, St. Paul-Minneapolis, Spokane, Seattle-Portland, Vancouver, B. C.

**SCENIC THRILLS
ALL THE WAY**

1. Mississippi River Palisades	5. Glacier National Park	9. Cascade Tunnel (7.79 mi.)
2. Minnesota—Land of 10,000 lakes	6. Rocky Mountains	10. Mt. Rainier (14,410 ft.)
3. Wheat and grazing lands	7. Spokane; Inland Empire	11. Puget Sound; Olympic Peninsula
4. Williston oil basin	8. Cascade Mountains	12. Columbia River Gorge, Mt. Hood

Rather than a map with stops listed along the way, this promotional visual highlights the magnificent views riders might witness while traveling on the *Empire Builder* between Chicago and Vancouver, British Columbia. In 1966, *Empire Builder* brochure, courtesy of Ramsey County Historical Society.

cold air as I stepped through the vestibule and pushed the handle on the door. Stepping inside, I walked along a short corridor past a roomette and a serving buffet. The corridor opened into a lounge with a writing desk and several tables and chairs. At the rear, separated from the lounge area by a pair of glass panels, was the observation room. It was my destination, and I quickly settled into the rearward-facing settee.

Five minutes later, I heard a series of slams, as the doors closed, followed by a slight tug. We were underway. It was difficult to see outside because of the glare from the interior lights, but I could still make out the platform lights and the red-and-green switch lamps as we snaked our way through the turnouts, past the Third Street interlocking and began the climb toward Westminster Tower, past the Mississippi Street coach yards, and the Jackson and Dale Street Shops. We must have been doing the 79-mph limit by the time we slipped beneath the Snelling Avenue overpass and began the long downgrade run past the Minnesota Transfer, Union Yard, and the University of Minnesota, slowing only as we swung slightly to the left onto the Stone Arch Bridge into Minneapolis. A minute later,

we were stopped beneath Hennepin Avenue at the Great Northern station.

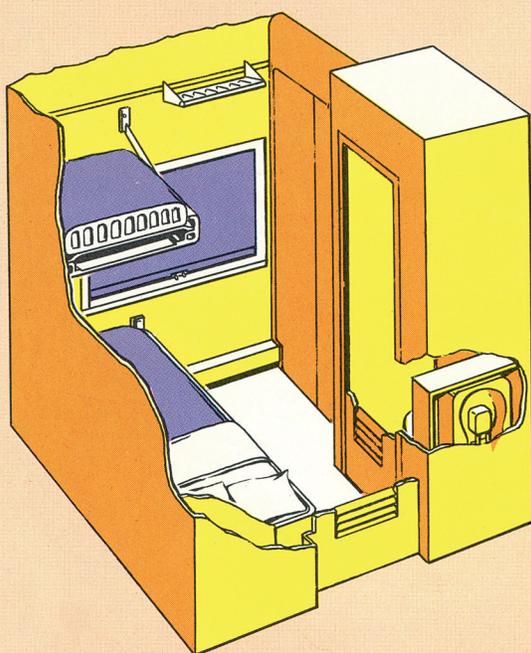
Minneapolis was a five-minute stop. I left my seat in *Cathedral Mountain* and walked to *Inuya Pass*. Reaching an open door, I stepped down to the platform to watch passengers stream aboard the coaches. The porter remarked that the sleepers were only half full, but the coaches were jammed—mainly with passengers bound for Fargo and Minot. He was a forty-year veteran and about to retire and expressed how sad he was to see the sleeping-car business go away. “Everyone’s in a hurry,” he said, shrugging his shoulders, just as the conductor called out “board!” and highballed the head end.

I decided to check out the diner. It was usually closed by this hour, but the porter said it was serving late because of a ski group [headed to] Whitefish, Montana, that had just boarded in Minneapolis. The ranch lounge car would remain open until well past midnight, but it catered to the coach crowd, and they tended to be a boozy bunch. As we left Minneapolis, I walked forward through the next two sleepers and stepped into the diner—a wonderful world of white tablecloths, china, heavy flatware, and waiters standing at attention. There [were] perhaps a half-dozen people scattered at separate tables. The steward stood at the opposite end of the car, near the entrance to the pantry and kitchen. Menu in hand, he motioned to me and walked down the aisle to an empty table. As I approached, he pulled back a chair next to the window.

“Good evening, sir. It’s a cold night tonight, but we have some wonderful things on the menu. Let me know if there are any questions. Enjoy your dinner.” With that, he placed a menu in my hand, withdrew a check and a pencil from his pocket, initialed it, and, in one sweeping motion born of long experience, placed both next to my right hand. Seconds later, a waiter arrived with a pitcher of ice water and deftly filled my glass without spilling a drop—despite the rocking and lurching of the car.

“Cocktail before dinner, sir?” he inquired. I paused a moment, realizing I’d just turned twenty-one, and that this should be something of an occasion. I remembered the great dining car scene in the movie *North by Northwest*. I pictured myself as Cary Grant across the table

John Diers slept in a double bedroom while traveling on the *Empire Builder*, though he spent most of his time watching the passing scenery from the *Cathedral Mountain* observation car. In 1966, *Empire Builder* brochure, courtesy of Ramsey County Historical Society.



DOUBLE BEDROOM

Roomy, relaxing. Perfect for vacationing couple or single traveler. Sofa by day makes into bed; second berth pulls down. Private washroom.

from Eva Marie Saint and replied, “Yes, a Gibson, please.”

The waiter left my table and walked to the steward, who returned carrying a serving tray and two glasses, one with shaved ice. Opening the cocktail bottle, he first poured it over the ice, then, placing a strainer over the glass, he poured the drink into the cocktail glass, adding a pearl onion.

I drank a silent toast to myself, appreciative of my good fortune at being aboard this grand conveyance—then stared out the window as the lights of Wayzata flashed by. There was a bump as we swung through a turnout and a dinging of crossing bells as we approached the Ferndale grade crossing, where a [queue] of automobiles awaited. It took mere seconds, but we slammed through the crossing, leaving the waiting autos in a swirl of snow. We were accelerating 60, 70, and now 79 mph. We blasted through Long Lake, whistle blaring. More snow and the distant lights of a farmhouse flashed by as we raced [past] automobiles on parallel Highway 12.

The waiter returned and inquired if I wanted to order. I said yes and began looking over the menu. On the cover was an image of Glacier Park and the *Empire Builder* traversing Marias Pass. I opened the cover and came to the difficult matter of selection. Closing the menu, I picked up the check and wrote: prime rib, rare; baked potato; blue cheese dressing on my salad. Time passed. I was in no hurry and sipped my drink for a considerable time, perhaps expecting Eva Marie.

Then she appeared. The steward seated a blond young woman at my table. She was attractive and laughed when I remarked about Cary Grant and *North by Northwest*. We talked. Turned out she was getting off at Breckenridge and would be met by family from a nearby town. She was going to stay at her grandmother’s place. We spent the next twenty minutes or so in pleasant conversation. I didn’t want to admit that I was riding the train just for the experience. It seemed so nerdy.

After a time, the waiter returned and inquired if he should place my order. I agreed and asked for a cup of coffee. As I was taking a sip, the train slowed, and a cluster of streetlights passed by. I couldn’t make out the station sign but presumed that it was Litchfield. The diner



halted before the bay window of the agent’s office. Inside, a man was busy conversing on the dispatcher’s phone. It was quiet in the diner, except for the whirring of the ventilation fans and our conversation across the table.

I was just finishing my salad when the waiter emerged from the pantry balancing a tray on his shoulder. Arriving at the table, he whisked a plate with my dinner off the tray along with a platter of hot dinner rolls. As the train lurched forward and began to move, I asked him why we had stopped, since Litchfield wasn’t a scheduled stop for the *Builder*. He admitted not knowing, and I turned to the window again, as we moved parallel to the town’s main street—Christmas lights hung across it.

A few seconds later, we passed a line of box-cars next to the town’s elevator, then came another stop, this one abrupt. Was it an emergency of some sort? A grim-faced conductor and a trainman walked through the car. I heard a vestibule open in the adjoining sleeper and looked

In a scene similar to what John Diers may have experienced, guests gather in the *Empire Builder*’s elegant dining car in 1952. Photography by Hedrick-Blessing PR, courtesy of Great Northern Railway Historical Society.



Marcia and John Diers at their home in Prior Lake, Minnesota. Courtesy of John W. Diers.

out my window to see them trudging forward through the snow toward the head end. Five minutes passed before I heard two blasts of the whistle, and we started to move. As the diner crept by, I spotted the conductor and the trainman standing in knee-deep snow ready to swing aboard. There was a bang as the trap closed and another as the vestibule door slammed shut. The conductor walked through the diner, his overcoat covered in heavy wet snow.

“Broken rail,” he muttered to the steward. I saw bright lights then the shadows of a section crew as we eased slowly over the broken rail they’d just repaired.

By this time, I had finished dinner. It was absolutely delicious. My waiter returned and looked at the check. Noting I had forgotten to specify a choice for dessert, he inquired, “We have French apple or pumpkin pie, ice cream or sherbet.” “Pumpkin,” I replied. It was wonderful, served with a generous dab of whipped cream. Pushing back the plate, I poured another cup of coffee. My waiter asked, “How was everything?” “Great,” I replied. The steward appeared, totaled my check, and placed it on a silver tray. I paid, and he returned my change. I took care to leave a generous tip. By this time, my dining companion had finished, and, as she got up, I wished her a pleasant trip and a merry Christmas. As I departed the diner and headed back to *Cathedral Mountain*, I recoiled at how stupid

I was for not finding out more about her. Later, I spotted her on the platform at Breckenridge and waved at her as we pulled away.

Years went by, and the *Empire Builder* soldiered on—first under Burlington Northern and then Amtrak—but it was a completely different train. I had revisited a few times but was not impressed. Gone were the Mountain-series observation cars and the elegant diner. Amtrak was trying hard, but microwave food and plastic dinnerware didn’t cut it. By then, I had largely given up on passenger trains, thinking it better to remember them as they were rather than accept what they had become. Except for commuter runs and business trips on the Northeast Corridor, I never returned.

One day, I stopped by a friend’s house on an errand, and, as I walked into his living room, a woman got up from a chair. We were introduced. She was the latch-key coordinator at a neighboring school. My friend served with her on the parent committee. The introduction turned out to be a formality because we had already met over dinner on the *Builder* on a cold winter night some twelve years before. I think we both pretended not to know each other, but it was a brief reunion. [Marcia Roisum] and I married six months later and have been together for forty-seven years.

John W. Diers is a retired manager-administrator in the public transit industry. He is a member of the Ramsey County Historical Society Editorial Board and has written numerous articles for Ramsey County History magazine. He is the author of two books: Twin Cities by Trolley and St. Paul Union Depot.

NOTES

1. “The William Crooks,” Friends of BNSF, blog, June 19, 2014, <https://www.friendsofbnsf.com/node.ownership-of-the-william-crooks-transferred-from-great-northern-railroad-to-the-minnesota-historical-society-in-1962>. The engine remained at the St. Paul Union Depot until 1975, when it was moved to the Lake Superior Railroad Museum in Duluth, where it remains today.
2. “Railroad Terms: Bad Order,” Union Pacific web-

site, https://www.up.com/aboutup/reference/glossary/railroad_terms/index.htm#:~:text=Bad%20order%20in%20a%20train,repairs%20by%20mechanical%20road%20truck.&text=Sufficient%20crews%20are%20available%2C%20but,may%20cause%20delays%20to%20calls. A train car that has been “bad ordered” has a mechanical defect and cannot leave the railyard until it has been repaired.