

October 1, 2022

Amtrak, Historical Perspective:

Railroad passenger service was the dominant way to travel from the mid 1800's until the mid 1960's. Eisenhower's Interstate Highway system and the dawn of jet aviation changed the matrix. Cheap fuel, affordable automobiles, and the growing aviation industry caused a slow decline in the number of passenger trains.

Drastic changes were ahead, and the latter half of the '60's was devastating to the passenger train. Mail was the backbone of the passenger network. Beginning in 1965, Zip Codes were introduced by the Postal Service. This was the culmination of years of planning by the Government, and aided by organized labor, including Postal Workers, UAW, Teamsters, etc. It was a huge redesign of how mail moved in America. Implementing a Hub system, mail would travel from small towns to centralized sorting centers, and then be returned for delivery. And it worked, but it required massive increases in labor, trucks and trailers, drivers, and an entire support system to operate and maintain the new process. In October of 1967, the United States Post Office announced the almost immediate end of the Railway Postal Service. This action placed nearly all passenger trains in a very untenable position. Passenger trains were privately operated, and connected rural America with the big cities and crisscrossed the country. One could travel anywhere with ease. All that was disappearing overnight.

The National Association of Railroad Passengers was founded to turn around the decline. This lobbying group worked with Congress to come up with a plan to preserve rail passenger service as a national system. In a major shift, passenger trains, by agreement with the carriers, were transferred from being owned by the railroads themselves. Congress agreed, and a new entity was created. The National Railroad Passenger Corporation, or 'Amtrak' short for American, Travel and Track was created by Congress in 1970. President Richard Nixon signed the law, with Amtrak to begin operating at 12:01am, May 1, 1971. The Amtrak era had begun. It operated a skeleton system of basic routes, a mere shadow of what the private carriers had operated just 24 hours before. But Amtrak had stopped the losses being incurred by the now freight only carriers. The new network had more than a fighting chance. Over the years, new routes have been added and others modified. Amtrak has a state of the art reservations system, and serves millions of riders each year. At the half century mark, Amtrak has proven its necessity, viability, and convenience, and is poised for greater growth and public service. It has matured into a railroad operating its own Northeast Corridor, Regional services, and Long Distance trains operating under contract agreements on host railroads, such as Union Pacific, BNSF, CSX, Norfolk Southern, etc.

Arkansas is served by the *Texas Eagle*, a long distance passenger train featuring comfortable high-level Superliner equipment. The *Texas Eagle* is a 1,306-mile daily passenger train route operated by Amtrak between Chicago and San Antonio in the central and western United States. Trains #21 (southbound) and #22 (northbound) also conveys a sleeping car and a coach to/from the *Sunset Limited* between San Antonio and Los Angeles on the days that tri-weekly train operates. When operating in conjunction with the *Sunset Limited*, the westbound continuing cars join with the *Sunset Limited* in San Antonio; the eastbound continuing cars split off in San Antonio for the journey to Chicago. These cars traverse a total of 2,728 miles, the longest route in the Amtrak system.

Current stations in Arkansas begin with Texarkana, followed by Hope, Arkadelphia, Malvern, Little Rock and finally Walnut Ridge. Missing from this route is the area between Little Rock and Walnut Ridge. Bald Knob is located between those two points, and is ready to serve as the much needed location for rail passenger access in North Central/Northeast Arkansas. This would open up accessible rail travel for Woodruff, Jackson, White and Independence Counties. In a region with few travel options, our communities would benefit tremendously with this additional stop, well into the future.

Craig Christiansen  
Arkansas State Representative District 47  
Chairman Rail Sub Committee

