

RPA 2018 Fall Advocacy Summit Report

By Jim Hanna – PRN Director District 4 – February 11, 2019

The Rail Passengers Association held their 2018 Fall Advocacy Summit in Miami, Florida from October 19-21. The location was selected to provide the attendees the opportunity to experience the new Brightline passenger service firsthand. I would like to have traveled by Amtrak, but that would have entailed a combination of the California Zephyr from Omaha to Chicago, the Capitol Limited from Chicago to Washington, D.C., and either the Silver Meteor or Silver Star from Washington to Miami, a trip consuming 60+ hours each way, and I had commitments at home that would not allow me to be gone that long. The chance of all three trains making connections on time was also an issue, as was the substitution of boxed meals for dining car service on the Capitol Limited. One of the true pleasures of train travel is the opportunity to socialize with other travelers, and the dining car is the best place to enjoy that.

Therefore, I booked a flight on Southwest Airlines. Southwest does not fly into Miami. Fort Lauderdale, a few miles north is the closest destination, but this was OK, as it gave me the opportunity to use some rail transportation to finish my trip. The Tri-Rail system operates conventional bilevel commuter cars on CSX tracks from Mangonia Park, a few miles north of Palm Beach, to the Miami International Airport, with numerous stops along the way, including one near the Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport. Tri-Rail provides a free shuttle bus from the airport to the train station. The bus stop is right outside the baggage claim area, and is well marked. The bus has large luggage racks, but only a few seats, so most passengers stand for the short ride.

I had just gotten to the ticket window to pay my \$3.75 fare when a southbound train pulled in. The kindly conductor (yes, there are some) saw me running his way and held the train until I could board. Fortunately, at the time I boarded at a little before 5:00 the train was not crowded, so I found ample space for my luggage and me. The train crew was friendly and helpful during my 30 minute ride to the Metro Transfer Station where I transferred to the Metrorail Green Line to get to downtown Miami. In retrospect, I should have ridden Tri-Rail all the way to end of line at the Miami Airport. The Metro Transfer Station is in a pretty sketchy area and it certainly would not be a safe place at night. As it was, a couple of panhandlers were about all I had to contend with.

Metrorail operates two routes, Orange from the airport to downtown, and Green, from northwest of the airport to downtown. The routes merge at the Earlington Heights Station and continue south of the city into Dade County. Trains are usually run in four car sets, powered by 700 volt DC using a third rail for power. Some of the cars in service were built in 1983 by the Budd Company, but they are slowly being replaced by Hitachi built cars, with all the old cars to be out of service in 2020. Fare is a flat \$2.25 regardless of trip length. The cars I rode were the old Budd cars, which are getting a bit shabby. My ride ended at the Government Center Station in downtown Miami, where I was able to transfer to the Metromover for the final leg of my journey.

Miami's Metromover is one of only three downtown people mover systems in the U.S. It really can't qualify as rail transit as the cars ride on rubber tires on a concrete surface elevated one or two stories over the city streets. A steel guideway down the middle steers the cars and shields the electric power buss bars. The cars are fully automated, with no operating personnel on board, and are the second generation of vehicles on the system, which was built in 1986 through 1994. Twenty-nine Bombardier Innovia APM 100 vehicles built in 2008, 2010, and 2014 ply the three loop system, serving a total of 21 stations spaced an average of two blocks apart. Speeds are modest, but the cars have impressive acceleration, so it does not take long to get around. The Inner Loop circles the downtown area and connects most of the major buildings with stops about every two blocks. The Brickell Loop circles the downtown area then heads south to the Financial District. There is a transfer point to Metrorail at the Brickell Station. The Omni Loop circles downtown and heads north, providing access to a number of tourist and entertainment sites, and good views of the Miami Harbor. I was able to ride both the Inner Loop and the Omni Loop while I was there. Cars on the Inner Loop usually operate as connected pairs, while single cars traverse the other two loops. Aside from a few seats reserved for elderly or mobility impaired people, most passengers stand for the duration of the trip. Each car has a capacity of 90 riders, but they would be packed in pretty tightly.

When the system opened a fare of 25 cents was charged, but eventually that was dropped when it was found that it cost as much to collect the fare as it brought in. Besides, Miami is desperate to get as many cars off the downtown streets as possible! My walk from the Riverwalk Station to the hotel took place during the afternoon rush. While waiting at a street corner I struck up a conversation with a traffic control police officer as I marveled at the mass of vehicles and the constant cacophony. He said, "No one in Miami knows how to drive, but they all know how to honk." They also don't pay much attention to traffic signals, which is why the traffic cops are stationed at most downtown intersections at busy times. Real fun happens when one of the lift bridges across the Miami River opens to let a large boat pass. The drivers go bonkers!

On my first ride I got off at the Riverwalk Station, as it looked like the closest place to my hotel. I should have taken an Omni Loop car to the Knight Center Station, which is connected by a covered tunnel to the Knight Convention Center, which is connected to the Hyatt Regency Hotel. I got checked in at the hotel and found that my roommate for the conference, Roger Clark, was already there. We set off in search of dinner, as there were no official events that evening.

The next morning we got registered and gathered our credentials and other conference materials, including information about the Brightline trip that afternoon. A couple of tours were offered in the morning, but were not of much interest to us, so we spent our time in the hotel lobby hobnobbing with RPA friends, and grabbed an early lunch. A tour of the Brightline Depot was scheduled to start at 1:30, so we boarded the Metromover to the Wilkie D. Ferguson Station, which is right at the very spiffy, new Brightline facility. The building is brand new, and work was still being done on it, so we had to dodge construction.

It is a three story structure, and the trains actually arrive and depart on the top level. The main floor will mostly be rented to retail shops and food vendors. A few were already open for business. We were given our tickets for the train, and then greeted by Gene Skoropowski, Senior Vice-President of Passenger Train Development, Brightline Trains LLC, who gave us a brief introduction to the facility. An escalator took us up to the second floor concourse level, where we had to show our tickets and pass through a brief security screening, but nothing as extensive as airport TSA. Bags were X-rayed and we passed through a metal detector, but it must have been set to a low level of sensitivity as my keys, pocket change, and belt buckle didn't flag me as a miscreant. We were then free to roam the public areas on that level, with the exception of the Select Class passenger lounge, which is restricted to the higher fare riders. However, the Smart Class waiting area is quite luxurious, with very comfortable seating, WIFI, and an abundance of electrical outlets and USB charging ports. A small snack and gift shop does not accept cash, only plastic and electronic payments. Restrooms are immaculate and ultra-modern. The whole building is beautiful and incorporates all the latest high-tech features. Huge programmable LED displays are actually incorporated into the architecture.

As our planned boarding time of 1:50 pm approached, a buzz started among some of the people waiting, and pretty soon the news spread that the inbound train we were to take back north had been involved in an automobile collision so our departure would be delayed. A bit later we were told that the train we were to ride had to be taken out of service, so the 2:13 departure was cancelled and we would have to wait for the 4:13 train. This was disappointing news, but unfortunately there are more than 150 grade crossings between Miami and West Palm Beach, and, if you recall the traffic cop's comment about the skill level of Miami drivers, wrecks have been all too common. People have been accustomed to slow moving freights on these tracks, but fast passenger trains are an entirely new danger.

Most of us did wait for the 4:13 train, and we were not disappointed. Brightline is using the same Siemens locomotives that Amtrak has been buying and Siemens cars, all painted in brilliant colors and eye-catching patterns. They look fast just standing still! Boarding is at platform level. We were in a Smart Class car, but it was beautifully appointed with large, reclining seats with very light tan leather upholstery, in a 2 x 2 arrangement. The tray tables on the seat backs were very cleverly made, with a small shelf just large enough to hold a single cup inset into the full size tray. This allows easy access to a drink while not filling all the space in front of you with the tray. Ride quality is superb! Each car has an attentive attendant who can sell you snacks and drinks, and free WIFI is available on the entire route. Take a look at <https://www.gobrightline.com/trains> for more information and photos of car interiors.

Since we were two hours late leaving and there was an important event scheduled that evening we rode only to Fort Lauderdale, where we had a 30 minute layover before the next southbound train arrived. This gave us a chance to get some photos and video of the train on which we arrived departing. The trains run in a push-pull arrangement with a locomotive at both ends. Our train had three Smart Class coaches and one Select Class coach. Presently the southbound train pulled in and we headed back to Miami. As a small compensation for the abbreviated ride

we did get free drinks and snacks on the way. The crew was able to give us some details of the collision that delayed our departure. A driver drove around a crossing gate and ran into the side of one of the cars at low speed. Fortunately no one was injured and only minor damage was done to the train car, but a panic-stricken passenger yanked one of the emergency exit windows out of one of the coaches. That required the car to be shopped to replace the window. If the window had not been removed that train would have arrived 20 to 30 minutes late, but could have continued in service. At Miami we were allowed to stay on the platform for a short time to get more photos.

That evening we had four very special guests join us for a Fireside Chat. Immediate past Amtrak CEO, Joe Boardman, was there in person. David Gunn, another former Amtrak CEO participated by prerecorded video, as did Michael Dukakis, former governor of Massachusetts and former Amtrak board member. *Trains Magazine* columnist Fred Frailey, who writes frequently about Amtrak, also joined us by video. The video participants had been asked to respond to a series of questions posed by RPA staff, and Boardman was asked the same questions by moderator and RPA CEO Jim Mathews. The subject matter was the state of passenger rail in the U.S. and the status of Amtrak. Far too much good information was presented to cover in detail here, but the important takeaways were that the U.S. does not recognize transportation as an essential public service, America is rapidly urbanizing with the result that auto traffic is choking itself, both interstate and corridor trains are necessary for different reasons, government is willing to subsidize roads and air travel far more extravagantly than rail, and there is a crying need for a national transportation policy.

An informal session was added to allow Paul Nelson, who, with his wife Betsy, ran a very successful RPA campaign to save the Amtrak Southwest Chief from extinction. New Amtrak CEO Richard Anderson seemed to be determined to shut it down, and was using the lack of Positive Train Control on a section of BNSF track across part of Kansas and New Mexico as a reason to eliminate it due to safety issues. The Federal Railroad Administration had exempted this line from PTC because Amtrak is just about the only traffic, with just two trains a day. Anderson even proposed substituting busses for the train over that part of the route, and eliminating sleepers and diners from the remaining east and west ends! This obviously would have driven most ridership away, and that would justify curtailing the train. Kansas, Colorado, and New Mexico had already pledged millions of dollars to upgrade the line. The Nelsons led a campaign that resulted in the U.S. Senate informing Amtrak in no uncertain terms that they consider interstate trains to be a vital public service and that they are not to be considered for elimination.

Saturday was a full day of meetings and presentations, sometimes three concurrently, so it was not possible for me to attend all of them. RPA CEO Jim Mathews opened with a call to press Amtrak to take a leadership role in creating a connected America, with more trains, better trains, and a national transportation policy. He was followed by Joe Boardman who characterized Amtrak CEO Richard Anderson as having been hired by the board to cut costs. With his background in the airline industry, he is trying to use that model for Amtrak, but it does not fit.

He does not grasp that trains don't just serve the endpoints of their route, but many points in between. Boardman sees the 2019 budget reauthorization as the next key RPA battle, so we need to deliver a strong message to Congress. He noted that Positive Train Control is more than a good and much needed safety system, but brings technology to the tracks that can enable much more efficient operation.

RPA Chairman Peter LeCody reported that RPA's credibility is growing in the rail industry, with Amtrak, and in the political arena. He sees brighter possibilities for U.S. rail passenger growth than in the recent past. RPA will be surveying rail passengers and communicating their needs to Amtrak and other passenger rail carriers.

I chose to attend the concurrent session "Why the Swiss Can Build Big Projects Cheap and We Can't" with Gene Skoropowski the presenter. It turns out it is not just the Swiss who can build major transportation projects ten times more cheaply per mile than the U.S., but many other parts of the world also can do so. Most of the rest of the world views public transportation as an essential element of life, whereas the U.S. treats it as necessary only for people too poor to own a private vehicle or who only use it for recreational travel. Because the U.S. has no comprehensive transportation plan, by the time the need for major transportation infrastructure becomes apparent the area is so heavily populated that it is too expensive to build. In Europe the rights of ways for transit are preserved during development. Competitive bidding drives up costs in the long run, as complete engineering design of a project necessary for a bid costs about 30% of the total project, so bidders are forced to pad their prices for the times they don't get the contract. Petroleum companies continue to lobby heavily against public transit. There are 219,000 grade crossings in the U.S. and almost none in Europe where they are planned into rail construction projects. Here they are left up to the discretion of and funding by local entities.

Mr. Skoropowski joined Patrick Goddard, Brightline President and CEO, and Jay Westbrook, General Manager of Florida Dispatch Company, for the next session, "Passenger Rail on Freight Tracks". This session was basically the Brightline story. It was conceived as an alternative to auto travel on the infamous I-95 in Florida from West Palm Beach to Miami. I-95, which stretches from the north of Maine to the bottom of Florida through some of the most heavily populated areas of the U.S., is the most dangerous highway in the country. Billions of dollars are spent annually along its length to expand and "improve" it, but it continues to get more congested. On the piece parallel to Brightline average traffic speed is down to only 35 mph and recently tolls have jumped from \$6 to \$12. Brightline saw an opportunity to provide a high-class alternative that is faster, more comfortable, and less stressful, and the possibility of expansion north to Cocoa and west to Orlando and possibly Tampa.

To do that they established an interesting relationship with the Florida East Coast Railway, a class II freight line operating on part of the historic Flagler owned Florida East Coast Railroad. Track from West Palm Beach to Miami (66.4 miles) was restored to double track and upgraded to FRA class 4 (79 mph) standards. Fortunately, FEC still had track into the heart of Miami which ended at a six block area they owned, which was mostly vacant land they leased for truck

parking. This is where the new Brightline Station has been built, and where FEC plans to further develop real estate holdings that should strongly supplement income from rail operations. To ensure unbiased train movement a third entity, the Florida Dispatch Company, jointly owned by Brightline and FEC, was created to do the train dispatching under the rules of a joint operating agreement. This has been a remarkable success, with both passenger and freight trains operating according to a strict schedule that keeps traffic moving very efficiently, and could be a model for other railroads with mixed service. This was not easy to accomplish, but has proven to be successful. The operating agreement with the FDC requires a minimum 50% on-time for freights and 90% for passengers. At present 12 to 16 freights and 32 passenger trains ply the line daily.

Expansion to Cocoa will require double tracking of 64 miles and upgrading to FRA class 6 (110 mph) with 160 grade crossings. This will be an expensive upgrade, requiring widening and upgrading of a number of bridges and new signaling. Reaching Orlando will require laying new track. Firm agreements have been made to widen the right of way of the Beachline Expressway toll road and to lay the tracks parallel to the road. Trains from Cocoa to Orlando will run at 125 mph. Preliminary studies are underway with the Florida DOT to share right of way on I-4 from Orlando to Tampa, with a possible station at Disney world. Brightline has also recently acquired XpressWest, a company planning to build a high speed line from Las Vegas to Victorville, California along I-15. Not long after the RPA conference the Virgin Group purchased a substantial minority share and Brightline has been rebranded Virgin Trains USA. I see this as a very good thing, as Virgin has the deep pockets needed to fund the significant costs to make the necessary upgrades and expansions, experience in railroad passenger operations in Europe, and strong brand recognition that will help maintain investor confidence. It is going to take some time to move people out of their automobile centric habits, and Miami, fortunately, has in place a public transit infrastructure that makes it possible to come there without a car and get around. I think this venture has the strong probability of starting a whole resurgence of passenger rail interest in this country.

After lunch we were addressed by Stephen Gardner, Amtrak Vice President and Chief Commercial Officer. He may have felt that he was walking into the lion's den, as RPA had already been very vocal about the Southwest Chief situation and other of Richard Anderson's misdirected directives. He reminded us that Amtrak is a federal government owned corporation with a board of directors appointed by the president and confirmed by the senate that is supposed to be making a profit. Gardner claimed to be bullish on passenger rail, but seemed to have a high bias toward corridors in heavily populated areas. Amtrak has a big concern with safety, and is looking to PTC as a vital improvement. The FAST Act has finally provided funds to make capital investments. Replacement of the P42 locomotives is underway, as are Amfleet cars.

He said Amtrak is focused on customer service improvements and better amenities at the same time they were destaffing stations and replacing dining cars with boxed meals! The latter is most likely due to a congressional mandate to eliminate food service losses by 2020. On time performance is at the crisis level with some routes nearing zero percent. Freight interference and

slow orders are the two leading reasons. The situation has gotten much worse since courts ruled that the FRA doesn't have authority to enforce the passenger train priority requirement baked into the original Amtrak operating agreement with the railroads! Acela replacement deliveries will start in 2021. Gardner made it clear that Anderson's focus is going to be on 400 to 500 mile long corridor routes in high population density areas that can support multiple departures daily. RPA agrees with the need for that kind of service, but adamantly opposes doing it at the expense of the interstate routes. Money is the big problem. Much of the equipment is worn out and needs to be replaced or completely refurbished and not enough federal money has been made available. Cooperation of the freight railroads is also a huge issue. RPA members did respond forcefully but politely to Gardner in response to his presentation on issues of disagreement.

For the next round of concurrent sessions I attended "The Next Opportunity and Challenge: Amtrak's Upcoming Re-Authorization" featuring Rick Harnish, Executive Director of the Midwest High Speed Rail Association, and Art Guzzetti, Vice President of Policy for the American Public Transportation association. RPA Vice President Sean Jeans-Gail noted that the monster in the room is the rapidly growing deficits in the Surface Transportation Fund, mostly due to the Highway Trust Fund failing to bring in enough money. Fuel tax rates have remained static for many years even though costs have risen dramatically and income has dropped due to more fuel efficient vehicles. Harnish stated that Amtrak reauthorization has to deal with how the railroads can make more money from passenger trains, the need for new business models, and updated safety regulations and domestic-only purchase requirements as no U.S. based manufacturers of passenger rail cars exist. Existing FRA standards were designed to protect passengers with weight and massive construction. Europe has shown that use of technology like that in aircraft can make railcars lighter, cheaper, and even safer. The U.S. is 50 years behind the rest of the world in rail passenger technology. China has disproven the myth that the U.S. is too big for passenger trains by running high speed trains on 850 mile routes that are time and money competitive with air service. Cities need to develop highly coordinated commuter rail and bus systems to interface with high speed trains.

Mr. Guzzetti claimed that intercity busses are taking riders away from the Amtrak Northeast Corridor, and that ride sharing services are changing the game for local travel in cities. There are no champions for rail passenger service in congress. Rail advocates need to create effective arguments against the organized rail detractors like the Koch Brothers and the CATO Institute. He thinks the U.S. needs to pick a high speed rail demonstration project and fully fund it. Since the California project is farther along than any others, he recommends it. Unfortunately, the dysfunction in congress shows no sign of improving.

Saturday business finished up with a general session that reviewed the high points of the day's concurrent sessions so everyone would get at least a little information about what was discussed in all of them. A couple of major points were that the public attitude toward train travel is improving, which opens a window of opportunity, and that the freight railroads are likely to look more favorably upon passenger trains if they can be more adequately compensated for having

them on their tracks. A new National Committee on Travel has been formed as an advisory group to the USDOT, and RPA CEO Jim Mathews is a member.

Saturday evening an extra fare event took us back to the Brightline Station for a reception to honor the memory of Jim Hamre, devoted RPA member, who was one of the people killed in the Amtrak wreck in Washington State last spring. RPA is creating a scholarship fund in his name, and the proceeds from this event were the seed money. It was held in the Select Class lounge, so we did get to experience its ambiance. Free drinks and exceptionally tasty finger foods were enough to let us avoid dinner.

Sunday morning opened with the Council of Representatives Business Session. Chairman LeCody emphasized the need for better communication up and down the organization. CEO Mathews thanked his staff for the hard work during the past year and reviewed the many RPA successes. Treasurer Clifford distributed the financial report and discussed plans for increasing revenues. Relationships are being sought that will provide sponsorship money to support RPA activity. Bruce Becker gave the dates for the annual Day on the Hill for 2019 as March 31 through April 4. The fall 2019 meeting will be in Sacramento, California on October 18 through 20. Four council resolutions were considered. One was referred to committee, one was amended and passed, one was defeated, and one was withdrawn by its submitter.

Two concurrent sessions followed. I chose to attend “RPA’s Passenger Experience: What Do We Want to See in the Future?” Charles Merckel, Chair of the RPA Passenger Experience Committee, is creating an electronic survey that RPA members can use to report their experiences on every Amtrak trip they take. We need to promote what train travel offers that other modes don’t. RPA needs to be ready for the day when we have a President of the U.S., an Amtrak CEO, and a congress favorable to passenger rail. Amtrak management wants to push more responsibility for initiating new routes and paying for them to the states, but this does not work well when more than one state is involved in a route. Richard Bruss, chair of the RPA Equipment Committee responded to criticism of Amtrak for not finding a place to reuse the Acela trains. Some critical parts for them are no longer available, so the cost to keep them running would be excessive. Amtrak is moving toward a single level fleet to resolve ADA issues and improve fleet flexibility since all equipment could be used anywhere on the system. We need to look at rail equipment from other countries for ideas. Large, comfortable seating is critical, as is WIFI that works everywhere. A dedicated lounge for first class passengers might be an attractive offering.

Our final lunchtime speaker was Paul Nelson on the topic of the “RPA’s Southwest Chief Campaign and the Advocate’s Way Forward”. He reviewed the highly successful effort to preserve the Chief as an all rail route with all existing services. It took many RPA members at the grass roots level contacting local politicians and civic leaders, who, in turn, contacted state political leaders and members of congress to make it clear to the Amtrak board and management that the interstate trains are an important national resource and are to be preserved. It proved the power that RPA can muster. Peter LeCody officially adjourned the meeting at about 1:00.

A tour of the Gold Coast Railroad Museum was offered as an optional event on Sunday afternoon, and since I could not get a decent flight out of Miami until Monday morning I decided to go. Transportation was provided by several Uber drivers with vans. The museum is located about 17 miles southwest of downtown Miami as the crow flies. It is at the former site of the Naval Air Station Richmond, the largest Navy blimp base during World War II. It covered over 2,100 acres and had three enormous wooden hangars, each of which was almost 1,100 feet long, 300 feet wide, and 185 feet tall, to house the airships! The blimps were one of the most effective antisubmarine defenses in the war, as they could move fast enough to cover a lot of area, but also could move very slowly or even hover motionless when shadowing a suspected sub, and radio contact information to surface vessels or armed aircraft. Each hangar could house six inflated blimps. The base was commissioned on September 15, 1943. Three years to the day later a hurricane with 123 mph winds came ashore, causing the wooden roof trusses to fail. Falling debris sparked fires in all three hangars fed by fuel from the blimp engines and other equipment inside, destroying them and their contents. It was one of the largest fires in U.S. history. Fortunately, by then the war was over so the hangars were never rebuilt.

The museum's concrete and steel train shed is built on a tiny bit of the footprint of Hangar #1, and the museum store and office is just outside of where its massive door once was. Four tracks provide indoor storage for about ten cars, and extend to the west with room for many more outdoors. The crown jewel of the collection is U.S. Car #1, "Ferdinand Magellan", which became in 1942 the official railcar for the President of the United States, serving presidents Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower. When retired in 1958 it was offered to the Smithsonian Institution, which unwisely dithered about taking it due to space constraints. The founders of the Gold Coast Museum jumped on the opportunity, and with some political connections were able to secure ownership. The only time since then that the car was taken offsite was during President Ronald Reagan's October 12, 1984 re-election campaign when he made speeches in several Ohio cities from its rear platform.

The car was built in 1929 as one of six private cars built by the Pullman Company, all named after famous explorers. They were rented to the rich and famous (but those not rich and famous enough to own their own private cars!), were sometimes used for presidential travel. In 1942 it was decided that with the war in progress it would be wise for the president to travel in a more secure car, so the government purchased the car and had it rebuilt with 5/8 inch nickel steel armor plating and 3 inch thick bullet resistant glass in the windows. It also has two emergency escape hatches, one in the roof and one in the presidential shower. The car weight went from 160,000 to 285,000 pounds, requiring special trucks to support its mass. It was left in Pullman Green paint with no special markings so it looked identical to other Pullman cars from a distance for security reasons. It is the only railcar to be declared a National Historic Landmark, a distinction that has been granted to only about 2,500 other things or places. More information about this important piece of American history can be found at <https://www.goldcoastrailroadmuseum.org/ferdinand-magellan> and

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ferdinand_Magellan_\(railcar\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ferdinand_Magellan_(railcar)). The car is not often open to the public, so we were quite fortunate to get the inside tour.

The museum has quite a large number of other passenger cars, both heavyweight and streamlined, on display. Many are from railroads that once served Florida, but they do have two Western Pacific cars from the original California Zephyr, dome observation “Silver Crescent” and baggage car “Silver Stag”, both a very long way from home! They also have a couple of stainless steel CB&Q cars, sleeper “Silver Vale” and slumbercoach “Silver Slumber”. Unique among the heavyweights is a U.S. Army hospital car. There are also a number of freight cars, MOW equipment, and cabooses in the collection. The most interesting to me was a very rare helium car that was used to bring the lighter than air gas from Texas to fill the blimps. It is basically a bunch of thick-walled steel tubes stacked on what looks like a boxcar with the sides removed. One pervasive myth about these cars is that they weighed less when filled with helium than when empty, which may have been brought about because the car data shows only the light weight, which is considerably higher than most freight cars due to all the steel in the tanks. The real reason is that even with the car fully loaded with helium at 3,000 pounds per square inch of pressure, the additional weight was only about 3,300 pounds, still more than when the car was empty. Helium is only less dense than air at atmospheric pressure or slightly higher.

Steam locomotives include FEC numbers 113 and 153, And Winston Company #48, a 3 foot gauge 0-4-0, none of which are operational. #153 is the pride and joy of the museum’s power, built by ALCO in 1922. It pulled the last train out of the Florida Keys after the devastating hurricane of 1935 that destroyed much of the causeway that connected the Keys by rail. It is on the National Register of Historic Places. Crown #3 is a 24 inch gauge 4-4-0 that runs hourly on a dogbone loop carrying museum visitors and is powered by compressed air from an engine driven compressor in the caboose, though it does have some sort of smoke generator to make it look more authentic. Several diesel-electric locomotives are also in the collection, four of which are serviceable and used for caboose hop rides and cab rides on the grounds. You can find details about all of their locomotives on their web site.

There is a nice display relating the history of the blimp base in the museum shop. Aside from some remaining concrete floors, the only surviving remnant of the base is one of the huge concrete housings for the sliding doors of hangar #1, which is now used as an antenna tower for numerous services, and is likely a nice ongoing source of revenue for the museum. Like most railroad museums it could do a lot more if it had more money. It is worthy of a visit, and if you are lucky you may be greeted by Ash, the museum’s resident rodent control engineer, decked out in his red bandana.

We Ubered our way back to the hotel. Roger had a late afternoon flight back to Arizona, so I was on my own for the rest of the day. My flight was to leave rather early from Fort Lauderdale, and it was not certain that I could make connections back there in time by rail, so I booked a shuttle. With some afternoon left to kill, I hopped on the Metromover one more time for a spin over the entire Omni loop to the north. It provides some nice views of Miami Harbor where the

huge cruise ships dock and of Miami Beach across the bay. This was my first visit to Miami since 1964, so I was amazed at the amount of growth. Monday morning I caught the shuttle at 5:00 a.m. and got to experience I-95 in person. Fortunately, at that time of the morning traffic was not too bad, though it was busier than I expected. The rest of my trip home was as pleasant as air travel can be these days, but railfanning from 30,000 feet is not very exciting.