



R I D I N G T H E S U N S E T

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You have to *want* to live out here," says the man across the table from me.

I'm on the Sunset Limited heading west, sitting at a table with white tablecloth and napkins in air-conditioned comfort, insulated from the noises of the tracks and the engines, gliding smoothly through a stark, impressive West Texas landscape. We had passed through Marfa at the beginning of dinner, and now, with dessert before us, the landscape has changed. There is less grass, less mesquite, less of any kind of visible plant material, yet we continue to see animals, including deer, antelope, and a jackrabbit. Suddenly, the tiny, ramshackle community of Valentine appears outside the window. It was probably never a thriving town, but today it looks almost deserted, with most houses in bad repair and several abandoned to the elements. No humans are visible, but a lone cow is standing calmly in the middle of a deserted street, chewing its cud and watching the train go by. "You have to *want* to live out here," says the man across the

table, a native of El Paso.

He is undoubtedly right. Life is not easy in this part of West Texas. It takes acres of land to feed one cow, and the annual rainfall will not support much in the way of traditional agriculture. Towns are few, small, and very far between. But the scale of the land is grand, with mountains often visible in the distance. For those burdened by crowded cities and suburban sprawl and who are comfortable with their own company, this land is heaven and worth the trouble.

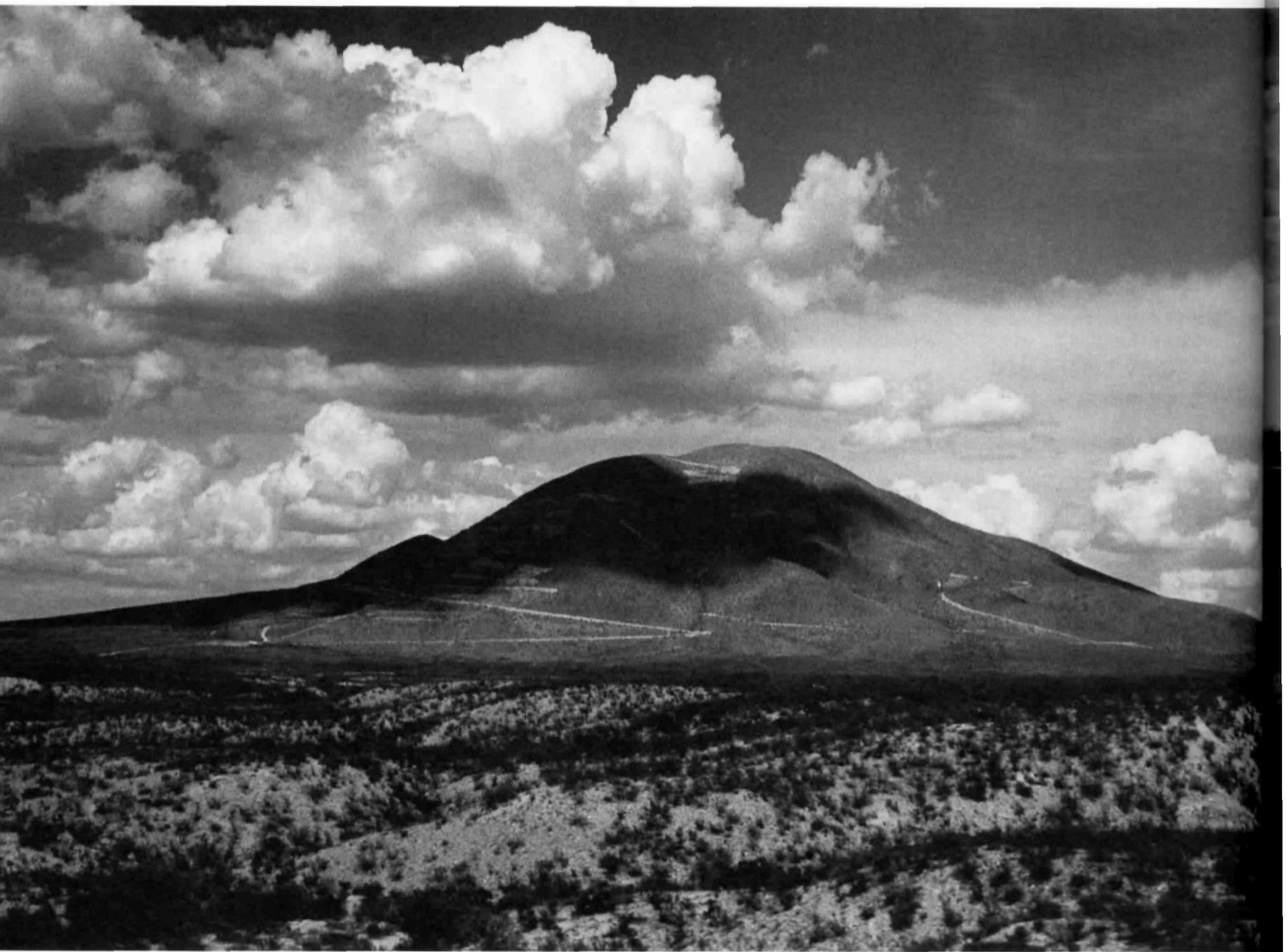
As a temporary respite from those same crowded cities and sprawling suburbs, there is no more comfortable way than the train to enjoy these vast landscapes. No worry about staying awake at the wheel and no cramped muscles from hours of confinement in an automobile seat. However, as I sit transfixed by the moving panorama outside my window, it occurs to me that there is a similarity between the harsh West Texas landscape and cushioned train travel across Texas. You also have to want to take the train. Travel times are long, the trains are often

late, and the scheduled departure and arrival times, falling, as they do, in the middle of a transcontinental run, are not designed for the convenience of Texas residents. If you want to ride the train from Houston to El Paso, the scheduled travel time is 17 hours and one minute, and you have to be prepared to leave Houston at one minute before midnight. There are no other choices. You can choose from three days of the week, Sunday, Wednesday, or Friday, but there is no choice in the time. One minute before midnight.

Personally, I found the idea of a midnight departure on the train exciting, and I embarked upon the Sunset Limited with great anticipation and a fair amount of mental baggage, including some of the extensive legend and lore about both the Sunset Limited and West Texas, memories of travel on other trains, both actual and from the movies, and fairly distant memories of a few automobile trips across West Texas.

I have ridden and enjoyed trains in Europe and on the East Coast corridor

between Washington, D.C., New York, and Boston, but I am not a train buff, and I am woefully ignorant of much of the history and workings of trains in America. For example, for many years, it never occurred to me that train tracks belonged to specific railroad companies. If I thought about it at all, I probably assumed that railroad tracks were like highways, open to anyone with a diesel engine. Now, thanks to a good, train-literate friend, I know that the tracks that run by the Katy Freeway originally belonged to the MKT (Katy) Railroad Company, and that the tracks with the traffic-stopping grade crossing on Richmond, near the Galleria, now belong to the Union Pacific. The business of track ownership had seemed like a piece of interesting but esoteric trivia until the Amtrak Sunset Limited stopped before we reached San Antonio and waited on a siding for a freight train to pass. As we waited in the stillness, I was reminded that, since Amtrak doesn't own the tracks over which it runs, there are times when it must give way to the owner's freight trains.



Mountain east of El Paso. Photo by Margaret Culbertson, 1997

This trip gave me the opportunity to improve my understanding of trains, as well as to reacquaint myself with the West Texas landscape. I am a native Texan, but it has been years since I have ventured west of Castroville or the Hill Country. In fact, living more than 20 years in Houston's subtropical greenness has made even the Blackland Prairie near Dallas, where I spent much of my youth, seem somewhat alien, to say nothing of the wide desert expanses of West Texas.

However, watching those wide expanses through the train windows is what made this trip memorable. I spent hour after hour in the observation car, kept impolitely glancing out the windows during dinner conversations, and stared out the window of my compartment with an unread book on my lap. The views were not traditionally beautiful and did not match stereotypical desert images, but they held my attention nonetheless.

Part of the fascination lay in the gradual transformation of the landscape as we progressed and the realization that one could actually see that transforma-

tion in spite of the length of time, or number of miles, over which it occurred. Watching the subtle alterations of the shapes, textures, and colors of the land and its flora was almost like watching an organic growth process, similar in a way to a time-lapse film of seeds sprouting upward. The land would slowly flatten or develop hillocks or crevices, mountains and geologic formations would emerge or disappear, mesquite would cover the ground or thin out to reveal innumerable yucca plants, all in bloom after the July rains. The infinite slow-motion variations captured my attention and wouldn't let go.

Before this panorama could materialize before us, we had to board the train in Houston and pass through hours of darkness on the way to San Antonio. The Houston Amtrak station is anything but an inspiring setting for the beginning of a rail journey across the State of Texas. Built in the 1960s and stuck between the Houston police garage and the downtown post office, the tiny, nondescript station is surrounded by

reminders of the automobile's victory over passenger trains. The building sits literally in the shadow of an elevated portion of Interstate 45; mail trucks constantly rumble past the tracks that once carried the bulk of the mail entering or leaving the city. No grand portals frame the entrance to the platform, and the atmosphere of the station's interior is more like a small bus station than the gateway to the legendary Sunset Limited.

The Sunset Limited made its first run in 1894, connecting New Orleans and San Francisco. It was advertised as the "quickest, safest, and pleasantest route to the coast," a preferable alternative to the northern route that might "carry you into the heart of the Rockies and leave you there a week or more, snow-bound."¹ It was a deluxe train, with the most modern cars and luxurious accommodations possible, including gas chandeliers and potted palms. There was even a separate "ladies' compartment car," attended by a maid and including a parlor and a library. In 1912, the western terminus was changed to Los Angeles,

and now Amtrak has extended the run east to Miami, making the route a true transcontinental link.

The current Amtrak Sunset Limited cars may not be as elegant as their chandelier-hung predecessors, but they are undoubtedly much more comfortable. The ride is smooth, and effective soundproofing cuts out almost all track and engine noise. The seats are more comfortable and roomier than you will find in the coach class of any airplane, and the dining is far more civilized. However, it was the size of the cars that surprised me first when the train pulled into the Houston station, dwarfing the clusters of passengers waiting to board. The entire train is essentially a tall double-decker, with seating and sleeping compartments on two levels, but with passage between cars only on the upper level. The dining car has seating on the upper level and a kitchen on the lower level, while the lounge car has observation windows and seating on the upper level and a snack bar and tables below.

The situation on the platform when



Irrigated field east of El Paso. Photo by Margaret Culbertson, 1997

the train arrived seemed chaotic compared to the regimented channeling of passengers in airports. The minimal local staff offered no directions or controls, and the waiting passengers surrounded the few uniformed personnel descending from the arriving train. I was eventually directed to one of the two sleeping cars at the far end of the train and found my compartment on the lower level.

It was a tiny space with room for only the two seats it contained, one facing the other, with the dark window in between. For privacy from those passing in the corridor, one could either slide a door or pull a curtain. The two seats could be folded out to form the lower berth, and an upper berth pulled down from above. "Deluxe Bedrooms" with sinks and toilets are available for an additional fee, as well as "Family Bedrooms" with two adult-sized berths and two smaller berths, and "Accessible Bedrooms" designed for passengers with special mobility requirements. Even though my compartment was small, it felt luxurious to stretch out between

starched sheets in the moving train, hearing the train's whistle, filtered through the insulated wall, sounding as distant as the train whistles I hear in my own house at night.

Sleep was impossible while the train was passing familiar sights and streets on its way out of the sleeping city. The circuitous route we were following required continuous attention. In fact, it took the daylight return trip to clarify the unexpected twists and turns. Although our next stop was San Antonio, we were not on the tracks that run alongside Interstate 10 on its way to the same destination. We wound north and south, crossing I-10 twice while still inside Loop 610, then headed south through Memorial Park, under the Southwest Freeway, through Bellaire, and eventually out of town alongside South Main Street, passing by Missouri City and Sugar Land. The tracks even took us by the gates of the state prison farm in Sugar Land, where Huddie Ledbetter, also known as Leadbelly, spent time as a prisoner in the 1920s. He undoubtedly heard the whis-

tles of passing night trains like ours, and he included references to the Sugar Land prison in his recordings of the blues classic "Midnight Special."

The route of the Sunset Limited reflects history rather than the straight line of a ruler. When C. P. Huntington of the Southern Pacific Railway decided to extend his line east from California, he made a deal with Thomas Pierce of the Galveston, Harrisburg & San Antonio Railway to use that company's existing tracks between Houston and San Antonio. The two companies laid track from opposite directions across West Texas and met in 1883 at a spot 227 miles west of San Antonio. These businessmen selected routes with the greatest revenue potential, connecting existing towns rather than looking for the shortest path between large cities, although they did create a few new towns at locations where the steam engines required water. Consequently, the Sunset Limited still heads southwest from Houston through Richmond, west through Eagle Lake, then northwest through Columbus

before finally settling into a more straightforward westward line towards San Antonio. After San Antonio, the tracks go almost due west to Del Rio before turning northwest through Sanderson, Alpine, Marfa, Sierra Blanca, and finally El Paso. Being a limited, the train stops only at San Antonio, Del Rio, Sanderson, and Alpine.

On my trip west, after San Antonio, the morning light illuminated a series of similar small towns whose water towers communicated their identity: Hondo, D'Hanis, Sabinal, Knippa, Uvalde. Yellow wildflowers lined the tracks and occupied entire fields between the towns. After Del Rio, the wide expanses of the Amistad Reservoir, created in 1968 by damming the Rio Grande, interrupted the progressively more desertlike landscape through which we had been traveling.

Crossing the high bridge 321 feet above the deep canyon of the Pecos River provided one of the most dramatic sights of the trip. The original route crossed more to the south, where the Pecos joins the Rio Grande, but even that crossing was difficult, requiring tunnels through



Ranch west of Del Rio. Photo by Margaret Culbertson, 1997

the cliffs on both sides of the bridge. To shorten the route and reduce the grades required by that early crossing, Jim Converse, a Southern Pacific engineer, envisioned a long "high-line viaduct that will skip the descent into the Pecos Canyon altogether, and practically swing the railroad through the clouds."² Completed in 1892, the bridge was the third highest in the world for many years. It was replaced by a cantilevered steel structure in 1944.

After the Pecos River the land rolled in billows like the sea. Mesquite- and sagebrush-covered billows gradually increased in size, with the path of the train cutting directly through some of them, exposing layers of geological history. Mountains began to appear as we neared Sanderson, and some of them, surprisingly, seemed to be covered in a thin film of green velvet. I learned that July is the beginning of the rainy season here, and instead of the brown desert I was expecting, the land was filled with yellow wildflowers, green bushes, blooming yucca, and ditches full of standing water.

After Alpine we crossed Paisano Pass, the highest point of the route at 5,074 feet. The altitude of the pass was a surprise, for the train never seemed to be climbing during the trip. For most of our time in the Trans-Pecos region the mountains remained in the distance, but at Paisano Pass, impressive rock formations and rocky slopes briefly approached the train before withdrawing again to a discreet distance.

On the long stretch between the Pecos River and Sierra Blanca, occasional reminders of the cattle industry's influence on this area's history and legend came into view: isolated windmills and water troughs, a few houses with corrals, cattle pens by the tracks in the towns, even a few cows roaming the range. But traces of mankind were few in this area where land and sky and distant mountains dominated every vista. It was, therefore, almost shocking when, west of Marfa and Valentine, a lush, irrigated orchard appeared on the south side of the tracks, like a mirage. For miles, the tracks formed the dividing line between vast

expanses of desert and this unlikely area of agricultural productivity. Nearing El Paso, irrigated fields became more frequent, but the contrast with the surrounding desert remained unsettling.

El Paso's train station, in contrast to Houston's, is a fitting structure to welcome a weary traveler, at least aesthetically. Built in 1905, the red-brick station was designed by Daniel H. Burnham & Co. of Chicago. It is finely detailed, with a generous, full-height central waiting room. The City of El Paso obtained grant funds to restore the building in the mid-1980s, removing white paint and other traces of the 1940s attempt to convert it to the Spanish Colonial style, and the city's Public Transport Administration now occupies part of the structure. Since so few passenger trains actually stop at the station, service facilities consist only of vending machines and two pay telephones, but the design and generous proportions of the space serve as a reminder of the station's more vibrant days.

All surviving train stations in Texas are reminders of a world that no longer

exists, whether they still serve occasional trains or have been converted to banks or antique stores. Rail remains important in the state, but passenger trains are an anomaly, and freight rules the tracks. The situation is not inevitable — rapid, efficient train service can be found in countries around the world. But, in Texas at least, you have to make a special effort to take the train, changing your schedule to conform to its schedule and remaining patient with occasional delays. However, our train was filled with people who had done just that.

Heading west, there was a grandmother from California giving her grandchildren a Great American Train Ride around the country; a Los Angeles woman who had visited Louisiana to see the rural communities where her parents had grown up; and a couple from Florida celebrating their 25th wedding anniversary with a trip to California and the Midwest. Heading home to Houston, I met two retired schoolteachers returning from a vacation in California; a woman from North Carolina returning from a visit



Alpine. Photo by Margaret Culbertson, 1997

with her brother in Arizona; and an oil company executive from San Antonio returning from a conference in Canada. All had interesting stories to tell.

A retired couple from Florida, whom I met at lunch on the trip west, were amazed, when I showed them my map, at how much of Texas remained to be traversed. It is easy to forget the grand scale of this state when we fly from one city to another. Trains, however, enable us to savor distances and use them to expand our knowledge or relax our tensions.

Late at night, in my berth, on the trip back to Houston, I was listening to the train whistle and staring at the darkness when a curve in the tracks changed the train's direction slightly and brought the moon floating into my vision. The tracks curved again and it floated away, but a few minutes later it moved slowly to the exact center of the window before drifting away for the last time. It is said that the first star, not the moon, grants wishes. But I made a wish on that floating moon that somehow we can keep passenger trains rolling across Texas. ■

1. Arthur D. Dubin, *Some Classic Trains* (Milwaukee: Kalmbach Publishing Co., 1964), p. 198.

2. Neil C. Wilson, *Southern Pacific: The Roaring Story of a Fighting Railroad* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1952), p. 78.