

I had decided to make my departure from Toronto, Canada a memorable one, in that I decided to travel to Los Angeles by train. At the time the Union Pacific Railroad had a branch office in Toronto on King Street West. When I presented myself to enquire about a passenger ticket from Toronto to Los Angeles, I may have been the first such enquiry for years. This outpost office dealt mainly in freight. However, a week later Union Pacific mailed me an itinerary, leaving Toronto on the Canadian National on October 18<sup>th</sup> and leaving Chicago on the UP the following night for the two-day journey to Los Angeles. The total cost in Canadian funds was \$91.04.

I boarded the CN '*Maple Leaf*' at 11.10pm and travelled overnight to Chicago. Even if I hadn't been keyed up, it would have been impossible to sleep on the train with all its stops and starts as it lumbered its way across Ontario and neighbouring Michigan. When it eventually pulled into Chicago Dearborn station I was weary and bleary-eyed. I had almost a day to kill in Chicago as the Union Pacific '*City of Los Angeles*' didn't leave until six that night.

Chicago was cold, grey and windy and it didn't take me long to discover that even some of the grandest boulevards like State Street ended disconcertedly into rundown areas of tenements, abandoned lots and shuttered liquor stores. What's more, for the first time in many months I spent a day speaking to virtually no-one, other than ordering food and drinks. I started by exploring the department stores and gazing up at the handsome skyscrapers adjoining the Chicago River and ended up seeking refuge in Union Station early, with still three hours before the train was scheduled to leave.

The '*City of Los Angeles*' looked a city block long as it stood in the dim light of Chicago Union's subterranean platforms. Although I didn't know it at the time, by 1971 America's famous passenger trains like this one would become history with the winding down of passenger railroads and the advent of Amtrak. I checked my suitcase on the baggage car and located coach 2205. Eventually there was an 'All Aboard' from the conductor, a blast from the diesel horn and the train pulled slowly away.

I must have dozed a little because as dawn seeped slowly into the coach I saw we were travelling across an immense plain. My seat-mate, an older man, uncommunicative until now, said we were crossing Nebraska. I asked him how often he'd travelled on this train. 'Third time,' he told me. 'Also been on the Santa Fe to LA and the Great Northern to Seattle. Only way to travel.' He picked my accent right away and asked me where I was from. I told him Melbourne, Australia.

For the umpteenth time since being in America, I encountered an older American who'd been in Australia during World War 11. It seemed being an Aussie had some currency in this country, particularly with ex servicemen. He was widowed and I was beginning to get his life history except that we'd pulled into Council Bluffs for a stop

which interrupted his narrative. When we pulled out again after a ten-minute sleep he promptly dozed off and there was solitude again.

The scenery didn't start to improve into we crossed into Wyoming and even then it was just a marginal improvement. The train had a fifteen-minute stop at Cheyenne giving us the opportunity to stretch my legs. Just one hundred years before, this had been the scene of many bloodthirsty encounters with Indians as the railroad was constructed across the United States. On this quiet grey morning in the small city of Cheyenne, it seemed impossible to believe.

We took on extra diesel locomotives at the front and even then progress crawled as the '*City of Los Angeles*' began to cross the Rockies. By now the scenery was spectacular and I spent as much time as I could in one of the 'Vista domes' which gave panoramic views on all sides of the train.

Salt Lake City was reached near nine o'clock and then came another sleepless night as the train proceeded south across the Utah desert. At five o'clock in the morning we pulled into Las Vegas, duplicating in a strange way my visiting hours with Rod two years before. The Mojave desert we crossed during the night hours was revealed by daylight to be a frightening, desolate no man's land of stony desert with only cactus and brush to relieve the monochrome.

Eventually came the orange groves and greenery of California, then finally warehouses, factories, refineries and auto plants as the *City of Los Angeles* sneaked in the back door to its Pacific Coast destination. After a day and a half on the train I definitely felt like I'd crossed the continental United States. I couldn't imagine how the pioneers had done in their wagon trains.