

Leg 6 - Portland

Day 29 - Monday 17 January 2000.

The weather forecast for today of snow first thing in the morning didn't eventuate but it sure looked cold outside and when we went down for breakfast we could feel the sudden change in temperature reported to be 26 degrees Fahrenheit.

We had a long conversation with Aunty Thora on the telephone, once again apologising for not being able to do everything for us but I am more concerned about her coming down with the flue especially now that the snow has started falling in Chicago and the temperatures are dropping and the wind chill getting worse. It was sad saying goodbye on the phone and after a few tears I realised how close I had become to them all while here in Chicago after all these years of no contact except through Mum and Dad. I won't lose contact with them again, not now.

Our arrival at Union Station by taxi was uneventful as most Americans were observing the holiday for Dr Martin Luther King Jr. so we checked in our luggage 2 hours early and settled back in the 1st class lounge equipped with leather chairs, coffee, tea, muffins, juice and soft drinks.

Once aboard our train, the 'Empire Builder' we made our way to cabin 4, a sleeper cabin which is rather small but comfortable, much smaller than a sleeper cabin on the 'Sunlander'. It comprises 2 seats which fold into 1 bed while the overhead bed is released and dropped down not leaving much space between it and the door. Lucky we are not very big people and as it turns out, I lost the flip of the coin and will sleep up top tonight.

Not long after leaving the underground station we were soon heading out into the suburbs and the snow which must have been falling not long after we were dropped off at the station turned the country side with a blanket of fresh white snow while we are inside in the shelter and warmth. They have predicted snow for the next 4 or 5 days so we are leaving just at the right time as the snow would make it difficult to move around the city sightseeing. We have been truly blessed with wonderful weather and great company here in Chicago.

Soon the scenery changed from large cities to small country towns with vast stretches of rolling plains between them. With darkness all around the lights and snow made for a picture book image. Our dinner time was 6:45pm and the meal of steak and salad followed by dessert filled us so we could sleep peacefully in our 2m by 3m cabin.

A word of advice for anyone travelling on Amtrak, book a deluxe cabin as it has 2 large beds, its own bathroom/toilet combined and a viewing chair in a 3m by 3m space. Never mind, the cosy atmosphere in cabin 4 should be a good test of patience for us both.

The attendant continually asked us if we wanted our beds turned down, so finally at around 9:30pm we decided to take a shower and prepare for bed, Robyn on the lower level and my above.

Good night, sleep tight and I am sure I will go to sleep quickly as I love the gentle rocking of the train, so peaceful and relaxing.

Day 30 – Tuesday 18 January 2000.

After a good night's sleep I noticed it was getting a little colder when around 6:45am there was an announcement over the public address system advising passengers there had been an electrical short circuit in the power system in a carriage in front of the dining car so breakfast would not be served and could we please not use the restrooms as the flushing process is not working either.

We sat at a siding for some time as the engineers tried to isolate the problem and get the power restored to all the cars. In the end they gave up and headed for Minot, about an hour away where they would attempt to fix the problem.

By now we were heading through the prairies with farms and small rural communities all covered with snow and the waterways frozen over, very picturesque, postcard images. We passed through a town called Rugby which is geographically centred of the north-west route. In today's paper they are talking about the disease problems they are having with the local crops of wheat, durum, barley, sunflower, canola, soy beans and dry edible beans. Seems abnormally high rainfall at flowering time caused scab and sclerotinia.

When we pulled into Minot we all got off the train into the snow and cold wind and made our way into the warm station to go to toilets, what a relief. Those who adventured outside watched as they shunted the train into a siding to find out which car caused the electrical fault, with the train a distance from the station it was so peaceful except for the chilling wind, loved it. Finally they worked out it was one of the forward sleeping cars, so after leaving it behind we set off again about 1.5 hours late, a bit longer than the anticipated 20 minute stop. At least we have the dining car and we can eat along the way.

For one reason or another we are now 3 hours behind schedule and have travelled 943 miles from Chicago with another 1113 miles to Portland but more important is the announcement that lunch is about to get underway which will make up for the breakfast we missed.

Due to the loss of 1 sleeper car there was some rearranging of passengers so Robyn and I decided to help them out by upgrading to a deluxe cabin and boy what a difference. Now we had 2 full size cabin bunks, our own shower/toilet, separate observation seat and plenty of leg room to swing the cat.

The countryside doesn't change much as this area is farming of wheat, beef, open cultivation with the odd oil rig and gas field. Every now again the sky line changes with hills dotted with Indian reservations and forts. You can get the feeling of the early soldiers on horse back crying out 'come on men' as they attacked the Indian tribes or have I been watching too many American television shows and movies.

At Wolf Point (1170 miles) known for its wolf trapping and trading the outside temperature was 21 degrees Fahrenheit and we change to mountain time (put the clock back 1 hour). All along the track every 7 to 12 miles there are small townships established when they constructed the railway line and each has grain storage and handling facility and siding.

From this point we noticed additional wild life such as deer, wolves, antelope and buffalo and as Sleeping Buffalo Hot Springs there were white boxes where non-stinging leaf cutter bees are used

increase the production of alfalfa seed. Fascinating what can be read from the timetable, route guide, guest directory and more booklets in our cabin onboard the 'Empire Builder'.

The train is now trying to make up time so all stops at stations used to service the train are kept brief and passengers are warned not to go far away from the train or they will be left behind. Last temperature reading we saw was 17 Fahrenheit and as the sun sets and the snow like clouds starts to roll in, Robyn and I will just watch from the huge glass windows and stay in the warm train.

It's now 5:45pm (dark) and we are at Havre (1372 miles) and feels more like 7:00pm and we can't get use to the shorter daylight hours in the northern hemisphere. All of a sudden the countryside changes from wide open spaces to mountain as we pass through Browning as we head into the Rocky Mountains and East Glacier Park in Montana. By now the moonlight shinning on the snow and fir trees was truly breathtaking, another postcard moment. In this region there are 50 living glaciers between 9,000 and 10,466 feet with steep mountains and you can see the lights of houses deep in the valley.

Our train briefly stopped in front of 'Glacier Park Station', 4841 feet and built in 1913. The lodge is built from trees estimated to be 600 years old and used by the Great Northern Railway to promote rail travel. In a number of areas we pass through wooden structures built to protect the railway line from snow drifts from the steep mountain ledges.

We turned off the lights in the cabin and shared this beautiful and romantic event in each other's arms lying back in our bottom bunk. We are surprised at the number of houses and lodges scatted throughout this region known for its cross country skiing. Every now and again you can see the lights of the train and it snakes its way around the twisting railway tracks carved out of the cliff ledges of Marias Pass founded by John Stevens in 1889 in -40 Fahrenheit temperatures and without the protective clothing of today.

Eventually we couldn't keep our eyes and mouths (in awe not snoring) open any longer but we feel disappointed that we will miss the most spectacular and scenic part of the journey. I drifted in and out of sleep as the train would speed up and then slow down but the ride is very smooth and the bed is so comfortable except for the air-conditioning unit outlet just above my head in the top bunk.

The next thing I know is we are going backwards and it's around 4:30am. The train has been split into two sections, the forward section including the dining car and sleepers are heading to Seattle and the back section where we are will continue on to Portland. All I saw of Spokane Washington was snow on the platform and parking lots during the shunting process.

All through the night the train conductor was continually reminding passengers in the lounge cars to check their tickets and make sure they are seated in the correct section of the train so they go in the right direction. We found out later that at least one person ended up in Portland instead of Seattle, our concern was our luggage and that it is the right baggage car.

Back to sleep as all that is outside is snow, fog and darkness. If we every do this Amtrak trip again we will check the timetable to catch the train that takes through the Rockies during daylight hours, but then we would have missed the moonlight and stars.

Day 31 – Wednesday 19 January 2000.

Around 6:30am and I am up looking out the window as by now the snow is gone even though we are told the outside temperature is 25 Fahrenheit. We have stopped at Pasco and passengers are boarding and disembarking and this is the first time we see the Columbia River. The railway track snakes its way along this huge river all the way to Portland.

The Columbia River weaves its way past steep cliffs, mountains dusted with snow, vast lands used to grow all sorts of food crops as well as a thriving wine industry. At times the sky is clear, other times we are pockets of fog, magical.

Along the way there are a series of dams and locks providing hydro-electric power generation and transportation for the tug boats and barges carrying wood, grain, car wrecks, saw dust and every other type of cargo from the many ports all along the river bank to Portland. In Portland cargo is loaded into ships to go in all directions around the world.

Timber mills dot the banks on either side manufacturing timber for housing and construction as well as particle board. This day and age lumber jacks are no longer used to float the logs down the river and have been replaced with trucks and barges.

While we were coming down the river on the north side, another railway line winds its way on the south side and we were informed there are many rival railway companies and even Amtrak is made up of different railway corporations under the one name but operating independently. All rail traffic is satellite controlled from Houston in Texas and the engineer is in constant communication as trip wires located at many cuttings are used to warn drivers of rock slides on the line.

The 5 dams with their locks can raise or lower a ship up to 70 feet from one side to the other and usually takes around 20 minutes to complete. If the Columbia Gorge is anything like Norway, then they must be beautiful as well.

Due the weather, Mt Hood was hidden from us by clouds until we rounded Vancouver and Washington when all of a sudden it was exposed in brilliant sunshine and its peak of 11,235 feet (a little lower than Taos) with its white snow cap stood out against the city limits of Portland known as the 'City of Roses'.

Portland is still some 90 miles by river to the Pacific Ocean and when we arrived 2 hours late it was 45 Fahrenheit and after checking in to the 'Crown Plaza' with our luggage we set out across the bridge to investigate the city.

Portland is very clean with a tram system to move people very efficiently through its narrow streets. The tree lined streets still have party lights which must look spectacular at night. As there is no 'sales tax' added to the price of goods, what you see is what you pay and the prices are very reasonable compared to other States we have visited.

Tomorrow the main event is to visit the 'RANS Aircraft Factory' at 1:00pm to see how the RV range of ultralight aircraft are constructed including the latest techniques used in metal fabrication and the RV8 we still don't have in Australia.

Day 32 – Thursday 20 January 2000.

Looks as though Portland has had a fair bit of rain last night, but this morning the sun is out, a few dark clouds around and the temperature is 38 Fahrenheit. Unfortunately the sore throat Robyn had yesterday has now turned into much more so the medicine we got from the pharmacy will come in handy. We have been fortunate with our health so far throughout our holiday.

The main event today is to tour the Vans Aircraft factory at North Plains and meet up with Scott Risan who I have been communicating with over the Internet.

After breakfast we took the 'MAX', an electric tram system (constructed 2 years ago) that goes through the city centre out to Hillsboro in the west and Gresham in the west of Portland. The whole system is operated by an electronic ticket vending machine at each stop along the journey. The whole route is divided into zones at \$1.45 per zone. Our journey to Hillsboro some 45 miles from the city crosses 3 zones. While heading west we passed through a tunnel taking 9.5 miles at around 45 mph which makes it longer than any tunnel I have travelled in, even the tunnel from Bullocks Flat to Blue Cow in Perisher Valley on the Snowy Mountains.

We had to ring for a taxi in Hillsboro as there is no taxi rank; come to think of it I have not seen many taxis at all. The ride out to North Plains took us through farmland and hazelnut trees that have moss all over the trunks and branches due to the cold and high rainfall in this region.

Scott took us on the guided tour of the factory producing the RV4, RV6, RV8 and RV9 kits and is spread out over a number of workshops. Soon they moving to Beaver Creek where there is an asphalt runway at the local airport instead of using Vans own grass strip next to his house where he still lives.

The RV series of side by side or tandem seating configurations have been transformed from a tail dragger to trike ultralights whose numerical controlled machines cut, bend, pre-drill and stamp matching components ready for the builder to bolt and rivet together, very efficient with little waste. RV has a staff of 45 people looking after the ordering, manufacturing, packaging and shipping sections of the company. One of the most important aspects of the manufacture process is the use of powder coating of all steel sections to prevent rust and corrosion as well as the use of anodising on the ribs in the wing section.

Two types of canopy, side by side or pop top can be used to protect the cockpit and Vans have a range of analog and digital instruments which we don't see on sale in Australia. A small drive away from the manufacturing and packaging plant is the grass strip used for test and demonstrations of the RV range. Unfortunately the weather by now prevented a test flight as it was cold (45 Fahrenheit) and raining making the grass strip too soggy to take off and land. What a pity as I was looking forward to a test flight.

On display in the hanger was as RV3 and RV4 used as the prototypes for the early design and development. All RVs use Lycoming engines which are very versatile and efficient when performing barrel rolls and loop the loop aerobatics.

The final section of the hanger is where the RV8 and RV9 prototype aircraft are being assembled and tested using modified components to gauge handling and fuel consumption rates. While inspecting

the construction Van himself came into the workshop to inspect his new creation, a power driven glider his latest love for flying.

One is totally impressed with the design, manufacture and shipment process for their range of ultralights and if I could afford one I would pick the RV9 kit devote the 1000 hours needed to assemble the kit. Scott was very helpful and drove us back to the Hillsboro Airport MAX station where we caught the tram back to Portland.

Portland is a very beautiful city and the lights in the trees really sets off its friendly atmosphere and easy going lifestyle compared with the hustle and bustle of Chicago. The traffic is more forgiving to pedestrians and drivers don't honk the horn all the time. Actually I have not heard a car horn at all since arriving in Portland, bugger I just heard one now.

There are some aspects of American television which are hard to get use to:

- The number of advertisements;
- The poor quality of shows;
- Talk shows scrape the bottom of the barrel; and
- With all the news programs all you hear about is the USA as if there is no other country in the world.

Day 33 – Friday 21 January 2000.

Its 7:35am on a dark and wet Portland morning, normal so we are told for this region and the temperature is a pleasant 45 degrees Fahrenheit. The snow season starts at the end of January and reaches its peak in February tapering off in March so we are here at the right time.

The news on the television and papers are full of stories about the snow falls on the east coast with schools and government buildings shut and employees off work as the roads are icy and dangerous. Although the elections are not until later in the year, the media is covering all the debates between the presidential candidates from within their own political parties before the real campaigns begin. Glad we don't have a system like this in Australia, can you imagine Howard, Reith and Costello for the Liberals or Beasley, Crean or Kernot debating head to head to see who would be the candidate to lead their party? No thanks. But what really get me is the poor standard of debate and the lack of intelligence politicians have in the USA yet they claim to be the leaders of the world, heaven help us.

On their local television they even have televise local meetings for their counties, education committees and debates on just about anything and everything you can think of. Guess it is better than some of the local talk back programs which seem to be on nearly every television station regardless of the time of day or night.

For breakfast we walked up to the Lloyd Centre, a huge shopping mall in the North West region of Portland where most of the government buildings are located. It reminds me of the North Sydney area in New South Wales. Inside the Lloyd Centre is a full size ice skating rink complete with a large machine used to smooth and level the ice surface. Instructors for both ice skating and hockey use these facilities and there is a place where you can hire ice skates. On the two levels are shops and professional offices and an 8 theatre complex. On the third level is a food court with every type of food disk you would like to choose from.

We checked out of our hotel at 12 noon and caught a taxi to Union Station to catch the 2:33pm 'Coast Starlight' Amtrak train to San Francisco. Being 1st class we were ushered into the lounge and had lunch and coffee while waiting for our train to arrive from Seattle, Washington.

The train arrived early and left on the dot of 2:33pm passing through the industrial section before making its way out to the open grass fields with crops and sheep. The water runs off from the melting snow in the ranges combined with the wet lands there are plenty of creeks, rivers and waterways making the region very beautiful. At one spot we passed a large section of the fast flowing river where a hydro-electric power station is located with Mt Hood in the background.

The 1st class passengers were invited to a wine and cheese tasting event in the Pacific Parlour Car where the premium California wines were served together with an explanation on the wine and where it was grown. The person running the wine tasting didn't like it when I said they didn't compare with the wines from Australia and I don't think he made many sales from the other passengers either.

The country side is rather flat until it meets the hills dotted with small towns and larger cities. It wasn't until late in the evening that we moved into the Cascade Range where the fir trees returned as well as the snow. Once again the scenery is very pretty and gliding through the countryside with the lights from the towns and cities starting to become more evident as the light fades and the moon peaking over the range.

We stopped at one little town called Chemult and there was a light dusting of snow before once again we were heading out into the countryside again and time for sleep.