

Meeting Jerry Wright

When Your Train Breaks Down, Take A Hike

I love the train. I hate flying and prefer driving if the travel time is remotely close (I just drove 16 hours to Ithaca, New York, for a speech that would've taken 11 or more door-to-door hours to fly).

But I haven't driven to California since 1974 and that's not really practicable for business purposes. So, for the National Organic Standards Board meeting this spring, which took place in San Diego, I took Amtrak's *Southwest Chief*, which runs from Chicago to Los Angeles. It was a great experience. It was relaxing and I got a lot of work done.

I got on the train at Galesburg in Western Illinois. And I arrived in LA 45 minutes early before jumping on a connecting train to San Diego.

I enjoyed the trip on the way back but we were running about 45 minutes late when we got into Raton, New Mexico. They let us out to stretch our legs. Shortly thereafter the crew announced that the lead engine wasn't going to make it up the next mountain and they needed to trade power plants. Since it would take about an hour and a half, I seized on the opportunity to explore the town. There was abundant evidence that it had died, and not that long ago.

Half the storefronts were abandoned fairly recently. This had been a happening place. I stopped in an old auto dealership where the owner was still there, late on a Sunday afternoon, rebuilding an engine. The showroom and garage of an old auto dealership was filled with restored, or partially restored, vehicles with a pristine 1949 Buick in the front window (albeit under a heavy layer of dust).

He had a restored 1954 International Harvester pickup truck in back that I took an interest in. That was the year I was born and when I started my first professional gig, in 1974, I went to work for International and they gave me a brand-new pickup to drive. I got to strip the plastic off the seat. My first new vehicle!

When I told that story to the proprietor, 71-year-old Jerry Wright, and told him in addition to working for IH that I've been involved in farm politics, with the Farmers Union and now with Cornucopia, that led to his telling quite a series of stories that I found riveting.

Jerry was one of the founders of the American Agricultural Movement. AAM rose to prominence during the "farm crisis" of the 1970s.

Farmers were the victim of a market bubble that burst in agriculture when former President Jimmy Carter popped it with a sharp needle that was called the Soviet grain embargo. Farmers who had borrowed to expand, and gear up for demand in a booming commodity market, found themselves unable to pay their loans. The banks, and the federal government, aggressively and without mercy started foreclosing.

AAM organized farmers. In many locales they tried to circumvent foreclosure sales by having the community bid on the assets, on the cheap, and give them back to the farm families. Their tactic worked but the powers that be figured out how to neutralize it by sending in law enforcement.

This was the first time that tactic had been tried (it originated during the Dust Bowl days of the Depression), once again being at least temporarily successful. Back in the Depression farmers scraped together whatever cash they could and conducted “penny sales” bidding just a few cents on the land and tractors until the government sent in the National Guard.

Jerry helped organize and participated in the tractorcade to Washington. He told me about their dislike for the American Farm Bureau and that, in one town, a farmer used his large manure spreader to decorate the façade of a four-story building housing the Farm Bureau offices.

Another story Jerry told me was of a grain elevator owner in Missouri who took in the soybean harvest of area farmers and, as soon as he was done, declared bankruptcy. Unlike Wisconsin, Missouri didn't have laws requiring bonding and the farmers, initially, were going to lose their harvest. That is, until AAM organized a thousand volunteers to show up with shovels and they manually loaded the soybeans back into the farmers' trucks.

I don't know if I will meet Jerry again but if I ever roll through Raton, where the train takes a really quick stop, to allow nicotine addicts to have a smoke and the rest of us to stretch our legs, I'm going to run over to Jerry's shop and deliver a piece of Wisconsin cheese and say hello.

No one will ever have an experience like this flying. It's why I like to drive across country stopping to visit Cornucopia farmer-members and explore small communities. I highly recommend it. But if you'd rather do it from a comfortable armchair, I would encourage you to pick up John Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley* (they don't call him one of the masters for nothing) or William Least Heat Moon's *Blue Highways*.

Happy trails,

Mark Kastel