

# Merv's Train & Bix Beiderbecke Festival Trip

## August 2017

### Day One-Tuesday 1 August (Off We Go)

I boarded the California Zephyr at Colfax California and to my delight I found they were pulling my sleeper car 180 degrees from my trip last year which allowed me to sit on the more comfortable sofa to ride facing forward.



Donner Lake, California. Here is where we are near the summit of the Sierra Nevada mountains.

Since I boarded after the lunch service had started, I was at the end of the line. However, it meant that I had some very nice lunch companions who, as it turned out, we're all into music in one form or another. The man sitting next to me, Steve, is a music teacher from Boston wrapping up a vacation trip to San Francisco and heading to Chicago. He primarily teaches choir and piano.

The distaff side of the couple sitting across the table from me, Beth, is a violinist in Salt Lake City.

The dinner table brought another fine group. First was a retired librarian heading home to Chicago. Next to her was Don an author who writes screen plays and has a couple of books to his credit. At my elbow was Neil a physical therapist from Southern California who specializes in sports medicine. He was on his way a training camp in

northern Utah.

I thought I would still have my rail legs for sleeping on the train from last year, but not so. I laid awake for hours being jiggled, rolled, and vibrated until I finally fell asleep sometime in the wee hours, but awake again shortly after first light.

### Day Two-Wednesday 2 August (Utah and Colorado)

Breakfast brought even more interesting companions. Grandma, Joanna, along with grandson, Cooper, were retuning to Toledo after a busy three weeks visiting relatives in California. It sounded like they did everything there was to do in Southern Cal. Next to me was a young French lady from Paris who spoke limited English. She had never encountered grits, so I gave her a taste of mine, which she deemed OK.



Here we are entering the magnificent Ruby Canyon in southern Utah. The name, Ruby, comes, of course, from the red sandstone walls.

Later we travelled through the Ruby Canyon area where there are magnificent, huge cliffs of red sandstone.

We pulled into Grand Junction, Colorado a few minutes early, but it seems we have been watering the tracks for awhile with broken water pipe in the dining car. After fixing it and

refilling the bone dry tank, we were about 15 minutes late getting out of town.



More of the Ruby Canyon. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to capture the full splendor of the deepest part of the canyon. I just couldn't photograph the really high walls of the canyon out of the train's window. The only way to see this canyon is by rail or on the river as there is no road through this area.

Lunch was with Nancy and Tom, a couple from Buffalo, New York. They were returning home after attending a wedding near Truckee, California. Without that horde of Boy Scouts that were on the train last year, getting a seat in the dining car is a lot easier.



The Colorado river, in Colorado, with rafters, fishermen and mooners.

I wasn't all that hungry, so I was going to have the quesadilla plate, but I was told they were out of it. It seems they provision the train in Chicago as train 5 westbound and then turn the train around in Emeryville and send it eastbound as train 6, but still working off the same provisions loaded in Chicago. As

a result, train 6 runs out of more foods as it nears the end of it's run. This account was disputed by one of the servers who said they did re-provision in Emeryville, but they still seem to run out of some items way too soon.

A pleasant surprise awaited me after we exited the eastern portal of the Moffat tunnel (the tunnel is 6.2 miles long and crosses the continental divide at over 9000 feet in the center). The tracks slip in and out of numerous short tunnels while winding through some spectacular mountain scenery, but the best part is when we came out of one of the last tunnels and could see what looked like the entire Midwest spread out before us. You could see the sharp drop off of the Rockies, the rolling hills west of Denver, Denver and surrounding cities, and flat land beyond stretching off into Nebraska.



An Iowa corn field partially planted with the rows perpendicular to the tracks so you can see them. Otherwise each field is just a sea of green.

Dinner brought one of the most delightful groups that I have had the privilege to share a meal with. Susan and Peter from Mill Valley, California and Kirk from Sacramento. As it turned out, except for Susan, all the guys were into music in one way or another. Peter plays tuba and Kirk is a composer and pianist. After yakking about music for way too long we turned to Susan to hear her story, she's a paralegal working in San Francisco.

### Day Three-Thursday 3 August (Nebraska, Iowa and Illinois)

A little better night's sleep, but still rather

fitful. For breakfast I joined Paul and Sarah from England, and later their daughter, Anna, sat in. They, and two daughters, I didn't meet, were making a big holiday trip. They had been to San Francisco and enjoyed it immensely, then a stop over in Denver to take a car ride high into the Rockies. Then it was on to Chicago, New York, and Washington D.C. before they headed home. Again, more musicians, Paul is a guitar player.



The front end of our train. First two engines, then the baggage car followed by the crew's car. The last car visible is the first of three coach seat cars. Unseen are then the lounge car, the dining car and three sleeper cars.

We arrived a little late in Galesburg, Illinois, but not enough to be a problem. I rented a car and drove up to Davenport, Iowa where I settled into the same hotel that was housing the festival musicians. The festival venue is in a new casino about a mile from the hotel. While the casino does have a hotel, for me, it was better to stay at the Quality Inn with the musicians because this is where the after hours jam sessions would break out. More on those in Appendix A.

Being Thursday it was sort of an unofficial start of the festival with several of the bands playing that evening.

### Day Four-Friday 4 August (The Bix Festival)

Today kicks off the festival in earnest. They chose a most sensible starting time of

noon, but carry on to eleven at night with only an hour break. See Appendix A for those interested in the festival.

### Day Five-Saturday 5 August (More Festival)

More Bix Fest, see Appendix A

### Day Six-Sunday 6 August (Homeward Bound)

I didn't feel much like eating breakfast, so I hopped into my rental car and headed back to Galesburg to catch my return train. I arrived in Galesburg way too early, so I grabbed a burger and then took a nap in the car before dropping off the car keys.

### Day Seven-Monday 7 August (The Ride Home)

Well I finally got a good night's sleep on the train. For breakfast we had a great little group. Beth, a retired high school science teacher from Oakland, California. Jim, who was pretty mum on his career except to say he worked in government for awhile. and Nick, an Australian fellow who works in the mechanical aspects of stage production.



This is an attempt to show that corn fields are intermixed with soy bean fields, but with the train traveling at 80 mph it was hard to catch the shot I really wanted.

For lunch I only had two companions, Joe a corporate lawyer who lives in London, England, but born in the Netherlands. He

was on a combination business and vacation trip. After a short delay, Joe and I were joined by Karen who is a private secretary and girl Friday for a former pro tennis player whose name I didn't catch. She lives in Connecticut.

At dinner I was joined by a brother and sister pair, Linda and Larry, and their 90 year old mother, Cicie (sp?). Linda and her family run a ranch on the western end of South Dakota and Larry has a farm, growing corn and soy beans at the eastern end of South Dakota. It was really interesting to get the straight poop on how they farm those two crops.

## Day Eight-8 August (Back In California)

I got a good night's rest and woke up between Winnemucca and Lovelock Nevada. Breakfast was most enjoyable as I was seated with a German family of dad, Stephan, and his two daughters, Joanna and Lia. They all live near Stuttgart where dad is a gym teacher and coach. Joanna spoke English quite well and acted as an interpreter as Stephan and Lia spoke very little, but with her help we had a delightful conversation.

So, off the train in Colfax and home.

# Appendix A

## The Bix Biderbecke Jazz Festival August 3, 4 & 5 2017-Davenport Iowa

### The Bands

First Dan Levinson of New York and his *Rainbow Roof Jass Band* celebrated the 100th anniversary of the first successful Jass (as it was first spelled) recording by the Original Dixieland Jass Band (ODJB) in February of 1917. All of their four sets focused on recreating the recordings of the ODJB and other small jazz bands of the late teens and very early 20's. Dan mentioned that, unlike today, the musicians didn't take solos. The whole tune was played ensemble style as this was dance music, it wasn't intended that people would just sit and listen to it.

*Swing Central* is a relatively new quintet put together by Hal Smith and Jonathan Doyle. They played a lot of Chicago style tunes and quite a few of Jonathan's own compositions. The band featured a fine guitar, bass and piano. Jonathan on clarinet and Hal on

drums.

*The Graystone Monarchs*, a large group only played two sets, while all of the others played four. They feature recreations of jazz bands of the 1920's, a lot of tunes I have never heard of, but some really hot numbers.

Now my favorite, *The Fat Babies*. This nine piece group plays the tightest arrangements of tunes and songs of the 1920's dance bands. Again, at least for their first three sets there was hardly a tune I recognized, for the fourth set they played a few tunes I knew and even one I like to play "Nobody's Sweetheart". Pianist, Paul Asro, sang quite a few songs and his voice and his style have improved so much.

The fifth band was *The Dave Bennett Quartet* with Dave on clarinet and piano bass and drums for backup. Dave is a phenomenal clarinet player, but he chose to play more modern music and didn't follow the theme of

the festival. For his final number he was beating a poor electric keyboard into submission Jerry Lee Lewis style. Needless to say, not my cup of tea.

### The Jam Sessions

Then the really fun part was the Friday night jam session held at the Quality Inn hotel. Mike, the hotel manager hosts a midnight cookout of hamburgers and hot dogs

with all fixin's including chili, but main attraction is the music. These fabulous musicians who have been entertaining all day let their hair down and just play some awesome stuff. Dan Levinson expressed his displeasure at the non-musicians who applaud. He said "you don't applaud at a jam session. We have worked all day playing what people want to hear, now it's our turn to have fun and play what we want to play".

Andy Shumm, while not the leader of the "Fat Babies", is usually one who starts each tune. I asked Andy about the technique that he uses to kick off a tune. I have noticed that he taps his foot several times at the tempo he wants and then taps harder for two beats and then just as hard he taps three times and the whole band starts playing right where the fourth beat would be. However, sometimes he would only tap two times. He explained that he works with this band so often they can almost read his mind.

He had another piece of advice concerning tempos. He said to get an accurate feel for the tempo you want, don't think of the beginning of the tune but rather somewhere in the middle to get more accurate idea of the tempo you want.