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Riding That Train

Meet the people who seem to travel as many hours as they work on a long commute to Sacramento

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At 6 on a Wednesday morning, Jim Bourgart is already 15 minutes into a 175-minute commute by foot, bus, train and foot again. From downtown San Francisco he'll catch an Amtrak motor coach to the Emeryville station, where he'll sit 20 minutes on a hard plastic bench waiting for the 6:40 to Sacramento.

He doesn't mind as long as he is moving. It is the lost sleep time in the waiting room that hurts. Since the Capitol Corridor runs both the bus and the train, you'd think it could tighten the time-cushion allowed for traffic that never appears on the eastbound bridge.

"I could use those extra 20 minutes, or even 10 or 5," says Bourgart, who starts his day with a 12-minute walk in the dark from his SoMa condo to the bus stop at the Market Street entrance to Bloomingdale's. "Every minute counts, especially in the morning."

The Capitol Corridor is a line made possible by the voters, who in 1990 approved Prop. 116 to provide state funding for intercity passenger rail service. Until 1998, there were only four trains each direction per day and the morning commute was essentially westbound only. Now there are 16 roundtrips. The State of California owns the rolling stock, Union Pacific owns the tracks, BART supplies administration, Amtrak staffs the trains and stations and a joint powers authority oversees it. The Capitol Corridor is like Caltrain with more layers of agencies.

Between four morning trains, 1,000 passengers ride from the Bay Area to Sacramento daily. Emeryville is by far the busiest station, with 135 daily commuters. They may be unhappy about spending four hours a day on a train, but they are less unhappy than they would be spending three hours a day in a car. By either mode of transit they are less unhappy than they would be living in the great Central Valley. That goes for patent attorney John O'Banion, who upped and moved with his wife to San Francisco after 35 years in the state capital.

"We're blessed with this beautiful city, and you don't have that in Sacramento," says O'Banion, who walks down California Street from Nob Hill to meet his bus. "So you give up a little bit."

Most of what you give up is sleep. O'Banion, 54, gets by on 5 1/2 hours. He looks fresh in the

Emeryville waiting room, though he won't get his cup of coffee until the train leaves the Suisun/Fairfield stop, an hour away. (Among other things you learn from the conductors is that the proper pronunciation is "Sue-son.")

The 6:40 is the most popular morning run and the San Franciscans can't get off those plastic chairs and out of that bright waiting room fast enough. A few minutes before the boarding call, they blow right by the sign that reads "Warning: Please remain behind this sign until the train stops," cross the tracks and are on the platform.

Of the 135 riders who board here, 80 are bound for Sacramento and 55 for Davis. Those going to Sacramento on the 6:40 are mostly lawyers and policymakers. The Davis riders are shabby graduate students and earthy faculty with bicycles heading to the UC campus. The students stash their bikes in the rear and climb upstairs into the quiet car, which is kept dark so they can curl up in a double seat and get another hour of sleep.

The Capitolists are one car up. Because the train originates in Oakland, as opposed to San Jose, it is still on time and empty when it reaches Emeryville. Not as empty as the Amtrak bus coming over from the city, but empty enough that everyone gets a two seater, and some get a four seat booth with a table in the middle.

"I've got two offices," says O'Banion, unsnapping his briefcase. "I've got Amtrak and I've got Sacramento."

Seated in the immediate vicinity, like the traveling salesmen in "the Music Man" are Bourgart, Deputy Secretary for Transportation and Infrastructure; David Crane, Special Advisor to the Governor for Jobs and Economic Growth; Preston DuFauchard, California Corporations Commissioner; and John Rea, General Counsel for the California Labor & Workforce Development Agency.

They spread out, put their 10-ride tickets on the edge of their tables - so as not to be interrupted by the conductor - and begin their efficiencies. Three minutes into it, Crane has his laptop open and his BlackBerry working, his breakfast set out and his hard-boiled egg peeled.

"Without wireless, this would be a much less productive run," says Crane, who is on the intense end. He went to law school, just for the fun of taking the bar exam. He never intended to practice. When Schwarzenegger was elected, Crane started by driving to the Capitol, but switched to the train four years ago. Sometimes he returns on the 7:40 p.m., which gets in at 9:20, getting him home at 10 to get up at 4:30 or 5 and start over.

"Because you can work so pleasantly in the train, it's delightful," he says, "as long as you like to work."

The fare from San Francisco is \$24 one-way. Half the passengers buy blocks of tickets, bringing it down to \$14 one-way. Unlike Amtrak lines, there is no federal money involved in the Capitol Corridor. Its \$40 million budget comes from passenger fares and the state, on a 50-50 split.

At least two of the regulars on the 6:40 have some indirect connection to funding - Bourgart, 62, whose agency oversees Caltrans, a major funding source of the Capitol Corridor, and Crane, 54, who serves on the high-speed rail authority. To be sure everything goes smoothly, Gene Skoropowski, managing director of the Capitol Corridor, boards the train in Martinez.

Skoropowski is quick to point out that the Capitol Corridor is one of only two lines in the country to still put fresh paper headrests on each seat. "They're changed at least every day and oftentimes twice a day," brags Skoropowski, 63, a former architect who used to commute on the Boston line. His mother got tired of hearing him gripe about it. "She said 'If you want to change it you've got to get involved.'" So he did. That was 41 years ago. "I've been doing trains ever since."

It doesn't take too long before the topic of the 20-minute lag time between the arrival of the San Francisco bus and the departure of the 6:40 works its way into the conversation. "It's the closest to a guaranteed connection that we can make," says Skoropowski, who promises to look into it. He's heard a few complaints on this, but nothing like when the bar car dropped Sierra Nevada Pale Ale. Now that was a problem. He fielded 250 e-mails on that before he had a chance to restock it.

"It's whatever the riders want," he says. There is some debate as to whether riders want the seats to face forward or backward. People who are accustomed to riding Muni are used to facing forward so they can read without getting carsick. People who are wary of a train wreck like to face backward because the neck is protected from whiplash.

Then there is the debate over sitting on the east side facing the hills, versus the west side, facing the bay. On the 6:40, east side seats facing backward have the benefit of the sunrise. When it passes the oil refineries of Richmond, all the lights are still on, giving it the effect of a theme park ride.

Riding on the west side, it feels like the train is out over the water. Plus you get to see remnants of the old working bayfront of junk yards and boat docks and dilapidated fishing clubs on stilts. One looks to be sinking into the bay, carrying its "for sale" sign with it. The train bends with the shoreline, up against the hills, barely wide enough for the tracks. Then it runs under the Carquinez Bridge, old span and new.

"The interesting thing about the train is you really take a ride through California's history," says DuFauchard as the train passes by the C&H Sugar plant. "There's manufacturing history, there's agricultural history. It's like that book 'Angle of Repose.' "

At Martinez it turns left and crosses the Carquinez Strait on an 80-year-old truss bridge between the two spans of the auto bridge. Then it bisects across farming and duck-hunting country, where

you can see the elaborate blinds built to keep hunters camouflaged yet comfortable while waiting for the birds to come in.

The train passes under I-80 and cuts through cow country as it approaches Dixon. Skoropowski likes to tell the story of escorting some East Coast transportation experts through here. "One of them looked out the window and said 'where the hell are all the people out here? All I see is cows and open space. I keep hearing that everything in California is overrun and overbuilt.' Skoropowski took the measure of the man. "Well, you're not getting correct information, are you?"

Then again, maybe they were. As the 6:40 rolls out of Dixon you get to see the subprime mortgage meltdown in trackside housing tracts. As it rolls into Davis the students are lined up with their bikes at the door to disembark for their 8 o'clock classes, which started two minutes ago.

From here it is a straight 15 minutes to its final destination in Sacramento, with 10 minutes of padding on the schedule. It is past 8, so the cell phones are drawn out and flipped open. Back in the sleeping car, Jackie Valle, 27, wakes up in precisely the same spot every day and starts to apply makeup for her job at the Department of Public Health.

"My body is accustomed to it," says Valle, who lives in the Lower Haight and starts her day with a 5:30 Muni ride to Powell Street, where she crosses Market to catch the 6 a.m. Amtrak bus.

The Sacramento station, built in the 1920s for the old Southern Pacific line, is the opposite of the sanitized Emeryville station, which opened 15 years ago. The terminus of the Capitol Corridor is a grand brick building with arched windows and ceiling, hanging chandeliers and wooden phone booths. At one end is a mural depicting the triumph of the Iron Horse, with non-iron horses standing by and Leland Stanford orating.

The waiting room still has those curvy wooden benches with heat coming up through iron grates atop the backrests. A group of Amish - men in Abe Lincoln beards and bowler hats, plain wives in bonnets - seems to be enjoying this modernity while waiting for the train to carry them back to Lancaster County, Pa., in the absence of the stagecoach that used to come through here.

Forty Amtrak trains come through here a day, and there is an air of excitement when two runs pull in at once. A volunteer station host is standing on the platform to make sure passengers don't get turned around and end up on the California Zephyr for Chicago when they are ticketed for San Francisco.

Bourgart is a volunteer station host in his own right. Exiting the train, he takes hold of two blind men and slowly leads them off the platform so their white canes don't get caught in the tracks.

Most commuters are homeward bound on the 3:35 or 4:40, but Bourgart usually catches the 5:40. The train pulls into Emeryville at 7:20 and his bus is waiting, engine running, as he walks across

the platform and through the station. The connection is timed to the minute, the way he wishes the morning was.

If there is no bridge traffic, he is back at that lonely stop in front of Bloomingdale's before 8 p.m., and 12 minutes later he is home. There isn't time for exercise or sports on TV. Dinner with his wife is about it, because 9 1/2 hours after he walks in the door he's walking back out.

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