



HOW THE WEST WAS TOURED

Tony Perrottet

Author, *The Sinner's Grand Tour*



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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“To get a proper idea of the vast extent of our country, one must first attempt to wander over it.”

- William L. Humason, pioneer tourist, 1869

To cross America by land these days is a grandly nostalgic gesture, but almost everyone who attempts it experiences a moment of doubt, a frightening episode when the true enormity of the United States strikes home and you think, *maybe I should have flown?* For me, that moment came on a train in **Nebraska**. It wasn't provoked by the sight of the never-ending **prairies**, whose monotony was known to drive pioneers to despair and suicide, but an incident in the luxury gymnasium carriage of a **Union Pacific Streamliner** from the 1950s. I had already traversed a solid 1,100 miles on Amtrak from **New York**,

so the first glimpse of an exercise bicycle promised a **Lourdes**-like revival for my stiff limbs, while the wafer-thin satellite screen facing me promised to soothe my wandering attention span. So as we purred along the rails at 60 miles an hour, I hopped onto the bicycle seat – only to find that the state-of-the-art machine required me to electronically program the train’s current height above sea level. Our *altitude*? For perhaps the first time, the true scale of what lay ahead in the **West** dawned on me. The train, I realized, would gradually climb towards the **Continental Divide**, crossing the highest pass at a breathless 8,000 feet. And it wasn’t just the **Rocky Mountains** and the **Sierra Nevada** we had to negotiate, but nearly 2,000 miles of desert plateaus, wild rivers, and yawning gorges.

It was enough to make you call JetBlue.

No matter how many twenty-first century gadgets they may boast, long-distance trains in America still provoke these frontier flashbacks. My own trip, from the East Coast to **San Francisco**, was really an attempt to recapture this nineteenth-century world view. A couple of weeks earlier, while conducting some research in the New York Public Library, I’d come across a rare memoir written by one of the actual tourists on the first transcontinental rail journey in 1869, a certain William L. Humason Esq. This vivid document, published under the title *From the Atlantic Surf to the Golden Gate*, conveyed all the wonder travelers once felt on railways. It also provided a fresh new vision of the **Wild West** – and immediately inspired me to make the trip myself.

A century and a half ago, no traveler needed reminding how much dramatic terrain lay between the **Atlantic** and the **Pacific**, or what an engineering marvel the new rail line was. **California** could only be reached by a grueling overland **stagecoach**, a **steamer** around **Cape Horn**, or a slog through the **Panama** jungle. But after May 10, 1869 – when the two new rail lines being built from East and West were

famously joined with the driving of the **golden spike** in **Utah** – the journey to San Francisco could be completed in a week. *Seven days!* The prospect must have been as alluring as commercial flights to Mars.

It certainly inspired wealthy Easterners like William Humason. At first glance, he seemed an unlikely thrill-seeker - a middle-aged **Connecticut** businessman, who had made his fortune manufacturing fine cutlery. But like many **Gilded Age** scions, he was also an inveterate tourist, and more adventurous than one might guess. Having traveled all over the East and **Canada**, Humason leapt at the chance of taking this pioneer train across the frontier, whose tales of **Indians**, trappers, and explorers he had thrilled to since childhood. As it happens, this epochal railway odyssey was a wilder adventure than anyone expected. Humason's travel memoir turns out to be hilarious – and his Gilded Age tour a comedy of logistical errors that would make any travel agent blanch today.

My plan was to follow as closely as possible this ground-breaking 1869 journey, using Humason's words as a bridge to the uproarious past. Naturally, I did not feel obliged to recreate the precise physical conditions of my Western pioneer. This would be no *Frontier House* on rails. And so, perched on my Nautilus 2000 exercise bike, I guessed at eastern Nebraska's altitude (3,000 feet), turned on *Saturday Night Live* reruns on Comedy Central, and started peddling in the direction of California.

For William L Humason Esq., the overland trip had also started out in luxury, as he departed **Boston** on a first-class sleeper for **Chicago** and **Omaha**. Tickets sold for the fabulous sum of \$179 one-way to California, and the well-heeled passengers had been assured that Eastern standards of comfort would be maintained even in the wilderness. For a while, they were.