

Le Monde

Crossing Missouri

19 March 2014

Piercing the Faux French Façade

Boarding Amtrak's *Southwest Chief* in Kansas City, Mo.

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The church work I had come to do in St. Louis was rewarding to accomplish, but the hotel where we did it suffered from the malady of convention venues everywhere.

Meeting in rooms named Frontenac and Montmartre decorated with *fleur-de-lis* wallpaper hints at the French heritage of the Louisiana Purchase land we were visiting. But the morning 'til bedtime schedule shielded me from the people who live there and the way that heritage and land shapes who they are.

Cheri and her overflowing bags filled that void.

I met her and her sister at the train station nearest my hotel in suburban Kirkwood, where she and I were beginning our journeys home. Usually Cheri drives back to Kansas after visiting her sister, but she had always wanted to take the train. We were waiting for the *Missouri River Runner* to take us to our connection in Kansas City with the *Southwest Chief*.

But that first train was going to be late, having hit a farm tractor stuck on a grade crossing, so Amtrak had dispatched a bus to pick up connecting passengers and get us to KC on time.

"I'm so disappointed," Cheri said. "I've seen the Interstate. The train follows the Missouri River all the way, and it's beautiful."

She and her husband, who sells insurance and likes to hunt ducks "when it's 11 degrees below zero," once rode their bikes for 240 miles across the state on the Katy Trail, which follows the abandoned right-of-way of the old Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railroad, known colloquially as the Katy.

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The Amtrak (former Missouri Pacific) depot in Kirkwood, Mo., where I began my return trip from St. Louis.

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But missing the train wasn't her only source of agitation. Her daughter is getting married in July, and the stress is beginning to build. She's supposed to get on a Skype call in the morning to plan things with the future mother-in-law in London "and she's going to want to talk about hats."

Cheri is a plain daughter of the Great Plains. Her bags held a mother-of-the-bride dress her sister had bought for her in the big city named for a French king plus a bridesmaid's dress and a flower girl's dress. "I've already got a nice dress," she said.

The sister visited a shoe store across the street while I waited for the bus. Cheri checked out the feed and seed.

"It's going to be so hot in July for English people," she worried, "and our water is so muddy. I'm afraid of what they're going to think."

She's a high school science teacher and has hosted visitors from faraway places before. But they were kids, foreign exchange students from Japan and Norway and Spain. Easier to entertain.

She also knows what it's like to be the guest.

She's been all over Europe. She went to Japan alone for six weeks to stay with three families who had entrusted her with their kids. She knew what it was like to deal with home-cooked dishes she could

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My only picture of Cheri is this one inside the Kirkwood depot. She's in the blue top with the yellow jacket tied around her waist. Her sister has the big brown bag over her shoulder.



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Waking up in Colorado aboard the *Southwest Chief*.

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not identify and some, like fish eyes, that she could but didn't want to.

"I love where I live," she said, "but it's so flat."

So we talked about the Canadian Rockies which I've visited and where she and her husband will escape once the wedding is behind them.

In the day's dying light our bus picked up more passengers in "Jeff City," where the state capitol looms huge in the middle of a town so small that you can see across it, and then we stopped for

more folks in Sedalia after dark.

On the train platform in Kansas City we parted with a hug, she to her coach on the rear of the *Southwest Chief* and I to my roomette at the head end, where I'll spend two nights on the way to Los Angeles.

At 2:30 in the morning, while I slept under stars that shone through my window, Cheri got off the train in Newton, Kansas and set out alone on the last hour of her journey down the surveyor straight, lonely highway to Abilene and that worrisome call to the hat lady.