

## MY VERY OWN “SILVER STREAK” ADVENTURE

By Nick Gier

Both national and international politics have been pretty intense, so I’m taking a breather with another railway adventure. On this train ride I was not accused of murder nor was I seduced by Jill Clayburgh, but I do have something in common with Gene Wilder in his hilarious performance in the 1976 movie *Silver Streak*. With Richard Pryor on board it made the film even funnier. I don’t channel surf very often but I found and watched this movie many times.

As background for this story I should say that I’m sponsoring an Indian graduate student by the name of Johnson Roosevelt Petta. Indian Christian parents prefer biblical names, but Johnson’s really liked Democratic Presidents. I didn’t know he had an Indian “last name” until I saw it on his passport.

Johnson’s first two years of MA studies were at San Francisco Theological Seminary, and his pastor gave him a 1987 Toyota Corolla as a graduation present. I assumed that he was all ready to drive himself to the University of Denver to start his Ph.D. program on a three-year fellowship.

One evening Johnson called me in despair saying that he could not go to Denver. His Korean friends told him that he was not a very good driver, and besides there were two big deserts between California and Colorado! I should have realized that long-distance driving on high-speed freeways would terrify a novice driver from India. I immediately shifted to Plan B, which I should have thought of in the first place. I would fly down and drive with Johnson. We would visit all the national parks and other famous points of interest on the way. We had a leisurely 7-day tour of Yosemite, Death Valley, Las Vegas, Zion, the North Rim of the Grand Canyon, and Arches National Park (an amazing first for me).

After setting up Johnson’s household with a U-Haul truck full of used furniture, I started my trip back to Moscow. I had flown down to Oakland on Southwest, but at that time Southwest did not fly to Denver. I booked a seat on the California Zephyr to Salt Lake City, where I would take the plane back to Spokane. The bonus with this itinerary was that I would get to visit my Mormon relatives in Orem.

It was a bright sunny day when I boarded the Zephyr at 8 AM. I thoroughly enjoyed the slow climb up the Colorado Rockies and then through the 6-mile-long Moffat Tunnel. Our stops at Winter Park and Vail reminded me of the time I spent a week skiing all three mountains at Aspen while I was a graduate student in California.

Our stop in Grand Junction jogged my memory because that is where I took a small plane into Aspen in December 1968. There was a long line at the pay telephone, and a huge fellow in front of me was taking a long time with what appeared to be a big business deal. I didn’t notice that the station was completely empty as I took the phone to call my Mormon cousin.

As I finished my call, I rushed out to see what Gene Wilder saw many times in *Silver Streak*: the train 100 yards down the track with my luggage still on it! My panic did not last long because I remembered what the wily Wilder did: I would catch up with the Zephyr in a plane!

I took a taxi to the Grand Junction Airport—much improved over thirty years. I thought I would have to pay a fortune for a last-minute, one-way ticket to Salt Lake City, but it cost me only \$114. I had a nice leisurely meal and my flight arrived at 9 PM. I was able to rent car, check in to the Super-8, and drive down to meet the Zephyr at midnight. As my coach mates got off for a break, they were amazed to see me. One of them said “Where have you been?” and I answered “What took you so long?”

As I retrieved my luggage, I noticed that the big burly guy was asleep on the car. I had saved the notes he had left at the telephone in Grand Junction. They had prices in pound sterling all over them, so I thought he would want them back. I startled him as he woke up, but he was really happy to see those pieces of paper.

And even though there was a big man among us, I did not have to deal with Richard Kiel, the steel-mouthed, 7-foot monster we know from James Bond movies. Using a spear gun that Wilder found in the baggage car, he shot Kiel right off the top of one of the cars. Wilder was off and back on the Silver Streak three times, but the one time being left by the Zephyr was enough adventure for me.

I did have a good time visiting my Mormon relatives, but I missed seeing the most loving woman in the world: my deceased Aunt Inez. When my brother and I were growing up, we cringed when Inez would end her letters with “Oceans of Love.” We thought that hugs and kisses were icky, and that an ocean of love was really over the top. What I eventually learned from my dear aunt was that there is no such thing as too much love.

Train buff Nick Gier taught philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years.