Franklin Delano Roosevelt spent much of his life traveling by train. He also spent many of his last public hours aboard the eleven-car presidential train, when it became his funeral train. His final journey from Warm Springs, Georgia, where he died, to Hyde Park, New York, where he is interred, took three days and covered a thousand miles.

During FDR’s lifetime, most Americans traveled the country by train. Although commercial air transportation began in a limited way on January 1, 1914, rail travel was still preferred by most people. Airplane trips were long, uncomfortable, uncertain, and expensive.

During the Great Depression most sources of financing dried up, a problem that severely affected capital hungry railroads that needed constant infusions of money for construction, maintenance, and operations. The Reconstruction Finance Corporation, a major piece of legislation that went into effect during “The First 100 Days” of Roosevelt’s presidency, provided the funding to keep the railroads running.

Shortly after FDR took office, a presidential passenger car was designed expressly for his needs using a car built by the Pullman Company called the Ferdinand Magellan. It was refurbished for the use of the President and his party, but in most respects it was an ordinary observation/sleeper. At 84 feet in length (about half that of the USS Potomac), it was 15 feet high, 10 feet wide, and contained the presidential suite, two guest rooms, a dining/conference room, and an observation lounge. Each room in the car had a telephone. The elimination of one of the usual five staterooms allowed for a spacious observation lounge decorated with cream-colored woodwork, green carpeting, and light brown, tufted wall covering resembling leather. The president liked to poke along at speeds below 30 miles per hour, perhaps because the constant motion caused him some pain, or possibly because he enjoyed waving to the crowds who often gathered along his route.

With the start of WWII, the President agreed that the car should be modified to keep him safe and comfortable. For his protection, the Magellan was reinforced with 5/8-inch armor plate, three-inch thick bullet-proof windows, extra locks on its doors, and two escape hatches in the roof. The car weighed 142 tons, double the weight of a comparable, unprotected car. Its original name removed, the car was identified in code as “POTUS,” President of the United States. For added security, all other rail traffic would be cleared from FDR’s route while a team of railroad employees and Secret Service agents inspected every inch of track before the locomotive pulling the President was allowed to proceed.

President Roosevelt’s train travel presented certain challenges, among them the “secret” of his disability, which he always (and successfully) endeavored to keep from the public. When his train stopped in New York City, it only used Track 61, deep in Grand Central Terminal directly beneath the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. There the crew would off-load the presidential Pierce Arrow limousine from a freight car, and a freight elevator carried it and the President through the Waldorf garage to the street.

Tangential to FDR’s connection with trains, but worth noting, was the impact of A. Phillip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, on Roosevelt’s Executive Order No. 8802, issued June 25, 1941. A planned march on Washington proved unnecessary due to this order barring employment discrimination by the federal government, defense related industries, and federal contractors, based on race. Although the order was effective immediately, it was not well enforced until the 1960’s with the advent of the Civil Rights Movement.

The Romance of Travel is largely gone from our lives. Crowded airplanes and terminals offer little except speed — and increasingly not even that! The ideal of moving slowly across our country with time to see our similarities and our differences, and to reflect upon them, no longer applies. The contrast with FDR’s travels is immense. We have lost something important: the opportunity to gain perspective and insight that is swept away at an altitude of 36,000 feet.