

The face behind Herby finally is unmasked

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THERE HE IS, FOLKS. The one and only Herby. The real Herby. And this is the first time his photograph has appeared anywhere along with a confession that he is the mysterious artist who, for the last 25 years, has drawn some 60,000 Herbys on the sides of railroad boxcars.

Herbert A. "Herby" Mayer, a high-spirited, Puck-ish switchman for the Terminal Railroad Association in St. Louis, Mo., sent us his photograph because we were curious about what the real Herby looked like. He also sent us a drawing of a Herby, the legendary Mexican taking a siesta under a palm tree. It's probably the most traveled piece of art in the history of the world. This column last week disclosed Herby's identity after a fellow switchman, Cezar Tyjewski, of the Grand Trunk Western Railroad here, tracked down Mayer, who has just retired. For years, the elusive Mayer had been the object of a vain search by railroad officials and unions, railroad buffs and newsmen.

As recently as last August, Gordon Baxter, a columnist for the Beaumont (Texas) Enterprise and Journal, launched his own search for Herby. He wrote a column asking readers to write to him if they knew anything about Herby.

"I might call this man, Herby, the Picasso of American freight cars," wrote Baxter. "There is a perfect balance in the art, and a feeling of remote contentedness that cries out, 'Who is Herby? Where does he draw?' Why does he do it, this same one on so many freight cars that it has emerged and stands out in all the wonderful crazy chalk art and graffiti that is irresistibly drawn to a parked railroad car? Who are you, Herby? What are you saying to us from there? Is Herby a hobo?"

Baxter speculated that "the long, full, looping bottom 'Y' at the end of



Up the Creek

By CAL SAMRA

Herby's signature suggests the steady hand of a humorous and balanced man." Baxter was quite correct on that point. We expected Herby to be a wit, and a long telephone conversation with him confirmed that.

Herby recalled that "once a boxcar turned over in a woman's backyard. She told the wrecker foreman she knew the guy that draws that picture and to tell him to come get his damn boxcar out of her yard."

He said that sometimes people scrawled remarks beneath his Herbys. One remark, written with chalk, reported that "Herby was last seen alive and well in (a house of ill-repute) in Odessa, Texas."

Herby kept his secret so well that even the big St. Louis newspapers never had an inkling of who he was.

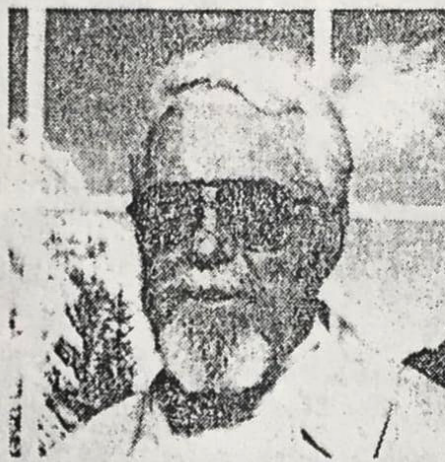
Mayer, a robust, ruddy-faced, bearded man of 62, said he has been happily married for 40 years to the same woman. The Mayers have four boys.

He said he was raised a Catholic and went to Catholic schools. "I'm not proud of the fact that I haven't been a churchgoer," he said, "but I pray every day. There isn't a day that goes by that I don't pray."

Was drawing Herby a kind of a prayer?

"I don't know," he said, "but I know it relieved me of a lot of tension, especially when it was extremely cold or raining outside."

Herby told this columnist in conclu-



Herbert A. "Herby" Mayer

sion, "I know that you believe you understand what you think I said. But I am not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant."

Mayer recently received in the mail from an anonymous person a poem, which read, in part:

*Across this mighty nation
Wherever there's a right of way,
You can always see Herby's signature
Throughout the night and day.*

*Now he probably has his critics,
Michelangelo he ain't,
But he's brightened many a railroad car*

*With a little chalk or paint.
How many a fuming motorist
As the train rolls down the tracks
Has noticed that little man sitting there
And leaned back and relaxed?*

*And when Herby takes his pension
For him there'll be no farm,
You'll find him in a railway yard,
A' chalkin' up a storm!*

Columnist Baxter said he feels "Her-

by's work belongs among the work done by other artists in the National Gallery of Art in Washington."

Yet, Baxter added, "even as I turn the light on Herby's art, I feel that this may be a grave mistake. Suppose Johnny Carson raised his sombrero and we all looked Herby right full in the eye?"

"Although Herby cries out to be found, I have a dread deep in my heart that the finding would be the ruination of our stately, balanced and serene Herby. Maybe we should just say, 'Thanks, Herby, wherever you are...'"

I suspect that, over the years, the much-traveled little Mexican has come to mean a lot of things to a lot of different people. To me, he reflects an almost saintly serenity in the midst of the frustrations and madness of the cities he visits daily.

I would tend to agree with Baxter. Now that Tyjewski has uncovered the secret, the fun's all over. But, Herby, thanks for 25 years of fun and games.

SEVERAL MEMBERS of the Lakeview Kiwanis Club gathered for drinks recently at the home of Jack Curtis of 246 Brewer Drive. "We kept hearing a cat's meow coming from some place, and we all looked everywhere in the house for the Curtis' cat, but we couldn't find her," said Andy Anderson, of 136 S. Ridgeway Drive.

The meowing continued, and seemed to be emanating from a floor-model stereo set. Curtis remembered that a repairman had come to the residence that afternoon to fix the turntable. The repairman had removed the rear panel on the set, fixed the turntable, and then replaced the panel.

When Curtis removed the back panel, Suzie the cat very eagerly crawled out.

Apparently, the cat had crawled into the rear of the set when the repairman turned his back.