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Columnist launches

search for railroad artist 'Herby'

By GORDON BAXTER

The drawing is deceptively simple. Done in chalk, boldly on the dark metal sides of a railroad freight car. The dimensions are what an average size man could reach, standing by the ends of the cross ties on the ballast, reaching high for the top, the base line cutting off at about waist level. The style is bold, slashing, hurriedly done, as if the artist were furtively glancing over his shoulder now and then or expecting to hear the oncoming rolling thunder of the slack coming out of the train as the distant engineer opens the throttle and the easel

gets snatched out from in front of the artist, leaving a work unfinished.

The drawing is always the same. Or at least I think it is. And I just learned that the originals are signed and dated. In fact I am looking at a photo of one signed 3-5-80, which relieves my mind of the rumor that the artist may be dead because nobody had seen any of his recent work lately.

I am glad I got the photo, because I can work from it in this sketch copy. I had tried to do that before, working from memory, and found that like trying to recall some simple Picasso that seemed so vivid, you cannot actu-

ally capture the subtle genius of line and space and form and mood in it unless you are looking at it.

I might call this man, Herby, the Picasso of American freight cars. His masterpiece of folk art conveys exactly all the things I want to say about him here, raises the same questions. 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 as recognizable in all the wonderful crazy chalk art and graffiti

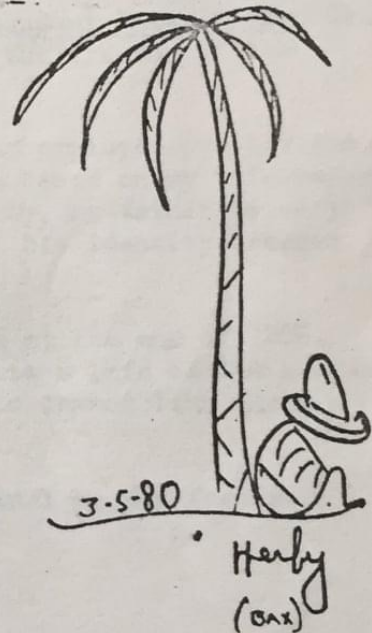
ti that is irresistably drawn to a parked railroad car. Who are you Herby? What are you saying to us from there?

I am a rail buff leftover from the days of steam. Railroad men are still sort of heroes to me. Among such friends is Ray Carder, a brakeman on the Southern Pacific out of Beaumont. In talking railroad romance and legends one day we stumbled onto the drawing by Herby. He had seen it, all the railroad men know Herby. And yes, he would watch the yard, carry his camera and try to catch me a current Herby. He did.

Herby sits on his island, wearing his sombrero down hiding his face, his patterned serape drapes his shoulders and arms that wrap comfortably against his chest behind drawn up knees. Herby's curled back rests against the trunk of a tall royal palm. The criss-crossed bark of the tree trunk leans slightly away from Herby in this one. The five graceful palm leaves are done in charming perspective from high overhead, affording more tranquility to the snoozing Herby than shade. The date is on the base line, the signature clearly scripted under the seated figure. The long, full, looping bottom of the Y at the end of Herby suggests the steady hand of a humorous and balanced man. But I'm no graphologist. I write to several friends who are doing time in the pen, and they all have excellent handwriting.

Is Herby a hobo? You must understand that there is a vast social difference between a hobo and just a common bum. Their numbers and legends are fading some from the Depression years when nearly every successful young man prided himself in having hoboed awhile. There was a code of manners, morals and ethics in the hobo jungle at the edge of rail yards and water tank stops. There even used to be an annual King of the Hoboes announcement carried in the underground "Hobo News." Was Herby a part of this? He is well known in the vast unknown telegraph line of folk heroes yet undiscovered.

Watch for Herby's one man art show next time a slow-moving, mile-long drag has you nailed down at some grade crossing. Look for Herby if you happen to be within viewing dis-



tance of a spotted string of freight cars. Write to me if you know anything about Herby. I think his work belongs among the work done by other artists in the National Art Gallery at Washington.

Yet even as I turn the light on Herby's art I feel that this may be a grave mistake. Suppose we did find Herby; suppose he became a media darling in a brief rush. 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 ..."