

Hola Amigos. Esto Es Herby!

EDITOR'S NOTE: Herb Cleaves, 40, author of the following report about a mysterious but well-known railroad cartoon figure, is a reporter for the Bangor (Me.) Daily News. He first began following the character 25 years ago as an employee of the Bangor and Aroostook Railroad. "I don't believe the person who draws Herby will ever be tracked down," he says, "but nonetheless, Herby is a beautiful thing."

A sleepy Mexican-American named "Herby" has been riding trains for a quarter of a century and is the most widely recognized cartoon character in railroad history.

Herby is a figment of the imagination of an unknown chalk artist who has been decorating the sides of railroad cars since the 1950s. Herby, it is believed, has appeared on every railroad line from Mexico City to Fairbanks, Alaska.

The sleepy sombrero-topped character is always depicted in the same pose, lounging under a palm tree, with the name Herby and the date inscribed beneath the art work.

I first met Herby at the freight yard in Van Buren, Me., during a blizzard in 1955. His creator had fashioned him in chalk on the side of a Santa Fe reefer (refrigerator car) in the pose that has become familiar to train watchers from coast to coast.

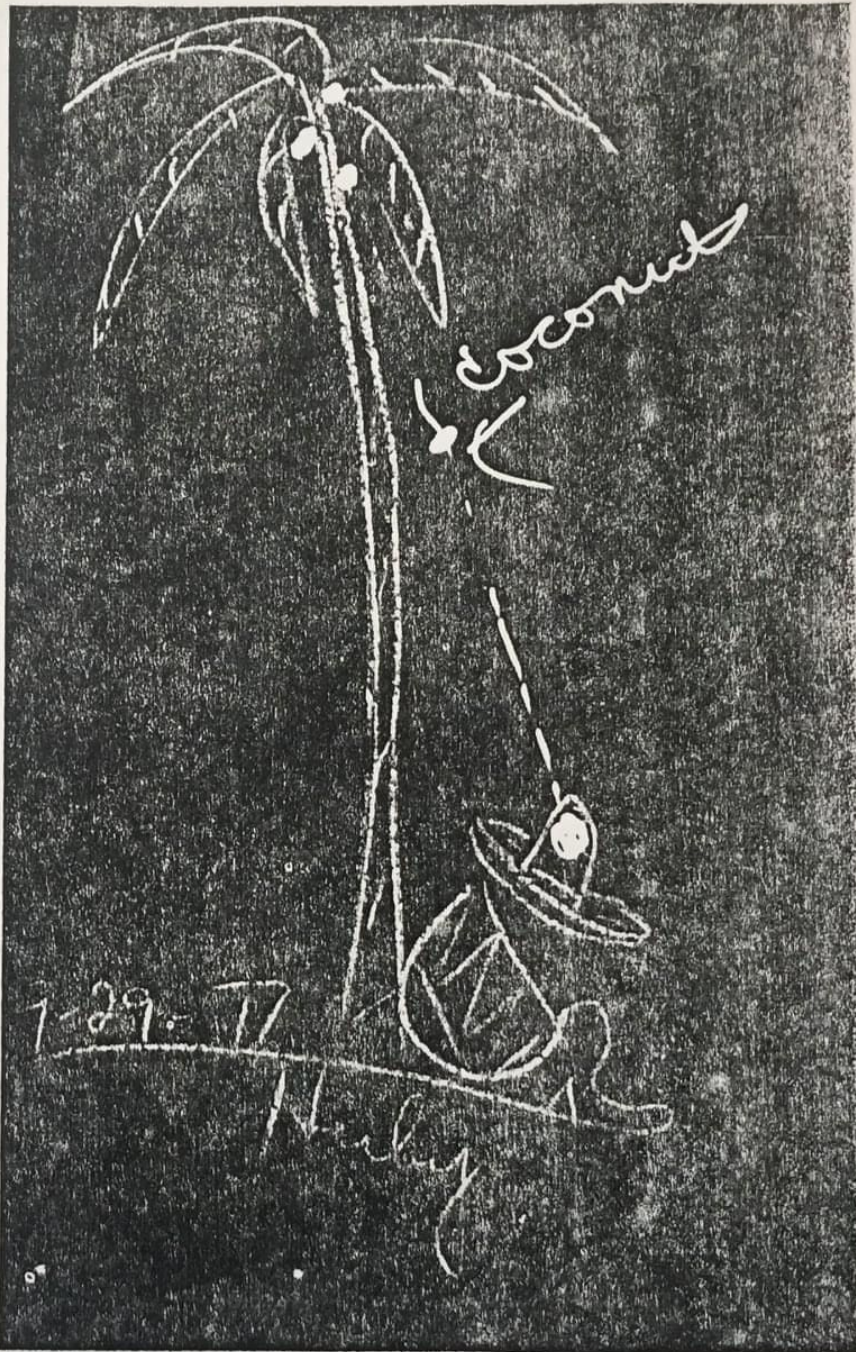
Herby is a bit of graffiti traced to a veteran railroad employee in St. Louis who remains anonymous. **Locomotive Engineer**, a railroad union publication, quotes a Missouri Pacific Railroad official, M. R. Deatherage, who knows the cartoonist, and who says Herby's mentor is intent on spreading his logo throughout the country.

"It's nothing," says Deatherage, "for him to decorate a 100-car freight train in just the time it takes him to walk the length of it."

In two or three talented chalk strokes, Deatherage claims, Herby's creator can leave his Spanish-flavored trademark on each car in a train.

Because most boxcar graffiti is crude and obscene, graffiti fails to meet with anyone's approval and many budding artists are chased from freight yards each year. Safety, of course, is the main concern.

An original Herby often lasts several months



This "doctored" Herby was photographed last summer on the side of an NW boxcar at Talbotville, Ontario, Canada, along our St. Thomas Division. Versions untarnished by pranksters don't include coconuts

before the chalk falls victim to weather. The cartoon is always the same: a slightly bent palm tree with five broad leaves and beneath it, the now-classic napping figure with the tilted sombrero and Mexican blanket.

Twenty-five years have passed since my first encounter with Herby but I still watch every train that passes for an old friend.