

Smile-Herby Loves You!

By Herb Ceaves

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 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, Mo., 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."

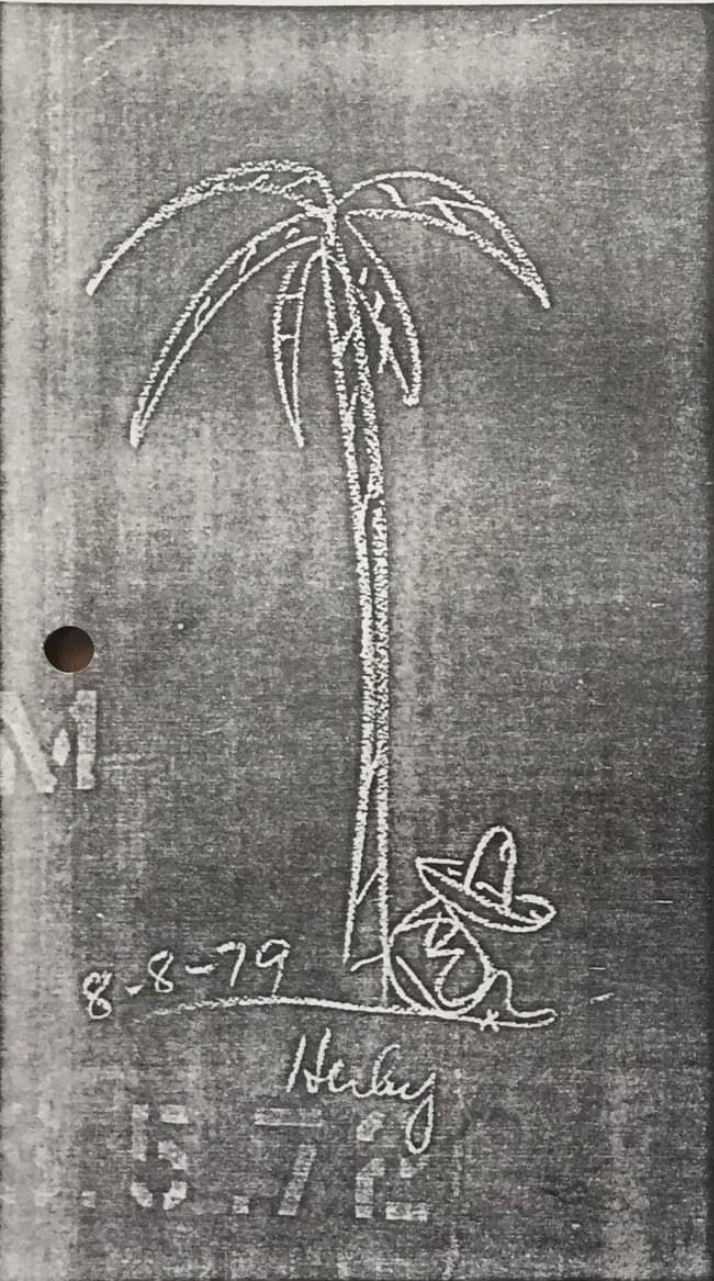
In two or three talented chalk strokes, Deatherage claims, Herby's creator can leave his Spanish-flavored trademark on each car in a train.

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 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.

Courtesy of the Bangor Daily News



This appealing drawing appears on thousands of boxcars every year, the work of an unknown chalk artist who's believed to be a railroad employee in St. Louis, Mo. In contrast with much of the obscene graffiti which appears on railroad boxcars, Herby is like an old friend to American railroaders.