

1-22-1981

Local railroader uncovers the REAL Herby



Photo by Don Nelson

Cezar Tyjewski examines a Herby drawn on the side of a boxcar.

The mysterious artist who has drawn some 60,000 Herbys on the sides of railroad boxcars for the last 25 years has finally identified himself.

A Herby, drawn with crayon or paint stick on the side of a freight car, is a Mexican with a sombrero and a blanket taking a siesta under a palm tree. Beneath the drawing is the signature "Herby" and the date of the drawing.

Herby is the acme of railroad graffiti, and many a motorist has seen one while waiting for a freight train at a crossing.

The mysterious artist is Herbert A. Mayer, 62, a freight conductor and switchman for the Terminal Railroad Association in St. Louis, Mo., for the last 41 years. Mayer, who retired Jan. 4, turns out to be a merry-hearted fellow who loves Mexicans and enjoys confounding railroad officialdom.

Ever since the 2-foot-high Herbys first appeared in 1955, the railroads, railroad unions and railroad buffs have



Up the Creek

By CAL SAMRA

been trying, unsuccessfully, to identify the artist.

Mayer finally was tracked down, perhaps fittingly, by a fellow switchman who is himself an artist — Cezar Tyjewski of the Grand Trunk Western Railroad in Battle Creek. Tyjewski for years has been fashioning Herby sculptures out of the crude junk metal he finds in rail yards.

Before Herby was discovered, the editor of the safety newsletter of the Missouri Pacific wrote: "Herby is becoming as much a part of rail lore as steam engines, pocket watches and Casey Jones."

Tyjewski recalled: "The Brother-

hood of Railroad Trainmen did a search about 15 years ago and thought they'd traced Herby to a clerk in the Proviso yards in Chicago. But the guy denied it. Four other guys then came forward and claimed they were Herby, but when they gave them chalk, they couldn't reproduce Herby."

In 1979, Tyjewski placed an ad in the UTU (United Transportation Union) News asking "if anyone has information about Herby — or if Herby feels so inclined" to write him at his Battle Creek address.

Railroad men from all over the country wrote Tyjewski, claiming they knew Herby or knew people who knew Herby. There was all kinds of wild speculation about the identity of the artist and the meaning of the drawing.

One of the more bizarre tales came from Mike Goldsmith, a clerk in the Sacramento freight office of Southern Pacific.

Goldsmith said a Southern Pacific special agent in Sparks, Nev., had told

him, "Herby is the name of an 'Anglo' carman who works for a repair facility in Roseville, Calif. Herby has the reputation of not liking Mexicans. So some of his fellow carmen started drawing pictures of Mexicans on boxcars and signing them 'Herby.' And the real Herby just went nuts."

"So, to keep Herby hopping, some Mexican guy up there in Roseville keeps on drawing the pictures."

Ralph Deatherage, a railroad engineer for the Missouri Pacific in Fairview Heights, Ill., near St. Louis, wrote Tyjewski, "Herby is a friend of mine. He would rather not have everyone know his name. But Herby is his real first name."

The letter from Deatherage had a ring of truth about it, and Tyjewski wrote him asking him to try to persuade Herby to write him.

Tyjewski didn't hear anything for months. Finally, early this month, he See HERBY, A-2

got a friendly letter from Mayer, identifying himself and enclosing a sketch of Herby which, Tyjewski said, was "absolutely the real thing. The whole letter is in the same handwriting as the signature on the sketch. There's no doubt Mayer is Herby."

The two switchmen have since exchanged telephone conversations and become fast friends. And, as if to underscore his identity as the true Herby, Mayer informed Tyjewski that in recent months, he has signed "Cezar" and "Tyjewski" under many of his Herby drawings, and asked whether Tyjewski had seen any of them.

While waiting at a Battle Creek rail crossing recently, Tyjewski's son, Doug Tyjewski, was startled to see a boxcar go by with "Tyjewski" scrawled beneath the drawing of a Herby.

Mayer explained to Tyjewski that, upon retiring, he had decided "to let it all hang out because of a group who have started selling Herby caps, jack-

ets, T-shirts, bumper stickers, switchkeys — without my permission." He said he has hired an attorney to try to obtain a copyright on Herby.

Interviewed by the Enquirer and News, Mayer elaborated: "If anybody makes any money on Herby, my family thinks it should be me."

But, he said, he'd never thought of making money on Herby.

"It's always been a fun thing with me, both drawing Herby and hearing comments — 'Who? What? Where? When? Don't that S.O.B. have anything else to do?' I've had more fun. Herby has helped me through some bad spots in my life."

Mayer said he can draw a Herby in 20 seconds, but he usually averages 30 seconds. "I could go around a freight train with 120 cars in about 30 minutes," he said. And he often has.

"We've got a dozen railroads going through here in all directions, and I'd say I've done about 60,000 Herbys easy

since I started," he said. "Some of the railroads painted over my Herbys, but then I did some more over the new paint. On a good day, I can do 200 or more; on a bad day, maybe 10."

Mayer said he started doodling Herbys as a way to stop smoking. "I'm not one to sit around," he said. "I had to learn to do it fast because the boxcars jump out from me. I always had to get the date on, too."

Mayer usually used yellow lumber crayons, or white, yellow or red paint sticks.

He could give no reason why he chose to draw a Mexican. "My wife and I have traveled quite a bit in Mexico," he said. "I think a lot of the Mexican people; they are wonderful people. Herby certainly isn't a slam on them."

He added: "The little Mexican is not me, but I've always been a loner, so in a way maybe he is me."

Unlike his Mexican, Mayer can't sit still even in retirement. He himself doesn't take siestas, and rarely naps.

He doesn't watch television, and in retirement, he has taken up jogging.

And the extent of his art is limited to Herby. "I don't draw anything other than Herbys," he said.

It may be a testimonial to the tight-lipped loyalty of the rail yards (or was it a conspiracy of silence?) that some of Mayer's buddies knew his identity all along, but never revealed the secret in 25 years.

"Heck yeah, even some of our railroad police knew I've been doing it, but even they kept the secret," Mayer said.

"I never really feared getting caught," he said. "My thing was to keep it secret."

Mayer has been invited to attend the annual Hobo Convention in August in Britt, Iowa, where the King of the Hobos is elected.

He and his wife also are planning a trip to China.

The Chinese are sure to be befuddled if Herbys suddenly start appearing on Chinese boxcars.