

Former hobo recalls boxcar boarding days

By HARRY ESTEVE
Of the Emerald

I began hopping freight trains by making short practice runs from Denver up to Glenwood Springs in the heart of the Colorado Rockies.

The first time was on a warm summer morning and, after finding no empty boxcars, I wound up in the back of a brand new Ford Ranchero on its way from Detroit to Salt Lake City. What I remember best was waving to groups of wide-eyed tourists rafting on the Colorado River.

The practice runs turned into longer excursions down to Southern Colorado and finally culminated in a 1500-mile trip to Oakland, Calif. It was shortly after the Oakland trip that I quit school, started a business and was able to afford more conventional means of scratching my eternally itchy feet.

A reliable Volkswagen and discounted air fares allowed me to travel wherever my restless little heart desired.

Now I'm back in school, I hear gasoline will cost \$1.50 a gallon by summer vacation and flying across the country could set me back a cool \$1,000.

Consequently, I've been brushing up on my boxcar boarding technique and dusting off my hobo memories. It occurred to me there may be others in a financial state similar to mine who could benefit from the wisdom of a hobo who has only recently come out of retirement.

As I recall hopping a freight train is simple, safe and about as illegal as smoking a joint.

When you enter a railyard, look as though you know what



Graphic by Sioux Anderson

you are doing. Don't look as though you are about to vandalize something. Your first step is to engage one of the switchmen in friendly conversation. The switchmen are the fellows you see waving lanterns and operating the track switching levers. Pick one and ask him when the train is called for, that is, when it is supposed to leave.

He should give you all that information, but don't be satisfied. Railyards are highly disorganized operations and chances are the first person you speak to won't know what is going on, although he may sound as if he does. They have pride in their jobs, after all. You must talk to at least five or six people.

You have to be patient. Gradually you learn how to fall asleep easily, yet keep one ear open for action on the tracks. Freight trains are frequently two to three hours late. Sometimes they are as much as eight hours behind schedule.

Your train will not be ready to leave until they have hooked up the engines, or "power" as they are called, and the caboose. No train goes anywhere significant without a caboose.

Never board a moving train. This is the only way to make freight hopping dangerous. Sure you've seen it in the movies, maybe even heard a few stories but don't try it. When a train is standing still, boarding a boxcar is as easy as loading a pick-up. It is hard to judge the speed of a moving train accurately. A hand hold could be wrenched from your grip or your foot could slip on some diesel oil and you could fall under a wheel and never run Pre's Trail again.

Find a solid looking boxcar that is empty. Completely empty. Do not get into a boxcar that still has cargo in it. Trains tend to lurch and jiggle a lot, which can send things sliding around and nastily awaken you from a peaceful hobo nap.

An unspoken law of the yards is do not board an occupied boxcar. Unlike the hobos of the thirties, young men crossing the country looking for work, the poetic bums of the fifties, or young writers travelling west in search of things to write about, most modern bums are old, alcoholic and reclusive. They crisscross the country with no motivation other than their permanent quest for impermanence. They subsist on the hand-outs of free kitchens in such cities as St. Louis, Denver and Seattle. Most bums enjoy their solitude, and it is too hard to tell who can be trusted and who

can't.

The sound of hissing air will let you know your train is ready to roll. Sit back, relax and drink some orange juice. No one is going to come patrolling down the tracks with a flashlight and a nightstick looking for you.

If you are approached and asked to leave, reason politely with the man. Tell him you aren't looking for trouble and nine times out of 10 he will either let you alone or wind up talking your ear off about the time he hitchhiked down to Mexico with his girlfriend.

Here are some last minute tips for those of you with travelling urges bigger than your bank accounts:

- When in the yards stay away from men in suits and ties or uniforms. They could be the yard detective or "bull." Find

out from a switchman if the bull is on duty and what kind of car he drives.

- Freight trains are extremely dirty. Expect to get off covered with diesel grease and dress accordingly. It washes off.

- Try to find a car near the back of the train to avoid diesel smoke.

- Be aware of what is going on with your train. They are broken up at small railroad sidings sometimes, and you want to be on the part that will be traveling on.

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