

Kicking cars: by Robert Hirning

Tramping through darkened deserted streets, the fetid stagnant fog smelled of hydrogen sulfide that wafted across Humboldt Bay from some paper mill in Samoa. Sounds of a chanting diesel and rumbling steel wheels guided my pathway on past chain linked fences and dark bricked facades. Being close to midnight, no one seemed to be out on the streets allowing me a chance to walk down the middle of the blacktop and avoid an occasional barking dog awakened from his slumbering guard post. The locomotive sounds became more and more distinct, first revving up and then idling down. This was followed after a few seconds by a thunderous crash. Drawing closer it soon appeared that a graveyard switch crew was “kicking cars” in the small yard. This procedure is done in a flat switching operation where cars are sorted by shoving them with the switch engine to roll free into a designated track. Through the gloom and fog I could see lantern lights dance in the air as ground crews signaled the engineer to give a shove or hold up. Switchmen would first release all the air, pull the coupler pin and throw the appropriate switches. As cars rolled out their speeds would vary, sometimes falling short or crashing into other cuts with a loud boom. Modern hump yards have retarders to modulate the speed of

free rolling individual cars or cuts of cars, weighing hundreds of tons, but this kicking process required a certain amount of seat of the pants know-how and rarely resulted in a soft mating of couplers. I hadn’t had that much experience hopping freights at that point, catching out only two or three times before, but my encounters with operating crews had always been positive so I approached a switchman standing by an illuminated switch stand. “Which track for the next one going south?” I asked, speaking with perceived confidence. “Oh that one over there” was the reply. “It will be going out later tonight, they already called the crew.” After thanking him, I hustled down the rough ballast to look for an empty car. This was an exciting time in my life. I had first come to Oregon on freight the summer before to rock out at the Vortex 1 Festival, but this time I had found my new home in a beautiful little valley known as Takilma. Less than 24 hours after alighting from a yellow van which Rainbow Bob and I had hitched a ride, I was now headed back south to gather up my meager belongings and return as soon as possible to spend the rest of my life there. Not wanting to hitch all night, and put up with nut cases and drunks, the Northwestern Pacific line from

Eureka south to Petaluma seemed like a much preferred alternative. My railroad maps also showed that the track followed a roadless canyon of the Eel River’s middle fork and the morning scenery would be spectacular. An empty box car with a wood floor (the best “side door Pullman” a tramp could hope for) stood there by itself, first in line, beckoning me to climb in the open door. Unlike passenger cars, where human beings are made to travel, with steps that drop down to the platform, freight cars are difficult to enter gracefully if at all. One must grab a piece of hardware, like the door hasp, and swing up with a vigorous body roll, hopefully inside onto the wood floor. If the ballast is highly mounded this may be an awkward hop of four to five vertical feet and highly dangerous if the train is moving even at low speed. Missing the roll, stumbling on the ballast or losing your grip could mean maiming or death. Climbing on when the train is stopped in the yard is the way to go, and after tossing my pack through the open door I rolled right in behind it. Adjusting my eyes like an owl to the darkened interior, the car seemed to be empty except for a few scraps of lumber. Nice digs, I muttered rummaging through the pack for a flashlight. The door I had entered was on the west side of the

train, looking out across the bay, but the other door was closed tightly, although not latched. Northwestern Pacific’s right of way, by map, followed the western side of the canyon so to get those spectacular morning views, that door had to be open, but after considerable pushing and tugging, it seemed to be positively jammed shut. Looking around the floor I spotted a 6-foot 2x4 in a small pile of scrap lumber and maybe, just maybe, it was long enough to lever the heavy door open at least enough to see out a little. Choosing a block for a fulcrum and holding the flashlight in my mouth, I began to push the 2x4 as hard as possible. Suddenly there was a tremendous crash and the flashlight, the 2x4 and me were flying through the air and, then, rolling down the floor. The open door, on the west side of the car, slammed shut like a meat cleaver on a chopping block and we were now rolling in complete darkness with me trapped inside, alone. Groping to find the flashlight I began to sense my predicament with both doors now tightly closed. Usually freight trains give a clue to their imminent departure and the huge jolt that occurs from taking up slack on all the couplers has some warning. A ticking or hissing of brake lines portents a quick response to get down and seek cover but the

silent glide of a kicked car gives no presage of what is about to happen. Just as I regained my footing there was another huge crash and I was back on the floor as we must have coupled on to another cut of cars. In an instant the door on the east side, which I had been trying to lever, banged completely open with a satisfying rumble as if shoved by some unseen monster hand. There are these moments in our lives where we just plain luck out. Some will call on God or Karma or other forms of the supernatural for explanation. Maybe the events that don’t turn out very well will never have a chance to be told, but it is moments like these that can make a believer out of any of us who live to tell the tale. Soon I learned from other tramps to collect railroad spikes whenever possible and force them down in the door channel so that a free sliding door is blocked. The next morning rose bright and sunny as we snaked along Eel River. I felt so glad to be alive and sang “Bobby McGee” at the top of my voice; a song now with special meaning. It had just been released on Janis Joplin’s “Pearl” album six months after her untimely death from a heroin overdose the previous October. She was 27 years old, the same as I was then, that sunny morning, as we rolled peacefully down the Middle Fork Canyon.

Healthy U News: by Nicole Rensenbrink

Have you noticed the “Did you know...” fliers posted around town and on the Cave Junction and the Illinois Valley Facebook page? Have you wondered what the “Caring Community” is about that the fliers refer too? The Caring Community is a collaborative of agency leaders and private citizens who are meeting monthly to brainstorm ways to promote a healthier, more positive Illinois Valley for our youth and families. We want to show youth and families that local people care about their well-being, support family-friendly activities, and increase the amount of parent education available in our region. Information gathered during the recent strategic planning process initiated by the Illinois Valley Community Development Organization showed that some of our young people were bothered by a negative image of our area that they believed some were ‘living down’ too. We agree that local prosocial, pro-health messages have been lacking in comparison to our complaints and criticisms. Our “Did you know...” fliers aim to offset

that with monthly wellness messages. These messages range from everything to stating the importance of hydration to encouraging people to make friends to sharing information about the importance of reliable attendance for school success. No one makes money off the fliers and there’s nothing anyone needs to do about them. They’re just meant to be read. The Caring Community also hopes to support existing family friendly events. We will have a Caring Community table staffed with friendly people at the Pet Parade, Hathkapasuta, and the Labor Day Festival. We’ll offer something free for little kids to do and provide information about local resources for adults. We may even start hosting our resource table at Shop Smart so we can let residents know about upcoming events, resource deadlines and ongoing offerings. Last, the Caring Community group believes that parenting isn’t an inborn skill. If you were raised in a very secure, loving home with parents who weren’t traumatized and had adequate resources to meet your needs, it’s likely that, barring any major stresses of your

own, you will be able to pass a lot of that security on to your children with minimal coaching. But, that said, if your child has special needs or a temperament radically different than your own, you still may need some help. And, for the many others of us who dealt with early obstacles, some parenting skills have to be consciously learned. For some folks, picking up a parenting book does the trick; for others, classes work best. We at the Caring Community would love to see a parenting and child development class offered to our high school students before they become parents. Currently, a collaboration is in the works to provide classes for grade school parents between The Family Connection and Evergreen School. The Caring Community welcomes the positive input of any resident. Find us on Facebook and either message us there or attend one of our posted meetings. *The staff and volunteers of Healthy U present this column as part of their mission to promote health in the Illinois Valley.*

RiverStars set to perform annual play

RiverStars Performing Arts will be premiering their fifth original theatre work under the Oregon Community Foundation’s visionary Studio to School program Dec. 10 and 11 at 5p.m. at Lorna Byrne Middle School. “The Heart of Winter” weaves a whimsical parable with evocative dance and playful theatre to create a family friendly feast of the senses to celebrate the holidays. Written from the heart of the Valley by local artists and students, the show celebrates rural agricultural living and our potential to realize a more just and sustainable community. The work’s four parts include an introspective look at commercial holidays, a celebration of holiday food and traditions, the role of family members past and present in creating winter magic, and a movement to envision and realize the community of our dreams. “The Heart of Winter” is performed by the ArtStars, (advanced artists,) the ArtNovas, (Middle school aged artists,) the EverStars, (Elementary aged artists,) and the dancefarm players (advanced, intergenerational artists). Lead roles include dancefarm players Na’amah Ocean as Soyola, Isadora Millay as Raven, Elijah Ocean as Dog, and Andrea King as Grandma Meda with ArtStars Maizi Giroux as Mother Madrone, Maddie Jones as Oak, and Annie Hertler as Manzanita. RiverStars Performing Arts offers free dance and theatre classes and performance opportunities to all Illinois Valley youth. The program has grown consistently since its inception in 2014, and now has 65 students participating in weekly dance and theatre classes. All performances are Pay-What-You-Can a half-hour before showtime. The Saturday night show will be followed by a \$5-15 sliding scale bottomless bowl soup dinner. All proceeds directly benefit RiverStars Performing Arts.



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Art's Red Garter

Pool Tourney
Tuesdays @ 6:30

KARAOKE
Wednesdays @ 9 p.m.

NOW & THEN

Friday, Dec. 2
5:30 PM

from
Taylor's Country Store



Wild River
HANDCRAFTED FOOD & ALE

GUPPY
Saturday night @ 6

Every Wednesday
Open MIC Night
6 - 8 p.m.

J Barley
Fridays @ 6 p.m

KARAOKE

w/ Steve - OH

Friday, Dec. 2 @ 9 p.m

Saturday Pool Tourney @ 7
Sundays - Free pool games

Sportsman Tavern

The SPOT

Jammer's Hump Day Karaoke
8 p.m.-midnight

open mic
Thursdays w/ B @ 7 p.m.

Ben Rice
Friday, Dec 2, 8-11 p.m.

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