

Rail Lore by Archie Green

For a century and a half American railroad workers have created folklore—songs, stories, styles—to cloak their lives. These on-the-job expressions by hoggers, snakes, and tallowpots as well as by baggage smashers, brass pounders, and car knockers were natural extensions of work, much like greasy overalls or telegrapher's green eyeshades. In the most direct sense, a spikedriver's chant or a fireman's elegy to his dead engineer was a verbal or musical form which helped members of a distinct occupational group define their social and economic roles.

Rail craftsmen see locomotives, cabooses, roundhouses, or track-sections as other mechanics view their personal work sites. Simply stated, one earns a living at the throttle or on the section. All human work is decorated by some artistic embroidery and railroading is richer than most kinds of work in this decoration.

Had rail lore remained the esoteric possession of only a special work force, it would have resembled the hidden culture of ironworkers or shipwrights—known chiefly within tight vocational bounds. But the lore of trains spread beyond the industry.

America has carried on a fifteen-decade love affair with iron horses and long steel rails. Obviously, train folklore was not the limited creation of railroad workers, for it was also formed and extended by individuals within other callings. Indeed, no other vocational lore, including that of cowboys and sailors, is as etched into the American character as rail lore.

For most non-railroaders the train is

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an omnipresent emblem. Further, it is a multi-faceted symbol: power, conquest, love, loneliness, resignation, escape, adventure. Not everyone knows the deafening clang of the roundhouse boilermaker's hammer; not everyone understands the beckoning callboy's ritualistic duty. Yet all have been touched by rail lore. To live outside the railroad craftsman's domain does not make one immune to his expressive life. Plainly, the "Orange Blossom Special" is not an instrumental piece played only for railroaders.

To hear and see the folklore of others requires some probing, some analysis as a prelude to appreciation. Perhaps the best handle in dealing with rail lore is to appreciate the dual nature of the material—functional and symbolic. Directly, the simplest figures of technical speech such as "flagging" and "highballing" served to pace work. Traditional slang is a tool to facilitate work itself; job talk also sets old-timers apart from apprentices, and both from non-initiated outsiders.

When those in other callings respond to a rail composition it is largely because of the train's symbolic purpose. Two stanzas describing similar physical movement make the point effectively:

I'm a walkin' down the track,
I've got tears in my eyes,
Tryin' to read a letter from my
home.

I'm goin' home on the mornin' train,
I'm goin' home on the mornin' train.
I'm goin' home, I'm goin' home,
I'm goin' home on the mornin' train.

The first, part of a bluesy lament, deals with earthly love and deep alienation. Although this lyric folksong is often titled "Nine Hundred Miles" it is as much a comment on social as it is on spatial distance. The second opens an old spiritual concerned with the metaphorical journey after death.

The iron horse's trail across the United States is marked in cartographer's signs. Cross ties are a few inches apart, while trestles and tunnels may be hundreds of miles apart and an S.P. reefer on a Maine siding is a continent away from home. But our nation's span is also found in the imagination, not measurable by geographic codes. It is when we non-railroaders are caught up by a trainman's story that we begin to measure it against our experience, our personal sense of time and place. Here, of course, we try to assimilate rail lore and give it non-occupational meaning. To some extent we all identify with Casey Jones' heroism or John Henry's vitality. Likewise, we are amused when we first learn that trains have nicknames: The Richmond, Fredricksburg and Potomac is also the Run, Friends and Push. We enjoy incorporating train talk into casual speech. "Sidetrack," "doubleheader," and "cannonball" are fluid words widely used today in many contexts.

In our travels it is still fun to find "Kilroy Was Here" scrawled on rocks and signposts. It is also pleasurable to know that Kilroy's hoary predecessor was a fancy calligraphic figure, J. B. King, chalked onto boxcar walls:

Who in the h--- is J. B. King?
You see his name on everything!
On boxcar high, and flatcar low,
You see his name wherever you go.

Within the limited scope of a festival booklet, one can note but a few examples of the innumerable types of rail lore: superstitious beliefs about ghostly trains, watertank graffiti, craft initiation pranks, mournful ballads exorcising grief from accidental deaths, language of flags, lights, and hands to supplement speech. The list is endless but two customary practices demand attention.

Industrial folklore does not gloss over work trauma. When freight cars were coupled by hand with link-and-pin devices, boomers would directly ask yardmasters for work. These bosses, in turn, asked brakemen and switchmen to hold up their hands in place of written references or service letters. If the applicant had fingers missing, this certified that he was an experienced worker and not a greenhorn.

One response to hazardous and onerous work was trade unionism. Railroaders were organizing unions early, and engaged in serious strikes during 1877 and 1894. Strikers were frequently dealt with violently and were also blacklisted. Such job discrimination led boomers to develop the custom of using their brotherhood (union) paid-up cards as "pie-cards." Hence, membership cards became meal tickets to gain food, rides, or shelter from other union brothers.

Even the simplest traditional act can be viewed at several levels of meaning. Before diesel fuel supplanted coal, engineers and firemen would knot red bandanas around their necks to keep from being burned by showering cinders. Was this only a protective act? Could these workers also have bedecked themselves with a bit of the

fire's very color in order to assert their control over an elemental and mysterious power?

The train itself—steam engine, rattling gondola, luxurious sleeper—is an immensely complex machine as well as a symbolic subject/object in American folklore. Gifted storytellers and folk-singers have had decades to polish their narratives and melodies against shining drive wheels. They have also had appropriate settings in which to perform for their peers. The faded wallpaper in many a boarding house was but one backdrop where a conductor could hone a savory anecdote into a traditional tale. Who has no memory of depot crews sitting on their baggage cards, "taking five" to pass along jests while waiting for the train's arrival?

When rough-handed construction stiffs of every color and nation laid America's rails, they also fused the noise and pulse of their work into folklore. Whistle moans, wheel clicks, metallic screeches, and engine roars were all humanized by warm emotion. We still hear these transformed sounds when harmonica and fiddle wizards grace the concert stage or festival platform

The Festival of American Folklife is but one kind of a presentation that draws on work-centered culture. Ideally, the Smithsonian Institution provides for interaction between carriers of tradition and members of the larger society. Specifically, our Festival sets a particular scene where citizens from all walks can closely watch other working people. In such an arena we begin to comprehend industrial folklore. As we hear men and women at work we pull their speech patterns into our own experience, and we relate their zeal to our personal aspirations.

Many years ago, Pullman porters

between runs would lay over in bleak company dormitories. Talk fests filled in time and established brotherhood. These sessions were not identified by the name of the terminal-point dorm, but, rather, by the term "Baker Heater League," named after a long-obsolete Pullman car-heating-apparatus.

Figuratively, the Festival of American Folklife is an extended "Baker Heater League" in which we all relive each other's excitement in work well done, or attempt to accommodate some of the pain also found on the job. Hopefully, as we see and hear ephemeral rail lore on the National Mall, we will perceive it both as a functional badge of craft skill and as a symbolic signal light in the American imagination.



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Railroad yardmen prepare a coal car for freight classification. Their occupation generates skills, songs, jokes, customs and costumes shared at the Festival.