Rail Rogues



Alex Krause

Honest Engine: *The rush of the forbidden, the call of the wild, the heartbeat rhythm of the tireless ties beneath churning wheels lure adventure-seeking urbanites looking for unusual, yet timeless all-American kicks.*

No one hops freights these days, they'll tell you. Too dangerous. Too uncomfortable. Too uncouth. Then tell me what am I doing howlin' down these tracks with that lonesome whistle blowin'?

By Wes Modes

It's nearing dusk. I'm lying in the grass among discarded ties and rail. The blue sky is being pushed east by a brooding sky in the west. The wind is gusty, and thunder crackles to the west. The guard dogs behind the barbed-wire-topped chain-link fence view me as a threat and bark sporadically.

My scanner monitors both the road channel and the yard channel. I think they are building my train in the yard. I hear one worker say, "Okay, 15 and 16 are ready. We're doubling over to 18-D. That's ready to leave Richmond yard. Just have the crew back their power out if they're ready. Over."

Thunder shakes the ground.

I'm bristling now, ready for action. I've been hiding all afternoon and have watched two unrideable trains leave the yard. I napped in the grass, jumping up whenever the scanner reported an outbound train.

A long roll of thunder makes me look up. It is raining to the west and moving closer.

My stomach echoes the thunder and I get out a bagel and some tuna. The first raindrops begin to fall.

First it's raining lightly. Then lightning strikes the earth nearby and it begins to rain in earnest. I pull out my poncho and huddle under it with my big bag, making adjustments to keep the wet out.

The scanner reports that my train is doubled over, an already long train hooked to another track full of cars. They're ready to go.

Several locomotives idle on the main track within the yard. I am not sure I can catch one of the rear units on the fly, but if I'm going to hop a unit while the train is idle, I'd better do it quickly. It's a bold move and I have butterflies in my stomach. Stuffing the wet poncho in my bag, I decide to get out of the wet now. I make a run for it.

'Hear the Whistle Blow a Hundred Miles'

First off, why do it? Well, let's take a walk down to the tracks. We'll sit on the wall and watch a few trains go by. Let's see if the lonesome train whistle calls your name the way it calls mine. I get a strange feeling in my gut just to be near the big trains whooshing and banging and clanging and hissing and rumbling. It's wanderlust. I'm itching to catch the next train out.

Surf the freight trains of the web.

Freight-hopping. "It's a kick in the ass. It's a lot of fun," Duffy Littlejohn says. "It is one of the last red-blooded American adventures left." He should know--he wrote the book on it. *Hopping Freight Trains in America* (Sand River Press, 1993) is the definitive freight-hopper's how-to manual.

"It's really adventure," Littlejohn says. "You don't have to buy a lot of shit and throw out a lot of money to do it. You can do it whenever you want, pretty much wherever you are in the country. All these other sports have all this pricey stuff that makes them exclusive and elite. That's what I like about freight-hopping. It's the opposite of elite. There's the new and growing phenomena of yuppie hobos. Recreational freight train riders. I'm one."

Littlejohn's a full-time lawyer and tells me he's ridden over 350,000 miles on freights in the U.S. and Canada. "You don't necessarily have to be young or urban or professional. But that seems to be the people who are attracted to this," he says. "I think boredom has a lot to do with it. I feel it all the time. Like on the way over here, I see a train and I kinda just go, 'God, I wish I could park my car and get the hell out of here.' "

So who rides freight trains for fun?

"Doctors, lawyers, Indian chiefs, bored computer programmers, college professors, young punks, business executives, professional people and even working mothers," he says. "Anyone who likes to screw off in a way that's marginally illegal and a lot of fun."

'Can't Help But Wonder Where I'm Bound'

Go find the local freight yard. Look for train yards in the forgotten part of town, the part of town with all the rough neighborhoods. A train will be leaving or coming through eventually.

The folks who work the railroad are called rails. Rails are your best allies. They are the most reliable source of information. They know where the trains are headed. And you can just go up and ask them. "Good morning, you got any trains going up Sacramento way?" And, generally, if they know, they'll tell you. Frequently, they'll even go so far as to call in to the tower and ask, "Hey, Joe, what we got going up to Sacto?"

When you're wandering around a yard, you'll find the crews, the switchmen and the car-knockers. Train crews are helpful, but they usually only know where *their* trains are going, and even then, only at the last minute. Switchmen know only where *some* of the trains are going.

The people who know the most about train movements are the car-knockers. Those are the folks who drive around the yard in little ATVs, hooking up and inspecting the trains. Car-knockers usually have their own headquarters with a dispatcher sitting in front of a terminal. The dispatcher usually will tell you anything you want to know about the arrival and departure of incoming and outgoing trains.

Why are rails so friendly? Why don't they throw your scruffy ass out of the yard or at least call the railroad cop? "There's no love between the railroads and the workers," Littlejohn explains. "Those guys have pretty thankless jobs. The railroad's always trying to screw 'em every chance they get, either by de-unionizing them or eliminating their jobs. They just feel like little cogs in a great big wheel. So when they see someone who's just out for a good time on their trains, they figure 'What the heck, I'll help this guy.' And maybe they even get a little vicarious thrill."

Tramps sometimes have good information. They'll usually tell you what they know. And what they don't, they'll make up. The challenge is figuring out which is which. Tramps also have a lot of knowledge to share about food and lodging.

A man named Skid asks us if we've eaten. "Salvation Army is serving a big meal down there. Chicken and corn and bread," he says. "They call me Skid, 'cause when I leave town I leave skid marks," he says.

Skid gives us pointers on where to get free food, how to get food stamps, also called tramp stamps, and GA, general assistance money.

"You can get your GA money today if you go down there," he says. But you can only get general assistance in any town once every so many days. So tramps on the "stamp train" travel the circuit from town to town collecting general assistance and food stamps. An abuse of the system, yes, but not nearly so harmful and expensive as others--the B-2 bomber, for instance.

Knowing the yard also helps. After asking around a bit, you start to get a sense of how the train yard is organized. The trains arrive *there*. The trains depart over *here*. The eastbound trains leave from *this* side of the yard. The westbound trains leave from *that* side. After a few visits, you should get a good sense of where the best place to catch out is.

'Stop Your Train, Let a Hobo Ride'

After breakfast, we hang out by the Amtrak station and find a bunch of tramps passing around a joint and beers. It is a mix of several men and two women. They tell us how to locate an Oakland-bound train. "You gotta know how to read a train," says the youngest of them, a young woman who calls herself Baby Girl. "An Oakland train will be mostly tankers and a few boxcars."

Baby Girl looks young, with none of the characteristic roughness and hardness of most hobos. "I've been riding the rails for more than 20 years," she says. "I'm 31. I first started riding when I was 11 with my grandpa. He was a lifetime tramp. He died in the best way possible, in a derailment up by Dunsmuir. You go around the hairpin up there, you'll see a train in the gorge. My grandpa's under a boxcar. I was on that train with him, three years ago. I was in a coma for eight weeks. I have pins in my hips and plastic knees."

She also has a baby in her belly. Baby Girl is six months pregnant. "My old man, the father of the baby, is out there," she says, and gestures vaguely at the rails. "I met him in Montana. He's the Dutchman. I'm not riding for a while 'cause I'm pregnant. Morning sickness is hell inside a rocking boxcar. When the baby's born I'm going to give it up for adoption."

I wonder if she's getting adequate prenatal care. "My family takes care of me here," she says, gesturing at the ragtag group of
hobos.

I sympathized with her being sick on the train. I caught strep throat on the rails last year. I stood on the back of a thundering hopper car with a blazing headache and a 104 fever and wondered why I do this.

"If you get sick, you got to lay up somewhere, go to a mission or whatever. You got to be smart about it and take care of

yourself. Have respect for your body even if you're at the bottom of the food chain," she says.

"Looks like you need some more gear," she says, pointing to my beat-up shoes, which I had unsuccessfully duct-taped back together. "Get yourself down to St. Vincent De P's."

'Down There Where the Train Goes Slow'

If you want to jump on a moving freight, find your train in the depths of the yard and wait for departure. This requires reliable information. Ask around. Find out exactly what train is going where, on what track, at about what time. Then walk the train and find a good place to ride. Choose a car, get in and take a nap for a while until the train leaves. Simple.

Here's the problem. The train may indeed be going where you want, but it may not be leaving anytime soon, even if they say it will. Schedules change. Trains get shuffled. You may wait all night or all day for the train to move. But don't sweat--the one thing to remember to bring when you hop is patience. Freight-riding involves as much waiting as riding. It's a Zen thing. Most lifetime hobos are pretty laid-back.

Instead of waiting, you can catch a train on the fly. The trick is timing and placement. Never catch a train going faster than you can jog. Find a place where the train is going slow. Around a curve, within the yard, at an ungated crossing--this is where the train slows down. Watch the train to spot a rideable car. Wait until the head end passes, then run for it.

As the car approaches, jog alongside. Throw your pack on first. Put your hands on the ladder or on the boxcar door as you run. When you have a real good grip, pull yourself up. Nothing feels quite the same. You are on top of the world, Ma!

Getting off a moving train is the same thing in reverse. Wait until the train is going slower than a jog. Careful! Don't make the mistake of my friend Faceplant Dave. Throw your pack off first. Hold on to the car tightly and start running as your feet touch the ground. When you have your footing, let go, move away from the train and stop running. A graceful detrain is the only thing that feels better than a smooth catch out.

'Waiting for a Train'

Empty boxcars are the kings of the road. Luxury travel. They keep you out of the wind, cold and wet. They offer a great view and plenty of room to move. Find one with both doors open, preferably. Find a railroad spike and jam it into the door slider. You don't want the door to close, because boxcars don't open from the inside. Stay near the front of the car. If the train should stop suddenly, you don't want to go flying.

Grainers or hoppers are a good bet. These cars haul grain and minerals. The "porches" at either end provide some protection. Ride on the back porch to stay out of the wind and rain. There is a hole in the end of the car that you can hide in if you need to.

Next best is a well car or container car. These cars carry those big long shipping containers. Often at the end of the cars, there'll be a space down in the well that provides excellent hiding and riding possibilities. In the rain, it doesn't offer much protection--but on a sunny day, you can sunbathe.

In a pinch, you can ride under a truck trailer on a piggyback car. Between the wheels is kinda cramped, but hides you pretty well. While on the road, you can scoot back from under the wheels. It's great to travel out in the warm wind with the sun on your face. You can wave at kids in cars driving by.

There are cars *not* to ride, too. Safety is the most important thing. Tank cars carry all sorts of nasty stuff and provide no good place to ride--don't ride 'em. Loaded flatcars and loaded gondolas provide the opportunity to be crushed by a shifting load, so leave those alone.

'Just Singing These Railroad Blues'

Safety is a big deal on the railroad. It is real easy to get good and hurt. You are made of soft, breakable stuff, while railroad equipment is made of very hard, very heavy stuff. A moving boxcar won't even flinch as it quietly rolls right over you in a sneaky surprise attack.

Don't walk between the rails. Don't cross under couplers or cars. Expect trains to move suddenly and violently at any time. Watch for cars rolling quietly through the yard. Don't mess with railroad equipment ever. Don't dangle any body part you care about off the train. Be careful out there.

Some yards have a railroad cop, also called the bull. The best way to get caught by the bull is by being careless. The bull typically sits in some office somewhere until someone calls him, which is seldom. Occasionally, the bull will make a foray out of the office to cruise around in the bull-mobile, typically a white pickup or Bronco. The bull may traverse all the roads through the yard before he retires back to his den. To avoid the bull, stay out of sight of the roads within the yard. Walk between strings of cars. Watch for the bull-mobile. Stay out of danger.

I've been busted numerous times and never arrested. Unless they've got me dead-to-rights actually riding the train, I tell them I'm a rail fan, just some guy nuts about watching trains. One rent-a-cop who pulled me off of a train took a picture me and had me fill out a card with my vital info. So now,

somewhere in Modesto, in an obscure little railroad office, there is a Polaroid picture of me paper-clipped to an index card upon which is scrawled a bunch of bogus information.

If you get caught, you could get arrested. But more likely you'll be given a warning or a ticket for trespassing. Be respectful, play a little dumb, and wait until the bull is out of sight before catching a train.

There are dangerous people on the rails. And on the street. And in any neighborhood. And probably in the same proportions. In all my travels, I have never met anyone who's given me trouble. Most of the hobos I meet are extraordinarily cool and accepting.

Only one time did I ever feel uncomfortable around other freight hoppers. We'd pissed two guys off after we'd refused to share our car on a rainy day (possibly the only rideable car on that train) and so they hopped in and shared our car anyway. All the hobos I've met say, "Damn, we're just trying to get by. The last thing we want is to mess with people and cause trouble."

'Got Some Real Estate Here in My Bag'

Keep dark. Dark clothes, dark pack, dark sleeping bag or blanket. This will make it harder to get caught by the railroad cops as you blunder around the train yards. You'll be walking a lot and throwing your pack on and off of trains, so pack small and light. Anything that *can* break, will. Leave your valuables at home.

And think about warmth. Dress in layers. You may end up on an open car in the middle of the night with a 60-mile-an-hour wind blowing. Your clothes and sleeping bag should keep you warm and comfortable and dry. If you're cold and wet, freight-hopping will be a miserable experience.

Bring sturdy gloves and boots to wear while scrambling around on freight cars.

An atlas can come in handy, both for finding where to catch out and where you've been left. You may be able to round up a railroad map. Call up the railroad business office and pretend you are doing a study on rail transportation. Ask for a map of American freight lines.

Bring something to drink. Exposure to the wind sucks the liquids right out of you. Bring something that's not going to spill when you throw your pack on and off cars.

Freight-hopping involves as much walking and waiting as actual riding. You spend most of your time waiting for information, waiting for a train, waiting for the train to get

under way, waiting, waiting, waiting. For this you'll need flexibility, and don't forget to bring your patience.

'Halfway Home and We'll Be There by Morning'

What if you get somewhere and can't get back? Hitchhike. Catch a bus. Catch a passenger train. I've done it all. I've been stuck more times than I'd like to admit. When the discomfort of lying in a cold ditch, dodging the bull and waiting for a rideable train overcomes your sense of pride in being a *freight-train* rider, alternative forms of transportation start looking real attractive.

I was in Barstow freezing to death. Barstow is a notoriously hot yard and I'd been busted twice in 24 hours trying to catch out. The bulls were spotlighting the trains and the yard and the road beside the yard and the bushes beside the road and even the desert beyond the bushes. These are gung-ho railroad cops.

I was losing hope until I realized that that bus over there would take me home in absolute comfort for only a small chunk out of my wallet. And frankly, I was willing to pay almost anything at that point. "Go Greyhound and leave the driving to us" never sounded so good.

Hitchhiking is a time-honored freight-riding alternative. Of course, it depends on your being comfortable with hitching. With attitude and some knowledge of self-defense, it is a great way to get around on the cheap.

And don't forget the passenger train as a way to get there. You're already down at the track--the station couldn't be too far away. It's kinda like freight-riding taken uptown.

'Gone 500 Miles When the Day Is Done'

"So," you ask finally, "should I do it? Should I try to hop a freight?" No, of course not. It's dangerous. Everyone has a friend of a friend whose uncle got his leg cut off by a train. And as you know from *Emperor of the North*, the bulls and the bums are brutal and relentless. No one rides freight these days.

Don't do it unless you are willing to trade safety and comfort for cold, boredom and intense discomfort. Don't do it unless you can lie for hours in the dirt waiting for a train, hike miles with a heavy backpack, and sleep in a deafening and violently rocking boxcar.

Just listen to a little Guthrie or Ramblin' Jack Elliott, and be content with that. Maybe walk down to the tracks again and watch a few trains pass. Then if you hear that whistle blowing and it seems to be calling your name, well... Maybe just maybe, if everything looks just right ...

From the May 23-29, 1996 issue of Metro Santa Cruz

This page was designed and created by the Boulevards team.
Copyright © 1996 Metro Publishing and Virtual Valley, Inc.