

Freight Train Blues

by [Robert Gear](#) (April 2020)



Salute Each Time the Cock Crows, Bryan Browne, 1940

An unhurried freight train mournfully greeted a still awakening township. The rooster, fresh from a night of joyful destruction at the house of a suburban Des Moines widow, approached the squealing tracks, cautiously eyeing the groaning monster. His chicken-sized brain clucked in a way only members of the poultry family can, with a toss of the head, swiveling downwards as each heavily-laden boxcar

trundled onwards, UNION PACIFIC RAILROAD, UNION PACIFIC RAILROAD, UNION PACIFIC RAILROAD, stenciled with dreary repetition on the wooden slats of each reddish-brown carriage. But a chicken's brain does not despise monotony; perhaps it is comforting in its rhythmic assertion of truth. "A new place to roost, a new place to roost, a new place . . ." He understood.

Flapping wildly, he gained a claw hold on a narrow moving ledge and clung remora-like onto the vertical side. With a further upward flutter he found a horizontal gap at the top of the car, then peered into the gloom at the sacks marked "USDA AGRICULTURAL PRODUCE."

The rooster became aware of hunger, squeezed through the gap and fluttered onto the topmost sack, and with practiced ease pecked swiftly through the sacking material. Grain cascaded down through the gash with a silky rush.

Satiated, he rested in the murky gloom of the moving boxcar, listening attentively to the clatter of the westbound wheels. His eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness and he thought to himself, "What place is this? Where am I going?"

Then he heard a voice from nearby in the gloom-enclosed space. A hand reached out to touch him, and he pecked at the indistinct palms, which retreated abruptly.

A sharp intake of breath and a vulgar utterance followed. After a few moments, the voice spoke more softly. "Calm down, chicken, I'm not going to hurt you". The tones were soothing and understood by the rooster, who recognized the tones of chicken admirers everywhere. "Will you be my partner? You're coming with me across the river, right?" The bird stared, head cocked to one side, with a serpent-like gaze at the face from which the sound originated. He had not to his knowledge crossed many rivers in his lifetime but the notion appealed to him. The voice spoke again. "My name's Joe. What's yours?" He tried to utter human speech, but could not

approximate even closely his own name. He knew that his name was Mo, since a previous owner had dubbed him that. But the owner of the voice understood, somehow. "Mo, did you say?" "Yes," he pecked enthusiastically, wattles and comb quivering.

The man said, "Ok then, my friend. We'll make a good team, us two, westward riding."

Joe was a good traveling companion. He told stories of his upbringing in the rural Midwest. He told about the time of planting, and harvesting and the days spent running through the rows of the growing corn, when as yet a boy, he felt the joys of freedom. He spoke too of the terrible wound he received while fighting in an old war. Mo listened attentively. When Joe stood up, he did so with difficulty, pulling himself onto his good foot with an undisguised effort. Mo saw that in fact he had only one real leg. The other was prosthetic. His clothes were old, torn and dirty.

"Some people call me Silver," he said. "Like in a story about pirates. Silver carries a parrot on his shoulder all the time. The parrot can talk. Do you reckon you can learn to speak? I get awful lonesome on the road." Mo squawked out "dhmm, hrmuuf, kfr." In his mind this meant something like "I will try to learn, but I mistrust you." And sure enough, he tried and tried again and again until it came out only as "Yes, I can try." That was something of a miracle. Joe knew parrots could speak. He had now to learn that roosters can do a fine job of making their opinions felt. And this bird's opinions about humankind were not entirely favorable. The animosity was inbuilt.

The train moved on sluggishly then stopped. A distant squawking was heard. Where was that from? He put his head to one side. It was coming from nearby.

An opening in the front of the car let in a dim thread of light. Mo hooked his claws just below the opening and

looked through into the adjacent car where a grating allowed air into that dim emptiness. From this vantage point, the squawking was more audible. It was not the language of Joe; it was his own. Now he sensed that it was a car full of poultrykind huddled in the moving obscurity.

Mo said, "Joe, I want to release them." He was amazed at the sound of his own voice. Was he speaking or dreaming? He swiveled his head down and down again rhythmically in a praying motion.

"I'm sorry friend. I can't help you," Joe replied. "The border station is on the other side of the big river. They will need to get over to the other side. Then perhaps they can get out. If they get through the checkpoint, someone will open the doors. Then they can break out. They must get across the river if they want to see new land."

Mo continued shuffling and pecking rhythmically.

Joe continued, "They may have hid themselves under a giant cover. All they have to do is keep quiet and the guards won't notice. Last time I was on this route, someone had pried open a plank in the floor and all the chickens made their escape through the gap."

The train jolted forward again and then came to a halt. Mo heard shouts and noises of bolts being slid back. Clang, clang.

The shouts got louder, and Mo felt his feathers ruffle as he understood that the sliding doors to the next car were being opened. Light flooded through the door, and he could make out through the grating the silhouette of a uniformed man with a rifle. A shiny red dot was visible, disclosing the lighted tip of a cigarette dangling from the man's lips. Behind the man he saw an expanse of water and beyond that green slopes tapered upward. All was quiet. The chickens under the tarp must have stopped their squawking. The man with the

rifle peered in for a few seconds and then closed and bolted the door.

“Now it’s my turn,” thought Mo, readying himself to escape when the chance arose. But no one came. He heard a shrill whistle, and the train edged forward.

Joe said, “That was close. I have been caught at the state border before. It’s not fun, I can tell you. But the guards aren’t very thorough. They don’t always check every car.”

The rooster suddenly gave vent to his hatred of this vulnerable, unsuspecting human.

“Hey, stop it, Mo. What you doing? Get off me. Get away.”

The train picked up speed, grinding and clanking rhythmically.

The minutes passed. After a while, they slowed down and stopped yet again. Mo peered down at Joe and then again through the grating. The great white tarp lay flat. Nothing stirred. Above the silence some voices could be heard. The door opened and two men got in. They wore blue overalls and flat caps. One man was thin and wiry. The other was very fat.

The thin man spoke, “What’s supposed to be in here, Jim?”

“Dunno.”

“Well, whatever it was supposed to be, it’s empty now. Just an old tarp covering the floor.” He pulled away the large rectangular cover.

“Hmm. Look at this Jim. There’s still that hole in the bottom of the car. I thought we told them to fix it last time. You can see right through to the rails. Be careful where

you step. By the way, there are chicken feathers and mess everywhere. Didn't they clean it out before this trip?"

"Dunno."

"I'm gonna look in the next wagon."

The door was pulled back, noisily.

"Oh, hello, hello. It's old Joe again. How come we always find you train hopping, Joe? Haven't you got anything better to do? . . . Joe?" The man shook Joe on the shoulder.

But Joe was silent. His seated body fell heavily against the floor.

The man gasped. "Oh, oh. Well that's the last time Joe's gonna make this trip. Must have had a heart attack or something." He shook the body to be sure.

"Jim, call the station master. . . . Hey, wait a minute. Look at this!" said the thin man, looking closer.

The bright sunlight penetrating through the open door illuminated the still face and body. The cheeks and brow were covered with small red holes from which blood oozed. One eye had been torn out and the lips were gashed open leaving visible a few remaining teeth.

But the rooster had already hopped down and away unnoticed. His eyes nictated in the strong light and he strutted on instinctively, perhaps in search of those of his own race now fanning out across the neat square fields of Nebraska.

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