

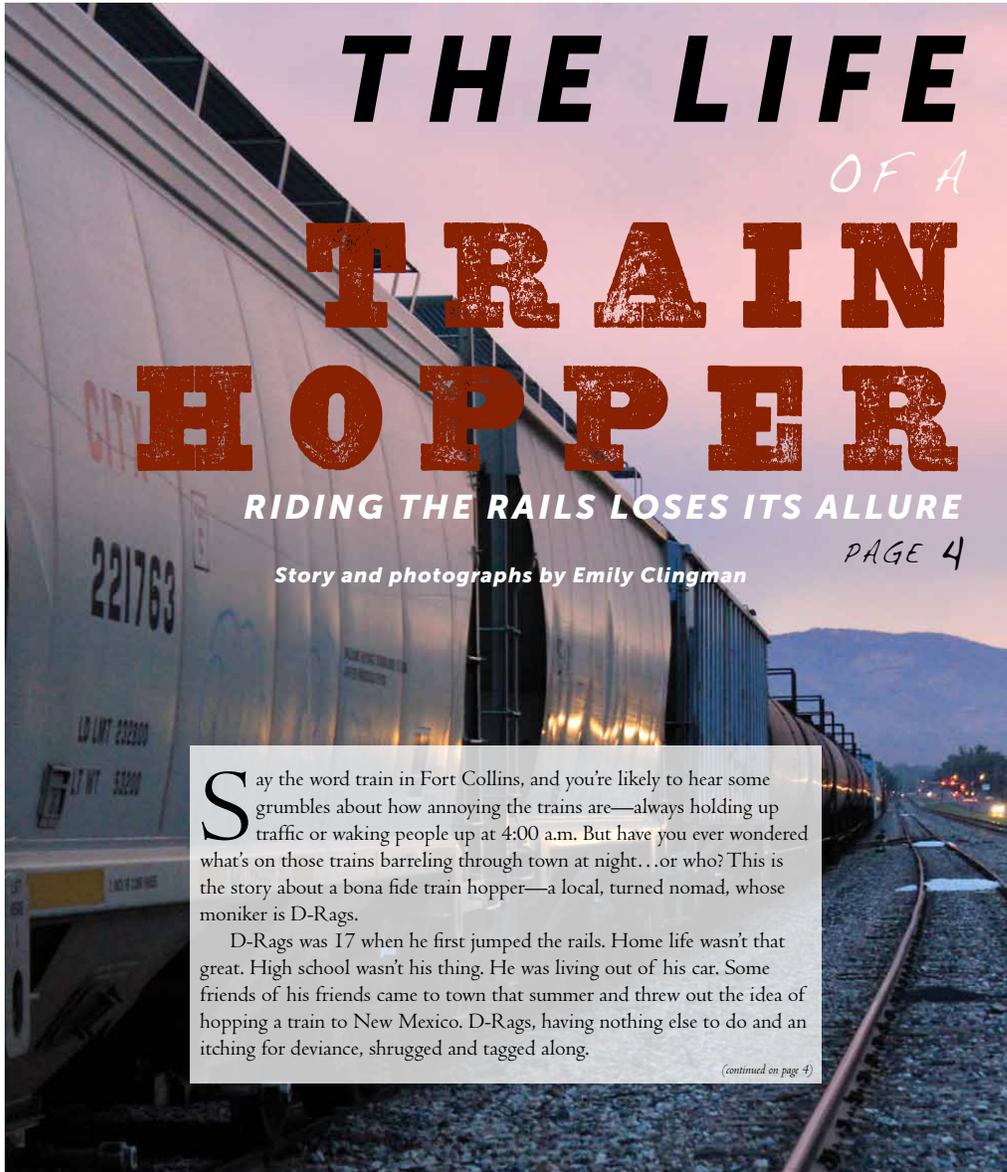


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# MATTERHORN

QUESTIONS, CURIOSITIES, & RESOURCES : FORT COLLINS, COLORADO



# THE LIFE OF A TRAIN HOPPER

RIDING THE RAILS LOSES ITS ALLURE

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Story and photographs by Emily Clingman

Say the word train in Fort Collins, and you're likely to hear some grumbles about how annoying the trains are—always holding up traffic or waking people up at 4:00 a.m. But have you ever wondered what's on those trains barreling through town at night...or who? This is the story about a bona fide train hopper—a local, turned nomad, whose moniker is D-Rags.

D-Rags was 17 when he first jumped the rails. Home life wasn't that great. High school wasn't his thing. He was living out of his car. Some friends of his friends came to town that summer and threw out the idea of hopping a train to New Mexico. D-Rags, having nothing else to do and an itching for deviance, shrugged and tagged along.

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That was about 12 years ago. Today, we're sitting on the patio of Awo-gadro's Number. D-Rags is settling into his memory while taking a drag off his cigarette and staring into his beer. "We got a ride [from Fort Collins] to the Springs," he says. "It's a bigger yard there."

They found a break in the yard's fence and partied that night until they passed out under a bridge. Though he and his buddies didn't hear it happen, a man was killed near them while they were sleeping that night. "He got shot or stabbed or something," D-Rags says. "I guess it happens all the time."

He pauses for a minute, then tells me how he first hopped a train. "You want to hop out in the yard. That's called the jungle," he explains. "You ask other bums where the trains are going and you gotta watch out for Bulls," referring to the yard police.

His face lights up. His grin comes back. "You just get on a gondola," he continues. "It's like a box car but with no doors. We fell asleep—which you shouldn't do." He laughs. "We wound up in Pueblo's yard."

They jumped out in Pueblo and ate at Carl's Jr. They bought batteries from Family Dollar for the radio. Back at the yard, they sat on a hill and waited for the train. "It was a full coal train," he says. "It was going pretty

fast; wasn't quite in the yard. Trying to climb the ladder with a huge pack was super shady." D-Rags hopped over the joints through the cars to get to his friend nine cars away. "The joints jerk and go down," he says, then, shudders. "We had wet rags on our faces to keep the coal dust out."

They rode into Texas. It took a day and a half. They got off in a small town in the middle of the night. They went to an all-night diner and washed the soot off their bodies, which were black from the coal. They fell asleep in a field and hitchhiked to Amarillo the next day, then to Clovis, Texas, where D-Rags spent a few weeks with his friend's family.

They stayed a few weeks in Clovis, got really drunk, watched some punk shows and ate a lot. Ready to resume their journey, D-Rags and his buddy headed to Albuquerque. When they arrived, they found dogs and razor wires for miles and miles. It was really awful, he recalls, then mumbles something about bums and crack heads and having to carry a jimmy stick—a hollowed out pool cue with a steel bar shoved inside—for protec-

tion. They quickly decided to hitchhike out of Albuquerque, and headed for Flagstaff, Arizona.

While sleeping under an overpass, a family driving by in a motor home woke them up. "They gave us all kinds of groceries and twenty bucks," D-Rags says, then, laughs. "But they didn't want to give us a ride."

They eventually caught a ride from a Mexican trucker who didn't speak English but offered D-Rags a beer. "He was cool," D-Rags says. He thinks about Flagstaff for a minute and says, "It was nice, kind of like Fort Collins."

Sitting with D-Rags more than a decade later, it's clear that thinking and talking about train hopping are similar to train hopping itself—kind of erratic, impromptu, and with lots of sidetracks.

After that first ride, D-Rags rode trains every summer. "[Riding] a train is like riding in a big dinosaur," he explains, taking another drag off his cigarette. "You get butterflies about it the night before, but once you get on, it's not that bad."

In fact, the train ride itself is kind of boring according to D-Rags. Sometimes even miserable. It's not really all that crazy, he says, just a lot of

sitting. "You read a lot and bring a ton of water because it's hot in the sun all day. If it rains or is cold, that's even worse."

It's what happens between the train rides that bring back the most memories for D-R, and that characterize the culture of ardent train hoppers in America.

For one, train hopping is absolutely illegal. (Don't try this at home folks.)

"Bulls can shoot you," D-Rags says with a nervous chuckle. "The FTRA have been in shootouts with the Bulls." The Freight Train Riders of America is a train gang that roams about the country in freight cars. They are known to be violent, linked to hate groups, and have distaste for occasional or seasonal joy riders, as members of the FTRA are usually "lifers"—they ride until they die. Many of them are convicts on the lamb. They've been described as the Hell's Angels of the railways. D-Rags looks up to the sky and mutters, "Scumbags...murderers."

Nights in the jungle are disturbing, at best. Train yards, especially in





big cities, are littered with communes of homeless people and drug addicts. "Once I was hanging out in this shanty town in East L.A.," D-Rags says. "[It was a] crack park; everyone was smoking crack. I woke up next to a huge pile of homeless people shit."

He sits up straight and talks a little faster about some of the things he's seen or done in the yards or in the towns he stayed in between train hops—bums killing bums, sleeping on used heroin needles under a Portland, Oregon, bridge, staying in roach motels, smoking pot in a burned down school until some guy came in with a gun and they had to high-tail it out of there.

Living the life of a wanderer was harsh. There's a lot of hitchhiking. "Once we walked like nine horizons," he says—walking for nearly 12 miles until the next ride.

And a lot of waiting. "The hardest thing about squatting is doing it in the city," he explains. "It's the worst. It's a pain in the ass. You're tired, the sun's already down. Anything will do." He's slept just about everywhere, even in a planter in California, where the sprinklers came on in the morning and drenched his backpack.

"I'd sleep in that," he says, pointing to an electrical box next to our chairs on Avo's patio.

As he thinks about all the things he saw and the vagrant life he was living himself, he pauses and says, "It was really shitty like 70 percent of the time, but the other 30 percent was fucking great."

"A lot of people ride trains because they are homeless, want to stay out of prison, or because of mental issues. Or they'd rather travel than be a home bum (street kid)," he says. "For some of them, it's a family thing," he says with nostalgia. "They've been riding through the generations."

D-Rags hopped trains for about seven years. Some of his favorite times were riding to California and hanging out for a while. He hung out with a cool rockabilly chick in San Diego, got a job in a skate shop, found a whole pizza on a park bench in Venice Beach, saw a lot of punk concerts, met some cool hippies in Needles, drove a BMW around Palm Springs, traded a bracelet for a pitcher of beer.

"It was wild," he smirks proudly.

Eventually, D-Rags settled down. He laughs as he remembers a falling out with his cohorts and wound up calling it quits and taking the "Shamehound" (a Greyhound bus) back to Fort Collins.

He never got caught. Getting off the trains was pretty easy, as the yard workers were usually pretty cool. "They won't rat you out," he says. "They'll tell you where the guard towers and the yard cops are." Security in the yards became a problem over time, however. The yards were implementing body heat sensors, especially along the border. It became riskier.

It's been about five years since he's hopped a train. He's 29 now, working a steady job as a bouncer at a local bar. Things are getting pretty serious with him and his lady.

D-Rags is still rough around the edges, sporting piercings and a black hoodie embellished with patches of his favorite punk bands. His vagabond days are just memories now.

Will he ever hop a train again?

"I want to," he says, as he smiles and takes a drink of his beer. "But just for a joy ride, maybe to Wyoming or something. If I ever have a kid, he's gonna hop a train with me."

*Emily Clingman is a local news writer and photographer. Her work can be found in The Northern Colorado Business Report, The Johnstown Breeze, Scene Magazine, and other publications across the country. Read more of Emily's writing at [www.emilyclingman.com](http://www.emilyclingman.com).*

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