

May 1, 2002

Frederic XXXXXX

Dear Fred,

I understand that you are the creator of "Fred's Web site" that has well written articles about trains and many outstanding photographs of western scenes and hobo art. Do you work for the San Francisco Chronicle as a photographer? If this is true then the quality of the photographs is understandable for they are very superior. As a simple writer of club newsletter articles I recognize the quality of your writing and if you are associated with the Chronicle, the professionalism of your writing is also understandable!

If you are not the Fred XXXXXX that created "Fred's Web site," then please ignore the rest of this letter.

I'm writing to you as a member of the speeder / motorcar hobby to express my concern for an article posted on your web site about riding the UP track through Tennessee Pass. The hobby calls unauthorized rides such as yours "bootlegging." It's obvious in your article that you understood that you were involved in trespass. Perhaps you believe that since the sheriff was not waiting for you by your truck at the set off point then no harm had been done. This is not true.

Your activity has harmed the legal hobby of speeder riding simply because you did trespass. "Bootlegging" or riding without permission hurts the hobby. Here's how. There is no such thing as abandoned railroad track. Unless the rail has been pulled up, the ties sold for backyard planters, and the stone ballast dug up for fill; the track is not abandoned. In this case the UP owns it and is financially responsible. Riding without permission is trespassing. Run-ins between railroad officials and trespassers make the companies suspicious of all motorcar operators. Bootlegging activity has caused problems for just about every club trying to organize legal events. This is a "frail hobby...completely dependent upon the goodwill...of the railroad owners."

Over 1200 members of the North American Railcar Operators Association and their 650 insured and certified operators struggle constantly to improve relationships with the railroads. We, who do not participate in trespass, must overcome the distrust of railroad officials toward speeder owners created by trespass.

I invite you to come on one of our events to see how the hobby operates, meet the people involved. You'll see the things we do on each event (inspections, safety meetings, crossing procedures, etc) to be safe and operate in a way that gets us invited back to the railroad for another run. Once you've met the members of the hobby you will see the people harmed by bootlegging.

You might check out the site [www.narcoa.org](http://www.narcoa.org) to see more information about the legal and organized hobby of speeder trips.

Sincerely,  
Wayne Parsons  
Granada Hills, CA

Reply from "North Bank Fred"

Hello Wayne:

I appreciate your concern about the speeder article on "Fred's Website" but there has been a slight, and probably unavoidable, mis-understanding that arises when there is a link to an individual page on a website and the visitor misses some information that was given on a previous page.

My name is Fred and I am the creator of "Fred's Website". Fred XXXXXX is a [very good] photographer for the San Francisco Chronicle and is associated with some articles posted on my site, but is not involved with the website itself nor the speeder article, which was written by Too Tall Ken. The purpose of posting "articles" and "stories" on my site was to gather whatever interesting information I could find about trains and hobos - if a particular subject was brought up it was because I thought that visitors to my site would enjoy reading about it, and not because I may or may not have any personal endorsement for the subject. I hope you realize that if I discarded some tidbit of information because I thought it might offend someone there would be nothing left to read.

As far as speeders go, I find them very interesting. I came very close to purchasing a "fixer upper" several years ago after watching a large group of them go past my house on the Siskiyou Branch in Northern California. From almost 30 years of hopping freights I'm well aware of the thin line of trust between the railroads and those who wish to "use their facilities" for whatever reason. Many times in the middle of the night I'd come upon some crewman or yardworker and have just a few seconds to project a sense of understanding and professionalism toward his concerns and let him know that if my presence made him uncomfortable in any way then I would simply leave. As I'm sure you've found out by now, once you lose a person's (or a company's) trust, it's very difficult to re-establish any sort of working relationship with them.

Irresponsible speeder operators ruin things for you and your group and irresponsible tramps (and rail-riding serial killers) do the same for me. I'm sorry to hear that the speeder article caused such an alarm - I was completely unaware of any possible repercussions from posting it, and will forward your email to Ken. Thanks for taking the time to write!

Take care,  
Fred

# Tennessee Pass by Speeder

Written by "Too Tall Ken" (a part time hobo). These events took place sometime before May 2002

It promised to be fun, or else it would be like a funeral. I was going back to Tennessee Pass. As a prelude to its possible abandonment, the Union Pacific railroad had ceased service on about 100 miles of this spectacular former mainline railroad through the heart of Colorado. I had been over the Tennessee Pass rails on several freight trains, and once, oh so long ago, in a passenger train.

Was the line dead? UP had taken the tracks out of service but hadn't torn up the tracks or even formally applied for abandonment. There was some talk of the state purchasing the rails, then some signs that UP might reconsider the abandonment. Still, there was a good chance this would be my final ride. And a unique ride at that: this one would be by track speeder.

A track speeder is a small track inspection vehicle. Railroads used to use them everywhere until the advent of "Hi-Railer" vehicles, which are basically trucks with guide wheels that let them drive on rails as well as roads. A Hi-Railer is convenient: if you need to go out to lunch or to the hardware store, you just drive to the nearest grade crossing and go. A speeder is limited to the rails. As speeders were displaced by hi-railers, they were sold off to short-line railroads, dealers in used railroad gear, scrap yards, and private collectors. Fortunately, my friend Hank was one such collector.

The lead-in should have been more fun than it was. I wanted some major event, a hoggish wallow in scenery, railroad fun, and beer. A couple of days off for a speeder ride was hard to shoe-horn in between work and family events. My wife justly complained about my running off and leaving her stuck with both kids. I had a cough that made me sound like a dying smoker. Hank had a week without family - perfect for good-old-days railroad debauchery with friends. Then he caught an intestinal bug and spent days close to the commode, frustrating our attempts at an early getaway. It was a damn hot and uncomfortable July. I looked forward to a more than few cold beers in the cool mountains, but Linnert, our third henchman, had quit drinking and had been sober for four months. We decided to not to drink either - but it was worth it to see Linnert's eyes clear and his hands steady again.

We finally got out of town on a Friday. Linnert borrowed a massive new king-cab pickup from his boss. It hauled the speeder on its trailer easily up the mountain passes, first over 11,000-foot summit in Eisenhower Tunnel, then over 10,600-foot Vail Pass and finally over 10,400-foot Tennessee Pass itself. On the way up Tennessee Pass, we felt a little paranoid going through the former division point and helper station at Minturn, engine service facilities now removed, yard tracks now rusting. We need not have worried. It looked doubtful that anyone to do with the railroad hung out anywhere near. Just thick with tourists and recreators spilling over from nearby Vail.

A hot nearly cloudless afternoon. We stopped once above Eagle River Canyon to admire the soaring highway bridge near Redcliff. Drove over the pass, then off the highway right down to the south portal of the summit tunnel underneath Tennessee Pass and the continental divide. A pair of mountain bikers rode along the rusty rails of the dead mainline. Even at a distance, we could see them eyeing us warily as they saw our big white pickup towing an obvious piece of railroad gear. They hurried off, riding on the maintenance road that paralleled the right of way. We never saw them again.

Summit tunnel. Scavenging railfans had already ripped off the sign that said Tennessee Pass from the signal box near the portal. Rails empty. A nice wood grade crossing to put the speeder on the tracks.

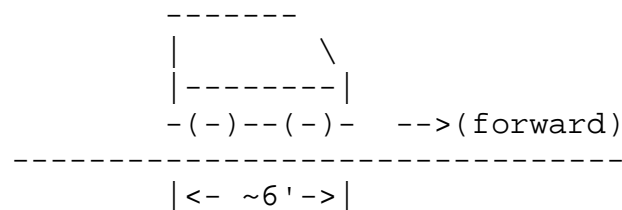
We haul it on a little trailer with a ramp that swings down, gauged correctly for the flanged wheels. A boat winch lets one person ease the small but heavy machine onto the wood ties of the grade crossing. Two long stout aluminum bars slide through the length of the speeder. You slide them out and then you can move the whole 800-pound rig like a big wheelbarrow. One guy can do it, but two makes it lots easier. We get it lined up on the rails, pointed south, then park the truck.

God, it's hot - too hot to wear long pants, although we really should have long pants and hard hats if we want to look like railroad employees. The thin mountain air does little to impair the burning sun. I slather up with sunscreen, but it doesn't seem to help much and makes me feel even hotter. Get food, cameras, and plenty of water. I cough a few times, then it's on the speeder.

It starts up easily, then we're rolling downgrade on the 136-pound continuous welded rail on a former mainline. Only two years ago this track had as many as thirty trains a day pounding over it. Now you can hear the gritty rust grinding underneath our steel wheels.

The speeder is a Fairmont M-19, formerly belonging to UP. The UP yellow paint is a nice disguise: most people think we're on official business, even though this line probably hasn't seen a working speeder for many years.

The speeder has a roof and a front wind screen, no sides. A plywood box down the middle holds the gasoline motor and minimal controls (brake, throttle, ignition, wiper, running lights). There is a seat for the operator on the left side, and anyone else sits on the other side on the rough wooden box, enduring the vibration of the motor. Two people fit there comfortably, three fit if they're friendly, four if they're drunk.



It's loud. I jam in the hearing protectors early. Bitter lesson from freight hopping: the noise can wear you down and contribute to mental mistakes. This isn't particularly dangerous, especially since we're not indulging in our typical level of drinking for such an occasion, but we need to stay alert for unfriendly eyes, railroad activity, and things on the track that could bounce us off to a very rough landing.

The view is beautiful, as always. The tracks wind through forest, leading toward tiered ranges of mountain peaks. I see them and automatically yearn to explore, to follow the river as far as I can. It's a mystery that demands travel. The next bend will reveal a new view, a new perspective, a new lay of the land. Understanding will dawn, but a new mystery will lie beyond.

Out of the forest into a park - some plains surrounded by mountains. Three of the highest mountains in Colorado loom over an amazingly flat lush valley, now starting to go sere in the summer heat. Mt. Elbert with its distinctive cirque, Mt. Massive with its triple subpeaks, snowy and majestic. Further south is La Plata Peak, with one menacing ridge that looks like the dorsal crest of a granite dragon. More big peaks chain to the south, inviting the eye and inviting the speeder to run on down the rails to the most distant hazy mountain, down to the cool shadows of the Royal Gorge.

But this is still a paranoid business. We ride on, sometimes a little too close to gawking cars full of eyes on the highway.

The ride is smooth, but we can feel some of the joints between the rails that got pounded out of shape by thousands of wheels of hundreds of trains full of coal or iron ore.

Soon we're almost to Malta, a junction where the branchline to Leadville takes off. It's the end of our ride. A single rail is unspiked and lying on its side. We stop to look around. Beyond the missing rail, a sort of stop sign in a barrel full of rail joiners sits in the middle of the rails to warn any unwary engineer who drives the one remaining local train too far this direction from the wye at Malta.

This is *deja vu* for speeder rides - the dying lines are the best to ride because of the lack of trains. Last year we rode on the remnant of the Colorado and Wyoming from the plains west of Laramie, Wyoming, over the Medicine Bow Mountains into Colorado. Just as we were dropping down toward Kings Canyon and the beautiful slow revelation of the plains of North Park and the sublime peaks that ring the valley, the rails ended like this, the railroad died and became a ghost. It would never return. Now we're on a near ghost, a railroad skirting the very edge of oblivion. Prognosis for resurrection rumored but unknown.

Time to turn around. We reverse for a short distance to reach the grade crossing at the Turquoise Lake road. Turnaround: get the poles out and turn the speeder like a wheel barrow. A car comes from the lake, stops and waits for us, the driver smiling. Wish we looked more official, but there's nothing to do about it. We smile and wave our thanks for his courtesy.

Back to the tunnel on the rusty rail through the hotness of Tennessee Park. We reach the double track approaching the tunnel. Our truck is still there. Where would it be? No sherriff, no railroad vehicles full of irate workers. I feel the hot sun on my skin and the hotness of fever in my body. We plunge into the inky black of the tunnel and feel the coolness of the earth as a blessing, 200 feet underneath the continental divide.

It's a quarter mile long, and we scoot through at about 20 mph. I look forward to the north portal growing bright before us, then look back. Something strange has happened: a huge cloud of black soot follows us down the tunnel; I can barely see the south portal through the smog. I had heard of the train crews complaining about the soot problem, but this is amazing - and probably deadly to the lungs; humans can't filter diesel soot very well. I try to hold my breath. We pop out into clean air, the tracks in a forest, playing tag with the highway across a marshy valley. We take a rest break out of sight of the road. Oily soot has stuck to our skin. It doesn't wipe off, just smears out into black streaks, mixing with the sunscreen into something truly unpleasant. Damn.

Move on, down the big S-curve at Mitchell, beside and below the highway again, past the place where the taconite train derailed several years ago. A huge heavy train of iron ore didn't brake down to a slow enough speed as it left the tunnel. In less than a mile, it became a runaway. Iron ore pellets still litter the rails, but the crew survived.

Through a cut, out of the relative flatness of the valley, onto the side of a mountain. The highway rapidly drops hundreds of feet below us. To the east is the broad flatness of Eagle Park, surrounded by tall shoulders of mountains. You can see the ghostly roads and outlines of foundations, all that's left of Camp Hale, home of thousands of men during the war.

The rails are rusty. Here and there we bang into small rocks that have fallen on the rails - or else rolled onto the snow last winter and descended gently onto the railheads as the ice crystals evanecsed away beneath them in the brief mountain summer. The speeder has rail

sweeps for large chunks, but they don't get everything. Bang. Hank is busy taking a video and doesn't see a stout aspen limb across the rail until we smack into it.

Through a cut. Another wreck site. This runaway left the rails at 65 mph. The devastated mountainside was cut up and plowed under by the flying steel, and a line of dead aspen trees below marks where acid spilled from a tank car. We hike to the top of the cut to see a display: someone stoutly welded a frame to bear a steel cross, the bell from one of the locomotives, and a single rail spike. Further on is a wooden cross at the edge of the forest with another single spike welded to a stout little frame beside it. Whoever did this took care, did a good job. The steel parts will last a long time, even at this elevation. Comrades fell here, and it is good to remember - but who will remember if no railroaders travel here anymore?

Another tunnel, then dropping rapidly to the valley floor, we duck under the highway and head down along the Eagle River. It's more of a small creek here, flowing merrily, but it's cheek-by-jowl with the tracks. Lots of good drainage work by the maintenance of way people in years past. Eleven inches of rain fell on my house in one day last year. I can't help thinking that a really huge downpour in Eagle Park could be trouble for the tracks. For now, at least, the tracks are in great condition: heavy rail, nice curves. A superhighway for the little speeder.

Down through Redcliffe where the houses back up to the smallish river. A flood would be trouble here, too. Not much activity. As always. Maybe they're all off working for the tourists in Vail. I enjoy looking into everyone's back yard and windows. Another creek joins the Eagle. We curve under the enormous highway bridge that soars through the sky above us, pass a couple of fishermen who look curious and wave. Another creek joins, and suddenly it's a real river beside us. We're into Eagle River Canyon.

The tracks fork, a siding clinging to one side of the canyon, the main track to the other, all that's left of the double track that went over the pass during the wartime traffic boom. We take the main. Lots of little stones on the rails that get under our sweeps. Bang. Shake. A couple of big branches. Smack. Two climbers scale a cliff high on the other side of the Gorge. Looks fun, but God it's hot except when we're in the blessed shadows. Another fisherman waves. Hope we didn't disturb the fishing, but the river is loud, too.

We pass the derelict jeep that smashed down from the highway, somewhere above by hundreds of feet. I've seen it before, but what a gnarled mess of metal. What a way to go.

Gilman. Seems that the Superfund cleanup is ended. Just a lot of derelict mining buildings in brick and tin, rusting away at the bottom of the canyon. A once-mighty inclined railroad or ore chute descended from the town and the mine somewhere above us, now it all lies in ruins on a scree slope between cliffs. The second track jumps back to our side of the river and rejoins us. Lots of crap on the rails, little rocks and a few bigger ones lying on the ballast. I guess when it was an active railroad there were people in hi-railers to come along and inspect the track periodically and clear out the rock fall. Plus 20 to 30 trains a day. It takes a heap of work to run a railroad.

The canyon loses its steepness. We can see where the second track used to continue all the way into Minturn. We cross the Eagle River on another steel bridge and reach a barricade - really just a few boards and rocks propping up a No Trespassing sign. We move them and head on to Minturn.

The valley is soft and green here, though starting to go dry in the heat. Typical of a dry Colorado summer. Lots of trees near the rails but not enough shade. The highway coils down from the mountain face to our east and jumps over the tracks on a bridge. Then it stays comfortably far away on the other side of the river.

Into Minturn. Lots of houses back up to the river, but few people to look. The mountain that holds Lion's Head Rock barely separates Minturn from Vail. The money from Vail is starting to infiltrate this once-working little railroad town, yuppie havens sprouting wall to wall. Yeah, sure they are nice houses. I'd love to own something like that myself. But to love railroading in Colorado seems to permanently infect me with melancholy because railroads die and leave only ghosts that are soon paved over, plowed up or fenced off. That fate stalks the slumbering tracks in Minturn, and the houses are but more evidence. The corporate interests want this to be another ski town.

We come to one of only three grade crossings in Minturn, a dirt road to the cemetery, which is wedged between the rails and the mountain. We turn the speeder at the dusty crossing, dodging a cement truck and a dirt bike. The biker, looking like a Japanese science fiction cartoon character in his green and white suit, helmet, and goggles, stares at our odd contraption. Each to his own motorized madness.

Linnert drives for a while. We stop at the pathetic little barricade north of Gilman to replace it. The water below looks cool as it rushes by, but there's nowhere to climb down easily.

We get to the switch at Gilman and decide to take the second track. Not hard to go through a switch in a speeder. Just stop where the rails have split but have not diverged more than a few inches, get out the lift bars, and hop the speeder over one end at a time. My turn to pilot - a little shaky at first. I was trying for the smoothness of the old Rio Grande Zephyr, the best passenger train I ever knew, but I let out the clutch a little too fast. Jerk, jerk, jerk. At least the operator's side of the speeder is shadier.

We stop to look at the buildings at Gilman. My dad owns an old railroad station in an old gold mining district. I grew up playing around mine ruins and wreckage. A little poking around and you can find interesting ladders to climb, ore shutes to open, rocks to roll. But there's not even much of that here. Someday the zinc dust will have blown out of the company town of Gilman up above us, and it will become inhabitable again. Then it will be a big real estate bonanza. Maybe someone will develop it as a town or put in a lift to the back bowls at Vail. Then maybe they'll rebuild the incline to the tracks here, and people will zip down to trains waiting here at the bottom to whisk them away to other resorts and airports. Yeah, sure, if this were somewhere in Europe.

We start off again and only get a couple of hundred yards. Rock, big one, on one rail. It's about half size of a small car engine. Linnert thinks we can move it. With three guys, it's not too heavy. We tip it off the rail. Wonder how far it rolled? Coming from far enough above, it could hit the bottom here about like a bomb would.

We wait while Hank goes down to the river to try to wash some of the soot off. I had thought of doing the same, but I see he has to negotiate a slope of sharp rocks. The water looks dead from the heavy metal pollution from the mine.

Off again. This is somewhat interesting on the other side of the canyon, but there are more rocks on the track.

Noisily, we round a bend and see two shirtless climbers hiking down the tracks. They turn around, surprised, then hold out thumbs to hitch a ride. We stop. I take out my earplugs while we chat. They were the same two climbers we saw earlier. They are intrigued by the speeder and seem to assume we're working for the railroad. We confess we are unofficial business - which is certainly true.

One of them has a bloody rash on his shoulder.

"Take a fall?"

"Yeah, I'm surprised you didn't hear me."

That creates interesting sound/picture images in my mind. Did he scream? Curse loudly? Knock down some big rocks? Pray?

"Well, hard to hear anything over the speeder."

Nowhere for them to sit, so we let them hang off the back. They're thrilled. We speeder them back to their car, parked near the high bridge at Redcliffe. I stall the speeder. Whoops.

We ask about the crushed Bronco. One of them says a friend saw it happen and almost joined it. Driving on the highway, high high up in the sky on the edge of the mountain, edge of the gorge during winter. There is a downgrade covered with black ice. His friend came over the hill, saw the Bronco go over the edge. Knowing his car would certainly follow, he bailed out of the car and slid to a stop as his car disappeared into the void.

Don't know if it's true, but it's a good story. They set off while we linger, drinking lots of water, listening to the confluence of the Eagle with some creek that flows off of Mount of the Holy Cross, a lovely mountain invisible from most places unless you're on another mountain. We say hello to a woman walking along the river fishing. Then it's off to the top of the pass, a nice run back up the river in the afternoon. The heat is off somewhat. The mountains are lovely beyond all disappointment.

We stop on the big S-curve at Mitchell, a named siding that isn't even a siding anymore. Hank gives me the video camera then backs up half a mile. I tape him making a run-by on the beautiful sinuous curves and steep grade. Nothing like a mountain railroad for interesting shapes. Linnert takes a smoke and watches a beaver swim in the pond back of the fill we're standing on.

Hank zooms by, shouts, "Hi, Adam!" for the sake of his four-year-old son, then stops and reverses to pick us up. We're all tired from noise wind and sun, not anxious to dive into the sooty tunnel again. We stand for a long time, chatting about nothing, drinking more and more water. We brought some fixings for crab, artichoke, and Romaine sandwiches. Traditional food for Linnert. So far we've been too tired to fix them.

Some nosy/curious railfan tourists stop and look at us for a long time from the road, about a quarter-mile away. Maybe they'll call the cops. Or maybe we'll just start a rumor that UP is working on the tracks up here. Sure enough, a report of activity on Tennessee Pass appeared on the Internet a week later.

Finally, it's back through the messy tunnel. We pop out on the other side. Our truck is still there, and the sherriff isn't. Good. Time to load up.

We drive through Leadville. UP has started ripping out rails on the branchline here. Why now, after they had been intact though unused for at least 10 years? We attract stares with the odd machine behind us. I think I see a hi-railer truck in the empty yards below Leadville. Hank thinks it's just a normal truck. A bit of paranoiac but friendly banter follows.

I argue for a trip today to Brown's Canyon, further down the Arkansas. Hank argues for a shower somewhere. I also go over and over on some scenarios to get us through the Royal Gorge tomorrow - have to put on somewhere west about 12 miles, head east, etc. The next "put-on" is in Canon City, across the street from the state penitentiary.

We head south down the Arkansas Valley toward Buena Vista. Then we see the nail in the coffin for all our big talk: a gigantic self-propelled track geometry test vehicle painted a bright Union Pacific yellow is scooting down the rails. Doesn't seem like they'd be out this late on a Friday, but who knows what schedule railroads keep?

We stop and watch it go by. If Linnert had stopped sooner, I could have gotten a picture of the thing rounding a corner over a steel bridge in golden afternoon sunshine. Maybe one of the railroad magazines would have published it. Oh, well.

The operator waves, leaning on the horn repeatedly as he goes down valley. Well. I didn't think I'd hear the sound of horns echoing through these canyons again, but damn - I don't think we'll want to go out on these tracks tomorrow if they're being traveled by maintenance people. Damn.

Our paranoia only increases. We get to Buena Vista and, looking for a hotel, and see a UP maintenance truck. It looks just like ours except for the company emblem on the side. We're not doing anything bad, but what else would you be doing with this thing on your trailer except planning some major trespassing on railroad property. Hope they didn't see us. Paranoia, paranoia. I invent a story in my mind: we just bought the thing down in Phoenix and are driving home this way. I feel better.

We end up at the same cheap motel I stayed in when I came up here in September 1996 and caught a short ride over the pass. God, the aspen trees were lovely then. Mt. Princeton looms behind us to the west. Sometimes I feel like shouting and pointing about this big gorgeous mountain that forms the backdrop for all the normal pedestrian concerns of this little town. Yet everyone somehow carries on their normal business.

I get a turn in the shower. Ugly black gunk streams off my body. The washcloth is stained gray. I try to sluice the worse of it down the drain. Still, someone may have difficulty cleaning the tub after we're gone.

Hank and Linnert want a steak. Off to the steak house. I could have settled for something simpler from the grocery store next door, but what the hell. Might be good for some local color.

The color wasn't so bad. Another great view of the mountains out the window and a table of young river guides next to us. Rafting the Arkansas is a big industry here. The women are always lovely and athletic, the men muscular and chronically goofy. We listen to their chatter - how much they hated that Mormon guy, how stupid the tourists are, I'm gonna move here when I get out of college. I feel like shouting, "No! Don't! It's already swamped with people! It'll just make it suck worse!" Not that such a diatribe would help. I guess that's how my parents got here, anyway, working a summer job more than 40 years ago.

Linnert and I soundlessly give mocking looks to Hank as one of the young guides stands then bends over to talk to a friend and waves her shapely bottom, attired in bright blue nylon wetsuit, directly next to Hank, Mr. Married Man and Straight-laced School Teacher, hah! Our faces tell him we have known him since his days as a decadent youth and can read the despicable lecherous thoughts that are raging through his puerile mind. He gives us a corresponding look that expresses simultaneous humor, frustration, and warm anger toward his kindly understanding friends. Ah, but there is sadness in this little incident: we remember, too, the days when young women might have looked at us with interest. Those days are gone, and we undoubtedly mourn them, even if unaware.

Back to the hotel to crash. Loud neighbors make the night miserable and almost sleepless. Should've expected it. I had hoped for camping out, but maybe the shower was worth the trade. Next day, we gas up. The speeder generates interested comments at the pumps.

"You guys working today?"

"That's the official story." And it is. I haven't lied. "We'll take the fishing poles, just in case."

Laughter. Suspicions averted. Just hope they don't work for the railroad.

We drive south along the flat valley, scouting grade-crossings for a likely put-on spot to reach Browns Canyon. Browns is a mecca for rafters, so every back road is chock full of cars with kayaks, busses with boats. We find a couple of possibilities but can't quite steel ourselves to go for a daring run in broad daylight. We used to hit the Wyoming & Colorado, a semi-active railroad at the time, in broad daylight. But that was more remote, and we always made sure the only two locomotives used on the line were tied up and shut down, 30 miles away.

We debate. Linnert will do whatever we decide. I think he wants to go for it. I have a good feeling for risks sometimes. The Royal Gorge is out of the question if there is a chance of active maintenance on the line - too many curves, too exposed on the approach. But my hunch is that we could just get away with Browns Canyon today.

A good night's sleep might have helped me argue persuasively now, but I'm not up for it. And what if I'm wrong? Hank says it feels mighty exposed. We may never be back, but it's Hank's speeder - how can I gainsay him? As though by default, we have decided to head for home. Damn.

Long drive, but at least it was scenic. We saw the mountain ghost railroad grades from the long-dead Colorado Midland and the even longer dead Denver, South Park, and Pacific. Maybe the former Denver & Rio Grande Western will join them, maybe not. Maybe there is a chance after all that I will be back for another ride. It'll probably have to be a freight train again if it happens. Somehow, I'll deal with that.

Hank surprised me when he said it was the best trip we'd ever done. I guess it was hard to tell because I felt so poorly. Eventually, my doctor diagnosed me as having bronchitis. He perscribed antibiotics and the legal fruit of the opium poppy - or a darned good synthetic replica thereof. I spent most of the rest of the month of July staring at my computer at work, counting the lovely pixels on the monitor, zoning out, thinking of the lovely mountains and the empty rails baking in the summer sun.