**The Baker Heater League**

**By Patricia C. McKissack and Frederick McKissack**

**1.**

**Porters developed a language and history that grew out of their common experiences.  And they shared their experiences from coast to coast, north and south.  Singing and telling stories helped to pass the time while waiting for an assignment, and it took the edge off being away from home and their loved ones.**

**Train stations provided quarters for porters called “porter houses.” Sitting around a Baker heater, a large pot-bellied stove, the first porters told tales, jokes, and real-life stories that, in time, developed into a communication network peculiar to themselves.  For example, if something happened in New York on Friday, porters in every state would know about it on Sunday.  Political news, a good joke, style changes, even a girl’s telephone number could be passed from New York to Chicago to Los Angeles, or from Minneapolis to St. Louis to New Orleans.  This special brotherhood became known as “The Baker Heater League.”**

**2.**

**As older porters died or retired, their stories became a part of railroad lore, and their legacy helped to reshape and mold new heroes and legends. Just as lumberjacks created their superhero, Paul Bunyan, and cowboys sang about wily Pecos Bill, railroaders had Casey Jones and John Henry.**

**John Luther Jones, better known as Casey Jones, was an engineer on Cannonball Number 382.  On the evening of April 29, 1900, Casey and his black fireman, Sim Webb, prepared to take the Cannonball from Memphis to Canton.  The scheduled engineer was out ill. The train left at 12:50 A.M. an hour and thirty minutes late.  Casey was determined to make up the lost time. Through a series of** *mishaps* **and miscommunications. Casey’s train crashed. Although the brave engineer could have jumped to safety, he stayed with the train and saved many lives at the cost of his own. Casey Jones became a railroad hero, and many songs were written about him:**

**Fireman jumped but Casey stayed on:**

**He was a good engineer, but he’s dead and gone.**

**Legend tells us in another song that:**

**When John Henry was a little boy.**

**He was sitting on his papa’s knee:**

**He was looking down on a piece of steel.**

**Say’s  “A steel-drivin’ man I’ll be. Lord. Lord.**

**A steel-drivin’ man I’ll be.”**

**3.**

**The real John Henry, believed to a be a newly freed slave from North Carolina, joined the West Virginia steel-driving team hired to dig out the Big Bend Tunnel for the C & O Railroad, circa 1870. Many stories detail the life and adventures of this two hundred-point, six-foot man who was so strong he could drive steel with a hammer in each hand.  John Henry’s death occurred after competing with a steam drill, winning, and then dying.**

**The steam drill set on the right-hand side.**

**John Henry was on the left.**

**He said, “I will beat that steam drill down**

**Or hammer my fool self to death.”**

**Casey Jones and John Henry belonged to all railroaders, but the** *Pullman* **porters had their very own hero in Daddy Joe.**

**4.**

**Daddy Joe was a real person, but like most legends, his exploits were greatly exaggerated.  One story establishes in the legend, if not in fact, that Daddy Joe was the “first Pullman porter.” He was said to have stood so tall and to have large hands so powerful that he could walk flat-footed down the aisle and let the upper berths down on each side.**

**Whenever a storyteller wanted to make a point about courtesy, honesty, or an outstanding job performance, he used a Daddy Joe story. And a tale about him usually began with: “The most terrific Pullman porter who ever made down a berth was Daddy Joe.” Then the teller would tell a story like this one:**

**Hostile Indians were said to have attacked a train at a water tank.  The all-white passengers were terrified. But Daddy Joe, with no regard for Pullman rules or his own safety, climbed on top of the train and spoke to the Indians in their own language.  Afterwards Daddy Joe threw a Pullman blanket to each member of the attacking party and added a blessing at the end. The Indians let the train pass safely.**

**5.**

**Whether he was facing hurricanes, high water, fires, robbers, or Indians, Daddy JO always masterfully dealt with the situation. Legend has it that he even thwarted one of** *Jesse James’s* **attempted robberies. Daddy Joe got so many tips from grateful passengers, he was said to be “***burdened* **down with silver and gold.”**

**The first porters, who created Daddy Joe in their own image, were proud of him. He represented the qualities they valued—unquestionable loyalty and dedication to the job.**

**New railroad employees were always the source of a good laugh, too. This new-brakeman story—or one like it—was a porter house favorite.**

**6.**

**It began with a young college graduate who got a yearning to work on the railroad. So, he traded in his suit and tie for the rusty railroad blues. Right away he was hired as a brakeman on the Knox & Lincoln Line. On his first run, the engineer was having a very hard time getting the freight up a steep hill.  After getting the train over, the engineer called out. “I was afraid she’d stall and the train would roll backward!”**

**The new brakeman smiled broadly and assured the engineer. “No chance of that happening,” he said, beaming with pride, “because before we started, I went back and set the brakes.”**

**Amid thigh-slapping laughter, another tale would begin with: “Did you hear the story about the flagman?” Of course they’d all heard the story a hundred times.  But each teller added or subtracted something until the tale was his own. That’s how the tales stayed fresh and original.**

**mishaps: unfortunate or unlucky accidents**

**Pullman: cars featured special seats, which were**

**converted to sleeping berths at night.**

**The porters who readied the berths for sleeping**

**also helped the train passengers during the day.**

**Jesse James:**

**He and his brother Frank roamed the American**

**West after the Civil War, robbing trains and banks.**

**burdened: weighted down by work, duty, or sorrow**

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