



Tom Berry Retires
Wisconsin Division
47 Years of Service

(Chicago Sun-Times, June 30, 2006) When Tom Berry started working as a brakeman for the Chicago and North Western Railway in 1959, there were still a few steam engines on the tracks. Back then Berry, fresh off his first year of college, figured it was only going to be a summer job. Instead, he ended up working on the railroad for 47 years, ultimately becoming a conductor. Yesterday, Berry, 65, of Rogers Park, took his last ride, retiring from Union Pacific Railroad as the company's most senior employee in the Chicago area. His union representative joked that Berry should have considered retirement a long time ago after he accidentally triggered a bomb scare in February. Berry left his briefcase next to a set of tracks on his way home from work. Hours later, Berry found out that train service had been held up for two hours as a police bomb squad investigated reports of a suspicious package. "They shot a hole in it. I had to get a new briefcase," he said.

Colorful stories like these were part of the package for passengers who rode with Berry. "I'll miss the people, but life goes on," Berry said. "I've got a million things I can do." One of those things might be to run for Congress -- again. Since 1994, Berry has made three unsuccessful bids to unseat Rep. Henry Hyde (R-Ill.) in the 6th Congressional District. He knew that, as a Democrat with few political connections, running against a machine politician in a heavily Republican district would be "like breaking into Stonehenge," Berry said. But, he reasoned, "You have to get in there and try." Berry also was chairman of United Transportation Union Local 528 for 20 years and a longtime legislative representative for the union.

Berry took his first railroad job with the Chicago and North Western Railway when he was 19. He became a conductor in 1969 and stayed with the company after it merged with Union Pacific in 1995. For the past year and a half, he's been punching riders' tickets on Metra's Union Pacific Northwest Line between McHenry and Chicago. Metra uses Union Pacific crews to operate trains on the line. Passengers said Berry brought a personal touch to the job, whether that involved debating the finer points of U.S. foreign policy or telling jokes and stories over the PA system. He also liked to announce when the train was coming into the station one minute early, so passengers could think about how to use the extra time.

Beloved by commuters - "Some conductors have the personality of a turnip, but when you're on Tom's train, you have a tendency to smile," said Joe Girard, 60, of McHenry, who takes Berry's train most weekday mornings and evenings. "He takes care of us," said Ketty Calzadilla, of McHenry. "You leave something on the train and you get it back the next day." Jon F. Holsteen, of Barrington Hills, even took a later train to work sometimes, so he could have Berry as his conductor. Several passengers showed their appreciation this week with letters, hugs and gifts for the conductor who treated them like family. "He'll be missed," said Berry's supervisor Greg Larson. "You can't replace that kind of knowledge and experience."



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