

Kilroy Was Here and Still Is

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Kilroy first made his appearance during the Second World War. He quickly became a household word and the little man with his nose over the top of a fence was as common as gang graffiti is today. Most people realized his connection with the American GI, but no one could tell me why he showed up on boxcars. I found out from the horse's mouth.

Content:

I was five years old when World War II ended. I didn't know much about the war except that one of my cousins had gotten a Purple Heart in France and the other was a Captain in the Adjutant General's office. I also knew that my father was an air-raid warden during the war and drove around in the neighborhood with shaded headlamps

wearing a warden's helmet. We used the pump can he carried in the trunk to put out fires at our cabin for years after until it finally rusted out.

June of '45 was also the summer I met Kilroy. He was chalked on a boxcar standing in front of the grain elevator across the road from my Grandmother's house on East Junius in Fergus Falls, Minnesota. I discovered him when my 7-year-old girlfriend, Annette, and I went to visit the kittens that lived in the mill. I asked my father about the long-nosed man peering over the top of a fence. He told me that everywhere American soldiers went they would draw him and the slogan "Kilroy was here." It was supposed to mean that Americans were everywhere.

But this was on a boxcar and there weren't any soldiers in Fergus Falls. Why was it there? Dad didn't know. Years later, my history teacher at Sanford Junior High showed a news reel with Kilroy painted on the side of a LST. I asked about him and my teacher told me that Kilroy was a Naval Yard Inspector in Boston and that "Kilroy was here" meant he had inspected and okayed the war materiel on its way to Europe and the Pacific. He also said that Kilroy was supposed to have been in love with a woman named Rosie. Rosie broke his heart by moving to California and becoming another WWII icon, Rosie the Riveter. I asked him if he knew why they were on boxcars. He had no idea.

Grandmother died in 1956. While we waited for the funeral to begin I checked out the mill hoping to find a new litter of kittens and happened on an older man who was sleeping there. He woke up suddenly and was happy to realize I wasn't a police officer. He had been run out of railyards all the way from Winnipeg. I remembered Kilroy and asked if he knew why riders of the rails drew him on the boxcars. He said it was code for hoboes to know that the place they were visiting was safe from hassling by police and railroad inspectors. The stationmasters and inspectors would erase the rest of the graffiti when they found it, but they left Kilroy alone, as he had become something of a national symbol. He also said that all the hoboes laughed at Kilroy and his long nose because he was supposed to represent the Jewish owners of the railroads. The implicit racism bothered me, but I didn't say anything. My new friend told me that he still saw Kilroy here and there, now eleven years after the end of the war.

He's still alive and well. A CNN report from Iraq showed a military transport with him spray-painted on its side. It was good to see him again.

John Anderson is a student of World War II history for many years. The Cellini Masterpiece, written under the pen name of Raymond John, is set on the island of Malta, the key to the Mediterranean during the Second World War. If you have a question or observation you may contact him at <http://www.cmasterpiece.com>

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