

MARK PETERSON—REOXY FOR TIME

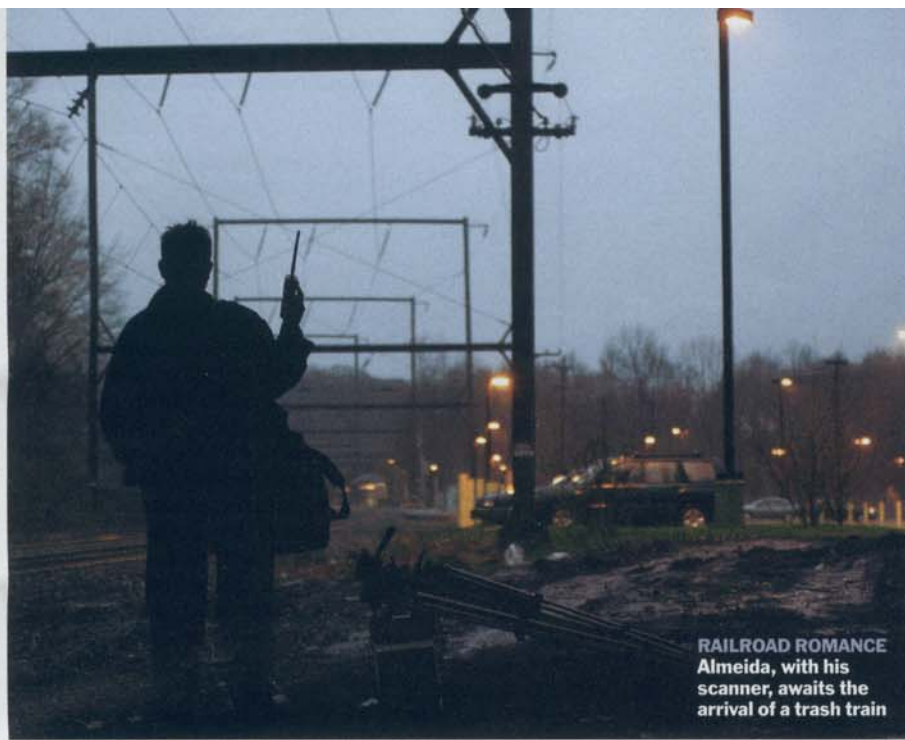
A Haverford College student of South Asian descent was detained last year by SEPTA police after he photographed a station—homework for an urban-history class, as it turned out.

Most railfans find ways to adapt. Some substitute business-casual attire for the usual Slayer T shirt to appear less threatening. Others carry the *Diesel Spotters Guide*—or their kids—to establish their innocence. As for Almeida, “I make a lot more eye contact,” he says. Then he offers his card, which lists his railfan-club affiliations. He estimates that he has given out 500 cards since 9/11. Usually, the matter is quickly resolved. “I have a little A.C.L.U. in me,” he admits. “So I say, ‘Why can’t I stay?’ But the cop is the one with the gun.”

Railfans have never been well understood. Rail employees call them trolley jollies, or foamers—for those who foam at the mouth at the sight of trains. Worst of all are FLMS: fans living with mothers. Almeida is aware of the snickering. But the history of the trains—not to mention the sheer thrill of a massive contraption hurtling down the tracks—is stronger than peer pressure. Earlier this spring, Almeida, 42, spent five hours in the cold, hoping to videotape the Ringling Bros. circus train, which never came. While waiting, he lovingly pointed out the faded markings of long-defunct railroads on passing trains. “Railroads built this country, and people seem to forget that,” he said, raindrops coating his oversize glasses. Almeida tries to find humor in the new age of scrutiny. Says Bob Weiler, a fellow railfan: “John’s got four cameras. No terrorist would do that.” “Unless,” says Almeida, “I was brilliant.”

Hearing a horn in the distance, the men abandon their graham-cracker snacks and scurry off to man the cameras. A hush falls over the fans as a trash train, hauling a wall of Dumpsters to New York City, rumbles by. Almeida smiles and afterward offers his best defense yet: “I could find better things to do. It’s just that, uh, I’m doing this.” ■

JOHN R. ALMEIDA



**RAILROAD ROMANCE**  
Almeida, with his scanner, awaits the arrival of a trash train

# Hobbyist or Terrorist?

Admiring trains has been a refuge for generations of men. Now it can get you a visit from the police

By **AMANDA RIPLEY** PHILADELPHIA

EVERY LUNCH HOUR, COMPUTER PROGRAMMER John Almeida leaves his cubicle at an insurance company outside Philadelphia and chases trains. He sets up four video cameras on tripods beside the tracks and waits, listening to his scanner. “I come out every day because history happens every day,” he says. Almeida, a father of three, is a railfan—a hobbyist who watches trains with the fastidiousness of a lab researcher. Over the past 15 years, he has shot hundreds of hours of video and tens of thousands of pictures. Call it what you will, it is hard to think of a more benign hobby.

So it is all the more jarring when Almeida gets mistaken for a terrorist—which happens about once a month, sometimes more. Since 9/11, he says, he has been followed by an Amtrak helicopter, questioned by police and rail workers and described to 911 dispatch as a “suspicious Middle Eastern male.” Almeida is of Irish Catholic descent.

Many hobbies, when considered closely, make no sense (spoon collecting, anyone?). But then there is railfanning, which even its disciples are hard put to explain. There are

about 175,000 U.S. railfans, almost all men, estimates Kevin Keefe of *Trains* magazine. They have clubs, websites and vacation excursions. They are, like all hobbyists, consumed by the cataloging of minutiae. “They’re just attracted to trains,” says John Bromley, spokesman for Union Pacific Railroad, who admits halfway through our conversation that he too is a railfan.

But the postindustrial age has been tough on railfans. First the majestic steam locomotives disappeared. Then juries started giving huge awards to people hurt on the tracks, and railroads grew hostile toward trespassers. Now comes terrorism. Railroads upped security after 9/11, but since the March bombing of four trains in Madrid, commuters have been more worried. “Anyone seen taking photographs is going to be questioned,” laments Richard Maloney, spokesman for SEPTA, Philadelphia’s public-transit authority. “The wide-open spaces and the freedom we have enjoyed to meander almost anywhere is gone.” Urban train buffs report being surrounded by police cars and customs agents.

**TROPHY CATCH** Almeida’s ‘03 photo of a CSX train

