

A TRAIN IS PART OF THE HOUSTON CITY SEAL, IN RECOGNITION of its economic impact here. In 1997, when I moved to the First Ward—the area between Interstates 45 and 10, Sawyer Street and Washington Avenue—there were three railroad lines in the neighborhood, all running east-west within eight blocks of each other. Two are still active, Union Pacific’s Freight and Passenger Mains, and now there are plans to add commuter rail trains and direct them out U.S. 290.

The railroads were built starting in the 1850s, so the tracks were really always part of the neighborhood. People used the trains and they worked for companies that used them. The building that is now the Winter Street Studios, for instance, was a furniture factory that relied on the local transport. Today people can no longer see that connection between the trains and our neighborhood. We watch all kinds of freight pass through—automobile carriers, grain cars, boxcars,

an underpass. That line alone had 14 passenger trains a day in the 1950s. Amtrak still uses it, but now it’s mainly freight.

This morning, delivering the civic club newsletter, I saw three trains move through in an hour and a half. I hear them, but I can tune out the noise. The people with the biggest problems are those with false expectations, the ones who moved into townhouses thinking the tracks would be torn up. Their houses shake, and they get bent out of shape.

When the locomotives stop it can be a very serious issue. The tracks cross all of our north-south streets, and if it’s a long train, it effectively closes those streets for 15 minutes or more. Those minutes absolutely count if somebody’s having a heart attack or other emergency. The situation is really bad in the East End, where trains just sit there and people can’t get past. That’s when children are most likely to get hurt

because they try to climb under the trains.

We’ve had many accidents and even deaths at the crossings. (Houston ranks #2 in the nation’s “trespassing fatalities,” which includes deaths caused by trains suddenly moving while people are passing under them.) We also have a safety problem when a train is coming and people race down our narrow streets in their cars looking for an open street to get across the tracks.

There are nine or ten crossings on Winter Street, so the train has to sound its horn before it gets to Sawyer and all the way through the community. The horn is heard up in Woodland Heights and in the Sixth Ward.

For about a decade, First Ward residents have been working to get what we call a safety zone, one that could become a quiet zone. What we want is to get certain streets closed where they cross the track and leave two or three open that have crossing

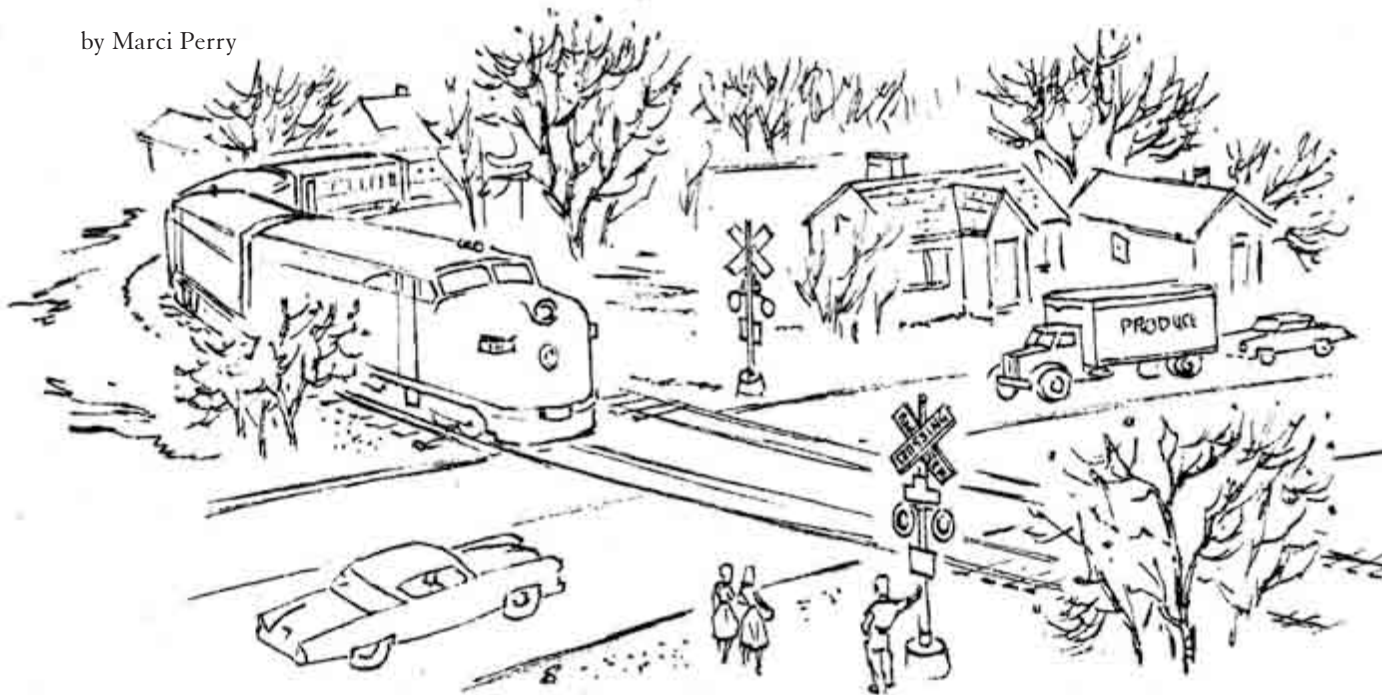
arms. We already succeeded in getting crossings east of Houston Avenue closed; now we’re trying to block off more streets on the west side. Ideally, I’d like to see an underpass for Houston Avenue at the Winter Street tracks, but only if we can find a way to preserve the properties on either side.

First Ward is a small community and doesn’t have much clout. But council member Adrian Garcia has always been involved in trying to help his constituents lead a more peaceful coexistence with the trains. In other areas, such as Manchester, grade separations have been built to put trains and other traffic on different levels. Steve Gibson, a developer and president of Western General, has put a lot of work into these issues.

We’re trying to make a win-win situation—something that’s good for the community and also good for the railroad. After all, you don’t kill Goliath with a slingshot; you work with Goliath and try to make him benefit, too. **C**

LIVING WITH TRAINS IN THE FIRST WARD

by Marci Perry



tank cars, container cars, everything you can think of—but we have no earthly idea what’s in most of those cars.

Winter Street has a railroad running down its center, the Freight Main. The street is paved with gravel, like streets in Houston used to be. There are little houses, basically cottages, on both sides facing the tracks, built by people who worked for the railroads. The Missouri-Kansas-Texas line ran along the wider Spring Street, and its tracks were set off to the side. Many of the buildings immediately around it were industrial, and as the industries moved out the tracks weren’t needed as much and were removed. The First Ward has been agitating for more than nine years for a bike path down the MKT line.

Union Pacific’s Passenger Main is actually within a more fallow area, with warehouses around it, and at the edge of the neighborhood, so those trains do not have the same impact on our lives as the ones on Winter Street. Houston Avenue skirts the trains via