

The Home News

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Clock-watcher Joe finds time to reminisce, feed 'chickens'

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SAYREVILLE—Five times a day Joseph Meszaros blocks traffic on Washington Road.

He doesn't care if drivers are late for an important appointment, or just have to get somewhere in a hurry. When it's time to block traffic, it's time.

With his shirt open and hanging loose over his suspenders, the old timer wipes his unshaven face with one hand while breaking a well-ripened plum in half with the other.

"Ten more minute," he says, glancing at his watch and gesturing toward the Raritan Railroad engine parked across from his gate shack.

In some ways, it isn't easy to understand Meszaros. Through his heavily accented and slurred speech, only one of six words is absolutely distinguishable.

The rest are in Hungarian or a pidgin English he developed

over the past 63 years.

In "10 more minute" the gateman will block traffic. He'll lower the weighted gates by hand—all four of them—while the Raritan's engine draws a line of freight cars across Washington Road near the YMCA.

Meanwhile, Meszaros has time to feed the "chickens."

For those who don't know pidgin, 'chickens' are actually sparrows.

Meszaros uses a tin can to scoop bird seed from a paper bag he keeps in his shack. In seconds, the chickens appear.

They understand Hungarian the gate tender says with a laugh. They are his best companions.

The people wave as they clatter in their cars across the tracks. "Hey, Joe!" someone yells as a fancy car whizzes by.

"Ah ya," two more years until retirement, Meszaros says. He's got his pension figured to

the penny. "Not much," he says. He waves a third "hello" to "Dupont boss," a regular passerby.

"Ah ya," only five trains come through each day. "Good job," the gateman says.

"Five minute," he gestures toward the brakemen who move toward their train. They ignore him.

Between trains, Meszaros leans from the gatehouse window and watches traffic. His mind wanders and his thoughts jump from past to present. Without knowing pidgin, his thoughts are difficult to follow.

Jimmy, his son, was shot in the head in Vietnam two years ago. It's a matter-of-fact recollection.

The Russians were "bad trouble" in Budapest. "Trouble, trouble. I come here, work railroad 1949.

"Every day . . . 8:30 work, 5:30 go home eat." Home is 15 Maple St., South River.



