HOBOES

BINDLESTIFFS, FRUIT TRAMPS, AND THE HARVESTING OF THE WEST

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HILL AND WANG
A DIVISION OF FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX
NEW YORK

o help him, shoveling that coal from
n, to get closer to the fire box door."
car re-railed, they would get the ac-
p material to raise the car, often pay-

y in the summer led several rail lines
Plains to offer special rates for men
e railroads from cities of the Upper
oups of at least five; the Santa Fe and
d one-sixth" rate from the Missouri
ll fare westbound, one-sixth for the
of ten or more.[26]
cadging rides was extremely danger-
ke are filled with reports of the inju-
ow up in court documents because
d shifted in M. & St. L. 6346 lumber
vas stealing ride in car," noted a 1907
tana. The Union Pacific's agent de-
ear-old trespasser: "Running his way
wheel passes over both feet mashing
n-year-old was found east of Topeka:
een cars legs cut off mashed hands.

deliberate acts of others. A Union
ist of a Denver man riding through
watchman struck him on arm with
paid $1 to the victim in such cases.
had to pay something to John Con-
Supreme Court ruled that one of its
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thwestern yards at three a.m. one

men who for varied reasons tres-
ute west to work the harvests. A ba-
the twentieth century by Dr. Ben

Reitman, who like Nels Anderson became identified with Chicago's "Hobohemia" after experiencing life on the road: "There are three types of the genus vagrant: . . . The hobo works and wanders, the tramp dreams and wanders, and the bum drinks and wanders." A fellow worker with Reitman at the Chicago Hobo College similarly called the hobo "a migratory worker. A tramp is a migratory nonworker. A bum is a stationary nonworker."

Peter Speek was aware of these divisions during his 1914 interviews for the Commission on Industrial Relations, when he defined hoboes as "a rank of casual laborers earning most of their living by labor, willing and desirous to work, but in the time of unemployment, when hard pressed, supplementing their living by such means as begging, application for charity, and stealing . . ."

The attempt to distinguish between *hoboes* and *tramps* was often complicated because it was easy to move back and forth between the two groups, and many did. A hobo might tire of looking for work; a tramp might decide that he had to work to survive. A writer in *The Survey* titled his article "How to Tell a Hobo from a Mission Stiff" and explained, "In the East the average public confuses the hobo with the tramp, but in the West, where he obtained his nickname, he is often a welcome guest at the farm in harvest time." The writer told of encountering a "Hobo Employment Bureau" in Philadelphia, whose leader welcomed hoboes as itinerant laborers but rejected bums as derelicts, while defining "mission stiffs" as those who would not work but were "willing to exchange 'conversion' for bread, coffee, and a free bed."[28] Romantic notions of hoboes as simply wanting a free and easy life could not survive the inspections of investigators who followed them into the harvest fields. Such studies all concluded that they were goaded by "the whip of economic necessity."[29]

The terms *hobo*, *tramp*, and *vagrant* and the images they evoked all drew on the age-old popular fear of wanderers from outside the community. English laws had begun dealing with vagrancy by the late Middle Ages, and by the early sixteenth century unemployment itself was termed a dangerous crime, "the very mother of all vice," according to a writer in 1509. A. Lee Beier, historian of England's "masterless men," writes that this attitude was consistent with both contemporary law and public opinion. A *vagrant*, or the earlier *vagabond*, came to be defined

as a person with no fixed residence or employment. In 1577 a writer said that the *vagabond* "will abide nowhere but runneth up and down from place to place . . . to and fro over all the realm"—a definition that later could have been applied to American tramps and hoboes. In fact, a writer in *The North American Review* in 1909 argued that the wording in the vagrancy laws of early England paralleled those of early 1900s America because "up to the middle of the sixteenth century rural England was very much in the same circumstances as rural America today," with a dispersed population, weak police protection, and growing numbers of the unemployed on the roadways.

The word *tramp* was widely used in England after *vagabond* and then in the early United States, usually as a synonym for *vagrant*. *Hobo* came into use later—possibly to distinguish between those traveling about to work and those who did not work. Different origins of the word *hobo* have been advanced, from an eighteenth-century English term *hoe boy* (referring to a bonded servant who hoed all day), to an employer's shout of "Ho! Boy!" By the time *tramp* and *hobo* crossed the Atlantic, both were fastened with negative connotations, which became attached to any man forced to move about hunting for work.[30]

The tramp in America emerged from the early wanderer, such as the Civil War–era vagabond along rural roadways, then loomed suddenly as a new, dangerous threat in the industrial world developing in the 1870s and 1880s. Looking back almost half a century later, the president of the Minneapolis, St. Paul & Sault Ste. Marie Railroad noted that "the tramp was unknown until the Civil War. We have had them ever since . . ." Various historians have charted the links between the agitated, boom-and-bust economy of those postwar years and the numbers of men on the road. *The New York Times* first used the term *tramp* in 1874; that same year the city marshal in Lynn, Massachusetts, referred to men lodged overnight in the jail as tramps. Press accounts during that decade's Molly Maguire violence in the Pennsylvania coalfields compared tramps to the violent Mollies who had been apprehended and hanged.

Poet Walt Whitman saw something he "had never seen before" one day in early 1879—"three quite good-looking American men, of respectable personal presence, two of them young, carrying chiffonier-bags on their shoulders, and the usual long iron hooks in their hands,

plodding along, their eyes cast
&c." He predicted disaster if the
persons kept increasing, for ther
"at heart an unhealthy failure." In
American Law Review were told
every species of criminal." He lac
means of support—so "what but c
a person?"[31]

Whitman was really lamenting
America, for he wrote in the era
strikes. State legislatures began to
came first, passing anti-tramp legi
upon earlier vagrancy statutes. Pe
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work for a period from one to six
and spread across the East—to Rh
New York in 1879, then to other s
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and he summed up the impact of
to seek employment is a crime in m
plying the old vagrancy statutes to t
popularity until a study in 1898 f
tramp legislation, many of them n
been classified as misdemeanors fo

The public ridicule, fear, and scorn
the eastern seaboard joined the we
role hoboes played in wheat harvest
Kansas: the *Salina Herald* hailed th
noting that it "was not as stringent
States" but "seems to have served its
vagrants" had to move on. But the e
center of the Grain Belt, added—sc
the law "no injustice has been done

in search of employment." A year later the *Herald* reported on the new Massachusetts tramp act, which "classes as tramps all persons who rove from place to place begging or living without labor or visible means of support," excluding women, children, the blind, and those asking charity. Tramps were to be put in a "house of correction or state work house for not less than six months nor more than two years." Massachusetts, it noted, even had a state "tramp officer."[33]

These acts meshed with American public opinion, if reminiscences and printed items may be believed. A woman recalling her childhood on a Wisconsin farm near railroad tracks said, "There was always the lurking fear that a tramp might take refuge in the barn—a tramp with a pipe or cigarette." Texas, after the railroads arrived, saw an increase in reports of arrests of tramps, sometimes linked to robberies. A reporter for the *Nebraska State Journal* joined Lincoln policemen late one night in mid-1894, when they raided the Rock Island yards and arrested seven vagrants sleeping in empty boxcars. "It was the same old story of human misery, of misfortune, of degradation and despair," the reporter wrote:

> It seemed hard that they should be taken from their miserable bed on the floor of the box car and lodged in the city jail, but such are the precautions which the authorities find it necessary to take to preserve an immunity from the tramp nuisance. Crimes, too, have been committed, attempted robberies have been reported, and while many innocent persons suffer, a great many of the guilty are caught.[34]

The *Denver Times* called tramps a low level of humanity, and each Denver policemen knew "as well as he knows his beat" that the tramps would beg, insult, burglarize, and even assault "before they would work for their bread . . ." In Kansas, the *Salina Herald* peppered tramps with various slings. Above all, they were criminals: "Many tramps have shown themselves in this section, much to the dislike of women and children. Too much care cannot be taken in securing premises over night." When tramps were caught, the city jailer restricted their diet to "a bucket full of water twice a day" in hopes of deterring them from ever coming back.

Almost universally, hoboes were tarred with the same brush as were

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tramps; an article in *Century* in 1884 referred to *hobo* as "the nickname of the American tramp." Nels Anderson recalled from his years beating his way around the West that "suspicion and hostility are the universal attitudes of the town or small city to the hobo and the tramp." When the *Nebraska State Journal* complained in June 1915 of the seriousness of the "tramp problem," it added that "hoboes do not show vicious tendencies unless they are cornered and are forced to make a fight." The so-called "King of the Hoboes," Jeff Davies, pointed to the problem: "It is the tramp who steals the farmer's chickens—the hobo gets the blame. It is the hobo who prevents the railroad wreck—yet newspapers, unthinkingly will give credit to the tramps."[35]

These were the men who converged on the Great Plains for the wheat harvest, then often went beyond to pick apples or hops in the Northwest or cotton in Texas, to dig sugar beets, or to head on to the orchards of California. Despite their important role, however, they would meet much opposition, whose source lay at least in part within the biases carried west by settlers. These attitudes were then passed on. A western hobo who had no problem locating the source of his troubles complained to a labor newspaper in 1910 that "the little school boys are not to blame when they throw clods at us; they have been taught that a hobo is everything that is vile and degraded . . ."[36]

Upon a foundation built of such contradictions, the New West began to emerge from its frontier era.

Pacific Railroad Company Records (11 A 5 5B), (138.H.8.7[B]), "Labor—Correspondence Concerning Injuries," in Minnesota Historical Society; President D. Miller, Chicago, to Peter A. Speek, "Report on Transportation of Laborers," in *Reports to the U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations* (microfilm copy in State Historical Society of Wisconsin, P71-T684/S7); Duffus, "Labor Market Conditions," 32. Eric H. Monkkonen argues that the term "beating his way" came from beating the railroad company out of a fare; see Eric H. Monkkonen, ed., *Walking to Work: Tramps in America, 1790–1935* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 9. It seems more likely that the term is carried over from the experience of walking through difficult terrain, heavy brush, when a person would have to use his arms to slash open a trail; that is, rough going.

23. The classic account is Jack London, *The Road,* in London, *Novels and Social Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1982), 210–11. *The Road* first appeared in 1907. Also, see descriptions in Carl Sandburg's autobiography, *Always the Young Strangers* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953), 395 and passim. Almost all recent accounts of hobo life contain descriptions of riding the rails. See Roger A. Bruns, *Knights of the Road—A Hobo History* (New York: Methuen, 1980), 36ff; Clark Spence, "Knights of the Tie and Rail—Tramps and Hoboes in the West," *Western Historical Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (January 1971), 8–10; Todd DePastino, *Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 66–67. Thanks to Mike Matejka for assistance in understanding hobo riding spots and techniques.
24. Personal Injury Register, Union Pacific Railroad, Record Group 3761, Subgroup 125, v. 1, v. 8 (1895–1902), 20, Nebraska State Historical Society. Case of James R. Read, Albany, N.Y., May 10, 1897, in Grand Island Jail Registers, Hall County Records, Nebraska State Historical Society, Record group 260, Subgroup 10, Series 1. Chief of Special Agents, Secret Service Record Books, Registers, Northern Pacific Misc. files, v. 5 (1914–16), case 16330; v. 7 (1917–19), case 23818.
25. *Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad Company v. John R. Johnson,* 3 *Oklahoma Reports* 41 (1895); Speek, "Report on Transportation," 16; Jim Tracy, interview, Livingston, Mont., June 2, 2002. Tracy formerly worked as a Northern Pacific special agent. Work by a hobo in exchange for a ride is covered in *George W. Woolsey, Administrator, v. Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad Company,* 39 *Nebraska* 798 (1894). See also *Harry O'Banion v. the Missouri Pacific Railway Company,* 65 *Kansas Reports* 352, 69 *Pacific* 353 (1902).
26. Chief of Special Agents, Secret Service Record Books, Registers, Northern Pacific Misc. files; v. 6, case 22394; *Spokane Press,* April 14, 1912, 1–2; Personnel—Box 32:FF 1397; Discharged Employees, 1888, Denver & Rio Grande Collection, Colorado Historical Society; Josiah Flynt, "Tramping with Tramps: The American Tramp Considered Geographically," *Century,* January 1894, 106; Warren McGee, Livingston, Mont., interview with author, June 2, 2002; Applen, "Migratory Harvest Labor," 127–29.
27. UP Personal Injury Registers, 1907–15, 132; *John Conchin v. El Paso & Southwestern Railroad Co.* (1910), 13 *Arizona* 259, 108 *Pacific* 260.
28. Discussion of hoboes and tramps mainly relies on Anderson, *On Hobos,* 61; Speek, "Report on the Psychological Aspect of the Problem of Floating Laborers," 23–24. "How to Tell a Hobo from a Mission Stiff," *Survey* (March 21, 1914), 781; Alexander Cleland, "The Time to Deal with Vagrancy," *Survey* (December 9, 1916), 268–69.

29. Carleton H. Parker, "Preliminary Report
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31. Speek, "Report on Transportation," 24.
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