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Knights of the Fast Freight

For hoboes, the West was the land of milk and honey, of adventure, scenery, and easy living. A "land stowaway" hopped the first transcontinental train, and for six more decades they rode the rails

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When young Jack London described the Reno of 1892 as "filled with … a vast and hungry horde of hoboes," he was reporting no isolated phenomenon; shaggy, rootless men—tramps or hoboes—could be seen in every part of the West from the 1870's down to the Second World War. Beginning in 1869, when Omaha Bill beat his way on the first Union Pacific train to the Coast, they were to be seen on all the western lines. Robert Louis Stevenson watched two of these "land stowaways," as he called them, "whip suddenly from underneath the cars, and take to their heels" while his train was standing in the yards at Elko, Nevada, in 1879. Freight trains heading for the Dakota wheat harvests thirty years later were black with transient riders, like roosting starlings.

These knights of the tie and rail ranged the nation, but the West was both their favorite locale and the beneficiary of their peculiar contributions. "Tramps are made in the West," noted a New Jersey social worker in 1903. The West was the land of milk and honey, of adventure, scenery, and easy living. In California—the "tramp's paradise—one might sleep free under the stars every night and pluck his breakfast from an orange tree. Like his brethren elsewhere and like the cowboy and the Indian, the western vagabond emerged as a stereotype in the public mind. By the 1880's he was replacing the redskin as a public menace—an evil, shiftless, thieving beggar better handled by an alert bulldog or a double-barreled shotgun than with sympathy. In time this image would fade and Americans would come to view him as a carefree, roving dreamer, either in Charles Chaplin's impudent version or in Emmett Kelly's more pathetic one.

Yet this stereotype distorts and conceals the importance of a substantial group of men who helped build the West. But to see them in perspective it should be pointed out, as the Hobo News did nearly fifty years ago, that the words "hobo," "tramp," and "bum" have decidedly different meanings: "A hobo is a migratory worker, a tramp is a migratory non-worker, and a bum is a stationary non-worker." Here we are not

concerned with the bum—the down-and-outer of the city skid row—but with tramps and hoboes, two distinctive classes of men on the move, who, in the words of one of them, aligned their interests "with the interests of the railroad companies."

In general, life on the road was a masculine prerogative. Before the Great Depression the rare woman tramp or hobo was inclined to be radical and hard-bitten, like the one who visited Bertha Thompson's mother in Bismarck, North Dakota, early in the century, the two of them laughing because "the men wouldn't be able to get at her on the rods." "Box-Car Bertha" Thompson herself—prostitute, member of a shoplifting gang, and social service researcher—had spent fifteen years on the road before she was thirty. She may have ignored her first advice on riding freights—"keep your trap closed and your legs crossed"—but she lived a life of adventure. Once, pregnant, the father of her child unknown, she rushed from Seattle to Chicago by freight to her lover in the death house; later another lover died in her arms after falling under the wheels of a Southern Pacific train in the outskirts of Los Angeles.

But most of the knights were men and, tramp or hobo, were attracted or pushed into the life by a variety of forces, some broad, some individual. The nationwide tramp epidemic of the 1870's was attributed in part to the aftermath of the Civil War. Men used to army life would find the way of the vagabond no real hardship. As one serious discussant wrote in 1877: … among other things which war teaches a nation, are the arts of marching,—of finding shelter and forage,—the habit of living on the country,—and the disposition to trust to-morrow to take care of to-morrow. That the ranks of tramps and hoboes expanded and contracted with the rise and fall of the national economy is self-evident. The depressions of 1873, 1893, and 1929 cast thousands, even millions, adrift, many of them restlessly riding the boxcars from noplace in particular to nowhere at all.

Sociologists suggest other factors: racial or ethnic discrimination, defects of personality, or crises in personal life. Indeed, the literature of the road reveals many instances of teenagers who turned to tramping because of family conflict, the death of someone close, or trouble in school, with the law, or over a girl. Youth has always had its problems of growing up, and more than one kind of "speed" or "trip" has provided an outlet for the alienated and the restless.

Scientifically oriented investigators put heavy emphasis on alcoholism—"a biochemical defect of one kind or another—e.g., an idiosyncratic geneotrophic lack of nutritive elements, or a defective function of the endocrine gland or a masked food sensitivity." The wooden grave marker of a hobo at Caliente, Nevada, put it more simply and added another basic cause:

A woman frail And a glass of ale Made a horse's tail Of me.

Many a man turned to the road because of overfraternization with John Barleycorn; many a lover jilted or husband betrayed, done in by a smoothtongued city drummer, left the farm or vine-covered cottage.

Another vital factor was the virus of restlessness and wanderlust, often an incurable malady. Born with

an instinct for the life, the true tramp or hobo was one of Robert W. Service's "Men That Don't Fit In." To such a man the road meant adventure, a primitive freedom, challenge without responsibility. As one confided to Josiah Flynt, hobo, detective, and journalist: I was brought up on a farm, but, my goodness, I wouldn't trade this life if you'd give me all the land in the wild West. Why, I can do just as I please now—exactly. When I want to go anywhere, I get on a train and go, and no one has the right to ask me any questions. That's what I call liberty.... "When I was pulled through the door of the box-car," wrote another, I was pulled into another world. ... I was no longer a plodding farm hand, I had stepped outside the law, into the realm where men lived by their wits.

Youthful wanderlust was sometimes kindled by reading reminiscent accounts like Josiah Flynt's Tramping With Tramps , although the thirteenyear-old who turned up in an early Nebraska hobo jungle, clad in a buckskin scout outfit, armed with an "enormous revolver" (missing one vital part), and looking for a chance to shoot Indians, was more likely influenced by Ned Buntline. Older tramps often enticed teen-agers to the road with exciting and intoxicating personal narratives. The "Big Rock Candy Mountains," which has been called a hobo love song, is basically the seduction of a lad to tramp life as a "preshun," or apprentice to a "jocker," a kind of knight-squire relationship, often with homosexual overtones.

For many it was the railroad itself that exerted the magnetic pull—"a lure, unexplainable, yet strong, like the light which leads a moth to destruction," as hobo writer Jim Tully put it. The true tramp "loved the train as a horseman loves his horse." To him, wrote Glen Mullin, the "scholartramp," ... a train is a thing compounded of magic and beauty, just as a bravely trimmed vessel is to a mariner. It arouses within him a latent mysticism. The rattle and swank of a long freight pulling out of the yards, the locomotive, black and eager, shoving her snorting muzzle along the rails, this is a spectacle and a challenge which only the wanderer who loves train riding can understand. ... She is an enchanted caravan moving into the mysterious beyond, hailing with bells and song the blue distance that fades forever as she moves.

Tramps and hoboes considered it their privilege to ride free on the railroads. They were "as proud of it as the American is of his country," said Josiah Flynt in 1893. Beating one's way by rail required skill and experience, and tramps were the true artists. One boasted of traveling three hundred thousand miles on thirty cents and his nerve. Another, a veteran of ten years on the road at age twenty-five, had beat his way on every line in the United States, including the Pikes Peak Railway. Hoboes were likely to prefer boxcars, but ingenious tramps rode anywhere: atop cargo in open gondolas, among livestock in cattle cars, on bumpers between cars, or in the empty iceboxes of the fruit specials. They hid in water tanks, in the coal in the tender, and in tool or supply boxes. In the words of Kenneth Allsop, they learned to ride a train "the way an Indian brave could ride a horse: they could hang onto belly, back, neck or rump, and get there."

To hop an ordinary freight, or rattler, was perhaps no great challenge, but to hold down a cannonball—a fast train of any kind—called for talent and courage. Riding the blind—the open vestibule next to the tender—was in one tramp's mind like "riding the nose of a great steel projectile hurtling like a comet through flying stardust and frightened planets," but it was also uncertain and unpleasant. The possibility of being ditched by the crew was strong at each stop, and in front was the fireman, ready to turn on the hose, throw coal or hot ash, or, worse yet, hale a tramp into the tender to shovel coal. The deck or top of a passenger train was even less desirable. The tramp who decked the Jarrett and Palmer

theatrical train out of Cheyenne in 1877, when it set a speed record between New York and San Francisco, had to cling for dear life to a stovepipe while sparks and cinders "cut through his clothes like bullets," lacerated his neck and face, and caused his hair to turn completely gray by the time he climbed down at Green River, according to contemporaries.

It took a daring tramp like Frisco, "a great old train-barnacle," to ride, as he once did, the cowcatcher of a Missouri Pacific passenger engine, and he nearly had a heart attack when he thought it was about to hit a white cow. The wind was devastating. "Open yer mouth and she'd blow you wrong side out," he said. The engine headlight "sprayed out across the prairie and attracted all the bugs in Kansas. My mouth and eyes and shirt got full of 'em, and them big shiny black bugs hurt too when they hit you between the eyes." Frisco also made several runs between Chicago and Los Angeles locked in a cramped battery box of the Golden State Limited. "Crawled out humpbacked, though," he explained. "My ol' spine had sprung a reverse curve, like a croquet wicket." Even more harrowing was riding the rods under the belly of a passenger or freight car, sometimes with the use of a "tramp's ticket," a grooved board designed to fit more comfortably over the rod than was the human body. Hardhearted trainmen occasionally used a special booby trap for riders of the rods: a spike dangling from a wire that was played out beneath the cars and bounced up from each tie, every blow "freighted with death," according to Jack London.

Few who followed the calling died in bed. In the twenty years after 1890, 32,276 tramps or hoboes were reported killed on American railroads, at least a third of them on western lines. Countless more were maimed for life. More than one met death when a missed hold sent him under the wheels; more than one came to an end at the hands of an overzealous brakie or railroad bull or starved when locked into a boxcar shunted onto an unused siding. Not that the demise of a railroad trespasser was worthy of much notice, as an item from a Montana newspaper of 1884, given here in its entirety, would indicate: Thursday night a tramp who undertook to get on the brake beam of a car in a train at Eddy, Missoula county, fell and the wheels ran over his head, crushing it and spattering his brains along the track. No inquest was deemed necessary. Frequently, however, inquests were required, and railroad crews lost valuable time because of them. As a result not all transient deaths were reported, and a knowledgeable railroad man pointed out in 1907 that there was "hardly a railroad line in this country but what has private graveyards on its own right of way."

To railroads, interlopers were in the long run more costly than train robbers. They were responsible for theft and thoughtless damage to freight and rolling stock. Tramps might burn up a boxcar trying to keep warm, spoil the upholstery on a handsome carriage shipped overland by flatcar under canvas, or ruin cars of bananas in west Texas by leaving the hatches open. Sometimes sharp lawyers brought lawsuits against railroads on behalf of tramps injured when thrown off moving trains by crewmen.

Railroads complained that town authorities did not enforce the law, but simply moved the vagrants along as rapidly as possible—by rail. Actually, local policies varied greatly; there were good towns and there were "horstile" ones. Friendly or at least neutral cities like Denver and Salt Lake City gave the tramp an opportunity to "throw his feet"—to beg for food, clothing, or money—or to replenish his wardrobe nocturnally from "gooseberry bushes," or clotheslines. San Francisco was even better, for there, said Flynt, was "a large native class whose character is not much higher than that of the tramp himself, so that he is lost among them—often to his own advantage." In the larger cities, too, was the tramp's "greatest friend on earth, next to his mother," the mission, whose glory seemed "to be measured by the

number of biscuits" served to vagrants. Between the Salvation Army—the "Sally"—and the Good Will Industries of the Methodist Church—the "Willy"—the knowing tramp could meet most of his physical needs if he hit the Big Town occasionally. Tramps and hoboes alike took advantage of mission facilities, though not without a cynicism frequently reflected in ribald parodies of mission hymns:

I don't care if it rains or freezes I'll be safe in the arms of Jesus. I can lose my shirt and britches, He'll still love us sons of bitches.

Begging had its perils, as the tramp discovered who tried to coax a Missoula housewife into giving him a meal in 1886 and "was chased off the premises by the irate lady armed with a six-shooter," according to a local editor. In most towns in the Southwest a man on the bum could get thirty days on the road gang just for being there; not all were as fortunate as the tramp arrested in Texas who was released after officers were "awed" to find a copy of the works of Shakespeare in his possession—and a stolen copy at that. Occasionally the inhabitants of a town took matters into their own hands. A bruised and battered tramp once described to Jim Tully what he called "sapping day" in a particularly unfriendly Iowa community: Well, sir, they ketches four of us and makes us run the ga'ntlet, and believe me, I run. The natives stands on each side for a quarter of a mile or more. ... They hit us wit' stones and whips. ... Some guy caught me wit' a rock here where you see this bump. ... I'll bet there was two hundred men there, an' a dozen women. ...

Because "town clowns," as the tramps called city police, would not prevent trespass, the railroads hired their own detectives, hard-nosed cinder dicks who often adopted a "scarethe-hell-out-of-'em" policy of raiding jungles and manhandling vagrants in the yards or on the cars. Many railroad bulls built unenviable reputations, but no other gained the almost legendary stature of Cheyenne's Jeff Carr, whose name was spoken with dread in the jungles. "A big goof he was wid a slouch-down mustash, cowboy hat, coupla guns strapped on im" was the description of a young road punk who saw him in action: Well, boy, we rode a blind out o' Cheyenne dat same night, and dey was tree ginks on it wid us; and purty soon a guy comes ridin' up side o' de train like hell splittin' tanbark on a wite horse. He reaches fer one o' de ginks and yanks him off'n de blind, and den ketches annuder one by de belt and trows 'im across de horse's neck an' starts shootin'. ...

For the tramp there was a professional pride in being able to hold down a train. "Only a dub will allow himself to be circumvented by a mere train crew," said one. But experienced crewmen often made life miserable. Sometimes the brakeman, or shack, locked the transgressors in a boxcar or nailed the door shut until the end of the run, when the law escorted them to the "Irish Club House," as happened to one grizzled veteran at Great Falls. Frequently the relationship was a violent one, with bloody brawls, knifings, and even running gunfights between the two groups of antagonists. The Railroad Gazette was speaking of an unusually explosive situation in the summer of 1878 when it said: "The life of a trainman on a freight train in some of the Western States is just now as exciting and almost as dangerous as that of a cavalryman during the war." Nevertheless, the trainman's life was always one of confrontation and possible bloodshed.

On the other hand, crewmen often levied tribute against those who could pay, extracting "bo money" at

the rate of a dollar a division (roughly one hundred miles). This tariff was reduced or even remitted if the rider was tearfully eloquent or carried an up-to-date union card. An astute brakie might boost his income by forty to seventy-five dollars each month, not to mention some payment in kind where cash was lacking. One hobo lamented that he had given the shack at Miles City a shirt and a pair of gloves, "as we had no kale in our jeans."

With little love lost between them, tramps and hoboes alike frequented the jungles that cropped up near water stops, division points, and railroad intersections. A makeshift camp, ranging from a small "tomato-can" affair to some a mile long in California, the jungle was the melting pot of trampdom. In the West no color line was drawn, and a crude democracy reigned. Denizens of these "private clubs" followed definite but unwritten rules, much like those of western cow camps with respect to sharing or not wasting food, providing fuel, or cleaning utensils, with a special code to regulate jungle crime.

The jungle is best known, of course, for its mulligan stew, probably a much overrated concoction built around "a feathered bird," that is to say, domestic poultry. To hungry men almost any food would have tasted good, even the mulligan described by one hobo as made "out of shoe heels and cow-hide with a few chips of birch thrown in for seasoning." At the other extreme was the legendary "million-dollar mulligan" once prepared in a San Bernardino jungle after the boes raided a carload of live chickens on a siding. It was a tasty dish, but there was hell to pay in San Berdoo, for the chickens were rare pedigreed stock, the result of long years of scientific breeding, en route to the Los Angeles County Fair at Pomona.

Like other men of leisure, tramps and hoboes were fond of liquor in almost any form, whether cheap wine or a local rotgut whiskey described as "kinder a cross between a circular saw and a wild cat." The jungles had their "canned-heat brigades," who settled for Sterno, and their "bay horse jockies," who made do with bay rum. Whatever the mixture, it could turn a jungle camp into a "very convivial assembly," as Jim Tully remarked, with the clientele "stretched upon the ground, the debris of intoxication all around them."

Under the influence of a little "whiteline," the jungle might rock with song, for men on the road were among the last of the ballad makers and had no1 peers as parodists. Other favorite amusements were the kangaroo court and the endless spinning of yarns about road experiences. Especially popular in this womanless society were countless variations of the story of the seduction of the lady of the house by the tramp begging a handout or (better yet) a "setdown" or meal in the housewife's kitchen. Apart from the embroidery work, the plot was generally the same: the tramp got a generous sample of the lady, her cooking, her husband's clothes, and the advice "If you ever come around here again my husband will shoot you full of holes. And if he doesn't, I will!"

It is obvious that the tramp and the hobo shared many of the same experiences. The basic distinction between the two made the tramp an anomaly in an America that put a high premium on industry and regarded idleness as a sin. The true tramp, for his part, regarded work in the same vein. "Work … ," said one, "has wasted more human life and happiness, and cemented the foundations of more inhuman wrong, oppression and misery than ever did the combined energies of war, physics, and bad whiskey." "Work?" said another. "I have no time to work. I've got to hustle around in order to get enough to eat." The English supertramp William Davies recalls a fellow tramp in Texas who reacted typically to an offer to work on the railroad. "Boys," he said slowly, "I am a very sick man. I am now making my way to Houston

as fast as I can, to get hospital treatment." "Yes," added Davies, also thinking fast. "Yes, and it shall never be said that I deserted a sick companion."

Despite the public stereotype to the contrary, the hobo was important to the West precisely because he was a laboring man. Especially from the 1880's to World War i he was one of the real builders of the West, called into being, like the cowboy, by a special set of circumstances. A short-term free-lance worker, he was lured to remote, far-flung western enterprises where the steady laborer would not go. Often with his blanket on his back, the hobo moved readily, switching from job to job, sometimes crossing half a continent between them. Whether as a gandy dancer in a California railroad crew, a Potlatch timberbeast, an Okanogan apple knocker, a ten-day miner in the bowels of Butte, a "diamond cutter" on the winter lakes of Minnesota, or a harvest stiff in the Kansas wheatlands, he did his bit and moved on.

Though hoboes worked in many fields, undoubtedly
the largest number were in agriculture, following truck
gardening or fruit or hop harvests through California into the Pacific Northwest or, at least into the mid-igao's, flocking into the Great Plains grain harvests "like a flight of alien unclean birds," to use the words of Hamlin Garland. At times trainmen were convinced that they were hauling a greater tonnage in hoboes than in freight; as many as a hundred and fifty were counted on a single train in South Dakota in August, 1896. A few years later a freight in Washington was so loaded with fruit pickers that a crewman called out: "All aboard. We might as well make it a passenger."

Except for illicit "bo money" such riders paid no fare. Railroads found it difficult to enforce their own rules against vagrants in large numbers, and grain was an important freight item. Hence western lines were willing to ignore the presence of the hobo harvesters—the "blackbirds"—during harvest season, when at peak they made up roughly one third of the midwest harvest force of some two hundred thousand. Many of the hobo laborers worked with some regularity in the woods or the ice harvest during the winter, but most floated aimlessly from job to job, averaging a dozen changes a year and losing perhaps a third of their time, usually in a city skid row.

Sharp employer practices and primitive living and work conditions made for a rapid turnover of hobo labor. The veteran Frisco tried railroad construction work as a "shovel stiff" but found many disadvantages, including a smelly bunk car, "shirt-rabbits in the blankets," and rye bread greased with sowbelly—"sowbelly with the buttons on too!" Frisco lasted a month before he was fired for "bustin' " the foreman.

Even if he made his winter stake in the harvest or on the railroad extra gang, many a hobo returned to "the stem" (the skid row) in the fall, "rich in suntan and experience" but without funds, as did young Ralph Chaplin, later poet laureate of the I.W.W. The typical hobo was like Frisco, who returned to Los Angeles after one brief job. "The bright lights looked so good after that hard life with the gandies," he said, "I got drunker than a fiddler's bitch and blowed my jack."

There was plenty of help in getting rid of money. The hobo harvester first had to escape the wiles of local bootleggers, gamblers, and especially the prostitutes, who kept pace with the harvest in their mobile "cat wagons." Then there were the professional yeggs, who "harvested the harvesters" on the freights, taking advantage of slow speeds on uphill grades like the Blue Mountain hump out of Pendleton in Oregon or

the Great Northern hump out of Whitefish, Montana, to hijack returning harvest hands. Steve Joy, a hobo known for the glass eye he often pulled out and rapped on the bar for drinks, was once robbed in North Dakota as he headed home from the wheat harvest "with a hundred beans sewed up in 'is pants leg." Three armed thugs made him and four other "harvest buzzards" peel off every stitch and jump from the moving train. Joy picked cinders out of his hide for weeks after limping the ten miles into Fargo in his birthday suit. The local police fixed him up with an old street-cleaner's uniform.

"They can never kill us off the way they have the Injuns," a hobo once told Josiah Flynt philosophically, "they" meaning society, the enemy. But the prediction ignored the forces at work; both hoboes and tramps were doomed. By the middle igao's the oldstyle hobo laborer had gone the way of the buffalo hunter and the stagecoach driver. Farm mechanization drastically reduced the length of the harvest period and the size of the labor force required. Western railroads ceased to haul hobo labor free and were superseded by the automobile, which gave a new flexibility to the itinerant worker. In one area after another, the bindle stiff in his rustic camp by the woods or by the oil fields was replaced by men with families and flivvers, along with the other paraphernalia of permanency. Yet in his own way and his own day, like the sodbuster or the prospector, the hobo, with his marginal, reckless way of life, had been an integral part of the raw, sweaty drama of the West and of the tradition of mobility associated with the frontier.

If the Great Depression of the 1930's again blackened the freights with transients, it was an aberration; these were not the professional tramps and hoboes of an earlier America. And subsequently the automobile, prosperity, and the new railroad technology involving remote-controlled, computerized train operations with infrequent fuel or water stops would combine to all but eliminate the tramp. Men now expressed their escapism, their wanderlust, their yen for speed, and their yearning for an absolute not through the boxcar, but on the highway or through more artificial or introspective channels. An era had ended, and tramps and hoboes, like the steam locomotive itself, became romantic relics out of the historic past, nostalgic memories of a way of life that was no longer possible.

SONGS OF THE ROAD HOBO SIGNS RIDING THE RODS
WITH A-NO. 1

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