

Hoboes, Bindlestiffs and Fruit Tramps

By Mark Wyman

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A. Intro

I think naturalist John Muir's statement is apropos: "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe."

I would put it this way: Problems of today usually have links to the past. This is certainly true in relating difficulties faced by our homeless, often migrant, populations, and conditions of those groups in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The governor of Kansas in 1893 was angered, and dismayed, when he learned how unemployed men were being treated as they traveled around the state. Governor Lorenzo Lewelling knew that there were veritable armies of men coming into Kansas each summer for the wheat harvest. But once the threshing machines fell silent these men were no longer considered important and were treated as not only unimportant, but unneeded, and in the way, unwanted.

Under local laws, Governor Lewelling learned, "thousands of men, guilty of no crime but poverty, intent upon no crime but seeking employment, have languished in the city prisons of Kansas or performed unrequited toil on 'rock piles' as municipal slaves, because ignorance of economic conditions had made us cruel."

He said that police records showed that "sleeping in a box car" was "among the varieties of this heinous crime of being poor," while some courts went so far as to nullify the constitutional guarantee of freedom of movement by ordering men to "leave town." So the governor instructed Kansas police commissioners from then on to stop arresting men simply because they were without work: "Let simple poverty cease to be a crime."

Police actions in Kansas were hardly unusual. Just before Governor Lewelling's "Tramp Circular," the *American Law Review* stated flatly that the vagrant with no home ties, and no means of support, was automatically in a situation in which "what but criminality is to be expected from such a person?"

There was some evidence for that. I have recently been going through Bloomington newspapers for those years after the Civil War and almost every issue carries some report like this:

March 25, 1886 –the Bloomington Weekly Leader:

p. 4 - "Wednesday a tramp stole an overcoat from the residence of Mr. Kenney, on Boon st. There is always a village of tramps outside the limits at the junction of the I.C., I.B. & W. and I.E. & W. railways, and Officers John Moergan and Mug Marilde went out and herded the whole gang, showing them into the city prison at the points of their revolvers. The coat was recovered but the tramps would not 'peach' on the guilty party."

B. The new setting

Since the late Middle Ages, English laws had confronted the issues involved in such cases, and unemployment itself was called a dangerous crime, “the mother of all vice.” English law called a *vagrant* a person having “neither fixed residence or employment.” These legal traditions crossed the ocean, but the state vagrancy laws that multiplied in American states in the late 19th Century did not take into account American realities. Since the railroad had become the major means of travel between cities and states and regions, railroad boxcars became the vehicles for the poor and jobless looking for work outside their own area.

This group was called “hoboes” in the late 19th Century—a term of uncertain birth. Perhaps it came from yelling “Hoe Boy!” at men hoeing crops, or even “Ho! Boy!” to get the attention of some worker. Its origins are lost. But men who were looking for work used the term proudly and rejected being called “tramps,” the older term for vagrants. My mother was a student at the Chicago Art Institute in the ‘Twenties and for an Education class she did a term paper on that city’s Hobo College. Its director gave her this definition: “The hobo works and wanders, the tramp dreams and wanders, and the bum drinks and wanders.” Someone else at the Hobo College said a hobo is “a migratory worker. A tramp is a migratory nonworker. A bum is a stationary nonworker.”

But how could you tell them apart? A key question, then and now: How do you tell the difference between a raggedly-dressed man or woman seeking work—and someone whose main passion is to avoid work? The Bloomington *Weekly Leader* pointed to the difficulties in a news item in 1886:

“A tramp who was stealing a ride on the freight train [that was] wrecked at Chenoa yesterday, worked heroically to rescue the injured employed. It transpired that he was temporarily unfortunate, and had been compelled to ‘beat’ his way from point to point. A good many of these wanderers are of the same class, and are entitled to sympathy and aid, but it is so difficult to determine the facts in regard to individuals that even the naturally kind-hearted are often at their wit’s ends to know what to do. It is a true saying that one half the world has very little idea how the other half lives. We can all afford to be very charitable towards unfortunates of any class.”

Certainly the police could not tell the difference. And so it was common for all to be treated as tramps, or vagrants, or criminals. Jack London had this experience in 1894 when he came into Niagara Falls City riding in a boxcar, then was arrested by the police. The next morning in police court he watched hoboes and tramps all being sentenced—each one, with no exceptions—to thirty days of hard labor for vagrancy. One was a teamster, from Lockport, out of work since the Depression that began the year before, who had traveled over to Niagara looking for work. As the judge left the courtroom he turned and asked the Lockport man “Why did you quit your job?” The teamster replied, “Your Honor, isn’t that a funny question to ask?”—and so the judge added another thirty days to his sentence. Jack London concluded that “The machine of justice was grinding smoothly.”

Hoboes beating their way inside, underneath, or hanging on to boxcars were often responding to a recruitment cry for harvest labor, especially across the West where new irrigation had transformed vast areas—wheat everywhere, but also apples, berries and hops in the

Northwest, sugar beets in the Central Plains, cotton across Texas and in Arizona, and a vast array of citrus and other fruits in California. By 1900 California alone produced half of America's citrus fruits, grapes, plums, and peaches; and 95 per cent of its apricots, almonds, walnuts, and olives.

To create this Garden West required a considerable investment, and usually labor costs were the only expenses over which a grower had much control. Because of the enormous investment costs you had to have a successful harvest, so you had to have plenty of harvesters. "Tons of peaches are dropping on the ground for want of pickers," the Fresno newspaper reported in August 1907, adding that "One man in Fowler estimates that fifty tons of fruit have gone to waste because he can't secure fruit pickers." Such stories were legion. In 1910 in Spokane, Washington, the report was that "fully \$2,000 worth of strawberries rotted on the ground . . . due to a lack of labor to pick the fruit...."

And so they sent out word—come West for good wages, or perhaps simply, come for work. But the stories that drew the men and women to help with the harvest usually were silent on job and camp conditions—and these were often pretty bad.

A California commission was struck with this in 1913 after hops pickers rioted at the Durst hops ranch at Wheatland, near Sacramento. The 2,800 pickers were a diverse crew of men, women, and children from more than a dozen immigrant groups, plus American hoboes. First: the promised wages were cut; water was inadequate despite the temperatures of 110 degrees in the shade; and then there was the sanitation: nine toilets for 2800 people, each consisting of a crude box over a two-foot deep hole, most with a single board nailed across for seating. One man died quickly of heat prostration; dysentery, malaria, and typhoid were present.

After two days the workers rioted, and in the resulting melee two workers were killed plus the district attorney and a deputy who had arrived to quiet things down.

Newspapers blamed a labor agitator—but a state investigator called Wheatland "a spontaneous reaction against intolerable conditions. . ." And when the state began investigating labor camps around California, the commissioner concluded that the conditions at Wheatland were "no exception."

As a farm wife told the California State Agricultural Society, "Make the employment of men brutal and you must depend upon a brutalized class. . . ."

All this was part of the world of the hobo. It was a world that our own Carl Sandburg knew. In summer 1897 he hopped a freight leaving Galesburg heading for the Great Plains. For several months he threshed wheat, washed dishes, chopped wood, picked fruit, and worked on a railroad section gang. He later wrote about the variety of fellow riders in the boxcars and in the "jungles" where they often stayed—including one fellow boxcar rider from Brooklyn who told him "A real tramp can't even think about work, and it gives him a pain in the ass to talk about it." A brakeman slugged Sandburg in the jaw when he refused to hand over 25 cents, and when Sandburg hopped down from the boxcar in McCook, Nebraska, a policeman confronted him: "We don't want the likes of you in this town. You get back on that train."

The reality was that harvest hands had to be found, and then kept until everything was finished—which sometimes meant that other matters sometimes had to be ignored. This was made clear in a mid-Twenties committee hearing in Washington when an Eastern congressman

told of hearing that Southwestern growers sometimes stole their Mexican workers' shoes at night to stop them from running away. Was this true? A Texas cotton grower answered:

“I have seen them unload parties at the tents, and some fellows would borrow the Mexicans' shoes and pants until morning. Mr. Chairman, it is just a question of self-defense. Go to the border and bring 50 Mexicans, and it will cost you \$600. That is not unusual. . . . You have got 200 bales of cotton worth \$200 a bale, and you owe the banker. . . . You want to buy a good automobile. You need a lot of things. That is how it works. In our country cotton is made within a period of four or five days. . . . You have got to hold 50 or 75 Mexicans, costing you \$600, to hold them over from week to week. What would you do? Just exactly what we do. You would have somebody there who would not sleep. You would not let the Mexicans leave.”

C. Today

A federal investigator working in those years wrote: There is a reserve labor force “because there must be.” Well, we have a reserve labor force today, in Illinois and everywhere. Large numbers, of course, are undocumented immigrants—many “driven by the whip of economic necessity,” which dictates that you will take any job and put up with any conditions. Those conditions can still be harsh—it is not many decades ago that the Farm Bureau opposed a federal law requiring toilets to be provided in the fields for workers.

It is no surprise that many of these workers wind up homeless. And there are many persons in McLean County who lack a permanent home for other reasons. The director of Bloomington's Project Oz speaks of the many homeless persons who are in tents around our community in warmer weather, or packed into apartments in winter. For most of us, they are out of sight, out of mind.

Class warfare to talk about this? Undoubtedly that was charged in 1893 when the Kansas governor said that ignorance of economic conditions made us cruel, and he ordered police to stop jailing men simply because they had no visible means of support. Our hobo past still speaks to us.

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A reflection by Rev. Jackie Clement

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As Mark says, our hobo past is still with us, but the names have changed. Those who pick our fruit and harvest our crops are now MSFWs: migrant and seasonal farm workers. Given the far reaching fields of corn and soy beans here in Central Illinois, I wondered that there were no MSFWs here. I figured corn and soybeans must be planted and harvested mechanically. What I forgot was that migrant workers are invisible in our society.

Indeed, Mclean County has quite a large population of migrant and seasonal farm workers, some single men and women, but mostly families, who come from Texas along the Mexico border, to

prepare the soil, de-tassel the corn and harvest it. By and large they are US citizens of Mexican descent, and there are a few who come from Mexico, returning at the end of the harvest. Undoubtedly there are undocumented workers as well. From mid-June through mid-August they live in the dorms at ISU and work for companies like Monsanto. And they are largely invisible.

The conditions under which they live and work have changed little from those who did the work 100 years ago. More of it is mechanized, certainly. And living in the ISU dorms isn't substandard housing, but living at ISU is brand new because their previous housing in Champaign had no sanitation facilities and was not somewhere we would consider spending even one night let alone bring our children to. And, of course, the cost of staying in those dorms is deducted from their pay. Most have little to no education, and little to no access to healthcare. These are our fellow citizens, yet we rarely even see them.

They are among the working poor. But there are many others who are homeless, not because they follow the work, but for many other reasons including addiction, mental illness and, simply, a tanked economy in which too many people live one paycheck away from disaster and their last pay check ran out.

The most common definition of being homeless is living on the street or in an emergency shelter, but it is broader than that. It also includes people living in places "not meant for human habitation," such as in cars, parks and abandoned buildings; those fleeing from domestic violence, or waiting for foster care.

Who do you picture when you think of the homeless? A middle aged man, ill-kempt, begging for spare change? An elderly woman pushing all her belongings in a shopping cart? Change that picture now to families with school-age children, to teens fleeing abusive parents and young mothers fleeing abusive marriages. In McLean County alone we have over 200 homeless students, and those are just the children who attend school. Many more do not.

So what are the religious implications of homelessness in this society? Well, justice is always a religious issue. Caring for the poor is always a religious issue.

But so too is living side by side with those who are all but invisible, those who, when they are seen at all, are seen as expendable. Did you know that last summer, in the space of three weeks, two homeless men were k on the streets of Bloomington?

What is the human cost for walking by those in trouble? What is the spiritual cost for averting our eyes?