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Labor's unsettled vagrancy: The rise and fall of the hobo labor movement, 1865-1929

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LABOR'S UNSETTLED VAGRANCY: THE RISE AND FALL
OF THE HOBO LABOR MOVEMENT, 1865-1929

An Abstract of a Thesis
Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Laura Kathryn Carpenter
University of Northern Iowa
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ABSTRACT

The historiography of the hobo labor movement analyzes the impact of collective activities on the performance of traveling work with particular attention paid to the responsive organizing of the International Brotherhood Welfare Association (IBWA) from 1865 to 1929. Through the application of social theory, the inclusion of representative objects from the National Hobo Museum, narratives of hobos, government-sponsored investigations, and the consideration of prior scholarly works, hoboing nonwork is best understood as an anti-modern, reactionary counterculture to the working-class that managed to deflect the drastic changes in class and economy at the turn of the twentieth century until its gradual demise leading up to the present day. The rise and fall of the hobo class consciousness originated in localized jungles in the rural Midwest, gradually shifting to the city with the organization of the IBWA in 1905. By investigating the institutional history of the IBWA, hoboing nonwork is given a proper narrative of significance not only as a lifestyle of subversiveness and deviance, but with an additional narrative of political activism and agent of change. Consequently, hoboing nonwork at its height was inevitably infused with larger blue-collar politics that stripped the lifestyle's identity of class struggle and forced the culture back to its rural roots. This is a story of local origin and national significance. With hope, readers will better understand the American hobo as a purposeful citizen, honest earner, remembered renegade in labor's story, and by-product to American post-modernity.

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This Study by: Laura Kathryn Carpenter

Entitled: Labor's Unsettled Vagrancy: The Rise and Fall of the Hobo Labor Movement,
1865-1929

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirements for the
Degree Master of Arts

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To the great wanderers of past and present.



Carpenter, Laura. “Steamtrain Way.” Photograph. 2019.

*Thank you to the people of Britt, Iowa
and the volunteers of the National Hobo Museum.*



Carpenter, Laura. "Hobo Jungle Freight: Britt, IA." Photograph. 2019.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | PAGE |
|---|------|
| INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| Method | 5 |
| Literature | 7 |
| Britt | 14 |
| CHAPTER 1 THE HOBO: COUNTERCULTURAL ORIGINS, 1865-1929 | 19 |
| The Craft of Hoboing Nonwork | 21 |
| Economic Selfhood | 26 |
| Individualism: Freedom of the Rails | 31 |
| Josiah Flynt, Jack London, and James Eads How | 36 |
| The IBWA | 44 |
| CHAPTER 2 “SIZE-UP”: THE RISE OF THE HOBOING NONWORKERS, 1865-1900s | 51 |
| Historical Origins | 54 |
| Outcasts in the Jungle: Class Formation in the Gilded Age | 57 |
| Britt: Rural Origins | 67 |
| Downturn in the 1890s | 72 |
| Criminalization of Vagrancy | 78 |
| Rural Component | 83 |
| CHAPTER 3 “PINCHED”: THE FALL OF THE HOBO LABOR MOVEMENT, 1905-1929 | 85 |
| “Pinched” | 91 |
| How’s Hobos: Progressive Priorities | 98 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| “Of the Hobos, By the Hobos, and For the Hobos”: The International Brotherhood Welfare Association (IBWA) | 104 |
| Philosophy and Tactics | 109 |
| <i>The Hobo News</i> | 116 |
| Downfall of the IBWA..... | 121 |
| CONCLUSION..... | 127 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 133 |
| APPENDIX A..... | 139 |
| APPENDIX B | 140 |
| APPENDIX C | 141 |
| APPENDIX D..... | 142 |
| APPENDIX E | 143 |
| APPENDIX F..... | 144 |
| APPENDIX G..... | 145 |
| APPENDIX H..... | 146 |
| APPENDIX I | 147 |
| APPENDIX J | 148 |
| APPENDIX K..... | 149 |
| APPENDIX L | 150 |
| APPENDIX M | 151 |

INTRODUCTION

The topic of hobohemia within the context of labor history underlies a unique counterculture adjacent to the American working-class.¹ Poised as unwaged, casual nonworkers prone to traveling to wherever jobs were available, the American hobo as a traveling nonworker once subjected a labor movement sympathetic to the unemployed and homeless people infamous for its obscure lifestyle of both work and leisure. Characterized as primarily white, male, low-skilled workers, these people managed to balance a specific work ethic with the yearning to travel from 1865-1929. With the privileges that the rails afforded to them, hoboeing job seekers hopped across the railways in search of temporary work and associated wanderlust. Though the exact nature of the hobo cannot be determined with lack of preceding evidence, this thesis seeks to discuss the idea of hoboeing as both a lifestyle of work and leisure while uncovering an identity that made work separate from people's lives against the forces of society that were constituting the value of work and status to the American identity.

The fact that the hobos did gather, form a consciousness based upon elements of subversion and defiance led hobos to proclaim a distinct economic selfhood and individualism. The idea of hoboeing is represented through *The Hobo News*, the International Brotherhood Welfare Association (IBWA), and the National Hobo Museum and through the stories of Josiah Flynt, Jack London, and James Eads How. Readers will better understand the personification of class struggle through the social investigations of

¹ The term "hobohemia" is the commonly used language to describe the hobo lifestyle, characterized as a fringe group of society made up of hobos. These bohemians lived in camps (defined culturally as "jungles") alongside railways and run-down urban districts in which hobos congregated.

Flynt and London. As the lifestyle began to amplify at the turn of the century, hobo colleges in their early days, also known as mutual aid societies, offered places for lodging, hot meals, and education. The story of How introduces the significance of the IBWA as a place for the jobless and impoverished to build a platform for social politics related to issues of unemployment and homelessness. Organizing the unorganized formed a working people's association that called for reform and government action to address the problem of emerging modern-day social issues in response to growing class inequality and struggle in the emerging industrial nation. However, in doing so, How hindered and toppled the hobo's ability to achieve and proclaim economic selfhood and individualism by building a political platform around the defining elements of what made hoboing unique, leading to the inevitable degradation of American hobo culture.

Previous scholarship on the interworking of the IBWA argued its significance for developing a mutual aid society to educate unemployed job seekers. However, no study explores the nature of the organization's lobbying from nonworkers in rural origins to workers of urban significance. Furthermore, little scholarship is dedicated to understanding the nature, power, and structure of IBWA as a major labor movement against the backdrop of similar movements at its height. Exploration into the IBWA as working-class organizing attempts to bring the social history of the hoboing perspective into the study of organized labor. This thesis argues the idea of hoboing introduced a social grouping of nonworking travelers who inducted labor activism and responsive organizing against a modernized labor market. Farming and rural labor no longer sustained the need for temporary work, therefore the traveler turned to wage work in the

city for assured employment. Such labor unrest illuminated a repent for validation and legitimacy as a major working-class counterculture. By both analyzing the institutional history of the IBWA and the larger social and cultural history of the industrial working classes at the time, hoboining nonworkers are best understood as the preexisting development of social welfare and a by-product of the early labor movement.

Research on hobo history previously argued hoboining men as reinventors of homelessness as a subculture of lower classes during the advancement of industry and the expansion of the railroad. It's critical to explore the economic and social phenomena that elicited this unique traveling life to understand not only the economic and social conditions at the time but also how such forces influence culture and lifestyle. Equally as important are the efforts to challenge conceptions of nonworkers as "homeless bums" and reveal the defining image of the hoboining nonworker: a transgressor and deviator of lower-class America. Furthermore, by analyzing the impact of IBWA organizing activities on the performance of traveling work, it's clear that hoboining is a resistive response to national transformations of a capitalist economy.

Furthermore, the story of the James How and the IBWA suggest two important points to make in the argument for the hobo's rise and fall. By 1905, the growing presence of hobo colleges in major U.S. cities such as St. Louis suggest the growing sophistication of collective debate and discussion from the rural hobo jungle to the IBWA. The hobo had a story that drew in workers who faced similar jobless circumstances. Coupled with the death of How and the IBWA's radicalized philosophy by the late 1920s, the fall of hoboining seriously questioned the novelty and longevity of its

unique nonworking elements and culture. Consequently, the nonworkers returned to their rural roots where their activism turned into continued celebration to this day. The context of emerging itinerant work and studying the economic forces at play in a modernized industrial society provides insight into lower-class responses to trade, industry and westward expansion, and the consequences of those responses. Efforts to uncover the significance of the IBWA will re-infuse labor's story into the hobo historiography and vice versa.

This thesis is not only relevant to hobo studies as a prospective subject of interest to both labor and social history but also is significant for uncovering additional dimensions within working-class culture. Moreover, hobo history is significant to better understand the connections between homelessness, unemployment, migration, and the rest of society. Such movement eventually led the wandering worker to the city, where labor ignited a series of class action that inspired a generation of workers to call for government intervention into the lives of American workers. This work delves deeper into the pillars of society, the emergence of temporary work within the labor market, the surplus of migrant workers in labor force, and an open-ended continuation of study to understand the first traveling nonworkers as originating in white, lower-class, unskilled America.

The guide to the language used for this thesis is important to define the terms that are commonly used in this work. The terminology used describes the important distinction between nonwork and work. 'Nonwork' is described as a part of life that does not include work related to employment or occupation. This term is used to describe a

nonworker as someone who not engaged in paid wage employment. For this thesis, ‘hoboing nonwork’ is used in association with the cultural lifestyle of American hoboing, a way of life grounded in both non-wage work and leisure. ‘Nonwork’ derives from the context of the antebellum pre-industrial economy that allowed for agriculture to remain separate from the industrial labor market. On the other hand, ‘work’ is used to describe wage earning employment. This term is used to understand the context of the emerging industrial economy where wage labor is determined by the relationship between a worker and employer in the labor market. ‘Unemployment’ and ‘homelessness’ is understood as the social problems associated within the urban landscape and industrial capitalism. However, the term ‘job seekers’ refers to workers who are unemployed in the industrial labor market.

Method

The methodological approach to this research is to enclose on a specific hobo social movement of labor advocacy through the analysis of social issues related to unemployment and homelessness from 1865 to 1929. Beginning with exploration into how the changing labor market at the turn of the twentieth century, the idea of hoboing is distinguished through a specific framework of the hobo’s most subversive elements: a work ethic built from a precise economic selfhood and individualism. The ability for the hobo to self-advocate and self-sustain a lifestyle of both work and leisure originates in the rural communities of nonworking cash laborers. The evidence utilized to construct the rural framework to understanding how hoboing originated comes from local newspaper articles of wandering activity in the rural Midwest, including reporting from Minnesota,

North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, Kansas, Wisconsin and Illinois. This evidence is found on the “Secret Society of Internet Hobos”, a collection of newspaper findings from as early as 1890 about local sightings of hobo-like activity. Furthermore, the town of Britt and the National Hobo Museum serves as a key example for making the connection between the rural communities and the urban settings. The Panic of 1893 set the stage for a mass movement of people to the rails with the spike of rapid unemployment and collective action. Analysis behind this decade of mass movement branches from the secondary works of Todd Depastino, Frank Higbie, Jackson Lears, and Michael McGerr. The shift to significance behind IBWA organizing will use letters, postcards, literature, propaganda imagery, local newspaper articles, museum collections, *The Hobo News*, and autobiographies invoke a colorful, often savage portrait of the traveling life from its rural origins to urban demise.

The National Hobo Museum in Britt, Iowa is the center for hobo history and culture. Located at the intersection of several railway lines, the museum continues to value and promote the heritage of the hobo. Most significantly, the town of Britt is the epicenter of the hobo’s origin and roots of gatherings for 120 years and counting. By using the museum’s collections as sources of evidence, the local origins of the hobo labor movement are best understood through the study of physical artifacts and intangible attributes of the collection. In addition, the collection is the best source of evidence behind the representation of hobo identity and culture. Exploring present-day gatherings in Britt uncovers how organizing shifted towards political advocacy in the city and shifted back to the Midwest as a preserved meaning of celebration. Questions remain

over how the museum's mission preserves the unique elements of hobo culture. The museum's continued efforts to make the hobo as someone that everyone loves romanticizes the lifestyle to the extent that the elements of subversiveness and defiance are essentially eliminated. Furthermore, the commercialization and profiteering of hobo identity and culture actually tangles the true representation of the hoboing nonworker.

By introducing a new interpretation of the IBWA as a major facet of the labor movement, readers will understand hoboing travelers as not only nonworkers, but also as political activists and agents of change. Identifying the philosophy and main tactics used by IBWA to protect the interest of members suggests that not only did the organization recruit members with non-hoboing roots, but also suggests the IBWA was initially not all that radical. Inserting the IBWA within the context of the larger labor movement of trade unionism amongst the progressive reform movement indicates a clear definition of the organization's philosophy and tactics. The application of *The Hobo News* as counterpublic message explores how the organization used the hobo's elements of economic selfhood and individualism as main strategies to showcase a political platform, which remains untouched and untapped by most secondary works.

Literature

The historiography of the American hobo largely remains blemished and underdeveloped. In 1923, Nels Anderson, a prominent sociologist, pioneered a new wave of sociocultural studies dedicated to understanding hobos, urban culture, and work culture. Much of Anderson's exploration stood at the forefront of capturing a frontier that was beginning to vanish by the late 1920s. Anderson's published *The Hobo: The*

Sociology of the Homeless Man in 1923. Though this is classified as a primary source, his work pioneered participant observation as a research method to reveal the features of a society and was the first field research monograph of the famed Chicago School of Sociology, marking a significant milestone in the discipline of Sociology. It is worth noting. Here are the customs and class distinctions, language, songs, morals and intellectual life of this body of men who, for widely varying reasons, chose the migratory life.² Anderson is the first to place ethnographic information against the context of history to put the hobo into historical perspective. Thus, Anderson perpetuated a series of early scholarship dedicated to researching the social and political understandings of early hoboing. This set the basis for understanding the hobo as the rural, unskilled worker turned social activist, which is interpreted by historians that followed.

Daniel Rodgers' *Worth Ethic in Industrial America* (1974) is a wide-ranging look upon how American worth ethic developed from the Protestant Reformation to pre-industrial capitalism through the embedment of the history of work in America. Historiographically, Rodgers's book is significant because it helps bridge what was before his time an elusive gap between the history of ideas and culture and the history of work. Labor history grew into a robust field with great focus on working-class culture, work habits, and belief systems. Rodger contributes an understanding of the modern work ethic in the emerging industrial order, distinguishing between what constituted work and what constituted nonwork – an important distinction to be made between conventional wage

² Nels Anderson, *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1923).

work and the hobo's defiance to such.³ By contemplating how work progressed and how hoboing ceased to follow, the defining elements of what made hoboing subversive and defiant to modernity reinforce how the culture managed establish its own economic selfhood and individualism.

Todd Despastino, *Citizen Hobo* (2003) and Frank Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts* (2003) are the two most notable secondary works within the larger historiography. Johnathon Alexander's *Unruly Rhetorics* (2018) resourcefully captures the entirety of James Eads How's uncovered life and significance, revealing not only the life of How but also the IBWA. These sources are probably considered the most scholarly written accounts and research of hobo history to date. This is largely due to much of the historiography comprised of mostly personal accounts from lived experiences in the forms of memoirs and autobiographies, such as Steam Train Maury's *Tales of the Iron Road* (1994), Jack London's *The Road* (1907), Josiah Flynt's *Tramping with Tramps* (1899), and Jim Tully's *Beggars of Life* (1924). All four writers form a similar interpretation of hobos establishing collective political voices through subcultural practices. However, the absent narrative of the IBWA's significance and its role throughout the establishment of the hobo as a legitimate political actor leaves a large gap in the existing historiography. These historians incorrectly label the IBWA as insignificant to labor's cause and also incorrectly distinct IBWA history as part of IWW

³ David Rodgers, *Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1859-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

history. Additionally, the significance of labor journalism remains too vague within the evidence to support such interpretations.

Todd Depastino writes the most current, creditable account argument within the historiography. He writes a less romanticized narration of American homelessness and citizenship that highlights a gradual shift of these social issues becoming major social reform issues throughout the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.

Hobohemia, Depastino argues, "Was a serious challenge to a nation guided by reigning middle-class beliefs in private nuclear families, moderate domestic consumption and steady work", and while welfare capitalism tackled poverty, it also helped to impose social conformity.⁴ Depastino rehomes a central focus on the desperation of contemporary urban homelessness, with its roots in family breakdown, abuse, addiction and mental illness. His work refuses to equate homelessness with deviancy, though characterizing hoboing as form of deviancy. He argues, "While the masculine romance of the road persists among middle-class white men as a means for expressing their disaffection with the family breadwinning imperative," he concludes, "the streets provide the nonconforming homeless with an abject counterculture that is at once part freedom and part prison."⁵ American hoboing is put through the context of class struggle. In doing so, he challenges the imagery of male whiteness as a counternarrative about how even white males struggled against the backdrop of inequality and alienation within capitalist

⁴ Todd Depastino, *Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 4.

⁵ Depastino, *Citizen Hobo*, 5.

society, thus properly characterizing America's first migrant workers as white males from the lower class.

Combining incisive cultural criticism with the practicality of a more traditional labor history, Frank Higbie illustrates how these so-called marginal figures were in fact integral to the industrial community, "whose movements were structured by the geography of job opportunity by seasonal change".⁶ He intersects temporary, migrant work into the story of labor history through the application of life histories, the investigations of social reformers, and the organizing materials of the IWW to present a complex and compelling portrait of hobo life. Intertwining literary, historical, and theoretical representations of the hobo, he explores how riders and writers imagined alternative ways that working-class people could use mobility to create powerful dissenting voices outside of fixed hierarchical political organizations. Once again, Higbie is another writer who extracts the hardships of the road from romanticized literature to uncover the often violent and dangerous working conditions and the "transient mutuality" that enabled survival and resistance on the road.⁷ This is a prime example of writing history from the bottom up. For many, the cultivation of transient mutuality encouraged migrant workers to help one another; to participate in resistance against harsh treatment, low wages, or poor conditions; to cultivate distinctive notions about manhood, solidarity,

⁶ Frank Tobias Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts: Hobo Workers and Community in the American Midwest 1880-1930* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 208.

⁷ "Transit mutuality" is a concept introduced by Higbie as an ethic that enabled survival and resistance on the road. Higbie argues that migrant's reliance on "transit mutuality" was a sign of their social marginalization. If one hobo shared their food with those without, they did so with the expectation that the favor would be returned. Laborers were in need of their transit communities to survive, forming a collective of a shared, lived experience.

and community; and to articulate a distinctive kind of workingman's radical “philosophy”.⁸ His work is a prime example of how historians use personal narrative to construct their presentation of history. However, Higbie’s “transient mutuality” argument mentions nothing of the IBWA and its resistive politics. Though Higbie does fixate hoboing into a distinct class of workers, his work falls short in capturing the totality of the hobo’s resistive organizing from his research to narration.

Johnathon Alexander pioneered the research behind the life of James Eads How and the rhetoric he formed around issues of homelessness and unemployment. Alexander’s work is about making ordinary people’s voices hard, pivotal in How’s story as a millionaire turned hobo who used his fortune to amplify the voices of honest, hardworking Americans. Rather than viewing the hobo labor movement in its entirety, Alexander skillfully dials back the scope of the movement to understand how individuals and collectives are driven towards action. His section on How is the first of its kind, attesting to the significance of the IBWA in labor’s story. Most significantly, he focuses on how *The Hobo News* was central to the IBWA’s collective efforts in circulating propaganda imagery and recruiting members sympathetic to the cause. He points to the possibility that unruliness, more than just one of many rhetorical strategies within political activity, is constitutive of the political itself. Though How and the IBWA constitute just one section of his work, Alexander properly places the rhetoric of protest into the legacy of the IBWA to understand its origins and eventual downfall.

⁸ Higbe, *Indispensable Outcasts*, 199.

While these writers acknowledged past attempts to organize for the sake of mutual aid, not one account delves into the inter-ideological workings of the IBWA as a major facet of the American labor movement. Unintentionally, the narratives of similar labor movements, such as the International Workers of the World (IWW), tend to overbear the pivotal activity of the IBWA. Previous scholars misinterpreted the actions of early nonwork organizing to be strictly education and cooperation based rather than perceived as direct political action. With a major shift in hobo, nonwork identity and the rise of vagrancy throughout the early 1900s, readers will better understand the traveling nonworker as a major advocator for forcing social welfare and government intervention into the urban policy agenda while ushering in a new era of progressive reform and political theory. Therefore, this thesis propels important historiographical and political implications to correct this wrong by bringing forward the historical value of the hoboing, nonworking labor force into the context of rising working-class collective action.

The first chapter outlines the subversive, defiant origins of hoboing nonwork with the application of the history of work ethic and social theory to explain the emergence of the nonworking labor force against the rise of a wage working industrial economy. The understanding of hobos as laborers and nonworkers introduces the lifestyle of both work and leisure from a class-based perspective. The second chapter explores the rise of the leisurely nonwork in the rural Midwest through the investigations of Josiah Flynt and Jack London. From the jungles to the city, reasons behind the nonworker's move towards urbanity are explained as a response to changes in transportation, urbanization, the criminalization of vagrancy, and the evolving job market. The third and final chapter

introduces James Eads How and the collective activities behind the IBWA, the organization's philosophy and tactics, delving deep into *The Hobo News* as the last remaining evidence of the IBWA's footprint. Concluding the rise and fall narrative of hoboing subversiveness does not intend to end the legacy of the hoboing nonworker, but rather give a sense of how and why hobo culture ebbed and flowed after a century of rapid change and expansion. Let's begin and wind-up in Britt, Iowa, a place where hobos of past and present call home.

Britt

What remains in Britt lingers a cultural representation of American hoboing. Caught up in the captivation of parades, potlucks, and fireside chats, the sequestered roadside town of Britt hosts the sincere communal effort to correct the misconceptions of homelessness and vagrancy.⁹ Located between the crossfires of the Canadian Pacific and abandoned Chicago-Northwestern rail lines, hobos still gather, share stories, and hop the rails.¹⁰ Downward to South Main Street stands the National Hobo Museum and cultural institution that houses centuries-worth of evidence that proved hoboing lingered in America's most remote places. Photos of men making mulligan stew in the 1930s and 1940s reinforce the tenacity and significance of labor's rural component.¹¹ What remains at the museum is evidence that the authentic cultural genuineness of the lifestyle preserved itself in the rural Midwest while the larger politics of homelessness and unemployment remained in the city.

⁹ See Appendix C.

¹⁰ Carroll Last, "Iowa Rail Lines," *Iowa DOT*, accessed October 14, 2019, <https://iowadot.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=95a7af3a70f948d3b0dc40805e51805a>.

¹¹ See Appendix D.

Understanding the gradual movement of hobos and related unemployed, homeless workers from its origin to the city proposes a bold and innovative approach to writing a history that deeply engages and explores the meaning of place and home. By analyzing Iowa's abandoned railroad lines and current lines in use, the visualization of place, space, and time exposes critical consumption of spatial history into historical research. People of every place and time deserve a history and the unique experiences of the hobo's place demonstrates that history from a local level provides a vital link for understanding the relation between immediate experience and the metamorphosis of the world at large. With the current encompassing forces and global sensibilities of economy and class struggle, this thesis advocates the power of local history to revivify the individual, the concrete, and the particular around objects, institutions, and movement directly experienced. The story of Britt is part of the hobo's accession in labor's story. Much of the significance of Britt serves to explain civil society's reaction to the presence of the hobo's rising influence at the end of the nineteenth century. Beginning in Illinois and finding permanent placement in Iowa, the evidence behind this shift describes the public's perception of tramps and homelessness.¹² Narrowing focus on Britt and the National Hobo Museum analyzes how cultural institutions project a mission of representing cultural heritage, distinguishing itself from the politics and economics, and in effort to preserve the lasting celebration of community identity.

What role do museums play in the construction of identity? Museums lie at the center of these debates, their collections, and the presentation and interpretation of these

¹² "Hobo Story a Hoax," *The Saint Paul Globe*, June 19, 1899.

collections, being inextricably linked to cultural identity. The National Hobo Museum may be the epicenter of the hoboing heritage; however, question remains over how the museum defines the hoboing identity and how that explanation overturns the hobo's subversive elements of selfhood and economic individualism. Exploring of the museum's collection will identify the motives and reasoning for what objects were acquisitioned and for what purposes. Through the use of the objects in exhibition, a greater sense of the narrative projected by the museum will assist in the understanding of what role the museum played in the narration of the hobo culture.

The first chapter is an anti-modernist, pre-industrial conception of hoboing as a nonworking counterculture in contrast to an emerging wage-working industrial society at the end of the nineteenth century. Whether hoboing was a means of problem solving, being marginalized, or an act of resistance to the dominate culture, there is an assumed mainstream, dominate order against which the counterculture exists. Chapter 2 traces the macro-setting for which hoboing's rural origins emerge as a major countercultural force against American society's transformation into an urban-industrial powerhouse. The final chapter dives deep into the micro-city interworking of how progressive reformist James Eads How reframed the position of hoboing in relation to work in society and took its characteristics of homelessness and unemployment to the extreme. Through the rise and fall of political agency, American hoboing is best understood as an absorbed collective response of the working-class to solving problems pertaining to unemployment and homelessness through an inevitable mobilization of countercultural devastation.

Similar to the blue-collar commandeering of the traveler's character and individuality, academic historians have fixed the hobo into the larger image of the wage-earning worker. Aside from the fact that the social identity of hoboing was politicized to degree of working-class radicalism, questions remain over why the hobo identity was commandeered and for what purposes. This thesis attempts to answer the question: along the streets of large metropolitan centers, was hoboing really mean to be politicized or was the personified image of homelessness and unemployment stolen from vagrancy's cultural prominence by the larger blue-collar class struggle? At what point was the traveler's rhetoric pulled from networks of association from which these discourses arose? Is this the cause for the fall of hoboing and the explanation for the persistence of hobo cultural momentum in Iowa?

With hope, this historical mend will broaden the identity of the American hobo by tracing nonworking labor from the regional economy of the countryside to the city and revering back to local roots. This scholarship is part of a much larger exploration that expands upon the unsung narrative of hobos as white men, subversive nonworkers, and economic transgressors. However, there are limitations to personifying the complete image of the traveler. Further investigation is needed to capture the confidently assured existence of female and African American hobos. Scarcity of evidence pertaining to the absence of female and African American hobos impedes the full mobilized portrait of hoboing, further stiffening the identity of the hobo as primarily white, unskilled, male workers. Based upon what little evidence remains, hobos remained advocates for the umbrellaing social life of the traveler's position in society. However, this work uses the

evidence that remains to explain the similar conditions experienced by the larger working-class. Stories written about local history are subject to local history narrative, which highlights both the challenges and opportunities for hobo history to express its dignity and righteousness into historical consciousness. The hobo's story cements into a bottom-up history, bares a countercultural class divide, and unfortunately clinches to the advocacy of IBWA. Let's set the record straight.

CHAPTER 1

THE HOBO: COUNTERCULTURAL ORIGINS, 1865-1929

The American hobo once existed as a by-product of economic destitution and anti-modernity. Little is known of its origins. To this day the absence of evidence behind the culture's confirmation of its post-Civil War existence limits the ability to speak of who and what the hobo was and where the hobo came from. Alternatively, the idea of hoboing can be understood in contrast with labor values and practices that contributed to the modern American work ethic and identity that emerged from both industrialization and Progressive Era reform. This term at first had been derogatory, then reclaimed merit, and now serves as a title that evokes a mythology of "bindlestiffs" and rail riders. How and why did this unique culture degrade as a subversive, defiant testament to the work forces that did not conform to the rise of the industrial economy? The origins of hoboing are native to the elements of economic selfhood and individualism that defined this specific lifestyle as defiant to the established economic system and institutions of the market economy. By weighing the progression and development of the American work ethic through centuries of changing tradition and philosophy, the idea of hoboing as a subversive and defiant lifestyle of work and leisure is convincing of a countercultural challenge to both labor and consumerism at the turn of the 20th century.

This chapter outlines the elements that made hobo economic selfhood and individualism fundamentally subversive and principally disorderly in the pre-industrial era. Hoboing is not precisely defined by the wage-earning work that elicited from the turbulent process of industrialization following the Civil War. Rather, hoboing is defined

as a pre-industrial freedom of nonwork that capitalized on economically independent farmers and tradesmen who defended the cause of a worker's freedom against the forces that edged out self-employed peoples under the pressures of capitalist economic and technological change.

The rise and fall of the American hobohemia adamantly characterizes the ethos and aspirations of the hobo counterculture through a well-defined era of targeted labor issues in an urban-industrial society. Since the aftermath of the Civil War, vagrant work gradually established a strict labor class that did not formally reflect the worker but distinguished an extension of variance with the larger working-class. Hobohemia is understood as both a lifestyle of lustrous adventure and economic necessity. Ted Conover, a traveler in the 1980s, stated, "I understood that some men did it professionally, and I grew up with a romantic vision of hobos as renegades, conscientious objectors to the nine-to-five work world, men who defined convention and authority to find freedom on the open road."¹³ Indeed, the hobo was a worker, but did not reflect typical American industrial work in its entirety. Their labor was sought by farmers at harvest time, which supplied these men with seasonal work during the slack season.¹⁴ The hobo defined labor as this idea that work was as a dream of success and a faithful sense of fulfillment, but yet hoboing established its own economic selfhood and individualism that questioned the centrality of work in the modern American identity.

¹³ Ted Conover, *Rolling Nowhere* (New York: The Viking Press, 1981).

¹⁴ "Old-Time Hobo Joins Dodo in Usedtobe Land," *The Bismarck Tribune*, March 6, 1920.

Yes, hoboing elicited from the understanding of “getting by” as a laborer with a self-sustainable living based upon a precise economic role.¹⁵ Their habitual standard of living relied on a specific cultural outlook that emphasized mobility, community, and impulse. Over the years, public opinion assisted with the defining image of the hobo. An editorial in 1918 stated, “Then, in them days, anyone who saw a hobo said ‘bum,’ that’s all. Well, times have changed. And to understand the change you must know the difference between a hobo and a plain tramp. A hobo is a guy who works when there is work is to be got. A tramp never works.”¹⁶ Though their traditional style of work extends outside the mainstream, their statement of purpose to the system cannot be underemphasized. With the gradual sophistication of the hobo nonworks to organize alongside blue-collar work succumbed the downfall of their cultural footprint. Their agency once exemplified mainstream subversiveness; however, casual freedom of employment also represents the costs of such resistance.

The Craft of Hoboing Nonwork

Hoboing’s era of significance rests upon the transitioning of class and economy towards the end of the 19th century. As a new work system introduced a new socioeconomic relationship between a worker and an employer, the acceleration of economic growth largely shifted the nature of work from a pre-modern to modern society. Progressivism flirted with the idea of how Americans were spending their free-

¹⁵ “Getting by” is a term that was coined by hobos to deceive someone in effort to obtain a free meal or free lodging. This is a term from the golden age of the hobo, from the 1880s until the First World War. These terms associate with cultural characteristics, such as riding the rails and homelessness. Godfrey Irwin, *American tramp and underworld slang: words and phrases used by hoboes, tramps, migratory workers and those on the fringes of society, with their uses and origins* (London: Scholartis Press, 1931).

¹⁶ *The Citizen Republic*, December 12, 1918.

time in balance with the monotony of work.¹⁷ Therefore, the industrial advance redefined a distinction between wage-work and leisurely nonwork. In pre-modern times, social activity was much less clearly demarcated into periods of “work” and “leisure”, and the physical location of work in a separate domain was largely absent.¹⁸ Industrial capitalism transformed the definition of work and the experience of the worker, while at the same time recasting people as consumers of leisure. Securing shortened hours of work increased the segregation of work and play into distinct categories in place of the older interfusion of free and work time.¹⁹ Though the sharp distinction between work and leisure only appeared with the advent of the industrial revolution, it is possible to trace the distinction between the two concepts to much earlier periods. With the development of modern industry, leisure became an activity that was considered relatively unimportant or even inimical to personal development.

The idea of hoboing is one of great triumph and sharp decline. After the Civil War, local communities in jungles and camps adjacent to the rails were formed by displaced veterans and out of work farmers. A hobo is a better sort of man than a tramp, has more self-respect and is usually young.²⁰ Taking on work where work was available, their unconventional work ethic caught the eye of curious bystanders Josiah Flynt and Jack London in the 1890s. By the 1920s, these groups disappeared amongst the establishment of the International Brotherhood Welfare Association (IBWA) through the

¹⁷ David Rodgers, *Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1859-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 106.

¹⁸ Ibid, 65.

¹⁹ Ibid, 108.

²⁰ Josiah Flynt, “Tramps and Hoboes,” *New York Times*, October 23, 1898.

leadership of progressive reformist James Eads How. Within the span of forty years, a sense of subversive individualism fused with similar aversions that instituted a cohesive organizational identity with the homeless, unemployed worker. However, the responsible citizenry of vocal advocacy was also responsible for the demise of hobo culture. By the 1970s, vagabonding downgraded to a mere cultural phenomenon that now congregates annually for celebratory events held in Britt, Iowa.²¹ While the culture of hoboining veered back regionally, much of its national significance remains to be distinguished in labor's history. The origins and implications of the lifestyle's elements of defiance and resistiveness were undermined by the underlying political nature of the Progressive Era that gradually reframed hoboining nonworkers as working-class people.

Since Independence, the dominant American understanding of selfhood and society came from the tradition of farm and shop economy, which defined freedom and equality in terms of ownership of the means of self-employment.²² A person's relation to the world was to contribute to it. Work ethic associated with an idea of usefulness as opposed a sense of idleness that consciously imposed a duty to produce in the material world with a mind in skill and self-discipline.²³ Values and goals were enshrined in work ethic morality that entrenched the determination or desire to work hard in order to achieve such ability and virtue. Work made people useful in an increasingly labor mandated economy and the work ideals that developed during the Civil War era changed concepts and standards of the antebellum economy. The economic matrix of the earliest

²¹ "Historical Sketch," *How It All Began: Annual National Hobo Day*, Flyer, National Hobo Museum, Britt, Iowa.

²² Rodgers, *Work Ethic*, 20

²³ *Ibid*, 14.

stages of industrialization reinforced old assumptions about work and even stirred up new ones. Moralists' usefulness transitioned into economic obligation.²⁴

Post-Civil War contention over familiar patterns of work divided the North and South over slavery and wage-employment. Considering each region lived and sustained on two very different types of economy, the mid-19th century conflict was essentially a contest between two different forms of labor: free versus non-free labor, master-servant economy versus economic independence and worker freedom.²⁵ Yet, even after the so-called economic value of slavery delegitimized, wage work began to seriously question a person's livelihood dependent upon the unequal bargaining power in an emerging capitalist system. The ideal of America was one where the "producing classes" – laborers and capitalists alike – reaped the wealth they created, rather than see it siphoned off by social "parasites", such as speculators, bankers, rich, planters, or vagabonds "unwilling to work".²⁶ The hobo was bound to live without work as the vagrancy crisis feared that the Civil War's new birth of freedom had shaded into the rebellion against the new social order of wage labor.

With the gradual demise of the independent household rendered in independence and self-employment, large landowners and industrialists claimed the right to rule as a privilege of their growing monopoly over productive resources.²⁷ Transitioning from an antebellum economy at the end of the 19th century, dispossessed farmers and workers

²⁴ Rodgers, *Work Ethic*, 21.

²⁵ Ibid, 32.

²⁶ Depastino, *Citizen Hobo*, 19

²⁷ Jeffrey Sklansky, *The Soul's Economy: Market Society and Selfhood in American Thought, 1820-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

began to associate propertyless people with unattainable liberty and democracy.²⁸

Individuals were set up against society with the introduction of the factory system that drastically overturned familiar patterns of work.²⁹ Wage labor allowed workers to change employers at their will and quit work altogether. However, quitting work wasn't realistic for everyone. Factory-produced good overturned the skilled workers and introduced a new set of automated skills that were highly mechanized and calculated. No longer were Americans accustomed to their labor, but the changes in economy also challenged work ethics and economic selfhoods.³⁰ These changes seriously challenged the traditional labor of hoboing and the work ethic that constructed the very essence of selfhood that defined the hobo's nonworking culture.

By the end of the 19th century, work ethic constructed a new reality for the average American: labor succumbed to the hands of a consumer economy. Work was what people were made to do as the foundation of happiness and the condition of existence.³¹ To that end, people were at the hiring hands of a much larger system that eliminated cooperation and erased independence selfhood. Consumerism became a constituent element of selfhood and individualism. While this work ethic assumed the modern American identity, hoboing, as a subversive and transgressing lifestyle to the conventionality of work, challenged mechanized production and mass consumption as an anti-modernist work ethic in an increasingly labor industrious society. With the hobo prevailing to live apart from work, the ideal of free labor power in relation to where all

²⁸ Sklansky, *The Soul's Economy*.

²⁹ Rodgers, *Work Ethic*, 22

³⁰ Ibid, 22.

³¹ Ibid, 29.

wealth goes only to those who produce it exposes the ever-increasing division between wealth and welfare.³² Yes, the hobo did work and their subversive individualism in relation with production remained a fundamental element of its internal identity.

Economic Selfhood

The most subversive quality of hoboing was the fact that hobos deliberately made work separate from their identities. The foundation of the industrial sector and its subsequent transformation of employment relied upon the elimination of antebellum self-employment and individual skilled work. Historian Jeffrey Sklansky studies the ideals of personhood and the material structures within which they are expressed by historicizing the very division of these two realms in American social thought.³³ As he demonstrates, Americans slowly but surely over the course of the 19th century revised their notions of selfhood so that they were in tandem with the rhythms and demands of the market.³⁴ The transition from an agrarian society to a highly commercial one created a period of tremendous economic disruption. Sklansky raises the idea of an independent thinker and critic of market society in signaling his accommodation to the capitalist order.³⁵ Hobo economic selfhood relied upon the ability to work for oneself, not upon the dependence on employers or profiteers of the capitalist regime. As small proprietors, farmers, workers, and artisans lost economic and social power over the course of the century, Sklansky argues the very language of sovereign selfhood was eliminated in the process.³⁶

³² Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Vol. 1* (Scotts Valley: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2010).

³³ Sklansky, *The Soul's Economy*, 51.

³⁴ Ibid, 72.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid, 252.

Though he speaks on the chipping away of selfhood and ownership, the story of hobo selfhood historicizes his argument in reverse. Instead, the idea of the American hobo counterargues an intellectual reconfiguration of the social ideas of independence, freedom, and selfhood with the economic and societal forces at play during this time. The ability to separate themselves from the work that manifested from the top-down, allowed for an autonomy of hoboing nonwork to proclaim its own consciousness and distinct identity. Let us explore further.

Despite the challenges that workers faced in their new roles as wage earners, the rise of industry in the United States allowed people to access and consume goods as never before. “Americans in these years saw the ride of large-scale-manufacturing and mass production, the spread of railroads and continental markets, and the creation of strict workplace hierarchies based on a universal system of wage labor.”³⁷ The rise of big business had turned America into a culture of consumers desperate for timesaving and leisure commodities, where people could expect to find everything they wanted and live a better lifestyle. With the rise in production, supply met the demand and American consumerism changed the way in which people spent their leisure time. The idea of hoboing was a sharp critique of both internal spheres of labor and leisure, a challenge to both labor and consumerism as the fundamental elements of selfhood.³⁸ With the formation of large hierarchal businesses and organizations, hoboing challenged the forms of status, authority, and control in a new economy of expectations.

³⁷ Depastino, *Citizen Hobo*, 4.

³⁸ Sklansky, *The Soul's Economy*, 52.

While hoboing continued to subvert and defy the new set of expectations from power structures at the top, a subcultural awareness emerged closer to the Progressive Era in response to many individuals being affected by the same problems of growing class inequality, unequal wealth distribution, and recession in the 1890s. As societal problems arise around a populace, it is unenviable human action to solve or corrective such problems that follows.³⁹ In his landmark study entitled *Delinquent Boys* (1955), Albert Cohen states the circumstances that produce a problem come from the actor's frame of reference and the situation the actor confronts.⁴⁰ This perspective argues that people spend time trying to solve mundane problems such as how to endure shelter, sustenance and companionship. However, not all problems are equally distributed amongst a population with unequal access to solve problems. Homeless working-class laborers chose to solve problems through abnormal, deviant, means and formed new cultural norms of the American laborer, arguably similar to the subversive, defiant elements of hobo selfhood. Furthermore, for the case of collective organizing, the number of actors with similar problems and limited access to solution causes a response of collective problem-solving by alternative methods.⁴¹

Building upon Cohen's ideas, Howard Becker's theory of subculture (1964) further emphasized that collective deviant behavior becomes subcultural when members of a group consciously identify themselves in contrast to mainstream society.⁴² Therefore, collective action represents a group of individuals who are connected to one another

³⁹ Patrick Williams, *Subcultural Theory: Traditions and Concepts* (Malden: Polity Press, 2011), 7.

⁴⁰ Albert Cohen, *Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the Gang* (New York: Free Press, 1971), 11.

⁴¹ Ibid, 14.

⁴² Howard Becker, *The Other Side: Perspectives on Deviance* (New York: The Free Press of Glecoe, 1964).

through interaction and shared interest. On the road, men frequently formed partnerships for reasons of safety, frugality, and company.⁴³ Much of the ability for how the hobo culture remained cohesive and tight knit through the years relied upon the distinct cultural characteristics of brotherhood and comradery.⁴⁴ These characteristics were founded and fundamentally engrained into the hobo's way of life primarily beginning in the jungles and camps at a very local level. Subcultural members' shared interests also led them to identify themselves as different from – usually in some form of antagonistic relationship with – normal, “square” society.⁴⁵ Through association, a class identity and consciousness began to develop through shared economic grievance. With little resource to solve problems, laborers eventually shifted to the city and absorbed the worker identity as people turned to factory work.

The idea of hoboing ultimately questions the centrality of work in modern American identity. This means that while work infused with the mechanized man under a calculated system of industriousness, hoboing countered the industrial economy with the belief that hard work brings economic success through a cause that defended a worker's freedom rather than the machine. Characterized as primarily white, young, male, low-skilled workers, hoboing does not directly mirror the mechanized, calculated work that defined the system of employment; however, the system inadvertently filled the hobo work ethic in the gaps where labor had its demands. Hobos were once vital labor components to production in agriculture, factory jobs, and other related unskilled work

⁴³ Depastino, *Citizen Hobo*, 69.

⁴⁴ Williams, *Subcultural Theory*, 8.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

primarily located in the Midwest.⁴⁶ The rural economy was still very much in its antebellum state, opening greater freedom for displaced nonwork to sustain apart from the routinization and mechanics of industrial labor.⁴⁷ It's important to make this distinction, however their identity holds similar characteristics to the worker in terms of purposefulness. With the privileges that the rails afforded them, hobos hopped across America on the railways in search of temporary work and associated wanderlust. Their labor was sought by farmers at harvest time, which supplied these men with seasonal work during the slack season.⁴⁸ To fulfill an economic need, they travel to the most remote areas of the country and work in the berry fields, the canneries, the oil fields, and the lumberyards.⁴⁹ With the discomforts of modernism, hoboing stood at forefront of labor changing discourse and action. Ultimately, the key elements of hoboing, vagrancy, and nonwork formed a personified image of hoboing that inevitably caught up with the larger social issues of the working-class.

The philosophy of purposeful displacement very much challenged labor in its relation to production. Steam Train Maury, an Iowan hobo, once said, "It matters not where a man belongs, somewhere he has a place and that place defines him to himself and his group. That was the attitude of a great many men on the road back then."⁵⁰ Hoboing constructed a work ethic that defined the group to which they belonged as working freemen, not necessarily part of a settled place of the working-class but from a

⁴⁶ Higbe, *Indispensable Outcasts*, 19.

⁴⁷ Rodgers, *Work Ethic*, 31.

⁴⁸ "Old-Time Hobo Joins Dodo in Usedtobe Land," *The Bismarck Tribune*, March 6, 1920.

⁴⁹ Depastino, *Citizen Hobo*, 5.

⁵⁰ "Steam Train" Graham Maury and Robert J. Hemming, *Tales of the Iron Road* (New York: Paragon House, 1990), 58.

constructed coexistence in pre-industrial American. Experiences of desire and deprivation formed an intersection of discourses that defined specific social roles for individual workers based upon discourse and lived experiences.⁵¹ The disconnect between how hoboing was perceived through social discourse and the actual lived experiences of traveling work is the place to look for how and why hobo subversiveness was eliminated through 50+ years of labor's evolution. Further investigation questions how these embodied experiences of cultural and physical marginalization shifted towards an understanding of what actions were taken to confront these remembered motives and feelings.

Individualism: Freedom of the Rails

Marxism defines individualism as the ethos which emphasizes the autonomy of the individual as against the community or social group. The fundamental identity of the freight rider centers around the idea of "right of way".⁵² Hobos viewed riding the rails as a special right as well as an advantage for those seeking seasonal work.⁵³ Hobos had once prized their footloose mobility as the supreme privilege of their culture. With the ability to use the railroad for economic advantage, hoboing fashioned an autonomous relationship between its culture and the modernizing economic forces at play. The railways formed the foundation of the traveling lifestyle of hoboing that made independent living possible. Hobos used railroads not only to broaden their job choices but also, from time to time, to 'lay off' of work altogether.⁵⁴ The rail network provided

⁵¹ Nels Anderson, *The Hobo: Sociology of the Homeless Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 56.

⁵² Depastino, *Citizen Hobo*, 23.

⁵³ Ibid, 23.

⁵⁴ Roger Bruns, *Knights of the Road: A Hobo History* (New York: Methuen, 1980), 36.

the vital link between city, county, consumer, and labor markets.⁵⁵ Mobility had been given as a central freedom in American life that was connected to the ideas of opportunity, democracy, and modernity. The idea that hobo laborers could move from one place to another formed a sense of selfhood and individualism separate from conventionalities of work. As citizens, hobos believe every willing, able-bodied individual is guaranteed the right to work, “right of way”, to earn a meager living, and to live a purposeful lifestyle.⁵⁶ The “right of way” philosophy falls in line with the majorly distinct cultural aspects that separates hobos from other working-class laborers: the railroad. Utilizing the railroad allowed hobos to travel great distances on the dime of the railway companies. By hiding underneath the carriage rods or scaling the tops of the freight cars, hobos skillfully and artfully “blitzed the blast”, crafting what is called “freight hopping”.⁵⁷ Utilizing the opportunity to freely move, nonworkers crafted a lifestyle based upon both occupation and voyage that allowed travelers to intervene in the economy in ways that no others could.

Scottish economist Adam Smith defines economic individualism as the foundation for people to free themselves from government control and intervention, positioned on a freer economic spectrum.⁵⁸ He made the case that prosperity is produced through a competitive market economy. With a more laissez-fair approach, individuals remain out of the economy and instead they are free to carry out their own economic

⁵⁵ Bruns, *Knights of the Road*, 36.

⁵⁶ Anderson, *The Hobo*.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1776).

affairs.⁵⁹ The casualness of hoboing constituted a labor system free of control and regulation that rested upon the freedom of mobility that allowed a movement of freedom that took away the control of their own laboring system and put focus on the individual. Steam Train Maury viewed the rails as the last truly American place, untainted by the regrets of modern progress.⁶⁰ The tracks were a thrill and financial advantage for the democratic workers defiant of wage-labor capitalism. More importantly, the rails provided an intimate economic freedom that served as an important element of an anti-modern, defiant response of individual choice in economic decision-making. The railroads laid the property necessary for free independent manhood and provided the vital link between city, county, consumer, and labor markets. “The image riding the trails interrupts rhetoric of progress embodied by the railroad. Instead this image sutures an alternative body, the poor mobile hobo, into the discourse, illustrating how a subculture physically appropriated the train.”⁶¹ Under these systems, government intervention is low, and instead most economic decisions are determined by individual consumers and producers. As such, people are given the freedom and choice on how to earn and spend their money, and on what goods and services they would like to produce or consume. However, the market forces of supply and demand ultimately allowed private ownership to shift the power of economic decision-making from the bottom-up.

Recession in the 1890s proved that economic disadvantage deeply impacted the lower classes, forcing many out of work people to the rails who adopted the

⁵⁹ Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1776).

⁶⁰ Maury and Hemming, *Tales of the Iron Road*.

⁶¹ James Lennon, *Boxcar Politics* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), 43.

characteristics of selfhood and individualism that very much defined the idea of hoboing.⁶² Modernization and urbanization not only drastically changed society in terms of economy and class, but deeply impacted hoboing's ability to control its own economic freedom. Consequently, traveling workers not only found blue collar work in the city but began to organize industrially. By the 1910's, the battle over identity politics forged a narrative that is highly political in nature.

Reform at the national level recognized that not only should hard work bring economic success, but for cooperation and negotiation to return to the relationship between labor and capital. Response to this formed the International Brotherhood Welfare Association (IBWA) in 1905 by James How. How's ultimate aim with the IBWA was to organize unemployed laborers in the same way workers were being organized by unions such as the IWW.⁶³ The IBWA's editorial autonomy lifted hobo sympathizers and intellectuals, highlighting a functioning publicized version of an oral format. The evidence of such efforts etched in the journalist propaganda of the IBWA, *The Hobo News*, recognizes the importance of labor over capital that the necessity of all labor groups is vital to a society subscribed to capitalism.⁶⁴

However, such evidence of propaganda imagery suggests a sharp revival of interest in government that foreshadowed labor voicing their frustrations onto the fort of organized capital.⁶⁵ In addition to understanding hoboing as a type of labor, the identity

⁶² Frank Brown Latham, *The Panic of 1893: A Time of Strikes, Riots, Hobo Camps, Coxey's 'Army', Starvation, Withering Droughts, and Fears of 'Revolution'* (New York: Franklin Watts Publishing, 1971), 7.

⁶³ "A Pension for Hoboes," *The Columbia Evening*, August 9, 1922.

⁶⁴ "The Spirit of Labor," *The Hobo News*, July 1921.

⁶⁵ "Migratory Worker's Union," *The Hobo News*, July 4, 1922.

of hoboing raises several questions to how and why this identity challenged the centrality of work in the American identity through time. As modern American identity shifted towards an understanding that hard work brings success, workism became central to the need to produce and became the centerpiece to identity and life's purpose. Hoboing represented the stark differences between those who were modernizing and those who were not. Depastino explains a growing sense of otherness between nonworkers and workers. "Because they seemed strange and placeless, tramps served as convenient screens onto which middle-class Americans projected their insecurities, anxieties, and fantasies about urban, industrial life."⁶⁶ Hoboing once constituted an economically necessary, however through time the culture remained a socially despised class of human beings.⁶⁷ Today's labor force may reflect a stark difference in places of origin and ethnicity; however, the politics, criminalization, and working-class identity of both groups of laborers remains very much the same. Hoboing was at the nexus of so much that is American, both as positive working-class cultural, political and economic affirmation and as representation of the seamiest underside of capitalism.

This scholarship challenges to not only characterize the identity of hoboing as subversive and defiant but also to identify the social actors and political agents who toppled the hobo's ability to sustain its own selfhood and individualism. By narrowing the study of hobos to the individual, such as the point of view from Jack London, Josiah Flynt and James How, the social movement of nonwork is caught by a reactionary

⁶⁶ Depastino, *Citizen Hobo*, 4.

⁶⁷ "Tramps bound for Iowa," *The Semi-Weekly Messenger*, August 17, 1900.

response of class-based outcry against the monopoly of class-divisiveness sponsored by American capitalism.⁶⁸ Conceptualizing this counterculture as a culture in which hobos were placed as forces in society, whether political or economic, the idea of hoboining pushed laborers into a culture of choice based upon the need to find work elsewhere.⁶⁹ In addition to the works of London, Flynt, and How, the inclusion of objects from hobo personal collections in Britt, Iowa creates a commercializing force that argues an additional agent of hegemony that projected a misrepresentation of the hobo.

Josiah Flynt, Jack London, and James Eads How

The concurrent forces of rapid industry and railroad expansion marked a major turning point for the new realities of urban industrial life. Class struggles related to industry and economy shifted victims of rapid change and out of luck workers into instruments of activism. Apart from the social investigations of Josiah Flynt and Jack London in the 1890s, by the early 1900s the hobo convention in Britt also served as a platform for hoboining job seekers to share their grievances of economic struggle. An article about Britt convention organizer Pipe Noe from 1900 suggests the presence of rural grassroots organizing amongst convention attendants. “Head Pipe Noe parried all questions the answers to which would show whether the hobos intended to take any action on political issues. Noe dreams of a unified hobo party that will be catered to by the politicians.”⁷⁰ This article is critical to understanding the struggle between farmers and laborers to define community and manage the rural-urban labor market in the

⁶⁸ McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 79.

⁶⁹ Despastino, *Citizen Hobo*, 33.

⁷⁰ “Tramps Bound for Iowa,” *The Semi-Weekly Messenger*, August 17, 1900.

Midwest. Single male agricultural laborers were central to the wheat belt economy and the larger rural community.⁷¹ The frustrations of the rural market were present, and Britt served as one epicenter where these collective challenges were present in the modernizing labor market. As result, increasing competition between the rural economy's need for laborers and growing opportunity that emerged from the cooperate economic order created a dissonance between a class of workers and a class of nonworkers.

Prior to 1900, social investigations were led by the government to explore the social understandings of tight-knit rural communities. Particular attention played emphasis on the growing pop-up communities, called hobo jungles, of farmers, homesteaders, and hobos looking to make big wages brining in the crops.⁷² Hobo jungles that were initially places for laborers to rest and repair eventually turned into places for participant observation from social investigators. Throughout this time, middle and upper-class intellectuals counted, classified, photographed, and examined the lives of working people. However, Flynt and London pursued these social investigations into the presence of vagrant, out of place, laborers in the rural Midwest communities as non-political descriptions of working-class life. Stated by Flynt in his memoir, *My Life*, he describes the challenges in conveying narratives that blur the line between fiction and nonfiction.⁷³ However, in his doing, he defines class through narrative and the life stories of traveling laborers. By retelling the tale of their disguise, by speaking in worker's dialect, even by sincerely admitting their real distance from working-class reality, their

⁷¹ Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts*, 135.

⁷² Ibid, 66.

⁷³ "Josiah Flynt: An Impression," *My Life*, 349.

early ethnographic observations on vagrancy as a specific social class of labor invoked geographies and social practices different from the conventionalities of industrial work, this firmly positioned hobos as laborers of nonwork.

Perhaps the earliest accounts of the cultural exploration of hoboing originates from curious investigators who dared to hop the rails. Flynt, a detective and journalist in the later 1890s, baffled his readers with the unprecedented study of “tramping”, as it was once called.⁷⁴ Infatuated with an infectious restlessness and wanderlust, his perspective originates from economic isolation, marginalization, and inequality, only to reinforce the “tramps” as those who took their economic freedoms to the extreme.⁷⁵ As one confided in him,

“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.”⁷⁶

Flynt began to gather the origins of transit work through experienced economic misfortune and systematic unfairness. Investigations into the lifestyle of rootlessness and displacement began to uncover the origins and meaning of hobo nonwork, masculine

⁷⁴ “Tramping” was a term that was used synonymously with the criminal. Public opinion coined this term as a response to the increased appearance of men leisurely traveling long distances not necessarily in search of work. However, Josiah Flynt’s descriptions of tramps suggest a detailed negative portrait of class division. The tramping of the middle class could be romanticized only if real tramps were criminalized with Flynt writing a powerful representation of class division. Josiah Flynt, “Tramps and Hoboes,” *New York Times*, October 23, 1898.

⁷⁵ Josiah Willard Flynt, “No Life Like a Tramp’s,” *Tramping with Tramps: Studies and Sketches of Vagabond Life* (New York: Century Company, 1907), 21.

⁷⁶ Flynt, *Tramping with Tramps*, 21.

prerogative, and a class of seasonal work on the move. As Flynt observed, “They are continuously shifting from place to place, particularly during warm months. They work when they have to and tramp only when the weather is fine.”⁷⁷ It was a sense of freedom and economic pursuit that attracted men from their farms to the rails. Wandering and working in this autonomous way was, by and large, a privilege that belonged to able-bodied white men around the turn of the 20th century.⁷⁸ By the 1890s, the nation-wide tramp epidemic began to seriously welcome the athirst of various methods of empirical investigation. For the first time, Flynt shaped myth into reality, expanding perspective into areas of political economy and class distinctions all while painting a portrait of life that happily transgressed from the mainstream.

Literary writers also wrote from life experience and empathy to class struggle. The complexity of the world hellbent on glitz and profit provided the foreboding landscape that ignited creative literary energies. The fluidity of the social order of the late 19th century allowed for self-made manhood that became increasingly problematic in a society convulsed by class conflict dominated by irresponsible capital.⁷⁹ Stories from rags to riches, the passing of the American frontier, and the nation’s transformation into an urban-industrial global power influenced the emergence of working-class literature. The persistence of evangelical traditions coupled with the refashioning of frontier mythology formulated classes within society that denied class existence.⁸⁰ The opportunity to self-

⁷⁷ Josiah Willard Flynt, “How Hobos are Made,” *Los Angeles Time*, February 11, 1900.

⁷⁸ Conover, *Rolling Nowhere*, 28.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 90.

⁸⁰ Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010), 90.

express from the proletariat perspective opened a wavering incision of class self-grievance and strife. Humanism and class struggle diverted philosophical attention to a subjective understanding of the traveler's working experience on and off the rails.

Jack London, a novelist, journalist, and social activist, shifted the understanding of hoboing as a lifestyle of romanticized wanderlust to a much larger existence of class struggle. He keenly observed the social and economic conditions of the working-class people of America and found the miserable condition of the laborers who worked day and night in the factories coal mines and heavy industries of America.⁸¹ Repulsed by work, he began riding the rails as a way to incorporate method into his literary works.⁸² He wrote, "I saw the wheels of the social machine go around ... men without trades were helpless cattle. The surplus labor army is the anchor of capitalism...the tramp is a by-product of this economic necessity; it is necessary to inquire into the composition of the surplus labor army."⁸³ London alluded to a simple case of supply and demand. Having sought inspiration from the ideas of Marx, he argued that Marx's labor value theory explains that the greatest generation of labor value is contingent upon the highest level of production possible.⁸⁴ By using his personal experiences as a poor worker, London used these ideas to approach the problems confronted by the working-class.

⁸¹ Neetu Sharma and Shivani Thakur, "Relocating the Roots of Marxism in the Call of the Wild and the Iron Heels of Jack London", *International Journal of Recent Technology and Engineering* Vol. 7, (April 2019): 318.

⁸² London, *The Road*, 78.

⁸³ Ibid, 23.

⁸⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Vol. 1* (Scotts Valley: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2010).

London argued that the surplus army of laborers performed in excess of the labor necessary to produce the means of livelihood of the worker. That the hobos performed extra labor to fill the labor void in order to own its own keep. Marxism argues that the specific type of nonwork, and the specific production associated, distinguished the hobo within its own class rank.⁸⁵ Therefore, if a surplus supply of labor creates a surplus product in demand, the wheels of the social machine can gain control over the surplus-labor and surplus product of the working population. As London expands upon this, he argues the vagrant population was divided into a new class of laborers that was being used for the benefit of the social elite.⁸⁶ Capitalist elites lived off the vagrant labor to produce wealth that was unequally distributed to those who produced the product. Drawing upon the ideas of Marx, the ability of the hobo to define its own labor and define its own production influences the economic order, production, and other social phenomena, including social relations, cultural systems, political institutions, and ideology.

With London's emphasis on the working-class subject to the machine, many blue-collar people began to see parallels in their own struggles to survive in a labor market. By looking through the larger context of the working-class and studying the economic forces at play, insight is provided into the lower-class responses to trade, industry, and westward expansion and, subsequently, extensions of such responses. London writes, "Free contract is all that remains to them. They may take what is offered or leave it. There are plenty

⁸⁵ Marx, *Capital*.

⁸⁶ London, *The Road*, 78.

more of their kind...they are members of the surplus labor army and must be content with a hand to mouth existence".⁸⁷ Ultimately, the discourse projected by London suggest the presence of a highly unconventional and uncharacteristic employee and employer relationship during this time. Investigator John James McCook's imagery of the jungles exhibits an encampment of shared forum and experience that rallied around distinct atmosphere of hearty camaraderie and tight networking.⁸⁸ Though no record remains of the communication between these nonworkers, London suggests general consciousness in the jungles understood the system was stacked against working people and small congregations along the railways transformed into an urbane association of workers.⁸⁹ Though the general discourse within these jungles was never recorded, what can be assumed is that the travelers congregated based upon similar experiences as laborers and working people within their own class-based distinction.

Nels Anderson pioneered ethnographic investigation into the world of homelessness in Chicago. Drawing from his personal experiences, his identity as an investigator did not depend on the life of hobo but did draw upon a sense of class divide. "A changing population of homeless men in Chicago, living together, has created a milieu in which new and unusual personal types flourish and new and unsuspected problems have arisen."⁹⁰ Published in 1923, his study *The Hobo* pioneered participant observation as a research method to investigate urban community problems. He observed, "It matters not where a man belongs, somewhere he has a place and that place defines

⁸⁷ London, *The Road*, 23.

⁸⁸ See Appendix F.

⁸⁹ London, *The Road*, 34.

⁹⁰ Anderson, *The Hobo*, vi.

him to himself and his group.”⁹¹ Anderson not only used conventions of university to create the idea of otherness and as well as expose the cultural gap between the two worlds. He’s the first to place ethnographic information against the context of the hoboing perspective giving source to a sense of realistic descriptions of the nonwork life of the collective. However, it was also Anderson who created an understanding that the hobo is not just an individual, but a product of a much larger subgroup. He argued, “Every community, through the very character of the environment which it imposes upon the individuals that compose it, tends to determine the personal traits as it does determine the language, the vocation, social values, and eventually, the personal opinions of the individuals who compose it”⁹² By associating the complexities of rural hoboing with the conventionalities of urban working life, he assists with eliminating the fine line between what defined work and what defined nonwork.

Where does the hobo fit as part of a recognized laboring class? As an extension of the proletariat, hobos designated the class of migrant wage-earning work engaged in industrial production and whose chief source of income derived from the sale of their labor power. Labor power not only demanded work in industrial jobs, but also required a demand for labor in the agricultural sector as well.⁹³ This is where hoboing took its root and founded a cultural footprint. The demand for labor ignited a sense of purposeful nonwork found in odd jobs requiring low-skilled workers.⁹⁴ As result, Flynt, London, and

⁹¹ Anderson, *The Hobo*, vi.

⁹² Ibid, vii.

⁹³ Higbe, *Indispensable Outcasts*, 33.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 33.

Anderson formed a specific class of low-skilled nonworking laborers in a country that denied its existence. Through the emergence of a specific nonworking class, nonworkers realized that their unprotected labor centered at the mercy of unregulated capital.

The IBWA

A person's identity began to consist of both a sphere of labor and a growing sphere of leisure; a necessary balance; which by the second half of the 19th century became a sphere of consumption and consumerism. By the early 20th century, Americans grappled with maintaining a balance between both.⁹⁵ Leisure elicited from the need to offset the dullness of labor and stultify the monotony of work.⁹⁶ The growth in production in the late 19th and early 20th centuries required growing markets and this meant expanding the consuming class beyond the middle and upper classes to include the working classes. With the rise of production, consumerism introduced a new life of leisure that caught the attention of the working classes. The development of consumer societies meant the erosion of the traditional values and attitudes of thrift and prudence that defined the antebellum era.⁹⁷ However, the idea of the hoboe challenged both labor and consumerism as the constituent elements of selfhood and individualism. As the market developed into a consumer-based economy, adhering to mechanizing work provided the economy security needed to balance both work and leisure. Hoboe merged into a social class of its own distinction, catching the attention of Progressive reformists.

⁹⁵ Rodgers, *Work Ethic*, 91.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

Picture the wheels of the top tier earners turn past the beggar who resorts to their post in the alleyway while staring into abyss.⁹⁸ Illustrations on postcards and artistic letters from hobos at first glance appear to be quire ordinary. However, these outlets of influential art provide ample evidence to a hobos' perceived place in the world by the 1900s. Propaganda postcards tell a story of societal fragmentation that served audiences with art that challenged imagination. Reality, on the other hand, proved that rapid change challenged the hobo lifestyle. By the 1910s, the idea towards progress drastically changed the ways that hobos traveled, worked, and simply lived. Railroad hopping and vagrancy became criminalized, the nature of temporary work was changing, the 1890s recession severely impacted agricultural work, and rapid urbanization increased economic activity in the city.⁹⁹ The expansion of government capabilities exposed a system that allowed some to prosper but fault to those left behind. This reorganization of social life promoted labor to seriously question its role in relation to capital. The state's efforts to intervene in the hobo's way of life drove the call for government to preserve the life and self-respect of the marginalized. If the government cannot provide employment as a demand of a visible means of support, there cannot be assurance to the able and will of the homeless and unemployed.¹⁰⁰ The call for government control of production suggests hobos advocated for the government control of class struggles rather than a strict grasp of labor power from the top. The critical eye on the limits of liberal capitalism turned to mobilizing the state to solve major workplace problems.

⁹⁸ See Appendix B.

⁹⁹ Latham, *The Panic of 1893*, 12.

¹⁰⁰ James E. How, "Hustling at the Hub," *The Hobo News*, July 1915, 2.

The chasm between government and nonwork intensified labor relations that no longer alienated the middle-class opinion. The story of the International Brotherhood Welfare Association (IBWA), led by James E. How, is often omitted and overlooked as a major labor movement that attracted rural laborers and urban unemployed, homeless workers. However, much of the organization's financial success relied upon initial financing from How. Recognizing a mutual outcry that endorsed worker's collective efforts, How left the comfort of the rich man's home and drifted into the group of hobos and tramps.¹⁰¹ Prior to the Great War in 1905, How established and bankrolled the IBWA as a cooperative of migrant workers focused on education and mutual aid.¹⁰² Initially, How organized in a very decentralized manner through various informal hobo clubs or hobo college meetings throughout the Midwest. Beginning in a very local manner, such as Britt, How organized in a very grassroots, community-based collective action. Mobilizing laborers in local towns, the IBWA similarly took upon a bottom-up approach against traditional power structures as did other notable labor organizers, such as the International Workers of the World (IWW).¹⁰³ Strategies of the IBWA proved notable successes – followed by equally notable failures. Encouraging open social welfare, the American workforce preferred a pragmatic recognition of their organized labor by educating the public mind to the right of collective ownership in production and distribution.

¹⁰¹ "A Pension for Hobos," *The Columbia Evening*, August 9, 1922.

¹⁰² Anderson, *The Hobo*, 246.

¹⁰³ "College has Hobo Club," *The Pioneer Express*, July 15, 1904.

The significance of the IBWA is not unfamiliar to labor's story. Sufficiently recognized by Higbie, Despastino, and Anderson, the IBWA gradually succeeded in capturing the emotional appeals of labor and gained public visibility in the later 1910s. The organization's successes remained on the agenda of many previous scholarly works, highlighting distinct audiences and different classes of workers that various labor organizations attracted. The specific tactics of the IBWA included founding and financing an organization that focused more on the out-of-work than those already employed, a stark difference compared to other labor movements.¹⁰⁴ By analyzing the movements of IBWA organizing, a proletariat counterpublic sphere of partial and fragmented voices is central to this study.¹⁰⁵ By countering the public's assumptions about societal problems, the organization defined their counterpublic messages around negating the public's dominate discourse of vagrancy and joblessness. Both the initial success of the IBWA and public sphere theory suggests How managed to form a counterpublic sphere that built communities of concern and pushed marginalized politics into the larger public conversation.

Much of what remains from the IBWA rests in its press that propagated the hobo's philosophy and practices to form a political platform through the official publication of the IBWA, *The Hobo News*. It sought to revise the mainstream story about America's hobos, homeless, out-of-work, and impoverished by both organizing a platform around nonwork and demanding structural social class changes.¹⁰⁶ However, the

¹⁰⁴ "A Magna Carter for Labor," *The Hobo News*, May 1919.

¹⁰⁵ James A. Herrick, *The History and Theory of Rhetoric: An Introduction* (London: Pearson, 2012), 195.

¹⁰⁶ Johnathon Alexander, *Unruly Rhetorics: Protest, Persuasion, and Publics* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018).

paper inadvertently used the defining cultural characteristics of hobboing as a way to create a specific discourse that catered to job seekers, but also perpetuated stereotypes against hobos. How used tactics similar to the mainstream media to help circulate a message to counter the social process that overlapped working-class social circles.¹⁰⁷ To suggest the materials put forward was highly propagandistic in nature goes without saying. The newspaper covers often depicted workers and their capitalist counterparts, displaying collective efforts of resistance, defeat of capital, or realistic imagery of bread lines and unemployment lines. Cartoons displaying labor overarching dominance over capital call for labor to prevail over big business.¹⁰⁸ Breadlines became popular images in 1922 editions as symbols of economic deprivation. The February 1922 cover states, “the bread line, the line of deepest want, the dead line, hungry and ragged, and gaunt”.¹⁰⁹ The IBWA intention to display such propaganda explain the intensity of such efforts to gain labor’s allegiance and sway public opinion. The delivery and circulation of these ideas intentioned to change the narrative of impoverishment from the perspective of the individual body to understanding class struggle as an institutional and structure issue.¹¹⁰ However, by the paper’s end in 1929, the propaganda imagery radicalized to an extent that no longer aligned with the original intentions of the organization in promoting education and cooperation.

¹⁰⁷ “Hoboes are Given Work by How’s New Bureau,” *The Washington Times*, September 12, 1911.

¹⁰⁸ “These Shall Not Prevail Against Him,” *The Hobo News*, July 1922.

¹⁰⁹ “The Bread Line, The Dead Line,” *The Hobo News*, February 1922.

¹¹⁰ Alexander, *Unruly Rhetorics*, 130.

The idea of hoboing nonwork in relation to work does not dismiss the idea of classes within society, rather the advocacy for the equal recognition of class identity, class needs, and the basic necessities of life, i.e. employment. What is difficult to explain is how and why culture and experience developed into class consciousness and action. The gradual toppling of the hobo selfhood and individualism sparked a new era of labor advocacy that mirrored similar labor movements at its height after the Great War from 1917-1923.¹¹¹ The call for a change in the relationship between government and its people, the vagrant community began to politically take shape. However, what it meant to be a hobo changed as the IBWA organizers nurtured their culture of subversiveness. The consequential shift in group identity from a localized viewpoint to one of a national perspective submerged the hobo into a larger groupthink that ultimately diminished the swank essence of transit work.¹¹² Consequently, the hobo merged into the larger social issues of unemployment, labor turnover, and floating labor.

The connecting hoboing and nonworking identity questions how Progressive Era blue-collar politics unseemly absorbed the traveler uniqueness. It is important to note that the hobo lifestyle began at a very individual level where a large number of individuals lived under similar social conditions.¹¹³ Hobo gatherings in makeshift encampments eventually provoked a sense of group consciousness born out of collective struggle that constituted a specific class of labor.¹¹⁴ As agents of hegemony, Josiah Flynt, Jack London, and James How leveraged hobo selfhood and individualism as a personified

¹¹¹ McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 288.

¹¹² "Hoboes Have 'Jungle Feed,' Head Good Speeches," *The Day Book*, June 9, 1913.

¹¹³ Becker, *The Other Side*.

¹¹⁴ Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts*, 135-136.

image of class struggle and yet machine politics grabbed ahold of the hoboing idea to project reformist causes in effort to address blue-collar societal issues of unemployment and homelessness. Though it is assumed the work of Flynt, London, and How did not come from malevolence behavior, there work signals a shift in understanding hobos as transgressing laborers to marginalized workers. In doing so, the hobo individualism that defined its ideology of freedom, self-ownership, and self-reliance were inevitably stripped away as a consequence of such inclusion of hegemonic actors.

Historically, the hobo's purpose drove the rise of artful authenticity with the fall of nondeliberate undoing. The game of hoboing is a contest of skills and wit with the odds in favor for profiteering self-interests than the laboring classes. Coupled with the demand of work and dangers of the rails, the brokenness of the traveling worker's body signaled a major counternarrative to the hobo's legacy and preeminent counterculture to the greater Progressive Era. This is a story of the idea of hobo subversiveness dissolving in the politics of struggle and failure but sustaining through the commercialization of success and celebration. Though the hobo does not directly mirror the worker, their statement of purpose cannot be overlooked. As result, hoboing remains a work ethic of unrecognized heritage with dissipating rarity.

CHAPTER 2

“SIZE-UP”: THE RISE OF THE HOBOING NONWORKERS, 1865-1900s

The successful hobo must be an artist. Travelers on the rails captured a unique art of door to door job seeking by innovating a lifestyle of both work and leisure and organizing a cooperative of shared economic struggle. Hoboing constituted a type of wanderers with a shared place and purpose from the localized jungles in the rural Midwest to a movement of progressive-influenced coalition of blue-collar activism in the city. The idea of the localized jungle, entrenched in the trees and brush nearby the rails, founded groups of shared association, experience, and security for traveling people in search of work. This chapter examines the insurgency of nonworkers at the turn of the 20th century from the perspective of how and why groups formed at the railways and jungles and the subsequent use of them. Furthermore, this chapter explores the reasons for why nonworkers shifted from their rural origins to the urban city. The gradual rise of traveler prominence promoted a subcultural resistance of social change. To “size up” the backdoors of the generous meant the great ability to tell a story and such stories appealed to the particular temperaments and personalities that catered to the humbleness of the traveler.¹¹⁵ Though storytelling had been grounded in fact and embellished in recognition, narration established a community forum of shared experiences throughout the Gilded Age. Stories were often comprised of fiction; however, the practice of telling an artful

¹¹⁵ To “size up” is a strategy used by a hobo who deceives a person in exchange for a meal. Such deception is often told in a form of a road narrative in effort to captivate the person and provoke empathy for the lowly hobo. The term was published by Jack London in his work *The Road*. His experiences door to door begging for a meal detail the creative storytelling by hobos to collect a hot meal.

story sounded both the cultural aspects and activist enthusiasms that preserved the art of hoboing for over a century and a half.

Reconvening hobo history to a local story perpetually confronts labor history's long-standing issue with invisibility of Midwestern rural workers and their vital contribution to the development of an urban-based economy. The traditional concerns of labor history have been largely urban-based, with emphasis on unionization, working-class politics, and the development of class-identity.¹¹⁶ Society has primarily characterized hobo workers in positive and negative ways. How much freedom do hobo nonworkers have in their choice amongst these identities? What actions did they take based on these embodied experiences? How has their influence stirred discussion about the role of government in people's livelihoods? This is a history of the collective values and the social understandings that formed the idea of the hoboing nonworker. Through the tales of Jack London and Josiah Flynt, the hobo is evinced as a transgressor and stalwart of disempowered America. Though entertaining, the rise of their lifestyle does not originate in reassurance or confidence; And their downfall doesn't offer much optimism either. However, their nonworking existence once as a subversive entity aids the historicity and cultural portrait of the traveling nonworker amongst a drastically transforming society at the beginning of the twentieth century. To know the hobo is to understand the traveler's memoir. Afterall, to "size up" a victim means to begin a great story.

¹¹⁶ Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts*, 144.

The realities of class struggle and division in American society are present throughout the narratives that Jack London shared throughout his investigations in the 1890s. His personal experiences of begging at front doors introduced a discourse within his narrative, *The Road*, that exposed the unrelatable realities between the upper and lower classes. He states, “The beggar at the door must be humble”, recalls London as he confronted the big house on the hill.¹¹⁷ Humility provides the hobo a sense of intellectual virtue that allowed the tramp army to rise as a legitimate laboring class with a distinct consciousness. Jack utilized humility to his advantage as he caught trains and caged meals. He was a clever freight hopper with dexterous concocting of tales to coax meals from strangers. Humility created a connection between the sympathetic and the beggar, a vital connection that allowed a sense of self-sustainment as the traveler went from place to place. However, that connection also indicates the deep divide between the working-class perspective and the perspective living in the big house on the hill. They called Jack idle and dissolute, but he quickly refuted. “If we all became hard-working and honest, there would be no one to toss bricks for you.”¹¹⁸ The work of London epitomizes the mutual relationship between capital and nonworking labor, where one cannot sustain without the other. The transit laborers in this distinctive era in history faced marginalization and exploitation at the hands of the classes that relied on them most with industries dependent on mobile labor made available by expansion of the nation’s railroads.

¹¹⁷ London, *The Road*, 5.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 6.

Historical Origins

Nobody knows the origins of hoboing. The lifestyle of invisibility and displacement baffled mindsets amongst the economic anxieties and impulses of the late 19th century. Jackson Lears argues in the age of migration, “Indeed, nostalgia for rural roots was itself a product of rootlessness. A restless spirit spun Americans off in many directions.”¹¹⁹ American hoboing once capitalized the freedom of the rails and the opportunities of economic independence. It was a way of life unfamiliar with the conventionalities of modernism. And as America continued to modernize, the hobo stumbled upon the perils of such progress. Hobos echoed a rebellion of anti-modernism and defiance. Their stories are of both local origin and national significance. While age-old narratives tend to be highly heroic and romantic in nature, the sophistication of the traveler’s ability to organize neglected to take self-responsibility for the internal demise and cultural downfall of American hoboing.

The origin of “hobo” is difficult to trace with any validity. Though the term “hobo” holds little to no grounding in its original meaning, the vagrant image became a duality, transgressor, and countercultural icon. Nels Anderson argued, “Within the area of his own social environment, the hobo has created, or at least there has grown up in response to his needs, a distinct and relatively independent local community, with its own economic, social, and social-political institutions.”¹²⁰ Anderson’s perception of how homeless men gathered a community of shared experience forged a counterculture that

¹¹⁹ Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 138.

¹²⁰ Anderson, *The Hobo*, vii.

reflected the working-class but did not directly mirror. The media in 1898 reflected a similar analysis, “A tramp is not a hobo, a hobo is not a tramp; a vagrant is neither, a criminal is none of these.”¹²¹ Anderson argued that the self-conceptions and self-perceptions of this specific form of traveling crafted an enthralling and bedeviling counterculture known as “hobohemia” in the city.¹²² Through his storytelling, Jack London shaped a recognizable and culturally distinct group of members who lived by a means of purposeful steadiness in rural regions. By studying nonworking culture throughout various regions, Josiah Flynt shaped the movement of the nonworkers, leading to their hop on, hop off points of the railways. Anderson, London, and Flynt studied nonworkers from very different settings, however their work contributes to the understanding of how and why nonworkers migrated and formed groups of shared experience. With group foundation came the preservation of the authenticity and genuineness of a nonworking culture, however Flynt and London unknowingly begin a literary unfastening of the most subversive elements of hobo culture.

Much of the hobo ideology rests on transfiguring the relationship between the exploiter and exploited in an existing capitalist system. One party would primarily benefit from the other with the lower classes depending upon its relationship with the capitalist classes. Hobos have two ways to earn the commodities needed to live: wage-work and begging.¹²³ Jack London would often beg door to door in search of “scoffings”.¹²⁴ Often,

¹²¹ “Tramps and Hoboes,” *New York Times*, October 23, 1898.

¹²² Anderson, *The Hobo*, 4.

¹²³ Ibid, 6.

¹²⁴ “Scoffings” is a term used by London to describe the handouts given to travelers who go door to door in search of a free meal. London describes the people in house on the hill that he visited for a handout and lack of consideration for the humbleness of the traveler. London, *The Road*, 4.

he was turned down resorting London to the very poor for something to eat. “The very poor can always be depended upon. Time and time again, I have been refused food by the big house on the hill; and always I have received food from the little shack down by the creek or marsh.”¹²⁵ London’s writings explain two important aspects about transit mutualism. One, the cohesion of the lower classes and connected subgroups forms similar shared experiences and grievances of class struggle as well as the necessary reliance in which lower class America depends upon one another. Two, the association between lower classes and subgroups forms an all-encompassing working-class base that further divides those at the top and those at the bottom in society. Therefore, through the writings of London, it is understood that hoboing relied upon groups of mutual association rather than the power structures at the top.

The historical significance of American hoboing mirrors a rise and fall understanding of hobos as nonworkers. By founding their own selfhood and economic independence apart from the fixation of consumerism and conventionalities of industrial work and life, hoboing carefully balanced the need to work while also maintaining a lifestyle of leisure. The Gilded Age raised class consciousness within the localized jungles from the plains of Iowa to the railways of Ohio.¹²⁶ Recession and panic in the 1890s forced an unprecedented number of men from the fields to the rails, which pushed

¹²⁵ London, *The Road*, 5.

¹²⁶ Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 110.

group thinking to the extreme.¹²⁷ Ultimately by the time of industry's height, hobos faced a new daunting reality: urbanization and modernization.

City life proved to launch a pathway for social change by threatening the very essence of what defined hobo nonwork. By the post-Civil War decades, romantic sentiment combined with republican tradition to foster a restless spirit born out of necessity and desire.¹²⁸ This restless spirit coupled with innovation drove a newly modernized workforce to establish itself in the city. Consequently, the establishment of the modern workforce drew a fine line between the industrial workers and traveling nonworkers. James How served as the segway between newly arrived job seekers and the ability to obtain easy work.¹²⁹ A 1911 article stated, "How said this morning that as soon as any man applies for work, he will be given the opportunity to show whether or not he is serious in his request."¹³⁰ This exhibits how the gradual shift of traveling nonwork faced a new reality as hobos moved to the city in response to employment shifting to a more urbanized enterprise. How's role in sending in the requests to hire these job seekers essentially eliminated their initial objective to stay out of the labor market and most significantly hoboeing's most subversive, defiant elements in the process.

Outcasts in the Jungle: Class Formation in the Gilded Age

The end of the Civil War signaled a shift in nuance amongst American mindsets. Internally, Americans began to change, and society began to shift as a sudden

¹²⁷ Latham, *The Panic of 1893*, 8.

¹²⁸ Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 138.

¹²⁹ "Hobos are Given Work by How's New Bureau," *The Washington Times*, September 12, 1911.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

consequence. The need to piece the nation back together meant a sense of regeneration in morals and ideals, including the moral principles of the American work ethic. The industrial work ethic helped impell the restless personal energies of the manufacturers, blessed their enterprises with a sense of mission, and gave them a transcendent sanction.¹³¹ Starting over after the war meant to some a take upon the whimsicalities of chance and coupled with the emergence of intense industrialism and the explosion of the railroad, a sliver of the unemployed and dislocated population began hopping the rails in determination to utilize and practice the opportunity to both travel leisurely and work hard.¹³² The rail network provided the vital link between city, county, consumer, and labor markets for traveling nonworkers for those who were unable to afford transportation.

Steam Train Maury, a prominent hobo of the 20th century, alluded to the open road as a special privilege to move freely, “This land and its features were the tramp’s open road map, and his knowledge of American geography was proving phenomenal.”¹³³ Wandering and working in this autonomous way was, by and large, a privilege that belonged to able-bodied white men around the turn of the twentieth century. Hobos filled jobs that were considered “temporary” or “seasonal”.¹³⁴ With this necessary labor void filled, transit workers became America’s first known migratory workers. By using geography to their advantage, migrating travelers not only reduced labor shortages, but

¹³¹ Rodgers, *Worth Ethic*, 28.

¹³² Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 112.

¹³³ Graham and Hemming, *Tales of the Iron Road*, 112.

¹³⁴ Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts*, 80.

contributed to economically in the rural sector. Tales from the road tend to romanticize the reasoning for the increase in practice of rail hopping, however this brief story of origin for the changing pillars of American identity and the responses to such changes intends to correct the realities of the road. Writers like London and Flynt let the personalization of hoboing emerge against the backdrop of industrial ambition but yet they expose the deep tragedies that faced laborers at the time.

American life in the Gilded Age marked significant changes in lifestyle, work, family, and leisure. A stark shift towards modernity signaled not only a change in economy, but in societal relations as well. Rural communities could provide laborers with an important margin of freedom from the labor market. Members of rural communities strategically engaged in seasonal wage labor in coal mines and on the railroad with the goal of supporting traditional village life.¹³⁵ However, the inability to resist exploitative labor market conditions increased as urban communities solidified. Labor markets as places for social relationships and ideological formation signified unequal relationships between buyers and sellers of labor and the demonstration that unemployment was an inevitable part of life.¹³⁶ However, those who harbored dreams of escaping the labor market all together in small businesses, homesteading, and farming allowed for seasonal and irregular labor to take root. As a result, opportunities in the Midwest for homesteading and farming catered to certain individuals who sought to be a temporary subject in the labor market. Higbie argues, “Because of these opportunities, worker’s

¹³⁵ Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts*, 13.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 12.

class consciousness often was built around a desire to escape the labor market, a desire not to be a worker.”¹³⁷ With industry booming and the labor market taking shape, the introduction of hoboing created a fine line between those who were a part of the workforce and those who were not.

Consequently, class and economy emerged as forefront issues amongst a society dividing those at the top and those at the bottom. Thus, a capitalist system based upon wealth inequality and parity emerged against the backdrop of rapid industrialization and the expansion of the railroad.¹³⁸ Rather, their discourse projected a philosophy that separated the conventionalities of work and life from the freedoms of nonwork. A hobo confided to the *New York Times* in 1884, “I used to be a greenbacker, but that party’s no good anymore. I’m a man of all the world now, and in my own way I enjoy life as well as most people. My way may be a little out of the orthodox line, but it’s all the same. Every man to his own idea.”¹³⁹ They understood that in advanced capitalism the means of production would increasingly be the body of the laborer. By taking themselves out of work, they were taking back the means of production and grasping the margins of freedom from the labor market. This is exhibited by the migration patterns to and from Britt. A 1900 convention organizer in Britt explained that the town served as the platform for the Magna Carta of the American hobo to take action on political issues and dream of a “unified hobo party.”¹⁴⁰ As communities of shared experience formed, so did the

¹³⁷ Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts*, 13.

¹³⁸ Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 138.

¹³⁹ “No Life Like A Tramp’s,” *New York Times*, July 6, 1884, 9.

¹⁴⁰ “Tramps Bound for Iowa,” *The Semi-Weekly Messenger*, August 17, 1900.

discourse of advocacy that followed. As a result, nonworkers developed a discourse that was openly hostile to the idea that work was the measure of the individual's value.

The railroad signaled a new type of freedom, both personal and economic. No longer were Americans captive by the nation's geography. The freight-hoppers took this independence as an invitation for unconventionality and consequently opened mindsets to an unorthodox escapist sentiment that made people realize they didn't have to live a life on the same shift.¹⁴¹ London exemplifies this ethos as a testament to not only his resistance to orthodoxy but as a reactionary response to societal earnestness and phantasmagoria. His run in with the "big house on the hill" exemplified a pattern of division that associated individuals as part of particular social groupings. His mentioned in his response to the handout of the working-class antagonist, "I suppose I represented to him mystery, and romance, and adventure – all that was denied the feeble flicker of life that was in him"¹⁴² He alluded to a sense of class and social stratification that created certain divisions within modern societies, mostly economic. Though London represented just one by-product of this reactionary response, he's the first to put hoboeing into the context of class struggle, contributed to the immersion of hobo nonwork and wage work, and tripped away elements of subversiveness in the process.

By 1900, thousands of homeless workers would ignite a movement that would seriously challenge the nonworker's place and presence in the workforce. Knowing the origin of such resistance put into context the challenges of rural life and the class conflict

¹⁴¹ Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts*, 81.

¹⁴² London, *The Road*, 10.

that followed. The will of a forging labor army bound to live without labor prevailed over a free labor ideal that signaled a weakness in the free market.¹⁴³ The Gilded Age marked the beginnings of hoboing as a lifestyle for Civil War veterans and others unable to find work.¹⁴⁴ Despite the inability to find steady work, the hobo is a worker, but a worker by its own definition of work. Based on Anderson's ethnographic observations, he explained, "They are not steady workers, but they earn most of the money they spend."¹⁴⁵ What is for certain is that hoboing nonworkers earned a meager honest living that eschewed the disciplines of productive labor. Josiah Flynt recorded many travelers' stories on the road throughout the 1890s, including his own. He captured the essence of the hobo identity by capturing the vital cultural phenomenon that provided the security for hobos to receive gainful employment amidst a lifestyle of self-sustainment. Flynt wrote,

Is a tramp a wild animal or a wooden elephant that he must be subjected to the open astonishment of the curious? Ain't a tramp human an' hasn't he got a right to live so long as folks will keep him? Perhaps you never met a tramp before—I mean a real tramp. The tramps you've met have been hard working men, always "moving on" in search of something to do—where the something is nothing and where the pay is large and regular. I'm the genuine article and I'm not ashamed of it.¹⁴⁶

Flynt articulately emphasized the importance of moving, which is the basic lifeblood of hoboing. Working seasonal and temporary jobs meant the freedom to separate oneself from the disabling conditions of capitalist self-ruling in the labor market. However, the

¹⁴³ Depastino, *Citizen Hobo*, 25.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 5.

¹⁴⁵ Anderson, *The Hobo*, 41.

¹⁴⁶ Josiah Willard Flynt, "No Life Like a Tramp's," *Tramping with Tramps: Studies and Sketches of Vagabond Life* (New York: Century Company, 1907), 21.

ability to move from job to job relied upon the freedom of movement and residence outside of the labor market. Moving is a physical link, a bond that is essential and unique and the open road constituted an idealized model of American democratic culture. The rails symbolized the inspiration for American democracy and individual liberty sovereign to the market. As early as 1876, the *New York Times* noted great numbers of “migratory, poverty-stricken individuals” in the West stealing train rides with “an unlimited amount of check”.¹⁴⁷ These ride-stealing techniques are what allowed nonworkers to obtain a sense of economic selfhood apart from the experience and values of modern industrial life. Though the railroad represented the modern identity of the nation, the nonworkers represented the perils of unsolved problems of reality along the way – the railroad represented modernity and hoboing embodied anti-modernity.

While the modern age of mobility began to propel the American working-class somewhat forward in the early 1900s with the power and freedom that innovation stimulated, such as the automobile, laborers in rural communities struggled with their margin of freedom in the labor market with the continued use of the railroad. Unlike train tracks, the “motor vehicle is individualistic and independent, free from timetables, and free from routes.”¹⁴⁸ Changes in transportation threatened to divide middle and lower classes and rural and urban regions even more. “The image of riding the trails interrupts the rhetoric of progress embodied by the automobile. Instead this image sutures an alternative body, the poor mobile hobo, into the discourse, illustrating how a

¹⁴⁷ *New York Times*, February 28, 1876.

¹⁴⁸ McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 228.

counterculture physically appropriated the train.”¹⁴⁹ The automobile was integral in freeing the middle class, but pushed the hobboing laborers to rely on the railroad more than ever before. However, as capitalism made the automobile increasingly available, the use of the railroad for transportation became solely the use of transportation for vagrants.

Conflict and contention drove capital and labor into an era of economic inequality, monopolistic power, and populist rebellion between 1870-1900, inciting a polarizing change from a sense of exhilaration to fright. No longer was the vast majority of work still done on the farm, but rather the economy shifted towards revolving around the factory.¹⁵⁰ With the economy nearly double in size, new technologies and new ways of organizing business led to few individuals at the top. Robber baron industrialists and financiers clouded much of the underlying issues that emerged as a result of the changing conditions at the time. Long hours, little pay, mere negotiation, and dismal working conditions were the forefront of issues that pushed class-collective actions towards unity.¹⁵¹ Soon laborers realized that they must unite to demand change. Even though they lacked money, education, or political power, they knew one critical thing: there were simply more workers than there were owners. The Minneapolis Journal in 1901 described the emerging presence of hobo jungles, “Every town of any size in North Dakota, especially if its is located on a main line, has its hobo camp where tourists who use the side door Pullman cars, or even less palatial methods, congregate. Even a hobo is a

¹⁴⁹ Lennon, *Boxcar Politics*, 43.

¹⁵⁰ Rodgers, *Worth Ethic*, 22

¹⁵¹ McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 134.

sociable creature, and they form colonies of their own.”¹⁵² As labor in rural communities took its first steps toward unity by forming these local jungles, a serious division between labor and capital is assumed to have influenced ideological thinking around shared experiences of both struggle and adventure, thus igniting a collective understanding to overcome the oppressions faced by travelers.

The actions of a self-conscious working-class is an essential element in any successful anticapitalistic movement. By mass and concentration, the worker has the potential in an economic strategic role to address experiences in exploitation, injustice, and collective resistance.¹⁵³ Pictures from early camp gathering affirm the magnitude of hobo organizing capabilities. For instance, documentation of jungle activity by John James McCook heavily relied upon the imagery of hobo gatherings.¹⁵⁴ These images showcased the vast array of travelers who arrived for rest and repair, some in rags and others in riches.¹⁵⁵ These images convey a picturesque image of commonality and brotherhood, laying the foundations for understanding the shared experiences between the travelers. Some came for a bite to eat, others a shave, but often travelers left with a sense of worker unity and solidarity. And where the travelers go, their ideas were to follow.

The position and location of the hobo stood at the forefront of resistiveness and self-serving amidst the forces of illegality that proved subversive and substantive in their

¹⁵² “Hobos Not All Victims,” *The Minneapolis Journal*, August 24, 1901.

¹⁵³ Rodgers, *Work Ethic*, 42.

¹⁵⁴ See Appendix F.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

own ways. To use the system already in place, the hobo carved their own existence to the capitalist's displeasure. Railways provided the outlet for migrant workers to seek various types of work in different areas of the country.¹⁵⁶ However, only those who dared to jump the tracks took on the welcoming prospect. "Only the elite rarely bit the ballast."¹⁵⁷ Those who were considered elite rail riders were those who proved superior to the amateurs in terms of their ability or qualities to hop the tracks.¹⁵⁸ It's well understood in the community that the existence of hoboing and the identity itself relied upon the skills and marketable knowledge of hopping freight trains.¹⁵⁹ Furthermore, the direction of the train determined the traveler's position and location within society. Industrial capitalism's incompatibility with the liberty of independent self-employers of the rural Midwest allowed more freedoms for the individual person to limit the dependency.¹⁶⁰ In turn, a society of massed wage earners and arbitrary employers could not maximize the scope of individual freedom.¹⁶¹ Consequently over time, the growing presence of factories projected new ideas of efficiency that eliminated the standards of worker's independence. Though the railroads provided the privilege to move freely and easily, the economic and social distinctions of independent mobility distinguished nonworkers as a distinct variance with other laborers.

¹⁵⁶ Anderson, *The Hobo*, 87.

¹⁵⁷ Bruns, *Knights of the Road*, 36.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 36.; "Fewer Tramps Now Riding Bumpers," *Albuquerque Citizen*, September 30, 1907.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Rodgers, *Work Ethic*, 43.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

Britt: Rural Origins

The Midwest served as home base for the unorganized to connect, primarily beginning in Illinois and then shifted to Iowa. Very early gatherings began at Danville in 1899, under the name “Tourists Union 63.”¹⁶² The name “Tourists Union 63” was coined to avoid any references to hoboing and homelessness at the community’s displeasure. Danville didn’t serve as the primary meeting place for long because the locals were displeased with the sight of the homeless population.¹⁶³ The wanderers referred to themselves as “tourists” as a way to both promote the event and refrain from police interference. With community displeasure in Danville, the hobos sought out new grounds for gathering. A man named Mr. Thos took the initiative to find a more suitable and welcoming place for hobos to convene. Knowing his contacts in Iowa, Thos wrote to A. Way, T.A. Potter and W.E. Bradford of Britt in 1899 to request the town as the next promoter of hobo gatherings.¹⁶⁴ Way and Potter read in a Chicago paper that Tourists Union 63 elected officers Onion Cotton and Grand Head Pipe Charles F. Noe and subsequently wrote an open invitation for the officers to visit Britt and “look the ground”.¹⁶⁵ In the autumn of 1899, the officers arrived and met with attorney W.E. Bradford to guide legal proceedings for bringing the convention to Britt for the first time the following year, August 22, 1900.¹⁶⁶ As promotion gained steam, everyone took the matter as a job – but not the promoters. How well they succeeded is a matter of history.

¹⁶² *Chariton Courier*, June 16, 1899.

¹⁶³ “The Hobo Convention,” *Evening Times-Republican*, July 13, 1900.

¹⁶⁴ See Appendix C.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

To this day, Britt Hobo Days has survived. Perhaps the start of the historical event ignited a sense of carnival and celebration, however questions remain if the Hobo Days Convention served as a class formation that defined traveling work as a sub-movement of the entire working-class.

Though little evidence clarifies the reasons for relocating, historic predecessors explain two reasons for such a drastic move. First in 1900, the people of Britt allegedly welcomed the hobos with more accepting arms than the people of Danville.¹⁶⁷ A resident of Danville explained, “Already hordes of tramps are passing thru the country bound for Britt, Iowa where on next Wednesday next head pipe Charles F. Noe, of the Tourists’ Union, will rap on a beer barrel with a bung starter and call to order the second annual convention of the amalgamed hobos of America.”¹⁶⁸ The context of the Midwestern landscape provided the appropriate route for crowds of wanderers and wandering appreciators to settle in Iowa. A resident of Britt explained, “Britt will receive the tramps like kings, with dookies at every back door, empty cars and barns to sleep in, and every comfort to have trampdom easy.”¹⁶⁹ Another explanation is that Britt is located at a major railroad junction, where many jungles were located to attract travelers.¹⁷⁰ Where there was a guaranteed pot of mulligan stew, there was guaranteed a place for travelers to discuss and debate. Anderson stated, “It is interesting to notice that within the area of his own social environment, the hobo has created a distinct and relatively independent local

¹⁶⁷ “The Hobo Convention,” *Evening Times-Republican*, July 13, 1900.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Carroll Last, “Iowa Rail Lines.”

community, with its own economic, social, and social-political institutions.”¹⁷¹ A tight community of travelers formed and became the base for traveling workers to meet, share stories, and talk about shared experiences.

As more vagabonds gravitated to this role, communal jungles or “camps” formed on the outskirts of crossing railways. Initially, the communities were primarily places for hobos to rest and repair.¹⁷² Congregations of wanderers would share stories, sing songs, and share suggestions for survival on the road. Located in the tall grasses and behind large trees, one would most likely find a jungle near a railroad hub.¹⁷³ On the road, men frequently formed partnerships for reasons of safety, frugality, and company.¹⁷⁴ These communities were key social centers for travelers to interact with one another, where they cooked food, shared stories, and provided support.¹⁷⁵ Their labor was sought by farmers at harvest time, which supplied these men with seasonal work during the slack season.¹⁷⁶ Though many travelers preferred the open road in isolation, they also recognized how important the sense of community was in the traveler’s life. These “marvels of cooperation” were settled communities where hobos ate, drank, washed, and shared romance of the road.¹⁷⁷ Though bonding was important in maintaining the authenticity and genuineness of the hobohemian culture, the jungles also foreshadowed the gradual sophistication of gathering that ultimately led to formalized organizing in 1905.

¹⁷¹ Anderson, *The Hobo*, 11.

¹⁷² Depastino, *Citizen Hobo*, 71.

¹⁷³ Ibid, 71.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 69.

¹⁷⁵ See Appendix D and E.

¹⁷⁶ “Old-Time Hobo Joins Dodo in Usedtobe Land,” *The Bismarck Tribune*, March 6, 1920.

¹⁷⁷ Depastino, *Citizen Hobo*, 70.

Along the edge of Highway 13 in Iowa still stands a jungle formed at the intersection of the Canadian Pacific and the abandoned Chicago-Northwestern rail lines near Britt today.¹⁷⁸ An old freight train imbedded in the grass is marked with signatures from past kings and queens crowned annually at the convention.¹⁷⁹ Travelers are sometimes found sheltering themselves in the train car or building a fire to cook.¹⁸⁰ Often times, hobos compiled their food scraps and prepare a pot of mulligan stew. While surviving by the fire, a truly extraordinary exchange of stories instantly shifts independent living to collective association of shared adventure and equally shared struggle.¹⁸¹ A sphere of unconcerned influence is created against a society of hostile environment and a place of shared experience settles a safe haven for travelers, a cultural staple for the traveling culture. Beneath their struggles of survival are underlying conversations that ignited class-based values and beliefs that would later shape advocacy pertaining to social issues including unemployment and poverty.

What began as stories of skill and wit over mulligan stew formed into class-collective ideas over the protection and guardianship of the laborer. The presentation of homelessness and impoverishment of the jungle community is not an uncommon public perception. However, the flame of the fire signals more than just a place for rest and repair but rather a precaution for a place of safety, solidarity, and similar homology. The reason for such gravitation is understood as a certain appeal by Flynt. His investigations

¹⁷⁸ Carroll Last, "Iowa Rail Lines."

¹⁷⁹ See Appendix H.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Becker, *The Other Side*.

conclude that it's the mode of travel that attracts the workers, a "tantalizing delusion", he calls it, that cannot be understood.¹⁸² He explains, "Sight of the jungle conquers the traveler's emotion and gives a sense of fresh direction."¹⁸³ Based upon Howard Becker's theory on collective deviant behavior, groups form based on shared lived experiences. He continued, "The tramp is hypnotized by the stories told in a "happy-go-lucky manner", the winning voice turns the traveler's head".¹⁸⁴ According to Flynt, perhaps this is the particular fondness of the outcast who is forbidden the privileges and rights of a polite society that the traveler can nevertheless identify with a community just as definite and exclusive as the one they have been turned out of.¹⁸⁵ Hobo gatherings may be the chief claim to fame for Britt, but it is often overlooked how the start of local origin was a precursor to the larger significance of hobo workers in organized labor. Jungles and Britt played some type of role in taking the imagery of hoboeing to relatable resemblance of the typical American worker.

Structural causes of unemployment grew well into the twentieth century. While the traditional structure of business began to harshly impact the relationship between workers and their employers, production satirized an era when economic progress masked social problems and when the siren of financial speculation lured sensible people into financial foolishness. However, not all Americans were easily fooled by the market, some were just short of luck. Market instability severely impacted the agricultural sector

¹⁸² Flynt, *Tramping with Tramps*, 47.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 68.

that left farmers with no currency to bring their crops to market.¹⁸⁶ The price of farm products plummeted, forcing many farmers to lose their famers and their livelihood. The crush of so many defaulted loans led to many banks retaking land and the farmer's life savings.¹⁸⁷ As result, laborers were laid off and this created a labor shortage on the farm. Unemployment soared. However, so did the number of those who hopped onto the nearest freight. It is not certain the number of unemployed workers turned hobos began traveling the rails between 1893-1896. However, what is for certain is that the amalgamation of railroad expansion and greater opportunity in the city promoted local jungle organizing to shift the hobo to a more urban-based labor force.

Downturn in the 1890s

Major disruption in the 1890s had been developing for decades. It expressed the fundamental flaws of an economy based upon unregulated capital markets and entrepreneurial frenzy. Lears describes the unenviable impact of an era of instability. "Gilded Age enterprise: an overcapitalized, overextended company built on a rickety network of promissory notes and gentleman's agreements."¹⁸⁸ The overpromising sound-money men continued to debate the internal explanations for instability, including the overcapitalized and overextended instability of currency and the laissez-faire economics that governed much of the Gilded Age.¹⁸⁹ However, the working-class constituency bore a deep class divide in American society. As the depression deepened in 1893, industrial

¹⁸⁶ Latham, *The Panic of 1893*, 21.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 174.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

workers were on the defensive everywhere, scrambling to survive their employer's relentless drive to minimize labor costs, maximize productivity, and smash unions.¹⁹⁰ Suddenly, the window of escape was thrown wide open, appearing thousands of new promising nonworkers who enlisted as new labor activists and cemented nonworking prominence for the next three decades.

The sudden collapse of the stock market in 1893 ignited a feeling of unease and uncertainty everywhere. Coupled with the rise in mass unemployment, labor strikes, low farm prices, and crop failures led to the Panic of 1893. As more and more crops were dumped onto the American market, it depressed the prices farmers could demand for their produce.¹⁹¹ Small agricultural communities, like Britt, were affected as farmers grew more and made less..¹⁹² In turn, farmers sought cheap labor and the railroads were asked to operate on "free passes".¹⁹³ Consequently, out of work laborers found their way to the rails for means of opportunity based upon a lifestyle of mobility that allowed for working a little while in each place, and then moving on. They rubbed elbows with home-living men, and they frequently found themselves a good worker, but they found the hobo an honest worker as well.¹⁹⁴ At the same time, the growth of the factory system in the United State raised worker's consciousness to organize for the protection of their rights. Lears argues, "When a single starving man became part of a

¹⁹⁰ Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 175.

¹⁹¹ Latham, *The Panic of 1893*, 15.

¹⁹² *The Hobo Times: America's Journal of Wanderlust Volume 10, Edition 2*, 1996.

¹⁹³ Latham, *The Panic of 1893*, 12.

¹⁹⁴ Lennon, *Boxcar Politics*, 15.

social movement, the threat to affluent appetites became more sustained.”¹⁹⁵ “Rugged individualism”, derived from individualism, argues that any individual can surmount to any given challenge from self-reliance and independence from the outside. However, when people believe that their circumstance are not unique to them, rather widely shared with others, they may make demands for larger societal change through collective response. Such response to recession in the 1890s ignited a wave of causes and measures embraced by all working men: cooperation and compromise.

The winter of 1893-1894 proved to be most harsh as employers laid off more workers than anticipated. These scattered groups of jobless men formed unemployment armies that assembled local unemployed men. The most famous, Jacob Coxey led the Coxey’s Army marched their grievances to Congress in 1894, recruiting jobless men on the way.¹⁹⁶ To alarmed “men of property”, Coxey’s army seemed of proletariat vanguard, sending a ripple of insecurity through the respectable classes.¹⁹⁷ What is significant of Coxey’s army is mirrored imagery of impoverished jobless people, proclaimed and arrested as “vagabond citizens.”¹⁹⁸ What is for certain is that nonworkers were no different as the army of the unemployed as they sought to put their lifestyle of self-sustainment under the protection of the state. However, the shared association unknowingly consolidated an identity of nonworking travelers with the blue collar unemployed. With workers alike, nonworkers began to define themselves in ambitious

¹⁹⁵ Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 181.

¹⁹⁶ “The Greatest of Armies, A Labor Day Poem by Robertus Love,” *The Hobo News*, November 1917.

¹⁹⁷ Cohen, *Delinquent Boys*.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 182.

ways, as instruments of interest groups that could build coalitions with other interest groups.

Though the recession triggered a crisis that led to economic hardship, civil unrest, and labor action, modernization continued to impact traditional political culture. While the nation transitioned to a developed nation, modernization, urbanization, and the changing labor market, though good for the initial expansion of mobility and employment for the hobo, forced the traditional culture of seasonal work behind the times. Many laborers were forced to the city as a result of industrialization impacting agricultural technology that would diminish the need for manual labor.¹⁹⁹ They were forced to take jobs that were not in typical casual fashion as the nature of labor shifted to opportunity in industry rather than agriculture.

Though the exact imagery of the hobo cannot be precisely defined, what is for certain is that casual work ingrained into the hoboeing purpose. Whatever job was available, hobos took upon that chance.²⁰⁰ Throughout his investigations, Flynt studied how work affected the will of the vagrant. In the midst of job searching, Flynt accounted for how hobos sought little, temporary jobs as opposed to “being successful in making large catches”.²⁰¹ Odd jobs filled the void of employment that wouldn’t otherwise be occupied. For instance, a man visited a hobo jungle in which Flynt stayed and offered every single hobo a job of shoveling sand for a dollar a day with the work continuing into

¹⁹⁹ “The Hobos are Given Work by How’s New Bureau,” *The Washington Times*, September 12, 1911.

²⁰⁰ Maury and Hemming, *Tales of the Iron Road*.

²⁰¹ Flynt, *Tramping with Tramps*, 166.

the following autumn.²⁰² This exemplifies that informal job hiring was quite common amongst the hobo jungles, like how Flynt encountered this particular offer. However, the informality of the job is what created a casualness in the rural labor market that allowed for rural nonworkers to remain invisible from the labor market. An article from the Minneapolis Journal in 1900 described the job seekers who appeared when the crops were healthy and ready for harvest.

“The majority came from Minnesota and Wisconsin. They are men who come down from the pinneries in the spring, gay in machinas, with their pockets full of coin to be spent for the most part in ritous living. They are the men who built the railroads, and dig the sewers and do all the other labor that falls to the unskilled hands. They come from the small villages and the small farms and join forces with the minors from Michigan, the surplus labor from the rural communities of Iowa and Illinois, and even from Ohio, Missouri and Kentucky. Bow-legged range riders, sheep herders, railroad laborers looking for variety and adventure, fully as much as work, join the big caravan too.”²⁰³

Even though these laborers were hard-pressed by poverty, they were not pawns of larger economic forces. The vast majority of these jobs recruited strong, honest men, “who expect to live by the sweat of their brows and who expect to pay as they go.”²⁰⁴ The fact that these nonworkers were mobile, unseen, and largely not tracked allowed them to be just as insignificant enough to remain disassociated with the labor market.

The jobs offered to hobos didn’t necessarily place them into a “fitted” qualification. The fact that these laborers did not necessarily fit into a specific job role or stay with any specific job long-term allowed for travelers to move freely amongst different types of employment. He stated, “If these fits once become customary the man

²⁰² Flynt, *Tramping with Tramps*, 277.

²⁰³ “A Great Industrial Army,” *The Minneapolis Journal*, August 24, 1901.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

is unqualified for any kind of work ever after, and usually ends his life in the lowest class of the outcasts' world.”²⁰⁵ With not being molded into one specific role, the ability of the traveler to move freely and work different types of jobs naturally led them to the city. The omission of precast worker qualifications just about allowed hobos to work any job in industry. They just needed the means of transportation to get there. However, towards the turn of the century, this proved to become more difficult. The hobo’s “right of way” no longer constituted the hobo’s privileged mobility.

By 1900s, much of the nation’s railroad system connected various pathways between rural, remote areas and inner-city, urban centers. The railroad opened the way for settlement of the West, provided new economic opportunities, stimulated the development of town and communities, and generally tied the country together. When the railroads were shut down during the great railroad strike of 1894, the true importance of the railroads was fully realized.²⁰⁶ The increased policing of the railroad cripple the nonworkers ability to freely move. “Bulls” they were called, hunted free riders in the freight cars in search hobos who “rode the blinds” of the freight or “decked” roof of the car.²⁰⁷ London often rode passenger trains as his primary means of travel, however he demonstrated how “beating the train” was by far the most dangerous occupation, Jack London experienced this firsthand as he was “pinched” by a “fly cop” and taken into jail as one of this “prisoners”.²⁰⁸ If caught, the hobo was “pinched”, a term used by hobos

²⁰⁵ Flynt, *Tramping with Tramps*, 17.

²⁰⁶ Bruns, *Knights of the Road*, 13.

²⁰⁷ London, *The Road*, 60.

²⁰⁸ “Fly Cop” was a term often used by hobos to describe the railroad policemen who confronted the travelers about their whereabouts and their intended destination. London, *The Road*.

when caught in a lie. “Prisoner” was a term used by hobos when convicted for the crime of hoboing. The term gained popularity amongst hobos as a testament for the feeling of how regulation impacted the hobo’s freedom of the rails. In addition, the word also serves as an indication that hoboing became an institutionally criminalized way of life.

Unable to claim residence, London was caught in a lie. Consequently, London was convicted and tried under the crime of vagrancy. He stated, “And now I shall faithfully describe what took place in that court-room, for know that my patriotic American citizenship there received a shock from which it has never fully recovered.”²⁰⁹ In the early days of the Gilded Age, vagrancy was a loose term used for describing early homelessness. However, by the 1890s, homelessness took a new meaning. No longer was traveling work considered a lifestyle of freedom or choice. Rather, homelessness and unemployment became an unprecedented criminal offense.

Criminalization of Vagrancy

As the railroad became the subject of regulation into the 1900s, the longevity of the traveler’s ability to freely move began to seriously threaten the nonworker lifestyle. In addition, the introduction of the automobile provided a new way for rural and urban America to connect in unmatched ways. Though the railroad was under intense regulation, the automobile provided a new way of transportation for travelers to join urban-industrial society.²¹⁰ However, the automobile also challenged the traditional culture of freight hopping. Coupled with the increase in railway regulation and new job

²⁰⁹ London, *The Road*, 30.

²¹⁰ Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 136.

opportunities in the city, traveling nonworkers eventually found their way towards an urban-based place of settlement.²¹¹ The reasoning for this is two-fold.

One, as the agriculture industry declined in opportunity and availability of industrial jobs matured, the nature of the laborer shifted towards the paralleled identity of the industrial worker. Part of this came from the hobo's desire to shed a criminal identity that was portrayed by the media and the law. For example, in 1905 a South Dakota newspaper reported on the policing of hobo jungles stating that officers thrived on the "hunting of hobos".²¹² An officer reported "It is extremely likely that the very few of them will wish to return to the city of rude awakening as long as these officers wear the uniform". The criminalization of vagrancy and hoboing contributed to the breakdown of not only the hobo's ability to move, but also desire to take on jobs in rural communities. The second reason for the shift towards an urban settlement is that freedoms of the rails drastically changed, nonworkers no longer relied on rural epicenters and they turned to the city for safe haven from the law. Kansas in 1917 experienced an increase in policing "the rods" of the freight cars in response to the growing presence of James How's IBWA members. A policeman stated, "Now he has a bitter enemy, an enemy who just dotes on pulling an inoffensive 'working man' out from under a freight car, or from a blind baggage. The hobo's new foe in the National Guardsman whose chief duty is guarding railroad property."²¹³ The stark actions taken against the presence of traveling job seekers

²¹¹ Despastino, *Citizen Hobo*, 129.

²¹² "Husky Heroes Hunted Harvest Hands," *The Aberdeen Democrat*, July 28, 1905.

²¹³ "Hobo Has New Foe," *The Herald*, August 17, 1917.

suggest the law's disapproval and distaste for the individuals who defied the pursuits to regulate the hobo's freedom of the rails, or "right of way". The initial link between rural communities and the sector essentially phased out the traveler's decades long privilege of making use of such vital networking.

Nonwork consequently suffered in response to the increased policing of the railroads and urban development. No longer were freight hoppers allowed free and unsupervised mobility. Hitching a free ride was soon accompanied with enforcement, something that hadn't been experienced prior to bolstered railroad regulation in the 1880s. By the late 1890s, the criminalization of vagrancy shattered all romanticized illusions of freight hopping, truly threatening the rite of passage for American hoboing. Where regulation was enforced, garrison followed. London writes,

"Behind me were the many generations of my American ancestry. One of the kinds of liberty those ancestors of mine had fought and died for was the right of trial by jury. This was my heritage and it devolved upon me to stand up for it. He got to me. My name and I stood up. The bailiff said, 'Vagrancy, your Honor,' and I began to talk. But the judge began talking at the same time, and he said, 'Thirty days.' I started to protest, by at that moment his Honor was calling the name of the next hobo on the list. His Honor paused long enough to say to me, 'Shut Up!' The bailiff forced me to sit down. And the next moment that next hobo has received thirty days and the succeeding hobo was just in the process of getting his."²¹⁴

The tales of the imprisoned highlight the shift in attitude in what it meant to be homeless and unemployed. The modes of social investigation were very much the cultural production of one class trying to come to the grips with the realities and politics of another. Through London's investigations, he alluded, "Floating laborers were the focus

²¹⁴ London, *The Road*, 31.

of investigation because they represented the extreme human manifestation of unregulated industrialization: men without women, workers without bosses, white men ‘enslaved’ by poverty.”²¹⁵ The creation and circulation of reports from Flynt and London, as part of the popular press, were part of a broader conflict of nature of vagrancy in American society. Whatever their method, investigators mapped out a working-class world that appeared to be an inversion of nonwork’s unique elements of subversiveness and defiance.

However, aren’t homeless workers still citizens with rights? London was dazed as he was denied his right of trial by jury and his right to plead guilty or not guilty.²¹⁶ The vagrant wasn’t always at fault and they weren’t necessarily let down by their will to work, but rather the system that allowed some to succeed and others to be left behind. Thirty days in jail gave London the experience to use against the law and justice as a right and privilege of American citizenry to speak out about the injustices against the prosecutions against vagrancy.²¹⁷ He represents just one example of how the criminalization of vagrancy aroused a massive outcry for the need to organize the fragments of unorganized labor. Drawing upon Marx, he used personal experiences of being tried for vagrancy as a catalyst for conceptualizing public discourse around the rights and privileges that are inherent to the working-class.²¹⁸ In order to represent a class-based struggle and to promote the rights of both workers and nonworkers, London

²¹⁵ Higbe, *Indispensable Outcasts*, 93.

²¹⁶ London, *The Road*, 31-32.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

was instrumental in placing vagrancy and casual workers in context with larger ideas of class and class struggle.

A growing perception that homelessness and unemployment was a permanent aspect of industrial society increased the number of social investigations sponsored by state and federal governments. As an investigator, Flynt fastened vagabonding as a response to larger social issues at hand, including vagrancy. He investigated the social analysis of individual hobos and vagrancy as a whole as a threat to the community. Consequently, he contributed to the public's sensitivity to vagrants. He labeled hobos as "human parasites" in effort to connect the "tramp" with the criminal.²¹⁹ Confident that his analysis and proposed solutions to vagrancy as a social "problem" would serve the public interest, he portrayed migratory workers as passive victims of structural causes.²²⁰ While this holds true, the effort to further portray hobos as victims shifts the narrative to understand hobos as unskilled workers in the form of agents of reaction and change.

Perhaps inevitable urbanization unfolded one possible explanation for the vagabond culture's inability to self-sustain. The railroad was no longer a free ride, industry fueled jobs that no longer justified migrating and the general policing of the hoboing signaled a hostile response to the lifestyle's prerogative.²²¹ The rule of vagrancy law led to serious convictions over the correlation between citizenship and rightful

²¹⁹ The word "tramp" is an outdated term that was used to describe vagrants as dirty, unwashed, uneducated, homeless bums. Today, the term is considered politically incorrect to describe the identity of a hobo. However, the term "tramp" was coined in response to a lack of understanding what a hobo was at the time. Flynt, *Tramping with Tramps*.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ "Vagrancy Laws," *The Hobo News*, April 1919, 12.

employment. By 1911, the hoboining nonworkers received recognition and representation in the field of journalism. Reported by a newspaper in Grand Forks, North Dakota in 1911, “It is the first time in their history that the knights of the road have felt the need of a literary organ. As a rule, they do not court publicity, and this far their chirographic efforts have been confined to cabalistic marking on gateposts supposed to carry information to the wandering brotherhood.”²²² The discourse that shaped public debate and discussion surrounding a citizen’s right to gainful employment was presented in the rural Midwest as an introduction to the happening of How’s IBWA. This ignited an emerging class-based ideology around casual nonwork that unknowingly kindled a distinct labor movement throughout the height of progressive politics.

Rural Component

To conclude the rural chapter of the hobo’s story, the nonworking hobos and related casual workers crafted a specific work ethic characterized as laborious, diligent, and assiduous. Those who sought economic independence from the conventionalities of modern working life were found in remote areas as far north as North Dakota and as south as Kansas. Untainted by the discomforts of modern progress, the rural component to the hobo’s story raises several questions of how hoboining forged a counterculture that shaped the values and social understandings of migrant workers, riders of the rails, and the deeper pillars of American identity. However, such mass-rise of activism led to the perceived image of hoboining to be reframed as blue-collar work. This analysis strengthens

²²² “The Hobo News,” *The Evening Times*, April 26, 1911.

the apparent connection between the rural origins of casual nonwork and the eventual progressive up-taking of hoboining's most defining attributes. The stories of the jungles, freight hopping, and policing introduce a new rural appendage in hoboining's origins that provides the context necessary for how social understandings into unemployment and homelessness set the stage for progressive era reform to take shape.

CHAPTER 3

“PINCHED”: THE FALL OF THE HOBO LABOR MOVEMENT, 1905-1929

While the Gilded Age drastically expanded the economy, not all Americans received equal outcomes. America never could have risen to its preeminent place in the world of industrial nations without the backbreaking toil of its workers. By the turn of the century, serious efforts to address worker grievances began to challenge political machines and corrupt organizations.²²³ Thus, a new wave of social activism and political reform ignited amongst lower working-class Americans. Vagabonding was a response to vast unemployment and homeless from the 1880s to 1920s. These people showed that while the nation boomed, there were certain busts along the way. Rallies of job seekers appeared in cities from San Francisco to New York to call for the drafting of legislation to Congress.²²⁴ The rallygoers advocated for government protection for the unemployed by calling for government-sponsored job creation.²²⁵ However, the stillness of the government's response to worker grievances testified to the power of working-class mutualism. Ultimately, the busts accounted for rising unemployment and homelessness social problems that largely remained unsolved. Because the government remained mostly absent within these discussions, some Americans resorted to their own means of survival. The Progressive Era allowed the United States to develop to a greater social, political, and constitutional level.

²²³ Rodgers, *Work Ethic*, 160-162.

²²⁴ “Sharp Points,” *San Francisco Call*, July 16, 1913.

²²⁵ Ibid.

Reflection and reform were particularly prolific during the last two decades of the Gilded Age, which coincided with the Progressive Era of American politics. The Progressives sought to solve many of the social injustices of the Gilded Age. Where the era was highly individualistic, progressive reformers advocated for socially beneficial programs in a more shared manner. Progressives who advocated for government regulation of industry asserted that economic and social policy could not easily be separated.²²⁶ The Progressive movement sought answers to social problems through scientific and methodological study. While the professions of medicine, social work, and law flourished, professionals sought to use their disciplines to increase public health and safety, reform prisons and tenement housing, and outlaw child labor.²²⁷ They took major part in this narrative as well through a platform that focused upon changing the relationship between the government and its people.

The political progression of the hoboing laborers managed to sustain itself for the better part of forty years. During this time, the sophistication of organizing propelled the consciousness of the nonworking laborer to absorb the worker's identity at the national level. Higbie explains one reasoning for why nonworking laborers shifted to the city. Labor shortages in industry opened new opportunities for nonworkers to provide unskilled work for various types of factory jobs that did not require skills.²²⁸ Social hierarchies between laborers distinguished themselves in different lines of work and especially to distinguish specific skills.²²⁹ Such hierarchies not only created different

²²⁶ McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 149.

²²⁷ Ibid, 252.

²²⁸ Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts*, 118-119.

²²⁹ Ibid.

categories of skill, but also positioned skilled and nonskilled laborers within their own spheres of influence. Anderson contributed to social categorization between seasonal laborers and hobos in the urban setting. The seasonal worker, according to Anderson, tended to have one definite occupation or trade and followed supplementary jobs only during the slack season.²³⁰ In contrast to the seasonal worker, the hobo may have a profession or trade, and may beg in-between jobs, according to Anderson.²³¹ While Higbie speaks to the social organization between laborers in rural communities, Anderson studies the movement of nonworkers once they reach the city by offering a firmer refinement between what defines work and nonwork. By specifying social categorizations based upon occupation, new social identities began to craft an us versus them mentality.

Greater issues were addressed as part of a nation-wide questioning of the government's role in people's lives and behavior. With the introduction of the railroad, the traveler was allowed greater access to the main cities. Hobos from rural Texas and Louisiana were hitching a ride to seek new opportunities that were considered limited in agricultural communities.²³² For instance, in 1906 a mass movement of laborers from outside San Antonio hopped the rails to job search in the industrious Midwestern cities.²³³ With nonworkers engaging in factory occupations, they were familiarized with the workingman's quarrels and the conflict that took place over increasing regimented labor. By the 1900s, labor organizations of work-weary wage earners dissented through middle-

²³⁰ Anderson, *The Hobo*, 63.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² "New Method of Stealing a Ride," *Daily Capital Journal*, June 21, 1906.

²³³ Ibid.

class ideas of time and labor that introduced ideas of the diligent worker at a time when a sense of class itself was weak.²³⁴ The hoboing social class inherently infused with the identity of the urbanized unskilled which interpolated the nonworker with the progressive labor movement throughout the early twentieth century.

Consequently, this raised questions of how the localized jungles contributed to the discourse on an average worker's right to earn a livable lifestyle under a system that demands labor and requires money-based social relations. Jungles and camps reflected a sense of coexistence and cooperation amongst those who visited.²³⁵ Often men would hop off the rails to grab a quick bite, a quick shave, or take a brief rest. Attendance of hobo assembly in the jungle is difficult to trace; however, it is certain that the origin of jungle congregating began off the railways in isolated spaces in trees and brush. John James McCook, a social investigator, captured the imagery of the jungles, exhibiting the cohesiveness of mutual association between travelers.²³⁶ Though the evidence on the discourse shared inside the jungles is absent, the imagery of social investigation, such as McCook, suggests a certain attraction of individuals from different origins that formed a community of shared experience, empathy, and compassion.

This natural sense of cohesion formed amongst the laborer as their mass existence in the urban setting began to seriously question their economic rank and interests. Anderson explains, "In the flux and flow of the life on the 'main stem' certain individuals are conspicuous. They are the soap-box orators, the organizers and promoters of utopias.

²³⁴ Rodgers, *Worth Ethic*, 169.

²³⁵ See Appendix F.

²³⁶ Ibid.

These men are the most loved or the most hated of all the hobohemian celebrities.”²³⁷

They share stories of the rails over a pot of mulligan stew and shifted provoking thought that signaled deep contradictions in commercialism and competition. Transit individualism soon turned to transit mutualism as all-would be reformers had one thing in common: they perceived themselves as outsiders looking in on a class world separate from their own. According to Anderson, “By the very nature of his occupation he is deprived of his ballot, and liable when not at work to arrest for vagrancy and trespassing.”²³⁸ Anderson captured the dichotomy of vagrancy: the public ignored the vagrant’s problems but yet is pitiful or hostile at their presence. Workers and nonworkers alike made sense of class conflict by reaching to the broader public interest from a variety of genres, exposing social conflicts and cleavages. From the jungles in Britt to mass media in St. Louis, the transformation of stories over mulligan stew into propaganda by floating laborers demonstrates how and why oral tradition became narrative. Anderson continued, “With no status in organized society, the laborer long for a classes society where all inequalities shall be abolished. In organizations, he finds association with restless men of his own kind in recognition everywhere else denied him”.²³⁹ The floating laborer was not merely a data point representing the dysfunctional nature of the American economy but posed a disruption to cherished narratives of republican commonwealth, upward mobility, and masculinity.

²³⁷ Anderson, *The Hobo*, 171.

²³⁸ Ibid, 167.

²³⁹ Rodgers, *Work Ethic*, 167.

To understand how the idea of hobo nonwork fused with the actuality of work is to understand the relationship between government and its people and the struggle of the existing relationship. As citizens, travelers believed this to be a mutually benefitable relationship with government providing means of economic support to people and in reverse people providing their labor power who are willing to support those means in return.²⁴⁰ It's the idea that in an economic situation, the worker is at equal level with the decision maker. Industrial workers engaged their employers in long and bitter disputes over working conditions as a tactic to rally around those placed the inherent value on work.²⁴¹ Based upon a mutual beneficiary of socialized economics, progressive reformist advocated for government security for laborers and workers in return for a stable labor force.

Beneath the working-class strive was a countercultural labor movement that not only addressed the conditions of nonwork but contributed to the kindling of a much larger blue-collar cause. The historical chronology of hoboing nonwork pivots into a contested time of criminalization to politicization throughout the early twentieth century. These people spoke the dialect of the working-class, shared their work and leisure-time values, and took the persona of a class-conscious worker. No longer were they just Midwestern laborers, but political actors, instruments of interest groups, and part of a larger coalition with other homeless and unemployed groups. The resulting debate about how transit laborers made themselves visible within the boundaries of the community was very much

²⁴⁰ "A Pension for Hoboes," *The Columbia Evening*, August 09, 1922.

²⁴¹ Rodgers, *Work Ethic*, 174.

about how America was passing from a traditional, agricultural state to a reformist, industrial nation.

“Pinched”

To be “pinched” is an ordeal known to any wanderer cemented between the boxcars of the commercial system and the class of rabbles to which they claimed residence.²⁴² Hobos passed with amazing frequency and introduced an active movement in labor. Much like the shadowed legacy of labor’s unsettled vagrancy, How relied upon the ghostly realities of unemployment and homelessness to kindle a new class of workers unsurmountable to the challenging forces that “pinched” the most vulnerable. A worker consciousness developed within the working-class that no longer concluded the poor were responsible for their plight.²⁴³ Progressive reformist’s emphasis on individual shortcomings had given way to a focus on the impact of environment.²⁴⁴ The inability to make a sustainable living forced hobbing nonworkers into a cramped interpretation of American itinerancy that sealed off a perception of consideration to those deemed most hapless in the emerging capitalist state.

By 1905, the popularity of the vagrant reached St. Louis and caught the eye of progressive reformist James Eads How who inspired progressive, engineered solidarity amongst the individualized and nonconformist attitudes of the jobless labor army.

²⁴² “Pinched” is a term used by a hobo who is caught in a lie with the law. This term was popularized as vagrancy became criminalized throughout the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. The term was published by Jack London in *The Road*. His experiences being pinched detail a common run in with the law by hobos as they were often caught in boxcars without claim of residence by railroad police. London, *The Road*, 29.

²⁴³ McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 99.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

Traveling in second class cabins and carrying canvas luggage, How took upon an workingman's image to appeal to a particular class of working people.²⁴⁵ Coupled with societal retribution and intensified ostracism, the public discourse of jobless men ignited a cry for validation, skillfully turning working-class uproar into collective action.²⁴⁶ The representation of nonworkers sought to harness and organize the energies of the unemployed and homeless, introducing a newly recognized organization that aligned the brotherhood with the larger blue-collar class. To which How laid tie with the hobo cause is not for certain, however his claim to organize the unorganized no longer forced the vagrant community to be "pinched" under labor's revered narratives. A typical progressive-era philanthropist and reformer, How uplifted job seekers and associated hoboing nonworkers into respectability by re-framing them as workers through social advocacy tied to unemployment and homelessness. As stated by creed, "These men have long been considered an economic necessity but had no definite form of organization that was ever able to better their working conditions – workers who are called upon to do seasonal work."²⁴⁷ How's legacy with the IBWA erases the subversive elements in the hoboing culture by making them acceptable to dominant structures of power. Consequently, he eliminated hoboing's most subversive quality: making work separate from their identities. To that end, it was How's notable strides that contributed to the demise of the hobo's urbanity and heritage.

²⁴⁵ "Millionaire Hobo Back with Message," *The Richmond Palladium and Sun-Telegram*, November 9, 1921.

²⁴⁶ Ibid, 125.

²⁴⁷ "The Migratory Workers Union: Why We Organize," *The Hobo News*, May 1922.

The turn of the twentieth century marked a bad time to be homeless. The entrenchment of the proprietary plutocracy extended a crisis of challenges amongst the economic insecure. Rapid industrialization and intensified private enterprise forced Americans into distinct social classes that would shape the work ethic of workers and nonworkers alike for years to come. Large numbers of industrial workers failed to internalize the faith of the factory masters.²⁴⁸ Long in advance of the worker recognition of leisure, workers dreamed of a workday short enough to push labor out of the center of their lives.²⁴⁹ Workers proclaimed dignity and worth of the individual from those who soiled their hand with honest labor.²⁵⁰ With worker emphasis on each person's ownership of their labor, economic individualism built an emerging factory system on individual workers' free exchange of their labor for wages. Economic necessity and security deprived their economic independence, or "right of way".²⁵¹ However, as the working-class institutionalized into its class, it realized that they would need their forms of cooperation against the internal divisions beginning to form in society. Depastino explains the forces of industrial progress that diminished the need for hobo labor. He states, "The story of hobohemia failed to capture the new forms of social and economic organization that emerged after WWI, especially the quickening trends toward consumerism, the serves traders, assembly line production, and suburban living."²⁵² Swept up in an economic variance with the new work discipline and coinciding social

²⁴⁸ Rodgers, *Work Ethic*, 155.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Depastino, *Citizen Hobo*, 23.

²⁵² Ibid, 173.

politics, the nonworker found itself wedged between society vastly changing and a struggle to maintain its unique cultural lifestyle.

Progressive era politics introduced a broad agenda that extended far beyond the control of big business. For the first time, Americans began demanding government involvement in the day to day lives of the middle and lower classes.²⁵³ Progressives battled to educate people, end class conflict, control big business, and segregate society.²⁵⁴ Rather than advocating for the fundamental restructuring of the capitalist system, progressives promoted ideas that social classes must be transformed by mobilizing the public sphere for bold discourse, negotiation, and planned action. One hidden gem of the era's greatest milestones is the jobless labor lobby, a social movement that remains as profoundly impressive and profoundly disturbing a century later. Change on the nonworker's frontier was inevitable and progressives commissioned hobos as agents of expansion.²⁵⁵ Pinched under labor's story, the personification and imagery of the hobo's steady joblessness and impoverishment appealed to particular progressive reformists, which contributed to the general demise of the hobo's cultural livelihood. Progressives began placing new terms of "migratory", "seasonal", and "casual labor" that placed the hobo squarely in the labor market.²⁵⁶ In doing so, they emphasized the role of modern wage relations in the making of the hobo counterculture.²⁵⁷ Subsequently, such discourse, like that of homelessness, critiqued hobo nonworkers as a by-product of an

²⁵³ McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 80.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, xv.

²⁵⁵ Depastino, *Citizen Hobo*, 174.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 181.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

industrial civilization.²⁵⁸ Through the actions of progressives, including How, the hobo nonworker was reintegrated back into the polity. Whether intentional or not, How's call for reform eliminated a unique legacy to the hobo's subversiveness and transgression and remained lost within labor's greatest strife's, until now.

To progressives, the workplace, like every other American sphere of life, needed improvement. Activists for higher wages, shorter working hours, and better working conditions sympathized with the hard lives of working wage-earners. With labor movements in almost every sector of industry and agriculture demanding recognition, the traveling nonworkers preferred a pragmatic recognition of their labor autonomy as well. They stressed the centrality of free labor driven by the philosophy that Americans achieve success through hard work.²⁵⁹ Ayn Rand held a moral defense to the right of each human to do any and all activities necessary to sustain their own life.²⁶⁰ In regard to the role of government in an individual's efforts to proclaim economic selfhood, protecting individual rights should be fundamental in the free market. Her defense is important in recognizing freedoms of the individual person in relation to the larger business-controlled market.

Furthermore, Rand argued that the government itself should be limited to its role in protecting rights.²⁶¹ The principles of economic individualism rely upon the limitations of government. Therefore, a capitalist system of free individuals is achieved only based

²⁵⁸ Carleton H. Parker, *The Casual Laborer and Other Essays* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, and Howe, 1920), 85-88.

²⁵⁹ Emanuel Julius, "Hoboism and Socialism," *The Hobo News*, February 1917, 4.

²⁶⁰ Ayn Rand, *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal* (New York: New American Library, 1966).

²⁶¹ Ibid.

on the recognition of individual rights. However, moral reasoning does not always translate between government and business. Within a free market of self-regulation, self-managed business enterprises act with, largely, free autonomy, paving way for enterprisers to regulate production and labor in a highly mechanized way.²⁶² The delicate balance of the free market's virtues also exposes the pitfalls of a highly self-regulated wage-earning arrangement between capital and labor. By the twentieth century, manufacturing expanded production to not only drastically impact urbanism, but also transitioning rural America into more capitalist-based in the production process.

For many years, hoboing drove a sense of economic individualism; it is the belief and practice that every person is unique and self-reliant.²⁶³ However, the agricultural sector that the travelers relied upon for steady employment, began to cripple over organizational weakness and internal division. The self-employment that agriculture once built itself on lost its self-sufficiency as most farmers began producing cash crops for the market.²⁶⁴ And throughout the Gilded Age into the early twentieth century, hoboing could thrive on such a viewpoint. Progressive era organizing emerged from part of the working-class that could not cope with its affluence. As free riders of the rails, traveling job seekers advocated for the common ownership of the means of production in the forms of cooperatives and self-employed individuals.²⁶⁵ This played a huge influence on the belief that workers would need to own the means of production in an economy to stop the

²⁶² Rodgers, *Work Ethic*, 66.

²⁶³ Depastino, *Citizen Hobo*, 23.

²⁶⁴ McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 27.

²⁶⁵ R.W. Irwin, "The Advance Guide and the International Brotherhood Welfare Association: An Answer," *The Hobo News*, July 1921, 10.

exploitation found in a capitalist system. These demands laid out the desire for better social conditions; to furnish medical, legal, and other aid to its members; to encourage the utilization of unused land and machinery to provide work to the unemployed; to educate the public mind to collective ownership in production and distribution; and to bring about the scientific, industrial, and moral judgment of the masses.²⁶⁶ Though nonwork counters the larger working-class, progressive reformers similarly endorsed nonworkers' collective efforts to control labor.

As American capitalism sharpened the division between capital and its labor, workers were even more forced to travel in search of work. How and the International Brotherhood Welfare Association inspired a new wave of labor combativeness at the beginning of the twentieth century. Not formally recognized as a major labor union, the organization's early days suggest its success as a mutual aid society dedicated, but not limited, to the plight of the hoboing nonworker.²⁶⁷ As a facet of a much larger cause keen to worker rights and conditions, jobless nonworkers sought to organize on the basis that they could solve the problems through the circumstance in which they were in.²⁶⁸ The teaching philosophy and tactics of the organization mimicked similar strategies set by other major labor unions and their corresponding movements.²⁶⁹ For example, the IBWA and IWW depicted homelessness through themes of alienation and home life. Anderson described the characterizations of hobo struggle on IBWA pamphlets, "By the nature of

²⁶⁶ Adrian Lynne Marie, *Organizing the Rootless: American Hobo Subculture 1893-1932* (PhD diss., University of Iowa, Iowa City, 1982), 12.

²⁶⁷ "Letters to the Editor," *The Hobo News*, July 1916, 9.

²⁶⁸ Becker, *The Other Side*.

²⁶⁹ Cohen, *Delinquent Boys*, 11.

his work and not by his own will, the hobo is precluded from establishing a home and rearing a family.”²⁷⁰ The IWW used similar invoked the lack of home life as evidence of oppression. Frederick Mills spoke at a IWW town hall in 1914, “You people think you live don’t you? You think you are happy? You men don’t know what it is to have a home, a wife, and a child, and yet you think you live”²⁷¹. Reactionary groups, such as prominent labor organizations, similarly weaponized the hobo’s alternative norms of home life an effort to link homelessness with class struggle. However, the collective behavior of the IBWA still identifies as distinctly influential with labor organizations and in contrast with greater American society.

How’s Hobos: Progressive Priorities

The panic of 1893 marked a serious turning point for job seekers. The Panic of 1893 uprooted them and hundreds of thousands of other Americans from their communities in search of work. The economic depression forced thousands of low-skilled, unemployed workers onto freight trains.²⁷² With the increasing image of men freight hopping, the public heightened their conjecture about these wanderers, or tramps as they were referred to at the time. Public opinion did not speak highly of the “tramp problem”.²⁷³ Images of vagrant men staring from empty boxcars, crouching on express train baggage cars, and trudging along railroad tracks were perceived as warning signs.²⁷⁴ People began to fear the jobless man and the barrage of arrests made on the illegal freight

²⁷⁰ Anderson, *The Hobo*, 88.

²⁷¹ Gregory Woirol, *In the Floating Army, 1914* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 125.

²⁷² Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 169. Depastino, *Citizen Hobo*, 56.

²⁷³ Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 118.

²⁷⁴ See Appendix F.

hopping derailed the hobo reputation as honest, hardworking people. A 1908 article reported the “trouble with tramps” as they moved from town to town looking for work.²⁷⁵ A 1909 article reported the experiments made to test the “out of luck” stories that hobos used to “size up” those who questioned their place of residence.²⁷⁶ The public discourse used in response to the increasing activity of hobo nonworkers seriously impacted American attitudes and opinion on the increased presence of homeless men.

In what was perhaps the last gasp of the pioneer spirit of communal land use, the brotherhood considered the railroad right-of-way as their own. They considered freight hopping their special privilege.²⁷⁷ And they sought the public to understand their defining characteristic, “Then, in them days, anyone who saw a hobo said ‘bum,’ that’s all. Well, times have changed. And to understand the change you must know the difference between a hobo and a plain tramp. A hobo is a guy who works when there is work is to be got. A tramp never works.”²⁷⁸ The American populace generally misunderstood hobos as vagrants and homeless burnouts. Today, these misconceptions remain largely intact. The urgency to set the record straight only strengthened the brotherhood around the objectives to recognize the unemployed worker and then to go against common misconceptions of homelessness.

The ability of hoboeing nonworkers to form a collective group of set established norms and behaviors subsequently allowed them to legitimize their social movement from 1905-1929. Led by How and similar sympathizers to their cause, including the

²⁷⁵ “Plenty of Hobos,” *The Plymouth Tribune*, May 14, 1908.

²⁷⁶ “Calling the Tramp’s Bluff,” *Coeur d’Alene Evening Press*, February 27, 1909.

²⁷⁷ Maurey and Hemming, *Iron Road*, 9.

²⁷⁸ *The Citizen Republic*, December 12, 1918.

general mass populace of the homeless and unemployed, the IBWA represented a section of labor's national protest. In its mission statement in 1919, the organization declared itself to be a "cleaning house for labor".²⁷⁹ Though the IBWA was the second largest mutual aid society its early days suggest two important understandings: sub-facets of labor were not all that radical and labor's misuse of the hobo's identity in advocacy led to the downfall of the hobo culture. Depastino explains, "A the hobo myth spread throughout the culture, it provoked strong reaction from progressive reformers concerned about the growing influence of hobohemia over urban life."²⁸⁰ As consequence, the hobo became a staple of new mass media and urban popular culture used by labor organizations. To fully understand the IBWA's importance in labor's story requires fixating the collaboration between the collective spirit of the unemployed workers and the urban migration of hoboeing nonworkers.

In the early 1900s, job seekers and hoboeing nonworkers alike began to organize with worker demands mirroring values of democracy, equality, liberty, and humanity. The Progressive Era and the rise of mass worker movements afforded these people with a voice to validate their legitimacy as part of the working-class. Jack London analyzed the relationship between the amount of available work and the number of available individuals to work, arguing what he called the surplus army. He wrote, "The surplus labor army is the anchor of capitalism...the tramp is a by-product of this economic necessity, it is necessary to inquire into the composition of the surplus labor army."²⁸¹

²⁷⁹ R.W. Irwin, "The Advance Guide and the International Brotherhood Welfare Association: An Answer," *The Hobo News*, July 1919, 10.

²⁸⁰ Depastino, *Citizen Hobo*, 126.

²⁸¹ London, *The Road*, 45.

With proper organization, the nonworkers who arrived in the city are best understood as an extension of the American worker at the time, but they did not formally reflect the worker due to their lack of skill and work ethic, or the conventional industrial work ethic that London referred to at the time. Their work ethic, delicately balanced by both work and leisure, differed from that of the industrial worker. London explained,

“The skilled worker holds his place by virtue of his skill and efficiency. Were he less skilled, or were he unreliable or erratic, he would be swiftly replaced by a stronger competitor. A steady man finds place according to his ability and the needs of the system, and those without ability, or incapable of satisfying the needs of the system, have no place.”²⁸²

London argues the less fit and less efficient, or the unfit and inefficient, compose the surplus army. In an economic system that favors competitive employment between those deemed fit and those deemed unfit, the unsteady and unreliable are not skilled and therefore not needed. With little skill, the jobless were left discouraged and powerless. By looking through the larger context of emerging migrant work and studying the economic forces at play in a modernized industrial society at the time provides insight into lower-class responses to trade, industry, and westward expansion and, subsequently, extensions of such responses. Ultimately, the traveling job seekers rallied a shared platform advocating for the protection of the unemployed.²⁸³ London wrote about his experiences, pointing to a specific reason for unemployment: a simple case of supply and demand. In a competitive market, the amount of available work cannot sustain the number of surplus workers. He argued, “The surplus army is an economic necessity, without it, the present

²⁸² Jack London, *War of the Classes* (Berkeley, Regent Press, 1905), 70-71.

²⁸³ “Liberty and the Pursuit of a Living Wage,” *The Hobo News*, September 1915, 9.

constructions of society would fall to pieces.”²⁸⁴ With more men out of work than jobs available, London’s “surplus army” classified a group of workers on the rails who have kept the economy viable but, consequently, the cause of their dispossession.

Consequently, progressive reformists in the early 1900s shaped a new image for the unemployed: the hobo became a universal image of class struggle and the personification of economic injustice. Characterized as marginalized by society and the system, the hoboeing nonworker personified an image for those who did not fit into the social roles supposedly laid out for them.²⁸⁵ Such activism came from a grassroots base of organizing unorganized labor. Parallels with the emergence of similar labor movements at the time reflects the development of an autonomous organizational movement perceptive to those who could not find work in the city.²⁸⁶ Successively, the recognition of the need to find a solution to unemployed job seekers systematized the distinct, independent organizing of the IBWA and publication of *The Hobo News* under the direction of How. This marked a time when nonworkers gradually migrated to the city as a reactionary response to rapid industrialization, urbanization, advancements in transportation technology, and a rise in class consciousness.

The story of Jim Tully, a road-kid turned hobo named Cincinnati Red in the 1920s, exemplifies one reason for how and why hoboeing nonworkers migrated to better job opportunities. Where one hobo went, others naturally followed mostly by word of mouth. The unemployed and homeless began to crowd city streets alongside similar

²⁸⁴ London, *The Road*, 45.

²⁸⁵ Depastino, *Citizen Hobo*, 106.

²⁸⁶ Ibid, 110.

worker activists demanding for equality and justice in the workforce.²⁸⁷ Tully wrote a journal throughout his travels to expose the astonishing chronicle of the American underclass. He wrote, “A tramp’s minds veer quickly, we suddenly decided to go to St. Louis. A drifter in Omaha had told us that wages were high in the harvest fields there. We wanted wages of course, but we did not care much about the work. A swift ride on a mail train found us on the levee front of a small town near St. Louis by the afternoon of the next day.”²⁸⁸ Where work was heard of, Tully followed a mass migration of nonworkers. By the early twentieth century, similar nonworkers were found in cities across the nation, with most gravitating to job opportunities in the city or surrounding harvest fields. Tully’s story shows that not only were nonworkers quick to respond to higher wages in the city, but nonworkers responded less to job opportunities in the rural Midwest. Tully’s quick move to St. Louis for wages shows that nonworkers were beginning to respond to the appeal of wage work.

By the early 1900s, progressive reformists began to shift the identity of hobo culture in society. The rag-tag character of the hobo began to appear in propaganda imagery used by progressives in their advocacy related to social issues of unemployment and homelessness. Specifically, the covers of *The Hobo News* depicted an unprecedented use of the hobo’s cultural characteristics in the rhetoric and discourse used by the IBWA. For example, the May 1915 cover depicts a hobo on the rails entitled with the caption “he built the road, with others in his class, chasing a job, spurred by his hunger”.²⁸⁹ Not only

²⁸⁷ See Appendix I.

²⁸⁸ Jim Tully, *Beggars of Life: A Hobo Autobiography* (New York: Albert & Charles Boni, 1924), 37.

²⁸⁹ See Appendix M.

are the cultural characteristic of the hobo used in the imagery, but the cover exemplifies how the IBWA associated the hobo with class. While the emergence of the IBWA explains the insecurity of the unemployed, coupled with the rise of progressive ideology, *The Hobo News* inked explanations and outlined organizational demands and intentions, ideological perspectives, and a renewed call for class cognizance. Lead by the phrase, “Of the hobos, by the hobos and for the hobos”, *The Hobo News* complemented the education and social advocacy sounded by the IBWA as a prominent media outlet.²⁹⁰ Though little remains of the IBWA’s footprint, *The Hobo News* to this day serves as the primary evidence behind the organization’s story. However, the newspaper also reveals an ill-treated use of hobo culture in its publications.

“Of the Hobos, By the Hobos, and For the Hobos”: The International Brotherhood
Welfare Association (IBWA)

The IBWA represented a significant section of labor’s national protest at a time when similar labor movements began to seriously question the role of government in the American workforce. By the 1910s, the depressions of the prior century had effectively blurred the distinction between workers who were connected to places because of their crafts – farmers, mill hands and miners – and the hobos, the transient and unstable workforce.²⁹¹ When the freight train started moving, all headed out for it. How recognized the rural nonworker’s need for escape from the oppressive heat and humidity, the vagrant laws that hinged their ability to move, and the meals that were rare and hard

²⁹⁰ See Appendix G.

²⁹¹ McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 28.

to come by.²⁹² Born in 1868 into a wealthy and prominent St. Louis family, educated at Harvard and Oxford, trained as a physician and theologian, and the primary heir to the family fortune, How could have enjoyed easy luxury at a time when millions were out of work and living in abject poverty.²⁹³ Instead, he refused wealth and his inheritance to a cause that both embodied and sponsored a collective, unruly rhetoric for a group of displaced and impoverished jobless workers.

According to How in 1911, he stated, “This is the object of our brotherhood. We are attempting to organize this cast floating element of labor which at present, has no voice.”²⁹⁴ With that, How joined the unwaged in the streets to circulate important counter public messages and rally for justice and fair treatment as they carried *The Hobo News* from door to door. However, the legacy of the IBWA does not begin wherever and whenever the trains stopped. It began with How offering his entire inherited fortune to the Mayor of St. Louis to aid the city’s poor in 1899.²⁹⁵ With check in hand, How asked the money to be spent on the poor.²⁹⁶ However, the city’s mayor ordered an investigation onto the reasons for How’s refusal to spend his inheritance on himself.²⁹⁷ At this time, such an offer would startle any person with little humility or humanity in a society with excessive individualism. The so-called “Millionaire Hobo” began to seriously question

²⁹² James Eads How, “Resolution,” *The Hobo News*, April 1917, 12.

²⁹³ Alexander, *Unruly Rhetorics*, 130.

²⁹⁴ “Millionaire Hobo Seeks a Cure for the Jobless Man. Over 4,500,000 without Work in the United States Says James Eads How,” *New York Times*, Sunday, May 14, 1911, 55.

²⁹⁵ “Scorns His Own Million,” *New York Daily Tribune*, September 3, 1899, 22.

²⁹⁶ Alexander, *Unruly Rhetorics*, 130.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 131.

the gap between those at the top and those at the bottom and the role of government in bettering the lives of the misfortunate.

This is not just a story of a man who devoted his life to educating others about inequality and injustice, but perhaps How's personal choices propelled a social movement that elides the reality of economic and political inequality of the time. Literary Johnathan Alexander writes, "One of the difficulties, even today, or activists seeking justice for the homeless or economically impoverished in American society is the popular notion that there is something wrong with a person who cannot make a living."²⁹⁸ The establishment of the new modern day work ethic perceived a disparity between those who work hard and those who work leisurely. This provided an outlet for How to build a cause around those who were perceived differently. How's lifestyle and personal choices challenged others to take note of how organizations like the IBWA provided quality and timely aid for the people in need, to promote wellness, to relieve suffering as swiftly, safely, and humanely as it can be done consistent with the best charity service.

Established in 1905, How's originally intended for the IBWA to provide a collective dedicated to the plights and concerns of the hobo nonworker. With specific calling to the migratory workers who were forced to travel for employment, the IBWA was funded wholly by How to assist the jobless and impoverished with finding work. About fifteen local chapters existed between 1905-1929 from Kansas City, to St. Louis, to Chicago, which provided resources for the men during the winter months when work

²⁹⁸ Alexander, *Unruly Rhetorics*, 132.

for them generally ceased.²⁹⁹ Under the tutelage of the IBWA, jobless men whose appellation was once synonymous with hobos, tramps, and bums, worked toward distancing themselves from disparaging stereotypes. It seems that much of the IBWA's resources successfully went into programs to refute the idea that hoboing nonworkers did not work, especially in the West.³⁰⁰ "Hobo Laborers Wanted" or "Hobos Wanted" could be found advertised in help wanted columns of local newspapers between Chicago and the Pacific coast.³⁰¹ Western farmers, construction foremen, and lumber bosses came to associate the word hobo with a laborer who was young and virile.³⁰² Their endless search for work took laborers from the oil fields to the wheat belt to the timber country.³⁰³ During the summer months, they could be found in Oklahoma and the Far West; in the fall the hobo could be found in the orange groves in California and the lumber camps of Washington and Oregon.³⁰⁴ Then began the trek back, some by freight others by cushion, in winter to the towns and cities.

The journey ended in destitution and homelessness if nonworkers were unable to find work. Hobos headed for the "jungles" to wait out the winter, or members of the IBWA could turn to one of the 15 local chapters around the country for food, accommodations, and training at one of the hobo colleges, one-room centers located in

²⁹⁹ "Police in Kansas City," *The Hobo News*, October 1915, 12.

³⁰⁰ Depastino, *Citizen Hobo*, 127.

³⁰¹ McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 72.

³⁰² Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts*, 9.

³⁰³ Depastino, *Citizen Hobo* 9.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 10.

skid row sections where a pot of “java” could always be found brewing.³⁰⁵ Nonworkers could take classes ranging from law to information on venereal disease. Promoted as colleges, the learning experience combined popular education with entertainment.³⁰⁶ Consequently, when an employer, whose livelihood was dependent upon seasonal workers, asked for a nonworker, he expected an industrious worker, one he could depend on to get the job done.³⁰⁷ The response of an estimated half a million jobless men was expected by How. The job seekers formed the backbone of the IBWA’s ability to self-sustain, educate, and protest.

Much of the success of the IBWA’s earliest days depended on How’s effort to organize migrant workers on a very local level. How established hobo colleges across the Midwest as a strategy to promote the philosophy and teachings of the IBWA. These centers were local chapters found in buildings located in the hobo parts of cities.³⁰⁸ How lectured on discussions that emphasized discussion on recruitment, education, anti-political discussion, hygiene, job searching, and where to find safe and secure lodging.³⁰⁹ A Hobo College opened in New York during the summer of 1919 under the direction of How offering courses in sociology, industrial law and public speaking.³¹⁰ Public speaking was believed to make the men more marketable, providing them with the skills to talk

³⁰⁵ “Java” is a term used by travelers for referring to coffee. Just like a pot of mulligan stew in the jungles, a steaming pot of java attracted unemployed men to hobo colleges for discussion of social issues faced by impoverished workers. “College Has Hobo Club,” *The Pioneer Express*, July 15, 1904.

³⁰⁶ “Five Into One You Can,” *The Sun*, December 26, 1899.

³⁰⁷ McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 120.

³⁰⁸ “Hobo Club Function,” *The Saint Paul Globe*, February 11, 1899.

³⁰⁹ “Hobo College Opens; James Eads How Proposes to Show Pupils How to Get Jobs,” *New York Times*, June 11, 1919.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*

more intelligently. The day started with a two-hour hunt for work. “If they were unsuccessful, they could return with first-hand information for a course in sociology,” quipped How in an interview with a reporter covering the story.³¹¹ There, men of the road gathered to swap stories and listen to lectures on everything from philosophy and politics to personal cleanliness and vagrancy laws. For nearly three decades, the hobo college provided an educational experience to these men and fostered a spirit of fraternity among them. How’s ability to organize at a very local level, fostered a foundation for the IBWA to build a strong grassroots basis.

Philosophy and Tactics

The manifesto and preamble of the IBWA is one that emphasizes the representation of a larger economic reality that homeless people are not failed individuals, rather the economic system of capitalism failed the people who were turned into an economic farce, mainly through the mainstream media.³¹² To organize and educate the unemployed through the circulation of the collective voices via *The Hobo News* moved How to reclaim nonworkers from individualized narratives, sought to organize the migrant population, and demand structural economic changes.³¹³ The only remaining evidence of the IBWA is found in the last remaining articles of *The Hobo News*. Through the pages of intended self-retribution, contributors to the newspaper were allowed to raise their voices in a public forum for the first time. Coupled with the press paper and annual Hobo Conventions in Britt, Iowa, the political direction of the

³¹¹ McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 73.

³¹² Will J. Quirke, “Profit Sharing vs. Wages,” *The Hobo News*, June 1916, 2.

³¹³ “A Pension for Hoboes,” *The Columbia Evening*, August 9, 1922.

organization classified unemployed laborers in the same way workers were being organized by unions such as the IWW.

The IBWA's philosophy as a mutual aid society distinguished itself from its more radical, union-based counterparts. In his effort to "educate the public mind to the rights of collective ownership in production and distribution", How's tactics included founding and financing an organization that focused more on nonworkers and the out-of-work than on those already employed.³¹⁴ The IBWA sought to spread ideas about income inequality, the need for unemployment benefits, and other labor causes that eventually found their way into mainstream discussions. The brotherhood teaching emphasized self-respect and equality, whether in the lower or millionaire classes. Stated in the October 1915 issue, "If we can find the spark of goodness in all our fellow men, we can arrive at a far better state of affairs than we have in the present muddled system."³¹⁵ The organization's emphasis on mutual association and even spiritual development distinguished it from other labor unions, although members saw their work as laying the foundation for the effectual unionization of the migratory workers. The IBWA declared itself to be a "clearinghouse of labor", which sought to "organize the unemployed and assist them in obtaining work" and "utilize land and machinery in order to provide work for the unemployed."³¹⁶ Clearly, How's tactics focused on the challenges faced by unemployed travelers by creating networks of discourse about wealth inequality and protection for the unemployed. These ideas formed the philosophy and tactics of the IBWA.

³¹⁴ "A Pension for Hoboes," *The Columbia Evening*, August 9, 1922.

³¹⁵ "Hobo Hustlers," *The Hobo News*, October 1915, 3.

³¹⁶ R.W. Irwin, "The Advance Guide and the International Brotherhood Welfare Association: An Answer," *The Hobo News*, July 1921, 10.

The gradual shift towards the city forced nonworkers to realize that no one would help them except for themselves. Therefore, strong organizations began to form as a reaction of taking up the numbers to express themselves.³¹⁷ Through a collective and cooperative approach, the IBWA projected an agenda that called for the abolition of private enterprise and the recognition of migrant worker rights.³¹⁸ As its objectives are stated on the back cover of each printed *Hobo News* issue:

“To bring together the unorganized workers. To co-operate with persons and organizations who desire to better social conditions. To utilize unused land and machinery, in order to provide work for the unemployed. To furnish medical, legal and other aid to its members. To organize the unemployed and assist them in obtaining work at remunerative wages, and transportation when required.”³¹⁹

Based upon a very anti-interventionist, anti-violence, government-orientated nature, the teaching and tactics of the IBWA focused on issues pertaining to war, guns, equal suffrage, welfare, poverty, prohibition, the right to work. The IBWA affirmed the notion that homeless, unemployed workers are not the fault of society’s issues, but rather society is a fault for the challenges faced by the traveling population. As explained in the October 1915 issue of *The Hobo News*, “The world is full of troubles. The Hobos are not making these troubles. They are inherent to our system.”³²⁰ As traveling nonworkers represent just a facet of the workforce, it’s important to understand they encompass the same skills and knowledge of larger blue-collar America. Editorials and public opinion commonly strove to educate the public about the misconceptions of traveling work, calling for the

³¹⁷ Cohen, *Delinquent Boys*.

³¹⁸ R.W. Irwin, “The Advance Guide and the International Brotherhood Welfare Association: An Answer,” *The Hobo News*, July 1921, 10.

³¹⁹ *The Hobo News*, 1915-1923.

³²⁰ “Hobo Hustlers,” *The Hobo News*, October 1915, 3.

“emancipation of the unemployed worker to the kingdom of self-respect.”³²¹ How’s ultimate aim with the IBWA was to organize unemployed laborers in the same way workers were being organized by other union organizations.

All in all, the tone of the IBWA’s philosophy promoted more progressive politics. IBWA members called for public ownership of railroads, free transportation for migrant workers, municipal ownership of the marketing facilities and food supply, public ownership of land, the use of schools to educate the public on economic industry, the conservation of resources, and justice for the criminalization of vagrancy.³²² As stated by a 1917 contributor, “The hobo is leaning that Socialism will help him immensely. In fact, socialism will save him from his present difficulties. Socialism, through intelligent government action, will guarantee each worker a job at good pay.”³²³ It’s important to understand that the IBWA did not intend to place government as central to the philosophy of the brotherhood, but rather the economic and political inequality caused by capitalism as the organization’s reasoning behind the plight of the migrant worker. As progressivism advocated for reform in the system of economic and social relations marked by private enterprise, the IBWA advocated for a specific model of economy that called for government control while maintaining an Ann Rand-like moral defense of individual freedom.

One of the most prominent issues that most debatably pushed the IBWA’s narrative to an extreme was the events of The First World War. The beginning of The

³²¹ “The Convention Call,” *The Hobo News*, January 1917, 3.

³²² “Service and the Class Struggle,” *The Hobo News*, April 1915, 12.

³²³ Emanuel Julius, “Hoboism and Socialism,” *The Hobo News*, February 1917, 4.

Great War is often considered the end of an era of social activism and political reform. However, it is arguable that the entry into the war pushed and provoked progressives even further to demand attention to domestic issues at home.³²⁴ The IBWA was not unfamiliar to this as the organization very vocally called for peaceful intentions over interventionist actions.³²⁵ Furthermore, it is debatable that these events are what led How and the IBWA to begin publishing a circulating counter public messages that called out the government for funding war over providing jobs at home. This is seen in two aspects of *The Hobo News*: on the covers and the editorials. For instance, a very early cover of the newspaper in 1915 shows illustrations depicting aid being given to foreign countries and not the struggling American citizen.³²⁶ The perspective of the working American is depicted through tattered clothing and starving bodies while standing next to crates of foreign aid being shipped off to Europe.³²⁷ This is very much a perspective of how working Americans viewed the very early days of the war.

The IBWA viewed interventionism and war as an unnecessary priority, perhaps intended to distract the public from the issues related to homelessness and unemployment at home. Overall, progressives grappled with the problems of war and peace.³²⁸ A few progressives largely supported the war, however, others fundamentally opposed it. The IBWA opposed the war and the draft. In 1916 during a special meeting to send a telegram to the White House, How and the IBWA drafted and sent a letter to President Woodrow

³²⁴ "How Wars are Made," *The Hobo News*, January 1918, 2-3.

³²⁵ "Why Our Working Men Do Not Want War," *The Hobo News*, April 1915, 13.

³²⁶ See Appendix J.

³²⁷ Ibid.

³²⁸ McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 275.

Wilson urging for peace and avoiding war.³²⁹ The letter advocated for the President to submit a peace proposal as a vote of the people rather than the vote of government powers to decide peace or war. Their objective behind this effort was to allow true democratic opportunity to decide the fate of the war. How called for a resolution for peace, per say, through the utmost democratic methods. He argued that if people had the opportunity to vote for peace, they would do so.³³⁰ However, this was not well received by the elected officials. One year later, How received a remark from a U.S. Senator stating, “A hobo would be the first man to be drafted in the army in the event of war and that the hobo would make good food for bullets.”³³¹ The senator’s response speaks volumes to how hobos were still perceived as useless bums as well as how the government responded to the calls and cries from the working-class. Ultimately, the First World War significantly shaped the philosophy and tactics of the IBWA for years to come, calling for universal peace at the hands of the people rather than in the hands of the power at the top.

Social problems such as poverty and drunkenness gained public attention towards the latter half of the progressive movement. Prohibition as a national movement contributed to the philosophical and tactical foundation of the IBWA. Throughout the era, President Roosevelt and President Wilson called for a higher social order to transform and regenerate the reconstruction of the individual human being.³³² This often translated into laws that would help Americans in their struggle for a higher and fuller life. The

³²⁹ “Hobos for Peace,” *The Hobo News*, January 1917, 7.

³³⁰ Ibid, 7.

³³¹ Ibid.

³³² McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 80.

government at this time passed laws that intimidated bad environments and bad habits.³³³ However, American perceptions viewed government intention as purposeful reforms in surroundings most related to poverty, idleness, and vagrancy. Naturally, the politics of drink spilled over into the display of unemployment and homelessness, often associating drunkenness as the reason for jobless workers. The issue of prohibition fueled the motives of the IBWA in the organization's efforts to counternarrative the tale of unemployment causing Americans to consume alcohol.³³⁴ It is assumed that the events of the prohibition movement would urge the government to solve the root issue: lower unemployment. As argued by an IBWA contributor, "With a greater demand for necessities of life with the abolition of saloons, there will be an increase demand of workers to produce necessities, thus absorbing those workers who lost their jobs through prohibition."³³⁵ However, the reactionary events of temperance led the government to outright the ban of alcohol and ignite the counternarrative agenda of the IBWA. As stated by an anonymous hobo in a 1916 editorial,

"Inherent in every man, beneath rags and dirt behind bigotry and prejudice, clouded by 'isms' and dogma, there is the good. To this good—the Divine Spark—by tolerance and kindness, by patience and unselfish service, by education and justice, to achieve the Universal Brotherhood—the Co-operative Commonwealth; often by faltering steps and slow, but ever upward, to reach the Ideal always, of necessity, through the practical—the IBWA makes these its laws and announces its purpose to govern itself thereby."³³⁶

³³³ McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 80.

³³⁴ William Gebhardt, "Prohibition and Unemployment," *The Hobo News*, May 1916, 2.

³³⁵ Ibid.

³³⁶ Ibid.

The philosophy of the IBWA believed that prohibition would not solve the inherent, overarching national issues of mass unemployment and homelessness. In the age of individual freedom, the progressive campaign misunderstood the real threat to the health and virtue of country, argued by the IBWA.³³⁷ The temptations of vice would not raise the head of the IBWA in the shape of the progressive movement in national politics. Rather, abiding to a purpose of recognizing the rights and the development of the individual would provide the foundation for the power, responsibility, and rule of the people—a philosophy that would become more extreme by the late 1920s.

The Hobo News

Central to the IBWA's story is the last remaining evidence of the organization's activities found in the disintegrating newspaper articles of *The Hobo News* that were published monthly on Clark Avenue in St. Louis from 1921-1922.³³⁸ The newspaper ran from the years leading up to and just following The First World War and well into the 1920s. It carried out its objectives in two major ways: propaganda imagery and opinion editorials. The content of the newspaper is characterized as functioning primarily as a published version of a more oral format—meaning the campfire tale-telling and political discussion of the hobo jungle.³³⁹ The paper featured personal jobless stories, poems, and commentary. However, the paper epitomizes how shared experience in the rural jungles over a pot of mulligan stew shifted to a more sophisticated advocacy for unorganized

³³⁷ McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 21.

³³⁸ *The Hobo News*, March 1921, 8.

³³⁹ Alexander, *Unruly Rhetorics*, 136.

laborers in the urban city regions. And with that shift, it's more understood how the collapse of the IBWA led to the downfall of hobo's working and cultural prominence.

The Hobo News lacked access to effective ways to circulate materials; however, the mobility of the nation's poor is what allowed the hobo news to reach a broader audience both among the poor and beyond.³⁴⁰ According to Alexander, the newspaper relied on distribution by hobos who rode the rails, followed the harvest, worked in the fields, and down the mines."³⁴¹ This was to assure that the message relayed into the hands of the larger public, rather than being distorted by the mainstream press.³⁴² This very much mirrors the tale-telling and political discussion in the local jungles of the hobo's earlier days. Except the paper is a published version of a more oral format than jungle talk. Initially, the paper was very successful in its attempt to reach its broad audiences. However, the time of the paper's run were the years leading up to and following the First World war – a period when the Sedition Acts and Espionage Act were particularly emphasized by the government. Not only did this impact the ability of the paper to circulate, but also severally impacted the reputation of the IBWA. However, the IBWA continued to write and publish through very vocal counterpublic messages.

In many ways *The Hobo News* was routinely suppressed. It challenged the press, seeking to revise the story of America's tramps, hobos, homes, out-of-work, and impoverished. However, in doing so, the paper was labeled as an opposition paper subject to vandalization by local police and shut down under the sedition acts.³⁴³ Suppression of

³⁴⁰ Alexander, *Unruly Rhetorics*, 138.

³⁴¹ Ibid, 139.

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ Ibid, 140.

speech and expression of opinion, as part of the war effort, strengthened the government's powers to constrain the press' ability to speak in a free manner. Depastino argues that *The Hobo News* was at the center of revolutionary politics by critiquing the relationship between person and nation.³⁴⁴ For example, the IBWA's critique of conscription placed the organization's activities under a close government radar. A writer in the February 1918 edition compared conscription with slavery stating, "Conscription and slavery have been used to advance the interests of the ruling and leisure classes. Under one guise or another human being have been compelled to serves masters without remuneration."³⁴⁵ The writer was critical of the conscription laws that drafted men into the First World War. This was not a particularly good time to spread particular propaganda that was considered revolutionary. By 1918, the government pulled its second-class mailing privileges, forcing the IBWA to solely rely on carry bundles of papers to distribute on the streets.³⁴⁶ By this time, distribution relied on rail riders to carry the paper from city to city and share or sell them, person to person. The paper as its own labor and free speech movement successfully reached audiences in ways that no other publications could, however its similar efforts to circulate and reshape mainstream narratives with other labor organizations exemplify how counterpublic messages were constrained by powerful oversight.

How's attempted to reach a broader readership with ideas that reached the public, but not exclusive to, the job-seeking poor. The purpose of the paper was to give an

³⁴⁴ Depastino, *Citizen Hobo*, 111.

³⁴⁵ "The Iniquitous Vagrancy Laws," *The Hobo News*, February 1918, 2.

³⁴⁶ Alexander, *Unruly Rhetorics*, 140.

individual voice through public forum to the mass of out-of-work laborers by circulating their collective voices.³⁴⁷ It addressed a double audience – for those it was written for and for those who were closer to centers of power. With hope, the idea behind this format of public forum was to sway the power that effected direct change. In 1917, for example, one writer directly addressed the second intended audience with a challenge: “We care not whether you to be an aristocrat or a plebeian, a priest, or millionaire, a professional man or worker – it is necessary for your welfare and you’re your fellow citizens, that you should be in touch with hobo life.”³⁴⁸ The rhetoric used by the writers indented to directly address agents of change to portray reality of poverty in America. However, to “get those truths out” relied on getting the paper into the hands of readers. Alexander states, “In other words, circulation mattered as much as, or more than, invention, arrangement, or style”.³⁴⁹

The imageries were mostly propaganda-based, illustrating pictures of starving skeletons, lady justice epitomizing democracy, the fort of capital symbolizing capitalism, struggles against poverty, amongst other descriptions of a cohesive, collective resistance. The March 1917 cover pictures the image of an impoverished man, captioned “the most misunderstood man ever.”³⁵⁰ The February 1921 cover depicts the dealing of laborers, titled “the sale of wage-slaves by auction”.³⁵¹ The ongoing conflict between the stories of a nation that might want to tell about itself and the lives many people experienced

³⁴⁷ Alexander, *Unruly Rhetorics*, 140.

³⁴⁸ “Hobos and Lawmakers,” *The Hobo News*, April 1917, 6.

³⁴⁹ Alexander, *Unruly Rhetorics*, 137.

³⁵⁰ See Appendix K.

³⁵¹ See Appendix L.

propelled How's work and the power of dissenting voices through *The Hobo News*. An editorial stated, "The hobo is a victim of capitalism, is treated as though he were a producer of evils. Conditions make him."³⁵² What made *The Hobo News* successful for numerous years was the editor's ability to take this rhetorical discourse and translate these dissenting voices into images personifying the hobo into an understanding of class struggle.

Clearly, the newspaper could not have existed without How's financial and ideological support. While the newspaper called for some financial support from its readers, first a mere ten cents to an eventual fifty cents, its purpose was not to make a profit.³⁵³ The financial support from How pushed a narrative that aimed to change public perceptions of vagrancy, often written by hobos themselves. Written by an unknown traveler in 1915,

"We want you to understand this purpose. You have here a picture of our boys in New York. They are capable, bright, and business-like, even if they do not belong to the hobo class. Now, there are, in this country, over two million, as a vast array of men who live the life of the casual migratory and most of the time, unemployed men, whom you call the hobos. They are doing the work of the World and you have never given a chance to understand them until you bought this paper."³⁵⁴

The importance of paying attention to who embodies the materiality of the paper's circulation and delivery cannot be underestimated. When dissident and under-represented groups seek to be heard, counter-public activities such as *The Hobo News* propelled How's work on the movement and power of dissenting voices. The paper represented

³⁵² Emanuel Julius, "Hoboism and Socialism," *The Hobo News*, February 1917, 4.

³⁵³ Alexander, *Unruly Rhetorics*, 136.

³⁵⁴ "Hobo Hustlers," *The Hobo News*, October 1915, 3.

rhetorical activism and relied upon the importance of circulation. Luckily, How's IBWA followers traveled for work. The army of the poor physically circulated this paper hand to hand, train car to train car, gathering people to debate and campaign for ideas of unemployment security and assistance.³⁵⁵ For *The Hobo News* to see the success it had, it took followers to hop a train and risk getting beaten or jailed to get the paper to the next town. "It wasn't elegant, but it certainly got the job done", said How.³⁵⁶

Downfall of the IBWA

How's death in 1917 from pneumonia and severe malnutrition pushed the IBWA into a new era of activism that shifted toward a more extreme manner.³⁵⁷ The aftermath of his passing would forever shape the IBWA's endgame and the larger cultural significance of America's hoboeing nonworker culture. The downfall of the organization cannot be traced by one single reasoning, though several events of the 1920s ultimately contributed to a new era of activism. First, more radical facets within the IBWA signaled an ideological shift within the organization, abandoning its traditional philosophy and values. Second, the identity of the IBWA appealed to a blue-collar cause that also abandoned the initial appeal to who the organization represented.

By 1923, the IBWA no longer isolated itself in St. Louis as local chapters sprung in other major cities, such as Cincinnati, Chicago, and New York. Travelers and IBWA followers were still hoping trains and carrying bundles to circulate on the streets from city to city and person to person. While circulating the newspaper was important,

³⁵⁵ Despastino, *Citizen Hobo*, 111.

³⁵⁶ Alexander, *Unruly Rhetorics*, 143.

³⁵⁷ Death certificate of James Eads How, Virginia Death Records, 1917-2014.

traveling nonworkers would often stop in search of work or temporary pay.³⁵⁸ Naturally with the spread of the IBWA's campaign followed the recruitment of travelers working similar jobs or who shared similar philosophies. Some of these men were already members of the International Workers of the World (IWW) and members of the Agricultural Workers Union (AWIU).³⁵⁹ The IWW as wage workers did not completely mirror the craft and trade of the hobo but gravitated towards educating the public mind on the plight of unemployed workers. Aside from the IBWA, the IWW was known to be more revolutionary and more radical in the union's philosophy and tactics. This created problems for the IBWA as members saw common concerns and interests expressed by IWW members that were distinctively their own. While the ideas shared by *The Hobo News* created a sense of community, the IBWA philosophy began to evolve into a labor organization that embraced radical theories aimed at disrupting and replacing the established social order.

Evidence from post-WWI copies of *The Hobo News* indicates a clear ideological shift in the IBWA. Changes in the tone and very structure of the newspaper reflected the growing influence of the IWW-inspired militancy. For example, in the July 1919 issue, an untitled and unsigned article declared a lost list of IBWA goals that included: to “make us masters of the machinery of production instead of its slaves”; “give every worker the full value of the product of his labor”, “abolish the landlord, the landlord, and the capitalist”; and “abolish classes”.³⁶⁰ Such departures from the previous emphasis on

³⁵⁸ Alexander, *Unruly Rhetorics*, 142.

³⁵⁹ Ibid, 138.

³⁶⁰ *The Hobo News*, July 1919.

education, uplift, and welfare work were commonplace in 1918. By this time, radicals and moderates in the IBWA conflicted with How on the organization's vulnerability to outside influencers. Radical members of the IBWA sought to fill the void left in the field of direct job action by establishing the Migratory Worker's Union (MWU) in 1918.³⁶¹ By organizing for similar purposes, the organization sought to usher in a "glorious socialist future."³⁶² Radicals also considered How an obstacle to increased militancy, while moderates blamed How for leaving the organization vulnerable to radical influence.³⁶³ Such tension was seen throughout the organization's early years. In 1913, How, at that time President of the IBWA, was thrown out of the first IBWA convention in New Orleans after "injecting socialism into the proceedings"³⁶⁴ Coupled with increased militancy, the breakoff of more radical facets, and the desire to eliminate influences of How, the IBWA shaped itself a new identity that contributed to the downfall of the organization. By the later years of the IBWA, the organization sought to represent hoboemia, however it wrestled with the conflicting imperatives that such representation entailed.

Such a gradual shift created a new era of solidarity amongst migrant and blue-collar workers. By the 1920s, American hoboing as an image of collective class struggle was pinched by the blue-collar cause. Such identity absorption confused the long-term objectives of the IBWA and to who the IBWA represented. By 1922, the IBWA was steadfast in its efforts to promote its interests and champion its cause, but it was a cause

³⁶¹ Despastino, *Citizen Hobo*, 109.

³⁶² Ibid, 110.

³⁶³ Anderson, *The Hobo*, 174.

³⁶⁴ "How Thrown Out By Hobos' Convention," *Omaha Daily Bee*, February 3, 1913.

that was so well known to the homeless man that it has lost its novelty. Nels Anderson stated, “The IBWA was no longer primarily for the homeless man, but for a wide circulation amongst the so-called ‘slum proletariat’.”³⁶⁵ Anderson’s investigations in 1922 argued that the intellectuals of *The Hobo News* became obsessed by the class struggle and they preferred to repeat the philosophy and tactics of the reformers who originally fashioned them.³⁶⁶ His observations instilled a clear mudding of distinction between the IBWA and its organizational counterparts.

Still, the IBWA believed that every citizen is entitled to what is necessary for his existence, such as food, shelter, transportation, and clothes.³⁶⁷ However, such rhetoric that once called for government acknowledgement for such needed assistance now shifted towards a call for establishing free employment bureaus for labor information and government ownership of the railroads.³⁶⁸ The paper printed several endorsed new definitions as well, such as anarchist-communism and anarchism.³⁶⁹ By 1923, publications in *The Hobo News* reaffirmed both the traditional manifesto of the organization but also raised questions on how the organization’s rhetoric became more radical. A crushing defeat to labor in 1917 led the IBWA into greater prominence, increasing its membership exponentially. With diminished activity from other labor unions, former members and migratory workers of all stripes turn in large numbers at hobo colleges and the pages of *The Hobo News*, leaving their radical imprints on both.

³⁶⁵ Anderson, *The Hobo*, 186.

³⁶⁶ Ibid, 193.

³⁶⁷ “Hobos Must Get Work,” *The Hobo News*, July 1918, 13.

³⁶⁸ Nick Nomad, “A Juvenile Hobo,” *The Hobo News*, February 1923, 2.

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

However, what most convincingly demonstrated the IBWA's abandonment of its traditional philosophy and values is the recurring statement in the later years of the paper in 1923: "help us solve the hobo problem".³⁷⁰ To what this claim pertains to is up for interpretation. However, such persuasive speaking suggests the traveling population to be a problem, a sight for sore eyes in which to eliminate. How in his earlier days never referred to the travelers, hobos, tramps alike, as a problematic group which such negative connotation. Perhaps the statement suggests an effort to diminish hobo identity in conjunction with the IBWA. Nevertheless, in their heyday, How's followers rallied their voices against being called such distasteful rhetoric.³⁷¹³⁷² By the mid-1920s, the IBWA seemed to embrace it. As the nation began to abandon key elements of progressivism like catering to organizing labor, the movement, along with the IBWA labor movement, began to diminish. Progressives paid a heavy price with their rhetoric of personal transformation and bold attempts to reshape personal identity.

The exact downfall of the IBWA's legacy remains to be determined. No longer is the organization's office located on 1111 Clark Ave in St. Louis, Missouri.³⁷³ By 1921, major operations of the organization permanently moved to 410 Clinton St. in Cincinnati, Ohio.³⁷⁴ As the organization diminished, so did any known evidence of *The Hobo News* in the later 1920s, leaving little suggestion to where and which direction the IBWA went. The decades end called into question the uniqueness of the traveler's cultural lifestyle as

³⁷⁰ Gustav Schaefer, "The Evolution of a Hobo," *The Hobo News*, March 1923, 3.

³⁷¹ "Capitalist Press Idea of a Bum," *The Hobo News*, November 1922, 2.

³⁷² Anderson, *The Hobo*, 171.

³⁷³ *The Hobo News*, March 1921, 8.

³⁷⁴ See Appendix G.

millions of Americans inadvertently faced a new decade of extreme poverty, unemployment, and homelessness in the 1930s. By this time, traveling nonworkers returned to their roots of origin to safeguard the wandering identity for decades of celebration to this day.

Readers may well ask why we even bother telling James How's story now so far removed. After all, unlike much better known social and labor activists of the time, the story of How and the IBWA is barely remembered. The jobless of How's time and the hobos present and prior to Jack London and Josiah Flynt's adventures recover a great story only to demonstrate how very difficult it is for dissenting voices to circulate. What is for certain is the regeneration and preservation of the hoboing's roots of origin in rural America, specifically Britt, Iowa. Never was the hoboing culture lost in Britt, but for a brief moment the movement, hoboing reached new heights to which the jungles could not sustain. Though the hobo labor movement rose and fell, Britt remains a sanctuary for wanderers as hobos, tramps, bums, laborers, and bindlestiffs to come and go for generations to come. As labor movements continue to ebb and flow, let these stories not be lost in recollection.

CONCLUSION

The cultural continuation of American hoboing remains as questionable as the origins to which it began. As travelers continue to come and go through Britt, the number of travelers left who still ride the rails remains relatively unknown for the unforeseeable future. The purpose of this thesis is to cement the connection of the rural activity of hobo nonworkers of the Gilded Age with the inner-city fundamentals of labor advocacy throughout the Progressive Era. Making connections exposes important aspects about two different times in history, including the resistive response to the capitalist labor market, the prominence of the casual nonwork in the Midwest, the growing skepticism of vagrancy and homelessness, and the nature of labor advocacy towards unemployment in the inner city. Most significantly, the intention of this academic project is to complement the work of the museum professionals National Hobo Museum, who work to preserve and promote the cultural traditions and heritage of hoboing. With hope, readers will better understand the crucial rural component of the hobo's story from the rise of its cultural authenticity and the fall of its economic identity.

As times grew more difficult into the 1930s for the nonworker, the hobo's existence became ever more redundant and their unique culture faded away. Though hoboing once prospered amongst the great plains, the loss of these traveling harvest hands and bindlestiffs throughout the twenty-first century was coupled with the loss of the culture, language, and stories. Unreliable economic and social conditions proved the hobo way of life was fragile and utterly too dependent on its antimodern ways. The IBWA plays a pivotal role in this story. The story's rise and fall demonstrates the agency

of job seekers in their efforts to bring meaning to social issues of unemployment and homelessness. The IBWA was dedicated to both improving the lives of the homeless and protecting the common interests of the unemployed. The story of the IBWA speaks highly of American society at the time, calling for reform and unity amongst some of America's most marginalized individuals. However, in the process, the organization's efforts both inevitably and unintentionally extinguished the uniqueness of the hoboing lifestyle. Regardless, the IBWA was successful in attracting a specific labor force that other labor movements could not attain. Let its genius not be lost in the memory amongst other great mass labor movements of its time.

Reasons for the cultural fragility of the American hobo are two-fold. First, unimaginable and unavoidable changes in technology, transportation, and the labor market could not support the traditional antimodernist lifestyle. Second, the IBWA used the hobo's unique image of joblessness, vagrancy, and class struggle for a larger blue-collar cause, thus diminishing the key elements of selfhood and individualism that defined the hobo nonworking identity. Subsequently, the culture revered back to its local roots, a place where its ethos continues to be celebrated as a lifestyle of adventure and wanderlust.

What can be conferred by this story is that the hobo nonworker validated casual, migrant work, legitimized traveling work as a major facet of the working-class, endorsed a movement of activism that aligned progressive values with the average worker, and introduced pre-New Deal ideas of reform. This project digs deeper into the IBWA labor movement than any prior scholarship by exposing two important truths to the legacy of

James E. How and the IBWA. One, the philosophy of the IBWA was not all that radical compared to the organization's counterparts, such as the IWW. The organization largely focused on tactics related to education, cooperation, and non-violence. Second, investigating deeper into the philosophy and manifesto of the organization reveals additional perspectives of working-class America. With hope, readers will better understand the idea of hoboing, and related nonwork, within labor's greatest strives.

Today, wandering is relatively an abandoned lifestyle and the candidacy for migratory work shifted towards a different demographic starkly different to the white, male, lower-class that once embodied traveling work. No longer was temporary, traveling work considered within the bounds of the nation's borders, traveling across county and state boundaries. Throughout the twentieth-century, immigrants who settled in rural, remote parts of the country gradually changed the demand for labor as employers turned to the immigrant populace for a new source of labor power. The immigrant workers who remained in the states often became migratory workers. They move around as different crops came into season, so they could be employed all year round. Sounds familiar? Workers from neighboring nations gradually moved to the US in search of work and relief, unequivocally and unintendedly pushing hobo laborers once identified as travelers into a new classification, the blue-collar class. As technology and the labor market continues to evolve, the uniqueness of American hoboemia will continue to transition into an inexorable culture of dissolution and isolation. It is ineffably inevitable and unluckily unfortunate.

Remarkably, the celebration of hobo identity and culture remains rather powerful in the hobo capital of the world, Britt. Hobos of past and present and hobo associators gather annually throughout the first week of August. Over a pot of mulligan stew and crowning of the hobo king and queen, the National Hobo Days Convention, 120 years old, still captivates the continued efforts to appreciate and preserve hobo history and culture. Many wanderers come and go with a shared sense of traveler companionship, still sharing their stories, selling art, and hopping freights day and night. With the hobo jungle still nestled between the railway intersection on Highway 18, the large red freight car's door is opened for hobos to shave their beards and charge their phones. A wanderer of yesterday would gaze at the sight of such efforts to "get with the times", exemplifying one of the few instances of how the culture has some-what modernized.

Britt continues to represent a safe haven for hobos to come and go. Hopping off of intersection between US 18 and Main Street begins a fundamental community-conscious urgency to preserve the recognition of boundless travel, admiration for innovative economy, and determination to work against hobo stereotypes. The small town is barely a blip on the map, but it hums to life where the last of the great wanderers visit. The ghostly legacies of Jack London, Josiah Flynt, and James Eads How still linger along the railways as a sign that their words still capture the spirit and heart of purposefulness displacement. It matters not where a man belongs, somewhere he has a place and that place defines him to himself and his group. The hobos had a place that defined them and the group to which they belonged as a working people, just not necessarily part of a settled place of the working-class. The remarkable reaction to such treacherous

adventurous of both joy and struggle is a persistent response to preserve the unique stories of the freight hoppers.

To know exactly why the culture ceased to mere existence cannot be determined or pin-pointed in history. The hobo's gradual fall from a culture of acceptance and escape for those who were deemed most disregarded by the woes of capitalism speaks volumes to how government can so easily leave the welfare of its people behind. History has shown that economy and class stir the grief of the working-class to a reactionary state of mind, often exemplified by savvy provocative acts of political advocacy. Perhaps being an agitator is what projects voices loud enough to be visible. And with social groups in society constantly evolving and reshaping, facets of the middle and lower classes may be key to understanding the world as a prerequisite for changing it.

In a society of citizen consumers, to have nothing, to own nothing, by choice, might be the most radical politics of all. As the hobo fades from the American scene, except as a visual or literary cliché, there's more and more confusion of who and what a hobo is. The hobo is a renegade, transgressor, laborer, political activist, agent of change, a mirroring image to your average American entitled to employment, wellbeing, and a fulfilling life. The hobo is all these characteristics with an unknowingly unique story to tell. Though the IBWA and associated nonworkers failed to gain traction and self-sustain, the its lasting effects seriously questioned several major questions as to what the relationship is between government and its people along with the worker rights associated with this dichotomy.

Preserving history at the local level is of lasting and cumulative value for developing local knowledge and understanding. Rod Skyora, former interim manager of the National Hobo Museum, also known as Minneapolis Skinny, is just one of the many retired hobos who still returns to Britt to capture the nostalgia of wandering and safeguard the heritage. His stories of freight hopping in the 1950s poignantly move today's generations to imagine the fright and euphoria of running towards a boxcar to grasp the essence of society's most sacredly spirited people with a shared story and mutual legacy. With his colorful vocabulary and lively body language, Rod "sizes-up" his showgoers as he relies upon recapturing the art of hoboing to continue the appreciation and celebration for labor's unsettled vagrancy. With such hope, the hobo's legacy will not remain "pinched" under labor's most recognized narratives. After all, to preserve a history begins with the ability to tell a great story.

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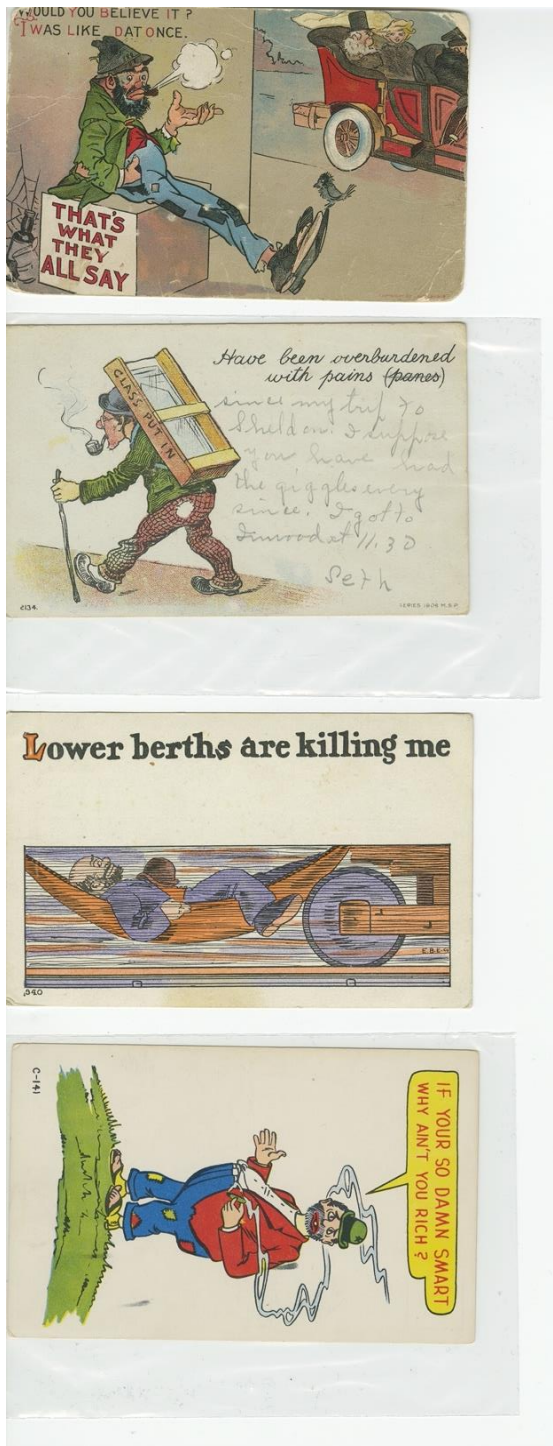
"Would you believe it? I was like that once. That's what they all say." Postcard. 1909. National Hobo Museum. Britt, Iowa.

APPENDIX A



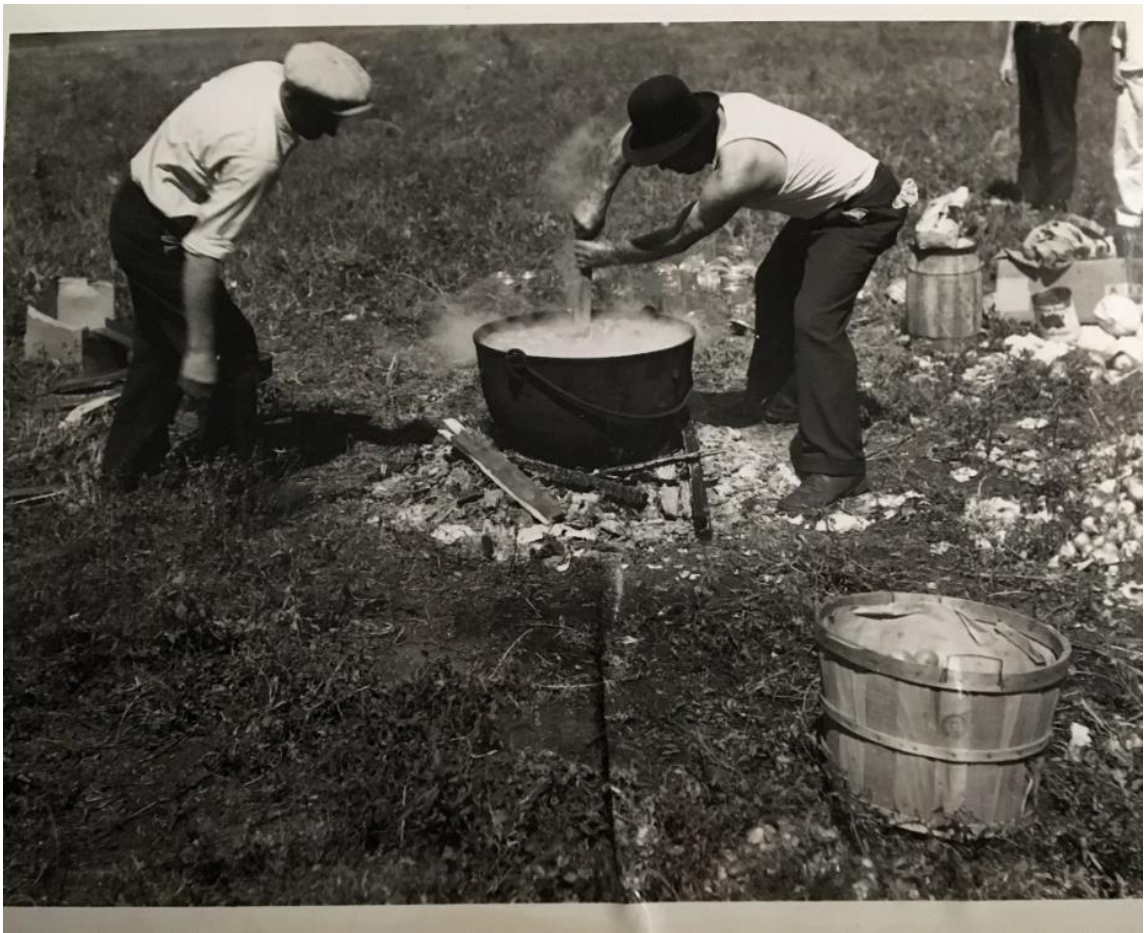
“Behind Time.” Postcard. May 3, 1909. National Hobo Museum. Britt, Iowa.

APPENDIX B



“Would you believe it? I was like that once. That’s what they all say.” Postcard. 1909.
National Hobo Museum. Britt, Iowa.

APPENDIX D



“Mulligan Stew in Hobo Jungle.” Photograph. National Hobo Museum. Britt, Iowa.

APPENDIX E



“Jungles in Britt.” Photograph. National Hobo Museum. Britt, Iowa.

APPENDIX F



McCook, John James. *Providence Bob and Philadelphia Shorty*. 1894. Butler-McCook House & Garden. Antiquarian Landmarks Society. Connecticut.

APPENDIX G

8

"HOBO" NEWS

HOBO NEWS

Published Monthly by the International Brotherhood
Welfare Association
419 Clinton Street, Cincinnati, O.

OF THE HOBOES, BY THE HOBOES AND
FOR THE HOBOES

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Letters pertaining to business, checks, money orders, etc., should not be made out or addressed to any individual, but alone to

THE HOBO NEWS,
419 Clinton Street, Cincinnati, O.

Communications for the editor should be marked "For the Editor," along with the foregoing directions.

All contributed articles to this paper must be signed. The policy of this paper will be outlined on the Editorial pages, and the Editor and Press Committee must not be held as endorsing the different views expressed elsewhere. In many men of many minds there is bound to be great divergence of opinion. It will be our policy as far as possible to reconcile these differences.

ADVERTISING RATES

Will be made known upon application, and will be based alone upon the actual certified edition as paid for at the pressroom and circulated to paid subscribers and agents.



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Editorial

All contributions, criticisms, articles and correspondence of whatever nature, pertaining to the policy of this paper should be sent to

THE EDITOR,

"Hobo" News,
13th and Pine Sts., St. Louis, Mo.

"Great truths are dearly bought. The common truth,

Such as men give and take from day to day,
Comes in the common walk of easy life.
Blown by a careless wind across our way.
Great truths are dearly won; not found by chance.
Nor wafted on the breath of summer dream;
But grasped in the great struggle of the soul,
Hard buffeting with adverse wind and stream."
—ANON.

LOVING MEMORY

WILL J. QUIRKE, the noted Hobo writer, is dead. Known to untold thousands as Bill Quirke, Bill the Writer, Bill the Poet, Bill the Hobo, Bill the Cattle stiff, Bill the Migratory worker, whose trade was everything that hard labor could accomplish, whose place was everywhere.

Bill lived the lonely and loveless life of the Hobo and died a characteristic lonely hobo death. At 1 o'clock in the wintry morning, when all around was quiet, a body was found on Sixth Avenue, between Marion and Columbia Streets, Seattle, Washington. It lay in the middle of the street, alone and deserted. An autopsy was performed at the City Hospital and it was discovered that he had been stricken to his death by an automobile. Like a thief in the night his fate overtook him.

Of the thousands of hoboies killed every year in these great, careless United States, a very large percentage are unknown and as lost to identification as the unknown warrior who sleeps at last amongst his fellow heroes in Arlington Cemetery. The hobo is by nature, sensitive and secretive, even suspicious. He never tells his personal history to his comrades and it is only by firm lasting friendship and the closest questioning that his life can be laid bare; and in strange places this unknown and unknowable product—sadly maligned and misunderstood as he is—of our social system, is laid away to his eternal rest, somewhere, every day, unknown, unwept, unhonored and unsung.

"Of the Hobos, By the Hobos, and For the Hobos." *The Hobo News*. December 1921.

APPENDIX H



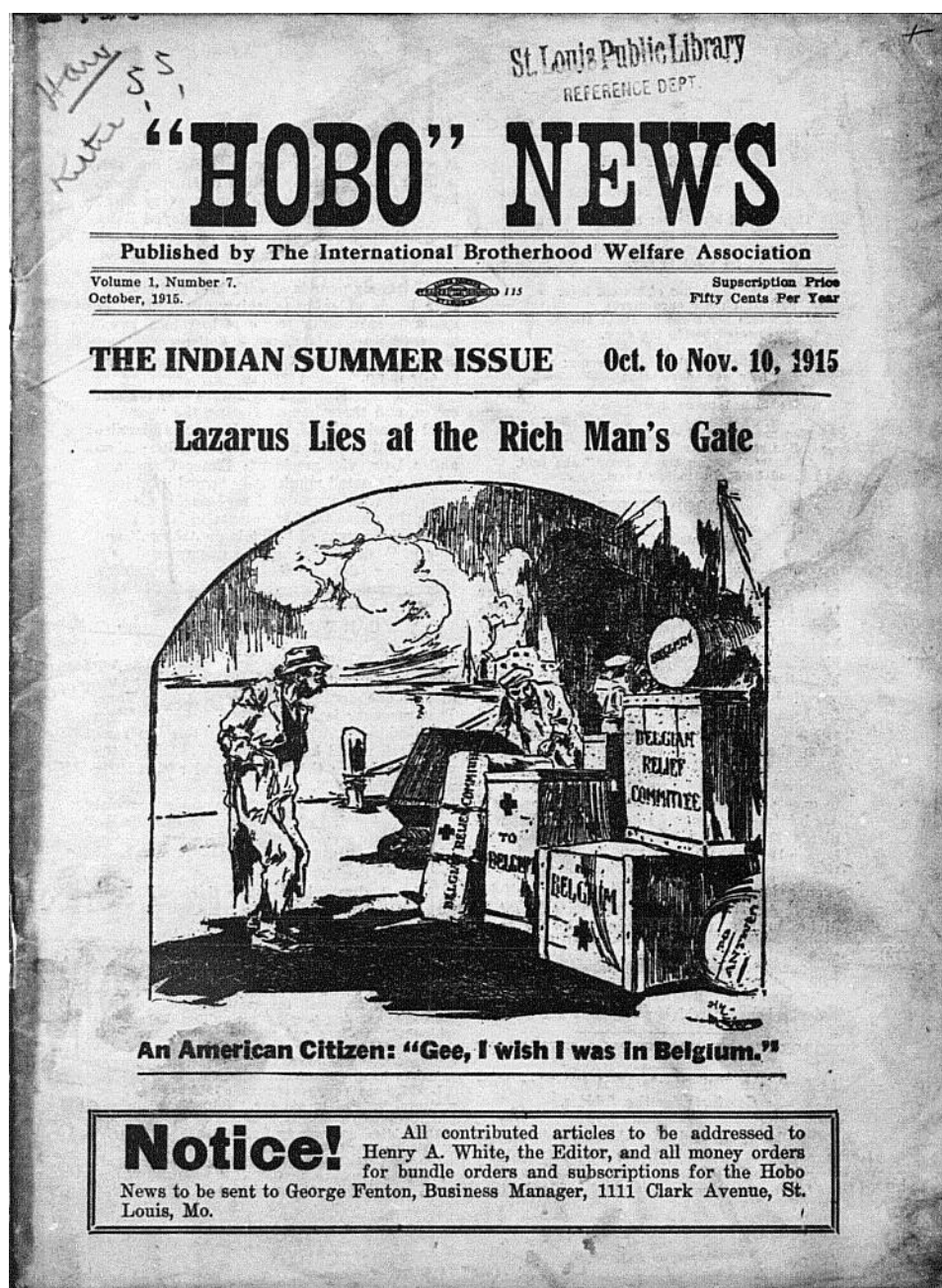
Carpenter, Laura. "Britt Hobo Jungle." Photograph. 2019.

APPENDIX I



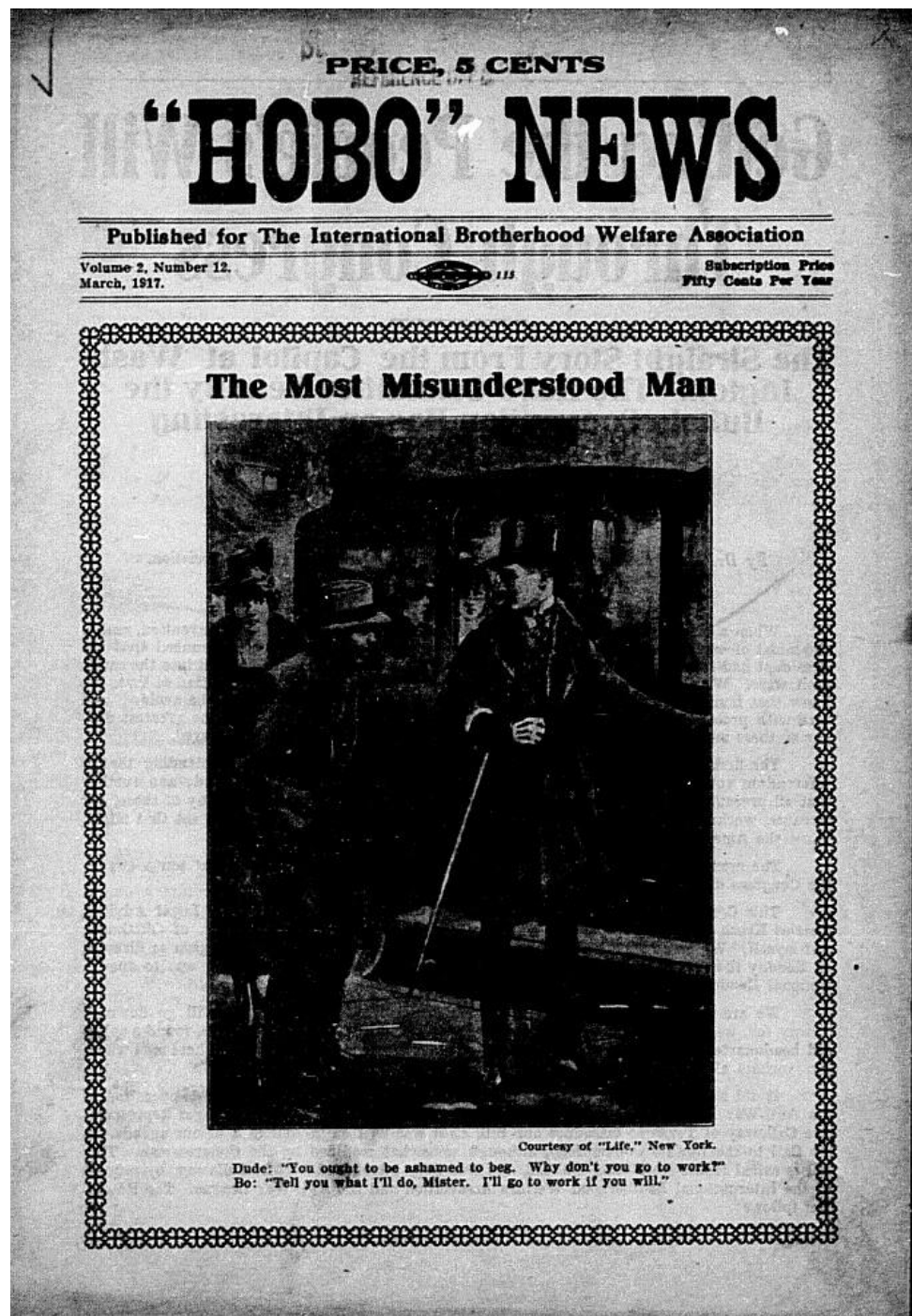
“James Eads How Speaking to Unemployed in Chicago.” Library of Congress.
Photograph. 1921.

APPENDIX J



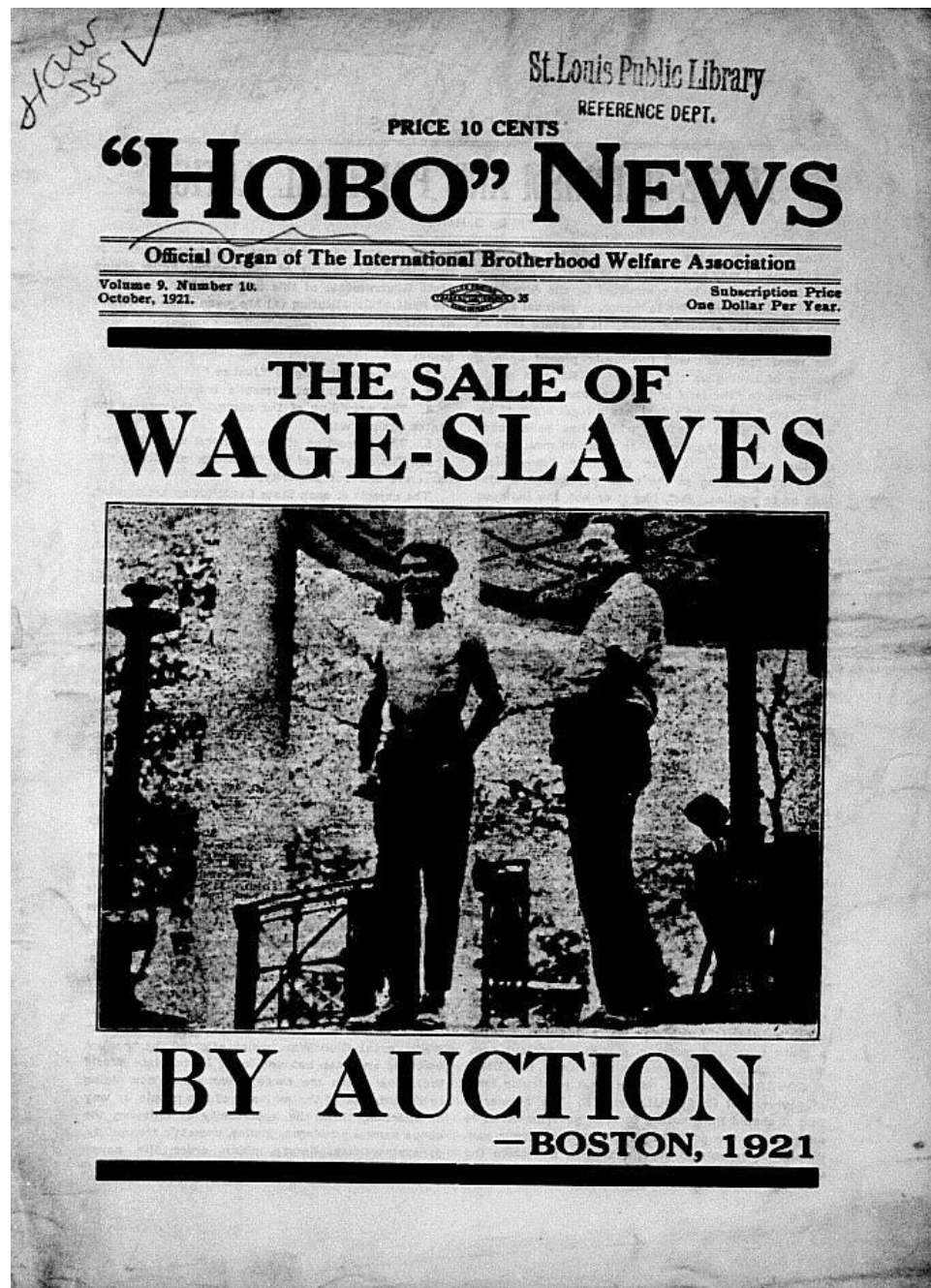
"Lazarus Lies at the Rich Man's Gate. An American Citizen: Gee, I Wish I was in Belgium." *The Hobo News*. October 1915.

APPENDIX K



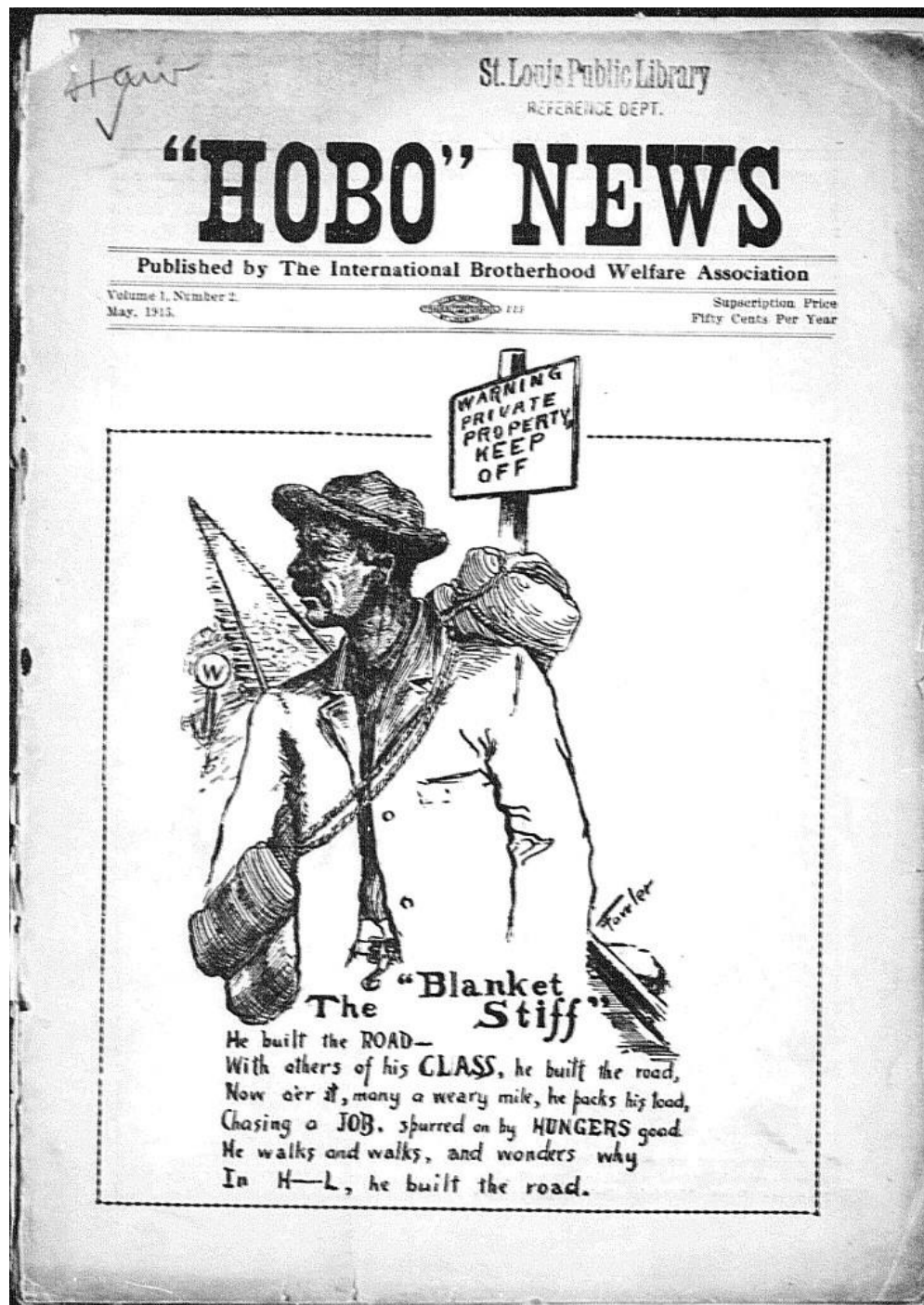
"The Most Understood Man." *The Hobo News*. March 1917.

APPENDIX L



"The Sale of Wage-Slaves by Auction." *The Hobo News*. October 1921.

APPENDIX M



"The Blanket Stiff." *The Hobo News*. May 1916.