

# "The American Hobo: A Journey Through History"



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## **Introduction to "The American Hobo: A Journey Through History"**

Welcome to "The American Hobo: A Journey Through History," a captivating narrative of the fascinating world of the American hobo. Step into the pages of this captivating fictional tale, woven with threads of true history, as it transports you into the world of the American Hobo. From the late 19th to the mid-20th century, these itinerant workers crisscrossed the nation, riding the rails and carving out a life of freedom, hardship, and resilience. Through the eyes of richly imagined characters, this story brings to life the struggles, camaraderie, and unquenchable spirit of these wanderers, blending fact and fiction to illuminate a forgotten chapter of America's past.

The hobo, often misunderstood and romanticized, was a vital part of the American workforce, contributing to the nation's growth and development. From harvesting crops to laying railroad tracks, hobos were the backbone of many industries, embodying the spirit of freedom and self-reliance that defines the American Dream.

This book explores the rich culture of the hobos, including their unique language, music, and culinary traditions. It also clarifies the often-blurred lines between hobos, tramps, and bums, highlighting the distinct identity and values of the hobo community.

Through personal stories, historical accounts, and cultural insights, "The American Hobo" paints a vivid picture of a bygone era, revealing the resilience, creativity, and camaraderie that characterized this extraordinary subculture. Whether you're interested in history, sociology, or simply the human spirit, this book offers a compelling exploration of a fascinating chapter in American history.

As you embark on this journey, you will discover how the hobo legacy continues to influence American culture today, from music and literature to modern nomadic lifestyles. Join us in uncovering the stories, traditions, and impact of the American hobo, a true icon of American folklore.

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This table of contents outlines a comprehensive and engaging history of the American hobo, highlighting their work ethic, unique culture, and contributions to society. The chapters cover the origins of hobo culture, their golden age, the distinction between hobos and tramps, their music and food, and the lasting impact of hobos on American culture.

The story begins in the aftermath of the Civil War, when discharged soldiers began hopping freight trains to return home and find work. It then explores the expansion of the hobo lifestyle during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as men traveled the country seeking employment in various industries.

The narrative discusses the rich culture of "Hobohemia," including the development of the Hobo Code and the annual Hobo Conventions. It also addresses the surge in hobo numbers during the Great Depression, when many Americans took to the rails in search of work.

A crucial chapter clarifies the distinction between hobos and tramps, emphasizing that hobos were willing workers who traveled to find employment, while tramps preferred to avoid work. This misconception often led to hobos being unfairly stigmatized.

The book mentions the musical traditions of hobos, featuring their use of instruments like guitars and harmonicas, as well as their unique cuisine and cooking methods. It then traces the decline of hobo culture after World War II, examines the legacy of hobos in American society, and presents the American hobo in a favorable light, highlighting their work ethic, resourcefulness, and contributions to the nation's development.

## Chapter 1: The Birth of the Hobo: Post-Civil War America

As the smoke cleared from the battlefields of the American Civil War in 1865, a new figure emerged on the American landscape: the hobo. Born out of necessity and opportunity, these itinerant workers would come to embody the spirit of freedom and the pursuit of the American Dream in ways that would captivate the nation's imagination for generations to come.

The story of the American hobo begins with the war-weary soldiers returning home to a country undergoing a period of transition. The railroads, which had played a crucial role in the war effort, now stretched across the continent like steel veins, pumping life into a rapidly industrializing nation. For many veterans, these rails offered a path to new beginnings and opportunities.



### The Rise of the Rails

As one former soldier, Jim "Boxcar" Johnson, would later recount, "We'd learned to live on the move during the war. When we came home, the idea of settling down in one place just didn't sit right with a lot of us. The rails were calling, and we answered."



The expansion of the railroad network coincided with a boom in industrial and agricultural development. Factories sprung up in cities, while vast tracts of land were being cultivated in the West. This created a demand for mobile labor – workers who could follow the harvest or move from one construction project to another.

## A New Kind of Worker

It was in this environment that the hobo was born. Unlike the tramps who would later give them a bad name, hobos were workers first and foremost. They were men (and sometimes women) who embraced a life of transience not out of laziness, but out of a desire to find work wherever it might be available.



One of the earliest accounts of hobo life comes from Jack London, who would later become a famous author. In his youth, London rode the rails and wrote about his experiences: "I became a tramp—well, in reality I became a hobo. The difference between a tramp and a hobo is that a hobo will work, a tramp won't."

## The Code of the Road

As more and more people took to this lifestyle, an unwritten code began to develop among the hobos. This code emphasized the importance of work, honesty, and mutual aid. Hobos would share information about job opportunities, warn each other about dangerous areas, and even leave signs – what would come to be known as the "Hobo Code" – to help their fellow travelers.

## The Seeds of a Culture

By the 1870s, the hobo had become a recognizable figure in American society. They were seen hopping freight trains, gathering in "jungles" (makeshift camps near rail yards), and showing up in towns looking for work. Their willingness to travel long distances for employment made them an essential part of the American workforce, particularly in seasonal industries like agriculture and construction.

As one hobo named "Steamtrain" Maury Graham would later put it, "We were the original migrant workers. We went where the work was, did the job, and moved on. It wasn't an easy life, but it was a free one."

This nomadic lifestyle, born in the aftermath of the Civil War, would go on to shape American culture, music, and literature for decades to come. The hobo had arrived, and with him came a new chapter in the story of America.



## Chapter 2: Riding the Rails: The Golden Age of Hobos

As the 19th century gave way to the 20th, the American hobo entered what many would later call their Golden Age. This period, roughly spanning from the 1880s to the late 1920s, saw the hobo lifestyle reach its zenith, becoming an integral part of the American labor force and a romantic figure in the national imagination.



### The Expanding Frontier of Work

With the rapid industrialization of America, the demand for mobile labor continued to grow. Hobos became the lifeblood of many industries, from the wheat fields of the Midwest to the lumber camps of the Pacific Northwest. As one hobo, known as "Banjo Bill" Eddie, recounted:

"One month you'd be picking apples in Washington, the next you'd be laying railroad ties in Montana. The country was our workplace, and the trains were our ticket to the next job."



## Mastering the Art of Train Hopping

Central to the hobo way of life was the ability to ride the rails for free. This wasn't just a matter of jumping on a moving train; it was a skill that could mean the difference between life and death. Experienced hobos developed an intimate knowledge of train schedules, yard layouts, and the best cars to ride.

"Boxcar" Betty, one of the rare female hobos of the era, described the experience:

"You had to learn fast or you wouldn't last long. Knowing which cars were safe, how to avoid the bulls (railroad police), and when to jump – these weren't just tricks, they were survival skills."





## **The Hobo Jungle: A Home Away from Home**

When not on the move, hobos gathered in makeshift camps known as "jungles." These were typically located near rail yards or on the outskirts of towns. In the jungles, hobos would share meals, exchange information about jobs and rail conditions, and form a sense of community.



## **The Hobo Code: Ethics of the Road**

During this golden age, the hobo code of ethics became more formalized. This unwritten set of rules governed behavior both on the rails and in town. Key tenets included:

1. Willingness to work for food or lodging
2. Respect for fellow hobos and their property
3. Leaving campsites clean for the next traveler
4. Helping other hobos in need

## **The National Hobo Convention**

In 1900, the first National Hobo Convention was held in Britt, Iowa. This annual gathering became a cornerstone of hobo culture, providing a place for hobos to connect, share stories, and even elect a "King" and "Queen" of the hobos.

## Hobos in Popular Culture

During this period, hobos began to capture the American imagination. They appeared in literature, music, and film, often romanticized as free spirits embodying the American ideals of independence and self-reliance.



Writers like Jack London and Jim Tully, both former hobos themselves, brought the realities and romance of hobo life to the American public. Their stories painted a picture of a life that was hard but free, dangerous but exhilarating.

## The End of an Era

The golden age of hobos began to wane with the onset of the Great Depression. While the economic downturn initially swelled the ranks of the hobos, it also marked the beginning of the end for their way of life.

As "Frypan" Jack, a hobo who rode the rails for over four decades, put it:

"The Depression changed everything. Suddenly, everyone was on the move looking for work. We weren't just hobos anymore; we were the face of hard times."

The golden age of hobos left an indelible mark on American culture. It represented a unique period when the search for work became a way of life, and the journey itself was as important as the destination. The legacy of these rail-riding workers would continue to resonate in American folklore for generations to come.



## Chapter 3: Hobohemia: Creating a Culture and Code

As the hobo way of life flourished in the early 20th century, a distinct subculture emerged, complete with its own language, customs, and code of ethics. This rich tapestry of traditions and practices came to be known as "Hobohemia," a term that encapsulated the unique world of the American hobo.

### The Hobo Lingo

One of the most fascinating aspects of Hobohemia was its colorful and inventive language. Hobos developed a rich vocabulary that served both practical and social purposes. As "Dictionary" Joe, a hobo known for his expansive knowledge of this lingo, explained:

"Our words weren't just for show. They helped us communicate quickly and secretly when we needed to. A 'bindle stiff' was a hobo who carried his belongings in a bundle, a 'jungle buzzard' was someone who mooched off others in camp, and 'riding the cushions' meant taking a passenger train instead of a freight."

### The Hobo Code: More Than Just Ethics

While the hobo code of ethics governed behavior, there was another "code" that was equally important: a system of symbols used to communicate information to fellow travelers. These signs, often chalked or carved near rail yards or town entrances, conveyed crucial details about local conditions.

"Chalk Charlie," famous for his detailed knowledge of these symbols, described their importance:

"A simple drawing could tell you everything you needed to know. A cat meant a kind woman lived nearby, a top hat and a triangle meant wealth, a cross meant 'angel food' – a religious meal, and two interlocked circles warned of handcuffs – the police."



### Hobo Hieroglyphics: A Visual Language

The hobo code of symbols was a sophisticated system that allowed for the rapid dissemination of information among a largely transient population. It covered everything from where to find work to which houses might offer a meal. This visual language demonstrated the ingenuity and solidarity of the hobo community.

## The Hobo Jungle: A Microcosm of Hobohemia

The hobo jungles were where much of hobo culture took shape. These temporary communities were governed by their own set of rules and customs. "Jungle Bird" Mary, who spent two decades on the rails, described life in these camps:

"The jungle was where you really learned what it meant to be a hobo. We shared what we had, told stories, sang songs, and looked out for each other. It wasn't just a camp; it was a school for hobo life."



## Hobo Gatherings and Conventions

Beyond the informal gatherings in jungles, hobos also organized more formal meetings. The most famous of these was the annual National Hobo Convention in Britt, Iowa, which began in 1900 and continues to this day. These gatherings served multiple purposes: they were part reunion, part cultural celebration, and part advocacy forum.

"Convention Kate," a regular attendee, recalled:

"It was at these meetings that we really came together as a community. We'd elect our king and queen, share news from around the country, and make sure our voices were heard. It wasn't all serious though – there was plenty of music, storytelling, and good times too."

## The Hobo Aesthetic

Hoboemia even had its own distinct aesthetic, visible in the art and crafts produced by hobos. Intricately carved walking sticks, decorated tin cans, and handmade musical instruments were all part of the hobo artistic tradition. These items were not just practical tools but also expressions of creativity and identity.



## The Legacy of Hobohemia

The culture of Hobohemia left an indelible mark on American society. Its influence can be seen in literature, music, and even modern counterculture movements. The hobo's emphasis on freedom, self-reliance, and community continues to resonate with many Americans today.

As "Philosopher Pete," a hobo known for his thoughtful reflections on the lifestyle, put it:

"What we created wasn't just a way to survive on the road. It was a whole way of looking at the world. We valued freedom and hard work, community and self-reliance. In a way, we were living out the American dream on our own terms.

The rich culture of Hobohemia, with its unique language, codes, and customs, reflects the creativity and resilience of the American hobo. It remains a fascinating chapter in the story of American subcultures, one that continues to captivate imaginations and inspire to this day.



## Chapter 4: The Great Depression: A Surge in Hobo Numbers

The stock market crash of 1929 and the ensuing Great Depression marked a pivotal moment in the history of the American hobo. As economic hardship swept across the nation, the ranks of the hobos swelled dramatically, forever changing the face of this unique subculture.





## The Economic Collapse and Its Impact

The Great Depression hit America like a tidal wave, leaving millions unemployed and desperate. As jobs disappeared and farms failed, many Americans found themselves with no choice but to hit the road in search of work. "Dustbowl Dan," who began his hobo life during this period, recalled:

"It wasn't just the usual crowd riding the rails anymore. You'd see whole families – men, women, and children – crowding into boxcars. We were all running from the same thing: hunger and hopelessness."



## A New Generation of Hobos

This influx of newcomers to the hobo lifestyle brought significant changes. Many of these "Depression hobos" were not seasoned travelers but ordinary people thrust into an unfamiliar and often harsh way of life.

"Schoolboy" Sam, who left home at 16 during the Depression, described the learning curve:

"Those of us who were new had to learn fast. The old-timers, they knew all the tricks – how to hop a train, where to find work, how to stay safe. For us greenhorns, every day was a school day, and the price of failure could be steep."

## Changing Perceptions

The surge in hobo numbers during the Depression also changed how society viewed these itinerant workers. While hobos had often been regarded with a mixture of romanticism and suspicion, the widespread economic hardship led to greater sympathy and understanding.

"Preacher" Paul, who rode the rails for over a decade, noted:

"Before the crash, folks often saw us as outsiders. But when their neighbors and even their own kin took to the road, they started to understand. We weren't looking for handouts; we were looking for honest work, just like everyone else."



## Government Response and Relief Efforts

The scale of the crisis eventually prompted government action. Programs like the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) provided employment for many, including some hobos. However, these programs also had the effect of reducing the need for the type of itinerant labor that hobos had traditionally provided.

## The Hobo Jungles: Swelling Communities

As more people took to the rails, hobo jungles grew in size and number. These makeshift communities became vital centers of mutual aid and information sharing. Soup Stu, who ran an informal soup kitchen in a Chicago jungle, remembered:

"Our numbers swelled, but so did our sense of community. In the jungles, we looked out for each other. If someone had food, they shared. If someone knew about work, they spread the word. We were all in it together."



## Cultural Impact

The Great Depression era left an indelible mark on hobo culture. New songs were written, capturing the hardships and hopes of the time. The hobo code expanded to include symbols related to New Deal programs and relief efforts.



## The End of an Era

As the 1930s drew to a close and America began to recover, the nature of hobo life started to change. The advent of World War II brought new economic opportunities, and many who had taken to the road during the Depression found more stable employment.

"Boxcar" Betty, who had ridden the rails since the 1920s, observed:

"The war changed everything. Suddenly, there was work everywhere. A lot of the Depression hobos went off to factories or the military. Those of us who stayed on the road, we were the last of a breed."

## Legacy of the Depression Era

The Great Depression fundamentally altered the trajectory of hobo culture in America. While it swelled the ranks of hobos in the short term, it also set in motion changes that would ultimately lead to the decline of the traditional hobo way of life.

However, the experiences of this era left a lasting impact on American culture. The stories, songs, and experiences of Depression-era hobos became an integral part of the nation's collective memory, influencing literature, music, and social consciousness for generations to come.

The Great Depression was the canvas upon which the American hobo's story was painted. In those trying times, the hobo lifestyle wove enduring legends into the fabric of American history. Their journey exemplifies unbreakable human resolve and the allure of hope beyond the horizon.

## Chapter 5: Hobo vs. Tramp: Clearing Up the Misconception

One of the most persistent and damaging misconceptions about hobos has been their conflation with tramps. This chapter aims to set the record straight, highlighting the crucial differences between these two groups of transient individuals and explaining how this misunderstanding has affected the perception of hobos throughout history.



### Defining the Difference

At its core, the distinction between hobos and tramps comes down to their relationship with work. As "Dictionary" Joe, our lingo expert from earlier chapters, succinctly put it:

"A hobo travels and works, a tramp travels and dreams, and a bum neither travels nor works."

This simple definition encapsulates the essence of what made hobos unique: their strong work ethic and willingness to travel in search of employment.

### The Hobo Work Ethic

Hobos prided themselves on their willingness to work hard at any job they could find. "Workingman" Willie, who rode the rails for over three decades, explained:

"We weren't looking for handouts. We were looking for honest work, and we'd do just about anything - from harvesting crops to laying railroad ties. The travel was just a means to an end, a way to go where the work was."



## **The Tramp Lifestyle**

In contrast, tramps were individuals who traveled but actively avoided work. They often relied on begging or petty crime to sustain themselves. This lifestyle was at odds with the hobo code of ethics, which emphasized self-reliance and contributing to society through labor.

## **Origins of the Misconception**

The confusion between hobos and tramps likely arose from their shared transient lifestyle. To the casual observer, a hobo and a tramp might look similar - both were often poorly dressed and carried their possessions with them. However, this surface-level similarity masked fundamental differences in their values and behaviors.

## **Impact on Public Perception**

This misconception had real consequences for hobos. "Reputation" Ricky, a hobo who later became an advocate for transient workers' rights, noted:

"When people thought we were all tramps, it made our lives harder. Towns would run us out before we could even look for work. Employers would turn us away, thinking we were just looking for a handout. It was a constant battle to prove ourselves."

## Hobos' Efforts to Distinguish Themselves

Aware of this damaging conflation, many hobos made concerted efforts to distinguish themselves from tramps. They emphasized their willingness to work in their interactions with locals, developed codes of conduct that prohibited begging, and even created internal policing mechanisms within their communities to discourage tramp-like behavior.



## The Role of Media

Popular media often exacerbated the confusion between hobos and tramps. Movies, books, and news reports frequently used the terms interchangeably, further muddying the waters in the public mind.

However, some media figures made efforts to clarify the distinction. John Steinbeck, in his novel "Cannery Row," wrote:

"Hobo is not a synonym for bum and tramp. A hobo is a migratory worker, a tramp is a migratory non-worker, and a bum is a stationary non-worker."

## Modern Understanding

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the distinct identity of hobos. Historical research, documentaries, and the efforts of organizations like the National Hobo Association have helped to clarify the unique place hobos hold in American labor history.

## The Hobo Legacy

Despite the persistent misconceptions, the true legacy of the American hobo as a vital part of the mobile workforce has begun to be recognized. Their contributions to building America's infrastructure, harvesting its crops, and maintaining the flexibility of its labor force are increasingly acknowledged.

As "Historian Hank" reflected:

"The hobo wasn't just some romantic figure or a nuisance. We were an essential part of America's workforce, filling needs that no one else could. It's high time that distinction was understood and respected."



## Conclusion

The conflation of hobos and tramps has been a persistent issue throughout the history of hobo culture. However, understanding the crucial differences between these groups is essential to appreciating the unique role hobos played in American society. By recognizing hobos for what they truly were - itinerant workers willing to travel where the work was - we can better understand their significant contributions to America's development and the true nature of their lifestyle and values.



## Chapter 6: Music of the Rails: Hobo Songs and Instruments

The soulful twang of a guitar, the mournful wail of a harmonica, and the rhythmic clacking of train wheels on steel tracks - these were the sounds that formed the soundtrack of hobo life. Music was an integral part of hobo culture, serving as both entertainment and a means of preserving and sharing their experiences.



### The Hobo's Musical Arsenal

Hobos were known for their resourcefulness, and this extended to their choice of musical instruments. "Melody" Mike, a hobo musician who rode the rails for over two decades, explained:

"You couldn't carry much on the road, so we made do with what we could. Harmonicas were popular - small, easy to carry, and you could make them sing. Guitars were trickier to transport, but if you had one, you were king of the jungle."

Other common instruments included:

- Banjos
- Fiddles
- Spoons

- Washboards
- Jugs

Many hobos also became adept at making instruments from found objects, turning tin cans into percussion instruments or crafting simple stringed instruments.



## Songs of the Road

Hobo music wasn't just about the instruments; it was about the stories they told through their songs. These ballads and folk songs captured the essence of hobo life - the freedom, the hardships, the camaraderie, and the loneliness.

"Songbird" Sarah, known for her beautiful voice and vast repertoire of hobo songs, shared:

"Our songs were our history books. They told of famous hobos, dangerous rail yards, kind-hearted townspeople, and the beauty of the open road. When we sang, we were keeping our stories alive."

Some of the most famous hobo songs included:

- "Big Rock Candy Mountain" - a utopian vision of the perfect hobo paradise
- "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum" - a satirical take on the hobo lifestyle
- "The Wabash Cannonball" - celebrating a famous train route
- "Waiting for a Train" - capturing the melancholy of hobo life

## Music in the Jungles

The hobo jungles often came alive with music in the evenings. After a day of work or travel, hobos would gather around the campfire to share songs, stories, and companionship.

"Fiddler" Frank reminisced:

"Those nights in the jungle, with everyone joining in on a song - those were the times that made the hard life worth it. For a moment, we weren't just a bunch of drifters. We were a community, united by the music."



## **Hobo Musicians Who Made It Big**

Some hobo musicians managed to parlay their talents into successful careers. Woody Guthrie, perhaps the most famous example, drew heavily on his experiences riding the rails in his music. Others, like Boxcar Willie, built entire personas around the hobo image.

## **The Blues Connection**

There was a significant overlap between hobo music and the blues, with many blues musicians having experience as hobos. The themes of travel, hardship, and longing for home resonated in both musical traditions.

"Bluesman" Bobby noted:

"The hobo life and the blues life, they weren't so different. Both were about struggle, about moving on when times got tough. It's no wonder so many of us could sing the blues."

## **Preserving the Tradition**

As the golden age of hobos began to wane, efforts were made to preserve their musical heritage. Field recordings captured the songs of aging hobos, and folk revival movements in the 1950s and 60s brought renewed interest in hobo music.

## **The Legacy of Hobo Music**

The influence of hobo music can still be heard in American folk, country, and blues music today. Artists continue to draw inspiration from these songs of the rails, keeping the spirit of the hobo alive through music.

"Historian Hank" reflected:

"The music of the hobos is more than just songs. It's a living history, a window into a unique American experience. Every time someone strums a guitar and sings about riding the rails, they're carrying on our legacy."

## **Conclusion**

The music of the hobos was more than just entertainment; it was the heartbeat of their culture. Through their songs, they shared their joys and sorrows, preserved their history, and created a lasting legacy that continues to resonate in American music. The sound of a lonesome harmonica or the strum of a guitar can still evoke the freedom and adventure of the open road, keeping the spirit of the American hobo alive for new generations.

## Chapter 7: Hobo Cuisine: Meals on the Move

The culinary world of the American hobo was one of necessity, creativity, and communal spirit. With limited resources and a life on the move, hobos developed unique cooking methods and recipes that became an integral part of their culture.



### The Hobo Kitchen

The typical hobo's kitchen was far from conventional. "Chef" Charlie, who rode the rails for over 15 years, described it thus:

"Our kitchen was wherever we happened to be - a jungle camp, a quiet spot by the tracks, or even on a moving train. Our pots and pans? Whatever we could carry. A tin can could be a cooking pot, a coffee can, and a cup all in one."

Essential items in a hobo's culinary toolkit often included:

- A "bindle" (a stick with a bundle) containing basic utensils
- A "yegg" (a small tin can) for boiling water or cooking
- A pocket knife for multiple uses

## Mulligan Stew: The Hobo's Signature Dish

Perhaps the most iconic hobo meal was Mulligan stew, a communal dish that embodied the spirit of hobo life. "Stew Master" Steve explained its significance:

"Mulligan stew was more than just a meal; it was a social event. Everyone would contribute whatever they had - a potato, a carrot, a piece of meat if you were lucky. You'd throw it all in a pot, and pretty soon, you had a feast fit for kings."

The beauty of Mulligan stew was its versatility. No two pots were ever the same, as the ingredients depended entirely on what was available.



## Hobo Coffee: The Lifeblood of the Rails

Coffee was a crucial part of hobo life, providing warmth and energy for long days of travel and work. "Java" Joe, known for always having a pot on the boil, shared his method:

"We'd make coffee in a tin can over a small fire. The trick was to add a clean pebble to the can. When the water boiled, the pebble would rattle, letting you know it was ready. We called it 'Boomer Coffee' - strong enough to keep you going all day."



## Foraging and Fishing

Hobos often supplemented their diets by foraging for wild foods and fishing. "Nature's Pantry" Pete was an expert at living off the land:

"You'd be surprised what you can eat if you know where to look. Dandelion greens, wild berries, fish from streams - nature provided if you knew how to ask."



## **The Hobo Code and Food**

The hobo code of ethics extended to food-related matters. Sharing was a crucial aspect of hobo culture, and those who had food were expected to share with those who didn't. Additionally, the hobo code of symbols included signs indicating where food could be obtained.



## Hobo Bread: A Staple on the Move

A simple bread recipe became popular among hobos due to its ease of preparation and portability.

"Baker" Bob shared the basics:

"You'd mix flour, salt, and water, then wrap the dough around a clean stick. Hold it over the fire, and in no time, you've got fresh bread. We called it 'Tramp Bread' or 'Hobo Bread'."

## Jungle Banquets

In hobo jungles, cooking often became a communal affair. "Jungle Chef" Jenny recalled:

"When we'd gather in the jungles, that's when we'd have our best meals. Everyone would pitch in what they had, and we'd cook up a feast. It wasn't just about the food; it was about the company."



## Hobo Ingenuity: Cooking on the Move

Hobos developed ingenious methods for cooking on moving trains. "Railroad Gourmet" Gary explained one technique:

"We'd wrap potatoes in wet newspaper and place them on the train's axle housing. By the time we reached the next stop, we'd have perfectly baked potatoes."

## **The Legacy of Hobo Cuisine**

While born out of necessity, hobo cuisine left a lasting impact on American food culture. Many dishes and cooking methods popularized by hobos found their way into mainstream cooking.

"Historian Hank" reflected:

"Hobo cuisine was about making the most of what you had. It was sustainable before that was a buzzword, communal before farm-to-table was trendy. In many ways, hobos were ahead of their time in how they approached food."

## **Conclusion**

The culinary traditions of the American hobo reflect the ingenuity, resourcefulness, and communal spirit that defined their way of life. From the humble Mulligan stew to the clever techniques for cooking on the move, hobo cuisine demonstrates human adaptability and the unifying power of a shared meal. These food traditions, born on the rails and in jungle camps, continue to fascinate and inspire, offering a unique glimpse into a significant chapter of American cultural history.

## Chapter 8: The Decline of Hobo Culture: Post-World War II Era

The end of World War II marked a significant turning point for hobo culture in America. The post-war economic boom, changing social dynamics, and technological advancements all contributed to the gradual decline of the traditional hobo way of life.



## Economic Prosperity and Its Impact

The post-war years brought unprecedented economic growth to America. "Prosperity" Pete, who rode the rails from the 1930s to the 1950s, observed:

"After the war, things changed fast. Suddenly, there were jobs everywhere. Factories were humming, construction was booming. The need for migrant labor just wasn't the same anymore."

This economic shift meant that many former hobos could find stable employment, reducing the necessity of a nomadic lifestyle.

## The Rise of the Automobile

The increasing affordability and popularity of automobiles had a profound impact on hobo culture. "Railrider" Randy explained:

"When everyone started getting cars, the romance of the rails faded. Why hop a freight when you could drive? The highways replaced the railways as the symbol of freedom and mobility."

This shift not only changed how people traveled but also altered the landscape of American towns, making them less walkable and less hospitable to transient workers.

## Changing Railroad Policies

Railroad companies, facing competition from highways and air travel, began to tighten security and crack down on freight hopping. "Boxcar" Betty, one of the last of the old-time hobos, recalled:

"The bulls (railroad police) got tougher, the trains got faster, and the yards got harder to sneak into. It wasn't just about catching a ride anymore; it was downright dangerous."

## Societal Attitudes and the Welfare State

The expansion of the welfare state and changing societal attitudes also contributed to the decline of hobo culture.

"Sociologist" Sam, who studied hobo communities in the 1960s, noted:

"As social programs expanded, the public's tolerance for transient lifestyles decreased. Hobos went from being seen as necessary migrant workers to being lumped in with the homeless and unemployed."



## The Last of the Old-Time Hobos

By the 1960s and 1970s, the number of traditional hobos had dwindled significantly. Those who remained were often older men who had been riding the rails for decades. "Last of the Breed" Larry, who continued to live as a hobo into the 1980s, shared:

"We were a dying breed. The young folks weren't interested in this life anymore. The old jungles were empty, and the hobo conventions felt more like reunions than gatherings of active travelers."



## The Transformation of Seasonal Work

Changes in agriculture and other industries that traditionally relied on seasonal labor further reduced the need for the mobile workforce that hobos once provided. Mechanization and the rise of migrant farm worker programs changed the nature of seasonal employment.

## Cultural Memory and Romanticization

As actual hobo numbers declined, the culture began to be romanticized in popular memory. "Historian Hank" observed:

"It's ironic. Just as the real hobo way of life was fading, it started to be glorified in books, movies, and music. People loved the idea of the free-spirited hobo, even as the reality was disappearing."

## The Evolution of Transient Lifestyles

While traditional hobo culture declined, new forms of transient lifestyles emerged.

The traditional hobo lifestyle—characterized by a desire for freedom and adventure—continues to exist in modern times, albeit in a different form. Instead of traveling by freight trains and finding work along the way, modern nomads use many types of transportation and work remotely using technology. Despite these changes, the underlying desire for independence and exploration remains unchanged.

In essence, how contemporary nomads, often referred to as digital nomads, share a similar sense of wanderlust and independence with their hobo predecessors. This modern iteration of being a nomad combines traditional values of freedom and adventure with modern conveniences and technologies.

## Preserving the Legacy

As the number of hobos dwindled, efforts to preserve their history and culture intensified. The National Hobo Convention in Britt, Iowa, transformed from a gathering of active hobos to a historical celebration and remembrance.

## Conclusion

The decline of hobo culture in post-World War II America marked the end of an era. Economic, technological, and social changes rendered the traditional hobo lifestyle increasingly obsolete. However, the legacy of the American hobo – their work ethic, their music, their code of ethics, and their spirit of freedom – continues to fascinate and inspire.

Hobos have made a lasting impact on American culture. Despite their diminished presence, they represent a unique chapter in history, symbolizing resilience, freedom, and the allure of the open road. Their legacy continues to resonate in literature, music, and popular imagination, reflecting core American values. While traditional hobos are rare today, their love of adventure and traveling lives on in modern nomads who seek alternative lifestyles, ensuring their cultural significance endures.

## Chapter 9: Modern Hobos: Keeping the Tradition Alive

Time has passed since the early days of the American hobo, but the positive contributions of this lifestyle continue to serve as an enduring example of a life marked by freedom and achievement.



**Living the hobo life in the 20th century was associated with several positive traits and lifestyles, despite its challenges. Here are some of the key aspects:**

1. **Freedom and Adventure:** Hobos embraced a life of freedom and adventure, traveling across the country by rail and experiencing new places and cultures.

2. **Resourcefulness and Adaptability:** Hobos were known for their ability to adapt to different situations and find creative solutions to challenges, such as cooking Mulligan stew or using the hobo code to communicate.
3. **Community and Camaraderie:** Hobo communities, or "jungles," fostered a sense of camaraderie and mutual support among members. Hobos helped each other and shared resources, creating a strong sense of community.
4. **Multiracial Solidarity:** In an era of widespread racial segregation, hobo communities often showed racial solidarity, with black and white hobos working together and supporting each other.
5. **Work Ethic:** Unlike tramps or bums, hobos were willing to work for their living, often taking on seasonal labor in agriculture or construction to sustain themselves.
6. **Simplicity and Minimalism:** The hobo lifestyle encouraged living simply and without attachment to material possessions, which was liberating for those who valued freedom over wealth.
7. **Cultural Expression:** Hobos contributed significantly to American folklore through their unique slang, music (such as the songs of Woody Guthrie), and storytelling traditions.
8. **Environmental Awareness:** Hobos often lived in harmony with nature, respecting the environment and minimizing waste out of necessity.
9. **Personal Growth and Resilience:** The hobo lifestyle fostered personal growth and resilience as individuals learned to navigate challenges and rely on themselves in a time of economic hardship, particularly during the Great Depression.
10. **Spontaneity and Living in the Moment:** Hobos lived spontaneously, embracing the unpredictability of life on the road and finding joy in the present moment.
11. **Political Awareness:** Many hobos were politically conscious and involved in labor movements, contributing to the growth of unions and workers' rights in the early 20th century.
12. **Skill Sharing:** Hobo jungles often served as informal schools where skills and knowledge were shared, from practical crafts to philosophy and current events.

This lifestyle, while romanticized in some aspects, was born out of economic necessity and the search for work during challenging times in American history, particularly the periods following the Civil War, during the Great Depression, and in the years between the World Wars.

While the golden age of hobo culture has long passed, the spirit of the American hobo lives on in various forms. This chapter explores how the hobo tradition has evolved and adapted in the modern era, and how some individuals still embrace aspects of this nomadic lifestyle.



## The New Face of Nomadism

Today's "hobos" often look quite different from their historical counterparts. "Digital Nomad" Dave, who works remotely while traveling, explained:

"We're not riding the rails anymore, but we're still chasing that freedom. With a laptop and Wi-Fi, I can work from anywhere. It's a different kind of hobo life, but the spirit is the same."



Modern nomads might include:

- Van-lifers living and working from converted vehicles
- Seasonal workers moving between temporary jobs
- Digital nomads working remotely while traveling
- "Rubber tramps" living full-time in RVs

## Preserving Hobo Traditions

Some individuals and groups actively work to keep hobo traditions alive. The National Hobo Convention in Britt, Iowa, continues to be held annually, attracting both old-timers and curious newcomers.

"Tradition Keeper" Tom, a regular at the convention, shared:

"We might not live the life full-time anymore, but we come together to remember. We share the old songs, tell the old stories, and make sure the younger generation knows about this important part of American history."

## **Modern Train Hoppers**

While far less common and much more dangerous than in the past, there are still some who attempt to ride the rails illegally. "Freighthopper" Fran, who occasionally hops trains, cautioned:

"It's not like the old days. The penalties are severe, and the dangers are real. But for some of us, the call of the rails is still too strong to resist."

## **Hobo Ethics in the Modern World**

Many modern nomads draw inspiration from the hobo code of ethics, adapting it to contemporary circumstances. "Ethical Explorer" Ethan explained:

"The old hobo values of work ethic, respect for nature, and helping others – these are timeless. We apply them to our travels, whether we're volunteering in communities or practicing 'leave no trace' principles."

## **Technology and the New Hobo Network**

Just as hobos of the past had their own communication networks, modern nomads use technology to stay connected and share information. Social media groups, online forums, and apps help today's travelers find work, share tips, and build community.

## **The Gig Economy and Seasonal Work**

The rise of the gig economy has created new opportunities for those seeking a nomadic lifestyle. "Gig Worker" Gina described her experience:

"I move between different short-term jobs – festival staff in the summer, holiday retail in winter, and gig work in between. It's a modern version of the seasonal work hobos used to do."

## **Hobos in Popular Culture**

The romanticism of hobo life continues to influence popular culture. Movies, books, and music still draw on hobo themes, often blending historical elements with modern narratives.

## **Environmental and Social Consciousness**

Many modern nomads are driven by environmental and social concerns. "Eco-Nomad" Ellie shared:

"Living with less and being close to nature – these were part of the old hobo life too. Today, we're doing it with an awareness of our environmental impact and a desire to create positive change in the communities we visit."

## **Challenges of Modern Nomadism**

While technology has made some aspects of nomadic life easier, modern hobos face their own set of challenges. "Reality Check" Rachel noted:

"Finding safe places to park overnight, dealing with the high cost of fuel, navigating healthcare without a fixed address – these are some of the hurdles we face. It's not all Instagram-worthy sunsets."

## **The Future of Hobo Culture**

As society continues to evolve, so too does the concept of the hobo. "Futurist" Fred speculated:

"With remote work becoming more common and people questioning traditional lifestyles, I think we'll see more people embracing aspects of nomadism. The hobo spirit of freedom and self-reliance resonates with many in the 21st century."

## **Conclusion**

While the days of hopping freight trains and gathering in jungles may be largely gone, the essence of hobo culture – the quest for freedom, the spirit of adventure, and the value of community – continues to thrive in new forms. As "Historian Hank" reflected:

"The hobo tradition isn't static; it's always evolving. Today's nomads may look different, but they're carrying forward that same spirit of independence and wanderlust that defined the original hobos. In that sense, the hobo journey continues, adapting to each new era while staying true to its core values."

## Chapter 10: The Hobo Legacy: Impact on American Culture

As we conclude our journey through the history of the American hobo, it's crucial to reflect on the lasting impact this unique subculture has had on American society, art, literature, and values. The legacy of the hobo extends far beyond the rails they once rode, influencing various aspects of American life and consciousness.



### In Literature and Poetry

The hobo experience has been a rich source of inspiration for American writers. "Bookworm" Betty, a librarian with a passion for hobo literature, explained:

"From Jack London to John Steinbeck, hobos have been central characters in some of America's most beloved novels. Their stories captured the American spirit of freedom and self-reliance."

Notable works influenced by hobo culture include:

- "The Road" by Jack London
- "On the Road" by Jack Kerouac
- "Bound for Glory" by Woody Guthrie

Poets like Carl Sandburg and Vachel Lindsay also drew inspiration from hobo life, capturing its essence in verse.

## **In Music and Folk Traditions**

The influence of hobo culture on American music is profound and enduring. "Musicologist" Mike noted:

"Hobo songs didn't just disappear with the hobos. They became part of the American folk tradition, influencing country, blues, and even rock music."

Artists like Woody Guthrie, Lead Belly, and later, Bob Dylan, carried forward the musical legacy of the hobos. The themes of travel, freedom, and hardship continue to resonate in American music today.

## **In Visual Arts**

Hobo culture has left its mark on American visual arts as well. From the iconic "hobo signs" to more formal artistic representations, the imagery of hobo life has become part of America's visual vocabulary.

"Art Historian" Alice pointed out:

"Artists like Thomas Hart Benton captured the hobo in their depictions of American life. Even today, the romanticized image of the hobo with a bindle stick appears in various forms of pop art and street art."

## **In Language and Slang**

Many words and phrases from hobo lingo have made their way into mainstream American English. Terms like "Big House" (prison), "flyover country," and "main drag" all have roots in hobo slang.

## **In American Values**

Perhaps the most significant legacy of the hobo is in the realm of values and ideals. "Philosopher" Phil reflected:

"The hobo embodied certain core American values - independence, self-reliance, and the freedom to reinvent oneself. In many ways, the hobo was a uniquely American archetype."

## **In Social Movements**

The spirit of the hobo has influenced various social movements throughout American history. From labor rights to counterculture movements, the hobo's rejection of conventional society has inspired those seeking alternative ways of living.

## In Environmental Consciousness

The hobo's simple lifestyle and close connection to nature have resonated with modern environmental movements. "Eco-Activist" Eva noted:

"Today's minimalism and 'leave no trace' ethics owe a debt to the hobo tradition of living lightly on the land."

## In Popular Culture

The image of the hobo is often used in movies, TV shows, and advertising to symbolize freedom, independence, or a nostalgic sense of Americana. This portrayal typically romanticizes the hobo lifestyle, emphasizing themes like adventure, nonconformity, and the pursuit of a simpler, freer way of life—values that resonate with American cultural ideals.

For example, in "The Grapes of Wrath" (both the novel and its film adaptation), traveling workers during the Great Depression evoke the hardships and determination of migrant laborers, which are often associated with hobo culture.

Pete Seeger, an American folk singer-songwriter, musician, and social activist, said, "I have sung in hobo jungles, and I have sung for the Rockefellers, and I am proud that I have never refused to sing for anybody."

Woody Guthrie, an American singer-songwriter and composer of American Folk Music, often performed for diverse audiences, including those in hobo communities, and was known for his commitment to sharing his music with everyone.

## In Tourism and Historical Preservation

Efforts to preserve hobo history have led to museums, historical markers, and even tourism centered around hobo culture. The National Hobo Museum in Britt, Iowa, serves as a lasting tribute to this legacy, preserving the history and stories of American hobos through its engaging exhibits and artifacts.

## In Modern Nomadic Movements

As discussed in the previous chapter, the spirit of the hobo lives on in modern nomadic lifestyles. From van life to digital nomadism, these contemporary movements draw inspiration from the hobo tradition.

## Conclusion: The Enduring Spirit of the Hobo

As we reflect on the legacy of the American hobo, it becomes clear that their impact extends far beyond their historical moment. The hobo represents a uniquely American archetype - the free spirit, the wanderer, the self-reliant individual seeking opportunity and adventure.

"Historian Hank" summed it up:

"The hobo may have largely disappeared from our railways, but their spirit lives on in our culture, our values, and our collective imagination. They remind us of the possibilities of freedom, the value of simple living, and the enduring allure of the open road. In a way, the hobo represents a part of the American dream - the idea that with courage and determination, one can always start anew, always find a new horizon."

The legacy of the American hobo, with its complex history of hardship and freedom, work ethic and wanderlust, continues to fascinate and inspire. It represents a unique chapter in American history, one that has left an indelible mark on the nation's culture and consciousness.

Storytelling was valued and practiced by hobos. To close out this book, the following is a fictional story, similar to the types of stories that might have been told by the campfire at a hobo campsite to new hobos in the early part of the 20th century.

Here's the story entitled "Rail Riding Rambler":

"Alright, Ramblers, gather 'round closer to the fire, because ol' Rail Riding Rambler's got a story for you tonight. It isn't a happy one, but it's a real one, about the toughest times this country has ever seen, and how the rails were both good and bad. See, I've been riding these rails since '29. Back then, things were tough. The Dust Bowl was blowing, banks were closing, and folks were losing everything.

Like me. I lost my farm, and my family scattered to who-knows-where. But a fellow's gotta keep moving, gotta keep living, so I took to the rails. I became a hobo and learned the ropes from the old-timers. See this here bindle? It carries all I need: a blanket, a cook pot, and a harmonica for playing the blues away.

Riding the freights isn't easy, mind you. You gotta know your trains, know how to read the signals, and know how to hop on and off without breaking your neck. More than once, I've outrun the bulls (railroad cops), dodged cinders from the engine, and slept through blizzards. But there's a certain freedom, a certain thrill, in feeling that wind in your face as you race across the plains.

And the jungles, ah, the hobo jungles! Those are our towns, were we live as a family of like minded travelers. You share stories, share food, share whatever you've got. I learned to make a mean Mulligan stew from whatever we could scrounge, down near the river. I met folks from all walks of life: farmers, factory workers, even a schoolteacher who lost his job. In those camps, we are all the same. Back then, many people were on the move, and it was hard to tell who was what anymore, as travelers had lost

their material possessions that used to identify them. In a way, I kinda liked that—everyone being equal, not thinking more of themselves just because they had more earthly possessions.

We have our language, you know. A 'bindle stiff' is us hobos. A "bindle stiff" is a hobo who carries his belongings in a bundle, typically a blanket or piece of cloth tied to a stick. This is a common term used within our hobo culture to describe someone who is always on the move and carries everything they own with them.

We use hobo signs to communicate too. A circle with two lines in the middle means 'ok for camping.' A symbol of a cross for religious people who will feed you good food. I carved those on buildings all over. Chalk Charlie taught us that.

These are some of the many hobo codes Chalk Charlie taught me:

- 1: Circle with two lines in the middle: "OK for camping"
- 2: Cross symbol: Means "Angel Food", food can be found here from people practicing their faith by giving food to the poor and hungry, or might also mean that if you talk about religion, you'll get food.
- 3: Figure with three triangles: A kind woman lives here
- 4: Simple circle: "Nothing to be gained here"
- 5: Three straight lines: "This is not a safe place"
- 6: U-shape: "Camp here"
- 7: Circle with an X inside: "Good place for a handout"
- 8: Four straight lines: "The housewife will feed for work"
- 9: Interlocking circles: "Hobos get arrested"
- 10: Spiral with a circle around it: "The judge lives here" or "Court"
- 11: Rectangle with a dot in the middle and water underneath: "Bad water"
- 12: Drawing the symbol of a Cat: Indicates a "good-hearted woman"
- 13: Four triangles: Advises to "tell a pitiful story"
- 14: Drawing the symbol of a Hen: Indicates a telephone

There is some disagreement and inconsistency regarding the exact meanings of hobo symbols; and if these hobo symbols were widely used.

I've picked fruit in California, laid tracks in Montana, and dug ditches in Louisiana. We hobos work hard, but we also know how to live and appreciate the freedom that comes with the hobo lifestyle. We're not bums; we're workers. We're building this country, one mile, one job at a time.



It was '31, right in the thick of the Depression. The Dust Bowl was blowing folks every which way. Even seasoned hobos like me were having a tough time finding a square meal. The railroads were crawling with fellers like me and my buddy Boxcar Eddie. We were heading west, hoping to find work picking Washington apples. But we got caught by the bull outside of Omaha. He tossed us off a slow-moving freight car onto the side of the highway.

Eddie, he was always resourceful, though. He had a tattered map, and he remembered that we had to find that meal, provided by kind people who cared for the poor and hungry, which Chalk Charlie taught us to find. "Rambler," he says, his breath fogging the air, "I heard tell of a jungle down near the river a few miles west. Likely some friendly souls and maybe a warm fire."

We set off, following Eddie's map—a network of scratched lines and hobo signs he kept tucked away for just such occasions. The hobo sign to designate a friendly family was nearby. We walked for hours. Then, through the trees, we saw a faint glow of light. It was a jungle, alright. A few lean-tos made of branches and canvas, a fire burning low.

As we approached, voices quieted, and a few fellers stepped forward, eyes hard and wary. But then, one old-timer stepped out. "Evening strangers," he said, his voice raspy. "You look beat. Come on in, share the fire. We ain't got much, but what we got, we share."

That jungle became our home for a little while. I met Jungle Bird Mary, a seasoned hobo who gave us strength to carry on. You knew she had ridden the rails since after the war and had worked more jobs than I had had meals over the last two years. She always had stories about the good old days, when you could hop on any train and work with nothing to worry about. Now, it's survival, you know?

Eddie, being the resourceful fella he was, even managed to trade some whittled wood carvings for a sack of potatoes. We made a Mulligan stew, shared it with everyone around the fire, and for one night, at least, the Depression seemed a million miles away.

I've got all types of memories. When I am with my hobo family and friends, I feel like I am at home, regardless of where I happen to be.

This life ain't for everyone, but for me, Rail Riding Rambler, it's home. It's freedom. It's a chance to see the world, meet good people, and keep the joy of living and adventure alive. So next time you see a freight train rolling by, give a thought to the hobos on board. We're out here, keeping the wheels turning and the stories spinning. Rail Riding Rambler stops to take a deep breath.

Those were difficult times, but we made it through together. Through our lifestyle, stories, and songs, we will continue to carry our message for years to come.

You are all welcome here to our humble campsite, where the fire is burning high, the stew is almost done, and the stories and music are just beginning.

The end.

## **Horizons Ahead**

### **Verse 1:**

I've been on roads that wind and bend,  
Crossed rivers wide, climbed mountains with friends.  
I've seen the sun rise over distant seas,  
And learned that every journey brings new memories.

### **Chorus:**

But as I travel, I've come to see,  
That the journey is not only about me,  
but also the people I meet along the way,  
And the lessons learned each and every day.

### **Verse 2:**

I met a stranger who shared a tale,  
That it's not the strength of the gale, but the set of your sail.  
I saw a village where love was the key,  
And learned that kindness can set humanity free.

### **Bridge:**

Life is a journey, not a destination,  
Every step forward reduces procrastination.  
So let's cherish each moment we share,  
Practicing love and kindness, and continuous prayer.

### **Chorus:**

But as I travel, I've come to see,  
That the journey is not only about me,  
but also the people I meet along the way,  
And the lessons learned each and every day.

### **Outro:**

Now as I look to the horizons ahead,  
I learn something new, on every path that I tread.  
I'm not lost when I roam, as the world is my home,  
With each step, having faith, to face the unknown.

## American Hobo

### Verse 1:

With my backpack on my shoulders and the wind at my back  
I'm riding the rails, following the railroad track.  
I am a wanderer with a will to be free  
This hobo life is the only life for me

### Chorus:

I'm an American Hobo, tried and true,  
Working hard and traveling through,  
Town to town, and state to state,  
When freedom calls, why hesitate.

### Verse 2:

In the hobo jungle by the tracks, we share stories and food,  
Making music by the campfire, has everyone in a good mood.  
We've got a code of honor, and rules to live by,  
We respect others, work hard and move on, after saying goodbye.

### Chorus:

I'm an American Hobo, tried and true,  
Working hard and traveling through,  
Town to town, and state to state,  
When freedom calls, why hesitate.

### Bridge:

From the fields to the factories, I work overtime,  
Building this great nation, together we climb.  
We're the unsung heroes, traveling happy and free,  
Living life unfettered, traveling from sea to sea.

### Verse 3:

When the whistle blows, I know it's time to go  
Catch out on a freight train, as it's moving slow.  
There's work to be found in every town I find,  
This hobo is happy, content, with peace of mind.

### Chorus:

I'm an American Hobo, tried and true,  
Working hard and traveling through,  
Town to town, and state to state,  
When freedom calls, why hesitate.

### Outro:

So if you see me passing through, don't you look away  
I'm just a hobo, living life my own way  
With my walking stick and a pack on my back,  
Finding work as I travel, then moving on down the track.