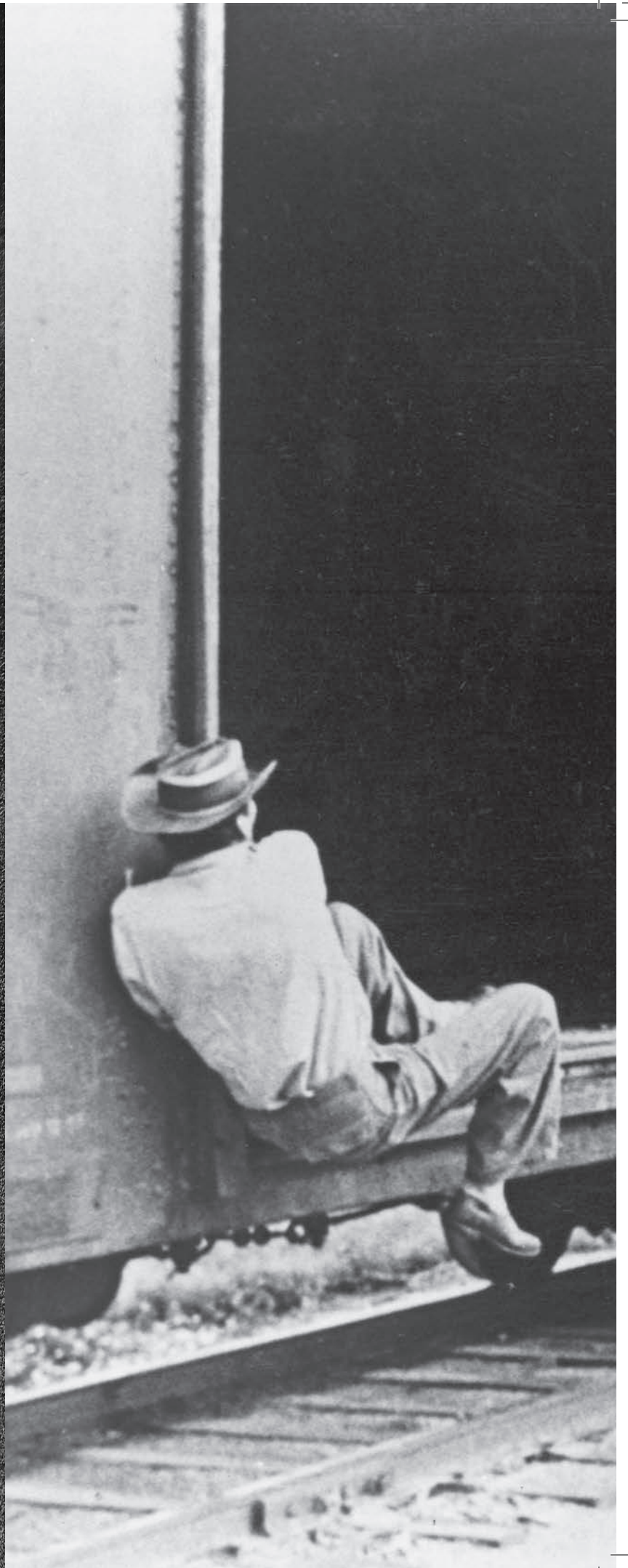


**BILLY
CLUBS
— & —
VAGRANCY
LAWS**

**CONFRONTING THE
"PLAGUE OF HOBOES"
IN NEBRASKA
1870S - 1930S**

BY NATHAN TYE



How to hop a freight train. A man swings himself up into a boxcar in the Lincoln Yards, undated. History Nebraska RG3830-2





TRAMPS THROWING A CONDUCTOR FROM A TRAIN.



A NIGHT CAMP OF TRAMPS NEAR BRYAN.

Above and Right: “Episodes of Tramp Life on the Union and Central Pacific Railroads. From Sketches by our Special Artists.” *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, Feb. 2, 1878. University of Illinois Rare Book and Manuscript Library

Word came over the telegraph on June 2, 1904, that a group of hobos were bound for Kearney. Among them were burglars wanted in Grand Island. Kearney police officers positioned themselves on either side of the train, ready to arrest whomever disembarked. Five men hopped off, spotted the police, and scattered. An officer commandeered a bicycle and sped off after a fleeing hobo. A half-mile later he overtook the hobo, but he was not one of the burglars. Asked why he ran, the hobo said police along the Union Pacific line regularly beat anyone stealing rides and he assumed he was next. The officers let him go.¹

The fearful flight of the unnamed hobo in Kearney was a rational response to Nebraska’s troubling history of exploitation and dehumanization of transient laborers from the 1870s through the 1930s. Subject to restrictive vagrancy laws, unfettered police violence, and brutal working conditions, hobos struggled to survive on a hostile prairie that loathed—but required—their presence. Yet, in rail-side camps, flophouses, and union halls, Nebraska’s hobos built a community and organized themselves to improve wages and working conditions. This essay charts the myriad ways Nebraskan communities worked to hinder and halt hobo laborers’ presence in the state and recovers stories of hobo community building, labor organizing, and resistance to these restrictions. It begins with an introduction to hobo life before discussing the implementation of state’s earliest vagrancy laws in the 1850s and 1870s. Next, it moves to Omaha’s hobo neighborhood

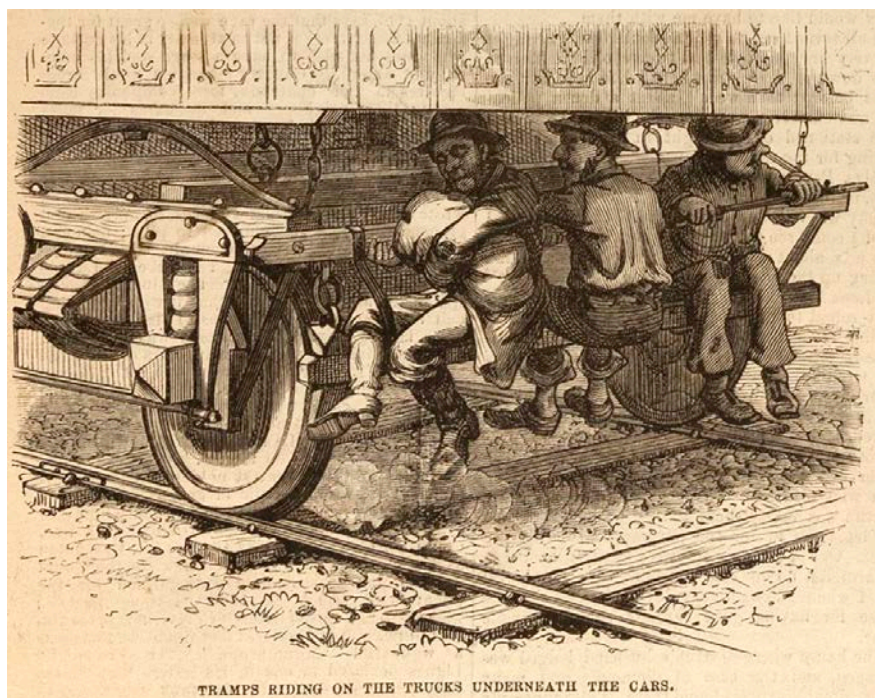
where hobos socialized and, beginning in the early 1910s, organized under the banner of the Industrial Workers of the World. Following the “Wobblies” (as IWW members were known) into the harvest fields, the essay documents the demand for improved wages and better working conditions that roiled communities across the state through the 1930s. When the Depression hit, some Nebraskans became hobos to survive. Many turned to the Federal Transient Bureau for support or eked out an existence on Omaha’s skid row during the last era of widespread hobo labor in the United States.

Despite police violence, infrequent employment, and the dangers of train hopping, hobos contributed to the development of Nebraska’s agricultural, legal, and social landscapes. Their presence is obscured in a historical narrative valorizing sod-busting families and not the hired hands and harvesters who labored alongside them every season. Fragmentary records partially explain this historical absence, for hobos kept few personal records, moved frequently, and lived at society’s periphery. Moreover, farm families rarely mention their harvesters because their ubiquity and fleeting presence were not noteworthy. Yet, newspapers, government records, and hobos’ reminiscences recorded decades later document this fascinating and fleeting history of transient labor in Nebraska during its peak years. While Omaha’s role as a hub for harvesters traveling across the Wheat Belt is known, the wider history of hobos across the state of Nebraska is not. Charting this history reveals a host of local and state forces coming together to exclude and criminalize the

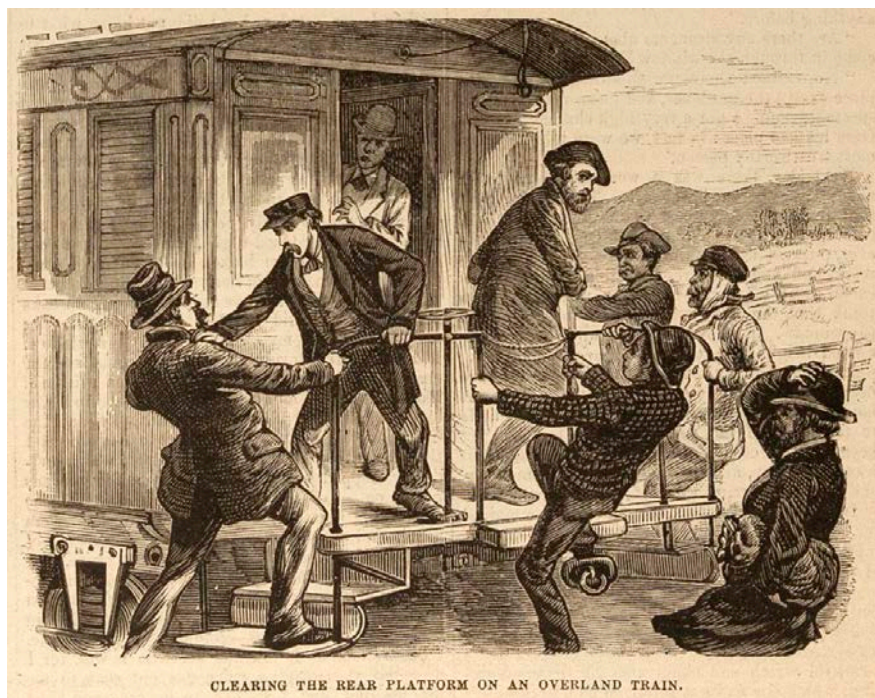
strangers, the poor, and migratory in their midst. Or, in other words, this essay documents a partial history of the legal and social norms determining who was considered a Nebraskan.²

Given the seasonal demands for hobos' labor, poor wages, an absence of good roads, and need to move frequently, illegal freight riding was the most efficient way to travel. Mobility and labor were the twin pillars of hobo existence. They defined themselves as those who wandered to work. Sub-categories such as *bindlestiff*, *yeggman*, or *tramp* marked specific jobs or rationales for traveling, but *hobo* was the dominant term beginning in the 1890s. Prior to this, tramp was the catch-all for transient laborers and rail riders, and continued to be used interchangeably with hobo through the 1930s. Most hobos were typically, but not exclusively, domestic-born white men. Large numbers of African Americans, Mexicans, and European immigrants also rode the rails. Nor were all hobos men. Some women donned men's clothing to ease their travels or adhere to their preference for living as men during an era with more rigid gender norms. All who took to the rails quickly discovered a brutal lifestyle combining the hazards of farm and railroad work. Newspapers and even fictional accounts carried frequent stories about hobos losing limbs falling from trains or dying in wrecks. In *My Ántonia*, Willa Cather describes a tramp "tired of trampin'," who briefly joins their threshing crew. After a few moments atop the steam thresher he "waved his hand to [Ántonia] and jumped head-first right into the threshing machine," killing him instantly. Hobos were expendable within the Progressive Era's industrial economy. Poor, mobile, unskilled, and without strong union representation until 1915, hobos risked life and limb for a system that considered them barely human.³

A series of economic depressions beginning in the 1870s, worsened by droughts and poor harvests, forced many onto the road. The number of transients was so large at the time that a traveler on the Union Pacific found, "even on the broad plains west of the Missouri... one comes with a shock of surprise upon the old familiar features, and sees a dusty, slouching figure or two trailing along the side of the track, pipe in mouth and bundle on shoulder." Many tramps of this era were out-of-work soldiers like the ex-Confederate hired by Luna Kelli's father to help her around the farm near Hastings. When the market crashed again in 1893, between two to three million Americans lost their jobs and a fifth of the



TRAMPS RIDING ON THE TRUCKS UNDERNEATH THE CARS.



CLEARING THE REAR PLATFORM ON AN OVERLAND TRAIN.

industrial workforce was unemployed by winter. Omaha reported its highest proportion of vagrancy arrest numbers, underscoring the sheer number of unemployed and efforts to round them up. Working-class activism and unionization reached new heights and thousands took to the road to survive. The suffering was so severe that by 1896 Nebraska's population decreased as many sought opportunities elsewhere. These developments



“Flophouse on lower Douglas Street, Omaha, Nebraska.” Photo by John Vachon, November 1938. Library of Congress

led many middle- and upper-class Nebraskans to question the morality of industrial capitalism, as Elia Peattie of the *Omaha World-Herald* argued, “Whether we lie on the floor of Rescue hall, rolled in an old blanket, or under eiderdown in a perfumed chamber, we are troubled with inquiries which will not let us rest, but which din at us with imperative voice, and ask us for how much of this suffering we have been personally responsible.” Across the country cities and states reacted to the wanderers sleeping on rescue mission floors or the jostling decks of boxcars with stringent vagrancy laws that criminalized their poverty and gave law enforcement free reign to abuse and detain men and women out of work, on the road, and/or those believed to be unsuitable for public space.⁴

Vagrancy Laws

As the number of tramps and hobos on the road swelled, vagrancy laws became the state’s preferred legal weapon against them. Nebraska’s legislature

retooled vagrancy statutes in 1879 and 1901, and most of the state’s municipalities passed similar laws during this period as well. Undergirding these efforts were social anxieties over the nation’s deepening class divide as union organizing, radical politics, and government corruption spurred unprecedented working-class activism. Nebraska law enforcement used vagrancy laws to regulate the movements, ideologies, and lifestyles of the state’s poor and working-class populations. The broad scope of these laws, described below, provided legal coverage for police round-ups of hobos, but also for arrests of beggars, the homeless, the disabled, and the politically radical through the early 1970s. Nebraska’s territorial legislature passed the state’s first anti-tramp law when it adopted Iowa’s vagrancy statute penalizing habitual drunks, prostitutes, beggars, gamblers, and tramps in 1855. Twenty-four years later, a new statute narrowed the definition of a tramp to those who refused to work, or lived off charity and/or begging. Legislators returned prostitutes, gamblers, as well as “wandering



persons—not giving a good account of themselves” to the law in 1901. Governor John Morehead called on the legislature to pass “stringent laws against the tramp nuisance” and increase tramp detention in the state reformatory and county poor farms during the 1913 session, but nothing was done. Thus, the 1901 law remained in effect until the Supreme Court overturned all vagrancy laws in *Papachristou v. Jacksonville* in 1972.⁵

Even as Nebraska’s legal definition of a vagrant changed between 1855 and 1901, it remained intentionally vague. This provided broad discretion for officers who used it to detain anyone considered too poor, too mobile, or too unacceptable to community standards. Although most Nebraska communities passed their own statutes to combat tramps and hobos, their numbers overwhelmed county courts, leaving the threat of vagrancy arrest or use of violence the preferred methods of getting hobos to “move along.” Lincoln’s *State Journal* demanded the creation of a state police force to combat hobos, but until

the state patrol’s formation in 1937, overwhelmed towns were on their own. In North Platte, for example, city and railroad police chased out the thousands of hobos passing through town, implemented forced labor, and organized “tramp patrols” to combat seasonal spikes in rail-riders. The *Kearney Daily Hub* reported in 1891, “Tramps and vagrants are numerous these days, and it keeps the police busy routing them out of the box cars.” Smarter hobos de-trained on Kearney’s outskirts and walked through residential neighborhoods to solicit meals and evade police. The large volume coming through town made enforcing the city’s vagrancy ordinance a bothersome task, so much so that Kearney’s police “pray[ed] for something to happen to give them needed excitement” during anti-hobo sweeps.⁶

Local charities, relief organizations, and police departments augmented vagrancy laws with forced labor in their effort to control what the *State Journal* deemed the “annual plague of hobos.” The work-test was the most common approach. Work-tests

“Lower Douglas Street, where unemployed hang out, Omaha, Nebraska.” Photo by John Vachon, November 1938. Library of Congress

required tramps and hobos to cut lumber or break stone at a shelter or jail to cure their supposed aversion to work. Rev. N. S. Haynes of Lincoln recommended a modified approach that required hobos to bathe before being put to work, but doubted “constitutionally lazy” persons could be reformed. Others agreed regarding forced labor. J. Sterling Morton argued “the dirty streets of Nebraska City might be carried far toward cleanliness,” if chain gangs of tramps were set to work, an approach North Platte adopted. The city’s “tramp patrols” picked men off the streets, conducted nightly sweeps of the train yards, and forced anyone they found to clean city streets and alleys, locate lost livestock, and drain standing water from roads. Kearney built a rock yard so hobos could break stone for county roads, which Union Pacific provided for free. Omaha and Norfolk considered similar arrangements. Together these efforts fell within the policy of “no sympathy” advocated by the *State Journal’s* editorial board. Nebraskans believed only a firm hand and work requirements would rid the state of the hobo menace.⁷

Hobos found these efforts deplorable. On a cold day in 1914, the exact date unknown, a group of hobos huddled together for warmth in Lincoln’s Burlington depot. Police felt the county jail was a more suitable site for them to pass the day. As the police wagon carted them away the hobos leveled a musical critique at Sheriff Gus Hyers. “Lincoln Jail,” collected later by a University of Iowa folklorist, decries their frequent imprisonments and disdain for the Lancaster County jail’s bad coffee and insect-infested bedding.

Lincoln Jail

There’s a spot up on K street
We know it full well,
A lime and stone building,
Sheriff Hires’s hotel.

Of beans and sow-belly
They feed you enough:
But the dish-water coffee, —
I gag on the stuff.

O sheriff, O sheriff,
I don’t like the smell,
Nor the bedbugs and lice
In your limestone hotel.

Sheriff Hyers was no friend to the hobo. He and his deputies met incoming trains and marched

whomever they found through the streets to the county jail where Hyers shook down hobos for cash and confiscated all Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) literature. Anyone incapable of paying the fine for train hopping was jailed while the rest were taken to the county line and told to get going.⁸

Hyers was hardly the only police officer abusing hobos and tramps across Nebraska. The most feared perpetrators of anti-hobo violence were not government officials but—as the hobo disclosed to the Kearney police officers in the introduction—the brutal private police officers and detectives hired by railroads to patrol yards and trains. Known to hobos as “bulls,” these men were the bane of hobos everywhere. They threw hobos from moving trains, shook them down for money, and regularly beat them within inches of their lives with billy clubs or brakemen’s clubs. This abuse haunted former hobos for the remainder of their lives. Jack London admitted, “I’ll never get over it. I can’t help it. When a bull reaches, I run.” In 1897, when a nineteen-year-old Carl Sandburg hopped out of a boxcar in McCook’s yard he found “a one-eyed man in a plain clothes with a club and a star stood in my way.” After the bull made it clear his type was not welcome, Sandburg climbed into his boxcar and went east. After a few days filling up on pilfered corn in a hobo jungle outside Aurora, he traveled to Nebraska City where he chopped lumber, picked apples, and slept in a jail cell. Then, “I caught a freight for Omaha. For years I had been curious about Omaha. And of all interesting city names, is any more musical than Oh-mah-haw?”⁹

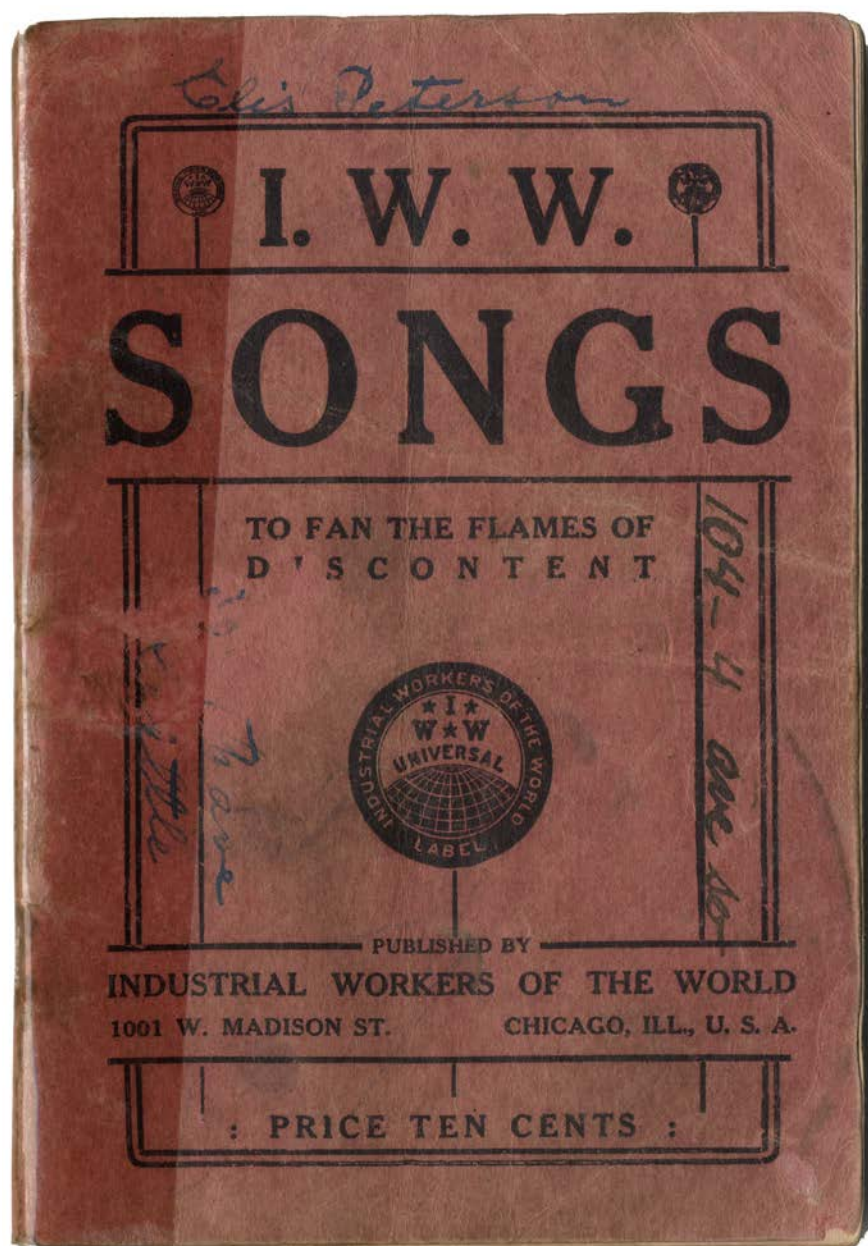
Nebraska’s Hobo Capital

Omaha’s warehouse district was a hobo curiosity indeed. Known as Jobbers Canyon for its density of wholesalers or jobbers, it epitomized the city’s rapid industrial and railroad growth from the 1880s onward. Jobbers Canyon’s dominance within regional markets and access to expanding railroad networks allowed to rightly claim that it “enables Omaha to supply the West.” Yet, tucked between Jobbers Canyon’s warehouses was a skid row area packed with lodging houses, cheap restaurants, second-hand stores, employment agencies, and labor halls catering to the casual laborers who formed the heart of the state’s transient population. The district’s unskilled laborers, often referred to as floaters, tramp laborers, or merely hobos, provided most of the labor for Jobbers Canyon and met the demand for railroad, construction, and agricultural

workers across the Midwest. Skid row businesses and Jobbers Canyon were mutually constitutive spaces, for the former housed the reserve army of labor drawn upon by employers, while the latter paid the wages that supported the flops, restaurants, and second-hand stores. The district's low wages and poor living conditions ensured high turnover amongst laborers. A Secret Service agent investigating local voter fraud found the area's "hobo hotels" filled with a constantly overturning clientele of anonymous men. Howard Chudacoff's analysis of residential mobility in Omaha found 72 and 75 percent of the city's casual laborers emigrated out between 1880-1900 and 1900-1920 respectively, likely drawn away from the city by the lure of better work elsewhere.¹⁰

Employment agencies facilitated placements across the region. Advertisements from agencies located in and near Jobbers Canyon from the 1880s and 1910s document significant demands for hobos' unskilled labor: six farm hands wanted, fifty railroad workers needed in Iowa and Missouri, one hundred laborers required in the South, fifty men for unspecified labor in Wyoming, men wanted for "steady outside work," one hundred desired for construction and Platte River bridge work for the Burlington. In addition to the district's employment agencies, a nest of cheap restaurants, second-hand stores, and lodging houses made hobos' scant wages go further. For hobos unable to afford a night in a flophouse, the Salvation Army operated a series of free lodging houses in the area, although some hobos chafed at the Salvation Army's requirement to bathe in order to stay. Together these businesses supported a dynamic body of workers constantly on the move, as Nels Anderson and his older brother found when they arrived in town in 1906. After a freezing overnight boxcar ride from Wyoming, the Andersons found Lower Douglas flooded with men. They estimated a thousand hobos were out and about on the street, three or four thousand passing through and begging across the city, with another five hundred packed into the downtown bars and flophouses. Fearing these masses would prompt a police roundup, the Anderson brothers fled on a Chicago-bound freight.¹¹

In 1938, Farm Security Administration photographer John Vachon explored what remained of Omaha's "hobo district," as he termed it, on Douglas Street. His presence was not always welcome. Vachon told his wife, "I've run into an awful lot of opposition in taking pictures of bums on the street." Omaha's hobos and Lower Douglas



denizens bristled at cameras, as Vachon's local contact explained, because the *Omaha World-Herald* was running a photography-based anti-vice campaign. Vachon's photographs of Omaha's hobos are among the most vivid depictions of Nebraska during the Great Depression. Most of the men he photographed were older hobos, men beaten down by a life of poverty that rendered them less likely to find work or hop freights. Younger men turned to New Deal programs and eventually wartime industries or military service as alternatives to casual labor. Thus, as fewer and fewer hobos took to the road, downtown Omaha increasingly catered

The Industrial Workers of the World's "Little Red Songbook," 1917 edition.
Author's collection

to the less-mobile hobo subcategory, the bum. In the ensuing decades perceptions of blight, decay, and a visible homeless population strengthened ConAgra's hand in the destruction of Jobbers Canyon and the transformation of the area into their former corporate headquarters.¹²

At its peak, Omaha's "hobo capital" was a keystone in the Midwest's casual labor market. Hobos coming off the road found work at the district's employment offices, relaxed in its saloons, and made their home in flophouses and shelters between jobs and over the winter. As the weather improved and labor demands increased, most hobos spread out across the region to repeat the cycle. Passing through Omaha was not exclusively devoted to employment or leisure. Hobos fed up with poor wages, inhumane working conditions, and frequent abuse from railroad bulls and police found a powerful advocate in the Industrial Workers of the World, which began organizing Nebraska's hobos through their branch in Jobbers Canyon in 1915.

Harvest Wobblies

The IWW headquarters at 1301 Douglas Ave in Omaha was the political and social hub for the area's hobos. Although no account of events from within Omaha's IWW hall has come to light, a visitor to New York City's IWW branch provides some idea of what Omaha's hall was like. Djuna Barnes found the hall filled with starved and overworked laborers on society's margin. Wobbly speakers argued the poor were locked out from "the gate of plenty," and demanded entrance "not by key but by a fist." Omaha's IWW hall was likely little different; filled with hard benches, hardened bodies, and powerful calls for a better life. Regarding the latter, the IWW found some success in better wages and in restrictions on unlicensed employment agents during World War I.¹³

Founded in Chicago in 1905, the IWW organized workers excluded from established trade and craft unions. Their anarchist ideology and calls for direct action spurred frequent rounds of arrests, mob action, deportations, and state-sanctioned violence. Prior to 1915 the IWW had a small presence in Nebraska, but the *Omaha Bee* warned its readers "the city has been open to a visitation [by the IWW] for a long time, and is likely to get it at any time." Beginning in 1914, the IWW refocused its efforts on migratory harvest workers. The following year it founded the Agricultural Workers Organization (AWO) to organize hobos across

the Wheat Belt. By 1916, 18,000 hobos had joined. Their union dues allowed the IWW to expand its movement. The AWO demanded a ten-hour day, minimum wage and overtime pay, as well as clean room and board. That same year they achieved a \$4-a-day wage in Kansas but not in Nebraska, where the average wage was \$3.50 a day. Local farmers claimed harvesters "are too exacting in their demands. They will work only so many hours, sleep in certain places, must have higher wages and are particular in the matter of food" and wanted a ten minute smoke break every hour.¹⁴

In June 1916, Wobblies flocked to Nebraska's fields. Hastings police estimated 200 Wobblies passed through town on a daily basis, while exaggerated reports from Axtell claimed hobos outnumbered the city's adult male population. Another hundred hobos arrived in both Lincoln and Blue Hill, while sixty Wobblies appeared in Fremont. Reports of Burlington trains "with tramps, harvest hands and I.W.Ws. clinging on like flies" led locals to believe an anarchist invasion was well underway. Despite these concerns, most local farmers welcomed the help because the season's wheat harvest was expected to exceed estimates. In Hastings, sixty-five hobos found work the first day and another sixteen sought help from the Chamber of Commerce's employment agency.¹⁵

In the evenings the Wobblies in Hastings gathered at the edge of town, likely around campfires. Collections were taken up for food while their leaders went over the day and reiterated the need to remain in the good graces of the locals. Two Wobblies arrested for drunkenness had their membership cards taken away. These gatherings were one of the defining characteristics of hobo communities. Gathered together in campsites known as "jungles," barns, water tanks, or boxcars, hobos shared stories from the road, offered advice to newcomers, chatted in their distinctive argot, and sang to pass the time. The IWW published its own songbook, *Songs of the Industrial Workers of the World*, better known as the *Little Red Songbook*, filled with scores of radical and revolutionary tunes penned by members. In all likelihood, at least one of the 100-odd men gathered in Hastings had a tattered copy tucked in his bindle and led them in "Solidarity Forever," "The Tramp," or "The Mysteries of a Hobo's Life."¹⁶

The Wobbly presence in Hastings was not without problems. Within days, police arrested two members for fighting. Two non-IWW hobos were held up in a boxcar outside town and blamed the Wobblies, but produced no evidence. In order to ease any tensions, the IWW's Omaha



branch leader and two local organizers met with the chief of police and police judge. The police agreed to not arrest anyone for vagrancy as long as they had money on their persons, and the IWW leaders agreed to maintain order among their men. Wobblies and the police also worked together to remove unlicensed employment agents, referred to in IWW newspapers as “employment sharks,” who sold jobs from Hastings’ street corners without a guarantee that the jobs were open or even existed. A few passing hobos even asked the chief of police to hold their earnings for safekeeping. By harvest’s end 130 hobos spent at least one night in the Hastings jail on charges of drunkenness or disorderly conduct, but only twenty were IWW members and no one was charged with vagrancy.¹⁷

Despite a relatively conflict-free harvest in Hastings, the *Hastings Daily Tribune’s* coverage of IWW actions elsewhere in the nation and state likely stoked community tensions. To ensure public safety, the Hastings police added two volunteer night watchmen for the duration of the harvest.

Over in Lincoln, Sheriff Hyers maintained his hostile approach to hobos and refused to negotiate with the IWW, proclaiming “the hoboes can’t run over the city and county while I hold office.” He arrested two IWW organizers who then assaulted Hyers and his father in the county jail, ending any possibility of cooperation. The IWW claimed Hyers was the abusive party and a call went across the Midwest for hobos to assemble and protest the imprisonment of their compatriots. Hundreds gathered but Hyers, on the advice of Governor John Morehead, refused to release them—only to change his mind the next day. Shortly thereafter all the IWW members in Lincoln and Hastings left, reducing tensions until the next harvest.¹⁸

Nativist and nationalist hysteria driven by the United States’ entrance into World War I renewed national and local efforts to suppress the IWW. In 1917, federal raids on IWW halls across the country, including Omaha, resulted in mass arrests, deportations, and confiscation of radical literature. State Defense Councils established to monitor farm

**Operating room, Omaha
Transient House, 1934.**

HN RG4290-1802



Transients in dining room of Omaha shelter, 1934. HN RG4290-2952

labor, crop production, and citizens' contributions to the war effort, also investigated labor agitation. Sheridan County officials feared an IWW-organized strike of its potash workers. The plant's manager reported IWW organizers were sneaking into town on freight trains in the middle of the night and threatening employees. He demanded assistance before the Wobblies blew up the plant. The plant was not blown up, but two years later the IWW were accused of sparking the Omaha's race riot. In November 1917 the AWO, reorganized as the Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union, hosted their annual meeting in Omaha. Four hundred Wobblies attended. During the meeting federal officers raided the IWW hall and confiscated \$78,000 in dues (\$1,438,614 when adjusted for inflation), more than two tons of union publications, and arrested sixty-four members. None of the detainees had a trial. All charges were dropped, but the Wobblies were not released until January 1918. The Omaha raid was a serious blow to the IWW's presence in the Midwest.

Across the country similar raids and arrests severely weakened the union and denote World War I as the IWW's high-water mark. Following the war, hobo numbers declined as the agricultural economy struggled, reducing wages and rendering hoboing an increasingly unlivable profession.¹⁹

Rubber Tramps

In the aftermath of World War I, sociologists and social workers claimed hobos were disappearing. Nels Anderson, no longer a hobo but a successful sociologist, argued hitchhikers and harvest hands with automobiles were supplanting illicit rail riders. The development of better roads in the 1910s allowed "fly-by-fords," "auto gypsies," "flivver hobos," or "rubber tramps" to travel without the danger, criminality, and vagaries of riding freights. Social workers found these were the same type of men who hoboed, "drifters, small farmers, skilled and unskilled working men, seeking jobs or new homes."

Yet, reports of the hobo's disappearance were overstated. Federal wheat estimates reveal hobo harvesters were still needed for a successful harvest. Dawes and Kimball counties estimated sixty percent, Buffalo County fifty percent, and Dawson county thirty percent of their harvest labor force would consist of transients in 1921. Even as the need for harvesters persisted, the agricultural economy struggled through the decade as crop prices dropped and farm debt increased in what observers later saw as a precursor to the Great Depression.²⁰

The 1920s agricultural depression forced many men from middle-class backgrounds to try their hand at harvest labor, such as John Winroth, a twenty-two-year-old Swedish immigrant living in Hastings. Winroth was a Mason and a World War I veteran, but a lack of employment forced him to become, as he later recalled, "a hobo going through the country" in 1920. Nor was he alone in leaving a middle-class background behind for harvest work. William Shirer, a college student from Iowa later to gain fame as a journalist in Nazi-era Berlin, worked the 1922 harvest in western Nebraska to make ends meet. Most of his fellow harvesters were card-carrying Wobblies. Every night they came together in a barn to sing from the *Little Red Songbook*. The increase in middle-class men turning to casual labor and the enduring presence of the IWW underscores both the severity of the agricultural depression in the region and the continued need for a union to defend the rights and humanity of harvest laborers. World War I-era suppressions exacerbated the negative public perception of the group, leading some Nebraskans to use the resurgent Ku Klux Klan against the IWW. Public commentary on the decline of hobos and acknowledgment of the IWW's reduced power belied the region's economic difficulties, warning of dangerous years and an unfortunate revival of hoboing that lay ahead.²¹

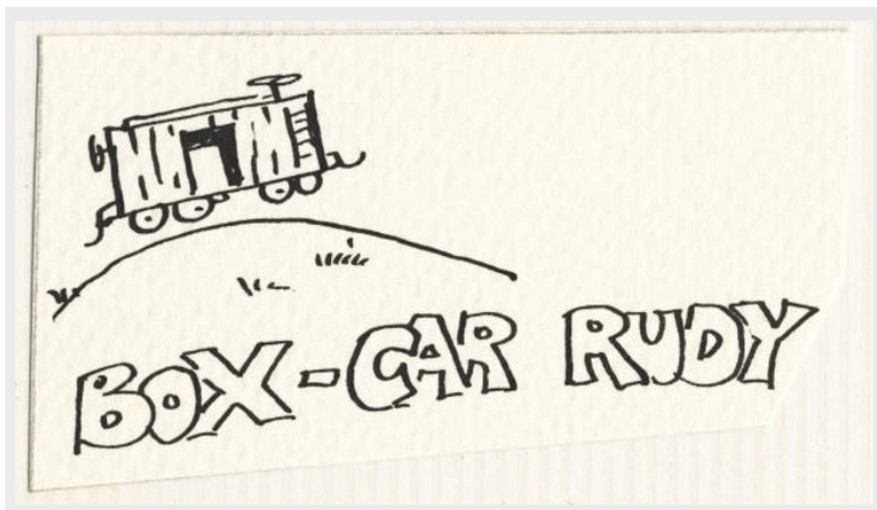
The Great Depression

Wall Street rumblings were far from most Nebraskans' minds in late October 1929. In Plattsmouth, the front-page story on October 29 told of an intoxicated "rubber tramp" who nearly burned down a barn. The market's crash was relegated to page five. Similar notices appeared in papers across the state and reassured readers as to the overall soundness of the American economy. Local attention was on the corn harvest. Farmers hoped another good year would indicate the decade's agricultural depression was behind

them. Unfortunately, the aftershocks of Wall Street's collapse rattled the banks and gutted the recovering agricultural economy. Farm incomes dropped precipitously throughout the Midwest, reducing the ability of farmers to hire migratory laborers. Governor Arthur Weaver called an extraordinary session of the legislature in March 1930 to shore up state banks (269 banks across the state shuttered by 1929) and allow farm credit to be extended on stored grain, but these efforts proved inadequate.²²

Nebraska was deep "in the throes of a financial depression," declared Governor Charles Bryan during a second extraordinary legislature session in June 1931, "the like of which has never been witnessed in our life time." For some, a decision on whether to wait it out or seek work elsewhere had to be made; for others, farm foreclosure notices made it for them. Freight trains quickly became makeshift homes both for hobo laborers and the newly homeless and unemployed. As the Federal Writer's Project guide to Nebraska observed, "day laborers, formerly sure enough of a place on Nebraska farms and in Nebraska industries, began the long trek of the unemployed." Already overburdened with supporting rural and urban poor, the state was reluctant to extend a hand to the transient populations they had long maligned as idle, malignant, and burdensome necessities to the farm economy. Local communities responded to the growing hobo population—and to IWW attempts to organize them—with batons, imprisonment, and police violence. Ultimately, the federal government began providing support for the state's transient population.²³

The IWW's 1930s organizational effort among hobo laborers was far from their World War I peak. The chilly-but-cooperative relationship between the Hastings police and IWW harvesters in 1916 was absent during the Depression. Wobblies in Hastings in 1930 bristled at the hypocrisy of the local police who drove hobos from the city during the year but "very graciously allows the workers a liberal stopover of twelve hours" during the harvest. If anyone refused to work for the poor wages offered they were run out of town. The IWW newspaper *Industrial Worker* labeled it "a typical case of using the police to black-jack the workers into submission and force them to swelter eleven hours under the Nebraska sun for whatever price the farmers wish to pay." Over in David City the police were not as generous. Famed Wobbly author T-Bone Slim reported that hobos were marched out and beaten by police if they did not leave town. Hobos gathered



“Box-Car Rudy” Umland as an itinerant farm hand in Ohio, ca. 1928-31. The Lincolnite’s “calling card” was a pen-and-ink sketch. Courtesy of Jane Pope Geske Heritage Room of Nebraska Authors, Lincoln City Libraries, Nebraska

in the city park waiting for farmers to pick them up were rounded up and told by officers, “Git, don’t bother the farmers.” Anti-IWW violence was not limited to the police. Two days before any hobos arrived in Hastings or David City a mob attacked four Wobblies in a jungle outside Seward. Finding anyone to work the harvest during the early years of the Great Depression was a struggle for farmers, particularly when police officers and mobs beat the only men willing and ready to work in the field.²⁴

As the Depression deepened, the number of transients on the road grew exponentially. No longer were they exclusively harvest laborers as more and more unemployed men went on the move. Police Chief Paul Acton of Beatrice reported 1,016 transients sheltered in the city jail during the winter of 1931-32. All of them were checked for IWW membership cards. To encourage them to move people, Acton’s department intentionally provided poor hospitality for those in need. They provided no meals, rarely any clothing, and broke up the three hobo jungles around town. Despite these efforts the *Beatrice Daily Sun* sarcastically referred to the chief as “Landlord Acton.” Omaha was also inundated. The city’s Homeless Men’s Bureau served 2,776 men in 1932. Thousands of unemployed and homeless men taxed local governments and private charities. Forcing hobos to “move along,” with its underlying threat of violence, was regarded as an act of self-preservation. As communities struggled to support their own, the prospect of supporting supposedly idle out-of-state hobos and tramps—some of whom were likely anarchists—did not sit well with many.²⁵

These concerns were not isolated to Nebraska. As Loren Eiseley found, “All over America men were drifting like Sargasso weed in a vast dead sea of ruined industry.” Eiseley was one of an

untold number of Nebraskans hopping freights in search of work. His experiences and those of other Nebraskans who took to the road during the Depression underscore the precarious existence of hobos at the time. In his memoir, *All The Strange Hours*, Eiseley recalled “mile after desolate mile, the Nevada desert glid[ing] by” as he lay prone on top of a boxcar with a wrist tied to the running board for safety. Afterwards he caught a mail train but battled a railroad bull as the train headed east at sixty miles an hour. The bull bashed him in the face and tried to throw Eiseley out over the wheels, but he hung on and fought back until the train eased into the Provo, Utah, yard. He escaped with his life and a bloodied face, but his anger remained: “I could kill him now after all these years.” Nor was this his only violent encounter. Somewhere between Tucson and Los Angeles another hobo stabbed him in the back; for the rest of his life Eiseley made a habit sitting with his back to the wall.²⁶

Escaping the wrath of bulls and local police did not ensure safety. Rudolph Umland, a University of Nebraska dropout, traveled widely as a hobo from 1928 through 1931. Working the wheat harvest from Texas to the Dakotas, cutting timber in Quebec, and traveling across the American West and into Mexico, life was difficult. Umland remembered, “I was hungry, always hungry.” Had he not found work at the Federal Writer’s Project in Lincoln alongside Eiseley, Umland predicted his “death in some vermin-filled flophouse and burial in a Potter’s field.” For many Depression hobos, finding steady employment and a proper home was the elusive goal. As an unnamed hobo from Chicago told an Omaha sociologist in the early 1930s, “I would like to find work and settle down. I don’t want to be classed as a bum.” This was easier said than done, for during his travels he encountered hundreds of “fellows from 13 years old and up to 70 years, just ‘going nowhere.’” It became increasingly clear—not just to hobos, but to most Americans—that individual effort and private charity was not enough to stem the tide of the Depression. The election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1932 led to a drastic increase of federal relief, including programs targeted to hobos and transients.²⁷

Governor Charles Bryan had initially rejected federal assistance, but the situation was dire. Charities were overwhelmed and jails filled with unemployed men on vagrancy charges. During the winter of 1932-33, 1,700 transients lodged at the Beatrice jail and Chief Acton found “a large proportion of these men are not hoboes... Of course we now and then find an oldtime hobo,

a genuine tramp among them. We never see any I.W.W. membership cards any more [sic].” Instead, his jail was full of the unemployed. In Omaha the transient unemployed sheltered in the condemned Pacific School building, but the Salvation Army exhausted its funds to keep it open. Nebraskans’ continued struggles to find work and keep food on the table forced Governor Bryan to establish a relief committee in July 1933 and to apply for federal relief funds in October under the auspices of the Nebraska Emergency Relief Administration (NERA). Even with the opening of relief, many county relief supervisors refused to provide mandated help to clients they deemed worthless paupers. To support the transients refused support elsewhere the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) established the Transient Relief Bureau, which operated urban shelters and rural camps for the tens of thousands of men coming off the road. From November 1933 through September 1935 the Transient Bureau established a men’s shelter in Omaha as well as work camps in Plattsmouth, Bellevue, Chadron, and Carter Lake. Additionally, a shelter for transient families opened in Omaha.²⁸

Omaha’s former Quartermaster Depot was converted into a headquarters and shelter for men. Transients received meals, slept, underwent medical checkups, and worked in metalworking, carpentry, printing, and electrical departments as well as its laundry, bakery, paint shop, and barber shop and some administrative positions for a weekly allowance of one to three dollars. According to the newsletters published on-site, men passed the time with movies, theatrical productions, and public boxing bouts. Omaha’s facility was too small to meet demand, so work camps in Chadron and Carter Lake were opened for men. For transients elsewhere in the state, federal funds distributed through NERA required counties provide overnight lodging and two meals a day. Some counties added work requirements for those receiving aid. In November 1935 the FERA was replaced by the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which closed the Transient Bureau. Camps were transferred to the WPA but the Omaha headquarters continued to serve the city’s transients through 1936 with NERA and Douglas County funding. The transient program proved successful as it pulled thousands of transients off trains and into stable job training and housing programs at facilities such as Omaha’s Quartermaster Depot.²⁹

Looking out the window as his train passed through Ashland in 1937, Carl Sandburg hoped to see back forty years. Decades earlier he and

thousands of others crisscrossed Nebraska by freight to work and survive; thousands more were doing so now. Maligned, ridiculed, and misunderstood, they battled hostile bulls and police and indignant locals while toiling beneath the beating sun for a meal, a bed in the hayloft, and meager wages. Hobos rightly deserve a place within Nebraska’s history. Hobos provided the backbreaking seasonal labor that transformed family farms into the industrial agricultural enterprises of today. Hobos responded to the abuses and indignities thrown at them by pushing back against abusive bulls, carving out their own spaces in rural campsites and Jobbers Canyon, as well as in Nebraska’s political landscape through the IWW. As Nebraska farmers mechanized during the 1930s and 1940s, the need for large numbers of seasonal laborers waned. When Sandburg was invited to speak at the University of Nebraska in 1937 he was no longer the hobo fleeing McCook at the insistence of a club wielding bull, but one of America’s most respected writers with the first of three Pulitzer Prizes to his name. Yet, as his train steamed across Illinois, Iowa, and into Nebraska, he recalled his first train trip across the region, when he saw the prairie from an open boxcar door. In Ashland he scanned the right of way, hoping to see a campfire and circle of men deep in the brush, but the hobo jungle he made his home in September 1897 was gone.³⁰

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NOTES

¹ *Kearney Daily Hub*, June 2, 1904.

² For more on the histories of hobos see: John C. Schneider, "Omaha Vagrants and the Character of Western Hobo Labor, 1887-1913," *Nebraska History* 63 (1982); Eric H. Monkkonen, ed., *Walking to Work: Tramps in America, 1790-1935* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984); Tim Cresswell, *The Tramp in America* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001); Frank T. Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts: Hobo Workers and Community in the American Midwest, 1880-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003); Todd DePastino, *Citizen Hobo: How A Century of Homelessness Shaped America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Mark Wyman, *Hoboes: Bindlestiffs, Fruit Tramps, and the Harvesting of the West* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010).

³ Higbie, 5; *Omaha Daily Bee*, Dec. 10, 1914; T. Earl Sullenger, *Studies in Urban Sociology* (New York: Bureau of Social Research, Municipal University of Omaha and The Survey, 1933), 107-108; *Nebraska State Journal* (hereafter, *NSJ*), July 13, 1916; *NSJ*, July 24, 1916; Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1918), 201-204.

⁴ "Across the Continent. The Frank Leslie Excursion to the Pacific. Tramps on the Union and Central Pacific Roads," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, Feb. 2, 1878; Ronald C. Naugle, John J. Montag and James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska*, Fourth Edition (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 254-55, 276; Luna Kellie, *A Prairie Populist* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), 50-51; Nell Irvin Painter, *Standing at Armageddon: The United States, 1877-1919* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), 110-40; Schneider, 264; Elia Peattie, "Mrs. Peattie in Rebuttal: Just a Word or Two in Passing Concerning the Society Question, 21 January 1894," in *Impertinences: Selected Writings of Elia Peattie, a Journalist in the Gilded Age*, edited by Susanne George Bloomfield (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2005), 41-42; Naugle, Montag and Olson, 276.

⁵ *Nebraska Survey of Social Resources*, Vol. 1 (Lincoln: Nebraska Emergency Relief Administration, 1936), 4, 17; *Kearney Daily Hub*, June 29, 1901; *Message of John H. Morehead, Governor of Nebraska, to the 33rd Session, Nebraska Legislature, 1913* (Lincoln: Jacob North 7 Co., Printers, 1913), 9-10; Risa Goluboff, *Vagrant Nation: Police Power, Constitutional Change, and the Making of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 298-332. Working in tandem with vagrancy laws, so-called "unsightly beggar" ordinances penalized the poor and disabled in an effort to keep them out of sight and off city streets. Omaha was the last city to enforce such a law. In 1974 an officer arrested a homeless man for having visible scars. Susan M. Schweik, *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 6-7.

⁶ In Dawson County for example, despite frequently passing through the area, only a handful of vagrancy cases are on record. The effort required to bring men to trial for a relatively minor crime with fees they likely could not pay dissuaded most prosecutions and made "moving along" a much more attractive option. See: *State of Nebraska vs. J. D. E. Sanders*, July 2, 1889, *State of Nebraska vs. Joseph Wallis*, July 2, 1889, *State of Nebraska vs. Roy Scott*, Sept. 16, 1895, Dawson County Criminal and Civil Court Records, Dawson County Historical Society, Lexington, NE; *NSJ*, July 20, 1916; Mark Ellis, *Law and Order in Buffalo Bill's Country: Legal Culture and Community on the Great Plains*,

1867-1910 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 129-32; *Kearney Daily Hub* (hereafter, *KDH*), June 2, 1891; *KDH*, April 6, 1897; *KDH*, July 14, 1898.

⁷ *NSJ*, July 11, 1916; *Report of the Eighth Annual Meeting of the Nebraska State Conference of Charities and Correction*. (Kearney: S.I.S. Printery, 1904), 8; *The Conservative*, June 1, 1899; Ellis, 192-131; *KDH*, Sept. 4, 1905; *Omaha Morning World-Herald*, March 23, 1906; *Norfolk Weekly News-Journal*, May 12, 1911; *NSJ*, July 15, 1916.

⁸ "Lincoln Jail," Folder: "Words for Music on Large Disc," Box 4, Edwin Ford Piper Collection, Special Collections, University of Iowa Library; *NSJ*, July 14, 1916.

⁹ Jack London, *The Road* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1907), 210; Carl Sandburg, *Always A Young Stranger* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1953), 397-99.

¹⁰ *Omaha Sunday Bee* (hereafter, *OSB*), July 30, 1911; *Omaha Daily Bee* (hereafter, *ODB*), Feb. 5, 1911; Howard P. Chudacoff, *Mobile Americans: Residential and Social Mobility in Omaha, 1880-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 90-93.

¹¹ Leonard K. Eaton, *Gateway Cities and Other Essays* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1989), 60-83; Daniel D. Spiegel, "'Big Ugly Red Brick Buildings': The Fight to Save Jobbers Canyon," *Nebraska History* 93 (Summer 2012), 54-83; *OSB*, July 30, 1911; *ODB*, April 17, 1882; *ODB*, Sept. 27, 1887; *ODB*, April 15, 1910; *Sunday State Journal* (hereafter, *SSJ*), July 16, 1916; Edward Dahlberg, *Because I Was Flesh* (New York: New Directions Press, 1963), 116-18. Dahlberg first recounted this Omaha episode and more hobo experiences in his debut novel *Bottom Dogs* (1930); Sandburg, 399-400; *ODB*, Feb. 4, 1904; *ODB*, March 8, 1906; *ODB*, Feb. 3, 1914; Nels Anderson, *The American Hobo: An Autobiography* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1975), 84-85.

¹² *John Vachon's America: Photographs and Letters from the Depression to World War II*. Edited by Miles Orvell. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 155. Vachon also photographed Lincoln, Nebraska City, North Platte, and Dawson County during the Depression. For more on the FSA and its photographers see: Gilles Mora and Beverly W. Brannan, *FSA: The American Vision* (New York: Abrams, 2006); John Raeburn, *A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 143-93; Schneider, 270.

¹³ Djuna Barnes, "A Visit to the Favored Haunt of the I.W.W.'s [New York Press, April 11, 1915]," in *New York*. Alyce Barry, ed. (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 1989), 200.

¹⁴ *ODB*, June 29, 1913; Philip Taft, "The I.W.W. in the Grain Belt," *Labor History*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1960), 59-62; Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of The Industrial Workers of the World*. (New York: Quadrangle/New York Times Books, 1969), 313-18; *Hastings Daily Tribune*, June 17, 1916; *NSJ*, July 14, 1916; *HDT*, June 21, 1916. For more on the AWO and later AWIU see: Greg Hall, *Harvest Wobblies: The Industrial Workers of the World and Agricultural Laborers in the American West, 1905-1930*. (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2001).

¹⁵ *HDT*, June 17, 1916; *NSJ*, July 20, 1916; *SSJ*, July 16, 1916; *NSJ*, July 19, 1916; *HDT*, June 22, 1916; *HDT*, June 12, 1916; *HDT*, July 14, 1916.

¹⁶ *HDT*, July 15, 1916; *NSJ*, July 15, 1916. The *State Journal* estimated 300 hobos attended the meeting. For an insider's history of the IWW songbook see: Richard Brazier, "The Story of the I.W.W.'s 'Little Red Songbook,'" *Labor History* (Winter 1968): 91-105.

¹⁷ *HDT*, June 12, 1916; *HDT*, July 13, 1916; *Industrial Worker*, July 16, 1910; *HDT*, July 17, 1916; *HDT*, July 21, 1916.

¹⁸ *HDT*, July 13, 1916; *HDT*, July 14, 1916; *HDT*, July 18, 1916; *HDT*, July 21, 1916; *NSJ*, July 17, 1916; *NSJ*, July 14, 1916; *NSJ*, July 18, 1916; *HDT*, July 19, 1916.

¹⁹ David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 69-75; Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All*, 398-422; Al Emory to Harry C. Richmond, November 4, 1917, Box 3, Folder 8, General Correspondence – E – 1917, SDC, RG23:52, History Nebraska; Clayton D. Laurie, "The US Army and the Omaha Race Riot of 1919," *Nebraska History* 72 (1991): 142; David G. Wagman, "Rausch Mit': The I.W.W. in Nebraska During World War I," in *At the Point of Production: The Local History of the I.W.W.* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1981), 124-29; Bureau of Labor Statistics, "CPI Inflation Calculator," accessed March 23, 2018. https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm

²⁰ Nels Anderson, "A New Race of Hobos Takes the Road," *New York Times*, April 11, 1926; Adaline A. Buffington, "Automobile Migrants," in *Proceedings of the National Conference of Social Work at the Fifty-Second Annual Session Held in Denver, Colorado June 10-17, 1925* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1925), 258-64; Transient Harvest Labor (Wheat), Jan. 1921, Summary Sheets for Surveys, 1921-1931, Records of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, 1876-1950, Record Group 83, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD; Naugle, Montag, and Olson, 292-93. For a brief review of connections between vagrancy arrests and automobile usage in Nebraska see: Schneider, 268.

²¹ John P. Winroth, Series 1: Interviews; Norden Club Project (Lincoln, Neb.), RG 2030.AM, History Nebraska; William Shirer, *20th Century Journey: A Memoir of a Life and the Times of William L. Shirer*. Volume 1: The Start, 1901-1930. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), 169-71; Michael W. Schyler, "The Ku Klux Klan in Nebraska, 1920-1930," *Nebraska History* 66 (1985): 245-46.

²² *Plattsmouth Journal*, Oct. 31, 1929; *Kearney Daily Hub*, Oct. 29, 1929. For a breakdown of farm prices from 1910-29 see James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska*. Second Edition (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 286-87; James F. Wickens, *Colorado in the Great Depression* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1979), 1-11; Catherine McNicol Stock, *Main Street in Crisis: The Great Depression and the Old Middle Class on the Northern Plains* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 17-30; Peter Fearon, *Kansas in the Great Depression: Work Relief, the Dole, and Rehabilitation* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 1-17; *Senate and House Journals of the Legislature of the State of Nebraska*. Forty-Sixth Session (Extraordinary) (No publisher listed, undated); Naugle et al, *History of Nebraska*, Fourth Edition, 333.

²³ *Senate Journal of the Legislature of the State of Nebraska*. Forty-Eighth (Special) Session (Aurora: Burr Publishing Company, Undated), 7; *Nebraska: A Guide to the Cornhusker State* (New York: Viking Press, 1939), 67.

²⁴ *Industrial Worker*, Aug. 2, 1930. Matt Huha, better known as T-Bone Slim, is regarded as the IWW's greatest literary voice and second-greatest songwriter behind Joe Hill. Slim

is credited with the classic song, "Mysteries of a Hobo's Life." For more on T-Bone Slim see: *Juice is Stranger Than Friction: Selected Writings of T-Bone Slim*, edited by Franklin Rosemont (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, 1992).

²⁵ *Beatrice Daily Sun*, Sept. 1, 1932; T. Earl Sullenger, *Studies in Urban Sociology* (New York: Bureau of Social Research, Municipal University of Omaha and The Survey, 1933), 112.

²⁶ Loren Eiseley, *All The Strange Hours: The Excavation of a Life* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), 7-8; Gale E. Christianson, *Fox at the Wood's Edge: A Biography of Loren Eiseley* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 385.

²⁷ Rudolph E. Umland, Scrapbook 1, Scrapbooks Box 1, Rudolph Umland Archives, Jane Pope Geske Heritage Room of Nebraska Authors, Bennett Martin Public Library, Lincoln, Nebraska; Rudolph E. Umland, Manuscript: *Umland, When The Horses Laughed: Tales of Another Time, Another Life*, Rudolph Umland Archives, Jane Pope Geske Heritage Room of Nebraska Authors, Bennett Martin Public Library, Lincoln, Nebraska; Sullenger, 115.

²⁸ Mary Cochran Grimes, "From Emergency Relief to Social Security in Nebraska," *Nebraska History* 71 (1990), 126-28; *Beatrice Daily Sun*, Jan. 8, 1934; *Nebraska Survey of Social Resources*. Vol. 1. (Lincoln: Nebraska Emergency Relief Administration, 1936), 93-102.

²⁹ *Nebraska Survey of Social Resources*. Vol. 1. (Lincoln: Nebraska Emergency Relief Administration, 1936), 99-104; *The Rattler*, Vol. 2, No. 15, July 6, 1935, Administration Records of the Transient Division 1933-1936 Transient Camp Newsletters 1934 35 Box 2 Nebraska, National Archives College Park; *The Rattler*, Vol. 2, No. 16, July 15, 1935, Administration Records of the Transient Division 1933-1936 Transient Camp Newsletters 1934 35 Box 2 Nebraska, National Archives College Park.

³⁰ *Daily Nebraskan*, Oct. 10, 1937. Sandburg traveled by coach the entire way, to the astonishment of his audience. They expected a man of his stature would splurge for a Pullman sleeper. After an introduction by Louise Pound, Sandburg spoke on "American Folk Songs and Tall Tales," followed by a reading of his poems. Three thousand attendees packed the Coliseum and countless more listened on the radio, but a poor sound system, loud students, and basketball equipment blocking the view made for a less than desirable event. *The Daily Nebraskan* decried the "barnyard manners" of those in attendance and letters of apology quickly arrived from the University and *Lincoln Star*. For more on Sandburg's speech see, Ernest Gross to Carl Sandburg, Oct. 11, 1937, Series 1, Box 7, Folder 109, Carl Sandburg Papers (Connemara Accession), The Rare Books and Manuscript Library, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; Harry Kurtz to Carl Sandburg, Oct. 11, 1937, Series 1, Box 10, Folder 41, Carl Sandburg Papers (Connemara Accession), RBML.