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HOBHEMIA
DISCOVERING THE AMERICAN HOOBO SUBCULTURE

An Introduction and Annotated Bibliography

LIS 620
University of North Carolina, Greensboro
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An Introduction to Hobohemia

Scope

This work examines the subculture of the hobo, hereafter referred to as “hobohemia.” While Americans have long had a fascination with the hobo as a cultural symbol of freedom and adventure, this symbol has taken many forms in pop culture. From Charlie Chaplin’s representation of the comic tramp to Jack Kerouac’s hobo-intellectual persona, society has alternately mocked, pitied, and glorified the hobo. In reviewing sociological and historical resources, as well as tramp memoirs as a genre, I hope to aid readers in understanding hobos in the context of their subculture.

The introduction to this topic is divided into five main sections. It proceeds chronologically, documenting the origins of the American tramp from colonial America through Reconstruction. The bulk of my research focuses on the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, which, when combined, show the rise and fall of hobohemia. Following this is a brief discussion of the “Death of the Hobo” in the Great Depression. In the final section, “What Remains: Hobohemia from 1940 to Present Day,” I examine the Beat Generation, modern-day hobos and the lasting effect that hobohemia has made on the American culture.

A note on vocabulary: Though much of the literature produced by social historians uses the words “hobo” and “tramp” synonymously, I will not. Hobos and tramps are demographically and socially indistinguishable. However, the hobo’s collective identity is dependent upon its distinction from tramps. In the words of Jeff Davis, “A hobo is someone who travels and works, a tramp is someone who travels and doesn’t work, and a bum is someone who doesn’t travel and doesn’t work.” Therefore, “hobo” and “tramp” will only be used interchangeably to refer to the socio-cultural interactions within hobohemia, which are common to both groups. In fact, the subculture of hobos applies to tramps as well, with the exception of work ethic. “Tramp” as an identifier should not be confused with “tramping” which refers to the act of footloose traveling and connotes a sense of simultaneous adventure and hardship. Both tramps and hobos participate in the act of tramping.

The Origins of the American Tramp
In 1640, only nineteen years after the Mayflower arrived in the United States, “vagrant persons” were documented in Boston and officers were charged with apprehending these social outcasts. Though historians can only speculate as to the cause of homelessness among European settlers in colonial United States, the incidence of homelessness increased exponentially during times of war and economic change. In 1820, the problem was so widespread that private charities began to make the first efforts to deal with the homeless without criminalizing them. Both public measures to address homelessness through law enforcement and private, charitable measures remained local until the Civil War.

**The Civil War**

The Civil War marks the beginning of emerging tramping and tramp/hobo culture. The war made use of the railroads, transporting soldiers across the country in boxcars or cattle cars, giving young men their first glimpse of the road. Additionally, military life for many meant a strong sense of brotherhood - sharing outdoor encampments, the fruits of foraging expeditions, and the spoils of battle victory. While not explicitly condoned, looting occupied territory was common practice by soldiers on both sides. By the end of the war, this tacit acceptance of looting became outright acceptance of theft.

The term “tramp” as it applies to the homeless was first coined during the Civil War, as adventurous groups of friendly soldiers referred to their foraging expeditions as “going on a tramp.” The term “bum” derives from “bummer” which was coined during the Civil War as a pejorative term used by civilians for foraging and thieving soldiers. In 1868, the New York Times used “bummer” as a synonym for vagrants, giving readers a clue that many vagrants were former soldiers. Indeed, the tramping lifestyle that arose following the Civil War borrowed many elements from the life of a soldier. In 1872, Charles Long Brace used the word “bumming” to mean sleeping outside, and five years later in 1877, the press named striking railroad workers “the bummer element.” This marks the tramp’s first association with labor unions.

**Growing Visibility in The Gilded Age (1865-1890)**

Following the Civil War, America saw a boom in industry. Labor economics moved from the established system that had been reliant upon agriculture, artisans, and tradesmen toward an industrial wage-
labor system. The Civil War had been fought and won on the principle of “free labor.” However, the hoards of workingmen entering the wage-labor system discovered the essential chasm separating business owners from employees. This tension, combined with a series of economic depressions following the war precluded “free” labor. Many were forced into casual, migrant labor markets in order to find work; others, like Jack London, found the tedium of workaday life too much to bear and took to the road and rails in search of adventure and freedom.

Reconstruction Era

Reconstruction following the Civil War brought the spread of homelessness into rural areas, chiefly due to the expansion of railroads. Tramps were widely reported to be combative, antagonizing, and at times, brutally violent. Reports of tramps commandeering trains abounded and rural townspeople became increasingly distrustful of poor travelers. Vagrants in both rural and urban areas whose requests for food, shelter, or money were denied were reported to have become violent. At this time, the myth of the foreign vagabond class arose. Newspapers circulated unsubstantiated claims that the majority of vagrants were immigrants. One police station surveyed estimated that ninety percent of persons sheltered overnight due to homelessness were foreign-born. However, the police station did not keep any demographic records; police stations in neighboring towns and across the country show records of mostly young, white, native-born males.¹

Challenging Patriarchy

Hobos during the Gilded Age were seen as a major threat to established gender roles. They established their identity in all-male camps, much like a military group, rather than in family and home. As white society attempted to adjust to the wage-labor system and the emasculation of either answering to a superior or being rendered unemployed, many began to feel as though the institution of family was in danger. Tramps and hobos were fleeing the feminine domain of home and the consumerist trappings it represented, choosing instead to lead a life unfettered with acquisitions. This choice

¹ Social workers, government surveys, and sociologists would verify these demographics time and time again throughout the hobo’s history. The hobo population was predominately white, native-born, and male. Most hobos were between the ages of 16 and 35, and most had at least a grade school education. The vast majority of hobos were unmarried.
represented a major moral crisis to the middle class. Hobos challenged the dichotomy of work/home, public/private, male/female that had been crucial to the construction of American identity and society.

**Relationship with the Railroad**

Beginning with the recession of 1875, “tramp” began to lose its negative connotations. Reports of tramp violence were few and far-between. In the 1880’s, deteriorating railroad conditions led to trainmen taking a softer view of tramps. Many were faced with job loss, as in the Burlington rail line strike in 1888, and turned to tramping themselves. Those who remained in railroad employ worked long hours in poor conditions for little pay. Railroad companies often failed to repair equipment, putting their trainmen at risk for injury or worse. These trainmen expressed comradeship with hobos, whose conditions and method of travel led them to similar injuries. By the early 1900’s, tramps and hobos could secure a ride on any freight train for a small “consideration” of ten to fifty cents. Hobos who showed a union card rode for free. Brakemen, in particular, were friendliest with hobos. This was due in part to the particular danger of their jobs, as well as the fact that, in comparison to other trainmen, they tended to be younger, rowdier, and single - much like the hobos themselves.

As railroad conditions worsened, trains came to be viewed as a danger to the public due to the numerous deaths of townspeople and livestock. Public opinion turned against the railroads. Citizens came to be more sympathetic toward hobos, who were at the mercy of the trains and who caused trouble for the railroad bosses. As this sentiment increased throughout the Gilded Age, railroad detectives came to expect little assistance from train crews or townspeople in discouraging tramping.

**Urban Areas**

Industry in the American West was developing quickly, and unskilled laborers were in high demand in the early 1870s. By 1880, however, the seemingly endless flood of migrant workers had exhausted much of the western job market. The series of recessions following the Civil War and Reconstruction forced many working class men into the transient life, including, for the first time in hobo history, skilled laborers. As the population of hobos swelled and surged westward, communication networks began to emerge. Jacob Riis and other
unattached unemployed migrants collected information about labor markets in the streets of urban centers like New York and Philadelphia, passing this vital information by word-of-mouth. These urban areas began to serve as information hubs for homeless men who flocked to them between jobs.

The necessity of migrating to urban areas meant a major shift in shelter customs for the transient poor. In rural areas, hobos set up “jungles” -- road parlance for temporary camps. These jungles were generally located out of sight of townspeople and law enforcement but near a train yard, a water source and, ideally, a place to forage for food like an orchard or farm. The scarcity of such amenities in cities meant that shelter was limited to police station lodging. Overnight lodging became a standard service offered by police stations in urban areas in the 1850’s. This near-incarceration, though a sketchy privilege, was a convenience for hobos. However, this privilege was denied to women and minorities, which ultimately contributed to the homogenization of the hobo subculture. Though women and ethnic groups were scarce on the road and rails prior to the Gilded Age, the 1870’s brought a virtual elimination of all but white males in the hobo population. Lodging houses were as yet uncommon, but would soon develop into a fixture of hobo life.

**Hobohemia’s Peak and Decline: The Progressive Era (1890-1929)**

As hobohemia crystallized on the main stem, hobos found their own expression in the sudden appearance of hobo publications, tramp memoirs and participant-observer ethnographies. This literature’s uniformity and the later publication of sociological works by Nels Anderson speak to their veracity and are useful for constructing a portrait of the subculture.
In the Progressive Era, urban centers served as social hubs, job markets, and offered opportunity for the hobo to purchase inexpensive food, shelter, sexual companionship, and recreation. Hobos congregated in downtown areas known as “main stems.” In Chicago, the main stem included West Madison Street, The Loop, South State Street, Bughouse Square, and the Jungle in Grant Park. The social, cultural, and economic activity of this main stem, combined with Chicago’s location at the confluence of every major railroad line, secured its place as the hobo capitol of America. Alternately referred to as “slave markets,” hobos were originally attracted to these areas by the high concentration of employment agencies. With the arrival of the vagabond population, property owners saw an opportunity for profit and quickly constructed shoddy lodging houses, whose accommodations varied from booths in lieu of rooms to rows of hammocks. Soon after, saloons, brothels, gambling houses, fortune-tellers, and cheap restaurants abounded, developing the main stem into the nucleus of urban hobo social and cultural activity.

Vagabond Infrastructure & Identity

Hobos mirrored prevailing middle-class judgments of deserving versus undeserving poor. A clear hobo hemian hierarchy existed, with hobos at the top of the chain, followed by tramps, and at the bottom of this hierarchy were bums. These groups did not associate
themselves with ethnic itinerant laborers. Their only shared characteristic was mobility, and the hobo/tramp/bum population maintained a specific collective identity separate from their ethnic counterparts.

Many work sites on the wageworkers’ frontier set up segregated labor camps. It is unclear whether this was due to racial tensions between white hobos and ethnic migrants or if the practice was a patriarchal attempt to minimize racial solidarity and thus union presence. While widespread racial hostility is not documented in either tramp memoirs or ethnographies, hoboheria was highly gendered and racialized. In hobo argot, “hobo” and “white man” were used interchangeably. Unsurprisingly, tramps and bums did not have the same specific racial connotations. The hobo collective identity depended as much upon its white male demographic standing as it did its work ethic. Hobos were at the top of the chain because of their whiteness, their willingness to work, and their pride in the fact that they rarely resorted to begging or thieving beyond rural foraging and food scavenging.

The hobo identity and a hobo’s standing also depended upon his adherence to the “hobo code,” a system of ethics. The hobo code was chiefly a system of reciprocity, “When one has money he gives it to the man who needs it, and when he is broke he asks the price of a meal from the man who has it.”

This code of ethics distinguished the hobo from the “confidence man” — a seemingly honest man who poses as a hobo in need in order to extract money from his victims. The importance of being perceived as authentic and honest cannot be overstated for the Progressive Era hobo. Due to the surplus of casual laborers, concentration of hobos in main stems, and word-of-mouth communication between hobos, a hobo’s survival depended upon his reputation. The hobo had to gain the trust of those who were in charge of hiring decisions and those who had money or food when he had none. He could not afford to lose the trust of his fellow vagabonds, as a poor reputation would cost him precious future opportunities.

Hobos’ guarded, private interactions often helped them to determine the difference between one of their own and a “confidence man.” Hobos and tramps were extremely circumspect, and this circumspection served as an indication of trustworthiness to other

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vagabonds. Within hobohemia, it was considered taboo to ask a fellow’s name or inquire about his past. This guardedness might have been off-putting to propertied classes, who had the luxury of physical privacy in their homes; it was a necessary self-protection for hobos. Hobos identified themselves by a moniker, in both social and labor interactions. Few hobos knew one another’s birth names, city of origin, or personal details. Friendships were brief, usually lasting the length of a shared job or travel route. However, hobos often reconnected with buddies on the social scene of the main stem.

**Hobosexuality**

Hobo identity, rooted as it was in brotherhood and masculinity, nonetheless felt its fragile gender status. Society condemned hobohemia as detrimental to established gender norms, and hobos themselves contributed to this uproar by shielding themselves from what they perceived to be feminine influences. Their rejection of home and acquisitiveness was a conspicuous rejection of the sphere of women. Nonetheless, women were necessary for meeting the hobo’s sexual needs. The main stem’s solution was prostitution; one man expressed a preference for commercial sex, as he then felt free from female expectations of marriage. Not all hobos utilized a brothel’s services; some abstained for financial reasons, others due to preference. Both sociologists and tramps extensively document the acceptance and widespread practice of homosexuality within hobohemia. Furthermore, pedophilia gained a foothold in hobohemia as a cultural norm.

Older, experienced vagabonds known as “jokers” enticed young, naive boys, “ punks,” to provide sex acts in exchange for protection, food, and knowledge. A jocker usually targeted boys new to the hobo life, but sometimes lured the children of townspeople away from their homes with the promise of an adventurous life on the rails. Once seduced, the jocker held the punk as property until the punk reached adulthood and took on a punk of his own. Alternatively, a jocker whose punk was particularly desirable (effeminate punks were prized) might lose him in a fight to a challenging jocker.
One of the best-known cultural artifacts of hobohemia—the song “Big Rock Candy Mountain,” a hobo campfire standard, referenced this jocker-punk relationship, in its last verse:

The punk rolled up his big blue eyes
And said to the jocker, “Sandy,
I’ve hiked and hiked and wandered too,
But I ain’t seen any candy.
I’ve hiked and hiked till my feet are sore
And I’ll be damned if I hike any more
To be buggered sore like a hobo’s whore

In the Big Rock Candy Mountains.3

Other hobos preferred less predatory means of obtaining sex and engaged in brief but highly emotional, intimate affairs with one another. This simulation of the positive physical and emotional aspects of a relationship allowed hobos to gain fulfillment without losing the freedom they sought on the rails. Some citizens chose hobo life specifically because of the acceptance of homosexuality. Mainstream society condemned “crimes against nature” and those seeking male affection could easily find it in hobos and tramps. One anonymous tramp, responding to Josiah Flynt’s essay regarding “sexual inversion” in tramps, estimated that the incidence of homosexuality (including, but not limited to pederasty) in the hobo community was as high ninety percent.

Hobohemia becomes politicized by the One Big Union

The Industrial Workers of the World was founded in 1905 on the principle of organizing the working class into “One Big Union” in order to rise up against employing classes and abolish the wage system. From its founding, the I.W.W.’s members were divided as to whether the union’s philosophy should dictate political action or direct action. In 1908, J.H. Walsh led nineteen politically active hobos by rail to the fourth annual I.W.W. annual convention in Washington, D.C. These radical hoboes called themselves the Overalls Brigade and sought to wrest control of the I.W.W. from the political-action-oriented “homeguard” (working class, non-migrant laborers). They succeeded, and following the convention, the union

3 This verse was edited out of the song before it was first recorded by Harry McClintock in 1928 and is not part of the parlor song familiar to many. These original lyrics are documented in George Milburn’s The Hobo’s Hornbook: A Repertory for a Gutter Jongleur. New York: Ives Washburn, 1930
was decidedly in favor of direct action and the hobo was its representative\textsuperscript{4}.

The Overalls Brigade returned to the rails and began organizing the main stem in cities across the country, recruiting thousands of new members. Hobohemia now had a unified political movement, thus legitimizing it in the eyes of mainstream society, who were suddenly aware of labor economics due to the increasing presence of unions in factories and on the wageworker’s frontier. Spokane’s main stem became home to the first of the I.W.W.’s legendary free speech fights as revolutionary hoboes launched soapbox campaigns to recruit new members. These campaigns sparked a controversy over the use of urban public space; citizens and law enforcement sought to reclaim the main stem while hoboes defended what they felt was their territory. These struggles would continue over the next decade and, at their core, represented the larger struggle between propertied classes and the unattached unemployed.

As hobos won the free speech fights in cities across the U.S., the I.W.W. worked to improve the main stem for migrants. They boycotted exploitative employment agencies and implemented their own systems of labor recruitment in newly instituted I.W.W. halls that also offered beds, kitchens, and meeting halls to members. These halls became an altogether more wholesome social substitute for saloons and gambling houses.

Contributing to the cultural uplift along main stems, radical bookstores began to spring up as well. Soon, the main stem was teeming with intellectual life and drawing bohemians and revolutionaries from neighboring areas. Hobohemia became intellectually fashionable, further contributing to its legitimacy.

\textsuperscript{4} Often overlooked in Industrial Workers of the World historical literature are the unintended repercussions of hobohemia’s sudden marriage to the I.W.W. At its outset, the I.W.W. intended to be “One Big Union” for laborers of all races and genders. However, the hobo’s strictly gendered and racialized profile soon took over union posters and literature, alienating female and ethnic members. As the plight of the working white man dominated mainstream press coverage of the I.W.W. and the I.W.W.’s own publications, women and minorities continued to take part in direct action against propertied classes, but were largely forgotten by the union.
In 1909, the Industrial Workers of the World published Songs of the Workers, on the Road, in the Jungles, and in the Shops—Songs to Fan the Flames of Discontent. This songbook represents the most important cultural artifact of hobohemia. It included many hobo folk songs, which up until this point were shared and learned by oral tradition, and added a number of original songs and union standards to the hobo’s repertoire. In 1914, Carleton Parker noted, “Where a group of hoboes sit around a fire under a railroad bridge, many of them can sing I.W.W. songs without a book.” The songbook came to be known as The Little Red Songbook and has been published in thirty-eight editions at the time of this writing.

Hobo Newspapers
The Industrial Workers of the World’s newspaper, Industrial Worker, became the first implicitly hobo periodical. Its second series, beginning in 1909 and still published today, included information about labor struggles and organized labor that was not covered by the mainstream press. It served hobohemia by circulating information about casual labor markets that had previously been available only by word of mouth and in exploitative employment agencies. Industrial Worker, along with other radical publications, was distributed in main stem bookstores and I.W.W. halls across the nation.

In 1913, James Eads How founded the Hoboes Jungle Scout, the first periodical published explicitly for hobos. How was also the founder and leading organizer of the International Brotherhood Welfare Association (IWBA). As World War I tensions began to build in the United States, the I.W.W. took a firm stance in opposition to the war. In response, employers and propertied classes launched a campaign against the I.W.W., accusing members of treasonous activity. Many hobos defected to the IWBA, which offered members an alternative to the philosophy of political agitation. The IWBA emphasized that hobos were a “chosen people” who would eventually lead the way toward a classless society, but encouraged education and
cooperation over oppositional action. In 1915, *Hoboes Jungle Scout* became the *Hobo News*. Its increased popularity furthered the IWBA’s organizational efforts. In 1919, the IWBA designated itself “a clearinghouse for labor” which bargained collectively for casual labor jobs. Around this time, it began to take on some characteristics of the I.W.W., and became a more outspoken proponent of socialism.

The *Hobo News* was the most popular hobo periodical and paved the way for the modern “street paper.” Hobos were able to obtain a subscription for fifty cents per year, and sell individual issues to propertied citizens in order to earn money and educate mainstream society about the hobo’s way of life. *Hobo News* contained labor information, similar to *Industrial Worker*, but also included reader-submitted poems, prose, and important survival tips regarding the best and worst places to “catch out” on a freight train, which cities’ railroad “bulls” (detectives) were most hostile to hobos, rural areas where law enforcement and townspeople were likely to assist a needy traveler, and the like. This forum not only allowed hobos to share their knowledge of specific places, but hosted creative expression by hobos, enabling them to define themselves and share collective experience. *Hobo News* was published monthly until 1929. A separate publication by the same name was published from 1936 to 1948; little documentation of this paper exists regarding its relationship to the original *Hobo News*.

A third hobo periodical, *Hobo World*, is referenced in historical literature but it is unclear whether this periodical is independent of, or the same as *Hobo News*.

**Tramp Literature**

Approximately forty tramp memoirs were published between 1890 and 1940, the bulk of these in the Progressive Era. These are generally recognized as a small sub-genre of literature, and scholarly analyses refer to them as such. Literarily, tramp memoirs are typical of the time period in their romantic recounting of hobo adventures. They are almost all written by reformed tramps and hobos, and end...
with a moralistic tone, touting the benefits of the “straight life.” Nevertheless, the uniformity of tramping experience reported in these memoirs, combined with the writings in *Hobo News*, helped the diaspora of hobohemia to form a sense of collective identity and experience beyond the main stem.

**Work and Money**

Though hobos largely defined themselves as laborers on the wageworkers frontier, they were not long-term, reliable workers. Most hobos worked only long enough to raise a “jungle stake,” enough money to live on in the jungle or main stem for a given period of time. Ending employment was followed by a period of “blowing it in,” during which the hobo would revel in and share his newfound wealth with others - buying a round of drinks for a saloon full of other hobos was customary. Though the length of this chosen unemployment varied by individual, many hobos regarded the code of reciprocity as a safety net on which they could rely after the jungle stake was spent and they searched for their next job. Some hobos lamented the self-perpetuating nature of such a cycle; how could one save enough money to become a property owner when wages had to be spent on food and shelter in urban centers? Others, however, enjoyed the rejection of acquisitivism as a positive, selfless aspect of their identity. Hobo code dictated that taking work when one had money in one’s pocket was taking work away from an other man who needed it.

This philosophy of work and money created another distinction between hobos and ethnic itinerant workers. Ethnic itinerant workers were generally valued as long-term, hard working people who would stay on a work site until the job was finished. They often had families to provide for, and worked with the goal of saving money in order to become property holders, which would elevate their status in American society. Hobos, on the other hand, as white males, already enjoyed a privileged status as their perceived birthright. They earned a reputation among labor bosses for being temperamental and unreliable. This would soon contribute to their downfall.

**The Decline of Hobohemia**

In 1922, as Nels Anderson penned *The Hobo*, his seminal sociological study of hobohemia, he was unknowingly documenting the end of an era. The social and political climate surrounding World War I had all but snuffed out hobo politics - most notably the I.W.W., and, to some extent, the IBWA. The politics that had legitimized hobohemia
disappeared. Coinciding with this change was the closing of the wageworkers’ frontier. The casual labor market in the West had always been temporary; hobo labor was needed only to build the infrastructure that would generate, process, and deliver products. Railroad construction was completed, and smaller crews of skilled maintenance workers replaced large construction gangs. The development of harvesting devices like the combine displaced unskilled agricultural labor. Migrant farm work that remained was largely taken over by laborers traveling by automobile. Hobohemia was inextricably linked to railroads, and migrants traveling by any other means were not acculturated to the hobo’s way of life.

Sociologists’ and social commentators’ vocabulary changed with the times. Whereas previously, social discourse had involved words like “tramp,” “hobo,” and “bum,” the new vernacular was “migratory,” “seasonal,” or “casual” workers. The disappearance of racial connotations from identifying vocabulary corresponds to the decline of a ruling white, unattached male demographic among the homeless. Ethnic workers and migrant families were favored among labor bosses for their perceived reliability.

As the Progressive Era slid toward the Depression, hobohemia as a relatively independent subculture disappeared.

**Death of the Hobo: The Great Depression (1929-1940)**

To the average American, the term “hobo” evokes a Depression-era tramp standing in soup queues, panhandling on street corners, and plucking a guitar from a Hoovervillian residence in an abandoned train car. Indeed, a majority of modern cultural references to the hobo are embedded with the historical markers of the Great Depression. However, “hobo” in this instance is a misnomer. Hobohemia was in its last days with the onset of the Great Depression. Its death was expedited by the influx of skilled laborers entering casual labor markets out of necessity, many with families in tow. Those traveling as unattached, unemployed migrants were mostly teenagers traveling by rail. This flood of newly homeless workers absorbed elements of the hobo subculture into the larger, mainstream cultural milieu. The hobo’s essential identity however, based as it was on purposeful disattachment and nonacquisitiveness, could not be reconciled with the new generation of homeless families who were pursuing labor markets previously dominated by hobos.
Though the majority of homeless migrants were still young, white, male, and unattached, this demographic no longer dominated mainstream images of homelessness. Nor did it sit atop a hierarchy of homelessness. During the Great Depression, the collective identity of itinerant workers was redefined. Notably, the most famous image from the Great Depression depicts a migrant woman and her children. This was the new face of homelessness.

The Great Depression was a watershed moment in the history of American homelessness. As the hobo became a cultural relic, homelessness was no longer romanticized and moralized in song, literature, and film. Because so many working-class Americans took to the rails and road in order to subsist and the reality of poverty swept the nation, the hobo would be the last class of homeless person perceived to be a footloose adventurer.

The Hobo Spirit Lives On: Present Day

American fascination with hobohemia has never fully subsided. While mainstream culture is still rife with references to hobohemia, many subcultures have borrowed from or even directly imitated Gilded Age and Progressive Era hobos. The hobo has been represented in nearly every major American literary movement. The most notable of these were the Lost Generation and the Beat Generation.

A survey of contemporary hobo memoirs reveals two distinct categories of modern hobos. The first, which will be referred to as
the *old-school hobo*\(^5\), is most comparable to hobos of the Gilded Age. Though not defined by demographics, these hobos still establish themselves in jungles and utilize hobo argot. Old-school hobos are largely apolitical. Like Gilded Age hobos, individual reasons for homelessness vary among members of this group. Some report being gripped by wanderlust, unable to resist the freedom of the road and rail; others are homeless due to unfortunate circumstances and find that the life of a transient is the best means for survival.

The second category of hobo, the *modern hobo*\(^6\) is most similar to the Progressive Era hobo. Modern hobos are highly politicized and intellectualized. Though anarchism has replaced socialism as the hobo political movement of choice, the nonacquisitive and egalitarian ethos remains the same. Modern hobos participate in a concerted, conspicuous rejection of consumerism and capitalism. This rejection is most apparent in the “freegan” diet - a vegan diet composed of the byproducts of capitalist waste\(^7\). Crimethinc. Workers’ Collective has replaced IWW as the publisher and distributor of radical political materials for this movement and similarly advocates for direct action protest of the patriarchal, capitalist social order. Interestingly, modern hobos mirror Progressive Era hobos in their inconsistencies as well. Whereas IWW hobos upheld a paradigm of white-male dominated subculture while representing an organization that espoused equality, modern hobos have similar demographics, even as Crimethinc. literature is pointedly feminist and egalitarian.

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\(^5\) This is my own designation. No meta-analysis of present day hobo memoirs currently exists in which formal terminology might have been established.

\(^6\) Ibid.

\(^7\) In other words, freegans dumpster-dive for their meals.
Subject Headings

As illustrated by the word cloud above, the bulk of library holdings on hoboes and tramps will be found under the subject heading “Tramps--United States.” Written work may be subdivided by topic or genre: --Biography.; --Case Studies.; --Drama.; --Handbooks, manuals, etc.; --History.; --History--20th century.; --Humor.; --Interviews.; --Language.; --Language--Dictionaries.; --Language--Miscellanea.; --Pictorial Works.; or --Songs and Music (however, in the case of “--Songs and music”, the subject heading “Hobo Songs” is preferred and will generate more results). “Tramps” may also be subdivided geographically within the United States, as in the case of “Tramps--Illinois--Chicago.”

Researchers will find that this topic has many related subjects. Depending on the aspect of hobohemia that most interests the reader, many subject headings may be useful. “Migrant labor” is imprecise but subdivides geographically and by genre, which may lead the researcher toward related works. “Labor Unions” and, more specifically, “Industrial Workers of the World” will be of interest to those whose research is primarily on the politics of hobohemia.

Those who are primarily interested in a particular historical period of hobohemia or tramping are best served by the subject heading “Tramps--United States--History” as Library of Congress does not subdivide subject headings for written works by date or offer subdivisions for “Progressive Era” or the “Gilded Age.” However, researchers interested in the Great Depression may search “Depressions--1929” or “New Deal, 1933-1939” which subdivide geographically within the United States.
Classification

As Dewey and Library of Congress classification schedules are most common to public and academic libraries, those will be covered here. Within each schedule, I have provided two tables. The first table should be utilized as a first point of reference for browsing. The second table lists related subjects, which may be useful as the researcher works from the general to the specific.

Dewey

The most common Dewey classification number for works dealing with tramps, hobos, or hobo-heimia is 305.5, social groups. Nearly all of these will be classified as 305.5 (social sciences, sociology, and anthropology - social groups). These may be further subdivided; the most common subdivisions are listed in the table below.

Most common:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>305.568</td>
<td>Alienated &amp; excluded classes</td>
<td>Most works about hobos, tramps, hobo-hemia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>305.569</td>
<td>Poor people</td>
<td>Works about homelessness in general</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The works listed in this paper show some outliers. While these resources may not be readily apparent when browsing these Dewey classifications, the subject matter is nonetheless pertinent and should not be neglected. Some areas for consideration are listed below.

Related Subjects:

<table>
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<th>Classification</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>301</td>
<td>Sociology--United States</td>
<td>Strictly sociological works; however, some social history works are classified here as well such as Kenneth Allsop's <em>Hard Travellin': The Hobo and His History.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>331.544</td>
<td>Labor Economics - Migrant &amp; Casual</td>
<td>Works dealing with migrant laborers who</td>
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</tbody>
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Workers did not identify as “tramps” or “hobos.” Generally, these relate to depression-era transients. For example, Nels Anderson’s *Men on the Move*.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>331.8</th>
<th>Labor Economics - Labor unions, labor-management, bargaining and disputes</th>
<th>Works dealing with the Industrial Workers of the World.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>362</td>
<td>Social Welfare Problems &amp; Services</td>
<td>Works dealing mainly with the way that transient populations interact with social welfare institutions, such as Joan Crouse’s <em>The Homeless Transient in the Great Depression: New York State, 1929-1941</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>813</td>
<td>American fiction in English</td>
<td>Tramp novels and Literary criticism of tramp novels, such as John Allen’s <em>Homelessness in American Literature</em>.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Library of Congress**

Library of Congress classification is slightly less detailed and subdivided than Dewey and allows for better browsing. In fact, I found many of my resources this way. About three-quarters of my sources are classified as HV4504, HV4505, or HV4506 - Poverty and crime. Related subjects are similar to those listed in the Dewey table.

Most common:

<p>| HV4504/5/6 | Poverty and Crime | Most resources about hobos, tramps, or |</p>
<table>
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<th></th>
<th>Related subjects:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HD8055</td>
<td>General Trade Unions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HV44</td>
<td>Social Group Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS35</td>
<td>American literature--study and teaching</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Annotated Bibliography

A Note on Form

Researchers will find introductory material in subject encyclopedias like Levinson & Ross’ *Homelessness Handbook*. The main body of work on hobos and hobohemia will be found in the form of scholarly books, which generally take either a sociological or historical approach to the topic. Sociological works are usually purely ethnographic or of the Chicago school of sociological thought, i.e. a combination of ethnographic and theoretical approaches. A notable exception to this is Cresswell’s *The Tramp in America*, which takes a novel semantic/semiotic approach. The most comprehensive resources are best classified as “social history,” in that they utilize both sociological and historical approaches to the subject as DePastino’s *Citizen Hobo* masterfully illustrates.

Social History of Homelessness

The following works provide a comprehensive history of homelessness with a particular emphasis on hobos or a history of hobos specifically.


Allsop offers a social history of migratory workers and drifters of all stripes, with particular emphasis on hoboes. His prose leans to the romantic and is embellished by Woody Guthrie lyrics in the introduction, as well as chapter headings such as, “Some People Just Got That Roamin’ Blood in Them,” and “King of the Road.” Factually sound and thoroughly researched, *Hard Travellin’* will appeal to lay readers and scholars alike. However, those interested in modern-day hoboes will wish to consult a more recent resource.


Todd DePastino draws on ethnographic and structural analysis research to produce this comprehensive, cohesive, and exhaustively researched volume. If readers choose only one monograph about the hobo subculture and its larger impact, this should be the one. DePastino focuses on the exclusive aspects of hobohemia, emphasizing that only young, white, native-born men were afforded
the privileges of hobohemia. Additionally, he documents the nation’s shifting definitions of “home” and “homelessness” throughout history, underlining the sociological implications of each shift. He posits that the hobo was both a product and an agent of capitalist expansion, but reminds the reader that hobos were not the only migrant group of their time. He briefly describes other migrant groups that served as both products and agents of expansion in order to compare their customs, struggles, and collective identities to hobos’.

*Citizen Hobo* is chronologically arranged, and includes a table of contents, bibliographic notes, and an index. DePastino’s research extends to unpublished materials and archives. He skillfully utilizes his research to build a narrative around the hobo and his world. This is an excellent starting place for hobo research; DePastino’s narrative will provide the reader with many adjacent topics to research such as the International Workers of the World, gender politics of the Progressive Era, and the “comic tramp” stage archetype, among many others.


“The history of homelessness is intrinsically interesting in its own right, but its broader significance lies in its connection to economic, social, and cultural trends that affected the entire society.” (p. viii) With this sure statement of intent, Kusmer begins his remarkably detailed history of homelessness in the U.S. from colonial times to present day. Of particular interest are chapters two through four for a treatment of tramps and their historical significance, but readers will have difficulty putting this book down. Thoroughly readable, each line is packed with historical and social import. This is by far the most comprehensive history of homelessness overall in the United States that this researcher discovered. Supplemented with excellent illustrations - both photographs and artwork - Kusmer builds the narrative of the American homeless experience, marking the Civil War as a particular turning point in both general American culture and the culture of homelessness, which gave rise to the phenomenon of tramping as a lifestyle choice. Indeed, the term “tramp” originated as Civil War slang for groups of soldiers going on an excursion, and though the nuances of its connotations has changed over time, the essential concepts of masculinity, freedom, and brotherhood have remained. Kusmer uses the term “tramp” to refer to all unattached, unemployed transients and avoids the
confusion that can arise from hobo distinctions. Though these distinctions are important for a precise definition of hobo collective identity, they are superfluous for Kusmer’s broad history and his choice to avoid these shows excellent editing.


This subject encyclopedia is an excellent first stop for any topic relating to homelessness. It briefly covers hobo literature, songs and writings from the Progressive Era through the Great Depression, particularly on sidebars on pages 12 through 21. These sidebars provide brief glimpses into hobo culture and will certainly entice readers to continue their research. Though brief, Levinson and Ross include colorful aspects of hobohemia and a bit of historical context as well. For the researcher just beginning his or her search, a short bibliography is included on pages 24 through 25.


The eight essays contained in *Walking to Work* provide a social history treatment of the subject, rather than anecdotal or sociological. The essays focus on the basic questions of who the tramp was (demographics), why people became tramps (circumstances), and how tramps interacted with society at large. Monkkonen unfortunately reinforces the myth that tramps and hobos were the only group of workers responsible for the growth of industry in the American West, with statements like “The tramp created the fluid, adaptable, moderately skilled, and strong workforce on which the expanding and changing industrial world absolutely depended.” However, it is worth overlooking these broad claims in order to read a new perspective on the threat that tramps posed to the patriarchal order. Additionally, these essayists examine the complicated relationship between institutions and tramps.


*Riding the Rails* is the companion book to the PBS documentary of the same name. It provides little new information regarding hobohemia at large, but does discuss the ways in which this subculture affected the children and teenagers involved in it. Of
particular interest are the interviews, including two young women who rode the rails during the Great Depression.


Wyman is primarily concerned with migrant labor in the American West from 1870 through the 1920s. He uses the term “hobo” in describing any migrant laborer, rather than restricting “hobo” to its definition of unattached transients, or its connotation of young white males. The confusion of vocabulary is frustrating as he frequently claims that hoboes created the American West. This statement is a common myth in American culture, and readers should be reminded that Wyman is referring to all migrant laborers, including those who were foreign-born, female, or part of family groups. Wyman does include some excellent information about the diversity of migrant labor in the West during the Progressive Era, but unfortunately neglects hobohemia and the white-male dominated subculture of tramping. Readers may wish to peruse this book for context while researching hobohemia, as it covers in detail the work that migrant laborers did and the way that this affected migration trends.

**Sociology of Homelessness**

**Progressive Era**


Nels Anderson’s work on hobos is unsurpassed. Published in 1923, this book remains the authoritative sociological work on hobos prior to the Great Depression. Anderson’s work is informed by experience. Prior to entering the University of Chicago’s graduate program, he was known as “Dean Stiff” on the rails and in the hobo jungles. This firsthand knowledge of his subject made Anderson a unique authority on hobos and tramp life. *The Hobo* details the culture on Chicago’s “main stem.” It is in this work that Anderson first coins the term “hobohemia” which remains in use among social historians to this day. Anderson details the hobo’s habits, culture, sex life, and the establishments that the hobo had come to rely on, including the lodging house. Following its publication and at Anderson’s recommendation, Chicago reformed its lodging houses, placing their operations in the hands of the Department of Public Welfare and
shifting the focus from reform to welfare. These intimate details of a
generally secretive subset of the population were groundbreaking at
the time of their publishing and remain an important work, not only
to those interested in hobohemia, but to all sociologists and
scholars.


Cresswell presents an academic portrait of the tramp as social
construct, struggling to accurately, rather than merely adequately,
define the tramp. He explains, “Definitions, once in existence,
provide the preconditions for any number of forms of knowledge
about the thing that is defined. Every social definition or category is
implicated in the construction, or making up, of people as parts of
the ‘real world.’ Such categories are haunted by the plethora of
meaning associated with them.” By contextualizing the tramp in
history and social constructs of the time, Cresswell painstakingly
details a portrait of the tramp. He is clear that the tramp to which
he refers exists after 1869 and is not informed by tramp literature of
the time, which he feels was mostly authored by “middle class
dropouts.” Though Cresswell may have overlooked some useful
cultural artifacts in his dismissal of tramp literature, his work serves
as an excellent sociological theory of knowledge as applied to tramps
and hobos of the Progressive Era. Furthermore, Cresswell’s work is
the only source in this list that is definitively postmodern in nature.

Retrieved from http://openlibrary.org/books/OL14353265M/Tramping_with_tramps

Josiah Flynt’s seminal *Tramping with Tramps* was the first
ethnographic study of hobo and tramp populations. Flynt, born
Josiah Flynt Willard, dropped his last name to live the tramping life
after graduating from the University of Berlin with the intention of
writing about professional vagrants. The result is picaresque, with
varied tones. At times, Flynt romanticizes the tramp and at others,
moralizes. Often, the articles contained in *Tramping with Tramps* feel
sensational. However, this collection of articles originally published
in magazines secured Flynt a position as the American authority on
tramps for more than a decade. His work informed the work of
most, if not all, participant-observer studies published during the
Progressive Era.

Josiah Flynt broke new ground with “Homosexuality Among Tramps.” This was the first report of homosexuality in transient populations, and it remained the only one in print until Nels Anderson’s The Hobo. Flynt’s tone is one of moral outrage and disgust, pointing to “sexual inversion” as a symptom of the tramp’s more overreaching moral shortcomings. He estimates the incidence of homosexuality in tramp populations to be about 1 in 10 men. However, Ellis included an account by a “sexual invert with complete feminine, sexual inclinations.” This anonymous respondent reports that he seeks out the company of tramps, because in his estimation, 90 to 100 percent of tramps participate in homosexual activity. He goes on to explain that they may prefer the company of women, but prostitutes do not give the experience of “love” or “intimacy” that they crave, so they form short-term, intimate relationships with a “make.” Other tramps, like the anonymous “sexual invert” who penned the response, may have taken to the tramping life in order to fulfill existing homosexual desires. Both accounts describe “jockers” who prey upon young boys (“punks”) who are new to the road, usually between the ages of 10 and 15. Other than the inflated estimation of incidence of homosexuality, the second account serves only to legitimize Flynt’s account.

The Great Depression


Seventeen years after The Hobo was published, Anderson was asked to revisit the topic. He writes that because of his oversight of labor problems taking place in 1923, “The Hobo was out of date about as soon as it was written.” He feels that writing further about the hobo and hobohemia has “no pertinence to the present problems of migrant people.” The migrant laborer in 1940 was a product of economic struggle, not of choice. Hobos were marked by their individualism and desire to live a life on the road. Migrants in 1940 were more likely seeking long-term, settled labor. Nevertheless, Anderson acknowledges that his subject is “an old problem in a new form” and provides a brief history of the technological advances that
have forced laborers to peddle their skills at great distances from their home. Many of the studies included throughout the book point to the fact that prevailing attitudes toward migrants had remained in place as well. Overwhelmingly, property holders and laborers alike indicate a distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor, keeping the migrant laborer marginalized and dependent upon appearance to prove his worth to strangers. Though Anderson acknowledges the increase in families on the road, he focuses this work on unattached migrant laborers and their plight. *Men on the Move* includes many tables and statistics; however, the reader should note that transient populations have been, and remain today, notoriously difficult to poll. Just as *The Hobo* is the authoritative work on hoboes up to 1923, *Men on the Move* shows Anderson’s equally brilliant sociological reporting on migrant laborers following the economic crash of 1929.


Like many authors of the same subject, Crouse elucidates the distinction between hoboes, tramps, and bums; however, she provides one additional distinction, which is particularly well-suited to the era she writes about. Hobos want to work only long enough to save money to have a little fun and move to the next place · their work underwrites their traveling lifestyle. Transients, in contrast, want to settle down someplace with permanent work. This explanation of vocabulary allows her to write much more clearly about her subject. Crouse paints a balanced picture of life on the rails · neither romanticized nor moralized · and provides a sufficient overview of the subculture. She is one of the few authors whose work downplays the incidence of homosexuality in hobohemia; comparing it to the incidence of homosexual activity in construction camps or army barracks, she states simply, “One could expect them to act like any other group of men would act in similar situations.”


As Nels Anderson pointed out in *Men on the Move*, there is little mention of girl tramps in this work except in the title. Minehan’s ethnographic work was inspired by a number of case histories, collected by the author, of men who were rendered homeless after the economic crash of 1929. However, he felt that “case histories
gave me little inkling into the inner mind of the man on the bread line.” And he began his tramping journey in the participant-observer style of research, in order to understand and document the men that “seemed like some strange night creatures who stirred abroad from caves and water holes”; whose “talk was not as other men’s.” This work is most notable as the best strictly ethnographic study completed during the Great Depression. This researcher noted marked differences in Progressive Era hobo culture and that of the Depression era, particularly the openness of Minehan’s traveling partners and research subjects. Minehan notes that he asked many questions, “Where were their homes? Where were they going? How long had they been on the road? Why did they leave home? What did they expect to do in the future? How did they live? What did they eat? Where did they sleep? How did they get clothing? What did they do all day?” These questions would have been met with suspicion and Minehan would have likely been shunned by Progressive Era hobos. After 1929, however, he seems to find willing subjects who provide him with personal histories. This, along with Anderson’s *Men on the Move*, will be particularly useful to researchers interested in Depression-era itinerant laborers and their way of life.


This research monograph, published in 1935, provides much of the raw data that sociological works of the era relied upon and analyzed, including Nels Anderson’s *Men on the Move*. Webb studied and surveyed transient populations in Seattle, Los Angeles, Phoenix, Denver, Kansas City, Dallas, New Orleans, Memphis, Minneapolis, Chicago, Pittsburgh, Boston, and Jacksonville, FL. His research focuses on the demographics of the transient populations and the effects of the Transient Relief Program, included in the Federal Emergency Relief Act of 1933. Webb finds that, as in the Progressive Era, transients registered for government aid were largely young (aged 16-35), white, native-born men with at least a grade school education. Additionally, 90-95% of respondents indicated that they were willing and able to work, and most transients were migrating from the East/Southeast to the West/Southwest. This data indicates that little had changed regarding the demographics of hoboes from Nels Anderson’s 1923 *The Hobo*. 
Tramp Memoirs & Literary Criticism

Tramp memoirs are, for the most part, uniform in content and tone. A selection of the forty tramp memoirs published between 1890 and 1940 are included here. Lynne Adrian describes nearly every book in the genre with her summation, “Almost invariably they are written after their authors had ceased actively riding the rails . . . All the hobo autobiographies tell of the author’s first train ride and the hobo who initiated him (or rarely her) into the ways of the road. The autobiographies include stories of deckng a fast train, holding down a particularly hard train, or riding in a tough spot on the train. They include a tale of an unusual person who has taught the author something important and the tale of someone killed from riding a train the wrong way. There are tales of the beauties of nature, run-ins with the law, and developing skill at begging for food.” Though these memoirs may not be exceptional (or particularly well-written for that matter), it is important to recognize each of these works as part of a shared experience, and therefore an integral part of the collective identity of hobohemia.

Due to the consistency of these memoirs, most will be listed with no annotation. The above description may serve as an annotation for any and all of the books listed. Jack London’s The Road has been annotated, due to its historical significance.


A note on the publication date: this tramp autobiography was written and published late in Fox’s life. Nevertheless, it takes place in the 1920’s and differs very little from other tramp memoirs.


Jack London was the nation’s first proletarian writer and literary millionaire. Of the copious tramp ethnographies and memoirs to
arise between 1890 and 1940, his is the most authentic work that is not strictly sociological in nature. In 1894, London quit his job and took to the rail-riding tramping lifestyle. By 1907, he was “profesh”-tramping argot for a professional tramp. *The Road* is London’s first autobiographical work. Though many critics argue that London’s success was in spite of his tramp literature, not because of it, *The Road* is a fascinating account and will appeal to fans of tramp literature and fans of London’s novels. In fact, those interested in hobo-hobohemia from an insider’s perspective would be well advised to skip the work of Josiah Flynt and others in favor of Jack London and Nels Anderson.

*The Road* documents the necessity of duplicity and theatrics in a tramp’s life, “Upon his ability to tell a good story depends the success of the beggar. First of all, and on the instant, the beggar must ‘size up’ his victim. After that, he must tell a story that will appeal to the particular personality and temperament of that particular victim... He must create spontaneously and instantaneously—and not upon a theme selected from the plentitude of his own imagination, but upon the theme he reads in the face of the person who opens the door.” In this passage, London seems not only to be explaining the necessity of creativity in a tramp’s survival, but shedding light on the phenomena of tramp literature in general. One feels that the uniformity of tramp memoirs reflects the theme tramps are reading on the face of society at large; each work an attempt to extract from readers the sympathy and interest that tramps seek in their “victims” by playing on the themes of society and politics that arose in the Progressive Era. London himself provides commentary on the struggle between workers and employers, the impoverished and the wealthy, unions and big business, and the general feeling in America that the hardworking everyman was entitled to his slice of the proverbial pie.

**Literary Criticism**


Allen offers an analysis and criticism of tramp memoirs, sometimes referred to as “life on the road” stories. Given that approximately forty of these memoirs were published between 1890 and 1940, readers may be surprised to find that *Homelessness in American Literature* is one of only two books that include literary criticisms of
the subgenre. Chapters two and four will serve readers who are interested in comparing Progressive Era tramp memoirs with Beat Generation depictions of life on the road. Allen documents the cultural shift from Horatio Alger’s sketches of lazy, shiftless, and sometimes criminal tramps to Jack London’s romantic tramp hero in *The Road*. Additionally, he points out that many tramp memoirists were not tramps, but participant observers who played the part of the tramp in order to get “writing material.” He rightly points out that most tramp memoirs fail to mention the politics of tramping, such that pursuing a tramping life is effectively a renouncement of capitalist/consumerist social norms. Unfortunately, Allen’s moralistic tone can obscure his more valid critiques of the genre. He opines that regardless of content, the mere fact of a hobo autobiography romanticizes the condition of poverty and homelessness, and is therefore detrimental to society as a whole. *Homelessness in American Literature* is the most well researched literary criticism available. Readers are advised to proceed with a skeptical eye to Allen’s social commentary and focus instead on his literary criticisms and the historical context he provides.


Feied’s work is a refreshing counterpoint to Allen’s *Homelessness in American Literature*, as it critiques and analyzes a similar subject without the moralistic tones. Unfortunately, Feied’s shortcoming is on the opposite end of the spectrum and he romanticizes the hobo, contributing to the perception of hobos as “cultural hero” in his analyses. Feied’s focus is more on hobos as they relate to culture, versus Allen’s focus on the homeless as they relate to society. Readers should take note of the connotations attached to the vocabulary used to describe the subject (“hobo” versus “homeless”) and be cautioned against allowing the manipulation of vocabulary to color their opinion. Both books should be consulted for a balanced opinion so that readers may form their own views about the impact of hobos in literature on culture and society.

**Ephemera & Song**

The 1939 Year Book is a remarkable piece of ephemera, published by the Hoboes of America. This item was distributed at the 1939 Hobo Convention and is largely dedicated to extolling the virtues of the Hoboes of America and the “Hobo King” Jeff Davis. The Hoboes of America does not warrant much coverage in reputable sources, and Jeff Davis appears to be a poseur. However, this booklet is extremely useful for its sections on “tramp distinctions” and the hobo dictionary. It is available now as an eBook; a few American libraries include this item in their holdings, most in microfiche or microform. Though the 1939 Year Book does not represent the majority of hobos and tramps, it is certainly a part of hobo history and contributed greatly to the current romanticized view of hobos as hard-working, kind-hearted men of the road.

Songs of the Workers, on the Road, in the Jungles and in the Shops---Songs to Fan the Flames of Discontent. Chicago: Industrial Workers of the World, 1919.

The I.W.W. songbook is the most valuable cultural artifact left by the hobohemian subculture. In 1914, Carleton Parker noted, “Where a group of hoboes sit around afire under a railroad bridge, many of them can sing I.W.W. songs without a book.” (DePastino, p. 97) The International Workers of the World served to politicize the hobo movement, cement a collective identity, and create the first hobo newspaper, the Industrial Worker. The Little Red Songbook, as the I.W.W. songbook came to be known, was first printed in 1905. Thirty-eight known editions have been printed to date, including the most recent, in 2010.


This collection of hobo songs and vernacular was published just as the golden age of hobohemia ended, and is an attempt to preserve a culture that was quickly vanishing. Milburn’s preface speaks to the romance of the tramp archetype: “Tramps and hoboes are the last of the ballad makers. Not in the Tennessee hills, or among the Sea Island Negroes, or in any other such arrested community is there a
more vigorous balladry than that which has been flourishing for the past fifty years in America’s peripatetic underworld.” However, his observations about the hobos’ songs themselves belie the romance in his previous statements, “Hobos do not have much truck with beauty, but in spite of that sad fact, there are occasional fine strains of imagery running through their songs.” Milburn traveled by freight train and camped in hobo jungles in 1926 and ’27, compiling the songs, tales, and lingo he heard from tramps and hobos. His preface disregards urban lodging houses and main stems, focusing instead on outlying hobo jungles as the nuclei of culture. Despite this oversight, *The Hobo’s Hornbook* remains the best collection of intangible hobo-heimian cultural artifacts.


Music from the Progressive Era and the Great Depression is included on this soundtrack. The most notable track for those interested in hobo culture is Harry McClintock’s *Big Rock Candy Mountain*, recorded in 1928. Though the lyrics have been edited to transform this hobo standard into a children’s song, the original is included on this soundtrack. Listeners should note that though McClintock edited out the final verse of the song, which refers to the predatory pederasty present in hobo subculture:

> The punk rolled up his big blue eyes  
> And said to the jocker, “Sandy,  
> I’ve hiked and hiked and wandered too,  
> But I ain’t seen any candy,  
> I’ve hiked and hiked till my feet are sore  
> And I’ll be damned if I hike any more  
> To be buggered sore like a hobo’s whore  
> In the Big Rock Candy Mountains.”

**Related Topics**

**Industrial Workers of the World**


This collection of comic-book-style graphics and text by thirty-five artists is a creative, entertaining presentation of the labor union’s
history. Section three, “Wobblies Far and Wide” includes four graphic stories of hobos and related subject matter, such as the free speech fights that took place on main stems all over the country. Though the book is certainly not intended to be research material - it doesn’t have an index - it does present the information in a much more colorful way than any other source listed here. While it may serve more as entertainment than research, it seems fitting to present the history of the Industrial Workers of the World in such an unconventional, original manner.


This imposing volume is the exhaustive history of the Industrial Workers of the World up to its “decline” in 1924. As the majority of the I.W.W.’s efforts have taken place prior to 1924, this volume should serve as an excellent research source. However, those interested in the organization’s work following 1924 should supplement research with more recent literature. No book published since *We Shall Be All* provides as complete and comprehensive a history of the golden age of the I.W.W., and one hopes that a second volume or updated edition will be issued in order to cover later years. *We Shall Be All* is arranged chronologically, dividing into four main parts the I.W.W.’s history: “Origins, 1890-1905; Formative Years, 1905-1908; Free Speech and Free Men, 1909-1917; Trials and Tribulations, 1917-1924.” Dubofsky does not, however, use the term “hobo” in this volume, so readers should search the index for specific persons related to the I.W.W. within hobohemia, such as J.H. Walsh, Ben Reitman, Jacob Riis; publications such as the *Industrial Worker*; or events, such as the free speech fights.


*Rebel Voices* is a treasure trove of illustrations, political cartoons, poetry, songs, and essays that combine to tell the history of the Industrial Workers of the World. Chapter 3 is dedicated entirely to I.W.W. Itinerants, and leads nicely into chapter 4 which documents the Free Speech Campaigns which largely took place on “main stems” and included a great deal of hobo participation. While not as exhaustive a history as Dubofsky’s *We Shall Be All*, it does provide a much more complete representation of the intertwined relationship between hoboes and Wobblies. For those interested in I.W.W. history
as it pertains to hoboes, tramps, and migrant laborers, this book will prove to be a more than sufficient resource.

**Social Reformers - Selected Biographies**


Ben Reitman’s name can be found in nearly every book about hobos and tramps from the Progressive Era. His work with hobos, the Industrial Workers of the World, and his publication of one of the classic “life on the road” books, *Sister of the Road: The Autobiography of Box-Car Bertha*, cemented his place in the hobo hall of fame. Though this book is not a handy reference source about hobo life in general, those interested in the politics of hobohemia should read the story of Ben Reitman. Bruns’ exhaustively researched and indexed book is an easy read about a brilliant man.


Though *Sister of the Road* claims to be the “autobiography” of Box-Car Bertha, “as told to Ben L. Reitman,” correspondence between Reitman and his publishing company prove this to be his own work. Indeed, many of his closest acquaintances report that the bulk of this work is comprised of Reitman’s own experiences. This fact, however, was undisclosed to the public at the time of publication and the book contributed to the pearl-clutching panic in society at the concept of “lady hobos” during the early years of the Great Depression. Unfortunately, Bertha falls into the cliché of hobo memoirs and by the end of the book is touting the joys of motherhood. This emphasis on maternal instincts is typical of hobo folklore, which typically depicts women as strong, protective, and nurturing. One is reminded of The Band’s “Up On Cripple Creek” lyrics in the depictions of women in hobo lore and literature:

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Up on Cripple Creek, she sends me
If I spring a leak, she mends me
I don’t have to speak; she defends me
A drunkard’s dream if I ever did see one.
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While this view of women is certainly positive, even adoring, it still patronizes women. Though they are now seen as strong protectors, rather than delicate beings in need of protection, they are still happiest when serving men and powerless over their instinct to
nurture men and children. Women who live as men in this subculture - free from home and its consumerist trappings, untethered to job or family - are viewed as unable to be truly happy, because they are denying their maternal instincts to nest and breed. However, the mythical lady hobo does maintain her independence, in so much as she never asks a man to stay with her. She is content to raise a family by herself and remain a safe harbor for her beloved to come to and leave as he pleases. Researchers interested in women hobos and gender roles during the Great Depression will find an excellent representation of prevailing values with regards to women in this book.


While Riis’ groundbreaking expose of New York tenement life is not directly about hobohemia, this portrait of living conditions among non-property-holding, non-migratory classes provides excellent context for any research regarding poverty in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. Riis’ work as a social reformer also dovetails nicely with Ben Reitman’s similar work. While Reitman sought to reform labor and living conditions for itinerant populations, Riis’ work was primarily in reforming living conditions among impoverished urban populations.

**Gender**


*American Masculinities* takes on the difficult task of condensing gender politic commentary into exceedingly brief subject encyclopedia entries. Lynne Adrian mentions both the homosexual aspect of life on the road and the exaggerated displays of masculinity that hoboes undertook. These topics certainly deserve further research, but this is an excellent starting place to explore the sexual and gender identity politics of hobo culture.
Today’s Tramps

Old School Type

The author, an anthropology student, takes a “hobo trip,” writing about his train-hopping journey in the first person. This memoir reads like a cultural tourism tale in parts, but hobophiles will enjoy the vicarious thrills as the author learns to navigate train yards, hobo jungles, and life on the road. Despite its “Tramps --United States --Case studies” subject heading, *Rolling Nowhere* is decidedly a memoir, with little of value to add to broader research about hobos, tramps, or present-day rail riding.


This book of photographs and text presents a contemporary participant-observer account of tramping. The author does not address his intentions with the book, except to say that he cannot present his experiences as purely sociological research or fieldwork because of the bonds he formed with his subject and the subsequent loss of rigor in his research. It seems Harper subscribes to the ubiquitous notion of tramping life as addictive. Once immersed, he found himself romanticizing the life even more. This book is useful for some of Harper’s observations, such as the fact that his subjects did not experience friendship in the way that he did. The concept of long-term relationships was as alien to them as the concept of a long-term home. However, the real value in *Good Company* is the photography. The grittily beautiful portraits of current hobo life are an excellent tool for comparison to photographs included in books about Progressive Era hobos, such as DePastino’s *Citizen Hobo* and Kusmer’s *Down & Out, on the Road*.


Dale Maharidge’s series of first-person essays combine with Michael Williamson’s masterful photographs to tell to tell the story of Blackie and his cohorts in their riverside jungle. Maharidge and Williamson paint a vivid picture of modern hobo life in West Sacramento. Some of the hobos profiled are homeless by choice; others have been homeless from a young age or are rendered homeless by unfortunate circumstances. The author does romanticize these “River People” to
some degree and in one passage implies that a visit to the jungle is a vacation from the responsibilities of civilian life, but this is tempered by Williamson’s photographs, which portray the hardships as well as the beauty of life in the jungles and on the rails. Despite the cultural tourism, readers will be endeared to Blackie and his friends.


This anthology of hobo anecdotes, advice, poetry, and short biographies provides a glimpse into the lives of modern-day hobos. Each author writes under his or her hobo moniker. Garrison Keillor’s quote about this book is included on the cover: “Stay home and read this book about the noble hobo.” However, One More Train to Ride does not elevate train hopping or homelessness as a “noble” pursuit. On the contrary, it is characterized by the remarkably honest words within - many hobos express a desire to settle down and start a family, and in the next breath articulate their strong anxiety about juggling the responsibilities of the “straight life.” Some hobos confess that they have debilitating mental health issues that would prevent them from leading “normal” lives. Readers will likely feel alternately sympathetic and intrigued, and will certainly come away from this book with a greater understanding of hobos past and present. After all, the peril of hopping a moving freight train hasn’t changed much since the golden age of hobohemia.

Modern Type


Written by an anonymous freegan anarchist tramp, this travelogue was originally published in a series of unarchived homemade zines that would have been lost had they not been fortuitously rescued from a bathroom by a band member staying with friends. The entries in these zines were compiled and edited into a single work by CrimethInc. Worker’s Collective, an anarchist and post-anarchist decentralized collective that promotes direct action and hopes to achieve a classless society. CrimethInc’s catalogue of printed and digital works, available on their website at www.crimethinc.com, offer a more complete view of modern anarchist hoboing.

Influential Fiction Featuring Hobos or Hobohemia
As is the wont of the genre, the fiction included in this list romanticizes the hobo-intellectual persona to a great degree. Nonetheless, this fiction has shaped the contemporary view of hobos and hobohemia. These works will be of interest to readers interested in reading about hobos for pleasure, but will be of little use to researchers in need of historical and sociological data. For that reason, they are listed here as “further reading” suggestions and are not annotated.


**Prominent Publishers**

University of Chicago Press prints a great deal of the sociological works on hobohemia, beginning with Nels Anderson’s seminal work, *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man*, in 1923. University of Chicago Press went on to publish all of Anderson’s works, and more recently published Todd DePastino’s *Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America*. University of Chicago Press’ prominence in this subject area is due to the University’s focus on sociology, which gave rise to a philosophy of sociology known as the Chicago School. The University of Chicago was the first to combine theory with ethnography in an urban environment. The most relevant of Chicago’s sociologists to this subject area is Nels Anderson who studied in the University’s department of sociology.

Chicago is home to many publishers whose works on the Industrial Workers of the World appear in the following bibliography. Though these works are not limited to one publisher, the fact that all are in Chicago is likely due to the fact that the I.W.W.’s General Headquarters is stationed in Chicago.

Those interested in modern hobohemia and its anarchistic politics are advised to begin their research with CrimethInc. Workers Collective. The CWC is a de-centralized network of independent cells that collaborate to publish works of propaganda, travelogues, and memoirs. These works are all directly related to anarchism and post-anarchism and mimic many of the more radical sentiments of the Industrial Workers of the World.