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Chapter Nine

Between Romance and Degradation

Navigating the Meanings of Vagrancy in North America, 1870–1930

Tobias Higbie

When American reformers “discovered” unemployment and vagrancy during the 1870s, they launched a debate about work and poverty that remained vigorous through the 1920s and in some ways still resonates in contemporary politics. Who were these people without jobs who wandered from town to town, begging for meals and straining the meager social services of local communities? Were they honest workers cast into poverty by forces outside of their control, or had their own character flaws, addictions, and manic driven them from the company of ordinary workers? Was tramping, like the frontier, a safety valve for overburdened urban labor markets, or was it a degrading perversion of normal life? 1

Consider the life histories of two “vagrants” with very different outcomes. Anton Johansen was born in Germany in the 1870s and as a child moved with his family to Clinton, Iowa. He began working at age twelve, and at eighteen he left town in order to avoid his father’s wrath after he was fired from his job for loafing. Over several years in the late 1880s to early 1890s, he gained a wealth of experience and work skills as a hobo, one of the millions of men who traveled by freight train in search of seasonal work in construction and extractive industries. Claiming the qualifications of a skilled carpenter he took jobs only to be fired in a few days when the foreman discovered his incompetence. Little by little, he learned the craft and the work culture. He also began to think critically about American social and economic conditions thanks to the socialist tramps he met on the road. Like other transients he worked, he begged for food and handouts, he went hungry, and he spent time in jail. But eventually he returned home,
married, and later moved to Chicago, where he became a leader of the anarchist community and the labor movement. His life story became the subject of a famous Progressive Era “human document,” Hutchins Hapgood’s *The Spirit of Labor* (1907). Now that his experiences as a vagrant were safely in the past, he considered his experiences as a vagrant to be them a valuable education in economics, politics, and psychology that helped him with his career.

A second laborer, Earl Coole never made it that far, and what we know of his life comes from a coroner’s inquest. In the summer of 1915 the seventeen-year-old was working for a farmer near Aberdeen, South Dakota. As the harvest finished up, he drew his pay and headed into town for a little excitement. As he walked along the tracks he met two harvest hands that had worked their way up from Arkansas. These two were packing a bottle of bootleg liquor, and they sold some to Coole, who promptly slugged back a few shots. His fast friends left him there by the tracks, staggering and holding his head in his hands. An hour later Coole lay unconscious on the tracks as a freight train came around the bend and, despite the engineer’s slamming on the brakes, crushed his young body.

Both Anton Johanssen and Earl Coole would have been called vagrants, and both were part of a much larger phenomenon I term the hobo migration. Between 1865 and the 1930s millions of laborers participated in this migration, cycling between seasonal work in agriculture, railroad construction, logging, and mining. Known variously as hoboes, tramps, and migratory workers, they were mainly young men, equally from urban and rural homes, and racially and ethnically similar to the working-class and rural populations around them. In the springtime, they hired out on railroad building and maintenance crews, living in remote areas along the railway lines, often in converted rail cars. In late summer they found work in the Great Plains wheat harvest, joining poor farmers, unemployed urban workers, and the occasional
student in a labor market that by 1920 was drawing as many as one hundred thousand workers each summer. As the harvest ended, some workers flowed into the northern timber industry. Others wintered in transient districts of large cities, picking up odd jobs or living off their accumulated earnings; or they returned to family farms and working-class homes.

The divergent fates of Johanssen and Coole highlight the difficulty of encompassing and defining this thing we're calling vagrancy. Some vagrants settled into relatively normal lives. Like Johanssen, more than a few prominent men recounted their tramping experiences in memoirs and interviews: writers Carl Sandburg and Jack Conroy, historian Philip Taft, and radical leaders like William Z. Foster and Ralph Chaplin, among others. Others were literally torn apart by the experience, their names and life histories lost to us, or filed with coroners inquests. For at least one historian, the difference was clear: the smart ones got out, the others succumbed. But this is too easy. Historians usually encounter tramps through the documents of the state—arrests and coroners inquests—through the words of newspaper reporters, the commentary of employers. Compared to the millions who spent some time on the road, we have very few memoirs and interviews that offer the voice of those who survived. Most disappeared after their brief interaction with the historical record, and we are hard pressed to say with any certainty what happened to them.

Like the people of other times and places explored in this volume, North American hoboes are a geographically and temporally specific manifestation of the discourses and experiences linked to vagrancy. As a mass social phenomenon that lasted more than fifty years, the hobo migration is a particularly useful point of reference for understanding the meanings of vagrancy. It created a powerful set of discourses that would influence sociological understandings of migration, poverty, and masculinity for years after the migration had faded.
These sociological discourses in turn had their impact on how historians have defined and described the experience of vagrancy and of the working-class and immigrant communities from which many so-called vagrants emerged and returned to. After briefly tracing some of this historiography, I turn to an analysis of the experience of vagrancy in North America between the 1870s and 1920s. It is in this context that vagrancy is most clearly part of regional migration patterns that were in turn linked to national and transnational flows of people, commodities, and ideas.

**Vagrancy Discourse and Hobo Historiography**

As the other essays in this volume make clear, ideas about vagrancy and experience of vagrancy did not always fit together neatly. Pioneered by the English, talk of vagrancy-talk has always been a discourse of social control that criminalizes certain populations in order to facilitate selective punishment. Vagrants are those who are liable to be arrested for vagrancy. In some cases, as in postrevolutionary China, they are a relatively well-defined group—beggars. In other cases, like colonial Kenya, vagrancy came to define entire working-class populations. In many cases, vagrancy talk is aimed at young working people, and especially those young working people who embody their society’s shift from agricultural to industrial production. For better or for worse, vagrants symbolize a very modern set of potentialities: freedom from social norms, and the danger of people set free.

In nineteenth-century North America those who wrote harshly about tramps had, paradoxically, often looked to the experience of tramping for their personal liberation from the hassles of materialism and the moral expectations of their middle-class communities. The most famous of these writers were men who had gone “undercover” to investigate the tramps. Commenting on his undercover work during the 1877 railway strike, the detective Allan
Pinkerton quipped, “No person can ever get a taste of the genuine pleasure of the road and not feel in some reckless way . . . that he would like to become some sort of a tramp.” Others went beyond dabbling in trampdom, embracing the underworld so completely that they lost their own identity. Born into a prominent Midwestern family, Josiah Willard ran away from home as a teenager and lived for years as a tramp, taking on the road name Cigarette. When he returned to middle-class life in the 1890s he made a name for himself with a series of popular articles on tramps under the pen name Josiah Flynt, and even took a job advising railroad managers how to keep tramps off their trains. When he died young—probably from alcoholism—his friends eulogized him as a man who longed to escape himself: give him “the disguise of a vagabond, or whisky with which to fortify himself, and the man’s spirit sprang out of its prison of flesh, like an uncaged bird.”

Sociologists of the early twentieth century would aim for a more objective relationship with their research, but they too relied heavily on participant observation to validate the information they received from working-class informants. Because sociology was only then emerging as a separate discipline, some early-twentieth-century studies looked a lot like their predecessors. Reflecting the drive for social reform and economic rationalization, freelancers like the Protestant minister Edwin Brown and the personnel executive Whiting Williams went undercover and wrote popular studies that suggested reforms and programs that they believed would lessen or eliminate tramping. Others went undercover as part of more systematic studies. As graduate students, the social scientists Frederick Mills and Peter Speck shipped out with hoboes, lumberjacks, and railroad workers as part of the massive U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations research project between 1912 and 1914. Similar studies were underway in Canada, most prominently by Edwin Bradwin, an adult educator working in the railroad, timber, and
mining camps of the Canadian north in the years before World War I. Interest in vagrancy continued after World War I with two major U.S. studies. One by economist Don Lescohier focused on the Great Plains wheat harvest and its workers. The other, Nels Anderson's *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man* (1923) looked at the bohemian neighborhoods of Chicago and was the first research monograph in the prominent series of the University of Chicago School of Sociology. Anderson had been a hobo for several years in his youth, and much of his study was based on participant observation in Chicago's migrant district.

By 1930 the hobo migration in the North American West was in deep decline because of mechanization in harvesting, mining, and timber. In the context of the Great Depression, vagrancy took on a different, or at least more complex look—the image of Dorothea Lange’s Migrant Mother now competed with that of unattached male workers. During the 1950s and 1960s, studies of vagrancy per se turned increasingly to the down-and-out in the declining urban skid rows. The emergence of the New Social History brought a number of studies of nineteenth-century vagrancy as historians began to mine quantitative data and other artifacts of earlier sociological investigations. Historians of crime and policing like Eric Monkonnen, scholars of unemployment like Paul Ringenbach and Alexander Keyssar, and several unpublished dissertations tried to recover the experience of tramping, while Amy Dru Stanley connected the discourse of tramping to broader postemancipation debates on free labor and women’s citizenship and economic rights.

Since 2001 at least three monographs have dissected vagrancy, broadly defined. Tim Creswell’s *The Tramp in America*, takes the perspective of critical geography to assess the ways in which tramps’ mobility undermined efforts to stabilize capitalist society, and the various cultural projects to define the tramp in a way that would work with capitalism. Covering the
tramp through the lens of homelessness are Kenneth Kusmer’s *Down and Out, on the Road: The Homeless in American History* and Todd DePastino’s *Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America*. Both books connect vagrancy to issues of urbanization, housing, and welfare policy. DePastino’s book also discusses the differential valuing of geographic and seasonal mobility for the rich and poor in America—the rich, after all, were also very mobile—and so places the ideology of home and homelessness at the center of twentieth-century American history.¹¹

My own approach to vagrancy has drawn more from the social history of working-class and immigrant communities than from the historiography of the welfare state. *Outcasts* consciously avoids the lenses of vagrancy and homelessness and situates its analysis in the context of regional labor markets. This approach echoes other histories of internal migration, especially Gunther Peck’s *Reinventing Free Labor* and Cindy Hahamovitch’s *Fruits of Their Labor*.¹² Peck’s study looks at “floating labor” in three different sites across North America, drawing on sources in several languages to explore the structures of labor markets, the experiences of workers, and the power of immigrant middlemen who supplied workers to the North American labor market. In contrast, Hahamovitch looks at the seasonal migration of agricultural workers up and down the Atlantic Coast during the early twentieth century. Although urban immigrants played a role in these labor markets early on, an increasing number of workers were African Americans from the rural South looking to supplement family incomes. Hahamovitch also explores the expanding role of the federal state in mobilizing and disciplining migrant workers during the New Deal.

These and other studies reflected a turn toward a more dynamic understanding of community among social historians. Beginning in the 1980s immigration historians had urged
studies that could explain interactions between ethnic groups as well as life within the ethnic community. The turn away from a focus on immigrant assimilation eventually prompted the exploration of “transnational” aspects of migrant life, defining community as something that could transcend the bounded geographic space of the ethnic neighborhood. In a similar vein, at least two generations of labor historians have been breaking away from what sociologist Sonya Rose has called the “quintessential worker problem.” The search for a normative working-class experience, Rose argues, created a distorted image of working class life that left out the experiences of women, minorities, and others with restricted access to the best-paid, most steady jobs. In brief, the “subject” of labor and immigration history has multiplied and diversified.

Vagrants, agricultural workers, farmers, and others marginal to labor history, because of their tenuous connection to full time wage labor and their lack of labor unions, now must be drawn deeper into the mainstream of social history.

Who Were the Hoboes?

There are few hard statistics on the hobo migration. The census did not identify migrants, and in any case they would have been as liable to undercounting as are poor workers in our day. Early-twentieth-century economist Carleton Parker figured that more than 10 million men worked in unskilled occupations. During the first three decades of the twentieth century, the U.S. Census counted roughly 30 percent of the labor force as lumbermen, farm laborers, and nonfarm laborers. Obviously, not all these people were hoboes, but these occupations were subject to extreme seasonal variations, as were the skilled craftsmen and factory workers. As the labor economist William Leiserson wrote in 1916, because of seasonal and business cycle related unemployment, “practically every wage-earner” passed through the ranks of “floating labor” at some point in his life.
A focus on the West North Central states (Kansas, Missouri, Iowa, Nebraska, South Dakota, North Dakota, and Minnesota) highlights the demographic similarities between those likely to be seasonal migrants and the rest of the population. Based on a sample of the 1910 manuscript census, the region’s males over ten years of age were 97 percent white, 80 percent U.S. born, and 96 percent literate. Laboring men (lumber workers, farm laborers, and nonfarm laborers) were 95 percent white, 79 percent U.S. born, and 92 percent literate. There were significant differences between men classed as farm laborers and nonfarm laborers, although anecdotal evidence suggests a good deal of cross over between the two groups. Farm wage laborers had a median age of twenty-one, making them younger than nonfarm laborers and the male population generally. Only about 12 percent of farm wage laborers were foreign born, with Scandinavians and Germans the largest immigrant groups; however, children of immigrants were a significant subsection of this group. Nonfarm laborers counted in the 1910 census sample were older, more likely to have families, and more likely to be foreign born. These workers had a median age of thirty, in line with the general male population of working age. Thirty-six percent of nonfarm laborers were foreign born, a significantly greater proportion than in the general population of the region. Scandinavians and Germans were most numerous, with significant numbers of Italians, Mexicans, Eastern Europeans, and Greeks. In addition, the census sample included more nonwhite workers (about 10 percent) among nonfarm laborers than in the region’s overall population, reflecting the employment of African Americans and Asians in railroad construction and maintenance, and Native Americans in lumber work.

The migrant workforce was split into a surprising array of occupational types. These could include the familiar harvest hand and lumberjack, but also more exotic names such as terms for railroad laborers (gandy dancer, snipe, and jerry), and various occupations within the
construction industry such as skinner (teamster), mucker (ditchdigger), dino (explosives specialist), and splinter belly (wooden-bridge worker). To a certain extent, these occupational lines could be identified by special clothing and language, but in many cases individual migrants moved between different occupations simply by purchasing the right type of clothing before going to the employment office. Beyond these occupational categories, the most obvious manifestation of hierarchy within the laborers’ subculture was the oft-cited hobo/tramp/bum trinity. Middle-class investigators picked up on these distinctions through the writing and speeches of ex-tramps like Ben Reitman. Although there were many variations on the theme, all posited a hierarchy of character in which hobo was at or near the top and bum at the bottom. Reitman had it that “the hobo works and wanders, the tramp dreams and wanders and the bum drinks and wanders.” A similar version stated, “A hobo is a migratory worker. A tramp is a migratory non-worker. A bum is a stationary non-worker.” Nels Anderson added the “seasonal worker” above the hobo because the seasonal worker followed a definite pattern, whereas “the hobo, proper, is a transient worker without a program.”

Despite these efforts to parse distinctions, the key to understanding the meaning of vagrancy in North America is the mixing of so-called vagrants with more stable workers in the widely dispersed job sites of extractive, transport, and agricultural industries. Census and survey data indicate that the vast majority of unskilled laborers in the upper Midwest actually lived with families, rather than being homeless. Between two-thirds and four-fifths of laborers counted in the census samples for 1900, 1910, and 1920 were either heads of household, children, or lived with relatives. Data on thirty-two thousand harvest workers collected by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) between 1919 and 1921 confirms this statistical impression. About a third of the harvest workers interviewed normally worked for wages in agriculture. Two-thirds were
usually nonagricultural workers—half of whom were skilled workers and half laborers. No more than a fifth of all the harvest workers interviewed by the USDA were classed as migratory workers without homes. Considering the normal image of harvest workers as hobos and tramps—that is, as vagrants—it is striking that 80 percent had homes to return to at the close of the harvest season.\textsuperscript{17}

If they did not go directly home after the harvest, many workers went on to find work in another seasonal industry, especially in timber, mining, and railroad construction. Whether or not their contemporaries would have called them vagrants, many working-class people were compelled to piece together a living from work in various industries. These migration patterns, into and out of seasonal labor markets, reflect both the economistic notion of the “labor reserve” and the survival strategies of poor working-class and rural people. Marx famously predicted that capitalism would push more workers into unemployment, creating a permanent pool of reserve labor that would hold wages down. Cut off from traditional forms of subsistence economy, the labor reserve would become the lumpen proletariat, a dangerous unorganizable class that threatens both capitalism and the organized workers who seek its overthrow. Non-Marxian economists consider these issues from the perspective of the “secondary labor market” of workers who, for whatever reason, do not have full-time wage work. They are the temporarily unemployed, the young, the excluded, the addicted, and the disabled. They are also women who normally work in the home but periodically enter the labor market to raise family income.

Local and regional seasonal work opportunities were vital to the survival strategies of poor urban and rural households generally, not just to the lives of those identified as vagrants and hoboes. Examples of these relationships can be found across North America. Harald Prins has shown that Mi’kmaq tribespeople, whose traditional lands span northern Maine and the Canadian
Maritime provinces, have migrated between community reserves and seasonal employment in logging and potato harvesting for more than 150 years. In a similar way, as Cindy Hahamovitch has written, the Atlantic Coast vegetable and fruit harvests drew Southern African Americans, many of them farmers and sharecroppers, into a migrant system that stretched from Florida to New England. In the Mississippi Delta, African Americans migrated for railroad and lumber work, eventually establishing permanent residence in the expanding sawmill towns of Louisiana and Arkansas. In the Southwest, Mexican American, Mexican, and Native American farmers worked in mines and on railroads not as an end in itself, but as a means to sustain their rural communities, farms and extended family networks. 18

Migration was never a one-way affair from rural community to urban labor market, and neither did the migrants experience a neat “proletarianization” in which they were stripped completely of their access to community resources. Instead, seasonal labor was both a measure of economic stress on the home community and an opportunity to maintain that community through a strategic engagement with wage labor. On the flip side, wherever seasonal labor demand brought outsiders to local communities, their presence highlighted the integration of small-town and rural life with translocal markets (sometimes national, sometimes global), and raised issues about the stability of families and the safety of local residents. This is one of the primary reasons—and not simply because they were young men—that migrant workers in various regions became associated with the negative image of dangerous and disconnected vagrants.

Many of those without homes were, as Vincent DiGirolamo explains elsewhere in this volume, poor boys and young men hard pressed by hunger to find work of any kind. Like Henry McGuckin, they often hit the road after a fight with a parent. Or like Philip Taft, they were living
more or less on the street when the opportunity for work in the West presented itself. With railroads close at hand, working-class youths could get out of town easily. These were certainly the migrants who were most likely to be identified as hoboes and tramps, and the most likely to be prosecuted as vagrants. Commenting on his time as a migrant, Fred Thompson remembered, “the very unpleasant sense of singularity when on a summer day one walks through a small town with a winter overcoat over one arm, knowing he will need it to keep warm that night, even though it marks him as a pesky go-about meanwhile.” Yet despite their harrowing personal stories of hunger, pain, and loneliness on the road, McGuckin, Taft, and Thompson each survived to live more or less normal lives.

The early-twentieth-century world of hoboes and harvest hands was the location of two emergent subcultures that became lightning rods for criticism by outsiders, and played a central role in the local version of vagrancy discourse. Henry McGuckin, Philip Taft, and Fred Thompson shared more than the experience of hoboing. Each of them was an activist in the militant social movement known as the Industrial Workers of the World. The IWW, or the Wobblies, began as a dissident trade union federation in 1905, but became associated with migrant workers in the West, especially after the 1915 founding of its Agricultural Workers’ Organization. For nearly a decade, the AWO maintained a presence in the wheat harvest of central North America and spread its influence into nearby seasonal labor markets in timber, mining, and the emergent oil industry of Texas and Oklahoma.

Unlike most other American unions of the period, the IWW was truly international with branches in Canada, Mexico, Australia, and South America. This loose international network of radical unionists was created by globe-hopping migrant workers, and in turn facilitated the international and even global scope of the hobo migration. The Mexican migrant Primo Tapia
spent time working the Great Plains wheat harvest and was a member of the IWW. When he returned home he applied the his lessons in organizing to local land struggle during the Mexican Revolution. Another migrant, F. G. Peterson came to the United States from Denmark around 1907. He worked his way across the continent, joined the IWW, and became an organizer, and in 1911 briefly fought in the Mexican Revolution before fleeing back to the United States. Another immigrant we know only as Doyle was born in Ireland, came to North America in the 1890s, and claimed to have traveled much of the Western hemisphere, including the major cities of South America. William Z. Foster, who later became a leader of the Communist Party, worked his way to Europe in order to observe conditions of workers there and participate in an international syndicalist labor congress.22

Local and federal authorities brutally repressed the IWW during World War I, imprisoning most of its key leadership for nearly a decade. Nevertheless, the union survived and grew in the 1920s, going into decline in large part due to its own internal factionalism, and the decline of the hobo migration that sustained so many of its members. The reasons for its endurance were clearly linked to its role in providing an infrastructure of community for migrant workers. IWW halls in towns throughout the West were a warm place to visit with well-stocked libraries. As one former Wobbly recalled, “If it had not been for my contact with the IWW and what I gained from them, I would have probably become a criminal. . . . Like many migratory workers, I had left the mill of religion behind me. I couldn’t even be threatened with hell. I had no respect for institutions, because I saw how they worked. I had no way to evolve a sense of values that would make me a social being.”23

The early life of St. Louis carpenter Robert Saunders captures much of the complex dynamic between the potentially liberating and degrading aspects of migrant life. Saunders’ life
is the subject of a fascinating dissertation by Kristine Stilwell, which makes it clear that migrants—that is, "vagrants"—were deeply linked to communities and to wider trends in cultural and social life. Born in 1893, Saunders spent most of his adult life as a husband, a father, a carpenter, and a union leader—hardly the image of the downtrodden tramp. But between 1911 and 1916 he hit the road eight times looking for adventure and for work. He first took to the road as a teenager, more for adventure than for money, and throughout his life he treasured the opportunity to see new places and meet new people. Like many other hobo migrants, Saunders worked a vast array of jobs: urban industry, agriculture, extraction, and transportation. His first successful travels took him to Chicago and Indianapolis, where he worked in factories. Then he went west to work in the wheat harvest, in a salt production facility on San Francisco Bay, and many times as a railroad construction worker. He also joined the IWW and he soon became a professional organizer. But there were downsides to Saunders’ adventures. He was frequently hungry, and often fell sick from bad food and water in work camps. He was thrown in state prison for his part in a Kansas City restaurant workers’ strike. While working as an organizer he came into regular contact with the criminals who robbed harvest hands, and he came very close to becoming a criminal himself. On one of his last rides on a freight train, Saunders nearly fell under the wheels. For several hours he clung to a one-inch-thick steel rod beneath a boxcar, unable to move until the train pulled into the next station. Nevertheless, he considered his experiences an important form of education. As he recalled in his unpublished memoir, "Among the [ho]boes I met more men who thought in abstract terms than in any other group that I have been thrown with in all my life."25

A distinct but overlapping subculture among migrants was that of homosexual men, a reality that encapsulated for mainstream society the dangerous aspects of vagrancy. As the
economist Carleton Parker noted without much elaboration, “There are social dangers which a
group of demoralized, womenless men may engender under such conditions [that are a] greater
menace than the stereotyped ill effects of insanitation and malnutrition.” Most disturbing for
many observers society was the prevalence of sexual relationships between men and young boys,
thought to be endemic to the vagrant world. These were the jocker and the prush\munet\(\) (in tramp
jargon), sometimes known more explicitly as the wolf and lamb, or simply husband and wife.\(^{26}\)
So common was the association between hoboing and intergenerational sex, many memoirists
made a point of stating that their relations with older men were totally platonic.\(^{27}\)

In his groundbreaking sociological study The Hobo, Nels Anderson documented a wide-
ranging culture of homo- and heterosexuality among laboring men. But Anderson’s most
detailed information on homosexuality remained unpublished in his field notes. Among
Anderson’s informants who described their early encounters with homosexuality was an
eighteen-year-old laborer living on Chicago’s main stem (transient district). This “Boy Tramp”
told Anderson that he had his first experience while working in the wheat harvest. In Kansas he
traveled with a man who took a keen interest in his well-being. While waiting in a wheat belt
town for work to begin, the older man suggested that the two walk out of town to a haystack that
would make a good sleeping spot. “When they reached the stack,” Anderson’s notes recounted,
“the man tried to force a union” with the informant, who “opposed him for an hour or so, but
finally submitted.” Anderson’s informant soon parted company with this man but encountered
others like him. Over the winter he returned to his hometown and had no sexual relations with
men. While working in Nebraska and the Dakotas the next year, however, “he met the same
types of men, had the same advances, and again yielded. This time he yielded with less coaxing
than before. He began to get a certain pleasure out of the practice, and even put himself in the
way of men who seemed to be interested.” According to Anderson, the Boy Tramp had 
overcome “any scruples he may have had” and strongly argued the merits of homosexuality.28

Anderson’s field notes represent just the tip of the iceberg according to Peter Boag’s 2003 book, Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest. Drawing on prison and police records from Washington, Oregon, and Idaho, Boag argues that homosexual relationships—especially those between men and boys—were in fact the defining feature of the Pacific Northwest’s seasonal migration of unskilled laborers. Although the world of seasonal migrants was a homosocial male world throughout North America, Boag points out that gender ratios were especially skewed in the Pacific Northwest where there were fifteen males for every female. The region’s male population was also younger than the U.S. average, more likely to be unmarried, and more heavily immigrant. Boag argues that “local authorities clearly utilized laws against same-sex sexual activities as only one part of a larger middle-class campaign to persecute working-class men of racial and ethnic minority backgrounds, particularly the foreign-born.”29 More so than is denoted with a simple notion of vagrancy as lacking a domicile, these mobile workers were vagrants because of their association with radicalism, foreignness, and transgressive sexuality.

The meaning of vagrancy in North America lies in the balance between images of romance and degradation, and between experiences of liberation and privation. The migrant workers of the North American West were often called vagrants, and frequently found themselves in jail for the crime of lacking money, a job, and a known address. Like other workers circulating at the periphery of transitional political economies, their work and their marginalization were central to the smooth functioning of the society that excluded them. The
U.S. and Canadian Wests relied on highly mobile populations. It was no crime to move from place to place, nor was being broke and on the road a guarantee of incarceration. But refusing to work at “going wages,” belonging to the IWW, or engaging in same-sex relationships could easily land a migrant in jail on charges of vagrancy. At the same time, the idea of being a vagrant often attracted both middle-class and working-class people—especially young men—because it offered the trade-off of high wages for relatively brief periods of unpleasant work. The fourteen-hour days of the wheat harvest, after all, were always temporary and therefore more tolerable. For some men, the opportunity to have sex with other men added a powerful layer of desire to the compulsion to find work and earn a living. To the middle-class individuals who went undercover, the tramp world also offered freedom from the expectations of respectability. One person’s liberation is another’s moral degradation, and ultimately most men were on the road because they had few other choices. They needed to earn money for themselves and their families, and they made the best of a bad situation. The bipolar view of tramping as both romantic and degrading facilitated the circulation and selective repression of laborers, creating opportunities to earn a living at the same time that it limited the chances to escape work.

Notes

<des.: set as unnumbered note at the beginning of the notes section> Portions of this chapter are drawn from chapters 3 and 5 of Frank Tobias Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts: Hobo Workers and Community in the American Midwest, 1880–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003). My thanks to Lee Beier, Paul Ocobock, Aminda Smith, Abby Margolis, and Gerry Ronning for their helpful comments and suggestions.


22[13]. Paul Friedrick, Agrarian Revolt in a Mexican Village; John R. Commons, Trade Unionism and Labor Problems, 102; notes on interview with Doyle, 1921, Don D. Lescohier Papers, box 1, folder 1, State Historical Society of Wisconsin[13]; Foster, Pages in a Workers Life; See also the life story of Thomas Wilson, USCIR unpublished records. On international aspects of the IWW, see Verity Bergman and other article in ILWCH[15]; Peter De Shazo, “The Industrial Workers of the World in Chile: 1917–1927” (MA master’s thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1973).


