

## HOBOS AND SONGSTERS: WORKING CLASS CULTURE

by Wayne Roberts

Pour marquer le 50e anniversaire de la Marche sur Ottawa de 1935, l'auteur a utilisé les techniques d'histoire orale pour retracer l'histoire légendaire et souvent mal comprise du hobo canadien.

Les hobos ont fait leur apparition après l'achèvement du réseau ferroviaire national dans les années 1880. Le chemin de fer permettait alors de chercher du travail saisonnier d'un bout à l'autre du pays, dans une économie de ressources naturelles. Vers 1920, à ces "chevaliers du rail" se joignirent des anciens combattants de la Grande Guerre qui ne voulaient plus retourner à la terre après leurs aventures outremer. Ces "hobos" (clochards, chemineaux) comme on les appelle en anglais, devinrent bientôt une intelligentsia canadienne vagabonde, avec pour seuls logis les tentes dressées au hasard des embranchements importants du réseau. La Crise de 1929 gonfla les rangs des hobos chevronnés par l'arrivée de "jeunes en colère" qui ne trouvaient aide ni travail dans les villes, et couraient l'aventure sur les grands chemins.

La vie de hobo donnait à ces jeunes sans espoir un sentiment de camaraderie et leur apprenait l'art de survivre en milieu hostile, les poussant ainsi dans les rangs de l'opposition. C'est ainsi que naquit le groupe d'activistes qui allait organiser l'unique mouvement de protestation sociale de la décennie, la fameuse March sur Ottawa. La guerre de 1939 mit fin au style de vie des hobos, mais ceux-ci ne disparurent pas pour autant. Troquant les wagons pour les champs de bataille, ils continuèrent même après la fin de la guerre leur lutte pour une plus juste économie au sein du mouvement ouvrier.

Canada's hobos have been given a bum rap. But today -- the 50th anniversary of the on-to-Ottawa trek that followed the 1929 stock market crash that sent 300,000 Canadian youth scrambling on top of freight cars to crisscross the country in search of jobs -- we can give these old knights of the road their due.

When the young unemployed huddled around railside campfires in the darkest days of the 1930s depression, they swapped stories and learned the code of the road from two earlier generations of rambblers. These hobo jungles, scattered across the country in all key railway division points, became bootcamps and intellectual storm centres for a generation of labour radicals who made a wide mark on our social and political culture. Long after these young men hung up their old hobo gunnysacks, they hung onto the memories of that decade, and went on to become movers and shakers in social movements that gave play to their freebooting independence.

The earliest hobos, from the 1880s on, were not outcasts. They were part of the roving labour market created by Canada's national rail system and the seasonal booms and busts of a resource economy. Hobos, tramp artisans, journeymen, boomers, piecard artists and w.o.p.s. were in the

same travelling fraternity, all on the same track looking for work on the fringes of civilization.

Those then-commonplace terms testified to the centrality of travel in the search for work -- whether it was skilled tradesmen using their union card for a grubstack (thus "piecard") as they tried their luck in different boomtowns, or unskilled labourers and seasonal immigrants "With Out Passport" (thus w.o.p.).

Hobos were the privates in that labour army that worked the harvest fields in the fall, lumber camps in the winter, and railway construction camps in the spring and summer. Seasoned hobos formed the backbone of the radical IWW or Industrial Workers of the World -- Wobblies, as they were known to friends and I Won't Work by enemies -- wandering troubadours of discontent who sang out "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum" as they signed their red membership cards. Throughout the 1910s and 1920s, the red card was more important than a rail pass for those who rode the freights.

In the 1920s, these grizzled veterans of the road were joined by veterans from World War I, men who had a hard time settling down on the farm once they'd seen "gay Paree". Many who saw the horrors of that war never recovered from the loss of innocence, and took to the road to find new meaning in life. Rather than return to the normalcy of suburbia, they commuted to work on the "sidedoor Pullmans" and found their bedroom communities in the hobo jungles.

Andy Nicholson, whose booming voice still echoes the rhetoric of that decade when he attends NDP gatherings as a representative of the Barrie Labour Council, was one of them. An IWW organizer, he held forth nightly at the discussions held around fires. "The 1920s was the great decade of iconoclasm", he intones. "I think the scholars have neglected that fact". Wobblies didn't pack the Gideon Bible. They packed The Debunker, a popular journal of political and social myth-busting of the day, and that formed the basis of their heated discussions when hanging around between jobs.

And for this generation of 'bos, between jobs was the best way to be. A favourite saying as they heard the morning factory whistles blow was "the master is calling, but I'm not coming". They were Canada's wandering intelligentsia.

The ranks of the old-time drifters were swelled during the 1930s by angry young men denied work, relief or unemployment insurance in their home towns. They were teenagers like Nels Thibault, impatient with feeling like a burden in the cashless economy of his parents' Saskatchewan homestead, and eager for a taste of travel. "Adventure was a great driving force" behind the hobo army, claims the retired president of the Manitoba Federation of Labour. "We were running away from being enveloped in the humiliation of relief, running away into the world".

Francis Furlotte, a laid-off autoworker from Windsor, hit the road from B.C. when he'd spent his meagre savings in 1931. "You might still starve there", he remembered thinking, "but at least you wouldn't freeze". Furlotte crossed the country eight times -- "eight times over the hump" -- looking for work.

They were only two of the 300,000 Canadian youths who did time in remote relief camps for the single unemployed. The relief camps -- run with military discipline and offering meagre board and 20¢ a day -- were a last resort for the unemployed, who gave up the freedom and camaraderie of the open road only when they were starved.

The jungle, where the hobo fraternity gathered, had a subculture all its own. Some men would go out "stemming" -- asking for a handout -- often in return for work. Catholics and Protestants were assigned to their own churches, the young and handsome were sent to neighbourhoods. Others asked for leftovers from bakeries, packing plants and market gardens. At dinnertime, the loot was brought back to the jungle, where it was cooked up by a hobo chef.

"They called me Fingerbowl Slim", Furlotte laughs. "If we were real lucky, we'd snare a chicken by a grain elevator, strangle it and cook it up. That was a real treat", he savours. "Grumps for dinner, we called it".

The hobos had their own version of popular culture -- the hard-hit parade of the dustbowl set. Some would spin tales of woe; some like Saskatchewan's cowboy songster Wilf Carter sang hobo lullabies with lines like "our country is rich, so we go hungry".

The late Charlie Gordon, an NDP stalwart in Nipawin, Manitoba could recite hundreds of lines of poetry repeated by the fire. He travelled with a man who carried a typewriter with him in case the muse hit him while atop a box car. His favourite poem was an ode to mortgages:

We worked through the spring and summer  
Through winter and through fall  
But the mortgage worked the hardest  
And the steadiest of all.

Stood guard at every window  
Closed up every door  
Till happiness and sunshine  
Made its home with us no more.

The weevil and the catworm  
They went as well as came  
But the darkbrowed scowling mortgage  
Stayed forever, eating hearty all the same.

The hobos also had their own political culture, their version of U.S. President Roosevelt's famous fireside chats. "We just talked about the hard times", recalls George Martin, later an important leader of Hamilton steelworkers, "and how they were never going to end. Things were just bloody awful, and we were talking about hobo heaven -- getting to Cuba where you could be in the sun -- or revolution".

The calibre of some of these conversations was apparently quite high. Landon Ladd, recently retired from a career as one of Canada's outstanding labour leaders and mediators, recalls stumbling by one fireside chat in Kamloops. "And what were they talking about? The materialist concept of history! The sum total of that conversation was something that university students of today couldn't get hold of", he snorts.

Ladd believes that his generation of labour leaders and radicals got its light from those fires. "We were outcasts, but we had guts, grit and determination", he says, "and by God we were going to fight the establishment".

The angry young men who got their political education in hobo jungles kicked off the most dramatic and militant demonstration, in fact the only national protest of the decade -- the On To Ottawa Trek of 1935. In B.C., relief camp workers went on strike for meaningful work and real wages, gathered in Vancouver, and then decided to take their protest direct to Ottawa. The sight of 1500 youths riding the freights to unload their indignation in Ottawa captured the imagination of the nation, but caused Tory Prime Minister R.B. Bennett to see red. Denouncing the trek as Communist, he ordered it halted. The trek ended in a massive riot in Regina on Dominion Day.

Nels Thibault never got to join that demonstration; he was organizing the young unemployed to hop aboard in Winnipeg. But in 1981, he got to relive history. As one of the chief Western organizers of the massive demonstration against high interest rates that year, he picked the official banner for the train that carried the western contingents to Ottawa: "The Spirit of '35".

Young 'bos also traded relief and soup kitchen rations for army rations. They filled the Canadian contingents of the 1200-strong Mackenzie-Papineau battalion that fought with the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War. In 1939, large numbers found work in war industries or joined the Canadian armed forces. With full employment, the hobo army was dispersed overnight.

But 1939 was not the end of the hobo experience. The late Carl Anderson, who became one of the United Auto Workers' leading Ontario organizers, could never get over the contrast between his life in the hobo camps and his life in the military. "In the hobo jungles I travelled through the Maritimes and Quebec, we had socialism in its primitive form", he claimed. "In fact, I still love Mulligan stew -- the stew we used to share in the old jungles. And I never forgot the self-discipline of that community, especially when I was eating three 'squares' a day under military discipline".

After the war, Anderson got a job as an industrial worker and joined in with rambunctious veterans eager to taste some of the good life they'd been denied for so many years. Veterans like him were the driving force in the postwar strike wave that still stands out as one of the longest and most militant in Canadian history.

For a hobo peering through the looking glass of passenger cars, "riding the cushions" -- as the term went for those who could pay for a seat -- was a symbol of higher caste. With six years' military training and meals under their belt, they saw to it that the world they returned to after the war would have some cushions for them too. The national dream for them was not the railway, but the industrial unions and social welfare policies that capped off Canada's economic development in the 1940s and 1950s.