"A Flight of Alien Unclean Birds": The Mobility of Hobo Labor in Iowa, 1870s–1910s

NATHAN TYE

As the United States lurched through an unprecedented economic depression, hundreds of unemployed men crossed Iowa in the spring of 1894 to join Jacob Coxey's march on Washington to demand federal support for the unemployed. Press reports identified the marchers as bums and tramps. Rumors of the marchers' purported revolutionary intent garnered sustained attention from law enforcement and government officials wherever so-called Coxeyites traveled. Kelly's Army, the San Francisco-based contingent that crossed Iowa, drew the attention of Iowa's Commissioner of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, W.E. O'Bleness. He and his clerk donned tramp disguises and enlisted in the army as it passed through Adair. O'Bleness wanted to "form his own opinion of the 'invasion' and the invaders."[1] His willingness to understand the marchers contrasted those of some local

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1. *Sixth Biennial Report of the Bureau of Labor Statistics for the State of Iowa*, 1894–95 (Des Moines, 1895), 10–12.

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communities, like Eldon. Eldon's deputies met Kelly's Army with clubs.[2] Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the presence and passage of so-called tramps, hobos, bums, and migratory workers was welcomed and challenged across Iowa.[3]

In his subsequent report to Governor Frank Jackson, O'Bleness argued "there is no doubt . . . that a large percentage really started with the intention of going to Washington and believed that good would result from the movement." O'Bleness found that a majority of the men wanted work if they could find it and could not, contrary to press reports, "be classed as tramps and vagrants as those terms are generally understood." Now, O'Bleness admitted that Kelly's Army certainly acted like tramps, for they traveled with "no means of support, . . . subsisted on public charity, and their banding together made their continued presence in any community both a burden and a menace." Nevertheless, the Army was law-abiding and earned the sympathy of locals as they traveled through the state.[4] Their passage through Iowa, in particular the visible mobility of unemployed and poor men, revealed the extent of community animosity towards the unemployed and tramp workers.

This essay explores the place of hobos within Iowa. Migratory workers' illicit rail travel, seeming disconnection from society, and sudden appearances and flight unsettled rural and urban

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2. "The Eldon Affair," *The Oskaloosa Herald*, 5/24/1894.

3. Generally, hobos differentiated themselves from other transient populations, like tramps or bums based on mobility and employment. Hobos existed at the top of this fluid transient hierarchy because they wandered to work, whereas vagrants worked to wander and bums neither worked nor wandered. Transient workers created and enforced these definitions, but they were also adopted by contemporaneous sociologists and reformers and are now used by most historians. For more on transient identity, see Jeff Davis, *"Hoboes of America," Incorporated 1939 Year Book: Encyclopedia and Reference Manual, Vol. 1* (Milwaukee, 1938), 15; Nels Anderson, *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man* (Chicago, 1923), 87–89; Godfrey Irwin, ed., *American Tramp and Underworld Slang: Words and Phrases Used by Hoboes, Tramps, Migratory Workers and Those on the Fringes of Society, With Their Uses and Origins, With a Number of Tramp Songs* (New York, 1930), 11–12, 40, 100, 191; Frank Tobias Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts: Hobo Workers and Community in the American Midwest, 1880–1930* (Urbana, 2003), 5.

4. *Sixth Biennial Report of the Bureau of Labor Statistics for the State of Iowa*, 10–12.

communities in Iowa. Hobos used mobility, specifically the act of illicit train riding, to claim a public presence, facilitate political organization, and most importantly, survive. Legislators, law enforcement, and editorialists framed these movements as disruptive to the social order and supported severe punishments against the mobile poor. The history of these transitory lives raises important questions about the treatment of the poor and homeless in the state, as well as the wider history of migratory labor in the region.

Historians increasingly analyze mobility as a contested site of cultural and social practices and meanings. Mobility shapes and is shaped by understandings of race, gender, citizenship, and/or warfare.[5] This is certainly true for transient workers. For, as geographer Tim Creswell has argued, "the threatening traveler and the unworthy wanderer practicing unwanted ingress" posed a significant threat to the social order and "haunt[ed] the nightmares of the modern state."[6] Hobos' mobility was a contested practice that spurred legal restrictions and community suspicion. Yet hobos relied on railroad mobility to further their political aims, and in both boxcars and courtrooms, they fiercely defended the practice of train-hopping. Jacob Coxey's Commonweal and the Industrial Workers of the World both employed mobility as a political practice to draw attention to the plight of hobos and demand better working conditions for transient laborers. Additionally, the legality of transient train-hopping reached the Iowa Supreme Court twice in the early twentieth century. Illicit mobility was a fraught practice.

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5. Elizabeth Pryor, *Colored Travelers: Mobility and the Fight for Citizenship before the Civil War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2016); Yael A. Sternhell, *Routes of War: The World of Movement in the Confederate South* (Cambridge, MA, 2012); Jeremy Packer, *Mobility Without Mayhem: Safety, Cars, and Citizenship* (Durham, NC, 2008); Genevieve Carpio, *Collisions at the Crossroads: How Place and Mobility Make Race* (Berkeley, CA, 2019); Jack Reid, *Roadside Americans: The Rise and Fall of Hitchhiking in a Changing Nation* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2020).

6. Tim Creswell, "The Vagrant/Vagabond: The Curious Career of a Mobile Subject," in *Geographies of Mobilities: Practices, Spaces, Subjects*, eds., Tim Creswell and Peter Merriman (Farnham, UK, 2011), 241.

Scholars of hobo workers often focus on spaces and regions with significant historical and archival densities of transient labor, particularly the Pacific Northwest, California, the wheat-growing regions of the Midwest and West, as well as the skid row sections of Chicago and Seattle.[7] As a result, some historians argue for region-specific transient variants.[8] Yet hobos marched in what historian Tobias Higbie deemed "a grand, disorganized parade" with little regard for the local, regional, and international boundaries they crossed to survive.[9] Although transient workers were not distinctive to Iowa, they were visible and integral participants in the state's agricultural economy in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Their passage and presence altered the legal, social, and political contours of the state.

Hobos worked in Iowa, but demand for casual labor, particularly agricultural work, was higher further west. Sioux City, Davenport, and to a lesser degree, Des Moines functioned as hubs where transient workers found work, rested over in skid row districts, and caught outbound trains. Iowa's population changed as urban centers expanded and many people moved further west in the nineteenth century.[10] Hobos were more likely to travel through Iowa rather than stay. Thus, Iowa's position as a transitory space makes it an ideal locale to explore the contours

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7. Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States. Volume IV: The Industrial Workers of the World, 1905–1917* (New York, 1965), 258–80, 473–85; Thomas Isern, *Bull Threshers and Bindlestiffs: Harvesting and Threshing on the North American Plains* (Topeka, 1990); Greg Hall, *Harvest Wobblies: The Industrial Workers of the World and Agricultural Laborers in the American West, 1905–1930* (Corvallis, OR, 2001); Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts*; Todd DePastino, *Citizen Hobo: How A Century of Homelessness Shaped America* (Chicago, IL, 2003); Richard Street, *Beasts of the Field: A Narrative History of California Farmworkers, 1769–1913* (Stanford, CA, 2004); Mark Wyman, *Hoboes: Bindlestiffs, Fruit Tramps, and the Harvesting of the West* (New York, 2010).

8. Todd DePastino, "Introduction" to Jack London, *The Road* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2006), xxii–xxiii; Eric H. Monkkonen, "Regional Dimensions of Tramping, North and South, 1880–1910," in *Walking to Work: Tramps in America*, ed. Eric H. Monkkonen (Lincoln, NE, 1984), 189–211.

9. Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts*, 25–65.

10. Michael P. Conzen, "Local Migration Systems in Nineteenth-Century Iowa," *Geographical Review* 64, no. 3 (July 1974), 339–61.

of transient mobility and how communities responded to the presence and passage of the mobile poor.

This essay draws broadly on encounters and stories from across the state. It attends to the history of hobo workers as they *moved* throughout Iowa. Illuminating this history reveals the ways in which hobos navigated community violence, criminal codes, and public disdain, and how they defended their right to move and be heard. The historiographical emphasis on Western and Great Plains migratory harvest labor means Iowa on the whole is rarely emphasized, with the exception of Sioux City.[11] The city served as a regional hub for transient workers bound for wheat fields in the Dakotas. Sioux City later became the site of tense conflicts with the only union to take up the hobo cause, the Industrial Workers of the World.[12] However, Sioux City was not Iowa's sole hobo hub. Davenport and Council Bluffs' transportation networks and developed social services attracted harvesters from throughout the Midwest. Moreover, the Omaha-Council Bluffs area served as another entry point into the Wheat Belt. Local employment also attracted hobos. Iowa's dominant corn crop still required a seasonal farm labor influx. Although not as labor-intensive as western wheat harvests, transient farm labor was a critical factor in the state's agricultural economy. In the early twentieth century, this eased with mechanization and all but disappeared following labor shortages and the rise of industrial farms after World War II.[13]

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11. Notable exceptions are Terry Ofner, "The 19th-Century Harvest Hand," *Palimpsest* 70, no. 2 (Summer 1989), 76–86 and Merle Davis, "'You Were Just One of the Unfortunate Ones,'" *Palimpsest* 70, no. 2 (Summer 1989), 96–102. Both of these essays, included in the *Palimpsest*'s "Working and Wandering" issue, highlight periods of economic downturn when unemployment was high and transient populations grew in size and visibility. This essay aims to show that transient mobility was a dynamic cultural practice and process created and recreated by transient workers from the late nineteenth through early twentieth centuries, rather than just a condition limited to economic depressions.

12. Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts*, 145–51; Philip Taft, "The I.W.W. in the Grain Belt," *Labor History* 1, no. 1 (1960), 53–67.

13. Allan G. Bogue, *From Prairie to Corn Belt: Farming on the Illinois and Iowa Prairies in the Nineteenth Century*, Second Edition (Lanham, MA, 2011), 169–70, 182–87; Cynthia Clampitt, *Midwest Maize: How Corn Shaped the U.S. Heartland* (Urbana,

Tramp Workers in Iowa

Davenport author Alice French, known by the *nom de plume* Octave Thanet, was critical of organized labor and the poor in her fiction and non-fiction works. Her biographer George McMichael claimed these perspectives derived, in part, from the long depressions in the late nineteenth century. During the 1870s, McMichael noted that tramps and hobos frequented Davenport. Over the Mississippi River in Moline and Rock Island, fire and church bells were supposedly rung to alert local residents when trains with tramps aboard neared the Quad Cities.[14] McMichael's story is uncited, so the veracity of these community tramp alerts is uncertain, but this anecdote nevertheless speaks to the tension over transient workers. As Terry Ofner found in his study of harvester hands in Iowa, "the itinerant harvesters often acted as lightning rods for some of the pent-up frustrations the economic depression generated."[15] Transients and their mobility were a target of community suspicion and scorn throughout the state.

Townspeople found the passage of tramps through their community more than a mere nuisance. Tramps threatened the social order. In July 1885, labor organizer Albert Parsons found a bold handmade sign nailed to the wall of the Kansas City, St. Joseph and Council Bluffs Railroad depot in Nebraska City Junction, Iowa.[16] The sign read, "Tramps Are Hereby Notified to Move On!" On Parson's midwestern speaking tour he witnessed "tramps on the wayside everywhere," a sign of the mass unemployment

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IL, 2015), 58–74; J.L. Anderson, *Industrializing the Corn Belt: Agriculture, Technology, and Environment, 1945–1972* (DeKalb, IL, 2009).

14. George McMichael, *Journey to Obscurity: The Life of Octave Thanet* (Lincoln, NE, 1965), 66–70. French's apathy toward organized labor and the poor was coupled with a disdain for those who threatened Victorian social and economic values. For a succinct summary of her career and anti-labor fiction and non-fiction, see Clarence A. Andrews, *A Literary History of Iowa* (Iowa City, 1972), 45–52. For an expanded analysis of Thanet's racial views and attitudes towards labor, see Sharon D. Kennedy-Noelle, *Writing Reconstruction: Race, Gender, and Citizenship in the Postwar South* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2015), 230–80.

15. Ofner, "The 19th-Century Harvest Hand," 79–82.

16. Nebraska City Junction was in Fremont County and later became known as Payne. Tom Savage, *A Dictionary of Iowa Place–Names* (Iowa City, 2007), 269.

brought about by economic decline. In Knights of Labor halls and outdoor meetings Parsons railed against the evils of capitalism and the need for socialism to solve the unemployment crisis.[17] While Parsons demanded structural change to solve mass unemployment communities across Iowa preferred the sentiment of the depot sign: move on!

Communities lacked sustained relief systems to manage large numbers of poor and homeless, and they relied on small-scale "outdoor relief" efforts or private charity to support the local poor. As a result, municipalities and state governments turned to vagrancy and anti-tramp statutes to control the growing numbers of transient poor. During the 1893 depression this was particularly acute. Unprecedented mass unemployment overwhelmed private charities and forced thousands into the street and onto the road, and spurred Coxey's march on the capital. Fearful of becoming overburdened by the homeless and potential unrest, vagrancy provided law enforcement with broad discretionary authority to detain the poor, force them to work, refuse them relief, and/or remove them from the community.[18] Drawing on centuries-old attitudes and legal restrictions about the wandering poor, vagrancy laws impeded transients' movements and criminalized their poverty. Vagrancy also provided Iowa police with legal sanctions against women whose community status, dress, or presence in neighborhoods known for vice, marked them as immoral.[19]

Iowa's first set of codified laws, the Code of 1851, included a broad vagrancy statute. This statute criminalized fortunetellers, fences, prostitutes, habitual drunks, gamblers, beggars and—of

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17. Lucy E. Parsons, *Life of Albert Parsons with Brief History of the Labor Movement in America* (Chicago, 1889), 33–34. The plight of the unemployed and the tramp in particular appeared frequently in Albert and Lucy Parsons' speeches and writing at the time. Jacqueline Jones, *Goddess of Anarchy: The Life and Times of Lucy Parsons, American Radical* (New York, 2017), 99–102.

18. Michael B. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America,* revised and updated (New York, 1996), 151–55; Michael B. Katz, *Poverty and Policy in American History* (New York, 1983), 180–81; Risa Goluboff, *Vagrant Nation: Police Power, Constitutional Change, and the Making of the 1960s* (Oxford, UK, 2016), 15–20.

19. Sharon E. Wood, *The Freedom of the Streets: Work, Citizenship, and Sexuality in a Gilded Age City* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2005), 22–23.

interest to this particular study—those found wandering without visible means of support or employment. Under the statute, the wandering poor needed to guarantee on security that they would only engage in lawful behavior for a full year or remain jailed until payment was made. Should they violate the law during that time they faced up to six months of imprisonment. District courts had leeway in assigning punishment; minors charged with vagrancy could be apprenticed to local tradesmen and judges had the option to contract out older vagrants for work. Up to six months of hard labor in prison was the final punitive option, and any earnings were split fifty-fifty between the county and prisoner.[20] The wandering poor were of secondary concern within the 1851 vagrancy statute. It primarily targeted illicit economies and community nuisances.

The number of transients riding the rails increased during the 1870s and steadily climbed through the end of the century. Post-Civil War railroad expansion facilitated the movement of workers across the nation. Western railroad construction drew untold numbers of transient men to build and maintain this growing network. Tramp laborers were a central source for seasonal casual labor throughout the region. Yet as historian Shelton Stromquist found, "Violent cycles of railroad expansion and contraction led to alternating labor shortage and glut from one season to the next."[21] Beyond railroad work, transient workers arrived in Iowa to meet a growing need for harvest labor or were pushed west by the ups and downs of employment in urban industrial centers, like Chicago. These "bummers," noted the *Hamilton Freeman* in 1874, "with a few rags tied up in bandana handkerchiefs and tar on their fingers, which are liable to stick to things without a moment's notice," became Iowa's preferred source for agricultural labor.[22]

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20. John E. Briggs, *History of Social Legislation in Iowa* (Iowa City, 1915), 45–46. In the 1890s, later vagrancy statutes replaced this with uncompensated forced labor as a punitive corrective to tramps' supposed disdain for work.

21. Shelton Stromquist, *A Generation of Boomers: The Pattern of Railroad Labor Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Urbana, IL, 1993), 123.

22. *Hamilton Freeman*, 7/15/1874, quoted in Bogue, 186.

Farm families of the era expected strangers to knock on their door, although families preferred peddlers, door-to-door salesmen, and junkmen rather than tramps.[23] Tramps appear frequently in farm diaries and recollections.[24] During the harvest season farmers welcomed these "strange nomadic fellows, which the West had not yet learned to call tramps," recalled the novelist Hamlin Garland, who spent part of his youth in Iowa.[25] Their arrival initiated a transactional relationship between farmers and laborers. Harvest jobs were short, so workers shared very little, maybe a moniker and the broad strokes of their life—if the farmer inquired that far. Farmers' detachment allowed them to rationalize the low pay and ill-treatment they meted out. Transient workers moved between jobs frequently since the demand for harvest labor was seasonally strong. The interpersonal and spatial distances built around transient laborers reinforced the negative attitudes many communities harbored towards transient workers. The "nomadic fellows" hired on their Iowa farm in the 1870s piqued Garland's curiosity but his memories of their arrival allude to the distance farm families established between themselves and seasonal harvesters.

> [F]or most of the harvest help that year were rough, hardy wanderers from the south, nomads who had followed the line of ripening wheat from Missouri northward, and were not the most profitable companions for boys of fifteen. They reached our neighborhood in July, arriving like a flight of alien unclean birds, and vanished into the north in September as mysteriously as they had appeared. A few of them had been soldiers, others were the errant sons of the poor farmers and rough mechanics of older States, migrating for the adventure of it. One of them gave

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23. Morrill E. Jarehow, "Social Life of an Iowa Farm Family, 1873–1912," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* 50, no. 2 (April 1952), 125–26.

24. Inez McAlister Faber, *Out Here on Soap Creek: An Autobiography* (Ames, 1982), 13; Oney Fred Sweet, "An Iowa County Seat," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* 38, no. 4 (October 1940), 375.

25. Hamlin Garland, *Boy Life on the Prairie* (New York, 1899), 246. For more on Garland's early years in Iowa, see Keith Newlin, *Hamlin Garland: A Life* (Lincoln, NE, 2008), 17–39; Thomas G. Schuppe, "Hamlin Garland of Iowa," *Annals of Iowa* 41, no. 3 (Winter 1972), 843–67.

> his name as "Harry Lee," others were known by such names as "Big Ed" or "Shorty." Some carried valises, others had nothing but small bundles containing a clean shirt and a few socks.[26]

Not all encounters between tramps and farm families inspired reflections on par with Garland. Sarah Gillespie Huftalen recorded two encounters with tramps on her family's Delaware County farm in June and July 1880. During the first encounter, Huftalen locked up the house and hid in the garden when a tramp appeared. The next month a pair of tramps broke into the cellar, but her father chased them off.[27]

Tense encounters were common. Tramps survived day-by-day on society's periphery and often had to beg, borrow, or steal to survive. The tramps who broke into the Huftalen's cellar carried straight razors and stones.[28] Over in Jewell Junction a tramp appeared at the county doctor's farm. Away with a patient, the tramp pounded and shouted at the door for two hours while the doctor's wife and son hid beneath the bed. A neighbor chased him off. Afterwards the doctor purchased his wife a pistol. It went unused.[29] Others wanting similar protection possibly purchased the "Tramp's Terror," a .22 caliber pistol sold for $2.50 by Chicago's Western Gun Works. An advertisement for the pistol in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated* read, "Tramps, Burglars and Thieves infest all parts of the Country. Every One Should go Armed."[30] The movement of strange workers through rural areas troubled locals and unsettling encounters only reinforced fears of tramps and hobos.

Community leaders and reformers solicited solutions to the so-called "tramp problem" from all quarters. One of Octave Thanet's earliest essays, "The Tramp In Four Centuries," published in *Lippincott's Magazine* in May 1879 drew on her observations of Davenport's itinerant poor. The essay consisted of four

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26. Hamlin Garland, *A Son of the Middle Border* (New York, 1927), 174.

27. Suzanne L. Bunkers, *"All Will Yet Be Well": The Diary of Sarah Gillespie Huftalen, 1873–1952* (Iowa City, 1993), 42.

28. Bunkers, 42.

29. Floy Lawrence Emhoff, "A Pioneer Doctor of Marshal County: Elmer Yocum Lawrence," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* 31, no. 4 (October 1933), 584–85.

30. "Tramp's Terror," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 3/23/1878.

historic letters followed by a fifth contemporary letter. Each letter recounted different approaches to vagabonds and the transient poor. In the final letter Thanet forwarded a *laissez faire* solution. "[S]uperficial remedies harm rather than help. Indiscriminate almsgiving and artificial employment (for this occasion only!) in one direction, and excessive penal legislation in the other, are equally injurious." Instead, French argued, "The tramp business in time rights itself."[31] In short, do not provide relief and tramps will disappear. Tramps' living conditions, went Thanet's argument, resulted from an individual's moral failure or lack of work ethic. Any sort of handout only exacerbated their poverty. Shortly after its publication Andrew Carnegie wrote to French to praise the essay, an indication some business leaders also found the tramp a pitied but ineradicable figure.[32]

Those involved in agricultural production offered more measured responses that echoed aspects of Thanet's criticism. These individuals also recognized the structural forces at play within Iowa's agricultural economy, which maintained this exploitative transient labor system. Farmers needed seasonal harvesters. Labor demands during harvest outstripped the local supply, attracting transient workers. Some recognized that this system was not ideal for farmers or workers. In an 1884 address to leaders of state labor statistics departments, reprinted by Iowa's Bureau of Labor Statistics, Professor Jeremiah Sanborn of the Missouri Agriculture College argued that transient agricultural labor threatened not only the rural home, but also damaged the lives of harvesters. Tramp workers burdened farm wives with additional mouths to feed and were a "moral pest to children." This stemmed from the conditions of their labor, according to Sanborn. "Seven months of sun to sun labor, followed by five months of intermittent and uncertain labor, with its saloon companionships in hours of idleness has been demoralizing to

31. Octave Thanet, "The Tramp In Four Centuries," *Lippincott's Magazine*, May 1879, 572, 574.

32. McMichael, 66–70.

farm labor."[33] Twelve to fifteen hours in the field left harvesters with little time for socialization and farm families were often reluctant to bring hired men into their social circles. Moreover, their poor pay precluded efforts to establish their own farms and settle respectfully in the community. As a result, tramp workers turned to the masculine domain of working-class saloons, a space for camaraderie, revelry, and relaxation during their scant leisure hours.[34] This peripheral social position reinforced their outsider status in a communal landscape built around familial and neighborly bonds. The nature of their work kept them from joining the community.

Debates over the causes and impact of transient labor on farmers and workers did not assuage the fears of rural communities concerned with the movement of outsiders through their space. Thus, to address growing public concern over the rise in transients crossing Iowa and to provide renewed authority to police these mobile bodies a new vagrancy bill went before the General Assembly in 1890. Unlike the 1851 law, which penalized illicit economic practices, the new statute focused directly on tramps. The law deemed any man over sixteen years old who was found begging or wandering without visible means to be a tramp.[35] While the bill passed the Iowa Senate by a wide margin, there was concern about the law's severity. Senator James B. Harsh from Creston argued, "I am unwilling to consent that the asking at any door in Iowa for food by a stranger shall subject him to such severe penalt[ies]."[36] Under the new law judges no longer had discretion to locate work or apprentice out convicted tramps. Instead judges meted out punishments of ten days of hard labor or five days of solitary confinement.[37] Hard labor typically

33. Iowa Bureau of Labor Statistics, *First Biennial Report, 1884–1885* (Des Moines, 1885), 22.

34. For more on working-class culture and saloons, see Madelon Powers, *Faces Along the Bar: Lore and Order in the Workingman's Saloon, 1870–1920* (Chicago, 1998).

35. Briggs, 105–06.

36. *Journal of the Senate of the Twenty-Third General Assembly of the State of Iowa* (Des Moines, 1890), 581–82.

37. Briggs, 105–06.

consisted of breaking stone for roads in rock piles built next to the jail. Not every community needed stone broken; Marshalltown had tramps weed dandelions on the courthouse lawn.[38] Refusal to work resulted in longer imprisonment: ten days of solitary confinement. Any leisure materials, including cigarettes, playing cards, books, and newspapers were forbidden. Bread and water were the only approved meal for tramps in solitary confinement.[39]

As the nation sunk into a protracted depression in 1893 the number of unemployed men on the road increased drastically. By winter the unemployed filled shelters and flophouses in cities throughout the country and unemployment remained high for years.[40] "As the winter advanced, the amount of suffering in the area increased," reported Omaha's Knights of Labor assembly, "so that the charitably disposed and the usual charity machine have been taxed to the full limit."[41] Elsewhere in the Midwest similar reports emerged. Journalist Ray Stanndard Baker, soon to join Jacob Coxey's Commonweal, looked on Chicago's homeless with disgust, "Bums, tramps! Why didn't they get out and hustle?"[42] Nationally an estimated 2.4–2.7 million Americans, some 17–19% of the population, were out of work.[43] As the depression continued some regional leaders saw mobility as a solution. In late 1894, Chicago Great Western Railway president Alpheus Stickney argued in the pages of the *Iowa State Bystander* that urban overcrowding caused the current crisis. With too few jobs for too many people the solution, he believed, was convincing "the farmer boys who are crowding into the cities" to return.[44]

Preceded by a long agricultural depression in the 1880s and financial panic in 1890, the Panic of 1893 decimated the economy

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38. Fred Emory Haynes, "County Jails in Iowa," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* 44, no. 1 (January 1946), 66.

39. Briggs, 105–06.

40. Richard White, *The Republic For Which It Stands: The United States during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865–1896* (Oxford, UK, 2017), 802–10.

41. "Good Work of D.A. 126," *Journal of the Knights of Labor*, 3/1/1894.

42. Ray Stannard Baker, *American Chronicle* (New York, 1945), 2.

43. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*, 152.

44. *Iowa State Bystander*, 11/30/1894.

and was, until 1929, known as the Great Depression.[45] This deep depression, mass unemployment, and a growing labor movement fomented what historian Michael Katz deemed a "collective hysteria" of the upper and middle classes. They feared the labor movement and unemployed masses threatened their power and influence.[46] Elite fears of unions and the unemployed also manifested in increased policing of transient workers.[47]

With unemployed men and some women taking to the road, the presence of tramps became a grave concern. In Fairfield the city council discovered that feeding tramps was more cost effective than punishing them. They furnished soup at the city hotel for "so-called tramps." Denigrated and despondent, the men told "the same old story of mines being closed, of factories being shut up." Unemployed, "they tramp from town to town" but find that not only is work unavailable but the "workingmen of these towns are also on the ragged edge of despair."[48] Unfortunately, communities often responded violently to tramps' presence. In December 1893, after a group of tramps beat two deputy sheriffs in Oskaloosa, an armed party of locals rounded up as many tramps as could be found and threw them in jail. A notice was posted warning all "the deadbeat tramps now infesting this section" that because "the law seems unable to protect them and their families," locals were armed and prepared to defend the community. "You must go away from here and stay away," the notice warned.[49] Workers who tramped to survive during winter of 1893–94 found a glimmer of hope in the call for federal employment by an Ohio businessman, Jacob Coxey. This call brought hundreds of presumed tramps across Iowa in the spring of 1894.

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45. White, *The Republic For Which It Stands*, 765–94; H. Roger Grant, *Self-Help in the 1890s Depression* (Ames, 1983).

46. Michael B. Katz, *Poverty and Policy in American History* (New York, 1983), 180–81.

47. Ofner, "The 19th-Century Harvest Hand," 83–84.

48. "How It's Managed," *The Weekly Herald* (Oskaloosa), 12/14/1893.

49. "Battle With Bums!" *The Weekly Herald* (Oskaloosa), 12/28/1893.

The Petition in Boots

The unemployed did not take their criminalization and demonization sitting down. In 1894, Jacob Coxey's Commonweal marched on Washington, D.C. and captivated the nation. A populist-minded Ohio businessman, Coxey hoped unemployed workers marching under the Commonweal banner would bring attention to their plight and his call for their employment to improve roads.[50] When Coxey's Commonweal arrived in Washington the famed reporter Nellie Bly joined the "deluded band" so "ragged, dusty, sun-burned, weather-beaten, footsore, they dragged along weakly, two by two" down Washington's streets. Bly offered a candid assessment of Coxey's Army: "A more woe-begone and hapless-looking lot of men I have never seen and hope never to see again."[51] Newspapers frequently referred to the Commonwealers as a "tramp army." Coxey and his organizers intentionally presented marchers as unemployed skilled laborers, men and women able and willing to work, and not as tramps or hobos. Yet tramping was an indelible part of working-class life, and many of the marchers had a history of riding the rods, or in the case of General Charles Kelly's Army, traveling part of the way to Washington via boxcar.[52] An unemployed carpenter turned farmer from Nebraska told Bly that he traveled on the roof of a boxcar and would return the same way if the march failed.[53] The hobo had, in all likelihood, joined General Kelly's Industrial Army and crossed Iowa on freight trains and rafts in April 1894.

Political scientist Jerry Prout argues that Coxey and the wider Industrial Army movement emerged from the precarious position of transient laborers. "Coxey turned the spotlight on the human casualties of capitalism," in particular those struggling with "the transient jobs environment of a new industrial economy."[54]

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50. Donald L. McMurry, *Coxey's Army: A Study of the Industrial Army Movement of 1894* (Boston, 1929), 21–33.

51. *New York World*, 5/6/1894.

52. Jerry Prout, *Coxey's Crusade For Jobs: Unemployment in the Gilded Age* (DeKalb, IL, 2016), 24–33.

53. *New York World*, 5/6/1894.

54. Prout, 7.

Groups of unemployed laborers formed Industrial Armies and headed east to join Coxey's march because the 1893 Depression and economic decline dating to the Panic of 1873 placed the wandering tramp at the heart of national anxieties over unemployment and economic decline.[55]

Coxey's Commonweal and the movement of Kelly's Army across Iowa made visible the conditions of and possibilities for transient workers at the end of the century. Moreover, Coxey's movement subverted the difficulties of organizing migratory and frequently unemployed workers into its defining show of strength.[56] By doing so Coxey and his supporters made the plight of the nation's poor visible on an unprecedented scale. The Industrial Armies offered a unique model. Like national strikes, it relied on loosely connected local actions under the umbrella of a larger movement, but unlike contemporary strikes or political parties, the Commonweal *moved*. By moving toward Washington, the marchers "proved they were not lazy or unemployable tramps," noted scholar Sean Luechtefeld, but "political agents, primed to make a persuasive argument . . . for unprecedented economic reform."[57] Regardless of whether the members of the movement were tramps, the associations between tramping, unemployment, and industrial capitalism were increasingly clear to the public. This era was, as historian Norman Pollack argued nearly sixty years ago, "an age of brutality." Pollack argued that critiques of industrial capitalism, particularly those of Populists, emerged, in part, from its alienation and degradation of laborers as evidenced by the proliferation of hobos, tramps, and the unemployed. To these critics the tramp was a sign of the times but more importantly, "symbolized . . . the approaching crisis." The

55. McMurry, 9–20.

56. Kim Moody suggests the long-term viability of labor politics in the late nineteenth century was undercut by workers' mobility and the difficulty in organizing those individuals who were subject to uneven employment, population turnover, and internal migration. *Tramps and Trade Union Travelers: Internal Migration and Organized Labor in Gilded Age America, 1870–1900* (Chicago, 2019).

57. Sean Luechtfield, "Petitioning in Boots: Motivation and Mobilization in the Rhetoric of Coxey's Army, 1894," (PhD, diss., University of Maryland, College Park, 2017), 186.

treatment of tramps, the conditions of the working-class, and growing protests against these structures revealed not only the fraught social and political landscape of the era, but also the centrality of the tramp to these raucous debates.[58]

To its working-class supporters, the Commonweal's journey represented a living embodiment of American democracy. Members of Peoria, Illinois' Knights of Labor assembly argued that Coxey's march and those who followed, including Kelly's Army, were a "living petition," whose right to assemble and advocate to their government were sacred.[59] Described by American Federation of Labor leader Samuel Gompers as a "petition in boots," the Commonweal pushed the limits of popular protest in the United States during the 1890s.[60] Dissent took varied forms during the 1880s and 1890s. Mass meetings, marches, protests, and strikes were common in growing urban environs, exemplified by Chicago's rise as a center of radical politics, but national actions like the 1888 Burlington Strike also radiated into small communities like McCook, Nebraska, or Pacific Junction and Ottumwa, Iowa.[61] Local debating societies animated middle-class men, while soapbox dissenters barked from urban street corners to any

58. Norman Pollack, *The Populist Response to Industrial America: Midwestern Populist Thought* (Cambridge, MA, 1962), 25, 32, 37. A unique defense of transient labor was undertaken by the Populist governor of Kansas, Lorenzo Lewelling, in December 1893. Lewelling's "Tramp Circular" directed police to not detain transients for vagrancy to "enable men to travel in search of work without being arrested for not having found it." *Biennial Message of L.D. Lewelling, Governor, to the Legislature of Kansas. Delivered January 9, 1895* (Topeka, 1895), 23; O. Gene Clanton, *A Common Humanity: Kansas Populism and the Battle for Justice and Equality, 1854–1903* (Manhattan, KS, 2004), 203–04.

59. "Living Petition Justified," *Journal of the Knights of Labor*, 4/26/1894; "Petitions, Etc.," *Congressional Record* 26, Pt. 5 (4/30/1894), 4295. Some Knights of Labor assemblies supported mass government employment efforts similar to Coxey's during the 1893 depression; for the example of Rutland, Vermont, see Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana, IL, 1985), 99–101.

60. Samuel Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor: An Autobiography*, Volume II (New York, 1925), 10.

61. Eugene V. Debs, "The C.B. & Q," *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine* 12, no. 11 (November 1888), 806–08.

and all passing by.[62] Coxey's marchers and the boxcar-bound petitioners that followed hoped to go, "on to Washington to move Congress to pass their bills," reported an undercover Secret Service agent within its ranks.[63] Railroad magnate James J. Hill called for military action against Coxey's "hapless-looking" men.[64] The presence of undercover agents and calls by railroad executives for violent suppression reveal the scale of the threat posed by transient mobility in the Progressive Era.

Kelly's Army rode freights, marched, and rallied locals to their cause across the West. After departing San Francisco, the Army spent two weeks crossing deserts, mountains, and open plains. The men were exhausted when they arrived in Council Bluffs on April 15, 1894. Angered by the Union Pacific's decision to bring the train into Council Bluffs and not Omaha, Governor Frank Jackson rushed to the city and ordered up seven militia units to maintain order.[65] Not only was Council Bluffs made responsible for housing and feeding the marchers, but curiosity seekers poured in from across the river to gawk at "a spectacle." The *Nonpareil* wished that such a scene would "never be again witnessed in the history of our country."[66] Crowds from Omaha packed the Army's encampment and labor organizations hoped to cross the river and hold supportive demonstrations in Council Bluffs. In response the *Nonpareil* offered a simple message to Omaha residents, "Stay At Home."[67] After four days camped at the city's Chautauqua grounds and with railroads refusing to carry them east, the Army set out on foot.[68] Among the marchers

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62. Tobias Higbie, *Labor's Mind: A History of Working-Class Intellectual Life* (Urbana, IL, 2019), 39–60; Kevin Mattson, *Creating a Democratic Public: The Struggle for Urban Participatory Democracy During the Progressive Era* (University Park, PA, 1997).

63. "William P. Hazen to John G. Carlisle, April 20, 1894," Grover Cleveland Papers [microfilm] (Series 2, roll 85), Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

64. "James J. Hill to Grover Cleveland, May 5, 1895," Grover Cleveland Papers [microfilm] (Series 2, roll 85), Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

65. McMurry, 149–164; Charles A. Schwantes, *Coxey's Army: An American Odyssey* (Lincoln, NE, 1985), 98–112.

66. *Council Bluffs Nonpareil*, 4/17/1894.

67. *Council Bluffs Nonpareil*, 4/22/1894.

68. McMurry, 149–76; Schwantes 113–32.

was Jack London, then just a shoeless eighteen-year-old hobo from Oakland.[69] In his diary, he recorded "inthusiastic *[sic]* crowds on foot, on horses & in double rigs" turning out in every town along the way.[70]

Back in Omaha, a mass of Kelly's supporters led by a group of women swarmed an arriving three-car Union Pacific passenger train. A Knights of Labor organizer and engineer steamed the stolen train toward Kelly's camp near Weston. When the train arrived, Kelly declined its use. Kelly's Army now measured between 1,500 and 1,900 men, too many for the pilfered train, so they walked on.[71]

Many people feared violence should the Army remain in the state any longer than necessary. The *Nonpareil* warned of "a rising of the workingmen, danger to the railroads and property and possible bloodshed" if they stayed another week.[72] Although supporters of the movement demurred the possibility of violence, they nevertheless saw it as an unprecedented challenge to the national political order. In an account of Kelly's Army's travels across Iowa, a Coxey sympathizer and Knights of Labor member considered the march on par with establishment of Oliver Cromwell's Commonwealth and the dissolution of the British monarchy.[73]

Despite critics' claims, the Army passed peaceably. The only recorded violence was directed at Kelly's men. Pinkerton detectives assaulted marchers in Ottumwa.[74] Once in Des Moines the

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69. Jack London, *Jack London on the Road: The Tramp Diary and Other Hobo Writings*, ed. Richard W. Etulain (Logan, UT, 1979), 45. Utah State University holds the original diary but the first scholarly edition was published in Iowa as "Tramping With Kelly Through Iowa: A Jack London Diary," *The Palimpsest* 7, no. 5 (May 1926), 129–58. London's journal is not only a fascinating literary artifact, but an extremely rare diary belonging to someone living on the road. Few hobo diaries or journals are known to exist. London drew on his diaries and memory for the autobiographical tales in series of *Cosmopolitan* stories later collected in *The Road* (New York, 1907).

70. London, 45.

71. McMurry, 149–76; Schwantes, 113–32.

72. *Council Bluffs Nonpareil*, 4/22/1894.

73. "Curious Coincidence," *Journal of the Knights of Labor*, 4/12/1894.

74. London, 52–53.

Army built rafts to float down the Des Moines and Mississippi Rivers to St. Louis. The sailing was hard. Marchers were hungry and exhausted after days in the sun when they finally arrived. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* made clear, "these men are not tramps," because tramps were constitutionally incapable of withstanding the struggles of a forced march across the country. Yet they readily admitted that stereotypical tramps joined their ranks, "[a]ttracted by prospects of free food and rides on stolen railroad trains" only to flee at the first sign of hardship.[75]

As Kelly's Army faded from local memory, others in Iowa demanded better treatment for tramp workers. The Iowa Socialist Labor Party's platform of 1899 blamed industrial capital for the "millions of willing workers . . . on the verge of starvation, compelled to tramp the roads and streets of this country in looking for work to obtain means to support themselves and families, but look in vain." Their platform demanded universal suffrage, equal wages for men and women, an end to capital punishment and child labor, and a multifaceted solution to the tramp problem. To improve the state's roads and rivers, they called for the unemployed to be hired at fair wages across the state. Furthermore, they called for a full repeal of all "pauper, tramp, conspiracy laws," and any other regulations broadly considered a vagrancy law.[76]

Kelly's Army, alongside Coxey's larger protest, and the Socialist Party's platform illuminate the economic and political tensions projected on tramps. Together, these political protests and platforms forwarded reactions on vastly different scales to a problem affecting not only Iowa's towns and cities but most rural midwestern and western communities. Kelly and his marchers strove to distance themselves from the general public's image of the tramp in order to forward a sympathetic image of unemployed workers. While they moved about looking for work like tramps, and may have hopped trains or begged at backdoors, these men were economic victims rather than immoral wanderers.

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75. "Kelly's Navy: It Is Floating On and Will Arrive Here on Tuesday," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 5/27/1894.

76. G. L. Dobson, comp., *Iowa Official Register 1900* (Des Moines, 1900), 223–27.

Commissioner O'Bleness argued that the only opposition to Kelly's march across Iowa came from "capitalistic and corporate interests" who "displayed not only a lack of sympathy for the men, but the most unrelenting and active hostility toward them."[77] Delineating between hard-up but honest laborers and parasitic tramps was a matter of perspective tempered by one's attitudes toward poor, working-class, and often foreign-born transients. Few positioned themselves on the side of the wandering poor, particularly those deemed tramps or hobos.

The Right to Ride

Hopping trains was difficult, dangerous, and ostensibly illegal. Officers charged hobos with theft, for they stole rides from the railroad, or trespassing, as they did board without tickets after all. Vagrancy statutes, as already noted, also provided sweeping policing power in response to hobo workers. Although transients' illicit movements were criminalized and policed, they found a surprising advocate in the Iowa Supreme Court. On two occasions, a hobo named Joseph Johnson appeared before the court to seek damages from the Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis and Omaha Railway (CSt.PM&O).[78] Both cases originated in the Woodbury County District Court in Sioux City but were appealed to the Supreme Court. After *Johnson v. Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis and Omaha Railway* reached the Supreme Court in 1902, the justices ordered a retrial that was completed in 1904.[79]

In Dakota City, Nebraska, on October 26, 1898, Joseph Johnson hopped aboard a CSt.PM&O freight bound for Sioux City. Johnson was headed east after working the wheat harvest. Ticketless, he clung to the boxcar's ladder for the short ride into

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77. *Sixth Biennial Report of the Bureau of Labor Statistics for the State of Iowa,* 1894–95, 11.

78. For a brief summation of the Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis and Omaha Railway's place in Iowa railroad history, see Frank P. Donovan, Jr., "The North Western In Iowa," in *Iowa Railroads: The Essays of Frank P. Donovan, Jr,* ed. H. Roger Grant (Iowa City, 2000), 137–40.

79. Supreme Court Opinions, Vol. 33, Jan. 2 1902 to Apr. 10 1902, RG 055, Supreme Court and Court of Appeals, Supreme Court Case Files, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines, Iowa.

South Sioux City. The brakeman ordered Johnson off, but as the train rolled out of town, he jumped back on. Again, the brakeman ordered him off and Johnson complied, but grabbed ahold of the boxcar ladder when he left. As the train picked up speed (estimated at 10–15 miles per hour) Johnson held fast to the top of the ladder. The brakeman reappeared and demanded he pay or get off.[80] Johnson's response is not recorded, but the brakeman did not take it well, and stomped on his fingers. As he scurried down the ladder the brakeman followed and kicked Johnson's head and neck. He fell beneath the train. The car's wheels crushed Johnson's foot. It was later amputated.[81]

Both parties agreed on Johnson's account of his near-fatal ride. Rather than debate the particularities of the boxcar fight, the central question of the case, according to the CSt.PM&O's lawyers was a railroad's ability to "lawfully protect their trains from the invasion of tramps." They argued that railroads had the right to protect their right of way, rolling stock, and transported goods from trespassers. Moreover, this was not solely a matter of commerce, but "the safety and well[-]being of the whole traveling public . . . for all are vitally interested in the safety and promptness of the carrying service."[82] Taking away the ability to remove trespassers undermined customers' trust in a line's integrity. While the court found this line of argumentation compelling, it did not supersede Johnson's claims.

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80. Brakemen frequently shook down hobos for cash. Most hobos claimed that the train crews did this to line their own pockets. Some railroads had established but unadvertised prices for freight train passengers. For an example in Iowa, see J.F. Gibson to G.A. Goodell, March 6, 1895, Box 1, Folder Correspondence 1895, Albert N. Harbert Railroadiana Collection, Special Collections and Archives, University of Iowa Main Library, Iowa City, Iowa.

81. Supreme Court Opinions, Vol. 33, Jan. 2 1902 to Apr. 10 1902, RG 055, Supreme Court and Court of Appeals, Supreme Court Case Files, Iowa State Historical Society, Des Moines, Iowa. Injuries were exceedingly common among rail riders and reports of lost limbs and lives appeared frequently in regional newspapers. The Welsh poet W.H. Davies lost a foot while hopping trains in Canada and documented his injury and recovery in his 1908 memoir. See W.H. Davies, *The Autobiography of a Super-Tramp* (Brooklyn, NY, 2011), 131–44.

82. Abstracts and Arguments, J-L, May Term, 1902, RG 055, Supreme Court and Court of Appeals, Supreme Court Case Files, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines, Iowa.

The Iowa Supreme Court readily admitted Johnson was an "impudent and exasperating trespasser," in its 1902 opinion, but this in no way justified the railroad's attempt to cause bodily harm and/or death. In other words, transient mobility was innately criminal, but it did not merit a death sentence. Railroads had every right to remove trespassers from their freight and passenger trains but could not inflict unnecessary violence or deliberately expose illicit riders to unreasonable harm or injury. The railroad was liable for the hobo's safety, not the negligent brakeman. The justices made clear that by no means were railroads tasked with improving the safety of their trains for the benefit of hobos. Hobos took their lives in their own hands when they illegally hopped a train, but once aboard, their trespass was complete. Any action to remove a hobo afterwards was an act of eviction for which bodily harm or death was too severe of a punishment. Thus, the Supreme Court ruled in Johnson's favor in 1902, overturned the district court's ruling, and ordered a juried retrial.[83]

When *Johnson v. Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis and Omaha Railway* returned to the Iowa Supreme Court in 1904, the railroad sought to overturn the district court's ruling against them. After their failures in the initial trial, the CSt.PM&O's lawyers refocused their arguments on the proliferation and danger of hobos. When Johnson was injured, "a large number of persons commonly known as tramps or hobos, were accustomed to trespass upon the freight trains," so much so that "[hobos] were accustomed to enter upon and leave said trains while the same were moving rapidly" and hop off just as quickly when ordered by train crews. In other words, the railroad could not be liable for Johnson's injuries because hobos were both so common and so skilled at hopping freights that his injuries were actually the result of his failure to act in accordance with established hobo practices. Upon seeing Johnson's appearance, the brakeman rationally assumed he was "one of the class of persons commonly known as tramps or hobos, and that he could with safety get upon and

83. Supreme Court Opinions, Vol. 33, Jan. 2 1902 to Apr. 10 1902, RG 055, Supreme Court and Court of Appeals, Supreme Court Case Files, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines, Iowa.

alight from the sides of box cars" on trains going much faster than the train they were riding. The justices found these arguments immaterial, for the actions and appearances of other hobos was not justification enough for the brakeman's violent eviction. The Supreme Court affirmed the district court's decision in support of Johnson.[84]

Joseph Johnson's six-year legal fight against the CSt.PM&O was not the typical avenue for hobos seeking justice. After most conflicts with train crews, hobos tended to their wounds in railside campsites and rode out on the next freight, unless they were arrested. This makes Johnson's case unusual but not unprecedented, as there was a small body of case law on hobos and railroad liability turned to during the trials. Although it established a railroad's legal liability for injuring and killing hobos, the onus for enforcement remained squarely with illicit rail riders. Rough working conditions, poor pay, and frequent bouts of unemployment, not to mention the possibility of a vagrancy arrest dangling overhead, left hobos with few resources to support a multi-year legal effort.[85] Thus, many turned to the labor movement and radical politics for support.

Organizing Mobile Workers

As the gateway to the wheatbelt, Sioux City served as the disembarkation point for hobo workers headed west as well as a place to winter over. This role rendered the city an important organizing point for the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the largest union for harvest laborers.[86] By 1917 the *Manchester Democrat* found Sioux City to be "a kind of vortex when it comes to the

84. Supreme Court Opinions Vol. 242, Feb. 1 1904–Feb. 24 1904, RG 055, Supreme Court and Court of Appeals, Supreme Court Case Files, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines, Iowa.

85. A partial solution to these issues arrived when the United States Supreme Court affirmed the right to counsel for poor criminal defendants in *Gideon v. Wainwright* in 1963. Charged with petty larceny but lacking legal counsel, the defendant Clarence Gideon was also a former hobo. He ran away at the age of fourteen and "accepted the life of a hobo and tramp in preference to my home." Anthony Lewis, *Gideon's Trumpet* (New York, 1968), 65–78.

86. Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts*, 140–41, 145–51.

migration of the hordes of Industrial Workers of the World from the harvest fields of Kansas and Nebraska to those of Minnesota and the Dakotas."[87] Founded in 1905, the IWW sought to unify all workers under the banner of "one big union." Their advocacy for direct action and confrontational tactics drew public condemnation and violent suppression. Yet they were the only union to take up the cause of migratory harvest workers. In 1915 the IWW established the Agricultural Workers Organization (AWO), later known as the Agricultural Workers Industrial Union (AWIU), to organize hobo workers. The Des Moines local was an early proponent for creating a centralized harvest worker union within the national IWW. This proposal was adopted and evolved into the AWO.[88] The union quickly became the driving force in organizing transient harvesters across the Wheat Belt and throughout the West. The AWO became the largest union of hobos in the nation. Its 1916 membership was estimated at 18,000 and their dues renewed the IWW's finances. This financial boost allowed the IWW to expand its national organizing efforts.[89] In Sioux City the union's support for harvest workers sparked local controversy throughout the 1910s, but in the 1920s and 1930s hobos in Iowa found strong support from the IWW.[90]

The IWW is critical to understanding transient mobility in Iowa for two reasons. First, their free speech fights in Sioux City laid claim to public space. In other words, by demanding the right to speak on street corners to spread their message and organize workers, the IWW fought for hobos' right not only to move but also to stay and have a visible presence in the community. As noted above, vagrancy laws and community policing hindered transient workers' existence in most Iowa communities. Free speech fights ensured transient workers the right both to be seen

87. J.W. Jarnagin, "Activities of State Legislature," *Manchester Democrat*, 1/31/1917.

88. Hall, 83.

89. Philip Taft, "The I.W.W. in the Grain Belt," 59–62; Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of The Industrial Workers of the World* (New York, 1969), 313–18; Hall, 80–188.

90. Davis, 101–02.

and heard, and also simply to exist in Sioux City. Second, the IWW's organizing efforts among agricultural workers relied on mobility to succeed. Unlike other unions, which disdained ostensibly unorganizable mobile workers, the IWW not only actively supported hobo laborers but sought them out on trains and in fields. Organizing at the point of production proved overwhelmingly successful for the AWO, which held its national convention in Sioux City in 1919.

The IWW's ideology, methods, and support for hobo workers did not endear them to many in the area.[91] Although they obtained public support from influential figures like Sioux City mayor the Rev. Wallace Short, the IWW was targeted by community groups and scathing editorials. In 1914, Marshalltown's Knights of Columbus chapter hosted David Goldstein, a Catholic convert and member of the Cigar Makers' International Union who lectured on the evils of socialism and the dangers the IWW posed to "the legitimate unions of labor."[92] While the IWW's ideology, as described by Goldstein, worried some, the more immediate concern over the presence of IWW harvesters drew wider public attention. "[Wobblies] seize trains, force towns and cities to feed them and commit other acts of violence," warned the *Manchester Democrat* in January 1917, foreshadowing the rhetoric used to suppress the organization after the United States entered World War I.[93] The presence and travels of IWW organizers and members across the state, many of whom were also seasonal harvesters on the move, tapped into existing local anxieties about the mobility of hobo workers. Wobblies were more than mere hobos in the eyes of many Iowans. These radical hobos were committed to the dismantling of their way of life. As a result, IWW organizing drives across the state as well as public demonstrations

91. Davis, 101–02.

92. "Goldstein to Lecture," *Evening Times-Republican*, 3/13/1914. For more on Goldstein's message and career as a Catholic lecturer, see Debra Campbell, "David Goldstein and the Rise of the Catholic Campaigners for Christ," *Catholic Historical Review* 72, no. 1 (January 1986), 33–50.

93. J.W. Jarnagin, "Activities of State Legislature."

in Sioux City and elsewhere garnered harsh responses throughout the 1910s and 1920s.

During the fall of 1914 the IWW expanded its efforts to organize hobos in Sioux City. They held educational nights at the Socialist Party Hall. There Wobblies provided daily hot meals during the winter for unemployed hobos. The IWW made meals from local donations, a sign that some in the community supported their relief efforts. Unemployment was widespread in Sioux City, but little was done to alleviate the problem, so local Wobblies crashed the influential Commercial Club's banquet to demand action. In response the city used Commercial Club funding to put men to work grading streets. To prevent further disruptions the city banned street speaking, shut down the Socialist Hall's daily meal, and looked the other way as private detectives hired by business leaders drove IWW organizers out of town. In response, the IWW called upon its members to descend on the city and agitate for free speech on street corners and in the Socialist Hall.[94]

At the height of the free speech fight, eighty-three Wobblies charged with vagrancy and disturbing the peace languished in a purpose-built stockade constructed beside the jail. The local press called for more stringent conspiracy charges should the "agitators" continue to cause trouble.[95] Police beat the imprisoned Wobblies after they refused hard labor. A hunger strike started after police threatened to stop serving food, and prisoners set fire to their bedding to protest the jail's inhumane and vermin-ridden conditions.[96] The IWW found a vocal supporter in Mayor Short. Short did not condone their methods or ideology but supported their First Amendment rights. In a sermon critiquing temperance, he commented on the Wobblies' on-going free speech fight. Short proclaimed,

> These men have done in Sioux City thus far nothing different from that which the fathers of our present sons and daughters

94. Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts*, 145–51; Hall, 76–77.

95. Wallace M. Short, *The Deeper Meaning of the "Temperance" Question* (Kansas City, 1915), 48–49.

96. Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts*, 148.

> of the Revolution did when they held meetings for the discussion of their grievances; these men have merely criticized the existing order. It is possible that the existing order deserves criticism; whether it does or not, these men have the right to criticize it if they wish.[97]

Finding itself confronted by an intransigent foe, the city yielded to IWW demands: a guarantee of free speech rights in the city and release of all imprisoned Wobblies. In return, the IWW would halt its members from flooding the city.[98] This episode underscores the amplified fear of transient mobility embodied by the IWW and its members. Sioux City authorities ultimately acquiesced to IWW demands, in part, to stem the arrival of more union members. Transient mobility carried sharper political meaning in this period. For these Wobblies would arrive by boxcar, ready to mount their street corner soapboxes and rally locals to their cause.

Over the next few years, the IWW operated in Sioux City with little controversy. Seasonal influxes of harvesters continued, but during World War I, nationalist and nativist rhetoric renewed the specter of the IWW as a dangerous organization.[99] In January 1917, prior to the United States' entrance into the conflict, Sioux City's state representative Frank C. Lake worked with legislators in bordering states on anti-IWW laws. Lake wanted to restrict the carrying of concealed weapons on freight trains and penalize those who "conspire to ride on trains by force or violence."[100] When war was declared state guard units deployed to protect key infrastructure points from German saboteurs. Troops guarding the Missouri River bridge in Sioux City forced forty-five Wobblies from a Chicago and Northwestern train. The Wobblies claimed the Sioux City police chief promised they would not be bothered, but the railroad welcomed their removal and thanked

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97. Short, *The Deeper Meaning*, 49.

98. Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts*, 148.

99. "Four Hundred I.W.W. Men on Way South," *Ottumwa Tri-Weekly Courier*, 11/23/1915.

100. J.W. Jarnagin, "Activities of State Legislature."

the soldiers for reducing the IWW presence.[101] As the war progressed, Iowa joined fifteen other states to pass criminal syndicalism laws targeting the IWW. Iowa's law made the advocacy of violence, crime, or sabotage to achieve industrial or political reform, either in writing or simply spoken, a felony.[102] Thus, wartime anxieties provided the state with further mechanisms to control the movement of transient workers in Iowa.

Wartime attacks on the IWW threatened to end Wallace Short's first term as mayor in 1918. Elected in March, Mayor Short found himself at the center of a local firestorm after testifying in the defense of over one hundred IWW members in Chicago. He told a Chicago courtroom that the Wobblies broke no laws in Sioux City during their 1914–15 free speech fight, did not incite violence, nor did they make themselves indecent or act beyond the norms of good citizenship.[103] His testimony incensed business, religious, and labor leaders back in Sioux City and spurred a recall effort. Short made it clear his support of the IWW was a defense of their constitutional rights, not their methods or ideology. Short's defense of his actions, coupled with a lack of labor support for the recall, appeared to end the controversy.[104]

On April 21, 1919, Short reignited community tensions by speaking at the convention of the Agricultural Workers Industrial Union held at the Sioux City IWW hall.[105] By 1919 local, state, and national law enforcement suppression weakened the AWIU, but many still considered the IWW an ongoing threat to the community. Mayor Short spoke to a crowd of fewer than fifty-four Wobblies, reporters, and law enforcement.[106] Shortly thereafter sheriff W.H. Jones raided the IWW hall with the help of 150 deputies. They did not encounter resistance from the few Wobblies present.

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101. "I.W.W Invasion Peaceful," *Evening Times-Republican*, 7/20/1917.

102. Edward S. Allen, *Freedom in Iowa: The Role of the Iowa Civil Liberties Union* (Ames, 1977), 13–14.

103. Harrison George, *The I.W.W. Trial: Story of the Greatest Trial in Labor's History by One of the Defendants* (New York, 1969), 102.

104. William H. Cumberland, *Wallace H. Short: Iowa Rebel* (Ames, 1983), 51–53.

105. Cumberland, 53–57.

106. Mary Short, *Just One American* (Sioux City, 1943), 114.

Hoping to prevent more confrontations Mayor Short asked the IWW to leave the city. They agreed. Business leaders led another recall effort over Short's support for the IWW, but the mayor won the vote handily.[107] Throughout the controversies of 1914–15 and 1919, Short never wavered in his defense of the IWW's First Amendment rights, even when wartime nationalism prompted suppression of both the IWW and free speech. In an impromptu speech at city hall just prior to addressing the IWW in 1919, Short made these convictions clear, "Our soldiers have been fighting for Democracy and it is incumbent on us to see Democracy in action."[108] Sioux City's battles with the IWW were the highpoint of hobo politics in the state. Less than six months after the AWIU convention the Palmer Raids began and weakened the IWW further.[109]

Elsewhere fears of the IWW persisted. In October 1919 a public meeting on the financial situation of Des Moines' street railway was disrupted by an IWW organizer.[110] A week later authorities in Marshalltown warned that IWW propaganda was "being freely circulated in this city among all classes." Examples acquired by the local paper railed against the continued imprisonment of Wobblies arrested during the war and appealed for funds for the IWW's General Defense Committee.[111] The movement of IWW literature in the state was considered as dangerous as that of their members. Despite these actions, local critics admitted the group was not responsible for any violence in the area. A few weeks later Marshalltown's American Legion post passed a resolution reaffirming their condemnation of the group in light of the Armistice Day riot between the IWW and Legion in Centralia, Washington, that left six dead. The resolution noted that "such conditions do not exist locally."[112] Nevertheless, some Iowans still warned of a local IWW

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107. Cumberland, 55–58.

108. Short, *Just One American,* 113.

109. Dubofsky, 454–56.

110. "Church Scene of Stormy Session," *Evening Times-Republican (Marshalltown),* 10/20/1919.

111. "Industrial Workers Spread Propaganda Among Local Labor," *Evening Times-Republican (Marshalltown),* 10/27/1919.

112. "Discuss Centralia Outbreak," *Evening Times-Republican,* 11/18/1919. For more on the events in Centralia, see Tom Copeland, "Wesley Everest, IWW

threat. Greater Iowa Association member H.E. Moss warned in 1920 that the IWW and other radicals threatened "the American home, religion and marriage."[113]

In 1923 the first prosecution of a Wobbly under the wartime criminal syndicalism law occurred in Marion. An IWW organizer, Henry Tonn, was arrested in his hotel room with IWW literature. The criminal syndicalism law prohibited radical pamphlets and other materials. Ultimately, Tonn's conviction was overturned by the Iowa Supreme Court.[114] The Agricultural Workers Industrial Union celebrated Tonn's dismissal but reiterated the need to defend hundreds of other Wobblies still imprisoned under wartime anti-syndicalism laws.[115]

Wobblies continued to find work in the state during the 1920s; a few harvested ice in Sioux City during the winter of 1923–24 and alerted other members that jobs were available with wages up to thirty-five cents an hour.[116] This was hardly the organization that once riled Sioux City and organized hobos across the Wheat Belt. Some found jobs as farm hands but considered the prospects of further organizing ill-advised. Moss believed the IWW was the harbinger of America's end, but local Wobblies thought their prospects for organizing workers in Iowa were poor. Wobblies in McCallsburg reported in the AWIU *Bulletin*, "Not much organizing among the slaves. Sentiment poor."[117]

Martyr," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 77, no. 4 (October 1986), 122–29; Tom Copeland, *The Centralia Tragedy of 1919: Elmer Smith and the Wobblies* (Seattle, 1993).

113. "Growing Danger of Radicalism," *Evening Times-Republican*, 4/17/1920.

114. Iowa's criminal syndicalism law remained on the books until the General Assembly passed a revised criminal code in 1976, which did not include it or related laws on treason. Allen, *Freedom in Iowa*, 13–21.

115. "Now Is The Time To Act," Agricultural Workers Industrial Union No. 110, *Bulletin No. 1* (1/18/1923), Folder 169, Franklin and Penelope Rosemont Collection of IWW Publications and Ephemera, Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois.

116. "Job News," Agricultural Workers Industrial Union No. 110, *Bulletin No. 3* (1/31/1923), Folder 169, Franklin and Penelope Rosemont Collection of IWW Publications and Ephemera, Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois.

117. "Job News," Agricultural Workers Industrial Union No. 110, *Bulletin No. 8* (3/7/1923), Folder 169, Franklin and Penelope Rosemont Collection of IWW Publications and Ephemera, Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois.

Conclusion

By the 1920s, social scientists and hobos themselves observed a drop in the number of transient workers. Advances in farm mechanization lessened the need for harvesters.[118] In the 1880s, E. H. H. Holman recalled hearing the harvesters hired by his father in Sergeant Bluff decrying the coming day when machines would "take men's jobs away" during the corn harvest.[119] That day arrived some forty years later. While railroads remained the dominant mode of travel for hobos, automobiles cut in during the 1920s.[120] The 1920s were also a period of stagnation in many rural areas. As historian Dorothy Schwieder noted, farmers realized that "farm life was good, but it was not good enough."[121] Decline did not mean the total disappearance of hobos, but fewer made their way by boxcar.

The agricultural depression of the 1920s forced many young men to seek outside work to supplement family incomes. Bruce Nolan spent six seasons working harvests across the Midwest and West during the 1920s. After leaving Sioux City, Nelson first found work carrying water to wheat harvesters in Kansas but as he grew stronger Nelson moved on to stacking grain in Kansas, picking apples in Washington, and harvesting potatoes in Minnesota and Idaho. In the fields he encountered the remnants of the IWW who, despite their weakened status, still attempted to organize harvesters. Nelson recalled, "The IWW did have the effect of making the people conscious that they should at least bargain for what they was going to get paid."[122] Gerard Leeflang, a Dutch immigrant turned hobo, traveled across Iowa in the mid-1920s. Riding freights near Ames he was warned by another hobo

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118. Nels Anderson, *Men on the Move* (Chicago, 1940), 27–40.

119. E.H.H. Holman, *Where The Tall Corn Grows: A Study of the Farm Problem in its Relation to the Labor Problem Based on Personal Experiences in Western Iowa* (Minneapolis, 1934), 10.

120. Nels Anderson, *Men on the Move* (Chicago, 1940), 27–40.

121. Dorothy Schwieder, "Rural Iowa in the 1920s: Conflict and Community," *Annals of Iowa* 47, no. 2 (Fall 1983), 104–15.

122. Shelton Stromquist, *Solidarity and Survival: An Oral History of Iowa Labor in the Twentieth Century* (Iowa City, 1993), 38–39.

to avoid the police at all costs because "in these counties they are mad about hunting hobos, and certainly tramps." West of Ames, near Boone, their train was stopped and searched by armed railroad detectives who beat a tramp caught running from the train.[123] Despite being fewer in number, hobos' illicit travel was still dangerous.

Not everyone was unsympathetic. South Amana station agent Herb Zuber encountered hobos of all types, pickpockets, migrant workers, and those down on their luck, when he started at the depot in 1923. On cold days some came to the depot for warmth, others passed through town seeking work or a place to settle for a while. Overall, Zuber considered them "pretty decent fellows."[124] Clifford Herr, an Illinois Central engineer who ran trains between Dubuque and Waterloo frequently dealt with hobos. "[W]e had lots of hoboes in the 1930's [sic]," he recalled, but they never bothered his train crews. Occasionally, crews asked hobos to feed coal into the locomotive in exchange for food. Herr and his crews established a positive relationship with the jungle camps along their route.[125] "We went up there a lot of times, get a bottle of coffee, and boy, you get [sic] some good coffee. . . . You never drank any better than a hobo cup of coffee!" Hobos also provided food for hungry train crews. Herr remembered "get[ting] a good feed out of it."[126]

Mechanization and the agricultural depression reduced hobos' numbers, but illicit train hopping was still a reliable form of transportation for transient workers and rural residents. In April 1925, the Davenport police picked up Hebert Killgrove, a fifteen-

123. Leeflang, 76–78.

124. Cliff Trumpold, "Hobo Sketches by an Amana Station Agent," *Palimpsest* 70, no. 2 (Summer 1989), 103–06.

125. Iowa railroaders considered hobo jungles part of the railroad. They were typically found outside the yard limits or other points where trains traveled slow enough to hop aboard. See Don L. Hofsommer, *Steel Trails of Hawkeyeland: Iowa's Railroad Experience* (Bloomington, 2005), 86–87.

126. "Clifford Herr Interview, June 23, 1918," Oral History Interview Transcripts, Waterloo, Iowa, Iowa Labor History Oral Project, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City. For more accounts of railroad workers and their relationship with transient workers in the 1920s–1930s, see Davis, "'You Were Just One of the Unfortunate Ones.'"

year-old boy from Wichita. While visiting family in Rock Island a telegram arrived with the news of his brother's death. A second telegram followed the same day, "No money come across country." Unable to hop any of the westbound freights, Killgrove was thumbing it on the road out of town when the police found him and referred him to the Ladies' Industrial Relief Society.[127]

Farmers and townsfolk understood the role of transient workers within the market for seasonal farm labor but feared their lasting presence within the community. Their movements aboard freight and passenger trains furthered their efforts to find work, escape mistreatment, and survive. Mobility facilitated the political mobilization of tramp workers in Iowa, first during the passage of Kelly's Industrial Army in 1894 and later during the IWW's free speech fight in Sioux City and wheat belt organizing drives. Yet hobos' mobility also unnerved local communities. Vagrancy laws provided some legal sanction to punish tramps and move them along whenever they appeared, but extralegal violence was not uncommon. Hobo workers' movements reveal the complex contours of law, charity, and community boundaries in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Iowa.

127. Ladies' Industrial Relief Society Family File Cards—1920's, Richardson-Sloane Special Collections Center, Davenport Public Library, Davenport, Iowa.