

# THE PALIMPSEST

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VOL. X11

ISSUED IN JULY 1931

NO. 7

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## The Hobo Convention

Judge and hobo, tramps and lawyers,  
Legislators, Weary Willies,  
Priest and pirate, saint and sinner,  
Bankers, beggars, correspondents,  
Printers, tailors, every nation  
Called they in this grand convention,  
Gave the freedom of the city,  
And the people yelled with laughter,  
When they saw the aggregation.

It was during the depression of 1896 that a group of young men in Illinois conceived the idea of forming a tramps' union in order to protect themselves against alleged incursions of organized labor. This band of Illinois "tramps" formed a State union, and the idea soon became popular all over the country. Presently a national union was effected.

Having formulated a set of by-laws, the professed hobos devised for themselves a tourist union button,

advertised the tourists' union as an association of tramps for mutual benefit and improvement, and charged an admission fee of twenty cents for a button. The only qualification for membership was the willingness of applicants to panhandle a dookie — that is, beg a hand-out at the back door from some maid or housewife. The tourist must prefer to ride on a brake beam rather than in a palace coach, and had to promise to petition the Congressman from his district to pass a law requiring steam heat in box cars. Conclaves were held annually, the bums taking free passage to the appointed town, and there, holding high carnival with plenty of eatables and drinkables, they forgot all their woes in the enjoyment of one holiday a year.

The origin of the hobo convention which was held at Britt, Iowa, on August 22, 1900, came about through an article that appeared in the *Chicago Record*. In the spring of that year, T. A. Potter, who was at that time a prominent business man of Britt, noticed that a number of tramps had held a meeting at Danville, Illinois. In fact, four hundred and seventy-eight "actual, genuine, tattooed-on-the-arm, and blown-in-the-bottle tramps" had been present. Out of curiosity, Mr. Potter addressed a letter to Mr. Roberts of Burlington, a State representative of the tramp union, asking for further details concerning the hobo organization.

Several months passed, during which time Mr. Potter really forgot all about the hobos and their gather-

ings. And then, one day he received a letter from Roberts, enclosing a blank application and a tourist union button. Proudly placing the button on the lapel of his coat, Mr. Potter became Britt's first member of the "Order of the Honorary Sons of Rest". Naturally, the button attracted interest, and the new member commenced to receive numerous inquiries as to what sort of society "Tourist Union No. 63" was.

Mr. Potter also wrote to Charles F. Noe, of Sycamore, Illinois, whom he found to be the secretary of the organization, and asked for application blanks. Mr. Noe was a newspaper man, the editor of the *Sycamore Democrat*. In fact, Mr. Potter discovered that the organization of professional tourists had originated with members of different typographical unions, printers, and men



THE BUTTON

connected with the newspaper business. But the organization had expanded, and by the year 1900, "scads and scores" of would-be hobos had become members of "Tourist Union No. 63". In addition to the bona fide hobo members, the honorary members at that time numbered fifteen hundred and included representatives of many businesses and no business at all, from newspaper slavery to bond-clipping luxury. Shriners and Elks turned hobo. Prominent men from

all over the State and nation became technical tramps.

The membership of the organization grew rapidly in Britt until many prominent men of the town were enlisted. Among the number was Thomas A. Way, who was then well known both on account of his business activities and his connection with politics; W. E. Bradford, a pioneer attorney; B. C. Way, then in the drug business at Britt; Phil Reed, who was in the newspaper and grain business; William Dana, a real estate dealer; and others in Britt and the vicinity.

After the discovery of the origin of the organization, E. N. Bailey, editor of the *Britt Tribune*, took a decided interest in the tramp union and, with his co-operation, "Trume" Potter became "the originator, the instigator, the initiator, the accelerator, the innovator and the head exasperator" of the hobo convention. The two men — Potter and Bailey — made a proposal to Big Brother Charles F. Noe that the town of Britt would like to play host to a national convention for the professional do-nothings, agreeing to supply a car load of beer for each five hundred hobos or fraction thereof, and to feed every man for two whole days. Mr. Noe visited Britt with "Onion" Cotton, the "Head Pipe" of the organization, and August 22, 1900, was decided upon as the date for the national hobo convention. The sponsors claimed that it was the first national convention ever held in Iowa.

Experienced bums, itinerant printers, bindlestiffs,

nestocrats, and society tramps were invited. Word was received from almost every State in the country that the professional tourists were heading toward Britt, Iowa. And Britt, a hitherto unknown little town of the Middle West, became in certain circles the Mecca of the whole United States.

According to the grand officers of the organization, Britt was chosen as the point of the national convention because the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad and the Minneapolis and St. Louis Railroad with their numerous freight trains gave ready access to the town from the effete east, the frozen north, the torrid south, and the wild and wooly west; because the soil for a hundred miles around was black and springy to the step and the walking delegates arriving by the country roads would not get footsore, and no sand would sift into their shoes.

During the interval after Britt had been selected as the convention headquarters and before the designated date of the meeting, the newspapers throughout the entire country exploited the unique affair. Responsibility for the publicity of the convention rested mainly upon E. N. Bailey, a chubby man of keen wit and good humor, who wrote many of the most sarcastic and penetrating epigrams of Iowa journalism during that period.

With large numbers of society tramps and hobos sending in requests for hotel reservations, the housing

question became a real problem. The first thought was to ask the superintendents of the railroads to set out at the junction about fifty empty box cars. Later, this idea was abandoned in favor of using the buildings at the fair grounds, the horse stalls being provided with fresh straw as beds for the Weary Willies.

If it was advertising that Britt wanted, the town got a full measure of that kind of devotion. About two days before the convention, a number of newspaper men arrived in Britt. In fact, there were sixteen special newspaper correspondents at Britt on the day of the convention. Among the reporters sent for the occasion were: Richard Henry Little of the *Chicago Tribune*, James J. Rafferty of the *Chicago Record*, Met L. Saley of the *Chicago Inter Ocean*, Byron Williams of the *Minneapolis Journal*, E. H. Robb of the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, Grant Tyler of the *Iowa State Register*, and T. G. Morehead who represented the *Des Moines Capital* and also prepared special articles concerning the convention for the Sunday editions of the *Chicago Times-Herald*, the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, the *Omaha Bee*, and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.

James J. Rafferty, of the *Chicago Record*, was arrested the day before the convention on the charge of being guilty of taking a bath. As this was highly against both the constitution and by-laws of the organization, he was tried and fined, but the evidence showed that it was only a bath of the corkscrew variety,

and he was let off after furnishing a bath of the same sort for the Court. Richard Henry Little was one of the prosecuting attorneys of the famous trial.

On account of all the publicity, several politicians of the State were attracted to Britt. A number of ministers also came to view the convention, and detectives were sent by several detective agencies for the purpose of picking up criminals who might be present in the crowd.

The greatest joke about the national convention of hobos was the seriousness with which both Britt and the bums regarded the whole affair. Almost two days before the convention, the tramps began to arrive. When they discovered that the citizens of Britt were going to treat them right, they organized scouts along the railways to direct the hobos to the fair grounds. By Tuesday evening — the night before the big day of the convention — bums and tramps were arriving from every part of the country, and every train of the Milwaukee and the Minneapolis and St. Louis railways was dumping its cargo of nondescript humanity out of box cars, off the platforms of the blind baggage, and from the brake beams of the trucks. It mattered little how they got there, "whether on cushions or by the highway, whether astride the bumpers or the bicycle, or yet by way of the rude raft launched on the bosom of the creek." All were there and "all were hungry". On Tuesday evening there were fifty hobos

in Britt by actual count, and for the first time in many years the residents of the little town locked their doors and hid the family silverware in mattresses. It was impossible to purchase a padlock for love or money in Britt the night before the convention.

The town had been appropriately decorated for the convention with banners, tin cans, and other articles suitable to the occasion. A streamer indicating the place of headquarters was stretched across the street from the Way-Healey building, while across the Bailey newspaper office was a banner announcing the location of "Tourist Hindquarters". All day Tuesday the society tramps and genuine hobos straggled into the town of Britt, where they were given a chance to parhandle the merchants of the town. The delegations of hobos were not pretty. They regarded themselves as the guests of Britt and proceeded to demand entertainment, food, and drink. Their national cry was, "Give us chuck and suds and we're happy."

By Tuesday, "Trume" Potter began to realize that the convention was a serious business. Before noon, sixty tramps had wandered into his velvet-carpeted office, asking, "Where do we feed? Where's the suds?" Every hobo demanded attention — and he got it. The delegates were taken to the fair grounds where they were given commodious quarters in the hog and cattle pens. And there they fed and boozed, lolled and lazied, enjoying two days of luxury.

The jargon of the hobos included many expressions peculiar to their cult. For instance, a "nestocrat" is a man who sleeps anywhere, a "tourist" is a man who can travel without money, the "gay cat" is the man who has charge of the camp fire and directs others in begging from the housewives throughout the village where the hobos are camping, a "bundlestiff" is a man who can cook anywhere.

On the morning of August 22nd, a sleeper on a Chicago train was set out and a party of hobo officials filed out. The president, "Onion" Cotton, and the secretary, Charlie Noe, had organized the party, chartered a car, and decorated it with appropriate banners. Accompanied by the Clear Lake band and a large crowd of the fraternity gathered en route, the Chicago delegation made a most spectacular arrival in Britt. They were escorted to headquarters by the reception committee, the Britt cornet band, and Bailey's "rag time" band. Before leaving Chicago, each member of the party had sealed his shoe laces and a wager had been made that whoever broke his shoe laces while on the trip (which meant that no one would take off his shoes during the whole time) would be penalized. And so, in the true hobo style, the Grand Ashayhis of the hobo convention lived for two days.

The Chicago party spent one night in Britt, and slept in Gifford's livery barn. About two o'clock in the morning, Mr. Potter was awakened by Mr. Noe,

who complained that the horses below snored so loudly that the peaceful sleep of the society tramps in the loft above was greatly disturbed. He wished the horses could be quieted.

It was a strange gathering that assembled at the fair grounds on the morning of the convention — “authors, railroaders, cigarmakers, designers, real estaters, printers, actors, doctors, society tramps” — they were all there and ready for a big celebration. Prominent men and the genuine hobos sat side by side, and drank beer and soup out of the same old tomato can. With the real hobos it was the chance for a day of much eating and more drinking, a chance to own a town, even if it were small. With the pretenders, it was a lark as enjoyable as those of past college days when sense gave way to nonsense.

About two hundred and fifty hobos attended the convention. They were all orderly and immediately organized themselves at the fair grounds by appointing one of their number as the chairman of a committee in charge of affairs. The chairman of the hobos was a college man, who proved himself well educated by delivering an excellent address before the convention. To this day, the identity of the collegiate tramp is unknown.

It was the chairman's duty to make out an order for provisions, which the committee in charge furnished. The tramps then cooked their meals in the same man-

ner that they did along the railroad right of way or on the bank of a stream. Large numbers of people came to watch these culinary activities of the hobos.

A side degree was organized by Attorney Bradford of Britt, in connection with the association proper, which was termed "The Sons of the Blue Rhinoceros". One of the tenets of this degree was the stipulation that every tourist must register on the white planks of the railroad property in an accessible place so that his message might be readily deciphered by tourists going through and slipping off passenger and freight trains. In this way the tramps would be able to keep track of each other, and to know in which direction their friends were travelling.

Weather conditions on the day of the convention were ideal, which was fortunate, for the program included horse races, ball games, foot races, and egg sucking contests. The special features of the day transpired at the fair grounds in the afternoon, opening with an address of welcome by Attorney Bradford and responses by Head Pipe "Onion" Cotton and Charles F. Noe. According to an article in the *Britt Tribune* for August 22, 1900, "both men declared that they were no speakers and their remarks proved that their declaration was no lie." The main speech of the day was given by W. L. Eaton of Osage.

The "rag time" band — or the "Tramp Drum Corps", as it was generally known — attracted a great

deal of attention, playing on the streets and at the fair grounds. The entire drum corps dressed as tramps was one of the most striking features of the convention.

Interest in the races was stimulated tremendously by the variety of enticing prizes offered to the winners. Awards for the foot race were as follows: first prize, one bottle Pabst tonic; second prize, cash \$2.00; third prize, cash \$1.50; fourth prize, cash \$1.00; fifth prize, cash 75 cents; sixth prize, one can of tomatoes; seventh prize, two pounds of cheese; eighth prize, one bottle of Hunyadi water; ninth prize, one ticket (on cushions) from Hayfield to Titonka; tenth prize, introduction to Bill Dana; eleventh prize, one cake of Ivory soap; twelfth prize, photograph of Phil Reed; and thirteenth prize, three days of work.

No doubt the races and athletic events proved most delightful to those who took delight in watching others work. The program closed with a grand farewell banquet for hobos only, at which time all restraint was removed and the town was wide open, presumably so that there might be no congestion of exits.

Throughout the convention, political talk was prevalent, the hobos having been imbued with the idea that they should take a hand in the presidential campaign and place a candidate in nomination. A good deal of opposition was expressed to McKinley because he "believed in giving work to every man." Just about this time Admiral Dewey had returned from the

Philippines and the convention voted to a man for the nomination of the hero of Manila. The prevailing sentiment in favor of Dewey was pithily expressed by Nebuchadnezzar Lloyd of Utah.

"Dewey is our logical candidate for many reasons", he said. "In the first place he has been thrown down and roasted by all the other parties. From the day he sailed he wanted to be President. Naturally we know how he feels. Then he is one of us, because he never had but one home and he gave that away. He believes in free trade, imperialism, silver, gold, and everything else that is repudiated by the other parties. He's our choice."

Immediately upon his nomination, Admiral Dewey was notified and informed that a nominating committee would call upon him and present credentials. The *Minneapolis Journal* published a cartoon showing the nomination committee travelling to Washington in a box car, and later another cartoon appeared illustrating the presentation of the nomination to Dewey, in which Dewey stood on top of a pyramid of beer kegs and received his nomination papers.

For Vice President, the convention nominated "Filipino Joe" Bazill who had been in the Philippines as a soldier, and at the time of the convention was riding about the country doing nothing except expressing his opinions of the Philippines.

After being in secret session nearly all day under

the water tank, the platform committee agreed upon the following planks:

1. We are in favor of legislation for the establishment of rocking chairs on all brakebeams on all railway cars and coaches.

2. All bulldogs shall be muzzled and any dog swallowing his muzzle and biting a tourist shall be shot.

3. Any housewife offering a hobo her own making of mince pie shall be declared guilty of treason and be punished accordingly.

4. All cushions and bumpers to blind baggage must be cushioned and upholstered.

5. The word "bath" must be expunged from the dictionary and any person caught bathing shall be tarred and feathered.

6. We believe in the free and unlimited distribution of beer without waiting for the aid or consent of any of the breweries.

7. No blanket stiff who squares it will be allowed to hit the road a second time.

8. We are opposed to all foreign wars, as the loading of transports necessitates too much work.

At the election of national officers, "Onion" Cotton was reëlected Head Pipe, Charles F. Noe, Secretary, and T. A. Potter, Chief Route Picker. Noe encountered considerable opposition from Martin Johnson who accused Noe of being caught at work during the past year. Noe retorted that Johnson had taken two baths since the first of July. To this slander, Johnson replied that Noe, "like the rammed petard, is only waiting for ignition to explode, so swelled is he over

the honors already heaped upon him." Moreover, he was even then wearing socks which, having been thrown against the wall, failed to stick and were therefore unfit for any member of the association. Noe explained, however, that the only reason he wore socks at all was because "turning the hose on his feet kept him cool those sultry evenings."

On the day of the convention, several telegrams were alleged to have been received from various cities throughout the United States, requesting the ordeal of entertaining the next convention. A rule was made, however, to the effect that there should be no more than one national hobo convention.

Toward evening on the last day of the convention, the people of Britt became rather worried for fear that the 'bos might tarry after the conclave had been formally closed. Noe, however, said "no", and his word commanded respect. Not more than four or five hobos remained on the following day.

There were probably five or six thousand people in attendance at the convention on August 22nd, though the crowd has been estimated as large as 20,000. Seldom has a more cosmopolitan throng ever assembled in an Iowa town than when "a general conglomeration of the human family got together" in Britt.

The national hobo convention occurred over thirty years ago, but a remnant of the organization still exists. Until the time of his tragic death in a fire on

March 6, 1931, T. A. Potter of Mason City occasionally received letters asking about the convention and requesting cards and buttons.

It is doubtful if a more hilarious farce was ever perpetrated than the national convention of "Tourist Union No. 63". Even the celebrated hoax of the Cardiff Giant of Fort Dodge did not receive as much newspaper notoriety as Britt gained through the monumental joke of the hobo convention.

That was more than a quarter of a century ago. To-day Britt is still a little town somewhere in the north-central part of Iowa. The people remember the hobo convention and rank it first in the history of the town, second only to the distinction of being the residence of Governor Hammill. As the motorist enters Britt he may read these signs beside the road:

THIS TOWN IS FAMOUS FOR  
THE HOBO CONVENTION  
THE HOME OF THE GOVERNOR

GRETCHEN CARLSON