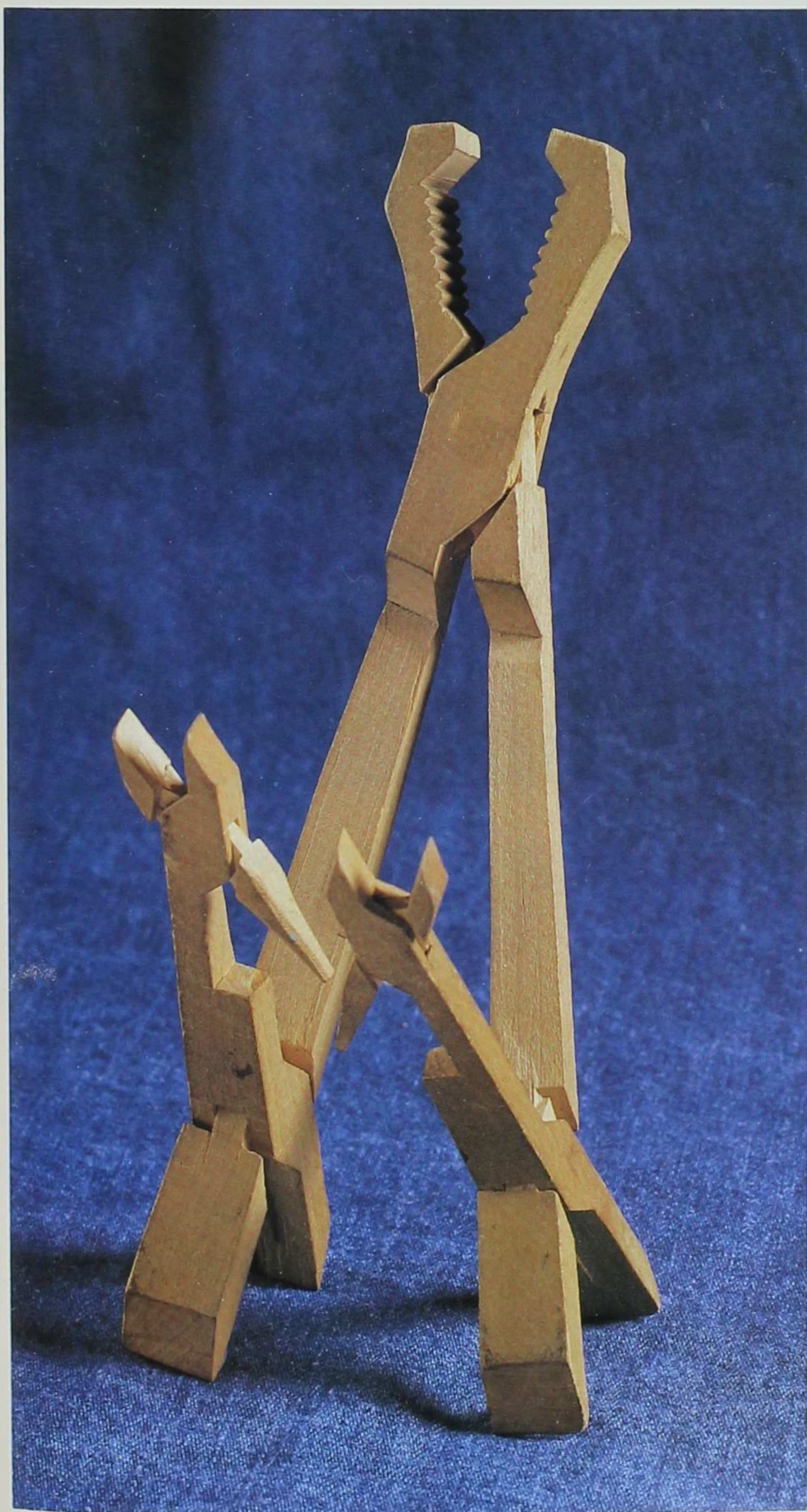


Time on Your Hands



Folks with time on their hands know that it takes a sharp knife, a steady hand, and a patient mind to whittle or carve. Consider this whimsical, 7½" creation, rivaling a Swiss army knife and carved from a single piece of wood.

At flea markets and in railroad yards, George Horton of Vining, Iowa, has kept a sharp eye out for examples of such skill and patience, and shares with us here some of his hobo memorabilia. Hoboes' ability to carve is most commonly evidenced by their monikers, or nicknames, carved like trademarks on railroad sheds and water tanks. Because most of these pieces lack identification, however, the carved objects here might well have been created by anyone with time on their hands.

Horton considers many of these examples as the sort of token or trinket a hobo might carve and give to someone in exchange for a favor. His collection also includes material examples of discrimination against hoboes and memorabilia from Britt's annual hobo convention.

The product of any folk art varies from creator to creator. Some may be small triumphs or ingenious extensions of a skill passed from one to another. Some, more crudely done, merely maintain the tradition. Nevertheless, all are expressions of an individual's personal style. And indeed, as a participant in the itinerant folk art tradition, who is a better example of individuality and personal style than the American hobo? —*The Editor*



Above: Carved from a single piece of wood, the ball-in-the-box is still an extremely common creation. Some shown here were found in flea markets; one, in the walls of a small-town depot. Hoboes sometimes wore the simpler ones (front row) as slides on red bandana neckerchiefs.



Left: Carved from peach pits, a squirrel (clutching an ear of corn) and a monkey (1¼").

Right: A collection of miniature tools (actual size). Each pair of pliers is carved from a single piece of wood, and the hinges work freely. Sets like these may have been made for children.



Below: "Tramp art" was a popular craft, practiced by anyone with a knife, a supply of uniformly thick wood from cigar boxes or fruit crates, and the patience to chip-carve the strips and glue or nail them in place. The layers of notched wood, characteristic of tramp art, also adorn frames, shelves, boxes, hanging cabinets, and miniature furniture. This box has padded velvet sides and top and measures 11½" x 8½" x 7".



*photographs by
Chuck Greiner*



Left: More creations from the whittler's knife. Two whistles (one shaped like a gun); chains from a single piece of wood; and a shoe, heart, and horse. These may have been carved by hoboes as tokens in return for a meal or other kindness.

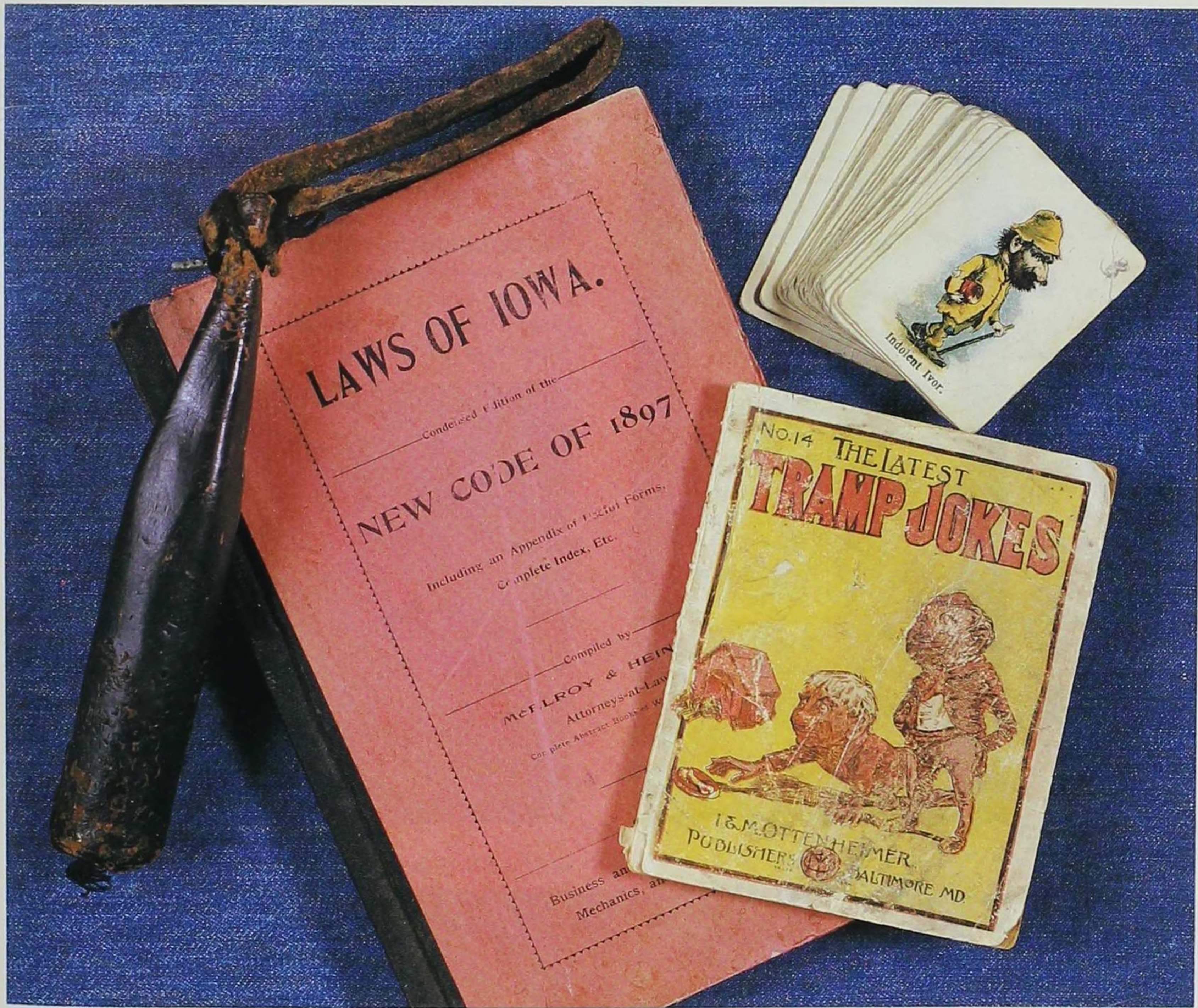


According to Horton, unemployed engravers, and others with such skills, created "hobo nickels" by altering the profile on Indian-head nickels. Encased, some may have been used as watch fobs.



Today's hoboes still create tokens of their personal style: leather pendant by "Knot-man" (son of "Alabama Hobo") and cable ring by "Frisco Jack." The rings have been auctioned at Britt's hobo festivals to raise money for the hobo section of the town's Evergreen Cemetery.

Right: This watch fob probably once belonged to the occasional hobo (called a "yegg") who gambled — an activity frowned upon by professional hoboes under their code of conduct.



Above: Several forms of discrimination against the wanderer: A railroad detective's hefty sap (steel wrapped in leather) was found in the Boone depot. "Indolent Ivor" appears as the stereotypical tramp in this deck of playing cards. The Iowa Code in the 1890s listed strict vagrancy laws. A sample from *The Latest Tramp Jokes*: "First tramp: 'I once possessed a splendid dog who could always distinguish between a vagabond and a respectable person.' Second tramp: 'Well, what's become of him?' First tramp: 'Oh, I was obliged to give him away. He bit me.'"



Below: In 1900, Britt's movers and shakers planned the hobo convention as a promotional scheme to bring attention to their small town. Revived in 1933, the yearly National Hobo Convention continues to keep Britt in the public eye every August. Britt's Chamber of Commerce recently marketed a limited edition of this commemorative bronze belt buckle (the 1900 convention logo appears in the small circle on the left).



Above: A rare ribbon from the first Britt hobo convention. (Pre-1900 conventions were in Chicago and Danville, Illinois.) The link and coupler (above "Britt, Iowa") is the linking device between railroad cars. Horton believes that Tourists Union founder Charles Noe used a Weary Willie caricature as the union logo. He carries his tin can for handouts and suspends from a stick his grub box with a bit of flour.

Right: Modern-day legends of the hobo world surround a celluloid Britt convention button, believed dating to 1900. Sale of the large buttons benefits Britt's new hobo museum and the cemetery fund.

