

## Working and Wandering

# 'You Were Just One of the Unfortunate Ones'

by Merle Davis

**P**ROSPECTS of employment continued to lure the unemployed and downtrodden — and, indeed, the ambitious — onto the road in the twentieth century. Wanderlust perhaps compelled some individuals to seek a romantic life on the road, but most persons who traveled on freight trains, wandered about railroad yards, and camped in hobo jungles were among the unfortunate ones who were traveling about the country desperately looking for work.

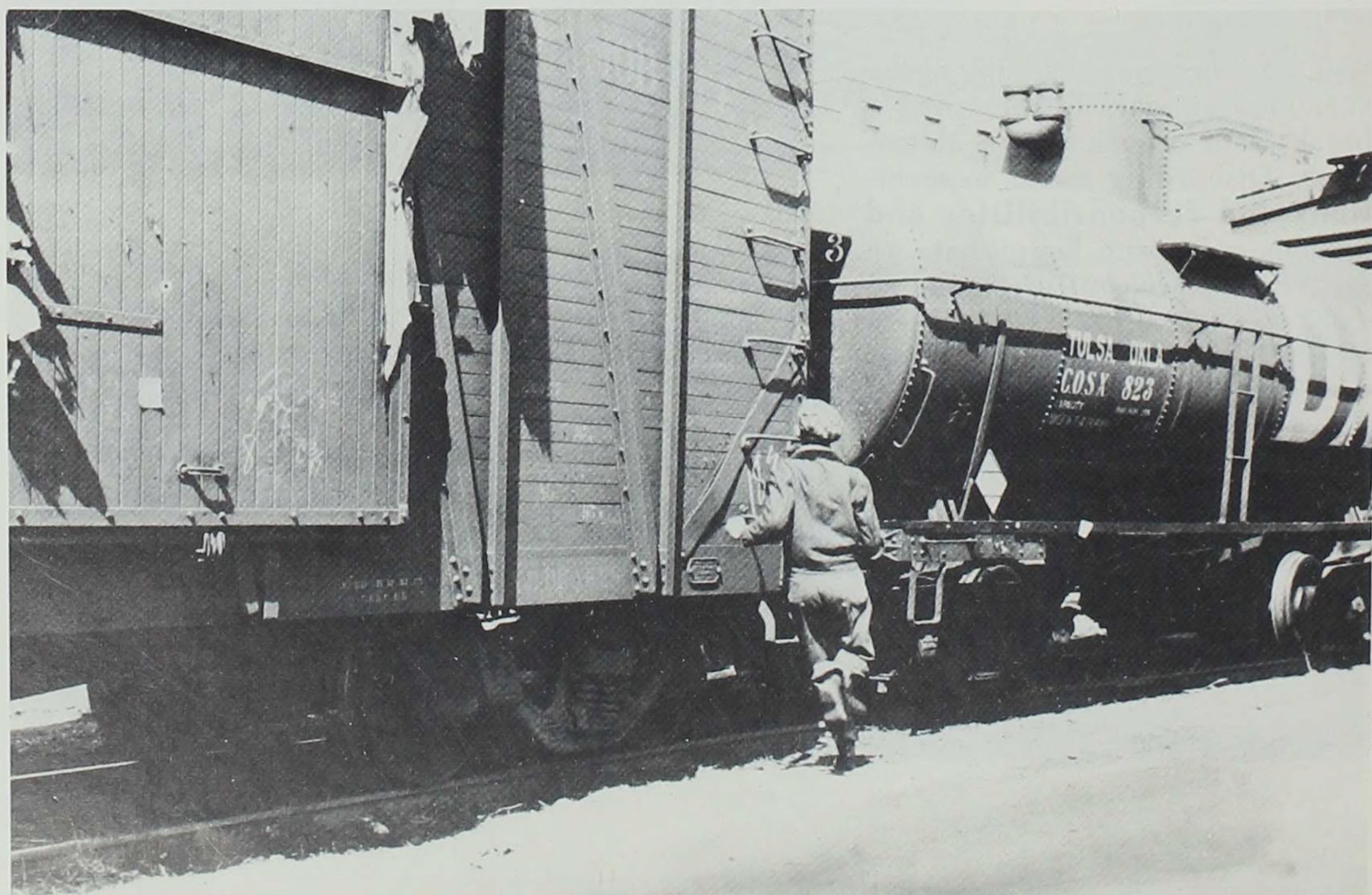
Life on the road was harsh. Stealing rides on trains was neither simple nor safe. Death under the wheels of a speeding train posed a constant threat. Migratory workers sometimes came to fear both train crews and railroad detectives. Certain rail lines gained notoriety for their rough treatment of transients. In 1932 the Southern Pacific alone ejected 700,000 per-

sons from its freight trains. Companions acquired casually on the road or in hobo jungles might be thieves, thugs, or worse. Townfolk and farmers alike often branded itinerant workmen as tramps, bums, hoboes — dangerous persons, both dreaded and despised. Loneliness, hunger, and privation were the constant traveling companions of the rootless laborers. Migratory laborers frequently were not only homeless, jobless, friendless, and often penniless — they were largely unorganized.

The one organization best remembered for harnessing the potential power residing in the brains and muscles of the great mass of unorganized migratory and exploited workers was

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One of thousands: A man hops a freight (Dubuque, 1940), photographed by John Vachon for the Farm Security Administration.





the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Founded at a Chicago convention in 1905, the IWW sought to organize all workers into one big union and thereby bring about a general restructuring of society. The IWW preached and practiced non-violent direct action in the settlement of industrial disputes, whether they were on the shopfloor or in the harvest field. IWW organizers found recruits in skid rows and hobo jungles, in workplaces and on freight trains. The IWW reached its peak in strength around World War I, but vigilante attacks and governmental suppression on the federal, state, and local levels led to its virtual demise in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Yet well into the 1920s, the red union card of the IWW guaranteed safe passage on freight trains in some parts of the West. Packing the same card in other places could lead to the rock pile or a roughing up by vigilantes. For many of the outcast and downtrodden, the IWW provided a practical schooling in the ultimate importance of organization and solidarity.

The Great Depression threw hundreds of thousands of Americans out of work. In the winter of 1932/33, estimates placed the number of unemployed persons at 25 percent of the workforce. Thousands took to the road for the first time, some for weeks, many for years. Husbands and fathers left their families. Teenagers took to the railways and highways by the thousands, some in search of work, others bound for no place in particular, simply wandering. In 1932 roughly two million young people were traveling around the United States. Des Moines railroadmen estimated in 1933 that four to five hundred young people were daily riding freight trains through the city. Although most of the transients found stealing rides on freights were male, one Des Moines railroad official guessed that four or five girls road freight trains into the city each day. In 1933 it was estimated that sixty thousand females were on the road in the United States. Families sometimes road the freights together, the children accompanying their parents to whichever destination the train would carry them. Most railroads serving Iowa allowed riders to travel unmolested on freights, and occasionally train crews even coupled extra cars onto trains to furnish shelter for

riders during bad weather. Although some youths lugged battered grips or carried extra clothing wrapped in brown paper bundles, most trekked across the country with only the clothes they were wearing. Upon arriving in cities like Des Moines, they usually sought out the hobo jungles, where they would sleep, boil coffee, make friends, bum a meal, perhaps look for work, and prepare to board another train. These were the outcasts of American society — the unemployed, the uprooted, the unfortunate ones.

The experiences of these individuals form an important chapter in the history of working people. In the mid-1970s the Iowa labor movement set about to document the history of the working people of Iowa and their unions. The Iowa Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO, bore primary responsibility for directing and financing this effort through its Iowa Labor History Oral Project. Trained historians traveled about Iowa and neighboring states conducting oral history interviews and collecting other historically significant materials relating to midwestern working people. Many of the interviews dealt with the recollections of individuals who took to the road in the 1920s and '30s, or with railroadmen who came into frequent contact with hoboes and transients. The following edited excerpts were gleaned from some of these interviews.

## Circulating

Wanderlust certainly compelled some persons to take to the road.

A Mason City railway switchman recalled: "There was Scoopshovel Scotty and Hairbreath Harry and many other ones. . . . One fellow by the name of Sullivan [would] come around every spring when the weather would get kind of mild. He'd sit on the tie pile and play the mouth organ. We'd always invite him down to our yard office and give him a sandwich or something, or make arrangements so he could eat over there at Long's Restaurant on Third Street. We enjoyed him every spring. We looked forward to him! There was a lot of fellows. . . . I felt sorry for them. Didn't seem to be looking for work, just circulating."

A railroadman from Mapleton remembered:



"I always had the urge to travel, even when I was a young boy. Before I had guts enough to leave home, I used to hop freight trains and ride them up the hills for fifteen, twenty miles and then jump off and walk back. I got a little experience when getting on and off these trains. Then, as I got older . . . I'd side-door Pullman around the country. You had to be like a tomcat, because you had to spring through the air at the right time, or you'd be slammed up against the boxcar. . . . I even rode the blinds on a passenger train. It was quite a deal if you could say you rode the blinds on the Southwest Limited or the Rocky Mountain Limited. A few times you'd get kicked off by the brakeman or conductor or fireman. It was rough at times."

## Bumming

Most people who rode in, under, or on top of freight and passenger trains without going through the formality of paying fares were not seeking adventure or excitement. They bummed around the country in search of work.

A Des Moines man who would later mine coal, drive truck, and help build farm machinery recalled being on the bum in the 1920s: "I made up my mind I wasn't going to school anymore [when I was sixteen]. The old man, if you didn't bring any money in, you wasn't staying under his roof. I couldn't find a job. So then me and him got to fighting and arguing, and I just went on the bum, riding freight cars all over the country. Wherever I could pick up work, I picked up work. I worked in the wheat fields, harvesting wheat. Worked in beet fields. I worked anyplace I would find work. Slept in the barns. [Farmers] wouldn't let us in their houses. You had to work for them, [but] you slept in the barn. They had a little table built out under a tree or something, and they fed you. That's as close as you got to the house. You were up at daylight, and you were out there until dark."

A Des Moines bricklayer who was working in Chicago when the Great Bull Market crashed recalled his experiences: "There was a little work, but not much. All them big buildings,

they just didn't have the money [to finish them]. They went broke. That's when I started on the bum. . . . Back in them days, when you was on the bum, if you'd find a job, [and] the guy didn't want to give [you] a job, some bricklayer would come and go to the foreman and say, 'Say, listen, let that kid work a day.' That'd give me some money. They'd volunteer to let me work in their places, which happened to me several times. It was just that you was on the road, and you was broke, and nine out of ten times you didn't have any money at all.

A Waterloo man who would later help manufacture tractors remembered: "The freight train was the best way to go. It was rough going, because you got kicked off and so forth. There was a lot of them riding. We took off and was going out to Montana, out to the wheat harvest, and see if we couldn't get a job. So we rode the freight trains. I'll never forget when we were pulling out of Fargo, North Dakota. We waited in there overnight, and there was over five hundred of us [who] crawled on a freight train."

A Fort Dodge truck driver recalled: "There was three of us [who] traveled together. Traveled everywhere west of the Mississippi practically. We would be gone three, four, six months at a time, and then come back. Our main object in running around the country was to find jobs, like dishwashing, peeling spuds, picking fruit, cutting hay. During the harvest we would be on the threshing runs. Out of Cheyenne, Wyoming, I suppose at one time maybe about forty of us [were] on one train, all going different directions. And you'd break up. Some of them would be going south to Arizona, some of them going north to Washington and Oregon."

An Estherville packinghouse worker vividly recounted: "For a whole year I just traveled, slept in the boxcars or wherever you could get a place to sleep. Jails. Anywhere that you could lay down. Place where there was sand for the railroads, you sleep there, anywhere. Oh, you survived. There was a lot of bakeries and butcher shops. You bummed them. Worked a little for your rolls and bread. You just done that, that's all. Usually I had a pack sack, and if you get a little work somewhere, you'd get some bacon ends or something like that. . . . I





didn't fool around the South because I might get put on a chain-gang. I was just a little scared of it. . . . A train would probably have a hundred on it; probably a hundred, hundred and fifty guys on a train going through. You were just one of the unfortunate ones, like everybody else. I met guys with real good educations. I was out in Idaho. There was a guy, he had paper wrapped on his feet. He was wrapped in paper clear to his knees to keep his feet warm. The newspaper come down and took a picture of him. Didn't have any shoes. Wrapped in paper."

## Camping

Hobo camping grounds — or jungles — left indelible impressions on the memories of railroad men and migratory workers.

A railroad brakeman and conductor from Waterloo explained: "Generally, wherever there was a water tank around the railroad there was a hobo jungle there. There was one at Independence, there was one at Manchester, and there was one on the left side of the track down at Dubuque, just about five, six blocks down from the river from our coal shed and water station. . . . There were anywhere from

### A hobo jungle outside Britt, 1939.

six to fifteen fellows in that camp most of the time. Down at Dubuque they could sleep under the bluff there. And then, if the weather was bad, they'd crawl in some empty boxcars that were in dead storage right close to this jungle."

A locomotive fireman from Waterloo also remembered the Dubuque hobo jungle: "[Hoboes would] go uptown and get them [coffee] grounds from the restaurants and dry it, take an old gallon can, pour water over that, and they'd make you the best cup of coffee you ever drank. You never drank any better than a hobo cup of coffee! Our engineer used to take cold water to Dubuque. He'd grab our company bottles [and] go down there to the hobo camp and get two bottles of coffee for us so we'd have coffee from there to Waterloo!

"Then they'd go up the [Catholic] sisters' place. They'd always get a handout there. . . . They'd go uptown and talk some butcher out of soup bone, come back there and throw it in a tin can. They maybe had an old five-gallon oil can or something that they'd got ahold of. Cut the top out of it and put it on the fire. Boil that old bone there and throw in the carrots and potatoes. Boy, you'd get a good feed out of it! I've eaten a lot of [stew] down there in the hobo



camp. They was always very sociable. You go down there, and they'd divide up with you if you wanted something to eat!"

A Mason City railroad brakeman and conductor recounted: "Right over here . . . just this side of the tracks, there was a hobo camp in there. There was a few trees in there. They never done no damage, the hoboes didn't, but they would go around and beg. They'd come and knock on your door and ask you. If you give it to them, all right. If you didn't, all right. . . . When them fellows left that camp, the cans they used for teakettles and coffeepots, they cleaned them all up. . . . And they would hang them in the trees so the next guy could use them. They really were gentlemen, as far as that's concerned, the majority, now."

The Mapleton railroad man recalled: "I met some real interesting people there [in the jungles]. It was rough at times. There was a few nights, too, when I went to sleep on hard coal and used the weeds that I pulled up for a mattress. I was only sixteen years old, but I got a college education out of it."

A Sioux City man who spent a short time riding the rails in 1933 related: "It was new to me, sitting around the jungles listening to older folks talk, professional hoboes. I wasn't professional. I was an amateur. . . . If you had

a penny or two, you'd throw it in the kitty, and you got a meal."

The Des Moines bricklayer also recalled jungles: "In Niles, Michigan, one time I was in a big jungle. . . . Maybe two hundred men in there, cooking, cleaning their clothes, boiling their clothes out, and all that kind of stuff. Oh, it was terrible. Wherever you went, you had them jungles. Guys moving this way. Guys moving the other way. And they was all good guys. You never seen no trouble. They would help one another. What these guys were, then, were just regular old American workingmen that were looking for work."

## Harassing

Migratory workers, as well as professional hoboes, needed to be on constant alert lest they suffer harassment at the hands of local law officers, railroad detectives, or unscrupulous train crews.

The Waterloo brakeman and conductor explained: "I just greeted them or spoke to them as I saw them on the train, but I never stopped to visit with them any more than to say

The train schedule set the tempo for a wanderer's day of waiting and riding. Below: A handful of men stop off in Britt (1930s). Opposite: Fellow travelers share a boxcar as they ride through Des Moines, 1934.



ART FISCHBECK COLLECTION, SHS; PHOTO BY SAFFORD LOCH





'Hello,' or 'Where are you going?' or something like that. No, I didn't chase them off, and I didn't try to shake them down for a package of cigarettes or whatever, like some fellows have."

The Waterloo locomotive fireman said: "They got on whenever they wanted to. We never paid any attention to them. They rode on the back of the tank. We didn't say anything, [but] just coming over the back of the tank they might scare the daylights out of you, if you stepped on one of them or something like that. Used to go back and get one [to] see whether he wouldn't pull coal for you. Give him a sandwich or something, if you had an extra sandwich, if he was hungry. Tell him to come down and pull some coal for you. And then, of course, if it was cold weather, it was nice and warm down there. . . . Of course, the doggone lazy brakeman, they didn't want to [shovel coal] because they didn't want to get dirty!"

The Mason City brakeman and conductor recalled: "No, never a trainman chased a hobo. They helped them. If there was an empty car, they told him where it was. They helped him because the brakeman's out there in the dark with a light, [and] the hobo's out there in the dark with a club. He's got the advantage on you, so you better be good to him. You didn't have to be afraid of them. They wouldn't hurt you. There was a lot of very, very honorable men as hoboes, well-educated. Jim Love, a conductor down here, always felt bad because he didn't get an education, and after he got to running trains, [and] we had a hobo [aboard], he would have him in the caboose, and many,

many times he split his lunch with him just to get the information out of that hobo. . . . There were some drunks, sure. There's evils in everything. But the majority of them were very intelligent men."

The Des Moines bricklayer remembered: "We [had] come into Guthrie, Oklahoma. And the railroad dick, he flashed his flashlight in there. He seen us up in one corner [of the boxcar]. Down in the other corner there was three colored fellows that [had gotten] in the freight car with us. Man! That's when we got in trouble. . . . So they took us down and put us in jail, kept me overnight. We come before the judge; and the judge, he sentenced them three colored fellows to the peanut farm, and the other two guys that was white, they put them on some other kind of deal they had there — not a peanut farm — to clean up the parks and so on. So the judge asked me, 'What identification have you?' I had a paid-up union card. That judge must have been a good union man . . . or something. He kind of accepted that, and he told the policeman, 'Take this kid down and see that he gets a good breakfast.' But I had to promise I wouldn't ride the train out of Guthrie, Oklahoma!"

The Waterloo factory worker recalled: "[Train crews] didn't give us any trouble. Just had these yard dicks that did it. They weren't as bad as they'd been years ago. Years ago they were really ruthless. I know we caught one freight train out of a town in Dakota. We caught one there, and he chased us off three times. . . . We come into a town [in the Dakotas], and the freight stopped there and wasn't going to leave till next morning, and they threw us in jail. We said, 'We'll sleep in the boxcar.' They says, 'No, you won't. You're going to jail.' I'll never forget that as long as I live. Soon as it got dark and we turned the lights off, the bedbugs were so thick you couldn't hardly stand it. We never slept a wink all night."

## Organizing

Many of the transient workers who hit the road in the 1920s and 1930s first learned about trade unions and the importance of organization and



solidarity through their contact with the Industrial Workers of the World.

A Des Moines machinist recalled the late 1920s: "When [my dad] went broke, I went from one place to the other looking for jobs. You rode the boxcars, and I rode plenty of them. I ran into these IWW guys in hobo jungles. I never was a member, but I was around with the IWW. 'I Won't Work' — some people would say that was the slogan of the IWW. Others would say it was 'I Want Work.' Another one was 'I'm Willing to Work.' There used to be signs in different towns: 'IWW's — don't let the sun set and find you here.'"

A Sioux City packinghouse worker recalled the same years: "Between threshing and picking potatoes in Minnesota and Idaho, knocking apples in Washington, [I traveled for] a period of about six years. . . . I did join [the IWW in Kansas]. That was about my second year of making the harvest there. The main operation they conducted was trying to get the people not to go out to the farms unless they could get a guaranteed wage when they went. Of course, in that day we were talking about two bucks a day; three would be tops. . . . Then they tried to establish that a stacker or a guy on the header barge, or different jobs you done through the harvest, should pay a little more than handling a pitchfork. I think they did have the effect of making the people conscious that they should at least bargain for what they was going to get paid."

A Cedar Rapids truck driver said: "I moved for about twelve years. I rode the freights all over the United States. I made the harvest in the Dakotas, and the apple orchards in Washington, and the hops in Oregon. You couldn't call me a fruit picker or anything like that. I drove truck. I seldom worked in the fields. I worked on the Green River Dam in Colorado [and the Grand] Coulee Dam in Washington State. I did a little bit of everything over all those years. Went back and worked in the lumber camps a while up in northern Michigan. I got into mining. I worked in several mines around Butte. I worked in the highest elevation mine located in the United States. I worked for the U.S. Valadium Company at Bishop, California, in a shaft that was [at] eight thousand feet. That was a tungsten mine. The

union up at Bishop was the IWW, Industrial Workers of the World. I guess that was about their last stronghold, but, holy cow! you had clean sheets on the bed! Living conditions were a big thing with them, with the Wobblies. They dealt with boomers and miners and lumberjacks and grain harvest workers."

The Estherville packinghouse worker remembered: "I heard they were hiring at Fort Peck, Montana. So I went down there. They didn't even want to take me. Finally, I went down into the tunnels. They were water tunnels. The boss said, 'You must really want a job bad enough to come down here and see me.' He says, 'I'll hire you.' So I went to work in the tunnels there. They hired nothing but tramps. That's all they would hire there, because they were killing them off just like flies. And that's why I got ahold of the IWWs. I finally joined the Industrial Workers of the World. . . . My first knowledge of unions was [from] them. I didn't know too much about unions at that time, but I talked to this buddy of mine. We worked together. He said, 'Well, look, you can't lose anything.' So we joined. We went right [in] with them. They were tough. Those old IWWs, when a grievance started they got right around the boss. And that's where it was ended, right there. The only way we had to settle the grievance [was] right there. You couldn't take a grievance to the office. They just stuck up for what was right, that's all. It was just a worker [who] wanted his rights. That's the only way we got it. The worker with his rights, that's all." □

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

The excerpts of interviews used here are from the massive collection of oral history interviews collected and processed by the Iowa Labor History Oral Project. Mark Smith, Secretary-Treasurer, Iowa Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO, authorized the use of interviews from this collection for the preparation of this article. The bulk of material dealing with unemployment and the movement of transient labor in Iowa in the 1930s came from the files of the *Des Moines Register*, especially for the summer months of 1932–1934. Among the most useful books for background information were Irving Bernstein, *The Lean Years: A History of the American Worker, 1920–1933*; Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the IWW*; Joyce Kornbluh, ed., *Rebel Voices: An IWW Anthology*; and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt*, v. I, *The Crisis of the Old Order, 1919–1933*.