



COURTESY PAT KELLEBERGER (1952 PHOTO)

Against the silhouette of a freight train, Amana station agent Herb Zuber (right) and Indian Joe Ferns, one of several hoboes Zuber recalls in the following sketches.

# Hobo Sketches by an Amana Station Agent

by *Cliff Trumpold*

**H**UNDREDS of hobo wayfarers passed through the Amana Colonies in eastern Iowa every year. The Amanas were an oasis for the hobo, a place where he could count on a handout from the communal kitchens in the seven colonies. Many times the church leaders had admonished the Amana villagers: "Turn ye not away

when ye are asked." The doors were opened to all. When the Amana Colonies changed to a capitalist economy in 1932, the communal kitchens were closed. But townspeople continued the tradition of hospitality and generosity, feeding hoboes from their private homes.

Most of those who came were nameless and

lived in the fringes of a shadow world, asking only for a slice of bread. Nobody ever saw them arrive. They would just appear, hang around for a few days, and — as quietly as they had come — vanish. If a hobo abused the Amana hospitality by overstaying his visit, he would be “offered” a job, and, more often than not, would leave on the next train.

But some of the hoboes did accept jobs. Outside laborers were always in great demand to perform menial tasks, especially on the village farms during planting and harvesting time. They became hired hands and received a generous wage, a place to hang their hats, and

three meals a day at a designated village kitchen. In the fall, after the hay had been stacked and the wheat and corn put up in the giant granaries, they would draw their pay, wrap up their few meager possessions, and leave for warmer regions.

Occasionally, some of the hoboes who were approaching middle age would realize that life on the open road was losing its fascination. They gradually tuned out the siren song of the locomotive whistle and settled in one of the Amana villages, where they quietly assimilated into the mainstream of the working class. When they died they were buried in the village cemetery, rarely noticed by more than a brief obituary. Their only legacy was a mute, concrete headstone. Their epitaph was a name and a date.

Most of the hoboes who passed through Amana during the first half of this century were “pretty decent fellows,” according to Herb Zuber, retired South Amana depot agent. He is quick to add that there were also some disreputable individuals: “We had pickpockets and worse. You had to be careful. And I know we had hard, tough criminals hanging around in the jungle, west of Upper South.”

Zuber’s tenure as station agent began in 1923 and lasted for fifty years. The Great Board of Elders, Amana’s elite ruling body, had wanted him to become a teacher, but he politely refused and was assigned the position of assistant agent and shortly afterward was promoted to depot agent.

The job was not an easy one. “In those days everything came by rail,” he recalls. The South Amana Depot was the interchange between the Rock Island Railroad in the village of Lower South Amana and the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul in Upper South Amana. A tremendous amount of passenger and freight traffic passed through the villages every day. North- and southbound passengers from the Rock Island, and local travelers from Conroy, Marengo, and other nearby communities, would gather at the little depot. As they sat around the stove a hobo oftentimes would walk in to warm up. Remembering the reaction of the passengers, Zuber laughs, “You know, some of those hoboes hadn’t had a bath in a year.”

“I remember a hobo who called himself the



ART FISCHBECK COLLECTION, SHS; PHOTO BY SAFFORD LOCH

Hairbreath Harry, photographed in 1934 at Britt.

King of Tramps. He cut his initials on everything. Several times I told him that if I ever caught him cutting around the depot I would give him hell. I nailed him one day," Zuber recounts. "He had just finished cutting his name . . . about an inch deep on a slant, in a thick, solid oak door. I was about to reprimand him when I saw his knife. . . . I thought about it a little. He had his name on the outhouses, on the freight doors on the south side of the depot, and on every telephone pole within five miles. I don't know how he found time to keep his knife sharp."

Most of the hoboes sported self-styled nicknames, and Zuber remembers many of them. In the following sketches, built from Zuber's memories and perceptions and recorded in an oral history interview in February 1989, the hoboes who stopped in the Amanas emerge as individualists who led lives of great freedom — and great danger.

**F**IREDOWN WILLIAMS was a Welshman, or possibly a Scot. He stemmed from well-to-do aristocracy and would have inherited a title and considerable wealth had he remained at home. He enjoyed a cup of wine occasionally but rarely drank to excess. His headquarters were in South Amana but he spent a considerable amount of time in Middle Amana, where he frequently held court in one of the west-end wine cellars. He was very articulate and apparently well read, as he was up to date on most world events and had a studied opinion, always radical, on most of them.

When Firedown headed south, he never failed to stop in Wellman, Iowa, thirty miles away. He probably spent half his days in Amana and the other half in the Amish and Mennonite community in that area. His favorite overnight hangout was the corncob bin next to the furnace in the basement of the Green Island country school. One winter morning in 1940, a county maintenance crew running a snowplow discovered his body in a roadside snowdrift.

Hairbreath Harry Ryan never wore anything



COURTESY AL KELLENBERGER

Pittsburg Blackie found contentment in his friendship with young Pat Kellenberger of South Amana (1952).

made of leather. To ward off the cold, he would wrap layer upon layer of gunnysacking around his feet and legs. One bitterly cold, winter day, Zuber went out to check on him. He walked along the tracks until he came to the stockyards where a pile of sand had been placed next to the loading chute to provide footing for the animals should the ground become ice-covered. Harry had built a big fire in the sand and was lying on his back, kicking his frozen bare feet in the hot flames of the fire.

One of Hairbreath Harry's treasured possessions was an old tin cup that he dragged in front of him on a length of wire. He always walked backwards, the result of a childhood mental affliction.

Harry was moving out one day on top of a boxcar on a westbound freight train traveling downgrade at around fifty miles an hour. Probably daydreaming or getting his bearings, or maybe just enjoying the passing scenery, he didn't notice an approaching water tower, onto

which a previous train crew had inadvertently failed to secure a heavy swing chain suspended from the fill spout. The massive chain, whipping merrily in the slipstream of the fast-moving train, just cleared the top of the cars, but left no room for anyone — such as Harry — unfortunate enough to be riding there.

Indian Joe Ferns sported a full head of white hair, “thick like pig bristles,” Zuber remembers. Indian Joe had become a hobo after his wife and child had drowned in the Galveston flood. He was a very heavy drinker, often to the point of physical insensibility. One December evening in 1936 after a full afternoon of serious drinking, he fell and passed out on the trail of the hobo jungle west of South Amana. A heavy snow fell that night, three or four feet, and after midnight the snow turned to rain. Early the next morning the wind shifted and the temperature plummeted to four above. The story goes that Joe awoke, terror-stricken to find himself completely encapsulated by three feet of solid ice. Somehow he managed to free himself.

“It’s unbelievable how much the human body can stand. He was a helluva good guy,” Zuber commented. “I would have trusted him with my life. I have his Bible around here someplace. I used to bring him down to my house and he would read to my young son, Tommy. He just quit coming around sometime in the early fifties. I wrote to a lot of places where he used to stay . . . even the universities around the Midwest, you know, the cadaver departments. He just disappeared off the face of the earth. Probably buried in some Potter’s Field, unknown, like so many others.”

Pittsburg Blackie was a confirmed hobo until he cast aside his cane and walking shoes and settled in South Amana when he was in his eighties. He died at ninety-five after spending the last years of his life living in an old woodshed owned by Al Kellenberger, a villager who looked after him. He now lies in the local cemetery, not as Pittsburgh Blackie but as Henry Strasburger. He had spent nearly a full lifetime on the road — the only life he ever really knew and the only life he loved.

Texas Ben frequently worked for the South Amana farm and the old community kitchen. He didn’t really need the money because he

seemed to have a secret funding source. “Here, Herb,” he’d say, peeling a bill off a fat roll wrapped in an old handkerchief. “Here’s an old twenty for you.”

Ben suffered a horrible end. He had climbed into an empty boxcar on a westbound freight one evening while it was parked in a yard siding. The door of the car was slightly ajar and Ben stuck his head through the narrow opening at the precise instant the locomotive “hit” the string of cars. The sudden impact slammed the heavy door shut, instantly crushing Ben’s skull.

Mush Faker was a traveling umbrella repairman in the days when ladies carried parasols. He carried the tools of his trade in a quiver slung across his back. Occasionally he would stop at Zuber’s house and sing for his son, Tommy. His favorite song was “The Face on the Barroom Floor.”

The freight train was the magic carpet for the hobo, but it often exacted the ultimate toll from the unlucky man who slipped and fell from his perch on the rods underneath, or lost his hold on the ladder while riding the couplings between the cars. One of these unfortunate hoboes was Frank Kane. Kane had been drinking on one spring day in 1940, when the 9:40 Rock Island passed through South Amana. Apparently he stood too close to the tracks as the high-speed train thundered by. The vortex spun him around and pulled him under the wheels.

The first to be notified was Zuber. He rushed to the scene of the accident. Realizing that another train was due shortly, he gathered up the arms, the legs, the head, and whatever else he could find. After placing everything in a neat pile, he took a last look at all that remained of Frank Kane, and left to call the coroner.

Zuber’s experiences present a fascinating interface of the hoboes and the Amana people. “I don’t think there’s anyone in the state of Iowa who knew more hoboes,” he claims. “They came, got their wine and three square meals a day. What more do you want? They had a place to sleep . . . and they were really wanted,” he says. “There was always some work available for them. . . . One-eye Robert Norton summed it up one time: ‘Herb, this is peaceful valley. It can’t be any better in heaven.’” □