

Working and Wandering

“MISSIS, will yer please sew me a Shirt on this Button?” asks the fellow in the postcard caption on the front cover. The response of the woman on the doorstep isn’t clear. Will she slam the door at his impertinence? Will she laugh warmly at his rather broad request and, instead of making a shirt for his button, give him an old shirt headed for the rag-bag and a sandwich from the kitchen? Is it trust or doubt in his eyes? What should we read in her raised hand?

This special section uncovers the ambivalence the American mainstream culture has historically demonstrated toward a smaller segment of society — the vagabond. Titled “Working and Wandering,” the section looks at the nineteenth-century harvest hand during Iowa’s wheat-growing years; Britt’s first hobo convention in 1900; the tramp motif on picture postcards; the unemployed who searched for work in the twenties and thirties; individual hoboes who routinely stopped at the A-manas; and folk art practiced by itinerants and others with time on their hands.

The ambivalence of mainstream America has appeared on many levels. A society needs migratory labor, and yet it fears the transient life-style. Elected legislators vote for strict vagrancy laws, while individuals continue to extend acts of personal kindness from their kitchen doors. Railroad management sets strict policies against those who hop freight trains, but railroad workers frequently offer them food and warmth. Small-town promoters host a national hobo convention, and the citizens lock their doors.

Perhaps the ambivalence arises from differing attitudes about work. Nineteenth-century

America depended on a large pool of migratory laborers and itinerant craftspeople. Today most Americans earn a living in the conventional manner, nine-to-five or three-to-eleven, and then return home. Likewise, some honor and obey the work ethic, while others choose to work sporadically. Still others, in both centuries, have had to search for employment or struggle for decent wages.

In preparing this section, we encountered many who had personal stories of working and wandering, and we added sixteen pages to this *Palimpsest* to accommodate some of those stories. Probably many of us remember wanderers coming to the back door willing to do odd jobs in exchange for a meal. As children, we found X’s chalked on the sidewalk or side of the house, proof to the next wanderer of our generosity. Others of us remember the freight trains in the thirties crowded with men — and sometimes families — traveling to the Dakota wheat fields or the Washington orchards. Some of us may have been on those freight trains.

Behind the Great Depression stories and the nineteenth-century journalistic exaggerations, look for the spirit to survive and the search for personal dignity. We found it in Hamlin Garland’s accounts of migrant harvest hands, in early efforts of organized labor, in the acquired skill (despite incredible danger) of hopping freight trains, in a small town’s efforts to put itself on the map.

The following section culls from historical resources and oral histories the voices and experiences of the Americans who have wandered and worked, and the varied attitudes of the mainstream society through which these individuals have moved.

—The Editor