



Hobo! Hobo! Hobo!
The little dogs bark.
The beggars are coming to town.
Some in rags and some in tags
And some in velvet gowns.

The National Tourists Union

—WILL BE HELD AT—

Britt, Iowa, August 22nd, 1900

Britt's First Convention

by George A. Horton

THE EDITOR of the *Britt News* puzzled over the hobo convention that had just ended in his town. "The only way to find out anything about a tourist meeting is to attend it," he wrote, "and after the thing is over you do not know much more about it than you did before."

Editor Simkins was not the only confused journalist who had covered the 1900 convention of Tourists Union No. 63 in little Britt, Iowa. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* had exclaimed, "Tramps, real tramps, tramps with tin cans tied to their waists and wearing weird whiskers, have been arriving all day. The citizens of Britt have all along regarded the affair as a huge joke and have taken great delight in sending out picturesque descriptions of a tramps' convention at which no real tramps were expected. In the first place the tramps were not expected to be able to find the town of Britt."

The promoters and participants in the first Britt hobo convention are long since gone, leaving only newspaper accounts of the convention and the events leading up to it. And what newspaper accounts there were! More than a dozen midwestern newspapers sent correspondents, and the correspondents sent back long, somewhat embellished accounts. But by finding common factors in the accounts

we can piece together what probably happened in August 1900 in Britt — an event that would go down in hobo history and eventually spawn a small-town tradition of August hobo conventions.

The idea for the first hobo convention arose three years before Britt's convention. As a slow freight crawled toward Indianapolis on a fall day in 1896, two travelers sharing a boxcar passed back and forth the idea of a brotherhood or union of their own kind. What brought the two together — and what unified thousands of men — was their love of rambling about in search of work or in search of adventure. Still in his twenties, Charles Noe worked on a Sycamore, Illinois newspaper when he wasn't hopping freights. Since boyhood he had stolen rides on trains, taking "to the grime and grease of a box car like a duck to the water," a Britt paper would later report. "Onion" Cotton, a road-wise rider who ran a small flop hotel in Danville, Illinois, also enjoyed rambling about in this style. Noe and Cotton started talking about the common needs of "tourists" — slang for various social degrees of tramps and hoboes in the world of vagabondia.

Their ideas for a protective tourists union bounced off the boxcar walls and banged together like the draw-pins and link couplers that held the cars together. Noe was aware of

the thousands of men who "work a while in one town and then pick up stakes and hoof it to another." Added to these itinerant shoemakers, railroaders, cigarmakers, designers, molder, printers, actors, tailors were the society tramps: "men that don't work, wear good clothes, and when they get busted away from home bum it back again on a box car or come back counting ties."

By the next spring Noe and Cotton had printed up union cards and buttons, written a constitution and by-laws, and planned a convention at the hub of all train stops: Chicago. The novel idea appealed to many who loved the road. Young tourists came by the hundreds. Old road-wise hoboes, some who had never stopped moving since the Civil War, showed up and were welcome. A second annual convention met again in Chicago in 1898, and tourist union chapters formed in nearby towns.

Exactly who belonged to Tourists Union No. 63 isn't totally clear. One 1899 newspaper account characterizes the tourist union as made up of "lively young men of respectable families" who invite genuine tramps "to give zest to their annual conventions." Others — railroad officials and segments of the public — feared the tourists as a rise of a new socialist union or a "revival of Coxeyism," and successfully pressured Noe and Cotton to move the third convention out of Chicago. Although some members had probably marched in Coxey's and Kelly's armies of the unemployed, the tourists union reportedly intended no seditious acts or governmental interference but sought to "make the struggle for existence a pleasure instead of a burden." Nevertheless, Noe and Cotton chose Danville rather than Chicago for the 1899 convention.

Adventurous young men and professional hoboes shared a common need for improved relations with railroad employees, freedom to search for work, and protection from the scores of state vagrancy laws that could send them to the rockpile. The tourists union attempted to address these needs while celebrating their camaraderie. Convening around a hobo jungle campfire, the Danville conventioners reported on safety and standards of conduct, confided the best places for handouts and new ways of riding the rails, and explained hobo

signs and symbols members might encounter on the road. Members were initiated, and titles, taken from hobo camp life, were handed out: Headpipes, Route Pickers, Guiding and Guardian Angels.

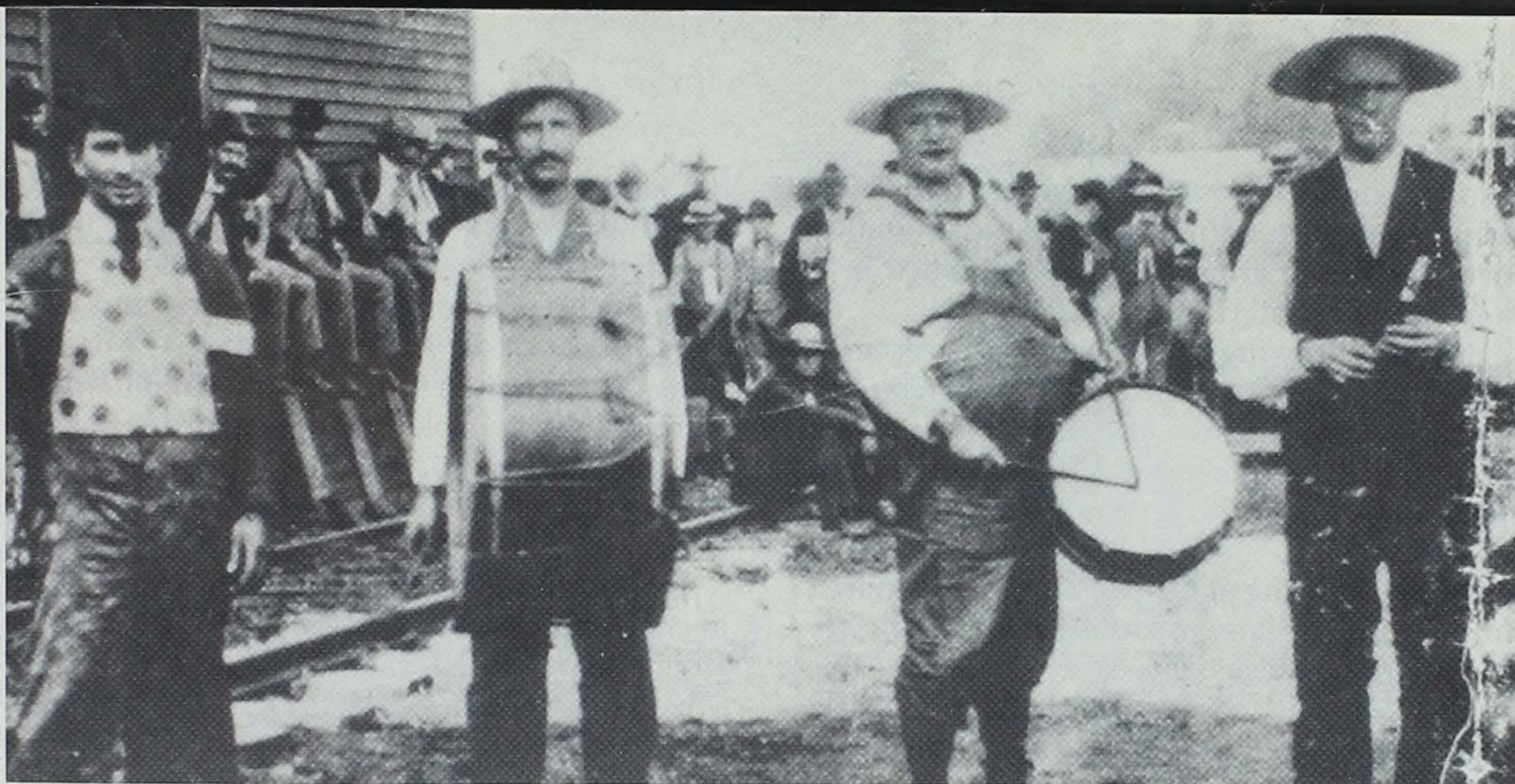
Noe acknowledged that the tourists had met in Danville for "social purposes" but promised that by 1900 they would take up political concerns. "We have invited the hobos to come to the convention and we are going to give them a good time and all they can eat and drink. Next year we'll get the hobo vote in line." The *Chicago Chronicle* reported that for 1900 "no effort will be spared to have thousands of tramps gather" at Decatur, Illinois, or Burlington, Iowa.

THE SUMMER OF 1899, small-town entrepreneurs Thomas Way and Truman A. Potter spied the story about the Tourists Union convention in a Chicago newspaper. Looking for ways to promote their sleepy little village of Britt in north-central Iowa, they wrote to tourists union president Noe, urging him to consider Britt (instead of Burlington or Decatur) for the 1900 tourist convention.

Upon Potter and Way's invitation, Noe traveled to Britt. It took only minutes to see that the town would be perfect. Britt was the junction of the Minneapolis & St. Louis and the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul railroads; numerous freight trains passed through the town of 1,540. Noe reportedly also liked the black soil of Hancock County — springy to the step of the "walking" delegates, or tramps. With Britt attorney W. E. Bradford on hand, a deal was made. Britt would get the national hobo convention, August 22, 1900.

Most Britt townspeople were probably not yet aware of the concessions made to the tourist union members (which Noe estimated in the thousands): a full deed to the city, a boxcar of beer, two days of slumgullion (hobo stew), and all dogs to be muzzled.

Motivated by small-town boosterism, Potter and Way recognized that whatever brought attention to Britt would likewise bring attention — and perhaps profits — to these two movers and shakers. Way was either part



Bailey brothers' band: unidentified fellow in vest marks time as O.S., E.N., and E.L. Bailey (and townspeople) meet the trains bringing the conventioners.

owner or founder of a Britt bank, the fire fighting company, a newspaper, a real estate and insurance office, and a telephone company. And "anything in Britt that Tom Way does not own is owned by Tom Potter," the *Daily Iowa Capital* claimed. Furthermore, since 1898 Britt had been skirmishing with nearby Garner to become the new county seat. Way regularly exchanged jabs with the Garner editor in their weeklies.

Potter and Way gave responsibility for convention promotion to "Bailey of Britt," a nationally known humorist and publisher of the *Britt Tribune*. Edward N. Bailey was well suited for the job. "Bailey is not related to the partner of Phineas T. Barnum," a Des Moines colleague wrote, "but is a whole circus in himself. He is a roly-poly creation of adipose and good humor, but his stubby hands can write some of the most cutting and risqué utterances of Iowa journalism." Bailey looked kindly on the convention plans and caught the spirit and the language. He dubbed Potter "the originator, the instigator, the initiator, the accelerator, the innovator and the head exasperator" of the hobo convention.

With great pride, the July 19 *Britt News* announced that while Philadelphia and Kansas City might have their national conventions, Des Moines and Cedar Rapids their political and business conventions, Spirit Lake and Clear Lake their chautauquas and religious gatherings, Britt would be "the only town in Iowa and the third in the United States to be honored with the Annual National Convention

of Hobos." The convention was set for August, "when the walking is good and the weather is right for the delegates to lay out at night under the cover of heaven."

The promoters printed and distributed posters, assuring the public that it would be "well worth coming many miles to see the deliberations." The novelty appealed to reporters and railroaders and "barber shop yarn spinners," who talked it up. Knights of the road heard about it through the grapevine or the premiere issue of Noe's *Tourists' Union Journal* (a newsletter defending the rights of the hobo).

AS THE CONVENTION DATE approached, it was clear the promotional efforts had succeeded. The Clinton (Iowa) *Dispatch* noted that every westbound Northwestern freight brought ten to twenty-five hoboes into Iowa, and hundreds more were on foot. Congregating near the Clinton railroad bridge across the Mississippi, they cooked, washed up, and enjoyed "the luxury of a shave" from a hobo barber. "We're fixin' up for our hobo convention," an "old grime veteran" told a reporter. "All the boys 'ill be thar, we wanter look the best we kin."

In Britt, merchants decorated their windows and shops with the hobo theme. Tom Way

strung a banner across South Main Street indicating tourist headquarters. In turn, Bailey strung a banner from the *Tribune* office proclaiming "Tourist Hindquarters."

Britt was growing by the hour. One reporter wrote that hoboes were "dropping from bumpers and brake beams" of every train passing through Britt. Reporters and detectives, politicians and ministers arrived, drawn by the crowds.

On the morning of the convention the tourist union officials and a delegation of eighty arrived from Chicago in a car chartered by Noe and Cotton and covered with banners. The Britt cornet band and Bailey's ragtime band escorted them to the fairgrounds, in time for the afternoon entertainment and races. (Way later recalled that the hobo foot race took two hours and "that the time watch wore out before it was over.")

THE REPORTERS assigned by large and mid-sized dailies to treat the convention seriously were beginning to believe, wrote one correspondent, "that it was a burlesque" but decided to "play the game to the end." Way and Potter coaxed them along, hitching up a team to take "the boys out to see the sights" — the grain elevator, the town pump, the arch over the cemetery gate, the fairgrounds race track and amphitheatre, and "Ed. Bailey's spittoons."

With delight, the correspondents reported that Britt's publicity stunt, designed to draw crowds of onlookers, was backfiring because genuine hoboes were arriving. "Britt now sees that the affair has passed the proportions of a joke," the *Burlington Hawk-Eye* wrote, "the news reached the genuine tramps and they were not deterred from coming."

"Fully 2000 tramps will be here by Wednesday," the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* announced. "The only thing that is worrying [Britt] is the fear that 1999 of them will like the town and vicinity and will not agree to move away."

Another paper claimed that Britt citizens had "made the fatal mistake of treating the hoboes with levity." Bailey's fife and drum corps was "all dolled up like hoboes and playing

the latest ragtime tunes." "The young men of the town dressed up as tramps and tried to get gay with the delegates. The town sports made up after the style of 'Old Hoss Hoey' and tried to qualify for seats in the convention. . . . Members of Tourists' Union No. 63 were obliged to lock the doors in order to keep out the sports." Suspicious of the press, delegates reportedly charged twenty-five cents for interviews.

Perhaps judging that Americans were weary of continual news stories on the McKinley and Bryan presidential campaigns, the reporters seized the convention for its comic relief. They lost little time in getting the hoboes to nominate their own presidential ticket. Papers from coast to coast kept the wires humming with the big question: What is happening at Britt?

The *Chicago Daily Tribune* parodied the pulse of backroom politics: "A Nomination committee . . . has been in session under the water tank down by the railroad all the afternoon earnestly discussing the matter. At present the Nomination committee is making a house-to-house canvass at back doors soliciting food and will take the matter up at a meeting behind Tom Way's woodshed tonight. . . . Excitement is intense, and the chickens are roosting high."

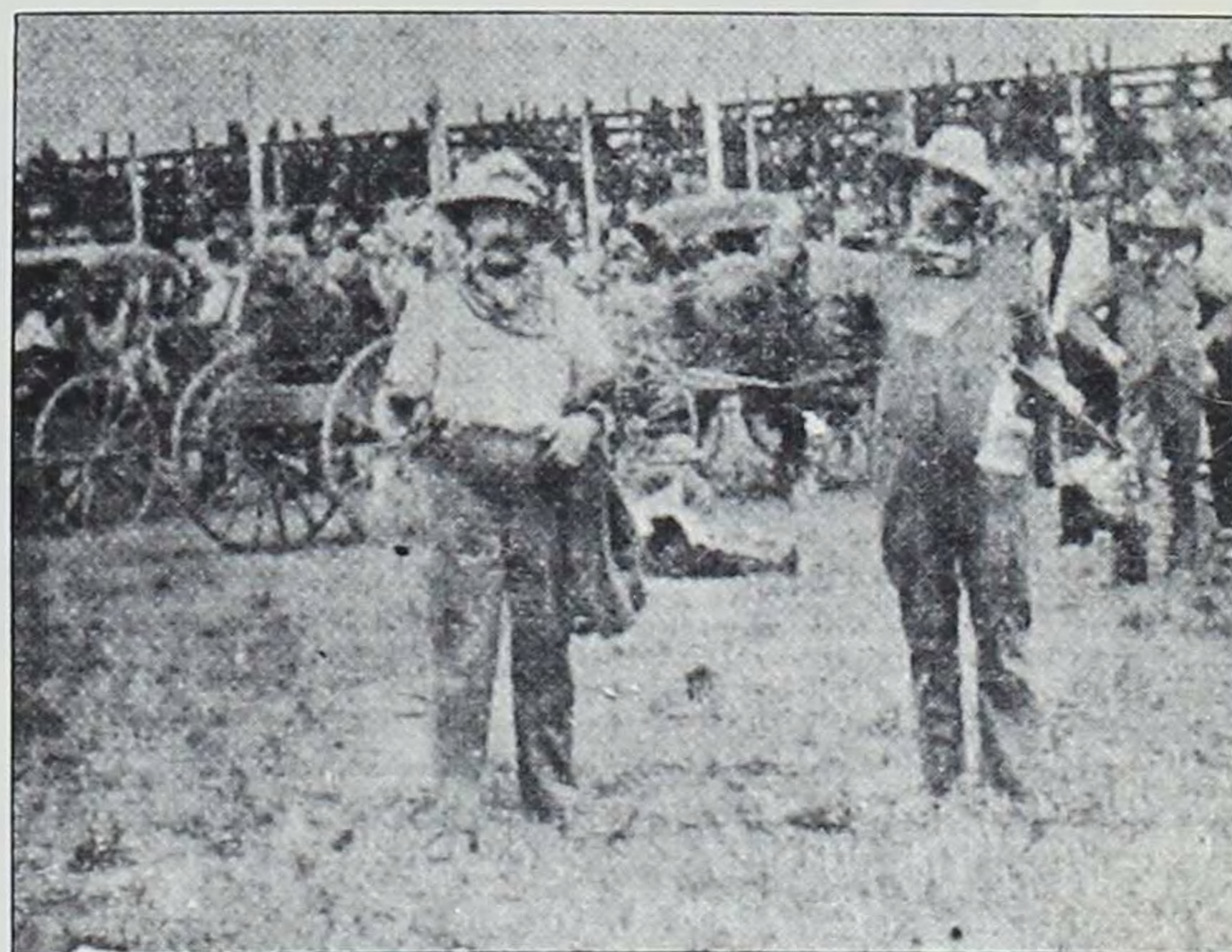
Delegates agreed on a hobo platform with some of the planks poking fun at their stereotype:

1. We are in favor of legislation for the establishment of rocking chairs in all brake-beams 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 shall 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

IMAGES FROM THE PRESS

Right: "The Dewey Notification Meeting" (Minneapolis Tribune)

Below: Filipino Joe, Dewey's running mate (Saint Paul Pioneer Press)



Above: "Representative Group of the Languid" (Saint Paul Pioneer Press)

Left: "The Anti-Prosperity Party: The Anti Movement Carried to Its Logical Conclusion" (Minneapolis Journal)

the loading of transports necessitates too much work.

The hoboes chose Admiral Dewey for presidential candidate. "Dewey is our logical candidate," Nebuchadnezzar Lloyd, delegate from Utah, explained. "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."

For Dewey's running mate, the crowd selected delegate "Filipino Joe." Rising to speak, Joe shifted his tobacco quid and made one campaign promise: "Ladies and gents: I'm no speechifier. The people wot brought us here has treated us great. Britt has been good to me an' I intend bein' good to Britt."

Joe and his fellow tourists apparently kept that promise. Although reporters noted that nervous townspeople were locking their doors and hiding their silverware, the *Iowa State Register* admitted that "no depredations were committed."

"THE HOBO CONVENTION has come and gone," the *Britt News* reassured its citizenry a few days later. "Nobody was killed, the town was not burned, nobody robbed. Britt is the best advertised town in the United States and is still doing business at the same old stand." "If everybody did not have a good time," the paper added, "it was their own fault as there was all colors of fun afloat."

Union president Noe had predicted a few thousand tourists, but after the convention the *Britt News* joshed, "The crowd in attendance was very variously estimated from 20,000 down. . . . Anyway it was the largest crowd for its size ever congregated in the state of Iowa." The *Iowa State Register* reported: "The town was so large [400 bona fide hoboes] it scared itself, and will not be over the boom for years."

The midwestern papers acknowledged the publicity coup their own correspondents had helped Britt bring about. Attesting that Britt

had "more varieties of genius" than any other American town, the *Sioux City Tribune* admitted that "Britt has had the entire country wondering for three weeks whether the hobo convention announced to be held there was a fake or the real thing." The *Tribune* continued, "They not only got the advertising they wanted, but they got a convention big enough to scare the people half out of their wits. When it was over the hoboes departed in peace, and didn't even take the town with them. And now they are trying to run Tom Way for congress in the Tenth."

The *Chicago Inter-Ocean* joked that "Britt is populated by very ambitious people who lay awake nights trying to study out some scheme that would bring their burg fame." The *Saint Paul Pioneer-Press* grumbled, "There are plenty of towns anxious for the advertising and willing to run the risk of thievery and rapine in order to get the bums and the newspaper notices. Britt won out this year through the efforts of Tom Way [and Truman] Potter."

Tom Way used the Britt convention as another jab in his ongoing county-seat war with the equally ambitious small town of Garner. In his *Britt News*, he smirked, "The Hobos were all sent to Garner the next day as they wanted a nice quiet place to rest for a day or two."

Britt had achieved fame. Young society tramps had had their lark. The professional hoboes no doubt weathered the jokes at their expense, relishing the brotherhood while guarding their cherished privacy. Reporters and readers had enjoyed a break from the McKinley-Bryan campaign.

"It was advertising that Britt was after, and she got it," Editor Simkins chuckled, well aware of correspondents' embellishments. "Let the good Lord have mercy on the reporter of the daily paper when he goes up to the pearly gates and tries to get in." For a few days in August 1900, reporters had shone the national spotlight on a spunky small Iowa town and its honored guests, the hoboes. □

NOTE ON SOURCES

Primary sources for this article were period newspapers covering the Tourists Union conventions of 1897-1900. See also Gretchen Carlson's "The Hobo Convention," *Palimpsest* (July 1931).