

Tell Me Where Have All The Hoboes Gone To Hobo Songs in American Roots Music

*I have truly seen America first, riding on a dirty freight train
I've been from the Frisco Golden Gate to the rock bound coast of Maine
Yes, I harvested wheat in Kansas, cut ice in Montreal
But the work I done in Texas, was the worst job of them all*
Goebel Reeves – The Texas Drifter's Warning (1930)

American Travels Of A Dutch Hobo

*Down through the years
Many men have yearned for freedom*
Joh Prine – the Hobo Song (1978)

In 1923, a young Dutch seaman arrived in New York City. His name was Gerard Leeflang and he was born in Rotterdam. He worked on board several ships as a wireless operator since 1919. During his first visit to the USA he was so deeply impressed by the American way of life that he decided to jump ship and stay. This was the start of a three year odyssey through the USA. During his travels he worked wherever he could but never stayed long in one place. He plowed, planted and picked corn, but after three years he decided that farming was not his future and went to Chicago. There he finally got arrested as an illegal alien. He had to report to Ellis Island for deportation to his native Netherlands. In 1984, after more than half a century, he wrote a book about his experiences on the road: "*American Travels of a Dutch hobo 1923-1926*", which he illustrated with self-made ink sketches. He considered himself to be a hobo but he confessed that at first he lacked the real skills to mount the moving trains and to dodge the railroad policemen. In his book he accurately described how he and a fellow hobo tried board a moving freight train:

"We can see clearly the contours of the train when it is in the bend. It is composed of a number of low open wagons, covered with a brown tarpaulin and other, high ones, and also of some tank wagons. The big locomotive, puffing black smoke produced by the brown coal it burns, has drawn near till about 80 feet. We discover various protruding things, which look like handles. We are not sure whether we can grasp them. We also see some iron steps reaching to the roof. We shall have to catch one of these things sticking out on the low wagons and swing ourselves into them somehow....The locomotive snorts past us and we feel the air displacement. The train moves faster than we expected--too fast. We have to be careful and keep tight whatever we get hold of. We are aiming with our eyes. Shall we....now? Nothing happens. There is no chance of my catching hold of anything....This train rides too fast for inexperienced hoboes like us....Discouraged we follow with our eyes the lousy train. Its boeohhh....., boeohhh, boeohs sound irritatingly in our ears when it disappears in the distance." (1) The scene Leeflang described had a striking resemblance to the spoken introduction of bluesman Bukka White's train song "Special Streamline":

That's that fast Special Streamline leavin' out of Memphis, Tennessee goin' into new Orleans. She runnin' so fast the hoboes don't fool with this train. They stand on the track with their hat in their hand.
Bukka White – Special Streamline (1940)

Later on when he met a group of skilled "train jumpers", Leeflang learned the tricks of the trade. They decided to catch a freight train together and try to find work as corn pickers in the central part of Iowa. The experienced hoboes instructed the newcomers in freight train hopping and riding: "*The leader of our little gang -there is always a leader- a tawny, dark-haired American, gives us to understand the time has come to get in action and he shows us how to jump on a train as safely as possible/ He sticks out his hands, the right one upwards, the left one down, his right leg sideways to right as far as possible. 'This is jumping position', he says. The left leg serves as a balancing weight. He gazes at the approaching train. 'It's the Santa Fe,' he yells, 'they are freights and tankers; fine to ride on. Beware of too far protruding ends, let those go, just catch hold*

of the handles-they're safe,' he points out". (2) In Leeflang's vision, hoboes were respectable vagabonds, he had no good words for tramps and bums whom he put below his kind. "A bum loaf, sits and does not wash, a tramp loaf, walks and washes his face, a hobo moves, works and ... he is clean." (3) He also made it very clear that the "American Hobo" was not always a native American. As a Dutchman he joined a group of migrant workers that consisted of three Yankees, an Irishman, a German and a Norwegian.

In his study "Hoboes, Bindlestiffs, Fruit Tramps, and the Harvesting of the West" Mark Wyman confirmed this: "Most hoboes were 'Americans', white native-born, or were Irish, Scandinavian, German or other immigrants from Northern Europe." (4) Of course there were African-American hoboes, but they were outnumbered by the group mentioned before. Paul Garon and Gene Tomko made a study of "Black Hoboes & their Songs", they concluded: "Fitting these African-American travellers into any kind of schematic is a difficult task, not because there were so few of them-although in a relative sense, compared to whites, there were only a few- but because the printed records they left are so sparse." (5)

Dead Men's Songs

There was a time when lonely men would wander

Through this land rolling aimlessly along

So many times I've heard of their sad stories

Written in the words of dead men's songs

John Prine – The Hobo Song (1978)

In 1978 John Prine recorded his 5th album "Bruised Orange". The final track on this record was "The Hobo Song". In this song he wondered where all the hoboes have gone to. And he claimed that their sad stories were told in the words of dead men's songs. These dead men were the recorded American old time country and blues musicians who sang about hobo life. The Index To Titles in Tony Russell's lifework "Country Music Records A Discography 1921-1942" (6) shows that there are lot of old time country songs about hoboes. And a close look at the pages of "Blues & Gospel Records 1902-1943" by R.M.W. Dixon and J. Godrich (7) proves that there are many blues songs about hobo life too. In his groundbreaking study "Long Steel Rail, The Railroad in American Folksong" Norm Cohen cited an old railroad magazine: "In 1935, Bud McKillips wrote in the *Railroad Conductor*, 'Will the depression, which has created hundreds of thousands of homeless wanderers create a new crop and new type of 'hobo poetry'? The chances are that it will...' It is perhaps ironic that the best-known hobo songs of the 1930s were written not by homeless wanderers, but by a western poet and a professional New York (Kansas-born) songwriter: Waldo O'Neal's "Hobo Bill's Last Ride" and Carson Robison's "The Railroad Boomer". Both songs were actually penned in 1929, before the impact of the Depression was fully felt." (8) Gerald W. Haslam stated in "Working Man Blues", his book about country music in California: "There was, as it turned out, a considerable market for hobo songs in the 1920s, in part of the commonality of the experience. There was no dishonor in young, unmarried men riding the rails from one migrant job to another; it was often viewed as a rite of passage." (9) Cohen concluded that "The musical folklore of hoboes, bums, and tramps is a broad field of study." (10) For his book he only used "songs of vagrants in which railroads play an important role." (11) Many African-Americans in those days were not able to read or write, so it is not a surprise that there were no books written about hobo life. "Luckily they left many phonograph records in place of the printed records that are so scattered and inadequate." (12) "As this is a study of songs, as well as life style, we also have the lyrics themselves as material evidence of history. But we also add a note of caution about this body of song. Most of the pieces here are blues and the singers are circumspect about the historical trail they leave. Racist reprisals were only a whip length away, and out and out condemnation of the southern system and racist practices was rare. Veiled allusion to these was common, however. So we must pick our way carefully." (13) "Blues singing hoboes documented their railroad experiences in song. Their efforts to dodge the law frequently failed and the penalty for hoboeing in the South was considerably more malevolent than in the North.

Men would be sentenced to the chain gang in North Carolina just for hoboining. Blacks were often sentenced to longer terms than whites who had committed the same offense; too, whites would be sent to the state prison, blacks to the chain gang, the former sentence said to be less humiliating and no doubt easier to serve. These experiences became the basis for many a blues." (14)

Hoboes, tramps and bums

The origin of the term hobo is uncertain. Through the years, many suggestions have been made. In the introduction of his book "Indispensable Outcasts, Hobo Workers and Community in the American Midwest" Frank Tobias Thomas Higbie gave a good summary:

"The term hobo suggests further complications. Its origin is obscure. Some suggest that it derives from *hoe boy*, or agricultural labourer, others that it is a shortening of homeward bounders, referring to Civil War veterans, many of whom became seasonal workers in the West. One itinerant worker claimed the term originated from the French *haute beau*, or "high beauty" and another from the Latin phrase *homo bonus*, or "good person". Still others believed it was simply a crippled version of the railroad workers' greeting "Hello Boy". Even when people agreed that the hobo was a transient worker, they disagreed on the significance of his transience and his strength of his commitment to work." (15)

Like Gerard Leeflang, men that had been (part time) hoboes disassociated from tramps and bums. In 1938 Jeff Davis, King Of the Hoboes, wrote a Hobo Yearbook and Reference Manual for the Hoboes of America, Inc. In this book he gave his opinion on what a hobo was:

"Well, believe me or not - a hobo is neither a tramp or a bum. A hobo is a gentleman of the road. The hobo was the highest in class. A hobo was a migratory worker who was always willing to work to make his way. He could have a special skill or trade, but he could also be ready to work at any task. Tramps travelled too, but they never worked as long as they could make a living out of begging. Bums were the lowest class, they were too lazy to roam around and they never worked." (16) "In the years since railroad provided a means to move more easily around the vastness of the West, migrant workers had attempted in many different ways to deal with the exploitation, the indignities, the taunts, and the coercion of their lives. A railroad engineer praising the hobo's skills in railroad construction asserted, "The hobo seldom strikes, If he does not get what he considers his rights, he leaves; usually without comment." (17)

Wyman cited another "insider" about this subject, ex-hobo Ben Reitman: "A basic definition was provided early in the twentieth century by Dr. Ben Reitman: 'There are three types of the genus vagrant...The hobo works and wanders, the tramp dreams and wanders, and the bum drinks and wanders.' A fellow worker with Reitman similarly called the hobo "a migratory worker. A tramp is a migratory non worker. A bum is a stationary non worker." (18) Higbie quoted Nels Anderson, a former hobo who became a pioneer observer of the homeless. He combined his own hobo experiences with sociological insight." The seasonal worker, or upper class hobo", tended to have one definite occupation or trade and followed supplementary jobs only during his trade's slack season. In contrast to the seasonal worker, the "hobo may have a profession or trade, and also may beg in between jobs." (19) These seasonal workers were not only described as hoboes, as Wyman pointed out: "But most harvesters were men, and they became closely identified with the western scene, hopping off freights, traipsing along roadways searching for work, ganging up around employment agencies. Later scholars would define them as "agricultural nomads" or "indispensable outcasts". They often carried a rolled-up blanket known variously as a bundle or "bindle" - hence their nickname "bindlestiffs." And they were called "hoboes", "fruit tramps", "harvest gypsies", "floaters", "transients", "drift-ins", "apple glimmers", "almond knockers", and "sugar tramps". Mexican *pizcadores* picked cotton and *betabeleros* dug sugar beets. Names were tossed around in sultry days along vineyard rows, invented in long evenings when they sat in the shade and talked of their new lives, sang old songs, and remembered families left behind when they took up the hobo life". (20) In his book Paul Garon borrowed from

blues harp player Hammie Nixon, "who used the word hoboeing to mean any kind of unpaid travelling: walking, hitchhiking, or riding the freights."(21) Although – as explained before- there was quite a difference between hobos, tramps and bums, all three names were used in songs. Sometimes because a singer wanted to make some changes in an already existing song and presented it as a new composition. Titles like "The Tramp's Last Ride", "The Tramps Dream" and "The Tramp's Mother" were variations on respectively "The Hobo's Last Ride", "The Hobo's Dream" and "The Hobo's Mother". There were many songs with rambler, rambling or ramblin' in the title. The influential blues guitarist Lonnie Johnson recorded "Roaming Rambler Blues" in 1927. In 1929 the Buck Mountain Band, a white string band from Virginia, recorded "Reckless Rambler", an instrumental that was never issued. Four years later bluesman Buddy Moss recorded "Midnight Rambler". Sometimes the term was used together with hobo: for instance in "Ramblin' Reckless Hobo", a song that was recorded by Richard D. Burnett in 1927. The terms were also used as a surname (Ramblin' Thomas) or moniker (Ramblin' Bob). The latter was a pseudonym bluesman Robert Lee McCoy used when he recorded for Bluebird Records. Others were Rambling Red Foley and Rambling Jack Elliott. The term rounder was also used: bluesman Peg Leg Howell recorded "Low-Down Rounder Blues" in 1928 and the Callahan Brothers "Rounder's Luck" in 1935. "Bum" appeared in the title "The Bum Hotel", a song recorded by uncle Dave Macon in 1937 and in the hobo anthem "Hallelujah! I'm A Bum", that was written and recorded by Harry McClintock. The term "drifter" was used by Hank Williams, who recorded as "Luke The Drifter" and by Goebel Leon Reeves, who called himself "The Texas Drifter". Reeves was one of the many singers who kept the hoboes alive in their songs. Between 1929 and 1935 Reeves recorded more than 30 songs about hobo life. He decided to become a hobo himself after he met one when he was still a kid. He served in the American Army during World War I and the trip to Europe made him eager to see more of the world. "Upon his return from the war Goebel Reeves commenced the life of an itinerant. Today a decision to follow such a life style might not be particularly ignominious, but in 1921 it was a different matter. His family was seriously disconcerted, and hoped that it was a phase which he would outgrow. He never did." (22) He used all three terms, hobo, tramp and bum, in his songs which had titles such as "At The End Of The Hobo Trail", "The Tramp's Mother" and "The Railroad Bum". He also used the term boomer in "Railroad Boomer". His composition "Hobo's Lullaby" is best known because of the fact that Woody Guthrie recorded the song in 1944.

*Go to sleep you weary hobo
Let the towns drift slowly by
Listen to the steel rail humming
That's the hobo's lullaby*

*Do not think about tomorrow
Let tomorrow come and go
Tonight you have a nice warm boxcar
Safe from all the rain and snow*

*I know your clothes are torn and ragged
And your hair is streaked with grey
Lift your chin and smile at trouble
You'll have peace and rest someday*

*Now do not let your heart be troubled
If the world calls you a bum
If your mother lived she'd love you
For your still your mother's son*

*I know the police cause you trouble
They make trouble everywhere
But when you die and go to heaven
You'll find no policemen there*

*And when you die and go to heaven
All the trains there you can ride
The hard boiled brakemen and the hoboes*

Sleep there peaceful side by side
Goebel Reeves- Hobo's Lullaby (1934)

Some of the songs about hoboes laid emphasis on the hard struggle, others had a more optimistic tendency. For instance in 1930 old time country singer Ernest Hare recorded "A Hobo's Life Is A Happy Life" while nine years later the country duo the Andrews Brothers recorded "A Hobo's Life Is Lonely".

The Hobo Jungle

*He said, "I will wait, and take the first freight
My friends in the jungle to see
For me there is waiting out there
Of a mulligan stew a big share
So away I will go and be a hobo
For the song of the jungles I hear*

Richard Brazier - Meet Me In The Jungles, Louie (1920s)

When John Prine sang that he saw no fire burning by the rusty railroad tracks he seemed to refer to the hobo jungle. Hobo jungles were social centers outside urban centers.

"They were temporary or semi-permanent locations near the tracks, and usually by a water tank, where hoboes would gather in the evening for company and an overnight stay. Sometimes they would be no more than cleared spots under the trees; at other times they would have cooking utensils, soap and perhaps a nearby creek for water."

(23) Joyce L. Kornbluh described the hobo jungle in her study *Rebel Voices: An I.W.W. Anthology*. "A hobo jungle was usually near a railroad junction point, close enough to a town for those hoboes who needed to 'bum lumps' (ask for handouts), yet far enough away from the attention of town police. A good place for a jungle included shade trees, room to stretch a number of blanket rolls on the ground, water for cooking, and wood to keep the fire going. The jungle was a social institution with its own rules, regulations, mores and division of labor." (24) There were strict rules in these locations that were populated entirely by hoboes. "Jungle crimes included lighting a fire at night that might attract railroad or town police, 'hijacking' (robbing) other men while they slept, leaving pots dirty after using them, neglecting to rustle wood for the fire, and damaging or stealing any jungle equipment. A guilty hobo would be thrown out of the camp forcibly." (25) Every traveler who arrived at a hobo jungle was welcome, no matter what race or nationality he had. The hoboes told each other stories and sang together. "A gallon of wine or a jug of cheap whiskey frequently led to impromptu entertainments. Often, long epic poems were composed and recited on the spot. Some became "hobo classics" which many committed to memory. Often humorous, these songs and poems highlighted the adventures and perils of hobo life." (26) In white country music the term "hobo jungle" was almost never used. Only Harry McClintock sang about "jungle fires" and the string band Leake Country Levellers recorded an instrumental "Jungle Waltz" in 1930. In the blues it was more common. Peetie Wheatstraw was the moniker for blues piano player William Bunch, he also recorded as "The Devil's Son-In-Law". Besides some songs about hobo life and tramping, he recorded "Jungle Man Blues."

*I ain't nothing but a hobo, want somebody to help me carry my load (2x)
I have travelled the road so long, ooh, well, well, until it have made my shoulders sore*

*Well, now, I been in the jungle, three long nights and days(2x)
But I can't find no one, ooh, well, well, to help me on my way*

*Now one of these days, I won't be no jungle man (2x)
Well, now, I'll be on the place, ooh, well well, I won't have to go from hand to hand*
Peetie Wheatstraw - Jungle Man Blues (1936)

Also Sleepy John Estes, a Tennessee bluesman who was very influential and considered to be a "blues poet", also recorded a song about the hobo jungle.

*Now when I came in on the Mae West, I put it down at Chicago Heights (2x)
I eased over in the hobo jungle and that's where I stayed all night*

Sleepy John Estes - Hobo Jungle Blues (1937)

Bumble Bee Slim, AKA Amos Easton, recorded a different "Hobo Jungle Blues" in 1936. He described the sounds he heard when he stayed there.

*I can hear the whistles blowin'
I can hear the water rollin'
I can hear the birdies singin'
I can hear the bells ringin'*

Bumble Bee Slim – Hobo Jungle Blues (1936)

Son Bonds was a blues guitarist and singer from Brownsville, who worked with Sleepy John Estes. In 1938 he recorded "Old Bachelor Blues" in which he described the loneliness of the hobo in the jungle.

*I'm a broken-hearted bachelor
Travelin' through this world alone (2x)
Used this railroad for my pillow
The jungle is my happy home*

*This old jungle, this old jungle
I'll be sleepin' by myself (2x)
Well, and I believe I will go
I will find somebody else*

*Now, just by me bein' a bachelor
Travelin' through this world alone (2x)
Well, you know I got to find
Me another home*

*Well, jungle, this old jungle
Cinders blowin' back in my face (2x)
I'm gonna get me a little woman
Gonna find some other place*

Son Bonds – Old Bachelor Blues (1938)

Even Memphis Minnie, a female blues singer, referred to the hobo jungle. "The scene is vividly drawn where the song's protagonist arrives at the jungle only to find the fire extinguished." (27)

*One cold night
I was out in the frost and snow (2x)
I didn't have a penny
I couldn't find a place to go*

*Way down the lane
I thought I'd see'd a fire (2x)
'Fore I could it make it there to warm my hands
The hoboes had put it out*

Memphis Minnie – Out in the Cold (1936)

Besides the hobo jungles, larger rail centers also had distinct neighborhoods catering to the needs of travelling laborers. The main street of that area was known by hoboes as the *main stem*. It was in the middle of a neighborhood filled with cheap lodging houses, employment agencies, restaurants, bars, pawn shops, and theatres. In Chicago there was a particular area on the Near North Side, also called Tower Town as it was near the water tower that survived the 1871 Chicago Fire. It was called Hobohemia and was famous for its mixture of artists and other bohemians along with the hoboes; indeed, some of the artists were also hoboes. It was the presence of the artistic element that gave the neighborhood its name, not the hoboes themselves.

Hobo Signs

"While the average person may not notice the signs, they are written on his fence, gatepost, or even his doorstep. To the knights of the road they stand out as blazing letters." (28)

Hoboes communicated in their own "lingo", which contained expressions as diverse as "Hoover or Californian blanket" (a newspaper used to sleep under) and "eat snowballs" (to stay north on the road in the winter).

"The word-of-mouth information passed on from one hobo to another, was nicknamed the 'Hobo Gazette'. It was a favoured method of finding work in the wheat belt in the mid-1920s." (29)

To warn each other the hoboes used so called "hobo signs", mostly simple line drawings created from chalk or charcoal. There were regional variations on many of the most common hobo signs, but a dyed-in-the-wool traveler was able to recognize their basic meaning. Roughly from the 1880s until the 1940s, hoboes would leave symbols on fences, sidewalks, street signs and railway stops for fellow hoboes to discover. These symbols provided vital information for other travellers. They not only gave information about the hospitality level of the town, but lead other hoboes to resting and eating spots. They also gave information about the local law enforcement status and the best approaches for a handout. Whenever a hobo arrived in a new town, he or she would seek out these hobo signs first to see if a stop over would even be worth the risk. In an effort to prevent detection from law enforcement or the creation of false or misleading symbols by outsiders, many of the original hobo signs have changed over the years. For the hoboes, finding food was a constant problem. They often tried to work for food at a local farmhouse. If the farmer was generous, the hobo would mark the lane so that his fellow travelers would know this was a good place for them. Leeflang, the Dutch "hobo" from the introduction mentioned this habit in his book when he described an encounter with a tramp after his own hobo days. "I could not bring myself to send him away without giving him something to eat. I had found it to my cost myself and I knew how it felt to be hungry. Maybe it would have been better to chase him away because those tramps had the usage to leave some sign for their confederates to tell them that in this house they had a chance to get some grub." (30) "Transients also became known for signs they would make on fences, warning others of what lay ahead – 'Go to back door,' 'Will make you work here,' 'Bad dog,' 'Danger steer clear.'" (31) These signs of the road were discussed in a magazine. "An article 'They Also Believe in Signs' appeared in *School Arts Magazine* (May 1923). It said: 'Possibly you have discovered that if your family is not averse of giving food to a hungry wayfarer, you are frequently visited by such men, while your next door neighbor may never be visited. Why is it?'"(32)

Listen To A Boomer's Story

Come and gather all around me

Listen to my tale of woe

Carson Robison – Railroad Boomer (1929)

Woodrow "Woody" W. Guthrie (1912-1967) became one of the best known of the young hoboes who rode the rails during the Depression. In 1927, after a few misfortunes, his family moved from Oklahoma to Texas Following the 1935 "Black Blizzards"--dust storms and drought that ravaged over 50 million acres in the southern Great Plains, Guthrie joined thousands of refugees traveling west to California. In his autobiography *Bound for Glory* Guthrie describes his travels and life on the (rail)road: "*I could see men of all colors bouncing along in the boxcar. We stood up. We laid down. We piled around each other. We used each other for pillows. I could smell the sour and bitter sweat soaking through my own khaki shirt and britches and the work clothes, overhauls and saggy, dirty suits of the other guys. My mouth was full of some kind of gray mineral dust that was about an inch deep all over the floor. We looked like a gang of lost corpses heading back to the boneyard. Hot in the September heat, tired, mean, and mad, cussing and sweating, raving and preaching. Part of us waved our hands in the cloud of dust and hollered out to the whole crowd. Others was too weak, too sick, too hungry, or too drunk even to stand up.*" (33)

Guthrie's "I Ain't Got No Home" can easily lay claim to the title "The ultimate Hobo Song". Definitely the lyrics of this haunting song will have sounded very realistic in the ears of the estimated millions of hoboes during the Depression years. Among them were many women and young people.

*I ain't got no home, I'm just a roamin' round
Just a wanderin' worker, I go from town to town
The police make it hard wherever I may go
And I ain't got no home in this world anymore*

*My brothers and my sisters are stranded on this road
It's a hot and a dusty road that a million feet have trod
Rich men took my home and drove me from my door
And I ain't got no home in this world anymore*

Woody Guthrie – I Ain't Got No Home In This World Anymore (1940)

"T.J. O'Brien, another western hobo, explained: "In this western country the conditions differ a great deal from those of the East. A majority of the workers in this part of the country do not know what home is. The only home most of us have is the roll of blankets which we carry on our backs." (34)

*Come and gather all around me
Listen to my tale of woe
Got some good advice to give you
Lot o'things you oughta know
Take a tip from one who's travelled
Never start to ramblin' 'round
You're liable to get the roamin' fever
You never want to settle down*

*Met a little gal in Frisco
Asked her if she'd be my wife
Told her I was tired of roamin'
Said I'd settle down for life
Then I heard a whistle blowin'
Knew it was the red-ball train
Left her standin' by the railroad
Never seen that gal again*

*Wandered all over this country
Guess I traveled everywhere
Been on every branch-line railroad
Never paid a nickel fare
I've been from Maine to Califo'nia
Canada to Mexico
Never tried to save no money
And now I got no place to go, boy
Now I got no place to go*

*Listen to a boomer's story
Don't forget the things I say
I hear another train a-comin'
And I'll soon be on my way
If you wanna do me a favor
When I lay me down and die
Just dig my grave beside a railroad
So I can hear the trains roll by, boy
I can hear the trains roll by*

Carson Robison – The Railroad Boomer (1929)

"The spritely song 'The Railroad Boomer' captures the carefree mood of the railroad wanderer, with a few hints also of the tragic consequences that may be in store for him. The song was written by the prolific hillbilly songwriter Carson J. Robison in 1929. The precise meaning of *boomer* in this song is uncertain; the word has meant different things at different times. Originally designating a migratory worker, the term came to be applied to railroaders who either worked for one employer far from home or changed employers frequently. At one time the word referred to settlers who joined the rush to a newly opened section of country. In 1901, *Railroad Trainmen's Journal* used it in a rather uncomplimentary way to mean a railroader who 'travels the road because he likes to travel and there is not much work in it.' The slang dictionaries give no suggestion that the word has etymological connection with *bum* and *bummer*, but that is an intriguing

possibility, and among the recordings of the song, both professional and not, the terms appear in the title as frequently as *boomer*." (35) Goebel Reeves, Roy Acuff and Riley Puckett, the blind singer and guitarist of The Skillet Lickers, also recorded the song. A version of The New Lost City Ramblers was eventually picked up by Ry Cooder. He changed the title in "Boomer's Story" and used it in 1972 as the title song of his album of the same name. The final verse contains lines that were often used in hobo songs. When the hobo "caught the Westbound", which in hobo slang meant that he passed away, he wanted to be buried near a railroad track, so he could hear the trains go by. In her song "Freight Train", which became a folk standard, Elizabeth Cotton used a variation on the same theme.

*When I die, won't you bury me deep
Way down on old Chestnut street
So I can hear old Number Nine
As she comes rolling by*

Elizabeth Cotton - Freight Train (1958)

Country singer Cliff Carlisle didn't want to be buried along the railroad, he wanted his dead body to travel until the end of times.

*When I die don't bury me, let me lay on that boxcar floor
Roll me in that old boxcar, close the boxcar door
Pull that throttle and step aside and let me ride forevermore*

Cliff Carlisle - In A Boxcar Around The World (1936)

"Cliff Carlisle, popular hillbilly singer of the 1930s, wrote or popularized a number of songs about boxcar-riding hoboes but none of them had the feeling of having been born or even sung in the hoboes' jungle camps." (36) "Freight Train Blues", told the story of a man who was born in the neighborhood of the railroad track. He claimed that the trains contributed in a certain way to his education:

*I was born in Dixie in a boomer's shack
Just a little shanty by the railroad track
The humming of the drivers was my lullaby
A freight train whistle taught me how to cry*

John Lair - Freight Train Blues (ca. 1934)

This song was first recorded by Rambling Red Foley in 1934, but the recorded versions by country star Roy Acuff & His Smoky Mountain Boys made it very popular. In 1962 Bob Dylan recorded the song for his first album. "For the itinerant blues singer of the 1920s and '30s hoboing was one of the main attractions of the railroad - the ride was always free. This depended, of course, on whether a tramp (the term generally used before the 1900s) was discovered in his chosen hiding place on the train, or not.

While railroad companies took great exception to the hobo because of wanton damage to freight trains and potential loss of revenue on passenger trains, some conductors and engineers did exercise a degree of leniency. Some might trade a short ride for a couple of songs if the hobo was a musician..." (37)

*Now, look-a-here hobo, you can't ride this train
Look-a here hobo, you can't ride this train
If you ride this train, you got to pick that guitar and sing*

*Here is what I said to him:
Mister brakeman, please don't throw me down (2x)
I'll pick this guitar for you, but I'm San Francisco bound*

Jesse Fuller - Leavin' Memphis, 'Frisco Bound (1958)

Georgia blues man Blind Willie McTell recorded several songs about trains and mentioned the term hobo. In his "Travelin' Blues", which contained spoken passages, he addressed himself to a cruel fireman and a low down engineer. "His artistry and quick intelligence combine here in a creation of great humor and poise, deftly quoting snatches of older popular songs ('Poor Boy' and 'Red River Blues'), imitating train noises on the guitar,

recounting a long dialog between the speaker, a hobo trying to bum a ride, and the railroad man refusing and tormenting him, and sewing together all these elements and more into a quirky, playful, sardonic whole.”(38)

*Mister engineer, let a man ride this line
Mister engineer, let a poor man ride this line
Said: I wouldn't mind it fellow but you know the train ain't mine*

*You's a cruel fireman, low down engineer (2x)
I'm trying to hobo my way and you leave me standing here*
Blind Willie McTell – Travelin' Blues (1929)

Ed Bell, an obscure bluesman from Alabama, made only a handful of records. In one of these he addressed himself to a mean conductor. When he is not allowed to ride the train for free, he prayed to God that the train would wreck with fatal consequences for the crew.

*Hey mister conductor let a broke man ride your blinds (2x)
You better buy your ticket, know this train ain't mine*

*I just want the blinds as far as Hagerstown
Say I just want the blinds as far as Hagerstown
When she blow for the crossing I'm gonna ease it down*

*I pray to the Lord that southern train would wreck (2x)
Till it kill that fireman, break that engineer's neck*
Ed Bell – Mean Conductor Blues (1927)

But there were also songs with a different point of view. In 1931 the influential jazz singer and trumpet player Louis Armstrong recorded “Hobo, you can't ride this train”. In this song he acted as a mean brakeman instead of a hobo.

*Oh hobo, hobo you know you can't ride this train
Now hobo, now listen here hobo
I told you can't ride this train
you done forgot I'm the brakeman on this train boy
I'm awful tough, I'm awful mad
I'm telling you ,ha, ha, ha
you gotta give me some, boy*
Louis Armstrong – Hobo, you can't ride this train (1931)

As late as 1965 J.B. Lenoir claimed that he was a hobo and instructed the conductor of an approaching train to diminish his speed so the blues singer could steal a ride.

*Slow down, slow down
Let J.B. step on board
Just wanna ride your train
One time 'fore you're gone*

*I been a hobo, I been a hobo
Mind you, all my life
Don't matter where I go
I'm never satisfied*
J.B. Lenoir – Slow Down (1965)

Besides the train crew, who could be very rude to the hoboes, there were the railroad policemen. Their core business was to keep trains and railroad clear of hoboes and tramps. “The need for such officials arose around the turn of the century when the number of tramps and migratory workers who tried to ride the trains for no fare began to swell to troublesome proportions.” (39) These men could be very rude. “The railroad police ('bulls', special agents', 'shack bullies' etc,).....were often little better than thugs and were usually very brutal towards the 'free rider'.” (40)

*Now I swung that 97, I went down in the free rail box.
Now I hung that 97, I went down in the free rail box.
Now I could hear the special agent when 'e come tippin' over the top.*

*Now some special agents, up the country, sure is hard on a man;
Now some special agents, up the country, they sure is hard on a man.
Now they will put 'im off when he hungry, an' won't even let 'im ride no train.*

Sleepy John Estes - Special Agent (Railroad Police Blues) (1938)

"Treatment by the railroad police (bulls, dicks), as well as by conductors and brakemen, was variable. At their worst, some bulls were ready to shoot hoboes on sight, or at least beat them to the ground and send them to jail. Some dicks got 50¢ a head for any hobo captured, and this bounty was a great incentive. Blacks were treated worse than whites, and often bulls would board a freight and throw off only blacks. In the southwest, whites and blacks were occasionally both spared while the more reviled Mexicans were thrown off unceremoniously. Bulls treated the railroads as their property, and it was within their authority to throw hoboes off trains, but the more rabid bulls would often raid the hobo jungles –on land not belonging to the railroad- and destroy clothes, utensils and other personal belongings found there." (41)

*We gathered 'round the jungle fire
The night was passing fast
We'd all done time for every crime had
And talk was on the past*

*All night we flopped around the fire
Until the morning sun
Then from the town the cops came down
We beat it on the run*

*We scattered to the railroad yards
And left the bulls behind
Some hit the freight for other states
And many rode the blind*

George Liebst -Hobo Convention Song (1921) (42)

This song was published in George Milburn's "The Hobo's Hornbook", which came out in 1930. In 1932 Boyden Carpenter recorded "The Hobo's Convention", for which he might have used parts of the lyrics written by Liebst.

I Heard That Lonesome Whistle Blow

*When I got up this morning
I heard the old Southern whistle blow*

Big Bill Broonzy - The Southern Blues (1935)

In spite of all the dangers and inconveniences men and women kept hopping on freight trains. In many songs, just like the sirens who tried to seduce Ulysses in the Greek mythology, the train whistle had an irresistible attraction to the hobo. In "Freight Train Blues" John Lair blamed the train whistle for his urge of going.

*Every time I find a place I want to stay
I hear a freight train whistle, Lord I'm on my way*

John Lair - Freight Train Blues (ca. 1934)

In the opening lines of "Ramblin' Man" Hank Williams told the same story:

*I can settle down and be doin' just fine
'til I hear an old train rollin' down the line*

Hank Williams - Ramblin' Man (1951)

The scene Carson Robison described in "the Railroad Boomer" was particularly painful. A freight train whistle made an abrupt ending to a relationship that just got started. The railroad boomer could not resist the call-tone of the whistle and left his girl standing by

the railroad and never saw her again. In a lot of hobo songs initials and mottoes of certain railroad lines were used. Sometimes they were mentioned in the titles of songs. In the indispensable studies of Norm Cohen and Max Haymes (see notes) all these abbreviations, along with the nicknames of the trains, were explained.

Riding the blinds, riding the rods

In his "Mean Conductor Blues", Ed Bell sang about riding the blinds. It was one of the many dangerous but illegal ways to ride trains. "Riders beating their way west learned what part of the rail yards to frequent for the best chance of grabbing a spot on the next freight. Most popular were the outskirts, where trains still moved slowly, before gaining speed. Some hung by the sand house, where the locomotive was loaded with sand to be sprayed under the wheels when extra traction was needed. If his speed and timing were right, a hobo might rush out and steal a ride in "blind baggage", the baggage car platform, where he was somewhat safer from discovery because baggage piled up inside the car blocked the doorway. Many would "ride the bumpers" standing on couplers between two cars, while locking their arms onto the brake rod. This method required both strength and unending vigilance." (43)

"The phrase 'riding the blinds' appears to have two definitions. One describes a position at the end of the baggage or mail car coupled to the tender of the locomotive ('blind' because there is no end door and therefore no access to the hobo from inside the train). The other refers to a far more preferable –but still dangerous– way of travelling as a hobo, which was to ask permission of the (white) conductor or engineer to cling to a series of steel rungs (usually three or four) situated at the end of the passengers cars on either side of the concertina-type connection corridors ('the blinds')." While 'riding the blinds' had its dangers and discomforts for the hobo, it was positively luxurious compared to 'riding the rods'...." (44) In his "Milwaukee Blues" Charlie Poole, one of the first country music stars, sang about riding the rods.

*Old Bill Jones said before he died
Fix the roads so the 'boes can ride
When they ride they will ride the rods
Put all their trust in the hands of God*
Charlie Poole - Milwaukee Blues (1930)

The last line in Poole's hobo songs says it all: riding the rods was a mixture of strength, staying-power, hoping and praying.

"Between the cross-section and the axle of the oblong four-wheeled truck is a slender rod, little more than a yard long, parallel to the partition and the axle. On this, the tramp once fitted the groove of his 'ticket', a board as broad as a man's hand and about six inches long. Crowded in this small space on the forward truck ... the passenger stiff rides, a feat requiring skill and courage. It was on this rod that the 'stiff' or hobo laid for the duration of his journey, watching the rails and ties (sleepers) flash by in a frightening blur! (45)

It was also very dangerous to ride a loaded boxcar, the merchandise might shift and crush a man to death. Hoboes never sat with their legs out the side of the car: if the door suddenly slammed shut, their legs could be severed from the body. Hoboes used slang terms for fellow travelers who had been injured while "beating trains". For example "Sticks" was a rider who lost a leg, "Peg" was a rider who lost a foot, "Fingy" or "Fingers" was a train rider who lost one or more fingers. A lot of blues musicians had names with these terms in it: "Sticks" McGhee, "One Arm" Slim, "Cripple" Clarence Lofton, "Peg Leg" Howell. The records made by the latter were advertised by Columbia Records with the slogan: "When 'Peg Leg' Howell lost his leg, the world gained a great singer of blues. The loss of a leg never bothered 'Peg Leg' as far as chasing around after blues is concerned." (46) Jail registers also provide further testimony to the perils of riding the rails and other dangers of hobo life: "both feet cut off at instep"; "right leg off above knee"; "left arm gone at shoulder"; "second finger on left hand gone"; "crippled in right leg"; "scar on nose, 3d finger on left hand gone." Picking hops or mucking ore, climbing shaky orchard ladders or dangling from a spar pole at a logging site – the brief entries on the

vagrancy arrests as well as the coroner's reports demonstrated the inherent dangers faced by men of this casual 'labor class'." (47)

Higbie summed up the bad conditions the transient workers had to suffer. "Nevertheless, the rough, destructive elements of laborers' culture were real enough. It is all too easy to romanticize hobo workers as freewheeling "knights of the road." Seasonal laborers' working conditions usually were unpleasant, unhealthy and dangerous. Their food always monotonous, was at times even poisonous, they faced robbery and extortion at every turn, legally from employment agents and illegally from hold-up men and train crews." (48) But there were other dangers to face for the hoboes.

*I got to catch a freight train to leave this town
"Cause they don't allow no hoboes a-hangin' around*
Charlie Poole - Milwaukee Blues (1930)

Female Hoboes

*Going to follow my man
'f I have to ride the rods*
Irene Scruggs - Itching Heel Blues (1930)

Not all the hoboes were men. In their book "Woman With Guitar", a biography of Memphis blues woman Memphis Minnie, Paul and Beth Garon concluded: "In spite of the many references in the blues to hoboing, few are made by or about women. Indeed, female hoboes and wanderers were uncommon during the earlier years that Minnie made her own way from town to town. By the time she gave up this mode of travel, female hoboes were becoming much more common and the Depression was deepening. The Depression put many women on the road, just as it multiplied the number of men already wandering, but women never accounted for more than a tiny percent of the hoboing population." (49) Minnie, about whom Big Bill Broonzy said: "Memphis Minnie can pick a guitar and sing as good as any man"(50), sang in several songs about her experiences as a young female hobo.

*I flagged a train, didn't have a dime
Trying to run away from that home of mine
I didn't know better
Oh boys, in my girlish days*
Memphis Minnie - In My Girlish Days (1941)

*I walked through the alley
With my hand in my coat
The police start to shoot me
Thought it was something I stole*

*'Cause ain't nothing in ramblin'
Either running around
Well I believe I'll marry
Ooooo ooo, Lord, and settle down*
Memphis Minnie - Nothing In Rambling (1940)

*I walked down the railroad track
That Chickasaw wouldn't even let me ride the blinds (2x)
And she stops, picking up men
All up and down the line
She's a low down dirty dog*

*Hmmm, Chickasaw don't pay no woman no mind (2x)
And she stops, picking up men
All up and down the line*
Memphis Minnie -Chickasaw Train Blues (Low Down Dirty Thing) (1934)

"Distinctions based on gender and sexuality were another important way in which the hobo community identified its boundaries, both internal and external. Among the generally male hoboes traveled a small number of women who sought employment, adventure, and escape from stifling social expectations. Unlike men whose jobs were in the rural hinterland , transient working women moved from town to town seeking urban

employment as clerical workers, domestics or entertainers. Often dressed in men's clothing, sometimes with short hair, these "sisters of the road" were less noticed than their male counterparts. (51)

Irene Scruggs, another female blues singer, sang about her drifting man:

*Now when his heel is itching
He wanna start drifting
And go a long, long way from home
Now when I first met him
He gave me a gold watch and chain
He caught the train today
And left me out in the rain*

*Now you know that's mean
And it won't be long
Before he'll come drifting home, maybe in the morning
He'll come drifting home, o baby
He'll come drifting on home*

Eventually Scruggs got tired of waiting for her husband and decided to follow him down the tracks. Even if she had to ride the rods.

*Just as soon as that train
Rolls up in the yard
Going to follow my man
'f I have to ride the rods
Was a mean old fireman
As mean as he could be
When I waved at my man
He blew his smoke back at me*

Irene Scruggs - Itching Heel Blues (1930)

In the last line Scruggs described an often used blues image: a person is standing on the platform looking at the leaving train that takes a beloved one away while a cruel fireman blew his black smoke at him or her.

Birds of Passage

*I am out to do the best I can
As I go ramblin' 'round boys
As I go ramblin' 'round*

Woody Guthrie - Ramblin' Round (1941)

Former hobo and sociologist Nels Anderson considered the seasonal worker as the upper class hobo. "The yearly movement of laborers through the harvest fields of the Great Plains often confronted observers as a mystery of nature. As early as 1860 an Illinois farmer newspaper labelled harvest workers "birds of passage" and more than sixty years later, a South Dakota correspondent for *Country Gentleman* magazine wrote of harvest workers, "Like the flock of swallows that come in the springtime, they harvest the wheat and then vanish into the unknown again." (52)

*The peach trees they are loaded
The limbs are bending down
I pick 'em all day for a dollar
As I go rambling' 'round, boys
As I go ramblin' 'round*

Woody Guthrie - Ramblin' Round (1941)

The dust-jacket of Wyman's book read: "When the railroad stretched its steel rails across the American West in the 1870s, it opened up a vast expanse of territory with very few people but enormous agricultural potential: a second Western frontier, the garden West. Agriculture quickly followed the railroads, making way for Kansas wheat and Colorado sugar beets and Washington apples. With this new agriculture came an unavoidable need for harvest workers—for hands to pick the apples, cotton, oranges, and hops; to pull and top the sugar beets; to fill the trays with raisin grapes and apricots; to stack the wheat

bundles in shocks to be pitched into the maw of the threshing machine. These were not the year-round hired hands but transients who would show up to harvest the crop and then leave when the work was finished. Variously called bindlestiffs, fruit tramps, hoboes, and bums, these men—and women and children—were vital to the creation of the West and its economy.” (53) “Railroads tightly tracked the location of seasonal laborers’ jobs, services and homes, and they were the most common mode of travel until inexpensive automobiles came on the market in the mid-1920s. This close relationship between railroad town and seasonal work resulted in part from freight trains coursing through the densely populated working-class residential districts. This commonplace of industrial life was a danger to life and property and an enticement to travel. Open boxcars offered easy access to the hinterland , and working men and women regularly availed themselves of the opportunity.”(54) A lot of these “fruit tramps” were from Mexico and they were treated even worse than Afro-Americans. In the 1920s Mexican families in Texas “were travelling aimlessly through the country, living in tents and picking up whatever work they could find.” (55) Like the African-Americans the Mexicans sang to lighten the hard labor they had do. “Mexicans frequently described their hard life in corridos – (narrative) songs they created and sang at their gatherings. Some were composed while they worked in the fields, their cotton bags dragged behind, the sun beating down. Dan Dickey translated the “Song of the Cotton Harvest” (*Canción de las pizcas*), by an unknown Mexican, in which the singer sang:

*And I worked all over the county
I cried in the furrows like a baby
The pain in my waist
The pain in my waist
I just couldn't stand it*

But he was so desperate for money that even by moonlight I would go out and pick

Another *corrido* singer sang:

*When I came from Mexico
In a closed train car
They brought me under contract
To the cotton picking.” (56)*

John Prine sang in his “The Hobo Song” that hoboes were “rolling aimlessly along”. In his book Higbie pointed out that reality was different: “One of the best ways to see the intertwining of rural and urban life and work is to follow laborers from job to job. When we map these travels, it is apparent that what observers took to be aimless wandering or unthinking migration was guided significantly by economic structures, family, and individual survival strategies.”(57)

Industrial Workers of the World

*I was riding one day on a train far away
Wishing there was a Wobbly near
When it did just seem like someone in a dream
Came a Wob with a hearty cheer*

Paul Walker – A Wobbly Good and True (58)

In 1905 a group of American leading radicals had a meeting in Chicago. They wanted to create a new labor movement. William D. ‘Big Bill’ Haywood, one of the pillars of the Western Federation of Miners was one of the originators. “The 1905 convention in Chicago gave birth to the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), whose members were soon nicknamed the ‘Wobblies’. The IWW’s attack on employers especially appealed to western migratory workers, ignored by the American Federation of Labor trade unions. In fact, hoboes and other seasonal workers received little support from anyone—not from employers who wanted them to move on when a job was finished; not from communities little interested in them except at harvest time; and certainly not from most city, state, and federal governmental units. Since migratory workers almost by definition could not vote, they were unable to bring pressures for governmental protection at any level. Their only ‘safety net’ consisted of charities that sometimes” provided a meal along with prayers, or kindly jail keepers who would let a hobo sleep in jail on a cold night. These were the men to whom Haywood appealed...Carleton Parker, a Californian professor

investigating labor conditions, said the IWW was recruiting 'from the most degraded and unnaturally living of America's labor groups,' itinerants who were 'hunted and scorned by society.'" (59)

Singing was an important outing for the Wobblies. Their song writing became common because they "articulated the frustrations, hostilities, and the humor of the homeless and the dispossessed." (60) The official songs were collected in 'The Little Red Songbook' and the IWW continues to update this book to the present time. "Indeed IWW literature offered an important interpretive venue for the laborers' life experiences, and few items achieved greater popularity than 'The Little Red Song Book', a pocket-sized volume of radical verse. One song in particular, "the mysteries of a Hobo's Life," by T-Bone Slim, is an illustrative coming-of-age model." (61)

*I took a job on a extra gang
Way up in the mountain
I paid my fee and the shark shipped me
And ties I soon was counting*

*The boss he put me driving spikes
And the sweat was enough to blind me,
He didn't seem to like my pace
So I left that job behind me*

*I grabbed an old freight train
And around the country travelled
The mysteries of a hobo's life
To me were soon unravelled*

*I traveled east and I travelled west
And the "shacks" could never find me
Next morning I was miles away
From the job I left behind me*

*I ran across a bunch of stiffs
Who were known as Industrial workers
They taught me how to be a man-
And how to fight the shirkers*

*I kicked right in
And joined the bunch
And now in the ranks you'll find me
Hurrah for the cause - To hell with the boss!
And the job I left behind me*

T-Bone Slim – The Mysteries of a Hobo's Life (62)

T-Bone Slim was the moniker for the Finnish-American hobo intellectual Matt Valentine Huhta. "The song tells of experiences that any seasonal labourer would have recognized: an abusive and hard-driving boss, stealing rides on freight trains to find work, and struggling to avoid railroad police. The 'mysteries' of life on the road are left largely to the imagination, but the resolution of the problems identified in the first two verses is not. When the hobo joins the IWW, he learns 'how to be a man' less through independence than through belonging to the cause." (63) "Former hobo Nels Anderson recalled it as 'a song-promoting movement' and saw the hobo's ballads and protest songs bringing 'a unanimity of sentiment and attitudes, the strongest form of group solidarity in the hobo's world.' Carleton Parker noted the importance of singing in his report on the 1913 Wheatland riot, observing that even lacking a tightly bound membership, "where a group of hobo's sit around a fire under a railroad bridge, many of the group can sing I.W.W. songs without the book." (64) Joe Hill, an early Wobbly songwriter, wrote IWW lyrics to Christian hymns so the union members compete with the Salvation Army band that was often determined to drown out Wobbly speakers. He also wrote the IWW signature song for which he used the melody of "Sweet Bye and Bye". The song was originally named "The Preacher and the Slave" but became famous as "Pie in the Sky" after Carl Sandburg included it in his song collection "The American Songbag" in 1927.

*Long-haired preachers come out every night
Try to tell you what's wrong and right
But when asked how 'bout something to eat
They will answer with voices sweet:
You will eat, by and by
In that glorious land up in the sky
Work and pray, live on hay
You'll get pie in the sky when you die*
Joe Hill – The Preacher And The Slave (1900s)

Where have all the hoboes gone to?

*Could it be that time has gone and left them
Tied up in life's eternal travelin' sack?*
John Prine – The Hobo Song (1978)

Already in the early 1920s, the market demand for hobo labor was diminishing. The increased mechanization industries such as farming, ice harvesting, and logging made men increasingly less necessary. Hoboes existed but were no longer necessary. "Now the bindlestiffs had competition as they slogged around the roadways searching out harvest jobs. As early as 1917 they had seen it in the Fresno vineyards: families arriving in "machines," packing tents so they could camp out. The automobile's intrusion into the world of the hobo and fruit tramp did not come suddenly, but by the mid 1920s it was turning the traditional labor market upside down." (65)

Old time country singer and yodeller Jimmie Rodgers, "The Singing Brakeman", made many songs about railroads and hoboes. His most famous song about the subject was "Waitin' For A Train", which described the way a hobo was chased away by a brakeman because he had no money to buy a ticket. And the worst part of it all was that the railroad worker called him a railroad bum, which, as was explained before, was an insult. In "Hobo's Meditation" Rodgers philosophized about the hobo's afterlife.

*Will there be any freight trains in heaven
Any boxcars in which we might ride
Will there be any tough cops or brakemen
Will they tell us that we cannot ride*

*Will the hobo chum with the rich man
Will we always have money to spare
Will they have respect for the hobo
In that land that lies hidden up there*
Jimmie Rodgers- Hobo Mediation (1932)

In "Hobo's Lullaby" Goebel Reeves claimed he knew the answer to Rodger's questions:

*And when you die and go to heaven
All the trains there you can ride
The hard boiled brakemen and the hoboes
Sleep there peaceful side by side*
Goebel Reeves- Hobo's Lullaby (1934)

John Prine's question: "Where have all the hoboes gone to?" was answered in a romantic way by some of the dead singers he mentioned in "The Hobo Song". In their songs the hoboes all went to "Hobo's Paradise", "Hobo's Heaven" or "The Big Rock Candy Mountain": the ultimate hobo's dream written and recorded by Harry McClintock. "Whenever hoboes gathered each had a story that began with a "brief and sketchy description of the circumstances under which the meal was obtained, then a long, complete, detailed and drooling of each item of the food. And the stories always ended-- 'and three cups of coffee.' " (66)

Memphis bluesman Jim Jackson recorded a parody of "I Heard A Voice From Heaven Say", a humorous song about a rambler with the "miss meal cramps" who dreamt about food, the kind of food he could only dream about.

I walked, and I walked, and I walked and I walked

*I stopped for to rest my feet
I set down on an old oak tree
There I went fast asleep
I dreamt I was sittin' in a swell café
Hungry as a bear
My stomach sent a telegram to my throat
There's a wreck on the road somewhere
I heard the voice of a pork chop say
"Come unto me and rest"
Well you talk about your stew and beans
I know what's the best
Well you talk about your chicken, ham and eggs
Turkey stuffed and dressed
But I heard the voice of a pork chop say
"Come unto me and rest"*

Jim Jackson – I Heard The Voice Of A Pork Chop (1928)

According to Harry "Mac" McClintock the food mentioned in Jim Jackson's song was hanging on the trees on the big Rock Candy Mountains. But you had to die first before you could get there. "Consider the description of the afterlife offered in the song 'The Big Rock Candy Mountains': no police, good weather, no need to change your socks, and a land overflowing with food, liquor and cigarettes. For hoboes, these references were not abstract."**(67)**

*One evening as the sun went down
And jungle fires were burning
Down the track came a hobo hiking
And he said: Boys, I'm not turning
I'm headed for a land that's far away
Beside the crystal fountains
So come with me, we'll go and see
The Big Rock Candy Mountains*

*In the Big Rock Candy Mountains
There's a land that's fair and bright
Where the handouts grow on bushes
And you sleep out every night
Where the boxcars all are empty
And the sun shines every day
And the birds and the bees
And the cigarette trees
The lemonade springs
Where the bluebird sings
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains*

*In the Big Rock Candy Mountains
All the cops have wooden legs
And the bulldogs all have rubber teeth
And the hens lay soft boiled eggs
The farmer's trees are full of fruit
And the barns are full of hay
Oh I'm bound to go
Where there ain't no snow
Where the rain don't fall
And the winds don't blow
In The Big Rock Candy Mountains*

*In the Big Rock Candy Mountains
You never change your socks
And the little streams of alcohol
Come trickling down the rocks
The brakeman have to tip their hats
And the railway bulls are blind
There's lake of stew
And of whiskey too
You can paddle all around it
In a big canoe
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains*

*In the Big Rock Candy Mountains
The Jails are made of tin
And you can walk right out again
As soon as you are in
There ain't no short-handled shovels
No axes, saws nor picks
I'm bound to stay
Where you sleep all day
Were they hung the jerk
That invented work
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains
I'll see you all
this coming fall
in the Big Rock Candy Mountains*

Harry "Mac" McClintock – The Big Rock Candy Mountains (1928)

In 1900, Britt, Iowa held a hobo convention as a way to promote their community and land in on the tourist and convention circuit.

The convention was held next in 1933 and since then it has been an annual event. Every year in Britt a King and Queen of the Hoboes are crowned. Mulligan Stew, the ultimate hobo food, is served and stories are told around campfires in the "hobo jungle". In another way the hoboes have not completely disappeared, as Higbie claimed: "A new fascination with hobo life percolates through American popular culture. Spurred on by a desire to "live off the grid," a new generation of middle-class adventurers has taken up freight train riding as a hobby. In part this trend takes off from a decades-long cultivation of folksy hobo culture among people who have experienced more or less brief stints on the road. There is a National Hobo Association with a Web site and a monthly newsletter, the *Hobo Times*. Several guide books offer suggestions on how to catch a freight train, what clothes to wear, and other details of the modern hobo life." (68)

Ain't Nothing In Rambling

While there are still people longing for the lure of hobo life, maybe it is good to cite some of the "dead men" who, although hobo life was often romanticized, warned their listeners in their songs to stay at home.

*Take a tip from one who's travelled
Never start to ramblin' round
You're liable to get the roamin' fever
You never want to settle down*

Carson Robison – Railroad Boomer (1929)

*Now boys don't start your ramblin' round
On this road of sin you're sorrow bound
Take my advice or you'll curse the day
You started rollin' down that lost highway*

Hank Williams – Lost Highway (1949)

Contemporary singers also described the negative aspects of hobo life in their songs. In 1964 Tom Paxton recorded his "I Can't Help But Wonder Where I'm Bound". He had a warning and some good advice for young people who wanted to go out on the road.

*Well if you see me passing by and you sit and you wonder why
And you wish that you were rambler too
Nail your shoes to kitchen floor lace 'em up and bar the door
Thank your stars for the roof that's over you*

Tom Paxton – Can't Help But Wonder Where I'm Bound (1964)

The late Johnny Cash recorded this song and it was released on his final album. John Sebastian was the leader and singer of The Lovin' Spoonful, a popular sixties pop band that played a modern version of the jug band music from the 1920s. In 1990s he formed a jug band and he recorded a warning for all the modern youngsters who dreamed of hobo life.

*Now all you young men singing the blues
Ain't seen your toes sticking through your shoes
Ain't nowhere to hobo anymore*

*If you got dreams being on the road
If you think that your old Tom Joad
Ain't nowhere to hobo anymore*

John Sebastian/Jimmy Vivino – Ain't Nowhere to Hobo Anymore (1996)

Conclusion

*There was a time when my heart was free to wander
And I remember as I sing this hobo song*

John Prine – the Hobo Song (1978)

The hobo songs that were recorded since the 1920s, told the stories of men and women who, sometimes out of their free will, but mostly under circumstances, were living a hard life on the road. All too often this way of living was romanticized, while the reality was a hard struggle for life. To the present day the life of the hobo speaks to our imagination. As Paul Garon concluded: "Our unconscious identification with the hobo is no glorification of his life, but rather a desperate attempt to find an alternate version to the master narrative of our lives. The hobo songs appeal to us because of our dissatisfaction with daily life, it is up to us to respond to this appeal by remaking the world so that the happiness we seek becomes an everyday affair." (69)

*I crept with lice that stayed and stayed for spite
I froze in "jungles" more than can be said
Dogs tore my clothes, and in a woeful plight
At many a back door for my food I pled
Until I wished to god that I was dead...
My shoes broke through and showed an outburst toe
On every side the world was all my foe
Threatening me with jibe and jeer and chains
Hard benches, cells, and woe on endless woe
And yet that life was sweet for all its pains*

Harry Kemp – The "Tramp Poet" (1920) (70)

Acknowledgements

This project started in 2010 when the Reverend Rieks Hoogenkamp asked us if Champagne Charlie could make a musical program with hobo songs for a project about modern hobo signs he was working on. In a very short time we collected a lot of songs and we gave a few concerts. Soon the idea for a new cd project was born: "Hobo Signs & Railroad Lines". But on account of our busy schedule we finally put it on the shelf. Then Kees van Minnen, director of the Roosevelt Study Center, heard of the project. He asked us if we could record a special album for the 25th anniversary of the RSC. We did not have to think twice, since our co-operation with the RSC for the cd project "Waitin' On Roosevelt" was very satisfactory. Before we knew it we made a selection of hobo songs and started to rehearse. Simultaneously I started to study hobo life and transcribed many hobo songs for the cd booklet. A lot of people helped me to accomplish my research. In the first place Hans Krabbendam of the Roosevelt Study Center, who provided books that I could not find elsewhere. When I started my study, I decided to contact a few of the American writers of these books. Without exception they gave me permission to use their great studies. And they all took the time to read the manuscript in its entirety. Paul Garon, Norm Cohen, Max Haymes (who is not American but British, by the way) and Tobias Higby all provided invaluable guidance, advice and insights. I extend my thanks to them. I would especially like to thank Mark Wyman who helped me in many ways and provided some really interesting, rare books about hobo songs. Finally I want to thank Kerry Blech for being a friend and opening doors that would otherwise have stayed closed.

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