

Hobo History

The name "Hobo" first started appearing in the early 1800's. Before the Civil War many hobos had taken to the rails as a way of life. Around the time of the Civil War, railroads were being built at an astonishing rate and in the early 1870's there were between 50,000 and 60,000 miles of track interwoven throughout the United States. During the late 1880's, a depressed economy was certainly prevalent, times were hard and hobos took to the rails in great numbers. Hitchhikers were also increasing and nobody had any money to go anywhere and pay the ticket to get there.

By the 1930's, the railways had grown to about 241,000 miles of track and the trains were running to all the bustling markets including Chicago, Michigan and from all points south in order to move raw goods to the industrial northern areas and for hauling cattle grain and everything else imaginable. During the early days, the hobo was believed to be involved in doing a lot of bad things, including stealing and derailing trains and take over entire trains. Fortunately, in the rural communities, people would help hobos and give them jobs during the harvest time.

Every hobo had a skill that he could do real well, like repairing shoes, making wire fruit bowls and hoeing a garden for a little something to eat. Many hobos were skilled musicians and could play good music with a guitar or harmonica, or some other musical instrument. It was not uncommon to see a hobo standing in the rear of a house drinking a cup of coffee and eating a sandwich, standing up, and doing a little chore for the donor of the coffee and food.

Around the time that World War I was raging and we were yet to join in the war, hobos were running rampant, trying to get into a stable work force and maybe settle down and some did, but the number continued to grow. By the 1920's, the unsettling image was making a change, there were some very notable people that had rode the rails, among them Jack London, and author Carl Sandburg, they made it big in their field so many people took this to mean that there were some that had it all together and could make a go of it, without living around a bunch of trains. A clown made up as a hobo caught a lot of attention because what they really did was depict a way of life in America to which some people could relate. During the Great Depression, over 8,000 women & over 200,000 children rode the rails as well.

In 1932, the Bonus marchers arrived to pressure Hoover for their long awaited bonuses, and they were not the same as the hobo who was resourceful in making his way and not starving; he made it on the ability to get by, they improvised when the chips were down. The center of the hobo life as the camps or jungles, which were located conveniently close to a railroad track and generally on the sunny side of a hill near a source of water. No real names were given, you used a moniker like Luther the Jet, Hobo Joe and Greenie, Cinder Box Cindy, Oklahoma Slim, Guitar Whitey, Mister Bojangles, Midwest John, Boxcar Willie (see story below), Gats, New York Maggie, Photo Boll, Pig Train, North Bank Fred, New York Ron, Liz Lump, Senator John McClaughry. There were certain rules like the pots were left clean and no fellow hobo was to rob another one who came into camp. Thievery was to be kept to a minimum, maybe a piece of food taken or vegetables taken from a garden or something off the clothesline. There was to be no breaking into any house or threatening people, these were serious offenses and could bring death by a fellow hobo. Hobos nearly always rode freight trains. Greenie told me that he always carried a railroad spike with a gold painted tip, so he could identify it as his. He would use this to keep the railroad yardman from closing the door on him, which could result in him freezing to death or suffocating, as some freight cars were pushed into the rail yard and out of use for weeks at a time.

In the period leading up to World War II, many hobos went into the 3-c camps and then into the army serving in World War II. Afterwards, some would take advantage of the GI Bill and enter college or other professions which caused a steep decline in the numbers of hobo. What used to be up to 500 on a freight train in the early 1950's would only turn into around 10 hobos on a fully loaded freight train. So the handwriting was on the wall, they were a group that would be almost extinct in the years to come, but a few still lead this life, but the numbers remaining are limited.

Boxcar Willie: Branson, MO., Well known Hobo and Country singer *BoxCar Willie* is back on track in his battle against leukemia. The 67-year-old entertainer returned home from the hospital Tuesday March 2, 1999, he had received chemotherapy. He had been hospitalized for two weeks after cancer treatments left him ill and weak. "He's doing a little better," said his daughter, Tammy LaCore. BoxCar Willie was diagnosed with leukemia in 1996. He was then declared cancer-free in 1997 and returned to performing. But the disease returned last April, forcing him to cancel his shows in Branson. Born Lecil Martin in Sterrett, Texas, in 1931, BoxCar Willie was the son of a railroad man who used to play his fiddle on the porch while his son sat in on guitar. By his teens, he had graduated to playing in jamborees all over the state, but he gave up show business to enlist in the Air Force. He spent 22 years there, logging some 10,000 hours as a flier, Boxcar Willie die 12 April 1999 at the age of 67. He is survived by his wife, two daughters and two sisters.