Denizens of the road: An examination of America's itinerant laborers 1870-1920

Gary Rempe

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B.A., Columbia College, 1987

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

University of Montana

1990

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This study will examine our present body of writing on hoboes, in the process revealing the general public's perception of them around the turn of the century. The remainder of the thesis will place hoboes in the larger context of itinerant laborers in general in order to reveal variations among itinerant laborers arising from gender, ethnicity, and marital status. It will discern the forces that manufactured the tremendous extent and scale of geographic mobility among laborers during the period 1870-1920, creating what some more enlightened contemporaries called a "floating labor supply," delineate the different characteristics of movement among laborers, and briefly discuss the decrease in geographic mobility among laborers during the 1920s. Finally, it will analyze the life of itinerant laborers in America's work camps during the early twentieth century.

The unpublished records and final report of the United States Commission on Industrial Relations, 1912-15 and numerous other federal as well as state government publications provided the foundation for this manuscript.

The highly mobile world of itinerant laborers first manifested itself to the general public during the panic of 1893. The general public's increased awareness of the plight of itinerant laborers this crises produced, however, rapidly declined with the arrival of better economic conditions at the turn of the century. Only the romantic and sensational literature on itinerant laborers persisted to the present. This writing in tandem with bits and pieces of scholarship scattered throughout a highly compartmentalized historic profession represents our present body of scholarship on itinerant laborers. Chronic unemployment and developments in transportation constituted the primary reason both the scope and scale of itinerancy among laborers increased dramatically after 1870. In addition, while laborers did not have access to reliable information on job conditions in areas beyond the local level when family and friends did not reside in their proposed destinations, they still managed to travel at regional and national levels by moving only short distances at a time. Life in work camps varied with industry, region, ethnicity, gender, and degree of isolation but almost uniformly contained unsanitary and dangerous living and working conditions.
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"Other people call him a hobo, but he calls himself just a common laborer belonging to the ranks which are roaming over the country."\textsuperscript{1}
INTRODUCTION

Our present perception of the hobo as an historical phenomenon is largely inaccurate and appallingly incomplete. Only a tiny minority of historians have ever acknowledged the hobo as a serious topic for historical research. As a result our concept of the hobo is shrouded in a veil both sentimental and romantic. Hoboes easily lent themselves as popular literary characters. The reading public found their itinerant lifestyle and colorful jargon unique and fascinating. To them they appeared an interesting social anomaly, unnatural, even bizarre. With a life absolutely alien to their own, the reading public could not help but find hoboes captivating. Consequently most hobo writing, despite occasional professions to the contrary, catered to the reader's desire for a bizarre type of hobo. Hoboes such as the Pennsylvania Kid, Hairbreadth Harry, Cannonball Eddie or Dynamic Ben Benson, "reputed lord of the rods for over forty years, as well as a poet and writer," pervade our literature grossly distorting our perception of an important historical phenomenon.¹

This view of hoboes as something strange or unique ranks as the greatest of many misconceptions about them. Certainly from the perspective of American society since
1920 or from the viewpoint of his middle class contemporaries the hobo would indeed appear odd. When placed in the context of the period 1870-1920, and viewed from a working class perspective, however, the hobo becomes not odd but commonplace. From this perspective his life was not unique in the least—hobo Hairbreadth Harry gives way to hobo Joe Schweiner. The hobo was simply the American born single male itinerant laborer that constituted a large part of America's workforce during this period.  

The wave of mobility studies in the 1970s proved the tremendous degree of geographic mobility among this period's laborers, yet we know little else about them. Broad generalizations of when, why, and where these laborers moved have too often sufficed in the place of systematic study. Questions of geographic mobility among higher skilled and better organized workers in America such as carpenters, printers, and cigar makers, which probed beyond measuring the degree of movement, first received historical attention in 1981 when Jules Tygiel wrote of America's tramping carpenters. Almost a decade later the itinerant world of the more numerous and more mobile unskilled workers and common laborers, apart from their Trans-Atlantic crossings, remains largely unexplored.
Itinerant laborers provided the highly mobile muscle essential to American industrial development. Just as fur traders pioneered America's agricultural growth, itinerant laborers pioneered this country's industrial growth. Itinerant laborers were the harbingers of industry and its concomitant urbanization. They swarmed over the face of the country in unprecedented numbers after the civil war continually gathering and dispersing as the economy demanded. They built America's capitalistic infrastructure. From bridges and dams to railroads, highways and harbors, itinerant laborers provided the mobile labor crucial to any developing country.

The first chapter of this study will examine the present body of writing on hoboes, in the process revealing the general public's perception of them around the turn of the century. The remainder of the thesis will place hoboes in the larger context of itinerant laborers in general in order to reveal variations among these laborers arising from gender, ethnicity, and marital status.

The second chapter will discern the forces that manufactured the tremendous extent and scale of geographic mobility among laborers during the period 1870-1920, creating what some more enlightened contemporaries called a "floating labor supply,"

delineate the different characteristics of movement among laborers, and briefly discuss the decrease in geographic mobility among laborers during the 1920s.

Finally, the third chapter will analyze the life of itinerant laborers in America's work camps during the early twentieth century. From finding a job in a work camp to the effects of region, industry, ethnicity and gender, this section will examine many aspects of work camp life. Unfortunately the scope of this master's thesis reveals but a small part of hobo history. Nevertheless, it does provide some insight into the illusive and long neglected highly mobile world of the American hobo.⁴
CHAPTER ONE
THE ORIGINS AND HISTORIOGRAPHY OF WRITING ABOUT HOBOES

The voluminous body of writing on hoboes existing today began with the panic of 1893. Poole's Index to Periodical Literature listed twenty-five articles between the years 1892-1896 dealing with the itinerant laborers contemporaries commonly called tramps. In the 110 years prior to 1892, a total of only thirteen articles listed under the heading of tramp appeared in Poole's index.

The "Hard Times" of the 1890s swelled the ranks of hoboes. Legions of laborers traversed the country in search of work. This in turn set off an unparalleled increase in writings about hoboes in the form of tramp and to a lesser extent hobo literature. Of course this literature only referred to non-working hoboes. As workers, contemporaries perceived hoboes as hardy lumberjacks, fearless miners or graceful and daring gandy dancers as nonworkers, they were considered nothing but rapacious tramps. Consequently, while tramp literature is only occasionally useful in illuminating the life of hoboes at work, it is an excellent source for viewing both their lifestyle and living conditions as well as the general public's perception of them when not working.5
as well as the general public's perception of them when not working.\(^5\)

This writing embodied America's different responses to the proliferation in tramping occurring throughout the country. It revealed that during the 1890's a small number of social Progressives realized for the first time that often hoboes were the products of unemployment and not merely lazy vagrants. For example, during his research into the living conditions of tenement houses in 1899, sociologist John Lloyd Thomas, to his surprise, discovered that in these workingmen's hotels "very many of the pitiable tenants...are sober, respectable, industrious men...." Other Progressives included people such as American social insurance pioneer William Willoughby, John R. Commons, Henry George and Arena editor B. O. Flower. They attempted to find employment for as many hoboes as possible and sought measures that would prevent men from becoming unemployed in the first place.\(^6\)

It must be emphasized, however, that these men represented only a tiny minority of the population. Most Americans still followed the traditional view of unemployed itinerant laborers that maintained the majority of hoboes were not itinerant laborers but merely lazy, filthy, thieving vagrants. As former hobo Ralph Chaplin reminisced "to all good citizens we were
This belief existed even among those sincerely concerned for the working classes. United States Commissioner of Labor Carrol D. Wright believed workers could be subdivided into a three-tiered hierarchy. The artisan, "Steady, thrifty, and socially ambitious" resided at the top. Next came the sick and unintelligent followed by "the drunkard, the criminal, the immoral, the lazy, and the shiftless." Commissioner Write represented the group of Americans that believed theirs was a land of unlimited opportunity. Many Americans commonly thought "You have but to note the details of the lives of successful men to see that fortune rarely favored them in the beginning with more than a keen perception, a willing pair of hands, and determined application." This group of Americans believed the "tramp problem" stemmed from personal deficiencies rather than from economic conditions. This view of hoboes prevailed prior to the panic of 1893 and afterward continued to represent the mentality of a substantial number of Americans.7

Other traditionalists, of the "this country is going to hell" school of thought, believed the increase in tramping further proof that the dark days of democracy Thomas Jefferson ominously forecasted loomed just over the horizon. The increase in tramping combined with labor unrest, an alarming rate of business combinations,
urbanization, immigration, rapid industrialization, and severe economic depression to create a bleak picture of American society for much of the population. Speaking of the consolidation of competitors in industry J.H. Hall, commissioner of Montana's Bureau of Agriculture, Labor and Industry, stated the prevailing ideology of this period: "As a safeguard against such misfortune to the Republic, home-owning farmers and self-respecting laboring men [which non-working hoboes certainly were not] must ever be the main reliance."8

Others simply chose not to deal with the negative aspects of tramping. It was difficult enough for Americans raised on wholesome Jeffersonian Agrarianism to accept the fact they were becoming an urban and industrialized people. To ask them to incorporate completely into their world view what, in their eyes, was one of the most vile products of urbanization and industrialization, would be to ask too much. Instead this group of the population displayed interest in the novelty of tramping. In response, articles on "How the Tramp Travels" or "What the Tramp Reads" or the tramp's "Adventures with the Police" began to appear.9

By the turn of the century America's economy had largely recovered from the hard times of the 1890s. Sociologists continued trying to understand hoboes and the forces that produced them. They counted them,
interviewed them, and even lived among them. Despite their efforts and sincere concern for these laborers, neither popular support nor a substantial and systematic study of unemployment and its effects emerged at this time. Because the majority of Americans demanded fiscal retrenchment and decreased spending during periods of economic recession, the tradition of ignoring unemployment until it became a serious problem continued. Impetus for public sympathy for the unemployed and for truly professional and objective research on the causes of unemployment came only with the Great Depression.\(^\text{10}\)

In response to better economic conditions which in turn resulted in fewer hoboes, the traditionalist writing on hoboes waned. In doing so their response to tramping followed its previous sine wave pattern of increasing and decreasing with the visibility of hoboes. This pattern occurred not only at the national level, but at regional and local levels as well, varying in intensity and duration with the economic conditions of each region or locale.

What began as a fascination with tramping, has grown until today there exists a large body of literature on hoboes. From Jack London's \textit{The Road} to Robert Brun's \textit{The Damndest Radical}, the hobo has become a familiar character in American literature. Is it surprising that
these most mobile Americans should pervade our literature, popular press, short stories and folk tales? As historiography since the 1960s has shown, geographic mobility has always been an integral part of the American experience. We are now only beginning to understand its effects on our society.¹¹

Today there exists a large body of writing on hoboes. Nevertheless, as Eric Monkkonen points out, "this literature is as marginal as its objects of interest...." Surprisingly enough, systematic study of hoboes during this period has not been attempted by social historians. As a result hoboes remain obscure as historic and social phenomenon. The cause for this is commonly blamed on a lack of source material. This, however, is only partly true. While hoboes are certainly more difficult to research than other more visible workers, recent research demonstrates there exists a substantial amount of information on hoboes during this period. To understand why there is a dearth of professional scholarship on these workers, and why their study is important, it is necessary to place these denizens of the road in their proper historiographical context.¹²

Shortly after the mid-twentieth century, American historians gradually became aware that their writings
focused on only a small minority of the population. Politicians, capitalists and labor leaders, among other social elites, received the bulk of historical research. To remedy this, social historians of the late fifties and early sixties began to write the history of the average American. Theodore Roosevelt, Andrew Carnegie and Eugene V. Debs stepped aside for "John Q. Worker."13

The new social historians stressed quantification and explicit model building in their methodology and armed themselves with immigration records, tax ledgers, city directories, birth, marriage, and death records, census manuscripts and anything else they could statistically manipulate in their effort to conquer the masses. With their new techniques and broader conceptualization of what constituted history, they began to shed light upon the previously dark droves of average Americans. For example, fertility, persistence, the functions, structure and roles of the family, and social and geographic mobility, can now be viewed with varying degrees of accuracy.

In his seminal mobility studies on Newburyport and Boston, Massachusetts, Stephan Thernstrom speculated that there existed a large floating population in late nineteenth century America "buffeted about from city to city...helpless before the vicissitudes of a rapidly changing economy." He lamented that more was not known
of the permanent transients who made up the bottom layer of America's late nineteenth century social order. "You get only occasional glimpses into the part of this iceberg that appears above the surface, in the person of the tramp, who is first perceived as a problem for America in the 1870s and reappears in hard times after that--in the 1890s and in the great depression most notably."\(^{14}\)

As social historians such as Thernstrom neared their goal of producing a whole view of American society, at including the excluded, they became increasingly aware of hoboes. While engaged in other areas of social history, most commonly mobility studies, historians occasionally heard the far-off tramping and scuffling of the multitudes of unskilled itinerant labor drifting in and out of their study in the form of the "tramp," but their perception of these workers never progressed beyond this.

The geographical limitations inherent in mobility studies prevented the researcher from studying the hobo, who was more of a regional, often national, and even international phenomenon. The scientific discovery of hoboes could only be accomplish with the intensely focused research involved in mobility studies. This very focus which made their discovery possible, however, also prohibited further research.
There is a similar problem in other areas of historical research on hoboes. Not only did hoboes move about spatially from one area to another, they also worked in different industries and their ranks contained many different ethnic groups. Because the vast majority of industrial and ethnic history concentrates on only one industry or a single ethnic group, even those historians who have dealt with these laborers have done so only within the narrow confines of their field. Thus, one of the major reasons for the scarcity of professional scholarship on hoboes is the tremendous degree of specialization by historians during the twentieth century. It is difficult for historians to recognize a subject that crosses regional, national and international geographic boundaries, as well as industrial and ethnic lines. What exists are histories of Boston, Omaha, and Poughkeepsie; or logging, mining, and the railroads; or Italians, Greeks and Finns. These studies are crucial for a thorough understanding of the past and many more are needed, yet they provide only pieces to the historical puzzle. They should not be seen as ends in and of themselves, but as solid building blocks from which larger historical forces can be constructed. This has been one of the rationale behind specialization. Nevertheless, now that we have a large number of highly specialized historic fields few
historians actually employ work outside their own field to the extent they should. So much material has been amassed in each field of inquiry that even to suggest crossing geographic, industrial, and ethnic boundaries in one study might seem ludicrous to some.\textsuperscript{15}

Ironically, the only viable solution to this problem of historical compartmentalization is to specialize even further. Only by focusing on highly specialized topics that cut across a number of historic fields can historians begin to piece together our fragmented historical picture. This is one reason why working-class history is becoming increasingly important. It provides a unique opportunity for historians to cut across a large number of historic fields. By focusing on a specific type of worker, the working-class historian can wade through the ever deepening sea of specialized historical information with much less chance of drowning than most historians.

Therefore, the study of hoboes is significant not only in its attempt to include an important and largely ignored group, but also because it provides a means to connect historic fields that are too often studied as separate entities. Hobo research incorporates elements of women, working-class, urban, ethnic, and industrial history as well as mobility studies.\textsuperscript{16}
Only recently have historians started substantive research on these workers. Much of the most recent work on hoboes is conveniently anthologized in *Walking to Work: Tramps in America 1790-1935* in the form of "tramp" research. It delineates three periods of tramping in America. The first period leads up to the Civil War and is characterized by tramps wandering as families, truly destitute and poor. The second period starts in the early 1870s and then begins its decline after World War I. "Tramps" in this period were neither deviants nor outcasts, but instead itinerant laborers responding to the transformation of the United States from commercial to industrial capitalism. During this period laborers commonly tramped about the country in search of work. While cyclical unemployment and economic crises did greatly increase tramping in "Hard Times," even in good times local and regional economic change often spurred younger workers to go "on the tramp." Author Josiah Flint pointed out it was wrong that the term tramp "covers every traveler on the road, some really want work."17

The arrival of a mature urban industrial system in the United States ended this era of tramping, setting off both a decline in the number of hoboes and a change in their composition. With the exception of itinerant laborers in agriculture, today's hoboes are relatively
few in number and largely derelicts, in direct contrast to the vast majority of their immediate predecessors.\footnote{18}

In the field of working-class history, recent historiography has illuminated a hierarchy of labor with the more skilled and sedentary at the top and the least skilled and most mobile at the bottom. Unfortunately, the farther down the hierarchy the researcher travels, the dimmer his subjects become until finally, at the very bottom of the hierarchy, one finds mere shadows. The highly mobile and often unemployed itinerant laborers that occupy this plane have received surprisingly little attention by working-class historians. Skilled and organized itinerant workers first received study in the early sixties when Eric J. Hobsbawm wrote of "The Tramping Artisan" in Britain. A quarter century later the unskilled itinerant laborer remains largely ignored.\footnote{19}

Labor movements these workers participated in such as Jacob Coxey's Army of Unemployed and the Industrial Workers of the World have received a great deal of attention by working-class historians. These movements, however, were not representative of the daily ebb and flow of life among hoboes and therefore provide only a very small part of the this group's history.\footnote{20}

The lack of research on these workers is especially frustrating for the working-class historian studying the
late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when this economic underworld accounted for a large percentage of the total work force. There are many questions to answer. What was life like in the work camps in which a great many of these laborers often lived? Did conditions in these camps very from one geographic region to another? What obstacles existed, if any, to prevent them from escaping their itinerant lifestyle? What happened to these workers after they left the view of mobility studies? Did these workers constitute a "permanent floating proletariat" or, as Howard Gitelman suggested, were the individuals coming into mobility studies the same ones as those that left? Did these workers possess their own cultural identity and social organization as historian John C. Schneider has argued? How did these highly mobile workers maintain their equilibrium? What role did itinerant laborers play during strikes? What effect did these itinerants have on the more permanent workers? To what extent did their itinerancy reflect or form their working conditions? Did the general public's perception of hoboes vary from one region to another?

The systematic study of hoboes as distinct social and historical phenomenon is long overdue. Moreover, it is time social historians started reaping the benefits of specialization they have so arduously sown for over a
Notes


2. For most contemporaries hoboes were synonymous with tramps. That the vast majority of tramps and hoboes were actually laborers see Eric Monkkonen, ed., Walking to Work: Tramps in America, 1790-1935 (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1984): 5, 213-14; Frank V. Whiting, "Trespassers Killed on Railways, Who are They?" The Railway Library 1912 (Chicago: Stromberg, Allen & Co., 1913): 211.

their trans-atlantic crossings.

History 38 (Autumn, 1988): 38-42. John C. Schneider has also studied these workers; see Schneider, "Omaha Vagrants and the Character of Western Hobo Labor, 1887-1913." Nebraska History 63 (Summer, 1982): 255-72 as well as Schneider, "Tramping Workers," in Monkkonen, ed., Walking to Work, 212-34. Roger A. Bruns, Knights of the Road: A Hobo History (New York: Methuen, 1980) is one of the best popular histories on itinerant laborers. It is delightful to read and contains a great deal of information. Nevertheless, as the label "Knight" implies, this work like Kenneth Allsop's, Hard Travellin: The Hobo and His History (New York: New American Library, 1967) is both sentimental and romantic. They are, however, both great places to start.

5. William Fletcher and Franklin Poole, ed., Poole's Index to Periodical Literature, vol. 4 (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1897). The hard times quote is from Charles Dickens, Hard Times: For These Times (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1854; reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1988). This is not to imply that the economic conditions were any worse in the 1890s than in parts of the 1870s. As Jeffrey G. Williamson has pointed out in his Late Nineteenth Century Economic Development: A General Equilibrium History (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1974), 117-118, the depression of the 1890s was no worse than that of the 1870s.


10. While unemployment statistics during this period were very inaccurate, they can be used to view the rise and fall of unemployment. One indicator there were fewer tramps by the turn of the century was that the percent of the civilian labor force unemployed dropped from 12.5% in 1898 to 6.5% in 1899. See Historical Statistics of the United States Colonial Times to 1970, Bicentennial ed., Part 1 (Washington: Bureau of the Census, 1975), 135. On America's demand for fiscal retrenchment in hard times see Irwin Yellowitz, "The Origins of Unemployment Reform in the United States," 360. On good techniques for measuring unemployment not arriving until the 1930s see Sanford Cohen, Labor in the United States, 3d ed., (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill, 1970), 522.


CHAPTER TWO

IRREGULARITY OF EMPLOYMENT AND GEOGRAPHIC MOBILITY AMONG AMERICA'S UNSKILLED WORKERS AND COMMON LABORERS, 1870-1920

"The unemployed of to-day are the workers of to-marrow, and vice versa." ¹

Increased itinerancy among laborers in America first manifested itself to contemporaries in the form of that growing nuisance, the "tramp," during the early 1870s. These wayfaring strangers began to crowd police stations, congregate in particular sections of cities, and tramp about the country along its rapidly expanding "metropolitan corridors." For most of the population, especially railroad officials, "tramps" were a particularly stubborn and mysterious phenomenon which, despite numerous and varied attempts at elimination, continued to swarm about the country until their disappearance in the early 1920s. Two attorneys for the Northwestern Railroad at Omaha publicly stated in April of 1894 that "Coxey's Army should all be blown up with dynamite.... They are bums, beggars, and hobos...." Few people during this period ever realized that the vast majority of "tramps" were actually ordinary laborers.²

As the first part of this essay will demonstrate, a number of developments after 1870 transformed America's economic landscape making it quite common for laborers
in this period to move about in search of, and often as an escape from, work. Because unemployment and geographic movement played such a central role in the laborer's experience during this period, the scholar can illuminate much of their world by focusing on these topics. The purpose of this study is to shed new light on America's laborers by using unemployment and geographic mobility as synthetic themes. It will attempt to discern the forces that manufactured the tremendous extent and scale of geographic mobility among laborers creating what some more enlightened contemporaries called a "floating labor supply," delineate the different characteristics of movement among laborers, and briefly discuss the decrease in geographic mobility among laborers during the 1920s.³

Two developments in the post Civil War era increased both the scope and the scale of itinerancy among America's laborers. The arrival of highly developed transportation and communication networks and the dramatic increase in the number of laborers in both absolute and, in the case of common laborers, relative terms, combined to foster the geographic movement of more laborers over greater distances than ever before.

Following the Civil War railroads and telegraphs threaded their way across the continent, trollies and
later subways spun about cities, and steamships crisscrossed the Atlantic further binding the world's industrial core to its rural periphery. As a result, job information and workers flowed at unprecedented rates from one city, region, and country to another. Laborers learned of jobs through the mail, wire, newspapers, promotional publications, and family and friends. By traveling in steerage, hiding aboard ship, or "stealing" train rides, even the poorest of laborers now could afford to reach these jobs. Employees at Boston's Wayfarer's Lodge remarked in 1885 that the stowaways "come to us direct from the ship, black as negroes from the coal bunkers where they have slept...." And, as a writer for the Billings, Montana Gazette observed, "A dollar will carry a man a long way in a box car...." Because laborers traditionally lacked the financial means for travel available to more skilled and better organized workers, the arrival of cheap, extensive, and efficient transportation profoundly altered levels of itinerancy among laborers. Indeed in 1910 sociologist Alice W. Solenberger wrote:

It is the mere accessibility of the railways more than anything else, I believe, that is manufacturing tramps today. So long as it is possible for practically any man or boy to beat his way about the country on the railway, we shall continue to have tramps in America.4
Actually, transportation accounted for only a part of increased itinerancy among laborers. Equally important was the dramatic increase in the number of people subject to the insecurities inherent in wage labor during this period. Between the years 1870-1910 the number of manual wage earners in the United States increased 301 percent. During this same period America's entire population rose only 132 percent. Moreover, the relative percentage of these wage earners employed as common laborers also increased in many industries. For example in construction, America's largest employer during this period, the number of common laborers grew at a rate more than double that of the construction work force as a whole. In the iron and steel industries the percentage of common laborers in Philadelphia, for example, increased from between 20 and 30 percent in the late 1870s to between 40 and 50 percent just ten years later.5

In 1915 the U.S. Industrial Commission correctly observed: "The number of these migratory workers seems to be increasing not only absolutely but relatively." This expanding pool of highly mobile laborers worked in a rapidly changing and unstable industrial economy in which chronic unemployment, both involuntary and voluntary, was the primary cause of geographic movement among laborers. In 1914 Michigan woodsman Math Gans
bluntly summarized the job security of laborers when he stated, "All laborer's jobs are short-lived." Employment fluctuations plagued American industry making periods of involuntary unemployment the laborer's scourge.6

The most spectacular increases in unemployment among laborers resulted from the cyclical nature of America's economy which intermittently plunged the nation into the major economic crises of 1873, 1893, and 1908. Cyclical depressions occurred before 1870, most notably in 1837, but after 1870 they increased in both frequency and duration. These panics paralyzed industry causing layoffs and shutdowns on an enormous scale. For example, the number of failures per 10,000 businesses soared from 89 in 1892 to 130 the following year representing well over 16,000 business failures. The movement of massive numbers of laborers in search of employment resulted; their wretched condition occasionally surfaced as in 1894 when it took the form of Jacob Coxey's "petition in boots."7

World War I further aggravated the job insecurity of laborers both by causing another major depression in 1914 and by temporarily altering the economy. In New York City the depression overtaxed the municipal lodging house to the point that city officials packed the surplus homeless into city boats, the waiting rooms of
the Department of Public Charities and the Department of Correction. Even after the depression ended, the war continued to produce shorter periods of unemployment for workers by inducing major shifts in the economy, causing a decline in some industries and rapid growth in others. After Ohio began work on European war orders, the number of employees in the state increased by 154,918 over the course of a single year. When one factory slowed its production, consequently dismissing the excess workers, and another expanded demanding more workers, the laborer often responded with geographic movement. Postwar demobilization again displaced laborers as the country reoriented itself to a peacetime economy. 8

Rampant business reorganization, the outcome of America's transition from commercial to industrial capitalism by the early 1890s and shortly thereafter to corporate capitalism, intensified the job insecurity of laborers. For example, in 1895 there were only 43 mergers in the United States. By 1898 this number had risen to 303 and by 1899 to 1,208, the highest level it would ever reach. After a merger or acquisition, businesses reorganized, often displacing laborers in the process and forcing them to move about in search of employment. 9

The voracious appetite for raw materials of America's burgeoning cities and factories also increased
unemployment among laborers in many primary resource industries. The logging industry offers the most striking example of industrial dislocation. The center of production in the lumber industry shifted from the lake states to the South between the years 1899-1904. The Pacific Coast then surpassed the South in terms of production in 1926.10

Rapid technological changes during this period, accelerated by the Civil War and later by WWI, also displaced laborers. While some autonomy persisted well into the twentieth century, for most skilled workers during this period the day was rapidly disappearing when a father could say to his son, "You may loose your money but never your trade." Throughout the world the job security of workers decreased with the development of new technology. These technologically displaced workers were, as John Stuart Mill said, "sacrificed to the gains of their fellow-citizens and of posterity." In lasting, old time lasters believed the lasting machine Jan Matzeling improved in the late 1880s sang as it worked: "I've got your job! I've got your job!" Major innovations such as the lasting machine and the countless minor improvements and modifications that skilled workers like Jan Matzeling often undertook, permeated industry, subdividing tasks and reducing the skill level of workers. This in turn increased the
insecurity of workers either by eliminating their positions altogether or by making their jobs available to almost anyone so that when hard times struck, instead of receiving a reduction in pay, the fallen skilled worker was simply dismissed like any other laborer.¹¹

A less visible, though no less important cause of unemployment for laborers were the smaller but consistent annual fluctuations in employment that prevailed in varying degrees throughout American industry. The most pronounced of these annual fluctuations occurred in such seasonal industries as canning, construction, lumber, fishing, and agriculture. Factors such as spoilage and weather compelled seasonal industries to require large numbers of laborers for only a few weeks or months during the year. For example, California canneries employed nine-tenths of the state's entire population or 160,607 workers in August of 1909 and only 2,781 in February of the following year. Employment in seasonal industries also varied with product yield. Wisconsin pea canneries, which employed primarily women, operated 10.1 hours per day for 28.8 days in 1909 when the average yield per acre equaled 60 cases. In 1910, however, employees in the state's canneries worked 9.9 hours per day for 21.6 days when the average yield per acre dropped to 52.8 cases.¹²
In addition, national growth in the form of urbanization and industrialization increased the number of workers involved in seasonal construction work. From 1870-1913 the United States grew faster economically than any other nation in the world. This meant bridges had to be built, canals dug, rails laid and maintained--in short, the infrastructure for what would become the world's leading industrial nation by the 1890s was "Under Construction." This growth in turn created a tremendous demand for construction workers. In fact, with 22.4% of its wage earners engaged in construction in 1870 and 18.7% in 1910 America's working class contained the largest proportion of building workers in the world during this period. In 1912 one writer was astonished at the increase in New York City municipal lodgers during 1911, largely brought on by the construction of the Ashokan Dam and other extensive public improvements. The cities lodging house had 9,163 people pass through it in January of 1909, 7,401 in January of 1910 and with the undertaking of these public projects 16,995 in January of 1911.13

Though less pronounced, annual employment patterns fluctuated even in industries independent of the four seasons. In 1909 the U.S. Immigration Commission produced the most reliable results for determining the regularity of employment in this period's principal
manufacturing and mining industries. Its study of 27,909 males revealed only 16.8% of workers in bituminous coal mining worked twelve months during the year and only 46.9% worked nine months or more. Only 20% of workers in iron and steel worked for twelve months and 25% worked less than six months. Only 54.7% of workers in slaughtering and meat packing, 37.8% in clothing, and 29.9% in shoes worked twelve months annually. Another report, which focused on the steel industry, revealed that out of a possible 52 weeks an average steel worker could expect to lose at least 5 during the year.\textsuperscript{14}

Employment also fluctuated throughout the year in industries employing primarily women laborers. A 1909 investigation of 1,000 female laborers in New York City concluded that half held their jobs less than six months and that two-thirds worked in industries with large annual employment fluctuations such as clothing, food, cheap candy, tin, and perfume factories. A study of women laborers employed in U.S. clothing factories in 1909 revealed that the work force in this industry increased by 19,000 between January and March, decreased by 31,000 between April and July, increased by 32,000 between August and October, and decreased by 14,000 between November and December.\textsuperscript{15}
Fluctuations in annual employment patterns throughout American industry varied from one region, industry, and firm to another. The percentage of heads of working-class families reporting periods of unemployment at some time during 1902 was lowest in the western United States at 30.85%, followed by the N. Central at 48.42%, the N. Atlantic at 49.3%, the S. Atlantic at 51.71% and the S. Central at 74.98%. The length of time unemployed also varied between these regions with western families reporting the longest periods of annual unemployment at 11.33 weeks and those in the N. Central United States the shortest at 8.83 weeks. In 1904 Pennsylvania's coal mines operated an average of only 196 days while Colorado's worked an average of 261 days. In 1913 a bituminous coal miner in Virginia could expect to lose only 26 of 306 working days while a similar worker in Illinois lost 116 days, one in Indiana a 117 days. Speaking before the Industrial Commission, a spokesmen for Montana's coal miners stated, "We have mines in this state at the present time that have not lost a day in 3 weeks all summer. We have other mines in the state that haven't worked three weeks all summer." Copper mining and smelting presented the most striking example of stability during this period with 93.5% of workers in
these industries working twelve months, followed by gloves at 80.4% and cigars and tobacco at 73.2%.\textsuperscript{16}

In periods of unemployment, a time which "often occurs in the position of laborer" according to itinerant laborer Thomas Lee, the loss of working time frequently forced men on the road. After studying traveling laborers in Aberdeen, North Dakota, sociologist Peter A. Speek wrote in 1914 that there existed "a considerable number of men who have left fairly good jobs because of a temporary slack in work." The following quote describing a typical female laborer in New York City in 1909 illustrates the unsettling effect of fluctuating unemployment on an individual worker:

One girl, now twenty-four years old, has the following record: learner, perfumery (probably filling bottles) one year, $3 to $6 a week, left because work was slack; packer six months, $4.50 a week, left because work was slack; operator on switchboard one year and three months, $5 a week, left "to advance," which she did by entering a tile factory to paste paper on tiles, at $8 a week. At the end of a year dull business sent her out to look for work again. During a period of six years, she worked scarcely more than four.\textsuperscript{17}

Fierce competition, rapid technological change, and sometimes hasty expansion produced an often hideous working environment for laborers. America's working conditions were among the worst in the world. From 1902-06 America's coal
mines led the world in average number of men killed per thousand at 3.39 followed by Prussia at 2.06. In 1917 alone, America's manufacturing industries reported 1,363,000 workers injured. From copper and zinc poisoning or "brass founders ague" to arsenic fumes in copper smelting to localized paralysis and twitching in cigar manufacturing, danger constantly loomed over the laborer's world. Because laborers, as this study will shortly reveal, changed jobs more frequently than any other type of worker, they were particularly vulnerable to injury and disease. After studying white lead workers in 1910, the U.S. Bureau of Labor concluded "the more unsteady the men the less effort is made to protect them." Whether picking or drilling in an unusually dusty and unstable portion of a mine or cleaning uncommonly foul smelling mercurial storage tanks, laborers were often viewed, especially by production managers, as "disposable workers." A foreman working in one of the 23 white lead factories studied by the U.S. Bureau of Labor commented "We make no effort to keep a steady force of laborers, encouraging the unskilled men to leave after a few weeks because we think it prevents them from becoming poisoned."18

Frequently laborers, most of whom lacked any type of effective workman's compensation until after WWI, either moved geographically to better their working environment or sometimes were forced on the road because of work related
injuries. Alice W. Solenberger's 1900-04 study of 1,000 homeless men in Chicago, the majority of whom were itinerant laborers, concluded that 25% were "temporarily or permanently crippled or maimed." Sociologist Nels Anderson said this of a Chicago laborer:

0.0. is fifty-three years old and he has been a migrant for many years. He has been a lumber-jack and a harvest hand. He has tried his hand at various casual jobs but most of his time has been spent in the mines. He used to work in the most dangerous mines because they generally pay the most money. Three years ago (about 1919) while working in the copper mines in Butte, Montana, he contracted miner's "con," which is some sort of lung trouble. He had no place to go, could not hold a job, and has wandered about the country ever since. He has no hope of regaining his health and is too proud to return to his people who live in Ohio.

This man was not unique. Contemporaries referred to an entire block of cheap lodging houses and hotels for itinerant laborers in Chicago as "Consumptive Row," said to rival New York City's "Lung Block." Consumption or silicosis, however, was not the only hazard forcing workers on the road. Laborer Sam Gray, a 35-year-old shipyard painter who had recently immigrated from England, left the stability of his painting trade because "he felt its bad influence upon his health in England." When he arrived in America he tried to continue the same trade, but very soon noticed the danger of white lead poisoning--"painters colic." Anderson mentioned "G.T." from New England: "He was
wandering about the country in the hope of regaining his health. He was a textile worker and claims that the dyes and dust were the cause of his condition." Laborers with missing limbs and "bent and twisted bodies" congregated in Chicago's hobo district. Anderson recorded: "Red begs and sometimes peddles pencils along Halsted Street. He lost his leg several years ago while working in the coal mines." These injured outcasts worked at whatever menial tasks they could perform to generate income, but often fell to tramp status by begging in order to supplement their scanty wages. While Ford Motor Company began using "substandard men" in 1913, they were exceptional. The vast majority of employers did not hire handicapped workers.19

Unemployment among laborers also resulted from a number of other important factors, both voluntary and involuntary, other than those listed above. Additional causes of unemployment included strikes, blacklisting, and vacations. A 1902 study by the U.S. Commissioner of Labor, however, demonstrated that inability to obtain work ranked as the number one cause of idle time for the heads of 12,154 working-class families throughout America. Surprisingly, strikes accounted for less than two per cent of idle time. "Sickness" ranked second at
22.54% followed by slack work 13.05%, vacation 6.45%, shut downs 4.3%, and bad weather 2.25%.20

These percentages changed from one industry to another. For example, the highest percentage of accidents causing idle time occurred in transportation, bad weather in fishing, and strikes in iron and steel. They also varied from year to year. For example, the percentage of lost time due to strikes increased with better economic conditions. In a study of the causes of idle time among New York State's organized workers, labor disputes accounted for 2.8% of lost time in the depression year 1908 and "lack of work" 88.8% but with the arrival of better economic conditions by 1910, labor disputes accounted for 28% of lost time and "lack of work" 62.3%. Because all workers took part in strikes, the New York statistics are also representative of laborers.21

The Commissioner of Labor study included manual workers of different skill levels, all of whom were married, and 99% of whom were male. Because firms almost always laid off those with the least skill first, it is safe to assume that inability to obtain work was an even more prominent cause of unemployment among the heads of laborers' families than for manual workers in general. In addition, of 976 female laborer positions investigated in New York City in 1909 half ended their
Laborers who were married, women, and immigrants seldom voluntarily quit their jobs. With families to feed, clothe and shelter, and frequent bouts of unemployment already reducing their meager wages to often subsistence levels or below, married workers seldom voluntarily left their jobs. The lumber industry offers a convenient comparison of job persistence between married laborers who were primarily employed in milling and single laborers who were primarily employed in logging. Throughout the lumber industry employers agreed that loggers represented a much more unstable workforce than millers. H.G. Miller, a Kalispell, Montana lumberman who had been in business for 25 years stated in 1914, "The mills employ men who are largely family men. Those men get the preference, and from year to year we have a large number of men that we can always depend on and they depend on us. The contrary rule is in effect in the woods. Those men are very largely drifting men." Women were just as reluctant to quit a job. Because of the limited opportunity for employment among women, except during WWI, they could not afford to risk leaving whatever jobs they could acquire. The 1909 investigation of 1,000 women laborers in New York City
concluded that only 10 percent left on their own initiative.23

Immigrants seldom quit not only because of limited opportunity, but also because the majority of them, especially after 1890, journeyed to America simply to work for a limited period of time and then return home. For example, the average Italian laborer stayed in the United States only 2-5 years. By viewing their miserable work conditions as a means to a better life in their homeland and not as an end in itself, immigrants could endure their working conditions better than American born single male laborers who were of a "roving disposition." Throughout American industry employers concurred that immigrants were "easier to handle...steadier workmen."24

In contrast with laborers who were the heads of families, women, and immigrants; American born single males frequently voluntarily quit their jobs. Indeed laborers in general quit more often than any other segment of the workforce, and among laborers, American born single males did most of the quitting. Laborers constituted the highly unstable, shifting portion of America's work force. While the labor turnover among skilled tradesmen rarely exceeded 50% and usually remained below 30%, the labor turnover among common laborers rarely dropped below 100% and usually hovered
much higher. In 1913 skilled workers in a Milwaukee gasoline engine factory had a labor turnover of only 27.7% while common laborers in the same factory had a labor turnover of 195.5%. Laborers generally and American born single males specifically, constituted the majority of America's shifting labor supply. A study of 53 establishments with a combined workforce of 69,553 workers, from June 1917 to June 1918 concluded that long-term employees, defined as workers on the pay roll over a year, accounted for 62% of the work force. Shifting employees constituted the remaining 38% of the work force. The 26,430 positions filled by this 38% required 93,206 accessions and 96,207 separations over the course of a single year. Among this highly unstable portion of the work force, the rate of labor changes were three times that of the more stable. Surprisingly, this relatively small percentage of the work force, composed mostly of American born single male laborers, was primarily responsible for the astonishingly high labor turnover rates prevailing throughout most of American industry.25

Economist Don Lescohier found that a labor turnover of 500 to 1000% existed in lumber camps and on railroad and construction work. A 1914 study of twenty metal plants in the midwest revealed a labor turnover of 127%.
In the steel industry the U.S. Commission on Industrial relations discovered that

besides the fluctuations due to industrial conditions, there is also much unsteady employment due to the fact that many of the men do not retain any one position for a very long period, but go from plant to plant and take whatever work they can secure wherever it is offered....

A study of 500 establishments between the years 1910-15 concluded that to maintain 211,786 workers it required an average of 504,532 labor changes each year. This same study also concluded that "enormous as is the extent of labor instability...it is fair to assume...that the actual situation is even worse." Lescohier believed he could safely assert that the "average turnover in American industry is over 100 per cent." Most scholars of this period believed that on average a 25% labor turnover sufficed for labor replacement.26

Increases in labor turnover were directly proportional to better economic conditions. Just as general strikes mushroomed in good times, so did what Carlton Parker called the "strike in detail." Economists Paul Brissenden and Emil Frankel concluded that in 1912 there occurred 49,806 voluntary separations, with better economic conditions this figure rose to 141,035 by 1913 and then dropped to
46,660 with the depression of 1914. Lumberman H.G. Miller stated in 1914, "Well, in times of high wages the men drift from one camp to another. They seem to want to go, and the custom has been to have about three crews, one coming and one going and one at work." He believed labor turnover in logging dropped to as low as 200% in a "normal" year and escalated to over 1000% in a tight labor market. In 1918, a year with a census unemployment rate at its second lowest ever, a smelter foreman for Montana's Anaconda Copper Mining Company stated: "In every department conditions are bad. The men are changing all the time. Cannot keep them. If forced to do the work they should quit in the middle shift sometimes.... This morning we called on the surface department for 6 men. Sent two to the zinc roasters and they refused to work. Sent four to the McDougals and only one stayed." Some employers responded to rampant labor turnover by holding a portion of wages back for a period of time in order to maintain their work force. In 1906 managers for the Great Northern Railway Company chose to retain the summer bonus of 10 cents out of every 1.35 to 1.45 earned per hour by laborers "on account of the scarcity of labor...." Labor turnover also varied with the time of year. As weather conditions improved and traveling between jobs became easier, workers moved about at much
higher rates. The vast majority of labor turnover throughout the year, especially in the North, occurred between March and August.27

In hard times voluntary quitting gave way to increased layoffs and dismissals. In 1914 layoffs accounted for 31 percent of separations, in 1913 only 7%. Most of this increase resulted from the need for firms to reduce their work force as production fell. Some of this increase, however, probably also resulted from the increased security employers enjoyed in a glutted labor market.

It is important to emphasize that for the single American born male laborers, who did most of the quitting, the number of separations due to involuntary unemployment in the form of lay offs and dismissals during periods of high unemployment was far below the number of separations do to voluntary unemployment in the form of quitting in a tight labor market. While the total number of labor changes in the firms studied by Brissenden and Frankel were 1,076,864 in 1913, from 1913-14 this figure dropped over 50% to 470,715. In contrast with laborers who were married, women, and immigrants, this resulted in a lower degree of geographic mobility among American born single male laborers during periods of high unemployment than with
low unemployment, a phenomenon with important implications for the 1920s.28

In the search for employment single white American born laborers enjoyed a larger range of movement than married, women, and immigrant laborers. Free from prejudice, possessing the social skills (speaking English) necessary for life on the road, lacking familial responsibility, single American born laborers moved throughout the country. Eric Monkkonen has suggested the lack of union journals among laborers quelled their numbers moving at the regional and especially the national level. Laborers simply lacked the information necessary for regional and national travel. While this appears correct it is important to remember that while American born single males traveled primarily only short distances, many of them did so on a regional, national and international level. If a laborer in New York wanted to reach San Francisco he might begin by first pushing a wheel barrel in a Pittsburgh factory, then work on a railroad grade crew near Chicago where he would probably quit in the fall to harvest wheat in the midwest, work his way to Denver and chop cord wood, then on to Ogden, Utah to load freight trains and then, maybe years later, finally reach San Francisco. By traveling in short bursts, laborers managed to reach regional and national
destinations using only local information networks—saloons, lodging and boarding houses, pool rooms, coffee clubs, grocery stores, public parks and street corners. In comparison, a number of differing factors served to reduce the range of movement among laborers who were married, women, and immigrants, to below that of single white American born males.  

The range of movement among married laborers rarely extended beyond destinations within a day's movement by city transportation or walking. Accounts of fathers waking early every morning then returning home late at night when unemployed abound. By employing this routine the married laborer could avoid sleeping in the streets or in police stations and municipal lodging houses. In addition, their absence during the day also made them less of a burden on the family budget. "In the morning father was gone on his daily hunt for work before we were up. He no longer came home at noon now, for when he was away he did not have to eat...." Laborers made the painful decision to leave the family behind for an extended period only as the very last resort. In addition, during periods of unemployment married workers could fall back on the earnings of other family members. During hard times the entire family mobilized to supplement the lost income of the primary wage earner. The U.S. Bureau of Labor discovered that while
many working-class daughters worked, most mothers worked only during hard times. In addition, the range of movement among women laborers rarely extended beyond the town or city in which they resided. It was simply neither proper nor safe for women laborers to travel extensively on their own. Moreover, women could not afford extensive travel as easily as men. On the one hand women received substantially smaller wages than men. In 1916 the U.S. Bureau of Labor concluded "In practically every industry studied the men's wages ranged higher than the women's, and the proportion of earning fair or good wages was much larger among men than among women." On the other hand, because society considered it improper for a women to take advantage of the network of cheap lodging houses, saloons, police stations, jungles and municipal lodging houses available to men, it cost more for women to travel than men. Consequently, the majority of women laborers limited their destinations to within a day's travel, by walking or on city transportation, of their residences. Recent women immigrants from Europe or Asia were often further restricted to movement only within their enclave. One contemporary wrote: "As an unskilled worker, a 'greeny,' the girl is compelled to find work in her own neighborhood, among her own people...."
Certain immigrant women, most notable Italians, who traveled with their children during the summer on a regional level picking fruits and vegetables, represented an important exception to the inter-city movement of most women. Beginning shortly after the turn of the century, the summer exodus of Philadelphia's Italians into New Jersey rural districts almost depopulated certain public and parochial schools in Philadelphia.32

Lack of communication skills and prejudice rank as important factors in circumscribing the range of movement among immigrants in general. Communication skills were crucial to life on the road. Immigrants were acutely aware of the anti-immigration sentiment felt by natives, especially native workers. In 1913 Joe Schweiner, a recent immigrant from Germany, remarked that "the native American workingmen do not like me because I am a foreigner." For many, especially South Europeans and Asians, to leave the security and familiarity of their ethnic group meant a frightening experience. Native workers frequently complained immigrants stole the jobs of "liberty loving American Citizens...." In crude but accurate terms a writer in 1893 summarized the native workers view of immigrants stating: "The more dagoes on the job the poorer the pay day...." When immigrants like Joe Schweiner moved, they
traveled from one familiar ethnic group to another, or from an ethnic group directly to a job, in the latter case usually in a group, with as little wandering in between as possible. Mr. Schweiner journeyed to Bridgebury, Connecticut because "a German fellow said that there were many Germans...." Even most recent immigrants journeyed directly to a friend or relative after their arrival in the United States. In 1907 and 1908 over ninety-eight per cent of immigrants arriving in the United States carried an address of a person to whom they were traveling. In addition, 79% of immigrants arriving in 1908 possessed a rail ticket from their port of entry.33

Of course the range of movement among immigrants varied from one immigrant group to another depending on their communication skills and the level of prejudice they endured. Possessing better communication skills a newly arrived British or Canadian immigrant obviously would have enjoyed a larger range of movement than a newly arrived Italian or Greek immigrant. Generally subjected to less prejudice than other immigrant groups such as Asians or South Europeans, Mexican laborers, for example, enjoyed a range of movement almost equal to American born laborers. Commenting on Mexican laborers one editor wrote "they were born in this country, or pretty nearly in this country, and have more right to be
here than these Japanese and Italians and Greeks." Mexican laborers could travel more easily with American born laborers than certain other immigrant laborers, allowing them to take advantage of the wider network of saloons, cheap lodging houses, and jungles available to their American born counterparts. In fact, contemporaries believed both groups possessed a roving disposition. While comparing the reliability of workers, an employment agent in Colorado commented in 1908 that "roving Mexicans are better than roving white men."  

The lack of organization among laborers often produced geographic moves characterized by ignorance about the employment conditions of the proposed destination. Private employment agencies, charitable organizations aiding in employment such as the YMCA, immigrant aid societies, the growing number of free public employment agencies placing primarily domestic help, saloon keepers, and priests lacked sufficient cooperation and organization to provide truly effective and reliable job information. With the exception of the brief stint of the United States Employment Service during WWI, "America had no system of labor placement.... Chaos ruled where order alone could furnish the needed service." Organized itinerant workers such as carpenters, printers, and workers in the
metal trades at least had access to union journals describing job conditions in other areas. These periodicals offered largely gloomy forecasts of job conditions; a reflection of the skilled worker's eagerness to repel additional workers from his area. These journals provided an important alternative to the deluge of promotional material itinerant laborers often relied on when neither family nor friends resided in their proposed destinations. A young and naive laborer, fresh from the farm, might have believed advertisements such as the one placed by St. Paul, Minnesota's Bowman Development Co., Ltd., which announced "$500.00 for an Investment of 10 cents," marking St. Paul as a region of great economic opportunity. Exaggerated ads and boosting of cities, however, were not reserved to the booming cities of the West. Peter Speek wrote in 1914 that the "boosting advertisement of cities and states is done all over the country. This attracts job-seekers and causes congestion of the unemployed in the boosted cities." In 1912 the businessmen of Detroit formed the Employer's Association of Detroit in order to increase the flow of laborers into the Detroit area. The association established a joint fund for joint advertising on a national scale. The association placed advertisements in 191 cities across the country
announcing "the availability of work and urging workers to join in the city's growth."\textsuperscript{35}

Highly publicized events calling for large numbers of workers exerted a powerful pull on laborers. Advertisements for workers for the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904 exerted such a strong pull on laborers that a writer as far away as Montana remarked: "Nearly all of the tramps are trying to make their way to St. Louis, although there is always a few that are bound westward."

In a conscious effort to increase the flow of labor to its plants, Ford nationally publicized a profit sharing plan called The Five Dollar Day in January of 1914. Contemporary observers estimated 10,000 eager laborers gathered outside the company's gates the very next morning. Charles Crane Knaack, a single 23 year old American from Chicago was one of the laborers lured to Detroit in mid-winter. He "heard and read in the newspapers of Mr. Ford's plan of profit-sharing and was very anxious to wield a broom for $5.00 a day. He has been hanging around the plant since his arrival here [Detroit] without any results." Laborer U.B. Martin, a 25 year old American Jew, "jumped" a freight to Pittsburgh and from there traveled to Westinghouse El. Co. because other laborers told him he could find plenty of work there. Mr. Martin estimated that the same train contained about 20 to 30 other jumpers. Freezing
temperatures and gusting winds greeted him on his arrival. After an exhausting six week trek for employment he experienced both a physical and mental breakdown—"everything was so hopeless and gloomy!"

Finally a Jewish laborer directed him to a free state hospital...." The Industrial Relations Commission concluded in 1914 that many laborers "move from place to place on rumors that have no basis...." Most laborers simply followed the crowd composed of other itinerant laborers, hoping that sooner or later they might secure employment.36

A number of groups attempted to organize itinerant laborers, most notably the Industrial Workers of the World, the International Brotherhood Welfare Association of Unemployed, Migratory and Casual Workers and the Itinerant Workers' Union or Hoboes of America, Inc.. Even the most successful of these unions, however, succeeded in attracting only a tiny fraction of these laborers. As Melvyn Dubofsky said of the IWW: "The organization admittedly failed to show much for its efforts in terms of membership roles...." Indeed, why these unions failed is as relevant to the study of laborers as why they experienced what little success they did. While at present there exists insufficient research to discern the precise reasons behind the IWW's
failure, the following statements made by actual itinerant laborers in 1913 are suggestive.37

Thomas Lee, a 58 year old American would appear an ideal candidate for the IWW. As a youth he wanted to earn and save enough money to buy a farm and raise horses, but always failed because he spent his saved money during periods of unemployment. After years of struggle, hopes, and disappointments, he gave up the idea of becoming a farmer. After the loss of his lifelong dream he did not care to save money; when he received it he "blew it in." For over 40 years Mr. Lee endured the general public's scorn when not working, vermin infested bunks, rancid food, obnoxious foremen and dangerous working conditions. Why then did he not join the IWW? He simply "did not know about labor organizations—thinks they are necessary and good for those that belong to them. He has never had a chance to join one."38

Patrick Flynn, a 40 year old married American born woodsman and sailor from Milwaukee stated that "he does not know anything about the IWW." George Madis, a 31 year old Russian who had lived in America 5 years, stated "he does not know very much about the IWW, but so far as his knowledge goes, he believes that it is a worse organization than the AM. F. of Labor, because any destruction of property is against culture and
progress." Tom Hennessey, an American born 35 year old man who worked as a sailor in New England "favors labor unions; they secure higher wages and better labor conditions," but "he does not know anything about the IWW." Charles Crane Knaack, a 23 year old American from Chicago stated: "He has no knowledge of labor organizations or other social problems--'everybody ought to look for himself.'"39

It appears that the majority of highly itinerant single males did finally settle down after a number of years. Indeed Howard M. Gitelman suggested this when he speculated that the "men who came into Waltham, [Massachusetts] were very much like those who left." Some found their niche and settled down while others continued moving until they too found a place where they could settle. In his detailed survey of over 100 typical itinerant laborers conducted between 1913-14, sociologist Peter Speek concluded 82% had been on the road less than fifteen years. In addition, all of the qualitative and quantitative sources indicate that the majority of these laborers were in their twenties and thirties.40

Nevertheless, one must remember that roughly one-quarter of these men did not settle down and that this figure as well as the evidence on age does not include those who died at work, on the road, or committed
suicide. This group of workers did in fact constitute Thernstrom's "permanent floating proletariat." Some of these workers preferred their itinerant lifestyle but others, they kept quitting to "better conditions. But conditions never got much better." For the latter the barriers blocking an exit from an itinerant lifestyle proved too much. Fred Kiener stated: "He does not see any way out of the position of casual laborer." Some may have endeavored to escape their condition by learning a trade, but like Morris Pokrass could not afford to pay a fee of from fifteen to twenty-five dollars for a two week training period. Indeed many itinerant laborers believed "craft unionism...the greatest stumbling block in the path of the laborer who wishes to improve his or her condition." Others like 58 year old Tom Lee who, after repeated failures of trying to save money in order to settle down, lost all hope of a more permanent lifestyle and simply resigned himself to life on the road. Peter Speek wrote of Sam Gray, the 35 year old ship yard painter who quit his trade for fear of contracting "painter's colic:" "He has no hopes for the immediate future. He has done everything to get out of the position of casual laborer in America, but has always failed. This is the reason he has lost all hopes and even his belief in God."41
Voluntary quitting as a cause of unemployment waned during the 1920s substantially reducing the degree of movement among American born single male laborers. For example, in manufacturing the average monthly rate of quits per 100 employees of 7.4 between the years 1910-1918 dropped to 3.7 between the years 1920-29. Effective workmen's compensation laws in every state but 6 in the South by 1920, the development in a highly visible minority of firms (employing roughly 20% of the work force) of pensions, lay off compensation, stock options, home financing and other benefits to induce laborers not to leave, the aging of the work force, and most important, consistently high levels of unemployment, were all instrumental in reducing voluntary unemployment among these laborers.42

The rapid expansion of personnel departments during the first half of the 1930s resulting in the widespread use of benefits to induce workers not to quit, and an increased emphasis on seniority in promotion, lay off, and rehiring decisions, made the low levels of quitting spawned during the chronic unemployment of the 1920s permanent.

While the decline in voluntary unemployment reduced the geographic mobility of American born single male laborers, other laborers who were married, women, and immigrants continued to move about in search of work
during the 1920s with little change from previous decades. Only with the unemployment reforms during the second half of the 1930s did the degree of movement among American born married male laborers begin to decline. Women and immigrant laborers would have to wait until the 1960s before they too could reap fully the unemployment benefits sown in the aftermath of the Great Depression. 43
Notes


2. The 1870s increase and 1920s decrease in "tramps" can be viewed using police lodging data, see Eric Monkkonen, ed., Walking to Work: Tramps in America, 1790-1935 (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1984): 8. That the vast majority of "tramps" in this period were in fact laborers see Ibid., 5, 213-14; Frank V. Whiting, "Trespassers Killed on Railways, Who are They?" The Railway Library 1912 (Chicago: Stromberg, Allen & Co., 1913): 211. The metropolitan corridor quote is from John R. Stilgoe, Metropolitan Corridor: Railroads and the American Scene (New Haven: Yale UP, 1983). On the two railroad attorneys see Butte Bystander 21 April 1894, 2.


10. On the migration of the lumber industry see U.S. Historical Statistics, Part 1, 542. The lake states include MI, MN, and WI; the South AL, AR, FL, GA, IA, MS, OK, and TX; the Pacific Coast AK, CA, HI, NV, OR, and WA. According to these statistics the surpassing of the South by the Pacific Northwest occurred in 1926, which is much later than we are often led to believe. In William G. Robbins, Lumberjacks and Legislators: Political Economy of the United States Lumber Industry, 1890-1941 (Texas A & M UP, 1982), 3, the author subtly deemphasizes the movement of the America logging industry to the South stating "The movement of the logging frontier west (and south) is the most striking historical aspect of the lumber industry...." His periodization is vague as well. "When the timber resource was exhausted in one region, there were bigger and taller trees just beyond the ring of the woodsman's ax—in the Great Lakes area beginning in the 1840s and the 1850s, in the great pine forests of the southland in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and then on to the last great stand, the Douglas fir forests of the North Pacific slope, in the early twentieth century." The U.S. Historical Statistics illustrate that the South actually continued to be very close to the west coast in terms of production until 1943. In addition, one wonders if 1926 qualifies as a part of the "early twentieth century."


17. The Thomas Lee quote is from U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations, 1912-15, Unpublished Records, 6:0253 quoted in Bruns, Knights of the Road, 141; the Peter A. Speek information Ibid., 6:0148. The block quote is from Odencrantz, "The Irregularity of Employment of Women Factory Workers," 198-99.


20. On possible causes of loss of work see U.S. Commissioner of Labor, Eighteenth Annual Report, 1903: 45, 296-99, quoted in U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations, 1912-15, Unpublished Records, 13:0732,0733, see also 0737; Peter A. Speek, "The Psychology of


22. On loss of work time as the primary cause of unemployment for women in N.Y.C. see Odencrantz, "Irregularity of Employment of Women Factory Workers," 201.


25. On labor turnover varying with the skill level of a worker see Sumner H. Slichter, *The Turnover of Factory Labor* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1919), 57-58. The total number of labor changes is equal to the total number of accessions (new hires) plus the total number of separations (quits, lay offs, discharges). Brissenden and Frankel, "The Industrial Mobility of Labor," 597-98.


28. The lay off and discharge statistics are from Brissenden and Frankel, "The Industrial Mobility of Labor," 587-88. On total labor changes dropping in hard times see Ibid., 584.


33. On the need for communication while unemployed see Montgomery, Fall of the House of Labor, 87; Golden, Urbanization and Cities, 226. The Joe Schweiner information is from U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations, 1912-15, Unpublished Records, 6:0204 and 0207. Both of these quotes are from Butte Bystander (25 March 1893): 2. On Dillingham concluding 98% of immigrants in 1907-08 carried an address, and 79% of immigrants arriving in 1908 had rail tickets see "Our Responsibility for Immigrants After Landing," Survey 24 (9 April 1910): 75-76. See also U.S. Immigration Commission, Abstracts of Reports, vol. I, 40.


38. U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations, 1912-15, Unpublished Reports, 6:0253, quoted in Bruns, Knights of the Road, 143.

39. The Patick Flynn information is from U.S. Commission of Industrial Relations, 1912-15, Unpublished Reports, 6:0221; the George Madis information Ibid., 6:0215; the Tom Hennessey information Ibid., 6:0192; the Charles Crane Knaack information Ibid., 6:0168.

these laborers see Ibid., 214-15. The Peter Speek survey is quoted in Bruns, Knights of the Road, 143.


CHAPTER THREE

"OH, IT'S A DOG'S LIFE:" LIFE IN AMERICA'S WORK CAMPS DURING THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Hoboes spent much of their lives laboring and living in work camps. Characterized by temporary employment, isolation, and often wretched living and working conditions, America's work camps demanded itinerant labor. Like the hoboes who toiled in them, these temporary urban communities appeared and disappeared as the economy dictated. Labor camps ideally suited the needs of industrial expansion into America's vast wilderness. Indeed they symbolized a characteristic part of the American experience—the rapid industrialization of virgin land. Work camps provided a vehicle through which American's, living in a sparsely populated country, could build their capitalistic infrastructure. From bridges and dams to railroads, highways and harbors; in short, wherever a need arose for short term labor a work camp appeared beckoning itinerant laborers from near and far.

This chapter will attempt to reveal the rich texture of camp life during the early years of the twentieth century. The reader will find most scholarship on work camps scattered throughout numerous single industry histories. Laborers in agricultural work camps have received the bulk of professional scholarship. From
Carie McWilliams Factories in the Fields to Cletus E. Daniel's Bitter Harvest, the plight of agricultural workers in America has received a great deal of attention. Unfortunately, scholars virtually ignored other industries that relied on work camps. Among this group of industries, work camps in the logging and railway construction industries received the most attention. Much of this writing, however, is either romantic or it treats hobo in logging and railway construction work camps as a subject of only tangential interest. Life in other work camps remains almost completely unknown. Moreover, there exists very little professional work focusing on work camps that crosses industrial lines.¹

For too long the train of professional scholarship has steamed past work camps. Our present perception of life in work camps is as incomplete as that of a train passenger in the early twentieth century. We peer out our historical window and only an occasional glimpse of camp life reaches us as the scholarly train hurries to a different destination. This study will make work camps its sole destination; it will focus on the life of itinerant laborers in America's work camps during the early twentieth century. It will concentrate on the life of laborers in the four largest industries relying on work camps during this period; agriculture, railroad
construction, logging, and highway construction. In the process it will reveal variations in work camp life arising from differences in industry, ethnicity, gender, region, and degree of isolation. This essay will not be the all encompassing study that life in work camps deserves, but it will begin an historical dialogue on this important aspect of America's industrial development.

No data exists for this period on the precise number of work camps or of the number of laborers in work camps. Some fragmentary data compiled by several state institutions and the 1912-15 United States Commission on Industrial Relations, however, is suggestive. Prompted by the California Wheatland hop field riots on 3 August 1913, a number of state's began inspection of their work camp conditions in the same year. In 1913 the New York State Bureau of Industries and Immigration conducted an extensive investigation of their state's work camps. They roughly estimated that at this time New York State contained over one thousand labor camps employing over one hundred thousand laborers. In the same year Wisconsin's Industrial Commission estimated that their work camps employed fifty thousand laborers. In 1914 the Industrial Relations Commission estimated that Montana contained 500 work camps. In addition,
California studied some 876 camps in 1914 and concluded that these camps, representing but a part of the state's total, employed 60,813 laborers. Drawing on this information as well as Census Bureau data, interviews with local leaders, and field impressions, the United States Commission on Industrial Relations roughly estimated that in 1914 the various work camps throughout the country employed no fewer than one million laborers.²

Each of these itinerant laborers found employment in work camps through a variety of means. The job seeker's method varied with the laborer's ethnicity, regional location, and chosen industry. Most commonly, itinerant laborers secured work through employment agencies. These agencies provided cheap labor in large quantities when and where the employer demanded. Consequently, to the logging foreman, railway agent, building contractor or government official the employment agency was indispensable.

Itinerant laborers, however, often viewed the employment agency as a mixed blessing. On the one hand it did provide job information and usually job placement complete with transportation. Laborers, who changed jobs every few months and owned little more than the clothes on their backs, desperately needed these services. In 1914 the U.S. Commission on Industrial
Relations discovered that 75 per cent of laborers traveling to Kansas for the fall harvest possessed no means to pay for their rail fare. On the other hand, a minority of employment agencies exploited their patrons. As a result, the entire business gained a largely undeserved reputation for ill treatment. Consequently the phrase "slave market" described the employment agency district of a city in the parlance of laborers.³

Corrupt employment agencies engaged in every illegal activity possible to increase their profits. They charged excessive fees, split fees with the employer, and even sent men to places where no jobs existed. A typical complaint filed by a group of Greek laborers in 1910 stated that while in St. Louis an agent charged per person $7.75 in fees when it should have been only two dollars, $5.75 for free rail fare, and then an additional $11.75 at the depot in St. Louis before letting them board the train to St. Paul. Another group of laborers claimed their agents placed them on trains in New York City bound for the western part of New York State with passes that proved invalid. When they attempted to return home on the same passes officials arrested them.⁴

The majority of Employment agencies, however, were not corrupt. In 1911 Illinois undertook one of the very
best studies of employment offices during this period. It revealed that of the 372 employment agencies investigated, 92 had complaints against them, one had to have its license revoked, and 217 had no complaints against them. While corruption characterized more agencies than it should have, the fact still remains that most agencies were not the bastions of evil contemporaries believed.\textsuperscript{5}

Employment agencies varied in type and size and could be found in or near the "main stem" of nearly every city in America funneling itinerant laborers into work camps. Employment agencies in St. Paul and Minneapolis alone placed 61,000 laborers during 1908, the majority of which ended up in work camps. Contemporaries estimated that in Chicago two-thirds of the work offered by employment agencies consisted of "gang work."\textsuperscript{6}

Among the different types of agencies, laborers used private agencies most often. The size of private agencies varied extensively. Some private agencies placed thousands of laborers annually by operating on a national and even international scale. With offices in Saint Paul, Duluth, Bemidji, Sioux City, Grand Forks, Fargo, Memphis, Seattle, Portland, and Spokane, H.W. Osborn's Western Employment Company supplied the Great Northern Railroad with laborers in a manner typical of
large private agencies. Drawing on his network of agencies, Osborn could supply large numbers of laborers in a very short period of time. The following exemplifies the process this type of company employed after receiving a labor order: "565 men are required for the Butte Division for sections. Orders have been placed for 200 of these at Chicago and 200 at St. Louis, and it is expected that the balance can be picked up in St. Paul." In addition, private agencies operated in cheap hotels, grocery stores, the kitchens of tenement houses or the backs of saloons. These smaller agencies annually placed hundreds of laborers on regional and local levels.7

Other types of agencies frequented by laborers destined for work camps included immigrant aid societies, local charity organizations such as the YMCA, churches, and a growing number of free public employment agencies. Of this group of agencies, immigrant aid societies placed the largest numbers of laborers. Ethnicity, however, greatly limited the number of laborers using immigrant aid societies. The YMCA and churches, to many laborers loathing, usually required membership in exchange for the employment they provided, greatly limiting their patronage. Free public employment agencies, although they could be found in sixteen states by 1913, lacked sufficient funds,
management (often political appointments), and cooperation to provide effective job placement service. Consequently, itinerant laborers seldom used any of these types of agencies. Instead, most laborers found employment in work camps through private employment agencies.8

Among laborers, immigrants sought help from employment agents more often than American born laborers. Immigrants, naive of American business practices and social customs, and often aware of the antagonism American born laborers felt toward them, found the employment agent a useful if not indispensable tool in their search for employment. Of 61,000 laborers placed by employment agencies in St. Paul and Minneapolis during 1908, Serbians constituted the largest number at 23,000, Scandinavians ranked second at 22,000, followed by South Italians at 9,000, and American born laborers at 3,000. In 1914 Peter Speek discovered that American born work camp laborers for the Chicago Milwaukee Road, living and working outside of Great Falls, Montana, all applied for their jobs directly. Immigrants in the same camp used employment agencies out of St. Paul.9

Among the various work camp industries, itinerant laborers working in agriculture relied on employment agents the least. Agricultural enterprises,
communities, and even entire regions exercised every means available to insure an adequate supply of labor at harvest time. This in turn resulted in a deluge of advertisements organized and financed by commercial clubs and railroads calling for itinerant labor for the harvest. In a typical letter, dated 1912, the commercial club of Fargo, North Dakota informed the Great Northern Railway that the state needed an estimated 25,000 laborers for its harvest. The Great Northern responded with assurance they would give North Dakota's need for farm labor "all the publicity possible through news items in the papers." Not only did a great deal of knowledge about employment in agricultural work camps reach itinerant laborers, but railway companies also facilitated the transportation of laborers to harvest by winking at laborers "stealing" train rides. Whether riding under, in, or on top of trains, tramping across dirt roads, or occasionally picking up a ride in a wagon with a friendly passer-by, itinerant laborers journeyed by the thousands to harvest locations across the country.10

When the various agricultural industries demanded laborers for other less critical periods of their season, ample labor could be found in designated areas of the nearest urban center. A wagon trip by an employer to the nearest town, a help wanted posting in a
saloon, or an ad in the local paper could gather enough laborers for activities such as weeding, branding, pruning or plowing. For example, while they did place ads in papers within the state and used a very limited number of employment agents, California's largest canning company most often disseminated job information informally through word of mouth. Itinerant laborers, drawing on these information sources, discovered where to gather in order to meet with someone interested in securing their help. In addition, they could ascertain which agricultural work camps needed their help as well as the location of the various camps. Eastern Montana Rancher Erwin Miller reminisced, in regard to finding laborers shortly after the turn of the century, "you just picked them up, they were around somewheres, a lot of them came in from Minnesota and North Dakota, and they were good help." Mr. Miller never needed to advertise for laborers because "there were always plenty...when you would come to town you could always pick up men...." Of course every agricultural job an itinerant laborer took did not necessarily lead to employment in a work camp. Often agricultural laborers found themselves living in the same home with their employers. Usually itinerant laborers could expect to find themselves in agricultural work camps only when working for the very largest of enterprises.11
If a laborer could not read help wanted notifications or did not speak English, these information sources would lose most of their utility. Consequently, immigrants often relied on employment agents even for agricultural employment. From the Asian companies placing Japanese and Chinese in sugar beet or plum camps to padrones placing Italians in onion or apple camps, immigrants often depended on the assistance of fellow countrymen more Americanized than themselves in their search for employment. For example, each spring farmers from New Jersey rural districts arrived in Philadelphia and negotiated with padrones in order to secure labor. After reaching a per capita price settlement with the farmer, the padrone traveled from door to door in his ethnic enclave soliciting laborers. By advertising free shelter in the country with cheap fruits and vegetables to eat, he easily secured as many laborers as he needed. The padrone then contacted other more influential Italians connected with the railway and arranged to have his group transported to New Jersey.12

Apart from those in agricultural work camps, only laborers in logging work camps often secured work without the help of employment agencies. H.G. Miller, a logging employer in the northwestern United States who had been in business for over 25 years, remarked in 1914 that no systematic method for obtaining loggers existed.
In many areas loggers simply applied at work camps on their own initiative. According to Mr. Miller loggers "usually have a general knowledge of when logging is likely to begin and about that time you begin to see them show up." As this study will shortly reveal, loggers, more skilled, better paid, boarded, and housed than laborers engaged in construction or agriculture, tended to work in the logging industry much longer than their collaborators in other work camp industries. Seattle lumberman of 19 years Paul Page stated that 90 percent of his men had worked for him on and off for 18 to 19 years. This higher level of occupational persistence appears to have made loggers very familiar with the locations, time tables and employment processes of logging camps. This in turn made employment agents unnecessary for many loggers. Of course exceptions did exist. For example, loggers in the Grey Harbor area of Seattle obtained jobs in logging camps through a free employment agency maintained by a lumberman's association.13

In contrast to agricultural and logging work camps, laborers in railway and highway construction camps nearly always consulted an employment agent. For example, in its 1911 investigation, the Immigrant Labor Commission discovered that each railroad employed a labor agent to handle all of their non English speaking
laborers. The prevalence of employment agencies in construction occurred largely because, depending on the region, immigrants constituted from 50 to 95 per cent of the laborers a construction employer hired. American born laborers detested unskilled construction work, usually quitting as soon as they made a "grub stake." Employers in these industries constantly complained of the unreliable nature of American born laborers. As a result many construction employers preferred to hire the steadier working, more manageable immigrant over American born laborers. As a California highway construction employer observed in 1914, often the question of whether or not to hire immigrant or American born labor did not even present itself to an employer. American born laborers in California simply refused to work in construction camps.14

The fee a laborer destined for a work camp paid an employment agent varied with the labor supply, the amount of time a laborer would wait for a job opening, and the type of agency. The labor supply changed from season to season and from year to year, raising and lowering employment agency fees in the process. With the arrival of warmer weather each spring, orders for work camp laborers poured into agencies flooding them with labor demands in a matter of weeks. Under such conditions employment agents often sent out laborers
free of charge simply to fill orders and hold customers. After reaching another low during harvesting in the fall, fees again rose with the onslaught of winter. During the winter months jobs dwindled while fees skyrocketed. Fortunately, most laborers earned enough money during the summer months to carry them through a jobless winter. For those laborers who failed to acquire a winter stake, however, finding a job became an arduous and expensive process. Job finding under such circumstances entailed reading every newspaper ad each morning, wandering in and out of employment agencies that repeatedly stated "we don't want you," standing in humiliating soup lines, and often walking the streets at night instead of sleeping. Walter Wykoff knew first hand the difficulty of securing work during the winter. Writing from the room of a YMCA in Chicago on a Saturday evening in December 1891, Mr. Wycoff recorded:

and I am learning, by experience what it is to look for work and fail to find it; to renew the search under the spur of hunger and cold, and of the animal instinct of self-preservation until any employment, no matter how low in the scale of work, that would yield food and shelter, appears to you the very Kingdom of Heaven....

The intensity of seasonal fluctuations in fees also changed from year to year with annual fluctuations in labor demand. In 1913, a year when labor was scarce, fees rose far less during the winter and dropped far
lower during the spring than in 1914 a year when there existed an abundant supply of labor.\textsuperscript{15}

In addition to seasonal and annual fluctuations, fees depended on the amount of time a laborer was willing to wait for a job. Laborers commonly stated "the man able to pay the largest fee goes out first."\textsuperscript{16}

Fees also fluctuated with the type of agency. Most private agencies charged laborers for their services. In some cases, however, the employer paid the fee. As the name indicates, free public employment agencies, assisted by government subsidies, charged no fees. A laborer using churches and other charitable organizations to find employment usually incurred no monetary costs, but, as noted earlier, often either transformed his living habits or joined the organization in return for employment.\textsuperscript{17}

After securing employment in a work camp and possibly paying a fee to an employment agency, a laborer needing transportation would then be sent to the work camp by the agency, accompanied by a large group of laborers. The transportation usually cost the laborer nothing. In some instances, however, an employer demanded that in order to receive free shipment a laborer had to remain on the job for at least a week. Whether crammed into a poorly ventilated box car or stuffed in the back of a farmer's wagon, discomfort was
one constant any laborer traveling to a work camp could count on.\textsuperscript{18}

During their journey to work camps, most laborers found themselves among others of similar ethnicity. While ethnic mixing occurred in some instances, the work camp dominated by certain preferred ethnic groups or by a single ethnic group was far more common. After studying railway construction camps in 1910, the U.S. Immigration Commission concluded that these camps did not constitute miniature melting pots mirroring America at large, but that instead "each gang was a racial unit, living in separate cars and usually in a separate camp."

Ethnicity and as well as gender sharply divided work camp laborers. The different ethnic and gender groupings of laborers in work camps varied between and within industries.\textsuperscript{19}

In agriculture immigrant laborers of Asian, or South European origin worked primarily in intensive agricultural industries such as fruits and vegetables or canning. From Italians throughout New Jersey and New York to Asians and Mexicans on the West Coast, these types of immigrants dominated the fruit and vegetable industries wherever they resided in large numbers. American born laborers simply could not compete with foreigners who were willing to perform such arduous work for so little pay. In 1914 California's largest canner
stated that his canneries employed foreigners in areas where they resided in large numbers, American born where immigrants were scarce.\textsuperscript{20}

In addition, because of the symbiotic relationship between intensive agriculture and cities, a large supply of immigrants usually resided near fruit and vegetable farms. Because of their proximity to the crops, immigrants could easily rely on someone within their enclave of similar ethnicity and more Americanized than themselves in order to secure work in the outlying areas of their city.\textsuperscript{21}

In America's grain and livestock industries immigrants from cultures more similar to America's such as Canadian or British along with American born laborers, predominated. The U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations discovered in 1914 that American born laborers constituted 70 per cent of a sample of 12,000 harvest hands in the midwest. They concluded that farmers in this region "much prefer native help." This bias for Americanized laborers in the grain and livestock industries persisted throughout most of the country. In 1914 the leading hop grower on the Pacific Coast stated he hired mostly American born single male laborers or hoboers.\textsuperscript{22}

This ethnic division within American agriculture occurred for two reasons. On the one hand American
grain and livestock growers, usually more distant from
cities than intensive farmers, lacking any systematic
hiring method, and often prejudice and afraid of those
passionate and violent brown and yellow men, did not
want foreigners roaming about the countryside in search
of employment. On the other hand, foreigners,
iliterate, unable to speak English, and often aware of
American nativism, preferred not to journey from farm to
farm in search of work far from their ethnic enclaves.

The following examples illustrate these two factors.
On 16 June 1914 three Romanians, Steve Blaha, Tony
Arnescu and Jan Omroz paid an employment agent $17.89 a
piece and left Cleveland with 96 other men of Romanian,
Hungarian, and Slovak origin on the New York and St.
Louis railroad bound for harvest work in Topeka, Kansas.
Once in Topeka, they found no work. They remained at
the Topeka train station for two nights and one day but
found no employment. Work existed in other parts of the
state, but because these men spoke no English, they
could not adapt themselves to the state's constantly
changing agricultural labor market. Their options and
resources depleted, these men walked back to Cleveland,
nearly dying of fatigue and hunger in the process.
Often tragic consequences befell immigrant laborers who
tramped across the country without the assistance of
more Americanized laborers. A group of 53 Hungarian
laborers, failing to secure railway work promised them in northern Arkansas, scattered and attempted to work their way back to Chicago. While en route to Chicago on foot, police shot two of them in St. Louis.23

Gender also divided laborers in agricultural work camps. While certain immigrant women, most notably Italians, traveled on a regional level with their families picking fruits and vegetables, women generally did not engage in this type of activity. Only in the canning work camps did women predominate. The percentages of women in California's canneries offer a typical example. In 1914 men constituted only 10-15 percent of laborers in California's canneries. This same pattern repeated itself across the country. Women from New York to Wisconsin to California journeyed, often with their children, to nearby canneries each harvest in order to earn extra money.24

In contrast to most agricultural work camps, women in railway, highway, and lumber work camps comprised only a tiny minority of laborers. Work camps employed women as cooks, but seldom as anything else. It would have been scandalous for a woman at this time to work at such bestial jobs with such uncouth men so far from civilization. Moreover, the average woman of this period simply lacked the physical ability needed for
carrying rails and ties or swinging axes and mauls or
picking and shoveling all day long.\textsuperscript{25}

In addition to gender, ethnicity also divided
workers in railway and highway construction and logging
camps. Immigrants in general predominated in work camps
in the former, North Europeans, Russians, Canadians, and
American born laborers prevailed in the latter.

Immigrants prevailed in railway and highway
construction for the same reasons they predominated in
America's intensive agricultural industries; they were
simply more willing to perform these difficult jobs for
less money than American born laborers. The Commission
on Industrial relations concluded that railway and
highway construction employers elected to hire
immigrants because "they are less troublesome, stay
longer on the job and work harder. They want to earn
money and save it, white natives are only after a
stake...."\textsuperscript{26}

In the logging industry previous experience largely
determined the ethnicity of loggers. The job selection
habits of Mathias Matinz's father, an immigrant from a
mountainous region in Austria, were typical. As his son
reminisced, "Since our mountain people were handy with a
saw and ax, they usually looked for jobs in the logging
regions." After working in the logging industries of
Bavaria, Hungary, Romania, Bornia, and Galacia, Mr.
Matinz journeyed to America. Initially he worked on railway construction gangs, but soon "his old love for the saw and ax got the better of him." Comfortable and experienced at his old country profession, he began working in the woods. Logging, a skilled industry, required much more prior work experience than agricultural, railway or highway labor; experience which ethnic groups such as Mexicans, Asians, South Italians or Greeks were unlikely to possess. Consequently, North Europeans, Canadians, Russians and American born laborers held a virtual monopoly on the logging industry.27

Prejudice also decided in which camp a laborer worked. People during this period commonly believed the laborer's ethnicity determined his or her job performance. The type of prejudice was very subjective, varying from one employer to another but prevailing throughout work camps. Construction employers in Chicago preferred to hire Austrians "of large stature" and Bulgarians who were "quick to learn...." California employers preferred Italians for construction, Germans, Danes, American born, Irishmen and Englishmen for agriculture. Lumbermen in the Northwest believed Asians "physically unable to do the work required in the logging camps." Employers firmly believed in the validity of their prejudice. They based hiring
decisions on it and seldom made concessions. A New York City employment agent mistakenly sent Greek and Polish laborers to a lumber camp where employers desired only Russian and Polish laborers. The lumber camp foreman compelled the Greeks to return to New York City at a loss of approximately $7.00 each.28

Once in a work camp laborers, with the exception of loggers, performed tasks that involved little skill. Reminiscing about his first day as a railway laborer, a Macedonian immigrant later wrote this about railroad construction: "The whole thing struck me as too simple to be true.... There was not an engineer in sight, nor an American to lend credence to this thing...." Unskilled tasks characterized the work laborers performed in railway and highway construction and agricultural work camps. In 1914 the Industrial Relations Commission estimated that from 80 to 90 percent of laborers in work camps were unskilled. Other sources corroborate this estimate. California's largest canner employed a work force 90% unskilled; the West Coast's largest hop producer employed a work force 95% unskilled; the chief engineer of the Northwestern Pacific Railway estimated skilled labor constituted only 3 to 7 per cent of his work force. With the exception of the logging industry, all laborers, regardless of industry, region or ethnicity, performed simple tasks
while at work: lifting, pushing, hauling, carrying, picking, or pulling.29

Only in the logging industry did laborers perform skilled tasks. Typical logging activities such as felling trees, loading logs or floating logs required much more skill than the simple tasks characteristic of other types of work camps. While logging foremen utilized a minority of unskilled labor for building and maintaining logging roads, or even logging railroads, the majority of loggers worked at skilled jobs.30

The hours of labor in a work camp lasted, at the very least, from sunrise to sunset. If one adds to this the time laborers consumed traveling, either by foot or hand car, to and from work, then an average work day consisted of approximately eight to twelve hours, depending on the amount of daylight. Only laborers in agricultural work camps during harvest time could expect to toil in excess of twelve hours. Fighting spoilage and the elements, agricultural employers often pushed their laborers to work very long hours. For example, women in Washington's fish canneries worked 15 to 19 hours during the salmon harvest. Most agricultural laborers, however, did not mind the long hours. Since their work typically ended after several weeks and usually provided a much needed boost to often subsistence level family incomes.31
While engaged in their work, laborers weathered a barrage of environmentally caused hardships. In many regions loggers worked in sub-zero temperatures day after day that often caused rheumatism at an early age and severe frost bite. Laborers in agriculture and railway and highway construction camps often suffered from the opposite problem, extreme heat. From sweltering 90 degree days in the humid Northeast to afternoon highs in excess of 100 degrees across the Midwest's prairies and the Far West's flatlands, these laborers often succumbed to heat exhaustion and, less frequently, heat stroke. Train passengers during this period often wondered why railway laborers stood so dangerously close to the train as it sped by them. It never occurred to contemporaries that the passing train created a breeze in which laborers could find a measure of relief from the intolerable summer heat. Swarms of biting insects also contributed to the discomfort of summer laborers. Black flies, mosquitos, horse flies, ground bees and dozens of other types of antagonistic insects constantly harassed laborers working during the summer.

In addition to the hardships of nature, laborers at work also often endured hostile foreman. The seasonal instability of work camp industries perpetuated the drive system of personnel management in work camps into
the early twentieth century. In order to accomplish as much work as possible during the course of a few months or weeks, foremen often drove their laborers with verbal abuse and threats. Itinerant laborer U.B. Martin detested work on a railway grade near Green Bay complaining that "the boss was always hollering and using the worst profanity."³²

Neither extreme temperatures, insects, nor hostile foremen, however, ranked as the most pernicious threat to work camp laborers. The constant threat of accidents weighed far more heavily on the laborer's mind. Laborers frequently lost limbs in primitive agricultural machinery, drowned while floating timber, blew up while tunneling, or were crushed while loading logs and ties. In 1907 1 out of every 19 railway laborers could expect an injury and 1 out of 369 would die while at work. A perusal of the mortuary column of any local newspaper of the period vividly portrays the danger involved in working in these industries. The following newspaper quote offers a typical account:

Immediately after dinner time yesterday he [John Savoie] had gone to the woods as was his custom. A large log being raised to the trucks swerved when leaving the skids, rolling and falling to the ground, Savoie was caught beneath on the chest.

Historian Andrew Prouty aptly titled his book on accidents in the lumber industry More Deadly Than War.³³
The isolation of work camps made even a minor accident a dangerous affair. Often the closest medical physician resided from 20 to 60 miles away. Consequently blood loss from a relatively minor injury or the spread of a controllable infection could cause death by the time medical assistance arrived. Some larger construction camps operated with a medical tent. In most instances, however, an injured laborer could expect to wait hours if not days for professional help to arrive.34

Insurance against accidents varied between industries and regions. In the logging industry of the Middle and Far West a laborer typically paid from 50 cents to a dollar per month for accident insurance. This coverage paid for a logger's medical expenses but provided no compensation while he remained unemployed. Much to their distaste, every logger had to pay his hospital due each month if he wanted to work. The method of payment for insurance in these regions differed from one employer to another. Some employers handled the collection of fees and record-keeping themselves while in other instances laborers purchased tickets on a monthly basis direct from hospital representatives. The latter method often proved very ineffective. Too often a logger failed to procure a
hospital ticket during the month he became injured or his ticket expired just before his injury occurred.\textsuperscript{35}

Despite the shortcomings of logging accident insurance in the Middle and Far West, at least loggers in these regions enjoyed some sort of protection in the event of an accident. Loggers in the Northeast possessed no systematic accident insurance. In fact, with the exception of railway construction camps, accident insurance as well as on-the-job medical facilities were practically nonexistent in the work camps of the Northeast. To offset medical costs laborers in this region voluntarily created funds out of their wages to care for a fellow-worker seriously injured. Unfortunately during hard times or when an unusually large number of men suffered injuries, this type of coverage became useless. In contrast with the Northeast, highway construction companies throughout the rest of the country usually maintained medical tents in addition to some form of insurance.\textsuperscript{36}

Railway construction camps maintained the most nationally consistent form of accident insurance. Construction laborers on all railways paid monthly 50 cents if they earned over 50 dollars and 25 cents if they earned under 50 dollars. This covered the medical expenses of an injured railway laborer, but as with logging accident insurance in the Middle and Far West,
it did not provide compensation while unemployed due to injury. Accident insurance in agricultural work camps was also nationally consistent. The laborers in these camps across the country received no systematic form of insurance.37

The wages a work camp laborer could expect to earn varied extensively between industries, regions, ethnic, and gender groups. Loggers earned the highest wages of any work camp laborer. Depending on the economy, employer, and skill level, loggers made from $20.00 to $30.00 per month with board in the Middle West and from $25.00 to $45.00 per month with board in the Far West.38

Laborers in railway and highway construction and agricultural work camps generally received the lowest pay. While wages in these industries fluctuated with the economy, the work experience of the individual laborers, and from one employer to another, these laborers typically earned on average from $1.25 to $2.00 per day excluding board. Women and immigrants averaged 10 to 20 cents less than American born male laborers. During periods of high labor demand, wages increased substantially, especially in agricultural work camps. The wages of laborers in the work camps of the West Coast's largest hop producer offer a typical example. Most of this company's employees were American born laborers who earned $1.85 a day regular pay and $2.60 a
day during the harvest season. The minority of Asians that worked for this company earned $1.50 a day regular pay and $1.75 a day during the harvest season.39

Wage discrimination against immigrants in tandem with cost of living in turn caused regional variations in work camp wages throughout the various industries. The larger the percentage of immigrants and the lower the cost of living in the work camps of a region, the lower the wages of its work camp laborers. Consequently, the lowest wages could usually be found in the work camps of the Northeast, the highest wages in the camps of the Middle and Far West. The Industrial Relations Commission estimated that laborers in the Middle West earned 1 to 5 percent more than laborers in the North East and that laborers on the Pacific Coast earned from 10 to 20 percent more than laborers in the Middle West.40

Not only did laborers in regions characterized by work camps with a large percentage of immigrants earn smaller wages than those containing predominantly American born laborers, they also suffered more exploitation. The commissary store was one of the most exploitative features of railway and highway construction, lumber, and to a lessor extent, agricultural work camps in the Northeast. From these stores a laborer bought tobacco, work clothing, food
supplies, and beer. For northeastern laborers there existed no choice between purchasing employer owned or private store products. Laborers nearly always had to buy their goods from the camp's commissary store regardless of a camp's proximity to private stores. For example, Buffalo's city limits contained a number of commissary stores that work camp laborers were forced to patronize. Often employers in this region required laborers to purchase a certain amount of goods from their commissary store over the course of a specified period of time. For example, a laborer may have been asked to purchase $3.50 worth of goods every two weeks. The employer deducted this amount from his wages regardless of whether he purchased his quota of goods, or not. In most work camps, however, this practice did not occur. Instead laborers "understood" that they had to buy all of their supplies from the camp's commissary store. If they failed to obey this unwritten rule, they were immediately discharged under some pretext. These practices in themselves would not have been unreasonable except that generally speaking the goods in the commissary stores of this region were priced 20 to 30 per cent higher than in private stores. Moreover, commissary stores sold goods of inferior quality and often with misrepresented weights. In the Middle and Far West incidents of commissary store misconduct also
occurred, especially where immigrants prevailed in a camp. Nevertheless, as numerous government field investigators observed, commissary stores generally operated at a higher standard in the Middle and Far West than in the Northeast.41

Laborers in Northeastern work camps also lacked a systematic boarding system, making the commissary store their only source for food supplies. This occurred because laborers in the overwhelmingly immigrant dominated work camps of the Northeast preferred to prepare their own meals. Whether Russian, Italian, Austrian or Greek, immigrants from countries with cuisines that differed substantially from the American born laborer's diet consistently opted to cook their own meals rather than use a boarding company. For example, Italian laborers in work camps baked their own bread by having volunteers hollow out holes in an embankment and then fill them with burning embers until well heated. They then emptied the embers and placed the bread loaves inside, sealing the entrance with stones and mud. A typical daily routine of meals for an Italian laborer consisted of coffee and dry bread for breakfast, macaroni, soup, bread, and coffee for lunch, and macaroni and either rice and potatoes, tomatoes, or beans for dinner. Croatians, Polish, Slovak, and Russian laborers ate bread and coffee for breakfast,
meat, bread and coffee for lunch, and soup, bread, coffee, beer, and sauerkraut for dinner.\textsuperscript{42}

Despite their reliance on high priced commissary stores for food supplies, Northeastern laborers managed to pay less for their board than laborers in other sections of the country. They accomplished this by preparing their own meals. In addition, the Northeast's more extensive transportation network made work camps less isolated and therefore the wholesale cost of food supplies substantially cheaper than in other regions. Consequently, while laborers in the Northeast paid outrageous prices for food supplies in comparison to the prices of private stores located in this region, these high prices still totaled less than food prices in other sections of the country. On average laborers in the Northeast paid from $3.50 to $5.00 per week for board. Laborers in the Middle West paid from $4.00 to $5.25 per week, and laborers on the Pacific Coast paid from $4.50 to $7.00 per week.\textsuperscript{43}

In other sections of the country the employer, boarding company, immigrant gangs or employment agent usually provided the board. Italians working in Great Northern Railway construction camps offer a typical example. These laborers received their food supplies from their employment agent—H.W. Osborn's Western Employment Company. Osborn maintained a bakery in St.
Paul from which he supplied Italian laborers with "those supplies which the Italians must have." These foods included bread at a cost to the laborers of 10 cents a loaf and various pasta items. Many immigrant laborers in the West also used a gang system for their board. Under this system the gang's interpreter took charge of a common living fund from which staple food products such as bread, meat, potatoes, and macaroni were purchased. Laborers obtained other "luxury" foods such as butter, eggs, and canned fruit on an individual basis.44

Among these different types of boarding systems in the Middle and Far West, employer operated boarding generally ranked far above any of the others in terms of quality. Most employers believed good food essential to labor productivity and did not attempt to profit monetarily from their board by sacrificing the quality of their food.

In contrast to food supplied directly by employers, board provided by outsiders was often so poor it resulted in food poisoning or "camp disorders" among laborers. The net profit of these boarding systems ranged from 3 to 5 cents per meal depending on the number of laborers and the quality of food. The larger the number of men consuming food, the larger a boarding system's per meal profit. In work camps where only a
small number of men needed board the company actually lost money. In order to increase their per meal profit, boarding companies frequently sacrificed the quality of their food. Often laborers relying on these types of boarding systems ate liver hash nicknamed "chinese stake" instead of meat, rotten potatoes, and instead of coffee a concoction of chicory laborers called "bitter water." Consequently, laborers commonly labeled boarding companies "stomach robbers." Fogg Brothers Commissary Company, one such stomach robber, operated on the Great Northern Railway. While employed in one of the railway construction camps to which Fogg Brothers catered, laborer U.B. Martin witnessed the death of another laborer after eating his first supper. Mr. Martin liked his boss but found the board "simply poison." Twenty days later Mr. Martin and a number of other laborers also became ill and began vomiting and experiencing painful stomach cramps. Upon completion of a medical examination a physician discovered that Mr. Martin had consumed poisoned food.45

The type of shelter a work camp laborer ate his meals and slept in differed extensively between industries. In agricultural work camps a laborer often lived either in a very crude shack or simply outdoors. During the warmer months or in regions with mild climates, agricultural employers customarily told their
laborers on the first night: "Sleep everywhere and everyway, as you can and please; I have ground enough for all of you!" The 2,800 laborers working for the Durst Ranch, California's largest single employer of agricultural labor, slept on a barren hillside in tents that could be rented for 75 cents, rude shelters of poles and gunny sacks called "bull pens," and out in the open on piles of vines or straw. These crude facilities, however, characterized agricultural work camps only during periods of high labor demand such as harvest. During the rest of the year most laborers either slept in tents or bunk houses.46

Laborers in canneries, 90 percent of whom were women, always had some form of shelter provided for them. Cannery women lived in tents, especially on the West Coast, and in old abandoned farm buildings, or in company built sheds. Because the term of employment in a cannery lasted only a number of weeks during the summer, these structures usually contained minimal home comforts. Cannery women usually slept on straw and could almost always count on overcrowded conditions, especially if the harvest were larger than usual. After studying a cannery in New York State one state field observer wrote "Company owns two buildings in which Italians live packed in like sardines." Another observer recorded, in regard to a New York State cannery
camp containing Italian families, "Large room, concrete construction, three small windows, six women, seven children, one married man, one stove, six beds, two females nursing babies.... One room upstairs two windows...three beds, one cot; five women, five children, one man."47

In railway construction camps laborers lived in bunk cars. Indeed wheels and rails provided the foundation for all the rail camp's buildings, attesting to the extreme geographic mobility of railway laborers. Railway Companies outfitted the insides of box cars with eight to ten bunks to create sleeping cars. In these cars the bunks were either located at each end with a table placed in the middle or they were stacked two or three high with no tables. Each camp maintained a mess car that simply contained a long wooden table, benches, and lockers on the walls to store tableware. Next to the mess car could always be found the kitchen car. This car contained a bed for the cook (usually about 1 for every 30 laborers), a range, tables, an ice chest, and lockers for food storage. As long as the construction work remained within 3 to 4 miles of the camp site, the work camp did not move. Laborers used hand cars to travel back and forth between the camp and work site. Once the distance to the work site exceeded 4 miles, the foreman summoned a switch engine that moved
the entire camp to its next location. This movement did not inconvenience laborers in the least. Only those who baked their own bread and had to dig a new oven with each move experienced any additional work.48

In highway construction camps laborers lived in tents, abandoned buildings, shanties of scrap wood and tar paper, and during longer term projects, in company built bunk houses. One New York State field observer recorded, "The quarters consist of one room shanties, accommodating from twenty to fifty laborers. No attempt is made to clean them, and they have an unwholesome odor. They are covered with tar paper and have no windows." Highway construction laborers had to sleep wherever their work took them. Often this meant on the shores of swamps, in deserts or even on the sides of mountains. The general manager for Utah Construction stated that frequently his laborers had to blast off a level area on the side of a mountain before they could pitch their tents.49

Bunk houses characterized shelters in logging work camps. These buildings contained wooden bunks filled with straw in double tiers running around the perimeter of the structure. A single window, usually nailed shut to keep out the cold, could be found at the end of a bunk house and a large stove in the center. After a long day laboring in the wet woods, loggers took off
their wet clothing and hung them about the stove to dry. The drying clothes in combination with poor ventilation often produced an awful stench and inadequate oxygen. Loggers frequently complained of waking up feeling dizzy, with a film coating their mouths.50

The crowded conditions of shelters combined with the deplorable sanitation conditions in work camps to create filthy living conditions for laborers. Some camp planners chose to build work camps on the lowest land possible in order to access ground water more easily. This resulted in poor drainage that after a short time transformed the camp area into a giant mud hole better suited for pigs than men. Poor building layout resulted in insanitary conditions in other instances. Occasionally horses, pigs, or cattle shared the same roof with laborers or, more frequently, corrals were located too close to the mess hall and sleeping quarters; manure drippings contaminating the latter structures. Laborers commonly piled uncollected garbage next to the mess house and manure near the corral instead of removing it from the camp area. Of 537 California work camps that used horses, 27 percent allowed the manure to accumulate in the vicinity of the kitchen and mess structures. In many camps laborers packed water wells with manure in late fall to prevent the well water from freezing during the winter. With
the arrival of warmer weather, the manure often polluted the drinking water. Wisconsin's Industrial Commission discovered a case where work camp laborers recovered an entire pail full of manure from a well.51

The bedding in work camps was almost uniformly lousy and dirty. Laborers constantly complained their clothes and bedding were "alive" with bugs. Occasionally laborers gathered their clothes together for a "boil up" at which they boiled the lice out of their clothes. After a few peaceful nights alone, however, the insects returned to torment their prey in full force. In the Far West laborers furnished their own blankets in an attempt to limit the number of lice with whom they slept. Consequently, western itinerant laborers were nicknamed blanket-stiffs.

It is difficult to ascertain to what degree poor housing and sanitation conditions permeated work camps. Only the state of California attempted to quantify and rate the living conditions in its work camps. In their study, California camp inspectors classified camps as good, fair, and bad according to a systematic rating system. Camps classified as fair did not even meet the minimum standards established by the state board of health. After examining 876 camps, the inspectors classified 297 camps (34%) housing 21,577 laborers as good, 316 camps (36%) housing 22,382 laborers as fair,
and shockingly 263 camps (30%) housing 16,854 laborers as bad.52

Work camp laborers responded to their miserable conditions by quitting at very high rates. Economist Don Lescohier found that a labor turnover of 500 to 1000% existed in logging camps and on railroad and construction work. In agriculture, farmers constantly complained of the unreliable nature of their laborers. Carlton Parker estimated that loggers in California in 1914 remained on the same job an average of 15-30 days, construction workers 10 days, harvesters 7 days, cannery workers 30 days and orchard workers 7-10 days.53

Increases in labor turnover in work camps were directly proportional to better economic conditions. Just as general strikes mushroomed in good times, so did the "strike in detail." Lumberman H.G. Miller stated in 1914, "Well, in times of high wages the men drift from one camp to another. They seem to want to go, and the custom has been to have about three crews, one coming and one going and one at work." He believed labor turnover in logging dropped to as low as 200% in a "normal" year and escalated to over 1000% in a tight labor market. Some work camp employers responded to rampant labor turnover by holding a portion of wages back for a period of time in order to maintain their work force. In 1906 managers for the Great Northern
Railway Company chose to retain the summer bonus of 10 cents out of every 1.35 to 1.45 earned per hour by laborers "on account of the scarcity of labor...."

Labor turnover in work camps also varied with the time of year. As weather conditions improved and traveling between camps became easier, workers moved about at much higher rates. The vast majority of labor turnover throughout the year, especially in the North, occurred between March and August.54

The act of quitting and then moving helped work camp laborers maintain their equilibrium. It allowed them to exercise a greater degree of freedom and control in their lives. Instead of enduring an antagonistic foreman, dangerous work, or paltry wages, laborers simply quit when opportunity afforded. Indeed the quitting and moving of laborers many contemporaries perceived as wanderlust, irresponsibility or laziness was simply an attempt by laborers to deal with their wretched working conditions. Many laborers did not care where they traveled, North, South, East, or West, they just wanted to keep moving. Camp laborer Tom Wilson commented in 1914 that "he likes the work but can't stand the monotony; he wants constant changes...." Another laborer remarked in the same year, "I worked steady when I was a kid, too, but I got to beating it around to where I could get the jobs, and it got into my
blood. I could not hold down a job longer'n two weeks not if I was made to. I got to keep moving." Many camp laborers even preferred an itinerant lifestyle. Of 222 typical itinerant laborers in California studied between 1913-14, sixty-seven per cent stated they were "floating" with no intention of securing steady work.55

Many single male camp laborers often endured their working conditions only long enough to acquire a "stake", a sum of money large enough to live on for a specified period of time. It varied in size with a region's cost of living and with the amount of time a laborer intended to spend "resting." Week-long stakes ranged from a low of $10.00 in California or New York to as high as $60.00 in the Rocky Mountain region. With this sum laborers bought whatever new clothes they needed, enjoyed a few days relaxing on the streets, in saloons, and in the company of women, then set out for work again. Many also worked for a winter stake. With this laborers could live in cheap ten cent lodging houses throughout most of the winter when work became scarce. One contemporary wrote,

to one who has not tried it, it is remarkable how long the spark of life may be kept alive by an occasional nickel for a glass of beer and attending free lunch privileges. According to an estimate by one of my friends in this class, a man may live 'comfortably' in New York [City] on 6 or 7 dollars per month!
In San Francisco it was estimated that a laborer could winter on $12.00 per month eating three 10 cent meals per day and sleeping in 10 cent lodging houses at night. Over a ten year period Chicago police stations provided lodging to 1,275,463 homeless men. During the same period the municipal lodging house sheltered 370,655 homeless men. Of both of these groups only 20 per cent were residents of Chicago. Itinerant laborers unemployed and resting constituted the remaining 80 per cent.56

The high labor turnover and geographic movement of work camp laborers facilitated the spread of disease between camps and between work camps and urban centers. Typhoid fever and small pox often spread through a camp and into other camps with remarkable speed and deadly consequences. After a severe outbreak of small pox and typhoid fever in the Northwest, physicians traced the cause to the roll of blankets loggers carried with them. In addition, contemporary physicians believed camp laborers carried diseases contracted in camps and whorehouses into towns and cities. Camp laborers acted as distributing agents for the most virulent forms of venereal diseases, typhoid, and small pox. After investigating its work camps in 1913, Minnesota's department of Labor and Industry began its report with the following statement:
There are employers in Minnesota who house their workmen in boarding camps who seem to have no regard whatever for the health of their employees. These workmen are herded together in dirty bunk houses where they contract various diseases, and are then returned to the cities to associate with their fellowmen and to spread the diseases they have contracted.\(^{57}\)

A number of states including New York, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Montana, and California attempted to regulate camp conditions, with some success. In one remarkable case in New York State an official reported in September of 1912 that a certain camp was insanitary to the point it threatened an epidemic. In this camp 85 Polish and Italian laborers and their wives and children lived and slept in two dilapidated old homes with five persons in a room. When the state inspector reinvestigated the camp a year later, after state regulation started, the employer had cleared away all the rotten vegetable matter, meticulously cleaned the buildings, installed new iron beds and mattresses, and provided each family with two rooms.\(^{58}\)

Despite some remarkable improvement as a result of regulation, the isolation of camps and the laborer's ignorance of proper sanitation often hampered state efforts. Most employers willingly cooperated with state officials. Nevertheless, some took advantage of their usually isolated locations to evade state regulations and every standard of decency. Logging work camps in
Idaho and Montana were often so isolated that a river down which logs floated and up which supplies came often provided the only link between the camp and civilization. Laborers, however, often proved an even greater stumbling block to sanitation reform than greedy or nearly bankrupt employers. Many laborers, ignorant of proper sanitation, felt that employers telling them to sleep in beds with mattresses and take showers intruded on their private lives. In 1914 Seattle lumberman Paul Page stated: "Lots of times we get loggers that will go in and throw the mattress out of the window and go up to the barn and get hay...." Many "proper" investigators experienced trauma when, after finally installing spittoons in a number of camps, the laborers refused to use them. After laboring under the direction of foremen as long as the sun remained in the sky, laborers did not want foremen to tell them how to live their private lives. Moreover, what could be more psychologically satisfying to laborers working in an environment where they were constantly told what to do, than to spit on company owned floors whenever and wherever they pleased.59

During their free time, laborers in railway and highway construction, logging, and single males in agriculture not only enjoyed chewing and smoking tobacco, they also drank beer, played cards, and
conversed with one another. In the evening or during bad weather laborers sat about tables and along benches or simply on the ground talking and playing cards, reading, writing letters, mending clothing, and repairing shoes. Conversations generally contained "the fiercest profanity." Laborers not only addressed their horses, oxen, saws, shovels, and hammers with profane words, they also swore profusely when speaking to one another. Laborers commonly greeted each other with "Hello there, you son of a bitch, how're you?" Usually some type of string instrument provided music and often the men sang. Understandably, most of their songs contained or focussed on "a pretty maiden, so pretty and so fair...." On weekends, when laborers felt better rested, they occasionally even held dances. Half of the men wore a red scarf on their arms and danced as women, while the other half danced as men.60

Laborers in canneries, working long hours over a short period of time, spent most of their free time eating or sleeping. Married agricultural workers traveling with families naturally spent most of their free time with their families eating, sleeping, and caring for their children.

Excessive drinking, especially among single men, often led to fights. On such occasions the laborers themselves or the foremen provided law and order.
Police patrolled camps near cities or towns, but in most instances the boss maintained peace in work camps. One observer noted that the bosses in the sparsely populated regions of the West carried automatic revolvers and were all "large men." This is not to imply that disorder filled work camps. On the contrary, laborers maintained a code of ethics and conduct that they enforced through ad hoc groups. Only when this system of social control failed did the foreman have to take action.61

Indeed even in the highly transient and complex world of camp laborers a sense of community existed. Ever present danger, long days of working in groups or gangs of similar ethnicity or gender, and miserable living conditions bound laborers in work camps together. While the faces of workers changed rapidly, these salient features of work camp life provided a continuity of experience among laborers moving from one camp to the next. This was particularly true of the logging industry where high levels of occupational persistence existed.62

Work camps may have varied extensively according to region, industry, ethnicity, gender, and degree of isolation, but danger, difficult work, and deplorable living conditions were three variables any work camp laborer could count on remaining constant. While it is dangerous for anyone to attempt to describe a complex
phenomenon such as life in work camps in a single phrase, perhaps a group of laborers living in an isolated railway construction camp in Montana in August of 1914 succeeded. When Peter Speek asked these men what they thought of work camp life, they heartily responded in unison: "Oh, it's a dog's life!"
CONCLUSION

We are left then with a highly itinerant world of laborers that first manifested itself to the general public during the panic of 1893. The general public's increased awareness of the plight of itinerant laborers this crises produced, however, rapidly declined with the arrival of better economic conditions at the turn of the century. Only the romantic and sensational literature on itinerant laborers persisted to the present. This writing in tandem with bits and pieces of scholarship scattered throughout a highly compartmentalized historic profession represents our present body of scholarship on itinerant laborers.

We are also left with a brief glance into the highly unstable world of laborers who lived through America's period of rapid industrialization. We have seen that chronic unemployment and developments in transportation constituted the primary reason both the scope and scale of itinerancy among laborers increased dramatically after 1870. From American born single males quitting during periods of economic prosperity to laborers in general being the first to experience dismissals and layoffs in hard times, rampant unemployment, both voluntary and involuntary, constantly forced laborers to move about in box cars, steamship steerage, wagons, and
on foot. Suprisingly, strikes accounted for less than two percent of idle time.

In the search for employment American born single males enjoyed the largest range of movement. The lack of social skills and nativism circumscribed the immigrant's range of movement. Family financial support and familial ties limited the movement of married laborers to a local level. Social pressure and more importantly insufficient monetary resources made women move about at a local level as well. In addition, while laborers did not have access to reliable information on job conditions in areas beyond the local level when family and friends did not reside in their proposed destinations, they still managed to travel at regional and national levels by moving only short distances at a time. Most itinerant laborers did finally settle down into a more sedentary mode of life, a small minority, however, did not find their niche in America's rapidly changing economy. These laborers did in fact constitute a permanent floating body of laborers at the bottom of America's late nineteenth and early twentieth century social order.

Employment agencies assisted laborers and employers in their effort to adapt to America's constantly changing economic climate. Large and small private agencies, free public employment agencies, immigrant aid
societies, and charitable organizations all attempted to aid laborers in their search for employment. Of these agencies, private agencies operated most effectively and placed the largest numbers of laborers. While corruption characterized more private agencies than it should have, most private agencies were not the bastions of evil contemporaries believed. Moreover, by providing large groups of laborers when and where the economy demanded, these agencies performed an absolutely essential function during this period.

We have also delved into the highly complex phenomenon of the work camp. Camp laborers experienced hardships at a level almost incomprehensible by modern labor standards. Laborers, segregated into work camps by ethnicity and gender, toiled from dawn to dusk at arduous tasks which, with the exception of loggers, involved little skill. In the process they endured the trials of nature, often antagonistic foremen, and ever present danger to life and limb. Isolation and often inadequate or non-existent accident insurance made even a relatively minor injury in a work camp a dangerous and often expensive affair. As compensation for their efforts laborers received paltry wages, and crowded and filthy lodging. Laborers generally consumed good board, especially when they prepared it themselves or received it directly from their employer. Those unfortunate
laborers who relied on private boarding companies, however, often had to eat food substitutes or contaminated food. As a response to their conditions, laborers constantly quit their jobs causing astonishingly high rates of labor turnover in work camps. This turnover in combination with the insanitary conditions of camps facilitated the spread of diseases between camps, and camps and urban centers. A number of states attempted to regulate conditions in work camps but experienced only marginal success. Not only did the isolation of work camps make enforcement of state regulations difficult but, equally important, the laborers themselves often resented employers telling them how to live their private lives.

Life in work camps varied with industry, region, ethnicity, gender, and degree of isolation but uniformly contained unsanitary and dangerous living and working conditions. Nevertheless, work camps provided a vehicle for the industrial conquest of America's virgin land. Like the laborers who toiled in them, these camps appeared and disappeared as they attempted to adjust to America's rapidly changing economic landscape.
1. Carey McWilliams, *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California* (Santa Barbara: Peregrin, 1971); Cletus E. Daniel, *Bitter Harvest: A History of California Farm Workers, 1870-1941* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1981). Many studies exist on this topic, however, most of them do not begin their analysis until the 1930s. In addition to the above named books, the first of which contains an excellent updated bibliography, one of the best studies of itinerant laborers prior to the Great Depression is LaWanda F. Cox, "The American Agricultural Wage Earner, 1865-1900: The Emergence of a Modern Labor Problem" *Agricultural History* 22 (April, 1948): 95-114.


10. On Fargo, ND see letter from C.P. Stine to O.R. Gray 19 July 1912 in Great Northern Railway Company Papers, 2:0820.


17. For an example of an employer paying the fee see IRC., Final Report, 2:1253.

18. On employers providing free shipment only if a laborer worked for them for a specified period of time see IRC., Unpublished Records, 6:0178.


22. IRC., Unpublished Records, 6:0154.


25. For an example of women cooks in work camps see Abbott, *Immigration*, 483.


34. For an example of a construction employer using a medical tent see IRC., *Final Report*, 6:5108.


37. On accident insurance in railway work camps see IRC., Final Report, 5:4260.


40. This information was derived from IRC., Unpublished Records, 13:0479 and 0487.


42. On baking bread see Immigrants in Industry, 18:428. On an Italian laborer's diet see Ibid., 400. On the diet of Croatians, etc., see Ibid., 400-401.


44. On Osborn's bakery see H.W. Osborn to W. Begg 2 December 1906 in Great Northern Railway Company Papers, 3:0086. The quote is from a letter from H.W. Osborn to J.R.W. Davis 20 March 1907 3:0071. On immigrant gangs see Immigrants in Industries, 18:428.


47. On cannery women see IRC., Final Report, 5:4981; 5:4964. The quotes are from Abbott, Immigration, 488.


49. The quote is from Abbott, Immigration, 487. On Utah Construction see IRC., Final Report, 6:5108.

94; Rexford G. Tugwell, "The Casual of the Woods" Survey 44 (3 July 1920), 473.


52. Parker, Casual Laborer, 74.


57. On the small pox outbreak see Montana Department of Agriculture, Labor and Industry, Eighth Biennial Report, 1902, 214. For contemporary accounts see Montana Daily Review 6 October 1900; Montana Fruit Grower, 29 November 1901; Ibid., 17 January 1902. See also IRC.,


61. Immigrants in Industries, 18:401, 429.

62. Historians of the American West writing on mining camps have done the most extensive research into the effects of itinerancy on work camp community. For a view similar to this studies see Elliot West, "5 Idaho Mining Towns--A Computer Profile" Pacific North West Quarterly 73 (July, 1982): 119-120. For a different, largely functional approach, see Robert V. Hine, Community on the American Frontier: Separate But Not Alone (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1980).

63. IRC., Unpublished Records, 5:0307.
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