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# America on \$0 a Day: the Private World of a Compulsive Hobo

By DAN CARLINSKY

Gone, or almost gone, is the caricature of the classic hobo: unshaven face, ragged clothes, funny hat, stuffed kerchief on a stick across the shoulder, eating beans from a makeshift stove by the railroad tracks, sleeping in boxcars. That character belongs to the Depression, but a few old-style hoboes, or reasonable jocalmites, still exist. One of the most articulate of them, a solid, gray-haired man with a two-tiered moustache, "Steamtrain" Maury Graham, stayed put long enough recently to describe the world of the hobo and his philosophy.

According to his definition, a hobo rides trains. A tramp just tramps. A hitchhiker is simply a hitchhiker. A bum won't work, but a hobo will.

Steamtrain has always worked, as a cement mason, and can earn \$10 an hour. He is married, has two daughters and five grandchildren, and owns a house. On his travels he always carries proof of a permanent address as well as about \$50 (which he is reluctant to use) to convince anyone who needs to know that he is not a vagrant.

The hobo's life has been Steamtrain's first love since he started riding the rails in the summer while he was in high school. As a young man he spent eight years as a hobo full time; then he got married, settled down and raised a family. In recent years, now that his children have moved away, he has responded to the call of the train whistle once again. He leaves his wife at home and rides the rails for weeks at a time. Yet he knows he's one of a fading breed.

What follows is his description of how the hobo travels, lives, survives.

I hobo for fun. That's my pleasure. I could go as a regular tourist to see the sights—I have a little truck at home—but that's not as thrilling as to go by train and get off in each town and meet a bunch of people in a bar or on the street. Meetin' people is the whole game. I can see all the regular tourist sights, too, but with different eyes.

Most people you meet are friendly; it's the truth. I have a heck of a good time approaching people. I just start a conversation. The few unfriendly ones look at you like you're a piece of scum. I can read their eyes.

If a couple of us sit off a little to the side of a road and build a little fire it isn't no time before there's a bunch of people, a bunch of kids, over there around us. And they want to sit around the fire and listen to the hoboes tell stories, and it's fascinatin'.

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The Britt Beery-Tribune

A lot of hoboes get back into civilian life now and then, like I did, but the call of the road, the steam whistle in the night, gnaws at you. You have to come back.

Real hoboes stay on the rails, but it's very hard nowadays. Crime has driven most people from the railroads. The railroad "bulls," or police, don't have time to sort out their friends; they keep everyone away. Not long ago 30 men raided a train in Detroit, breaking open the boxcars and stealing TVs

and stuff. They caught 13 of 'em. They can't let anybody near the trains.

I can usually get along fine because I'm known on most of the lines in the East. I carry a card from one of the head detectives on the Reading Railroad. The man who is not known is going to get kicked off, and if he doesn't watch his step he's going to get hurt. A hobo should never get tough with no railroad bull, or the bull will slap him silly. The railroads don't hire kindly old gentlemen.

Another thing: there aren't as many trains as there used to be, and you can't always tell when or where they're runnin'. I always try to get on a train in the yard if I can, while the train's stopped. An amateur should never try to catch a train while it's moving.

Hitchhiking is also dangerous. I see a lot of young people having a good time hitchhiking coast to coast. You meet a lot of good people that way but you meet a lot of not-so-good people, too. You know, it used to be you were

afraid to pick up a hitchhiker because he might be a crook who might rob you or steal your car or something. Now it's the other way around: a lot of people are picking up hitchhikers and dumping them in the ditch.

I recommend tramping, if you find that interesting. I think young people today have forgot how to walk. People years ago didn't think anything of walking from one town to another. The hoboes used to have a beautiful time. There'd be lots of places where people

**On Getting Around:** "Real hoboes stay on the rails, but it's very hard nowadays. Crime has driven most people from the railroads. A hobo should never get tough with no railroad bull. The railroads don't hire kindly old gentlemen."

**On Sleeping:** "A boxcar is a good place to sleep. Or go to a junkyard and sleep in an old car. All big commercial buildings have a heating plant with an operator. I go down in the basement and ask him; it's always nice and warm. If the weather is right, the best of all is sleeping out under a tree. The Hotel Weeds, they call it."

**On Eating:** "You go to somebody's back door and ask 'em for something to eat. The younger housewives now are scared; the times have changed. But you always offer to work."  
"To me, making your own fire and cooking is the funnest thing there is."

**On the Environment:** "A real hobo takes care of the jungle; he always leaves it cleaner than he found it."

would just wait until their old friend the tramp came around their way to sit and tell stories.

Stay off the main roads: it's no fun walking down a main highway with cars whizzing past you, blowing fumes. The thing to do is go off to some country road, some picturesque place in the mountains where the springs are running.

Still, the real hobo sticks to the railroad most often. There's something about it that captures a man's soul.

The old-time hoboes used to follow the weather. Like they'd follow the wheat harvest, starting down in Oklahoma and gradually working north till they reached clear into the Dakotas and Idaho. Just working enough to get by, to get 50 bucks in their pockets and move on. A lot will winter in Florida or around New Orleans.

The weather tells the hobo when and where to travel. If he's going to see the country, he wants to hit the beautiful parts. There's gotta be hills and mountains to make scenery; there's no beauty in flat ground. In the East I like all of Pennsylvania, most all of Maryland, most all of Virginia. Then I skip down into the Deep South, like Mississippi, which is a beautiful state and full of lakes. And Minnesota has lakes, too. My favorite railroad lines are the Western Maryland and the Reading and parts of the Penn Central.

Then out West there's the Southern Pacific, the Santa Fe, and the Union Pacific up through Oregon and Washington. Washington is one of the most beautiful states to be a hobo in. It's full of orchards for eating, and then up north it's real beautiful mountains. Just to ride through there for a couple of days is a great adventure.

A hobo can carry a little bag, like I have, or a sleeping roll, which is the real old way of doing it. They call the sleeping roll a bindle. In the bindle you have a towel and a toothbrush and a razor and a change of clothes, and you can keep your leftover food in it. The bindle has a rope tied around it, and you can throw it over one shoulder. That way it leaves your hands free so you can catch hold of a boxcar and get on without losing your grip. A lot of these young kids fooling around on the road use a backpack, but if your shoulders are strapped back with one of those you can't move your arms as freely. You're liable to get killed hopping a freight.

For washing, lots of buildings have

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spigots on 'em some place. There's always water around a house. If it's not winter, I just go up there and wet a rag. I don't stay around washing but wet the rag and get on out of the yard. I can always go to a filling station and get water and use the toilet, too. But if you're ever out on the road where you can't get to one, it's best to carry a roll of tissues or Kleenex in the bindle, 'cause you're in a heck of a jam without 'em. Unless you want to go back to the old system of leaves.

A boxcar is a good place to sleep. Even if I'm not riding the rails, if the weather is bad I go to a railroad yard and try to find an empty slittin' around there. Or go to a junkyard and sleep in an old car. You can always get a junk car some place, and it's a very good place to sleep. Or, if it's real wintertime, all big commercial buildings have a heating plant with an operator 24 hours a day. I go down in the basement and find this man and ask him if I can sleep in there. It's always nice and warm.

You used to be able to sleep in pretty near any jail. But that's getting harder. Some places they've got to clear it with the chief or someone before they let you in for the night.

Then there are the institutions. The Salvation Army and the mission stations in the bigger cities will put people up. I've never done it, but a lot of hoboes hit the church bit, staying in one mission after another till they're kicked out. They call 'em mission stiffs. I don't go near the Red Cross—they're full of red tape.

If the weather is right, the best of all is sleeping out under a tree. The Hotel Weeds, they call it. Or the jungle. You can't sleep right flat on the ground, of course. You've gotta have some cardboard under you and some cardboard over you, even if you have a sleeping roll. You cover up with an old carton and it keeps the dampness and the dew off of you. Sometimes the dew gets so heavy it's like it was rainin'.

A real hobo takes care of the jungle; he always leaves it cleaner than he found it.

It's very easy if you get broke and your conscience don't bother you to go to somebody's back door and ask 'em for something to eat. Not in Chicago or Toledo or New York, but in small towns I would say 75 per cent of the people will give you something. The younger housewives now are scared, as is natural; the times have changed so much.

But you always offer to work. I've done this even though I've had some money with me, because I wanted to meet the people. The women in their fifties and sixties all want to tell me about how they used to feed the hoboes. And they're proud of it, it's a blessing that's remained with 'em. They haven't seen a hobo in 20 years, probably, so we just sit and talk.

The hobo just goes up to the back door—never the front—and says: "Listen, I'm travelin' along out here, I've been ridin' this freight and I got off and I'm goin' on down the road and

I'm uptight for a little food. I'd be glad to cut your grass or do some chores if you'd fix me up a sack of sand-wiches, and while you're fixin' I'll be glad to work." The grass always needs cuttin', or you can weed a flower bed. Any old-time hobo knows how to prepare a flower bed or work in a garden or prune a tree.

You have to look presentable. A person don't want a smelly, horrible-looking old type in the house and they will hesitate to let you in. But if you look too prosperous, on the other hand, they don't like you, either. It's better to have some rags on you. I have my old outfit, so people look at me and they say, "There's a hobo." I like to look like <sup>ours</sup>.

### Bread and Baloney

Of course, if you don't want to go door to door, if you've got some money you feel like parting with, you can buy a loaf o' bread and a ring o' red—which is a hunk of baloney—or a bag of beans or a box of rice. They're cheap and you can go a long way on them. It's less trouble to get a can of baked beans and warm 'em up, but if there's time it's cheaper to cook dry beans. You put 'em in a coffee can or something and cook 'em for a couple of hours. Why, you can eat real cheap that way. And if you got leftovers you can take 'em with you and eat 'em again.

A lot of times you can get spoiled fruit and vegetables free from a store-keeper and cut off the bad part and eat them. The man on the road should be able to go into a grocery or bakery and fast-talk someone out of some stuff. Of course, butcher stores are another thing. Some of the meat they try to pass off on you, when you think they're doin' you a favor, is all gray and spoiled. They don't give you any of them nice bright-red steaks.

I don't like to panhandle for money. A lot of hoboes sell needles or something you can carry around with you and peddle, which is okay. But flat-out asking for money seems to be different from going to the back door and asking to work for something to eat.

I once was trying to mooch some ground coffee and I went to about six houses and they said, "No, we don't have any to spare." So at the last one, the lady says no, and I says, "Do you have any in the coffeepot, second-hand grounds?" She's ashamed to say I couldn't have them even, so I asks her to wrap 'em up in a piece of newspaper. I took 'em down to the jungle and got good coffee out of 'em. You boil it extra long in the pot, and it's still good, if a little on the weak side.

To me, making your own fire and cooking is the funnest thing there is.



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TRACKING — Real hoboes "stay on the rails," riding trains that follow the warm weather.

and save it in your bindle, and you And bread and canned baked beans you can practically live on. Beans is one of the most concentrated protein foods there is. I never eat white bread. If you like it, all right, but I always get cracked wheat or a good grade of brown bread—it's better for you. In the old days, we used to get a good-

there and eat it like an ice cream cone. You couldn't eat that much—and for 15 cents!

There's a book called "Stalking the Wild Asparagus," on how to live off the lard, and it's by an old ex-hobo, Euell Gibbons. This fella was raised in a poor family and his mother taught him all the wild foods that are good

there are certain kinds of roots and berries and nuts you can live on just fine.

I love mushrooms. Just last Tuesday I picked a whole frying pan of the most wonderful mushrooms in the country right off a lawn when it was raining. They was just poppin' up, and I took 'em and rinsed 'em off and frid 'em. If you're trampin' and usin' up energy, you gotta eat more; if you're ridin' a boxcar you eat less. But wherever you are, you take what you can get.

A very few old-timers in their seventies or eighties are still on the road at least part of the time. They're all found in California or the Southwest, where the weather is warm. Some go north along the coast to Washington, Idaho and Montana in the summer. I believe I'm the only one of the old brotherhood who still rides rails in the East. Once in a while, I'll see a hippie or bum or someone just going down to the next town, but that's it. I've been back on the road in the East for four years now and I haven't seen one real hobo. We're dying out.

It's sad. The hoboes are the last of the free men.

"Steamtrain" reckons that in small towns 75 per cent of the people will still give him something to eat at the back door.

sized loaf of bread for seven cents—they didn't slice it—and a can of baked beans for eight cents. You cut a slice off the end of the loaf and reach down the middle and pull the inside all out open the can of beans and pour it in

to eat. I know quite a few of 'em and I'm trying to learn more. There are all kinds of greens. Dandelion greens are only good in the spring, but there are others that, if you find them in the shade, stay tender all summer. And