Preface

What the reader meets in this book may be more autobiography than perhaps he cares for, but it is the best device I know for relating the story and lifeways of the American hobo who figured so vitally in the development of the American Middle West and Far West, especially from about 1860 on. He was already vanishing about 1920 and whatever there is on record about him is widely scattered and would be difficult to assemble.

The hobo still exists, at any rate, the name continues. He is a comic character in television, or the weary willie tramp in cartoons, one who scrounges for food, an amiable, parasitic fellow. Perhaps he is portrayed by newsmen as the habitué in the “jungles,” those legendary, hidden camp sites by some stream where men cook, eat, sing jolly songs and have their rude shelters. Much whiskey must also be there. And they are said to have a language of their own.

Such types there are and doubtless always have been, but the hobo in this account was a worker who wandered, whose number at times when work was plenty and development wide-ranging must have exceeded two hundred thousand. This was the urgently needed labor force of the frontier. Indeed, he was a creature of the frontier, and he moved into history with the frontier.

Hobo workers comprised a utility labor force out in front as the settlement of the frontier lands, as the founding of industries, as the building of cities in the United States moved westward. While others moved “Westward-Ho” developing farms, fencing the land, building stable communities, the hobo was building the railroads making such settlement possible. At work, he lived in camps along the railroad, in bunk houses if working in the lumber woods, in shacks if working in the newly developed mines. He was there too while settlement was under way doing the seasonal work, before the refrigerator, harvesting ice up north in winter, harvesting the grain in summer, or he worked on early cattle ranches.

My own book about the hobo appeared in 1923, more than fifty years ago, as The Hobo. About twenty years later I was asked to do a sequel to it, Men on the Move, also by the University of Chicago Press. That was during the Great Depression when, for the first time in nearly two decades thousands were riding freight trains as when Coxey’s Army was on the go in 1894. But these were not hobos who worked and wandered, they were mainly late teenagers crowded by unemployment out of their home communities. The hobo, created by the needs of the frontier, has disappeared. In the first chapter I mention the migrating covered-wagon families in the West. They disappeared before 1900. The automobile and the Great Depression brought a new type of migrating family, reported so well by John Steinbeck in Grapes of Wrath.

Here I must mention a book by Edmund Bradwin who wrote about the
mobile workers on Canada's frontier; builders of railroads, loggers in the forests, workers in the mines and general construction workers. His Bunkhouse Man appeared about 1926 but had been accepted as a doctoral dissertation by Columbia University in 1922, a year before The Hobo was published. It got little notice. In 1970 The Bunkhouse Man was republished (University of Toronto Press) with an introduction by Jean Burnet. I did not know about it until asked to review it a few months ago.

"Hobo" had not then entered the Canadian vocabulary. Men who worked building railroads were "navvies," an early term used in England for the same workers (see Terry Coleman, The Railway Navvies, Penguin, 1968). In 1904, two years before I became a hobo worker, Bradwin went among those frontier workers as an adult education teacher from Frontier College for worker education (several in Canada). The worth of his book inheres in descriptions of the primitive working conditions, the ways of working and the extent to which the mobile workers were exploited by contractors, more so than in the United States. His wish for these men was that they would become stable settlers on the frontier. He did not describe their life in the towns.

The American hobo was mobile by freight trains from the late 1870's on; the Canadian migrant had to walk and carry his pack long distances. The possibility of free transport (stolen, it is true) may have helped develop a hobo independence, as moving, from one type of work to another enabled him to acquire proficiency in various skills and developed in him that degree of sophistication which varied experience and worldly acquaintance brings. He was not fenced in.

I have been asked a number of times to look into the possibility of making a study of the American hobo from his frontier emergence to his exit with the passing of the frontier. That would be an ideal project for Americana research, but it would be far out of reach of any individual, out of reach for the time needed and more out of reach moneywise. It would be meaningless, even time wasted to look for statistical material, although bits may exist. The many studies of homeless men done by welfare agencies do not separate from the rest the man who worked and wandered.

At the time I wrote The Hobo I read many books, articles and reports on tramps and tramping, vagrants and vagrancy which were included in my bibliography. Since that time almost every year until recently I have had appeals from college students writing master’s dissertations. In a few of those cases the student had had some hobo experience. Those documents could be found. Hobos have written about themselves and their work and life. Such materials must exist in local libraries. Materials could be found in local newspaper files, in social science journals or in the early industrial journals and, of course, in various public records at the local level. Such a search, say, between about 1860 and about 1910 could be done but it would be expensive.

Such an effort was made by a group of students at the University of Minnesota in the early 1960's. Out of that came Skid Row as A Way of Life by Samuel E. Wallace (Bedminster Press, Totowa, New Jersey, 1965). "Skid Row" is a
term the student group borrowed from the logging-lumber industry. The skidrow was a type of flume used to slide logs through a chute from points of higher elevation, with the help of water, to some point where they could be loaded or otherwise handled. It is a term which is now widely in vogue. It was used by the student group in the sense that I used "Hobohemia." It was the "Main Stem," known widely so by the hobos. Wallace says of Skid Row in Minneapolis (formerly "Seven Corners"), where the story was done, "When the Hobo was strong in number, skid row was sometimes called by a name derived from him — hobohemia. Today both the hobo and the term hobohemia have been practically forgotten" (p. 190). But the area, as mentioned in one of these chapters was the main hobo job market for the North and Northwest. Wallace’s book contains a good bibliography to about 1960.

My autobiographical approach must include my move-about family — a type of hobo family — during a period of fifteen years before we settled on a Michigan farm. Not until settled there was the last of my mother’s dozen babies born. Three were lost in infancy along the way. The family moved ten times. It was Mother who bore the brunt of breaking house, disposing of surplus things and starting anew somewhere else. In some respects family mobility was not unrelated to the hobomania of the American frontier.

My father was an immigrant of Swedish peasant origin who lived about eighteen years in Germany and who in 1882, at the age of about thirty, reached the United States. His ideal was to get an American wife, settle on rich land and have a large family, mostly boys. His boys would all be farmers and have farms near his. His daughters would marry farmers. His children would be stable Americans.

Father, from his orphaned childhood, knew only work. In Germany he learned the bricklayer’s trade and how to mix lime mortar. His first American job was on a railroad extra job, next he was a coachman for a German businessman in Chicago, followed by a job in the coal mines, then to farm work and the lumber woods of Minnesota. He and an Irish partner walked westward across South Dakota to work in Deadwood, a booming mining camp. In Kansas City he worked on construction as a bricklayer. Then he went to St. Louis where he met mother who worked in a sausage factory, an American-born girl of Scottish immigrant parents. They started housekeeping in Chicago, but not for long. The family went to the West, returning after a decade to Chicago.

Father had become an American hobo, after five years of going from job to job, riding freight trains, feeling free to come and go as he wished. It was the one holiday of his life which he could never forget or cease to relate. His stories plus the wandering of the family may have influenced his boys. Not one turned to farming, all turned to work and wandering, especially my older brother, Bill and I. We often mixed with the people, the kind of people who moved about.

Much of my personal contact with the mobile man, before it had any meaning, was during the four years when the family lived in Lewiston, Idaho, an inland market town for miners, ranchers and woodsmen. I played on the "Saloon Street" where the mobile types gathered. Five years later I was a
newsboy on Madison Street in Chicago. My experience as a hobo worker began in 1906 and continued with various interruptions until World War I.

When with that background I reached the University of Chicago in 1921, a graduate student in sociology, and without money, it turned out to be the practical thing to do my term papers on subjects I knew most about, as much outside the ken of my fellow graduates as I was outside their interest areas. Luckily, money came from an unexpected private source to support me for a year while I did a study of hobos and hobohemia in Chicago. At this I could lean heavily on my own background, although when The Hobo appeared it said nothing about that background. I wrote a personal introduction to it in 1964 when the paperback edition appeared.

Thus by a chain of coincidences, I became a student of the hobo, an "authority" on his work and way of life. This identity had much to do with the diversity of jobs which came my way the ensuing decade. Those jobs in turn brought me into the public service as a labor relations officer, of sorts. When I finally received my doctorate in 1930, the goal I had hoped to reach was receding. I had not lived down my identity with the hobo, and my new identity, labor relations officer with the work relief program, did not commend me then to sociology departments.

In much of the literature now appearing or which has appeared concerning the marginal types – hobos who work and wander, tramps who wander more than they work, or the mendicants who neither work or wander – describe them in terms of middle-class conventional values. That means using adjectives expressive of shock, or otherwise catering to those attitudes, lest they themselves be identified by the reader with the "great unwashed." Journalists often resort to wit as a substitute for objectivity. Thus the hobo, no longer here, lives on, not as an essential frontier worker, but as a comic character.

Most hobos, as I knew them, were ordinary men with the faults of average ordinary men – the typical stay-at-home blue-collar workers or white-collar workers; for that matter, the garden variety of business men. They too, when in the money, drank whiskey, looked for women and gambled occasionally. Perhaps the hobo, his money gone, would beg on the streets or knock on back doors, and he traveled on freight trains, forbidden by law. Mainly, he was a worker, and this is the image he had of himself. In town, he was often cheated or robbed by other types inhabiting the same Main Stem. Earned money brought by him to the Main Stem in his day helped greatly to keep the business side of the Main Stem solvent.