

HOW HOBOS ARE MADE.

A SPECIALIST ON THE EVOLUTION OF THE TRAMP.

By a Special Contributor.

SCATTERED over the railroads, sometimes traveling in freight cars, and sometimes sitting pensively around camp fires, working when the mood is on them and loafing when they have accumulated a "stake," always criticizing other people, but never themselves, seldom very happy or unhappy, and almost constantly without homes such as the persevering workman struggles for and secures, there is an army of men and boys, who, if a census of the unemployed were taken, would have to be included in the class which the regular tramps call "Gay Cats." They claim that they are over five hundred thousand strong, and socialist agitators sometimes urge that there are more than a million of them, but they probably do not really number over 100,000.

Not much is known about them by the general public, except that they are continually shifting from place to place, particularly during the warm months. In the winter they are known to seek shelter in the large cities, where they swell the ranks of the discontented and complaining, and accept benefits from charitable societies. They certainly are not tramps in the hobo's sense of the word. His reason for derisively calling them "gay cats," is that they work when they have to and tramp only when the weather is fine.

Many of them really prefer working to begging, but they are without employment during several months in the year, and are constantly grumbling about their lot in the world. They think that they are the representative unemployed men of the country, and are gradually developing a class feeling among themselves. They always speak of their kind as "the poor," and of the people who employ them as "the rich," and they believe that their number is continually increasing.

Studying the "Gay Cats."

For the past year it has been one of my duties to keep well in touch with this class. At the request of a railroad official, who has been considering an innovation in railroading, I have made some special investigations regarding all who trespass on the steel thoroughfares.

"The attitude of the company toward this class of trespassers," he said in talking to me about the matter, "must necessarily be the same as toward the tramps, as long as they both use the same methods of travel, but I have often wondered whether there are enough of those who claim to be merely unemployed men to justify railroad companies in experimenting with a cheap train a day, somewhat similar in make-up to the fourth class in Germany and Russia, for their patronage. At present the trouble is that we can't tell whether they would support such a train, and I personally am not convinced that all of them are as honest out-of-works as they say they are, when arrested for stealing rides. If you can gather any data concerning them which will throw light on this matter, I should be glad to have it."

All told, I have met on the railroad, during the past year, about one thousand men and boys who claimed to be out-of-works, and not professional vagabonds or tramps. In saying that I have met them I mean that I have talked with them and learned a good deal about their history, present conditions and plans and hopes for the future. They talked with me as freely as with one of their own set; indeed, they seemed to assume that I belonged among them. I have made their acquaintance up to date in ten different States, and in cities like New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, Cleveland and Chicago.

The most striking thing about them is that the majority are practically youths, the average age being about 23 years, both West and East. Of any 1000 out-of-works, fully two-thirds were between 20 and 25 years old; the rest were young boys under 18 and mature men anywhere from 40 to 70.

Youths of all classes of society have their wanderjahre, and so much time during this period is taken up with mere roaming that it is easy to understand how many of them must be without work from time to time. It is also true that young men are more hasty than their elders in giving up jobs on account of some real or supposed affront; life is all before them, they think, anyhow, and meanwhile do not intend to knuckle down to any overbearing employer. In certain parts of the country, on account of crowded conditions, it must be stated furthermore that it is difficult for a certain number of young men to get suitable employment.

There is a sociological significance, however, about the present strikingly large number of young men who are "beating" their way over the country on the railroads. There is gradually being developed in the United States a class of wanderers who may be likened to the degenerated "Handwerksburschen" of Germany. They are not necessarily apprentices in the sense that the "Handwerksburschen" usually are, although the great majority of them have trades and make some effort in winter, at least, to work at them, but they are almost the exact counterpart of the "Burschen" in their migratory habits. Years ago the traveling apprentice was a picturesque feature in German life, and it was thought quite proper and useful that he should pack up his tools every now and then, get out his wheelbarrow, and take a jaunt into the world. He had to take to the highways in those days, and there was no such inducement as there is now to take long, unbroken trips. A few miles a day was the average stint, and at the end of a fortnight, or possibly a month, he was ready and glad to go to work again.

This is not the case today. The contemporary "Handwerksbursch" works just as little as he can, and travels in fourth-class cars as far as the rails will carry him. In a few years, unless there is some home inducement to bring him back, he generally wanders so far afield that he becomes a victim of "Die Ferne," a thing of romance and poetry to his sturdier ancestors of Luther's time.

for him has become a snare and a delusion. German vagabondage is largely recruited from German apprentices. It is the same love of "Die Ferne," the desire to get out into the world and have adventures independent of parental care and guidance, which accounts largely for the presence of so many young men in the ranks of the unemployed in this country. As I have said, they are not tramps or "hobos," but neither are they victims of trusts, monopolists or capital.

Things That Develop "Gay Cats"

Great public undertakings like the World's Fair at Chicago, the recent war with Spain, a new railroad, and the attractions of places like the Klondike, have a tendency to increase the number of these youthful out-of-works. The World's Fair stranded many thousands, and there are already signs that the war with Spain has brought out a fresh crop of them. They have taken to traveling on the railroads because they have become inoculated with wanderlust, and because they think that it is only by continually shifting that they are likely to get work. The same thing took place, only on a larger scale, after the civil war, and our present tramp class is the result. Some of the young men who took part in the Spanish war, and, when mustered out, joined the wanderers on the railroads, will eventually develop into full-fledged tramps; it is inevitable. At present they are merely out-of-works, and at times honestly seek work.

Let me tell the story of one of my companions for a few days on a railroad in Pennsylvania. He was only 20. He was a plumber by trade, and had left a job only a fortnight before I met him. The weather had got too warm to work, he said (it was in June), and he had enough of a "stake" to keep him going for several weeks on the road. He was on his way to the Northwest.

"The West is the only part of this country worth much, I guess," he said, "an' I'm goin' out there to look around. Here in the East everything is in the hands of the rich. There's no chance for a young fellow here in Pennsylvania any more." I asked him whether he was not able to make a good living when he remained at work. "Oh, I can live all right," he replied, "but this country's got to give me somethin' more'n a livin' before I'll work hard month in and month out. I ain't goin' to slave for anybody. I got as good a right's the next man to enjoy myself, 'n' when I want to go off on a trip I'm goin'." I suggested that this was hardly the philosophy of men who made and saved a great deal of money. "Well, I ain't goin' to work hard all my life 'n' have nothin' but money at the end of it. I want to live as I go along, 'n' I like hittin' the road every now and then."

"How long do you generally keep a job?" "If I get a good one in the fall I generally keep it till spring, but the year round I guess I change places every two or three months." "How much of a loaf do you have between jobs?" "It depends. Last year I was nearly four months on the box once—couldn't get anything. As a general thing, though, I don't have to wait over six weeks if I look hard."

"Are you going to look hard out West?" "Well, I'm goin' to size up the country, 'n' if I like it, why I guess I'll take a job for a while. I got enough money to keep me in tobacco 'n' booze for a few weeks, 'n' it don't cost me anything to ride or eat." "How do you manage?" "I hustle for my grub the way hobos do—it's easy enough." "I should think a workingman like yourself would hate to do that." "I used to a little, but I got over it. You got to help yourself in this world, 'n' I'm learnin' how to do it, too."

"Gay Cats" Mostly Americans.

The nationality of the gay cats is mainly American. A large number have parents who were born in Europe, but they themselves were born in this country, and there are thousands whose families have been settled here for several generations. I bring this out because it is a popular but mistaken notion that the native Americans contribute very few recruits to the "army of unemployed," and the tramp class, and that it is the foreigners who cause most of our labor disturbances and fill our poorhouses and jails.

What I have said in regard to the unemployed young men applies also in a measure to the old men; the latter are in many cases as much the victims of wanderlust as are their youthful companions; but there are certain special facts which go to explain their vagabondage. The older men are more frequently confirmed drunkards than are the younger men. Occasionally during the past year I have met an aged out-of-work who was not addicted to drink and who was penniless and "on the road" from other causes, but nine-tenths of all the mature men were by their own confession hard drinkers. Whether their loose habits are also answerable for their love of carping and criticizing and their notion that they alone know how the world should be run, it is impossible for me to say; but certain it is that their continual grumbling and scolding against those who have been more persevering than they is another of the causes which have brought them to their present unfortunate state. Men who are unceasingly finding fault with their lot, and yet make no serious attempt to better it, cannot "get on" very far in this country or in any other.

This type of out-of-work exists everywhere—in Germany, Russia, England and France, as well as in the United States, but I am not sure that our particular civilization, or rather our form of government, has not a tendency to develop it here a little more rapidly than in any other country which I have explored.

Won't Work Outside Their Trades.

It is furthermore to be remarked concerning these aged out-of-works that pride and unwillingness to take work outside of their trades have also been causes of their bankruptcy. The same is true, to some extent, of all sorts of unemployed men, young and old, but it is particularly true about those who have passed their thirty-fifth years. I have known them to tramp and beg for months rather than accept employment which they considered beneath their training and intelligence.

It has been a revelation to me to associate with these men and to see how determined they are that the em-

We told you so!" Many of them have given up their jobs in a pet, and taken to "the road," with the idea that if they cannot get what they want they will make the world lodge and feed them for nothing. Let me describe a man of this sort, whom I traveled with in Ohio. He had been without employment for over eight months when I met him, and had just passed his forty-second year. He expected to get work again before long, and was passing the time away until the position was ready for him, traveling up and down the "Hobo & Bore" railroad. He was a carpenter by profession, and claimed that for over five years he had never worked at any other occupation, when he worked at all.

"I put in three hard years learnin' to be a carpenter," he said, "an' I ain't goin' to learn another trade now. For a while I've got to take all kinds of jobs when I got hard up, but I've got over that. If a carpenter or nothin' with me from now on. You got to put your foot down in this country or you won't get on at all."

"If I was married 'n' had kids, o' course I'd have to crawl 'n' take what I could get, but secin' I ain't, I'm goin' to be just as stuck up as any other man that's got somethin' to sell. That's what all men like us in this country ought to do. The rich have got it into their heads that they can have us when they want us, and kick us out when they don't want us, 'n' that's what they've been doin' with the most of us. They ain't goin' to play with me any more, though. Ten years ago I was better off than I am now, 'n' I'd be in good shape today if it hadn't been for one of them trusts."

"Are you not at all to blame for your present condition?" I asked, knowing that the man had an appetite for whisky. He thought a moment, and then admitted that he might have squandered less money on "booze," but he was not at all sure that he was not entitled to the "fun" that "booze" brings.

"'Cause we workin' men drink," he explained, "'n' a lot of us gets on our uppers, but ain't we got as much right to get drunk 'n' have a good time as the rich? I'm runnin' my own life. When I wants work I'll work, 'n' when I don't I won't. What we men need is more independence. What the devil 'ud become of the world if we refused to work? Couldn't go on at all. That's what I keep tellin' my carpenter pals. 'Don't take nothin' outside o' your trade,' I tell 'em, 'n' then the blokes with no trades 'll have a better chance.' But you know how it is—you might as well tell the most of 'em not to eat. I have had a little sense knocked into me. You don't catch me workin' outside o' my trade. I'd rather bum."

And, unless he got the job he expected to, he is probably still "on the road."

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