# KANSAS HOBO
## A Saga of the Dirty Thirties

by
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Edited by
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I've been havin' some hard travelin', I thought you knowed
I've been havin' some hard travelin', way down the road
I've been havin' some hard travelin', hard ramblin', hard gamblin'
I've been havin' some hard travelin', Lord

I've been ridin' in fast rattlers, I thought you knowed
I've been ridin' in fast wheelers, way down the road
I've been ridin' in blind passengers, dead-enders, kickin' up cinders
I've been havin' some hard travelin, Lord

-Woody Guthrie, "Hard Travelin"

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When was the last time you saw a hobo clinging to or riding atop a boxcar of a train rolling through Kansas? Clearly the Great Depression nomads, so common in earlier America, are now a vanishing breed and have been for some fifty years.

In the summer of 1956 we chose Colorado for the family's vacation, loaded the kids in the car and drove into the land of nature's wonders. We lived in a log cabin for a week, fished for trout in a mountain stream, counted the deer in the back yard, and visited the Garden of the Gods with its fantastic red rock formations, Pikes Peak, and the Royal Gorge looking down from the world's highest suspension bridge, and the Federal Mint in Denver.

I found it hard to decide which of Colorado's wonders was the most wondrous. For the kids there was no contest. The most startling, wondrous sight to be talked about back home came in western Kansas when we passed a long, slow moving freight train with a half dozen hobos riding in and on an open-door boxcar. The kids waved and bums waved back. The children were ecstatic. So to add a bit of folk culture to the treat I sang a verse of "The Big Rock Candy Mountain," a song I had played a thousand times on the old upright Victrola when I was my kids' age.

By the 1950s hobos that were seen on most Kansas freight trains in the 1930s were known only as cartoon characters and laughable clowns, sueh as Charlie Chaplin and Emmett Kelly. Rail-hopping, real-life people who waved back were so rare for post-WWII children that they were considered exotic objects of great curiosity, awe, and wonder.

Few freight trains rolled through western Kansas in the summers during the 1930s that did not carry some free-loading transients. Estimates indicate that during the Great Depression over one million men became hobos searching for jobs they could not find at home. The Missouri Pacific Railroad officials reported 186,028 transients on their line in one year. Not only men but at least 8000 women were counted in the same year, besides entire families as well as boys and girls on their own. The total eount for the Missouri Pacific for Great Depression five years was 387,313.[1]

Travel was never comfortable, safe or enjoyable. It was dirty, usually too hot or too cold, and always dangerous. The Missouri Pacific reported 385 deaths or serious injuries to the free riders in one year. At the peak of hobo travel 6,500 illegal riders on all trains were killed or seriously injured in a single year.[2]

Kansas was a prime target for untrained men looking for the harvest fields or other farm labor. As a Ford County farm boy I met and worked with many of the desperate young unemployed men, some just out of high school. Their stories of catching a train and the life they lived would not entice anyone to join the army of hobos except as a last resort. We and neighboring farmers every year hired these men for short stints. Their names were never more than "Arkie," "K.C.," or Bud." I remember "Slim," who explained that he rode the boxcars from San Francisco with only a couple of Milky Way candy bars as food for the entire trip. He still had one nickel in his pocket, he said, "so I ain't broke." It was a matter of pride. For the first three days with us he ate more than the rest of the crew combined. My mother thought she could not fill him up and that was a matter of pride for her.

Some of my schoolmates joined the transients because jobs in small towns were just as scarce as the cities. One of my good friends, Dean Foster, years later wrote of growing up in the Depression. His reminiscence was entitled "A Saga of the Dirty Thirties." Among other things he described a month-long trip to California, hobo style, in 1939, the year we both graduated from Fowler High School. His account reflects the typical hobo life–the dangers of catching and riding the freights, the "amenities" of the Hobo Jungles, search for work, petty thievery to stave off hunger, dodging the "Bulls" (railroad guards), and the grime and discomfort of "life on the bum."[3] He wrote:

After haying I worked wheat harvest and plowing for E.J. Shogrin. After plowing, which was the first part of August I drew my wages and went to town. I hadn't went home to clean up before I ran into Horace Feiok. He had dropped out of high school and went to California. Horace and I had become good friends while I had a paper route. I

delivered the *Wichita Eagle* and he delivered the *Wichita Beacon*, *Hutchinson News* and the *Dodge City Globe*. He told me that he was going back to California by freight train and had talked me into going with him. He said we could get work there. I went home and cleaned up. No one was home. I went back uptown and Horace found out that I had around $250 in my pocket that I was planning to take. He said he would not let me take that much money. He said that I could take $30 and to go put the rest in the bank, which I did.

We got someone to take us to Meade where we caught the train. Horace had a friend in Goodwell, Oklahoma that he wanted to see, so we got off there. . . After visiting an hour or two we went back to the railroad station. There was a passenger train stopped at the station and headed west. Horace said we may be lucky, why don't we blind this passenger train? I had never done that, so I said, "O.K." I don't know what the word "blind" has to do with it, but where you ride when doing this is between the front passageway car–which is usually the mail car–and the coal car. There is just room enough for two people to stand between the two half accordion bellows that form the passageway from one passenger car to the next.

We knew that the railroad bulls were tough in Dalhart, Texas, and were afraid we would get caught there. We were lucky. It was dark when we got to Dalhart and we jumped off and hid behind telephone poles. When the train started up again, we ran out and caught it again. We weren't so lucky at Tucumcari, N.M. We got caught there getting off. They weren't bad, just told us to get off railroad property and start walking. We walked through town and about one-half mile west of town to a railroad switch where the freight trains switch onto the track.

The next morning we caught a freight train and rode to Vaughn, N.M., where we got off, as we had to change railroads there. We wanted to go through El Paso, Texas, and across the southern route to California. While waiting for another train, someone told us that there was a lot of haying going on down around Roswell, which was about one hundred miles southeast of Vaughn. But there was no railroad going there. We decided to try hitchhiking to Roswell.

We were not on the road long until we were picked up and taken all the way to Roswell. It was Saturday afternoon and all the farmers were in town. We started walking the streets and asking everyone that looked like a farmer if they had any work. They all gave the same answer: "I just finished haying and am all out of work."

About sundown we decided it was time to move on. We had noticed that there was lots of trucks going through town heading west, which was the way we nceded to go to get back to our railroad. We walked out to the edge of town and found a dip in the road where the trucks had to slow down. We hid behind a tree and when the first truek came by and slowed down, we ran out and jumped on the tongue of the trailer. The tongue was very short and was really erowded for two people to ride on it. After we had gone fifty or sixty miles the driver stopped on top of a hill. When he slowed down we jumped off and hit the ditch and laid down flat on our bellies. Thc driver got out and hit all of his tircs with a hammer, then got in the truck and started up. We jumped up and got baek on the trailer tongue.

Another fifty or sixty miles we came to a small town. I told Horace that I was about fed up with this method of travel and wanted to get off and catch a bus. He said that he was going on and would wait for me in Alamogordo, which was where our railroad was. I got off and went to the bus station, but there were no buses until morning. I eaught a bus about sunup and went to Alamogordo, which at that time was a small town. I walked every street in town, but no Horace. I didn't know what to do: go back home or go on. I finally decided to go on, at least to El Paso, so I eaught the next freight train.

When I got off in El Paso there was a city park next to the railroad yard. I started walking through the park, which was filled with hobos, and there was Horaee sitting on a bench waiting for me. He said we just had time to go, so away we went. At that time there were only three streets in Juarez [Mexico]. One street was shopping stores. I will let you guess what the other two were.

The railroad bulls in El Paso are very tough. They ride the freight trains when they start and kick off the hobos until just before the train

gets to a point where its speed is such that they can no longer get off. If a hobo wants to get on the train and stay on he must get on beyond the point where the bulls get off. Horace and I went out to about where we thought this point was, and hid behind some trees. When the train came by we ran out and alongside the train. We were running as fast as we could, but the train was passing us up. The longer we waited the faster the train passes us. We decided it was now or never. We both reached out and grabbed a step as it went by and hung on. We both made it. We must have been out a little further than we should have been. Between blurring passenger trains and truck trailers and catching freight trains on the fly, it's a wonder that at least one of us didn't get killed.

The next day the train stopped at Douglas, Arizona. We got off and went across the border, but there was nothing there. Early the next morning the train stopped in the middle of nowhere and pulled onto a siding to let a passenger train by. There was an old man there loading the railroad ties on a truck. We told him we were looking for work. He said he didn't have any work, but that if we would help him finish loading his truck with ties and go home with him and unload them, he would fix us a good breakfast. We said O.K. He lived back up the track two miles. After we got the ties unloaded he said we could take a shower while he cooked breakfast. The shower was a fifty gallon drum on top of a building with a coffee can full of holes hanging on the faucet. The water was nice and warm. I think it was the first shower we had since leaving home. The old man fixed us a good breakfast, after which we went back to the railroad siding and caught another train.

The next stop was Yuma, Arizona. There was a hobo jungle there in a wooded area next to the railroad yards. There was a man there with a big kettle, like the ones we used to make homemade soap in. The kettle was full of hot beans, and hobos could get all the beans they could eat for a nickel. He also had a free call service: just tell the man which way you were going and which tree you would be sleeping under, and when it was time to catch your train he would come around and wake you up. While at this hobo camp we were told that a lot of hay was raised in the Imperial Valley, which is in California, between the Salton Sea and Mexican

Border. This wasn't too far out of our way so we decided to go there. When we got there it was the same old story: All our hay has been put up.

From the Imperial Valley we headed north toward the fruit country. We had to go through Indio, where we had been told that the railroad bulls were active. Indio is a small town and we went through there with no problems. The fruit country is in the San Joaquin Valley, which is the center of California and runs from Bakersfield to Sacramento, which is over two hundred miles. We ended up at a hobo jungle about ten miles west of some town that I don't remember the name of. It could have been Fresno, Merced or Modesto. All there was there besides the hobos was a large fruit warehouse and a small grocery store across the road. The peach picking was in full swing, and they were hiring.

There must have been over two hundred hobos looking for work. Early in the morning the hobos would line up in two lines along the railroad tracks. A foreman would come down the tracks between the two lines. He would have some slips of paper in one hand, and about every five steps he would pass out a slip of paper. If you could grab one of those slips, you had a job. After about four or five days we came to the conclusion that all the slips were going to the tall skinny men with long arms. Little chance I had of ever getting a job at five feet, six or seven inches and one hundred and twenty-five pounds.

We decided to hang on for awhile longer and maybe they would get down to us. However, we never saw the line getting shorter. We started living on fresh fruits. Each morning one of us would leave camp before daylight with a flour sack. We would walk down the tracks for about one-half mile, then slip over the fence into the orchards and fill the sack mainly with peaches and white grapes, then slip back into camp and hide the fruit. What we were doing was strictly prohibited, and if we had been caught we would have probably still been in jail.

After we had been there two full weeks, with no job and the lines still just as long as when we first got there, I told Horace that I was again fed up and thought I would head for home. He said that he was fed up too and wanted to go where he was in California before he came back to Kansas. He never told me exactly where that was, but I know that it was

somewhere in thc San Francisco Bay area. He had to go north and I had to go south. I saw him on Pearl Harbor day, Dec. 7, 1941, in Santa Maria, California, while we both were in the service.

I caught the next freight train going south. The train was all refrigerated boxcars, except one oiltank car located the third car behind the engine. All the boxcars were closed and locked, even all the ice compartments at the front and rear of each car were locked. They must have been full of fresh fruits and vegetables headed for the Midwest. I got on the oil tank ear. There is a wood plank all around the tank and a rail above the plank about waist high. The only way to ride is to sit on the plank or stand on it and hang onto the rail. When I got on I tried to string around the rail. The car had one wheel with a flat spot on it. Every time I would set down the flat spot would just about bounce me off. I rode that ear all the way to Vaughn, New Mexieo, where I had to change railroads.

When the train got to Grants, New Mexico, I got off at the west edge of town and walked through town. There were Indians setting along all the sidewalks, and they stared at me until I got scared. I just kept on walking. I found out later that they have an Indian eelebration there every summer, and all the Indians come down out of the hills.

As the train started leaving, it started raining real hard. I was at a filling station and out of the rain. I thought about not catehing the train, but decided if I didn't I might be stuck there for two or three days, so I eaught the train. When I got to Vaughn, New Mexico, I was soaking wet and it was cold even though it was August, and it was getting dark. There was nothing there but a depot and a big water tank.

I walked down the railroad tracks for one-quarter mile and eame to a cattle crossing. I started pulling boards off and sticking them under the tracks and prying up on them to break them into short pieces. All of a sudden two men came running out of the depot. One of them said, "It sounds like boards eracking to me." I hit the ditch and laid down real flat. The men turned on a big searchlight and shined it up and down the tracks, but never spotted me.

After things quieted down and the men went back inside, I walked

baek to the water tank. The tank was two concrete cylinders that intersected each other like grain elevators. I stood up in the corner formed by one of the intersections and went to sleep. I didn't know that anyone could sleep standing up, but I sure did. I woke up about daybreak and there was a train there about ready to leave. I walked by the locomotive and the engineer asked if I wanted a cup of coffee. I said, "No thanks." I hadn't started drinking coffee yet.

I caught the train and rode it to Meade, where I got off, walked uptown and ran into some friends. They told me that my Aunt Mary Shogrin had passed away and the funeral was to be the next day. I went to the funeral.

After this four-week episode I must have set down and talked to myself. We must have decided that if a man was going to make it in this cruel world he would have to have an education. I drew my money out of the bank and went to Dodge City and enrolled in junior college.

With the end of the Great Depression, the effects of World War II, and the changes in railroad equipment, the number of amateur hobos like Dean dramatically declined to the point that children could find them rare and fascinating.

People who had ereated the army of Depression hobos, more commonly called "bums," became solid eitizens. Some ex-hobos became famous, including, among others, Supreme Court Justiee William O. Douglas and television personality Art Linkletter. Dean Foster enlisted in the U.S. Army and became a bomber pilot flying thirty-two missions over Germany.

After the war, the assistanee of the GI Bill, he financed his way through the University of Kansas, graduating with a degree in Aeronautieal Engineering. On graduation he worked for Beech and Boeing, retiring in 1981. Eventually he moved to Hot Springs Village, Arkansas. He died December 29, 1997.

Dean's hobo episode was only a minor one in a long and productive life. And so, too, was the flood of jobless transients who passed quickly into the nations's memory as only a blip in the country's progress. That

Dean Foster would recall clearly fifty years later the details of his brief time "living on the bum" indicated something of the impact that month-long adventure had. The dismal decade of the 1930s remained a haunting memory of what could happen to even the most prosperous of nations.

Stories, pictures, and memories of the nation hitting bottom include the bread lines and soup kitchens of ordinary but desperate citizens, shabby and bedraggled World War I veterans selling apples on the street corner, the Joad family of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Dorthea Lange's stark photograhps of poverty, and hobos clinging to freight trains. There were more profound and lasting consequences than these, but these are the emotional icons we preserve as the essence of the Great Depression.

## NOTES

1. David Shannon, *The Great Depression* (1960: Prentice-Hall), 56-59.
2. James R. Chiles, "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum," *Smithsonian* 29 (August 1998): 66-79.
3. Foster's stories of being a transient ring authentic and common to those in Kenneth Allsop, *Hard Travellin': The Hobo and His History* (London: Pimlico, 1967).
4. Dean Foster, A Saga of the Dirty Thirties, Manuscript, in the possession of Ruby Foster, Wichita, Kansas.