

Aptos has a long tradition of transients, starting with hoboes

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In any mid-county old-timer, the sight of long-haired young men trudging the roads with blanket rolls on their backs stirs memories of the hoboes who, from the coming of the railroad in 1876 until its drastic cut in operations in the 1930's, used the roadbed as a pathway from town to town, or "rode the rods". Like today's hippies, these were men who found the social and business life of their society too constraining and who sought a wider freedom in a life sans responsibility for building and maintaining property and for contributing to the welfare of others.

Unlike the hippies, these wanderers were usually men well over 30 years of age, most of whom had tried to find a place in the establishment and had met discouragement or failure. But some of them were men with an unsatiable wanderlust. Many of them in their late middle years settled down to compatible jobs and even became men of property. Possibly some of the readers of this article are descendants of men who gave up the wandering life to settle down.

They were proud itinerant workers. Many were possessed of real mechanical and agricultural skills, and they trudged into mid-county villages at just the right season to get the jobs they liked best. They scorned tramps and bindle stiffs—ragged, lazy loafers who lived by begging and petty thievery—the latter able to carry on their shoulders all their worldly goods, in a bandana tied to the end of their stick. But the hoboes would work only long

enough to earn what they felt they needed. That point reached, they collected their wages and moved on.

Some came year after year and became well-known to villagers. There was, for instance, Mr. Keller. He used no other name. And he would learn only the surnames of his employers and his fellow workers, who were always addressed as Mr. Berlin, Mr. Hansen, or Mr. Williams. He was possessed of two khaki suits, which he kept immaculately clean, and he always appeared for work freshly shaved and well washed. His British-accented speech was faultless, and no frustration could move him to profanity. Farm boys hailed his coming, for he would sit with them gathered around him after dinner and tell of his years of adventuring in South America. Many smiled in knowing skepticism at his tales of schools of small fish that could reduce a man or a horse to a skeleton in a matter of seconds; of the wood of big trees so soft that it could be carved into any desired shape with a pocket knife, but that could be changed to marble-like hardness by immersion in water; of wood so light that a man could easily lift several big logs at once; of ruined cities and of thousand-foot cataracts in mountain vastnesses so high in the air that the outlander's nose would bleed if he moved at any but the slowest pace. The skeptics who have lived long enough have seen the proof of his veracity on movie and T.V. screens.

Then there was Jim Fabre, French pensioner, lamed by a German bullet in the Franco-

Prussian War. He had come through Aptos many times and had impressed local farmers with his skill in caring for and handling horses. One year he arrived with a beautiful sheep dog at his heels and announced that he wanted to settle down as a "hired man". A farmer near the village engaged the old man, and for a decade he gave excellent service, marred only by a tendency to drink far too much beer—a vice his dog, "Deekie", learned to imitate.

And there was "the Arab", more tramp than hobo, who always managed to appear when jobs were scarce. Long and homely of countenance, unbelievably thin, and nearly seven feet tall, he was a grotesque figure. He was well aware that many farm wives kept a table on the back porch for itinerants, and he always managed to feed well for two or three days. As pretext for his visits, he always produced a small yellow vase, which, he declared, he had made from a clay deposit he had found in the Valencia area; if the man of the house would only give him the proper financial backing, they would both make a fortune.

Hoboes tended to be loners, but the lower orders of wanderers were more gregarious. They had regular camps or "jungles"—spaces under the ends of bridges or trestles, dry areas under or

even in big redwoods, and vacant barns and houses, always near a creek. Many old structures, the Rafael Castro hacienda among them, fell victim to their careless fire building. Daring small boys spied upon these hideouts, fascinated as a group of tramps gathered about a big can, propped on rocks over a bed of coals.

This can become the pot in which they prepared their slumgullion. Carefully purloined vegetables and a big bone begged from a butcher were the usual ingredients. If begging or pilfering had been particularly successful, potatoes were baked in the ashes and with them a chicken or duck rolled, feathers and all, in a thick coat of mud, which carried off the feathers when it had baked to hardness. Corn was roasted in the husk, and leaves of lettuce, cabbage and certain wild plants were eaten raw. Supper over, the weary wanderers sought out the nearest haystack for a bed or gathered

It was great fun for youngsters, too, to watch the wanderers sneak into an open boxcar or hurriedly stow themselves and their blanket rolls on the big steel rods that braced a car from beneath, just as a train started to move.

Who knows? Maybe Bliss Carmen or Jack London was among those vagabonds.

Upholstery Dirty?