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The 19th-Century Harvest Hand

by Terry Ofner



CENTURY, JUNE 1899

LEGEND has it that “Erie Crip” and “Phillie Pop,” two discharged Union soldiers, were the founding members of the informal fraternity of freight-hopping hoboos. The two seasoned soldiers, accustomed to the marches and camaraderie of military life, found the prospect of domestic existence somewhat claustrophobic. So while most of the nation’s veterans were heading back to the farm or factory, our two “knights of the road” hitched a ride on a passing freight train to see what lay ahead.

The rapidly expanding nation required a host of restless and homeless men such as Pop and Crip to build its roads, to harvest its wheat, to work the northern pineries, as well as to lay the track for the railroads the men rode from place to place. In their search for livelihood and occasional adventure, Crip and Pop and the thousands of other marginal workers in American society would encounter public attitudes ranging from indifference to hostility. Local and national newspapers of the period can be read as a barometer of prevalent public attitudes toward itinerants who worked and wandered their way across Iowa in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Most of the itinerant laborers who traveled

by rail and steamboat to Iowa each summer of the 1860s were part of one of the most remarkable seasonal events of the period — the wheat harvest. Untold numbers of migrant laborers converged on the wheat belt by train- and boatload to harvest the ripening crop.

During the years immediately preceding and following the Civil War, Iowa was fast becoming one of the nation’s leading producers of wheat. In 1860 Iowa ranked eighth in the Union in wheat production, raising more than eight million bushels. By 1870, Iowa jumped to second behind Illinois, producing more than twenty-nine million bushels. Iowa wheat production peaked in 1875 when farmers sowed nearly three million acres, reaping nearly forty-four million bushels.

A timely harvest was crucial to farmers. Wheat, once ripe, had to be cut and bound into sheaves before the grain over-ripened and scattered. A delay of as little as a week could reduce yields considerably. Because much of the wheat in a region would ripen about the same time, and since the process of reaping the wheat required more workers than were available locally, the farmers hired itinerant harvest hands.

Over the years the midwestern farmers and

harvesters developed a rather simple hiring system. The harvesters, traveling in bands by rail or steamer, would arrive in a major trading center such as Davenport. A farmer would then drive in by wagon, hire four or five harvesters, and take them to the farm for the duration of the harvest.

Local newspapers often announced the arrival of harvest hands — giving an approximate number of harvesters looking for work. The *Daily Davenport Democrat* of July 15, 1869, reported: "Some two hundred or more harvest hands were congregated along Front street today, waiting for bids from farmers."

The harvest hands were, of course, subject to the uncertainties common to all agricultural pursuits. If crops were poor or if rain delayed the harvest, the demand for their labor would decline sharply. Such seemed to be the case in the summer of 1869 in eastern Iowa. Much of the wheat crop was behind schedule or ruined due to a wet growing season. A short announcement on July 16 in the *Democrat* brought home the grim reality of the uncertainties the harvesters faced: "Harvest hands are asking for work. Prices yesterday were \$1.25 and few employed. Last year at this time prices were \$4.50 to \$5.00." But five days later the *Democrat* could report of improving conditions: "The [steamer] City of St. Paul landed another crowd of harvest hands last night, some of whom were seriously discussing the question of lodging. The harvest hands are finding places [to work] at \$2.50 to \$3.00 per day."

On rare occasions a reporter might offer his readers a short sketch of the sort of life the harvesters led, as in this note in the *Democrat*: "The men see the hard side of life; in the northern pineries during the fall and winter, then rafting during the spring, and during the harvest [they] follow the river up, and are here again ready for the pineries late in the fall."

IN SPITE OF relative prosperity for the farmers in the region, not all was well in the Iowa wheat fields of the 1860s and early 1870s. The *Daily Davenport Democrat* reported tension between the farmers and the harvesters in July 1868: "Notwithstanding the large numbers of harvest hands that have

been arriving in the city for a week past, our farmers find some difficulty in engaging them at ruinous prices. About four dollars is asked, and at that price they will not work more than a day or two before they leave, and oblige the farmers to leave their fields and come to the city for others. In some instances they are so important that they ask what reapers are used — what they are to eat and drink — and whether they are to sleep in the best beds or not."

The harvesters, it seems, understood the law of supply and demand. Through banding together and through a primitive form of strike, the harvesters discovered they could leverage higher wages from the farmers. A writer for *Harper's Monthly* managed to capture the harvesters' technique in process while watching from the front porch of a hotel in St. Charles, Minnesota, in August 1868.

The hands had arrived from Iowa the day before by boat and train "looking like a detachment of Goths and Vandals on a marauding expedition." They had started the harvest season near St. Louis, Missouri, and had worked field after field until they had reached Minnesota. The reporter recorded this exchange between the field hands and the hotel landlord:

"Landlord, have there been any farmers in yet wanting hands?"

"Well, gentlemen, not as I've seen; but they'll be coming in now pretty fast. Turner, I heard, was around yesterday looking for some help."

"What are they paying here now?" asked another of the gang. He uttered his question in a hard, resolute way, as if he had made up his mind what he would get, and didn't care much what was paid.

"Well, the price isn't fixed yet," replied the landlord, "but the farmers talk about not giving more'n two dollars a day."

"They'll pay more than that before the week's out," rejoined the other, sententiously.

"What are they paying down below?"

"Three dollars; and they'll have to come to it here. There's a big pile of wheat this season — half again as much as last."

"I know it; but there will be men enough. Every boat will bring up its crowd."

"Well, you'll find yourself mistaken — you

see. Bet you, we don't bind for any two dollars — no, nor any two and a half — will we boys?"

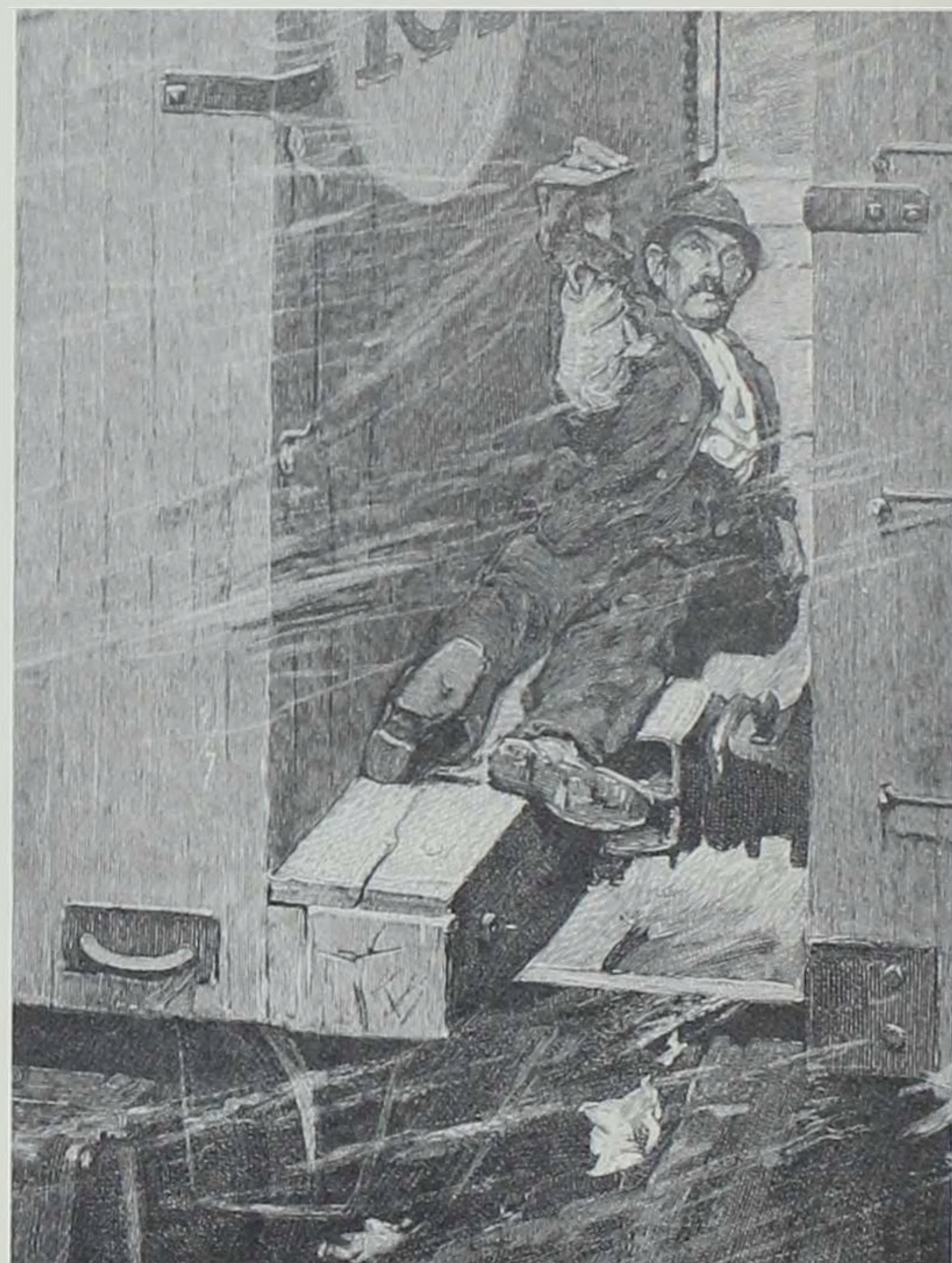
The others grunt their determination to stick to three dollars without flinching.

The harvesters hoped to catch the farmers in a bind. When there were few harvesters available, they could afford to wait until farmers were desperate enough to pay higher wages for their help. The harvesters sometimes won the day. More frequently, new hands flocked to the fields and wages tumbled. Whatever the outcome, the harvesters' bargaining technique was not one to ingratiate the harvesters with either farmers or the middle-class townspeople. For the farmers, the annual hiring of harvest help became one of the major uncertainties of wheat farming.

BECAUSE a ready fund of harvest labor was essential for a speedy and timely harvest, it stands to reason that ambivalent feelings would build up around the harvesters — feelings born of the farmers' dependence on the labor of a group of unmanageable outsiders. Such ambivalence is evident in the writings of Hamlin Garland, the midwestern novelist who wrote of growing up in the 1870s on his father's wheat farm near Osage, Iowa. While expressing the shock that the unorthodox life-style of the hands provoked in minds of the more conventional citizens of the community, Garland's portraits of the harvesters also provide some of the most colorful and detailed pictures that come to us from the period.

"They reached our neighborhood in July," wrote Garland, "arriving like a flight of alien unclean birds, and vanished into the north in September as mysteriously as they had appeared. A few of them had been soldiers, others were the errant sons of the poor farmers and rough mechanics of older States, migrating for the adventure of it. One of them gave his name as 'Harry Lee,' others were known by such names as 'Big Ed' or 'Shorty.' Some carried valises, others had nothing but small bundles containing a clean shirt and a few socks."

Though Garland worked alongside the hired help, it is doubtful he enjoyed their fellowship. They were not, in Garland's words, "the most



JOSIAH FLYNT, TRAMPING WITH TRAMPS (1901)

Jumping freights was a free way to travel, but not without its risks of expulsion or severe injury.

profitable companions for boys of fifteen." Indeed, the harvesters represented much that the exponents of conventional mainstream morality saw as reprehensible. The itinerant laborers were, according to Garland, "reckless young fellows, handsome, profane, licentious, given to drink, powerful but inconstant workmen, quarrelsome and difficult to manage at all times. . . . and on Saturday night and Sunday spent their wages in mad revels in the country along the river, where a couple of road-houses furnished harbor and amusement for their like. 'We take no orders from any man,' they often said, and made much of their freedom to come and go."

Yet this "freedom to come and go" may well have appealed to the young farm boy, moored as he was to the monotony of prairie life. In his autobiographical novel of the period, Garland let his nine-year-old protagonist, Lincoln, dream of the romance of the road the harvest hands inspired: "To Lincoln there was immense fascination in these men. They came

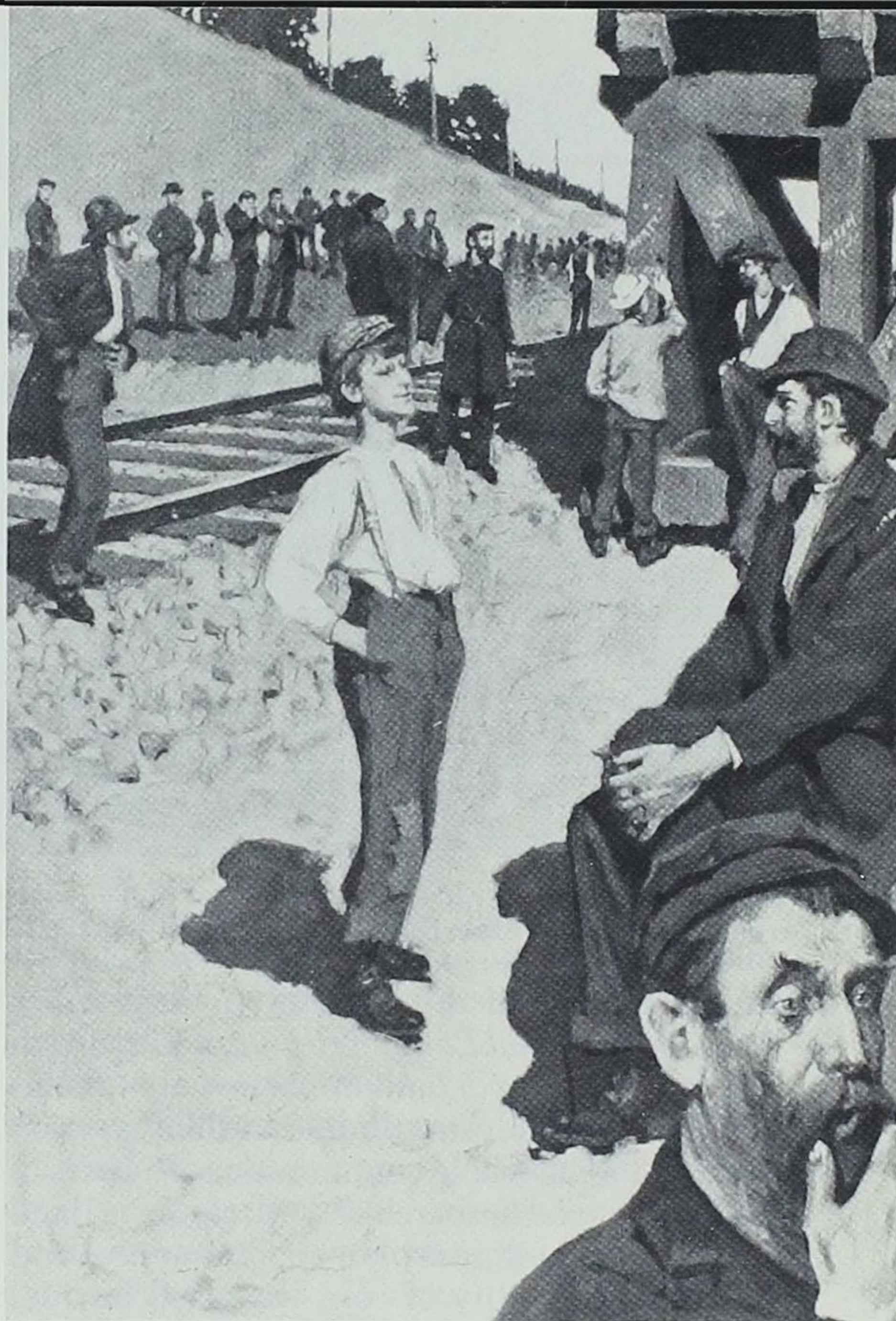
from distant lands. They told of the city, and sinister and poisonous jungles all cities seemed, in their stories. They were scarred with battles. Some of them openly joked of 'boarding at the State's expense.' They came from the far-away and unknown, and planned journeys to other States, the very names of which were poems to Lincoln."

And in spite of their "mad revels" and licentiousness, the young Garland could not help being seduced by their blend of gentility and flair: "When dressed in their best they were dashing fellows. They wore close-fitting, high-heeled boots of calfskin, dark trousers, with a silk handkerchief in the hip pocket, a coloured shirt with gay armlets, and a vest, genteelly left unbuttoned. A showy watch-chain, a big signet-ring (useful in fighting), and a soft black hat completed a costume easy and not without grace."

From Garland's writings it appears that the harvesters themselves were proud of their independence. The local farming communities, for their part, probably remained indifferent to the social and material needs of the harvesters. The local "road-houses" may well have been the only entertainment available to the itinerants. But such entertainments further isolated the workers from middle-class residents.

Apart from the suspicion that settled communities have historically held for outsiders and wanderers, economic factors may well have further motivated the farmers' and townsmen's distancing behavior. Local farming economies could not absorb the extra laborers beyond the time of harvest. By maintaining a distant and aloof attitude toward the itinerant harvesters, local communities could rest assured that the unwelcomed laborers would move on after the harvest was completed.

Through such methods, the postwar wheat-farming economy in the Midwest developed a network of uneasy and unwritten contracts between railroads, hotels, farmers, and harvesters — contracts designed to bring the wheat harvest in before it blighted in the field. Railroads often looked the other way during harvest season when harvesters stole rides; townspeople and innkeepers prepared each summer for the inundation of hands; farmers



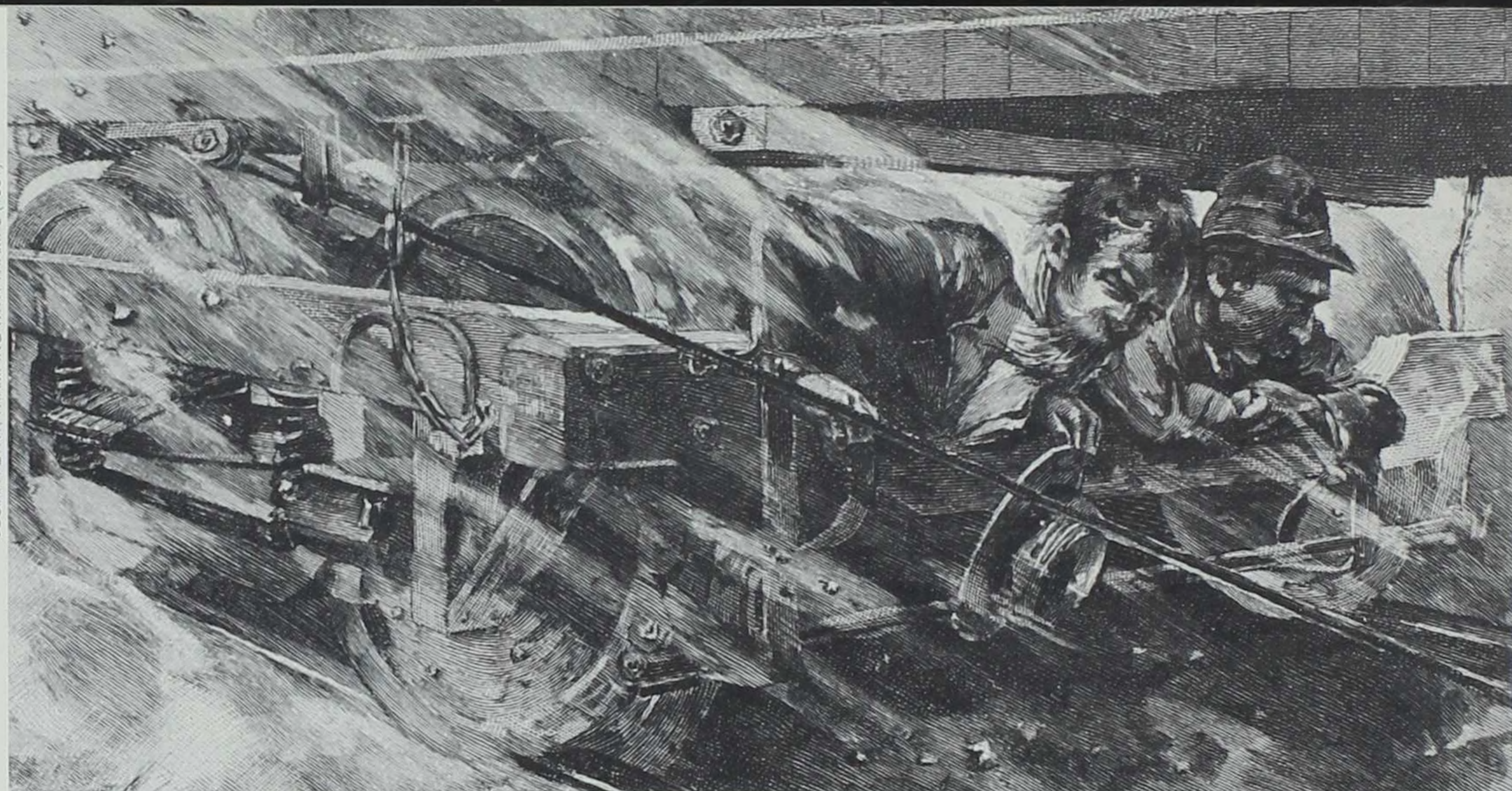
CENTURY, JUNE 1899

Author Josiah Flynt feared that children running away on freight trains would grow dependent on the adventure and frequent change of scenery. Victims of "railroad fever," they would find it impossible to settle down.

agreed to feed and house the harvesters; and the harvesters themselves agreed to continue living on the fringe of the economy — to accept the grudging hospitality of the wheat farmers during harvest and to move on after it was over.

Yet, in spite of their life of constant movement, the harvesters hardly seemed downtrodden and disadvantaged; rather, they seemed to have taken a certain pride in their rough yet vital livelihood. But trouble loomed on the horizon, not only for the harvesters, but for the nation at large.

IN SEPTEMBER 1873 several major New York banking houses failed, causing the stock exchange to close until October. A financial panic ensued that ushered in an economic depression that lasted for much of



Author Jack London, whose wandering took him into Iowa, claimed that of all the ways to ride a freight, "riding the rod" required the most expertise and courage but was the least detectable by yard detectives.

the remainder of the decade. In September 1875 the *National Labor Tribune* of Pittsburgh reported that two million men were unemployed and wandering about in idleness; mine closings forced whole communities of miners to take to the road in search of work. In Iowa, land values dropped sharply; an "immense and unknown" quantity of corn was used for fuel because it was cheaper to burn than coal or cordwood. Workers in the cities suffered pay cuts and lay-offs. In May of 1877, the day laborers working for the city of Dubuque were being paid a dollar a day. By July the C.B.&Q. railroad had reduced section-hand wages to ninety cents a day, an amount one newspaper reporter noted was little better than beggary.

Although times were hard for everyone — farmers, townspeople, and itinerant workers alike — little ink was spent in Iowa newspapers empathizing with the plight of harvest hands. Indeed, the itinerant harvesters often acted as lightning rods for some of the pent-up frustrations the economic depression generated. The term "harvest hand" nearly dropped from the journalistic vocabulary during the depression of the 1870s, only to be replaced by the term "tramp" — a term that to readers connoted laziness and mendicancy. Most newspapers accused these "tramps" of being unwilling to work or of demanding unreasonable wages from Iowa farmers. The papers rarely acknowledged the problems the tight economy and

other social changes were creating in the lives of the harvesters.

With the contraction of the money supply, there was little cash in the farm economy to hire extra hands at the rate that would allow them to live decent lives. Times were so bad that middle-class townspeople sometimes took the jobs once relegated to the harvesters. A correspondent for the *Iowa State Register* reported such a situation on August 6, 1877: "Notwithstanding there are many hungry tramps at almost all hours of the day begging for 'grub,' farmers are having trouble [getting] what help they need through harvest. Owing to the hard times, our lawyers, squires, doctors, wagon makers and blacksmiths are most all in the harvest field making \$2 a day."

An influx of unemployed miners and factory workers from the eastern industrial states also competed for the same harvest jobs, and may well have sparked isolated episodes of violence between the regular harvest hands and the recently unemployed. The introduction of labor-saving machinery also reduced the demand for harvest laborers, inspiring some reports of sabotage against the new machines. In all events, there were more harvesters than jobs, a situation that idled many workmen on the streets of Iowa cities. The newspapers called these idlers "tramps," and warned that they posed a definite threat to the citizenry. On April 8, 1877, the *Burlington Hawk-Eye*

asked: "Tramps: Shall Burlington be Infested with Them?" The *Hawk-Eye* warned of the impending invasion: "With the mild weather of spring come the tramping feet of the vast army of unemployed. . . . This is but the advance guard of the unnumbered hosts who will swarm through the streets, who will sun themselves in groups on the levee during the day, who will skulk around the suburbs in the evening. . . . Everyone remembers how they fought on the levee, disturbing the peace and injuring the reputation of the city."

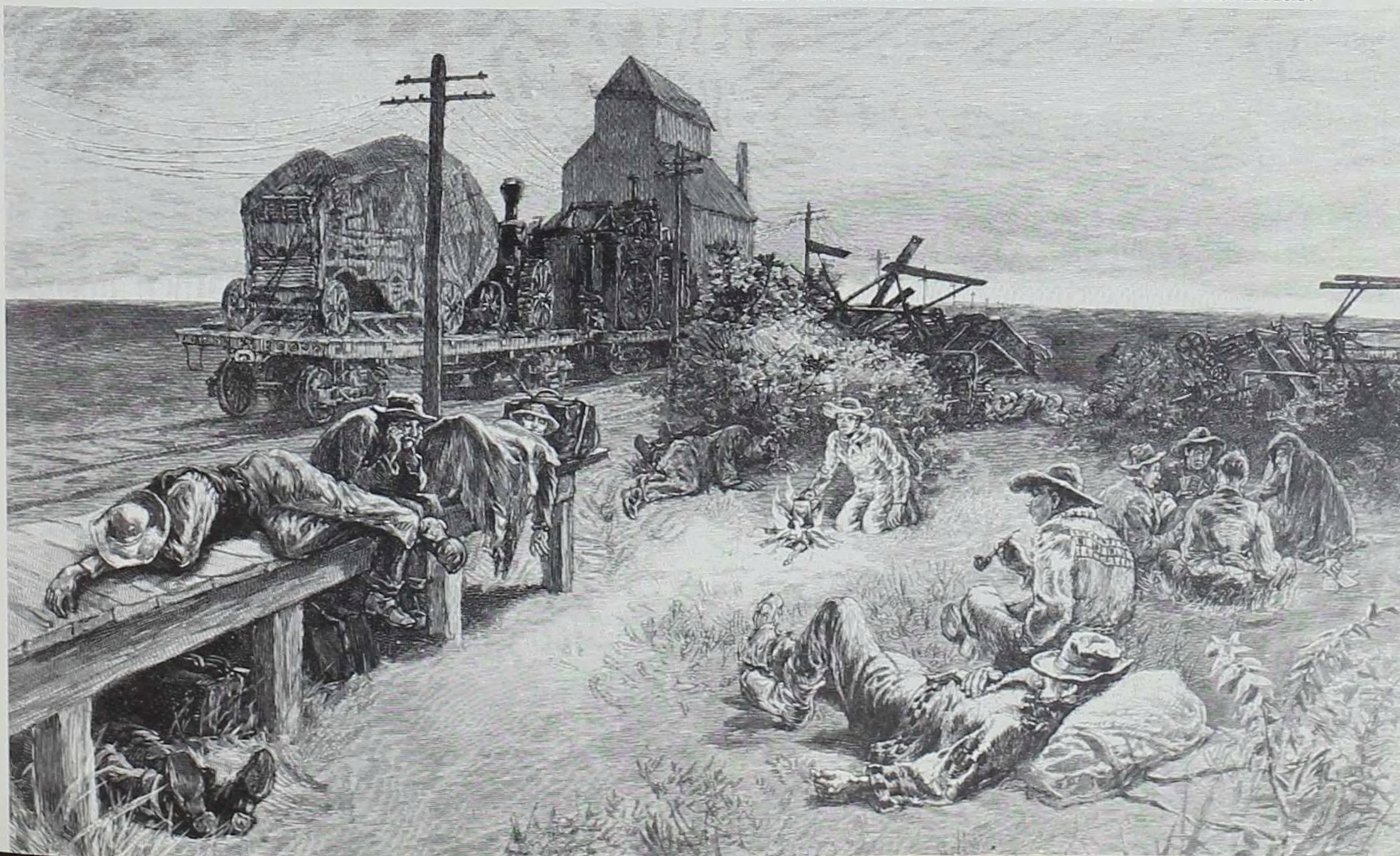
The *Hawk-Eye* acknowledged that the tramps may well have been honest men who found themselves jobless after the financial crisis of 1873 that "closed the mills and mines, the factories and foundaries where they were wont to earn by honest toil a livelihood." Nonetheless, the paper's view was not one that questioned the economic structures that created the vast army of unemployed in the first place. Nor did it sympathize with the unemployed laborer unable to find work in the wheat harvest or anywhere else. Rather, it viewed unemployment as a moral failure on the part of those idled. Tramping in search of work became, for the *Hawk-Eye* and other newspapers, one of the great breeding grounds of idleness: "The great majority of tramps who will, unless restrained, overrun this city this summer, are . . . shiftless, indolent and worthless. Many of them have become so by tramping. They will

not work when opportunity is given."

Iowa newspapers were not alone in expressing these attitudes. The national press was publishing similar images of the tramp. Indeed, Iowa newspapers may well have taken their cue from such mainstream national papers as *Harper's Weekly*. In September 1876 it editorialized: "'Knights of the turnpike,' as they are facetiously called by a correspondent . . . but better known under the simpler cognomen of 'tramps,' have of late become a recognized class in our community. Formerly we were accustomed to hear only occasionally of these dangerous stragglers, who wandered through villages, alarming women and children by their wild appearance and imperious demands for food and shelter, but of late the country has been infested with them. They are no longer simply traveling beggars, but thieves and robbers, without respect for persons or property."

Harper's Weekly was not alone in portraying the unemployed and migrant workmen as the lazy and dangerous tramp. Francis Wayland, a charity reformer of Yale, recommended withholding charity from tramps since it only encouraged their idleness. He also recommended harsh suppression of tramps, for they composed a "dangerous class" that was "at war with all social institutions."

There was little that the harvesters or other itinerant laborers could do to combat this new
Harvest hands rest in the western wheat fields.



HARPER'S WEEKLY (DECEMBER 13, 1890)

negative image voiced by the commercial press and the middle-class charity reformers. The itinerants' life-style had changed little — they migrated with the harvest and other seasonal employment as before. But severe economic changes had precipitated a shift in public attitude against those who lacked a permanent address, or otherwise fit the stereotype of the tramp.

The newspapers of the day both reflected and molded such public opinion. Their inflammatory prose and stereotyping certainly metamorphosed many otherwise honest workmen into the "dangerous class" the moral reformers railed against. As a young man, author Hamlin Garland himself experienced the dehumanizing effects of joblessness and hunger when confronted with the unyielding and inhospitable coldness of New England farmers. He and his brother were trying to work their way to Boston during a summer vacation from school. What started as a pleasant lark in the land of Emerson and Thoreau, turned into a rather unpleasant initiation into the world of tramping: "Jobs, it turned out, were exceedingly hard to get. The haying was

over, the oats mainly in shock, and the people on the highway suspicious and inhospitable. As we plodded along, our dimes melting away, hunger came, at last, to be a grim reality. We looked less and less like college boys and more and more like tramps, and the house-holders began to treat us with hostile contempt.

"No doubt these farmers, much beset with tramps, had reasonable excuse for their inhospitable ways, but to us it was all bitter and uncalled for. . . . All humor had gone out of our expedition. Each day the world grew blacker, and the men of the Connecticut Valley more cruel and relentless. We both came to understand (not to the full, but in a large measure) the bitter rebellion of the tramp."

WHETHER IOWA NEWSPAPERS were riding on a national wave of sensationalist rhetoric waged against the new class called "tramps," or genuinely reacting to events in their own communities, is impossible to determine. But whatever the cause, the language

Harper's Weekly (September 2, 1876) warned that "a cottage where the male members are at work in some distant field is usually the spot selected by the tramp as the scene of his depredations. Our engraving . . . shows us the alarm and danger to which women and children are frequently subjected" until the arrival of the "yeoman" (here visible beyond the doorway). The long-range revolver (opposite) was advertised as one solution to the tramp terror.



Our NEW Model LONG RANGE Revolver.
"TRAMPS' TERROR."

\$3 Including 100 CARTRIDGES!
 Every Revolver Warranted Full
 Nickel Silver Plated and
 Best English Steel. Rifled Barrel,
 deadly accuracy and long range
 combined; automatic action.
 Cylinder revolves when
 Hammer is RAISED.
 BEST Low-priced
 Revolver Sci-
 ence can
 produce.

Same Regular
 Cartridges, kept
 by all dealers.

Specially
 adapted for the
 Pocket. Weight, 7 ounces.
 Loads without removing the
 Cylinder, either to receive
 Cartridge or eject shell.

This is
 the Weapon
 for Police,
 Bankers, and
 Household use.

3,000
 Testimonials.

UNEQUALLED OFFER.
Full Nickel Silver Plated
7 Shot Revolvers as
Premiums.
A MONTH'S AMMUNITION FREE
 Tramps, Burglars and Thieves infect all parts
 of the Country. Every One Should go Armed.

Address
WESTERN GUN WORKS, 69 Dearborn St., Chicago, Ill.

used to report the actions of itinerant laborers in Iowa newspapers reached a fever pitch in the summer of 1878. An August 1 headline of the *Davenport Democrat* warned: "Tramps on the Rampage in Iowa: Trains Seized, Towns Mobbed, and Crimes Committed." The report told of twenty tramps armed with clubs and bludgeons that took possession of a train at Janesville, of one thousand tramps who had compelled the citizens of Plymouth and Nora Springs to feed and clothe them, and of a gang of tramps who had accosted a German farmer near Mitchell.

On August 9 two tramps were blamed for the ravishing of a woman in Henry County, prompting the *Avoca Delta* to say: "We have come to Phil. Sheridan's conclusion on the Indians — there are no good tramps but dead ones." The *Burlington Hawk-Eye*, in the meantime, ran an advertisement for a revolver that sold under the name "Tramp Terror." The sales pitch suited the times: "Tramps, burglars, and thieves infest all parts of the country. Every one should go armed." The late 1870s were not good years to be an unemployed migratory laborer looking for work in Iowa.

JUST AS THE DEPRESSION of the 1870s generated a good deal of anti-tramp rhetoric, it also gave rise to anti-tramp laws. In 1876 the Iowa legislature added a section to the vagrancy law which stipulated that persons convicted of vagrancy or begging could be fined up to fifty dollars and

sentenced to hard labor at the rate of seventy-five cents a day until the fine was paid. The definition of a vagrant was broad enough to include unemployed harvest hands waiting to find work in the fields.

Owing to the prevalence of a work ethic that viewed unemployment as a personal and moral failure rather than a social problem, few voices outside the trade-union movement spoke on behalf of the laboring classes. Fewer still argued for such unconventional and marginal laborers as the itinerant harvester. During the height of the "tramp scare" in Iowa in 1878, those that did voice concern for the tramps were often motivated more by political "third-party" ambitions than by true solicitude. In 1878 the *Lehigh Union*, a Greenback newspaper, used the tramp issue to attack its Republican opponents: "If Christ were among us to-day, associating with the poor, going from house to house and preaching the gospel, every Republican paper in the land would call him a 'lazy tramp,' or a 'dangerous Communist,' and would cry out with one accord, 'Crucify him! Crucify him!'" Responding to this the Republican *Hamilton Freeman* of Webster City retorted: "Yes, if the Savior of mankind was on earth and did go about the country burning farm machinery, insulting and outraging every farmer's wife and daughter he found unprotected (as the Greenbackers' 'poor tramps' do) and refused to earn his bread by honest labor . . . every decent man would cry out 'crucify him.' But the Savior was the friend of the poor and downtrodden, as the Republican party has ever been." In the midst



of the rhetoric, the tramps and harvesters were left to shift for themselves — a practice, it seems, they were perfectly willing and capable of doing.

But more changes awaited the harvesters — changes that would impinge on those who relied on Iowa's wheat crop for summer work. Infestations of chinch bugs and swarms of grasshoppers plagued Iowa wheat fields. Farmers began to realize that they could turn a greater profit by converting from wheat production to a combination of corn, hogs, and cattle. Other wheat farmers, faced with declining yields, opted to move west as the Dakotas opened to homesteading.

As the wheat belt moved west, and as Iowa farmers converted from labor-intensive wheat production to the more family-based corn and livestock agricultural economy, attitudes toward the itinerant laborer shifted as well. Since Iowa farmers no longer needed large numbers of seasonal labor, the state could strengthen its laws against homeless workers without endangering the agricultural economy. Whether impelled by the shift in agricultural practice, or by other motives, Iowa

"They ketches four of us and makes us run the gauntlet, and believe me I run," reported one vagabond about an Iowa community. "The natives stands on each side for a quarter of a mile or more. . . . They hit us wit' stones and whips. . . . I'll bet there was two hundred men there, an' a dozen women." (Quoted from Bruns, *Knights of the Road*).

lawmakers strengthened the state vagrancy law several times before the end of the century. By the 1890s persons convicted of being a "tramp" (a new legal category), could be sentenced to hard labor or solitary confinement. If they refused to work, they could be put on a bread and water diet for the duration of their sentence. The ultimate effect of the anti-tramp legislation was to make the unemployed worker a criminal.

BY 1900, very few bands of itinerant harvesters followed the south-to-north work cycle through Iowa. Most Iowa farmers were now raising corn. The prevalent image of the harvest hand was no longer the proud and swaggering harvester of Hamlin Garland's memory; nor was it the dangerous tramp brandishing a bludgeon, as in the

days of the tramp scare. Both older images had been replaced by cartoon caricatures of lazy tramps or hoboes that were popularized in the national press — tramps with names such as Weary Willie and Dusty Roads, who were thankful for every chance to avoid work.

Iowans, as well as most Americans, apparently no longer felt threatened by itinerants. With the days of economic hardship thought to be a thing of the past, and with stiff vagrancy laws believed to be protecting them, city dwellers and farmers alike could afford to laugh at the antics of the emasculated and impotent caricature of the comic-strip tramp. But such laughter was likely nervous laughter — a form of protective device to manage the ambivalent feelings the vagabond workers and wanderers had inspired.

J. J. McCook, a turn-of-the-century charity reformer, took great interest in vagabonds and collected hundreds of life stories from wanderers of all descriptions. From his interviews and surveys he speculated on the roots of the

vagabond's life-style. He noted that the dividing line between the life of a normal citizen and the vagabond's was perhaps not as clear and comfortable as most people were willing to admit: "The average man grows up to live a regular life and to work as a part of it. . . . we are taught to believe that there is a necessary relation between doing our daily tasks, eating our regular meals, going to bed in a fixed place, rising at a prearranged hour, wearing a certain kind of clothes, — that there is between all this and being 'good,' an unalterable relationship. . . . when suddenly to one of us comes the discovery that we can stop all this and yet live — nay, grow fat, perhaps, and vigorous and strong; drop worry and responsibility . . . go everywhere, see everything, choose his own company, read the newspapers, vote often, commune with nature, live and die the lord of creation again. And when that discovery comes, it is apt to be fatal."

The vagabond, for McCook, was an individual who had escaped the confinements of



JUDGE (DECEMBER 7, 1895)

By the late 1890s the wanderer had become standard fare for readers of humor and satire. Farmer Greene asks, "Hain't yer got no business?" Wandering Willie replies, "W'y, yes; jes' at present I'm advocatin' better roads."

conventional life. Weary Willie and the laughter he inspired may well have represented a reverse of the work ethic — a release from some of the discontents and boredoms of settled existence.

IT WOULD BE FOLLY to assume that all Iowans treated the migratory laborer in the inhospitable fashion suggested by the newspapers and moral charity reformers of the period. Indeed, many Iowa households probably offered meals, odd jobs, and charity to wandering persons, otherwise the reformers would not have felt compelled to argue against the practice.

But the press maintained an indifferent, and at times hostile, attitude toward the itinerant workers who labored in the state. From the evidence provided by the newspapers of the period, Iowans were anything but cordial. It appears that local inhabitants merely tolerated

itinerants when their labor was required. When economic hardships or changes in agricultural practices reduced the demand for migrant laborers, a grudging hospitality gave way to open hostility. The state finally legislated laws designed to control and suppress them. Through it all, Iowans rarely recognized the itinerant for what he was — a laborer willing to work at jobs few others would take. □

NOTE ON SOURCES

Primary sources were Iowa and national newspapers and magazines of the period. Secondary sources include Hamlin Garland, *Boy Life on the Prairie* (Lincoln, 1961), and *A Son of the Middle Border* (New York, 1917). Roger A. Bruns's fine overview of hoboes, *Knights of the Road* (New York, 1981) and its thorough bibliography proved very helpful. See also: Eric H. Monkkenen, ed., *Walking to Work: Tramps in America, 1790-1935* (Lincoln, 1984). Agricultural sources include Allan G. Bogue, *From Prairie to Corn Belt: Farming on the Illinois and Iowa Prairie in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago, 1963); and Jacob A. Swisher, *Iowa, Land of Many Mills* (Iowa City, 1940).



SAVED.

FLOWERY FIELDS — "Is dere any demand fer farm laborers between here an' Squedunk?"

FARMER JONES — "Naw; I reckon th' farmers hev hired all th' help they need by this time."

FLOWERY FIELDS (shaking his partner) — "Wake up, Weary! We've struck de right road at last."