

“THE KING OF TRAMPS:”

MONIKER WRITING AND THE PUBLICITY-SEEKING TRAMP

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ABSTRACT

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Devon Hanofski

As the hobo and tramp emerged in late nineteenth century North America, the two subcultural groups had developed their own distinct cultural traditions that included marking graffiti as a communication tool. Hobo and tramp literature suggests one of the forms of graffiti, the stylized signatory pseudonyms known as “monikers,” were marked upon railroad structures as a way of staying in touch with others travelling by rail across the continent. This thesis explores further the subcultural practice of moniker writing, suggesting another motivation for the tramp’s moniker; to achieve publicity. Using examples documented by the author in North Dakota, Montana, Idaho, Washington, Oregon, California, and Texas, monikers are analyzed alongside historical newspaper articles in five case studies on tramps “Sailor Kid,” “Mover,” “A-No.1,” “Penn, the Rambler,” and “Tex K.T.” The findings propose that for some tramps, moniker writing was a means to make themselves known beyond the subculture, marked more for notoriety than correspondence. Additionally, some tramps developed relationships with the press to advance their fame and tell the story of how *they* are the “King of Tramps,” a title attributed to those who hold records in speed, distance, most places travelled, or at times self-bestowed. That is, both the moniker and the press were instruments of publicity-seeking that allowed a subset of tramps to be seen from the railroad to mountaintops. This study offers several theoretical contributions, particularly to the history of North American graffiti from an art historical and material culture perspective. As well, the research lends to the history of tramp culture generally, highlighting the career tramp as an overlooked member of the roving class.

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INTRODUCTION

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the North American railroad was adorned with the markings of thousands of men, women, and children who found shelter under its bridges, took relief in the washrooms of their depots, and travelled in or on its passenger and freight cars in search of work or as wanderlust. The graffiti left by these individuals—the hobo and the tramp—is of two distinct traditions within their subcultures. The first—what I will refer to in this thesis as the “hobo code,” was a cryptic set of symbols reportedly used by the hobo and tramp as a method of forewarning others, an intracultural form of communication that sought to prepare the transient population as they reached a new town or city. For example, an “X” marked in chalk could mean anything from “NO GOOD: too poor and know too much,”¹ or denoting that work is available.² However, as Phillips, and many other graffiti scholars,³ point out, evidence of this form of graffiti is largely unsubstantiated.⁴ Nonetheless, it is the written communication most commonly associated with the hobo and tramp.

A second form of graffiti—known as monikers—were also used by the hobo and tramp, yet have been given much less attention than their enigmatic counterpart. The literature suggests monikers are mementos of the tramp in that very place at that time and often included which direction they were to leave, symbolizing both their presence and their itinerary through a written pseudonym, date, and a cardinal direction (fig. 1).

¹ *Juniata Sentinel and Republican*, August 1, 1877, p. 3.

² “The Secret Code of Tramps,” *The San Francisco Call*, August 17, 1902, p. 11.

³ John Lennon states in Chapter 2 of the Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art, *Trains, Railroad Workers and Illegal Riders: The Subcultural World of Hobo Graffiti*, p. 28. As well, Charles Wray of The Historic Graffiti Society notes finding no evidence of this form of graffiti in his multiple years of researching and documenting hobo and tramp graffiti throughout the pacific northwest and Midwest United States.

⁴ Susan Phillips, “Following the Moniker Trail: Hobo Graffiti and the Strange Tale of Jack London, Skysail, and A-No. 1,” *Boom California*, October 17, 2019, <https://boomcalifornia.com/2019/10/17/following-the-moniker-trail-hobo-graffiti-and-the-strange-tale-of-jack-london-skysail-and-a-no-1/>.



Figure 0.1: Illustration of “Seldom Seen” moniker. (Published in *Mother Delcasse of the Hoboes: and Other Stories*, Cambridge Springs, Pa: A-No. 1 Publishing Co., 1918, p. 37. From Collection Development Department. Widener Library. Harvard University. [https://iif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:43311392\\$39i](https://iif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:43311392$39i)).

As Tully described them, monikers placed on a water tank “form a crude directory for other tramps who might be interested in the itinerary of their comrades. Once in a while a tramp sees such a moniker of a friend and starts in the direction of the owner.”⁵ In Burns’ analysis of relatively more recent markings (also known as monikers) done by railroad workers, transients, and graffiti writers on freight cars, he suggests that the early moniker—in his example, Jack London’s and “Skysail Jack”—was a mere declaration stating “I was here,” referring to the “primitive desire to sign one’s name.”⁶ Charles Wray of The Historic Graffiti Society suggests that “monikers offered a sense of identity to those who wished to remain anonymous” in a life punctuated with illegality.⁷ Like Burns, he furthers that monikers were a proclamation, a statement of “I was here,” both to those who may see the markings in the future and take interest in them, and to other hoboes and tramps as signifiers of legitimacy in their travels.

This thesis argues another history of the moniker by focussing on those I have identified as “publicity-seeking” tramps. Although many tramps found fame from their lives as vagabonds,⁸ this essay recalls a select few examples who held a unique set of shared characteristics. The publicity-seeking tramp was the professional globe-trotting careerist who sought to see the world, to set and hold titles that included records in speed and distance, and to mark their names along the way to serve as evidence and become a symbol of superiority within the tramp world.⁹ The publicity-seeking tramp also formed relations with the press; the newspaper a tool much like the moniker, used to display their tramp success. Both of these written forms, the moniker and the newspaper article (along with poetry and literature), transferred the fame developed in *their* world, to those outside of it. Although the motivations suggested by Tully, Burns, and Wray remain the consensus on moniker writing, the publicity-seeking tramp’s motivations extend beyond intracultural communication and the simple statement of their being in a particular place at a particular time. The moniker signifies a use much deeper, a mechanism that aided self-creation in a largely alienated and invisible world.

⁵ Jim Tully, *Beggars of Life* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 1924), 142.

⁶ Matthew Burns, “We Were Here: Marks, Monikers, and the Boxcar Art Tradition,” (Master’s thesis, Lehigh University, 2005), 12, accessed October 16, 2018, <https://preserve.lehigh.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1882&context=etd>.

⁷ Charles Wray, e-mail conversation with author, April 16, 2020.

⁸ See Jack London, Josiah Flynt, Walt Whitman, et al.

⁹ “King of Tramps Visits in Havre,” *The Havre Herald*, July 6, 1906, 7.

With the help of the press, moniker writing served to cement their stature, be it self-bestowed or not, as the best of their class: the “king” of tramps.

THESIS STRUCTURE AND NOTES ON METHODOLOGY

Although the tramp has been discussed in American scholarly works since at least the late 1800s, moniker writing has largely been an overlooked practice. One of the more influential pieces of late nineteenth century tramp literature, Josiah Flynt’s *Tramping with Tramps*,¹⁰ was widely read in academic circles but does not mention the practice beyond defining “monikey.”¹¹ Perhaps the most recognized academic study on the hobo and tramp was by an individual directly influenced by Flynt, Nels Anderson.¹² Anderson, a sociologist of the Chicago School wrote the first major survey about the hobo in 1923, *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man*. It too features little of the practice.

As Phillips points out in her essay on monikers documented in photographs, “references to hobo graffiti from this period are well known in literature, but less is known about works documented in photography, or carvings that survive at various sites around the United States.”¹³ Although the references Phillips refers to are well known, they are, however, not significant in analysis beyond defining the moniker as a simple pseudonym, or as written graffiti merely symbolizing their presence.¹⁴ This thesis furthers on Phillips assertion that less is known about documentation of sites found in North America, and as such, utilizes photography in much of its analysis.

In the summer of 2018, I travelled through the states of North Dakota, Montana, Idaho, Washington, Oregon, and California, searching locations along several rail lines that currently service the Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF), Union Pacific (UP), and several shortline railroads. These states were chosen given great historical worker migration and that some

¹⁰ Tim Cresswell, *The Tramp in America* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013), 60.

¹¹ Josiah Flynt, *Tramping With Tramps: Studies and Sketches of Vagabond Life* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1900), 341, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/40036/40036-h/40036-h.htm>.

¹² Cresswell, *The Tramp*, 61.

¹³ Susan Phillips, “Following the Moniker Trail: Hobo Graffiti and the Strange Tale of Jack London, Skysail, and A-No. 1,” *Boom California*, October 17, 2019, <https://boomcalifornia.com/2019/10/17/following-the-moniker-trail-hobo-graffiti-and-the-strange-tale-of-jack-london-skysail-and-a-no-1/>.

¹⁴ Tully, *Beggars*, 142.

presence of monikers had been identified in the Pacific Northwest. In 2019 I was also able to research locations in Texas, where I was for another matter. There, I focused on UP and BNSF lines between Dallas and Houston, where a moniker by Tex, King of Tramps had been found in 2014.¹⁵ The path, and the locations along the way, were chosen based on surviving structures (in particular depots and bridges), identified by the U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration, Bridgehunter.com, Depotmaps.com, and other publicly available data. However, at times learned instinct also played a role. A brick wall as seen from inches away may contain several carvings not observable from metres away. In both trips into the field, I had documented approximately two-hundred surviving examples of railroad graffiti spanning the late nineteenth century to the 1970s.

Along with photography, the newspaper has also been an under-represented source material when approaching the topic of graffiti within the hobo or tramp subcultures, and provides significant source of material for this essay. Archival newspapers have simultaneously illuminated the nature of the publicity-seeking tramp and their desire to see their name on both on public property and in print. This is described in 1909 by W.M. Herschell of *The Indianapolis News*, comparing the “new publicity-seeking tramps” to their precursors. Herschell states that “the old-time tramp was not a seeker after newspaper notoriety. He lived within his own circle and cared for no publicity that went beyond the circle. He desired to be known simply to the gang and was content to cut his ‘moniker’ or initials only where the members would find it.”¹⁶ The term “publicity-seeking tramp” became a defining slogan for this thesis.

As well, interviews were conducted alongside field and archival research to build upon moniker knowledge. The first was done with ex-tramp, Daniel Leen, who witnessed monikers in their original context beginning the 1950s when he first set out on travelling the northern United States by freight. The second was done with Charles Wray, a graffiti historian who I have communicated with on several occasions in the process of researching and writing this essay. It is in discussion with Wray that I have as well made the conscious decision to redact specifics of

¹⁵ John Lomax, “The King Of Tramps Was Here, 81 Years Ago,” *Houstonia Magazine* (*Houstonia Magazine*, October 27, 2016), <https://www.houstoniamag.com/travel-and-outdoors/2014/02/the-king-of-tramps-was-here-81-years-ago-february-2014>.

¹⁶ W M Herschell, “Weary Willie, Wayfarer, One Happy-Go-Lucky Guest of the Railroads, Now Promotes His Free Transcontinental Tours from the Roadside,” *The Indianapolis News*, September 8, 1923, 21.

moniker locations throughout this thesis. Since the beginning of my research, multiple surviving examples of historic monikers have been defaced or completely removed. The aforementioned methods are brought together to analyze specific tramps and their use of monikers as case studies. These methods culminate an alternate understanding of the tramp's moniker, countering that written in primary and secondary hobo and tramp texts. Ultimately, this approach in analysis illuminated the "publicity-seeking tramp" as a new way of understanding hobo and tramp graffiti.

The first part of this investigation—chapter one—attempts to paint a brief *mise-en-scène* of the story of North America's transcontinental railroads, a series of events that altered North American society with promises of modernity's technological and economic progress. I explore the significant cultural shift the transcontinental railroad brought to society and the individual, functioning as a tool of mobility and freedom for those displaced by the American Civil War. I then turn to the hobo and the tramp, in part a product of the Civil War, who either in search of work or in pursuit of an antidote to wanderlust, used the railway for those very reasons of mobility and freedom. Beyond exploring the origin story I also discuss the hobo and the tramp in the context of what defines them as relatively distinct groups within a more broadly used definition. The chapter ends with a discussion on the railroad as an apparatus for finding unconventional successes that ranged from publishing autobiographical literature or poetry to academia.¹⁷ Chapter two further discusses the hobo and the tramp, providing a background discussion on the communicatory practice of writing graffiti within their subculture. I briefly discuss the "hobo code," then turn to the lesser-known monikers, a defining element of the publicity-seeking tramp's practice. This is followed in chapter three with the idea of the "publicity-seeking tramp." Focusing on five tramps: "Sailor Kid," "Mover," "A-No. 1," "Penn, the Rambler," and "Tex, King of Tramps," I trace what is known about their lives through archival newspapers and examples of their monikers found through field research, analyzing their version of individualist self-creation as a transient based on the railroad. By focusing on the act of moniker writing, along with their presence in the majority of the source material—the newspaper—the motives for this form of graffiti become apparent. I conclude this essay by addressing a culmination of what is found in each chapter, defining the publicity-seeking tramp

¹⁷ Again, see Jack London, Josiah Flynt, Walt Whitman, et al.

while opening up avenues of further investigation. Each chapter does not intend to be comprehensive; however, the discussion in the following pages is meant to link the many moving parts of the hobo and tramp's history with the little known story of their practice known as moniker writing. In particular, it is meant to offer another history of the moniker as an apparatus of publicity-seeking that extends beyond the subculture.

CHAPTER 1: GOING TRANSCONTINENTAL AND THE BIRTH OF THE HOBO AND TRAMP

No man was accounted a traveled American unless he had crossed the Great Plains and the Rockies in a train of steamcars.¹⁸ —Stewart H. Holbrook in *The Story of American Railroads* (1947)

The idea of a transcontinental railroad that would connect the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific exists as far back as 1832. That year, in an Ann Arbor, Michigan weekly, an op-ed suggested the idea when relatively few had seen the Pacific coast let alone seen a locomotive.¹⁹ It was not until the middle of the American Civil War that President Abraham Lincoln prophetically suggested it would be a transcontinental railroad that would significantly alter the future of the country.²⁰ By the time the war was over, the country had indeed undergone massive railway expansion. In the United States, the network of railroads expanded from about nine thousand miles in 1850 to more than seventy thousand miles over the next twenty years.²¹

These tracks introduced a war-torn and displaced population to the “possibilities of extended mobility.”²² In *The Tramp in America*, Cresswell writes of Josiah Flynt, a would-be tramp who was hired to undertake an ethnographic investigation of this population. For Flynt, the tramp (and the hobo) was a product of the Civil War, who accustomed to life in the midst of a war that involved a life on the move (largely by railroad), had continued to live this way at wars-end.²³ Bruns has written of the conditions following the America Civil War in a similar way:

The Civil War had turned thousands of boys into disciplined foragers, resilient, hardened, able to find food and shelter in all conditions, proficient in the use of the railroad. After the war, many of these men, uprooted and inured to years of wandering and fighting for survival, found peace an unsettled time. Many had no homes or ties—or had forgotten

¹⁸ Stewart H. Holbrook, *The Story of American Railroads*. (New York: Crown Publishers, 1947), 347.

¹⁹ Holbrook, *American Railroads*, 163.

²⁰ John Lennon, *Boxcar Politics: The Hobo in U.S. Culture and Literature, 1869-1956*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), 29.

²¹ Roger A. Bruns, *Knights of the Road: A Hobo History* (New York: Methuen, 1980), 26.

²² Cresswell, *The Tramp*, 35.

²³ *Ibid.*, 35.

them. Few jobs awaited. Now, with the days of troop movements and army camp life and dodging hostile forces behind, many continued their wandering – picking up odd jobs, sleeping outdoors under any available cover, begging meals, a new kind of adventure for which they were well trained. They followed wagon roads and trails. But mostly they hit the tracks.²⁴

It is then—during and at the close of the American Civil War—that the North American hobo and tramp materialized. Their presence was quickly felt throughout the United States and later Canada as the hobo and tramp took to the railroad as a means of transportation throughout the continent. Their motivations for doing so, however, vary greatly.

In much historical literature, newspaper editorials, popular culture, and even sociological and anthropological studies, the terms “hobo” and “tramp” (and sometimes “bum”) are often used interchangeably to describe the homeless, those without work, and those who rely on the train as a source of free travel. Another term, “vag,” or vagrant, is also used.²⁵ The term hobo, for example, is at times used as an umbrella term to describe anyone riding a train illegally, and at other times in a derogatory fashion toward homeless populations generally. Likewise, the term tramp is also used as a catch-all for the transient train rider, and it too, has been used to disparage. According to Jeff Davis, the distinction between the three are as follows: The hobo is a migratory worker, a tramp is one who roams the world but refuses to work, and a bum is a tramp lacking ambition to travel.²⁶ To many, these definitions were not to be taken lightly. In a 1934 issue of *The New York Times*, Wilbur L. Caswell took offense to previous misuse of the terminology in a letter to the editor, stating: “The hobo steals rides on freight trains to get a job. He and the tramp will have nothing to do with each other, and to confuse one with the other is perilous.”²⁷

In *The Hobo*, Anderson comes to the conclusion that beyond the hobo, tramp, and bum, there are actually multiple types of homeless men, stating:

Although we cannot draw lines closely, it seems clear that there are at least five types of homeless men: (a) the seasonal worker, (b) the transient or occasional worker or hobo, (c) the tramp who "dreams and wanders" and works only when it is convenient, (d) the

²⁴ Bruns, *Knights of the Road*, 7.

²⁵ Godfrey Irwin, *American Tramp and Underworld Slang* (New York: Sears, 1930), 193.

²⁶ “Says Tramp Is Not a Hobo,” *The Sea Coast Echo*, March 22, 1913, 4.

²⁷ Wilbur L. Caswell, “Hoboes, Bums and Tramps,” *The New York Times*, March 26, 1934, 16.

bum who seldom wanders and seldom works, and (e) the home guard who lives in Hobohemia and does not leave town.²⁸

What Anderson does not cover in his description, however, is that there were also women and children who rode the rails, although in much lesser numbers.²⁹ Nonetheless, while the words “hobo” and “tramp” are often used as a blanket term, and although the distinctions between the two may be important in certain contexts, this thesis will deal primarily with the tramp, those who are more attentive to travel as opposed to finding work. As such, the term “tramp” will be used primarily, unless quoted or stated otherwise. However, the publicity-seeking tramp, as you will read further into this essay, blurs the lines between the wanderer and a worker.

While the Civil War is largely credited as the beginning of the tramp, it was the great expansion of railroads afterward that allowed for these groups to flourish. Four years following the end of the American Civil War, on May 10, 1869, at Promontory Summit, Utah, the last tie was laid between the Central Pacific’s *Jupiter* and the Union Pacific’s *Number 119* in a ceremony marking the completion of the Pacific Railroad, America’s first transcontinental.³⁰ Less than two weeks later, the “Iron Horse” left Boston, Massachusetts, destined for San Francisco in what would be the first transcontinental railroad trip in the United States.³¹ Sixteen years later in Canada, on June 28th, 1886, the Canadian Pacific ran its first transcontinental trip from Montreal, Quebec, to Port Moody, British Columbia.³² The two decades that followed the first transcontinental railways saw them expand exponentially, marking the beginning of what many consider to be the golden age of the railroad, a period that would solidify a remarkable shift in technological changes that would drastically change both countries and, in some ways, the world.³³

The exponential increase of railways in the nineteenth century was a major industrial capitalist project aimed towards nation-building, allowing for the movement of commodities

²⁸ Nels Anderson, *The Hobo: the Sociology of the Homeless Man*. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 89.

²⁹ Cresswell, 22.

³⁰ Charles F. Carter and McPherson G. Logan, *When Railroads Were New* (London: Bell, 1909), 257.

³¹ Holbrook, 347.

³² Valerie Knowles, *William C. Van Horne: Railway Titan* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2010), 96.

³³ Cresswell, 16.

from rich-in-resource landscapes that remained relatively untouched prior to the railroad. Railway expansion was part of a broader process of industrialization oriented towards a national policy of “westward expansion” in both the United States and Canada. The Pacific Railroad opened up the American West to commercial agriculture, offering a means for apple growers in Washington, sugar beet farmers in Colorado, or grain growers in the Dakotas, to move their product throughout the nation to consumers.³⁴ In the United States the rapid expansion of the railway network provided much needed economic growth in the few decades following the Civil War. In Canada, it was the entry of the pacific coastal province of British Columbia to the Union in 1871 that brought further demands on the Dominion government for provision of easy travel and trade between Eastern Canada and the West Coast. As the effects of the transcontinental south of the border became increasingly evident, Canada sought to create a distinct northern economy, one that was “competitive with that of the United States but never completely independent from it.”³⁵ It was out of this necessity the Canadian Pacific Railway began to materialize, the two countries embarking on a path to create their own self-serving national identities.³⁶

While the railroad brought about the ability to move goods across the United States, it also found itself as a mechanism for labour mobility. The thousands displaced after the Civil War became what Jack London, a well-known author and a rider of the rails himself, suggests were a “surplus army.”³⁷ Because of the number of men who had no work, these men acted as an economic necessity to keep the capitalist system afloat. In other words, London viewed the circumstances that led to this population as an issue of supply and demand. For commodities like corn, as an example, to be moved to a distinct market is one thing, but the large crops were nothing without labourers to harvest them. Labourers in the West were simply not available in the quantity needed to do such work, making seasonal migratory workers necessary. A system emerged in which labourers would travel westward for work, and when the work was completed,

³⁴ Mark Wyman, *Hoboes: Bindlestiffs, Fruit Tramps, and the Harvesting of the West* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2011), 4.

³⁵ Andy A. Den Otter, *The Philosophy of Railways: The Transcontinental Railway Idea in British North America* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 231.

³⁶ Lennon, 3.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

leave the area only to return the following harvest.³⁸ The railroad thus acted to move both the goods and the itinerant labourers whose necessary work in the harvest brought the goods to the market. These itinerant workers, by most definitions, are hoboes.

Cresswell refers to another point of inception for the tramp. He states social historian Paul T. Ringenbach maintained that tramps were “discovered” by social reformers in New York in the years after the financial panic of 1873, itself a symptom of the industrial transformation taking place. This financial panic followed a period of massive stock speculation, the rapid expansion of the agricultural West (a product, in part, of the new trans-Mississippi railroad network), and a world-wide drop in prices. More than one hundred banks collapsed, insurance firms closed and the previously booming railroad industry was hit hard. In turn, hundreds of thousands of rail workers quickly lost their jobs. The crisis was felt throughout the 1870s in an ongoing depression that would see hundreds of thousands more out of work. The result, an increasing numbers of jobless men whose presence was seen on the streets of American cities. Ringebach suggests it was at this time that social reformers noted this and came up with the new word—tramps—to describe them.³⁹ This situation was again repeated twenty years later, in 1893, when the national economy was threatened by a series of bank failures and industrial collapses, “contributing to the ever-growing band of homeless and destitute people looking for work, or just getting by.”⁴⁰ Cresswell also notes an argument made by Monkkonen, suggesting further that the working-class “incorporated tramping as a rational response to underemployment as well as unemployment.”⁴¹

Flynt described tramping as a slippery slope, through which the railroad corrupts even those train riders who were genuinely in search of employment. He states that even “out-of-works who beat their way on freight-trains very easily degenerate into professional vagabonds” once they learn “how easy it is to manage without working.”⁴² In his view, it would not take long for the riders to begin travelling for the sake of travel. Furthermore, it presented a tempting outlet for the “romantic and adventuresome boy,” who after getting a taste of life on the road, held the

³⁸ Wyman, *Hoboes*, 5.

³⁹ Cresswell, 12.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 37-38.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 37-38.

⁴² Josiah Flynt, *Tramping with Tramps; Studies and Sketches of Vagabond Life* (London: Unwin, 1900), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/40078/40078-h/40078-h.htm>, 310.

risk becoming a confirmed tramp.⁴³ The 60,000 tramps estimated by Josiah Flynt in the 1890s grew after the turn of the century to probably fifteen times that number. In 1921, for instance, 20,643 “undesirable persons” were removed during the month of October from “trains and property” of one company, the Southern Pacific, according to Dan O’Connell, chief special agent for that carrier.⁴⁴ There are no reliable statistics on early tramp populations, but some estimates of the 1900s and 1910s ranged from 350,000 to 500,000 tramps.⁴⁵

The ways in which a hobo or tramp could snag a free ride were also numerous, using the railroad as their primary mode of transportation, and to a lesser extent, ocean freighters. On a passenger car they could be found evading fares by riding the “blind,” a location named as such given that it was hidden because of its location on a small platform at the front of a baggage car which was shielded by the baggage piled against the front door.⁴⁶ This was but one nook among many crannies that a free rider would opt for. Others include the “iron plate,” a small toehold on a steam car; the “death woods,” a narrow plank above the couplings; the couplings themselves; the top of the train, or perhaps most daring of them all, the “rods.”⁴⁷ “Riding the rods” meant squeezing into a small space under a boxcar or passenger car on what was referred to as a “tramp’s ticket,” a board laid upon a series of “underbraces or gunnels running lengthwise about eighteen inches below the car,” where a hobo or tramp would lay just inches above the speeding railroad ties.⁴⁸

Matusitz states “that some early thinkers saw the birth of trains as a way for individuals to escape their miserable lives and the tedious aspects of agricultural and industrial work.”⁴⁹ Although this is in reference to the expansion of other occupations that came with the railroad, such as ironworks and engineering shops, many men who suffered trauma from the war were afflicted with an “acute mania,” making it difficult to settle down and adjust to domestic life.⁵⁰

⁴³ Flynt, *Tramping with Tramps*, 313.

⁴⁴ Holbrook, 393.

⁴⁵ Cresswell, 38-39.

⁴⁶ Bruns, 37.

⁴⁷ Cresswell, 32.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Jonathan Matusitz, “The Impact of the Railroad on American Society: A Communication Perspective of Technology,” *PASOS Revista De Turismo y Patrimonio Cultural* 7, no. 3 (2009): 451-460, <https://doi.org/10.25145/j.pasos.2009.07.032>, 458.

⁵⁰ Todd DePastino, *Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 18.

Likewise, many could not handle the “monotonous quiet of home” after the war and turned to a life of unfocused wandering.⁵¹ This, all in a time that coincides with the beautiful natural wonders of the west becoming newly accessible by train. This behaviour of abandonment was not only seen in veterans but in others considered once “well-to-do.” One example was “Seldom Seen,” a tramp known for carving his signature along the length of Pullman passenger cars. A former attorney in Memphis, Tennessee, Seldom Seen lost his job “through some malpractice, the outcome of which he was unable to control.”⁵² Without money, the future “Prince of Tramps” took to tramping until he was able to remove himself from the—as he referred to it—condition of wanderlust. Seldom Seen is one of many examples who found joy in the life of wandering and became a “professional” tramp. Decades later, north of the border, a similar story was accounted and retold. In McCallum’s exploration of what may be the only book written by a self-identified Canadian hobo during the Great Depression, *Vancouver Through the Eyes of a Hobo*, the author, “V.W.F.,” states that “while initially struck by the country’s natural beauty,” they found themselves “confronted again with cities, factories and Profit and Loss, and poverty and unemployment, and hate and crime.” With that, the author made the decision to “roam once again,” mapping a life that resisted the city and the ills perceived by V.W.F for a journey McCallum poignantly calls “personal freedom in Nature.”⁵³ While the reasons in the pursuit of life as a hobo or tramp are diverse, V.W.F., among others, “characterized the hobo life with the terms of a pastoral romance, in which Nature was understood as morally and aesthetically superior to the economic modernism of the City.”⁵⁴

DePastino writes that the tramp challenged the social order, “putting their own ideals of ‘homelessness’ on prominent display, especially as they gathered along the ‘main stem’ of the industrial city.”⁵⁵ Although the “tramp scare” was at its height in the 1880s and 1890s, it began nearly as soon as the tramp was defined; and did not end until World War Two.⁵⁶ Cresswell wrote of the manner in which tramps were referred, stating: “Tramps were pests, a disease. They

⁵¹ DePastino, *Citizen Hobo*, 18.

⁵² “The Hunted Prince of Tramps,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, accessed September 19, 2018, 3.

⁵³ Todd McCallum, “Vancouver through the Eyes of a Hobo: Experience, Identity, and Value in the Writing of Canada’s Depression-Era Tramps,” *Labour / Le Travail* 59 (2007): 43-68, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25149754>, 56-57.

⁵⁴ McCallum, “Vancouver,” 53.

⁵⁵ DePastino, *Citizen Hobo*, xviii.

⁵⁶ Cresswell, 9.

descended on small rural towns like ‘plagues of locusts.’ They swarmed and stormed. They formed armies and invaded. They appeared closer to nature than to culture.”⁵⁷ It was, for the most part, the popular urban press that stoked the flames of the tramp scare, treating them in an incredibly negative light; especially in the earliest tramp population. In what may be the most well-known example of the grim sensationalism found in newspapers of the time, the 1877 *Chicago Tribune* published a piece that read:

The simplest plan, probably, where one is not a member of the Humane Society, is to put a little strychnine or arsenic in the meat and other supplies furnished the tramp. This produces death within a comparatively short period of time, is a warning to other tramps ta keep out of the neighborhood, keeps the Coroner in good humor, and saves one's chickens and other portable property from constant destruction.⁵⁸

It is without question that the tramp was largely viewed as a menace to society in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, a view lasting well into the next century. However, the decades at the turn of the century began to see, at times, the tramp in a new light. Brown writes of the “intellectual vagabond” and the “hobo hero,” two examples of altered perceptions, “established in their purest forms roughly between 1890 and 1910.”⁵⁹ The “intellectual vagabond” referred to the poets and writers of the bohemian variety. The “hobo hero” on the other hand, were the Jack London types, what Brown refers to as the “‘participant-observers,’ whose accounts of the hobo's ‘reality’ were permeated with a romantic conception of the life of the road.”⁶⁰ Moreover, he continues that for both figures, life on the road held the prospect of personal transformation; a transformation that included “physical and spiritual liberation, masculine self-creation, and the seductive illusion of infinite possibility.”⁶¹ Lenz, in his dissertation on the American tramp, discusses the tramp as a figure of American success, a

⁵⁷ Cresswell, 9.

⁵⁸ Jeffrey S. Brown (1992), http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/hst_theses/23?utm_source=digitalcommons.brockport.edu%2Fhst_theses%2F23&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages, 12.

⁵⁹ Jeffrey Scott Brown (1992), 6.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

cultural hero who rises to the top from what much of society would consider the bottom.⁶² He cites figures such as Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, oil magnate H.L. Hunt, poet Carl Sandburg, novelists Louis L'Amour and James Michener, and singer and actor Burl Ives. Other later examples would include John Dos Passos and Jack Kerouac, those who as well may be considered “hobo heroes,” and have at least, been considered American cultural heroes.⁶³

While the tramp permeated American culture as a successful hero-type, they began as well to find success in other areas. Josiah Flynt, the tramp sociologist best known for his book, *Tramping With Tramps*, sought fame from life as a tramp, although through a slightly different method. Flynt sought to learn about the lives of tramps, and to “know it well,” he states, “I must become joined to it and be part and parcel of its various manifestations.”⁶⁴ For Flynt, his foray into tramping was in one aspect a sociological learning exercise about the tramp, and on the other hand, the catalyst of his career. In his autobiography, *My Life*, Flynt expresses:

The mere reading of some biography of a self-made man, who had struggled independently in the world from about my age on to the Presidency perhaps, would fire me with a desire to do likewise in some far-off community...the appeal to go elsewhere carried with it a picture of independence, midnight oil and self-supporting work which fascinated me, and at an age when most boys have got over their gusto for wandering, I would start off in secret, to return famous, some day, I hoped.⁶⁵

For Flynt, tramping was a way in which to seek fame, a desire to be self-made. For many others, tramping hearkens back down to the simple idea of freedom. It provides an accessible—yet certainly illegal and dangerous—avenue to see the world.

While the story of the hobo and tramp is not a new one, it is lesser known that hopping freight trains for pleasure was and continues to be a phenomenon not historically unique to the United States and Canada. The United Kingdom seems to have predated this, with a publication in 1845 of *Tales of the Trains* by Charles Lever, known as the “Tilbury Tramp.”⁶⁶ In 1930s

⁶² Christopher Wylie Lenz, *The Railroad Tramp and the American Cultural Imaginary* (dissertation, 2013), https://ufdcimages.uflib.ufl.edu/UF/E0/04/52/50/00001/LENZ_C.pdf, 174-175.

⁶³ Frederick Feied, *No Pie in the Sky: the Hobo as American Cultural Hero in the Works of Jack London, John Dos Passos, and Jack Kerouac* (New York: Citadel Press, 1964).

⁶⁴ Flynt, 313.

⁶⁵ Josiah Flynt, *My Life* (New York: Outing Pub. Co., 1908), 12.

⁶⁶ Charles Lever, *Tales of the Trains* (London: Downey, 1899).

Russia, the government was reportedly more tough on their own version of the hobo than the United States and Canada. The harshness toward transients came through the Council of Commissars who issued an order to imprison for six months anyone caught stealing a ride on trains, whereas the deliberate damage of railroad property was punishable for up to three years.⁶⁷ Such measures indicate there was a relatively significant population hopping freights in Russia at that time. The details and extent to which deliberate property damage was done to Russian trains also proposes further research into the prospect of historical graffiti on the Russian railway. Germany too, had at least one tramp “king”—Karl Drygalski. Drygalski, who “just wanted to see the world,” was caught and subsequently sentenced to six weeks in prison for beating the Reich’s railway for 45,000 free kilometres over a span of five months in 1929.⁶⁸ Alongside the Tilbury tramp, Russian train hoppers, and the German “tramp king,” tramps in America appear to have also beat other railroad systems overseas, with many tramps making the claim of voyaging on ocean freighters to several countries with significant railroad infrastructure.⁶⁹ Perhaps any country with a railroad has had some individuals in great or small numbers, at some moment in time, use the railroad as a means to travel freely. However, the historically extensive use of railroad graffiti was something wholly North American.

⁶⁷ “Soviet Wars on Hoboes,” *The New York Times*, June 4, 1934, 8.

⁶⁸ “Germany’s Tramp King Does Much Traveling,” *The Cuero Record*, December 10, 1929, 3.

⁶⁹ See “A-No.1,” “Penn, the Rambler,” “Tex, King of Tramps,” et al.

CHAPTER 2: THE MARK OF THE TRAMP

The hobo and tramp have several distinct cultural traditions, many of which have caught the attention of those outside their subculture. The annual hobo convention at Britt, Iowa, is one example, a convention that is now organized by the local chamber of commerce.⁷⁰ Another tradition is the practice of writing graffiti. The hobo and tramp used graffiti in two ways, both as intracultural communication, yet serving different purposes. The first, the “hobo code,” are the peculiar markings reportedly used by hoboes to give forewarning to other hoboes regarding, among other things, food and safety. The second are monikers, a form of graffiti that shares more similarities with the graffiti of today than it does the hobo code, that accomplishes two things: the first, to display the presence of “I am here;” the second, as a form of sharing your whereabouts among an, at times, large group of transient individuals spread throughout North America and the world.

There is no specific moment in which writing graffiti became a common practice for hoboes or tramps, but it is likely that as soon as the hobo and tramp appeared on the railway, they began to mark railroad property. Graffiti is an ancient phenomenon, and the hobo and tramp would have also likely come into contact with markings from the general public at some point in their lives. Another possibility is the influence of markings made by railroad workers on railroad infrastructure, which began in “the earliest days of the railroad.”⁷¹ These marks were done in chalk to communicate to other workmen which cars were to be uncoupled or reassembled, or which cars needed maintenance, and were therefore largely utilitarian.

In an 1889 article from the *Great Falls Leader*, the author writes of a “mysterious form of telegraphy” which “no man has ever obtained a complete key to the system.”⁷² The author is referring to a form of graffiti done by hoboes known as the “hobo code,” “hobo hieroglyphics,” or other terms that suggest a secretive language used between hobos. The article contains several images of the peculiar markings that reportedly act as a form of intracultural communication.

⁷⁰ “Welcome to the Annual Hobo Convention,” *Britt News Tribune*, June 23, 2016, https://globegazette.com/community/brittnewstribune/welcome-to-the-annual-hobo-convention/article_c7cf33dd-9162-58fb-bb5b-04be30be43f7.html.

⁷¹ Matthew Burns (2005),

<https://preserve.lehigh.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1882&context=etd>, 12.

⁷² “Tramps’ Signs,” *The Great Falls Leader*, February 12, 1889, 2.

One of the marks is said to represent the direction in which the hobo who scrawled the graffiti is heading, an arrow forming a circle where the arrowhead represents the direction they are travelling (Fig. 2.1).

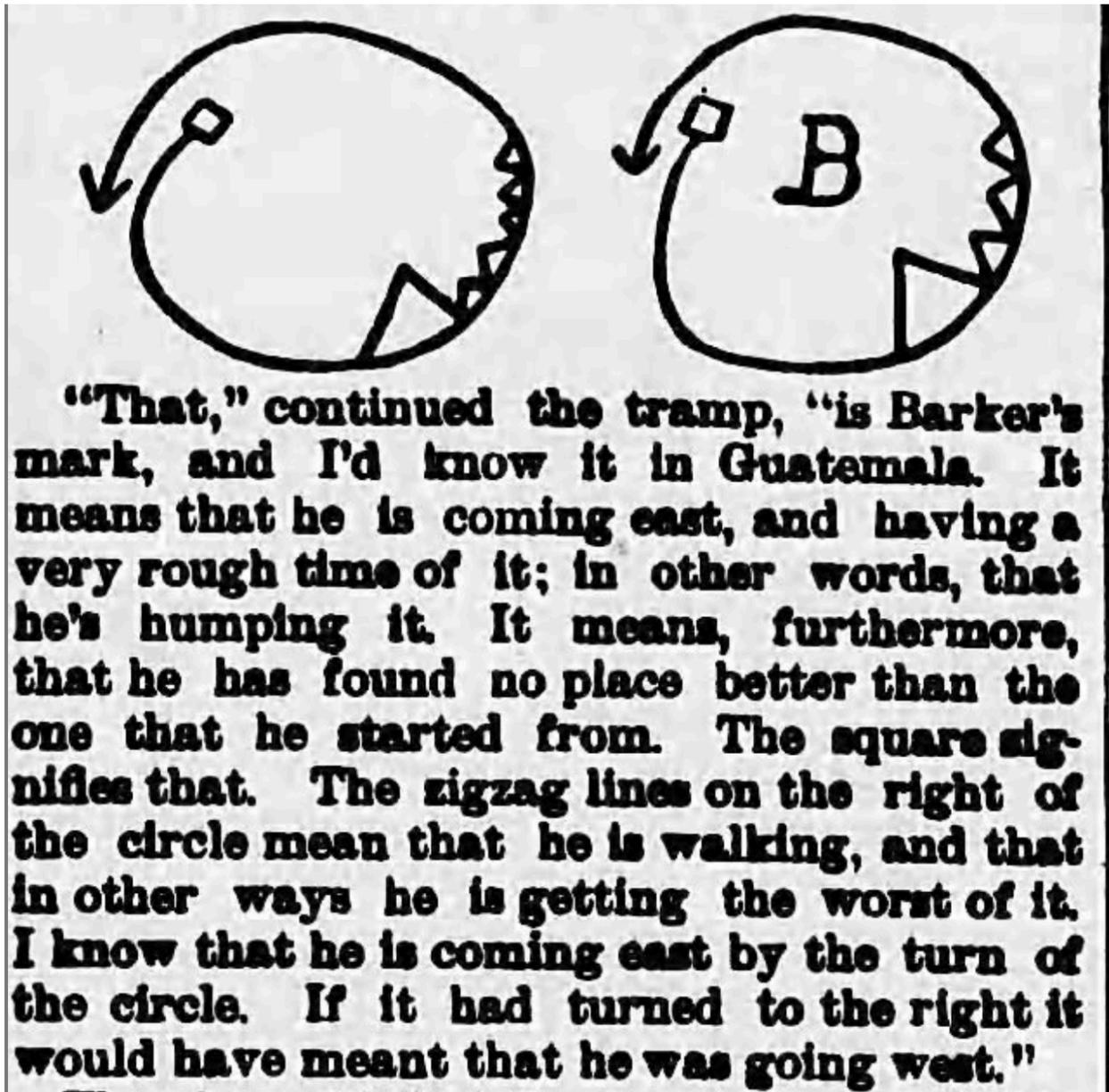


Figure 2.1: Illustration of tramp sign depicting direction of travel. (Published in “Tramps’ Signs,” *The Great Falls Leader*, cFebruary 12, 1889, 2).

Inside the circle is a square and a “zig-zag” representing that they have “found no place better than where they started,” and are currently travelling on foot. The supposed uncovering of a language created by vagabonds that is unknown—yet all around us—is nothing new. In fact, examples of cracking the code made by members of the “underworld,” so to speak, from writers, journalists, and the curious, go back several decades prior.⁷³

In Hotten’s *The Slang Dictionary*, he devotes an entire section of his book to hieroglyphics used by vagabonds in the United Kingdom, suggesting earlier roots to this form of public communication. Hotten lays out several pieces of evidence for this form of communication, including a report to the General Board of Health, Parish of Havant, Hampshire, describing the markings:

The vagrant’s mark may be seen in Havant, on corners of streets, on door-posts, on house-steps. Simple as these chalk-lines appear, they inform the succeeding vagrants of all they require to know; and a few white scratches may say, “Be importunate,” or “Pass on.”⁷⁴

What Hotten is describing here are marks created by the tramps and vagabonds of the United Kingdom. Like the hobo and tramp of North America that came several decades later, the tramp in nineteenth century England was also described as a vagrant of the criminal class, implying the tramp was less about leisure than criminal activity. Hotten questions the origins of the signs discussed in the report, noting that even in mid-nineteenth century England the “answers have been many and various.”⁷⁵ He asks whether it may be the “Gipsies,” noting similarities in the tradition of transiency and their own method of public communication. The Gipsy method described by Hotten is a practice of applying public markings as a means of following their brethren. Absent of drawn symbols, these public markings include specific placement of organic materials such as grass and sticks, but like the hobo code their intention is to inform. Jan Yoors, who lived and travelled with the Roma Kumpania⁷⁶ for a decade, confirms this communicatory practice in his book, *The Gypsies*. Yoors recalls the Roma using a similar communicative system

⁷³ “Tramps’ Signs,” 2.

⁷⁴ John Camden Hotten, *The Slang Dictionary: Etymological, Historical, and Anecdotal* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1898), 27.

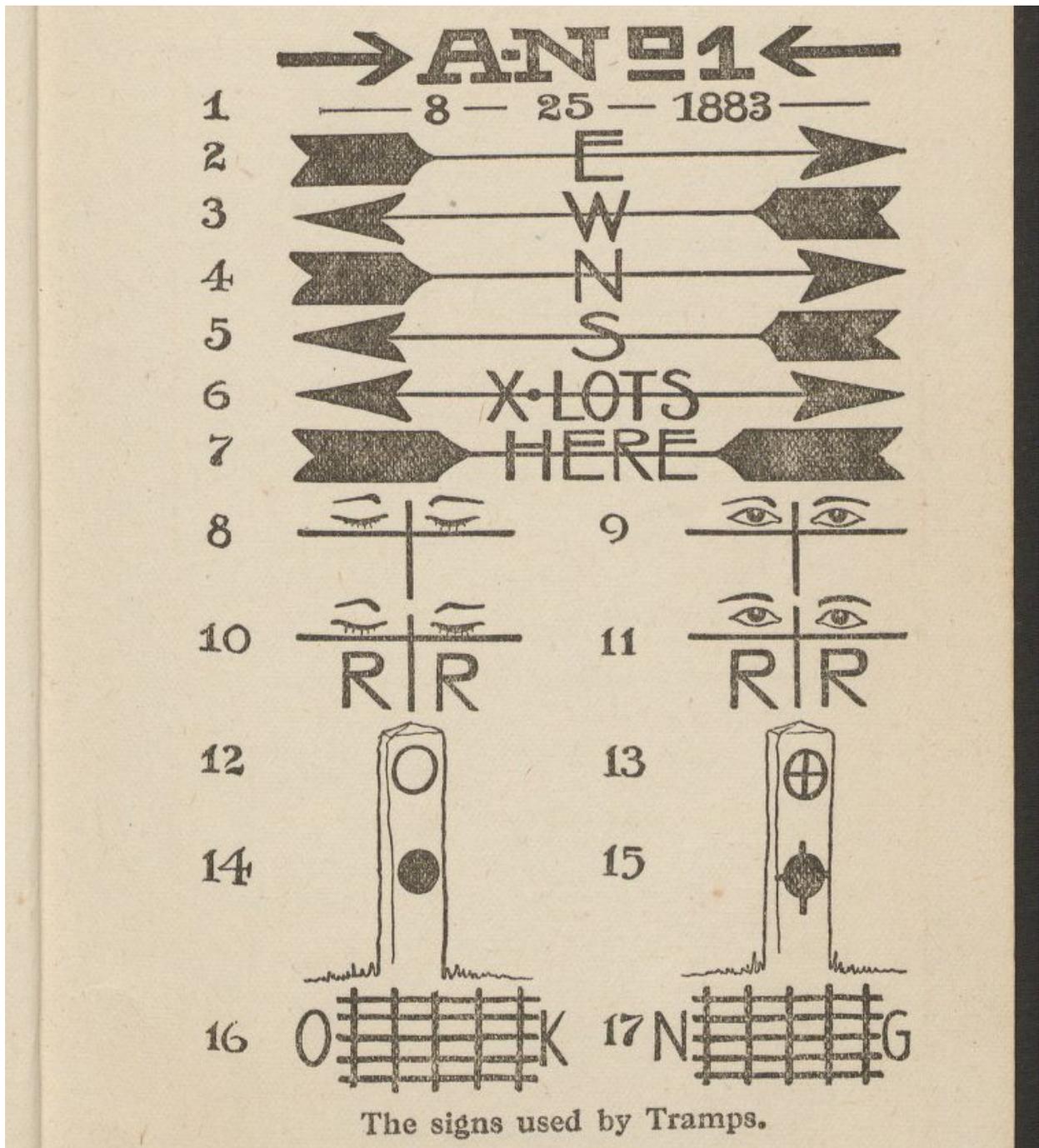
⁷⁵ Hotten, 28.

⁷⁶ The larger groups of Romani family units, the “horde.”

using organic materials as described in Hotten's dictionary several decades earlier.⁷⁷ The direction the caravan was travelling, for example, was shared by tying a piece of fabric to a tree, above a gathering of rocks or twigs pointing toward the direction.

In North America, many newspapers published articles "decoding" these markings adding to the public knowledge and heightening a romantic idea of what these markings were for. A 1914 article in the *Dayton Daily News*, entitled "MARK OF THE TRAMP," is an example of how the media may have helped manufacture the story of the hobo code. It tells the story of multiple unidentified individuals who have purportedly encountered the marks, and warns its readers that they too may be pestered by a tramp if they do not obliterate the markings when found. The author states it was "by chance" that the code of the tramp, a diagram taken from A-No.1's book, *Hobo-Camp-Fire-Tales*, had become available to the author (Fig. 2.2). The author's statement is a clear fabrication given the book was published three years prior and publicly available. In addition, the article contains multiple images showing self-identified reproductions of A-No.1's moniker in staged locations referred to as "code marks" matching A-No.1's diagram.

⁷⁷ Jan Yoors, *The Gypsies* (Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1987), 126.



The signs used by Tramps.

Figure 2.2: Illustration used in “MARK OF THE TRAMP.” (Published in *Hobo-Camp-Fire-Tales*, Cambridge Springs, Pa: A-No. 1 Publishing Co., 1911, 11. From Collection Development Department. Widener Library. Harvard University. [https://iif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:43311395\\$13i](https://iif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:43311395$13i)).

Among the several newspaper accounts attesting a theory to the signs of the hobo, there did exist critics; however, they would appear to be in much smaller numbers. In 1900, an authorless article from *The New York Sun* wrote of the “popular notion that tramps have a mysterious sign language,” and that “elaborate accounts have been written in newspapers about the amount of information they give to one another in this way, and many persons believe that tramps rely on a sign language in their begging.”⁷⁸ The author does state, however, that there did exist a “crude system of marking ‘good’ houses, but these vagrants do not belong to the rank and file of the tramp army, and are comparatively few in numbers.” However, the markings of the “hobo code” were also said to be occasional rather than usual. The author’s theory on the appearance of tramps at people’s homes was not that of a “sign language,” but verbal communication that a “good” house was shared among them. The author continues:

Probably one of the main reasons why the public has imagined that tramps use hieroglyphics in their profession is that when charity is shown to one of them the giver is frequently plagued with a visitation from a raft of beggars. This phenomenon, however, is easily explained without recourse to the sign language theory.⁷⁹

While there have been critics, the narrative that the widespread existence of these signs has permeated general thought on the hobo, from earlier known examples like Allan Pinkerton’s 1878 *Strikers, Communists, Tramps and Detectives*, to later academic treatises on the hobo and tramp.⁸⁰

In academic circles, the “code” has typically been seen as an aside to other sociological topics. As early as 1924, sociologist Towne Nylander made an uncited claim of signs being used

⁷⁸ “APPEALS MADE BY TRAMPS,” *The Butte Daily Post*, January 1, 1900, 7.

⁷⁹ “APPEALS MADE BY TRAMPS,” 7.

⁸⁰ Allan Pinkerton, *Strikers, Communists, Tramps and Detectives* (New York: G.W. Carleton & Co., 1878),

https://books.google.ca/books/about/Strikers_Communist_Tramps_and_Detective.html?id=Sl3PAAAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=kp_read_button&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=signs&f=false, 57.

by tramps in his study of the migratory population of the United States.⁸¹ Another essay of hobo sociology is Floyd William Howell's 1968 thesis, *Exploratory Investigation of the "Jungle" and Some of its Members*, Howell set out to "explain some of the 'hobos' attitudes and reasons for living in his own special society" by interviewing several hobos who were, at that moment, taking residence in a Montana jungle.⁸² As part of the sociological investigation, Howell also sought to determine if a "code" was currently being used by those camping along the Missoula trackside. His results concluded that they were not being used, with none of his examples of "code" markings being recognized by the interviewees, many of whom began their lives as a hobo or tramp in the 1920s and 1930s. Howell continues by stating the interviewees claim this form of graffiti was no longer in use and that communication had become completely verbal.⁸³ What can be taken away from Howell's essay is further evidence that although these signs may have existed to some extent, for an unknown period of time, they were not as widespread as early literature and newspaper articles would suggest.

Today, a search on the internet for "hobo signs" will bring up a number of articles perpetuating the idea these markings were a common occurrence. The consensus between hobo graffiti researchers states the opposite. Lennon views modern consumer culture and journalistic sensationalism on the widespread belief in these symbols, stating:

In my research, I have found no evidence for this type of sophisticated symbolic language being used by a large swath of the hobo population. Hobo graffiti does not reveal an intricate symbolic written language written by hobos during the Great Depression (and, conveniently, [that] can be sold on t-shirts and hats on eBay in the present day).⁸⁴

Although these signs dominate historic and current perceptions of hobo graffiti, categorical examples of these markings are not known to exist. What remain are archives of sensationalist newspaper columns, that when read in their original context, exemplify the ongoing "tramp

⁸¹ Towne Nylander, "The Migratory Population of the United States," *American Journal of Sociology*, 30 no. 2 (September 1924): 129-153, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1086/213671>, 131.

⁸² "Jungle" is a term used to describe hobo and tramp encampments, located near the "catch out," the point best suited for catching a train.

⁸³ Floyd William Howell, (1968). <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/5376>, 38.

⁸⁴ John Lennon, *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art* (Abingdon: Routledge, accessed March 26, 2019), 29.

scare.” Included are accounts of signs from hoboes and tramps themselves, that for all is known, did not exist to the extent they were reported to. Whether there is any relation between earlier forms of communication as practiced by the Romani, European vagabonds, and their North American counterparts, is not entirely known. However, it is without question that graffiti played another significant role the lives of many tramps, and continues to play a significant role in hobo and tramp mythology.

The romanticization of the hobo code within the press and popular culture has, even to this day, cultivated an understanding of hobo and tramp graffiti that largely overshadows another form of graffiti known as monikers. A moniker, and its several written and verbal variants of “monica,” “moniker,” “monniker,” “monekeer,” or “monicker,” to name a few, is the “tramp coat of arms,” the mark or markings which the tramp or hobo applied to water tanks, on depots, and anywhere else they may have spent time.⁸⁵ Monikers were said to be written as a means to keep track of one another throughout their highly transient lives, a form of intracultural communication akin to the hobo code. As Tully describes it, monikers “form a crude directory for other tramps who might be interested in the itinerary of their comrades. Once in a while a tramp sees such a moniker of a friend and starts in the direction of the owner.”⁸⁶

The term’s origins are obscure, although the term “monakeer” shows up at least as early as 1860 in the *Dictionary of Modern Slang, Cant, and Vulgar Words*, defined as simply a person’s name or signature.⁸⁷ The book is a collection of terminology used at the time in in the streets of London, the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, the Houses of Parliament, the Dens of St. Giles, and the palaces of St. James, which suggests the term—like the “hobo code”—may have been brought to America by vagrant members of the Victorian era underworld and given new life in the North American hobo and tramp subculture.

Similarly, in *American Tramp and Underworld Slang*, the term moniker refers to a nickname deriving from Old English thieves’ cant. Elaborating on the makeup of a moniker, the dictionary states:

⁸⁵ *The Indianapolis Star*, August 11, 1941, 8.

⁸⁶ Tully, *Beggars*, 142.

⁸⁷ John Camden Hotten, *A Dictionary of Modern Slang, Cant, and, Vulgar Words* (London: HardPress Publishing, 2012), 174.

The nicknames referred to are common, in fact almost invariably used, in tramp and underworld circles, formed of the person's proper name and a characteristic, or of that characteristic and the name of the town or city from which he came, as "Blinky Smith," "Dopey Benny," "Chicago Red," "Oklahoma Slim," etc.⁸⁸

These characteristics include locations such as the city, province, or state the tramp is from, their ethnicity, affiliations such as labour organizations, age, body type or features, and self-styled proclamations, such as "The Extraordinary." Jack London's autobiographical memoir, *The Road*, goes into great detail describing the various ways in which a moniker could be created:

"Monicas" are the nom-de-rails that hoboes assume or accept when thrust upon them by their fellows. Leary Joe, for instance, was timid, and was so named by his fellows. No self-respecting hobo would select Stew Bum for himself. Very few tramps care to remember their pasts during which they ignobly worked, so monicas based upon trades are very rare, though I remember having met the following: Moulder Blackey, Painter Red, Chi Plumber, Boiler-maker, Sailor Boy, and Printer Bo. "Chi" (pronounced shy), by the way, is the argot for "Chicago."⁸⁹

A common moniker is based upon geography, typically noting where they were from, like a city, state, or their heritage. Coupled with a descriptor, which could be their ethnicity (many of which were rooted in stereotypes), London continues to give examples of monikers:

Texas Shine or Toledo Shine convey both race and nativity. Among those that incorporated their race, I recollect the following: Frisco Sheeny, New York Irish, Michigan French, English Jack, Cockney Kid, and Milwaukee Dutch. Others seem to take their monicas in part from the color-schemes stamped upon them at birth, such as: Chi Whitey, New Jersey Red, Boston Blackey, Seattle Browney, and Yellow Dick and Yellow Belly—the last a Creole from Mississippi, who, I suspect, had his monica thrust upon him.⁹⁰

Others, London states, may bear names suggesting "physical peculiarities," such as: Vancouver Slim, Detroit Shorty, Ohio Fatty, Long Jack, Big Jim, Little Joe, New York Blink, Chi Nosey, and Broken-backed Ben. London ends his breakdown of the moniker by noting "road-kids" almost always carry the name "Kid" in their moniker. Some of whom London encountered were

⁸⁸ Godfrey Irwin, *American Tramp and Underworld Slang* (New York: Sears, 1930), 130.

⁸⁹ Jack London, *The Road*. New York: Macmillan, 1907. Accessed April 10, 2018.

[http://www.freeclassicebooks.com/London Jack/The Road.pdf.](http://www.freeclassicebooks.com/London%20Jack/The%20Road.pdf), 101-102.

⁹⁰ London, *The Road*, 101-102.

the likes of Iowa Kid, Blind Kid, Holy Kid, Swift Kid, Corduroy Kid, and “Orator Kid (who could tell how it happened), and Lippy Kid (who was insolent, depend upon it).”⁹¹

A hobo or tramp held no obligation to possess a single name over their career either. Jack London took three monikers during his days as a tramp; “Sailor Kid,” “Frisco Kid,” and “Sailor Jack.” In one of his earlier moments in tramping, London took on the title of “Sailor Kid” as he set out over “the hill” (the Sierra Nevada), both in reference to his work in the ocean and his age and stature in the tramp world at the time. After passing “the hill” and putting the Rockies between himself and his native state of California, he then took on the moniker of “Frisco Kid,” a tribute to his hometown of San Francisco. It was not until later that London began to use the moniker “Sailor Jack,” done in an effort to differentiate himself from the “gay-cats,” a term used derisively toward a young or fresh tramp.⁹² London did this by dropping the “Kid” from his moniker entirely, as he describes further in *The Road*:

“Gay-cats” also come to grief at the hands of the road-kids. In more familiar parlance, gay-cats are short-horns, chechaquos, new chums, or tenderfeet. A gay-cat is a newcomer on The Road who is man-grown, or, at least, youth-grown. A boy on The Road, on the other hand, no matter how green he is, is never a gay-cat; he is a roadkid or a “punk,” and if he travels with a “profesh,” he is known possessively as a “prushun.” I was never a prushun, for I did not take kindly to possession. I was first a road-kid and then a profesh. Because I started in young, I practically skipped my gay-cat apprenticeship. For a short period, during the time I was exchanging my Frisco Kid monica for that of Sailor Jack, I labored under the suspicion of being a gay-cat.⁹³

Using “Toledo Kid” as an example, “A-No. 1” states that only the last part of moniker is used in conversation. For example, written on a water tank may be the moniker of “Toledo Kid,” but in discussion the tramp would be referred to simply as “Kid.”⁹⁴

When it comes to the written moniker, there are no specific guidelines in their application. In his book *Hobo-Camp-Fire-Tales*, “A-No. 1” states that a complete written moniker includes a hobo or tramp’s road name, the date, and direction of their travel, which

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Godfrey Irwin, 84.

⁹³ London, 132-133.

⁹⁴ A-No. 1. *Hobo-Camp-Fire-Tales*. Cambridge Springs, Pennsylvania: A-No.1 Publishing Co., 1911. <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:8623663>, 14.

would often include the cardinal direction or an arrow, or a combination of both.⁹⁵ However, monikers range in materials used, locations, and some may or may not include any of the attributes described by “A-No. 1.”

Some hobos and tramps took artistic license in their work, adding designs or flourishing their names in an ornate or interesting manner. “Red-Chi,” a red-haired painter from Chicago, would reportedly draw a paintbrush with the words “RED-CHI” placed within the brush’s bristle.⁹⁶ In *Beggars of Life*, Tully describes a scene witnessed on a trip to San Antonio, Texas, among several hobos in a passenger coach, in which one “amused himself by cutting his moniker on the window sill,” and when finished “stood up and admired it like an artist.”⁹⁷ Others, like “Tex, King of Tramps,” would refer to themselves as an artist and their monikers as art, displaying a sense of pride in their work.⁹⁸ “Tex, King of Tramps,” however, took moniker writing to a level not seen in earlier generations of tramps. As seen in Fig. 2.4, the often large-scale monikers of “Tex, King of Tramps” were meticulously painted at the level of a professional sign painter.

⁹⁵ Again, see figure 2.2.

⁹⁶ Dixie Jones. “The Yellow Pages of the Hobo Set.” *Advocate-Messenger*, Danville, Kentucky, 1976. August 1. Accessed March 6, 2018. <https://newspapers.com/image/142597143/?terms=yellow%2Bpages%2Bof%2Bthe%2Bhobo%2Bset>, 39.

⁹⁷ Tully, 142.

⁹⁸ “‘T.E.X.’ Self-Styled King of Tramps, Now in Jail, Relates by Poem and Tale The Joys and Woes of Hitting the Trail.” *The Billings Gazette*, July 26, 1931, 1-2.



Figure 2.3: “Tex” King of Tramps, Eastbound in Washington State on 7’12’41. (Digital photograph by the author, 2018).

In contrast to the more elaborate designs done by the likes of CHI-RED or Tex, King of Tramps, many monikers were quite crude, simple initials and nothing more. In Fig. 2.4, a shed is shown that remains (with others) today in California's Bay Area. The shed is covered with hundreds of monikers ranging from those described as relatively "complete" by A-No.1's standard, to simple initials and imagery. The shed is as an example of the wide range of styles and designs a tramp would mark. In Fig. 2.5, two monikers: "Union Bill" (centre) and "Montrock Slim" (on the right), are just a couple examples of the many markings carved into these structures. Dated 1899, the Montrock Slim carving is the oldest dated example in this location. However, for encompassing what is likely several decades of monikers, this location only portrays a single technique in their application—carving.



Figure 2.4: Shed featuring hundreds of hobo and tramp markings, California. (Digital photograph by the author, 2018).

Carving monikers was one of the more common techniques a tramp would employ. Carving their moniker into wood, be it on or inside a depot, or on any of the several wooden structures found in a rail yard, required only a knife, or any other sharp stylus that could penetrate wood. Moniker carvings can be found on telephone poles such as this surviving example by Tex K.T., seen in Fig. 2.7, who according to Hank Zuber, also carved it in “every telephone pole within five miles” of the Amana, Iowa, depot.⁹⁹



Figure 2.6: “Tex” K.T. carved into an Oregon telephone pole. (Digital photograph by the author, 2018).

⁹⁹ Cliff Trumpold. “Hobo Sketches by an Amana Station Agent,” *The Palimpsest* 70, 1989, 104.

A-No. 1 too, carved his moniker into telephone poles according to Bethel, Maine, historian Eva Bean, which suggests that it may have been a relatively common practice.¹⁰⁰ One common technique used to inscribe monikers into wooden surfaces was to carve a shallow relief of their lettering, the negative space and block letters mimicking a three-dimensional effect, seen in this nearly completely weathered away example (Fig. 2.7). This appears to be more common in earlier markings, seen in both the previous “Union Bill” and “Montrock Slim” examples as well, although dating monikers can prove to be difficult if a date does not accompany them. In that case, it is possible to determine a window (although far from conclusive) with historical knowledge of the structure or surface the marking is on. Monikers were also applied by scribing concrete, and stone, writing with pencil, grease, charcoal, or painting with a brush, and have been found everywhere from railroad property to government buildings and jail cell walls. Monikers are also found in remote places a tramp may find themselves in their wanderings, such as the sandstone outcroppings known as “Moon Rocks” at the Bonny Doon Ecological Reserve in California’s Santa Cruz Mountains.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Alison Aloisio. “Famous Hobo Left Mark in Bethel Area,” *Lewiston Sun Journal*, 2015.

¹⁰¹ In a direct message to the author vis Instagram, July 13, 2018, “@peace_cma_” stated that among the numerous carvings at “Moon Rocks” was one that read “Tex, King of Tramps.”



Figure 2.7: Unknown moniker weathered on an Oregon shed. (Digital photograph by the author, 2018).

In more recent decades, the term moniker is used to distinguish a form of graffiti that shares some relation to the early hobo and tramp monikers but is done by railroad workers, some hobos and tramps, and modern graffiti writers. These monikers, however, are almost exclusively applied to railroad cars and are almost entirely done in an oil-based paint stick that is reminiscent of chalk. As Phillips notes, a 1938 issue of *Railroad Magazine* indicates “train writing was practiced by railroad employees as often as by hobos themselves. As with hobos, railway workers beginning in the late-nineteenth century created insignias, chalked them on boxcars, and watched the marks travel on the rails as they did.”¹⁰² Former railroad worker, “buZ blurr,” who has been a member of the moniker writing culture for decades, states, “romantics” mythicized that monikers were the work of hoboes, although the vast majority were done by employees of the railroad.¹⁰³ This is also noted by Burns in his thesis, *We Were Here: Marks, Monikers, and the Boxcar Art Tradition*.¹⁰⁴ He charts the history of monikers and some of the most well-known moniker artists from the 1930s onward, including “Bozo Texino,” an iconic smoking cowboy motif done by J.H. McKinley, a Missouri Pacific Lines employee and subject of Bill Daniel’s 2005 documentary, *Who is Bozo Texino?*.¹⁰⁵

While the monikers described by buZ blurr and Burns are those done primarily on railroad cars by railroad workers, the moniker discussed in this thesis appears to have its roots at least a few decades earlier. They were done by the hobo and the tramp, perhaps influencing the work of the railroad worker and contributing to the mythicization that buZ blurr referred to. In fact, the moniker of the tramp, until recently, has largely been misrepresented. Early literature on the tramp speaks little about the moniker beyond its use as a nickname, simple descriptions of their style, and the purpose of such markings beyond intracultural communication and a mark of the ego. But, another use for the moniker, rooted in the same notions of notoriety and companionship, does exist. Although the motivations for moniker writing are varied, they are—

¹⁰² Susan A. Phillips, “Notes from the Margins: Graffiti, Community, and Environment in Los Angeles,” *Journal of the West* 48, no. 2 (2009): pp. 35-42, <http://www.susanphillips.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/Notes-from-the-Margins.pdf>

¹⁰³ Phillips, “Notes from the Margins,” 39.

¹⁰⁴ Matthew Burns.

¹⁰⁵ Bill Daniel, *Who Is Bozo Texino?*, accessed November 12, 2018, <http://www.billdaniel.net/who-is-bozo-texino/>.

as I will describe in the following chapter—a way for certain “publicity-seeking” tramps to gain self-made fame within a world of globe-trotting.

CHAPTER 3: THE PUBLICITY-SEEKING TRAMP

For Lennon, monikers can be understood as a “subcultural reading and writing practice.”¹⁰⁶ He suggests that hoboes achieved fame from graffiti by becoming visible through their markings, specifically referencing those done by both railroad workers and hoboes on rolling stock. He uses an example found in Jack London’s *The Road*, where London recalls a story of traversing Canada in search of “Skysail Jack,” whose moniker he found on a water tank in Montreal in 1894. He argues London—a competitive individualist—used his and other monikers as a way of competing in a game.¹⁰⁷ Absent of any clear rules, the game, however, symbolized London’s tramping prowess; the graffiti was a tool in this race across Canada and ultimately a tangible marker in the “tramp hierarchy.”

The notion of any tramp hierarchy is one of unclear or widespread definitions. Like the “game” played by London and “Skysail Jack,” it is largely without any rigid rules that could be applied to any significant population of tramps. From what literature suggests, if a hierarchy were to exist it would include of a number of positions, ranging from the newcomer “gay-cats” and “kids,” as described by London, to the seasoned full-time “profesh,” or professional.¹⁰⁸ The hierarchy would also include the more obscure “kings” and “queens.” In Britt, Iowa, a yearly hobo convention takes place that dates back to 1900. The tradition, at least present by 1934 and continuing today, includes the yearly crowning of a new hobo “king” and “queen.”¹⁰⁹ In another convention in St. Louis, 1908, the group of mostly young tramps who were excluded from another concurrent gathering because of their age, spoke of stories from the road. The guest of honour was “Kansas City Kid,” who gained the position for “having his moniker on more water tanks than any other traveler.”¹¹⁰

For many wandering tramps, life consisted of a series of traditions that allowed them to have one foot in the subculture and one foot out. As they strove for records of speed or distance, in the goal to become a king or professional tramp, some took to mainstream society to flaunt

¹⁰⁶ John Lennon, “Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art” (Abingdon: Routledge, accessed March 26, 2019, 32.

¹⁰⁷ Lennon, 33.

¹⁰⁸ London, *The Road*, 92.

¹⁰⁹ “Hairbreadth Harry, King of Hoboes and Poet, Visits Algona, Sings His Poems,” *Kossuth County Advance*, August 2, 1934, 1.

¹¹⁰ “Convention of Young Tramps in St. Louis,” *The Sheboygan Press*, February 8, 1908, 4.

their expertise; to be known both within and outside of “trampdom.” This involved, at times, building a relationship with the press to the point where it was a near daily occurrence to tell the local newspaper editor of their arrival. When they did, they boasted of their time as a tramp, telling many stories of how they came to be. Even if a relationship was never made, many still used the press occasionally. Some wrote literature or poetry to tell their story. What bonds the tramps in this thesis is not just the railroad or life as a tramp, but the act of publicity-seeking through their written stories and monikers. In their pursuit of the “crown,” it was the press and the moniker that became the messenger.

SAILOR KID

In 1890, a young man, “hardly more than a mere boy in general appearance and stature,” yet “fairly well dressed,” and “bespeaking naught but honest and intelligence,” paid a visit to the *Boston Globe*’s office.¹¹¹ The man, Wilson Becker (also spelled Becher), went by the moniker “Sailor Kid” (not to be confused with Jack London’s moniker of the same), and was about to begin an attempt at a record-breaking journey from Boston to San Francisco in twenty-one days. He stopped into the *Globe*’s office to discuss his life story as a tramp, in what may be one of the earliest examples of the publicity-seeking tramp. He was a record holder, he was the “king of tramps,” and his moniker proved it.

At the age of nine, after reading Jules Verne’s *Around the World in Eighty Days*, he left his birthplace in British Guiana to see the world.¹¹² He travelled to such places as Hong Kong, Calcutta, Honolulu, Queenstown, Canada, and nearly all of the United States, where in 1887 he attended a hobo convention in Nanticoke, Pennsylvania. It was there that he was titled “king of the tramps” following a race from New York City to San Francisco and back via New Orleans, before his opponent “Patsy Bolivar.” In doing so, he “carved his name on every railroad water tank he passed, this serving as proof of the fact that he had already gone over the ground.”¹¹³

His moniker acted as the signature of his being in every town and city, the water tank being the “tramps register.” His name would also adorn other places. In Colorado, he climbed to

¹¹¹ Thomas F. Anderson, “King of Tramps: Romantic Life of Sailor Kid,” *The Boston Globe*, May 17, 1890, 5.

¹¹² Anderson, “King of Tramps,” 5.

¹¹³ Anderson, 5.

the top of Pike's Peak, then to Long's Peak (published as "Lang's Peak") where he said to have carved his name in an area known for the existence of hundreds of carved signatures dating back to the 1850s.¹¹⁴ The story of Sailor Kid is an early example of a tramp using the press as a tool to put forward his life to those outside of the tramp world. The moniker, here, is an act to be seen by those outside of the tramp world. Sailor Kid's moniker did indeed act as evidence to his whereabouts, registered on the water tank in an announcement to other tramps that he had been there. With the publication of his story in the *Boston Globe*, it furthermore acted as evidence to outsiders. The general public was familiarized with the moniker and the legacy of one of the earliest globe-trotting "king of tramps."

MOVER

In 1926, two letters were written on Canadian National Telegraphs blanks and sent to the editor of the *Border Cities Star* of Windsor, Ontario. The letters, from a William Lloyd Daniells, were written to declare he was taking the crown from the "king of the hoboes," Jeff Davis. In one letter, Daniells states:

I have traveled this world—earth and seas—for 20 years. In 20 years I have covered almost twice the distance of Jeff Davis. My hobo's "moniker" will prove this. I have beat the freight trains of every country in the world that has a railroad. Believe me, I don't have to brag on myself. Follow my moniker and find out and you will see for yourself that Jeff Davis isn't a hobo at all, but is a grand and glorious bluff.¹¹⁵

Daniells concludes the letter with his moniker, "Mover," in all capital letters, book-ended by inward facing arrows, a "W" below denoting his next direction, and two arrows "piercing" the dates (Fig. 3.1). The dates signify the year he began tramping and the current year, although the newspaper appears to have been mistaken in their reinterpretation, confusing his nines for sevens and his sixes for fives.

¹¹⁴ "Register of the Rockies - The Historical Garden of the Gods," accessed February 5, 2020, <https://sites.google.com/site/thehistoricalgardenofthegods/register-of-the-rockies>

¹¹⁵ "London Man is Contender for Crown as Hobo King," *Windsor Star*, October 6, 1926, 5.

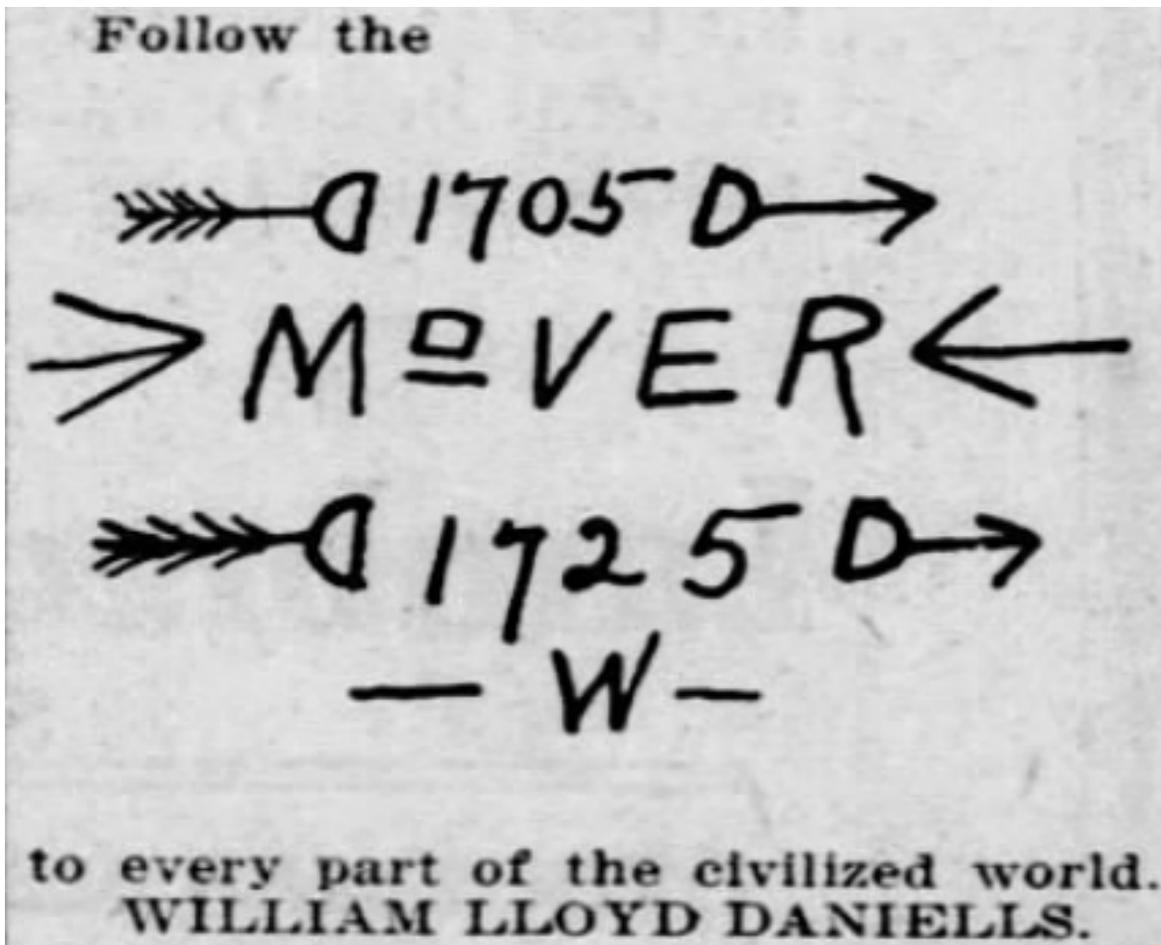


Figure 3.1: Illustration of Mover moniker. (Published in "London Man is Contender for Crown as Hobo King," *The Windsor Star*, October 6, 1926, 5).

Mover's letters are fascinating for a number of reasons, aside from their inclusion of yet another variation of signs attributed to the hobo code. The first is how Mover, after seeing an article a week earlier in which Jeff Davis reportedly stated himself as king of the hoboes, wrote quickly to the newspaper for a renouncement of such a statement. Here, the media becomes a method of communication between two hoboes. The newspaper—as will be discussed in greater detail in the following section—played a major role as an outlet for transmitting information from the hobo or tramp to the public. The other, is how Mover, like London before him, outright declares his moniker as a symbol for fame and recognition in the tramp world, and perhaps, the outlying world as well. In his final statement in one of the letters, Mover writes, "this sign proves me the world famous tramp, bum and hobo for many thousand miles." To be a "king," as Mover

is suggesting, is to have your moniker in “every part of the civilized world.” The moniker is evidence of his royal status.¹¹⁶

According to Mover, the more a tramp marks his moniker, especially if widespread geographically, the greater a tramp they become. The moniker, then, becomes a symbol of both fame and superiority in the tramp world, where many are quick to style themselves as the greatest, the most famous, or as king. It is difficult to verify Mover’s claim of surpassing Jeff Davis’ 875,000 miles travelled by train; however, Mover did travel. At least two of his monikers—closely resembling the illustrations found in his letters—survive some thousands of kilometres from where he wrote those scathing letters in London, Ontario. In Oregon, his moniker survives on the exterior of a depot, dated 5—22—1915 and southbound, written on brick in a black substance, perhaps grease (Fig. 3.2). In Iowa, his moniker is found inside a depot, carved into moulding, reading 10—1913 (Fig. 3.3).



Figure 3.2: Southbound Mover (5 22 1915) on exterior of Oregon depot. (Digital photograph by Charles Wray).



Figure 3.3: Southbound Mover (10 1913) carved inside an Iowa depot. (Digital photograph by Charles Wray).

A-NO. 1: “CHAMPION TRAMP OF THE WORLD”

In 1907, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* wrote of a “champion tramp of the world,” described as “absolutely without a rival in his strange profession.”¹¹⁷ The tramp in question was Leon Ray Livingston, known better as “A-No. 1,” or “A-No. 1, the Rambler,” and he was perhaps the most well-known tramp of his ilk and era alongside the more successful writer and tramp, Jack London. A San Francisco native like London, Livingston ran away from home at age eleven in 1883 and began the life of travelling the world, famously travelling “500,000 miles for only \$7.61,” as was proudly stated on the cover of each of his twelve books (Fig. 3.4). His books, at the cost of twenty-five cents per copy, were sold in train stations throughout Canada and the United States and served as both readers of tramp life and as warnings to young boys who might take to the road. With the help of these publications, his exploits made a significant impact on

¹¹⁷ “Tramps? Here’s the Most Astonishing Hobo in All the World,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 24, 1907, 52.

the public's perception and knowledge of tramping, as well as on other tramps who sought to gain notoriety from their "profesh."

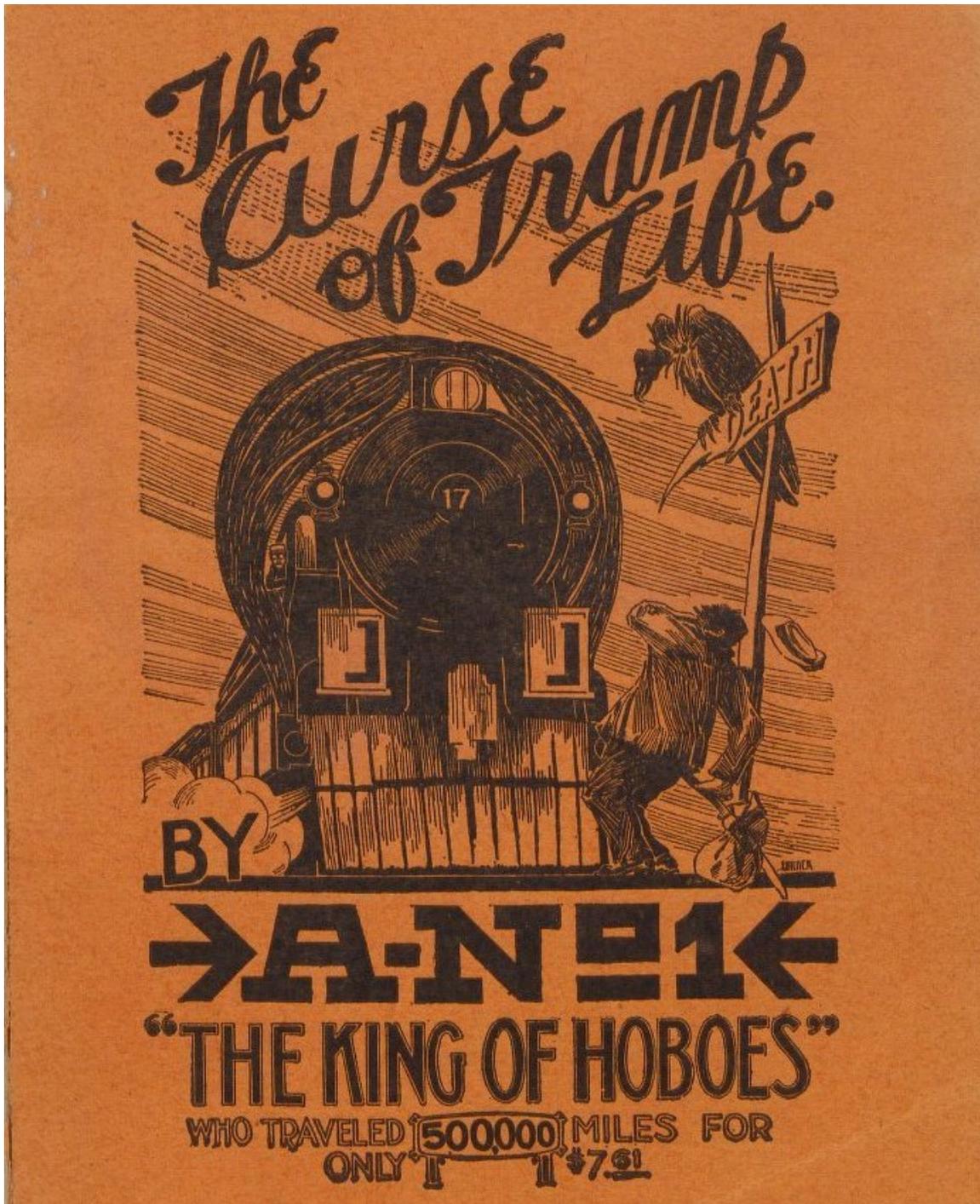


Figure 3.4: Cover of A-No. 1's "The Curse of Tramp Life." (Published in *The Curse of Tramp Life*, Cambridge Springs, Pa: A-No. 1 Publishing Co., 1912. From Collection Development

Department. Widener Library. Harvard University.
[https://iif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:43311397\\$1i](https://iif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:43311397$1i))

Throughout much of his tramping career, A-No. 1 developed a significant relationship with the press that would help to solidify his place as one of the most famous tramps in the early twentieth-century. The press offered an avenue to build the tramp's persona as a distinguished tramp of class, to further his publications, and to prove his abilities as a tramp, all ultimately strengthening his stature as a tramp "king." Although he may not have been the first tramp to be featured in newspapers, with tramps like Sailor Kid or Seldom Seen,¹¹⁸ among others highlighted in earlier newspapers, he was the first to consistently do so in a manner where approaching the press was—at times—a nearly daily occurrence. Articles that featured him circa the later years of 1900 and into the 1910s typically spoke of his achievements as a tramp, like his prevention of more than twenty railroad wrecks, his travelling enough distance to circle the world eighteen times, and how he made his money, for a time, by carving figures out of potatoes.¹¹⁹

He also positioned himself as a gentleman tramp. He did not "look" like a tramp, which is to say he did not fit the public perception of tramps at the time. He had his suit pressed twice a week, wore a gold watch, and if he had the money, would sleep in a hotel.¹²⁰ What makes A-No. 1 and other publicity-seeking tramps unique is that they built themselves up as career tramps, blurring the lines of the subculture as a wandering train hopper with an intellectual, a professional of their trade. "Sailor Kid" reported his many records and "Mover" pronounced his royalty as a tramp through mileage evidenced by his moniker, but A-No. 1 managed to overtake them all in his pursuits. This is, in part, due to his ability first to harness the power of the news. He later found that through writing and publishing his story through his own publishing company. With the A-No. 1 Publishing Company (the moniker he reportedly trademarked),¹²¹ he could continue to tell his story for generations.

In 1910, A-No. 1's methods of receiving attention caught the eye of a man from Wellington, Kansas, enough that the *Wellington Journal* felt inclined to bring this to the attention of its readers. The article writes:

¹¹⁸ "The Hunted Prince of Tramps," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, May 20, 1906, 3.

¹¹⁹ "Tramps?," 52.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹²¹ Owen Clayton, "Punks, Prushuns, and Gay-Cats: Vulnerable Youth in the Work of Jack London and A-No.1," *Studies in American Naturalism* 14, no. 1 (2019): 76-103, <https://doi.org/10.1353/san.2019.0015>, 82.

It has now turned up that this is nothing but a big advertising stunt which is being pulled off by the railroads. The tramp does make these big rides, but he is not so badly wanted after all, is the belief of a certain Wellington man. This man comes to this opinion after talking with one of the railroad specials who has been after this A No. 1.¹²²

The discussion between an anonymous “Wellington man” and a “railroad special” led to the conspiracy that A-No.1 might be, or at least some level of his storytelling, fraudulent. “But you see from the accounts of his travels and how he talks about the roadbeds and the service afforded by the railroads, that it is not at all a ba [sic] free advertising stunt,” the railroad special told the Wellington man. The article continued stating that:

It seems that as soon as this A No. 1 man has pulled off a big stunt, by beating a big special train from one division point to the other, that he always by accident falls in with some reporter and then comes to the story, probably a column of how he just missed the special men, or maybe of how he even dined with them and they failed to get next to the game.¹²³

“I am of the opinion,” said the author, “that this hobo is doing these stunts for the railroads and when he gets short of change he makes his application and it is forthcoming. He is not nearly as badly wanted as the public thinks.”¹²⁴ There may be some truth to this conspiracy. A-No. 1 claimed to have “passes,” or a little black book of signatures from the “heads” of each railroad that gave him permission to ride free of charge.¹²⁵ And his ability to reach a large number of newspapers the country over did provide free advertisement. It is also for the railroads perhaps no coincidence that the release of A-No. 1’s first book was released shortly thereafter.

Absent from the conspiracy was any note of the numerous examples that suggest A-No. 1 was indeed wanted by law enforcement on several occasions, often for carving his moniker in public places.¹²⁶ A-No. 1’s penchant for carving his name was yet another method of seeking publicity. As the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* wrote, A-No. 1 had his moniker on “almost every

¹²² “Advertising Stunt,” *The Wellington Journal*, October 13, 1910, 1.

¹²³ “Advertising Stunt,” 1.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹²⁵ “A-NO. 1 MINUS FAMOUS OVERALLS AND BANDANA, HITS ROAD AGAIN,” *Buffalo Courier*, November 15, 1925, 85.

¹²⁶ “Champion Tramp May Be Guest at County Jail,” *The San Francisco Call*, April 17, 1909, 9.

depot, tool shed and water tank in the United States. In April of 1909, the *San Francisco Call* reported A-No. 1 was apprehended for carving his moniker throughout the city in just a few days.¹²⁷ He had not cut into a water tank, nor a depot, but he had carved his name in the upscale Hotel Langham and St. Francis hotels, as well as in many saloons in the city. He also attempted to carve his moniker into the woodwork of a Western national bank.¹²⁸ As well, he had carved his moniker several times inside just one building—the San Francisco Hall of Justice.¹²⁹ Along with these unusual locations, it is further peculiar for A-No. 1, who made claims not to drink, to be in a saloon. However, what can be understood from this account is that he was on a “spree” of marking his moniker throughout San Francisco, marking it in many locations in just a few days. It is also clear that his motivations for marking were, presumably, not intended entirely for other tramps. One of the victims of his knife was the Waldorf saloon, described as one of the “better places” where you could buy a cocktail of the finest liquor.¹³⁰ The St. Francis hotel was as well an unlikely hobo and tramp haunt, nor would it serve as a tramp’s directory, and as such these monikers are not in line with what has been written in much of literature. Did A-No. 1 mark these out of sheer ego, for anyone and everyone to see, to authenticate his status? Perhaps. Following his apprehension at the Hotel Langham, A-No. 1 refused to talk to the police. He did make one exception: he told the police he “held the tramp record of 11 days from New York to San Francisco.”¹³¹

Four years following his moniker writing spree in San Francisco, A-No.1 again had a warrant out for his arrest, this time in Connecticut.¹³² The warrant was based on the marking of his moniker on the federal post office building in Hartford, as well as in the towns of Torrington and Thomaston, just east of the city. On his charges, *The Brattleboro Daily Reformer* wrote: “Never before has the ‘monica’ appeared on forbidden places, but has been restricted to water tanks, bridges, railroad sheds and other property over which the tramp fraternity exercises a sort of part ownership with the roads.”¹³³ The San Francisco example shows this not to be true. The

¹²⁷ “Carving on Doors Leads to Man's Arrest,” *The San Francisco Call*, April 16, 1909, 11.

¹²⁸ “Carving on Doors Leads to Man's Arrest,” 11.

¹²⁹ “Champion Tramp,” 9.

¹³⁰ Mary Germain Hountalas and Sharon Silva, “Dining Out in San Francisco,” in *The San Francisco Cliff House* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2009), 34.

¹³¹ “Carving on Doors,” 11.

¹³² “Warrant Out for 'A-No.1',” *The Bennington Evening Banner*, July 28, 1913, 2.

¹³³ “Prince of Tramps,” 3.

moniker a symbol for publicity extending beyond these locations. Nonetheless, painted on the wall of the Hartford post office was a moniker reading “A-No. 1—7.22.13—,” done in what was referred to as “his own personal style.” The moniker may have resembled his personal style, but he denied perpetrating the act himself. The article further suggested it was the result of a hatred towards him for helping children out of the same life of tramping as himself; the “famous moniker” forged by one of the many “unprincipled” members of the tramp fraternity.¹³⁴ Whether A-No. 1 was the culprit or framed. However, a result of his popularity, he spawned numerous imitators.

His moniker, at least in name, was “spoofed” in nearly identical fashion by “J-No. 2.” In an interview with Charles Wray from *The Historic Graffiti Society*, Wray states that many took offense to the imitation, suggesting “J-No. 2” was a “fake.”¹³⁵ Included in Anderson’s *Milk and Honey Route* (which he published under his own pseudonym, “Dean Stiff”) were a series of definitions. Among them was an entry for A-No. 1 that read: “A-No-1—A famous tramp who writes his name ‘on everything like J. B. King.’ He writes books about his alleged adventures. Many young hoboes write this monicker on water tanks, and chalk it on box cars.”¹³⁶ According to Anderson, it was a known fact that others would forge his moniker. This becomes evident by comparing some surviving examples of A-No. 1’s moniker.

Along the Arroyo Seco confluence of the Los Angeles River in Pasadena, California, are a collection of preserved monikers that sit high up on the abutment of an overarching bridge. The collection includes two “A-No. 1” monikers, one undated and the other August-13-1914, seen in Fig. 3.5.

¹³⁴ “Prince of Tramps,” 3.

¹³⁵ Charles Wray, e-mail conversation with author, April 16, 2020.

¹³⁶ Dean Stiff and Ernie Bushmiller, *The Milk and Honey Route: A Handbook for Hobos* (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1931), 199.



Figure 3.5: A-No. 1 monikers along the Arroyo Seco, Pasadena, California. (Digital photograph by the author, 2018).

Originally discovered in 2000 by Pitzer College Anthropologist and graffiti scholar, Susan Phillips, neither of the monikers at this location resembles Livingston's moniker as portrayed in his books, and as well, the date of the second falls months after Livingston's reported marriage and retirement from tramp life.¹³⁷ Another example, found in the 1960s near Bethel, Maine, by Hugh "Cubby" Swan, also does not reflect the published depictions of the moniker (Fig. 3.6).¹³⁸ Another (Fig. 3.7), located on a water tank in Northern California, shares greater resemblance to the simplicity found in the examples from Pasadena and Maine than it does his moniker found in his own writing. Wray suggests more examples that may be illegitimate, stating "there's a rash of 1935 A No. 1 marks (one example seen in Fig. 3.8) across the northwest that all appear fake, only one matches his serif style."¹³⁹ Even so, the date here points to copy-cats of a later generation, two decades after Livingston retired from tramping.

¹³⁷ F. L., "A-No.1, King of Hoboes, Quits Road for Bride," *The Oregon Daily Journal*, March 29, 1914, 43.

¹³⁸ Alison Aloisio, "Famous Hobo Left Mark in Bethel Area," *The Lewiston Sun Journal*, May 7, 2013, <https://www.sunjournal.com/2013/07/05/famous-hobo-left-mark-bethel-area/>.

¹³⁹ Charles Wray, e-mail conversation with author, April 16, 2020.



Figure 3.6: A-No. 1 moniker found by Hugh “Cubby” Swan, Maine, (courtesy of *The Lewiston Sun Journal*, May 7, 2013, <https://www.sunjournal.com/2013/07/05/famous-hobo-left-mark-bethel-area/>).



Figure 3.7: A-No. 1 on the Black Butte, California water tank, (Digital photograph by the author, 2018).

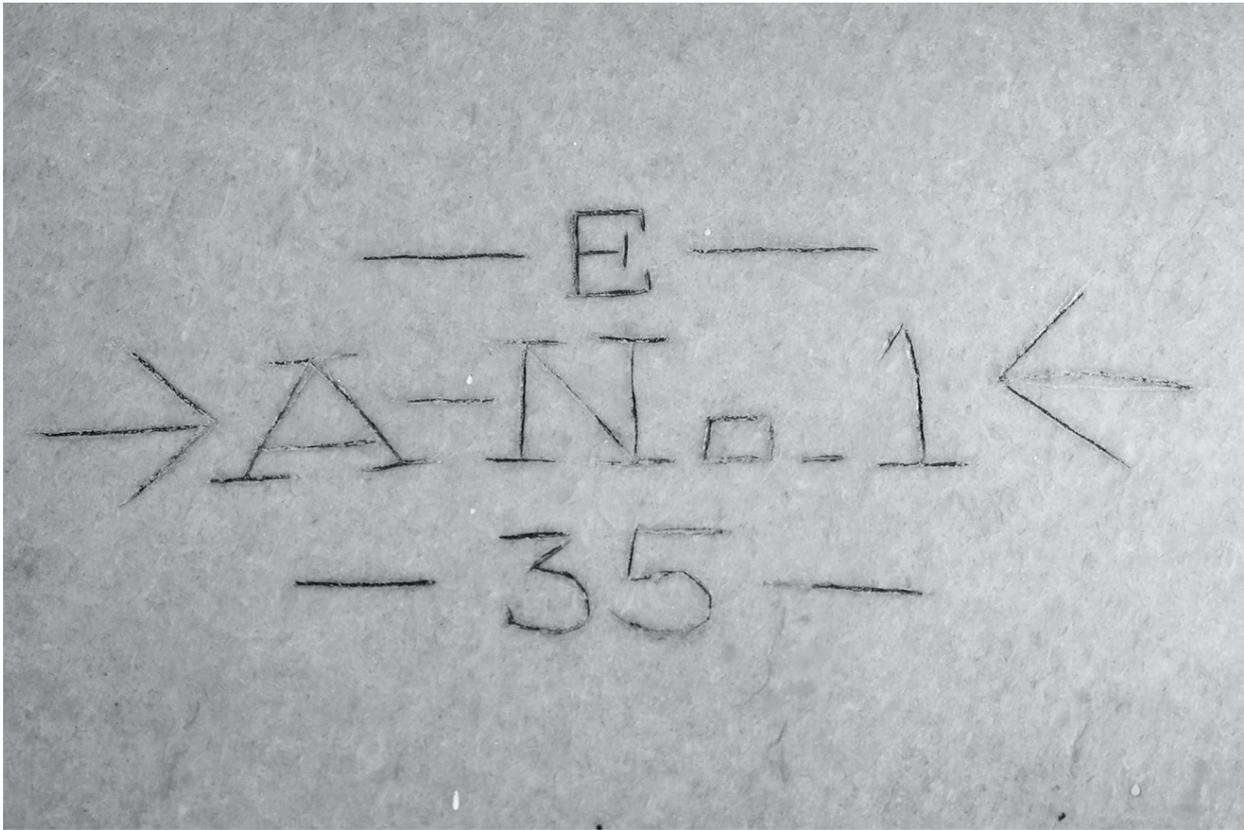


Figure 3.8: Potentially fraudulent “A-No. 1,” Eastbound 1935. (Digital photograph by Charles Wray).

Much of A-No. 1’s popularity can be tracked down to his modus operandi. As popular as A-No. 1 was for his exploits and relationships with the press, presidents, railroaders, and other famous tramps such as Jack London, it was his methods of publicity-seeking that helped spread his fame as a tramp. A 1909 article from the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* is an example of how his moniker stood as a symbol of his celebrity. The *Post-Dispatch* reported that the recent closing of a Kansas City locale known as “Bum’s Haven” only received attention from the press due to a moniker on its rock walls; that of A-No.1. The moniker—according to the paper—is familiar to not only tramps, but trainmen, policemen and newspaper staff all over the country. It was referred to as the mark of the “most famous tramp in the world.”¹⁴⁰ Like the numerous other articles boasting that A-No. 1 paid a visit to their small town or city, his moniker too, was a mark that symbolized his fame. In what would normally be a routine break-up of the “jungle,” here the

¹⁴⁰ “The Last of ‘Bum’s Haven,’” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, June 20, 1909, p. 50.

moniker of A-No. 1 created a sense of excitement that St. Louis had been hosts to a “famous” visitor. It is also a glimpse into how the press legitimized the publicity-seeking tramp. The publicity-seeking tramp, romanticized in the pages of the newspaper for their exploits, offered a new interpretation of the wanderer.

In September of 1912, a Colorado newspaper reported news out of Houston that “‘A-No. 1,’ the king of the hoboes, is dead,” his fate met on the Louisiana & Nashville railroad in a gruesome accident that left him—in the colourful words of *The Chronicle-News*—“literally ground to death.”¹⁴¹ The news was told by a tramp by the moniker of “Chicago White,” who claimed to be his companion for the last year and who, along with a priest, had buried A-No. 1. The news was picked up throughout the country, although “Chicago White,” whether an actual tramp or companion, was reporting erroneous information. Nonetheless, despite a lack of evidence, the papers took it as an opportunity to sensationalize a would-be tragedy. Several months later, A-No. 1 retorted the hoax in a letter to the *Oregon Sunday Journal*: “This is to tell you that I am still in the land of the living and am still busily engaged chasing trains, to me in turn chased by those who represent the law. I have been and am still, a professional tramp.”¹⁴² A-No. 1 would remain a professional tramp until 1914. Newspapers around the country told the story of A-No. 1’s wedding on January 28, 1914.¹⁴³

Although he reportedly retired from tramping, his name would still appear in newspapers up until his death. A-No. 1 continued to use his fame to receive press that would spread his message of saving young men from wanderlust. He would hold lecture circuits, travelling the United States with this message. An advertisement from *The News-Herald* in Franklin, Pennsylvania can be seen in Fig. 3.9, declaring him as “one of the most forceful speakers on the American platform today.”¹⁴⁴ In the advertisement, his moniker can also be seen displayed under the words, “world-famous as.” He was famous for his moniker, the name becoming synonymous with the intellectual, globe-trotting tramp. He used his moniker as a method to gain publicity,

¹⁴¹ “‘A-No.1,’ King of Tramps Dies Under Wheels of Train,” *Chronicle-News*, September 16, 1912, 3.

¹⁴² Fred Lockley, “Notorious Nomad Justifies His Own Strange Career,” *The Oregon Sunday Journal*, March 16, 1913, 43.

¹⁴³ F. L., “‘A-NO. 1,’ KING OF HOBOES, QUILTS ROAD FOR BRIDE,” *The Oregon Daily Journal*, March 29, 1914, 43.

¹⁴⁴ “The News-Herald,” *The News-Herald*, October 27, 1925, 9.

both on the walls of a brick depot and within the many newspapers he appeared. His moniker, however, continues to be a trademark of his life as a famous tramp. One must simply look at his tombstone in Cambridge Springs, Pennsylvania, which reads: “‘A-No. 1.’ At Rest at Last.”¹⁴⁵

EVERY YEAR
200,000 BOYS RUN AWAY FROM HOME
80,000 GIRLS TAKE TO THE WANDERPATH
35,000 OF THE BOYS END AS WORTHLESS TRAMPS
7,500 ARE CRIPPLED BEATING TRAINS
3,500 PERISH IN ACCIDENTS OR BY EXPOSURE

PARENTS-TEACHERS-BOYS-GIRLS
Should Hear The Heart-Gripping
and Highly Educational Lecture

WHERE IS MY WANDERING BOY TONIGHT?
— BY —
Leon Ray Livingston
TRAMP-AUTHOR-ORATOR
WORLD-FAMOUS AS
→A-NO.1←
THE RAMBLER
WHO TRAVELED
520,000 MILES FOR \$7.61



One Of The Most Forceful Speakers On The American Platform Today
MR. LIVINGSTON
SO VIVIDLY EXPLAINS THE PROBLEM OF THE TRAMP
THAT BOYS AND GIRLS REMAIN CONTENTED AT HOME

BENEFIT AMERICAN LEGION
OCT. 30, FIRST BAPTIST SUNDAY SCHOOL ROOM,
8 P. M.

Figure 3.9: A-No. 1 advertisement, 1925, (courtesy of The News-Herald, *The News-Herald*, October 27, 1925, 9).

¹⁴⁵ “FAMOUS TRAMP MADE FLYING VISIT,” *Norwich Bulletin*, July 19, 1913, 8.

PENN, THE RAPID RAMBLER: “MORE ADVERTISED THAN ‘DUKE’S MIXTURE’”

“Penn the Rambler,” or “Penn, the Rapid Rambler,” was a publicity-seeking tramp from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, known formally as Frank C. Welch. Although there are differing accounts of the exact years, it is said he took to tramping in the early 1890s as young as age eleven after fleeing his childhood home by jumping out of a third-story window.¹⁴⁶ There are many similarities between Penn and—whose influence on him was likely—A-No. 1. In stark contrast to the way earlier newspapers from the nineteenth century talked about the tramp as an infesting nuisance, Penn, like A-No. 1 and others who garnered positive attention for their exploits, was viewed favorably. His lifestyle and character was mostly praised and celebrated. He positioned himself amongst a class of tramp Brown refers to as the “intellectual vagabond,” a group of self-made men that along with “hobo heroes” like Jack London, began to diverge from representations of the supposedly illiterate and “lowly” vagabonds of the 1890s.¹⁴⁷ Like A-No. 1, Penn positioned himself as a globe-trotting intellectual who spoke many languages and had many talents. In this romanticized representation of the tramp, he was said to “look like anyone else,” rather than a “typical” tramp.¹⁴⁸ The *Leader-Telegram* described him as neat, clean shaven, wearing clean linen and a new set of clothes, his “normalcy” displayed in the publishing of his portrait (Fig. 3.10).

¹⁴⁶ “America's Greatest Tramp,” *Sapulpa Evening Light*, September 11, 1909, 3.

¹⁴⁷ Jeffrey Scott. Brown, *Hoboes and Vagabonds: The Cultural Construction of the American Road Hero*, (1992),

http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/hst_theses/23?utm_source=digitalcommons.brockport.edu/hst_theses/23&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages, 6.

¹⁴⁸ “Penn, the Rambler,” *Leader-Telegram*, June 9, 1909, 5.



Figure 3.10: E. (F) C. Welsh, known as “Penn the Rambler,” June 9, 1909, *Leader-Telegram* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin), courtesy of Newspapers.com

Penn also followed a formula for advertising himself in a similar manner as A-No. 1, both through the press and in writing their monikers. Penn sought to meet the local press of every town or city he rode into. Eau Claire, Wisconsin’s *Leader-Telegram* called Penn his own press agent, known in every newspaper office in the United States.¹⁴⁹ In another article, the same

¹⁴⁹ “‘Penn the Rapid Rambler’ Pays Leader Office a Visit,” *Leader-Telegram*, August 29, 1908, 8.

newspaper stated he had a “world-wide reputation.”¹⁵⁰ This is exemplified in a series of newspaper articles journaling his travels over several years. Four articles from July of 1908 provide just one example. Beginning first with a 1908 article from the *Billings Gazette* entitled “Famous Tramp Visits City,” his path can be followed heading east from Montana through North Dakota.¹⁵¹ His arrival was published in Beach, North Dakota’s *Golden Valley Chronicle* just three days later: the “famous tramp” stopping long enough to get a “square meal.”¹⁵² Four days after his brief time in Beach, an article was published in Fargo, North Dakota praising his tramping feats, touting him as a “distinguished” tramp, “renowned” and “known the country over.”¹⁵³ Two days later, another article was published in Jamestown, North Dakota’s *Jamestown Weekly Alert*, portraying the previous leg between the cities of Beach, Bismarck and Jamestown. In just one week, an approximate six hundred miles in travel resulted in at least four featured articles, ensuring his presence was known to the many readers living along the Northern Pacific line.

Penn returned to North Dakota in September of that year, “unexpectedly” dropping into the Grand Forks *Evening Times* office on his way north to Winnipeg, Manitoba. The article writes of this approach to advertising himself, stating:

“Penn” makes it a point to visit the newspaper office as soon as he hits town and in this way gets a writeup, the clippings so procured being used to prove that he has done some rambling in the last few years.¹⁵⁴

Another series of articles from April of 1909 further confirm this strategy. In typical fashion, Penn visited St. Louis, Missouri, on his way to Chicago, Illinois, “mooching” a meal from a diner with a *Post-Dispatch* reporter, in return sharing with him a stack of newspaper clippings recounting his travels.¹⁵⁵ Three days later, he stopped long enough in Decatur, Illinois to show a reporter a “large number of press write-ups,” which the reporter believed, “indicate that he holds

¹⁵⁰ “Penn, the Rambler,” 5.

¹⁵¹ “Famous Tramp Visits City,” *Billings Gazette*, July 21, 1908, 6.

¹⁵² “Penn, the Rambler,” *Golden Valley Chronicle*, July 24, 1908, 1.

¹⁵³ “Penn, the Rambler Strikes Fargo,” *The Fargo Forum and Daily Republican*, July 28, 1908, 7.

¹⁵⁴ “Penn, the Rapid Rambler,” *The Evening Times*, September 12, 1908, 6.

¹⁵⁵ “Rapid Rambler Tells How He Fools Trainmen,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, April 7, 1909, 18.

a unique place in the world of Trampdom.”¹⁵⁶ Although not entirely unique, Penn did hold a place in the world of “Trampdom,” and the more clippings he could gather, the more believable his story. If he had publicity, which again was largely positive, he had the power to continue making a name for himself.

The press write-ups that featured Penn were formulaic in their style, suggesting he scripted the information he shared to journalists. For example, it is always made known how many miles he has accumulated, usually a running tally from the current year or his all-time record, and how little money, if any, he spent to achieve them. They often include what he considers other tramp records that act as claims to fame and display his status as a tramping champion or king. He made claims of traversing North America countless times, including eight times across Canada and throughout Mexico.¹⁵⁷ Holding the self-proclaimed record of circling the globe on three occasions, he spent time throughout much of Europe, South America, Asia and Africa. Other “records” he claimed to hold included surviving two train wrecks, and facing arrest on only two occasions.¹⁵⁸ An example of his records printed in the *Billings Gazette* is as follows:

1901—Crossed the Gulf of Mexico and went to Capetown, South Africa; returned to New York six months later; made a flying trip of 11 days to Vancouver; returned through Washington and California on his way to Texas; went to Mexico City.¹⁵⁹

His formula also regularly included his techniques in “beating” the railroad. His most famous technique, one that he shared to the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, later published in *Railroad Man’s Magazine* in 1909. It was, however, described as conniving; tricking the innocent, unsophisticated conductors, the story of which was “enough to bring tears.”¹⁶⁰ The trick involved falsifying a hat-check with his own knife, a mark specific to the conductors own that signified the destination. When on the train, he would leave the “ticket” in his hat, placed over his eyes as

¹⁵⁶ “‘Rapid Rambler’ Visits Decatur,” *Herald and Review*, April 10, 1909, 12.

¹⁵⁷ “Penn the Rapid Rambler Rambles On,” *The Topeka Daily Capital*, April 10, 1928, 12.

¹⁵⁸ Penn The Rambler, “More Work Than Play When You’re ‘Roughing It’; Through Picturesque Old Mexico With Penn the Rambler,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 13, 1910, sec. Worker's Magazine, 40.

¹⁵⁹ “Famous Tramp Visits City,” 6.

¹⁶⁰ “Rapid Rambler Tells How He Fools Trainmen,” 18.

he sleeps. When the conductor notices the correct punch-mark on Penn's hat he carries on down the car. This allowed him to ride in the comfort of a passenger car as opposed to outside of it, or on a freight train. This trick was so successful, he reportedly deceived conductors over one hundred and fifty times.

However, the romanticization of the tramp in the pages of the magazine did not sit well with all of their readers. In response to the magazine featuring Penn's hat-check forging, a railroad employee who said to have known him expressed concern that boys would do the same. The fear was that young men may both leave their homes as tramps, committing other illegal acts—such as hat-check forgery—along the way. In fact, the author cites his own brother as an example:

My brother, after reading his poem in *The Railroad Man's Magazine*, issue of January, 1910, remarked "I will try and do just as he does it." And, sure enough, the kid was practicing cutting conductor punch-marks an hour afterward, making him liable to arrest for forgery.¹⁶¹

Perhaps A-No.1 was correct in the influence a public tramp like himself or Penn had. If this account is to be taken as truth, others were following in their steps. *The Railroad Man's Magazine* responded to the letter, on one hand denigrating the idea of the tramp altogether, and on the other stating that "the tramp has become a necessary feature in railroad literature," and is part of "the romance of the railroad."¹⁶² And it is true, the tramp was and continues to hold a place within the romance of the railroad, intertwined in its history. For Penn, his contribution to the romance, in some ways, was merely a reflection of how much he strove to insert himself into the public eye.

The clippings that Penn carried with him acted not only as evidence of his travels and many feats, but as well as source material for future books. He described the intent to write his autobiography, a complete and graphic history of his travels; the goal to eventually live off the profits from the book(s).¹⁶³ However, it appears as though he never got to publishing. In 1911,

¹⁶¹ "Imitating Hoboes," *The Railroad Man's Magazine*, February 1910, 383-384, <https://archive.org/details/railroadmansmag111910newy/page/384/mode/2up?q=tramp>.

¹⁶² "A Rapid Rambler's Rimes," 761-762, <https://archive.org/details/railroadmansm10190910newy/page/762/mode/2up?q=tramp>.

¹⁶³ "'Penn the Rapid Rambler'," 8.

Penn was apprehended in Tampa, Florida after breaking a glass window and stealing three thousand dollars' worth of diamonds with an unidentified Windsor, Ontario man who, unlike Penn, avoided jail time. He was sentenced to ten years.¹⁶⁴ According to "Tex, K.T.," Penn had passed away by 1931, likely spending his last years in prison.¹⁶⁵

Although his autobiography was likely never published, a version of his story can be followed through several years of newspaper articles featuring him. As well, his writings, both as literature and poetry, were found in articles and magazines throughout the early twentieth century. Newspapers acted as an informal tramp diary for Penn. His path was recorded in print within small towns scattered across the United States, and although I have not come across any in my research, conceivably Canada and abroad as he made claim. This relationship allowed for Penn to build his persona as a tramp celebrity like other tramps had done before him. With his clippings, he was able to prove, or more accurately manufacture, the idea to each newspaper that he was indeed famous as a tramp. Or, at least he should be.

In the late months of 1909 and early months of 1910, Penn's stories and poetry began appearing in multiple newspapers and magazines throughout the United States. In 1910, one story could be found in both the *Chicago Tribune* and Spokane, Washington's *Spokesman-Review*.¹⁶⁶ The articles tell of a trip to Mexico from California, beginning with an account of spending ninety days in prison at the San Joaquin county jail for carving his moniker in the town of Tracy, California. In the same 1909 issue of *The Railroad Man's Magazine* that spoke of his hat-check trick was a poem written by Penn promoting himself as a great tramp. The poem is a compact and stylized version of nearly every article about him. The poem, titled simply "Penn the Rambler," is essentially an abstract of his tramp life written in the third person. He wrote of holding records in the line: "The Rapid Rambler came to town, / And broke all records coming down." He wrote about his popularity with the press, writing: "The history of his life you'll hear, / In every paper far and near."¹⁶⁷ He also wrote of his moniker and where you may find it, with: "His moniker, inscribed as 'Penn,' / On tanks you'll find it, now and then."

¹⁶⁴ "'Penn the Rambler' in Cell.," *The Indianapolis Star*, February 2, 1911, 2.

¹⁶⁵ "'T.E.X." Self-Styled King of Tramps," 1-2.

¹⁶⁶ "Penn" Himself, "With 'Penn, the Rapid Rambler;" Who Takes a Practical Little Jaunt Through Picturesque Old Mexico," *The Spokesman-Review*, November 13, 1910, 36.

¹⁶⁷ "A Rapid Rambler's Rimes," *The Railroad Man's Magazine*, October 1909, 761-762, <https://archive.org/details/railroadmansm10190910newy/page/762/mode/2up?q=tramp>.

Both his poetry and his stories reference his moniker, however they speak little of his motivations for writing them. In April of 1909, Penn reached Chicago, landing an article that would be published as far away as Miami, which offers a bit of a glimpse into his motivations for moniker writing.¹⁶⁸ While in the city he made his usual move to show a reporter his stack of newspaper clippings, but his first order of business was another method of advertising his self—writing his moniker. Although it was not unusual for a hobo or tramp to mark their moniker upon arrival to a town or city, the described urgency to do so reveals the importance of the practice. In this case, it is especially interesting in its placement, on what was then a new hotel, the LaSalle. The building, since burned by fire in 1946 and demolished in 1976, had no known history with hoboes and tramps in Chicago; in fact, its purpose was much the opposite. The LaSalle was an ornate and upscale hotel that some observers at the time referred to as a “tendency to luxury and high life.”¹⁶⁹ Like the San Francisco hotel that A-No. 1 both stayed in and marked his moniker on, Penn may have chosen this location simply for its visibility as a centre for many visitors. The LaSalle, however, was not yet completed when he marked it. Complete or not, if Penn’s signature was seen on a building touted as “the finest hotel in the world,” it would surely draw ire and most certainly garner him attention.

Another example of his method of using graffiti for publicity reveals a technique that is highly unusual for tramps. In several articles from 1909, Penn discusses his would-be book and his intention to sell copies at the Alaska Yukon and Pacific Exposition in Seattle the same year. In what is either a case of inconsistent tall tales by the tramp or an amusing corruption by journalists, differing accounts of his time at the Seattle exposition exist. The *Leader-Telegram* claimed Penn would make the trip to Seattle behind four Angora goats, drawn in a covered wagon.¹⁷⁰ Upon their arrival, Penn and the goats were to both become an attraction. They continued by stating later, he would use the goats and wagon to travel from town to town to sell his books. However, an earlier article by the *Fargo Forum and Daily Republican* stated Penn had plans to travel to Seattle for the “Yucatan” exposition, not as a gimmick with goats, but rather carrying with him four Angora cats.¹⁷¹ However, it is what was published in a Rochester, New

¹⁶⁸ *Miami Morning News-Record*, April 16, 1909, 1.

¹⁶⁹ Robert Bruegmann, *The Architects and the City: Holabird & Roche of Chicago, 1880-1918* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 334.

¹⁷⁰ “Penn, the Rambler,” 5

¹⁷¹ “Penn, the Rambler Strikes Fargo,” 7.

York newspaper that reveals an extraordinary example of self-promotion that may be the first instance of sticker-based graffiti as guerrilla marketing:

Two years ago Welch rambled into Seattle, interviewed the publicity department of the A.-Y.-P. fair and started out to post small stickers in almost every important railway station in the United States and Canada. The greeting “Meet Penn the Rambler at the A.-Y.-P. in Seattle, 1909,” met the eyes of the travelling public.¹⁷²

Whether Penn actually got around to posting stickers in American and Canadian depots is difficult to confirm. It does, however, display the significant lengths to which he was willing to go to promote himself as a tramp extraordinaire.

In 1909, The *San Antonio Daily Express* reported “‘Penn’ is written on more than 2000 bridges and buildings” in the United States.¹⁷³ According to Penn, his “monacher” could be found across the world, on the docks of St. Petersburg, Galveston, Hong-Kong, Sydney, Australia, Cape Town, Honolulu and Sagasaki.¹⁷⁴ Penn’s moniker writing was a direct part of his quest for fame, and like Mover, was another evidential aspect of his travels and to his ability as a tramp extraordinaire. It also suggests that railroad infrastructure was not the only place for monikers. Both the LaSalle hotel and exposition “stunt” serve as evidence of this, suggesting that monikers were done to be seen by populations beyond the tramp. Becoming known, carrying the title of “king” (be it self-styled or not) involved extensive travel. As for verification, the press told their story and to varying degrees Penn told his own. Combined with writing monikers, the two techniques allowed the general population to become aware of the tramp’s presence—be it in St. Louis or St. Petersburg. Although no surviving examples of Penn’s moniker are known to be documented, an example can be seen (Fig. 3.11) published in a 1923 edition of *The Indianapolis News*, with the caption “THE ROUTE MARK OF A ONCE FAMOUS VAGABOND.”¹⁷⁵

¹⁷² “Noted Tramp Visits Rochester For Hour,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, July 26, 1910, 13.

¹⁷³ “Greatest Tramp Has Made Long Journeys,” *San Antonio Daily Express*, October 10, 1909, 9.

¹⁷⁴ *Miami Morning News-Record*, 1.

¹⁷⁵ William Herschell, “WEARY WILLIE, WAYFARER, ONCE HAPPY-GO-LUCKY GUEST OF THE RAILROADS, NOW PROMOTES HIS FREE TRANSCONTINENTAL TOURS FROM THE ROADSIDE,” *The Indianapolis News*, September 8, 1923, 21.



Figure 3.11: THE ROUTE MARK OF A ONCE FAMOUS VAGABOND, (*The Indianapolis News*, September 8, 1923, 21).

TEX K.T.: THE EXTRAORDINARY KING OF TRAMPS

Shortly after Penn had gone to prison, and while A-No. 1 had turned to missionary work that intended to help spare young men of the “disease” known as wanderlust, the proverbial crown was handed to a new king; the coronation taking place over the next several decades. Born 1901, in the Canal zone of the Isthmus of Panama, James Jesse Wells, known as “Tex (The Extraordinary), King of Tramps,” or “Tex KT,” began his extensive tramping career in 1915 at the age of fourteen. It would take him around the globe, his stylized and refined moniker placed on much of it.

“Tex KT” (Tex), who as an avid fan of literary tramps Jack London and Leon Ray Livingston—considering both an inspiration—built up legendary status that still deeply resonates today on the periphery of American folklore and among graffiti and railroad enthusiasts.¹⁷⁶ Like the examples of Sailor Kid, Mover, A-No. 1, and Penn, the Rambler, Tex was a global tramp who, whether by train or boat, tramped through much of the world, including Canada, Cuba, South America and Europe. Although well-travelled, Tex spent most of his time in the United States, where he wrote the vast majority of his monikers beginning as early as the 1910s until at least the 1960s. By July of 1931, he claimed to have placed his moniker in or on seven thousand three-hundred cities, towns, and depots.¹⁷⁷ The prolific nature of his moniker writing is exemplified by his claim of marking eight thousand and twelve places throughout the world just over two months later.¹⁷⁸

Like A-No. 1 and Penn, Tex wrote more than just monikers. He claimed to have poetry published in pulp magazines *Whizz Bang*, *Smoke House*, *The Railway (Railroad) Man’s* magazine, and in at least one newspaper.¹⁷⁹ Following an altercation in the town of Fromberg, Montana in 1931, the *Billings Gazette* would interview and publish a poem by Tex after his subsequent arrest. The poem, written in the Billings County jail, details his capture and incarceration while also describing his tradition of moniker writing. In the poem, Tex displays his priorities upon his arrival to Fromberg: “I cooked my coffee in my tin can / Fried me a little bacon in the-frying / pan; / I went to the depot to carve my / name / Agent saw me but I finished

¹⁷⁶ ““T.E.X.” Self-Styled King of Tramps, Now in Jail, Relates by Poem and Tale The Joys and Woes of Hitting the Trail,” 1-2.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

¹⁷⁸ “Globe-Wandering Tramp Is Landed in Douglas Jail,” *The News-Review*, October 1, 1931, 8.

¹⁷⁹ ““T.E.X.” Self-Styled King of Tramps,” 1-2.

just the / same.”¹⁸⁰ After completing carving his moniker, an altercation broke out between him and a man he believed was a ticket agent. The story reported by the *Gazette* later described that it was a telegraph operator who “had trouble with a tramp” after he “spoke to him about carving his initials on the station.”¹⁸¹

The poem continues describing how through his moniker he has “won” his fame: “Thirty days to do on jail-house stew / Twice a day, wouldn't appeal to you / But just the same, T-E-X-K-T is my / name, / Tis the title by which I won my fame / I've rode the vessels, I've rode the / rails. / But I think, I'll keep out of all the / jails.”¹⁸² Recalling A-No. 1's theory of wanderlust as incurable once it becomes a habit, it would appear that Tex had an incurable habit for both marking his moniker and travelling. It was, at least, powerful enough that he could admit to himself he would continue to participate in this lifestyle upon leaving the jail. In his admission to the cyclical nature of his habits, the poem writes: “But just the same, I will forget / When my 30 days is done, you bet / And then again the rods I'll ride / To a far away country, where I will / abide.”¹⁸³

While A-No. 1 and Penn were known to regularly approach the press to share their stories and build upon their notoriety, Tex relied solely on moniker writing. Although he did appear in newspapers, it was for a different reason: the result of what some railway detectives described as “a lack of discretion in selecting places for his sign.”¹⁸⁴ Less than three months following his thirty day sentence in Montana, he indeed forgot about his previous stint in the Billings County jail as he prophesized in his poem. In October of 1931, he was jailed yet again for writing his moniker, this time, a sixty day sentence in Oregon's Douglas County jail.¹⁸⁵ Dated the same year, one of multiple monikers by him from the location of his capture in Oregon, can be seen in Fig. 3.12, marked northbound.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ “King' of Tramps Is Held in Jail,” *The Billings Gazette*, June 30, 1931, 3.

¹⁸² ““T.E.X.” Self-Styled King of Tramps,” 1-2.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ “Globe-Wandering Tramp Is Landed in Douglas Jail,” 8.



Figure 3.12: Tex K.T. Northbound (1931) in Oregon. (Digital photograph by the author, 2018).

After his arrest in Oregon, the *News-Review* wrote a feature similar to the *Billings Gazette's* just a few months earlier, unveiling more about his life, motives, and methods of moniker writing. Furthering what is known of his influences, the article writes:

As a lad he met up with A-No. 1, who became his inspiration. A-No.1 had travelled the world over and had left his monogram in the most remote spots. Thrilled with the thoughts of such a life of adventure, Wells started out to better his idol's mark.¹⁸⁶

The impact of A-No.1 is suggested as more of an inspiration in moniker writing than a literary one. However, the article describes that he was also in possession of “dozens of notebooks in which is carefully written material for future books that he intends to write,” including a “whole dictionary of hobo slang.”¹⁸⁷ It does not appear, however, that he ever published nor took to advertising any books to the press as others had. Perhaps positioning himself as a writer, as well as boasting of his ability to speak six different languages, was more about legitimizing himself as a tramp than whole truths. Nonetheless, the article works in the same manner as the media exploits of Penn and A-No. 1 by providing publicity to the tramp. It also shows the influential effect that A-No. 1 had through both his books and his presence in the press. His influence ironically serving against his own stated interests of saving young boys from the same life.

In regards to Tex's primary method of self-promotion—moniker writing—the article reflects on his approach to marking:

Tex insists that railroad “bulls”¹⁸⁸ have no artistic sense. He does a neat job of printing his signature. He practices various type styles and prides himself on being a real artist when it comes to putting up his adopted title with red or black paint or carving it in with one of the half dozen pocket knives he carries for that purpose. He has a preference for red paint but sometimes that's hard to get, and he has even resorted to red shoe polish.

After his arrest in Oregon, the Southern Pacific Railway (SP) suggested his “art was costly,” racking up fifteen hundred dollars' worth of damage to SP property in Oregon alone.¹⁸⁹ The suggestion that monikers were artistic in the slightest was not a common perception in the

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ A ‘Bull’ is railroad slang referring to the railroad police.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

previous decades, or even at the time the SP referred to them as art. For Tex to suggest that bulls lack artistic sense, is also a claim that his work of moniker writing was itself an artistic endeavour, a practice worthy of time and care.

When looking at his markings, the practise of multiple fonts and the care and attention taken in creating them, it is evident that monikers were an important part of his life that he prided himself on. In Fig. 3.13 an example from 1958 is seen, containing two lettering styles. The “58,” appears to have been done with a stencil, as it is remarkably clean in its appearance.



Figure 3.13: Tex K.T. (1958) in North Dakota. (Digital photograph by the author, 2018).

In many examples, the lines left from the wooden boards used for concrete moulding are used as guiding lines in the spacing and accuracy of the letters (seen in Fig. 3.14). In others where he used a brush and paint, the lines made are less accurate, however, in comparison to other examples of monikers, such as the previous examples done by Mover, the technique and personal style associated with the monikers of Tex typically exhibit cleanliness in their application that was simply not seen in others.



Figure 3.14: Tex K.T. Westbound on Boxing Day (1933) in Texas. (Digital photograph by the author, 2018).

Along with the precision in his monikers, his approach to marking was often bold in other ways as well. It is typical to find an existing Tex, K.T. moniker, several feet long, high upon a wall. The *Billings Gazette* noted several monikers from him in the region, including one painted on the former water tank at Big Timber, Montana, “in large letters so that it can be seen for some

distance.”¹⁹⁰ The water tank is no longer standing, but the image evokes a scene out of the 1973 film, *Emperor of the North Pole*, in which a fictional A-No. 1 marks his name boldly on the tank’s tower; an image since recreated on the water tank in Yreka, California (Fig. 3.15).

¹⁹⁰ “Tex K.T., Is Taken for Carbon County Beating Up Party,” *The Independent-Record*, July 3, 1931, 8.



Figure 3.15: An ode to A-No. 1, “Emperor of the North Pole,” on a water tank in Yreka, California, (Image courtesy of “cubbie28” 2016, <https://cubbie28.wordpress.com/2014/07/26/leapin-lizards-to-a-no-1-to-portland-on-the-19-train/>).

Two surviving examples found hours from Big Timber also portray maximum visibility and a strategic placement for the monikers to be seen from a distance. In Fig. 3.16 the moniker reading “‘Tex’ King of Tramps,” noted as westbound on July 24, 1929, sits approximately twenty feet high on the backside of a railroad-adjacent warehouse. On the same wall, others, also by him, are seen in Fig. 3.17 and Fig. 3.18, the latter faded near completely. On another warehouse approximately five-hundred kilometres away, the example seen in Fig. 3.19 is placed equally as high. This example, dated just under a year later in 1930, heading east, also reflects the technique of using the linearly laid bricks as guiding lines in the spacing and height of the characters.



Figure 3.16: “Tex” King of Tramps Westbound (7’24’29) in Montana. (Digital photograph by the author, 2018).



Figure 3.17: One of three “Tex K.T.” monikers adorn the same wall, Montana. (Digital photograph by the author, 2018).



Figure 3.18: Detail of a moniker by “Tex K.T.,” done in what appears to be shoe polish with stylistic “bracket” motif, Montana. (Digital photograph by the author, 2018).



Figure 3.19: “Tex” K.T. Eastbound (7’12’30) in Montana. (Digital photograph by the author, 2018).

Along with the bold lettering and placement, Tex was known as well for the sheer volume he wrote his moniker. In the 1980s, Herbert Zuber, a former station agent from Amana, Iowa, who had interacted with him on several occasions, spoke of Tex and his seemingly incessant obsession for marking his name. In an interview for the The Iowa Labor History Oral Project, Zuber states:

I remember a hobo who called himself the King of Tramps. He cut his initials on everything. Several times I told him that if I ever caught him cutting around the depot I would give him hell. I nailed him one day,” Zuber recounts. “He had just finished cutting his name...about an inch deep on a slant, in a thick, solid oak door. I was about to reprimand him when I saw his knife...I thought about it a little. He had his name on the outhouses, on the freight doors on the south side of the depot, and on every telephone pole within five miles. I don’t know how he found time to keep his knife sharp.¹⁹¹

Zuber’s memories of Tex in Iowa seem to confirm his mania for marking his moniker. As surprising as it may be that he may have carved his name into the depot and nearly every surface surrounding it, it is important re-acknowledge what the *News-Review* wrote about him in 1931. At that time, he had marked his name in over eight thousand places. What is particularly fascinating—and a testament to the attachment to his craft—is that Tex was keeping a running tally of each individual moniker. Daniel Leen, a former tramp, also notes how prevalent Tex K.T.’s moniker was during his journey to college in the 1960s along the “hi-line,”¹⁹² Leen states:

I would ride from Seattle to Wisconsin by freight train, and that would be a three day trip on the hi-line. I think that’s where I first saw those images, the painted letters, “Tex KT,” “King of the Tramps,” and a date, usually in the early-to-mid-50s if I remember correctly. This guy, definitely, was leaving a sign that he was a hobo to be known far and wide. It seemed a little bit egotistical or something. You know, it made me wonder, who was this guy?¹⁹³

His markings were so visible and prominent to those on the railroads, he caught the imagination of nearly anyone who saw them. In Fig. 3.20 another example of a Tex marking is seen, just

¹⁹¹ Cliff Trumpold. "Hobo Sketches by an Amana Station Agent." *The Palimpsest* 70 (1989), 105, <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol70/iss2/10>.

¹⁹² The “hi-line” is the Burlington Northern-Santa Fe (formerly Great Northern) railroad line between Seattle, Washington and Minneapolis, Minnesota, the northern-most line in the United States.

¹⁹³ Daniel Leen, March 16, 2020.

outside of a central Montana town. The bold letters, placed high on the abutment of an overpass would be visible to anyone peering out the window as the train began to pick up speed as it left the town.



Figure 3.20: “Tex” King ‘of’ Tramps Westbound (7’16’40) in Montana. (Digital photograph by the author, 2018).

Through moniker writing, Tex found fame with those who spent time around the American railroad, and as such, has occasionally emerged as a mysterious cultural figure

transfixed into the minds of many travelling Americans. He once starred as the principal character of a fictional story for *Esquire* magazine, titled “Night of the Pig.”¹⁹⁴ Former CBS news journalist, Eric Sevareid, who spent years riding the rails during the 1930s, also wrote of Tex in his autobiographical memoir, *Not So Wild a Dream*, stating:

There were strange men among them, remarkable men, unknown to the rest of America. No one has written the biography of Tex, King of Tramps, for example. I never saw him, but I knew there was an obsession in him not unlike Hitler’s, a terrible straining of the ego to find expression—either that or he was a wandering imbecile having a glorious time. At least fifty times in the course of a couple of thousand miles I came across his insigne, his coat of arms: Tex—KT. You would find it carved on the wooden seat of a privy on the edge of a Nevada town, penciled on the wall of a shower room in a Salvation Army flophouse in Idaho, chalked on the iron side of a locomotive tender in South Dakota, painted in six-foot high letters of red on a white cliffside high up in a Montana canyon. Men told me you found it from Maine to California, everywhere, printed, written, carved thousands of times in the course of what must have been fifteen or twenty years of wandering.¹⁹⁵

The locations outlined by Sevareid may be fictional, however, they are testament to the prolific nature of his moniker writing. It may not be possible to prove that he marked a Salvation Army flophouse in Idaho or on a cliffside in Montana, but his monikers can still be found in those states among others. What is most fascinating by these accounts is how Tex had inserted himself into the lore of the railroads. As the *Railroad Man’s Magazine* wrote of Penn, that the tramp had become a part inseparable to the romance of the railroad, Tex did so nearly on moniker writing alone.

In Helena, Montana’s *Independent-Record*, Tex spoke of himself among the tramp world as a “lone wolf,” never mingling with other travelers.¹⁹⁶ If he is to be believed in this statement, the suggestion that he left his moniker in the traditional sense would be moot. He would not be using the moniker to keep in contact as the moniker was largely believed to serve. By the time he was “king,” monikers could very well serve another purpose, at least for himself. He was, after all, a tramp of a newer generation, but nonetheless tied to the evolving tradition of moniker

¹⁹⁴ Robert Tod Struckman, "Night of the Pig," *Esquire*, October 1, 1935, 108.

¹⁹⁵ Eric Sevareid, *Not So Wild A Dream* (Columbia, MS: University of Missouri Press, 1995), 42.

¹⁹⁶ “Tex K.T., Is Taken for Carbon County Beating Up Party,” *The Independent-Record*, July 3, 1931, 8.

writing like A-No. 1, in which he started out to best. The monikers of Tex—along with those of any of the publicity-seeking tramps discussed in this essay—were conduits of recognition that would extend beyond their placement under a railroad overpass, but into the mythos of railroad folklore; an achievement worthy of fame in its own right. When the *Billings Gazette* asked why he writes monikers, his motivations for doing so became clear: “What do I do it for? Oh, just for notoriety I guess.”¹⁹⁷ His motivation to mark his name throughout the United States, and perhaps elsewhere, was simple; he just wanted to be known. And, by all accounts, it worked. He gathered attention not only from other hoboes and tramps, but from railroad workers and the many passengers that would see the letters from the windows of their passenger car.

¹⁹⁷ ““T.E.X.” Self-Styled King of Tramps,” 1-2.

CONCLUSION

The railway brought to North America an idea of industrial progress that connected those throughout the vast continent. For the hobo, the railway was a mechanism that offered work, a means to find employment where employment was available, attainable by the tracks that now connected them. For the tramp, the railway produced the ability to live a life that could remain largely free from the constraints of employment. Although the tramp by definitions followed in this essay was the “one who roams the world but refuses to work,”¹⁹⁸ some tramps viewed their lifestyle as an occupation in and of itself. Some publicity-seeking tramps did find work (self-employed by publishing books or poetry about their experiences), however it does not make them a hobo. The point of this investigation is not to try to classify early rail riders into groups, but it does highlight that with those engaging in the tramp or hobo lifestyle there was a spectrum of personalities and motivations. The idea of a “professional” tramp would be just one.

To be a professional tramp was to see the world on as little money as possible. It also meant achieving other markers of tramp “success,” like “beating it” across the United States, Canada, or even the world, in record time. The records that a tramp held would not be known if not for their ability to boast of them. For a tramp to be a professional, in a profession outside the margins of mainstream society, they had to make their existence known. This involved a degree of infiltration back into the society they largely abandoned. Tramps like A-No. 1 and Penn, the Rambler consciously took to the press to share their stories in newspapers throughout the United States and Canada. The press not only displayed their names, but articles would tout them as “king of tramps,” or “champion tramp of the world.” These articles served to promote their records, their stories, their poetry and their books, ultimately offering a way for tramps to use their celebrity as a way to receive notoriety and, at times, an income.

For A-No. 1, his fame allowed him to settle down from tramp life. His fame was used to continue a life that would remain heavily committed to tramping in a new way. No longer beating his way across the world or writing books, he turned to missionary work meant to dissuade would-be tramps from becoming a victim of the “disease” known as wanderlust. Penn, the Rambler, on the other hand, spent his last years in a Florida prison before he was ever able to publish his own body of literature. However, both A-No. 1 and Penn, the Rambler gained

¹⁹⁸ “Says Tramp Is Not a Hobo,” 4.

notoriety beyond writing literature. They would also become famous by leaving their “monikers” everywhere they went. These tramp signatures would prove their arrival and/or departure in any given place throughout the world. They would as well serve as evidence to their might as a tramp, and as a physical marker of their fame. Tex, King of Tramps became known only for his moniker writing. For Tex, his fame was less a pursuit, but a symptom of thousands of markings he cut, scratched, and painted throughout North America. He would gain publicity not from his poetry or through other published works, but by marking his name incessantly. Not to say he did not appear as a feature of the press as other tramps had; it was, however, never intentional. It was his prolific marking that often found him both a stint in jail and a story.

One of the defining features of what I have come to call the “publicity-seeking” tramp is the behaviour of actively seeking fame through both the press and the moniker. Physically placing their stylized signatures around North America (and perhaps the world as well) was a subcultural tradition. It was, however, used beyond the commonly defined motivations found in previous essays or studies on the tramp, which suggests the moniker was nothing more than a means of keeping in touch with one another. It has become clear that the moniker also worked a promotional tool for the careerist tramp, as interwoven with tramp life as any other daily routine. Yes, the motivations for many hoboes and tramps may have been to simply note their whereabouts to others, but the moniker—for some—served another purpose. It was a publicity-seeking method for realizing fame. Both the moniker and the press were instruments of publicity-seeking that allowed the tramp, their tramping skills, to be seen from the railroad to mountain tops.

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