

# Life along the Rails

Preacher

Harmony Hank

Handbag Hattie

Dawg

Steamtrain Satch

Oklahoma Oscar

Sleepy Slim

Now that trains and railroad tracks are no longer a common sight, the romance of the rail and the sound of the engine whistle are gone. Young people today are unfamiliar with the tales of cross country trips by train, and many have never heard of the “Hobos” who “rode the rails” in search of work and adventure.

## What is a hobo?

No one knows for sure just where the term “hobo” originated. One theory is that, during the depression in the United States, those who lost their jobs joined others who were unemployed and adventuresome by inclination. They would at times converge on an area where work had to be done, like weeding the fields with hoes. Those who did this were known as Hoe Boys, which later was united to make “Hoeboys”, and then finally “Hobos” (which later included women along with the men).

## What is NOT a hobo!

Hobo culture is not to be confused with “tramps” or “bums”! The difference has been explained: **A Hobo is a man who wanders and works. A Tramp is a man who wanders and dreams. A Bum does neither.** The keyword in describing a hobo was independence. Unlike tramps or bums, hobos were usually very resourceful, self reliant and appreciative people. They displayed a quiet pride arising from self-confidence and the secure knowledge that they controlled their own destiny. They avoided long-term work commitments, preferring to be free to follow the call of the open road when it came. Hobos frequently used what talents they had to earn a meal before it was time to move on.

## The “jungle” life

The center of hobo life was the camp or “jungle” which was located wherever it was most convenient, preferably close to a railroad track. It was usually on the sunny side of a hill near a source of water. The camps were used by all, who usually were identified only by colorful nicknames and were expected to follow the rules, leaving the cooking pots clean, not robbing another hobo, threatening local people or breaking into houses (although stealing from a garden or clothesline was more or less common!). In their leisure time many hobos used their knives to create things of beauty to barter for food or exchange for money. The items they carved or whittled became one of the original forms of American folk art, known as hobo or tramp art.

## Remembering the past

Many hobos abandoned their fierce independence to settle down and become prominent businessmen, lawyers, writers and entertainers. After World War II their numbers declined rapidly, and these independent travelers disappeared entirely with the demise of local train service. But some of our older citizens remember the “Hobo Camp” which was located not far from the train depot.

In the early history of *Harmony MN*, the coming of the railroad not only signaled a way for farmers to transport their products and for merchants and homeowners to receive needed goods, but actually changed the location of the town! The original small village of Greenfield was moved a mile north because of the location of the railroad in 1879. Harmony and its neighbor Canton each contributed \$12,000 toward construction of a line from the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul tracks to Reno on the Mississippi. The first work train passed through the new town site on December 26, 1879, and passenger trains began running regularly on January 19, 1880. An era of building began, and the new town of Harmony grew and prospered. The railroad was the lifeblood of the community until 1977 when, despite the protests by farmers and businessmen, all rails and ties were removed.

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Woodcarver Stanley J. (Slim) Maroushek received training in his craft from the Bily Brothers of Spillville, Iowa, and now teaches others. Carefully designed, the figures of the Hobo Camp create a life-like grouping.

