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Article Summary: A 26-year sample of Omaha vagrancy arrests provides evidence that in Nebraska the hobo age was already on the wane at the beginning of the twentieth century. Hoboes had gathered in Omaha because it was a rail hub and institutions had grown up around the rail yards to provide services for them. By the early 1900s homeless men had replaced many of the working hoboes in the area.

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Photographs / Images: railroad yards in Omaha; hobo climbing onto a box car; two young men boarding a box car of a moving train

Tables/Figures: Table 1: percentage distribution by place of birth of vagrants, 1887-1913, and adult males nationally and in Omaha, 1900; Table 2: percentage occupational distribution of vagrants by race and place of birth; Fig 1: annual distribution of vagrancy arrests by occupation; Fig 2: quarterly distribution of vagrancy arrests by year; Table 3: quarterly percentage distribution of vagrancy arrests by occupation

Omaha Vagrants and the Character of Western Hobo Labor, 1887-1913

BY JOHN C. SCHNEIDER

Tramping workers in the United States between the 1860s and 1920s filled the labor needs of a far-flung and not yet fully mechanized economy. Thousands were called at harvest time to midwestern wheat farms in areas stretching from Kansas to the bonanza fields along the Red River in Minnesota and the Dakotas. Migrant laborers also picked fruit for California growers. They gathered berries on Michigan farms. They picked hops in upstate New York. During the winter months lumbering and ice-cutting beckoned workers to the northern timber and lake regions. Transient laborers helped to bring up coal and metals from the nation's mines. Perhaps the most ubiquitous opportunities for tramping casuals were afforded by the railroads. Veritable armies of men were needed to grade land, lay and repair track, and build bridges. By 1910 there were an estimated three and a half to four million of these "hoboes" nationwide, most of them in the Midwest and Far West.¹

Men on the road routinely found their way to cities. Railroad lines converged and terminated there, and western hoboes depended heavily on the railroad for transportation, even though stealing rides on box cars often led to dangerous accidents or rough handling by the police. There was also seasonal and short-term work to be had in the city, and job agencies to visit to find employment in the fields and construction camps. As the number of migrant workers passing through cities increased over the last third of the nineteenth century, a variety of institutions sprouted to serve them, creating what hoboes referred to as the "main stem." These crowded and bustling subareas of cheap lodging houses and cafes, second-hand clothing stores, saloons, brothels, and employment agencies were located near the downtown and

rail yards and were a highly visible feature of the urban landscape.

Historians understand the contribution hoboese made as a labor force to the nation's economic growth, but they are less able to speak with any certainty about the kind of men hoboese were and about their patterns of movement. Reformers, writers, and ex-hoboese have left shelves of books and articles about men of the road, but while these impressionistic exposes are revealing and insightful, they are of only limited value in helping historians to ascertain the character of tramping workers and the rhythm of their wanderings. Contemporary statistical analyses, such as the famous McCook tramp survey of 1891, are random snapshot views of homeless men that do not uncover seasonal, yearly, or generational changes in the migrant work force.²

A 26-year sample of vagrancy arrests from the surviving manuscript arrest ledgers of the Omaha police department sheds considerably more light on the world of transient men, and western migrants in particular. The findings suggest, among other things, that the transient population became over time almost exclusively native-born; that those who tramped were usually unskilled, but were joined by men with skills when the economy was depressed; that some men were more likely than others to tramp at certain times of the year; and that as early as 1900 the fulltime hobo was becoming less visible among migrant and seasonal laborers.

The sample consists of 1509 persons arrested for vagrancy and for other offenses that were euphemisms for vagrancy, including "tramp," "boxcar tramp," and "sleeping in boxcar." It is a random sample of every 20th vagrant, beginning September 1, 1887, and ending March 31, 1913, with short gaps in 1892, 1905, and 1906. In addition to the date of arrest the blotters include the sex, race, nativity, and occupation of each arrestee.³ The data have their limitations, to be sure. Not all of those arrested for vagrancy were necessarily migrants, and conversely, most of the migrants in Omaha were not arrested for vagrancy while in the city. Those who were arrested were probably among the more destitute. The policies, diligence, and discretionary behavior of the police had a lot to do with the number and to an extent the character of vagrancy arrestees. Police blotters, in other words, are not the best

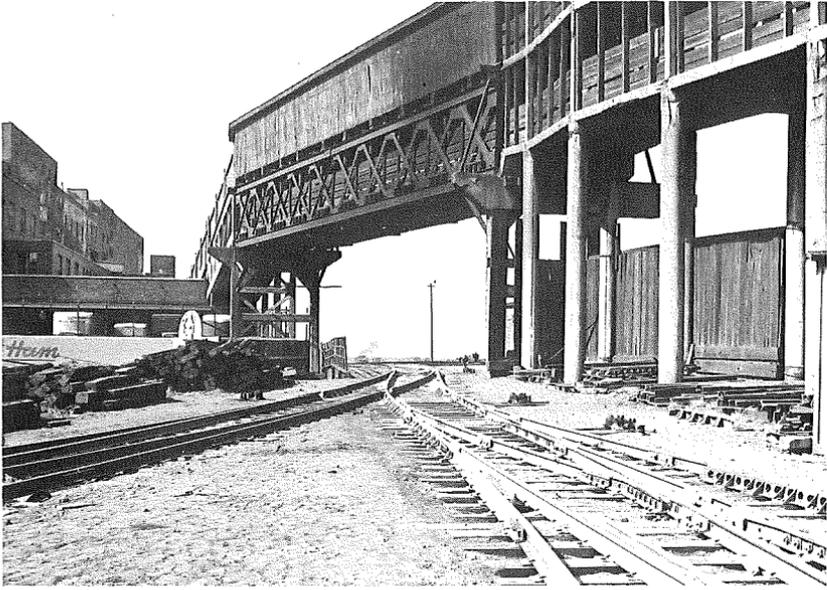
source for establishing a profile of migrant workers. But men on the tramp constituted a largely inarticulate group whose identity cannot be determined from standard demographic sources. Historians must turn to whatever offers even remotely an opportunity for greater understanding of the problem. The police blotters are used here with a full recognition of their limitations and the speculative character of the conclusions drawn from them.

The Omaha police department as far as could be determined, pursued a relatively consistent policy toward vagrants, who were considered a threat to the city's order not so much because they appeared to be idle persons but because they were thought to be thieves and burglars. A rash of property crimes usually led to a police campaign against vagrants. However, throughout the year the police made routine sweeps of certain areas to collect "vags," and as evidence of these sweeps, vagrancy arrests during the entire period often came in bunches—from a dozen or less to several in the vicinity of 100. Early in these years police policy included a twice-weekly foray through the rail yards, where men loitered around empty boxcars and looked for freights to jump. After a time the police widened the net, routinely descending on downtown parks, lodging houses, and other places where transients were usually to be found.⁴

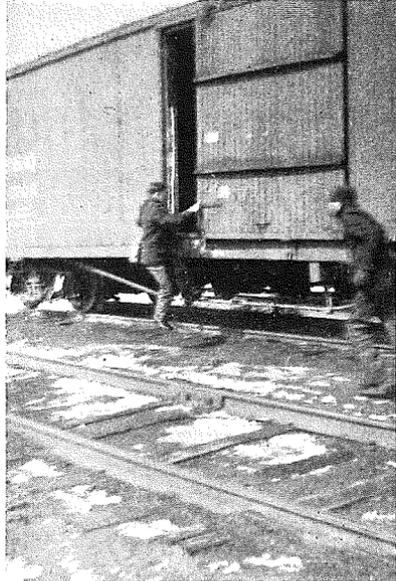
Because the arrest ledgers do not include addresses of arrestees, there is no way of estimating how many of them were transients. Undoubtedly most were, but at least some were local residents whose loitering in the wrong place at the wrong time brought them a vagrancy charge. On July 17, 1912, a sweep by the police of Jefferson Square Park in downtown Omaha netted 58 vagrants, 10 of whom, according to one newspaper, turned out to be resident workingmen enjoying a little sunshine and relaxation.⁵ It is unlikely that the proportion of nondrifters was always that high. As one way of minimizing the number of such persons in the sample, however, vagrancy arrests in connection with prostitution were not counted. These arrests, for such offenses as "vagrant and in house of prostitution" or "vagrant and pimp," plainly included not only prostitutes but also men who were connected with the city's vice business—pimps, barkeepers, gamblers.

Omaha attracted large numbers of migrant workers in these years. It was a rail center and a major stopping point on transportation lines leading to and from harvest and construction work throughout the Midwest and West. Hoboes traveling to California, it was said, followed two main routes, one through St. Louis and Kansas City, the other through Omaha and Denver.⁶ In fact, Omaha was known among men of the road as the gateway to the West, the city beyond which one might need to carry a bed roll for nights on or off the job. Nels Anderson, later in life a sociologist interested in the study of homeless men, passed through Omaha as a young hobo sometime around 1907. He was impressed with the size and variety of the city's hobo area, apparently located in the general vicinity of 10th through 13th streets just south of Dodge. A companion of his stood on a corner along the main stem and tried to estimate the number of transient men in the city. "He guessed a thousand on that street and side streets," Anderson recalled, "another five hundred in bars and flop houses, another three to four thousand mooching on the streets or begging back doors or trying to get freight trains for somewhere else."⁷

The busiest months for migrant workers in the plains states were in the summer and early fall, during the grain harvesting. Common were the freights, such as one in the middle of July, 1899, that pulled out of Omaha with "small armies" of tramps on them heading for the wheat fields. The *Omaha Bee* reported early in August, 1906, that an unusually large harvest in Minnesota and the Dakotas was bringing the city's employment agencies a brisk business. They were sending out between one and two hundred men daily.⁸ At other times, however, out-of-work homeless men packed the city's philanthropic institutions. Edwin Brown, a reformer interested in lodging houses who played the role of hobo in cities all over the country, visited Omaha in 1911. "I walked down the darker streets in the lower part of the city where the out-of-work are forced to gather," he wrote. "In Boston I thought I had never seen such a gathering of human misery as I found on Boston Common, but nowhere have I found that condition so evident in a smaller way than in Omaha." Brown looked unsuccessfully for a place to sleep at the YMCA, the Salvation Army, and at least two missions. He ended up with other



*Railroad yards in Omaha. . . . (Below left) Hobo climbing onto a box car. . . . (Below right) Two young men boarding a box car of moving train. Bottom photos from Thomas Minehan's *Boy and Girl Tramps of America* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1934), ff. 78.*



homeless men on the grass in Jefferson Square park, only to be chased out by a policeman.⁹

The sample of vagrancy arrests seems to confirm the contemporary view in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that homelessness and migrant work were a man's world. Actually there were many homeless women in American cities during these years. Some were prostitutes, others did odd cleaning or cooking jobs, while still others were destitute women akin to the pathetic "bag ladies" often seen on city streets today. However, few tramped and rode the rails as the men did.¹⁰ Only 31 of the vagrants in the Omaha sample were women, half of them prostitutes and most of the rest women with no recorded occupation. If there is a story to be told about the "sisters of the road" it cannot be told from the data at hand. The female arrestees will be excluded from the analysis, leaving a total sample of 1478.

Blacks made up 13.9% of the sample, a surprisingly high percentage, since they made up only 9.7% of the adult male population nationwide and 3.8% in Omaha.¹¹ While vagrancy arrests may have been a way for the police to control the local black population in the interests of a racist community, it is also clear that many of these arrests grew out of concerns not unlike those that motivated vagrancy arrests in general. The police went after black vagrants early in 1908, for instance, because of a rash of petty crimes for which they were blamed. There are indications that the blacks arrested as vagrants were just as likely as white vagrants to be migrant workers. A noticeable increase in black vagrancy arrests during 1904 turned out to be part of the aftermath of a packinghouse strike in South Omaha. Blacks from the South were among the strikebreakers, and over the ensuing weeks many found their way to "notorious colored resorts," where they drew the attention of the police. Allegedly they had quit their jobs. On at least one occasion a black man was reported among harvest workers stealing rides on freights out of Omaha.¹² Blacks tramped outside of the South but were less likely to be seen the farther one traveled from the South. Before he passed through Omaha, Anderson had worked in Montana with a railroad construction crew that included about a dozen blacks. So out of place were they that when the cold weather set in and the rest of the workers began to leave for warmer regions, the

blacks stayed behind because they felt strange "that far north" and feared passing through the all-white camps along the line. These lonely blacks had been sent out from Kansas City, whose main stem, according to Anderson, was one-third black. Chicago's on the other hand, was almost entirely white. Omaha's probably fell someplace in between. There is no evidence from Omaha, however, that would question the fact that few blacks gained entry to the social world of white migrant workers.¹³

All of the blacks in the sample were native-born, and so were most of the whites. In fact, almost four out of every five vagrants were born in the United States (Table 1). Moreover, the percentage of native-born increased dramatically over the period and averaged around 90 by 1902 and after, a rather high figure. Among adult males nationally the percentage of native-born stood at 76.4 in 1900. It was even lower in the cities and industrial communities through which hoboes so often passed. In Omaha the figure was only 65.5. Fragmentary statistical evidence on other urban homeless men during these years shows that anywhere from just under one-half to

TABLE I

PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION BY PLACE OF BIRTH OF VAGRANTS,
1887-1913 (THREE-YEAR AVERAGES), AND
ADULT MALES NATIONALLY AND IN OMAHA, 1900

	U.S.	Ireland	Germany	England/ Scotland	Scandinavia	Other
1887-1889	52.9	36.6	5.8	1.0	3.1	1.0
1890-1892	62.9	18.2	7.6	2.3	6.8	2.3
1893-1895	72.5	9.8	8.5	2.6	3.9	2.6
1896-1898	76.6	14.1	4.9	2.2	1.6	1.0
1899-1901	80.4	4.6	7.2	1.3	2.6	3.9
1902-1904	92.4	4.9	1.0	1.0	1.4	0.0
1905-1907	91.9	2.9	1.5	2.2	1.5	0.0
1908-1910	84.9	4.7	3.3	0.0	1.9	5.2
1911-1913	92.5	1.1	1.7	1.7	1.7	1.1
Sample total	78.3	11.2	4.5	1.5	2.6	1.9
U.S. 1900	76.4	3.4	6.2	2.7	2.8	8.5
Omaha 1900	65.5	3.3	8.5	3.5	9.6	9.7

Sources: Sample data; U.S. Census Office (12th Census), *Population: Part I* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1901), ccxvii, 942-945.

just over three-fourths of them were native-born.¹⁴ Contemporaries commonly observed that hoboes were a predominantly "American" group. A University of Nebraska professor was sure this was true of the state's harvest workers.¹⁵ Government studies of immigrant labor in the early twentieth century show that recent immigrants, mostly from southern and eastern Europe, did a variety of seasonal and migrant work. Employers reported, however, that these men were more likely to see the jobs through than natives or some of the older immigrant groups, such as the Scandinavians. Perhaps this meant that they were not as peripatetic as native-born or Americanized migrant laborers, which may explain why they were a less visible part of the hobo subculture.¹⁶

Only the Irish among the foreign-born were over-represented in the sample of vagrants. The centrality of the "bachelor group" in the Irish culture may have manifested itself, among other ways, in a degree of Irish immigrant homelessness in America.¹⁷ The prominence of the Irish in the sample, however, derives mostly from high percentages in the earliest years that drop markedly thereafter. The sharpness of this decline in Irish vagrancy defies easy explanation, but in a general way it parallels the decline in all foreign-born among vagrants, especially around the turn of the century. This is a pattern that scholarship heretofore has not revealed, and it may be possible to say more about it later after analyzing the rest of the data.

When vagrants gave the police their occupations they probably told what skills or experience they had, not what they were doing at the time. In more recent years skid row men have been shown to cling to an occupational identity long after it bears any relation to reality.¹⁸ The typical Omaha vagrant may in fact have been without a job or the prospect of one at the time of arrest. An Omaha Police Court judge noted in 1897 that many of those arrested for minor offenses, such as vagrancy, were honest men "compelled by the scarcity of work to travel from city to city." In 1910 the South Omaha police justice complained that most of the vagrants brought before him were men with craft skills who were not working. He insisted that there were plenty of jobs available for them, but this seems unlikely.¹⁹ If homeless men were actually employed in Omaha temporarily, or on their way to work, their jobs

probably required little skill, regardless of how much skill the men might have had. A reporter who visited the city's cheap lodging houses during the winter of 1890 described the lodgers as "teamsters, graders, street cleaners, railroad hands, and several who smelled like a farmyard, plainly showing that they were employed in a livery stable, probably as hostlers and cleaners."²⁰

The sample data reveal that most vagrants were manual workers who possessed little or no skill (Table 2). Over half of them were unclassified laborers. Among working males nationally the percentage of unclassified laborers in 1900 was only 10.3, and if farm laborers are added, still only 17.8.²¹ The pattern shows up among all groups of vagrants, yet with predictable variations. Blacks were much less likely than whites to be highly skilled (though a bit more likely, interestingly, to have skills of at least some kind). The Irish and Scandinavians among whites disproportionately had no skills at all, while the Germans, British, and remaining foreign-born were disproportionately represented among the highly skilled. The Omaha data indicate that overall the men who tramped in the West were not men with skills displaced by the industrial system, but rather men whose *lack* of skills made it easier or more necessary for them to turn to the road.

By the early 20th century reformers had begun to view men

TABLE 2

PERCENTAGE OCCUPATIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF VAGRANTS BY RACE AND PLACE OF BIRTH (SAMPLE DATA)

	Professional/ Proprietor/ Clerical	Skilled	Semi-skilled	Unskilled	No Occupation
Sample Total	6.1	14.0	17.3	56.1	6.5
White	6.7	15.9	14.5	56.6	6.3
Black	2.5	2.4	34.1	53.2	7.8
U.S.	6.8	13.5	19.4	53.6	6.7
Ireland	1.2	13.3	13.3	70.3	1.8
Germany	7.5	20.9	6.0	58.2	7.5
England/Scotland	4.5	18.2	9.1	45.5	22.7
Scandinavia	0.0	7.7	2.6	82.1	7.7
Other	10.8	28.6	7.1	42.9	10.7

on the tramp as less a problem in moral character and more a problem in unemployment. The writer, Jack London, concluded that they constituted a "surplus labor army" without which "our present capitalist economy would be powerless."²² Such observations often failed to consider the possibility that tramping appealed to men unhappy with the regimen of the industrial workplace. Nevertheless, the relationship between tramping and the labor market merits consideration. The period from the Civil War to World War I saw as much cyclical activity in business trends as any in American history. In the shorter period under consideration here, there were business downturns in 1890-1891, 1893-1897, 1900, 1903-1904, 1907-1908, and 1910-1911. Omaha felt the effects of the big depression of the nineties, but not so much the effects of the downturns in other years, including the sharp recession of 1907-1908. The number and character of transients in Omaha, however, would undoubtedly reflect national or regional economic trends, not local ones.²³

The proportion of vagrancy arrests to all arrests in Omaha was indeed at its highest levels in the badly depressed years of 1893, 1894, and 1896, and it made its greatest one-year leaps in 1896, 1904, and 1908.²⁴ More revealing are annual changes in the occupational background of vagrants (Figure 1). The percentage of skilled and semi-skilled vagrants rose sharply in proportion to the unskilled in 1890, 1893, and 1911 and reached one-third or more almost only in depressed years. When the economy faltered, therefore, large numbers of skilled men went on the road, either as tramping artisans or more likely as casual laborers.²⁵ Even professionals, proprietors, and office workers among vagrants increased proportionately in lean years: 1891, 1894, 1895, 1896, and 1904. Overall, the depression years of the mid-1890s show the smallest percentage gaps among vagrant occupational groups. These were years when Omaha's transients were a most diverse lot, compared to the usual preponderance of unskilled men.

The contemporary literature on hoboes describes a highly seasonal rhythm to their life on the road. Free spirited, the men traveled a great deal in the warm months as they followed casual work, and in the colder months either headed south or "holed up" in urban lodging houses.²⁶ The Omaha data allow a close inspection of their patterns of movement.

FIGURE 1
Annual Distribution of Vagrancy Arrests by Occupation (Sample Data)

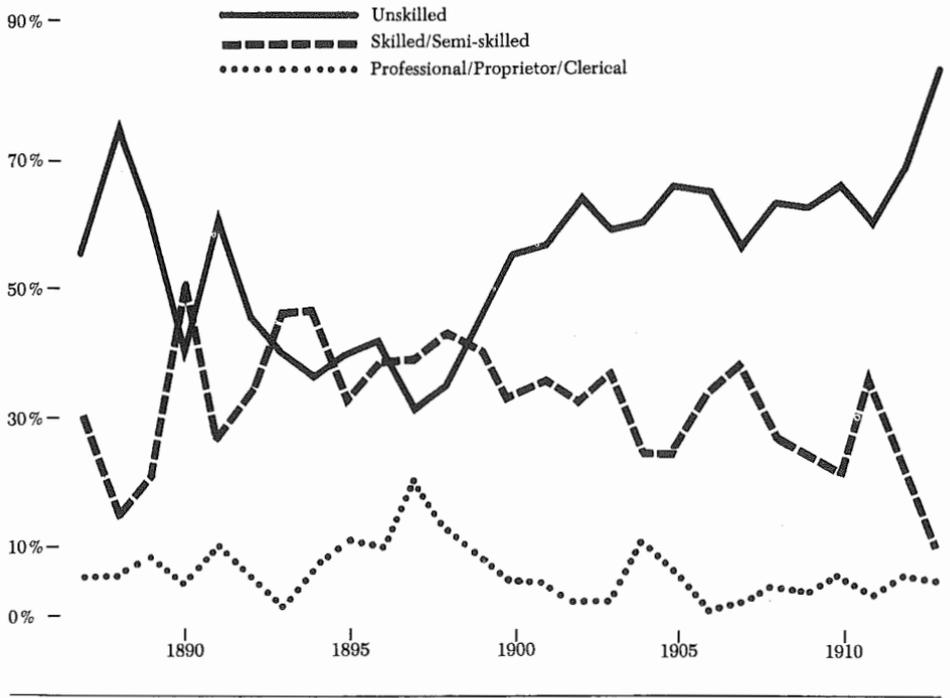
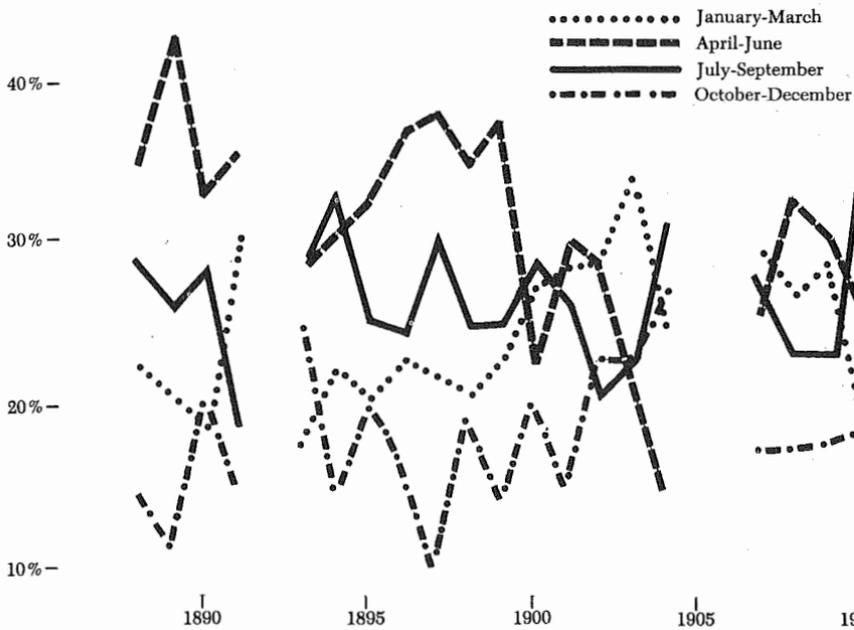


FIGURE 2
Quarterly Distribution of Vagrancy Arrests by Year (Sample Data)



More vagrancy arrests were made in the spring (30%) than in any other quarter of the year. Omaha witnessed increasing numbers of transients in the spring as travel became easier and construction projects began. In June, 1899, almost 25 men were arrested—"vagged"—one day behind an employment office "while waiting for a chance to get out of town on railroad work."²⁷ The rate of arrest remained high (27.5%) in the summer months when large numbers of men traveled through Omaha on their way to the harvest. In the fall the arrest rate dropped substantially (18.0%). This would indicate that there were far fewer migrant workers passing through Omaha with the end of the harvest, the decline in construction jobs, and the prospects of less attractive traveling weather. In the winter, therefore, the movement of homeless men through Omaha must have almost ceased. The vagrancy arrest rate, however, went up considerably (24.2%). This suggests that the city's cheap lodging houses harbored large numbers of homeless men without travel plans or perhaps even jobs. As the men loitered about the city, they inevitably came into conflict with the police. Some of them may have sought out this contact. "As the season advances," the chief of police complained in 1890 (and again in 1900), "the vagrants, tramps and petty criminals assemble here to establish their winter quarters; it does not require much work on their part to be sent to the county jail for sixty or ninety days, where they all know they can enjoy their victuals and comfortable quarters without work."²⁸

Vagrants from the ranks of professionals, proprietors, and office workers had the most evenly distributed quarterly arrest rates (Table 3). Their homelessness and movement were least tied to seasonal labor needs, or the weather. When these men went on the road they must have gone out of desperation, oblivious to the prospects of work at that particular time of the year. Still, their highest rate of arrest was in the summer, indicating that the harvest must have beckoned these men. The manual workers who predominated among transients were more seasonal in their movement. Those with skills, however, had higher arrest rates in spring and summer and a lower rate in winter than did the unskilled. Skilled men were warm-weather hoboes. Perhaps they had better job prospects in the winter and did not have to hibernate in the cheap lodging houses. Finally, there were the vagrants who had no oc-

TABLE 3
 QUARTERLY PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF
 VAGRANCY ARRESTS BY OCCUPATION
 (SAMPLE DATA)

	Jan.-Mar.	Apr.-Je.	July-Sept.	Oct.-Dec.	
Proprietor/ Professional/ Clerical	26.6	21.3	30.8	21.3	(100.0)
Skilled/ Semi-skilled	20.4	32.3	29.6	17.7	(100.0)
Unskilled	26.3	29.5	26.5	17.7	(100.0)
No Occupation	25.3	40.5	16.5	17.7	(100.0)

cupation at all to give the police. Some were boys, others were men whom the police chose to describe as "tramps," "bums," or "loafers." Many vagrants who claimed occupations may also have been "tramps," but those who could not or would not claim occupations were more likely to be. Contemporary observers characterized tramps as men who dreamed and wandered, while hoboes worked and wandered.²⁹ Omaha's tramps—vagrants with no occupation—fit the description. Their rate of arrest was unusually high in the spring and unusually low in the summer. Tramps were highly visible at the start of the traveling season, but were not much in evidence when work abounded nearby for migrant laborers.

The quarterly distribution of vagrancy arrests is even more revealing when examined year by year for the entire period (Figure 2). The proportion of vagrants arrested annually in the spring dropped, while the proportion arrested in the fall rose, though less sharply. The net result was that after about 1900 the seasonal spread in arrests was less than it had been before. More significantly, what had been a fairly consistent pattern of seasonal arrests—the highest rate in the spring, followed in order by summer, winter, and fall—gave way to much greater annual variation. In short, the presence of homeless men in Omaha seemed as time went on to have less to do with traditional seasonal labor needs and the ease and comfort of outdoor travel. It would appear that fewer tramps and migrant

workers passed through Omaha's transient areas. If so, then as vagrancy arrests became less clearly patterned seasonally they should also have declined. Proportionately to the population of Omaha they did not, but they did constitute a smaller percentage of all arrests, averaging about 16 percent before 1900, only 12 percent after.³⁰ Moreover, there was a substantial decline after the 1890s in the number of vagrants arrested explicitly for sleeping in boxcars. The police may have abandoned entirely their routine sweeps of the rail yards, or they may simply have stopped using that particular charge, but it is conceivable that the decline in boxcar vagrants among arrestees also reflected an actual decline in the numbers of seasonal workers passing through Omaha on the railroad.

One speculative explanation for these findings is that fewer seasonal laborers were needed in the plains states by the time of World War I than in the 1880s and 1890s. The evidence, however, does not support this. Agricultural patterns were changing throughout these years, especially in crop diversification, but farm labor needs did not decline. In Nebraska, 450,000 additional acres were planted to wheat between 1899 and 1901, mostly new strains of winter wheat. It was only in the 1920s that farm mechanization, principally the tractor and combine, first began to replace substantial numbers of migrant workers.³¹ Furthermore, construction and employment in the railroad industry held firm through the World War I years, and jobs in western lumber camps did not decline until around 1930.³² Another possible explanation for the changing quarterly arrest patterns of Omaha vagrants is that harvest hands and other migrants were beginning to use the automobile to get to the fields and work camps, thereby avoiding the snare of the police in freight yards and the streets of the main stem. Here again, however, it was not until the 1920s that significant numbers of migrant workers traveled by car.³³

A more plausible explanation is that an increasing number of seasonal workers in the plains states, as was already the case in the older Midwest, were residents of farms, towns, and cities near migrant job areas. The *Omaha Bee* found it newsworthy enough to report in the summer of 1906 that most of the men the city's employment agencies were sending to the wheat fields were actually Omaha residents looking for

a few weeks' work at good wages. Their physical appearance, language, demeanor, and the account they gave of themselves to the police may have made these part-time migrants less likely to be arrested as vagrants than the "professional" hoboes who, as one California grower complained in 1914, "every year go around the circle on the brake beam" in time with the rhythm of western seasonal work. Evidence abounds that these and other regulars on the road had their own "look," recognizable to the men themselves as well as to the police. The hobo writer William Edge was delighted when he was for the first time taken for a confrere by a veteran hobo. "My hands, coarse and calloused, and vocabulary and voice passed muster," he wrote later. "My clothes were satisfactory; my general attitude, carriage, bearing, stamped me as a bum." The competition from local labor possibly upset the traditional patterns of migrant work opportunity. More and more hoboes might have passed up the harvest and other seasonal jobs in the plains states. These were Omaha's missing boxcar vagrants.³⁴

The availability of local western labor, then, was apparently changing the character of seasonal work forces in the plains states even before the World War I era, when farmers, job agencies, the railroad, and the police all conspired against full-time hoboes because of their association with the radical Industrial Workers of the World. Changes in the character of migrant workers also apparently came before wide-spread use of the automobile, which made the harvest fields and construction camps more accessible to college students, the temporarily unemployed, and others for whom such work was only an occasional diversion.³⁵

If fewer men lingering in Omaha's lodging-house districts and rail yards after 1900 were full-time migrants following the call of seasonal work, then more of the men must have been following their own peripatetic spirit (although they were still hoboes, not tramps, since the proportion of arrestees with no occupation does not show a corresponding rise). Perhaps some were men who lived on the main stem year-round and did odd jobs in and about the city. Hoboes called this latter group "the home guard." That Omaha's main stem sheltered an ever larger percentage of such men gives meaning to the findings on nativity presented earlier. The increased proportion of native-born among vagrants may have reflected this change in the

population of transients. Immigrants were evidently much more common among traditional hoboes than among the home guard and others who by the time of World War I had become more prominent on the main stem.

The change in its population signaled a transformation in Omaha's "hobohemia." Still a vital and complex area, it was nonetheless harboring fewer migrant workers who simply used its services and more homeless men who may have viewed tramping and the main stem as ends in themselves. Nels Anderson believed that such men made up most of the population on Chicago's stem in the early 1920s but that true working hoboes still dominated the transient men's areas of cities such as Minneapolis and Omaha.³⁶ The evidence presented here suggests that as early as 1900 Omaha's main stem sheltered a greater variety of men, including the "inadequate" types Anderson found so numerous in Chicago. The declining presence of hoboes on the main stem was what eventually helped turn it into the more recent skid row of dropouts and derelicts.³⁷ If Omaha was typical of other western cities where hoboes were so prominent, then this evolution may have begun earlier than commonly believed. The hobo age was already on the wane as the century dawned.

NOTES

1. Kenneth Allsop, *Hard Travellin': The Hobo and His History* (New York: New American Library, 1967); Clark C. Spence, "Knights of the Tie and Rail—Tramps and Hoboes in the West," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 2 (January, 1971), 5-19; Roger Bruns, *Knights of the Road: A Hobo History* (New York: Methuen, 1980).

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3. Omaha Jail Register, 1887-1913, Nebraska State Historical Society. The missing dates are May 1-December 31, 1882, and June 22, 1905, through April 28, 1906.

4. *Omaha Republican*, July 11, 1888, 7, July 27, 1890, 10; *Omaha Daily Bee*, August 9, 1904, 7; *Omaha Evening Bee*, July 29, 1910, 1; *Omaha Sunday Bee*, May 19, 1907, Sec. A, 4, July 31, 1910, Sec. A, 8; *Omaha Daily News*, May 7, 1908, 2; *Omaha Sunday World-Herald*, August 7, 1910, 2; "Report of the Chief of Police" in *Municipal Reports of the City of Omaha* (Omaha: Omaha Republican Printing Co., 1890), 270.

5. *Omaha Morning World-Herald*, July 18, 1912, 1.

6. Solenberger, *One Thousand Homeless Men*, 330.
7. Nels Anderson, *The American Hobo: An Autobiography* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975), 85.
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11. US Census Office (12th Census), *Population: Part I* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1901), cxcvii, 934-35.
12. *Omaha Daily News*, February 1, 1908, 2; *Omaha Daily Bee*, September 27, 1904, 10; *Omaha World-Herald*, July 20, 1899, 8.
13. Anderson, *American Hobo*, 68-80; Paul T. Ringenbach, *Tramps and Reformers, 1873-1916: The Discovery of Unemployment in New York* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1973), 71-72; John C. Schneider, "Tramps and Hoboes in Urban America, 1890-1920: A Subcultural Perspective," unpublished manuscript, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1981.
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31. John T. Schlebecker, *Whereby We Thrive: A History of American Farming, 1607-1972* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1975), 244-49, 264-66; James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 249-54; Carey McWilliams, *Ill Fares the Land: Migrants and Migratory Labor in the United States* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1942), 102-3.
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33. McWilliams, *Ill Fares the Land*, 100-101; Spence, "Knights of the Tie and Rail," 18.
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