

# BUSTED IN BOOM TOWN

IN GOOD TIMES AND BAD, THE HOBO IS JUST  
PASSING THROUGH. HE REMAINS A PART  
OF OUR NATIONAL MYTHOLOGY.

By TED CONOVER

**T**HE BOXCAR ON OUR Burlington Northern freight from McCook, Nebraska, rocked side to side as the train slowed and crossed a section of bad track on its arrival into Denver. Brakes squealed and doors banged, every sound magnified by the huge echo chamber that is an empty boxcar. My fellow passenger had not spoken during most of the trip, which was okay because I probably couldn't have heard him anyway. But now, as we entered the yards, he started to talk.

"Goddamn coal trains," he muttered, surveying the ones we would have to climb over to make our way out of the yard when the train stopped. I stood in the open doorway of the boxcar, looking out on the Denver night. "Hey—get back!" he hissed, pointing to the railroad control tower we were about to pass. "They'll put the dicks on us." I retreated to the darkness at the back of the car.

"They got a mission here?" I asked him, wondering where I would spend the night.

"Twenty-third and Lawrence," he said with little pleasure, "but it's too late to check in. You missed the sermon. Hell, you missed dinner, too, but that's okay—all they serve is some goddamn beans somebody made fifty years ago up in Laramie.

"What I do—I sleep in one of them bad order cars they got lined up on the U.P. [Union Pacific] tracks down there. They don't move 'em to the shop 'til morning."

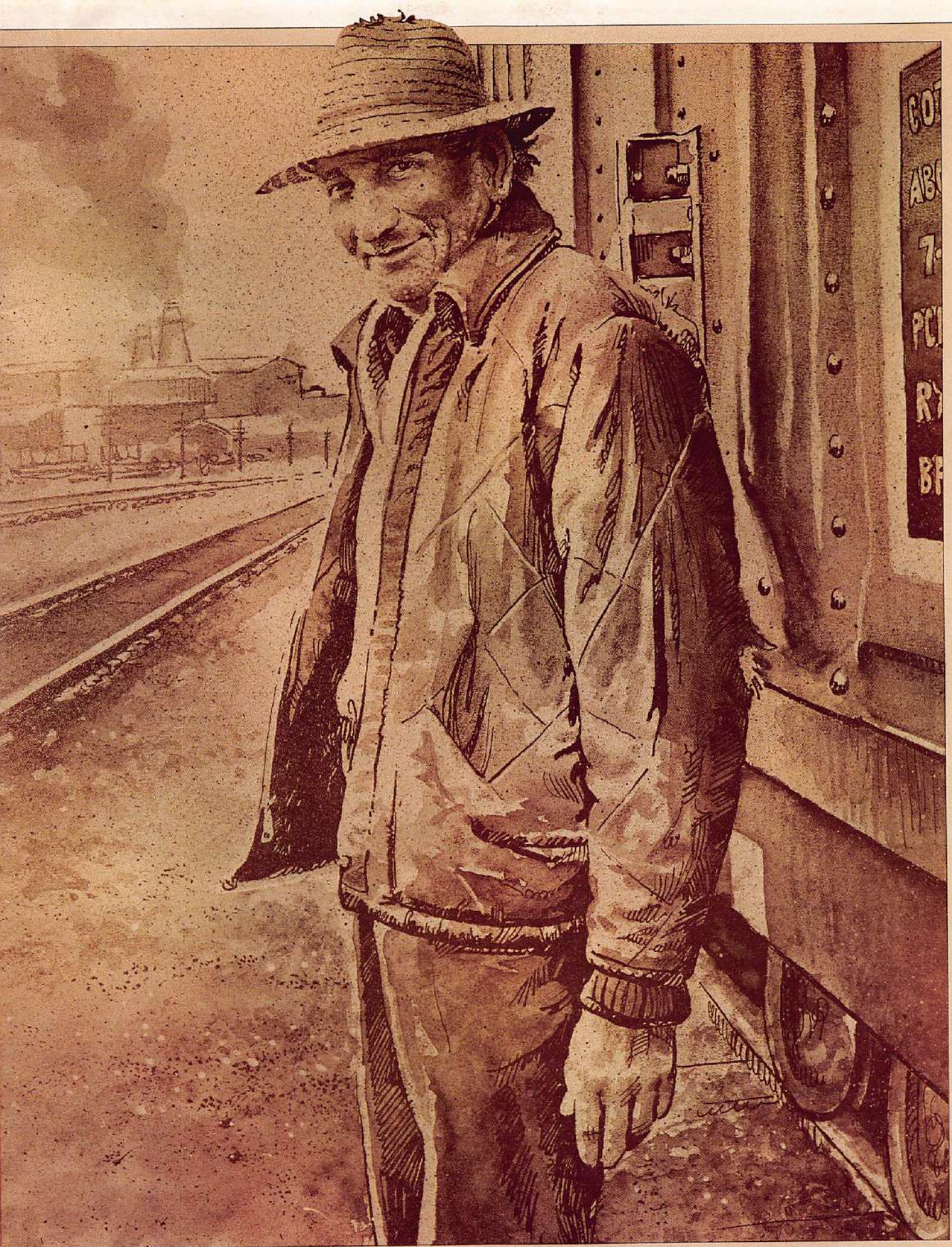
I nodded, adding that I was unfamiliar with the routine in Denver.

"Oh, it's a good town for eatin'," he said. "You got the Sally [Salvation Army] at 21st and Larimer at 9 A.M., bologna sandwiches at the Holy Ghost church at 10, dinner at the Catholic Worker at 4 . . ." He went on. A Denver native, I had never heard of these places.

The train stopped with a jerk that nearly knocked us off our feet. I was cautioned to wait until they "broke the air," a signal that the locomotives had disconnected themselves and the train was going no farther. Finally it came—a loud, harsh "WHOOSH" of air escaping from the brake hoses. My companion signaled for me to follow, and stealthily we climbed down from the boxcar and wound our way over the coal trains and out of the yard, entering downtown just north of Union Station. I would have liked the man's company, as home looked disturbingly foreign from this angle, so I introduced myself. "My name's Ted . . ." I started.

He kept walking. "Well, Ted, one thing you gotta know about Denver—if you got two pennies in your pocket, separate 'em. I'll prob'ly see you tomorrow," and he turned, bedroll over his shoulder, and vanished down Larimer Street.









DENVER, BEING A major railroad junction, is a fairly big town for hoboes, or "railroad tramps," as they call themselves. Men arrive from Cheyenne, Lincoln (via McCook), Pueblo, and Grand Junction, most on trips originating in points far distant. The word "origination" is inexact, however, as it is hard to say just where the hoboes' travels started, or where they will end. Rather, travel for them is a way of life, one some of the older guys will tell you they have been living since childhood; one of the younger guys, much fewer in number, may have started yesterday. Nor are the reasons for travel always clear, though the number of trains of unknown destination I have jumped with hoboes leads me to believe that often, getting out of a place is a more important motivation than arriving at the next one.

Travel is also what makes railroad tramps distinct from others who are down and out in Denver. Most tramps are here only for a couple of days or weeks at a time, long enough to rest, take a look around, maybe use up the three nights allotted to them at the rescue mission, get in trouble, or get tired of the place. A few get part-time jobs, or sell their blood.

These are activities also engaged in by Denver's "full-time transients," the guys tramps refer to as "home guard," "bums," or "winos"—but tramps hate to be confused with these men. They consider themselves a notch above in the hierarchy of the down and out, superior because they have the wherewithal to pick up and "catch out" on the next train if things get "hot," superior because they will occasionally work (they say); superior because they are not slaves to alcohol to the degree that they fall asleep in the gutter, become malnourished, or lose their gear.

Still, the groups mix, and the outsider is often hard put to tell the difference. Downtown is the common ground, and once a day the Catholic Worker House, 23rd and Welton, is a major meeting point.

WHEN I ARRIVED (at the Holy Ghost Church) it was past sandwich time, but sitting on a planter box a few feet away from the sandwich door, I saw an obvious home guard, wearing an old overcoat and black oxfords—mission clothes. He was about 6 feet tall, and had red hair cut Prince Valiant style. With a spoon he was eating from a can of Campbell's Chunky Soup.

"Just in?" he asked.

"Yeah," I answered.

"Hungry?"

"Yeah."

"Here—you got a cup? Have some of this."

I removed a cup from my shoulder bag, and accepted his gift

of soup, offering a cigarette in return. "Got a ten dollar food voucher from the Sally," he explained.

"Where else can a guy eat around here?" I asked. Dinner at the Catholic Worker was next, he said in a backwoods Southern voice, and he was going there, too. "But first c'mere—I'll gitcha some coffee."

Entering the basement of Holy Ghost, we went to the men's room, where the man rinsed his spoon and I my cup. Then, producing his own cup and a jar of instant coffee from deep in a pocket, he sprinkled some coffee into the cups, turned on the hot water, and filled them up. Not quite the Brown Palace, but on this cool day, it tasted good.

I arrived at the alley behind the worker house when there were still only about fifteen men in line. By the 4 P.M. feeding time, the line had swelled to more than a hundred, and curved around the block. Like most people down and out, the line was mostly white and male. There were a number of blacks and Chicanos, though, and two or three women. One, a boisterous Chicana, assaulted the line just as the doors opened, shoving her way in front of the guy ahead of me, crying, "Ladies first! Ladies first! Hurry up, you guys!" No reply was offered by anyone in the somber-faced crowd.

As we passed into the dark room—a former garage, by all appearances—the pile of bedrolls staked at the door grew and grew. The fare was excellent for free food: vegetable soup, corn on the cob, banana mush, watermelon, tea, and kefir. The men ate quickly and left without a "thank you"—and this, along with the graffiti scribbled on the Holy Ghost Church meal hours sign ("Don't get hungry any other time!"), reminded me of how I was at first offended by tramps' lack of gratitude. Later, though, especially after staying at rescue missions, it became understandable. As George Orwell observed, "A man receiving charity practically always hates his benefactor—it is a fixed characteristic of human nature."

The man across the table and I began one of few conversations being carried on at the meal. He was a Vietnam vet, like most of the younger guys I have met on the bum, and had spent some time on the rails. When I told him of my plan to visit the jungles near the Platte River, he advised against it. "There's guys down there that'll kill you for a nickel," he said, "especially now, in this cold weather. Don't take your bedroll with you—I can guarantee you won't have it in the morning."

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TRAMPS WHO COME to Denver stay in a variety of places. Those who highly value their independence, which is most of them, find a "jungle" site under one of the many bridges and viaducts that crisscross the industrial area just west of downtown, in open fields between the factories and warehouses that line most of the railroad yards ("the Bonne Aire Motel," I heard one tramp say, when asked by a policeman where he was staying), or along the banks of Cherry Creek or the Platte River. These are places few of us visit, spaces tramps inherit by default.

But times are changing. The narrator of the Depression-era *Hobo Trail to Nowhere* came through Denver regularly, and reported that he always found a pleasant, grassy spot to sleep under a bridge along Cherry Creek. Though some guys still do this, the new bike path has made it awkward, as large numbers of helmeted, ten-speed cyclists and business people in expensive jogging suits frequently pass by. Boom meets bust west of downtown.

Shrubbery remains along the Platte, though, and amidst it,



the homeless still find a home. Trying to overcome the contradictory feeling of being a hobo on the bike path, I walked the Platte and noticed a good jungle on the east bank. I decided to greet the occupants.

A "jungle," I should note, no longer denotes a massive encampment of hoboes; rather, modern tramps use it to mean simply "campsite" or "group of campsites." Entering one is still a tricky business. The best way to enter, tramps know, is during the daytime, looking utterly unconcerned and possibly friendly. One should pause at the perimeter of the jungle, making some noise to gain the occupants' attention, and say something like, "Mind if I come in?"

The reply, when I approached Al and Treetop's jungle on the east bank of the Platte, was not an "okay" or a nod of the head, but the hysterical barking of Al's spitz mix, Lady. "Shut up, goddamnit, I said shut up," said Al, all but ignoring me. It was not a "yes," but neither was it a "no," so I walked in and set down my gear. I was just in, I explained, and trying to get my bearings, and more than a little hungry, besides. Al, like almost all tramps with extra food, was quick to oblige. He handed me a cellophane-wrapped ham and cheese sandwich from a box full of them, and I took a seat on an overturned bucket.

The jungle's main feature was a tent-like shelter made from heavy green canvas and plastic sheeting, suspended from linden and cottonwood. A wooden spool table sat next to this, covered with food and condiments; the end of a mattress projected from the shelter's door. Presently the shelter and mattress moved, and a giant of a man rose stiffly to his feet and regarded me critically. Later, I would hear Al call him "Tree," and later still "Treetop." Hearing Tree address "Al" by name was also how I learned his name. They never asked my name—formal introductions, along with hand-shaking, are not a part of hobo etiquette, and in fact are likely to prompt suspicion.

"Hungry, huh?" said Tree. I nodded. He relieved himself in the bushes not far from the tent, and when he returned to sit on the mattress I relocated my bucket nearer to him. We listened to country and western music—the transistor radio was powered by discarded batteries from brakemen's lanterns, a common set-up in jungles—and occasionally Tree would remark on a song coming over the radio, or would wave at a jogger passing by on the path across the river. We discussed the trains from Lincoln, the "daytime man" and the "nighttime man," as Tree called them, and prospects at the day labor pool downtown ("the slave market," in Tree's terms).

Tree looked about sixty. White whiskers gave his face a ragged outline, and a floppy-rimmed hillbilly hat hid his bald scalp. He wore old boots, loose canvas pants, a heavy shirt, and a jacket. Al joined us. He looked about twenty years younger, wore his shirt open and no socks. Al was black and Tree was white—an unusual pairing among tramps. Al declined my offer of instant coffee, and didn't smoke, either. He and Tree enjoyed occasional sips from a bottle of wine in a bag on the ground between them and traded jokes. I was not offered the wine, which is normal among tramps—unless you contribute to its cost, alcohol is one thing tramps are stingy with. Soon, a collection began for the next round, however, and I pitched in a handful of change. Then all three of us embarked on a supply expedition.

The first stop was a mammoth dumpster behind the Burlington Northern offices. Though tall, the aging Tree needed



a boost. I obliged, and was soon being handed a pair of shoes, which, luckily, fit Al, and a number of used lantern batteries. These Tree tested by holding his tongue to the two terminals. If it tingled, there was juice left.

Next, we found an out-of-the-way west Denver street corner and savored the three Budweisers Al had bought with money from the kitty. Our last stop was a catering concern which, Al and Tree knew, daily threw out all the sandwiches, yogurts, salads, etc., which had passed their expiration date. Again, Tree did the digging, and Al and I sorted the haul into three large plastic bags, which we later shouldered and hauled back to the jungle.

There was no dinner time; each man ate the recycled food—some of it stale but most of it perfectly fine—when he was hungry. Later, to the light of crooked, broken candles sunken into the sandy soil of the tent floor, we listened to a football game on the radio. Al and Tree bitterly contested the merits of the two teams. It became late. "Okay if I stay here tonight?" I asked. "Do what you want," answered Tree. I cleared a space for my bedroll and slept under the stars, a quarter mile from downtown Denver.

I was with Tree and Al two days. The evening of the second, two young Chicanos dressed in storebought, casual clothes and mostly oblivious to Lady's barking, strode boldly into the jungle.

"I'm lookin' for an old friend named Treetop," said one to Al. "Tall guy, been hanging out in Denver for about five years. I heard he was down here—you see him?" Out of the corner of my eye I saw Treetop, staring blankly ahead.

"No, why I ain't never heard of the guy," said Al. "What'd he do?"

"Oh, nothin', I was just wantin' to say hello," said the man. Then he glanced over at Tree, sitting in the dimness. "You know Treetop?" he asked. Tree dully shook his head.

After the men had continued down the bank, Al agitatedly gestured at Treetop. "You know those guys?" he demanded.

"I ain't never seen 'em," he said, shaking his head confusedly.

"They were detectives," said Al. "I know it. They weren't no tramps—one of 'em smelled like talcum." Both of them were very worried, and I wondered what Tree had done that lawmen, or somebody, was looking for him. The insecurity and vulnerability of the jungle was suddenly quite apparent to me. Not wanting to get caught in a violent situation should the men return while we were asleep, I asked if they thought they might need my help later that evening. The question annoyed them; they said they would be just fine. I decided to say good-bye. Al I would see again later, but





Tree left town the next day, bound for Montana.

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I WALKED BACK INTO town along the tracks, over ties that I suspected somebody had spaced just so that tramps would have trouble walking on them. One step too long, the next step too short.

Though I missed the evening plate of beans, it was not too late to get a spot on the floor of the basement of St. Andrew's Abbey, 20th and Glenarm. The atmosphere at the shelter is much better than at most. Patrons are younger, for one thing—men under thirty can stay three nights a month, while older men are allowed only one—and for another, as Father Lloyd Holifield explained before the lights went out, "We're not interested in converting you here. If you become interested in our way, that's terrific, but we're not pushing anything down your throats." It was a welcome change from the rescue missions found in most cities, where the cost of a night's meal and lodging is attendance at an hour-long evangelical sermon (an "earbanging," the tramps call it), in which the tramps are told what sinners they are.

Soon, the Episcopal monks who run St. Andrew's handed out blankets. The cement floor was cold and hard. As I lay down, using my jacket for a pillow, a cockroach skittered by. Later in the night, the monk's cat licked my nose and, terrified, I woke up, having dreamed it was a giant cockroach.

Breakfast at St. Andrew's is invariably porridge. "Eat it quick, before it sets," advised a monk, setting down a bowl before me. There was also coffee this morning, and spirits were mostly high.

"Pour me some of that—let's get the old plasma flowing so it'll come out easy!"

"See these goddamn boots? They got 1,500 miles on 'em."

"I'm catching outta here on a fast freight, today," said one tramp, recently out of jail. "Fuck this town."

Back on the street, I recognized a lot of the same guys from prior days. It was still strange being as one of them in my home town. I walked in fear that I

would be recognized by some dropout from my high school, who would eye me, former overachiever, and say, with smug satisfaction, "Ahh, look who's here!"

Sometimes I ask myself, "Why *am* I here?"

The idea first came to mind when I was a senior at Amherst College in Massachusetts, searching for a topic for an anthropological honors thesis. I was somewhat sick of school, both academically and socially. Amherst is a rarefied environment, an expensive school attended by some of the country's most talented and competitive students. They were people who have everything to hope for in life, unlike the hoboes I had met when I took a year off from college and worked as a Vista volunteer in Dallas. I found the hoboes more interesting than the students, perhaps because they were so different and I knew nothing about them.

At first I was taken by a romantic vision of hoboes, whom I viewed as renegades, conscientious objectors to the nine-to-five work world, men who found freedom only on the open road. I wondered whether they chose to live apart from society, or whether they were forced to. The best way of finding out was to live with them, and I was captured by the idea of hopping freights, those myth-laden behemoths so tied to the growth and exploration of the West. It seemed something a red-blooded American boy just ought to do.

Also, very little was known about modern-day hoboes. They are remembered as a phenomenon of frontier days and the Depression, and the popular belief is that there are none anymore. But having met several while hitchhiking, bicycle touring, and hanging out around Union Station as a teen-ager, I knew that wasn't true.

For four months I rode the rails, through every Western

## GO TO JAIL...

"HURRY UP, asshole," yelled the policeman.

I looked up, startled. I was walking west across the 16th Street viaduct that afternoon, bewhiskered, longhaired, and carrying a bedroll and paper grocery sack. The policeman's patrol car, lights flashing, was straddling the center line of the road, fifty feet ahead of me. He was standing next to it, waving his arms and ordering the drivers of passing cars to hurry up, too.

Unaware that I had done anything wrong, I continued at the same pace toward the end of the viaduct.

"Hurry up and get your ass off the bridge!"

"Why?" I asked, still walking.

Pointing at me, he cried, "I SAID GET OFF THE DAMN BRIDGE—NOW MOVE!"

I complied, then looked back and jotted down the license number of his car. He noticed this and shouted, "Go ahead and write it down—if you can read!"

Once off the bridge, I paused. Had I been better groomed, wearing a coat and tie, I thought, this would never have happened. I had never been in trouble with the law—never even received a traffic ticket—and suddenly one point about police treatment that hoboes had made to me time and again was driven home with force: it's different when you're poor.

I decided to complain to the police department. I knew I would probably need the policeman's badge number to make a credible complaint and so, mustering my courage, I stepped back onto the bridge and asked for it.

"I told you to get off this bridge!" he yelled.

"Please tell me your badge number, and I'll get off the bridge," I said.

"I'll arrest you!"

"What is your badge number?"

"You'll get it on the summons if you don't move your ass off this bridge!"

Knowing that department policy requires an officer to disclose his number



state except South Dakota. Eighty freight train rides and numberless days in jungles after I began, I had learned much about hoboes and much about myself. I learned my capacities and limitations. I learned of life and the opposite end of America's privileged spectrum. Going without them for so long, I learned how important to me are my family and friends. I found hoboes to be more like me than I had ever imagined, having many of the same needs and aspirations, if not the means of fulfilling them. And I learned that hoboes, even the toughest and most violent of them, are, like everybody, prone to emotional bruises, and among them are some of the most bruised people in the country. About 20,000 men do still ride the rails, is my guess, but they differ in many ways from their more numerous forebears.

Modern hoboes are not victims of the massive unemployment that set millions adrift fifty years ago, workers who find that migrancy increases their income. But lack of jobs is still a factor: Treetop is representative of a number of older blue collar workers who, through feebleness, simply can no longer hold down a job. Either they have a few years to wait until they qualify for pension or social security, or they already receive them and find the money is too meager to live on respectably. Still others of this group can afford a one-room apartment somewhere, but find the settled life dull and prefer to be on the road, where each day brings new acquaintances and circumstances.

Alcoholism, which causes men to lose jobs and families, also creates hoboes. So did the Vietnam War, from which a disturbingly large group of younger tramps emerged with problems: painful memories, personality disorders, drug problems, a cold welcome from countrymen. A final group, which



mostly remains separate from the others, comprises Mexican farmworkers.

It was not what I originally had expected. The issues of choice are fuzzy: a few men seem to be tramping solely through coercion, kept on the run by police or addiction. Others, I suspect, wouldn't stay put if you gave them an estate in Cherry Hills. But for the vast majority, riding the rails is something that they are pushed into and that pulls them along, the result of an argument with society that ended when the hobo said, "You can't fire me—I quit!"

I HEAD BACK TO the Platte. Today, I am meeting a photographer and we are going to try to meet people who will allow him to take their pictures. Al is amicable, but against the idea; most others we meet are similarly camera-shy. Finally, we meet a pair of young guys, longhairs just off a train from Cheyenne, at their jungle underneath a bridge. Muffin, Skits (for "schizophrenic," his former condition), and their kitten, Denver, allegedly "a real good railrider," are listening to Led Zeppelin music playing loudly from a radio inside Muffin's handsewn pack. "Denver" is torturing grasshoppers, and Muffin undertakes to wash some clothes in the Platte.

We discuss the Denver jail, which I have recently visited (see p. ??), the price of local marijuana, "found foods," from Euell Gibbons' pine bark to what Skits terms the "McDonalds payoff"—showing up at a fast food restaurant at closing time, and recovering unsold but still-warm hamburgers, etc., from the garbage.

Friends have been made easily and, as we leave, the photographer calls out, "Have a good trip," as though it were a finite matter, something scheduled to end soon.

Skits calls back, correcting him. Smiling, he says, "This trip never ends." ■

*Ted Conover spent four months riding freights with hoboes. His story of the experience will be published next fall by Viking Press.*

when asked, I persisted: "What is your number?"

"Mister, you're getting arrested."

He slammed shut the door on his cruiser and stopped the traffic. Then he walked over to me, twisted my arms behind my back, and handcuffed me.

"Take it easy," I said. "I'm not resisting."

Holding me by the handcuff chain, he shoved me forward, lifting the chain high so that the cuffs dug into my wrists. Then he opened the front passenger door of the cruiser and pushed me in. My head hit the metal door frame.

He frisked me inside the car. "How old are you?" he asked.

"Twenty-three."

"Good, then you'll go to jail," he said. "I'm sure you been there before."

As we drove off, we passed my gear, laying by the side of the road. He had refused to pick it up. Nor would he answer my questions about why I should not have been on the bridge, or about his name. It was only by listening to conversations on his car radio and at the station later that I learned that members of President Reagan's party had been passing by at the time on Interstate 25, underneath the viaduct.

I was held in a tiny cell at the west Denver substation for about an hour, during which time I heard the policemen refer to me as a "shitheel." Later I was transferred to the city jail, booked, and held overnight—without dinner. Wanting to see how I would be treated if I were really a hobo, I neither posted bond nor told anyone I was a reporter. In court the next day, the judge fined me \$50 but suspended it, and I was released from jail.

When my property was returned to me, I immediately checked my notebook. The pages upon which I had quoted the policeman's first remarks to me and copied down his license number had been ripped out.

Of course, a true hobo probably would not have been arrested in this case. Knowing his place, he would have scooted quickly off the bridge and been on his way. My self-esteem and naivete are greater than those of most hoboes—and I had received a sobering lesson. — T. C. ■