

# What Happened To Hobos?

What happened the hobos? Are they still with us? Have they disappeared, or perhaps we just call them 'homeless' now?

A hobo is actually a migratory worker or homeless vagabond, especially one who is impoverished. The term originated in the Western—probably Northwestern—United States around 1890. Unlike a "tramp", who works only when forced to, and a "bum", who does not work at all, a "hobo" is a traveling worker.

It is unclear exactly when hobos first appeared on the American railroading scene. With the end of the American Civil War in the 1860s, many discharged veterans returning home began hopping freight trains. Others looking for work on the American frontier followed the railways west aboard freight trains in the late 19th century.

In 1906, Professor Loyal Shafee, after an exhaustive study, put the number of tramps [*hobos*] in the United States at about 500,000 (about 0.6% of the U.S. population). His article "What Tramps Cost Nation" was published by The New York Telegraph in 1911, when he estimated the number had surged to 700,000.

The number of hobos increased greatly during the Great Depression era of the 1930s. With no work and no prospects at home, many decided to travel for free by freight train and try their luck elsewhere.

Life as a hobo was dangerous. In addition to the problems of being itinerant, poor, and far from home and support, plus the hostility of many train crews, they faced the railroads' security staff, nicknamed

bulls, who had a reputation of violence against trespassers. Moreover, riding on a freight train is dangerous in itself. British poet W.H. Davies, author of *The Autobiography of a Super-Tramp*, lost a foot when he fell under the wheels when trying to jump aboard a train. It was easy to be trapped between cars, and one could freeze to death in bad weather. When freezer cars were loaded at an ice factory, any hobo inside was likely to be killed.

According to Ted Conover in *Rolling Nowhere* (1984), as many as 20,000 people were living a hobo life in North America. Modern freight trains are much faster and thus harder to ride than in the 1930s, but they can still be boarded in rail yards. [<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hobo>]

