

Essay for:

Laura Addison, *No Idle Hands: The Myths and Meanings of Tramp Art*, 2017

International Museum of Folk Art, Santa Fe, NM

<https://www.amazon.com/No-Idle-Hands-Myths-Meanings/dp/089013622X>

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Truth Inside the Myth: The Obscure History of Tramp Art in America

by Leslie Umberger

I became a tramp—well, because of the life that was in me, of the wanderlust in my blood that would not let me rest.

Jack London, from *The Road*

The dream of freedom is as foundational to the idea of America as any other. The “American Dream” is often framed as a story of self-made success. And yet, on the opposite side of that coin is the dreamer seeking a free and easy lifestyle. The self-made business success and the artistic nomad have long played opposing roles in the American story: the hero and the anti-hero in readily reversible roles. The Great Depression fueled durable myths of rugged individualism and “hitting the open road” as millions of Americans found the dream of the stable home and family life in shambles. But who was the “tramp” or “hobo” who lived on the road and answered the harsh reality of loneliness and poverty with vagabond fraternity and hope everlasting?

The American writer Jack London called it “seeking,” a restless search to see and feel the wide-open world. In 1892 London took up as a “tramp,” one of several words used to describe the person who traversed the country via the railway network that stitched all points of the Western frontier to the rest of the United States in the years following the Civil War. Their travel was illicit, but the notion that any penniless youth with enough grit could travel the beautiful breadth of the land was as integral to the American Dream as any other piece. London

lived as a traveling tramp for just one summer, but the experience imprinted upon him indelibly, and the stories he drew from this time would impact countless others thereafter.

London would not be the only American icon to adopt the tramp identity. The poet Carl Sandburg lived as a tramp in 1897, traveling by day, playing his guitar and collecting songs and folktales by night.<sup>1</sup> Like London, he wrote about the experience in the years to come, and similarly romanticized the hardship in *The Road and the End*:

I shall foot it down the roadway in the dusk, where shapes of hunger wander and the fugitives of pain go by. I shall foot it in the silence of the morning, see the night slur into dawn, hear the slow great winds arise. Where tall trees flank the way and shoulder toward the sky...<sup>2</sup>

Sandburg's active collecting of songs and stories situates him in a more specific proximity to the tramps and hobos who carved boxes, frames, and whimsy sticks to mark the time and attest to both existence and collective identity. Songs such as "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum" and "Tramp, Tramp, Tramp, Keep On A-Tramping" simultaneously bemoaned and glorified the hardscrabble life of the itinerant, but moreover they shaped misfortune into community. The core idea of a "folk" art of any kind is that it carries communal bonds and markers of tradition across time and space. The poet Kenneth Rexroth believed Sandburg's songs evidenced "an old free America," and described a radical American individualism that would, in time, give life to the counterculture of the 1960s.<sup>3</sup>

The additive, pieced and carved works that came to be called "tramp art" may elude any concise history, but they arguably link makers who witnessed or experienced hard times and great change in their country and used objects to attach themselves to something larger than themselves. Neither Sandburg nor London lived the vagabond life for long, or out of desperate need, yet what they both embody is the duality of myth and reality living within the American "tramp" identity.

The tramping days of both London and Sandburg situate in the pre-twentieth-century era, yet, like the era of the Great Depression when tramping in the United States peaked, the earlier timeframe was also one in which an American economic crisis had set change in motion. The era of the craftsman was giving way to the age of the factory worker. This change meant the worker could no longer trade on years of skill to keep a job; factory workers could be replaced with anyone willing to work more cheaply; immigrants, ex-slaves, women, and even children entering the market shifted the scene to one in which supply far outpaced demand and slums became part the urban landscape. Programs for social welfare or workmen's compensation didn't exist; if you lost your job you could beg or starve, look for day jobs, or become an outlaw.

The vagabond lifestyle of the tramp or hobo variously wove all of these options together. It also filled an important void for people inherently inclined to self-identify through work—both productive labor and skilled craft. The romance of "the Road" didn't match the harsh reality, but those who took to it didn't usually have other plans to fall back on.

The traveler culture that arose in the 1930s employed notions of adventure and a fraternal culture to buoy the soul against despair. A combing of American biographies from this era reveals a great many mentions of men who, at least for a time, took to the rails, searching for subsistence and identity. The profiles range from television personality Art Linkletter (1912–2010) to oil tycoon H.L. Hunt (1889–1974) to the artist Emery Blagdon (1907–1986), who would be posthumously featured in the 2013 Venice Biennale—not for tramp-style carvings, but for the complexly bent and woven wire forms that came to mark his mature artistic identity. For those of skilled hand and raised to believe the devil makes work for idle hands, handcrafts were a marker of talent, knowledge, self-worth, and community—even if it was a loose one.

Broadly speaking, the men called variously hobos, bindlestiffs, tramps, and fruit gypsies arose in tandem with increased farming in the American West, which began in the late part of the nineteenth century and extended more than two decades into the twentieth. “It was brought first by the railroad as it coursed through the plains and mountains and coastal districts, opening vast stretches to farming,” explains historian Mark Wyman. “Then came irrigation canals that, together with the railways made possible new kinds of intensive agriculture...what this new frontier lacked was laborers.”<sup>4</sup>

The people who started riding the freight trains following the seasonal harvests became the migrant working class.<sup>5</sup> They toted meager belongings and bonded briefly in encampments. By all accounts it was an extremely hard existence. Communities welcomed workers at harvest time and arrested them or kicked them out for vagrancy when the crops were in. Riding the rails was perilous; travelers who rode without paying were subject to the brutality of the rail police (the “bulls”) and were often injured or killed in the process of riding or boarding. Distinctions arose to refer to the specific types of wanderers. Dr. Ben Reitman explained, “The hobo works and wanders, the tramp dreams and wanders, and the bum drinks and wanders.”<sup>6</sup>

But the differences were subtle and shifting. Firsthand accounts are relatively rare, although the record was substantially bolstered during the making of the documentary film *Riding the Rails* (1998).<sup>7</sup> Project partners Michael Uys and Lexy Lovell put a call out in the American Association of Retired Persons magazine *Modern Maturity* for individuals who lived life on the road between 1929 and 1941. They had some three thousand respondents—still a fraction of the millions that were out of work and wandering during this era. The accounts tell harrowing stories of abandoned and runaway children, destitute men and women, all starving, lonely, cold, and risking life and limb every day. But they also speak to a culture that values wanderlust and “rugged individualism.”

Specifically, the history of tramps and “tramp art” are the most difficult elements to reconcile. During the Civil War, luxury goods were taxed to generate war revenue. The Revenue Act of 1864 required cigars to be packaged in boxes, generating a surplus of discarded mahogany and cedar boxes as well as pine shipping crates. Tramp art aficionado Clifford Wallach notes that cigars were not the rare commodity that they are perceived as today—every man who could afford them indulged, so the packaging discards were indeed abundant. “In a very real sense,

available materials gave rise to the craft . . . The greatest disadvantage of this scavenged wood, its thinness, was turned into an asset by the tramp artists, who layered it in increments to achieve mass.”<sup>8</sup>

The carving style of chipping or notching and layering wood, like any number of folk practices, may indeed have Old World roots, but found fertile ground in the United States. Materials were plentiful and the practice was easy to learn and excel at. Visually and metaphorically both rugged and individualized, these works, in their very physicality, conveyed something that had both communal and individual traits. Far from being works of fine craft, they showcased the maker’s ingenuity and ability to make something from nothing.

In the Civil War prison camps and hospitals, men took up carving and whittling and, after that, the overarching craft had myriad independent evolutions. Tramps too, in the form of wandering men displaced by the vagaries of war, materialized during and after the Civil War, but there is little to suggest any direct link between wanderers and what they may or may not have made at that time.<sup>9</sup>

The woodcarver Levi Fisher Ames (1840–1923) likely learned some of his sophisticated whittling techniques during the Civil War. Hospitalized for much of his service period, and finally discharged on disability in 1862, Ames went on to make a sizeable body of work. Small piecework carvings suggest that whittling may have been something he could do to keep hands and mind busy while laid up. His small works include miniature rifles, amputated limbs, canteens, and a blanket roll with knapsack—but they also include deftly executed hobo and tramp styles such as chains of numerous styles, interlocking gyroscope forms, and various “Crown of Thorns” style crosses and picture frames.

While Ames’s oeuvre would go on to be predominantly defined by animal carvings, there is much to suggest that he learned his whittling techniques during his convalescence; practice made perfect but the styles themselves were likely passed along.<sup>10</sup> Ames would go on to lead a stable home and family life, but the art of carving remained at the heart of his personal practice.

Wallach describes several cases in which chip-carved boxes, frames, or small home shrines were fabricated specifically as trade-goods, made on the cheap by itinerant artisans or tradesmen in exchange for food or lodging with a well-to-do family. But he also argues that, more often, the ambitious examples of this kind of work were made in a more fixed environment like a home workshop or garage.<sup>11</sup>

In the end, there is no single truth about tramps, hobos, or men with an affinity for woodcarving. What is true is that most itinerants carried a razor or jackknife, if little else. Knives were not only essential to a hardscrabble existence, but they were also used as tools of communication. Jack London and others have attested that tramps would carve symbols or their monikers on fences or on the legs of water towers near “the jungles,” or encampments; it was the closest thing they had to a message board.<sup>12</sup>

The account of Fred Hoffman (1845–1926) offers an interesting piece of the puzzle as well. Hoffman was a man from Pennsylvania who took up the tramp lifestyle, moved north to Canada, staying with the Old Order Mennonite community in the winter and the nearby Amish settlement in the summer. Amish and Mennonite families kept a *trampschtub* or “beggar’s room” specifically for vagrants in need.<sup>13</sup>

In her essay “A Great Many Tramps We Had Overnight,” Nancy-Lou Patterson chronicles stories of tramps who lodged with the Mennonites in Waterloo County, Ontario, Canada, which lies between Buffalo, New York, and Detroit, Michigan, north of Lake Erie.

Patterson explains that not only was Hoffman a prolific artist, but he also taught a great many younger knife-carrying travelers the art of chip-carving.<sup>14</sup> Hoffman strikes an interesting balance between the rail-riding hobo and the home-based handyman. Although he was technically a person without a home, possibly even living as a fugitive outside of the United States, he was also well known to these communities. Matthias Martin, who knew Hoffman around 1918, notes that families trusted him enough to look after their children, and it seems likely that he would have been allowed to use the tools and work areas of the household as well.

Hoffman would reportedly fish and share his catch and give his carved pieces to those who housed him. Martin notes that the works of art Hoffman gave as gifts were greatly valued by their recipients and that a concentration of his work has remained in this region. Martin recalled that Hoffman did not go to church but that he was very conversational and often joined families for a meal; he was both auxiliary to and part of these communities. “They didn’t consider him to be just a tramp; he was Fred Hoffman!”<sup>15</sup>

Patterson explains that the local bylaws of the area described “transient traders” as a general nuisance, at best a challenge to be managed. Yet individual accounts more often suggest a more charitable view. Joseph Schneider, a Pennsylvania-German Mennonite, built a house in Kitchener, Ontario, Canada, in 1816 that features a *trampschtub*; it became a living history museum in 1981. His granddaughter, Louisa Schneider Troxel (1847–1932), lived in her grandfather’s house and recalled, “All the company we entertained, and a great many tramps we had overnight, we never found a bedbug.”<sup>16</sup>

A key problem in historicizing tramp art in the United States is that anonymity was part of the vagrant culture, but it was also uncommon for makers of small crafted items, regardless of where they lived or worked, to sign them. Wyman notes, “Pockets of deceased hoboes and tramps usually held no more than a few cents or a few dollars, plus a razor, perhaps a knife . . . Names and histories had been jettisoned long ago.”<sup>17</sup> The cases of known makers can offer only glimpses into an expansive history that is concretely documented only in random instances. Yet, as is the case with quilts, the objects carry with them suggestions about their past.

Quilts of every age may range from humble, pieced-together items of practical use to finely crafted and ambitious projects. The former tend to indicate humble, sometimes impoverished, origins, and either a need-driven use of scraps or a moral value of frugality and practical reuse.

Colors and patterns may further indicate cultural and regional preferences, but something cobbled together or patched and stitched time and again generally describes a waste-not-derivation. Most often, these are the quilts for which the makers' names have been lost to history; artistic identity was not as important as keeping the family warm and, unless a family member has kept records over the years, the object becomes detached from its history.

The latter kind of quilt, the finer and more planned piece of work, describes different, although still highly variable, situations. Fine quilts with matched, and sometimes imported, fabrics, elaborate patterns or appliqué, larger sizes, and small, fine stitching tend to suggest affluence—either the maker's or whomever paid to have it made by servants or by hired craftspeople. Some ambitious projects or memorabilia quilts are the work of groups, such as church groups or ladies gatherings. These are the cases in which authorship tends to survive, proudly made pieces are signed, cared for, sometimes kept for special occasions or never used at all.

Quilts of groups such as the Amish and the Mennonite occupy still other realms, attesting to a distilled culture's spiritual and cultural beliefs through plain, strong, beautiful works to which authorship is not generally attached.

It seems to follow that carved items adhere to a similar pattern. Pieces that might have been made on the road, with little beyond a stick and a knife, or a few castoff cigar boxes, would be less likely to have their maker's name attached. And that larger works, seemingly made in a workshop, over time, or a more comprehensive body of work, would be more likely to have a known history.

Adolph Vandertie (1911–2007), who self-identified as a “hobo and whittler,” asserted that items made on the road did tend to be smaller and more portable, but that they made up for their size by boasting great skill.<sup>18</sup> “Tramps and hoboes really should be known for whittling whimsies—a very popular pastime for them—not for making tramp art, he explained.”<sup>19</sup> By “tramp art,” Vandertie was specifically referring to the style of layered, chip-carved works. Vandertie explained the differences of these practices in his own book, *Hobo & Tramp Art Carving: An Authentic American Folk Tradition*.<sup>20</sup>

Around 1924, Vandertie started visiting the tramp and hobo “jungles” of northern Wisconsin. These so-called jungles were campsites, usually just outside of a town and near the rail lines and a water source, where wanderers of various stripe gathered for rest, camaraderie, and food—but they were also places where identities were formed. “(They) lived by their own code of law and honor, authored their own stories, composed their own songs, developed their own customs, and wrote their own language,” Vandertie would write. “They were members of a new society who discarded their real names and replaced them with names of the road, such as Feather River John ‘McCloughy,’ Fry Pan Jack, Box Car Willie and Frisco Jack.”<sup>21</sup>

Vandertie was enraptured by the stories told around the campfire, but especially by the wood carving and whittling which many of the men practiced as they sat. He explains, “There is very little written about the leisure time of the hobo, but it is known he became a stick whittler. He

came about it naturally because he carried a jackknife, his most valuable tool, in his pocket; and wood was always available."<sup>22</sup> Endlessly original and inventive, yet made with just scrap wood, a knife, and maybe some shoemaker's tacks, these items literally embodied a make-something-from-nothing ethic.

Vandertie's history is critical to consider because the handcrafts of the wanderers weren't seen as important works of art at the time they were made, and, as he pointed out, the lifestyle of the men living a beggar's life, scratching out survival, didn't lend itself to a written historical record. As these men searched for the missing, intangible parts of personal identity that are generally shaped by income-generating work and a stable home and family life, they had to reinvent themselves from top to tail and find pride in different ways. Concomitantly, the overarching myths of anonymity and a wanderlust lifestyle became an integral part of the art form, even as people later found work, stayed home, and built a new identity atop of the dreamer foundation.

Vandertie was younger than many of the men who were seasoned veterans of homelessness by the time the Great Depression was in full bloom. Wanting to succeed on his own, he greatly admired their resourcefulness, fraternity, and skill, recalling: "The true hobo was, by-and-large, a very decent honest person who was down on his luck, that's all."<sup>23</sup> Vandertie sensed that there would come a day when a first-hand account of this work and the artists who made it would be valued, and he took it upon himself to put such a thing in place.

As much as Vandertie liked to describe the differences between grifting "tramps" and hard-working "hobos," he readily admitted that such differences were often fluid, just as the difference between a dedicated family man and an itinerant drifter were often alternate parts of the same man's identity. And in the later half of the twentieth century, when the romantic idea of the itinerant artist became more firmly attached to notions of tramp art, Vandertie's account offers invaluable insights into a form of folk art that is simultaneously limitless in scope and tightly centered, that embodies the lonely drifter and ideas of charity and community in equal measure.

Vandertie first learned hobo-style whittling skills from his grandfather, who had, not unlike Levi Fisher Ames, learned many of the techniques when he was a prisoner of war during the Civil War. The stories from his grandfather about life after the Civil War cast a romantic aura on the idea of a society of men that seemed footloose, fancy-free, and highly impressive with a knife.

Vandertie was one of ten children. His parents ran a saloon, but during Prohibition, it foundered. His mother divorced her alcoholic husband and moved her children from Lena to Green Bay, Wisconsin. She cleaned for businesses by day and for private homes at night after she put her children to bed. In the documentary on his life, *Westbound*, Vandertie recalls with bitterness the way his family was treated by the Catholic Church. Penniless and starving though they were, the Church school kicked them out for not being able to pay. "Who needed charity

more than we did?" Vandertie asked. "Where the hell was the big welfare they brag about? So much money they collect for charity; I never saw a bit of it. I'll never forget that."<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps the absence of his father heightened the romance of things his grandfather had taught him. And perhaps it fueled Adolph's desire to hang out in the camps where migrant workers increasingly gathered. "It was in these hobo jungles that I ate my first Mulligan stew and learned the art and trademark of the whittler: the ball-in-cage and the chain."<sup>25</sup>

As taken with the romance of the rail-riding lifestyle as Vandertie was in youth, he ultimately took another path. He married and began a family. For years he would battle poverty and alcoholism, just as his father had. When he faced the day that he might similarly lose his marriage and family, Vandertie turned his attention once again to carving. Vandertie delved in deep, and he became obsessed not just with making art, but with the comprehensive culture of tramps and hobos.

The jobs that kept people home and rooted came finally as the Depression ended and the country prepared for war. In a sweeping way, World War II hastened the end of the tramp and hobo era. But Vandertie was not alone in harboring a nostalgia for this formative experience and a passing age. In a simple but adequate home-studio, he mastered both the whittling styles of the hobo and the additive, chip-carved forms of the tramp, long interlocking chains of wood, even the interlocking stick forms known as "Crown of Thorns." By his own estimate, Vandertie carved more than 4,000 individual pieces of art. But he also became dedicated to collecting these art forms, in all their many manifestations, wherever he found them.<sup>26</sup>

In 1982 Vandertie traveled to the National Hobo Convention that, still today, is held annually in the town of Britt, Iowa. The first convention was held there on August 22, 1900, organized to be a gathering for a growing culture of people who felt misunderstood and mistreated.<sup>27</sup> There, he encountered a world of people who, like him, had survived the Depression and moved on, but who also had retained their romantic attachment to an itinerant, railroad-culture identity.

As a truly hard life was displaced by something more stable, there was more time for sitting, storytelling, and making the carved and whittled art forms that attached them to this experience. Vandertie's love for this community was powerful and palpable, and people slowly joined him in wanting this culture to be remembered. They dubbed Vandertie "Grand Duke of the Hobos." When he returned to the Convention in 2006, he himself had become the elder, and he was not simply remembered, but celebrated like a hero.<sup>28</sup>

In 2007 Vandertie, as they say in tramp and hobo vernacular, "caught the westbound train." His bitterness towards institutionalized religion had never softened and he believed that the "afterlife" was something contained solely in the objects and memories you left behind on earth. His family collaborated with filmmakers and friends Jim Rivett and Shelly Young on arranging a memorial service. They planned a meal and invited the then-reigning "Queen of the Hobos," Connecticut Tootsie, to say a few words and to spread the word among people within her community.



The event was a folk culture phenomenon. Some 400 people arrived in Green Bay. A smattering were local friends and family, most were people who still identified as tramps or hobos and who believed in the tradition of honoring the elders and giving a heartfelt goodbye to a member of their loose-knit clan. Young recalls the word-of-mouth network was astonishing: “People literally came out of the woodwork!”<sup>29</sup>

Although the golden age of tramping was a memory, the people who came were deeply attached to a fading culture of struggling wanderers. Like war veterans, they came to pay tribute to one of their own, even if they didn’t really know him.<sup>30</sup> They shared a meal, told stories, and sang songs into the night. The tribute to a man who had faced many failures, but had also worked hard to preserve something larger than himself, was an event for the ages.<sup>31</sup>

In his years of collecting, Vandertie made and gathered thousands of boxes, frames, whimseys, crosses, miniature tools, and pieces of furniture.<sup>32</sup> His personal history does not fully substantiate a more overarching one, connecting tramp boxes to tramps or whittled canes to hoboes nor does it fully explain an art form that pollinated from person to person, place to place, and era to era. But his case may typify an era of carvers who held on to a “tramp” identity in response to an experience that left an indelible mark for both the itinerants and the people who housed them.

Vandertie’s story also embodies the idea that that folk art forms and cultures are malleable, morphing things that exist to carry memory and connote fraternal bonds; there is no single reality but a loose connection of kindred spirits. For makers that may have taken up, or devoted more time and energy to carving and whittling after life had gotten easier and time had stretched out, it is likely that these items served as powerful carriers of both group-affiliation and memory. And for those who may have taken up the carving arts in later generations, perhaps someone told them the campfire tales of old and showed them a trick or two with a pocketknife, for at the heart of folk styles are connection and pride.

## Notes

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Lead quote is taken from Jack London, *The Road*, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1907; reprinted by Seven Treasures Productions; 2008), 83.

<sup>1</sup> Carl Sandburg’s *The American Songbag*, a collection of around 280 songs, was published in 1927 and chronicled many of the songs and lyrics he collected while traveling around America. These songs encompass diverse characters, communities, and dialects: colonial, pioneer, prison, work-gang, railroad, minstrel, chants, and ditties. Sandburg dedicated the book to “those unknown singers—who made songs—out of love, fun, grief—and those many other singers—who kept those songs as living things of the heart and mind.”

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<sup>2</sup> Carl Sandburg, "The Road and the End," in *The Chicago Poems*; Digitized by Cardinalis Etext Press, C.E.K.. Posted to Wiretap in June 1993, at <http://carl-sandburg.com/Poems.htm>. Accessed by the author March 4, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Erika Doss, "Wandering the Old, Weird America," in Leslie Umberger et al. *Sublime Spaces & Visionary Worlds: Built Environments of Vernacular Artists* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2007), 29.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Wyman, *Hoboes, Bindlestiffs, Fruit Tramps, and the Harvesting of the American West* (New York: Hill and Wang, a division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 4.

<sup>5</sup> This history is often presumed to pertain only to men, although to a lesser and still important degree, women and children took to an itinerant lifestyle too.

<sup>6</sup> Ben Reitman, in Wyman, 2010; 37. See also, Nels Anderson, "The Juvenile and the Tramp," *Journal of the American Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology* (August 1, 1923): 290–312. Anderson identified various types of boys comprising the "tramp" society. The adventure seeker, the rebel, the boy fleeing a home broken by the pressures of the Depression, the work seeker, the mentally handicapped boy who sought a place he belonged. Others were runaways from brutal orphan homes or abusive juvenile detention centers.

<sup>7</sup> Errol Lincoln Uys, *Riding the Rails: Teenagers on the Move During the Great Depression* (New York: TV Books, L.L.C in conjunction with the documentary film by the same name; 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Clifford Wallach and Michael Cornish, *Tramp Art, One Notch at a Time: The Craft, the Techniques & the Makers* (USA: Wallach-Irons, 1998), 15.

<sup>9</sup> Wyman, *Hoboes, Bindlestiffs, Fruit Tramps, and the Harvesting of the West*, 38. Wyman notes that the *New York Times* first used the term "tramp" in 1874, by which time their numbers were of increasing concern to local governments.

<sup>10</sup> Leslie Umberger, "Levi Fisher Ames: Natural Curiosity," in Umberger et al., 2007; 57–73. Ames's account is pieced together from family lore, war history, documentation, and the art he left behind. After the war, Ames retrofitted his small and disparate works in glass-fronted shadow boxes. His later pieces (animal stories) would be custom-fit to this box format, but the small pieces gathered and placed post-carving are likely to be pieces he carved during the war and brought home in 1862.

<sup>11</sup> Wallach and Cornish, *Tramp Art, One Notch at a Time*, 16.

<sup>12</sup> Jack London, *The Road*, (New York: MacMillan Company, 1907; reprinted by Seven Treasures Productions, 2008), 68–70. See also Uys, 1999, 167–68; and Wyman, 2010, 54.

<sup>13</sup> Helaine Fendelman and Jonathan Taylor, *Tramp Art: A Folk Art Phenomenon* (New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1999), 55. Fendelman and Taylor trace the names associated with tramp art and argue that "tramp work" could have originated in association with items made by lodgers in the *trampschtub*.

<sup>14</sup> Nancy-Lou Patterson, "A Great Many Tramps We Had Overnight: Fred Hoffman and the Tramp Art Tradition in Waterloo County," 1989; essay accompanying an exhibition at the Joseph Schneider Haus

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(November 1989–April 1990; on file at the University of Waterloo, Special Collection and Archives, The Nancy-Lou Patterson Papers), 9. Patterson’s information on Hoffman comes from her interview with Matthias Martin (May 1989), who knew Hoffman from his days as a lodger in their community. Patterson writes, “There is evidence that Ephraim Martin, Daniel Ropp, David Scherk, Elam Shantz, Erwin Shantz, Orvie Shantz, and Levi Shantz (and perhaps David Horst) made their delightful works under the influence of Hoffman; and Simeon E. Martin, grandson of the Waterloo County potter William K. Eby, who remembered the tramps gathered around his grandfather’s warm stove, was also taught to carve by Fred Hoffman.”

<sup>15</sup> Patterson, “A Great Many Tramps We Had Overnight,” 3–4. The idea that Hoffman lived as a fugitive comes from Matthias Martin’s recollection that Hoffman (suspected as an alias name) told him and other children a poignant story about a man who was unjustly accused of wrongdoing and forced into a life of hiding.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>17</sup> Wyman, *Hoboes, Bindlestiffs, Fruit Tramps*, 55.

<sup>18</sup> This is based on this author’s personal affiliation with Vandertie between 1998 and his death in 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Fendelman and Taylor, *Tramp Art: A Folk Art Phenomenon*, 42. The authors cite Adolph Vandertie from a personal interview conducted in Green Bay, WI, 1995.

<sup>20</sup> Adolph Vandertie and Patrick Spielman, *Hobo & Tramp Art Carving: An Authentic American Folk Tradition* (New York: Sterling Publishing Company, 1995)

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>23</sup> Adolph Vandertie in *Westbound: The Journey of a Lifetime*, a film written and produced by Jim Rivett and Shelly Young for Arketype Entertainment (Green Bay, Wisc.; 2009).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Vandertie and Spielman, *Hobo & Tramp Art Carving*, 10.

<sup>26</sup> Adolph Vandertie in *Westbound*, 2009.

<sup>27</sup> The Britt convention was a transformed version of a convention that began in Chicago under the name Tourist Union 63 Convention. The gathering was not particularly welcome in Chicago and some founders of Britt, Iowa, saw the relocating of this event to Iowa, near the rail lines, as a good fit for a small town that needed visitor income. See Iowa Public Television website: <http://www.iptv.org/simplepleasures/story.cfm?id=9604&type=story> and the Britt, Iowa, website: <http://www.brittiowa.com/hobo/> for additional information. Another account of a vagabond visiting the Hobo Convention in Britt is that of Arvel Pearson, who visited in 1939 and reportedly became the youngest “King of the Hobos.” His account appears in Uys, *Riding the Rails*, 82.

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<sup>28</sup> Shelly Young, phone conversation with the author, February 12, 2016, and e-mail correspondence with the author, March 14, 2016.

<sup>29</sup> Young, phone conversation with the author.

<sup>30</sup> An account from Ralph Shirley, who rode the rails in 1936, says, “Some hoboes would sit and stare at one spot, only occasionally shifting their eyes. It was the same expression we later saw on the faces who’d seen too much combat in war.” Shirley’s account was among the *Riding the Rails* project eyewitness accounts and quoted in an unpaginated section of the Uys, *Riding the Rails*.

<sup>31</sup> I was among the fortunate guests who experienced this memorial event and gathering of “wandering” souls.

<sup>32</sup> Vandertie’s own art, as well as the work of others that he collected, is largely held in his home state of Wisconsin, at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan and at the Ashwaubenon Historical Society Museum in Ashwaubenon.

Leslie: Some images to consider:

Tramps in box car playing cards: <https://www.loc.gov/item/ggb2004000403/>  
This one is ok

Hitting the grit (walking on rr tracks): <https://www.loc.gov/item/2002705734/>  
\*I like this one the best

John Vachon: Unemployed fruit tramps, Berrien County, Michigan, 1940:  
<https://www.loc.gov/item/fsa2000041712/PP/> Don’t like this one much

[http://www.ebay.com/itm/222072966763?\\_trksid=p2055119.m1438.l2649&ssPageName=STRK%3AMEBIDX%3AIT](http://www.ebay.com/itm/222072966763?_trksid=p2055119.m1438.l2649&ssPageName=STRK%3AMEBIDX%3AIT) (I can buy this one if you’re interested in it as an illustration. Speaks to tramp anxiety, yet doesn’t seem not quite aligned with your essay.) Mixed feelings on this one, I would not mind it if it accompanied the hitting the grit, but not as a replacement. It certainly does speak to a hard life.

Also see attached list of Ames chain samples I love both of these. I like 156 too but it’s less iconic of Ames’s work. 46 is probably my favorite—it has the legible label which is a plus.

2001.002.0046

2001.002.0158

Brief bio options if desired:

Leslie Umberger is an art historian who has specialized in folk, self-taught, and vernacular art since the late 1990s. Previously the Senior Curator of Exhibition and Collections at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Wisconsin, Umberger is currently the Curator of Folk and Self-

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taught Art at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C. She has curated more than fifty exhibitions and lectured and published widely. Her publications include *Something to Take My Place: The Art of Lonnie Holley* (2015), *Untitled: The Art of James Castle* (2014), and *Sublime Spaces & Visionary Worlds: Built Environments of Vernacular Artists* (2007).