Reading the Past

This issue of Iowa Heritage Illustrated focuses on Iowa and the Midwest as the source of abundant food that its best citizens found ways to share with the rest of the world. Historically, however, we have not given sufficient credit to one segment of society that has been critical in the production of such abundance. Particularly in the years from the end of the Civil War to the end of World War I, much of the Midwest’s agricultural abundance relied on the labor of underpaid hired men and migrant, seasonal workers. In fact, as late as 1920, farm laborers "working out" for wages on nonfamily farms represented a larger portion of the American labor force than miners of all kinds. Yet those workers remain largely invisible in the historical record, mostly because their transient status meant that they have not been seen as integral parts of particular communities and because they left few records of their lives and work.

Two new books begin to correct that oversight: Indispensable Outcasts: Hobo Workers and Community in the American Midwest, 1880–1930, by Frank Tobias Higbie; and Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America, by Todd DePastino. Perhaps the most striking thing about both books is how they take readers inside a very unfamiliar world, but also show us how much that world was an integral part of more familiar rural and urban experiences.

Indispensable Outcasts is grounded more in the lived experience of transient workers on farms and railroads throughout the Midwest and Great Plains and in the forests and Iron Range of northern Minnesota. Higbie focuses on those workers’ relationships to the communities and economic conditions within which they worked. Hobo workers, he shows us, were not aimless drifters. Instead, they were in rational pursuit of economic opportunity, and they served critical needs for seasonal labor in the communities through which they passed and in which they worked. Nor was the life of hobo workers characterized by some idealized form of freedom from all constraints and dependence on others. “The supposed independence of the road,” Higbie found, “turns out to have been structured by a distended network of advice, assistance, and care . . . predicated on a vague but real ethic of mutuality.”

Such understandings shatter stereotypes of hobos that many of us have absorbed from popular culture. Higbie devotes some attention to how those stereotypes arose and what they say about the mostly middle-class commentators who spread them. But that myth making is more central to Citizen Hobo. Where Higbie’s work shatters the stereotypes, DePastino plays with them to help us understand hobo culture. Just as important, he shows how middle-class culture has been alternately threatened by and strangely attracted to a subculture that operates apart from traditional understandings of home and family. The second chapter in each book identifies the biases in accounts of tramping by Progressive Era social scientists, journalists, fiction writers, and other observers. DePastino continues throughout his book to analyze images of homeless people in vaudeville, novels, photographs, cartoons, music, and film.

Higbie tracks hobo workers across the rural areas and small towns of the Midwest; he includes a fascinating account of a free-speech campaign by members of the Industrial Workers of the World in Sioux City in 1915. For DePastino, “hobohemia” culture is found more in neighborhoods in cities such as Chicago, New York, Minneapolis, and Seattle filled with cheap lodging houses, employment agencies, restaurants, bars, pawn shops, and theaters catering to hoboes who were between jobs. In Minneapolis in 1922, for example, private and public employment agencies found work for 130,000 men.

Both books use many of the same sources, and there is considerable overlap, but the focus and goals are quite different. If Indispensable Outcasts seems more grounded in the actual experiences of hobo workers, Citizen Hobo is more attuned to change over time, and it brings the story of homelessness up to the present. Both shed new light on a much misunderstood part of our history. ❖

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