

By Kathryn Dodd

Recently Marshall McKinney, a Krumite currently living in Colorado, commented on Facebook in response to several pictures I had posted of the migrating birds that come through my back yard. Marshall writes: "I can't help being reminded of the 'hobos' who used to come to our back door when I was a kid. Mom would always give them a sandwich and a glass of milk and perhaps a piece of fruit if we had any in the house. The railroad track, as you know, was just about a block from our house and conventional wisdom had it that they would leave a "secret sign" for fellow sojourners at places where folks were kind enough to give them a bite to eat. I remember some of the neighborhood kids and I trying to find it, but with no luck." He then goes on to say about the bird pictures I had put on FB- "I have this wonderful mental image of some kind of "avian sign" that says- "Hey guys! Free food, drink and a bath right down here! You might keep an eye open for it."

Jackie Standifer and Della Davis reminisced about the hobos and both remembered their mothers providing food for them as did many Krum families of that time. Della said her mother would fry cornbread or corncakes and give to them. Both remembered the hobo camp down by old train depot on the west side of the tracks was called the Mulberry Hotel because it was under a Mulberry tree. The picture in this article with all the boxes is from the Mulberry Hotel in Krum which was located at the north end of the present day mural parking lot.

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 in America 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.

Hobo Signs

To cope with the uncertainties of hobo life, hobos developed a system of symbols, or a visual code. Hobos would write this code with chalk or coal to provide directions, information, and warnings to others in "the brotherhood". A symbol would indicate "turn right here", "beware of hostile railroad police", "dangerous dog", "food available here", and so on. Some commonly-used signs:

- A cross signifies "angel food", that is, food served to the hobos after a sermon.
- A triangle with hands signifies that the homeowner has a gun.^[10]
- A horizontal zigzag signifies a barking dog.

- A square missing its top line signifies it is safe to camp in that location.
- A top hat and a triangle signify wealth.
- A spearhead signifies a warning to defend oneself.
- A circle with two parallel arrows means get out fast, as hobos are not welcome in the area.
- Two interlocked circles signify handcuffs (i.e., hobos are hauled off to jail).
- A caduceus symbol signifies the house has a doctor living in it.
- A cross with a smiley face in one of the corners means the doctor at this office will treat hobos free of charge.
- A cat signifies a kind lady lives here.
- A wavy line (signifying water) above an X means fresh water and a campsite.
- Three diagonal lines mean it's not a safe place.
- A square with a slanted roof (signifying a house) with an X through it means that the house has already been "burned" or "tricked" by another hobo and is not a trusting house.
- Two shovels, signifying work was available (shovels, because most hobos performed manual labor).



Mulberry Hotel- Hobo camp in Krum



Example of Hobo Signs & Symbols