

The curious life of a hobo

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The symbol, “r”, means if you are sick, folks here will care for you; “///”, means this is not a safe place.

These symbols are part of a secret language, one that not so long ago was used by a subculture that has existed for 100 years or more: Hobos. Today, the term *hobo* is often used derogatively, interchangeable with “bum” or “tramp.” Although the three groups included a fair number of those suffering from alcoholism and other ills, there were specific differences between them. A bum was someone who outright refused to work. A tramp was someone who would work, but only if pressed to do so. A hobo was the noblest of the three as someone who traveled the countryside looking for work.

Hobos adhered to a strict code that differentiated them from other vagabonds. Among other things, life according to the hobo code required one to be respectful of the local laws and gentlemanly, not taking advantage of vulnerable people. They were to protect and help runaway children, too, doing their best to convince them to return home. When possible they were to be tidy and clean-shaven. For these reasons, in the past hobos were usually well tolerated by the private citizens they came into contact with.

Although they have been around a long time, there was a huge influx of hobos during the Depression years. In America, hobos were the first migrant workers, mostly native-born men who usually traveled by rail. In lieu of payment for their rides, they often pitched in to work as extra crewmen on whatever train they found themselves.

In the ‘30s, it was quite common to see rail riders in Hopkins County, primarily due to the amount of train traffic in the area. My father’s family lived near and worked for the railroad, and they were aware of the presence of hobos, hiring them as needed for farm work and rendering assistance to them when required. A cousin recently told me that when he was a boy, he sometimes visited a group of hobos that could be found in the alley between the old hospital building and the train tracks in Madisonville; his mother regularly fed one, who always wore a suit.

Because hobos were usually on the move, they developed their own picture language, as a means of communicating something worthwhile to fellow travelers who might pass through after them.

These symbols are now referred to as *hoboglyphs*, and they were usually drawn in an inconspicuous spot with a lump of coal or carved into a fence post. These messages pointed out things like a good house to find a meal or a warning of thieves in the area.

Today, genuine hobos aren’t as common as they once were, but they’re still out there and most are surprisingly up-to-date. Rail riding is more a lifestyle choice rather than a necessity, and many contemporary hobos have other means of transportation. Hobo signs have evolved to keep up with the times, too. Contemporary glyphs include a symbol indicating that free wireless service is available in a particular location, one that means a GPS “will screw you here,” and even one that means Discover cards are accepted at this business.

Hobo Folk Art

In their spare time, many hobos occupied themselves by creating both practical or purely ornamental handcrafts. Among the best-known of hobo folk art work are carvings. With little more than an ordinary pocketknife, intricate boxes, clocks and picture frames were made out of wood, and bas relief sculptures were carved on coins. Because the metal is easily worked, nickels were the coin of choice. They became known as *hobo nickels*, and along with other crafts were bartered, sold or given as gifts. In time, these carvings that were once sold for a few



National Archives photo

A high kicking hobo gets a hand up from his rail riding buddy.



Laura Hung Angel, The Messenger

Hearty vegetable soup, top, from the Country Cupboard, and burger from Dave’s Sticky Pig are good examples of hobo style cookery.

coins became valuable art pieces, and currently can sell for several hundred dollars.

Today, there is a resurgence in the art form with contemporary artisans creating new works based on the original carving techniques. Amy Armstrong, noted jeweler and hand engraver, is one of today’s top artisans in the field of nickle carving, and her coins have become valuable collector’s items.

The town of Brit, Iowa, which boasts itself as the hobo capital of the world, hosts an annual hobo convention. In addition to being at a set time and place where hobos can gather and catch up on one another’s lives, the convention is also a time for hobo weddings, entertainment, and parades. Booths are set up selling hobo art

works and food.

The Recipes

Along with their symbolic language, hobos were the inventors of several clever cooking techniques and quasi-recipes that, unbeknownst to many, have worked their way into the conventional kitchen. The quintessential hobo dish is Mulligan stew, a concoction of meat, potatoes and whatever other vegetables are on hand; its cousins are burgoo and Brunswick stew. I was delighted to discover that my Kentucky mother’s homemade vegetable soup fit perfectly into the category of a Mulligan stew — your mother’s probably does as well. As an imaginative child,



Amy Armstrong photo

This contemporary hobo nickel was carved by well-known hand engraver Amy Armstrong and is called, “The Hiking Hobo.”

had I known was having a hobo dinner I may have done a better job of eating it.

Many other one-pot meals are based on hobo cooking methods, as are the ever popular “Hobo Pockets”: a chunk of sausage or other meat folded up in foil with potatoes, carrots and seasonings.

Mulligan Stew With Beef

The original preparation of this stew was a cooperative affair. One fellow would round up some meat, if possible, which could range from anything to a stray chicken or a bit of venison, salt pork or even canned corned beef. Someone else would forage for vegetables, and yet another person would obtain salt and spices. By pooling their meager resources *a la* the story of Stone Soup, a thrifty yet hearty dinner for several people could be assembled and cooked in a large can over an open fire, very often alongside the railroad tracks. Irish soda bread, sometimes called hobo bread, was a common accompaniment to these one pot meals.

While Mulligan stew is usually an improvised dish, here is a recipe designed for modern kitchens that can be followed as is, or used as a guide with what you have on hand.

1 28-oz can stewed tomatoes
1 26-oz carton lower sodium beef stock
3 cups leftover roast beef, cut into bite-sized pieces
½ head cabbage, chopped
1 medium onion, chopped
2 12-oz bags frozen mixed vegeta-

bles
4 potatoes, peeled and cubed
Salt and pepper to taste

Empty the tomatoes in a large pot and break them up with a potato masher or fork. Add the remaining ingredients, bring to a boil, then reduce heat and simmer, covered, at least 45 minutes, stirring occasionally. Add more stock or broth as needed. As long as it is covered and stirred once in a while, you can let this cook all day, or just put it in a slow-cooker. About 12 servings.

Camp Supper

Modern migrant workers have blended their own distinctive ethnic twists into hobo style cookery. Years ago, I encountered some French hobos who were working at a local orchard, and their meals were quite rustic. In a 2008 story in a UK publication, *The Telegraph*, Xanthe Clay reported that an increase in migrant workers of Polish descent resulted in an increase in Pole-inspired ingredients such as horseradish and pickled cabbage. As with this recipe, Mexican migrant workers have added limes and chili peppers to the pot.

3 tablespoons oil or bacon drippings
6-8 chicken pieces (about 3½ lbs)
3 cloves garlic, chopped
1 large onion, sliced
6 Roma tomatoes, quartered
3 ears fresh corn, cut into several small “cobbettes”
2 medium zucchini, coarsely chopped
2 poblano peppers, sliced
3-4 limes (1/2 lime per person)

Heat the oil in a large skillet over medium heat and saute the garlic for about 1 minute. Add the chicken pieces and cook for 10-15 minutes or until browned on all sides, then add the onions and cook about 4 minutes or until just becoming translucent. Add the tomatoes, zucchini and peppers; reduce heat and simmer for 10-15 minutes or until chicken is done. Halve or quarter limes and serve with the chicken. Six to 8 servings. This dish goes well with plain rice or roasted potatoes.

Contact the Foodwriter

If you would like to contribute an interesting recipe to be considered for publication in the Messenger, send an email including your name and contact information to: Laura_Hunt_Angel@yahoo.com