

A COUPLE OF HOBOS THIS SPRING

Was the big rock candy mountain here?

Forrest Whitman

It is spring. It's the time of year the old time hobos would start to travel. Their "national anthem" will be sung at their "convention" this summer in Iowa. Here one verse is:

**On the first of May or so they say
A Hobo came a hikin'
just lookin' for his likin'
As he roamed along
He sang a song
Of a land of milk and honey
by the crystal spring where the blue bird sings
on the big rock candy mountain**

From time to time I've had the opportunity to interview a couple of hobos who knew a lot about Gilpin County back in the day. We were a regular stop for them. Like many hobos they decided they liked the roving life and didn't much fit in any place else. Both did have temporary "camps" where they squatted or maybe even owned a place. They did work when they had to and were awfully fond of alcohol.

Both knew verses to the hobo song above. My friend Ed (now in hobo heaven) even recorded a few versions. They don't all qualify under the FCC decency standards, but are fun. The folk singer Burl Ives cleaned up and popularized a version which became a popular kids song.

Voluntary or forced hobo life?

Both Roy and Wayne made the point that most hobos did not voluntarily ride the rails. Most just drifted into the "rolling along" kind of life. Railroads were the convenient way to get to the next stop, though these two did establish "homes" here and there.

They would "catch out" in long distant trucks if they could, but that was difficult. There were insurance rules barring a trucker from picking up transients. In a box car or riding low in the "units" (helper engines in the string) was a less risky way to travel. Also the travel had to be incognito. Names were not exchanged.

Who were they?

There were few woman hobos, and those out there were not volunteers. They were running. Often they ran from a man. Most had left their man in a hurry. One had left after an all night drinking bout in which her partner ended up with some knife wounds. She wasn't likely to go back and explain. Some helped her out with a couple of bills.

Men who had a problem with booze or mental disorientation were likely forced to

move on too. A few had small time legal charges like vagrancy and petty theft to avoid. That made them fugitives from justice.

They liked to be free in the open air even if they did freeze. If they became known to local law they might be hauled in. Even if they just became enrolled by “do gooders” they would be visited too often and urged into one shelter or another too forcefully. Then they had no choice but to catch out.

How hard was it?

Some hobos had caught a financial break which made life a lot easier. The two I talked to for this article alleged they had money somewhere. Roy claimed to have won a lawsuit which netted him two hundred thousand dollars plus a little more. That was forty years ago. Even after he paid legal fees that still seems like a lot. His might have been a true story, but at any rate he now sometimes occupies a tiny ranch.

Where was the big rock candy mountain?

The famous hobo retreat mountain (Big Rock) was “up a gulch.” There were cigarette trees by the soda water springs where the blue bird sings. Every hobo got there eventually.

These two even had sort of a real world set of co-ordinates. It was in some of those shacks around these parts. Thirty or forty years ago there were still shacks standing. The song gives some clues.

**In the Big Rock Candy Mountain
You never change your socks
And little streams of alkyhol
Come trickling down the rocks
The Brakemen have to tip their hats
And the railroad bulls are blind
There's a lake of brew and whiskey too,
and you paddle around in a big canoe
and there ain't no snow
And the winds don't blow
So, come with me.
I'll see you all in this comin' fall.
On the big rock candy mountain**

My old buddy Ron tells me that both of these gentleman are still reachable. How so? At least one of them has very limited reading and writing skills, but his old girlfriend does. Facebook doesn't care about that. Roy looked pretty good.

Future for hobos?

Just the other morning right around dawn I spotted three hobos sitting on the front porch of a caboose. They were apparently sharing a bottle of “the hobos overcoat.” It was thirty five degrees last night so the warming medicine had been useful. They'd caught out in Texas to avoid the heat, but now wondered if they weren't pushing the

season. They were thinking they might have to find some day labor to get together money for a better sleeping bag and maybe some better whiskey.

Those three have a future, but that's not generally true for hobos. We live in a country that puts more people in jail than any others. Maybe they can find some alternative to prosecution program. Let's hope so. I'd not recommend going hoboining to today's youth at any high school career fair.

Don't quit looking for the big rock candy mountain

Don't quit looking for that mountain. Neither of our local hobo visitors quit and it is a pretty sweet life for them so far. You'll know you found it when the bluebird sings by the cigarette springs.