The Hobo Life:
Travels with Lonesome Walt

Not tied to place or job, the American hobo rides the rails and lives by his wits.

By Frank O Smith

The first cry of the train whistle was almost imperceptible, blending with the chatter of the birds in the pines around the rail yard. The two tramps sprawled in bedrolls in the middle of the Bend, Oregon, freight yard did not stir. The night had been cold and damp, and dawn smelled of frost and wood smoke from the mill down on the river. The whistle blew again, louder now, but still somewhere on the outskirts of town,

On First Street, along the row of warehouses that back onto the freight yard, a police cruiser prowled one last time before change of shift. The growing light of day spilled over the roofs of the dark warehouses into the yard, muting the shadows of boxcars shunted onto sidings. The outline of the two slumbering forms became distinct against the gravel roadbed. When the whistle blew for the third time, the tramp called Trapper lifted his head.

"Walt," Trapper yelled in the direction of the other lump of covers. "Walt, come on. The train's coming"

There was a slight movement within the other bag.

"Walt, damnit. Train's coming."

Trapped slipped from his bag. He scratched and pulled at his full, unclipped gray beard and ran his fingers through his matted hair.

"Walt. Get your ass up."

Trapper was kneeling, brushing the crust of the night's frost from his bedroll, when the lead locomotive came into view around a bend 200 yards away.

"Damn," he cursed, rising to face the train. There were five green-and-black Burlington Northern locomotives hooked in series, spewing dark, oily, diesel smoke like fearsome steel dragons running in a pack. The train was northbound. Trapper had thought – had hoped – that it would be heading south, like the geese for the winter. It slowed and blew a long, ear-piercing blast on its horn. A head emerged from the other bedroll. Lonesome Walt sat up, rubbing his dark face with his hands. He yawned and stretched slowly, as though the rail yard and all the eye could see was his.

"Where are we?" Walt asked, his voice foggy with sleep.

"Same as yesterday," Trapper said.

"Bend," Walt said, smiling. He fluffed his thin gray goatee. "It's a good little town. A good town to be from."

Trapper rummaged in his pack and came up with two beers. He handed one to Walt. Walt nodded. As the lead locomotive pulled abreast of them, he raised his beer as if in toast. The engineer waved back. The morning was filled with the thunder of locomotives. The ground shook. The air stank of diesel smoke. The two tramps tipped their beers and drank and, so doing, christened the third day of waiting to get beyond Bend.

The journey south had been, from the start, an unrelenting series of delays. There is no way of knowing what to expect hopping freights. "No way to figure it," Lonesome Walt had told photographer Richard Kalvar and me. "You get on 'em and stay on 'em and they'll get you where you're going." Walt, a Modoc Indian with a crooked nose and a devilish sparkle in his dark eyes, rode his first train in 1931. In the half century since, he'd ridden everything and been everywhere, he said, but Rhode Island. He had waited as long as ten days to catch a train.

Six of us rolled out of the freight yard in Pasco, a railroad town on the arid plains of eastern Washington, the first Friday night. Trapper was with us. We had not yet met Lonesome Walt. There had been a derailment in the Columbia River Gorge. The delay had filled the yard with trains, and the rescue mission downtown with tramps. It was the end of the apple harvest, and it had been a hard year for the tramps because the crop was poor. Already, snow had fallen in the Cascade Mountains, and flurries had hit Pasco. The coming of winter was a critical time for men on the move. Talk at the mission was of destinations in California and beyond, of olive to pick near Sacramento, of oranges and cotton in Arizona. It was perennial talk, as old as the earliest railroading in America, when men hoboed westward laying rails to Utah and stayed on to log timber and work harvests throughout the West. As their numbers grew, they came to form

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the nucleus of the Wobblies, forging an important link in the history of American populism. During the Depression, over two million people – including entire families – rode the rails, pursuing the promise of work down the line, trading talk of jobs elsewhere. I had heard such talk in missions before. It was in the Pasco mission that we met Trapper.

Trapper was a little man, five-six or so. Not yet 45, he wore the miles he had traveled in the lines around his eyes. He bragged he had a week to go before celebrating his twenty-third anniversary as a tramp. Trapper had spent the summer in the mountains of Idaho and Montana panning for gold, and picking up food stamps like every tramp. He got $100 a month in military disability payments as well. He could be arrogant and surly, but he was the most engaging of the forty or fifty tramps staying in town. Like most of them, he was heading south to beat the cold – to Klamath Falls and then on to California. Friday, after word spread that trains were moving again, we ran into him again at the rail yard. We joined him at his fire and waited for the 171, the train tramps call the California Man. It was a regularly scheduling Burlington

Northern freight that left the yard nightly. Its route was down the eastern side of the Cascades, through Bend, to Klamath Falls, and on into northern California and the Sierra Nevada. The night we caught it, there was only one open boxcar. Three other tramps were already inside.

Trapper climbed in without asking. He stated his immediate dislike for all three men sitting on their bedrolls in the dark. I recognized them from the mission. One of them, Missouri Slim, was a man I had ridden with before and knew him to be trustworthy and good company. The other two were fruit tramps drifting south to pick oranges in

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Yuma, Arizona. No one had said a word to offend him. He sat in the far corner of the dank, dark car and delivered a harangue on bums while sipping whiskey from a bottle. It put an ugly tension in the darkness. It was an ugliness that festered several days.

Lonesome Walt and a young apple picker named Dan got on at Wishram, where the train crosses the Columbia River to Oregon. Dan was quiet and kept to himself at first, but he was likeable and had a sense of humor. Bound for home in South Carolina, he was in only the fourth day of his first trip by train. But since he had come with Walt, Trapper accepted him. Trapper, in fact, had never seemed friendlier. Neither he nor Walt could agree on when they had last seen each other, but it ha been a while. Both were pleased. Trapper kept Walt at the open door all day, sharing his food and his whiskey.

It was nearly dark when the California Man pulled into Bend. We were disappointed; none of us wanted to go Klamath Falls in the dark. K-Falls was a "hot" yard. There was a bull – a railroad detective – on the night shift who was tough on the tramps he caught in the yard. Everyone got off before the train left Bend, though Trapper made it clear he wished Slim and the other two tramps had gone on. He sat honing his knife until they got the hint and wandered off to claim their own spot to sleep.

All the next day, Trapper's rage intensified. He made several trips for beer and bought a fifth of whiskey. It was two hours after dark when the first southbound train came through the yard. Slim and the other two decided to take their chances with the bull in K-Falls and go on it. Trapper and Walk stayed on in the rail yard, neither sober enough to care. We remained with them.

A day passed. There were no freights going south. Around noon of the third day in Bend, the monotony of waiting was broken by the appearance of another tramp walking along the tracks. His name was Hippie John, and he was welcomed gladly into camp. He was a big man and wore a beard like Trapper's and a sliver earring in one ear. He and Trapper and Lonesome Walt spent an hour reminiscing.

"You seen Foodstamp Jack?" Trapper asked.

"Hell, ain't you heard? They caught him running stamps. The FBI got in on it. He's in jail."

"Jack's a moody son of a dog," Walt laughed. "He don't take a joke too well."

"What about Boxcar Betty?" Hippie John asked. "Anybody seen her?"

"I seen Betty up in Wenatchee before summer," Walt said.

"She's a clean ol' tramp," Hippie John said.

"I don't know," Trapper said. "Any woman that wears her hair like a man, I want nothing to do with. There's a lot of tramps riding now I don't want nothing to do with. All these winos and bums who get themselves a bedroll and a jug and call themselves tramps. They're *jack*rollers is all." Trapper began to steam again with the heat of the day before. "It's gotten where the camps are full of them. You've got to be careful. They'll stick you and take everything you got. They jackrolled a tramp under the bridge in Pasco this summer. Killed the son of a bitch for four damn dollars in food stamps. For *food stamps*!" Trapper was puffed red with rage.

"Yeah, I know," Hippie John said. "I heard two tramps in Vancouver got killed this summer. One of them was beat to death by a *woman*."

"She didn't do it," Walt interrupted. The other two men looked at him. "She didn't kill him. I was there." Walt said there had been seven or eight of them waiting to catch a train. Just before midnight, Walt went up to town. When he came back, the police were there, and they had the woman in the back of the car.

"But there ain't no way she done it," Walt repeated. He dug a ragged, grease-stained section of newspaper from his pack. The story described him as a transient. The woman was charged with heating him to death and then throwing the body into the Columbia River.

"The one I think done the killing was him," Walt said, pointing to a man kneeling down in the news photo, his face turned away from the camera. "He disappeared just before the trial. I seen him once in Pasco after that, and when he seen me, he got in a car and was gone. But I'll see him again," he said. "And if I have to, I'll drag him back to Vancouver. She won't have to do time in prison for something she never done. Not like I had to do."

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An hour before the sun went down, we heard the faint whistling of a train. It was out of the north. Everybody was up, gathering his gear. The whistle blew again, and in minutes, the train pulled into the upper end of the yard. It came down past us, the engineer piercing the dusk with the shrill cry of the horn to be sure we had seen him. The train rolled slowly to a halt.

There were no open boxcars – nothing to ride but a grain hopper or some open flatcars where you would have to ride out in the wind. Dan moseyed down the train to find a flatcar. The rest of us crowded onto the hopper. We had waited long enough in Bend. We were willing to take our chances with the bull in Klamath Falls.

While we waited for the train to roll, two kids came walking up the tracks: a boy, gangly, maybe 20 years old, and a girl barely 16. They had a pitiful assortment of gear: one bedroll, a small duffel, and a knapsack.

"This the California Man?" the kid asked, trying to sound tough, as though he'd been around.

"Where you think *you're* going?" Trapper said, laughing petulantly.

"Tulsa. We're going to get jobs."

Trapper laughed again.

"My brother lives there," the girl said. Her cheeks were flushed crimson from the cold.

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"Why don't you get a job here?" Trapper asked.

"Bend sucks." The boy took the girl by the arm and together they continued on up the tracks. Trapper puffed on his pipe, looking after them. He stood up and threw his gear out on the ground and climbed down.

"What are doing?" I asked, incredulous. "You'll miss the train!"

"I don't want to ride it. I think I'll ride alone."

The train picked up speed. Trapper stood in the rail yard next to his gear, his pipe clenched between his teeth, the collar of his jacket turned up. He grew smaller as we pulled away, fading into the darkness without so much as a good-bye. The three of us on the grain car buttoned our coats against the night chill.

It was nearly noon the next day before the fog lifted and we got our first clear view of Klamath Falls. We had jumped free of the train, stiff and cold, around midnight on the outskirts of town. We spent the night at a little lakeside camp Walt knew about hidden back from the main line

It is hard to know what to believe of the stories tramps tell bout themselves. But of this I had come to be sure: when Lonesome Walt stood in the camp and looked out on the lake and the tan hills around Klamath Falls, he saw the geography of home. Whether or not it was true that his grandfather was Chockatoot, the Modoc chief who signed the Treaty of 1864, which put the Modoc and the Klamath Indians on the reservation, this was where Walt had spent his childhood. Walt grew up to be like his father, a scrapper. He told us he'd been a welterweight fighter, a bronc buster, and a ranch hand. It was near here, just on the far side of the mountain to the north, that Walt had fished and ridden horses as a boy. His father named him Lonesome.

"I may joke and I may laugh," Walt was fond of saying. "But God help me, I don't play. He loved telling funny stories; but about many things, he was private. Walt's "John B," as he called it, the symbol he scrawled in chalk on the sides of the boxcars he rode, was a large teardrop face, the eyes and the mouth represented by three sevens. "The sevens make twenty-one," he said, "for the years I was in prison. But it was for something

I never done." The charge, he said, was murder, though he gave no other details. Though Walt would make references to his past, he kept the full accounting to himself. It was only by pieces that I found out why Trapped called Walt the "millionaire hobo." He was in fact a man of considerable, if only occasional, wealth: in 1964, when a tribal council voted to sell the reservation to the federal government to create the Winema National Forest, he became heir to several hundred thousand dollars. The money was paid in large installments. Lonesome Walt was notorious for his generosity. When he had money, he gave it away: to his wife, his children, and his children's children, and to the men he met on the road. When he didn't, he lived as he always did, getting by as a tramp. He'd tried to give up the road several times, he said, 'but when spring came and the birds started singing, I was gone." Walt hadn't seen his wife in four years. He rarely visited his children.

A hard wind blew all day off the lake. Late that afternoon, Walt walked into town to check the personal column in the local paper. One of his sons who lived in Klamath Falls looked after his affairs and his money. Whenever payment came, there would be a message for Walt in the paper.

In the hour before sunset, we heard the boom of duck hunters intermittently from around the marsh. Just at dark, Walt came walking back along the rail spur. Dan was with him, and farther back, following several hundred yards behind, were the kids. Dan had been sitting alone in the weeds by the tracks near town, not far from where he'd jumped the night before, trying to figure out, he said, what he ought to do next. Then Walt had come walking along.

Walt immediately built up the fire. The kid and the girl were both shivering. The girl held back at first, but the boy went straight for the fire. He sat down on a railroad tie, rubbing his hands over the flames. The fire drew all of us into a tight circle. Overhead, the stars were brilliant against the blackness, and a line of Canada geese flapped and honed on their way south. When the wood got low, Walt disappeared into the darkness. We heard the snapping of dry willow branches, and after a while, he returned with an armload of fuel.

"Hell, I don't have to worry about being cold," the kid said, sitting in the face of the fire. "Once I get you down in that boxcar tonight, honey, I'll be plenty hot." He laughed and hugged his girl. They left around ten o'clock in search of a Southern Pacific train to California. After they had gone, I said I worried about the girl but didn't care what happened to the kid.

"I hope they're *both* all right," Walt said. "That's something I never done, bring a woman on the road. The kid will have to be careful."

We were up at daylight the next morning. The kids came wandering back before noon. They were exhausted; the girl's face was puffy and dirty. "We got run out of the SP yard. Some guy thought we were runaways," the boy laughed. "I told him, 'Hell, go ahead and call my mom. See what I care.' He told us to get walking."

"How'd you sleep?" Walt asked.

"Warm as toast," the kid grinned.

"Shit," said the girl. "We froze our asses off."

Walt went to gathering firewood to make another fire.

About three o'clock, Walt and I walked to town to get groceries for the ride to California. The earliest train south wouldn't be in before midnight. When we left, Dan was stretched out on his sleeping bag in a shallow gully, out of the wind, reading a book. The kids lay curled together on a sleeping bag on the ground near the fire. When we got back, there was another tramp there, a stranger, sitting on his bedroll with a bottle of wine right in the middle of camp. He grinned, showing rotten teeth, and welcomed us. Dan and the kids lay sleeping. Walt acted no differently, treating the man as though he had always been there. I sensed something odd about him, something disturbing. He laughed and joked and recited foul little ditties. At first he said his name was Michael O'Reilly. Then he said it was Ray.

"I'll kill your ass right here," said Ray, his voice strained with rage.

"Touch that knife and I'll kill you, too," Walt said.

"Anybody here want to make a run into town?" he asked, draining his bottle of wine. Walt stretched and said he'd go just for the walk, and together they set out down the tracks. I wasn't more than half an hour before Walt cam scurrying back.

"That's something I never done," Walt said emphatically. "We weren't in the store two minutes and he stared grabbing stuff and putting it in his jacket. I got out of there. They'll throw a guy in jail just being with a tramp like that."

Half an hour more and Ray came back to camp. He carried a sack with a carton of cigarettes and a bottle of wine in it. He produced steaks, a hunk of cheese, some canned beans and another bottle of wine from his coat pocket. "An old Indian trick," he said, grinning. He put the meat on the fire to cook. "A tramp's got to eat," he said. When it was done, he shared it with the kids, insisting they take some. He uncapped a bottle of wine and sat swilling it in front of the fire.

"It takes a good man to take me," he sang. "But it don't take him long." He had Lonesome Walt join him on the other end of his bedroll, and between them they passed the bottle.

"You're okay," Walt said, his voice becoming gravelly from the wine. "You know, you're okay." Ray insisted they shake hands and tried to crush Walt's hand in his. Walt sat grinning back at him. "You're okay," Walt said. He seemed to be having a good time. Ray's slurs grew more odious the more he drank. Walt laughed more often. The wind grew harsher. Dan finally got into his sleeping back down in the gully, out of the piercing cold wind. I sat back from the fire ring, hunched-shouldered against the chill.

"Did I ever tell you the story about Pancho Villa?" Walt offered.

"Shut your pig face, fat boy," Ray snapped.

Walt paused, turning to look Ray in the eye. He laughed a long, low laugh of exhalation, his invincible smile still on his face. "You know, you're something. You're something else." He laughed again. "If you don't want to listen to my

story, this is *my* fire. You can go over there and sleep it off." Walt raised his arm and pointed out into the darkness.

"Get your damn hand out of my face, fat boy. I'll kill your ass right here," said Ray, his voice strained with rage. I bolted upright. Ray had his hand stuck deep in his coat.

"Touch that knife and I'll kill you, too," Walt said. He had his hands poised motionless in front of his chest, ready to strike. There was a sudden movement, and the men fell upon each other, tumbling backward into the darkness beyond the fire.

We were up, standing over the two figures. But Walt, the grizzled old Indian, was the man on top. Ray thrashed his feet, but to no use. He went limp.

"It's okay," Walt said, feeling my hand pull on his shoulders. "This boy is okay. He won't fight anymore."

Walt lay there, pinning the man's hands across his chest. The man was breathing hard, staring up at Walk. "You okay," Walk laughed. "You know, you okay."

Slowly, Walt stood and backed away. The other man got up, turning his face from the crowd. Dan came wandering in from the gully.

"What's going on?" he asked in a sleepy voice.

"Come on," Walt said. "It's time to go."

Ray and the kids disappeared in the shadows of the rail yard that night. The rest of us caught the train. It streaked out of Klamath Falls at four in the morning with its whistle blaring, and it crossed the border to California before dawn. We rode all day through forests of evergreen, giant ponderosa, spruce, and pine toward the day's destination: Lonesome Walt's camp in the canyon of the Feather River. Walt would pan gold there until the first heavy snowfall, then worry about what to do for the winter. That was the last day we traveled together.

Lonesome Walt was extraordinary. Flawed and imperfect by epic degrees, he was still a man of good humor, of instinctive, unaffected kindness, of immense generosity and goodwill. For whatever reason he rode and kept private to himself, he was a man one could be fortunate to count as a friend.

You would meet all kinds traveling as a tramp, Walt told me. "You'll hear a hundred excuses why. A lot of men tell you it was their family or a woman who put them on the move. But that ain't so. I've ridden hundreds of trains and met hundreds of tramps. Everyone tramp who's climbed on a train climbed on all on his own… I don't say I'm a hobo. I don't call myself a tramp or a bum. I ride because I like the wind in my face. I guess you could call me a traveler. You could say riding trains was my life."
