

“GLORIFICATION OF THE HOBO: How Seattle’s Hospitality to Tramps is viewed at a Distance”

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Glorification of the hobo has its disadvantages. The cities of the Pacific Northwest are paying the penalty of unwise hospitality. Even as in newer, slumless towns the poor are always present, and there must thus be here, as elsewhere, an element of the unemployed. Seattle, Tacoma, and Portland are each of them unfortunately in the position of the master of the house who made a marriage feast and then went out into the highways and byways for his guests. The trouble is that the number of those without appropriate raiment for the feast is abundant. A kindly but indiscriminate consideration for the unemployed has filled the cities of the Pacific Northwest with floating populations in which the criminal element strongly dominates.

Seattle has done more in the way of kindness for the unemployed than the other cities of this section. When the American Federation of Labor held its annual sessions here a few months ago, here came also to the city Jeff Davis, a citizen of the world, rejoicing in the title of ‘King of the Hoboes.’ Having arrived, Mr. Davis announced that he had previously sent out a call for a meeting in Seattle of all the hoboes of the country, simultaneous with the meeting of the Federation of Labor. That his call had been effective was proved immediately after his arrival by declarations of the presence of a multitude of unemployed who acknowledged the sovereignty of Mr. Davis.

The immediate outcome was the formation of Seattle Union Number One of the Itinerant Workers of the World, with a membership of about six hundred men. There was no formal recognition of this union by the Federation of Labor, but it was organized in the Seattle Labor Temple, all its meetings were held there and the needs of its members became the instant care of prominent local labor leaders and a ready group of politicians and socialistic sympathizers. Influences were set at work which resulted in hasty appropriations by the city and the county, aggregating twelve thousand five hundred dollars, to provide food and lodging. With much ostentation it was announced that the men did not want charity; they wanted work. A scheme was devised of having them dig in the basement for a new county courthouse, the plans for which have not been prepared nor the money provided. An abandoned hospital building was fitted up for the lodgement, bedding was bought and contracts made for their meals.

For the men who control the finances of the city and county it is but fair to say that they were deceived. They made the appropriations in the belief that the money was to go chiefly to the relief of the city’s own unemployed citizens, and that work was to be provided for the natural influx of men paid off for the winter from the mines, the lumber camps, the fisheries and the

farms of the neighborhood. But the call of the hobo king had been effective. From everywhere within brake-beam distance had come the wayside loller, the beggerman, the vicious tramp.

The records at police headquarters tell the rest of the story. There has never been a winter in Seattle's history, not even in the days when the city was known as a wide-open seaport of impressionable toughness, when there has been so much of petty crime. No progress has been made in the unnecessary courthouse basement. The Itinerant Workers, secure of meals and a place to sleep, will not work and the widespread knowledge that these hospitable provisions have been made has filled the city with the cheap crooks and marauders who through the summer months menace the peace of the countryside.

Seattle's blunder has been shared in lesser degree by Tacoma and Portland. But the convention call emanated from Seattle, and this city has been given first attention, while the others have been afflicted only with the overflow.

Meanwhile there is not a farm nor an orchard in all the Pacific Northwest that would not gladly give employment to from two to a dozen men throughout the winter. There is clearing and fencing and ditching to be done, repairs of all kinds, the care of stock and other kinds of reasonable work. The wages would be small, it is true, but the living would be good and the work intermittent, as the weather permitted.

The farmers and orchardists cannot get the help they need. The cities are thronged with loafers and burdened with petty crime. With it all one hears more talk of the merits of socialism than ever before in the Pacific Northwest.