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FOODWAYS IN THE HOBO JUNGLES

Heritage and Tradition among the Unhoused in the United States in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

Abstract

The iconic dish of hobo jungles in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century was mulligan stew, in which anything and everything on hand was thrown into a communal pot for all to share. The dish symbolised the distinctive culture of the unhoused in which mutual aid and cooperation coexist with independence, resourcefulness, and freedom.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw the flowering of what some scholars have termed Hobohemia, in which tens of thousands of unhoused individuals migrated across the United States, often by hopping on freight trains and then gathering in camps known as 'hobo jungles' where they socialised and regularly shared meals.[1] In this article, we maintain that 'mulligan stew', perhaps the most emblematic of those shared meals, represents not only the democratic mixing of diverse ingredients thrown together in a large pot over a fire that rarely extinguishes, but also the mixing of diverse individuals in the hobo jungles, where according to Nels Anderson (1889–1986), one of Hobohemia's foremost scholars, 'Absolute democracy reigns'.[2]

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2 Anderson, Nels: *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1923), 19.

Anderson's pioneering ethnographic study of Hobohemia – which also served as his master's dissertation in sociology at the University of Chicago – offers several definitions of 'the homeless man'. One of those most often cited comes from the anarchist-physician Dr. Ben L. Reitman (1879–1943): 'There are three types of the genus vagrant: the hobo, the tramp, and the bum. The hobo works and wanders, the tramp dreams and wanders and the bum drinks and wanders.'[3] One similar categorisation – admittedly less poetic than Reitman's but using those same 'three types' – defines hoboes as 'migrant workers', tramps as 'migrant non-workers', and bums as 'non-migrant, non-workers'.[4] The words for those three types have been in circulation for at least 140 years, according to the authoritative *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*). For instance, the word 'hobo', which the *OED* dates to 1885, may have 'originated as a conversion of an interjection used as a greeting or to attract attention', as in 'ho boy' or 'ho beau'.[5] The word 'bum' in the sense of 'a person without a settled home regarded as an idler or scrounger' may date to 1864, according to the *OED*.[6] Oldest of all is the word 'tramp', in the sense of 'one who travels from place to place on foot, in search of employment, or as a vagrant', which the *OED* dates to 1664.[7]

Whether Hobohemia's denizens differentiated among themselves in these ways is debatable. However, what seems clear is that those who are unhoused constitute an occupational folk group as much as any other occupational category, such as actuaries, biologists, cowboys, dishwashers, engineers, firefighters, gaffers, and haberdashers – to take only the first eight letters of the alphabet. The unhoused possess their own sets of skills, traditions, specialised knowledge, daily patterns, attitudes towards work, and codes of behaviour that not only distinguish them from other occupational groups, but that also meet their needs as a community. Two fundamental elements of their folk culture are 1) the places where they gather to reinforce their senses of community; and 2) their foodways, which we define as what they eat, how they prepare their meals; and how they consume their meals.

3 Anderson: *The Hobo*, 87.

4 Deutsch, James I.: 'Non-Traveling Subjects and their Non-Journeys: The Phenomenon of Homelessness in the United States', in Ferens, Dominika – Kociatkiewicz, Justyna and Klimek-Dominiak, Elzbieta eds.: *Traveling Subjects: American Journeys in Space and Time* (Kraków: Rabid, 2004), 277.

5 'Hobo' in *Oxford English Dictionary* online <https://www.oed.com> accessed 24 October 2024.

6 'Bum' in *Oxford English Dictionary* online <https://www.oed.com> accessed 24 October 2024.

7 'Tramp' in *Oxford English Dictionary* online <https://www.oed.com> accessed 24 October 2024.

The primary locus for unhoused individuals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the 'jungle' or 'hobo jungle'. According to Nels Anderson, 'Jungles are usually located in close proximity to a railroad division point, where the trains are made up or where trains stop to change crews and engines'.[8] Anderson goes on to explain that the jungle 'should be located in a dry and shady place that permits sleeping on the ground. There should be plenty of water for cooking and bathing and wood enough to keep the pot boiling'.[9]

Because legal authorities could raid a jungle at any time – 'to arrest or beat up the lodgers […] and […] to tear down their shelters and riddle their cooking pots with bullet holes'[10] – most jungles were 'ephemeral' and 'makeshift', using materials that were 'extemporized out of any oddments and materials within snaffling distance'.[11] For example, a 'fireman's broken shovel or discarded tie plates' became 'substitute frying pans'; 'bent wire' functioned as meat kebabs; and 'tomato cans or sardine cans' served as 'plates for the stew'.[12] Not surprisingly, the jungle's vulnerability to raids is akin to contemporary sweeps of the unhoused, in which 'law enforcement officials and sanitation workers may descend – sometimes without warning – upon areas where homeless people are congregating, thereby either forcing the homeless to move elsewhere or arresting them for outstanding warrants or for minor offenses, such as vagrancy and loitering'.[13]

Their ephemerality, notwithstanding, the jungles were on one hand 'marvels of cooperation' and places of 'reciprocity and mutualism' that served as 'surrogates for the settled working-class communities they had abandoned'.[14] However, any idealistic notions of utopia were similarly ephemeral:

> the cooperative structure of jungle camps and hobo life in general derived more from necessity than from a shared romance of the road. Put simply, hoboes lacked the support networks usually available to residentially stable workers. In

8 Anderson: *The Hobo*, 16.
9 Anderson: *The Hobo*, 17.
10 Allsop, Kenneth: *Hard Travellin': The Hobo and His History* (New York: New American Library, 1967), 165.
11 Allsop: *Hard Travellin'*, 165.
12 Allsop: *Hard Travellin'*, 165–166.
13 Deutsch, James I.: 'City-Wide Sweeps of the Homeless', in Arrigo, Bruce A. ed., *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Surveillance, Security, and Privacy* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2018), 170.
14 DePastino, Todd: *Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 70.

> a world of strangers, migrants drew upon their class experiences to improvise new forms of obligation and mutual aid.[15]

One of the best examples of 'reciprocity and mutualism' appears in the jungle's iconic dish, known as 'mulligan stew'– a name that the *Oxford English Dictionary* attributes to a proper name, 'perhaps arising from an alteration of Irish stew, by substitution of *Mulligan* as a common Irish surname.'[16] A number of sources offer vivid images of the materiality of making a 'mulligan' while simultaneously offering a glimpse into the reciprocal communality of foodways within the jungles. Most references to mulligan stew come from either anecdotal or fictionalised accounts of hoboes' lives, but there are also several scholarly accounts of life in the jungles.

The adaptability of the mulligan was the dish's chief strength – anything and everything on hand could be thrown into a communal pot, stewed as long as necessary, and served up for those surrounding. For example, car repairman and democratically elected 'King of the Hoboes', Gordon 'Bud' Filer, told the *Penn Central Post* in 1969 that 'We put in every kind of meat and vegetable imaginable. And we never stop cooking it. When I say we throw everything in, I'm assuming you know about the rule: No socks.'[17] This openness to ingredients is echoed throughout the literature on hobo jungles, especially in the best-known autobiographies of hobo life. *The Trail of a Tramp* (1913) by Leon Livingston (aka A-No. 1, 1872–1944) introduces mulligan as a dish that 'is made by stewing in a large tin can almost everything edible over a slow fire.'[18] *Beggars of Life* (1924) by Jim Tully (1886–1947) describes a mulligan as 'a combination of nearly everything cookable.'[19] The malleability of a mulligan's ingredients was necessary for a population with limited and inconsistent access to foodstuffs and accordingly became the feature of the dish most often highlighted in literary descriptions.

The strong sense of community among the unhoused meant that a mulligan's preparation was thoroughly collaborative; all in the camp contributed to it – a fact that a number of texts took pains to emphasise. For instance, journalist and historian Kenneth Allsop (1920–1973), in *Hard Travellin': The Hobo and His History* (1967), writes that mulligan 'is kept perpetually replenished by contributions from all, hoppins, or vegetables, and gumps – meat of any description, butchers' scraps,

15 DePastino: *Citizen Hobo,* 70.

16 'Mulligan Stew' in *Oxford English Dictionary* online <https://www.oed.com> accessed 24 October 2024. Emphasis in the original.

17 'King of the Hoboes', *Penn Central Post* (November 1969), 6.

18 Livingston, Leon Ray: *The Trail of a Tramp* (Erie: A-No 1 Publishing Company, 1913), 52.

19 Tully, Jim: *Beggars of Life* (New York: Albert & Charles Boni, 1924), 314.

bacon rinds, the occasional rustled chicken. All render down into a mess which may vary in savoriness, but which is always hot.'[20] Similarly, James Freels – a hobo quoted in Cliff Williams' *One More Train to Ride: The Underground World of Modern American Hoboes* (2003) – observes that 'everyone contributed to the ingredients. […] As people come along to eat the stew, the charge was one item contributed to the pot.'[21] More colourfully, Livingston in *The Trail of a Tramp* describes a scene in which members of the jungle are tasked with scrounging specific food items to contribute to the mulligan pot. He writes that 'in accordance with a custom of the Road every camper drawing a marked slip was under obligation to immediately leave the camp and return there with the necessities he had found enumerated on his docket.'[22] Livingston goes on to explain that, should a man return to camp without the item on his docket and unable to provide a 'reasonable excuse' for its absence, he would then be expelled from the camp 'by means so forcible that his disgrace was all the more painfully brought home to him.'[23] The expectation of a contribution to the pot was so embedded in the traditions of the jungle that to fail that task was to risk violent eviction by the folk group. Whether or not any hobo was ever sent out with orders as specific as 'two pounds of granulated sugar, a carton of coffee and two half-gallon cans of tomatoes'– as Livingston depicts – is doubtful, but the reference to such an unquestioned expectation of a contribution confirms the broader culture of communal interdependence in the jungles.[24]

Not only were the materials sourced collectively, but nearly every step of the cooking process was done as a group. In his master's thesis in economics, 'The Casual Laborer of California' (1922), Towne Joseph Nylander (1896–1976) described a kind of 'communistic society' wherein the men 'all [cooked] over the central camp-fire, and all contribute food to the general mess.'[25] Similarly, Tully wrote that 'a half dozen fires burned, and hoboes worked like an army of cooks over them. Some brought water from the creek, while others peeled potatoes, and prepared meat for the skillets.'[26] Nels Anderson, too, painted a picture of a deeply collaborative environment, writing that 'while some of the men are busily engaged in cooking, others are sewing and

20 Allsop: *Hard Travellin'*, 165.
21 Williams, Cliff: *One More Train to Ride: The Underground World of Modern American Hoboes* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 79.
22 Livingston: *The Trail of a Tramp*, 50.
23 Livingston: *The Trail of a Tramp*, 50.
24 Livingston: *The Trail of a Tramp*, 50.
25 Nylander, Towne Joseph: *The Casual Laborer of California* (M.A. thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1922), 51.
26 Tully: *Beggars of Life*, 253.

mending their clothes or shoes, and still others are shaving […] After supper, pans and cans are cleaned out, the paper is read and passes the rounds.'[27] The extent to which the making of a mulligan was a truly collective endeavour is evidenced by the concurrence of texts describing such expansive cooperation at every level of the process. The labour did not start and stop with the cooking pot, but was spread evenly throughout the jungle.

Within the hobo jungles, mulligan stew served as a touchstone for this culture of interdependence, acting not only as a metaphorical representation of the culture's democratic foundations, but also as an opportunity for the unhoused to experience and create the culture of their jungles. As such, mulligan stew may symbolise the distinctive culture of the hobo jungles, where diverse individuals contribute to the whole in a process that embodies not only equality and democracy but also individualism and freedom.

Moreover, the example of mulligan stew confirms how the study of foodways may yield insight into the values, realities, and relationships within a particular community. As Michael A. Di Giovine and Ronda L. Brulotte note in their introduction to *Edible Identities: Food as Cultural Heritage* (2014), food not only 'binds people together', but also links 'members of society together through space and time, serving as referential touchstones for a group's self-identification […] and representing the group to outsiders.'[28]

The symbolism inherent in mulligan stew – both literal and metaphorical – thereby illustrates the binding and linking of community members, in this case the community of unhoused at the turn of the twentieth century in the United States. The egalitarian participation at the core of making a mulligan reflects the foundational presumption of equality in the jungle. Whether contributing a chicken or an egg to the pot, most important was each individual's concrete demonstration of commitment to the democratic structure of mutual aid that sustained lifeways in the jungles.

The democratic principles of cooperation, reciprocity, and mutual support were foundational to life in the hobo jungles. The equality of the ingredients reflected that of the individuals supplying them, thereby creating a network of cooperation that

27 Anderson: *The Hobo,* 24.

28 Di Giovine, Michael A. and Brulotte, Ronda L.: 'Introduction: Food and Foodways as Cultural Heritage', in Brulotte, Ronda L. and Di Giovine, Michael A., eds.: *Edible Identities: Food as Cultural Heritage* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016), 1.

allowed its members – without any other means of support – to create their own mutual-aid structure and to maintain their own lives of freedom and movement. That very culture of inter-reliance allowed for the striking independence, resourcefulness, and freedom that marked the lives of those at the root of Hobohemia.

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