

DOCUMENT 1: CHILDREN AND THE GREAT DEPRESSION

The readings in this section are taken from a book by Thomas Minehan, *Boy and Girl Tramps of America*. Minehan was a researcher who, beginning in 1932, traveled among America's homeless to learn the "ideas, attitudes, and viewpoints of the mass of men hit most cruelly by the depression." He soon found that many of the homeless were young people—girls and boys—who traveled the nation's railroads. Disguised as a homeless man, Minehan managed to collect the stories of over five hundred boys and girls. While not all children were homeless, the stories show some of the problems faced by families during the Depression.

Minehan said that, in his experience, about one of every twenty children traveling the rails was a girl. There is a PBS documentary, "Riding the Rails" (1998) that also covers this topic; the filmmakers believe that as many as 250,000 young people lived on the road at the height of the Depression.



Children at city dump (July 1938) Arthur Rothstein

Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection [LC-USF33-002831-M2 DLC]

Why Did They Leave Home?

"Did the old man kick you out?" I ask.
"Well, no." Loyal still to his family, Joe does not exactly want to give the wrong impression. "He didn't exactly kick me out, but he gave me plenty of hints. He hasn't worked steady in the last three years," Joe explains. "There's seven of us kids at home, and I'm the oldest. I'm seventeen. I worked for about six months two years ago for a grocer who gave me no wages but, you know, food and stuff. Then he closed up. I couldn't get anything. The old man kept giving hints. Last fall they cut down on our relief. We had to go to bed because our house was so cold. I cut nine cords of wood for a man. He gave us two. That wasn't so bad, and I thought I'd stay until Christmas. I got the kids a duck, too, for Christmas, but I ain't saying how I got it. Then, before the old man could start giving any more hints, I scrams."

Source: Minehan, pp.37-38

Kay is fifteen. Her blue eyes, fair hair, and pale cheeks are girlish and delicate...Sickly and suffering from chronic undernourishment, she appears to subsist almost entirely upon her finger nails which she gnaws habitually.

"There wasn't"—she takes a finger away from her mouth long enough to join the discussion—"much else for me to do but go. There are eight younger kids at home and one older sister out of work. Dad hasn't worked steady for four years. Sis, for two. Mother got a job scrubbing—\$7 a week, and that's all we had to live on except for some clothes we got from a ledge. We wouldn't take charity. So when a farmer offered me a chance to work all summer for potatoes and vegetables for the family last winter I took it. I could have stayed with his wife, but I thought maybe if I skipped around through the country I could earn some cash and send a few bucks home. But it don't look much like it now..."

Source: Minehan, pp.45-46

Ragged, smiling Texas, merry as usual, is returning with a knapsack full of bread which he has begged up-town. He recounts his experiences and success gustily and with the pardonable braggadocio of one who has accomplished something.

"...and one woman asked me why did I leave home, and I answers, 'Hard times, lady!' Just like that. 'Hard times, lady, hard times!'"

His auditors laugh. And hard times it seems to be, lady.

Three hundred and eighty-seven out of four-hundred and sixty-six boys and girls stated definitely that hard times drove them away from home. Yet there were other reasons. Twenty-six of the remaining seventy-nine were on the road because of some trouble with a girl.

Source: Minehan, pp.47-48

Their New Education

Not all young tramps have honest rackets. One girl I knew bought a small basket of assorted vegetables. With this on her arm she went from house to house. Of a woman coming to the back door, she asked prices so high that she never sold anything. She did not intend to sell anything. Her racket was to find a back door open—and the woman not at home.

Source: Minehan, pp.131-132

While the necessities of life are forcing many young tramps to beg and steal or to starve, many clever ones are doing neither. They are learning rackets. A racket in the child tramp's parlance is merely a legal method of making a living under pressure. It may be a personal talent that can be exploited. More often it is something that can be sold or traded for board and meals....

"Every town is soft for me," boasted another youth as our train slowed up in the yards of Indianapolis and we prepared to jump [off the train]. "Watch me hit this one for a meal in ten minutes. Come along, and I'll get you one too," he offered.

I came. My friend entered the first saloon we encountered after we left the [railroad yard].

"Listen," he said to the proprietor. "I am an artist. I can draw any kind of picture on your window you want. Let me clean off that old stuff and draw something new. All it will cost you is a couple of forty-cent dinners."

The proprietor agreed, reserving the right to reject the work. We cleaned the windows. My friend went to work. He drew a picture of a foaming stein, a fat German, a dachshund, and a Gibson girl, in five minutes. We got the dinners.

"You see, Shorty," he bragged, and not without justice, "you gotta have a racket. Then it is a snap."

Source: Minehan, pp.129-131

Begging is the first thing they learn. But a few years ago it was almost a profession. Good panhandlers in 1929 made \$4 or \$5 a day in any city. Today [in 1934], the best seldom make forty cents. It takes a good tale, a new approach, and Spartan-like fortitude and persistence to get a dime. Sharp wits and nimble feet are needed now to hit the stem in any city. Cops are hostile; the public is hard-boiled; and jails are waiting. Various deceptions are necessary. The child tramp learns all of them....

...house-to-house begging is an art in itself.

"Look for a yard with a lot of kids' playthings in it," coached a youngster from Schenectady, who five years ago was playing with toys himself. "And a place where they keep the grass cut in front, play-toys in the back yard. You're sure to get something if it is only a meal.

"A good day to hit a house is when there is a lot of washing on the line," he continued. "You're sure the woman is at home and got something ready to eat...."

Source: Minehan, pp.121, 126