

# "Shelter Men": Life in Chicago's Public Shelters during the Great Depression

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"I GOT MY FIRST TASTE OF SHELTER LIFE at 758 West Harrison, where application for admission to the shelters is made. I had to stand around outside a while before the doorman would let me in. When I got inside the building I found a lot of men sitting on benches. They were cursing the shelter, the shelter men, and the case workers. One old man sitting near me complained with curses, 'There's too much cock-eyed red tape around this place. It's getting worser and worser every time I come up here.' A younger man confided to me, 'It took a lot of courage for me to come into this place; in fact I came up here three times before I went in and then only when a couple of friends came along who had been in before.'"<sup>1</sup>

So begins an undercover investigation of the Chicago shelters in the spring of 1935. The picture that emerges from this and similar accounts is not only damning; it is, in places, rather horrifying. One reads of incredibly filthy bathrooms in one shelter, "plain dirt all over the floor, while urine that was old and strong smelling was running in small streams everywhere," through which "it was necessary to wade" in order to use the facilities. Garbage cans, overflowing and pungent, were pointedly placed beside the long breadlines in which the men shuffled to get meals, many of the shufflers regularly expectorating into filthy spittoons that were placed in prominent locations. Sleeping every night in a packed room with twenty-five other men was another hardship, especially considering the cacophony of "snoring, sneezing, moaning, sleep-talking, and coughing" that kept one awake for hours. "Last night one man coughed so loud and so long that he woke everyone up. Finally a fellow told him, 'For

Christ's sake shut up or get to hell out of here!" The blankets seemed to one reporter to be made of paper, which left the tenants shivering all night from drafts—drafts that did nothing to ameliorate the stench of perspiring bodies and disinfectants. Bedbugs and lice, fond of this environment, bit and crept all over their prone prey.<sup>2</sup>

There is some good scholarship on the homeless in the Depression, but more can still be said about the conditions of shelters and inhabitants' responses to them, in particular their *resistance* to dehumanization. Charles Hoch and Robert Slayton's excellent *New Homeless and Old: Community and the Skid Row Hotel* (1989), for example, places Chicago's Depression-era public shelters in a broad historical context and describes in some depth what "shelter men" had to endure, but says little to suggest that they were not totally undone by their miseries. Its approach, on the whole, is to describe what was *done to* them, not what *they did*. Nor does it say much about the evolution of relief policy in Chicago during the 1930s, focusing instead on the broader theme of the decline of the private sector in low-income housing and rise of the public sector. Kenneth Kusmer's *Down and Out, On the Road* (2001), on the other hand, is a sweeping social history of homelessness in America that concentrates not on the evolution of low-income housing but rather on all facets of homeless life and society's treatment of the homeless. As a comprehensive account, it highlights not only the suffering of the poor but also their *activeness*, even their "rebellious discontent." Its analysis of shelter life in the Depression, however, is rather brief and, if anything, overly positive. Being a national study, it cannot delve deeply into matters on a local scale. The same is true of Todd DePastino's *Citizen Hobo* (2003), which in any case is primarily a cultural history, focusing especially on how the (changing) racialized and gendered meanings of homelessness shaped popular understandings of social citizenship. The actual lives and struggles of shelter men are of peripheral significance to this work.<sup>3</sup>

Joan M. Crouse's *The Homeless Transient in the Great Depression: New York State, 1929-1941* (1986) is a more microscopic study, analyzing the relief policies, shelter conditions, and experiences of homeless non-residents in New York. In fact, it has much in common with this article, except that I concentrate on the experiences of locals rather than transients. Also, Crouse's book does not have much of an argument—in which respect it is no different from many other excellent scholarly

works—whereas I try to emphasize the resistance, resilience, and class consciousness (both latent and open) of shelter-sufferers.<sup>4</sup>

Limitations of space prevent me from considering two major categories of the homeless: women and transients. The former were much in the minority compared to men, and conditions in their shelters were generally far better than in men's shelters. Relief for transients, on the other hand, has too complex a history to be covered in this article. Travelers from all over the country were frequently able to secure lodging in Chicago's free shelters (in addition to its cheap private flophouses and church missions), often by lying about their residential status. But, except during the two-year period (1933–35) of the Federal Transient Program, official policy toward unemployed transients was hostile: typically their stay in a shelter was supposed to be limited to at most a week or two, after which they were ordered to move on to another city.

The argument in this article will proceed as follows. The first section contains a brief sketch of the relief administration that evolved to care for Chicago's thousands of homeless men in the early 1930s. The bulk of the paper, however, is focused on conditions in the shelters and how "clients" responded to them. As we will see, a fruitful way to characterize these institutions is that they were effectively designed to turn their residents into "bums," as a *Chicago Tribune* article put it.<sup>5</sup> That may not have been an intention present in the mind of any policymaker or bureaucrat, but it was how they functioned, and the people who designed and implemented policy were certainly aware of it. Given that few major changes were ever made in shelters, the natural conclusion is that they effectively served their purposes as determined by the governments that funded them and the relief administration that ran them, an administration that itself was subject to pressures from the conservative business community (whose anti-relief attitudes were well articulated by the *Tribune*). To the degree that it occurred, the transformation of men from active shapers of their own and society's destinies into hopeless derelicts whose self-worth had been crushed not only crippled the spirit of rebellion in a disaffected group of men; it also provided a useful pretext to publicly demonize them (as the *Tribune* did, for example), to demonize public relief itself and argue for its dismantling, and to tar and feather, by association, the lower classes in general. It reinforced class prejudice and the Social Darwinistic self-justifications of the wealthy at the same time that it made more docile

and compliant tens of thousands of once-spirited men, by tending to strip them of their humanity. From this perspective, shelter relief was a masterpiece of class politics.

And yet many of the men resisted, both individually and collectively. After weeks or months spent in the shelters they typically grew resigned to the dismal conditions, but hope for a better future did not always die. Individuality and even creativity were not wholly extirpated. Thus, I emphasize the ways in which the men evinced an oppositional, even a class-conscious, attitude, as well as their efforts to maintain their individual identities.

### **Relief Administration**

On the eve of the Depression, Chicago had several well-established communities of "the unattached" in the vicinity of the bustling downtown district. To help provide for (some of) these men, free shelters were maintained in the 1920s and earlier by welfare organizations and religious agencies, such as the Salvation Army, the Christian Industrial League, the Jewish Social Service Bureau, and the Central Bureau of Catholic Charities. The religiously affiliated shelters were known as missions, since in return for food, beds, and maybe some clothing the men were subject to appeals that they accept God in their lives, repent of their dissolute ways, and convert. Intermittently there were also municipal lodging houses run by the Department of Public Welfare, where men received a bed, two meals daily, and medical care. Until 1930, Chicago managed to make do on this somewhat ad hoc arrangement.<sup>6</sup>

It was in autumn of 1930 that the swelling numbers of men applying for assistance necessitated a change in policy.<sup>7</sup> A Clearing House for Homeless Men was established in November 1930 (under the auspices of the new Governor's Commission on Unemployment and Relief), the function of which was to register the men who applied for assistance and assign them to a particular shelter. Civic groups and police distributed thousands of cards to panhandlers and unemployed men around the city directing them to the new Clearing House, which was also publicized by newspapers, with the result that a deluge of men soon descended upon the agency. Based on a short interview, each man was directed to one of the city's permanent shelters or the seven emergency shelters operated by religious organizations and the Chicago Urban League, which ran one

for African Americans. By early 1931, Chicago had eighteen free shelters for men, maintained by both private and public agencies and financed by the Governor's Commission and later its successor, the Joint Emergency Relief Fund of Cook County. Most of them were located in the vicinity of West Madison Street's Hobohemia.<sup>8</sup>

The numbers of men housed, at least temporarily, in these shelters varied greatly between seasons and as the Depression grew more severe. Between October 16, 1930 and June 1, 1931, 43,200 men passed through the city's shelters; but the numbers dwindled in the spring, most importantly because the Governor's Commission, having nearly exhausted its funds, could afford to keep running only two of them by June 1. In addition, fuller investigation revealed that many of the able-bodied unemployed had resources on which they could draw, so they were kicked out in favor of the aged and disabled. Some of those who left secured employment, but others began again to sleep in public parks or box cars. In the fall and winter, though, it proved necessary again to open more shelters, fifteen this time, including several more than before on the South Side. (As in the previous year, the shelters were financed by private donations, this time to the Joint Emergency Relief Fund.) But relief needs proved so overwhelming in the winter of 1931-32 that the state finally had to step in in February and provide funds through the Illinois Emergency Relief Commission, as the Clearing House assumed direct control of all the shelters except for those maintained by the city Department of Public Welfare and one run by the Salvation Army. Now that money was a little more forthcoming—and as thousands more Chicagoans lost jobs in 1932—the number of men's shelters kept increasing, until there were 25 in November 1932.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, the number of people being cared for in shelters—including a minority who received meals only and not lodging, because they had their own rooms—climbed from 12,000 in October 1931 to 20,000 in February 1932, and then to 35,000 in January 1933. Later that year and in 1934 it decreased, so that shelters served an average of somewhat more than 16,000 men per month in 1934. The numbers of men in shelters continued to decline in 1935 and '36, to as few as 5,000 in July 1935, 2,000 in September, and only 100 in June 1936, when one shelter remained open in Chicago. It wasn't that the economy was doing amazingly well by this point; rather, the administration of relief had changed. For one thing, some men had been transferred to WPA work camps. More importantly, nearly all

were placed on home relief instead of shelter relief, because this was seen as less demoralizing than being herded like sheep in warehouses, old factory buildings, schools, and "cage hotels."<sup>10</sup>

Statistical studies conducted at the time indicate who these men were who found themselves suddenly living (with some exceptions) in the old neighborhoods of Hobohemia, in many cases surrounded by alien elements—flophouses, burlesque houses, pickpockets, drunks. According to a 1932 study, very few were attached to families, being single, widowed, divorced, or separated. Their mean and median age was 43 (though it substantially increased in the summer, when younger men found seasonal employment or "struck out on the road" to look for work); 14 percent were African American, and 39 percent were foreign-born—figures indicating that homelessness was disproportionately high among the black and immigrant populations. A report in 1935 suggests that between 5 and 10 percent were the old type of beggar and bum, while 20 percent were a somewhat "higher" class of migratory laborer.<sup>11</sup>

This heterogeneity of the shelter population necessitated attempts at classification and distribution of groups of men to particular shelters. Young men and boys were assigned to one shelter, middle-aged and able-bodied men to another group of shelters, migratory laborers to others, white-collar workers to yet others, and so forth. The system was far from perfect, however, as a hodgepodge of men could be found in most of the shelters (except for the white-collar ones, where, in accord with prevailing ideologies, inhabitants were treated better and on a more individualized basis). An especially egregious example was the lodging house devoted to "chronic alcoholics, drunk and disorderlies, epileptics, narcotic addicts, [and] mental subnormals," together with a mixed group of able-bodied men over age fifty, all of whom were subject to the punitive disciplinary style of the particular superintendent.<sup>12</sup>

Chicago's relief administration, like the entire country's, was constantly in flux the whole decade, as policymakers and administrators managed the conflicting demands of the business community on the one hand, which tended to desire lower costs and more niggardly relief, and the unemployed and their advocates on the other, who fought for humane policies. In 1935 the latter group had a significant victory: most shelters were closed and the Service Bureau for Men (the successor to the Clearing House) abolished, its former clients—approximately 17,000 men

at that point—being transferred to home relief, and hence to individual care. In principle, at least, this policy change was supposed to return single people to a more normal status in the community at the same time that it improved the quality of their care.<sup>13</sup>

While relief administration continued to evolve, these changes of 1935 were permanent. There was never again a return to the time when 15,000 or more men had to endure the miseries of congregate care in a few overcrowded buildings. From late 1935 to 1942, only one or two public shelters remained; and after 1942, even these were closed. The entire relief load of homeless men—only a few hundred by then—was again taken over by private agencies such as the Chicago Christian Industrial League and the Salvation Army, both of which maintained high-quality lodging houses with individualized treatment.

### **Shelter Life**

An outside observer of Chicago's shelters in the 1930s might have concluded that one basic rule explained their functioning: to the extent possible, the poor must be treated as criminals and/or animals, to punish them for the crime of being poor and thus potentially dangerous. A graphic illustration of this guiding value occurred in 1938, when the Chicago mayor and high officials in the CRA and the police department endorsed the idea of fingerprinting all "inmates" (as they called them) of public shelters. It was thought that at least half the 2,100 men in the CRA's two shelters would leave immediately if a fingerprinting expert appeared on the premises. The proposal was not enacted—probably because of questions about its legality, or simply the difficult logistics of carrying it out—but a month later Evanston put it into practice, quickly netting two one-time convicts. "Lock them up," a police lieutenant ordered, "until we find out if they are wanted for crime." This was perhaps a somewhat backward logic, but illustrative of the authorities' attitude towards the poor.<sup>14</sup>

It has been known for a long time that one of the main functions of relief is to discipline the labor force. That is to say, the frequent miserliness of relief policies, the degradation into which they have forced those among the poor who could not find employment, has—in the words of Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward—served the purpose of enforcing work norms.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, historically provisions for poor relief and for punishment of criminals have sometimes overlapped, as is demonstrated

in Georg Rusche and Otto Kirchheimer's seminal *Punishment and Social Structure* (1939).<sup>16</sup> It should hardly surprise us, therefore, that even in the middle 1930s, when mass popular unrest was forcing expansions of public welfare programs, relief remained grotesquely inadequate. Nor is it surprising that this fact was most dramatically manifested in the case of the "dangerous" population of unattached men who had lost the means to live in their own home.

Consider the testimony, from 1935, of an inmate of Chicago shelters:

Here [in shelters] privacy is a forgotten word. On a cold or rainy day, or during the evenings, men are crowded into the basement or assembly room—German, colored, Pole, Greek, Mexican, American, Irish, Russian, and every nationality. . . . Here also are degenerates, drunks, working men, bums, clerks, old men with all ambition gone, young men whose every ideal has been crushed, all herded together. One almost tastes the stench of unclean bodies, and the sulphur odor from fumigated clothes. For quite a while this lack of privacy nearly drove me nuts.<sup>17</sup>

It is true that some people received relatively decent treatment. The few white-collar clients, mostly clerks and salesmen, lived in buildings that had been designed for residential purposes, and so were relatively comfortable. One or two men might sleep in a room, in some cases the kind of room in certain flophouses: a square wooden cubicle with chicken-wire mesh on top to prevent stealing and to let in air. These tiny rooms were the opposite of luxury, but at least they afforded *some* privacy. Furthermore, the beds actually had mattresses, sheets, and pillows. Men in the non-white-collar shelters had to sleep on an uncomfortable canvas army cot, usually without a sheet or a pillow; and when they did have a sheet, it was unlikely to have been washed in months and might be soiled with blood or fecal matter. For a short period (until funding ran out) some white-collar men were even allowed to live in their own rooms and were given \$4 a week in return for one day's work, so as to reintegrate themselves into their community. And yet despite such perquisites, caseworkers remarked that these higher-status clients were apt to have an even more adverse reaction to shelter life than those with more humble backgrounds.<sup>18</sup>

Shelter inmates' hardships began immediately, as soon as they stepped inside the intake center and began the hours-long wait for a



two-minute medical examination. An interview by a caseworker was the next step—a rather pointless step in light of the fact that nearly every applicant was always accepted, and his references and details were almost never checked. One applicant gave a spirited complaint about this procedure: “Hell, they want to know when your grandmother died, what she died of, and why did ya let her die. They ask you a few questions, get up and chew the fat with someone, then maybe come back and ask a few more questions. Boy, when you go through all that red tape to get in here and swear that pauper’s oath, and swear you’ve told the truth when you have told several lies, you’ve touched bottom. There’s no pride left.” This was perhaps an exaggeration, but indicative at least of how the institution functioned—before you had even really entered it.<sup>19</sup>

The physical facilities of most shelters, bare and dreary, were not calculated to lift the spirits. Typically there was a recreation room in which people could sit and play cards or dominoes or other games, or stand or sit on the floor because the room was overcrowded, full of all types of men—native and foreign-born, the bum and the skilled tradesman, the ex-clerk and the ex-convict, even black and white—packed together.<sup>20</sup> Not much recreating went on here, though, as is clear from the following description of one such room (which was written, admittedly, in that most terrible year 1932):

In the auditorium was [a] group of men. If one walked among them, one was conscious of their apathy. One could feel their hopelessness and misery. Some were dozing on the seats. Others were lying asleep on the platform. A few checker games were in progress. Infrequently, a card game went on in a corner. . . . One noticed a certain stillness in the place. It did not seem possible that so many men [in fact, hundreds] could be gathered together without some noise. Then the thought struck home that these men, for the most part, were not talking. They were sitting in dejected silence, and those who were talking did so quietly.

The day’s search for work had proved hopeless. There was nothing to do but tramp the streets or sit and brood, no money to buy amusement for the empty hours. . . .<sup>21</sup>

The recreation room, however, could be called pleasant compared to the “bull pen,” a dark, damp, dismal place located in the basement. Littered with cigarette butts, wads of chewing tobacco, crusts of bread, and discarded clothing, it had no furniture except some backless benches. Here

was where men could escape supervision, where they could smoke, spit on the floor, drink, or sleep off a hangover. It was also where men were sent to be punished, if, say, they had failed to show up for fumigation that night, or if they had returned to the shelter intoxicated. During the day, the bull pen was frequently occupied by fifty or a hundred men—young, middle-aged, elderly—dozing on the benches or the floor because they had been unable to sleep the previous night. "The great majority of them," reported an investigator, "do not appear to be sleeping off a drunk, but rather merely so weary in body and in spirit that the oblivion of sleep offers them a haven."<sup>22</sup>

As for the sleeping rooms, they were so densely packed with cots that it was sometimes necessary for the occupant to crawl in from the head or the foot of the bed—which violated state health regulations. (As usual, the white-collar shelters were an exception.) And then, having gone to bed at 8:00 or 9:00 p.m., the occupant spent the night trying to get to sleep, until awoken at 5:30 or 6:30 a.m.<sup>23</sup> Among the annoyances he would have to endure were the stuffiness of the air, the stench, the cold drafts from outside, the sizzling and cracking of steam in the pipes, the quarrels over opening or closing a window—"Put that window down!" "Put that damn window up!"—and of course the lice. If he was sick in the morning he would be forced out of bed anyway and denied access to the sleeping room until 7:00 p.m., when it was opened again.<sup>24</sup>

The health service seems to have been fairly well organized, though the care provided was not always satisfactory. Each shelter had an infirmary, where a physician worked one-and-a-half or two hours a day and an orderly was present twenty-four hours daily. Medicine could usually be obtained from supplies at the infirmary, where there was also some (inadequate) provision for bed care. The Clearing House opened a small central infirmary in November 1931 for emergency cases and convalescents from all the shelters; by 1934 it had seven paid physicians, a part-time dentist, and nine full-time nurses, with 275 beds—more than all the shelters' infirmaries combined. A psychiatrist was added to the staff in 1934, in recognition of the thousands of shelter inhabitants who were mentally unbalanced or depressed; but the large majority of these cases could not even be examined, much less treated, due to the lack of resources. It is true that all the men had caseworkers (theoretically) who occasionally met with them, but, like the psychiatrist, these workers were

terribly overburdened—and, moreover, usually lacked the training for psychotherapy. There is reason to think, too, that a great many undiagnosed cases of tuberculosis existed among the shelter men, in light of the constant spitting and coughing of many of them.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to medical care, clients were offered miscellaneous personal services for free, such as barber service, shoe repair, and tailor service. Unfortunately they were never adequate to meet the needs of the majority, especially since the staff had privileged access to them. The shoe repair service, for example, must have been constantly overcrowded, because the shoes that the men were supplied with were of low quality, causing blisters and infections. Clothing, too, was of “extremely poor quality,” to quote the Director of the Clearing House for Men, even after a Central Clothing Depot had been set up in May 1932. Prior to this, the clothing issued by the various shelters had been ill-fitting; the establishment of a central depot at least helped address this problem. But even then, clothing appropriations amounted to a dollar per year for each man—\$50,000 for 50,000 men during the year 1931–32. What this meant concretely was described in 1934:<sup>26</sup>

Even the most casual observer of the men in the shelter must notice how ragged the clothing of a large proportion of the men is. Some of them appear almost scarecrow-like; with knees visible through trouser legs too far worn to repair; with trouser seats patched and repatched with contrasting colors; with shirts so frayed and tattered that it is difficult to understand how they remain in one piece; and coats or sweaters so threadbare as to be no protection at all against the cold. . . . Fully three-quarters of the men in [one] shelter appeared to be so disreputably clothed that their appearance would label them as “bums.”<sup>27</sup>

Meal service, too, tended to be inadequate the whole decade. Until November 1934, most shelters served only two meals a day, at 6:30 a.m. and 5:30 p.m. It was assumed that if the men got hungry in the interim, they could go out and beg for food or find odd jobs. One Chicagoan wrote of his experience early in the Depression: “After breakfast at our [shelter] we would hurry over to another charity where we got some more soup and bread. Then we legged it forty-seven blocks to the South Side where a church dispensed coffee and bread. From thence we rushed back nineteen blocks to another church which started feeding [lunch] at eleven. If lucky, we got around in time to get a second [lunch] at another place two

miles further uptown. That left us about two hours in mid-afternoon to rest, to panhandle tobacco money, or to read such scraps of old newspapers as we were able to pick up."<sup>28</sup>

The quality of the food served at shelters was uneven. Particularly in the early years of the Depression, it was common for food to be rotten or bug-ridden, and to be generally unpalatable because it had all been carelessly thrown together onto the plate, resulting in an unintended stew. On paper, the menu could look appealing, featuring fish, potatoes, beef, mutton stew, biscuits, vegetables, fruit, and coffee. In practice, though, it tended to be bland at best, as a reporter described his supper of cold beets, a tin soup bowl of beef stew, a tin mug of weak coffee, and unbuttered bread. Under tremendous pressure from social workers, activists, and the shelter men themselves, meal service was improved in 1934, most significantly by the addition of lunch, but also by providing a more varied menu and the possibility to have almost as much coffee and bread as one wanted. Nevertheless, the essence of the whole depressing meal-time experience remained: a man had no choice in what to eat; he was even assigned to a particular seat (a spot on one of the long backless benches in the dining room), likely next to people whose table manners he found revolting; he simply shoveled in the food quickly and without conversation, mindful of the men still waiting outside; and, of course, to eat he first had to shamble along in a serpentine line for at least thirty minutes or up to two-and-a-half hours, three times a day.<sup>29</sup>

All things considered, the central fact of shelter life was *regimentation*. One author summed it up well: "When the man enters the shelter he learns the meaning of the word 'line.' He is a 'linesman'; he lines up to see the caseworker; he lines up for his meals; he lines up to fumigate [every two weeks] and then to bathe; he lines up to wash, to shave, to use the toilet, and to go to bed. 'I spend,' said one man, 'half my waking hours either standing and waiting for something or sitting and waiting for someone.'" "Why in hell don't they line us up against the wall and shoot us and get it over with," grumbled one inmate. Watchmen were always present to intimidate and challenge the men, especially drunks, who were frequently beaten—with clubs, sawed-off baseball bats, or lead pipes—and forced outside even in the cold night air. Signs posted on the walls warned, "Don't Loiter Here—This Means You," "Keep Quiet and Listen," "Don't Spit on the Floor," and "Keep Out," this last with an illustration of a fist

striking a nose. The very walls, drab and unfeeling, were saturated with the atmosphere of bureaucracy and impersonal authority, of hours and hours spent every day in the lines—"lines eight blocks long to get food"—monotony and gloom and the same bleak routine day in and day out. "The place has approximately the same effect as a jail," remarked a reporter. "It is the individual against the world. The monotony of the same old faces, ideas, arguments, line, nothing to do but sit, finally gets under the skin."<sup>30</sup>

An observer of shelter life might have concluded that the whole point of the program was to infantilize the men, to deprive them of initiative, autonomy, and individuality. A total bureaucracy regulated every aspect of their lives, except in the hours every day that they spent in the streets. There was no need and no place for independent thinking. To make sure that inmates did not have to use their mind even to remember procedures and duties, bulletins with instructions were posted all over the building. The structural ideal was a kind of totalitarianism, power's penetration of every recess of the mind to break down the personality and reduce it to the lowest common denominator, the apathetic former job-seeker, the inarticulate bum, the broken old man—to atomize, to isolate and make anonymous, to fill with resentment and consciousness of inferiority. In some cases, "spies" even circulated among the inmates to learn of opinions and happenings, a fact that only heightened the atmosphere of distrust and suspicion. The rule of impersonality so shaped the men's minds that they seldom cared to learn each other's names, seldom inquired of past lives or personal business. Many preferred not to talk at all but to sit alone, as they worried there was no escape from the "hopeless maelstrom" into which they felt themselves being pushed. Perhaps ironically, the non-Hobohemians—the white-collar workers, the skilled tradesmen, the steady unskilled workers—were frequently more despondent about the future than the habitual Hobohemians. "Not one man in ninety-nine," some insisted, "who has passed forty years and has lived in these flophouses will ever make a comeback." There were no jobs to be had, and even if there were, the men's shabby clothing and their air of resignation—after years of fruitless job searching and months of living in a shelter—told against them. Their fate, it seemed, was to become "shelterized," to internalize the bureaucracy.<sup>31</sup>

Even work relief, which social workers and some administrators hoped would empower and help rehabilitate clients, often did not have the

desired effect. Beginning in June 1932, it took the form of projects for the Cook County Department of Highways, the Chicago Bureau of Streets, maintenance work done in the shelters, and, in the case of some (though not all) white-collar clients, clerical and professional work for the Chicago Public Library and the Board of Education. All men except the disabled and those who served on the shelter staff were required to work one five-hour day for each thirteen days of meals and lodging or, if the client needed meals only and not lodging, nineteen days of meals. Technically their five hours of labor got them \$3.25 in credit for shelter relief plus 25 cents in cash, but since they had already been receiving shelter relief for free in the preceding years, it seemed to many that they were really being paid only five cents an hour. They considered themselves slave laborers. "[This is] worse than slavery," an African American man complained to a labor reporter. "The officials order us around like prisoners. Slaves were worth money. The owners wanted them to live so they could work. Here they don't care if you're sick or if you die." Nor did it help that the character of the work was not exactly edifying: even many white-collar men, not to mention the others, had to do such artificial "made-work drudgery" (as they disgustedly called it) as cleaning spittoons, sweeping floors, shoveling snow, and cleaning trash-filled alleys. This work-relief program continued until the summer of 1935.<sup>32</sup>

It is true that some men appreciated the opportunity to feel at least moderately useful. And of course they all did appreciate the 25 cents (however niggardly it was), with which they could buy a razor, tobacco, soap, a lunch, or, in some cases, alcohol and sex with a prostitute. In an environment as degraded as the one described here, the little pleasures that could be bought with 25 cents would assume outsized importance, as precious links to the world of the living.

### **The Shelter Men**

While the shelters tended to function, in effect, as devices of dehumanization, the unfortunate men who found it necessary to live in them did not thereby cease to be men. Implicitly, and often explicitly, their humanity rebelled against the kind of treatment they received. At times they even organized to change practices, with some success; and their experiences gave most of them a definitely left-of-center—and far from apathetic—political consciousness. They did not become only an undifferentiated

mass of cattle, as they were frequently thought of, but remained individuals with their own distinctive pasts and futures, and personalities.

So, first of all, what were their pasts? Who were these men? By 1932 there were over fifty different nationalities and cultural groups represented in the shelters; 60 percent of the people were American, after which the most common group, constituting 7 percent of the men, was Polish. (A study three years later indicated that the immigrant population had risen to 50 percent.) Of all the continental European immigrants, who were about 30 percent of the total, the central European peasant was most highly represented. On the whole, half of the shelter men had already been accustomed to the Hobohemian culture, being either "bums" (habitual drunks, beggars, etc.), migratory laborers, or casual laborers rooted in Chicago, nearly all of whom had lived in flophouses and lodging houses in the main stem of Hobohemia. For the other half, including the steadier type of unskilled worker, it was more or less traumatizing to find themselves suddenly living with bums or—if he was an American—"damn foreigners." The African Americans who entered shelters had almost as diverse an occupational background as the whites, but in the aggregate there were nonetheless clear differences: far more black men had been engaged throughout life in odd jobs, and far fewer in skilled occupations; they were on average ten years younger than the whites (most of whom were middle-aged or older); and they had been more prone to alcoholism and gambling, although these habits were quite common among the whites as well. Interestingly, once they had begun shelter life, black men continued to spend time with their non-shelter friends much more often than either the American or the foreign-born whites did.<sup>33</sup>

The Hobohemians' background was of raw living in the kaleidoscopic neighborhoods of West Madison, North Clark, and South State streets. All ages, nationalities, and occupations, including some skilled and white-collar workers, were seen here—indeed, were seen even just on West Madison Street, which had a magnetic energy that both repelled and attracted. Its habitués were apt to swear, "I'm going to get off this god-damn street soon"—away from the petty racketeers, the drug peddlers, the drunks and their predators the jack-rollers (whose pastime consisted of beating up drunks and stealing from them whatever was worth stealing), the professional beggars and stick-up men—and they might even succeed in getting away for a couple of weeks, but always they returned.

with the self-reproach, "I'll be damned if I can stay away—what it is, I don't know." Part of it was the inexpensiveness of the area, where meals could be had for 15 or 20 cents. More important, though, was the companionship that could be found in the hotels and lodging houses, and the hash houses and restaurants. "Who the hell wants to stay out in a furnished room by himself?" remarked one man in protest against the idea of leaving the street. "I'd die of lonesomeness."<sup>34</sup>

Contrary to the received wisdom, the people who lived on such streets were likely to prize their independence, thinking of themselves, in fact, as much more free and independent than their socially esteemed betters in the middle class, who were tied down by marriage and the whole mundane existence of the mainstream. Often traveling all over the country, working as harvest hands, railroad laborers, lumberjacks, truckers, waiters in cheap restaurants, stevedores, or just panhandling and doing odd jobs whenever they could get them, the young and middle-aged men were wont to have a sort of defiant pride, a don't-give-a-damn attitude (tinged with a certain sensitivity) about how the outside world viewed them. Conscious that they were seen as low-lives, they regularly insisted to themselves and others, "I ain't a damned bum!" This stubborn pride and love of freedom manifested itself in Hobohemians' sometimes being even more intolerant of the regimentation and dependence of shelter life than non-Hobohemians: whenever they could, they left the shelters for flophouses or lodging houses, where they didn't have to wake up, go to bed, and eat at prescribed times, or stand in long lines most of the day. This was especially true of "professional beggars" (technically a different category than bums)—who, incidentally, worked as hard at their jobs as many a skilled or white-collar worker.<sup>35</sup>

Having had less exposure to mainstream indoctrination than many non-Hobohemians, these people tended, arguably, to be more independent-minded and realistic in their views about life and society than their middle class counterparts were. Their attitudes had emerged relatively organically from their material conditions, and persisted through the years spent in shelters. Living hard, precarious lives ever on the edge of want, familiar with the policeman's glare and even his truncheon, expert in the ways of class struggle—survival—on a visceral and personal level, hobos and their kin built their worldview on the foundation of a granite cynicism. Everything was a "racket"—religion, politics,



business, relief administration. Missions, for instance, were not at all popular for their treatment of their homeless beneficiaries as a captive audience that had to endure hours of sermons and prayers in order to get mediocre food. "Something that should be put out of business," grumbled one shelter inmate, a middle-aged American who had been a migratory steam shovel operator, "is all missions and churches. What the hell good are they anyway? They don't produce nothing. They are just like banks. They're parasites." The fact that, according to one study, about 40 percent of men in shelters seldom or never attended church because of disbelief or indifference to religion (as opposed to the 40 percent who had other reasons for not attending, such as poor clothing and lack of money) suggests just how anti-religious Hobohemia was; for the skilled and unskilled workers with steadier jobs more regularly attended church, at least when they had jobs.<sup>36</sup>

Politics may have been even more an object of derision than religion. In the political sphere, the deeply materialistic and realistic worldview of most Hobohemians manifested itself in two different attitudes: a far-left hostility to the dominant social order, and a cynicism about getting involved with politics at all. In the rare cases when these men voted, for example, they were apt to sell their vote to the highest bidder. "I might as well give my vote to the one who will pay me the most, for what does it matter?" one protested. "You'll only get a rimming either way. They have you coming and going. The poor man doesn't have a chance in this country; the cards are stacked against him. . . . He might as well take the half dollar for his vote." Such an attitude, forged in the crucible of daily class struggles, may seem cynical or objectionable from one point of view, but will be understood as perfectly rational from the perspective of real life.<sup>37</sup>

The other political attitude, the left-wing radicalism, had been most pronounced in the heyday of Hobohemia before the 1920s, when the IWW was at its height. A dense and vital counterculture had thrived nationwide, nourished by radical newspapers (*Industrial Worker*, *Hobo News*, *Solidarity*, *Liberator*, *Voice of Labor*, etc.), socialist literature (migratory workers were smitten with Jack London but also read Marx and Engels, Lewis Morgan, Paul Lafargue, Antonio Labriola, Gustavus Myers, and the like), songs by Joe Hill and other Wobblies, an entire folklore that glorified manly independence and resistance, and such institutions as far-left unions, radical bookstores, Bughouse Square and its duplicates

in Seattle and Los Angeles and elsewhere, and clubs like the famous Dill Pickle Club in Chicago (where hoboes, artists, intellectuals, and radicals of every provenance could meet). All this declined in the 1920s, under the impact of wartime and postwar repression and the increasingly settled character of communities. Nevertheless, Hobohemia was far from finished by the 1930s, and neither was its left-wing, even anarchist, ethos. Casual workers with the attitudes of Carl Kolins, the steam shovel operator quoted above, were still very easy to find, even in the public shelters that functioned so as to beat the spirit out of a man:<sup>38</sup>

... Another thing I don't like about the [*Chicago Tribune*] is that they're always rapping Roosevelt. To read the *Tribune* you would think communism was a kind of deadly poisoning. Well, it is to those big fat grafters. They've got all the money they want—that's why they don't want communism or a liberal government. They want to keep us on the bum. . . . [The radio priest Father Coughlin] is pretty good as far as he goes but, of course, he don't want communism, though he is preaching the same thing except that he wants to keep the churches in. Naturally, he would, otherwise that would spoil his racket. . . .<sup>39</sup>

Doubtless the Communist organizers who tried to reach men in shelters and flophouses, and the Party newspapers the *Daily Worker* and the *Hunger Fighter*, had something to do with such opinions. And it's true that many other Hobohemians were far from identifying as radicals, whom they called "wobblies," "dirties," and "chiselers." The point is that the ideological background of this swath of shelter inmates was broadly left-wing, far more leftist, more laborite, than the Democratic Party under Roosevelt. Even the men who were scornful of radicals tended to share their views about how American society operated and how it ought to operate. Understandably disillusioned with the political and economic system, these self-professed patriots and non-radicals would express their alienation by saying things like, "Give the country back to the Indians," and by discussing such left-wing ideas as "production for use" with enthusiastic approbation.<sup>40</sup> I will return to this point momentarily.

The non-Hobohemian portion of the shelter population was just as heterogeneous as the Hobohemian portion, but its members had tended to have more stable work and be less mobile than the men we've been discussing. Still, one cannot draw a firm line between the two categories, since in many respects they overlapped. Often the non-Hobohemians'

path to the shelter had begun with marital problems such as divorce, separation, or the death of a wife, which might result in excessive drinking or depression and the loss of incentives to work. Physical disabilities or injuries were the decisive factor in other cases.<sup>41</sup>

For these people, the decision to apply to shelters was frequently agonizing, signifying as it supposedly did their failure, their complete defeat and social death. Shelter men were certainly more prone to self-blame than the rest of the unemployed. "If I hadn't been such a fool in the past," a common sentiment went, "I would have had a job at the present time, or at least I would have had some money saved up." "If I had let drink alone I would have been all right." As one of the down-and-out, it was hard not to at least partly absorb the dominant society's contemptuous attitude towards the down-and-out.<sup>42</sup>

And yet, again, the self-blame was frequently united with disgust for authority and a blaming of one's problems on the fact that everything was a racket. (This was an idea that Communist organizers and newspapers spread, e.g., by arguing that the relief administration was graft-ridden.)<sup>43</sup> One man, for instance, prefaced an expression of self-contempt with a spirited critique of the relief administration:

As far as the shelter is concerned, it ain't so bad—but the management. They're all a bunch of damn rats, all of them without exception. If you understand the relief system it's all based on graft, and all these case workers around here give a damn about is to draw their salary and make it as tough as possible for us, and the more they can squeeze out of us and the less they can give us, that's just that much more for their own pockets. If you understand that principle you understand the whole relief system. The food is terrible. You have got to line up like a bunch of pigs and wait for hours at a time to get a dish full of that slop they throw at you—self-respecting hogs wouldn't eat it. Though, of course, it's good enough for us stiffs. Who are we anyway? We are nothing.<sup>44</sup>

This was stated by a man familiar with Hobohemia, but it was an attitude that quickly spread to non-Hobohemians after they had entered the shelter. Their former respect for authority—qualified and partial as it always was—gave way to a subversive consciousness of being oppressed and exploited (in work relief), and a belief in the fundamental irrationality of a social order that would deprive so many healthy men of productive pursuits. A type of radicalization—often a cynical and resigned, i.e. realistic

and rational, type—tended to take place, even without sustained exposure to Communist organizers and publications. If a man felt that he had become a bum, he generally blamed it on the shelters, not himself. "The shelters made a lousy bum out of me," was a common refrain. It became a general idea that the profit system had to be changed so as to provide work and security for the laboring class; men who made radical statements were widely applauded, although only a minority subscribed to Communism. (Most took the sensible view that this ideology was unrealistic and its adherents deceived about political possibilities in the United States.) Even those who had once been religious adopted the Hobohemian attitude: "the general consensus [in the shelters]," writes one investigator, "is that all religion is to be classed along with charity organizations as a racket." In fact, some researchers who lived in the shelters as clients were themselves susceptible to the left-wing collective consciousness: "All one hears around this place is a constant discussion of government, the relief racket, and economic conditions until it naturally gets on one's nerves and soon gets him down until he just sits back and waits for something to happen."<sup>45</sup>

And things did happen. In the early years of the Depression, when the Communist Party was most active in organizing the unemployed, well-attended meetings were held at many shelters. For a long time the auditorium in the Newberry Shelter was the scene of almost nightly meetings of an Unemployed Council committee, which functioned in part as a grievance committee that intervened with management on behalf of the inmates. According to a researcher, the Communists had a "large following" among the men and "exercised a potent influence over them." Part of the attraction of the meetings was simply that they provided entertainment and opportunities for self-expression, as well as for solidarity and a sense of belonging. But it is clear that a large number of the attendees substantially agreed with the ideas on offer—the importance of class consciousness, of fighting for workers' rights, of building a movement against capitalism, and more specifically of fighting to improve conditions in the shelters. "At the conclusion of the meetings," the researcher noted, "the radical songs are sung—'Solidarity,' 'We'll Hang Hoover to a Sour Apple Tree,' and the 'Marseillaise.' Misguided as it perhaps all is, it is rather a stirring sight to see men and boys stand erect at the end of the meetings and sing these songs with great emotional feeling."<sup>46</sup>

Nor was it only a matter of meeting and singing. Shelter inmates organized to change administrative practices, and sometimes their efforts met with success. One of the few records of such activities is the *Hunger Fighter*, which periodically published short notices on "flophouse" victories. In December 1931, for example, the paper reported that 200 men and boys at one shelter were granted some concessions when they overturned the tables in the cafeteria and threw the "slop" onto the floor, shouting that they wouldn't starve to death quietly. At other shelters there were reports of grievance committees being formed to present demands to the administration: three meals served every day; a more appetizing menu; the provision of chewing and smoking tobacco twice a week for all men; and 18 inches of space between beds. A couple months later the paper advertised a few small victories, as when the Salvation Army was forced to fire a chef and serve better food, and when at another shelter the chairman of the "flophouse committee" (part of the Unemployed Council) showed the superintendent that there were bugs in the food, which convinced him to order healthier meat. In early 1932 a dramatic incident took place: several patrol wagons of police with tear gas and guns forced 500 men out of a shelter run by the Chicago Christian Industrial League after they had voted 493 to 7 against religious services, which they were being forced to listen to every night. And so it went at shelter after shelter, in these years—especially 1930–33—of radical ferment among the unemployed. The *Hunger Fighter* and the activities of Communists were well known to, and well feared by, relief administrators, as shown, for instance, by the time when an inmate's clothing was destroyed by sulphur fumigation and he demanded new clothes, to no effect. "Okay," he told the superintendent, "I'll tell the reporter for the *Hunger Fighter* about this." "No, no, not that!" the superintendent replied, and found a sweater, shirt, and coat for him.<sup>47</sup>

In May 1932 there was a particularly notable victory: after a shelter on Morgan Street was closed, the 400 homeless people who had lost a place to live sent delegations to the Central Clearing House for Men. The administrators there realized that the men would not be "bulldozed" so easily (to quote the *Hunger Fighter*) and quickly offered to take them all back.<sup>48</sup>

The highpoint of Communist influence in the shelters was probably the spring of 1932, when, according to a former Communist, "it was very

easy to organize a demonstration because all you had to do was send word through the flophouses that something is taking place and inside of a half hour you had ten thousand people out in the streets." This was surely an exaggeration, but it's a telling statement anyway. Almost two thousand homeless people held memberships in shelter committees at this time, and many more attended the meetings. In general, working-class neighborhoods of Chicago in these months and years burst with class consciousness of both explicit and implicit types, which easily spread to—indeed, partly originated in—the Hobohemian districts and even many formerly middle-class people who now lived in them. Few shelter men were committed to a Marxist ideology, but the majority were deeply aware of an antagonism of interests between authorities—economic, political, administrative—and the working or unemployed poor. Their own experiences had taught them this antagonism; Communist agitation only drove the point home, heightened their awareness, and encouraged them to act on it.<sup>49</sup>

The whole question of class consciousness that comes up in historical scholarship—'How class-conscious were the workers?', 'Why weren't they more conscious?'—has, perhaps, a rather straightforward answer. While few were educated in the niceties of Marxian theory, the working-class unemployed of Chicago, and the homeless, tended to be quite conscious of class, and even, on some level, of the importance of solidarity in order to achieve gains. A researcher of Chicago's shelters in 1935 observed that, "If one goes into the assembly room on an afternoon or evening, he will hear men giving the capitalistic system hell in a big way. A dozen cure-alls are suggested as immediate remedies for the depression—communism, socialism, take the profits out of business, immediate payment of the soldiers' bonus, old-age pensions, unemployment insurance, government work projects, and the like." All such ideas were in the air at the time, and people were well aware of them and their premise, class conflict. One did not have to have incredible insight or belong to some revolutionary vanguard in order to understand, in a broad way, one's class interests and the imperative to stand up and fight against the "boss class." Franklin Roosevelt's denunciation of "economic royalists," after all, was not exactly an unpopular stance, in light of his crushing victory over Alf Landon in the 1936 presidential election. If most shelter inmates did not engage in continual struggles to influence relief policy or to defend the rights of

the poor, it was not necessarily because they misunderstood their true interests or had been indoctrinated with capitalist ideologies, or were incurably apathetic; it was because the task of organizing large numbers of people is not easy, requiring energy and stamina that one no longer possesses after years spent in a public shelter. Furthermore, these people, naturally, were more interested in concrete improvements in their lives than an abstract ideology aimed at a distant future. Thus, to the extent that mass demonstrations and flophouse committee meetings did not substantially improve conditions, men drifted away from them.<sup>50</sup>

But adherence to left-wing ideas and participation in direct action were not the only ways of asserting oneself in a demoralizing environment. In fact, the restlessness and protests of shelter inmates in late 1931 and early 1932 led to an important new program that ameliorated the boredom and unhappiness of the homeless: authorities decided to create a Special Activities Division that could provide the men with some recreation and education, thereby, supposedly, rectifying the conditions that caused them to be "the ready prey of the agitator," as an administrator said. (In this respect, the shelter men themselves were probably unaware of how successful their protests had been.) Beginning in early 1932, the new department expanded during the next few years to the point that, by 1934, it conducted "motion picture shows, stereopticon lectures, vaudeville shows, boxing and wrestling exhibitions, orchestral entertainment, community songs, educational classes, handicraft activities, athletic competitions, games of various descriptions, libraries, and debates." It operated in each shelter, and not only as entertainment: the homeless themselves staffed the programs—not least because it was discovered that among them were musicians, song-and-dance men, and specialty performers. In fact, in April 1932 these men expanded their performances beyond the shelters, putting on a two-week-running minstrel show for the public called "The Breadline Frolics." Sponsored by eighty civic and social clubs, the show was enormously popular, being covered by newspapers from the *New York Times* to the *Los Angeles Times*. Aside from the thousands of dollars it raised for the homeless, its most significant function may have been to apprise the public of the very real talent and intelligence that, because of the economy's utter dysfunction, were consigned to shelters.<sup>51</sup>

The relatively active recreations, especially sports, were most popular with the younger men. During the winter it was basketball and boxing

(and ping pong): for example, in two of the shelters "a number of boxing bouts and music and novelty acts staged in one of the congested and ill-ventilated basements would shake the rafters and induce long rounds of spontaneous applause." In the summer it was outdoor sports: four shelters had baseball teams (Newberry had *eight* of them) and all had at least one softball team; twenty horse-shoe courts were maintained; and handball and volleyball games were popular at a number of shelters.<sup>52</sup>

It was also the younger men who were most interested in discussion groups and classes, especially the vocational ones—typewriting, shorthand, bookkeeping, etc. All categories of inmates, however, made frequent use of the shelter libraries (sometimes even the city libraries), despite the dim lighting and poor conditions. Thousands of books and magazines were donated every month to the Clearing House, which circulated them among the shelters. Newspapers and pulp magazines were by far the most popular, but technical and scientific literature was not ignored. A sympathetic researcher, impressed by the popularity of reading, pithily summarized its appeal to the homeless: "Reading provides an escape from the sordid and depressing situation of the shelters into the world of imagination. A story enables a man to identify himself with the successful hero of the tale, and serious study enables him to live in the future possibility of a higher and better status." It should be recalled that workers, even the homeless, in the United States had always been avid readers. As the Chicago sociologist Nels Anderson stated in 1923, "The homeless man is an extensive reader. This is especially true of the transients, the tramp, and the hobo. The tramp employs his leisure to read everything that comes his way. If he is walking along the railroad track, he picks up the papers that are thrown from the trains; he reads the cast-off magazines. If he is in the city, he hunts out some quiet corner where he may read." Such traditions continued in the shelters, including among immigrants, who liked to read papers in their native language.<sup>53</sup>

A common practice was for men to leave the shelters early in the morning, say at 6:00 a.m., and walk to the nearest "L" station to get the morning newspaper. So many had the same idea that they had to stand in line at the station exit, where departing passengers, who had saved their paper for the unemployed men at these exits, would hand it over. Some of the men collected many papers this way, whereupon they returned to the shelter and sold each for a penny; but most simply took one for their



own use, to pass the time and to maintain some connection to their old life.<sup>54</sup>

On the whole, even after the creation of the Special Activities Department, the principal forms of recreation remained extra-institutional and anti-institutional, the activities most conducive to escape from collective anhedonia: drinking, gambling, and visiting prostitutes. In a viciously class-structured world, these were what was left those on the wrong side of the divide. Considered vices by middle-class society, their popularity among shelter inmates was emblematic of these men's extreme disintegration from dominant ideologies and ways of life, bourgeois proprieties. They chose their own path, adapting and resisting at the same time.

Gambling, for example, was far more than an act of desperation or despair: rather, it was a positive source of excitement, hope, and intellectual stimulation, as well as an implicit rebellion against the deadening influence of the shelter bureaucracy. Having been exiled from social, political, and cultural life, and being compelled to endure the institutionalized suppression of their personalities every day, shelter inmates enthusiastically embraced gambling as one of the remaining means of expressing themselves and resisting the complete extinction of their identity. "The gambling habit has been accentuated since shelter entrance," a researcher writes in 1935. "The men are necessarily limited to small stakes, but they express as much enthusiasm and use as much energy in their gambling as do the patrons of expensive gambling houses." Card playing and, especially, betting on horse races were the most common activities, the latter being done either among the men themselves—betting with razor blades, cigarettes, and other small items—or at cheap gambling places on West Madison Street. To quote an investigator,

The men consume much time and energy in doping the races. They pour [sic] over racing literature and racing results in the newspapers and talk for hours on the relative merits of the various horses, the ability of certain jockeys, the condition of the track, the crookedness of the stables and jockeys, and the odds on the horses. On the basis of their reading, conversation, and knowledge of the races, even though they may have little or no money to bet, they have a great time doping out how one should place his bets.<sup>55</sup>

Clearly this supposedly vicious, and illegal, activity was not engaged in solely for acquisitive purposes (as rational as those were), but also for

creative purposes. Elaborate systems were devised for placing the right bets. For some men, gambling became an obsession. "Such men eat horses, sleep horses, and talk horses all day long": in fact, the races gave them a reason to live. What is just as striking as the intellectual energy they, and others, devoted to gambling was the astonishing persistence of *hope* among men who usually lost, the invincible conviction that sooner or later they would have a string of successes and accumulate enough money, perhaps, to leave the shelter. After years of unconsummated job searches and the humiliations of shelter life, hope's last refuge lay in gambling. "If it wasn't for the fact that the pony players always hope and constantly look for a future change in luck," a shelter inmate observed, "many of them would commit suicide."<sup>56</sup>

There were other comforts too, however—if one had a little money, from work relief or begging or doing odd jobs. Visiting prostitutes was one. Sex-starvation was a curse for many of the men, since in their state they were hardly desirable to the kinds of women they had been accustomed to seeing. "I tell you that I feel sick when I am away from women," one man said. "I am a married man, a father of children, and even the sight of a woman is helpful to me." One solution, widely adopted, was masturbation. Another was to engage in homosexual practices, though probably less than 10 percent of the men turned to this form of relief. Some were able to drain their dammed lust by going on long walks the entire day, ten miles out and ten miles in, which so tired them that they gave little thought to women. Others chose a more immediate type of sublimation: watching women in parks and on beaches. Oak Street Beach was a mecca for these men; they would spend much of the day there sitting and dreaming and "wondering if the big blonde will come again today." Young men even bought swimsuits and flirted with the girls, their self-confidence intact despite shelter life.<sup>57</sup>

But of course the most satisfying relief was actual sex, usually with prostitutes. It is impossible to know how many men, and with what frequency, resorted to this expedient, but a study in 1935 of 400 randomly selected men found that 40 percent made visits to prostitutes or other women, the average frequency being about once in six weeks. At between 25 cents and a dollar or two, these were prostitutes of a low status, sometimes middle-aged—but "an old woman isn't so bad after her nose is powdered"—and not rarely willing to rob their clients of whatever they could,

even false teeth. Men also visited African American women, who were generally younger and cheaper.

Of the three vices in which shelter men most often indulged, drinking was the most widespread. Perhaps even more than gambling, drinking among the homeless was and is widely considered somehow pathetic or reprehensible or stupid, proving them to be worthless bums, since supposedly they should be using the money they get from begging and other sources to buy food or invest in their future. People rarely stop to reflect that after years of discouragement and alienation, one may simply want to feel good from time to time. Ordinarily, for those in the middle class, drinking alcohol is nothing but a means to have fun; for shelter inmates, however, it was more than that. Of course it can be thought of as a form of escape, but a more interesting and fruitful way to conceptualize it is as a type of resistance or rebellion. One might recall in this context Bruce Nelson's comment, in *Workers on the Waterfront* (1990), about the "drunken sailor" stereotype: rather than being nothing but an expression of a "childlike and irresponsible" nature, seamen's tradition of drinking was "an expression of powerlessness, a reflection of alienation and rebellion, an act of camaraderie among men who lived beyond the pale of bourgeois civility."<sup>58</sup> Again, we must remember that the cynicism and gloomy outlook of most shelter men was not merely a passive reflection of conditions; it was based on a realistic and rational analysis of objective possibilities. Collective resistance could lead to small victories, but it could not change the basic structure of shelter life, nor could it give men jobs, the one thing most of them desperately wanted. So there was little to be done, except . . . try to hold on to some remnant of hope, adapt to reality while yet struggling to maintain one's identity, and rebel against dehumanization in imagination and conversation. Alcohol, like gambling, facilitated these things.

Confidence, courage, and conviviality: three manifestations of one's individuality, and three joys for which alcohol was a uniquely adept midwife. "When I drink I got guts," said one inmate. "When I'm not tanked up I sit quiet and still, but when I'm drunk I can go up and bum anybody, panhandle, or bum from store to store. I can go to a woman, fight, or do anything." The sense of freedom, friendliness, and uninhibitedness that comes with drinking would naturally be intoxicating, so to speak, to an inmate of a semi-prison. While entering the shelter as a stranger in a

strange land, he soon learned that "a group of jolly companions could be found around a bottle." Few men drank alone, preferring to share their bottle with friends or anyone nearby. Sometimes several would contribute to a communal fund with which to "enjoy a real spree" together. They could go to the cheap taverns that abounded in the neighborhoods, or to the "moonshine joints" located in the basements of dilapidated old buildings, or they could buy the even cheaper "derail" that was sold illegally—denatured alcohol diluted with water. Sitting together, they jocularly told tall tales about past conquests of women, or complained about the relief administration, or discussed possible solutions to the economic depression. And so they coped with the misfortunes that had befallen them.<sup>59</sup>

The most fruitful way to think about these people's situation—like the situation, indeed, of any subaltern group in the modern world—is to focus on the conflict between impersonal, fundamentally class-determined institutions (which impose bureaucratic, authoritarian roles on those who work in them) and the messy humanity, resistant and resilient, of the people subjected to them. This dialectic of the anti-human confronting the human called forth a variety of responses from the subjugated homeless, not all of them pretty or admirable, but none of them uninteresting. The whole project of herding together carpenters, mechanics, shopkeepers, butchers, railroaders, clerks, farm hands, family men and single men, young men and the elderly, and fifty different nationalities can even be called a fascinating social experiment. Unsurprisingly, in such conditions divisions between the men were the norm, not the exception. White Americans, for example, were frequently (though far from always) so prejudiced against the non-English-speaking foreigners in their midst that their anti-black racism was all but forgotten in comparison. "I don't talk to the Pollacks [i.e., foreigners]," said one American in 1934. "If there is nine hundred men in here, eight hundred men are Pollacks. I get along with them because I stay away from them." "These damn foreigners," complained another. "Why, they are so ignorant and crude. When you are sitting down, they will cough right in your face. . . . Why can't they teach these fellows a little manners and etiquette so that when they cough, they will turn their face away and avoid all that." Such hostility, on the other hand, had a constructive effect: it tended to unify the groups who were its targets, encouraging friendship and intimacy among those with a similar cultural background.<sup>60</sup>

In general, it seems that most shelter men understood who their real enemies were: the politicians, the administrators and staffers who lorded it over them, the rich businessmen who they knew ruled the country in their own interests. But, physically separated from these enemies, living in animal proximity to fellow unfortunates whom they neither knew nor liked, they did as workers so often have and directed some of their simmering resentment at alien groups in their midst. Thus did the squalor of their surroundings divert and pervert their populist indignation.

And yet in our own time of intensifying social strife we would do well to honor those who came before us, past victims of class conflict and a dysfunctional economy. In their fortitude and perseverance there may be lessons for us to heed.

## Notes

1. Edwin H. Sutherland and Harvey J. Locke, *Twenty Thousand Homeless Men: A Study of Unemployed Men in the Chicago Shelters* (Chicago: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1936), 2.
2. Jesse Walter Dees, Jr., *Flophouse* (Francestown, NH: Marshall Jones Company, 1948), 96, 97; Sutherland and Locke, *Twenty Thousand Homeless Men*, 3, 4, 8.
3. Charles Koch and Robert A. Slayton, *New Homeless and Old: Community and the Skid Row Hotel* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989); Kenneth L. Kusmer, *Down and Out, on the Road: The Homeless in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 204; Todd DePastino, *Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
4. Joan M. Crouse, *The Homeless Transient in the Great Depression: New York State, 1929-1941* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986).
5. "Relief Shelters Make Men Bums, Survey Reveals," *Chicago Tribune*, June 15, 1935.
6. Dees, Jr., *Flophouse*, 40-51; Alvin Roseman, *Shelter Care and the Local Homeless Man* (Chicago: Public Administration Service, 1935), 4.
7. In fact, policy ought to have changed by February 1930, when the Commissioner of Public Welfare made the incredible statement that the municipal lodging house, which served not only homeless men but also convalescents from Cook County Hospital, had been used by 65,000 men in the past four months. How this can be true is a mystery, since its bed capacity was only 120 men per night. *Chicago Tribune*, February 13, 1930. It may be that the commissioner was referring also to men who ate their meals there but did not sleep there.

8. Clearing House for Men, *Men in the Crucible* (Chicago: Illinois Emergency Relief Administration, 1932), 1; Robert S. Wilson, *Community Planning for Homeless Men and Boys* (New York City: Family Welfare Association of America, 1931), 114, 115; Roseman, *Shelter Care*, 4; Robert W. Beasley, "Homeless Men—Chicago: 1930-31," *Social Service Review* 5 (September, 1931), 439.

9. Beasley, "Homeless Men," 439; Robert W. Beasley, "Care of Destitute Unattached Men in Chicago with Special Reference to the Depression Period Beginning in 1930," (M.A. thesis, 1933, University of Chicago), 14-16, 18, 19; Dwayne Charles Cole, "The Relief Crisis in Illinois during the Depression, 1930-1940," (Ph.D. dissertation, 1973, St. Louis University), 25; Roseman, *Shelter Care*, 4; *First Annual Report of the IERC* (Chicago: IERC, 1933), 75.

10. *First Annual Report of the IERC*, 75; Clearing House for Unemployed Homeless Men, "Report for the Month of December, 1931," Welfare Council Papers, Chicago History Museum (hereafter, CHM); Council of Social Agencies of Chicago, *Social Service Year Book*, 1934 (Chicago: Council of Social Agencies, 1934), 28; *Biennial Report of the IERC, Covering the Period July 1, 1934 through June 30, 1936* (Chicago: IERC, 1936), 101-105.

11. *Men in the Crucible*, vi; Roseman, *Shelter Care*, 9-11, 52.

12. Beasley, "Care of Destitute Unattached Men," 31, 32, 83, 84.

13. *Social Service Year Book*, 1935 (Chicago: Council of Social Agencies, 1935), 9-11; *Social Service Year Book*, 1936 (Chicago: Council of Social Agencies, 1936), 5; *Biennial Report of the IERC, July 1, 1934 to June 30, 1936*, 103-106.

14. *Chicago Tribune*, January 8, 9, 11, 12, and February 10, 1938.

15. Specifically, in their classic *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), xv.

16. Georg Rusche and Otto Kirscheimer, *Punishment and Social Structure* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939).

17. *Chicago Tribune*, June 15, 1935.

18. Roseman, *Shelter Care*, 14, 15, 26, 34; Dees, Jr., *Flophouse*, 137, 138.

19. Sutherland and Locke, *Twenty Thousand Homeless Men*, 2.

20. While there was a separate shelter for black men, every shelter had some whites and some blacks.

21. "The Drifting Unemployed: A Study of the Younger Unemployed at the Newberry Shelter," 1932, pp. 15, 16, Welfare Council Papers, CHM.

22. Sutherland and Locke, *Twenty Thousand Homeless Men*, 5-8; Roseman, *Shelter Care*, 10; Dees, Jr., *Flophouse*, 97, 103, 104. These documents and page numbers are the sources for the following paragraph as well.

23. Men were allowed to stay out past 10:30 p.m., or in some cases Midnight, only if they were granted a special pass.

24. Beasley, "Care of Destitute Unattached Men in Chicago," 34, 35; Sutherland and Locke, *Twenty Thousand Homeless Men*, 8, 9.

25. Roseman, *Shelter Care*, 30-32; *Second Annual Report of the IERC*, 145; Dees, Jr., *Flophouse*, 56-59; *Men in the Crucible*, 15-17.
26. Beasley, "Care of Destitute Unattached Men," 37, 54, 55; Roseman, 18, 19; *Men in the Crucible*, 34.
27. Roseman, *Shelter Care*, 18.
28. *Ibid.*, 15-17; France Bunce, "I've Got to Take a Chance," *Forum and Century*, February 1933, 108-12.
29. Roseman, *Shelter Care*, 15-17; *Men in the Crucible*, 36, 37; *Chicago Hunger Fighter*, December 26, 1931, February 27, 1932; Dees, Jr., *Flophouse*, 105-108; *Chicago Daily News*, October 20 and 28, 1932; Sutherland and Locke, *Twenty Thousand Homeless Men*, 3-5.
30. Roseman, *Shelter Care*, 7, 8; Dees, Jr., *Flophouse*, 121-25, 134; Sutherland and Locke, *Twenty Thousand Homeless Men*, 7, 14; Glenn H. Johnson, *Relief and Health Problems of a Selected Group of Non-Family Men* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937), 33.
31. Sutherland and Locke, *Twenty Thousand Homeless Men*, 14, 15, 144-58; Dees, Jr., 124; "The Drifting Unemployed," 46; Samuel Kirson Weinberg, "A Study of Isolation among Chicago Shelter-House Men" (M.A. thesis, 1935, University of Chicago), chapter 4.
32. Beasley, "Care of Destitute Unattached Men," 38-44; Roseman, *Shelter Care*, 20; Dees, Jr., *Flophouse*, 82-85; *Worker's Voice*, October 15, 1932; Sutherland and Locke, 101.
33. *Men in the Crucible*, 62; S. Kirson Weinberg, "The Problem of Unattachment of Shelter House Men," 1934, term paper for Sociology 310, Ernest Burgess Papers, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library (hereafter UCL) 1, 84; Sutherland and Locke, *Twenty Thousand Homeless Men*, 35, 65-67.
34. "West Madison Street," 1934, Burgess Papers, UCL.
35. Kusmer, *Down and Out*, 160, 161; "West Madison Street"; interview with J. P. Smith, November 13, 1934, Burgess Papers, UCL; Harvey J. Locke, "Unemployed Men in Chicago Shelters," *Sociology and Social Research*, 19 (May-June 1935), 420-28; Dees, Jr., *Flophouse*, 140.
36. Anderson, *The Hobo*, chapter 11; interview of Carl Kolins by John Oien, 1934, Burgess Papers, UCL; Weinberg, "A Study of Isolation among Chicago Shelter-House Men," 43; Sutherland and Locke, *Twenty Thousand Homeless Men*, 67.
37. Sutherland and Locke, *Twenty Thousand Homeless Men*, 67, 68.
38. Anderson, *The Hobo*, chapters 13 and 14; DePastino, *Citizen Hobo*, chapter 4, 175-77; Nels Anderson, *Men on the Move* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1940), chapter 1.
39. Interview of Carl Kolins, by John Oien, 1934, Burgess Papers, UCL.

40. Sutherland and Locke, *Twenty Thousand Homeless*, 161.
41. *Ibid.*, 70–86.
42. *Ibid.*, 78, 91.
43. To quote the December 26, 1931 issue of the *Hunger Fighter*: "Anyone who knows anything about Chicago business knows that everything connected with it is bound to be a racket of some kind. And so when workers begin to starve and freeze the business of giving them relief becomes another racket. The more underhanded a racket works, the better it is. Now, take Governor Emmerson's Joint Emergency Relief Committee, for instance. First, it collects about nine million dollars from those workers who still have a cent or two left. Then it dishes out big gobs of this swag to all kinds of 'charity institutions' for them to hand out as they see fit. . . ." In some respects, shelter men's cynicism was the cynicism of Communists.
44. Interview of Carl Kolins, by John Oien, 1934, Burgess Papers, UCL.
45. Sutherland and Locke, *Twenty Thousand Homeless Men*, 152, 159–62.
46. "The Drifting Unemployed: A Study of the Younger Unemployed at the Newberry Shelter."
47. *Hunger Fighter*, December 26, 1931; January 9, February 27, and March 12, 1932.
48. Randi Storch, *Red Chicago: American Communism at Its Grassroots, 1928–35* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 109.
49. Beasley, "Care of Destitute Unattached Men," 72; Storch, *Red Chicago*, 109, 110.
50. Quotation from Sutherland and Locke, *Twenty Thousand Homeless Men*, 13.
51. *Men in the Crucible*, 19–24; Roseman, *Shelter Care*, 28; *The Billboard*, May 7, 1932; *Chicago Tribune*, April 26, 1932; *New York Times*, April 25, 1932; Dees, Jr., *Flophouse*, 63, 64.
52. *Men in the Crucible*, 21.
53. Sutherland and Locke, *Twenty Thousand Homeless Men*, 104–7; Dees, Jr., *Flophouse*, 62, 63; Roseman, *Shelter Care*, 29; Anderson, *The Hobo*, 185.
54. Sutherland and Locke, 94, 95.
55. *Ibid.*, 122, 124, 125. In interpreting the significance of gambling for these men, one recalls Noam Chomsky's remarks on spectator sports in contemporary society: a major reason for the incredible popularity of professional sports, and the enormous amount of attention and analysis that people regularly devote to them, is that most other avenues for the exercise of collective intelligence are closed to the public. To quote Chomsky, "in our society, we have things that you might use your intelligence on, like politics, but people really can't get involved in them in a very serious way—so what they do is they put their minds into other things, such as sports. You're trained to be obedient; you don't have an interesting



job; there's no work around for you that's creative; in the cultural environment you're a passive observer of usually pretty tawdry stuff; political and social life are out of your range, they're in the hands of the rich folk. So what's left? Well, one thing that's left is sports—so you put a lot of the intelligence and the thought and the self-confidence into that.” Such was the function that gambling served among many thousands of Chicago residents in the 1930s. See *Understanding Power: The Indispensable Chomsky*, eds. Peter Mitchell and John Schoeffel (New York: The New Press, 2002), 99.

56. Sutherland and Locke, *Twenty Thousand Homeless Men*, 126–28.

57. *Ibid.*, 128–32.

58. Bruce Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront: Seamen, Longshoremen, and Unionism in the 1930s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 24.

59. Roseman, *Shelter Care*, 33; Sutherland and Locke, 113–22; David Scheyer, “Flop-House,” *Nation*, August 22, 1934; Dees, Jr., *Flophouse*, 117–20.

60. Weinberg, “The Problem of Unattachment of Shelter House Men,” 82–84, Burgess Papers, UCL.