

HOBOS, BINDLESTIFFS, FRUIT TRAMPS, AND THE HARVESTING OF THE WEST

By Mark Wyman (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010, 368 pp., \$28.00 cloth, \$16.00 paper, \$9.99 eBook)

HOBOS TO STREET PEOPLE: ARTISTS' RESPONSES TO HOMELESSNESS FROM THE NEW DEAL TO THE PRESENT

By Art Hazelwood (San Francisco: Freedom Voices, 2011, 84 pp., \$25.95 paper)

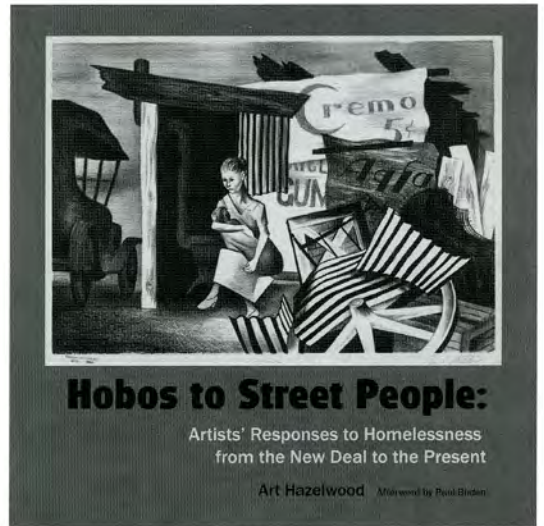
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IN THEIR LATEST BOOKS, Mark Wyman and Art Hazelwood offer lucid portrayals of the most marginalized characters in the history of the American West and, in the wake of the Great Recession, provide valuable historical perspectives of the contemporary migrant worker and the homeless American.

The men, women, and children variously called bindlestiffs, fruit tramps, bums, and hoboes were vital to the creation of the West and its economy, yet their history has been largely untold. In his book *Hoboes, Bindlestiffs, Fruit Tramps, and the Harvesting of the West*, veteran historian Mark Wyman provides this much-needed story of western development. The book's narrative follows the symbiotic evolution

of rails, crops, and labor. With refrigerated freight and massive irrigation projects across the West, family fields of a few hundred acres were converted to "bonanza" farms composed of thousands, small farmers became small capitalists, and local hires were replaced by traveling flocks of seasonal labor. In the spirit of historian Howard Zinn, Wyman offers an alternative history of the West's development from below, tracing the migrations and struggles of the floating proletariat that harvested America's breadbasket, orchards, and forests from the Civil War to the 1920s.

Although *Hoboes* is singularly emblazoned on the book's spine, the work focuses equally on migrating families



A bindlestiff walks from the mines to the lumber camps to the farms in Napa Valley in 1938.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS; PHOTOGRAPH BY DOROTHEA LANGE

of wives and small children, wage-working Indians, and high school students. In his chapter on the “Beeters,” Wyman explains how the early corporate domination of beets in Nebraska led to especially grueling labor conditions, where sugar entrepreneurs preferred families for their stability, less drunkenness, and, most crucially, more hands. The book depicts the use of convict labor, including several locked up on vagrancy charges, and the yearly migration to the Willamette of Native Americans, who picked hops for wages, moving between their traditional homes and capitalist society. The single itinerant hobo is but one of many characters in Wyman’s work.

Ethnic diversity also plays large in Wyman’s history. The book illustrates the striking differences between organized Japanese work gangs, doubly discriminated Mexican laborers, and German-Russian migrant families seeking the American dream through acquiring their own property. It also brings to light the ethnic alliances forged through harvest labor, such as the pan-Indianism formed through tribal migrations and the successful organizing by the International Workers of the World of a seemingly impossible ethnic assortment. Although this is a scholarly text, Wyman connects meticulously curated statistics, archival news reports, and policy memos with the personal experiences of the workers, rendering sympathetic portraits

of his subjects and lively passages that move the work forward with verve.

Art Hazelwood’s *Hoboes to Street People: Artists’ Responses to Homelessness from the New Deal to the Present* picks up where Wyman leaves off, in the Great Depression, and presents powerful works of art aimed at social change. The beautiful publication is a product of the touring exhibition that first opened in San Francisco in 2009 and features nearly sixty works of visual art engaged with issues of homelessness. But this is no mere exhibition catalog. Hazelwood’s book traces the artworks through historical shifts in government policy, from the New Deal to Welfare Reform, and examines artists’ shifting relationship to their subjects and to the state, first as government WPA artists and photographers and later as activist artists relentlessly critical of the state. As Hazelwood himself is a member of the former camp, the book reads as a manifesto for artists to join together to inspire the public to act.

The book features works by well-known artists such as Dorothea Lange, Rockwell Kent, and Anton Refregier, but also resurrects older political artists who have largely been forgotten, including Leon Carlin and Giacomo Patri. Contemporary artists include a host of Californians, among them Jose Sances, Sandow Birk, and the formerly homeless Jane “in vain” Winkelman. The book brings together the works one usually finds on gallery walls and in an array of popular media aimed at the public conscience: screen-print posters, cover art of homeless broadsheets, and graphic novels.

Although Wyman misses the opportunity to connect the history of the hoboes to migrants of today, dialogues between contemporary and past perceptions, portrayals, and policies of homelessness are at the center of Hazelwood’s survey. The book opens with two photographs: Dorothea Lange’s *Mother and Two Children on the Road to Tule Lake*, made in 1939, and David Bacon’s photograph of an indigenous woman and child, part of a group of farmworkers from Oaxaca, made nearly seven decades later. It is striking how little has changed when confronting the human pathos expressed in each portrait depicting mothers attempting to maintain their families amidst economic catastrophe. Yet, Hazelwood notes important distinctions: the globalizing forces that have reshaped agricultural economies since Lange’s era, the rollback of New Deal reforms, and the growing public perception that economic insecurity is considered a sign not of greed, but of a properly “flexible” workforce. In this new era of precarious labor and draconian anti-immigration policy, these two books offer historical perspectives that not only explain how we got here, but also provide the critical lenses necessary to imagine progressive futures.