RAILROADING

Post-Visit Activity

Activity	**Hobos**
Adapted From	"All Aboard" — A Thematic Unit from Steamtown National Historic Site
Setting	Classroom
Duration	45 minutes
Subject Areas	Language Arts
Skills	Making inferences, Communication, Analyzing, Interpretation
Grade Level	4-5

Objective:

Students will be able to:
1. **learn how hobos used the railroad for travel**
2. **learn how hobos communicated among themselves**
3. **draw hobo signs**

WV-IGOs:

Language Arts - 4.26, 4.29, 4.31, 5.26

VOCABULARY

hobos
authorities

MATERIALS

1. Hobo signs and their meanings
2. Hobo Sign Worksheet
3. pencils, crayons, or markers

BACKGROUND

See Resource Page — Railroad Vagabonds "Hobos"

PROCEDURES

1. Discuss hobos with the class. Point out that hobos were much more common years ago, especially during the Depression.

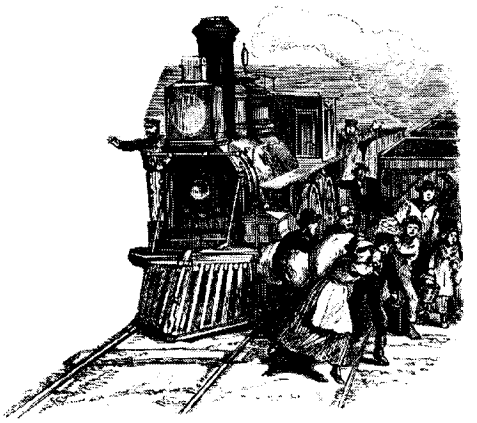
2. Tell students that many hobos felt a bond with other hobos and often tried to pass on helpful information with symbols that they would draw on fences or sidewalks for the hobos that would come after them.

3. Discuss the hobo signs. Teacher may want to provide a copy for each student or may just want to list them on the board for discussion.

4. Hand out a Hobo Sign Worksheet to each student. Have students fill in the correct symbol.

EVALUATION

Check the worksheet to see if students completed the activity.



EXTENSION

1. Have students brainstorm to create their own list of classroom symbols with certain meanings like the hobos did. Let students spend a day communicating with other students through the symbols they have created.

2. Declare a classroom "Hobo Day." Have students dress in hobo clothing (mismatched, worn or raggedy, wrong size). Students can carry their belongings in a towel tied up to resemble a sack instead of bookbags. Students can eat a snack that day similar to something hobos would have eaten, such as beans and franks or something else from a tin can that is precooked.

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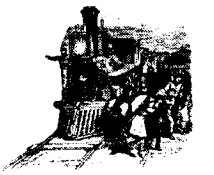
Resource Page — Railroad Vagabonds "Hobos"



"Being a hobo was an adventure. There were new things to see in every part of the country and I enjoyed every mile." — Calvin Bates

In the late 1920s when Calvin Bates was a young man fresh out of high school, he tried working in the coal mines and on farms loading hay. Believing there was no future in these occupations, Bates decided to see what other opportunities existed. He hopped trains as a means of transportation and rode the rails cross-country. Calvin Bates became a hobo. For five years in the 1930s, Bates lived a life of adventure, bumming around, jumping freight trains, cooking under trestles, and living on handouts. Bates' life of adventure became a life of necessity for many others. During the Great Depression, hobos traveled throughout the New River Gorge by the hundreds.

John Redman, a track walker for the railroad, explained that the railroad detective in Thurmond looked the other way when it came to hobos. "The railroad detective ... wouldn't bother them because he knew they were having a hard time. What's the use of putting them in jail. The jail couldn't feed them either," Redman said. Hubert "Boss" Cole, a railroad worker at Fayette Station, remembers trainloads of hobos traveling through the New River Gorge in the 1930s. Cole said these special trains, nicknamed "flying saucers," simply traveled from one area to another during the depression looking for places where passengers could find food. Likewise, hobos existed on a local level in the New River Gorge. Redman recalls residents along the river hopping trains to travel between communities.

"I know a man at Fire Creek who would hop a boxcar or coal car if it came by before the passenger train," explained Redman. "You'd just have to get up speed running and catch the stirrup." But many who attempted this stunt were children. Children growing up in the coal camps along the New River viewed the trains as a part of everyday life; therefore, they did not comprehend the danger involved in hopping trains, and many played on and around the railway. This problem was quickly solved if a parent or other adult caught the children in action.

The fears of the parents were genuine. Calvin Bates, our hobo adventurer, learned this in July 1935. He was in Chillicothe, Ohio, when he decided to hop a train going to Texas. As he made his jump for the moving freight train, he slipped and fell, and his arm went under the wheel. Bates said his hobo days ended when he lost his arm.

Webster's Dictionary describes a hobo as one that is homeless and usually penniless, leads a largely vagrant life (often by choice), and occasionally works at odd jobs. For Bates, this was a lifestyle he treasured. For some during the Great Depression, this was a desperate means of survival. But regardless of the situation, hobos were as much a part of life in the New River Gorge as the many trains passing through daily.

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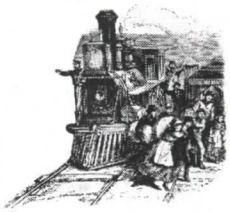
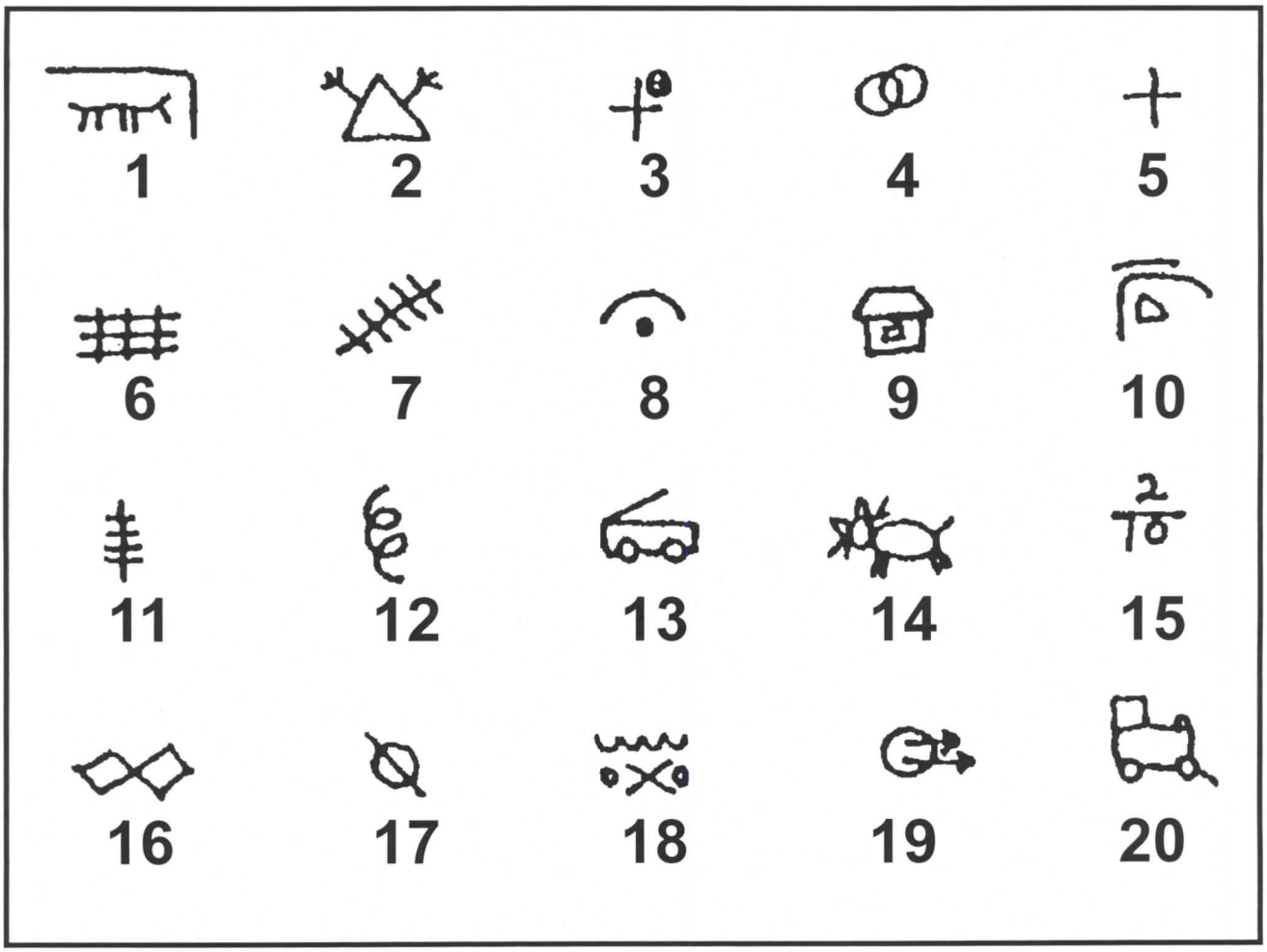
Resource Page — Hobo Signs





Meaning of Hobo Symbols

1. Beware of dog
2. Man with gun
3. Doctor
4. Police
5. Religious talk gets free meal
6. Jail
7. You'll get cursed out
8. Authorities on alert
9. Well guarded house
10. You can sleep in loft
11. Policeman's house
12. Judge lives here
13. Trolley stop
14. Kind lady
15. Thieves about
16. Keep quiet
17. Good road to follow
18. Fresh water safe camps
19. Hit the road quick
20. Good place to catch a train.

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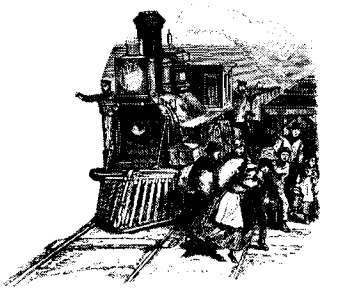
Hobo Sign Worksheet



Directions Read phrases from the old hobo songs and draw the correct hobo sign on the line.

Hallelujah! I'm a bum.
Hallelujah! Bum again,
Men in blue coats watching tonight,
Hallelujah! All bums hide!

_____

I went to a house
And knocked on the door;
A lady came out, says,
"You been here before!
Do come in and rest half a day,
Then pack some honey-bread
And be on your way."

_____

The train will be stoppin'
Nobody will be watchin'
But – LOOK OUT for the barking beast,
He's hungry and he's bitin'.

_____

Oh, the springtime has come
And I'm riding the rail,
Without any food,
Without any bail.
I'll go to a church
Pray loud!
And hold out my pail.

_____

The sky's so starry,
The water runs clear.
Why should I roam tonight?
I shant be bothered here.
Goodnight!

_____

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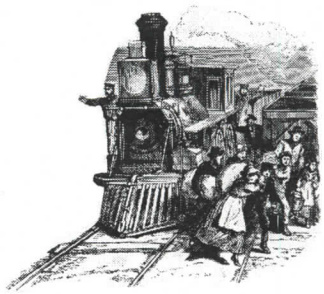
Hobo Sign Worksheet Answer Key



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