

## **Introduction** Nels Anderson 1889–1986

### *The Hobo, for Life*

Nels Anderson was a paradoxical figure in the history of Chicago sociology. His book *The Hobo* ([1923] 1961) inaugurated the University of Chicago Press's Sociological Series, those nearly two dozen books published in less than two decades by which a larger public came to know the Chicago approach. By natural inclination he was thoroughly steeped in the social problems orientation that was central to Chicago sociology. He was, seemingly, a natural for sociological work. And yet, while other Chicago students' careers flourished in the decades following the 1920s, Anderson was unable to secure employment in academic sociology until the age of seventy-four due to prejudice on the part of other sociologists against his work with hobos and his work in the more applied areas of sociology. Unlike his fellow students, most of whom were the sons and daughters of clergymen or related professionals, Anderson was the son of an immigrant who could not understand the value of an education beyond the fourth grade—much less a doctorate. But, in the end, Anderson was able to synthesize his desire to know, his desire to help, and his unique personal history into a remarkable career that would span six decades. He is an underrated figure in the history of sociology.

Anderson was born 31 July 1889 in a tenement in Chicago. Like many American families of that era, the Andersons moved around in search of a better life, and his early years were spent in covered wagons in the West, in tenements in Chicago, and on farms in Michigan. In his midteens, Anderson resisted his father's desire to have him take over the family farm; he left home, and took up a series of migrant laborer-type jobs, "beating" his way across the country on freight trains. He was a dirt mover in Galesburg, Illinois, a horse driver in Montana, a farmhand in Kansas, a panhandler in Denver. Along the way, he was tossed off trains by railroad "dicks," jailed, and run out of town several times (Anderson 1980–81, pp. 10–16). These experiences would even-

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tually sharpen his insights into the plight of laborers in general and hobos in particular.

It was also not uncommon for Anderson to beg at the back doors of houses when he traveled and, through one of a series of fortunate encounters in his life, he one day begged at the door of a Mormon family named Woods in Utah who took him in and essentially adopted him. He lived and worked with them for several years. Aside from the stability of this environment, the other great advantage to Anderson of his Utah stay was the Mormon view of education—"the more the better"—a view that contrasted sharply with that of his own family (Anderson 1980–81, p. 19). So, working summers and vacations on railroad maintenance and as a timberman in the Utah metal mines, Anderson was able to put himself first through high school and then college at Brigham Young University, with a sixteen-month interruption while he was a soldier in Europe during World War I.

Anderson arrived in Chicago on a freight train at the age of twenty-six. One of his professors in Utah, John Swenson, had dissuaded him from following his plan to enter law and told him instead to study sociology at Chicago since, as he put it, "they work with new ideas" (Anderson 1983, p. 396; 1980–81, p. 6). By his own admission, Anderson knew little sociology, and Albion Small, then department chair, admitted him essentially without credentials (1983, p. 399). The departmental faculty at that time included Small, Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, and Ellsworth Faris, who had been brought in to replace W. I. Thomas.

Anderson was never particularly close to other graduate students at the university in the 1920s; these included Roderick McKenzie (ecology) for whom Anderson taught at the University of Washington for a semester, Floyd House (industrial morale), Ernest Mowrer (family disorganization), Walter Reckless (vice), Ruth Shonle Cavan (suicide), Frederic Thrasher (gangs), Louis Wirth (the ghetto), and later the well-known figures of Herbert Blumer, Everett Hughes, Harvey Zorbaugh, and the anthropologists Leslie White and Robert Redfield, among others (see Faris 1967; Carey 1975; Matthews 1977; Bulmer 1984). Anderson reports that his fellow graduate students were "politely amused" at the idea of studying hobos. None would visit the Madison Street area that was the site of his research (Anderson 1980–81, pp. 5–6).

After some time in the program, Anderson learned one day that Ben L. Reitman, M.D., would give a lecture on the homeless men of Chicago. Perhaps because of his own background hopping freights, he was interested in hearing it. As Anderson reports: "Reitman proved to be one of those speakers who likes to attract harsh attacks in public debate. For him to give a lecture was to put on a show. He would lump

[all the types of homeless into three categories]. . . . ‘The hobos who work and wander, the tramps who dream and wander, the bums who drink and wander’” (Anderson 1980–81, p. 4). Anderson found himself objecting to the neat typology and, after a lively discussion, Reitman and Anderson continued their talk at a local restaurant. It was over coffee and pie that Reitman invited Anderson to do a study of the homeless in Chicago and pledged that he would be able to secure support and funds. The study that would become *The Hobo* was sponsored by the United Charities of Chicago and was funded by a private donor, William A. Evans, M.D., who wrote a syndicated column for the *Chicago Tribune* called “How to Keep Well.” Anderson was supervised by a three-man committee consisting of Reitman, Joel Hunter, the director of United Charities, and Ernest Burgess as the committee’s science advisor and chair (Anderson 1983, pp. 400–404; 1980–81, pp. 4–8). For Anderson, Burgess was the perfect mentor, for his interests appeared to be closer to the reality of “social problems” (Hughes 1979). Though he had no research experience and reported knowing “no sociological jargon,” he says that he “never worked harder on a job, or with greater care” (Anderson 1980–81, p. 6). Anderson moved into a “workingman’s hotel” in Hobohemia during his research, and the fruit of this project, after a year of interviews and observations, was *The Hobo*. After Burgess read it, he passed it on to Park who surprised Anderson with the news that he had made some small changes and that the University of Chicago Press was ready to publish it as soon as they could get it ready (Anderson 1980–81, p. 8). Departing from the usual order of degrees and publications, Anderson turned the book in as his M.A. thesis (Faris 1967, p. 65).

Within the context of a thematically eclectic scientific production, Anderson’s name and interests remained linked to the hobos he studied early in his career and to his 1923 book *The Hobo*, which, he once remarked, “I have not been permitted to forget” (Anderson 1940, p. 1). Throughout his description, Anderson stressed that the era of the hobo (“a man who works and wanders”) had come to a close in those same years, and he further succeeded in showing a set of relations between the phenomenon of the hobo and the social dynamics of the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century. He especially emphasized the historical link between the development of the United States, the process of Americanization, and the presence of the nomadic and casual laborer throughout the nation’s social fabric. This approach countered the idea prevalent at the time that “their homelessness was . . . pathological in a society which assumes as axiomatic that every individual must belong somewhere, must have family, must have economic roots” (Anderson 1975, p. 168).

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Because of his social background, his life experience, and his cultural orientation, Nels Anderson is undoubtedly the most atypical of the young students who gravitated toward the University of Chicago's Sociology Department of the 1920s. He was among the first, and perhaps the best, of those researchers to inaugurate a method for knowing the features of society based on direct participation and observation. He describes the world he sees with no mediation. He presents vividly the harshness of the vagrant's life and the contradictions inherent in the hobo's identity that form yet another variation on the theme of the breakdown of the American dream. Such a vivid narrative may be surpassed only by the more literary descriptions of Jack London or by some passages of Tom Kromer ([1935] 1986).

#### A Researcher in the Department

Anderson's early career was an expression of the processes of institutionalization and professionalization of a sociological discipline on its way to becoming "scientific." This was a discipline that was leaving the world of abstraction and coming to terms with real life. *The Hobo* is testimony to this process and, in all likelihood, is one of the most significant and powerful examples of research and narrative appearing in the Sociological Series. The book was highly reputed and positively reviewed, and Anderson's ability to draw on an intimate and autobiographical knowledge of American hobos endowed them, in his account, with a culture and a personality that they had lacked in earlier representations.

Not long before the publication of *The Hobo*, Beardsley Ruml, director of the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial, had stressed "the absence of a scientific groundwork in the social field" due to the situation in the social sciences. These "were themselves very young. . . . The subject matter of the social sciences was extraordinarily difficult to deal with. . . . The universities have not been able to organize their programs so as to afford opportunities for social research." Above all, "as a result, production from universities is largely deductive and speculative, on the basis of second-hand observations, documentary evidence and anecdotal material. It is small wonder that the social engineer finds this social science abstract and remote, of little help to him in the solution of his problems" (University of Chicago Library, Special Collections, Reserved Papers, Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Series, box 2, folder 31).

The theory of science that would guide the projects that fulfilled Ruml's criteria for a relevant, empirical social science at Chicago was derived from the pragmatist insight, dating from about the turn of the

century, that it is attention to contextual, empirical phenomena that makes inquiry scientific. As Park put it in 1921:

It has been the dream of philosophers that theoretical and abstract science could and some day perhaps would succeed in putting into formulae and into general terms all that was significant in the concrete facts of life. It has been the tragic mistake of the so-called intellectuals, who have gained their knowledge from textbooks rather than from observation and research, to assume that science had already achieved its dream. But there is no indication that science has begun to exhaust the sources or significance of concrete experience. The infinite variety of external nature and the inexhaustible wealth of personal experience have thus far defied, and no doubt will continue to defy, the industry of scientific classification, while, on the other hand, the discoveries of science are constantly making accessible to us new and larger areas of experience. (Park and Burgess 1921, p. 15)

Following the spirit of such a view, Anderson helped to pioneer the method that came to be known as “participant observation” as well as the collection of personal documents and life histories. In many ways, this approach was an articulation of the famous invitation that Park had addressed to his students: “Go and sit in the lounges of the luxury hotels and on the doorsteps of the flophouses; sit on the Gold Coast settees and on the slum shakedown; sit in the Orchestra Hall and in the Star & Garter Burlesk. In short, gentlemen, go get the seat of your pants dirty in real research” (quoted in McKinney 1966, p. 71). Park’s scientific inclination was accompanied by a keen attention to research in which he synthesized his many years’ background in journalism. This background led him to remark that the problem does not lie in the use of one method of analysis rather than another, but in the fulfillment of the requirements of knowledge, for which reason “it is important that we employ the best methods as they are” (quoted in Matthews 1977, p. 179).

Anderson did, and indeed *The Hobo* has been described as “an ice-breaking piece of direct reporting” (Faris 1967, p. 66). Anderson’s attitude oscillates between an awareness of his intimate knowledge of the world of the hobos and a lack of confidence in his ability to render it well enough. However, he perceives that it is only by employing direct methods of description that one could get at the world of the hobos. His method was tied to his everyday relations, to the characters with whom he came into contact, and was a reinterpretation of Park’s journalistic advice: “Write down only what you see, hear, and know, like a newspaper reporter.” This process is based on the capacity to read the reality in which those characters live, to perceive their condition, to reproduce their stories, to recognize their emotions and ethics. Ander-

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## The **Hobo**: Introduction to the Phoenix Edition

It is now thirty-nine years since *The **Hobo*** was published and forty years since I began assembling the materials out of which the book grew.

Not long ago I was lecturing at the University of Copenhagen, and I was asked to devote one lecture to the **hobo**. I was particularly asked to tell about the author, how the book came to be written, how the research was done.

In 1882 my father migrated to the United States after a boyhood in Sweden and some twelve years in Germany. Some labor contractor picked him up on arrival, and he was sent to a railroad construction project. For the next year, until he learned enough English to get along, he went from job to job trying to find German- or Swedish-speaking companions. The effort to get settled enabled him to acquire a facility for getting about. As he gained confidence in this respect, he lost for the time his wish to settle. My father found himself moving about through the Middle West, a real **hobo** worker: farmhand, miner, lumberjack, building worker, and for a while coachman in Chicago. Once he ventured west as far as Deadwood in the Black Hills during a gold rush. For my father, getting Americanized by this process of moving from job to job was a continuing adventure. He remembered later with pride how he learned to beat his way on freight trains.

Five years later in St. Louis he met my mother, who had been employed as a housemaid and as a factory worker. After the marriage they went to Chicago, where I came on the scene. While I was still an infant, my father heard about a great fire in Spokane. This opportunity he could not miss. Spokane would need bricklayers, and in 1889 we moved west.

Spokane was *the West*; here was plenty of land and much work. My father filed on a timber claim not far from Spokane. My mother, with two small children, and a third born soon after, lived in a shack on the

From *The **Hobo**: The Sociology of the Homeless Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), v–xxi. © 1961 by The University of Chicago.

claim, looking after the garden and chickens. My father worked in town, coming home on horseback for weekends. This arrangement was not satisfactory, so the claim was sold and my family, in a covered wagon, trekked to Lewiston, Idaho. Here my father had an opportunity to farm Indian land on shares in the Nez Percé Reservation. The Indian reservation was not satisfactory either, so the family moved into Lewiston. My father built a good house, our first. He had steady work at good wages. But he wanted land where his family could take root; so after wandering in a covered wagon and sleeping in tents at night, we arrived at the Teton Basin in Idaho. The Teton Basin had rich land but no schools.

Everything was sold, and the family returned to Chicago less than ten years after departing that city. Chicago was disappointing. My father found work, but his wages were not enough. We lived in the worst kind of housing on the edge of Hobohemia. I turned to selling newspapers in the very streets and alleys, saloons and other places I was to study later. There was continuous sickness in the family. One baby born in Chicago died after a few months. My father could think only of finding a farm.

Less than three years after leaving the Teton Basin we were living on a rented farm in Michigan. Two years later, in 1903, we had our own farm nearby. It was my mother who called the halt. In the sixteen years since her marriage she had packed and moved ten times, and, in the course of this wandering, twelve babies had been born to her. Nine were still living when we settled on the Michigan farm. My father agreed he would not move again and put the farm in my mother's name.

When visitors came, if it was not my father telling his stories, it was Mother telling hers. My father usually tried to point out how in America even a "greenhorn" could get around. In his own way he saw the road as adventure. He never heard of Walt Whitman, but his thinking about the open road was no different.

Now that he had finished moving, his attention was on the dream that came with him from the "Old Country," to take root in the land. He would settle each child on a farm, and each Anderson would stick together against the world. In the end only two of his children became farmers, each of them only after he had done some wandering. Four of the boys became migratory workers before settling in other careers. My three sisters also left home and did some moving about before settling.

But none of my family became a drunkard, gambler, or loafer. All became self-supporting in some occupation above common labor. In that solid sense my parents did not fail.

I left high school and became a mule driver in Central Illinois. I was getting a man's pay, and I felt I had an occupation; besides entering the honorable ranks of the mule skinner, I had entered a select company of hobo workers. We had to widen the grade for doubletracking the Santa Fe railroad from Chicago to Kansas City. Every few miles along the entire stretch were grading camps. We lived in tents, and so did twenty span of mules. We moved the dirt with an elevating grader and dump wagons. Work was ten hours a day, six days a week.

In this crew of good names, the respected old-timer was Shorty Carroll. He symbolized much that "hobo" came to mean to me. He had driven string teams in the West. He had been on all the big railroad construction and canal-digging jobs, and he knew about levee building along the Mississippi. He had been a prospector, a stagecoach driver, and had marched with "Coxey's Army." A good worker and a better storyteller, Shorty had a weakness for strong drink. Four years later when I met him in Montana his health was breaking. He had finished working as a blaster in a railroad tunnel, his money was gone, and he was recovering from drinking his earnings. He said he was going "over the hump," over the mountains to the Pacific Coast. He was really going over the hump in another sense, but he was still a hero to me, and I felt it an honor to lend him money and to see that he boarded a train. There were other good names in that group: Rickety Bill, who talked little but about whom many stories were told, Kansas City Dick, Yellow Kid, Memphis Joe, and other "monickers," each having a character of his own.

Like the student who learns the "theory" of his occupation in school, I learned how the hobo behaved, or should not behave, in town, how he went about from place to place on freight trains, how he evaded train crews and railroad police, and how he found his work. But I had no experience of my own, and after six months in the outfit I began to feel self-conscious about holding on so long. I had become what the hobos called a "home guard."

Under this compulsion I went to Chicago, to remain only a few days. I met a man who had worked for the Santa Fe outfit, whose money was gone, and who was ready to ship out on the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad, then in the process of extending its line across South Dakota, Montana, Idaho, and Washington to the Pacific. This was the last big American railroad building project and, as I realized later, the "last roundup" for the hobos, who had formerly performed such work. For a month I worked for this road in South Dakota.

I decided to move on into Montana, where I found work again as a skinner. My next job after that was on a rock contract, driving a railroad tunnel. Before another year had passed I had also worked in a

lumber camp and a metal mine, and another four years were spent in pursuit of experience. I learned to ride freight trains and even passenger trains. I tried my hand at different kinds of work. While I was never given to spending money on drink, I did find myself penniless a number of times. I used these occasions for getting another kind of hobo experience, begging from passersby on streets ("panhandling") or begging at back doors for food.

Something like five years after leaving home I decided to go to Los Angeles, but I found the going difficult. Twice in the course of the night I was put off the train, but each time managed to get back on. The third time was at a lonely station near the Utah-Nevada line. The stationmaster gave me a drink of water and told me to move on. The next water tank was seven miles ahead. When I reached the water-tank station, the stationmaster warned me to move on. Another five miles nearer Los Angeles I came to a small valley with four ranch houses.

I saw a man mowing hay in a meadow near the track. When I asked him for a job, his answer was negative, but he did take me to his home for supper. The next day I helped him get in the hay, not asking about money, and learned there was a job some twenty miles away in Utah. The rancher from Utah happened to be present, and I was hired by him.

On that ranch I liked the variety of the work. I was taken in as one of the family. I found myself being persuaded to return to school. For the next several years, whether I was away at school or working, the ranch was my home. My high school work was taken partly in the academy branch of the Brigham Young University, partly in a school not far from the ranch. I earned money as a timberman in mines, as a maintenance worker on railroads, or as construction worker. Other students earned their money herding sheep, working on ranches, working in stores. I could earn much more through my migratory work.

From 1912 to 1920 I concentrated on getting through four years of high school and four of college at Brigham Young. Although learning was an absorbing interest, I had no goal except the vague one that I might later study law. John C. Swenson, chairman of the economics and sociology department, suggested that I would not be happy in the law, that I should go to a graduate school to study sociology, and that the most dynamic center for sociology then was the University of Chicago. Going to Chicago was my final effort at riding freight trains.

In Chicago a new way of earning a living had to be found. I knew how to get in and out of cities, but I had never worked in one. Finding

jobs was easier than adapting to an upper-level academic life, for which there was so little time.

Then came an unexpected demand on my time. In each class I had to prepare a term paper, which meant field research and reading. I knew the hobo, his work, and his urban habitat, and I was permitted in two classes to do papers about that world so little known to most professors.

Because these initial papers were well received, other possibilities opened to me. I chanced to meet people who were interested in the problem of the homeless in Chicago. I had never thought of the hobo in this way, but in Hobohemia, his Chicago habitat, he was indeed among the homeless. I began reading articles, reports, and books about the homeless and the vagrancy problem. None touched the hobo as I knew him. I came to know Ben L. **Reitman**, physician to the homeless, friendless, and wicked, who enlisted the interest of Dr. William A. Evans, author of a syndicated medical column, who gave a small sum to start a study. This enabled me for several months to devote my time to research.

From this beginning other support came from the Chicago Council of Social Agencies and the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Fund. I found myself engaged in research without the preparation a researcher is supposed to have. I couldn't answer if asked about my "methods." In my research efforts, however, I did have two resources that could be put to good use—a capacity for interviewing and a capacity for reporting what I had seen and heard. Still, even after the publication of *The Hobo*, when I was permitted to take the oral examination for my master's degree, I was not able to answer most of the questions put to me. Apparently some of my answers must have amused the professors. When I was called back into the room for the verdict, Professor Albion W. Small pointed to the street, "You know your sociology out there better than we do, but you don't know it in here. We have decided to take a chance and approve you for your master's degree."

To return to the story of *The Hobo*, I took a room on Halsted Street near Madison, the heart of Hobohemia, and continued my research. Of the guidance I received at the University of Chicago from Professors Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess most was indirect. The only instruction I recall from Park was, "Write down only what you see, hear, and know, like a newspaper reporter."

At last I had to write a report for the Chicago agencies which had displayed interest in the study. I had many "documents" but no idea how they might be put into a report. The task was one of arranging my materials into some sort of pattern. When I delivered it to Park and Burgess for their review, I had an unsure feeling because it seemed