

Nonfiction

THROUGH
YOUR EYES

TRUE
TEEN
STORIES
FROM
HISTORY

WHAT IS A HOBO?

During the Great Depression, millions of people became "hoboes." A hobo is a homeless and often poor person who travels in search of work. During the 1930s, most hoboes traveled from place to place by sneaking onto freight trains.

**NARRATIVE
NONFICTION**
Reads like fiction—
but it's all true!

TEEN HOBOES OF THE 1930s

DURING ONE OF THE MOST DESPERATE TIMES IN AMERICA, 250,000 KIDS LEFT THEIR HOMES TO TRY TO SURVIVE ON THEIR OWN



CHECK IT OUT
AS YOU READ, LOOK FOR:

Cause-Effect Relationships

Think about what caused the teens in this article to become hoboes. How did living on trains affect them? What effect did these teens have on the places they traveled to and on the country as a whole?

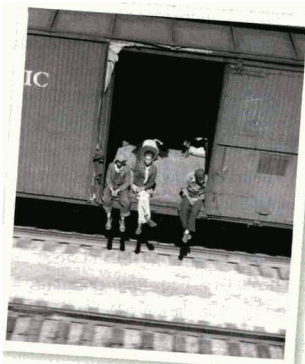
BY KRISTIN LEWIS

In the summer of 1934, 13-year-old Robert Symmonds found himself chasing an enormous freight train. His plan was to hop onto one of the moving cars without getting caught by the railroad police—and without getting sucked onto the tracks, where he would be crushed beneath 3,000 tons of steel. Luckily, the train was moving slowly. He reached out for the ladder on a tank car and, gripping tightly, hoisted himself up. He climbed to the top of the car, where he found a narrow wooden plank to sit on. There wasn't much to

hang on to—only a small metal bar. At least he was safe.

But not for long.

The train began to pick up speed. The wind whipped past Robert's face as the train approached 45 miles an hour, then 55, then 65. "The plank started to vibrate like a springboard," Robert remembers. It tossed him in the air, and he struggled to hang on. "All I could think of was that I shouldn't have gotten on the train. If I lose my grip, I'm gonna die. I'm gonna go under the wheels. What will my mother think? She'll get word that her darling son was found mangled along the railroad tracks." ➔



LEFT: GAP PHOTO IMAGES; RIGHT: BETTMANN/CORBIS

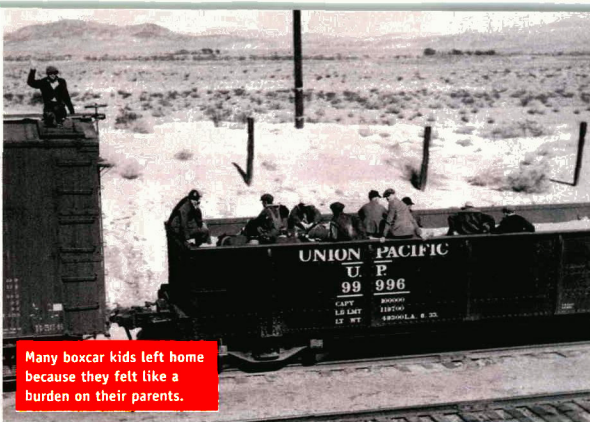
Miraculously, Robert managed to hold on until the train reached its next stop. By then, he was so exhausted he could barely walk. But that didn't stop him from sneaking into a boxcar a few cars back. There was no way he was going to give up that easily.

In the 1930s, more than 250,000 kids like Robert rode freight trains across America. They were known as "boxcar children." Poor and homeless, they hopped from train to train and drifted from town to town. Some sought adventure. Most were looking for work, their families too poor to care for them. No matter where they came from or where they were headed, they all came to understand one brutal truth: Life on the rails was treacherous.

Penniless, Homeless

The 1930s was a period of extreme hardship in the United States. The country had fallen into financial disaster. Banks had failed. Factories had shut down. Farmers couldn't sell their crops. Many families lost their life savings. By 1932, one in four Americans was jobless. Hundreds of thousands of people roamed the country in search of a meal, a place to sleep, and employment. This period became known as the Great Depression. To this day, it remains the longest and most brutal economic depression in American history.

Like so many others, Robert and his family were hit hard. In Errol Lincoln Uys's book *Riding the Rails: Teenagers on the Move During the*



"IF I LOSE MY GRIP, I'M GONNA DIE."

—Robert Symmonds

Great Depression, Robert shares the story of how he became one of the boxcar kids. His dad had been a successful business owner. The family lived in a nice house in Seattle, Washington, and there was always food on the table. Then Robert's father lost everything. It wasn't long before the family was penniless and homeless. A relative offered them a cabin in Oregon, but life wasn't any better there. There was no running water, no electricity, and no money.

Robert decided it was up to him, the only son, to save his family. He had seen young hoboes riding in the boxcars of trains that passed through town. He had even hopped a few trains himself—just for fun—like that terrifying tanker car he had ridden in 1934. But he had never gone very far from home.

So in 1938, at age 16, Robert hiked to the rail yard. He planned to

ride south and get a job harvesting crops—if he could survive the journey.

A Thrilling Adventure

By the 1930s, the boxcar kids had become a national phenomenon. Newspapers wrote about them. Magazine articles offered advice on how to survive as a hobo. There was even a movie made on the subject.

Though the articles usually stressed that a boxcar was no place for a kid to live, teens across America found these tales utterly thrilling. Life on the rails seemed like a fantastic adventure. Many teens imagined stopovers in glamorous big cities and warm summer nights rolling through the wilderness. On a train, they would be free, making their own way in the world. Many kids found the idea so alluring that they ran away to hop trains—even kids who had plenty to eat at home.

A Harsh Reality

Boxcar kids soon discovered that the reality of riding the rails was far grimmer and more dangerous than what they had read about in glossy magazines. Danger lurked everywhere, even before a kid stepped onto a train. The rail yards were patrolled by “bulls,” guards paid by the railroad companies. These men could be vicious. They would beat kids before hauling them off to jail. Some even stole what little money the kids had.

The greatest danger was the train itself—thousands of tons of metal speeding along the tracks. Newspapers were full of gruesome stories about kids who were injured or killed while hopping trains. A fall from a boxcar roof could result in a broken arm, a broken leg, or a broken neck. A foot or a leg that slipped beneath a train’s wheels was instantly severed. There was also the potential

hazard of being sucked under a train and crushed to death. From 1929 to 1939, nearly 25,000 train hoppers died. Another 27,000 were injured.

Those who managed to survive the train rides faced hunger and illness. They might go days without food. Weakened by hunger and cold, many became sick with diseases like pneumonia. They would wander into towns, ragged and filthy and sometimes infested with head lice. They would beg for food or try to get short-term jobs in exchange for a few cents or a cup of coffee. But the towns often had their own suffering to deal with. Many towns simply couldn’t cope with more

mouths to feed. “Go home to your parents,” people would say. After all, if an adult couldn’t get work, why should a kid?

Not everyone turned the boxcar kids away. Many people extended charity to young hoboes because they knew how fragile their own security was. During the Depression, anyone could be weeks away from losing a home. Even wealthy people could end up homeless if they lost their jobs. Then they might be the ones hopping trains and begging for food.

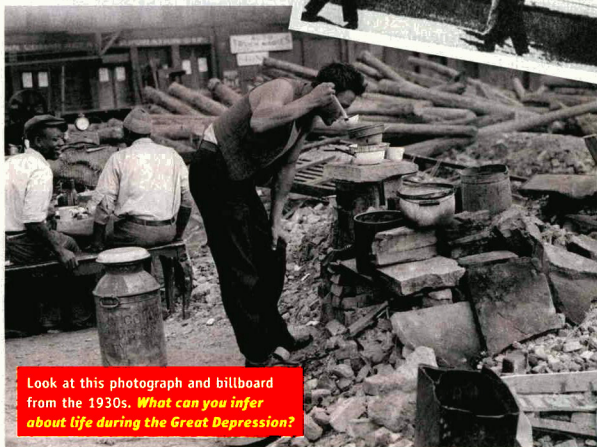
A Glimmer of Hope

Eventually, Robert got a job as a farm laborer, just as he had hoped to. Each spring, he would hop trains up and down the West Coast,

migrating from farm to farm to work in the fields. It was backbreaking labor. He sent as much money home as he could—and that money, little as it was, would see his family through winter.

Other kids were not as lucky. They drifted from Wyoming to Kansas, from Oklahoma to Ohio, in search of work. Few found enough of it.

There was a glimmer of hope in 1933, when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt created the Civilian Conservation Corps. The purpose of the CCC was to hire unemployed, unmarried men between the ages of 18 and 25 to work in national parks and forests. They would be housed, well fed, and paid \$30 a month, with the stipulation that 25 of



Look at this photograph and billboard from the 1930s. What can you infer about life during the Great Depression?

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HOMELESS TEENS TODAY

In the 1930s, they were known as boxcar children. Today they would be called homeless teens. Homelessness among teens remains an enormous problem in the U.S. More than 1.7 million American teenagers are without a home. They live on the street and in shelters, cars, tents, and abandoned buildings. How do they end up there? Some belong to families that are homeless. Others are on their own—having run away from home to flee abuse, violence, or family tensions. Some kids are homeless because their families fell apart after divorce or a parent lost a job or became ill. No matter what the cause, all homeless teens face common perils. See the chart at right.



Teen Homelessness by the Numbers

75%	drop out of school
50%	participate in gang activity
50%	abuse drugs in their lifetimes
50%	get pregnant or get someone pregnant
32%	try to commit suicide

STATISTICS: DOSOMETHING.ORG (DROP-OUT RATE, SUICIDE); NATIONAL NETWORK FOR YOUTH (GANGS, DRUG ABUSE, PREGNANCY)

those dollars be sent home to their needy families. In those days, \$25 a month was enough to pay rent and buy groceries for a small family.

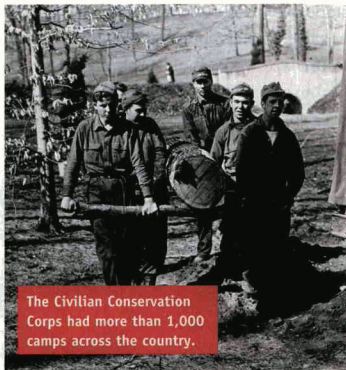
The CCC was a success. From 1933 to 1943, it hired 2.5 million young men. They planted trees, fought forest fires, built dams, and cleared campgrounds. In 1939, Robert secured a six-month spot at a CCC camp in Montana. Today, you can still hike the trails that kids like Robert helped to clear.

A New Era

By the 1940s, the era of the boxcar kids was coming to an end. The country's economy was starting to recover. War was brewing in Europe and Japan. Many kids left the rails and the CCC camps to serve in the military. Robert was one of them. He joined the Navy and fought in World War II. After the war, he got married and raised four children

in California.

For the boxcar kids still alive today, the memory of the 1930s is bittersweet. The suffering they endured and the misery they witnessed stole their adolescence. The boxcar kids left home as children and overnight became adults. On the other hand, riding the rails made them self-reliant and deeply compassionate. And of that they are incredibly proud. ●



The Civilian Conservation Corps had more than 1,000 camps across the country.

CONTEST

Write About Cause and Effect

In a paragraph, explain one of the cause-and-effect relationships in the article. Remember, one cause may have multiple effects. Send it to **TRAIN CONTEST** by April 1, 2011. Ten winners will each get a DVD of the PBS documentary *Riding the Rails*. See page 2 for details.



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