

Hit the Road, Jack: Jack's Tramping Adventures Across America

When Jack was 16 years old, he had his first adventure as a “gay-cat” (a greenhorn hobo) by “decking” (riding on the roof of) a train from Sacramento over the Sierras to Reno.¹ Jack was introduced to this dangerous enterprise by a group of Sacramento “road kids,” youngsters who rode the rails illegally. Jack said that the cross-country rail exploits of these road kids made his oyster pirating adventures look like “thirty cents.”² Jack would later write that tramping satisfied his “wanderlust.”

A couple of years after his first tramping experience, Jack once again set out to ride the rails. On April 6, 1894, an 18-year-old Jack and his friend, Frank Davis, paid the fare on a train leaving Oakland for Sacramento, planning to catch up to Kelly's Army. Kelly oversaw the West Coast contingent of Coxey's Army. Also known as the “Industrial Army,” or “Army of the Commonwealth in Christ,” this was a group of unemployed men participating in a protest march on Washington D.C., asking for jobs.³ Once Jack and Frank arrived in Sacramento, they sent their suitcases back home by Wells Fargo since they would now be jumping on overland freight cars headed east.

As with Capt. Shepard in the Yukon, the tramping hardships proved too much for Frank and he turned back at Winnemucca, Nevada. Jack continued on, tramping across Utah, Wyoming, and meeting up with Kelly's Army in Nebraska. The army had insufficient provisions and on May 24, in Hannibal, Mo., tired of the “starvation,” Jack and a couple of other men set out on their own. Jack made it to Chicago the end of May to find several letters waiting for him, including one from Flora with four dollars.⁴ Eliza had given Jack a ten-dollar gold piece to start his journey and now with this money from Flora, Jack was able to bargain for shoes, an overcoat, a hat, pants, a shirt, and dinner.

Even with next to no money, Jack still managed to visit some of the major U.S. sites including, among others, the former Chicago World's Fair grounds⁵, Lincoln Park, Niagara Falls, the capital, and Druid Hill Park in Baltimore where he listened to soapbox orators.

¹ In Charmian's biography of Jack, she mistakenly states this was in 1894.

² These “road kids” and others Jack met while riding the rails also introduced him to their own language. “Hobos” are often called “tramps” and while they are both migrants, a hobo is typically someone who travels looking for work, while a tramp usually refers to a non-working wanderer. The genesis of the term “hobo” is not known for sure but some attribute it to an abbreviation of “homeward bound” used by soldiers trying to get home after the Civil War, while others believe it was short for “hoe-boy” meaning farmhand or from a greeting like “Ho, boy,” among others. Jack uses the terms hobo and tramp somewhat interchangeably but seems to prefer the term “tramp.” They are also referred to as “stiffs” or “bindle-stiffs,” a “bindle” referring to a rolled-up blanket they carried with them. Jack (known as “Frisco Kid” and “Sailor Jack” on the road) rose up the ranks to the top of the tramp caste system as a “profesh.” A “profesh” was considered the aristocracy of the tramp world and also sometimes feared for their criminality.

³ Jacob S. Coxey was an Ohio businessman who in 1892 sought Congressional funding to pay unemployed men to work on public works projects like better roads.

⁴ Flora's letter was addressed to Jack's pseudonym, “John Drake” in Chicago and Jack used the name “Jack Drake” when he was arrested in New York. (The police figured out Jack's real name from the content of his pockets.) Jack discusses using this name in *The Road* but neither Jack nor Charmian give any explanation for it.

⁵ The World's Fair had been held there the year before, in 1893.

He also took time out to take a steamer across Lake Michigan to visit Flora's sister, Mary Everhard, and her family in St. Joseph, Michigan. Much to the dismay of her two sons, Harry and Ernest, Jack's Aunt Mary saw Jack as a "hero" and "worshipped him," listening to his road stories, buying him clothes, feeding him, and encouraging a writing career. This "hero worship" led Mary at times to favor Jack over her own sons. Mary, for example, chastised Ernest for having Jack help him pitch hay in the hot sun. Mary insisted Jack rest in the shade while Ernest continue his work. Jack eventually rewarded Ernest by making "Ernest Everhard" his own hero in the *Iron Heel*. Jack stayed with the Everhards for about a month and then headed for Niagra Falls the end of June.

Jack had a comforting respite at his Aunt Mary's home but he endured much hardship on the road. Besides the freezing conditions and other dangers from jumping on freight cars, Jack lost his coat and overcoat early on from sparks which set them on fire. The soles of his shoes fell off and he ended up injuring his feet from walking in his socks for miles. The worst hardship came when Jack reached New York and after visiting Niagra Falls, was imprisoned for thirty days in the Erie County Penitentiary for vagrancy, from June 29th to July 29th, 1894. Upon release, he made his way across Canada and then worked onboard the S.S. Umatilla from Seattle to California as a coal stoker to make it home by fall.

Jack's tramping experience forged his socialism, his commitment to becoming a "brain merchant," and sharpened his story telling.

Many of the hobos or tramps Jack observed were hard working men forced on the road because they could not find jobs or were maimed by jobs and then let go. Jack viewed these working men as merchants of "muscle," selling muscle like other merchants sell their wares. The difference was that unlike a shoe seller who can restock shoes, "there was no way of replenishing the laborer's stock of muscle. The more he sold of his muscle, the less of it remained to him." In *What Life Means to Me*, Jack wrote of his tramping days that he had gone "down in the cellar of society, down in the subterranean depths of misery . . ." and what he saw there gave him "a terrible scare."

This scare led him to a "frantic pursuit of knowledge" and opening the books when he returned to California. As he wrote in *John Barleycorn*, Jack was now more determined than ever "never again to offer my muscles for sale in the brawn market;" he focused on becoming a "brain merchant" instead of a "work beast."

In *How I Became a Socialist*, Jack explains how the tramping experiences also advanced his socialism beliefs. One cannot read stories like, *The Iron Heel*, *The Apostate*, *The Dream of Debs*, *South of the Slot*, *People of the Abyss*, and others without seeing his continuing empathy for those consigned to these "subterranean depths of misery."

Being unfairly imprisoned and suffering a denial of due process (Jack was told to "shut up" by the judge who spent 30 seconds on each "vag" or vagrant case), was a further catalyst for his

socialism, his fight against social injustice, and his life-long solidarity with the downtrodden.⁶ In his non-fiction work, *The Road*, Jack even expresses empathy for the families of the “bulls” or police who were paid for each vagrant they arrested. Jack’s father, John London, held one such job and Jack remembered that the “amount of meat on the table” depended on how many “tramps he could catch.”

His tramping also very much sharpened Jack’s story-telling abilities. Jack possessed exceptional abilities when it came to panhandling for handouts on the road. He would “size up” his mark and tell a story that appealed to the “peculiar personality and temperament of that particular victim,” and it was a constant improvisation. In Boston, he even charmed an officer who had roused him for sleeping on a park bench by telling him tales of Japan for two hours, some from his travels there on the *Sophia Sutherland* and others made up from travel brochures he had read. The officer gave Jack a silver quarter. As Jack aptly observed, “I have often thought that to this training of my tramp days is due much of my success as a story-writer.”

Like in so many other fields, Jack was a trailblazer with his tramping stories. While there were certainly publications about tramping by Jack’s time⁷, Jack was “the first American writer of any significance to speak of the tramp or hobo from intimate knowledge and understanding.” Authors like Jack Kerouac, John Steinbeck, John Dos Passos, among others, would take inspiration from him.

Resources:

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Etulain, Richard W., *Jack London on the Road: The Tramp Diary and Other Hobo Writings* (1979) Utah, Utah State Univ. Press, *en passim*

Kingman, Russ, *A Pictorial Life of Jack London* (1979) NY, Crown Publishers, Inc., pp. 50-60

London, Joan, *Jack London and his Times* (1968) Seattle, Univ. of Wa. Press, *en passim*

Labor, Leitz, Shepard, *The Letters of Jack London: Volume One*, (1988) Stanford, Stanford University Press, pp. 259-260, 353(fn. 1),

London, Charmian, *The Book of Jack London Vol. 2* (1921) Miami, Hard Press Publishing, pp. 147-186

Kingman, Russ, *Jack London: A Definitive Chronology* (1992) CA, David Rejl/Jack London Research Center, pp. 7-8

⁶ Jack not only fought for but befriended those from all walks of life, including ex-cons. His book, the *Star Rover*, is based in part on Jack’s interviews with former San Quentin inmate, Ed Morrell.

⁷ Jack dedicated *The Road* to Josiah Flynt, who wrote *Tramping with Tramps* and who Jack considered “the tramp authority,” and “the Real Thing, Blowed in the Glass.” (Hobo slang for a trustworthy, upper class tramp and sometimes referred to as someone born to be a hobo.) Flynt (Josiah Flynt/Flint Williard), a sociologist and author, not only tramped as a youngster in the U.S., but did so later on in Russia in 1897. Like Jack, Josiah was comfortable with people from all walks of life. In Russia he stayed with Tolstoy and then tramped with Russia’s “goriuns” (vagabonds).

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Brandt, Kenneth K., *Jack London: Writers and their Work* (2018) Liverpool, Liverpool Press, pp. 92-105

Sinclair, Andrew, *Jack: A Biography of Jack London* (1977) NY, Harper & Row, pp.19-27

Raskin, Jonah, *The Radical Jack London* (2008) Berkeley, U.C. Press, pp. 63-73

Clayton, Owen, *Vagabonds, Tramps, and Hobos: The Literature and Culture of U.S. Transiency 1890–1940* (2025) Cambridge, England, Cambridge Press, pp. 79-106

Old hobo slang:

<https://arc.lib.montana.edu/ivan-doig/objects/2602-B039-F12.pdf>

Josiah Flynt

<http://www.cynicalreflections.net/2012/12/a-philosophy-of-tramping-josiah-flynt.html>

Brown, Jeffrey S., Masters Thesis: *Hoboes and Vagabonds: The Cultural Construction of the American Road Hero*

<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/233574745.pdf>

(NB: Leon Ray Livingston (a.k.a. A-No1) wrote *From Coast to Coast with Jack London*, but it is a highly fictionalized/inaccurate account of tramping with Jack across the U.S.)

Written by Kate Johnston (see also, *Jack's Facts* #12, Oct. 2025, for an abbreviated version of this article)