BOWERY MISSION

While on assignment for *Ken* magazine, I had the opportunity to meet some of the most intriguing characters. As a photographer I rarely got a lot of time to get to know my subjects but my assignment at the Bowery Mission in New York City was different. I spent quite a bit of time waiting to see who would come into the mission and if they would be amenable to being photographed for a magazine that was then know to be a polemic with an antifascist underpinning.

I got to know a few of my photographic subjects as they tended to hang around long after I was finished with their shoot. Some told me their time on the road as vagabonds or hoe-boys which most of us now call hoboes. Some of their travels were mundane but others were quite remarkable. As someone whose time was usually tightly scheduled, I found the idea of hopping trains and hiking off into the unknown stimulating to my creative imagination.

HYMN

He said he was always a "tow-head" and they called him Whitey even when he was under 30. As a younger man, he would sometimes ride the rail lines from place to place to find farms or orchards that needed field hands. He found the best work hopping the Shenendoah, Tennessee, or Richmond rail lines. He introduced to me certain symbols that he and other travelers would use to alert each other to the significant things in the area they were passing through. They would usually carve them into posts or trees.

Days in the field or orchard were long and the work was back breaking. He would try to lift the spirits of others in the field by belting out the songs he had learned in church. Usually they would join in but many times they had no energy or their throats were just too dry.

Whitey said there was once a young lady, Mary Ann, he admired and would sometimes walk the rail line north out of town to see her. The harvest season was the only time Whitey came to this area and Mary Ann did not know of Whitey's admiration. He said that they rarely spoke to each other but he would think fondly of her through out the rest of the year.

One year he was anxious to see if she was still living near by and passed by the intersection where he saw this symbol:

and followed those instructions having seen it upon previous visits. Along his 2 mile walk he also passed a structure that had been named for her. At the end of his walk he crossed the bridge and saw someone standing not 25 steps away, partially hidden by the "V" tree that was between them. She was leaning against another tree and called to him remarking that it had been a long time since she had seen him. Thrilled she noticed him, he shouted that it had been exactly 2 weeks shy of a year. As he walked toward her a young beau who was holding her flower basket came from behind the tree she was leaning against.

Whitey blushed, embarrassed at the thought she might have had an interest in him. What excuse he mumbled to the couple he could not remember. All he recalls is that spot is where he forever left his heart. He turned, tipped his head back as he sang his way along the tracks to the north.

REDEMPTION

Jack had been sipping coffee and listening to Whitey's tale beside me. He nodded solemnly at the end of the story and spoke one word, "women."

He made it clear that he had sinned many times when he was on the road and the day he mended his lustful ways was the special time he
Chose to share with me. It started with when jumped onto the Union Pacific railway then hitched and stole his way onto the Burlington railroad. He soon found himself running from the law and made his way up a section of the La Crosse rail line.

Jack was hiking north when after about 2 1/2 miles he came to a four way intersection and saw a post with symbols carved into. Each direction gave advice on the condition of each trail.

- North:
- South:
- East:
- West:

Although he took the recommended direction, he wondered if he had made a good choice. After .2 of a mile with the creek to his right, a larger gathering of people stood at the end of a metal fence looking into the water. Children were counting one to ten as he looked down to see a young man struggling and being held underwater by an older man. Jack was about to run quickly from the crime when the older man pulled the youngster from the water and the crowd broke into song. It was the first baptism he had ever witnessed.

The singing grew in intensity as, one by one, more folks were baptized in the creek. Jack's vantage point from a large rock overlooking the creek afforded him a clear view of each person, young and old, emerging with a clean soul. A woman turned to him and asked, "Are you next brother?"

Jack's head started to spin and as he heard the words, "Lord thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations" he felt himself being pushed back and the children counted one to ten.

The next thing he knew, he was sitting across from the large rock with his back to the bank. His head was drenched, with creek water or sweat he did not know, and rested in a small indent a couple of feet from a small tree. A fair young woman held his hand and offered him water from a clear glass. As he gratefully drank from it, he knew he had chosen the correct path.

Hallelujah

It was a couple of days after talking to Whitey and Jack that Cleo came into the mission. He too had traveled the rail lines but had done most of it with an older brother when he was too young to remember much. He knows they spent some time hopping the Erie and well as the Tyrone Railroads. The only one he could remember with any clarity was jumping on and off of the Reading line.

It was late evening one summer when he and his brother were looking for a campsite before it got dark. The sun, to their right over the stream, was dipping very low and they gone 3 miles when they saw a symbol beside the trail:

They were glad to stop walking and shared some of their flat bread at a fireless camp before they laid back on the long grass. Cleo's eyes were getting heavy as his brother pointed out every star he knew in the night sky. Cleo's favorite was the bright star in the big dipper.

He fell into an uneasy sleep dreaming that the copper coins his brother always trusted him to carry had turned to twinkling white diamonds. They felt heavy in his back pocket and started to weigh him down.

Cleo woke to his brother kicking him in his backside and the muffled sound of men's voices coming from the south. He heard his brother whisper, "Hide!" and he quietly ran in the first direction that struck him. It was black out with only starlight to help him, he ran toward his favorite star until a bank stopped him.

The men were shouting near their campsite and he didn't want to risk being heard or seen climbing the bank so he cowered there, between two similar small trees with large rocks behind each. He stashed all of his valuables behind the one that was to his left when he hit the bank.
The night passed slowly and it was close to dawn when his brother found him. The men had taken their food but Cleo showed that he had kept their coins safe all night. As they left the area, Cleo's brother carved a new symbol new the campsite:

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**FAITH**

It was my last day at the Bowery Mission. I was getting a few last photos of some of the new men who had come in that day when he came up to me. He said that he heard I was collecting stories as well as photographs and would I like to hear his. I invited him to sit and while I photographed him as my last subject at the Bowery Mission he told me his tale.

He said he had spent most of his life frequenting the Allegheny, Indiana, and Lehigh Valley Railroads and knew almost every inch of each. One morning he was walking south toward a town where a trail intersected his from the left ("you-klan" is how he said it). His trail went on to cross a nice stone arched bridge. They built a newer bridge beside it and he chose cross it as it passed so close to the largest, oldest tree he had ever known. He had always made sure to touch this tree for luck.

When he approached the tree, he noticed someone had carved a new symbol into it.

This made him wonder. He knew what the symbol meant but why was it there? He climbed down from the bridge and stood by the large tree on the south bank of the creek. While pondering the meaning of the symbol and watching the mist rise from the twisting creek he was sure he saw an image of a human in the mist. It was not male nor female but with long gauze like wings. He ran south west across the field, and ended up near one of the children of the great tree from where he had been standing.

As he reached the south side of double trunked tree, he looked up into a kind, ascending face in the misty dawn sky. The face swirled in the morning breeze and was quietly gone but it left him with an inner peace that he said he carried with him always.

My film ran out then and I excused myself to get some more from my bag for a final few shots. When I turned around, he was gone. I never learned his name. I remain forever indebted to those four fellows at the Bowery Mission who profoundly inspired my work.