

# Dropping out, running away

"If something goes wrong I say forget it," said a 24-year-old man who has been on the road for seven years. "I like my life to be simple and uncomplicated."

"A lot of men are trying to take a geographical cure for their problems," the director of the Lincoln People's City Mission said. "But they bring their problems with them."

Both men are describing the life of a transient, a hobo, or what some might call a bum.

Who are the men who live along, making freight trains and alleys their homes? According to workers at the city mission, where many of these men find a night's rest and a meal, the men have various personal reasons to live as they do.

The reasons are often related to alcohol. Some men just enjoy life "on the road."

Phil Palmer, the young man quoted above, said only about one-fourth to one-third of transients work their way out of this lifestyle.

"There are a lot of them that would love an opportunity to get out of this life. But there's no way they can," he said.

ONCE THE PATTERN is established, Palmer said employers are less likely to hire a transient for any permanent work.

Palmer said the types of men who go on the road vary. He said he met a man in Utah who was the inventor of the child-proof bottle cap. But because some things went wrong in his personal life he had become a transient.

The mission's night supervisor, George Norton, said the men have different reasons they can't settle down. He said some might be wanted by the law.

"Some of them are from broken homes. Some of them just like the life," he said. "They're willing to work. They're good workers. They work for a grub stake, get some clean clothes and when they get itchy feet they take off."

Norton, who was once on the road himself, said "itchy feet" are the main reason men become transient.

"We had an old fella here, he was in his 80s," Norton said. "We put him on the staff so he'd have a private room. One day he told me, 'I'm going to check on my income tax.' We found out a week later he was down in Topeka, Kan."

Norton shook his head in wonder. "An 80 year-old man! I guess he got itchy feet."

"Most of them just like to travel," Norton said. "We have men who come by here every year. If the work was good maybe they'd stay a couple weeks."

BUT THE REV. JERRY DUNN, director of the People's City Mission, disagreed. He said he thought about 90 percent of the men he sees have problems relating to alcoholism.

"With many of the older men it's a way of life for them," Dunn said. He said these men began traveling when they were younger, doing seasonal work in various parts of the country like harvesting apples in Washington or oranges in Florida.

The fastest growing age-group is the 16- to 30-year-olds, Dunn said. The average age for a transient is 38, he said.

"We're seeing a lot of dropouts of the 60s drug culture trying to get back into society again and finding things have changed considerably," he said.

THE AVERAGE STAY at the mission by a transient is five days, Dunn said. With enough beds for 48 a night, the mission served 25,559 men last year, he said.

The number of transients has been increasing lately, Dunn said. Based on his experience Dunn said this indicates a recession is on the way. Transients are the first to be fired and the last to be hired in bad economic times, he said.

Norton said the men usually carry just a bedroll, a change of clothing and shaving equipment. Racks of cast-off or donated shoes, coats, hats and other articles of clothing line the Mission's basement walls for men who need them.

Transients favor Lincoln during the summer months, Norton said, taking to the roads and trains of states further south in the winter.

The Mission is located just a few blocks from the freight yards, a perfect location for transients, who most often hop on the freights for a free ride, Norton said.

Palmer said some of the younger men will hitchhike to get around.

Many of those working at the People's City Mission said they were once "on the road" themselves. They have empathy for the transients and can work to help the ones that want out of the lifestyle that keeps them constantly moving, carrying their lives on their backs.

Such an unstable lifestyle is sometimes looked down on by more stationary members of society, but transients say their way of life can't be well understood by those who have never tried it.

"Until you've actually lived like this don't criticize it," Palmer said.



Phil Palmer, 24, said he thinks people should "walk a mile in his mocassins" before judging the life of a transient. Palmer went "on the road" after high school and said he probably will continue this life for a while.

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A transient decides not to take advantage of the city mission and finds a night's rest in an abandoned building.