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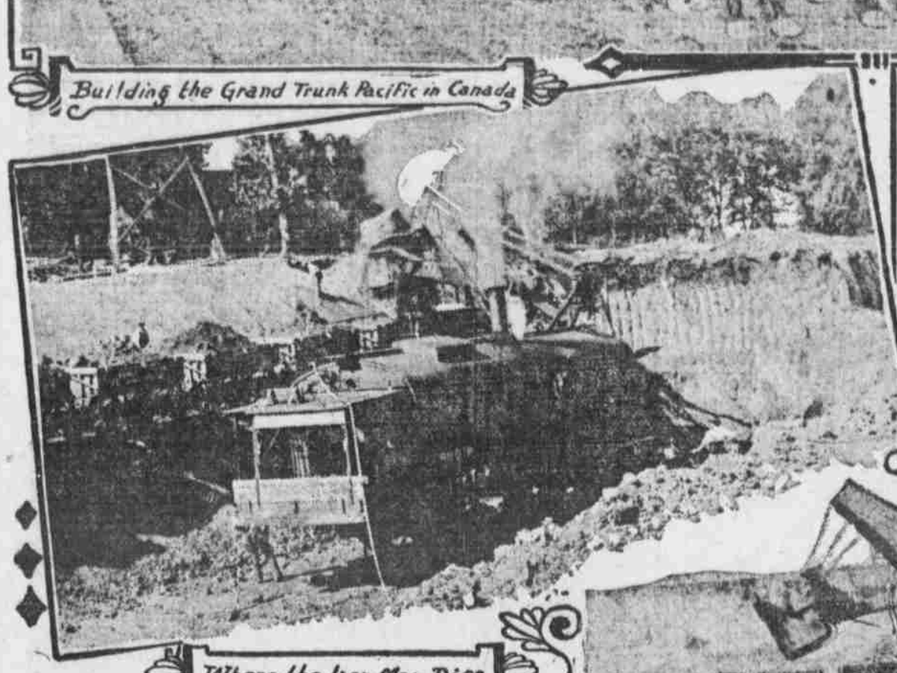
Men Who Spend Their Lives in Making Over Nature

Changing the Landscape



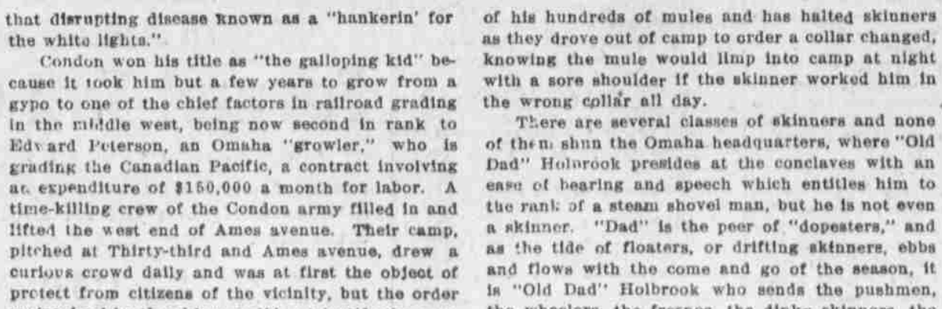
Building the Grand Trunk Pacific in Canada

Making a Ditch in Nebraska

Where the Iron Man Digs

Moving a Mountain

Skinner in his glory



"Small Outfit" at Work

MEN go into the wilderness, backed by modern science, and mountains fade before them, valleys disappear, rivers are removed from their beds, lakes appear where never water stood before, forests are leveled, and the whole aspect of nature is changed. In civilized sections the expanding needs of man are ministered unto by similar methods. Little thought is taken of these men; they are reckoned with as a part of the machinery of the modern industrial movement. But they have a life of their own, in which romance and adventure iron out the wrinkles and lift it from the sordidness of mere existence. Venturous as the bold pioneers of a new world, possessing the characteristics of strong and free men, they are as clannish as the tribes of the mountains. They live apart, indulge in their own fancies in their own way, and when they foregather in hours of relaxation, they commune in a language that is much their own. These men are told of in a measure in the article that follows. It can be better understood by presenting at the beginning a glossary of some of the terms:

Skinner—Driver of a grading machine drawn by mules; used loosely to mean all who work in grading ganges, on railroad grades or other dirt-moving work for companies or corporations.

Dynos—The men who build the tracks of the railroad, including those who lay the ties, drive the spikes and handle the steel.

Rust-eaters—The dynos who lay the steel rails.

Fresnos—The four-mule scrapers, knows as slips, or the men who drive the four-mule machines.

Mormon—A scraper with a tongue in it.

Mountain Cat—A skinner who works in the mountain country.

Western Cat—The skinner who works in the plains country.

Gooser or Pushman—Driver of the pushing machines, which crowd the dirt into the pit in fills.

Sprocket Man—Man who holds the plow.

Longlashman or Strong-arm Man—A driver of a big team of four or more horses.

Spillman—Man who spills the dirt from the steam shovels.

Bellyrobber—The cook.

Ironburner—The camp's blacksmith.

Muckers, tampers and slopers are the men who shape the dirt in the fills, shoving it around into places where it is needed.

Gypo—A small outfit of two or three machines; also the men who work with the small outfits.

Gandy-dancer—The handler of the steam shovel.

Dinky-skinner—Skinner who works with the gang of graders for a narrow gauge road.

Cranesman—The man who handles the "dipper."

Fitmen—The fellows who level the dirt ahead of the steam shovel.

Stable-dog—The caretaker of the mules.

Growler—The boss of the outfit; the contractor.

By A. M. EASTERLING.

RECRUITED from every known vocation and et preserving with jealous love its own peculiar type a strange army of 1,500 "skinners" is marshalled in Omaha by local men in the spring of each year and sent forth to every section of America and Canada to engage in industrial struggles involving millions of dollars. Until the snow flies and the earth freezes this quaint army of dirt-movers builds its railroads, levels hills, fills valleys and fulfills the prophecy or destroys the hopes of the boomers, who are the advance guards and the outposts of modern civilization.

Through languid summers in the south, the hot midsummers of the central west or the short and tantalizing warm seasons of the north, these skinners, with wonderful camaraderie, labor like the slaves of ancient Egypt, yet withal contrive to surround their work with that halo of romance with which the man of mediocre temperament invests the skinner's prototype—the cowboy. They live with the same wild abandon as did the horsemen of the plains, drinking a little harder, spending more freely, eating better grub, making more money, dreaming bigger dreams and worshiping the boss while they laugh at his worries.

Wherever the tentacles of progress reach to clutch and hold the riches of new countries, there the skinners gather, but always as the forerunners of the permanent civilization which builds its country homes and its somber cities of steel and stone. They spend their wages and much of their time in the cities, but the wanderlust, which is one of their characteristics, impels them on and on, always a little in the lead, blazing the trail for their less restless brethren to follow. They are the mighty Nomads of capital, weaving the gossamer schemes of the men with money into tangible things—leveled hills, uplifted valleys, mountains undermined—and behind them sounds the roar of swift-moving engines on thin steel rails, bearing the home-makers.

Back of Billy Atkins' saloon on Farnam street, in a little old shack, the skinners keep their headquarters. There the floaters gather, year in and year out, proud of their calling and jealous of its good name. No swaggering stranger could flaunt in their faces a deadlier insult than to sneer at a grader, a growler, a dyno, a skinner, a fresno, wheeler or even a gypo. They are clannish, hobnobbing with none who comes unintroduced, but generous to the friend who is broke.

"Most clannish crowd you ever saw," said John M. Ward, one-time politician of Sarpy county, but now first lieutenant to George W. Condon, who is known all over the middle west as "the galloper." "If a skinner with 100 plunks in his pocket hits a gang of 100 dead broke pals, you can bet your bottom dollar every skinner in the bunch will pocket a buck. That is their way. They are the last survivors of the great free spenders of the early days. They love the picturesque, the flamboyant, and they're true blue."

Always, without exception, the skinner wears the telltale toggery of his trade. A narrow-brim black hat with high, undented crown, and his "$6 shoes" are as necessary to the skinner as a T-bone steak and a black cigar or a thick and juicy plug, which are the known prime essentials of his life. Because the rust-eaters, the lingoistic appellation of the rail-laying squads of the railroad construction gangs, are less careful of their dress they are not admitted to the inner councils of the truly elite skinners. The rust-eaters ordinarily prefer a battered cady or an outlandish cap to a high black hat.

Exact as the science of railroad grading has become, the skinner, with his love of the peculiar and the picturesque, refuses to be less exact in his lingo and will seldom speak of his own work except in the idioms of the trade, often perfectly meaningless to the uninitiated. Even "Whitey" Ransom, one of the "gallopers'" cooks, and touted as the small man of the big appetite, has too much pride of profession to verge from the vernacular.

"Whitey" has become famous for his T-bone steaks, potatoes lyonnaise, blackjack and punk, the latter meaning coffee and bread. In addition to this fare under Condon's orders that it be served well and bounteously, "Whitey" has made a specialty of cake and preserves or something equally as delicious for dessert. Condon was once head of a gypo, or "one-horse outfit," and has extended his business until his monthly payroll reaches around $50,000. One of his theories is, and the skinners all over the country are familiar with it, that the best fed men are the best workmen. Every night he gives the hard-worked graders everything their hungry stomachs crave, knowing that if they are well fed they will smoke their cigars, cigarettes or pipes and roll into blankets without suffering from that disrupting disease known as a "hankerin' for the white lights."

Condon won his title as "the galloping kid" because it took him but a few years to grow from a gypo to one of the chief factors in railroad grading in the middle west, being now second in rank to Edward Peterson, an Omaha "growler," who is grading the Canadian Pacific, a contract involving an expenditure of $150,000 a month for labor. A time-killing crew of the Condon army filled in and lifted the west end of Ames avenue. Their camp, pitched at Thirty-third and Ames avenue, drew a curious crowd daily and was at first the object of protect from citizens of the vicinity, but the order maintained by the skinners did not justify the complaints and they were willingly withdrawn.

A skinner camp is a model of order and cleanliness. About the big stock tent where the mules which pull the grading and pushing machines are kept the stable-dog and his flunkeys hold dispotic sway. Even the "boss man" would not interfere with the arrangements of the stable-dog any more than he would dare meddle with the stomach-robber, as the cook is called, for this cook has his own flunkies and is a person to reckon with in a grading camp.

There are, in the skinner camps of the middle west and Canada, a few outfits where horses are used to drag or push the grading, leveling and scraping machines, but the true skinner abhors the horse. Give him stubborn teams of big mules, seventeen hands high, and the pride of the longlashman possesses him at once. No other wild or domestic animal could fill the place the mule holds in the skinners' camps. He is by nature peculiarly equipped for the work; the heat does not hurt him; his hide is tough and few welts rise where the long lash strikes; he is more sure of foot than the horse, less nervous, less fastidious.

Although the mules could withstand much rough treatment and neglect, the stable dog ministers to them as painstakingly as a Hindu cares for the sacred cows of India. While the boss-man does not meddle in the affairs of the stable dog, it is told in many grading camps with apparent pride that the growler could at a glance, while walking past the harnessed teams, detect a missing buckle or on the instant see the slightest "switch" of harness. "The galloper" is accredited with being of so keen an eye that he knows the collars belonging to each of his hundreds of mules and has halted skinners as they drove out of camp to order a collar changed, knowing the mule would limp into camp at night with a sore shoulder if the skinner worked him in the wrong collar all day.

There are several classes of skinners and none of them shun the Omaha headquarters, where "Old Dad" Holbrook presides at the conclaves with an ease of bearing and speech which entitles him to the rank of a steam shovel man, but he is not even a skinner. "Dad" is the peer of "dopesters," and as the tide of floaters, or drifting skinners, ebbs and flows with the come and go of the season, it is "Old Dad" Holbrook who sends the pushmen, the wheelers, the fresnos, the dinky skinners, the dynos, the meat-burners and the mountain cats on their way. In some mesmeric manner he knows where the newest gypo is at work, how many skinners the big growlers need, where the next army of dirt shovers is likely to be flung and the length of time it will maneuver there.

Any skinner who works with a steam shovel gang of from seventy to 700 men, or even with the wheelers and fresnos, is entitled to wear the black hat and the $6 shoes, but it grieves the soul of a skinner greatly to see a poor little despised gypo affect the mannerisms of a high-class skinner, when everybody knows he is nothing but a straggling scout of the main armies of graders. Although the gypo drives the grading and pushing machines and the dump wagons on little jobs and his dreams are not shot through with glamour of mighty conquests of the earth such as the steam shovel men know, he is, for all that, admitted to be a very near relative of the blue-blood skinner.

Squatted on the floor of Holbrook's little shack, or lounging on the rough benches about the walls, the skinners renew acquaintances and spin thrilling yarns of last season's adventures. There are stories of encounters with bears and bobcats and hair-raising descriptions of struggles at night in the wild lands of Canada or the swamps of the south with strange ferocious beasts—stories to make a boy gasp.

One of Peterson's skinners declares he has witnesses to prove that he chased a big black bear into camp one day and that the frightened animal suddenly turned and chased him back into the woods and that he was lost for two days. Another skinner who worked last season in Canada says a flock of wild ducks in numbers so great that the stars were hidden swept over the camp one night. Thinking the white tents were water, they circled and settled.

The flaps of the "growler's" tent were rolled up and at least a dozen of the migrating ducks crawled under his roof, fluttered over his bunk and even tried to hide under the covers. The growler, awakened from sound slumber, suffered all the symptoms of a man with the "snakes," and had it not been for his strong constitution he would have undoubtedly endured a nervous breakdown, this skinner affirms. Men in all manner of night garb ran yelling from the tents and stood befuddled while the whirling drove went by. The stomach robber was less flustered and solemnly gathered in the wounded birds, caged them in the cook shack and for many days thereafter the skinners dined on wild duck.

Skinners seldom laugh at the stories told, for loud laughter is not one of their characteristics. A group of them will only smile at a yarn which sets the chance hearer to guffawing. Cosmopolitan as they are, they consciously repel the loquacious person who seeks to be one of them in their revels or to participate in their frequent conversatinal fetes. They meet in session at their old haunts year by year, discuss the latest and the oldest news and wander on their separate ways, their real lives a closed book to their dearest comrades of the clan.

"Where's he from?" an inquiring person asks "Dad" Holbrook when a particularly picturesque skinner takes leave of headquarters. "Dunno. He's a skinner," and Holbrook goes on with his chewing, feeling his explanation has been full and satisfactory. Some time during the life of the skinner he finds his way back to his old haunts, although he may have spent a score of years in South America or Africa on some big job, and he is just as content to "chew the rag with the dopester' and pass the latest grading camp gossip with strangers, apparently, as he would be to chat with the acquaintances of former years.

"They come and go—hundreds of them," said Holbrook, in a meditative mood. "Where? Nobody knows. Nobody cares. They come and go and come back again, sometime. Isn't that enough? I remember them after many years. They are not easy to forget, as you seem to think. They scatter over the whole continent when the season is over and the ground freezes, but when the spring thaws come they hear the old call and invariably find their way back to the camps—new camps, ntw faces, new growlers, but a grading camp with the veteran skinners there—and that is the great lure."

As Holbrook ceased speaking and clambered down from the steps where he sat outside the shack half a dozen men in high black hats and glistening shoes came out, called a cheery "goodby, Dad." and vanished down the alley. "Dad" looked after them with a yearning in his eyes, for his days of hard labor are over. "Where are they going?" a stranger prompted, but "Dad" did not hear the question, or, hearing it, thought it puerile and vouchsafed no answer.