

Wobbly Walk Through the Siskiyou

by

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After lightning killed his father on their Donation homestead, eight year old Dick Payne moved to town with his mother, becoming a rivulet in the migratory stream that urbanized America. The town, Medford, was an 1885 creation of the railroad, the transportation catalyst in the nation's transforming economy. On summer nights young Dick could hear the banging and chugging of the southbound freight through the open window of their house at 3rd and Bartlett Streets, a mere two blocks from the train depot. During the day in the lot next to their house, the vacant lot closest to the depot, shabby men would gather for speeches.

"They shouted a lot," he recalled over a half century later, "but no one paid much attention to them."

Undoubtedly among the orators were Wobblies, IWW transients who recessed their travels as freight train barnacles ranging up and down the west coast in search of employment. Medford generally ignored these curious cranks for their soapbox oratory posed no threat to the community's social order, but when an army of them arrived on a freight that following winter, it decidedly unsettled the town's constable, J. P. Hittson, who called out his deputies to meet the train. As the February chill sent a steam column skyward, they passed up the line of cars, encountering only a few quiet greetings or muffled conversations as they peered into dark boxcars. There was no confrontation for the "army" was bound for Fresno, where Wobbly orators were locked in a free speech imbroglio with that city's officials.¹

Fresno city "fathers" were anxious to staunch Wobbly rhetoric when they realized just how unambiguous these workers were about the existing economic and social order. "The working class and the employing class have nothing in common," the preamble to their organization's constitution stated. "Struggle must go on until all the toilers come together on the political, as well as on the industrial field, and take hold of that which they, produce through an economic organization of the working class."²

IWW local 66 had been organizing construction and power plant workers in Fresno and offered to include agricultural laborers as well. Fresno officials considered exhortations to "struggle" and seize "that which they produce" to be sufficient grounds for arrest. When the IWW journal *Industrial Worker* urged members "to go to Fresno and break the law," one hundred twelve Wobblies responded in Portland. In the previous year, 1910, Wobblies successfully

conducted a passive resistance campaign that filled Spokane jails with speakers who defied a prohibition on street corner speaking, so they targeted Fresno with the Spokane tactics.

Wobbly speech resonated with Whitmanesque imagery—gyppos, scissorbills, hit-the-grits, and bindlestiffs. They bombastically excoriated corporations and chilled bourgeois sensibilities, as well as those of many skilled and settled workers, with references to general strikes, direct action, slowdowns and sabotage. They often adapted popular gospel hymns with lyrics that exuded social criticism and defiance, singing of "pie in the sky," of "power in a band of workingmen, of "Casey Jones the Union Scab," and "nearer my job to thee." With a red flag as their symbol and disregard for private property as one of their tenets, Wobblies were frequently confused with Marxists, which they decidedly were not Like the Black Panthers a couple of generations later they were judged more for what they said than by what they did. In Portland they heckled Lord Baden-Powell, the founder of the Boy Scouts, taunted the veterans of the Spanish-American War at the base of their monument, and generally alienated the "establishment" by sponsoring strikes and raging against bosses, exploitation, and wage slavery. Their reputation suffered even more when they opposed World War I, and when two of their most famous firebrand leaders, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, and Big Bill Haywood, abandoned IWW syndicalism for communism, distinctions lost on most IWW critics.

The seasonal nature of the Pacific Northwest's agricultural and timber economies attracted transient workers, frequently unmarried, whose rootlessness freed them from home and hearth constraints. They absorbed their working class doctrine tutorially around hobo jungle campfires and in boxcar seminars, and like churchgoers inculcated through hymns with simple theology, they sang the ideology contained in their *Little Red Songbook*. When Fresno's workers called for support the Northwest responded with men steeped in labor theory, experienced in public demonstrations, and rootless enough to be undaunted by the prospect of jail.³

E. M. Clyde of Seattle penned an account of part of the Northwest's IWW contingent committed to Fresno. His widow gave the manuscript to Charles P. LaWarne who in turn published it in *Labor History*.⁴ The Fresno expedition which Clyde describes was generally characterized by the press as an anarchist endeavor fraught with potential violence. However, a review of newspaper reports along their route demonstrates that a reservoir of public sympathy accompanied them.

After collecting twenty dollars in donations, Clyde and sixteen others boarded a freight in Tacoma, headed for a Wobbly rendezvous in Portland. A confrontational brakeman permitted them to remain on board when they presented union cards, but a conductor was not so tolerant. Drawing a pistol, he ordered them to "unload," but rescinded the command when the riders advised him of the consequences should he fail to shoot them all. He responded by tossing a lighted flare into their boxcar and promising their arrest upon arrival in

Centralia, They extinguished the fusee and saw no more of him.

Hundreds demonstrated their solidarity with Fresno by parading through downtown Portland, banners aloft. Then the IWW and the local Socialist Party convened a joint meeting. They organized an executive committee, expelled unwelcome observers, raised funds for a trip treasury, elected to refer to themselves by number rather than names, to communicate with those outside their group only through designated spokesmen, and sent scouts to the rail yards to reconnoiter train departures.

"Loaded Cars Broken Open," shrilled the article in the Portland *Oregonian* under the article banner "'Army Goes South" Oregon's premier metropolitan newspaper seldom characterized the Wobblies favorably. "The train crews were helpless to prevent the aggression," it reported, and concluded that they headed for Fresno on the midnight train "expecting trouble."⁵ But they were determined to avoid trouble en route.

The eight o'clock stopover in Albany demonstrated their travel regimen. While an appointed few detrained to solicit contributions for their food fund, most sat quietly, exchanging stares or occasional pleasantries with curious onlookers. Police provided morning newspapers and assurances of unwelcome. "Some had been in Spokane's bull-pen," the local weekly newspaper said of the travelers, and others were gamblers "kicked out of Seattle." Despite that unflattering description it acknowledged that "no objection was made to their riding," though it went on to conclude that "the railroad hardly dare do it" An irascible local baited them with a popular calumny that IWW stands for "I Won't Work," but they ignored him. A few complied with a request to vacate a boxcar loaded with beer, undisturbed by these reputed disrespecters of property.⁶ Albany was the first demonstration of their single-minded purpose: to reach Fresno in order to demonstrate their commitment to free speech.

During the Albany pause a concerned onlooker or a practical joker flashed a message thirty miles down the track to the marshall of Junction City who mobilized a posse to meet the train. One suspects the Southern Pacific crew, for they had added a boxcar to replace the one decoupled in Salem, which sent the Wobblies scrambling onto a gondola filled with Great Lakes sand destined for a municipal water filtration plant The conductor's decision to add a car in Albany for the convenience of the Wobblies suggests that a rapport was developing with the trainmen. At Junction City the engineer managed to stop the train with the Wobbly car abreast of the depot. "Almost all of the male population was waiting for them," a journalist reported, "backed up by a formidable array of weapons including every kind of conceivable implement from a shotgun to a meat ax." Stay on the train or we shoot they warned.

After a staredown a few townsfolk edged close enough to chat. The travelers' courtesy astonished them and they began to suspect a prank. During the crew's switching the locals gathered at a siding and listened to IWW oratory before they resumed southward.⁷

The Eugene *Daily Guard*, which had reported that they had "captured a freight train," acknowledged that "they were not molested here, as little was known of their presence in this city."⁸ During their 5:00 p.m. Roseburg stopover they dined on bologna and cookies, then paraded down Sheridan Street flanked by their fund raisers who solicited eight dollars. Meanwhile the train crew declared that the Southern Pacific had added two boxcars in Portland "to avoid a confrontation." The Roseburg *Evening News* also printed the persistent rumor that their ostensible destination was Fresno but they were actually headed to join the revolutionaries convulsing Mexico. Once out of town the paper declared that the "Industrialists Will Be Entertained at Dunsmuir" where "a carload of police were waiting."⁹

It was an ominous portent, echoed the next day in bold type in the *Oregonian*:

TROOPS MAY BLOCK MARCH OF MALCONTENTS TO FRESNO¹⁰

But the gravest threat confronting the Wobblies was not an armed blockade. It was railroad intransigence and winter weather. At the foot of the Siskiyou Mountains the Ashland switching yards, maintenance shops, roundhouse, and bunkhouses serviced the Southern Pacific's Shasta Division which was headquartered over the mountains in Dunsmuir, California. That division's officials had no intention of continuing the amity that apparently developed between the Wobblies and the Portland train crew, for while 112 breakfasted on bread, bologna, and coffee purchased in Ashland their empty boxcar was bumped off, even as the local police was conveying its unwelcome. In the face of a winter that boasted one of the region's deepest snowpacks, they clambered aboard open flatcars, only to be told that the local superintendent would not permit them to depart in full view of the depot. Actually the Southern Pacific division headquarters ordered the engineer to make a "running shoot" through Ashland so they could not reboard.

Walk up the track a mile where the train will stop for you, they were told.

Sensing a ruse they concealed three men aboard the train to cut the air, which would halt the train should it try to run past them. The three miscalculated and the train steamed a mile beyond the gathered Wobblies before stopping. As they raced to board, the crew restored the air and the train was again underway before they could close the distance. At an emergency trackside meeting they refused to accept the disappointed executive committee's resignation, expelled three suspected spies, and decided to hit-the-grits—walk the tracks—to Steinman, a watering siding ten miles into the mountains.

Volunteers remained behind to board the next train through Ashland and break its air where all could board. As the gray day darkened they tramped into Steinman and began milling around in the snow without food or shelter. Most also lacked overcoats. The sympathetic resident section boss, A. W. Nell, loaned them axes and shovels to clear an area in the snow and build a few bonfires. His wife supplied them with apples and crackers, though hardly enough to feed 112.

An eleven o'clock meeting again refused the now exasperated executive committee's resignation, but by three, the morning chill and desperation moved them to elect new officers.

Down the mountain eight railroad detectives showed up to block any new arrivals from joining them. Meanwhile a Medford reporter in Ashland interviewed a northbound train crew who described the Wobblies "huddled in the shelter of a water tank," and the Ashland police declared that they carried weapons.¹¹ The reporter then made his way up to their camp and later filed a wire story saying:

The railroad has given orders that no trains shall stop at Steinman, and mountaineers who know the Siskiyou pass say there is grave danger that the wayfarers may perish in the storm and snow.

The reporter remarked that their tempers were beginning to fray, and a few broke their strategy of silence and shouted remarks during an interview until glares silenced them. None divulged their identity. A few shouters had said Fresno was a smokescreen with Mexico and its revolt as their ultimate destination, but the official spokesmen emphasized:

We are bound for Fresno to go to jail...our members are going to keep going there until Fresno allows free speech...our intentions are peaceable...not a man among us is armed.

They invited him to search for weapons. He found none.

Before dawn the new officers announced that they would hike four miles to Siskiyou Tunnel where trains could be boarded as they stopped before their final run at the summit. So through the remainder of the night the Wobblies walked deeper into the mountains. At dawn they purchased vegetables from the store at the Siskiyou stop, cooked a "mulligan," and waited for the next train. Though freights were considered to be a fair means for travel, passenger trains, with their paying customers, were not. So when C. A. Hill and other railroad detectives stepped down from a passenger car in Siskiyou, the Wobblies made no effort to board.

The detectives disclosed that they were ordered to prevent any southbound boarding, but they could offer rides all the way back to Portland. Rumors that the Wobblies carried weapons also distressed railroad officials, they said. To dispel the rumor all lined up and submitted to another weapons search. Even though weaponless, the detectives still forbid them to board southbound freights.

Tensions mounted and solidarity broke upon the next freight's arrival. Some rushed the train in defiance of the detectives' shouted warnings and prohibitions, though they made no attempt to dislodge any. Meanwhile other Wobblies stood trackside and refused to board, realizing that a pretext for a violent confrontation could destroy their legitimacy and credibility. For an awkward interval those on the train, anxious to get beyond the mountains' icy grip, looked down on their companions who were unwilling to hazard their commitment to their Fresno

comrades. "Civil war nearly broke out within our ranks," Clyde remembered, but "after heaping abuse upon each other" (as well as upon the police and the Southern Pacific), principle bested convenience and one by one the boarders jumped off. Reunited, all watched the train pull away. The detectives also stayed behind to monitor possible future attempts.

Their declaration that "only one thing will cause us to turn back and that is the news that our brothers in Fresno have been liberated from jail and are allowed their constitutional right of free speech," might have been modified by circumstances. They could have retreated back out of the mountains to regroup, for stirring declarations did little to warm shivering bodies. Ten lost heart and turned toward Ashland. The remainder, in an expression of undeniable courage, set out on foot through three feet of snow to crest the summit and press into California with its possible prospect of confronting troops and posses. Hornbrook, their intermediate goal, lay nineteen miles away. "There will (be) no attempt made to describe the misery, exposure and hardship endured on this trip of 19 miles through the snow, slush, and water but the suffering will long be remembered by us," Clyde wrote. Meanwhile, the railroad notified California's governor and Siskiyou County's sheriff.

A February 17th wire story out of Sacramento reported that California's governor, after grouching about Oregon's failure to stop the Wobblies, had ordered Major General W. H. White to alert the national guard's Second Regiment, particularly Company B at Redding and Company A at Chico, with two infantry companies and a troop of cavalry to stand by on reserve in Sacramento. They would be activated should the authorities of Siskiyou County, which bordered Oregon, appeal for help. Meanwhile railroad police from San Francisco headed north to secure the Dunsmuir freight yards from Wobbly pilfering.¹²

Just across the state line they purchased cheese and crackers in the mill town of Hilt where some began to lag and drop behind. Some made for barns to pass the frigid night while down the line in Redding residents monitored their approach through their local newspaper, *The Courier Press*, which described them as a "hobo swarm," but acknowledged that they were "well behaved" at Siskiyou. But Hornbrook was "considerably stirred over (their) expected arrival," it reported. If Hornbrook was stirred it was not with apprehension, for its locals prepared a stew to welcome those who began to arrive in their hamlet after dark. A community breakfast greeted stragglers from the barns the following morning. A railroad physician, who came unexpectedly, supplied medicine at no charge and dispatched one Wobbly with frozen feet to the hospital. The county sheriff arrived from Yreka to announce that they would pass through his county unharassed. An advance party went ahead to Montague, out of the snow, where the residents provided them with food for two days and firewood for their camp at the baseball field where they raised a red flag, sang, and offered a half hour of "red hot" speeches in the "bitter cold." In the latrine they discovered ten pounds of dynamite which they turned over to the police, convinced that it had been planted to discredit them. With the railroad police leapfrogging by train to stay abreast of

them, they left the tracks and walked back into snow along a wagon road shortcut to Weed, bypassing Gazelle where railroad detectives guarded the stock pens. In Weed they camped on the plaza, posed for a photo, held a rally, and passed the hat to raise nine dollars.

The next stop, Sisson, now the city of Mt Shasta, interjected a bizarre element into what had been an arduous journey on foot. The manager of the May Roberts Theatrical Company walked into their camp and offered to transport them into Dunsmuir aboard Ms. Roberts's chartered rail car. Accepting, they arrived on the turf of their nemesis, the Southern Pacific's Shasta Division, and packed the opera house for Ms. Robert's performance, punctuated between acts by IWW speeches. Afterwards she hosted them for "supper." No confrontation with troops materialized, as rumored, and local sympathizers welcomed them. The town's leading socialist, saloon keeper J.M. LaDue, opened his establishment to them with drinks on the house. Some were invited to stay with families, and the Knights of Pythias hall overlooking the railroad yard housed the remainder.

Facing a long uninhabited stretch in three feet of snow down the Sacramento River canyon, the executive committee tried to negotiate a payment to ride a train, but with only \$3.00 in their treasury the railroad officials would have none of it. The next day they walked out of Dunsmuir, headed for Kennett forty -six miles down the track. "During this hike we were strung along the track for a distance of 20 miles or more," Clyde, the last one to arrive in Kennett, remembered. "The first day some made LaMoine, some Delta, and others Antlers." Spread out as they were, those in Delta outdistanced the treasury, but a sympathetic storekeeper provided them with bread and potatoes, and in Antlers Mrs. J. F. Gregory provided an unsolicited breakfast for 30.

"Pastures Found Green in Kennett," the Redding paper reported, as indeed they were. Kennett, submerged now beneath the waters of Lake Shasta, produced copper from 1896 through World War I. Most of its 1,714 inhabitants were decidedly working class. They opened the Eagles Hall to the Wobblies, reduced in numbers now to 102, and raised an astonishing \$50.00 in donations. With traces of spring in the air they scheduled a baseball game and the hometown emerged victorious: Kennett 2, IWW 1.

D. O'Connell, a railroad detective still charged with keeping them off the freight trains, acknowledged in Kennett that none had "tried to board or had been a problem." Revived by Kennett they headed south again.

After regrouping and raising provisions and seventeen dollars on the street at Coram, home of the Balakial smelter, they marched en masse into Redding where "the big hearted landlord" Henry Clineschmidt threw open his Temple Hotel on California Street to them. His largesse included not only beds and five free meals, but a recuperative interval in which their Sisson-to-Dunsmuir patroness Ms. Roberts scheduled a fundraising benefit performance for them at the armory: "'Mrs. Temple's Telegram,' an IWW Benefit Comedy."

The *Courier-Press* urged the public to attend "and make this a financial success for those who are spoken of as men, and good fellows at that, who only want their rights and the rights of every free American—that of free speech." Their stay in Redding confirmed that "they do not seek saloons; they are a sober and well-behaved lot of men." Ms. Roberts intended to hire a rail car to transport them to Fresno but attendance receipts did not meet expectations, though she still presented them with \$15.00. While the local newspaper concluded that the Fresno face-off was "as good as ended," an advance team was already in Red Bluff generating support as the main body walked to Anderson where the *Dispatch* had called them "Industrious Bums."¹³

The Chico Record reported "Won't Workers live up to name" in an article about a Northern California Power manager in Anderson who offered all the marching Wobblies construction jobs on the Battle Creek power plant in Coleman. With Fresno, not employment, as their mission, none accepted. The Anderson police, with the Southern Pacific police looking on, urged them to move on. While the Southern Pacific permitted apolitical hobos and transients to ride the freights, Fresno bound Wobblies still could not, so they walked on to Cottonwood by nightfall where E.G. Carter opened a hall and gave them a cabin to cook their donated and purchased food.

Beyond Cottonwood the advance team in Red Bluff did good work, for the municipal government placed the Stewart Building at their disposal. They scandalized the local press with their public meeting denouncing capitalism system, the major parties, and politics in general. "It is not a worthy cause," the paper shrieked, and asserted that the money appropriated by the council for the hospitably renting of the building should have been spent to beef up the police. The advance team at the next stop, Vena, home of a Stanford University winery, mobilized local socialists to donate money, food, and firewood, stacked in the yard of saloon keeper, who availed his establishment and twelve bottles of liquor. Not surprisingly speaking intensified as the evening wore on, particularly glowing references to the commonality between the IWW and socialism. And since rumors persisted that victory had been achieved in Fresno, some advocated that the treasury (then about \$15.00) be invested in additional celebratory drink. Some deserted amid this erosion of solidarity, while the remainder pressed on to Chico the following day.

Of all the towns on the path to Fresno, Chico appeared to be the most hysterical about approaching Wobblies. *The Chico Record* first raised the town's awareness with a page one story "Big Army of 'I Won't Work' Men Huddle Beside Water Tank," while on page five another article judged that most press accounts about the Wobblies were "needlessly alarmist" Throughout the coverage of the Fresno trekkers, the Record published articles that reflected a distinct difference in the attitudes between the editors and some reporters. When the Wobblies reached Dunsmuir where troops were rumored to be deployed, a *Record* article declared, "Hobo War Merely Another Myth," and interviewed the Chico national guard commander to confirm that there was no alert. Nonetheless, when the

Walkers were still far to the north in Hornbrook, ten hapless hobos arrived in Chico aboard a southbound freight. The constable arrested them immediately, assuming that they were a Fresno-bound vanguard. In court two days later they averred that they were not Wobblies and those who promised to leave town were released. They rejailed William Murphy, "who was disposed to be insolent". The following day another news story discredited hobos and transients. A tramp wielding a five cent piece tried to lure a six year old girl into a shed, but an alert neighbor called for help and saved her from a "terrible outrage." The man escaped. But the account alerted the community to transients.

As the Wobblies were leaving Red Bluff the *Record* reported that the Fresno confrontation had ended and "Industrials were leaving the city." A journalistic spoof followed entitled "The Battle of Never Was," describing "militias, boy scouts, and Indian bands arrayed," and "Lo!" a figure on horseback approached at a "mad gallop" to report that the battle with the Industrials "which had been scheduled by the newspapers of Northern California will not take place." Nonetheless, three days later headlines announced "Hobo Horde Will Be in This City Today."

Though they sported red ribbons, their arrival from Vina was hardly auspicious. Their advance party again enlisted the help of local socialists and rented Argonaut Hall from Charles Harris, but each party thought the other accepted responsibility for the expense. There they received a telegram confirming that the Fresno fight was over. After their final meal, \$12.50 instead of the usual \$9.00, two dollars remained in the treasury. Then the \$6.00 rent bill, which they believed the socialists had paid, arrived. One man stayed behind to discharge it with his labor. So they voted to disband and burned their minutes. A few street speakers later gathered a small crowd at city hall and blasted the local reporter who wrote that they had refused work in Anderson. However, the *Record* reported that the "army dissolved."¹⁴

When they elected to refer to themselves by number rather than by name, and when they elected to burn their minutes, the Fresno trekkers deprived history of some insights into their personal dimensions. Perhaps that was their intention, for "solidarity," not individuality, was one of their foremost canons. But even if they cannot be identified individually, anyone who, in the depths of winter, has traveled Interstate 5 through the Sacramento River canyon south of Dunsmuir where it parallels the Southern Pacific's tracks, can attest to the fortitude of ill-clad and poorly-nourished men, slogging through the snow, risking hypothermia, frostbite, or freezing, in order to reach a hostile community that promised to jail them if they publicly demonstrated for free speech.

This nation often esteems those who hazard their lives to promote and secure its liberty. Monuments often celebrate those offering their last full measure of devotion, including conscripts and bounty-induced volunteers, as well as volunteers motivated by conviction. Perhaps a monument should be raised at Steinman or where the tracks curve away from the southern edge of Dunsmuir to those men of conviction who voluntarily, for the cause of free speech, hit-the-grits

and disappeared into the snowfall to confront possible death, not in the face of hostile gunfire, but in the face of an indifferent nature's blizzard.

History forgets more heroes than it remembers. Those Wobblies warrant memory.

Citations

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3. Robert L Tyler, *Rebels of the Woods: The IWW in the Pacific Northwest*, Eugene, 1967, is the standard study of the nature of Northwest Wobblies.

4. Charles P. LeWarne, "On the Wobbly Train to Fresno," *Labor History*, XTV (Spring, 1973, 264-90.)

Clyde's account is also reproduced in: Philip S. Foner, ed., *Fellow Workers and Friends: IWW Free Speech Fights as Told by Participants*, Westport, 1981. Subsequent references to Clyde are drawn from this source.

5. *Portland Oregonian*, February 17, 1911 (Hereinafter cited as *Oregonian*.)

6. *Albany Democrat*, February 24, 1911; *Mail Tribune*, February 19, 1911.

7. *Mail Tribune*, February 17, 1911.

8. *Eugene Daily Guard*, February 17, 1911.

9. *Roseburg Evening News*, February 17, 1911.

10. *Oregonian*, February 18, 1911.

11. *Mail Tribune*, February 17, 1911, February 19, 1911. The Medford reporter's dispatch from Steinman provided the basis for most initial descriptions though various publications sometimes utilized their own embellishing headlines and adjectives. The "running shoot" was described in the *Redding Courier Press*, February 17, 1911.

12. *Mail Tribune*, February 17, 1911. Unless otherwise indicated descriptions of this passage through northern California are drawn from the *Courier Press*

between February 17th and 27th.

13. The descriptions from Anderson and in the Red Bluff News are reported in the Courier Press, March 2 and 4, 1911.

14. Chico descriptions are drawn from Clyde and issues of the Chico Record between February 18 and March 8, 1911.