An Informal History of Hitchhiking

JOHN T. SCHLEBECKER *

BEGGING rides from passing motorists, or hitchhiking, is an American contribution to world civilization which has been largely unexamined by historians. And this is strange because hitchhikers first became familiar figures on the American scene in the middle 1920's, and have been more or less ubiquitous ever since. They have even appeared in popular literature and art: the Little Hitchhiker of the comic strips; the chief witness in Erle Stanley Gardner's *Case of the Vagabond Virgin;* Tom Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath;* the principals in the motion picture comedy, *It Happened One Night,* and in countless other places.

Hitchhiking originated in the United States, and spread more recently into Europe. Growth of the practice obviously depends upon readily obtainable automotive transportation. Furthermore, the vast distances in America posed problems of transportation which provided people with reasonable excuses for soliciting rides. The hitchhiker was first of all a product of American automobile civilization. He appeared elsewhere only as automobiles became common.

Hitchhikers are a varied lot, and their reasons for electing this mode of transportation have been as diverse as the travelers themselves. Roughly, hitchhikers beg rides because: (1) they are unable to pay for transportation, (2) they are unwilling to pay, (3) they cannot find any other means of transportation, (4) they are looking for an adventure, and (5) any combination of these. At one time or another transients, professional beggars, criminals, migratory workers, and general misfits have sought rides. But these were always an unimportant proportion of the total number of hitchhikers. Although some of these, such as the migratory workers and the temporarily unemployed occasionally accounted for a large part of the total, they seem not to have predominated anywhere for any length of time. The tramps apparently have kept to the railroads. Unlike the society of tramps, the ranks of the hitchhikers contain a fair proportion of women and girls. Over the years hitchhikers have come at random from all levels of society.

---

* Mr. Schlebecker is an Assistant Professor of economic history at Iowa State College and an alumnus of Beta Psi Chapter (University of Montana). "As a hitchhiker, man and boy, for some twenty years," the author has attempted to treat an aspect of our social history which has been generally ignored by historians.

Vagabonds and beggars have a long history. This history, however, is only indirectly related to the development of hitchhiking. The ride beggar of early America was a far cry from the multitudes who took to the roads between 1920 and 1957. Furthermore, the hitchhiker was seldom a professional transient or beggar. More frequently he personified the observation that at one time or another all men depend on the generosity of strangers. The very prevalence of the practice also set it apart from other forms of begging, and made it an adjunct of hospitality rather than of charity.

Henry Ford began mass production of the Model T in 1908. If hitchhikers existed before 1917, however, they left few records. Early automobile literature reveals a preoccupation with problems of mechanics and road construction. Of course, these were significant concerns, especially from a hitchhiker's view. Widespread wandering by lifts was difficult if not impossible until the automobile was made highly efficient, and until roads were improved to carry the heavier traffic.

When Vachel Lindsay, poet and traveler, decided to take a trip in 1912, he did not even consider the possibility of hitchhiking. He merely decided to walk across country, and not associate with tramps or ride the rails. But he noted later in his *Adventures While Preaching the Gospel of Beauty,* that at end of day he often found himself tired. Under these circumstances the rides offered by motorists were most welcome. As he observed:

> This delightful use that may be made of an automobile in rounding out a day's walk has had something to do with mending my prejudice against it, despite the grand airs of the tourists that whirl by at mid-day. I still maintain that the auto is a carnal institution, to be shunned by the truly spiritual, but there are times when I, for one, get tired of being spiritual.[1]

Lindsay did not request rides. Instead he found them offered to him. This sequence suggests one possible origin of hitchhiking. Perhaps the art owed as much to the generosity of drivers as to the presumption of a democratic people.

And yet, in 1912 Lindsay did not truly hitchhike. Early records of automotive transportation give no evidence of hitchhiking until around 1917.[2] Veterans of the First World War recollect soliciting rides on weekends, but their methods or degree of success are not recorded. Seeking lifts, however, seems to have been common enough to cause local army officers to issue passes only to those who would show they had enough money to buy their transportation.[3]

Hitchhiking probably began during the First World War, but the art apparently declined immediately thereafter. It was taken up again in the 1920's, with strong overtones of adventure. In 1921, J. K. Christian won membership in the Chicago Adventurer's Club by hitchhiking 3,023 miles in 27 days, or an average of more than 100 miles a day. That the feat was considered exceptional at the time suggests the still primitive development of highways and automobiles. It also indicates that hitchhikers were still something of a novelty.[4]

---

[1] Vachel Lindsay, *Adventures while Preaching the Gospel of Beauty* (New York, Macmillan, 1916; first printed in 1913), pp. 13, 84-85.

[2] The *New York Times Index* carries no mention of articles on hitchhiking or any variant of it from 1913 to 1921, and other sources are also silent.

[3] The statements about genuine hitchhiking during the First World War rest upon the recollections of a very few men with whom I have talked. But see also Samuel D. Zeidman, "Thumb Fun!" *Review of Reviews,* XCV (April, 1937), 55.

In the middle twenties a slight depression and the Florida land boom stimulated an increase in the number of hitchhikers. Simultaneously journalists developed an interest in the practice. The press issued warnings to motorists on the dangers of picking up hitchhikers. The police in parts of industrial Massachusetts, lacking direct legislation, tried to stop the practice by arresting hitchhikers for obstructing traffic. Self-appointed keepers of the public morals vigorously attacked the practice, but even they recognized some differences between hitchhiking and the more ancient tramping and vagrancy. An editorial writer for the New York *Times* noted:

> Most of these people, however, are not dangerous. They are simply immeasurably impudent. To the Sociologist they have a curious interest. Along roads where the universal omnibus thunders they wait and wait. Walk they will not. To beg they are not ashamed.... Why don't they carry out their system to its fullest? If the automobilist along the road owes them a ride, the householder along the road owes them shelter and food; ... and the keepers of the universal "hot dog" kennels are bound to put these privileged passengers on the free list.[5]

To the confusion of critics, hitchhikers almost never extended their requests to other items. Unlike the knights of the road, the hiker wanted only transportation. Hitchhikers differed from tramps so completely that in 1926 the agenda for the national convention of hoboes even included an item on the education of "auto hikers" to the ways of the road.[6]

---

[4] New York *Times*, Oct. 31, 1921, p. 32.

[5] *Ibid.*, Oct. 12, 1925, p. 20; *ibid.*, July 18, 1925, p. 3; *ibid.*, June 21, 1925, section IX, p. 11.

[6] *Ibid.*, Nov. 13, 1926, p. 11.

Throughout the later twenties, hitchhiking increased in prominence and importance. Local unemployment fostered population movement. At the same time, technological change made greater mobility possible. The changes included more efficient automobile manufacturing, more powerful engines, declining production costs, and wider ownership of cars. Of these, the very commonness of automobiles was highly significant. In 1920 some 9,231,941 automobiles were registered in the United States. By 1925 registrations had increased to 19,937,274 and by 1929 had gone up to 26,501,443.[7] Simultaneously the road system was measurably improved. The consequence of the improvements was suggested by accounts of longer and faster hitchhiking trips. In 1927 a pair of hitchhikers traveled from Los Angeles to New York in 14 days, while one adventurer made the round trip from Brooklyn to the Pacific and back. Apparently travelers moved between New York and Florida frequently and rapidly.[8]

Oddly enough children formed a large proportion of the hitchhikers. In or near cities they begged lifts chiefly to get to or from beaches or playgrounds. Of the various groups that hitchhiked, however, none occasioned as much comment as the girls who soon became a common sight to motorists. As early as 1926, the New York Girls' Service League considered girl hitchhikers a special problem. Certainly they had been begging rides before they were discovered to be a problem.[9] Girls hitchhiked especially during the summer when pleasant weather and vacations offered comfort and time for adventure. In a series of short stories in the *Saturday Evening Post,* Booth Jameson chose as heroines a pair of girl hitchhikers who worked as waitresses up and down the coast between New York and Florida.[10] According to the fictional account, most feminine hitchhikers were "big fat girls," but however that may be, girls did travel in search of work and adventure. Newspaper reports substantiate the general accuracy of the fictitional accounts. A married woman, dressed as a man, was arrested on a charge of vagrancy after hitchhiking from Westerly, Rhode Island to New York in 1927, and in 1928 two Brooklyn girls planned to hitchhike to Los Angeles.[11] Probably women and girls made up only a small proportion of hitchhikers. Obviously, however, they were active from the beginning.

---

[7] *Statistical Abstract of the United States,* for the appropriate years.

[8] New York *Times,* April 20, 1927, p. 6; *ibid.,* Sept. 28, 1927, p. 41; Booth Jameson, "Charles V and the Hitch-Hikers," *Saturday Evening Post,* CC (May 26, 1928), 10-11, plus.

[9] "Stop Children from Begging Rides in Minneapolis," *The American City,* XLI (Nov., 1929), 147-148; New York *Times,* July 18, 1926, Sect. II, p. 18.

Motorists' attitudes toward hitchhikers cannot be determined. Most accounts of hitchhiking emphasized the long intervals between rides which might in part have resulted from a general public distrust of hitchhikers. Laws against them also indicate some disapproval. Some people insisted that hitchhiking was, or at least symbolized, an attack on free enterprise and self-reliance. Officials, and others, occasionally worried about the danger to driver or passenger.[12] In spite of any disapproval, hitchhikers continued to travel.

The Great Depression began in October, 1929 and by 1932 twelve million Americans were unemployed. In 1937 the Lynds reported that the gasoline stations in Middletown had not suffered greatly during the depression. People sacrificed a great deal in order to keep their cars. Although the production of new automobiles declined during the early thirties, the use of cars did not. At the same time, roads were further improved, due in large measure to construction undertaken as state and federal work relief. Meanwhile, the depression forced new hordes onto the roads. All events combined to increase the number of hitchhikers who now became ever-present along the highways of the nation. In the twenties the pioneers of hitchhiking had been primarily children, college men, and a few women. By the thirties the ranks included all types of people. The earlier groups still predominated.

---

[10] Jameson, "Charles V and the Hitch-Hikers," *loc. cit.*, pp. 11, 64; Jameson, "Just Students," *Saturday Evening Post*, CCI, Oct. 15, 1928, p. 14-15; Jameson, "Hitch-Hikers by Night Light," *Saturday Evening Post*, CC (May 5, 1928), 130.

[11] New York *Times*, Jan. 19, 1927, p. 3; *ibid.*, Aug. 16, 1928, p. 23.

[12] New York *Times*, Oct. 12, 1925, p. 20; *ibid.*, Nov. 29, 1927, sect. III, 4; "Stop Children from Begging Rides in Minneapolis," *loc. cit.*, pp. 147-148.

Young boys made up a fair proportion of the hitchhikers, but in the 1930's they often took extended journeys rather than short trips to the beach. Some were leaving poverty-stricken homes, some came from moderately prosperous families, some were just out for fun, but more than before, they moved from town to town. Children continued to hitchhike for short distances, generally to places of recreation. In some places ordinances against the short distance juvenile hitchhikers were fairly successful. Truancy and hitchhiking were occasionally connected. The association was natural enough, and just as naturally alarmed both moralists and the police.[13]

College students did most of the hitchhiking during the thirties for short and long trips alike, and long distance trips became more frequent. In 1936 a blind college student even hitchhiked across the continent; later in the decade trips to Latin America and Bermuda were reported.[14] College men and women were usually treated as a privileged class. Very often people even felt that laws against hitchhikers ought not apply to students. Under these circumstances, evidence of college status became desirable for successful hitchhiking. In 1938 Chapman J. Milling noted:

> For a very good reason all the college boys on the road appear to be freshmen. The little skullcap with its letter

---

[13] Harlan Gilmore, *The Beggar,* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1940), p. 87; Bergen Evans, "I Pick 'Em Up," *Scribner's Magazine,* CV (Feb., 1939), 11; "In the Driftway," *Nation,* CXXXV (Sept. 14, 1932), 233; "Bronx Board of Trade Combats 'Hitch-Hiking,'" *American City,* XLII (Jan., 1930), 106; "Hitch-Hikers Thumb the Wrong Driver," New York *Times,* Aug. 5, 1939, p. 17; *ibid.,* April 30, 1939, p. 18.

[14] New York *Times,* Jan. 11, 1930, p. 1; *ibid.,* Dec. 31, 1933, sect. IV, 7; *ibid.,* Sept. 13, 1935, p. 2; *ibid.,* Aug. 7, 1936, p. 1; *ibid.,* Aug. 30, 1938, p. 18; *ibid.,* Aug. 1, 1939, p. 6.

> or numeral distinguishes them at once with at least the outward appearance of gentlemen. But not every wearer proves to be a freshman....
>
> A fairly neat suitcase, liberally plastered with pennants, will serve as a good substitute for the freshman cap. These pennants, the gum-sticker variety, can be readily obtained for about one cent each in every college town. Experienced vagrants are well aware of their persuasive effect.
>
> A friend of mine relates how he once picked up a "college" man who spoke Bowery English and who had evidently failed to perform the rite of ablution for several weeks. As soon as the fellow got in, he asked my friend his destination. The latter named a point some distance short of where he actually intended to stop and thus got rid of the imposter. He failed, however, to eradicate a certain perfume, not the odor of sanctity, which, alas, lingered in his car for several days.[15]

Pretense of college status was difficult to assume and maintain, however, and the number of tramps who could qualify was undoubtedly small. Infrequent frauds cannot invalidate the general observation that college men predominated as hitchhikers during the thirties. In fact, during this decade, college men seem to have considered any other form of travel as slightly reprehensible.

Women hitchhikers continued to be prominent, and like the men, long journeys became more common for all—small girls, teen-agers or grandmothers. Usually the reason for hitchhiking seemed to be vacation adventure at little expense. But not always, for one woman of fifty hitchhiked from New Brunswick to Philadelphia to dramatize her protest against the condemnation of her home. Economic and social dislocations were reflected by some of the hitchhiking trips. A girl of 18 hitchhiked about the country for three years, staying in jails and Transient Bureaus, and a waitress of 17 hitchhiked from Florida to New York with her two-month-old baby. Ex-

[15] Chapman J. Milling, "Hitchike Passports," *Forum,* C (Aug., 1938), 78-80.

periences of this sort must have been more frequent than reported. Women hitchhikers committed all manner of crimes, including murder. All writers on the subject of hitchhiking duly noted the hazards of the Mann Act.[16] Although the industrial depression caused many women to take to the roads, so also did the depression in agriculture. One motorist recalled:

> I once gave a ride to a farm woman of 60, who, with her 3 small grandchildren, was attempting a 25-mile stretch. She had the old technique down pat, thumb and all. As soon as she stepped in my car, she began calling down curses on the dozen or more cars which had just passed her. I listened to her entire life history during those 25 miles.[17]

The poor of all kinds took to the road. C.C.C. boys hitchhiked. So did farm children, school teachers, whole families including nursing babies, and even a college instructor on his honeymoon. Old men and women in search of relatives, and, in short, every type of unfortunate seemed to look for security or employment by hitchhiking to some place or other. Accounts agree, however, that most hitchhikers were young people looking for adventure or going home for a weekend. The practice became so commonplace that in 1937 one writer estimated that at least one man in ten had hitchhiked once in his life.[18] Statistics are non-existent, but the estimate may well be conservative.

Hitchhikers interested in speed either avoided large cities, or bought transportation through them. Many records indicate that the hitchhiker could usually travel faster than the average tourist. In 1931, 300 miles a day in the West and 250 miles a day in the East were considered average.[19] Experienced hikers worked on the principle asserted by Kipling that "He travels the fastest who travels alone."

---

[16] The Mann Act prohibits transporting women across state lines for immoral purposes. New York *Times*, Feb. 15, 1933, p. 23; *ibid.*, Nov. 11, 1934, sect. IV, p. 7; *ibid.*, Aug. 13, 1936; *ibid.*, June 28, 1936, p. 1; *ibid.*, May 14, 1936, p. 27; *ibid.*, Jan. 15, 1937, p. 23; *ibid.*, Aug. 26, 1938, p. 18; *ibid.*, Oct. 26, 1938, p. 18; Milling, *loc. cit.*, p. 80.

[17] Milling, *loc. cit.*, p. 80.

[18] Gilmore, *op. cit.*, p. 87; Evans, *loc. cit.*, pp. 11-12; Milling, *loc. cit.*, pp. 79-80; "A Studious Hitch-Hiker Looks at Hitch-Hiking," *Literary Digest*, CIX (May 16, 1931), 43-45; New York *Times*, Sept. 1, 1936, p. 23; Zeidman, *loc. cit.*, p. 55.

The increased number of hitchhikers in the thirties almost automatically resulted in an increase in the number of crimes connected with the practice. A writer for the *Nation* observed in 1932: "A lonely pedestrian on a country road is no longer a weary ploughman who on being invited to ride will pay his way in homely country epigrams. He is, instead, a gangster from Chicago. . . ."[20] Criminals did hitchhike, as the record plainly shows. "Pretty Boy" Floyd, for example, was reputedly shot and killed while hitchhiking. The residents of Lindsay, Oklahoma, even erected a monument to the victim of a hitchhiker. This first memorial read:

> September 17, 1895—November 19, 1935. Ray Evans, Attorney, Shawnee, Oklahoma, Martyr to Hitch-Hiking.[21]

The stories of crimes by hitchhikers would fill many pages. During the thirties, and later, many of these incidents were given wide publicity. Every imaginable type of nastiness, cruelty, and brutality was perpetrated by hikers. People considered these crimes to be particularly despicable because they were committed by those who had been befriended.[22] The vast, indeed, overwhelming majority of hitchhikers appear to have been law abiding, but the conduct of some cast a shadow on all. People in general became more and more concerned as the decade wore on.

[19] Milling, *loc. cit.*, p. 80; Hugh Hardyman, "The Art of Hitch-Hiking," *New Republic*, LXVII (July 29, 1931), 283-284.

[20] For some accounts of crimes: New York *Times*, Sept. 14, 1935, p. 3; *ibid.*, Feb. 25, 1935, p. 9; *ibid.*, Sept. 20, 1936, sect. II, 12; quotation from: "In the Driftway," *loc. cit.*, p. 233.

[21] New York *Times*, Dec. 13, 1936, p. 3; *ibid.*, Aug. 25, 1935, sect. II, 2.

[22] Especially informative: Milling, *loc. cit.*, pp. 78-81; New York *Times*, Aug. 25, 1935, sect. II, 2.

On the other hand, many of the stories of hitchhiker crimes were apocryphal. In 1939 Bergen Evans noted:

> "You hear them everywhere: X had his pocket picked by a hitchhiker, Y was sued, and Z now sleeps in the old churchyard! And when the wind cries in the chimney and the lights burn blue, we are told even more eerie things. There is the seductive girl in sables who said that her Dusenberg had broken down and begged a lift to the next town. Overpowered by her charm, the simple Samaritan forgot that the next town was just across the state line and just under the Mann Act, and now he is the haggard and bankrupt victim of blackmail. Then there is the fragile old lady from beneath whose petticoat peeped the cuffs of a man's trousers or from whose knitting bag protruded the muzzle of a machine gun—I forget which. At any rate, the kind hearted motorist who was about to let her get into his car saw it in the nick of time and stepped on the accelerator. She's become quite a legendary figure, this dear old menace. She flits in the dusk on the outskirts of Chicago and appears in the dawn southwest of Denver. Late revelers have passed her on the Boston Post Road and the winter visitor sees her in Florida, where her artillery is sometimes hidden under Spanish Moss and sometimes wreathed in orange blossoms.
>
> She proves that "you *never* can tell." And the narrator of her exploits has an unfailing warning: "Don't pick 'em up! Don't pick *any* of 'em up!"[23]

But this poking fun at the more absurd stories and fears of motorists could not obscure the very real dangers. State after state passed laws prohibiting hitchhiking. Ostensibly the laws protected motorists. E. E. Whiting, however, commenting in 1931 on the demand for legislation, noted that much of the noise was being made by public transportation companies. (One electric railway claimed to have lost more than $50,000 from hitchhikers in only one year). Whiting's observation on the possible influence of pressure groups did not stir up much controversy. The forces behind this type of legislation may be worth further exploration.[24]

---

[23] Evans, *loc. cit.*, p. 10.

The laws, whatever their inspiration, were ineffective and seldom enforced. In part, the people did not strongly favor them, and in part the proportion of police to hitchhikers made enforcement impossible. The police contented themselves with sporadic campaigns, or selective arrests of individuals. The practice of arresting only suspicious looking persons resulted in the collection of some interesting statistics. Those of the Wichita police force, for example, indicated that two out of every five hitchhikers detained and fingerprinted had major criminal records.[25] Only a little juggling was needed to make it appear that forty percent of *all* hitchhikers were criminals.[26] On the other hand, crimes by motorists against hitchhikers were reported more and more often. But press reporters seldom seemed particularly outraged at this type of crime.[27] In order to reduce crimes, in 1938, C. J. Milling suggested that certificates should be issued to respectable hitchhikers. These could be shown to drivers as evidence of honesty and sobriety. Milling proposed to regulate rather than forbid ride begging. His ideas were not adopted by any unit of government.[28]

At the same time that state and local governments tried to halt hitchhiking, the federal government gave it moderate approval. Instead of treating hitchhikers as potential criminals, the New Deal government tended to handle them as victims of the depression. In 1933 a Transient Bureau was set up as part of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. The Bureau ended in 1936 when the Works Projects Administra-

[24] E. E. Whiting, "On Thumbing," *Essays of Today*, ed. Rose A. Witham (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1931), pp. 265-268.

[25] New York *Times*, Sept. 1, 1935, p. 17; *ibid.*, Sept. 14, 1935, p. 7; *ibid.*, Aug. 25, 1935, sect. II, 2.

[26] See: D. Wharton, "Thumbs Down on Hitchhikers!" *Reader's Digest*, LVI (April, 1950), 21-25, condensed from *Liberty*.

[27] "Hitch-Hikers Now Robbed," New York *Times*, July 18, 1937, p. 14.

[28] Milling, *loc. cit.*, pp. 78-81.

tion took over some of its activities. Between 1933 and 1936, however, the Transient Bureau established and administered some 300 centers for the care and shelter of transients. A time limit was set for the length of stay at any given center. Job finding and recreation facilities were provided. While it lasted, the Bureau assured transients, including hitchhikers, of a few meals and lodging. The overall effect of the Bureau cannot be determined, but its services probably tended to increase the number of hitchhikers.[29]

A large literature on hitchhiking was produced during the thirties. Most of the magazine articles approved of the art and its practice. Some of the authors were hitchhikers, others had had pleasant experience in picking up riders. Writers usually protested that hitchhikers were not tramps, and most of the hikers who wrote claimed that cheap transportation was not the object of the people who thumbed rides. The authors preferred to picture the hitchhiker as an adventurer who greatly admired hard work and free-enterprise capitalism.[30] Hitchhiking was, in fact, asserted to be the best possible training in the ancient virtues. In a sort of summation, S. D. Zeidman declared:

> To the hitchhiker himself there is one final word. Hold your head high—not arrogantly but proudly. The road develops characteristics in you which are requisites for entrance into business and professional life. If you are impatient, it teaches you to wait. If you have a temper, it gives you a placid nature. If you are selfish, it teaches you to be generous. If you are impetuous, it forces you to think.[31]

Writers asserted, with some truth, that the continual appearance of hitchhikers demonstrated the strength of democratic sentiment in the country. Others saw in the practice a reflection of the inherent kindness of Americans.

---

[29] Jeffrey R. Brackett, *The Transportation Problem in American Social Work*, (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1936); New York *Times*, July 25, 1937, sect. XI, 1; Gilmore, *op. cit.*, pp. 93-94.

[30] "In the Driftway," *loc. cit.*, p. 233; Milling, *loc. cit.*, pp. 78-79; Hardyman, *loc. cit.*, p. 285.

[31] Zeidman, *loc. cit.*, p. 56.

Not that hitchhiking remained totally American. In England hitchhikers appeared now and again. Mostly they were young people out on an easy and novel holiday adventure. In Mexico, two Americans found that although drivers would halt on signal, they invariably wanted money for transportation. In the Philippines, headhunters stopped a doctor and requested a lift, but an element of coercion in this act disqualifies it from consideration as an example of genuine hitchhiking.[82] Another decade passed before the American art was widely practiced abroad.

As business conditions improved after 1938, the number of hitchhikers declined, although the practice still remained one of America's favorite forms of adventure. Then the United States entered the Second World War. By 1942, government agencies had been established to control the production and use of tires and gasoline. Automobile factories turned to making guns and tanks. Americans could no longer drive when and where they pleased. At the same time, millions of men went into the armed forces, and left their automobiles behind.[83] Under the circumstances, hitchhiking became a definite part of wartime travel. Hitchhikers, in a way, came to symbolize the national emergency.

Hitchhiking became respectable during the war. First, it was accepted as necessary, and then it became generally permissible. Emily Post approved the practice for girl defense plant workers in 1942; by 1944 Senator Eugene Milliken could announce a hitchhiking election campaign in Colorado. During the depression men had often hitchhiked looking for jobs;

[82] New York *Times*, July 23, 1939, sect. X, 9; in Mexico, *ibid.*, Aug. 30, 1938, p. 18; *ibid.*, July 11, 1937, sect. II, 2.

[83] This change was clearly shown by the automobile registration statistics. In 1940 some 32,035,000 automobiles were registered in the United States. In 1945 this had declined to 30,638,000, but rose to 48,567,000 by 1950. From: *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1956*, p. 551.

after 1941 they hitchhiked to work.[34] Throughout the forties children continued to hitchhike to the beach. After gasoline rationing, so also did their elders. Just before the war, college men, by then long familiar sights along the highways, predominated as hitchhikers. By 1942, however, almost all young men were in uniform. Servicemen became the new privileged class of hitchhikers. In 1940, just before America entered the war, the total number of hitchhikers was lower than at any time in the previous decade. By 1944, however, more hitchhikers were on the road than ever before. Most of them were in uniform.[35]

The public took a charitable attitude toward men in uniform. Hitchhiking increased, and was accompanied by an even greater outbreak of criminal activity. Just before the war a survey by the Institute of Public Opinion had shown 54 percent of the nation's motorists insisting that anti-hitchhiking laws should be enforced. In spite of the wartime increase in hitchhiking crimes, however, public sentiment became more amiable. The new attitude seems to have been based on the virtual impossibility of enforcing the laws in wartime. By 1943, for example, the transportation system of the United States had seriously deteriorated. Ralph Schimpf, fugitive from the Ohio State Penitentiary, when caught in Omaha, was allowed to return to Ohio on his own because neither state could provide transportation for him. As he started to hitchhike back to Columbus, Schimpf remarked: "We all got to do our bit at a time like this."[36]

A democratic people, habituated to population mobility,

[34] New York *Times,* Aug. 28, 1944, p. 17; *ibid.,* Jan. 14, 1940, p. 3; *ibid.,* Dec. 23, 1942, p. 16; *ibid.,* Dec. 7, 1942, p. 26.

[35] *New York Times Magazine,* Aug. 4, 1940, p. 2; on children, etc.; "Girls' Experience Shows Hitch-Hiking Reasonably Safe," *Science News Letter,* XL (July 12, 1941), 22; New York *Times,* July 24, 1942, p. 18; Loring A. Schuler, "He Thumbed His Way Through College," *Reader's Digest,* XXXVIII (June, 1941), 77-78; New York *Times,* April 4, 1940, p. 12; Wharton, *loc. cit.,* pp. 21-25.

[36] *New York Times Magazine,* Aug. 4, 1940, p. 2; Schuler, *loc. cit.,* pp. 77-78; New York *Times,* Sept. 22, 1943, p. 21. Precisely true or not, the story does show the seriousness of the transportation situation.

living in an extensive territory, and faced with the problems of war, readily accepted hitchhiking. The practice had originated partly because so many Americans owned automobiles; it continued in the early 1940's because so few motorists were on the road. By the time war ended in 1945, American kindness and American democracy gave every indication of making hitchhiking a permanent American institution.

The railroad strike of 1946 increased the number and variety of persons who hitchhiked. Bankers, merchants, and workers rubbed shoulders temporarily in May, 1946, as they gestured from the side of the road. The new hikers discovered, as had the old, that truckers offered rides most readily.[37] The importance of women hitchhikers was formally recognized with the crowning of Linda Folkard as "Miss Hitchhiker of 1946" by the Bowery "Mayor." At the age of 19, Linda Folkard had reportedly hitchhiked 15,000 miles.[38]

After the war most thumbers seemed to want adventure primarily; they were saving money only incidentally. Even Europeans came to America to hitchhike for fun. Two of these, William Havard and Kenneth Cosslett, Oxford students, later recorded their experiences for the *Saturday Evening Post.*[39] In 1948, a different sort of adventurer, Walter Bernstein, took a short jaunt as he explained to readers of *The New Yorker:*

> A few weeks ago, for no particular reason—except that the weather was warm, the trains in northern New England are likely to be erratic, my car had been requisitioned by my wife, and I had some business to attend to—I hitchhiked from Milton, Vermont, which is some thirty miles south of the Canadian border, to New York City, or *anyway* almost New York City.[40]

---

[37] New York *Times*, May 24, 1946, p. 5; "Wall St. Men Get Home by 'Bumming' Truck Rides," *ibid.*, p. 3.

[38] New York *Times*, Aug. 23, 1946, p. 21.

[39] W. Havard and Kenneth Cosslett, "We Saw America on $20.00," *Saturday Evening Post*, CCXXII (March 11, 1950), 26-27, plus.

[40] W. Bernstein, "Our Footloose Correspondents, A Trip by Thumb," *New Yorker*, XXIV (Oct. 2, 1948), p. 64.

His reasons seem typical for the period. Apparently he wanted an adventure, and luck gave him a fairly reasonable excuse for gratifying the whim. Like almost all of those who hitchhiked after the war, he insisted that he learned a great deal about the people of America. Some hitchhikers seemed motivated chiefly by this desire to meet other Americans.[41]

Meanwhile, newspaper publicity given to a wave of lawlessness by a few hitchhikers made for increasing reluctance on the part of drivers to co-operate. Post-war accounts indicate great friendliness on the part of a small minority of motorists, but the great majority refused to stop. By 1948 hitchhiking was popularly more disreputable than it had been at any time since the twenties. The laws were no better enforced than before, but autoists ignored the thumbers. One incidental result of this popular attitude seems to have been a change in the kinds of people who hitchhiked. Popular fears apparently discouraged the indigent wanderer as well as the criminal. The new hitchhikers were most frequently adventurers who expected to walk and wait.

In the post-war period hitchhikers seem to have appeared more and more often in Europe. Possibly the example set by American soldiers abroad may have stimulated this development. Press and magazine accounts of hitchhiking in other countries were often misleading, however,. because many of the reported examples were not of genuine hitchhiking. In 1949, for example, two Swedes were reported to be hitchhiking around the world, but in fact they were working and walking—just hoboes. Reports out of China in 1948 used the term "yellow fish." The "yellow fish" was one who paid for transportation on private or government trucks, and this was not hitchhiking either. Two English women did actually hitchhike in Italy and France in 1948, and trips were made by others, but usually Europeans rode bicycles. Only in the British Commonwealth did the American art meet with much favor from travelers or motorists, and in these places techniques were more restrained. In the fifties, however, hitchhiking was becoming quite popular in Germany, France, and Italy. Possibly the economic and social distinctions between owners and non-owners of automobiles presented barriers to continental hitchhiking. Nevertheless, some Americans and British living abroad persisted in hitchhiking. They exerted continual pressure on continental mores.[42]

---

[41] Havard and Cosslett, *loc. cit.*, pp. 26-27; Bernstein, *loc. cit.*, pp. 64-70; Blanche and Paul Leonard, "Hitchhike Home," *Christian Science Monitor Magazine,* April 2, 1949, p. 10.

In the 1940's hitchhiking was first considered respectable and later disreputable. With the great Red Scare following the war Americans seemed to have become less liberal and possibly less democratic than before. Relative prosperity seemed also to harden the hearts of many people. The change in attitude was sudden and noticeable, but those intent on adventure found that begging lifts was still fine sport and could still be practiced in America. By 1949, however, hitchhikers were clearly declining in numbers.

In the course of their long and varied history, hitchhikers had gradually developed generally accepted techniques and equipment. During the early twenties when hitchhiking was in its infancy, techniques varied greatly. But these were quickly reduced to a few standardized methods of considerable effectiveness. By 1925, at the latest, the thumb signal was definitely being used by Americans. One approach described in 1928 was less restrained: "They stepped right in front of my car and swung their knapsacks at me."[43] One reason for the continual complaints about juvenile hitchhiking was that children sometimes stood in the middle of the road in an effort to stop passing automobiles. But these tactics seem extreme rather than customary. Some sort of waving was more common.[44] And even in these earliest years of hitchhiking, one observer noted that ". . . . their manner was of confident assurance, a manner well known to all successful hitch-hikers." Some called it impudence.[45]

---

[42] "A Long Walk," *Christian Science Monitor Magazine*, March 26, 1949, p. 12; New York *Times*, Sept. 12, 1948, p. 17; Santha Rama Rau, "Hitchhiking with the Yellow Fish," *Harper's Magazine*, CC (March, 1950), 69-79; Gerda L. Cohen, "The Craft of Auto Stopping," *Spectator*, CXXCIII (Sept. 30, 1949), 414; Louis McIntosh, "Hitchhiking in Europe," *Atlantic*, CXCVI (Dec., 1955), 108.

[43] Jameson, "Just Students," *loc. cit.*, p. 15; New York *Times*, Oct. 12, 1925, p. 20.

During the thirties some American hitchhikers opposed the use of the thumb signal. One even asserted that it was comparatively useless. He suggested, as did others, that a pleasant facial expression be used as a substitute. The advice was probably based on a wistful effort not to appear as beggars. But the extended thumb was the customary and most effective signal used in the United States. It was and remains the chief emblem of the hitchhiker.[46] Nevertheless, some hikers preferred to request rides orally, particularly of motorists who had stopped at a filling station. Although this method was sometimes more effective than roadside signaling, it was not appreciated by service station owners. Stations which allowed hitchhikers to congregate often suffered a loss of business. The problem was most pressing in the thirties when large numbers of hikers were on the road. Notions on the best spots for hitchhiking were numerous, but the prevalent theory of the thirties was that any place where drivers had to slow down was likely to be satisfactory. Curves, stop lights and road junctions were preferred by many.[47]

When the thumb signal failed to get results, hitchhikers tried various substitutes. They appeared fatigued beyond all endurance, walked in the middle of the road, and pretended to be injured, all in an effort to halt motorists. Sometimes hitchhikers knelt in supplication. These desperate measures seldom worked very well.[48]

---

[44] "Stop Children from Begging Rides in Minneapolis," *loc. cit.*, p. 147.

[45] Jameson, "A Hitch-Hiking Reformer," *Saturday Evening Post*, CCI (Sept. 22, 1928), 22; New York *Times*, Oct. 12, 1925, p. 20.

[46] "A Studious Hitch-Hiker Looks at Hitch-Hiking," *loc. cit.*, p. 44; Hardyman, *loc. cit.*, p. 284; Milling, *loc. cit.*, p. 79; the prevalence of the thumb signal is supported by a literature too extensive to cite here, but it might be noted that an Englishman writing in 1939 called it "The classic American style." New York *Times*, July 23, 1939, sect. X, 9.

[47] Zeidman, *loc. cit.*, pp. 55-56; Milling, *loc. cit.*, p. 79.

Shortly before the Second World War, college students were carrying signs to attract attention. Although more than 2,000 students reportedly used this device, it was not really widely adopted. The extended thumb had come to stay, although in a wartime emergency Emily Post suggested that young ladies merely display factory identification tags. One A. W. M., writing to the New York *Times,* revealed his own system: ". . . learn to fly the distress signal. This consists of hoisting the International Flag—namely a one-dollar bill—each time a car approaches."[49] Waving the flag, even in wartime, placed him outside the pale of *bona fide* hitchhikers, and his suggestion was never extensively adopted. Some refinement in approach was introduced when Emily Post recommended that young ladies solicit rides only from cars with B or C gasoline ration stickers. Keyes F. Carson, a college student, informally initiated the hitchhiker's passport suggested by C. J. Milling in 1938. The practice did not spread and was of doubtful significance.[50]

The equipment chosen by the hitchhiker depended on the occasion and the distance to be traveled. In the twenties men often carried a knapsack if the journey was for any distance. Generally women wore trousers or knickers and carried packs.[51] During the thirties, however, hitchhikers avoided this informal dress if they could. Clothes were usually neat, often clean, but seldom new. A suit of some kind was customary for men, although not invariably. Masculine equipment generally included comb, tooth brush, razor, changes of underclothing, and shirts. Women usually carried one or two extra dresses.[52] In the thirties many hitchhikers abandoned the knapsack, and others avoided carrying bundles. A neat suitcase appeared more respectable. In addition, a hitchhiker with a suitcase did not leave the impression that he would walk, if necessary. Various writers on the subject in 1931 definitely advocated carrying only suitcases, but as late as 1936 some very successful American hitchhikers used knapsacks or sleeping bags. By the later thirties, however, American hitchhikers usually carried suitcases. British hitchhikers customarily carried knapsacks, as they still do. No matter how equipped, hitchhikers could somehow or other get lifts.[53]

---

[48] Milling, *loc. cit.,* p. 79; Herbert A. Toops and S. Edson Haven, *Psychology and the Motorist,* (Columbus, Ohio: R. G. Adams, 1938); New York *Times,* June 17, 1934, sect. IV, 7; *ibid.,* Aug. 25, 1935, sect. II, 2.

[49] Schuler, *loc. cit.,* p. 77; New York *Times,* Dec. 23, 1942, p. 16; *ibid.,* Dec. 13, 1942, sect. IV, 9.

[50] Schuler, *loc. cit.,* pp. 77-78; "Emily Post Gives the Nod to Hitch-Hiking and Frames Rules for 'Defense Debutantes,'" New York *Times,* Dec. 23, 1942, p. 16.

[51] Jameson, "Charles V and the Hitch-Hikers," *loc. cit.,* p. 11; Jameson, "A Hitch-Hiking Reformer," *loc. cit.,* p. 22; New York *Times,* Jan. 19, 1927, p. 3.

After 1946 neat civilian clothing replaced the uniform. The suit was less common than in the thirties. Usually hitchhikers in the post-war era preferred small hand bags to suitcases. In any event, knapsacks and bundles definitely disappeared in America for all except a handful of eccentrics. Rides were difficult to secure in the late 1940's, and hitchhikers waited for long periods, walked a good deal, and continually waved their arms. Consequently, fatigue was seldom feigned. Jails were as available as hostels in the forties as they had been in the thirties. Two Englishmen also reported that chapter houses of college fraternities could be used as stopping places. These seemed to be the newer equivalents of the old Transient Bureaus. Hitchhikers discovered that the police not only failed to enforce ordinances against hitchhiking, but were often friendly and sometimes offered rides or other assistance. By this time many of the officers were ex-hitchhikers.[54]

---

[52] Milling, *loc. cit.*, p. 80; "A Studious Hitch-Hiker Looks at Hitch-Hiking," *loc. cit.*, p. 44; Hardyman, *loc. cit.*, p. 284.

[53] "A Studious Hitch-Hiker Looks at Hitch-Hiking," *loc. cit.*, p. 44; Hardyman, *loc. cit.*, p. 284; New York *Times*, Aug. 7, 1936, p. 1; *ibid.*, Aug. 13, 1936; Milling, *loc. cit.*, p. 80; New York *Times*, July 23, 1939, sect. X, 9.

Then in the early fifties the power of the press was brought to bear against hitchhikers. Article after article appeared denouncing the practice. *Liberty, Reader's Digest, Cars, Rotarian,* and *Cosmopolitan,* to name a few, joined in the great attack. Warnings by automobile clubs and the F. B. I. became commonplace, and the daily press added to the uproar. The campaign apparently suited the temper of the times. Many people frankly admitted that they were afraid to "pick 'em up."[55] Hitchhikers became fewer and fewer; the art seemed to be dying in the United States, even if it was not yet dead. Probably contributing to the decline of the art was the startling increase in automobiles in the United States. Many of those who in another era would have been hitchhikers were automobile owners instead. In 1945, 30,638,000 private automobiles were registered in the United States. This increased to 48,567,000 in 1950 and 62,020,000 in 1955.[56] On many a campus the parking problem reached serious proportions. The backbone of the hitchhiking fraternity, the college man, was now in the automobile owning class.[57]

For nearly three decades Americans had been hitchhiking, and the practice had inevitably influenced American society, even if in subtle ways. In America, parochialism and cultural diversity broke down most rapidly in the Twentieth Century, and undoubtedly hitchhikers helped speed the process. Fur-

[54] Havard and Cosslett, *loc. cit.*, pp. 27, 75, 76, 83; "Hitchhiking Technique," *Life*, XXV (Sept. 13, 1948), 175; New York *Times*, May 24, 1946, p. 5; Bernstein, *loc. cit.*, pp. 64, 66, 67, 68.

[55] "Driver's Downfall," *Newsweek*, XLII Sept. 14, 1953, 86; "Pick Up Hitchhikers?" *Rotarian*, LXXVII (Aug. 1950), 34-35; "Don't Let Death Hitch a Ride with You!" *Cosmopolitan*, CXXXV (Aug., 1953), 82-87.

[56] *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1956.*

[57] *In trips made through Iowa, South Dakota, Wyoming, Montana,* Nebraska, and Wisconsin in the summer of 1957, more hitchhikers were in evidence than in any year since 1954. Although these personal observations are not by any means conclusive, it would appear that possibly hitchhiking is regaining popularity.

thermore, both those who gave and those who accepted rides received something from the experience. For one thing, free exchange of ideas took place between driver and hiker. Men do not mind exposing their innermost thoughts to strangers because strangers seldom turn informer. The general intellectual ferment of the twenties and thirties was undoubtedly accelerated by person to person exchange of ideas; how important hitchhikers may have been as agents for the transmission of ideas is hardly possible to determine. Certainly the continued appearance of hitchhikers reflected a general attachment to democracy. Just as certainly, a full history of the second quarter of the Twentieth Century must at least recognize the existence of this unique practice.