

CHAPTER IX

SEASONAL AND CASUAL LABOR

AMONG the industrial causes of vagrancy, probably the most potent one is the seasonal and irregular character of employment in a good many trades and occupations. Such trades and occupations are common to all sections of the country, but nowhere else are they so numerous, nowhere else do they furnish employment for such great numbers of men, as in the Mississippi Valley. For it is this region which every year in the harvest fields, in the lumber camps, in railway construction, on the lake boats, and in many other forms of seasonal work furnishes employment to thousands of unskilled laborers. The fact that so many of these men stay, between jobs, in the cities of the Middle West, probably explains why the vagrancy problem is, in many respects, more serious in this section of the country than in any other. Minneapolis and St. Paul, Kansas City, Omaha, and St. Louis, as well as Cincinnati and Cleveland, each have large colonies of homeless men; but, as explained in an earlier chapter, no city is quite so popular, the year around, with homeless men of all types, as is Chicago.

HOMELESS MEN

One of the questions which we almost invariably asked the men who applied to the Bureau for aid, was "What was the longest time you ever worked at one place?" The replies were most enlightening. When a man was unable to mention any place where he had worked for as long as two weeks, we knew our man without much further questioning. On the other hand, this inquiry not infrequently brought out the fact that a man who now to all appearance was a confirmed vagrant had once worked for fifteen or twenty years for a single employer. I recall one case of this kind in which we found that an old Irishman who had been more or less dependent for ten years had had a record of almost forty years' employment with a single firm. It was a question well worth asking, but we found the men's statements in regard to the length of time they had been continuously employed had invariably to be corroborated by employers or they could not be depended upon. Few of the men failed to realize the import of the question, and in answering it they were often tempted to overstate the actual time spent in certain positions. Men would claim to have worked three years in a place when in fact the time was but three months; or a number of months, when the term of their employment had really been measured by weeks or days.

There are two principal reasons why men who are employed in seasonal trades tend to deteriorate into tramps and vagrants. The first is found in

SEASONAL AND CASUAL LABOR

the irregular character of the work itself which unsettles habits of industry and makes the men unwilling at last to accept steady employment. The second is found in the conditions under which the men live in the large cities during their periods of unemployment and the habits which they form at such times.

When they work only a part of the year and are idle the remainder, it is surprising to see how soon they come to feel that this is the normal and best, if not the only, way to do. Not only will they not seek work at other seasons than those in which they are in the habit of working, but will refuse it when offered. The case of one able-bodied Irishman of forty may be cited in point. This man had been employed in seasonal labor for a number of years, but heretofore had invariably saved enough of his summer earnings to carry him through the winter. This particular winter, however, he had been unusually extravagant, and although he admitted having had steady employment on the railroads and in the harvest fields from the first of April to the middle of October, he was penniless in December. Not being of the type of men who will beg when hard pressed, he applied to us for work. We referred him to several places where work might perhaps be obtained, but he did not secure any. Every morning for a week he dropped in to ask if we had heard of any employment for him, and then spent the remainder of the day looking for it himself. One

HOMELESS MEN

morning when he was growing almost desperate, he asked me if I would not dismiss a lame man whom we employed for the small amount of janitor work required at the office, and allow him to do it instead. Surprised at the request, I asked him what the lame man could then do. "He can go to some institution," he replied angrily. "Everywhere I go I find cripples doing the odd jobs. It is a shame! They ought not to be allowed to take the bread out of the mouths of honest workmen who have both arms and legs. There isn't work enough for everybody, so the strong men are the ones who should have it."

I think this man's attitude toward cripples was rather unusual, but I mention him and it in order to contrast this conversation when he was almost desperate for lack of work and money, with another I had with him some weeks later. It was at the height of the ice-cutting season, when our applications from homeless men had fallen off greatly on account of the plentifulness of work. I met the man on the street. He seemed delighted at the chance encounter and shook hands very cordially. After the greeting was over, I said, "How does it happen that you aren't on the ice fields—surely you know where to find work today?"

"I don't need any," he replied.

"Oh, you have a job, have you? That's good. Where is it?"

"No, I mean I've *got money*. I don't need to work any more."

SEASONAL AND CASUAL LABOR

"Well, you are lucky. Is it a large sum? Did some relative leave it to you? What are you going to do with it? Tell me all about it."

"Relative! No, I ain't that lucky. You don't understand. I mean that I've got money that I worked for. I got a job that last day I was at the charity office and I worked nearly two months. Just stopped it here last Saturday. It was good pay and I've got a-plenty of it now. That's why I ain't working on the ice. I don't need to." He jingled the coins in his pockets as he spoke.

"But surely the amount you saved from less than two months' work will not last you long. Why don't you take the ice work now when you can get it. You will be out of money again soon, and then what will you do?"

"Oh, the summer work will be opening up by that time and I'll be all right. I won't have to come to you folks again. I'll be careful to save enough to carry me over next year. I never got caught that way before."

I urged him further to take the ice work, on the ground that he could save a little money if he did so.

"What should I save for?" was his reply. "I don't need to. I've no one but myself to look after. If I was a married man and had children, it would be different. A man with a family ought to work all the year 'round."

"But you may get sick, and some day you will

HOMELESS MEN

grow old. How will you live then if you haven't saved?"

He laughed good humoredly.

"Oh, well, I'm young enough yet. I ain't worrying about my old age, and I never was sick a day in my life. So you see there really ain't any need for my going on the ice this winter. It's cold, hard work, and I never liked it, though I've done it many a winter when I was hard up."

Then, as I still seemed unconvinced as to the wisdom of his idling, he added his final argument against going to work:

"I'm real sorry to disappoint you, Miss, since you seem so set on the idea of me working on the ice, but to tell the truth I really wouldn't think it was *right* to do it. I'd just be taking the work away from some poor fellow who needs it, and it wouldn't be right for a man to do that when he has plenty of money in his pocket."

Arguments similar to the ones quoted were so frequently advanced by men whom I urged to take steady employment in order to save money for their future, that I believe this story fairly represents the philosophy of a great many seasonal workers. They live from day to day, or rather from one job to the next. After a few years at seasonal employment they reach a point where they will not work continuously, even if they could. They really do not believe in doing so, nor will many of them admit any necessity for saving more than enough to carry them from one season to the

SEASONAL AND CASUAL LABOR

next. No matter how much money they might receive for their labor the majority of the men would not save and would be found no better able to support themselves in times of adversity, illness, or old age than they are now.

In the Mississippi Valley region in normal years, work for unskilled men is plentiful from the last of March till the middle of November, and the great majority of seasonal laborers are employed during most of that time. Lumber-campwork and ice cutting are winter trades which give additional employment to thousands of men during December, January, and February. Why is it, then, that even in normal years hundreds of men may each winter be found penniless, and seeking employment or charitable aid in the large cities of the country? I believe that the answer to these questions will be found by studying the conditions under which the men live in the cheap lodging houses of the cities and their habits of life during their periods of unemployment.

From the men themselves, and also through daily co-operation with physicians, police officers, mission workers, lodging house keepers, and others who knew homeless men and the district well, we at the Bureau office gradually acquired a considerable knowledge of conditions in the lodging houses and of the habits of their residents.

When the summer work is over the men, as has already been stated, flock in great numbers into the cities and crowd into the cheap lodging houses.

HOMELESS MEN

Having had but little need of money while at their jobs many have requested their employers to hold back their wages until the end of the season, when they come to the city with from one to three or four months' earnings in hand, a fact which in itself accounts for the prompt downfall of a number of them.* It is the custom of many, however, to pay the winter's room rent in advance, at a favorite lodging house, in order that they may, in any event, be certain of shelter, and then to deposit the balance of their money either with the clerk of the lodging house, or in a savings bank. If in the latter, the bank book is generally turned over to the clerk of the house to be locked in the office safe, in some cases with the distinct understanding that it shall not be given to its owner if he demands it when drunk. During the weeks which follow, the majority of the men live in complete idleness upon the money they have saved. How far it carries them into the winter depends of course upon the character and habits of the individual men themselves.

Long periods of idleness usually prove more or less demoralizing to workmen of any type, even when they spend them in comfortable homes with the normal restraining influences exerted by wife and children, neighbors and friends. When, however, men are homeless and are massed in great

* Robbery at night in the lodging houses accounts for the loss of the savings of a few of the men, while in some cases their money is taken from them in saloons or on the street while they are under the influence of liquor. See also page 318.

SEASONAL AND CASUAL LABOR

numbers in city lodging houses where there are practically no restraining and refining influences; where, in sharing a common living room they must of necessity associate with men who have long since become chronic tramps, confirmed beggars, or clever impostors, and where, moreover, public opinion as expressed by the majority of the men favors, rather than disapproves of drink, gambling, licentiousness, and other forms of vice, it is not surprising that many deteriorate rapidly and that such self-respect and decency as they may in the beginning have possessed is soon diminished or destroyed. Men who have higher standards of conduct, more resources within themselves and greater strength of character than the average unskilled laborer possesses, might find it difficult to withstand the influences of such an environment combined with complete idleness and the knowledge that they are not responsible for the welfare of any human being but themselves. The wonder perhaps is not that so many plunge into debauches and indulgences of all sorts which last until their money is exhausted but rather that upon the whole so few of them do so.

When at the end of a few days, weeks, or months, as the case may be, the homeless laborer finds his money exhausted, two courses are open to him. He can work or he can beg. Except during the short ice-cutting season, work for laborers is not plentiful during the winter months, and it usually becomes more and more scarce as the season

HOMELESS MEN

advances.* Most of these men, therefore, could not, if they would, find steady employment, and many of them, after weeks of idleness and dissipation, are so run down physically that they feel unequal to any sort of continuous hard labor, and do not seek it. "Odd jobs" or casual labor is the form of employment they seek, and such work accepted at a time like this has proved to be the right-about-face towards vagrancy of many a workingman in the cheap lodging houses.

For working at odd jobs means putting in coal, sawing wood, scrubbing front steps, shoveling snow, and doing other similar short-lived tasks about private homes to secure enough of which to enable him to support himself a man must go from door to door asking for work. It is this last necessity which is the undoing of so many of the men who resort to casual labor, for even though he may ask only for work the man himself knows that most men who go from door to door are beggars and that when the householder gives him employment he usually rates him only as a rather decent sort of mendicant. He realizes too that among better grade workmen he has to a certain extent lost caste by resorting to employment of this sort, and that in the lodging houses the true vagrants refer to him disrespectfully as a "Molly" and despise him for working at all. When he is

* December, January, February, and March were the only months in the year when able-bodied and unemployed men, either married or single, applied to the Bureau of Charities in any considerable numbers.

SEASONAL AND CASUAL LABOR

given a job he is often "for charity" paid more than he knows his work is worth and whether he asks for it or not he is usually given a meal besides. There are even a number of housewives who take pride in the fact that when a man appeals to them for work, "showing that he has the right spirit," they never fail to offer him a meal instead if they have no work for him to do. When the "unthinking public" is thus doing what it can to break down the self-respect of casual laborers, it is not strange that the men themselves soon learn to ask for the food first and that in the end they cease to ask for work at all.

There are many other men besides those engaged in seasonal trades who at times, and for mere industrial stop-gaps until better work can be secured, depend upon casual labor as a means of livelihood. Men of all grades of ability and skill among the thousand under consideration took such work when unable to find employment in their usual occupations, and it would be most unfair to imply that any large proportion of them became beggars in consequence. But it is nevertheless also demonstrated by this study that men, of whatever original strength of character, who for several consecutive years depend upon casual labor and at the same time continue to live in the cheap lodging houses, do in the end almost invariably become confirmed vagrants.

Just as seasonal laborers gradually come to feel that they cannot work the year around, so casual

HOMELESS MEN

laborers become so used to living from hand to mouth that many of them will refuse better work when it is offered. The excuse which they oftenest give is that they have not money enough to live upon until pay day; but that this is only an excuse is evident in part from the fact that men who are in earnest about wishing to secure steady employment are very rarely withheld from taking it on this account. In the neighborhood of most shops and factories there are boarding houses whose keepers will trust men who are employed in them especially if the men will give orders upon their wages, or make small advance payments as earnest of good faith. A fellow workman will often loan a man enough to tide him over until pay day. When we were able to offer a man a permanent position we not infrequently at the same time gave him a day's temporary employment in order that he might earn enough to pay a dollar in advance on account to his new landlady. In Chicago and New York men who have work are permitted to live at the municipal lodging houses until they have earned enough to pay their board elsewhere. There are many ways in which men who really desire steady work can tide themselves through until pay day.

The fact is, that men in whom the casual labor habit is confirmed do not care to take steady work and will not do so even when provision for food and lodging is included with offers of better employment. We proved this again and again at the district office by securing positions as porters

SEASONAL AND CASUAL LABOR

in institutions or hospitals, or as housemen in private homes, for casual laborers who seemed to show some fitness for such work. Very rarely were they willing to take them and when they did so it was often only to leave them within a week or two.

The managers of a certain foundry in one of the suburbs of Chicago agreed for several years to give employment to any homeless men we might send to them. The pay to unskilled men was to be \$1.50 a day, and by giving orders on their wages they could secure board and room in the neighborhood of the foundry without any advance payment. We tried to send only men who claimed to want steady work and who were able-bodied and not in the habit of drinking to excess. The men sent were therefore a little above the average of homeless men applicants. I am not able to give exact figures at this date but I well recall our disappointment in learning from the company as we did from time to time, how very small a percentage of the men we sent to the works ever went at all and how very few of those who went stayed for more than one week. Our experience in this respect could probably be duplicated by scores of social workers in other cities, for it has frequently been proved that merely finding employment for homeless men will not solve their problems. Lack of employment with a very large proportion of them is only a symptom, and treating the symptom will not cure the disease.

HOMELESS MEN

A long list of cases of men who begged for work, seemed really to want it, were sent to good positions, did satisfactory work in the positions but soon left them of their own accord, might readily be cited. We found a position as houseman and gardener for one man. His employer became greatly attached to him, but at the end of six months he left without giving any reason. Another man we placed as an orderly in a hospital. He proved very satisfactory in the work and was himself apparently satisfied with the position and pay, but in two months he left without saying why. A position as porter in a club house was given to another man; he held it three months. One as janitor was given to another; he held it five months. A place in the shipping department in a dry goods house was given to a man who had been seeking work for several months; he left in six weeks. Another man who was almost starving when he applied to us was given a position as floor-walker or usher in a dry goods store; he left it in eight weeks. I have not been able to follow the later records of all these men but the last named is today still in the habit of making frequent changes of position and locality, and has several times within the past six years had to apply to relatives or to charity for help. Many of the men for whom we found employment held the places for shorter periods than the ones mentioned; very few held them for longer; and in the class to which I am now referring all left their positions entirely of

SEASONAL AND CASUAL LABOR

their own accord. We found too upon investigation that a number of the homeless men who were seeking work in Chicago and who were finally forced to apply to the Bureau of Charities for aid, had left excellent positions in other cities for no apparent reasons.

So long as this is true it is quite evident that the men are not really reinstated industrially or socially when we merely find them employment. We must know that they are willing to hold as well as to take the positions offered, and it is a question whether helping vagrant workmen to secure employment does not in some cases do them actual harm rather than good, since the comparative ease with which they can secure work when they again decide they wish to take it, is one of the things which tends to confirm them in their habits of vagrancy.

The underlying, rather than the immediate causes of unemployment must be sought out if a man is to be really helped, and to discover these underlying causes it will be necessary for social workers who deal with homeless men to make just as careful investigations when they ask for work as when they ask for food or money. The fact that they ask for the former instead of the latter may signify little or nothing. Among the confirmed beggars considered in the following chapter, eight asked only for work when they appealed to the Bureau, but of the eight, two were too old and feeble to work at all, one was addicted to the

HOMELESS MEN

drug habit, one was insane, another was crippled and very dull mentally, still another was syphilitic and almost blind, while of the remaining two one had a bad record for stealing and the last man was untrained and lazy and had just been discharged from the House of Correction after serving his third term for vagrancy. All of the eight were out of work chiefly because they were unemployable.

Under the spur of necessity, or when as a matter of policy he thinks it best to do so, almost any vagrant who is physically able will work—for a while—but the question will always be how to keep him at work. We had a striking example of the importance of investigation in work applications in the case of a very decent-looking young fellow who came to the office one day and asked if we could send him to a "steady job." He said that he had been living by means of casual labor for several years but was tired of such an existence and wished to get back into the ranks of real workmen. He could give no references, claiming that no one that he had worked for would recall him. There seemed to be little that we could look up with regard to him, and as he was apparently anxious to find work at once, we sent him without investigation to the foundry above mentioned. A line from the manager the next day notified us that he had been employed and was then at work. In one week he left.

From a lodging house man whom we knew well and whose statements could be trusted, we later

SEASONAL AND CASUAL LABOR

learned why. He said that this man had asked us for employment only because the police had suspected him of complicity in some recent robberies and were watching him closely. The man was not a thief but he was and had been from his boyhood a confirmed beggar. Knowing that the police would arrest him on the slightest excuse he had not dared to ply his usual trade. He might have sought casual employment but it was irregular and did not pay well and he wished to earn enough to get away from the city at once. Moreover, if he took steady work at a foundry the police who had really been able to prove nothing against him would be more likely to be thrown off their guard and be convinced that he was a steady workman and not the crook they suspected him of being. These were the real reasons why he took the work and why later he left it. Our timely assistance, rendered without investigation, had in fact only aided him to continue in the very life of vagrancy from which we had vainly hoped that we were withdrawing him.