

THE ROMANCE AND HISTORY OF  
WHITTLING AND COLLECTING  
HOBO AND TRAMP ART



The obsession I have toward the hobby of whittling and collecting hobo and tramp art began as a young boy when I made frequent trips to the hobo jungles where I listened, wide-eyed, to the stories told by the hoboes of the faraway places they had been and the many adventures they had experienced. Some of their stories were quite colorful, many not necessarily true, but always interesting to an impressionable young boy. It was in this environment that I experienced the eating of Mulligan stew and the whittling of what has become the trademark of the whittler: the ball-in-the-cage.

I became so fascinated with this ball in a cage concept that I have included it in almost all the pieces I have whittled in the past 32 years. Needless to say, I have collected and whittled a great many of these artifacts of the whittlers' art, estimated in excess of 2,000 pieces. This includes more than 250 chains of various designs and lengths from 8 inches to one that is 217 feet long, weighs less than 2 pounds and has 2,821 links. This chain appeared in *Ripley's Believe It or Not* several years ago, and as is inevitable to all of us, there comes a time when a boy's dreams and fantasies must give way to the harsh realities of earning a living and raising a family. So it was that I postponed whittling for what seemed to me a very long time; as a matter of fact, until faced with the decision to quit smoking about 32 years ago.

I needed something to keep my hands and mind occupied and to keep from incessantly clawing at my pocket for a cigarette that wasn't there. I soon developed the habit of reaching for my pocket knife and a piece of wood, thereby developing another addiction—that of whittling. It is relatively easy to become totally involved in a compulsive hobby such as whittling. This preoccupation eventually led me to a small town in north central Iowa called Britt, a town well known as the hobo capital of the United States.

Every year since 1903 the National Hobo Convention is held there and the King and Queen of the hoboes are elected. The present King is Steam Train Maury Graham of Toledo, Ohio, and the Queen is Long Looker Mic Densild of Iowa. Some of the other hoboes are Sparky Smith, Fry Pan Jack, Mountain Dew, Iowa Blackie, Frisco Jack, Mr. Nobody, the Pennsylvania Kid, the Hard Rock Kid, John Mislen, Virginia Slim, Boxcar Johnnie, Portland Grey, Hand Bag Annie, Toledo Ruth and one neophyte from Wisconsin who acquired the title of the "Official Hobo Whittler."

My purpose in going to Britt was to research the history, art and philosophy of these wandering nomads of the rails. I came away with a better understanding of what I believe to be the basic difference between the hobo and the tramp, and that it is reflected in their art. For example, the tramp is likely to produce articles of a functional and practical nature, while the hobo on the other hand, being of a more aimless and less purposeful nature, produced things of a more whimsical and aimless nature.

Some of the less talented whittlers I had known (including myself) as a boy were content with cutting designs in willow branches, such as spirals, initials, whistles and the like. It was done by cutting through the bark, then peeling the bark off to create the designs. Many of the straight pieces that I have whittled are a direct spin-off of that art form. And this in turn has become what is known to the whittling fraternity as stick whittling.

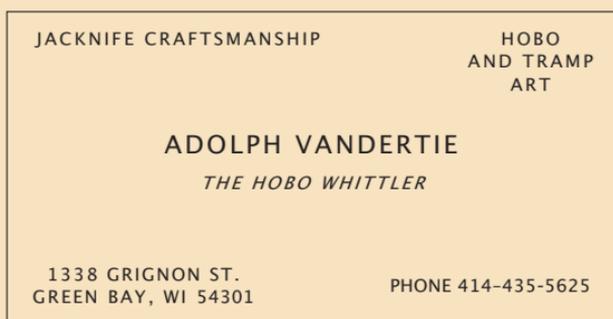
Tramp art was introduced into the United States in the early 1860s by the German and Scandinavian Wanderbuersons (wandering persons) or tramps. This art is a combination of chip carving and whittling and its primary source of material consisted of discarded

cigar boxes. The art died out in the early 1930's primarily due to the phasing out of wooden cigar boxes and the use of cardboard and plastic.

There are only an estimated 8 or 9 real rail-riding hoboes left in the United States and, because most of them are very old, I believe that this is the last generation of them. For this reason, I am most anxious to preserve not only their memories, but also the few remaining artifacts of their art and culture for future generations to enjoy.

My plans for preserving these artifacts involve negotiations with several museum-type organizations that have expressed an interest in providing a permanent repository for them. For the present, my home is a live-in museum where these things are on display at all times. You are invited to visit at any time.

P.S. Please call in advance to be sure we are home.



## Good Road to Follow

March 1, 2020–February 2021

Additional components of Vandertie's museum can always be viewed in the collection of the Ashwaubenon Historical Society at 936 Anderson Dr, Ashwaubenon, WI 54304

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