

APPENDIX A

HOOVERVILLE: A SOCIAL DOCUMENT

The following sketch, written by Jesse Jackson, the "mayor" of Hooverville, represents an interesting and significant social document. It is concerned with one of the largest and most colorful of the hundreds of shanty towns that came into existence in this country during the 1930 depression years.

At times, particularly during the early 1930's, as many as 1,200 men lived in this community, which was haphazardly constructed of packing boxes, lumber, and other discarded and reclaimed materials. Just why this community developed on such a large scale can be explained mainly by Seattle's unique situation in relation to highly seasonal industries and its importance as a labor market to which workers of all kinds are accustomed to gravitate. No doubt, other factors of both local and national character exerted much influence on the growth and direction of development which this community followed.

Unfortunately very little material on Hooverville which can be considered either reliable or significant has been published. The most authoritative and comprehensive survey is an unpublished master's thesis written in 1935.¹ In the following document is supplementary to this more extended study.

THE STORY OF SEATTLE'S HOOVERVILLE

by JESSE JACKSON, "Mayor" of Hooverville²

This is a true story of my own personal experiences. I was one of the first twenty to move into a shack on the property of the Seattle Port Commission, located upon Seattle's waterfront bounded by Railroad Avenue on the east, Dearborn Street on the north, Connecticut Street on the south, and waterfront to the west. This settlement passed through many hardships and grew to a shanty city of six hundred shacks and one thousand inhabitants.

I am a lumberjack. I spent almost a quarter of a century in the woods of the Pacific Northwest. Like most lumberjacks, I made fairly good wages, and being no exception in my rule, I spent most of these wages freely. When the world-wide depression struck the U.S. in 1929, I had a small savings account in one of Seattle's savings banks, but as the depression dragged on, my savings were gradually exhausted. In October, 1931, my funds were gone. I was compelled to seek help from a community fund agency. At this time no national relief system had been set up so the task of caring for the needy was being attempted in a piecemeal way by the community fund agencies that were not prepared to handle such a gigantic and unexpected problem and naturally the relief given, through no fault of theirs, was pretty scanty.

I was registered at a Central Registry for single homeless men and given a ticket that entitled me to for one evening meal at a soup kitchen that resembled pig swill more than it did human food. I had no morning or noon day meal, and as no beds or bedding had been provided yet, I was allowed to sleep upon the hard floor of the institution at night, using a few newspapers that I had picked up during the day for a bed. These conditions caused me to rebel against such a scheme of things and I started to find a way to get away from the thing. I was not alone—there were many of us. One week of this abuse was enough.

¹DONALD FRANCIS ROY, *Hooverville: A Study of a Community of Homeless Men in Seattle* (Unpublished Master's Thesis, University of Washington, 1935).

²Taken from a term paper prepared for the course in Human Ecology (Sociology 55) 155) by ANNETTE DE VOL TRUMBULL, under the direction of CALVIN F. SCHMID, University of Washington, 1938. A document similar to the following was prepared by Mr. Jackson for the Seattle Public Library.

Mr. Walter Gifford, the telephone and telegraph executive, headed a fact-finding commission, by appointment from President Hoover, to look into employment and unemployment conditions in the U.S.A. His first official act was to advise America's unemployed not to run around over the country seeking jobs, but to stay stationary some place, so that they might be better taken care of. We immediately took possession of the nine-acre tract of vacant property of the Seattle Port Commission and proceeded to settle down. We set in with the resources we found strewn over this property to construct relief shelters of our own. We were among the first to face and taste the bitter realities of a social system that would not provide employment for willing workers to enable them to care for themselves, or a humane relief system to relieve their sufferings in a time like this.

It seemed but a few short days until more than fifty shacks were set up, and then our troubles began. Business houses in this district did not know us. They considered us a bunch of ne'er-do-well undesirables and wanted to be rid of us. Seattle health officials decided our shacks were unfit for human habitation and a menace to health conditions in the city, and posted official notices on our doors, informing us of the fact and giving us seven days in which to vacate them. We had no other place to go and thought that the authorities were bluffing, so we paid no attention to the notices. The authorities were not bluffing; at the expiration of the seven-day notice, at five a.m., just as daylight was breaking, in one of the heaviest downpours of rain that fell in Seattle that fall, a regiment of uniformed officers of law and order swooped down upon us, with cans of kerosene and applied the torch. Amidst the confusion that followed, we salvaged our few belongings, and just as soon as the officers were out of sight, we returned and rebuilt our burned shanties.

One month later this performance was repeated. This time we did not rebuild, but dug in instead. With any kind of digging tool we could find, we shoveled the loose sand out of the concrete machinery pits, over the top of which we placed tin for a roof. This time we knew that there would be no burn-out. The concrete and tin would not burn. This time we knew that the authorities would have to find another way to get rid of us.

By this time a heated city election was on, and one of the issues was the destruction of the shacks of Seattle's unemployed. The result was a new city administration. The residents of shanty town did not take any part in their election. We did not hold any ill feeling toward the incumbent administration. We knew that they were not to blame for the destruction of our shanties, nor were they to blame for the very existence of shanty towns or conditions that prevailed in them. Social economics were to blame.

In June, 1932, the new administration was inaugurated, and a committee of different city departments visited us and called us together. The spokesman for the party told us that we were going to be tolerated until conditions improved, that they were going to lay down a few simple rules and regulations for us to follow and for us to select a board of commissioners from the ranks to enforce these regulations. The rules laid down were most reasonable. The Health Commissioner decreed that we must get some materials and build our shacks on top of the ground and come out of the gopher holes. He laid down a few other simple rules covering sanitation. The Police and Fire Department heads were also reasonable.

The melting pot of races and nations we had here called for a commission of several races and nations. Two whites, two negroes, and two Filipinos were selected.

After our conference with the department heads, we went hurrying hither and yon in search of materials with which to build more suitable homes. By this time the business houses in this district had become better acquainted with us and their attitude toward us changed and they became more friendly, and contributed very liberally to our needs, in supplying us with much-needed building materials and many truck loads of foodstuffs as well.

It seemed but a few short weeks until more than a hundred shacks were under course of construction. The grapevine telegraph carried the news that it was O.K. to build the shacks here and it was amazing at the number who wanted to squat here. Our numbers increased rapidly.

One evening several of us sat around an open campfire and one of the shanty dwellers remarked that "We must have a name for this place, we cannot call it 'any old thing.'" Another man remarked, "This is the era of Hoover prosperity; let's call this place 'Hooverville.'" So the name, "Hooverville," given through sarcasm to President Hoover, has clung to the place ever since.

The shacks in Hooverville are built out of every sort of material, and all sorts of architecture is followed, as it suits the taste of the builder and the material he had to build it from. Some are no bigger than piano boxes and some have five rooms. There is no gas, electricity, or running water. Kerosene lamps are used for lighting and wood stoves are used to cook and heat with. We have no modern house furnishings. The furnishings are either castoffs or hand made. Bunks are made of wood; boxes are used for tables and chairs. We discovered that gas tanks from automobiles made good stoves to cook and heat with when set upon legs and a pipe was fitted to take care of the smoke. The writer's stove is made from an ice tank once used by an ice company to freeze a cake of ice in. An end is fitted with a door, and a hole is cut to take care of the stovepipe, which is made from a discarded gutter pipe. The ingenuity of the men in working over discards and castoffs, leads many people to remark that "you fellows have gone back to pioneering." We apply the hobo term and call it plain, downright "jungling."

A big percentage of the men have built pushcarts, using two automobile wheels, no tires and any old sort of a rod for an axle. They push these carts through the alleys of the business district of the city collecting waste materials, mostly paper, that is sorted and baled, and sold to the salvage concerns, thus realizing a little each day. Others have made row boats and fish in the waters of Elliott Bay for a living. Some catch a few fish each day that are sold in Seattle markets, and others fish for driftwood, that is towed to the beach and cut into firewood and sold to fuel companies. There are a few of the men who ply their trades in a small way; such as, boat building, shoe repairing, selling daily papers, etc. None of them realize very much from such enterprises, but they can hold their heads up and say, "I am not on relief." One thing we have been proud of is, that when times have been their worst, never more than one third of us have ever been on the relief rolls at any one time. If former President Hoover could walk through the little shanty addition to Seattle bearing his name, he would find that it is not inhabited by a bunch of ne'er-do-wells, but by one thousand men who are bending every effort to beat back and regain the place in our social system that once was theirs.

Hooverville is the abode of the forgotten man. Seattle city authorities have decreed that no women or children would be permitted to live here, so no more than a dozen women live here.

The men are past middle age in life. Seldom is any one living here under thirty years of age.

The population is a sliding population. In midwinter it is at its peak, somewhere near one thousand two hundred, and goes down in midsummer to one-half this figure. Every spring a lot of fellows decide to leave and go in search of work into farming communities that lie "over the hill" in eastern Washington or in far-away Montana and the Dakotas. They offer their shacks for sale, which they are permitted to do, and realize a few dollars for a "road stake," to tide them over until they are earning again. The prices vary from \$3.00 to \$25.00, depending upon the size and condition of the shack. The same men often return the next fall, with their "winter stake" and buy back the shack at twice that price and have enough left to "hole up" for the winter.

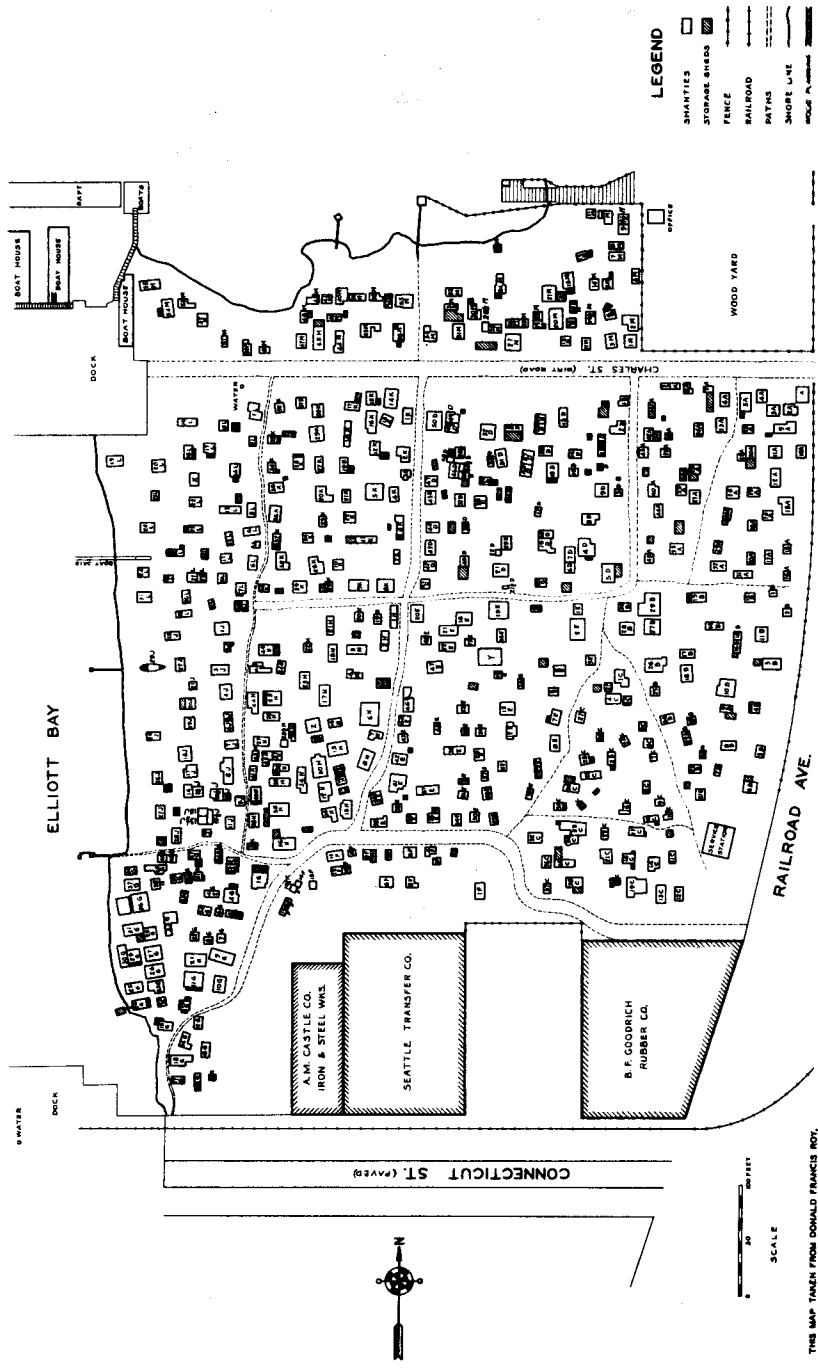
It is natural that in a melting pot such as this, many contrasts are found which account for the many interesting stories news writers tell about the place.

One of the most perplexing problems we had was the problem of numbering our homes so that it would be easy to find anyone here. The houses are not built in line on streets and avenues, but are set up any old way, leaving barely enough room between some for pushcarts to pass through. After carefully studying the matter over, we plotted the town out in sections, using the pushcart lanes for dividing lines, and numbering each section alphabetically, beginning with A and starting 1-A, 2-A, and on until section A was filled, then on to B, C, and so on, putting not more than fifty shacks to a section. Everyone agreed that this system was simple.

Questions often asked are: "Where do the residents of Hooverville come from?" "Who are they?" "How do they like to live in Hooverville?" Most of the residents are honorable, unemployed seamen, lumberjacks, fishermen, and miners. There are, of course, other tradesmen here. Most of them have service records with some Seattle business firm, showing that at some time or other they had been employed by that firm, and if given an opportunity would be out of town on the job somewhere, doing useful work again. The men apparently like to live here; in fact, almost all of them have never known anything better than camps and jungles, so the life is nothing new to them. They have long been accustomed to it.

Most grown-ups remember the years back when great numbers of men roved around over the West, either walking the highways or riding freight trains, carrying big rolls of blankets over

DISTRIBUTION OF SHANTIES IN "HOOVERVILLE": MARCH, 1934



their shoulders. "Bundle stiffs," they were called. They picked up jobs wherever they could find them, sometimes in railroad construction camps, or digging tunnels, or building dams. They never stayed very long in one place, and then drifted on. They always wore rough clothing and cooked and ate their meals in the jungle camps and unrolled their blankets and slept either in box cars or out in the open, with the ground for a floor and the sky for a roof. The police always saw to it that they never stayed very long in one town—"just long enough to cook up and boil up" they put it, and if Mr. Bundle Stiff did not voluntarily move on, police pressure was used to force his departure. He was being continually informed of there being plenty of work "right over the hill," and that the best thing he could do would be to go and take on some of it. He was always kept on the move. People often ask, "What has become of the old Bundle Stiff?" They see great swarms of young men rambling around, but do not see the old timer of years ago. The answer is that the "Old Time Bundle Stiff" has taken Mr. Gifford's advice and has built himself a shanty in some shanty town and has stopped drifting around. It is this type of men who predominate in Hooverville.

Hooverville is five years old. In the years that have passed, it is safe to estimate that more than seven thousand people have lived here at various times.

Our settlement has been publicized by teachers and writers. Once they called us pretty low-brow names; now they speak of us in high-sounding words and phrases—"Pioneers," "Human Driftwood," and one writer in a local paper in his column, "Along the Waterfront," calls us "Life's Steerage Passengers." He writes, "We walk through Hooverville. Poverty is rearing its ugly head on either side, but is it poverty? The shacks are neat, clean, and orderly. The men live here to escape the moldy existence of flop houses and transient bureaus that reek with disinfectant. Some have lack-luster eyes and seem saturated with misfortune, but for the most part they are chin up individuals, travelling through life for the minute steerage."

"What manner of man is the Mayor of Hooverville?" "How did he get his job?" "What are his duties?" "How big is his salary?" These are some of the questions I hear asked quite often when I am uptown far away from Hooverville, and asked by persons who do not know that the Mayor is listening. I often find it hard to control myself while the "Mayor of Hooverville" is being talked about. He, to say the least, has become an interesting waterfront character.

Really, I am no different than anyone else. At the time the settlement was founded, I was called a "Contact Man," a man to contact the city authorities and business houses, if the need arose. A few months later I was being called the "Mayor." A few months ago a writer in one of the large chain of newspapers wrote and published in that chain a syndicated article with the heading, "Hooverville, Seattle's city of shacks, is ruled by a dictator." All of these titles are wrong. I am just a simple person, living among simple people, whose status in life is the same as theirs, trying to do the best I know how to administer in my poor way to their wants. The men often seek my advice and bring their troubles to me. I advise them as best I can on many questions. By interceding at the right time, I am often able to prevent many little rows that might develop into big ones.

When there is something to be taken up with the city authorities, that job usually falls on my shoulders. When any one is sick, I am the one called upon to get the doctor and send him to the hospital. When the city authorities find anything wrong in Hooverville, I am the one who gets bawled out. My duties are many and varied. Sometimes I sorely tire of them. It is a bigger job being "Mayor of Hooverville" than a person would think.

The fame of Hooverville and its mayor has spread far and wide. Seldom a day passes that the mail does not bring a letter addressed to the "Honorable Mayor of Hooverville," written by some person in some place far away from Hooverville, seeking information about the place. It is sometimes a writer wanting material for history, sometimes a social worker who wishes to know something about the place. The most pathetic of them all are those I receive from some mother, asking me to help locate her runaway boy, or from a wife whose husband is missing. I sometimes am able to find the missing person in one of the shanties.

My salary is nothing. I do not feel that I am serving the city or state in any capacity. I am serving a bunch of fellows who are on their uppers, the same as I, and who have nothing to pay; consequently, I am not on any kind of a payroll.

Pretty near every day brings something new. This is just another shanty town, nine and a half acres of ground, but be it ever so humble, it's home sweet home. You ask something about

the political and social life. I had a very interesting letter. It was in June, 1935, from a school teacher in Tennessee. She says, "I have just read my local paper—" I never did find out who wrote about us in that paper.

I told this school teacher that I think all of these men haven't been used to a better home life than this. All we have been used to in the past quarter century is a very hard and rough life. Most of these men have no interest in politics, but I am the Democratic precinct committeeman. I told her that this is a settlement of forgotten men.

Our women down here are in most cases a bad sort. This school teacher wrote back and said, "Where are the families of these men? What are their plans for returning to them? I did not know that the Western men are such hermits." It is a question of living the life that we have had to live for the past quarter century. You might say that we have been living in a man's world. A lot of them perhaps have had no families to leave. There are quite a few brought in here. I never heard of anybody mistreating any woman who came down here, but it is not a safe place for them. We have about a dozen here now. I don't know how many different walks of life are represented here.

Letters from relatives come less and less frequent. Folks get out of touch, and you don't even know if a fellow is living under his right name. There is one man under sentence that I know of living here. He makes his regular reports to the parole board. We know all about it, but nobody else does. They felt that they were living the life of a black sheep and didn't want anybody to know anything about it.

We had one young fellow come in here a while back. (As a rule we don't have young men.) He said he was over twenty-one so I said it was all right for him to stay, but I thought he looked kind of young. I happened to pick up an Oregon paper one day, and here was this young fellow's picture saying he had left home, and he was only seventeen. I went to him and asked him why he didn't write to his mother, but he said he couldn't go back home, that he was "wanted" back there. I wrote to the police chief and he answered that this boy was only wild, not bad, and wasn't wanted for anything but running away. He has gone back home where he belongs now. Pretty nearly every day we have letters asking, "Can you help me find this one or that one?"

These last few days I have had a lot of foreign-born making application for their first papers. My honest opinion is that the average working man doesn't know what he wants in a political way. I really believe that I can count the Communists on the fingers of my two hands from the state of Washington. Down here in this settlement, I find that they are standing pretty solidly behind Mr. Roosevelt and the present administration. They have tried to hand out a little something to everybody, after a fashion, as they say. The foreign-born is taking out his papers so that he can get on the W.P.A. If you haven't got your papers; they'll look at you and say, "You're a nice fellow, but we can't do anything for you." The boys down here don't blame Mr. Hoover for this mess. It is just one of those things that happen.

In voting here, I think we gave Mr. Roosevelt a vote of about 7 to 1. The foreign-born don't take much stock in politics. We have about 80 percent foreign-born and the other 20 percent are native born.

The social outlook of most of the men doesn't amount to a very bright future. We feel that we have lived our life—as I say, we have no young men. The average man feels that he has his life ahead of him. The average age is fifty here, and when a man passes that, he feels that his life is over. We have very few here younger than thirty. All we have ever been used to is camps and jungles, so we are used to rough living. This life is nothing new to us at all. We go around here and chin with one another, and Frank knows Ed and Ed knows Frank. Most of the boys are friendly. We call them by Shorty and Slim and Fat. We get around and visit a lot. Quite a few of the men have radios. President Roosevelt usually makes a hit when he is on the air.

Everybody goes his way providing he doesn't disturb his neighbor, and we have quite a lot of that. If a man is out of eats, I think his neighbor will share with him. One fellow went up town this afternoon, and one groceryman who was going out of business, had sixteen pounds of butter and he gave it to this fellow. He brought it back and divided it up among all of us. I would say it is more of an individualistic life, but we do divide up quite a lot around here, but it is more of a settlement of rugged individuals.

In case of sickness, they are sent to Harborview Hospital. Veterans and seamen go to the Marine Hospital. It is up to us to see that our neighbors don't throw out rotten foodstuffs, but

the boys do pretty well. Our biggest job now is with the fire authorities. If a spark should get in, it would be gone just like that. I have found men dead in their shacks. They have just passed away during the night. We have had five or six such cases during the past two years. It is up to us to look through their belongings, etc. The coroner takes care of most of it, and looks up his relations—then we give his shack to someone else.

We draw up a few laws, but most laws are not laid down by us, but for us. The city authorities lay them down. I just go along, and if I see someone doing the wrong thing, I just say, "Now, George, this won't do. Let's respect our neighbor a little bit more than this." Drink is our big trouble. We have some D-horners. The biggest part of these men will work hard, but after they get it, that is the question, what they are going to do with it afterwards.

Most of the men are very bitter against war. We have probably two dozen World War veterans. We have some Russians here who were in the Russo-Japanese spree. If you try to talk to the average Russian, they just "don't savvy." All we want down here is to be let alone. Rugged individualism is their creed. One of the reasons we came here was to get away from relief organizations. The Salvation Army did everything they could, but when the band used to come down here to play for the fellows, some of them would say, "We came down here to get away from the Salvation Army!" I don't blame the Salvation Army. They did everything they possibly could, but this thing was so big that the community fund organization just couldn't handle it.

You can't come here and do just what you want. You can't live alone. You have to respect your neighbor, and your neighbor must respect you. If a trouble-maker doesn't want to listen to me, we call higher authorities than I am to come and get him. The boys drink a little more than they ought to down here. I got that way once myself right after my wife died. I just felt that I never wanted to draw another sober breath as long as I lived, but my brother took me in hand, and got me back on the right track.

A good many of the fellows feel blue and down and out. One time I heard my neighbor crying. I advised him to go east of the mountains to pick some cherries or something. I gave him a token so that he could ride out to Interbay where you catch the train. All the railroads ask is for us to keep out of the way of the train crew and get out of the way of the moving trains. They will even go so far as to tell you when and where to catch the next train. They pull out in the spring and drift back again in the fall. When I am away, they go to the postmaster of Hooverville. He is one of our men.

I made my own stove out of things I collected. This tank was once used to freeze ice in the Arctic Club. I made a talk up there once. When I had finished I went out the back way, found three of these tanks, picked them up, and brought them home. The stove legs are part of an iron cot. I sawed them off the right length, drilled a hole, and put bolts on. I got this white enameled stove shelf from a restaurant supply house. I picked the gutter pipe out of an alley.

The boys get a lot of junk around here. It just takes a little ingenuity to put it together. Sometimes I don't get any sleep at night so many of the boys will be knocking at the door and asking for different things. Last Sunday and Saturday nights, I didn't get one night's sleep. I had to go to one of the other fellow's houses to get some sleep—then they couldn't find me.

When some official says he is going to tear down all these shacks, the men all get excited. A bunch of the fellows picked blackberries from Beacon Hill and I have made a lot of blackberry jelly.

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON PUBLICATIONS
IN
THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Volume 14

October, 1944

SOCIAL TRENDS IN SEATTLE

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