

Boxcars to blackboards: professor reminisces

By Barbara Myers

A pile of newspapers on the dirty floor of the box car stirs and sits up - it's a new day in Hobo America.

To most, they are nameless tramps, skid row bums, vagrants - portraits of despair. But to Dr. James Rooney, Associate Professor of Sociology, these homeless men are more. They are portraits of survival - teachers of adventure.

Dr. Rooney knows, he's a self-proclaimed hobo with years of experience hopping freights and living on skid row. As he talks of his experiences from his scholarly office, a dapper man with a trimmed, greying beard, one has difficulty imagining this tea-drinking professor in any other setting.

But, as a native of Spokane, Washington, Dr. Rooney got his first lesson in "hobo life" when he was 16 years old.

"I wanted to get a job in town," he said, "but there weren't any available. When I heard on the radio that apple thinners were needed in Wenatchee, I went down to the farm labor office and signed up. The guy explained that I'd get .85 an hour, work ten hours a day, and pay \$2.00 for room and board."

Dr. Rooney said he went home, packed his bag, and armed with ten penny-postcards, set out to make his fortune.

"It was at this point," said Dr. Rooney, "that I met the first bunch of guys off of skid row. I quickly learned that the stereotype of the skid row alcoholic is not always accurate. There are many guys on skid row who have regular, steady jobs. Others are seasonal workers who work for a while and then come back to live off their savings."

After supper, Rooney said, he would sit and talk to his fellow workers. "I began to realize these people were a little different from the working class neighborhood people that I grew up with. But I thought they were really interesting."

The next year, right after his graduation from high school, Rooney was "on the road again," this time looking for adventure as a cherry picker.

"There weren't any farms in that region that offered room and board," says the ex-hobo, "so I talked to a few of the other tramps and found that lodging was available at the local freight yard - in the empty box cars."

Dr. Rooney said you must come prepared if you want a good night's rest in a box car.

"The floors of the cars are



not always swept out for the comfort of the tramps," he said, with a shy smile, "So you bring along a stack of newspapers - some for covering the floor and some for keeping yourself warm."

He explained that there is a trick to effectively using newspapers for insulation.

"You have to learn how to do it," he said, gesturing to his feet. "It takes about four sheets of newspaper: one to go over your feet and around your legs, another to go around your knees, a third to go around your hips, and the fourth for around your chest. Fold it in right, lay back, and aahhh, be comfortable."

That wasn't all that Rooney learned that summer.

"You'd be sleeping at night," he said, "and you'd hear the rrr on the tracks. That meant the locomotive was coming. If you have trouble waking up in the morning (he chuckles), just have a locomotive bump into your bed."

During that summer Rooney traveled 2500 miles around the Northwest and had 20 different jobs.

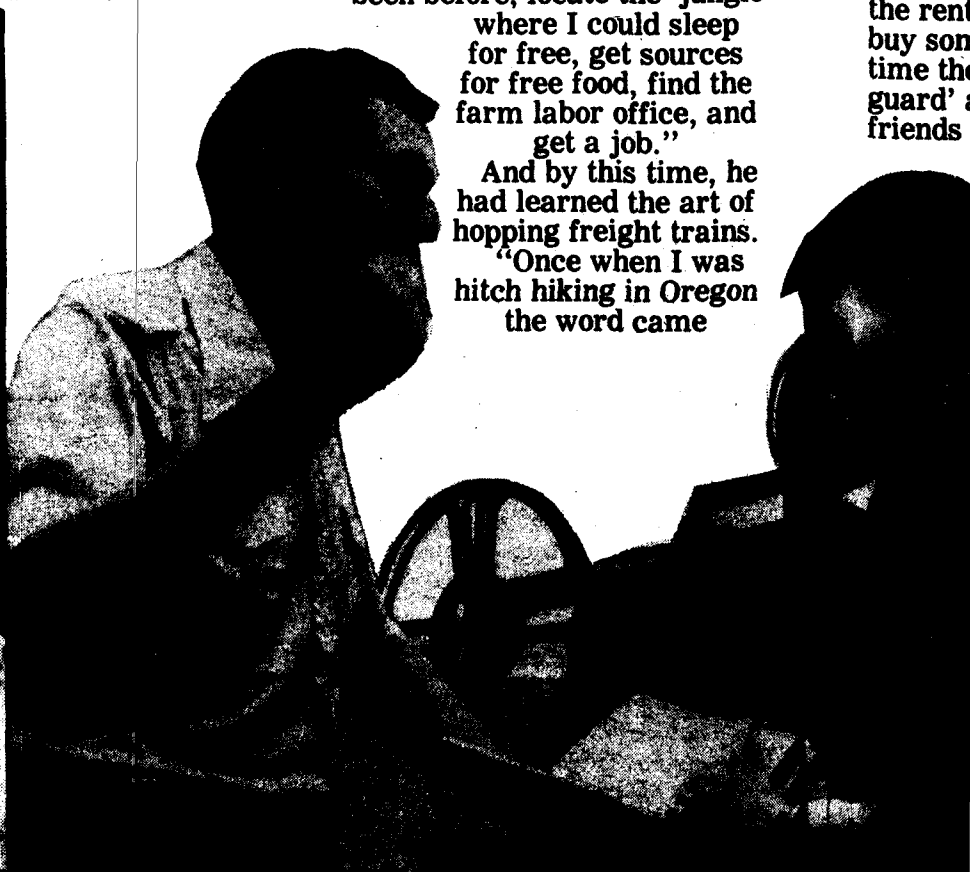
"I could make money and see some of the country at the same time. It was adventure all the way around," he said. "What more could you ask for?"

By the time he was 18, Dr. Rooney felt he could go anywhere in the United States and make it. "I knew how to go into a town where I had never been before, locate the 'jungle'

where I could sleep for free, get sources for free food, find the farm labor office, and get a job."

And by this time, he had learned the art of hopping freight trains.

"Once when I was hitch hiking in Oregon the word came



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