

# minisces vagabond way of life

down the line that a freight train was leaving the local yards, so I grabbed my bag along with everyone else, and headed for the freight cars. I didn't know what to do, but I soon learned that the hissing of the steam going through the brake system means that the train leaves in 10 minutes."

Dr. Rooney's first-hand experience was the basis for a dissertation he did as a senior at Gonzaga University in Spokane.

"Most people just went to the library and did a glorified term paper," he said. "I didn't want to do that. I wanted to do a live study."

By plotting out the life histories of these road men and recording the living patterns, Dr. Rooney was able to make classifications of skid row men.

The "Fruit Tramp," he said, "is the one who follows the crops and works. He is the committed worker. The 'Hobo' is the one who works minimally and follows the circuit."

People try to take a social type and assume homogeneity, he said, and "it's not quite that simple. There are also families and single guys on the road. Some of the single guys have a car. They are called the 'Rubber Tramps'."

Corresponding to the fruit tramps are the urban skid row workers who live by taking industrial, short-term jobs.

"Here again," said Dr. Rooney, "you have the dedicated workers and the semi-workers."

"These semi-workers on skid row," he explained, "are called the 'Home Guard.' They are not beggars or bums. They work the minimum amount to support themselves, about two days a week: one day to pay the rent, and the other day to buy some food. The rest of the time they stand around 'on guard' and gab with their friends - conspicuous leisure."

Not all skid row men stick to one type of work. Many rotate between farm work, industrial

short-term jobs, and railroad track repair.

Dr. Rooney said those who work on the railroad doing track repair in isolated rural areas are known as the "Gandy Dancers." They live in a work train and have a high proportion of heavy drinkers.

"On pay day," he said, referring to their folklore, "you don't expect to see a Gandy dancer back until you see him coming."

Then there is the "C, B, and Q Gandy," which translates to mean "Come, Boil up your clothes to get the lice out, and as soon as they are clean, Quit."

"That's life and times among the Gandies," he said, "Work for a few days and you're gone again."

Drunks and winos also fall into the classification of skid row men.

"The drunk," explained Rooney, "is the guy who goes out and works regularly but every job ends up in a drinking spree - three or four days to a week or two weeks. As the need for alcohol gets greater and the physical deterioration takes over, he becomes a wino."

Surveys taken in New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia show that the number of alcoholics, whether winos or drunks, is between 33 and 40 percent. "The others," said Dr. Rooney, "are the workers or the retired. Drunks don't live long enough

to be retired. They die in their late 40's or early 50's."

Life in the skid row community also has its drawbacks.

"Once in Chicago, two guys tried to roll me," said Rooney, "and one had a knife." He rolls up his sleeve to show the five inch scar on his right arm. "I had to fight them. I got cut up a little bit."

Would this man with the expressive blue eyes go on the road again?

"Oh yes, Oh yes," he said.

"It would be great fun to ride freight trains from here to the Rocky Mountains, or to go camping out in Montana. It's beautiful there - just bring a fishing pole, work on ranches..."

His voice trails as he seems lost in thought. Whether he is thinking of freight cars past or journeys yet to be taken, the hobo is in his blood.

