GOOD COMPANY

A TRAMP LIFE

THIRD EDITION

DOUGLAS HARPER

ROUTLEDGE

Good Company

This sociological classic shows how the railroad tramp's status as a deviant changed from frontier itinerant to post settlement vagrant; from class conscious proletariat in the Depression to the damaged post WWII vet. The third edition (with new photos) discusses how today the freights have become the milieu of violent gangs who transport drugs, human traffickers and serial killers. Beating the odds against increased post 9/11 surveillance are yuppie adventure seekers, young travelers, crust punks and oogles. In the background is the same freight train—unforgiving and lethal—and cultures policed at times by honorable tramps and at times by sadistic enforcers of violent gangs.

Features of the new edition:

- eight previously unpublished photos that reflect new directions in visual ethnography (90 photos altogether);
- a fuller integration of photos made during the author's participant research with tramps over thousands of miles on the freights and while living homeless in urban America;
- a new, nuanced edit of a narrative describing the author's five-week immersion with the quintessential tramp of the era, Carl.

Douglas Harper is a founding member of the International Visual Sociology Association, founded in the late 1980s, and was founding editor of the journal *Visual Studies*. He has held full-time faculty appointments in several American universities and visiting appointments at the University of Bologna and the University of Amsterdam. He has exhibited his photographs internationally and his documentary, *The Longest Journey Begins* (2015), is co-directed by Maggie Patterson.

Riding an empty auto carrier, somewhere in Montana.

Note: all photos, unless otherwise noted, by Douglas Harper

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3rd edition, updated and expanded

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Douglas Harper

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very good company, then and now

A tramp looks for a ride, Havre, Montana

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Introduction

Good Company, first published in 1982, was based on fieldwork done in an American subculture that had fallen below the cultural radar. This was a culture of men, hobos or tramps, who rode freight trains, drank on skid rows and worked on the fringes of the American economy. The culture had existed at least since the 1880s, and represented something quintessentially American: a life that flirted with the boundaries of criminality but was also a mobile working class. It was a culture with a trickster mentality, and it was wedded to freight trains as both symbol and reality. The trains were and are hard and dangerous to ride, but they offered a means to travel virtually anywhere in the country. By the time I headed out on the trains it was generally assumed that this way of life—the culture of the hobo—had disappeared.

In that era, the 1970s, homelessness was seen by sociologists as a social problem of the *skid-row bum*: homeless, family-less, jobless, even identity-less. The problems (and few studies acknowledged the existence of homeless women) of the bum were defined as growing out of his uncontrolled alcohol use. The tramp overlapped this group, but only in part. Part of what I did was to identify a left-over piece of American culture in which homelessness was in part a willful separation from society.

By the time I completed my dissertation and revised it for publication in the early 1980s, homelessness in America had become a national crisis. The collapse of industrial manufacturing in the Northeast uprooted families and a new generation of homeless vets had emerged from wars in Vietnam and, eventually, the Middle East. Some of these newly homeless families and vets rode freights and borrowed from the trappings of the old tramp culture. Others were homeless in old cars, camps or doubled up in cheap housing, but they were not tramps as I had found them fifteen years before.

In the meantime the economic dislocations caused by de-industrialization have lessened and homelessness, still a personal crisis for at least a million Americans, has largely faded from public consciousness. In the post-9/11 world it has become extremely hard to ride the rails but there are still some people on the trains. Accounts of these new and strange tramps, oogles and their doogles, meth gangs and murderers, are told in this third edition.

The urban areas formerly inhabited by tramps and bums have also transformed or disappeared. In cities like Boston and New York, the old skid rows—with flophouses, missions, pawnshops and cheap bars—gave way to upscale urban housing and new office buildings. In poorer cities the skid rows blended

into the deteriorated and largely abandoned inner cities. Thus the photographs in *Good Company* are a visual history of certain urban regions that date to a prior era.

The book is also a study of American culture in the early 1970s, albeit from an unusual perspective. Thus I've left intact the facts of the ethnography: the prices of things purchased, the social issues in the background, and the cultural tapestry from which our conversations emerged. Some of this is startling, indeed; a time not long ago when coffee cost a quarter and cars were a half a block long.

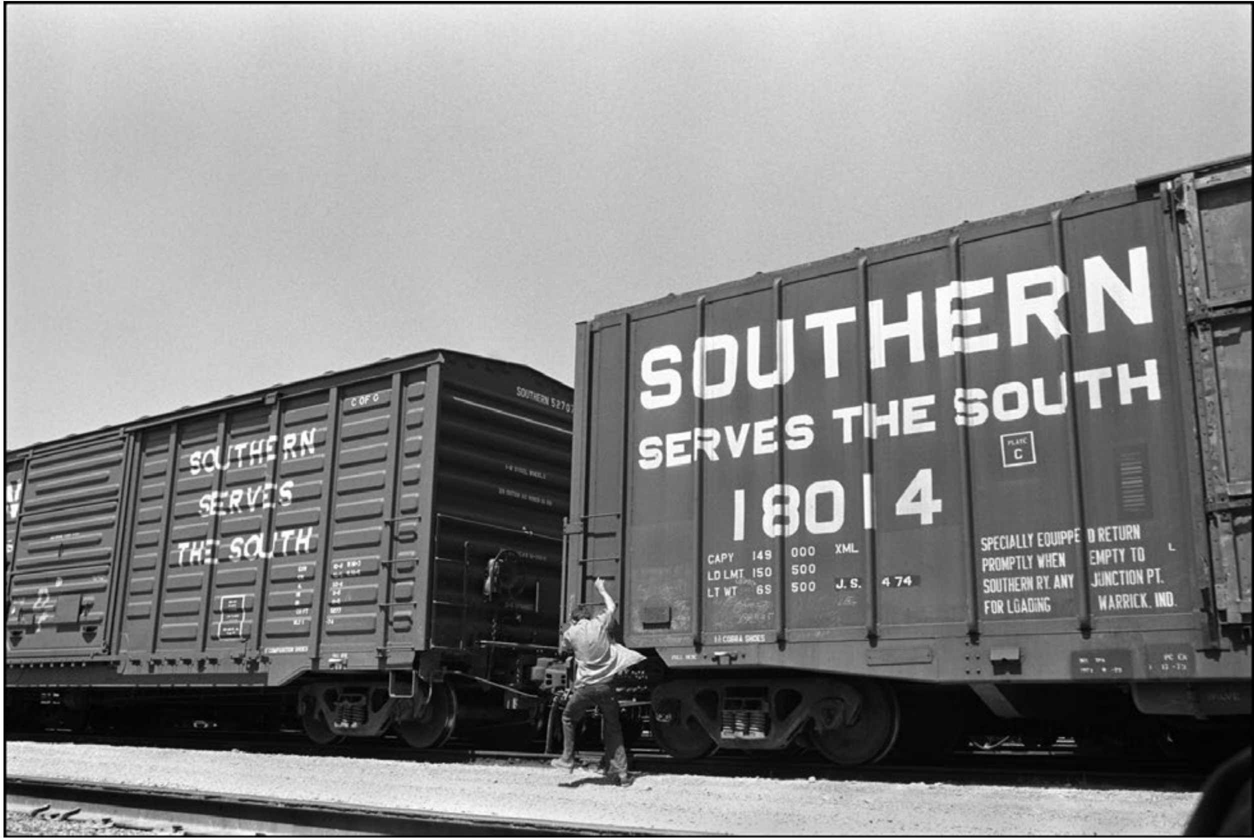
Good Company challenged several taken-for-granted sociological assumptions. The tramps I traveled with were drinkers, but they were not full-time drunks. They spent their wages on skid row, but when their drinking bouts were finished they dried themselves out and traveled thousands of miles on freights to work again. Some of these jobs, such as apple knocking in the American Northwest, depended almost entirely on their labor. The tramps I met were independent and hardworking with a clear sense of who they were and what they represented.

Sociologists had not seen homelessness this way because the tramp was elusive, and typical sociological research method—surveys—did not produce an insider's perspective. *Good Company* built on the work of my undergraduate mentor, anthropologist James Spradley, and was nourished by my graduate mentor, Everett Hughes, and other empathetic professors at Brandeis University, who directed the dissertation from which this book emerged. They encouraged me to experience the world of the tramp close-up, and to write and photograph the world I experienced in an unvarnished and direct way.

Revising the book has been a long, strange trip. When I met Carl, he was forty-nine and I was twenty-four. I was living hand-to-mouth as a grad student in Boston. My politics were strongly affected by the anti-(Vietnam) war movement and the other cultural upheavals of the era. My contemporaries and political fellow travelers largely regarded America as materialistic, racially, sexually and economically exploitative and conformist. This led me, perhaps, to romanticize tramps. But I found something genuinely appealing about many of the men I met on the road. I had devoured the writings of Jack London, John Dos Passos, Woody Guthrie and John Steinbeck; the novels and poetry of Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder and others of the beat generation; and old tramp autobiographies that had faded from the public mind. The men I met were part of that tradition; not a perfect fit, but tramps never fit perfectly anywhere.

I went back on the freights in the late 1970s to find Carl, and I spent many days over the years in the Minneapolis skid rows looking for him. But I never found Carl again, and I'll never know how he ended his days.

Carl, waiting for a train, stranded in western Montana



Catching out; riding streamlined, Minot, North Dakota

Part One: On the Road

I was drinking beer with some tramps one night in the fall of 1973. Jack and Eddie had buddied up when Jack picked Eddie "out of the gutter" in Wenatchee, and he'd taken him along to a job picking apples. Jack had an old car and called himself a rubber tramp. Eddie didn't say much and he didn't work very hard. He looked old and worn out, but Jack had an interest in him for some reason and was always saying things like: "Now Eddie, you aren't going off to drink that old wine no more, now are you?" And Eddie would shake his head back and forth—he wasn't going back; he wasn't going back.

I didn't know how they'd ended up together, just another random meeting someplace down the road. Jack was talking about the times he'd had: jobs, cars, drunks, bad freight rides, when Eddie interrupted: "Last job I had was making brooms for fourteen cents an hour—made two-hundred-forty dollars in sixteen months."

Jack banged his beer down on the table and stared at the other tramp: "Two-hundred-forty in sixteen months? You been on the *inside*?"

The tramp looked like he wished he'd kept his mouth shut. He finally nodded sadly and started telling us about twenty years behind the bars of San Quentin, Alcatraz, and a list of other prisons I'd never heard of. Jack kept looking at him like he couldn't believe his ears, and I was a little surprised the subject hadn't come up in the month they'd been together. Jack finally asked him what he'd done to get himself in so much trouble and the tramp said:

"It's checks—always little chicken-shit checks. My problem is my education—I know how to write my name. Did you ever think of it? Just sign your name and they give you money. It never fails to amaze me to find out my name's still good after all the trouble I've been in."

Jack shook his head and looked away: "You must have liked it in there to keep going back."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Eddie shot back.

"If you didn't like it, why did you keep going back?"

"I ain't been in for two years, and I ain't going back," Eddie said.

Then Jack cooled off and told Eddie he thought he'd turned a corner. "You know what your problem is? You got to choose the right company. You got to choose the right company for a change—you gotta stay away from those goddamn *skid* rows. How many times you been rolled on skid row?"

"Pretty near every time."

"You got to learn to choose your company better," Jack repeated slowly.

Eddie took a long pull from his beer, looked hard around the room and said: "That's something I been thinking about one hell of a lot these past twenty-three years—just who is good company?"

A division stop in Montana, Laurel freightyards

1

I had been waiting for a train a year before, in the same yard heading in the same direction, but it all felt new. The Minneapolis Burlington Northern yards stretch northwest from under the university and they go on for miles; ten, fifteen, twenty tracks wide; spurs heading north, spurs heading east; and somewhere in the maze a main line that carries the hotshot out of Chicago through Minneapolis to the west. I stood in the shadows of huge grain elevators, out of sight of the control tower, and I waited for a train due at midnight.

I'd been in the yards for a couple of days, peeking around, asking questions and making plans. Every time I've gone back to the freights I've had to cross an emotional hurdle—they seem too big, too fast, too dangerous and too illegal—and I get used to the idea by spending a few days in the yards, testing the waters. If the brakemen aren't busy they'll answer a carefully worded question. If there are railroad police around it's better to encounter them just hanging around; no gear and no suspicious behavior. Then you choose the day: *tomorrow* you'll catch out, tonight you'll party and pack your gear and tomorrow you'll be back on the road. When you walk past the *No Trespassing* signs into the yard your traveling clothes and your gear mark you clearly. You enter a world that has its own rules and few second chances, and you'd better know what you're up to when you cross that line.

I was shifting back into a tramp world for the fourth or fifth time. I'd made cross-country trips on freights, and I'd spent some weeks the winter before living on Boston's skid row. These experiences were trips into a life I ordinarily did not lead, and I brought back from them photographs and scattered bits of writing. I was going back to learn about and photograph the tramp way of life, that was only a part of the reason I was back again. The taste of camp coffee and the view from a flatcar on a slow ride through the Rockies were magnets that pulled hard indeed.

I felt my gear in order and plans set. The Chicago hotshot would carry me across the Dakotas, Montana and the Rockies. As much as I had a destination, it was Wenatchee, Washington, the center of the apple country and a junction of major rail lines. I knew the jungles in Wenatchee, and I knew that there would be tramps there to steer me to a job. The Chicago hotshot, with the right connections, should get me to Wenatchee in no more than a couple of days. I mulled it over and relaxed. It seemed manageable; it seemed in grasp.

After perhaps a half an hour the activity increased in the yard. Strings of boxcars were pushed up and down the parallel tracks, shuffled into boxcars, flatcars, gondolas and piggybacks that were being pushed over the hump. The

cars were slowly pushed up the man-made hill; then down they went, one at a time, zipped into one of the fifteen to twenty tracks at the bottom of the hump. They'd smash into the new cars and the couplings would snap shut. It was all controlled from the control tower that loomed above. The cars were shuffled and reshuffled—a few empties or badorders set off and pushed aside; a string of piggybacks or gondolas pushed into place—like a carefully rehearsed play; a train in the making. I watched idly until I noticed a long string of empty grain cars and flat cars moving into place. I guessed that the grain cars would be going west, probably to Minot or Havre, and that the flats would go on to the lumbering country in the Rockies. As the train stretched out further and further I decided to find out.

I picked my way across the yard, climbing carefully over the boxcar couplings. You don't know when a car will slam into the one you are climbing over, snapping the coupling back into its tube-like mount, so you climb with care. The coupling shaft looks like the natural place to step, but if the car snaps while you are climbing over your foot will be crushed and you'll fall under the train. I once saw a tramp who had been dragged under a car; he lay in the yard, surrounded by rail police, waiting for an ambulance. There was a trail of blood, beneath the boxcar, that marked his path.

So I crossed carefully; throwing my gear over the couplings, then scampering across on the coupling. I moved first with hesitancy and then with more confidence as, once again, I found my rail legs.

I found the longest section of train and I walked down the narrow canyon between the cars. A tramp crouched near the door of the first empty boxcar. He did not see me coming and his face soured when I suddenly appeared. He smelled of booze, sweat and urine, and it looked like he'd slept in his work clothes for a week. His face was scarred and unshaven. He had gear back in the boxcar so I asked him where he was headed. It was clear he wanted nothing to do with me, but he answered that he was going west to pick apples. I told him that I, too, was going to the harvest; to Wenatchee where I'd heard there was work. He answered, not a little sarcastically, that there wasn't any good work in *Wenatchee*, you had to go north, up the Okanogan River, to a town like Oroville. Before I could ask him where that was he'd slunk back to the corner of his car. I walked on to find my own.

I was nearly to the end of the train before I found another empty boxcar. It was old and battered, without wooden walls that would cool and quiet the ride. The wheels were mounted in old-style bearings that make an empty car jump and skitter, and the floor was covered with strapping iron and sawdust. It was, in all ways, a bad ride, but it was the only other ride on the train. There was no telltale "badorder" scrawled on the side of the car to indicate that it was a wreck headed for the repair yard, so I threw my gear in the door and climbed in.

I found some cardboard sheets for a mattress and pushed the litter out of the car. A brakeman stuck his head in the door and he startled me, but he seemed friendly; even interested. He told me the train was due out on the

high line—the old Great Northern tracks—as soon as it got its power. It would make the five-hundred-mile run to Minot before breaking up and it should get me there a few hours before the hotshot which was still due at midnight, so I'd be able to catch a few hours' sleep before continuing on. Then our conversation should have been over but he lingered. He told me he'd tramped all over the west when he was younger and he always tried to help a man out "as long as they looked like they knew what they were doing." It was all going downhill, he said; the tramps had become bums, and there were hippies on the trains who didn't know the ropes. You don't mind a rider, he repeated, if they know what they're doing. But the hippie will lie around in the open smoking dope like it's a picnic, and then they'll get hurt and sue the railroad. He shook his head, muttered that the world was going to hell, and walked away.

As my car slammed back and forth I pegged the doors open with old brake linings and railroad spikes. You try to keep the doors from jolting shut because there is no way to open them from the inside. Ruined brakelines, which lay around the yard, can be banged into the space between the door and the car, and even though they usually fall out after a few hours it is a job that is always done.

A yard engine lumbered by, engine racing and moving in its odd, slow pace. Two green Burlington Northern engines, attached back to back, idled alongside and past my boxcar. I caught sight of the engineer and our eyes met briefly, but his expression did not change. Just a minute later the air hissed down the brakelines of my train and the highball whistle blew. I was filled with a lonely sort of expectancy—an intense desire to be underway. Then the engineer snapped the throttle back, the jolt crashed down the train and the trip began.

As the train pulled out of the yard and gained speed the memories came flooding back. The noise and movement are more than I've ever experienced before. Nothing can be so loud! Nothing can throw me about with such abandon! The car, sprung for hundreds of tons, carries me as a tiny piece of flotsam bouncing, banging, swaying. The car rocks from side to side and I think of empty boxcars tipping and taking whole freight trains with them. You don't live through those, say the tramps. The car bangs so hard on road crossings I hold my mouth open to keep my teeth from cracking together. I try to sit and my body leaps off the floor and my sleeping bag skitters away. Slack creeps into the mile-long train, and as the car snaps ahead I find my body accomplishing the anatomical feat of moving three directions at once. I stand with my legs spread for balance, arm outstretched to the wall; using my knees for shocks. The train highballs and the tracks are bad and my car rides worse than any I remember. Or perhaps it just seems this way every time I go back. The eight hours ahead seem interminable but the train does not slow to ease my aches.

I spend the hours standing by the door. When the tracks parallel a highway I catch a glimpse of travelers safely encapsulated in their cars. Sometimes