Wandering Men Frequent Eugene

obo Numbers iple in 1948

By JIM ALEXANDER

ugene's floating population has led in the past 12 months: the ps, the men of the railroad cks, and their modern brethr—the men of the itching ch—are moving through and ying in Eugene in increasing bers.

ne index, the Eugene post of Salvation Army, reports free ls and lodging were given to re than 1560 drifters in the first months of 1948; the 1947 fig- was 894 for the like period.

nother, the Lane County pter of the American Red ss, reports swelling relief rolls these so-called "knights of the d."

rom the Oregon State Employt Service comes word that t hours are spent saying "No" ss the counter to transient kers in many cases looking for rt time work, a drink, and a move.

"This type of man is readily ognizable. Nobody wants m," says Guy Lang, manager the Eugene office.

But we get them. Two a day the county jail," reports Sher- Tom Swarts. Cost on the per meal service to these tran- ts runs at $2 and is paid by Lane County taxpayer.

A ten per cent increase in pet- theft," reports Eugene Chief of ce Keith Jones. While this not be pinned down to the ring derelicts, the rise in both ures might indicate some con- tion, according to the chief.

"We pick up criminals in their gles almost every time we hit m," admits a state police offi-

Where do these men stay in ugene?

o you remember that swim- g hole near the railroad dge, where kids like to go, chat, d get a little wet? That's where u find these men. They like to ay near water.

o you know that patch of trees Skinner's Butte where Eugene ngsters go to play cowboy and dian? Those fires you see at ht up there are the cooking res of the gentlemen of the d.

o you recall the old quarry out east of the rail yards; a good place for raft building by ocean-minded teensters? That's where the floaters eat and sleep between trains.

What has put these men on the road?

"I was restless after the war, couldn't find a good job, the wife nagged, and this is easy," was a thumbnail sketch given by a bearded 32-year-old sprawled on the side of Skinner's Butte watching a rusty tin of boiling coffee water.

'For My Health'

"I am traveling for my health. I call myself Jake. That's my name," was the response of a graybeard who was found chatting with three young Eugene swimmers where the mill race breaks through into the Willamette.

"Oh, I don't know. What do you want?" huskily whispered one "boy," who was cleanly dressed and added things were "too comfy" to worry.

"Work," was all a tight lipped lad with a crooked grin would say.

"On your way," came with a backward glance from a hulk leaning over a fading fire. No welcome here. "What do you want?"

"Just looking for someone."

No more grins, no more rest then. The same, slightly wary, careful, resentfull expression shows on all faces.

That's all. That's on Skinner's Butte; overlooking Eugene from below the cross.

"USED TO JUNGLE across the river, but the high water drove us out," said this traveller, standing on a millrace wall. Headed for Oakridge next, he plans on a little work in logging up there.

TOO OLD TO WORK, too old o hop the freight, this transient walks the railroad tracks, bound r the coast looking for "work r something."

'They're all careful. They see a lot. Two trains left today and maybe fifteen riders. A mixed crew," said Southern Pacific Special Agent Vince Masson, veteran handler of the wandering herd which rides into town on SP boxcars and sometimes breaks into SP freight.

Jungles Cleared

At the west end of the rail yards, near the River Road crossing the county has cleared off most of the jungle the "bo's" had there. Five shacks, made of good lumber, were burned off last week, said Masson.

In a fringe of trees a fading man, with a weakening body, stood before a little pile of paper; the beginnings of a fire.

"Is this alright, Captain?" he asked.

He stood with his heels close together; an effort toward respect. His eyes were watery and weary. His cheeks quivered with the effort of being firm.

He didn't feel strong. He felt old.

"How old are you?"

"I've been going a long time, Cap'n. I was a logger once, but when you get my age, you can't log any more."

"Have a cigarette?"

A puff. His grin begins to show but fades again.

"Have a pack?"

The grin is there. This is what he knew would happen. Not so bleary now are old eyes. Not so erect is the old body. Not so pathetic. Clever.

Shows Pack

He showed his pack. In it was a pair of dirty socks, two cans of potted meat, a box of crackers, some tobacco hand roll, towel, a new pen knife, a detective magazine, an old blanket, and a sweater. "That's all light equipment. Makes no worries."

"Free railroad fare; free hotel cost; a little free food here and there; the ceiling may leak a little, but the floor is solid and the walls don't cramp."

That was the song of most of the "knights."

The exceptions are few and far between, according to Masson. The song writer, out for atmosphere; the poet, seeking inspiration, and the do-gooder observing life are hard to find.

"You can tell a man by his boasts", Masson declares.

A black toothed teen ager was sure his "30,000 free railroads miles in a year was a new record."

Discontented Veteran

Fifteen jobs in three years reported an ex-GI, who felt the government "didn't take care of us when the war ended."

His wife is waiting back in Jersey, but it doesn't appear he will ever get settled. "I was a sergeant," he said, "Just any job won't do. So I'm still looking.

"Free beer, Boys, I never miss," said a mill race camper. "I can spot a beer car a mile off. And it's all free."

"Ever been caught."

"Once. I got ten years."

Such jail records are common among hobos, according to local police. They are fingerprinted, whenever they are picked up, and "It is seldom we don't get a page long record of vag arrests and others on these prints," said one officer.

Caught Murderer

"We caught a murderer that way," muses Sheriff Tom Swarts.

And a "vag," who was picked up for setting fire to a railroad tie in Lane County and put in jail for ten days, is now serving a sentence for murder in Des Moines.

Not unusual, according to Masson, is the pick up of known criminals along the railroad lanes. "They have heard," he said, "that you can't find a man in the jungle."

Action under Eugene's new vagrancy law, he said is rapidly earning Eugene a reputation that prompted one "bo" to tell Masson, "The word is out — Eugene is tough."

And so is the Southern Pacific. Tiring of the pointing finger of hostile local citizens who call the SP a wartime hobo paradise, Masson and his crew have launched a strong postwar campaign against the travelers.

Ed Wilkins, former army MP, and John Huber, one time Swiss policeman, carry the ball for Masson in most of the yard inspections.

Burning over the jungle lands, constantly pulling bos from box cars, patrolling all woodlands, these SP men are earning their yards a hard reputation too.

"But neither the city police or our department can cover all areas," Masson said. "The cost of hunting them down and processing them is high."

Cost to County

And even in death they cost the taxpayer money, mused County Coroner Phil Bartholomew.

Dead vagrants, found in the jungles and roads, and along the tracks, have autopsies, paid for by the county; services, paid for by the county; coffins, paid for by the county, caskets, paid for by the county; and a plot of ground, paid for by the county unless some relative can be found, which is usually not the case.

"Costs run up even higher when you consider the fires, we suspect are of hobo origin," says Chief Jones. They sleep under warehouse platforms and are careless with cigarettes and matches.

Massons prime example of the fire danger lies in a shack along the SP spur near Garfield and Third streets; an old supply building with papers scattered over the floor and cigarette butts covering the vacant spots. Beer bottles are stacked in one corner and another corner is used as a latrine.

"It is outside the city, so the Fire Marshall can't do much about it," said Masson. Possibility that the County Health Officer might condemn the shack is one answer, he guessed.

A fire there might become a widespread tragedy in his opinion, and "wherever you have a large tramp population you will find this problem of unused shed fire hazzards with threats of heavy ultimate cost to the community."

RELAXED BY THE FIRE, this jungle guest said he was on his way to a job. Nearby a pot of mulligan merrily bubbled. Hobos on their way through Eugene reported the area was a "soft touch" for handouts. The poor give the most, they reported. (All photos by staff photographer, engravings by Wiltshire's.)

Police Investigating Wounding of Man

Thomas D. Leffler, 260 Sixth Ave. W., was treated at a local hospital for minor gunshot wounds received from an unknown source late last week.

Leffler told city police that he was under the influence of liquor at the time, and doesn't know how the wound occured. He said that he remembered getting into an argument with another man in a restaurant between Eugene and Junction City, but could not remember how gun-play was involved.

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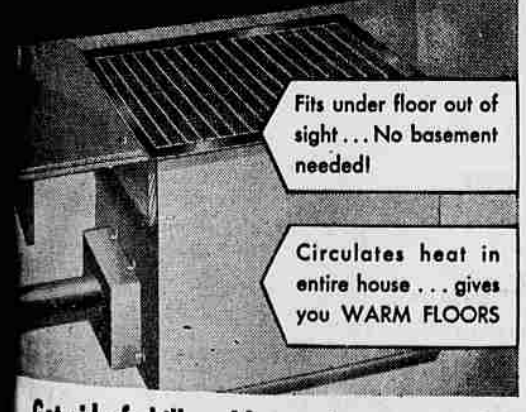

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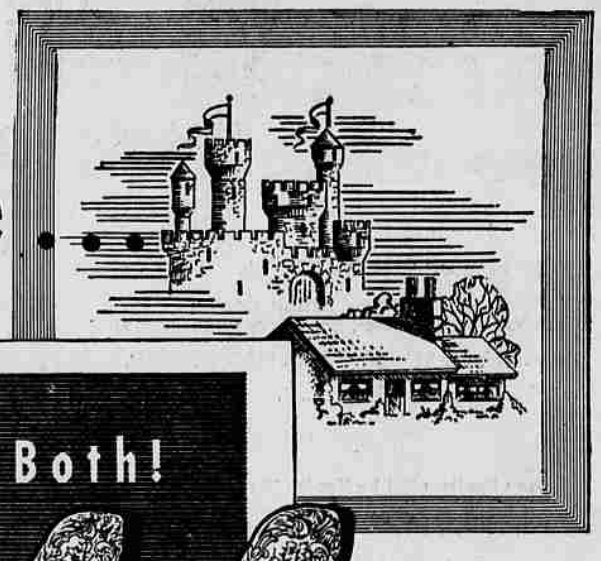

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