

Module 05: Industrialization and Its Discontents: The Great Strike of 1877

Evidence 5: Allan Pinkerton, "Mendicant Tramps," 1878

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Introduction

As more unemployed workers took to the roads in search of jobs, middle- and upper-class Americans grew increasingly concerned about the "tramp menace." Hundreds of thousands of wandering job seekers slept wherever they could find temporary shelter — in boxcars, on park benches, under bridge abutments, in barns — and survived by begging, finding piecemeal work, and engaging in petty theft. While roaming the countryside had once been a respectable, even honorable practice, many citizens grew less tolerant and more fearful as the number of so-called tramps increased in the wake of the depression. The word itself does not seem to have come into common usage until the 1870s, when it appeared as a disparaging description of those seemingly rootless individuals rendered homeless by the depression.

The document below comes from the hand of Allen Pinkerton, the founder of a national detective agency widely known for thwarting labor organization and breaking strikes. Just before the Great Strike of 1877, Pinkerton's agency helped destroy the Molly Maguires, an organization of Irish-American coal miners in eastern Pennsylvania that resorted to intimidation, violence, and murder when their legal efforts to better their conditions of work and life were rebuffed. Pinkerton was also a vocal critic of the Great Strike of 1877.

Questions to Consider

- According to Pinkerton, why had the number of tramps increased in the 1870s?
- In this passage, does Pinkerton seem to be generally sympathetic to the plight of tramps or critical of their actions?

Document

While it is undoubtedly true. . .that the "tramp nuisance". . .is of no recent

origin, I cannot agree. . . that our hard times have had no appreciable effect in increasing tramps; for I am certain, from personal observation and inquiry, that they have had nearly all to do in causing the country to be so filled with tramps as it is at the present time. The brotherhood of the road in some form has always existed, and years ago it appeared in America. But the great masses of our people were ignorant of the tramp or the tramp's character. The hard times which we have experienced have been universal. They have not only depressed our own industries that thousands of mechanics, clerks, and laboring men have been thrown out of employment here, but the same has been true of all European countries. America is the objective point for all classes who have been driven to the wall by poverty in every other part of the world, and thousands upon thousands have come to us without means of subsistence and without any possibility of securing a livelihood. What other recourse have these people had save to turn tramp, and beg and pilfer to sustain life? It is a pitiable condition of things, but there is not doubt that the majority of those now upon the road are there from necessity, and not from choice. If thousands are here from abroad who have been compelled to turn tramp, how many of our own people have been forced into the same kind of life as the only way left to live outside of the poor-house?

. . . [E]ver since the war, circumstances and conditions have been continually arising to transform respectable people into tramps. To bring this more forcibly to the mind of the reader, I would suggest that this book be closed for a moment, and that the reader then tax his own recollection for instances where men or women within his acquaintance, at one time enjoying a good position of good social standing, have, by some fault of their own, perhaps, but still oftener through ill-fortune, been bereft of their means of support, and, as a consequent, their friends, and in due time became wanderers and vagrants of the road. They may have lingered in the city for a time, but by and by every old friend's face is averted, every acquaintance's back is turned, and with a bitter heart and a discouraging, hopeless prospect beyond, they plunge into the country because they are compelled to, and, in nine cases out of ten, are from that moment tramps. I venture to say that nearly every one who will thus reflect upon the subject can recall several instances of this kind, and on further reflection it will be remembered that they have chiefly occurred since the war.

Source:

Allen Pinkerton, *Strikers, Communists, Tramps and Detectives* (New York: G. W. Carleton, 1888), 46-48.