

from *Riding the Rails*



ABOUT THE READING This reading is an excerpt from an interview with Clydia Williams, a woman who hopped freight cars as a child during the Great Depression. Eventually Williams went back to school, served in the military, and earned a graduate degree in business management.



As you read note the hazards of hobo life and how Williams and her cousins avoided them.

We lived in small one- or two-room places with a well in the middle of the yard that rented for twenty-five or fifty cents a week. My relatives would be gone for days at a time workin' someplace or lookin' for something to do. They left my cousins to baby-sit me. When they started riding freight trains, I went with them.

In 1932 there weren't as many people as were traveling later: maybe ten or fifteen on a train. We saw children our age riding alone and others who were with their families.

An empty boxcar was always our first choice for a ride. Sometimes we had to travel in cattle cars. The animals would bawl all the time 'cause they were thirsty and plain scared. Hog cars were less noisy, but the railroad didn't clean them and they stank.

We were thrown off trains but avoided trouble with the railroad [detectives]. We watched them making their rounds in the yards. When they went one way, we'd go the other. When we rode a train we would try to get off before we reached a town. Some **bulls** and **brakemen** were mean. We saw them catch many white **hoboes** and beat them just for the exercise.

VOCABULARY

bulls police officers or detectives

brakemen people who inspect or repair brakes on trains

hoboes homeless people

hardtack made with flour and water

Williams and her cousins kept away from the railroad detectives, who tried to catch and punish people who rode the trains without paying.

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I tied my hair up and wore boys' clothes because a girl could get into trouble on the road. Boys could go over and ask for water or something like that. "Yeah, OK, go out to the windmill," they would be told. If a girl did that, the woman of the house might just decide to keep you. You didn't have any rights in those days. People could keep you and make you work without pay. . .

Every town that I went to had some sort of sign that you weren't welcome. The white hoboes would have no problem unless somebody recognized them as a stranger. If you were black, they sure knew you didn't belong there.

We rode the trains in the spring and fall. We would stop by people's orchards to get something to eat. When we came to a town, we went to the back of hotels near the railroad yard and looked for food in garbage cans. We broke open crates and stole fresh fruit and vegetables at produce markets. We lifted milk and other items off delivery wagons. Country houses had big porches where pies and cakes were left to cool and smokehouses where they stored food. We didn't steal to sell for profit. We took only what we needed to survive.

Most of our folks were living on salt pork and **hardtack** biscuits. We may have had no chicken gravy or molasses, but we were eatin' better than they were.

Williams and her cousins knew it was wrong to steal, but stole the food they needed in order to survive.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. Why did Williams and her cousins ride the rails?

2. How did people in towns with railroad stations probably feel about hoboes?
