

**The Right Not to Work:
Living Under Anti-Tramp Laws in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, 1878-1895**

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Abstract

The history of American labor is one of strife. Almost any city with industry has experienced the effects of economic downturn at some point in their history. Within that history are certain members of society that are both seen and unseen. Vagabonds, vagrants, hobos, and tramps were staples of society, especially in cities along the railroads. These people valued freedom and independence above all else, never being tied down in one place for long. They picked up work here or there, but were willing to quit and move on when they wanted too. During the Progressive Era these outcasts of society had been demonized and were imprisoned or forced out of communities. This paper will research Wisconsin's 1878 revised Statutes, the 1883 Supplement to the revised Statutes, newspaper articles concerning vagabonds published in Eau Claire from 1878-1889, and then from 1890-1895. This will show how legally and publically the regular unemployed would be classified and prosecuted and vagrants and tramps during the Panic of 1893.

Introduction

The topics discussed in the introduction are vagabondage, the Panic of 1893, and Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

Vagabonds¹

Every era has its own version of restless souls in some form or manner. How they were received by their community would vary however. During the Middle Ages, men with no hope of inheritance could join crusades-- possibly never seeing their home or family again. During the period of European colonization in the Americas, men left traditional life and society to explore or trade furs with the Native Americans in the New World. Historian Louise P. Kellogg explained the motivations of the fur trader as, "The average trader would not exchange his wilderness life for all the glittering pleasures of the court. Better (to) be a "Cesar" in the wilderness than a sycophant at Versailles."² In America's Progressive Era (1890's to 1920's,) these men were defined through the vagabonds and the lifestyle they had preferred. The vagabond in that time was a migrant worker. The most concise definition for this group of people comes from historian Robert Wiebe: "Scorned, feared, yet desperately needed, migrant workers comprised the indispensable outcasts of rural America."³ The motivations and goals of these groups of people were all different, but at their core they were all restless, free spirits-- never putting roots down in a place for long.

¹ Due to similarity of definitions and for simplicity sake, this paper will use the following terms interchangeably: *vagabond*, *tramp*, and *hobo*.

² Louise Kellogg, "The First Traders in Wisconsin," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Jun., 1922), 356.

³ Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 17.



A group of men sharing a meal in a “hobo jungle” in 1895. Picture from Lisa Hix, “Don't Call Them Bums: The Unsung History of America's Hard-Working Hoboes,” accessed December 1, 2018, <https://www.collectorsweekly.com/articles/dont-call-them-bums-the-unsung-history-of-americas-hard-working-hoboes/>.

So who was a typical vagabond in Progressive Era America? Wiebe’s definition gives one the words and phrases: *scared*, *feared* and *desperately needed*. This definition can illustrate the reception of vagabonds from society but illustrate the image of what one might have looked like. Historian Frank Higbie does not necessarily define traits that are universal to all American vagabonds during the Progressive Era but covers what can be expected. Higbie placed gender at

the center of his analysis.⁴ Vagabonds were near exclusively men, but they were not devoid of women in their lives either. Many lived bachelor style lives for a period of time, but other migrant workers had wives and families they would return to when a work season was over. And they were no strangers to visiting prostitutes when extra cash was on hand. These men typically organized themselves, and lived in all-male crews sometimes called, “bachelor shacks” or “hobo jungles.”⁵ Vagrants had small amounts of food to live from and poor cooking skills. That would lead to food being even at times poisonous.⁶ These crews of men were also defined in terms of ethnicity. Because employment in the Progressive Era was often allocated based on ethnicity, white vagabonds organized together so they could position themselves favorably against other ethnic groups.⁷ Higbie relied on a vast number of factors to defertiate vagabonds against traditional society. The last trait discussed in this paper unique to vagabonds was labor skill. Vagabonds were uniformly unskilled laborers. Skilled laborers were essential and held secure jobs. They sneered at their foreman and avoided work all together for extended periods of time without fear of losing their jobs.⁸ Vagabonds became migrant workers in order to work where there was a demand for unskilled labor. Whether on a farm during peak harvest season, working as a rail crew laying track, digging canals, or other such jobs-- these men would move with labor demand.⁹ That is why the ability to freely flow and work in areas that needed workers made these men indispensable during the Progressive Era. Unfortunately, labor was not always in

⁴ Frank Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts: Hobo Workers and Community in the American Midwest, 1880-1930*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 14.

⁵ Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts*, 16.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

demand. As this paper will show, it was in times of economic downturn and depression that these men were scored and feared.

Panic of 1893

America is no stranger to the cycle of boom and bust frequent in a Capitalist economic system. One such bust in 1893 resulted in a nation-wide depression. The causes of depressions in the American economy are complex. Responses ranging from doing nothing at all, to doing too much all cross America could like into a nation-wide reaction. When multiple shortcomings become linked, a panic can set in which affects the whole nation.

The Panic of 1893 started with agrarian problems in the South and the Great Plains in the late 1880's and early 1890's. Farmers already suffering from commodity prices were hit with successive years of poor weather in both the summer and winter.¹⁰ In response to struggling farmers, the McKinley administration passed a tariff in 1890 hoping to protect the cash crop prices. The tariff had a rate of 48 percent which only served to expand the hard times globally.¹¹ The question of silver in this time also had an adverse effect on the American economy. The United States had the dollar backed only with gold. The steady, and stable gold supply kept inflation rates low, but that made it more difficult for those in debt to pay back loans. Americans who incurred large amounts of debt, such as the farmers previously mentioned, pushed for the dollar to also be backed by silver. That would have expanded the money supply, and created inflation making loan repayments easier. In July of 1890, the Sherman Purchase Act had been passed. This Act had not instituted a bimetallic system, but it did require the Treasury of the

¹⁰ H. Roger Grant, *Self-Help in the 1890s Depression*, (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1983), 4.

¹¹ Timothy Knight, *Panic Prosperity, and Progress: Five Centuries of History and the Markets*, (Hoboken, New Jersey, John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2014), 100.

United States to buy more silver. The rate for silver was fixed at a massively favorable rate to the seller, who could then go around and buy gold. In effect, this act would shrink the money supply, making it more difficult to repay loans.¹² The next major shortcoming to occur would be the bankruptcy of two railroad companies (the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad) in February of 1893.¹³ Then a major stock event helped to bring about the Panic a few months later in May. The National Cordage Company, which manufactured rope, failed in an attempt to corner the hemp market. When they cut their losses, they sold off a large portion of shares instigating a stock market swoon.¹⁴ The downward economic trend would lead to sell offs, which cascaded into more people selling off shares and creating a panic. By the end of 1893 roughly 500 banks had closed, and 15,000 other businesses closed their doors as well. By the middle of the next year, unemployment was up fifteen percent.¹⁵

What had started as agrarian struggles by farmers in rural America soon ballooned into the urban centers and devastated industrial jobs, as well as jobs in many other professions. Big cities and other areas typically in need of surplus workers soon were overflowing with men looking to work. In the winter of 1893-1894, New York made note of 67,280 residents who were unemployed and as many as 20,000 vagabonds and homeless. Chicago claimed to have as many as 100,000 out of work in the city alone.¹⁶ However some of that number might be including those that traveled to the city for the World's Fair in May of 1893. Unemployed silver miners

¹² Knight, *Panic Prosperity, and Progress*, 99.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁵ John M. Murrin et al., *Liberty, Equality, Power: A History of the American People*, 2nd ed., (Fort Worth, Texas: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1999), 648.

¹⁶ Samuel Rezneck, "Unemployment, Unrest, and Relief in the United States during the Depression of 1893-97," *Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (Aug., 1953), 328.

from Colorado made their way to Denver in search of work. The relief camps set up outside the city were merely holding stations as arrangements were made to ship the jobless to the East for free or close to it.¹⁷ Most likely they did not care or were unaware that in cities like New York, police were stationed at rail stations to cut off further influx.¹⁸ It was methods like these that created a problem in distinction between, “unemployed” and “vagabond.” Widespread unemployment and underemployment were putting family men, educated, and even skilled workers out of jobs who desperately wanted and needed them. The traditional vagabond and unemployed alike would apply for jobs when there were none. This new crowd of unemployed suffered the most. They did not possess the typical shifting skills mastered by vagabonds and were far prouder. Many were not willing to work out of their old trade, or for less wages than typical union wages.¹⁹ All over the nation these jobless men began organizing in small groups. One such group that organized had speakers lament that they had never been out of a steady job and now were forced into a life of idleness with no jobs to be found. They had drawn up a list of rights and grievances and said that there was no work because under that present system industries controlled by capitalists were prompted to employ the smallest number of men that was possible and would extract the largest amount of labor of them. They desire to work and therefore should not have to use up their savings and be forced to beg and steal.²⁰

One such man believed he had a plan to bring work to those unemployed who desired to work. Jacob S. Coxey was a local figure in Ohio known for his successes in manufacturing and

¹⁷ Rezneck, “Unemployment, Unrest, and Relief,” 328.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Donald L. McMurry, *Coxey's Army: A Study of the Industrial Army Movement of 1894*, (New York: AMS Press, 1929), 9.

²⁰ Ibid., 28-29.

far-left political affiliations (Democratic, United States Greenback, and People's Party.) Coxey developed several ideas that he believed would revitalize the American economy and bring jobs to all those who sought work. One such idea was his re-writing of the Good Roads Bill. The Bill sought to create a government run industry fixing roads. Anyone who wanted a job could work fixing roads and would be paid by the government for no less than one dollar and fifty cents for an eight-hour day.²¹ Coxey's ideas never materialized into law, but Coxey continued to campaign and promote his ideas through newspapers and other influential leaders of unemployment organizations. In the winter of 1893-1894, Coxey and a few others developed the plan to issue their pension to Congress, "with boots on."²² The plan was set for the spring of 1894, unemployment organizations from all over the nation began to mobilize and moved eastward. The martial characteristic and drill instilled into these unemployed men by Coxey soon resulted in himself being referred to as, "General Coxey" and his unemployed followers, the "Army of the Commonweal." General Coxey was estimated to have over 8,000 men in his ranks,²³ but when he arrived in the capitol in May of 1894 the numbers only reached a little over 1,000.²⁴ General Coxey was arrested on the first of May for trespassing after walking on the grass and his movement quickly fizzled.²⁵ Starvation began to set in in July when General Coxey made his last appearance before his army in Washington. He pleaded with the men to stay, and if the hunger became too unbearable, all they had to do was step on the grass and they would be

²¹ McMurry, *Coxey's Army*, 25.

²² *Ibid.*, 33.

²³ *Ibid.*, 242.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 250.

²⁵ Rezneck, "Unemployment, Unrest, and Relief," 334.

thrown in jail where they could get a meal.²⁶ He then announced he would be away for several months due to being announced as the People's Party Candidate for Congress in Ohio.²⁷ He would lose the election, and the army in Washington would depart in the meantime.

Coxey's Army was one of the first mobilized groups of people to march on Washington, and it would not be the last. Ultimately a failure, the movement still succeeded in posing a very real threat to Congress, and allowed unemployed men to retain some measure of dignity in their joblessness. The men could not properly be defined as vagabonds, because the work required in organizing showed that they would actually work if given the opportunity. At their core, the unemployment armies still posed a burden and threat to any community they moved near.²⁸

Eau Claire, Wisconsin

Almost five decades before Coxey's Army marched on Washington, the city of Eau Claire was first being settled in the territory of Wisconsin. In 1845, the site of today's city would receive its first permanent, non-Indian settlers. The settlement and expansion of Eau Claire was slow at first, but the strategic placement of the city on the Chippewa River and the vast supply of white pine growing in the valley made it the perfect place for a booming lumber town. In 1880, the population was 10,118, but over the next five years it exploded to 21,668.²⁹ This population boom can only be credited to the lumber industry that came to define Eau Claire, which earned it the name, "Sawdust City." The Chippewa Valley was Wisconsin's leading producer of pine logs,

²⁶ McMurry, *Coxey's Army*, 251.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 250.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 181-182.

²⁹ Brain L. Blakeley, *A History of Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Volume I: The Lumbering Era*, (La Crosse: Chippewa Valley Museum Press, 2017), 143.

and held an estimated one sixth of all white pines west of the Appalachian Mountains.³⁰ In 1890, Eau Claire boasted eight different mills,³¹ of which four made the list of top fifty most important mills of the upper Mississippi region in 1888.³² The effects of the Panic can easily be noted from the standing of the lumber companies. By 1902, only three companies controlled Eau Claire's lumber industry.³³ Only the Northwestern Lumber Company remained ranked in the top fifty lumber mills in 1898.³⁴ The few remaining lumber companies did not die with the Panic, but the emphasis on lumber and the seasonal, migrant labor that came with it would not survive.

Eau Claire's economic transition through the Panic was nothing short of incredible. With a population around 21,000 in the early 1890's, it would drop by several thousand to 18,637 over the first few years of the Panic.³⁵ This was a severe blow to the pride of the city hoping to become "Wisconsin's Second City." The city newspaper, *The Leader*, argued that population should not define a city, but what "people made it."³⁶ The population recovery of the city was slow, but that could be expected with a loss in so many seasonal labor jobs. In 1895, Eau Claire still had close to 2,000 men working in the lumber industry.³⁷ By 1905, the proportion of lumber jobs to industrial and other professional jobs had swung the other way. Eau Claire's small

³⁰ Blakeley, *A History of Eau Claire, Wisconsin*, 145.

³¹ Louis Barland, *Sawdust City: A History of Eau Claire, Wisconsin from Earliest Times to 1910*, (Stevens Point, Wisconsin: Worzalla Publishing Company, 1960), 48.

³² Blakely, *A History of Eau Claire, Wisconsin*, 145

³³ Barland, *Sawdust City*, 48.

³⁴ Blakely, *A History of Eau Claire, Wisconsin*, 146.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 250.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 251.

businesses were beginning to shine. In 1905, the number of mill workers was only 298 and being outshined by bankers (291), commercial agents and travelers (207), clerks and salesmen (471), and railroad and utilities work (301).³⁸ The old boarding and tenement housing for seasonal workers had been razed and single family homes were erected in their place.³⁹ By 1904, Eau Claire had the second highest rate of home ownership for cities between 20,000 and 30,000 people.⁴⁰ The city was transitioning away from seasonal, migrant labor and into a sophisticated and diversified economy. Before the Panic of 1893, Eau Claire enjoyed a thriving industry reliant on the exploitation of the environment. Whether or not the sustainability of an economy based on exploiting natural resources was considered, one could not be sure, but it brought the city into prominence in Wisconsin. A decade following the Panic of 1893, the values and beliefs of the city clearly had switched. Eau Claire was not interested in relying on migrant labor and the threats they posed, instead the focus went to the permanent residents and families that-- as *The Leader* newspaper put, “made it.”

The introduction of this paper serves to establish who will be discussed in it (vagabonds,) what events occurred and affected these people (Panic of 1893,) and in what city these affected people experienced said event (Eau Claire, WI.) By the time of the Panic of 1893, the majority of states had laws in place to deal with and prevent vagabondage in cities. Wisconsin had such laws put in place in 1878. This paper will review Wisconsin’s revised Statutes from 1878 and the Supplement to the Revised statute from 1883 for laws concerning vagrancy and tramps and review articles in Eau Claire newspapers from 1878-1889 regarding vagrancy and tramps-- and

³⁸ Blakely, *A History of Eau Claire, Wisconsin*, 254.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 255.

do the same with Eau Claire newspapers from 1890-1895. This will show how during times of economic growth and stability the indispensable outcasts are looked at as somewhat comical, tolerated nuisances who may have broken the new laws but were widely tolerated; during economic downturn that toleration would disappear for vagabonds and even the traditional jobless would be scorned, feared, and looked at as menaces to society. This is important for a number of reasons. Whatever reason that had led a man to adopt a lifestyle of vagabondage were a result of personal belief and experience. Most tramps and vagabonds did not adopt the life style out of economic necessity, because when it became illegal following the enacting of anti-tramp laws they continued to tramp. More importantly, it shows how laws that are quickly put in place, with loose legal language, can be abused and used to scapegoat members of a group during periods of strain, even when members of such prosecuted groups had not changed their ways of life or caused the strain.

Historiography

The vagabond in American history has been discussed from a variety of viewpoints. Today the vagabond, having been romanticized by writers like John Steinbeck and Jack London, conjures positive images when discussed. However, the scope of this paper revolves around vagabonds during periods of economic depression-- specifically the Panic of 1873 and 1893. That brings up the next difficulty in reviewing this history: the Panic of 1893 has been largely under-researched since the Great Depression. Many current articles and books discussing periods of economic depression look at the Great Depression. There are a number of works discussing the Panic of 1893 and the events that surrounded it, but the vast majority were written before the

Great Depression and are outdated. Lastly, in making comparisons and reviewing the history of this topic it is very important to keep in mind location. The obvious first thought comes from Eau Claire being a mid-sized town, when most studies of economic history tend to focus on bigger cities. What is important to recall when researching anti-tramp laws and attempting to place them in context is that they all existed were unique to the states they were passed. Great care must be taken when making comparisons to how other states treated their tramps and not make uniform conclusions based off of how another state might have handled a similar situation.

The first article being discussed is Sidney L. Harring's, "Class Conflict and the Suppression of Tramps in Buffalo, 1892-1894." Harring looks at both New York's Tramp Act, as well as the enforcement of it and argues that the struggle to enforce it resulted in police not only targeting tramps, but regular unemployed.⁴¹ Harring begins by defining "tramps" and what made them unique from other similar groups of people such as vagrants or beggars. From this definition, Harring could attempt to infer if anti-tramp enforcement was being used against actual vagabonds, or regular jobless based from the descriptions of the events and who were involved. Next, Harring covers the statistics of those in Buffalo without work in 1893. Harring argues that many of the reported states from the time were not accurate and were under reported.⁴² Harring then discussed the Tramp Act and enforcement of it. Many members of the police force believed that all tramps were criminals,⁴³ and Harring noted an incident when the police were unable to tell tramps apart from regular workers.⁴⁴ After discussing the language of New York's Tramp

⁴¹ Sidney L. Harring, "Class Conflict and the Suppression of Tramps in Buffalo, 1892-1894," *Law & Society Review*, Vol. 11, No. 5 (Summer, 1977), 874.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 876.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 876.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 889.

Act and its over- and somewhat brutal- enforcement, Harring dedicated a large portion of their article to a specific event and example of his conclusions in action. The section, *Police Repression of Count Rybankowski's Industrial Army*, covered the march of Count Rybankowski leading an army of Polish and Bohemian canal workers into Buffalo. The point by point coverage offered by local newspapers illustrated a highly dramatized telling of events focusing on the action and resulting firefights. The main points that should be taken away from this section was after Count Rybankowski and his men were arrested, all were tried as vagrants with murderous intent. The sentences only resulted in imprisonment for up to 90 days, but they were convicted as tramps without the proof that they were jobless. Count Rybankowski stated that none of his army were tramps, that he was a newspaper editor from Chicago, and that he couldn't have been a tramp because he had forty-five dollars in his pockets.⁴⁵ The judge denied his claims and issued the sentence anyways. The conclusions Harring drew from his research were that Tramp Acts were used to impose severe sentences for trivial offenses and minor crimes, tramp convictions were subject to multiple forms of abuse, and that legal requirements stated in the Tramp Act were being uniformly ignored. New York law specifically stated that one could not be considered a tramp if one were in their own county of residence but were still being arrested for tramping on many occasions.⁴⁶

Harring's research on vagabonds in the city of Buffalo during the Panic is a great source on placing them in society, and why they were scorned and feared. Laws of a previous depressions were created and instituted in order to specifically target these individuals. There was not many defining factors to separate them from the rest of the unskilled labor pool, except

⁴⁵ Harring, "Class Conflict and the Suppression of Tramps," 905.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 906-907.

their high rate of convictions for drunkenness and most telling of all-- the extremely high rate of unmarried men.⁴⁷ Yet, the Tramp Act was being used to arrest men who did not consider themselves tramps and did not have the defining traits of traditional tramps.

The next article comes from Joel E. Black. The article titled, "A Crime to Live Without Work: Free Labor and Marginal Workers in Industrial Chicago, 1870 to 1920," covers a much wider period of vagabond history. Centered in Chicago, Black's article argues that, "Among both urban authorities and the irregularly employed, assumptions about the meaning of dependency shaped opinions about labor in late-nineteenth-century Chicago."⁴⁸ Dependency, as discussed in this paper, refers to how much was a man dependent on others to get by.

After the Panic of 1873, Illinois had put vagrancy laws in place criminalizing the male economic dependency of the, "idle and dissolute."⁴⁹ However written into the laws were distinctions between the, "idle" and "dissolute," but those distinctions were lost in court. In 1877, the distinction was narrowed by amending the law to allow police to arrest any vagrant on sight.⁵⁰ The extreme range of the vagrancy laws lead some judges and charities to question the legality and ethics of them. Judge William McAllister protested the amendment as unconstitutional and making honest poverty a crime.⁵¹

The 1877 vagrancy laws were somewhat paradoxically the nadir of free labor, and the apex of vagabond social representation in Chicago. By leveling the field of vagabonds,

⁴⁷ Ibid., 875.

⁴⁸ Joel E. Black, "A Crime to Live Without Work: Free Labor and Marginal Workers in Industrial Chicago, 1870 to 1920," *Michigan Historical Review*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Fall 2010), 63-64.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 70.

⁵¹ Ibid., 70-71.

unemployed, and marginally employed-- the new laws removed the margins that outcasts normally found themselves in. Writers of the day discussed ways to recognize a gradation of unemployment. One such writer, Solenberger, believed that a slight level of dependency should not be a crime. He categorized men as temporary dependent, chronologically dependent, and hopelessly inefficient.⁵² He believed the first category should not be a crime, but the other two categories should receive some form of punishment. Those critical of the uniformity of the laws, and those who found themselves newly classified as vagrants wrote to newspapers and judges believing that minimal dependency of a man should not classify them with the traditional vagabonds. The vagabonds of Chicago used their new-found voice to organize and circulate newspapers critical of free labor economics and emphasize the importance of migrant labor. To vagabonds, free labor, was fundamentally unequal due to its emphasis on steady jobs and financial incentives for families.⁵³ This source provides an important analysis of the voice of the vagabonds. Their side of history is seldom heard from outside of individual narratives. The vagabond newspapers and organizations made use of their platform to spread their reactions to vagrancy laws and the economic system in place.

These two articles provide great examples of how to research historical events in the Progressive Era. Both defined the groups people being research, the city of interest and the laws governing them, and turned to local newspapers that often provided day to day coverage of events. Harring's period of research only covered two years and could not make generalizations or analyze change and continuity. His research focused on the immediate impacts of anti-tramp laws from the perspective of the vagabonds of interest and police in Buffalo. Black researched a

⁵² Black, "A Crime to Live Without Work," 76.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 67.

longer period of time covering fifty years of the vagrancy laws in Chicago. Black was able to look at the changing voice of vagabonds in the city and the reaction of police, judges, and newspapers to the very strict vagrancy laws put in place in 1877. The complexity of factors that are included in this topic can result in a diversity of conclusions. One of the main problems with trying to analyze and compare vagabondage during in the Progressive Era is that drafted labor laws differ from state to state. Wisconsin's anti-vagrant and tramp laws came into place in 1878.

Wisconsin's Vagrancy (1878) and Tramp (1883) Laws

Revised Statutes of the State of Wisconsin, 1878

In the United States, vagrancy laws would begin popping up in states starting in the 1870's. By early 1878, eight states in total would have such laws⁵⁴ and Wisconsin would enact them by the middle of the same year.⁵⁵ These laws were a response to the Panic of 1873 and the depression that followed. As mentioned in this paper the states of New York and Illinois had these laws enacted. Their methods used to enforce the laws by police and judges often overstepped what the actual language of the law was. This was because the language itself was too loose in defining who tramps actually were. So, when regular labors became jobless, they could have been prosecuted and tried as tramps when having no relation to traditional vagabonds.

The law itself, in Section 1543, begins by defining who was a vagrant:

⁵⁴ Samuel Bernstein, "Labor in the Long Depression, 1873-1878," *Science & Society*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Winter, 1956), 77.

⁵⁵ Wisconsin, *Revised Statutes of the State of Wisconsin*, (Madison, Wis.: David Atwood, 1878), 465.

All idle persons who, not having visible means to maintain themselves, live without employment; all persons wandering abroad and lodging in groceries, beer houses, outhouses market places, sheds or barns, or in the open air, and not giving a good account of themselves; all common drunkards; all lewd, wanton, lascivious persons in speech or behavior; all persons wandering abroad or begging, or who go door to door, or place themselves in the streets, highways, passages, or other public places, to beg or receive alms, shall be deemed vagrants.⁵⁶

The broadness of this definition provided more than ten ways to define someone as a vagrant, and thereby infringing said law. The definition placed in 1878 left no room for those who were simply out of a job. To search for work could be taken as a criminal offense. The New York newspaper, *Labor Standard*, said of their own vagrancy laws that they seemed ferocious in spirit and sought to oppress the unfortunate class of those of work.⁵⁷

Not only is the legal definition of vagrancy flexible, so too are the means by one can get arrested for said crime. Section 1544 allows any citizen to make a complaint to an officer, or “justice of the peace,” charging one of vagrancy. Those accused of vagrancy are allowed one witness to defend their case, and if the officer still deems the accused to be a vagrant a warrant would be issued for their arrest. Then the accused is taken to trial and if found guilty by a judge or jury they would be charged with vagrancy.⁵⁸ If the charged vagrant happened to be a child under the age of sixteen years old, they would be sent to an industrial school. If no industrial school was available, then any school in the state. For all those charges with vagrancy above the age of sixteen, they would be either sentenced to jail for no more than ninety days, or at the discretion of the judge, they could be sentenced to a county or town poor house. There they could be kept at hard labor for no more than six months.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Ibid., 465.

⁵⁷ Bernstein, “Labor in the Long Depression,” 76-77.

⁵⁸ Wisconsin, *Revised Statute*, 465.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 466.

The problem for those out of a job compared to vagabonds was that after a prison sentence was finished, they mostly would not move on to look for a new town or farm with job openings. The jobless who had made a city their home were stuck in perpetual fear while hoping for a job to open up before they were arrested again. The law made it difficult for one to even seek food from charities. In 1882, when a soup kitchen opened in Milwaukee, a police officer was quoted saying he took nineteen patrons of the kitchen to the local magistrate.⁶⁰ That is why the 1878 statute would update the laws regarding vagrancy in 1883.

The Supplement to the Revised Statutes of the State of Wisconsin: 1883

The *Supplement to the Revised Statutes of the State of Wisconsin, 1878* would attempt to fix the issues of defining vagrants from the regular jobless. The Supplement would target vagabonds by distinguishing between regular vagrants and tramps. The definition of a tramp was provided in Section 1547c as:

Any male person of the age of sixteen years or upwards, being a vagrant within the purview of Section 1543, revised statutes, who shall be found within any town, city, or village, having at the time no visible means of support, and not being at that time an actual inhabitant of such town, city, or village, or any such person who shall be found drunk and disorderly, shall be deemed a tramp.⁶¹

The legalese surrounding the definition of a tramp still made it complicated for judges, police, and the traditional jobless themselves to identify who was who. Since the broad definition of vagrants from Section 1543 of the 1878 Statutes remained and was even a part of the definition of tramps-- it meant that some people could be a vagrant and not a tramp and others could be both vagrants and tramps. A child under the age of sixteen could be a vagrant, but not prosecuted

⁶⁰ Robert C. Nesbit, "Making a Living in Wisconsin, 1873-1893," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Vol. 69, No. 4 (Summer, 1986), 268-269.

⁶¹ Wisconsin, *Supplement to the Revised Statutes of the State of Wisconsin, 1878*, (Chicago: Law Book Publishers, 1883), 335.

as a tramp. A man who was looking for work in his own town could be a vagrant but not a tramp, and a seasonal worker who looked for a job could be both a vagrant and a tramp. And if one was a drunkard, even in their location of residence, they could be convicted as a tramp, as seen in Section 1547c.

The 1883 Supplement extended more powers to those upholding the law, and an expanded range of punishments for those convicted of being a tramp. Part seven of 1547a allowed officers to arrest and imprison anyone they had good reason to believe was a tramp. The only stipulations for this extreme amount of power was that the officer had to present the accused to a magistrate within twenty-four hours in order to place a formal complaint.⁶² The most basic conviction of a tramp would result in no less than fifteen day in jail, and being fed nothing more than bread and water.⁶³ If a convicted tramp was accused of causing fear to any inhabitant of the state they could be imprisoned for no more than two years and hard labor. The punishment of no more than two years of imprisonment and hard labor could also be given to convicted tramps if they kindled a fire on any land without the consent of the owners, or having been assembled in a group of five or more tramps.⁶⁴ Towns that held convicted tramps in their jails could request that they be put to work on roads or other such public improvement projects. The officers that oversaw watching the tramps work would get paid up to two dollars for a full day of their work.⁶⁵

⁶² Wisconsin, *Supplement to the Revised Statutes*, 333.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 335.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 333

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

In an attempt to better legally designate who a tramp was, the state of Wisconsin expanded the powers of both police and judges in ways that could be abused. The ability for officers to arrest anyone whom they believed to be a tramp could easily be abused, because in many cases even with the expanded definition officers could not tell a tramp apart from a worker.⁶⁶ The language of the law was so unspecific in some places that convicted tramps could receive up to two years of imprisonment without knowing what they did wrong besides tramping. For example, part four of Section 1547a states, “Any tramp who shall wantonly or maliciously, by means of violence, threats or otherwise, put fear into any inhabitant of this state...,” and that can be used to increase the prison sentence of tramps on a judgment call basis. The anti-tramp laws of Wisconsin had clauses on how to deal with tramps who were suspected of violence, New Yorks’ laws had similar punishments for those just suspected of violence or provocation. Harring discussed such a situation when looking at the men of Count Rybakowski’s industrial army. They had unknown criminal records but were still tried as potential murderers to increase the prison sentence.⁶⁷ These referred to instances of ignorance and abuse occurred during periods of economic strain and social tension. When those societal pressures are not as prevalent, vagabonds were more at liberty to continue to move around and work where they wanted too. The social response to Vagabonds can be shown through the newspapers of the time.

Vagabonds in Eau Claire Newspapers

⁶⁶ Harring, “Class Conflict and the Suppression of Tramps,” 889.

⁶⁷ Harring, “Class Conflict and the Suppression of Tramps,” 904.

The political and legal position on vagabondage is determined by city councils and elected state officials, but the social position is decided on an everyday basis. Local newspapers are a great source to see not only what average citizens are writing about, but what are people reading and being influenced by. In fact, multiple sources used in this paper have relied on newspapers to provide first hand accounts of the arguments they center their papers around. Even individuals discussed in this paper used newspapers as an avenue to spread their ideas and causes. General Coxe was said to have compelled every newspaper in the United States to devote one to six columns to his beliefs.⁶⁸ This section will look at multiple Eau Claire newspapers from 1878 to 1895 and record what was written about vagabonds from the end of the Panic of 1873 to the middle of the Panic of 1893.

From reading articles about tramps, it becomes apparent that the articles concerning them are fairly formulaic. There are several types of articles that were routinely written. Because these articles come from a variety of authors, at various periods of writings, it is essential to compare specific themes/genres of articles within similar sections. For clarity, these sections will be separated between newspaper articles from 1878-1889, and then newspaper articles from 1890-1895. From there, the tone and language of similar events can be compared within the context of each section. The sections of each grouping will have sample articles that contain the following themes: crimes committed by vagabonds and arrests made, everyday interactions with vagabonds and opinions of them, and lastly opinions on the laws concerning vagrancy and how they should be handled.

Eau Claire Newspapers: 1878-1889

⁶⁸ McMurry, *Coxey's Army*, 21.

This first section will start with looking at a few articles on arrests and crimes of vagabonds. In May of 1878, the *Eau Claire Free Press* reported on a tramp being arrested.⁶⁹ What was interesting about how this article was written was that it said the tramp, “struck a streak of luck,” and that the arrest suited him just fine. The next article came from the *Eau Claire Daily Free Press* on June 10th of 1878.⁷⁰ A tramp by the name of Frank Wilson plead guilty to vagrancy but was only given two hours of jail time. The officer also reportedly told him to get his meal and get out of city limits.

The next article referred to comes from the *Eau Claire Daily Free Press*, published April 19, 1883. In this article, it mentioned how two “vags” were picked up and sentenced for twenty days each.⁷¹ Begging was a part of life for vagabonds, which will be covered more in the next section, but some had worse luck than others. An article written in the *Eau Claire Daily Free Press* on July 7, 1887 had the story of a vagabond going house to house, “demanding” food. One such house graciously accepted, treated the vagabond, and when set to leave he was arrested by his host-- Officer John Hancock.⁷²

Not all vagabonds were unwillingly arrested. An article from January 30th of 1886, had the author assuming that it was far more likely that most accounts of larceny were attempts to get jail time. The author reported that the theft of a coat could put them away for thirty to sixty days, which would be welcome in a cold winter.⁷³ This arrest record was recorded by the *Eau Claire Daily Free Press* on July 30th, 1887, but what was interesting about the report was that the

⁶⁹ “Local News,” *Eau Claire Free Press*, May 16, 1878, 3.

⁷⁰ *Eau Claire Daily Free Press*, June 10, 1878, 4.

⁷¹ *Eau Claire Daily Free Press.*, April 19, 1883, 4.

⁷² *Eau Claire Daily Free Press*, July 7, 1887, 4.

⁷³ *Eau Claire News*, January 30, 1886, 4.

writer of the article used the word, “unfortunate” to describe their arrest and imprisonment.⁷⁴ This is a clear indication of sympathy that some felt for vagabonds, but they were still greatly feared by many.

A few months later in October of 1887, the *Eau Claire News* reported a story of a tramp attempting to shoot a woman, missed, and was arrested.⁷⁵ Still, lenience of the Tramp Acts seemed to be more likely to be extended if tramps were willing to leave the city. A case in January of 1888, reported by the *Eau Claire Daily Free Press*, found three tramps lodging in a city building overnight. The officer gave them the option of confinement or leaving by the morning. They would leave having made the decision, as the reporter put it, to reject the society of the city by the measure of their prosperity and exemption from social responsibility.⁷⁶ What can be learned by looking at the arrests and crimes of vagabonds in Eau Claire during the 1880’s is that there was a large degree of variance. It was hard to place who was a vagabond and who were not. Which were the violent tramps, and who were the comical, lazy characters?

This section will cover articles written about people's interactions with vagabonds, and people’s opinions on their character. Instead of a sequential order based on the release date of articles, it will be ordered thematically by: peculiar and interesting tramps, and tramps refusing work or being general nuisances.

The first article covered comes from the *Eau Claire News*. In February of 1878, it ran a story about a tramp from a different paper, *St. Louis Republican*, about a “queer tramp.” Even

⁷⁴ *Eau Claire Daily Free Press*, July 20, 1887, 4.

⁷⁵ *Eau Claire News*, October 29, 1887, 4.

⁷⁶ *Eau Claire Daily Free Press*, January 30, 1888, 2.

though this article was written and published in a different city, it is still important to not what stories the local publication felt was important enough to post.

The man was forty years old, in perfect health, and educated as a doctor. One day he just decided not to work anymore and stayed at the poor house. When asked to leave the next day, as expected, the man refused! He was reported to have stayed in the same room, and in complete darkness before they forced him to get out and work. When he again refused to hoe or plough, they simply let him tramp on. He was named, “The Champion Tramp.”⁷⁷ In November of 1882, the *Eau Claire Daily Free Press* reported on the affairs of a Sunday in town. One bit of excitement that surrounded the day was an old tramp lodging in town. The reporter said that he was the “queerest” tramp even seen in Eau Claire, and generally created excitement and curiosity for those who got to meet him.⁷⁸ Some even referred to tramps as having mystical powers. In an *Eau Claire News* article from March of 1886, the reporter wrote of old Pennsylvania superstitions. The farmer with warts on their hands could supposedly be freed of them if they rubbed them on a tramp’s hat-- without the tramp noticing. This would, of course, pass said warts onto the tramp as well.⁷⁹ Characters and beliefs gave tramps a bit of reverence. In many cases especially the like article referring to the city as “society,” it placed vagabond outside of that and made them, “other.”

Eau Claire being the lumbering town it was, could most always use a steady supply of migrant labor. Some accommodations were made for this, such as Lumberman’s homes which would give seasonal workers a place to stay that wasn’t an alms’ house. An article written on

⁷⁷ St. Louis Republican, “The Champion Tramp,” *Eau Claire News*, February 2, 1878, 1.

⁷⁸ *Eau Claire Daily Free Press*, November 9th, 2018, 4.

⁷⁹ “Efficacy of Charms,” *Eau Claire News*, March 6, 1886, 2.

such places by the *Eau Claire Daily Leader* in January of 1885 discusses such places and how tramps fit (or not so much) into the housing. This article takes great strides to define the otherness of tramps by even labeling them, “genus “tramps.”” As if a completely different species. The officials of the Lumberman’s Home agreed that tramps were better suited in dealing with police stations and alms homes as twenty-four hours of work there for a tramp would be like twenty-four hours of a fish out of water.⁸⁰ While work in the woods would not suit the tramp, camping out and living there worked just fine. In February of 1885, the *Eau Claire Daily Leader* had started to see reports of more tramps in the woods surrounding Eau Claire. They had believed to be due to cheaper rail fare from New York to the West, and the author ends the article ominously concluding that sooner or later they would have to be dealt with.⁸¹

There were some problems in the city as well. By March of 1885, the *Eau Claire Daily Free Press* reported an instance of someone going door to door. The man asked for food, but the owners of the house said they don’t serve tramps. The man was clearly offended and retorted, “I am not a tramp, I am a beggar.” Unfortunately for him, they did not serve beggars either.⁸² There were some who were more willing to offer help to those in need. The *Eau Claire Daily Free Press* reported on one such story in an article published in June of 1889. A tramp approached a house and reportedly had such tattered clothes that the owner of the house took sympathy on him. She offered him the leftover pancakes from breakfast, as well as a linen duster and straw hat. The response to this story was most likely edited for comedic purposes, but the tramp was

⁸⁰ “The Lumberman’s Home,” *Eau Claire Daily Leader*, January 14, 1885, 2.

⁸¹ “Look Out for Tramps,” *Eau Claire Daily Leader*, February 1, 1885, 3.

⁸² *Eau Claire Daily Free Press*, March 5, 1885, 3.

said to have replied, “if it is all the same to you I’ll eat the duster and hat -- they’re lighter-- and cloths myself with the pancakes.”⁸³

There are many such stories and jokes like this told through the newspapers and while one should not necessarily interpret them as factual tales, they do provide some insight. The main characters, the pitiful tramp who turns wise, and the sympathetic housewife who gets embarrassed. These interactions, without comedic plot points played out on an everyday basis in Eau Claire. There were those in the city who responded poorly, like as reported in the *Eau Claire Daily Free Press* in March of 1889. The authors wrote that they city was enjoying a period of peace and quiet from the tramp nuisance, and that American aristocracy finally had a chance to swarm-- with a hope that it stayed swarmed.⁸⁴ While citizens looked at the tramp situation much more sympathetically. This author’s writings were published by the *Eau Claire Daily Free Press* in June of 1888. Their article went:

Do you ever think what it really means to be a “tramp?” No home, no friends, no work, no chance, nobody in all the wide world to care whether you live or die in the gutter like a dog. No heaven for such *vags* to inherit; no decent grave to hide them out of sight; no opportunity to be anything and no hand stretched out to give you the greeting or the good-by of love.... A name like a curse to blight every hope of manhood, and a reputation, like a ball and chain on your leg, to hinder the way to any good accomplishment. I tell you, when we sit right down to it, and figure out what it really means to be a tramp, I guess we will not find it so easy to withhold a piece of bread and a cup of coffee next time one calls.⁸⁵

Ultimately, this author’s writings were only a plea to his fellow citizens. Many of those who wrote about their issues with tramps would not be targeting the attitudes of citizens, but the Tramp Laws, organizations supporting tramps, and the tramps and their lifestyle itself.

⁸³ “A Tramp’s Benefit,” *Eau Claire Daily Free Press*, June 10, 1889, 2.

⁸⁴ *Eau Claire Daily Free Press*, March 4, 1889, 4.

⁸⁵ “What It Really Means,” *Eau Claire Daily Free Press*, June 17, 1888, 2.

This next set of articles will deal with the vagabonds in the city and the laws that were intended to regulate them. The first article looks to take a philosophical approach for why vagabonds choose not to work. Written in the *Eau Claire Daily Free Press* in June of 1878, it recounts a discussion between a woman and a philosophic tramp. The woman told the man of a place where he could go and saw wood, so he could buy something to eat. But he replied that, “There is a place in Heaven for you, but you don’t want to die till you are driven right towards it.” In the end, she gave him some bread. The author then explains how his parable-like tale shows how tramp logic works.⁸⁶ As long as people provide, they do not have to work. They believed the way to get rid of tramps and their way of life was to make sure there are no charitable organizations, or charitable people who sustain them. Otherwise, they will continue to grow.

The author of the next article blamed the vagabonds themselves rather than those who offered charity. Published in the *Eau Claire Daily Free Press* in 1879, this article originally published in the *N.Y. Exchange*. It attacks the tramp nuisance, by questioning the character of these members of society. They say that tramps are dangerous, reckless, and a terror to the community. They had not gone to college or Sunday Schools. The author believed the remedy for tramps was a constitutional amendment prohibiting the sale of liquor, and if that would not pass, it should fall to the states to enforce it.⁸⁷

The next two articles come from the opposite view of things. Published by the *Eau Claire Argus* in January of 1880, this article argues against the constitutionality of tramp law. The motivation for this article stems from an incident which happened a few months after the

⁸⁶ *Eau Claire Daily Free Press*, June 25, 1878, 2.

⁸⁷“The Tramp Nuisance,” *Eau Claire Daily Free Press*, November 10, 1879, 2.

Wisconsin legislature passed the tramp act. A tramp of seventy-five years was accused of tramping fifteen miles outside of Madison, WI. They set out to take him in on the cold night-- by the time he reached his jail cell he was pronounced dead from, "exposure." The authors believed the law is unconstitutional and preys on the weakest, and most outcast members of society. They demanded that the legislature of Wisconsin wipe that malignant act from the statutes.⁸⁸ While noble in effort, the article would not succeed in overturning any tramp or vagrancy laws in Wisconsin. By the time they published their article, already more states were passing similar laws with an almost unified effort of eliminating the right to tramp. Tramp laws might have made it illegal to tramp, but the laws failed to eradicate vagabondage. As seen by the many articles through the 1880's, tramps remained a persistent problem in Eau Claire.

The last article of this section being looked at will come from the *Eau Claire Daily Free Press* in April of 1889. The writer felt the problem was not with the ability of arresting them, or the charitable organizations, but that they were not being forced to work. They said that the officers would run tramps and vagabonds in, and all they get as a night or two in jail. Afterwards the municipal judge just tells them to beat it. This writer felt that played into the hands of the tramp, a free nights stay, food, and no work. If the officials actually enforced hard labor, that would get the tramps to actually stay away for good.⁸⁹

The newspapers written after the Panic of 1873 and before the Panic of 1893 tell multiple things. An economic depression and social strain caused by the Panic of 1873 resulted in quickly written legislation that allowed the blame to be shifted to an unprotected, and very weak class of workers. Vagabonds, if defined as a social and economic class, were already being marginalized under the system of free labor which explicitly benefited classes they were not compatible with.

⁸⁸ "Tramp Act," *Eau Claire Argus*, January 1, 1880, 2.

⁸⁹ "Give Them Work," *Eau Claire Daily Free Press*, April 20, 1889.

Through the Panic of 1873 and after, vagabonds would continue to live and work in their preferred style of labor. During the 1880's it is unquestionable that they could be defined as nuisances to the regular working order, especially when compared with other migrant laborers. From the views of Eau Claire's newspapers through this period, the laws provided some semblance of protection for those who may have been afraid of tramps, but to a greater extent, they were ultimately unsatisfactory in the completion of their purpose. Traditional tramps and vagabonds still roamed the countryside, begged where they could, and were imprisoned without ever reforming their way of life. In some aspects, it could be argued that it enhanced their ability to tramp through the usage of jails as housing. Real issues with the laws arose during the Panic of 1893 when the legal definition for vagrants and tramps were being applied to those who were not in the traditional class of vagabonds.

Eau Claire Newspapers: 1890-1895

This section will begin a few years before the Panic of 1893 for several reasons. One is to allow for contrast to be drawn in the tone and types of articles being written. The other has to do with the city of Eau Claire itself. As mentioned in this paper's introduction, Eau Claire lumber mills began closing even before the Panic of 1893 started. It is important to consider how a localized economic downturn might be viewed alongside a globalized depression. Sympathy for the average unemployed can be understood and even expected during local crises, but when everyone is on hard times, it may have an effect on who people consider to blame. This section, like the previous, will also be divided into the following thematic sections: crimes committed by vagabonds and arrests made, everyday interactions with vagabonds and opinions of them, and lastly opinions on the laws concerning vagrancy and how they should be handled.

The summer of 1890 began quite wildly at the end of the lumber season. The story published on May 5, 1890 by the *Eau Claire Weekly Leader* contained vagrancy, drunkenness, and murder all in one. A man once previously convicted of vagrancy, but had since been working for Knapp, Stout, and Co. had finally made it back to town after a long winter. As workers did, they went to the saloons and proceeded to spend their earnings. And insuring bar brawl broke out where the man being discussed struck several blows to another's head. This man was put in prison and would likely be charged with manslaughter if the assaulted passed away from his injuries.⁹⁰ What is interesting about this article is a distinctive amount of bias flowing through the text. The author plays up the previously changed vagrancy status of the man and even label him, "Cunningham, "The Vagrant."” This article and its implications will be discussed further in the next section. The next article is short, but it involves a case of tramp on tramp violence. The *Eau Claire Leader* published an article in November of 1891. This article describes an incident where two tramps viciously fought with one another and one had an eye gouged out by the other. The eye gouger was sent to penitentiary for two years, while the other tramp-- once healed-- went to a poor farm.⁹¹

Things were not getting better for tramps in Wisconsin. The next article of note comes a few months later in January of 1892. This incident reported by the *Eau Claire Leader* concerns a tramp that was assumed to be train hopping. The victim died along the route, but there was no way to identify them. All that was know was that their body was mangled by the train somewhere along the route from St. Paul, MN to Duluth.⁹²

⁹⁰ "The Late Tragedy," *Eau Claire Weekly Leader*, May 5, 1890, 2.

⁹¹ "Among the Sick," *Eau Claire Leader*, November 29, 1891.

⁹² "Fate of a Tramp," *Eau Claire Leader*, January 3, 1892, 6.

The next article comes from the *Eau Claire Weekly Leader*, published in April of 1893. This story involved a tramp bunking in a man's hay loft. When the owner of the hay loft went to feed his house, he was surprised by the tramp who had jumped him with a knife. They reported it was a vicious and brutal attack, followed by the tramp fleeing. The man was discovered shortly after and found to still be conscious and gave a description of the tramp. From what the reporter stated, it seemed like the tramp was well know, and was pursued.⁹³ It was apparent that tramps were getting more comfortable with the use, and abuse, of trains in the early 1890's. In October of 1893, the *Eau Claire Free Press Daily* reported that a train near Somerset, WI was boarded by three "toughs" and they attempted to rob the engineers. The men were eventually thrown off, but after stealing a gold watch. These men were referred to as tramps, but it does not mention if there was an indication that they were prosecuted as tramps in the past.⁹⁴

The next article is reported by the *Eau Claire Weekly Leader* in December of 1893. This article contains very little information other than the murder of a woman by a tramp. The identity of the man was not known, and the only other information presented was that the local sheriff was looking for this tramp.⁹⁵ After a string of reported violent crimes by tramps, the next article discussed had a story about a tramp similar to the ones read about during the 1880's. The *Eau Claire Weekly Leader* reported in February of 1894 that a tramp was caught stealing an overcoat from the Northwestern Lumber Company. The tramp's only response was that he wanted shelter.⁹⁶

⁹³ *Eau Claire Weekly Leader*, April 30, 1893, 2.

⁹⁴ "Officers After Them," *Eau Claire Free Press Daily*, October 19, 1893, 2.

⁹⁵ "Shot by a Tramp," *Eau Claire Weekly Leader*, December 10, 1893, 9.

⁹⁶ "Tramps a Plenty," *Eau Claire Weekly Leader*, February 25, 1894, 10.

The last article for the section on crimes and punishment would end violently, as so many of these articles have. In May of 1894, the *Eau Claire Weekly Leader* reported on a shootout between a sheriff and a gang of tramps. The chief of police reported taking shots at the tramps. He fatally wounded one in the eye and hit another in the hip. The chief said this was only done after a tramp had pulled a gun on him as a lone witness testified to. Three other members of the tramp gang were arrested. The article concluded by saying, “There is great excitement here.”⁹⁷

This section regarding crimes and arrests is in stark comparison with the articles of the previous decade. The issues previously were simple arrests or vagrancy or tramp changes. All cases in this sample of articles assumed the person being discussed was a vagrant or that they already had vagrant status. Most of these cases also involved the accused “tramps” of having weapons, when in the decade previously, only a few select cases involved guns. The more instances where tramps are perceived as violent as opposed to just nuisances, makes it more difficult for them to have interactions with the public.

Vagabonds of the past decade could be perceived any number of ways by the public. They could be curious, humorous, annoying, lazy, ect. But more articles were being written on the violent nature of tramps. They newspapers were publishing less articles referring to their odd or unique nature, and more articles about the problems they caused. The first article I will look at is much like the story of the snarky tramp and sympathetic housewife. This time the dynamic had changed. A short “wit” story published by *Eau Claire News* in October of 1891 made the stories of the last decade impossible. It states, “It seems the laws of nature that every industry has its natural enemies. The dog, for instance, is the natural enemy of the tramp.”⁹⁸ No more cases of the hopeful beggar walking up to one’s door if they had a ravenous dog.

⁹⁷ “Killed a Tramp,” *Eau Claire Weekly Leader*, May 27, 1894, 12.

⁹⁸ “Wit and Wisdom,” *Eau Claire News*, October 2, 1891, 3.

The next article is another little bit of humor. The *Eau Claire Leader* ran a story in December of 1891 about what people of the town got in their stockings. Police chief Higgans received a, “patent tramp bouncer.”⁹⁹ While obviously humorous in nature, the fact remains that tramps were a constant thing to think about in Eau Claire, even during Christmas time.

The next article to be analyzed comes after the Panic of 1893 was already in full affect. A write-in for an *Eau Claire Weekly Leader* paper in February of 1894 made a suggestion concerning the health of tramps. The writer said that tramps were the most susceptible to smallpox and therefore cities should try and vaccinate them whenever they spend a night in town, whether that be jail, city building, a calaboose, ect.¹⁰⁰ Not a few days later, another writer wrote in concerning smallpox. Due to the winter season being almost over, they were sure more vagabonds were to come as the weather warms. They said the city will be a scourge if they house them and that there should be a notice for tramps before entering the city that they would have to be dealt with.¹⁰¹ Health was a serious concern to all during the Progressive Era. One issue with these comments was that they specifically targeted tramps. That spreads the perception that tramps exclusively carried diseases, when anyone not vaccinated also posted the same risk. This again further pushed tramps from tolerated nuisance towards scorned and feared.

An article published by the *Eau Claire Free Press Weekly* in May of 1894 showed when distinctions between vagabonds, tramps, vagrants, and the jobless blurred for the readers. As previously mentioned in this paper’s section on Coxe’s Army, his philosophy and followers were those that considered themselves, “jobless, but willing to work,” and not, “tramps.” This

⁹⁹ “What They Got,” *Eau Claire Leader*, December 27, 1891, 3.

¹⁰⁰ *Eau Claire Weekly Leader*, February 18, 1893, 4.

¹⁰¹ *Eau Claire Weekly Leader*, February 25, 1893, 4.

article condemned that distinctions saying that honest laborers should have no sympathy with Coxeyism. The Coxeyites were not laborers, because they united with the beggars and thieves lead by Coxey. Coxey and his band of men were agitating and interfering with the present conditions of labor, where thousands of men were already on strike, and thousands of honest working men who still looked for jobs are having that be disturbed by Coxey's class crusade.¹⁰²

It is undeniable, as the review of Coxey and his army showed, that Coxey encouraged his unemployed working men to beg. This blunder could be seen as one of the main reasons why the distinction in the eyes of the law and the public became blurred. Coxey unified motivated men who wanted work, which would easily rule out traditional vagabonds and tramps, but by using their methods to keep the movement alive. With that distinction gone-- regular unemployed men could now be viewed as possible tramps. Effects could already be seen in Eau Claire newspapers not three days later. The *Eau Claire Weekly Leader* posted an article on the sentencing of a tramp. The author of the article labeled the convicted man as both a tramp and a Coxeyite.¹⁰³ Whether the convicted was a traditional vagabond, or just having just been out of a job was not mentioned. But perhaps that differentiating line was not there anymore.

This section on interactions with vagabonds and opinions of them will close with one final article. Published in December of 1895 by the *Eau Claire Free Press Weekly*, this article sought to define the causes of vagabondage. The five main causes were as follows: love of liquor, wanderlust, the county jail, the tough and rough elements of cities, and being an innocent, misguided pupil in reform school. The author then went on to further blame non-enforcement of law, and misapplied charity. The author concluded that vagabondage is a disease that must be

¹⁰² "Enduring Coxeyism," *Eau Claire Free Press Weekly*, May 10, 1894.

¹⁰³ *Eau Claire Weekly Leader*, May 13, 1894, 10.

investigated and treated.¹⁰⁴ What was important about this definition, regardless of being subject to the personal beliefs of the authors, is that it was the only time in this study that a definition of “vagabonds” did not have idleness, or laziness, implicit in its definition. This could simply have been an oversight of the author or implied in conjunction with one of the other factor. Another possibility could be perhaps an attempt to define vagabonds along with the class of seasonal, migrant workers whom-- prior to the Panic of 1893-- could not be grouped with traditional vagabonds. With more broad assumptions being made on what people were tramping since Coxey, it is very important to look at how the laws were being discussed locally.

The first article that discussed the laws regarding vagrancy and tramps will refer back to the first section. As the *Eau Claire Weekly Leader* referred to him as, Cunningham, “The Vagrant,” had a fellow “American,” (as he described himself) write into the *Eau Claire Daily Free Press*. In this paper, the accounts of Cunningham’s story were explained with minimal detail, and just the events that the *Leader* reported. The person who wrote in this response did not feel it was right that Cunningham was arrested for tramping after having spent his money in a saloon like so many lumbermen did. The author knew very well, as well as the *Leader*, that Cunningham was an employee of Knapp, Stout, & Co. therefore he should not have been convicted as a tramp. He further hoped that the man would get a fair trial as any American should.¹⁰⁵ Much like in the sources regarding Buffalo and Chicago, we see a direct example of a working man being prosecuted as a tramp. Due to the 1883 Supplement to the Statute, it was known that a simple drunkard can be prosecuted for being a tramp. The author argued that if the law allowed anyone that was a drunkard to be arrested for tramping, then everyone getting

¹⁰⁴ “The Causes of Vagabondage,” *Eau Claire Free Press Weekly*, December 5, 1895.

¹⁰⁵ “On the Case of Cunningham,” *Eau Claire Daily Free Press*, May 8, 1890, 7.

kicked out of the saloon after they spend their last nickel had to be arrested as well. Their argument showed that the law was absurd.

The next article involves how the city itself was dealing with tramps. The *Eau Claire Free Press Weekly* reported in March of 1891 that suppressing tramps was too expensive. The county could not afford to uphold the costs stipulated by the 1883 Supplement, and would instead pay officers twenty-five cents only, and magistrates just one dollar and fifty cents.¹⁰⁶ The issues brought on by dealing with vagabonds made it difficult to upkeep the system. The law specified prison or hard labor, but both costed money, and the less money an officer made putting tramps into hard labor, the more likely they would be to keep them in prison or push them out of town.

Several authors wrote articles about how other cities handle their tramp problems. The *Eau Claire Weekly Leader* published a story in August of 1891, on how Boston handled their tramps. If a tramp wanted a place to spend the night in Boston, they could get a bath, a bed, breakfast, and a clean garment. But there was a catch. And multiple of them. It was reported that they were given horrible ragged towels for their baths, and an alarm would sound from 5:30 in the morning till 8:30 in the morning when they had breakfast. The author estimated the cost of their meager breakfast could only have been two cents a head. And after all that, they had to chop wood for two hours.¹⁰⁷ This method was meant to demoralize the tramps in a hope that they would not come back for a nights lodging.

Another method forwarded in the *Eau Claire Leader* in January of 1892, was based off of a system used in Chicago. This author thought that Eau Claire should join with the surrounding

¹⁰⁶ *Eau Claire Free Press Weekly*, March 19, 1891, 6.

¹⁰⁷ "The Boston Method," *Eau Claire Weekly Leader*, August 24, 1891, 4.

counties and form a joint establishment. The author felt that a joint establishment in Eau Claire could host as many as 7,000 able body workers, and be a place where tramps could find work.¹⁰⁸ Whether this proposal was a joke, or a pie-in-the-sky attempt to make progress, it would never have been a suitable solution for the real vagabonds.

In 1892, an article was written questioning the ethics of the 1878 statute. *Eau Claire Free Press Weekly* published an article in February of that year questioning the only bread and water stipulation. The attorney argued a diet of bread and water for anything more than fifteen days could be considered *cruel and unusual*, and the 1887 statute penalized tramps with at least 30 days including hard labor on such a diet.¹⁰⁹ The questions raised were certainly valid, unfortunately they would not be contemplated for long.

By the time the Panic of 1893 hit, opinions regarding tramps themselves, who actually was a tramp, and what rights they had were near irrelevant. An article written in May of 1894, by the *Eau Claire Free Press Weekly* told about a man being picked up for being a vagrant, “pug.” He either had to work or leave, because vagrants were, “a constant menace to society.”¹¹⁰ The public opinion of those who were dependent on others was turning against those in need.

The next article being presented in this paper is nothing less than shocking to have to record. The *Eau Claire Free Press Weekly* published an article on May 5th, 1894. This article was titled, “Charity Hospitals.” The author of the article questioned the good done by charity hospitals, because very often they were visited by tramps who “boasted” of the excellent food and lived there through the winter. The author chastises these tramps as worthless creatures.

¹⁰⁸ *Eau Claire Leader*, January 24, 1892, 2.

¹⁰⁹ “Bread and Water for Tramps,” *Eau Claire Free Press Weekly*, February 18, 1892, 6.

¹¹⁰ “No Use For Pugs,” *Eau Claire Free Press Weekly*, May 31, 1894, 5.

They said their lives were just drinking sprees, with occasional sobriety attempts. They were accepted into the hospitals in the name of charity but returned to the drink with new found vigor after having been healed. The author believed the only good that would come of it, is if their cadavers were sent to medical hospitals for dissections. They said further, “The people whose lives are prolonged at the charity hospital are in many cases persons who ought to die because they will not earn their own living.” They closed their article by hoping for more discriminations, so that deadbeats, drunkards, and professional laggards would not be welcomed with open arms.¹¹¹

The extent of hatred and disregard for a class of American citizens that can develop during a period of economic strain is morbid. This period of Eau Claire newspapers had a much smaller range than that recorded during the 1880’s. The quickness with which the tone and reception of a group of people is extremely dangerous, especially when there are laws in place that make an already vulnerable group more susceptible to legal action.

Eau Claire is able to be compared to cities like Chicago and Buffalo in this period for one reason, and that was their reliance on migrant labor. All three cities had a large supply of season labor, and by extension many tramps. This paper only focuses on what the general public was saying and reading through local newspapers, but there were many similarities to the experiences of the city of Buffalo. Police action against tramps and jobless alike took place, and the distinction between those groups was narrowed following Coxe’s march on Washington. The period of discussion is shorter than what was covered in Joel Black’s article on Chicago, but there were interesting differences to make note of. In Chicago, the vagabonds had a more unified voice through their own newspapers and organized groups and were able to participate in

¹¹¹ “Charity Hospitals,” *Eau Claire Free Press Weekly*, May 24, 1894, 6.

discussions about America's economic system and services offered for the dependent. By looking at Eau Claire's newspapers, it is clear that Eau Claire had many sources for the dependent, such as the charity hospital, but there were almost no articles being published in favor of the tramps and vagrants. The articles written during an economic depression were by and large against those vulnerable members of society and ways to deal with them, whether that be forcing them to work, kicking them out of the city, or throwing them in jail. The sight of a tramp was no longer a curiosity, but someone to be feared.

Conclusion

*"Scorned, feared, yet desperately needed..."*¹¹², that was how Wiebe began his definition for a unique class of American citizens. Almost every label used to define that group of people discussed in that paper had been established with a negative connotation. That is why it is in the opinion of the author that the conclusion to his definition best fits who they were in American history, *Indispensable Outcasts*. As the scope of this paper did not cover the broad history and accomplishment of the Indispensable Outcasts, it will not attempt to conclude this paper in a grandiose fashion. These people lived within, and outside of cities, towns, and villages for decades living life the way they meant to live it. Sometimes the objects of peculiar fascination, other times scornfully reviled. As shown in the history of Eau Claire, these groups of people would sometimes make a living as part of the migrant labor force, other times they would drink their hard earned cash away in saloons. The laws made prohibiting their way of life in 1878 and added to in 1883 made things more difficult for vagabonds, but many still lived a tramping

¹¹² Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order*, 17.

lifestyle. Throughout the entire scope of this paper there were examples of these indispensable outcasts continuing to live through persecution. That persecution would even come at them from multiple directions, as they were scorned by those with jobs, and the jobless alike. But they would survive the Panic of 1893, just as they had the Panic of 1873, and continue to live their lives in the way they wanted too.

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