"Men on the Move: Occupational Communities in Western Boom Towns"

by

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When Nels Anderson wrote MEN ON THE MOVE he did so in the belief that the 1930s had given rise to a new kind of migrant in this country. "The hobo migrant," he wrote"... accepted migrancy as a phase of his life-program." On the other hand: "Modern migrants differ ... in that they travel with less prospect. They are migrating to reach a destination where they hope to settle" (Anderson, 1940:5; see also Anderson, 1923; Webb, 1937; and Webb and Brown, 1938). Today in the areas of the Rocky Mountains, where large-scale energy development is taking place, another type of migrant is emerging. Who are these people? From where do they come? Why are they -- and not someone else -- here? What are their problems, their needs, their concerns? How are they affecting impacted communities, and how are impacted communities affecting them? Which of them will stay, who will go on, and why?

The hobo, along with the tramp, was primarily male; his way of life was traveling. Medieval journeymen were probably not so unlike these men. The "depression pioneers" (Coyle, 1939) of this country were, like their 19th century counterparts, seeking a new life and a home that could offer better prospects for themselves and their children than the area from where they had come. Many of today's migrants resemble neither of these types, but look more like Hobsbawm's (1968) "tramping artisans" of 18th century Europe and Scott's glassworkers of 19th century France. These people traveled to find work and moved to new work when their work was finished. If one can accept historical

renditions, the migrants did not seek to travel but sought to work: when traveling was necessary, they traveled. But tramping artisans had homes and returned to them when possible. The glassworkers, traveling as families, made homes wherever they were -- often for extended periods of time -- and sought the stability of community and marginal integration into whatever community happened to need their skills.

The conditions determining the transiency of the people engaged in the energy development of the Rocky Mountain region and the style of their life and their movement indicate that these earlier historical examples are much more relevant than anything found in the history of this country. Still is there really enough known about them to make even this weak and perhaps academic claim? This paper presents some of what is known, but points primarily to what is not known. It is intended to raise questions and suggest lines of pursuit that are emerging in an ongoing research project. This paper, then, reports on a project that is barely begun, a project whose efforts will provide insights into the methodology of studying and the substantive knowledge about these modern-day transients. Such efforts are necessary if we as researchers are to help the peoples of this area understand and plan for the impact they will experience so long as the wealth and power of energy is a part of their direct experience.

A Previous Study: Gillette, Wyoming, 1975

Personal observation of plant construction labor forces and some

questionnaire data from the workers on the Wyodak electric generating plant near Gillette, Wyoming (Thompson, et al., 1975) indicate several things that are fairly well agreed upon about these workers and their families. These observations also give rise to some of the most basic yet relevant questions that need to be answered in order to minimize "... the disruptive impact of such a large population influx" (Thompson, et al, 1975:152). It should be noted that this research was concerned only with plant construction labor forces and particularly that at the Wyodak site; it did not involve the sum total of the workers moving into impacted areas. This decreases the generalizability of their results as well as overstating the 'typicality' of their profile.

"In many if not most social respects plant builders are like most other skilled and semi-skilled occupational groups" (143). In terms of structural variables -- education, income, number of children, etc. -- they do not seem to be atypical. The suggestion is, however, that they constitute a subculture, largely by virtue of their geographic mobility. The composition of a plant construction force is uniquely diverse, being made up of "at least three distinct types of plant builders" (144). The "professionals are the most reliable workers who generally enjoy and pride themselves in their work." They generally stay with a job until completion. The "travelers" have a touch of what John Webb (1935) designated as "wanderlust." They work, in part, to see new areas and "love to travel". The third type is the "searchers", the least skilled who are temporarily uprooted and the most likely to work at the job only a short while before moving on.

These types of workers are an outcome of mobility: the pressures it creates and the opportunities it affords.

Mobility also causes these workers and their families some degree of isolation within the community of their employment. The Gillette study indicated that nearly sixty percent of the workers do not consider Gillette their permanent home. Over half were dissatisfied with their present housing. The availability and price of housing were among the most serious problems cited by the respondents. Three out of every five respondents said that when they arrived in Gillette the people already living there, "were friendly and helpful." Given the fact that, "people already living here" could mean long-time Gillette residents, new families and persons like themselves, or both, it is difficult to judge if this figure supports an isolation hypothesis.

There are unique features of a construction labor force -- expecially the condition of isolation and the effects of mobility -- that lend credence to this group being considered a subculture[1]. The authors also found, however, that these workers held "typical educational aspirations for their children", sought rather normal recreational activities, and had concerns, e.g. high prices and poor shopping facilities, that could hardly be considered aberrant. This research, both as a questionnaire that provides some outlines of who these workers are and what they are thinking and as an intuitively derived profile based on limited observation and interaction is a relevant starting point for further research. The serious limitations of the data obviously give one little assurance of its facticity. But this

work raises several significant questions and, at the very least, begins to address a most important area of inquiry. Whether or not one can justify the use of the subculture concept, (see Massey, 1975) in regard to construction labor forces or even the transient workers in impacted areas as a whole rests on further research. It may be more useful and accurate to treat all members of the working class as a subculture, then distinguishing such groups as these workers with the concept of occupational community (see Cannon, 1967). Still, this tact may be less fruitful than approaching these workers with the intent of clarifying those "theoretically significant groups" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) that will help to answer the questions one deems relevant to impact research. There are a host of theoretically interesting research approaches that are available and many more that are yet to be outlined. Whatever approach one takes, it must be justified by one's questions, it must be pursued with a compatible methodology, and it must be capable of being discredited or clarified in the course of one's research or with further research. The remainder of this paper examines one piece of ongoing research whose value -- substantively and theoretically -- will be judged in the months ahead.

Transient Workers in Douglas, Wyoming

There were several questions that motivated this research[2]. Most of the substantive questions were raised in the first paragraph of this paper. There were also many theoretical and methodological questions that seemed most germane to this inquiry, questions that

transcend the content of this particular piece of research and that, if answered, will facilitate subsequent research in this area. This research is designed to generate grounded theory models that will help to provide answers to substantive questions about transient workers. It is also self-consciously phenomenological in methodology, though a strict phenomenologist might find such a contention embarrassing. These two aspects of the research will be discussed in turn.

"The money's in construction!"

When one first begins to live in an impacted town -- in this case, Douglas, Wyoming -- the cost of housing, of food, and of most other things is a bit startling. When one talks to the men working at energy-related jobs, the scale of wages and the potential for monthly and yearly incomes is scarcely short of breathtaking. The two things seem to naturally fit together: people make a lot of money; it costs a lot to live. Still, there is much talk about a new four-wheel vehicle, about how quickly the trailer will be paid off, about getting a boat, buying a case of fifths, spending forty or sixty dollars for a woman, and on and on. One begins to believe that the prime motivating force for these men being here is money. This, too, seems to bind them together, to make them all much the same. If one is seeking to develop theoretical models by distinguishing the relevant groups and then conceptually specifying the relationships among them as well as how each deals with the aspects of each's environment, one has not gotten very far. Is there only one significant group, 'transient

workers', united of a kind by the medium of money. Does this explain why they are here and how they live.

Only the most naive observer would make such a contention. "Big money" is a prime force in the lives of most young transient workers. It does explain much about them. But it also distinguishes between them and other workers, many older and with other concerns, many also young but here for additional reasons. Though only in its initial stages, our research has indicated that there are a series of relevant groups that fall under the rubric of transient workers.

A young worker explained his leaving home and following his boss to Wyoming with the simple phrase: "The money's in construction." Yet, another man put it less idealistically: "My wife's due in August. I gotta find some work." Still another man, older and less expressive told me: "I wanted to get out of mining. They needed a welder there, and I took the job." As the research proceeds our task will be to not only catalogue these reasons for being in Douglas. Our task will be to establish when these reasons -- in constellation with other features, structural and attitudinal -- warrant the delineation of relevant groups that will aid in the explanation of the substantive questions before us. As these groups and the theoretical models involving them begin to emerge, they will be checked against new evidence (c.f. Becker, 1958). Their accuracy and utility will be judged as an ongoing part of the research project.

Not only reasons but ways of describing oneself will surely prove important in distinguishing among various workers. Most men will

designate themselves by some officially recognized term or occupational title: roustabout, roughneck, insulator, welder, et cetera. Most of them also agree on the groups of transient workers that live in Douglas: oil field hands, miners, construction hands. The latter are often divided among those who work in building a plant, those who work on roads, and those who are building houses. These occupational groupings may prove to be quite relevant in explaining various things about these workers. Only subsequent research will tell.

One rather interesting phenomenon has occurred that may make such groupings less valuable than supposed. In two cases I have had persons refer me to others, using terms that I would not have predicted and that left me a bit puzzled. In one case, a woman (the wife of a crane operator) told me that I should meet some friends of theirs. "They're a construction family like us. They can tell you the same things as us, about how hard it is to find friends in that town." The husband of the friends she referred me to works at the uranium plant; he is a miner. Did my informant merely make a slip? Or, did it indicate her sense of solidarity with these people, her sense that they'd all been treated as "outsiders" by the townspeople. Is there a sense of unity indicated by the reference to "construction family?"

On another occasion, after a man -- an oilfield roustabout -- had told me about the rough nights he and his buddies had had in the bar last fall, he turned to one of his friends and asked for support: "We ain't the hell raisers we used to be, are we Johnny?" Johnny is neither a roustabout or an oilfield hand of any sort, nor is he of

similar age, nor of similar geographic origin. Both men are single and are friends. How relevant is this in terms of distinguishing theoretically significant groups? Further research should give some answers.

Some informants have indicated (though few have done so explicitly) that there may be something of a career among the transient workers in areas such as Douglas. Perhaps Becker's (1963) models of the deviant career will provide some guidelines for the formulation of types of workers, distinguished by their placement on the rungs of a career ladder. There is much mention of "when a man gets divorced" and "if he can find a woman that'll move with him", of "getting a family broke in" and "he likes his work and he's good at it." These and other features distinguish among men and mark points that seem most relevant in the course of a man's life. They are often a part of the explanation that men give for their being in Douglas, for their working for a given "outfit", or for their willingness or desire to move with great frequency. The patterns of a career, the conditions determining or breaking off a career, and the prediction of certain outcomes, based on stages of a career may prove to be a fruitful line of thinking and part of the grounded theory approach.

"Where you working'? Where you from?"

Most work on social impact has been explicitly problem-oriented. This is true whether one is researching potential environmental destruction, political groups that may seek to block industrial

expansion, overloaded sewage and police systems of impacted communities, or the people moving in to do the work of energy development. What is problematic is generally preordained. It is either culled from an academic dialogue or it is dictated by a company or funding agency with a concern that it wants researched. There is a clearly intended effort to avoid this approach in this research project. The discovery of what is problematic and the basis upon which this problematic rests constitutes the richest avenue of inquiry into the subject matter: transient workers.

The practical activity that people engage in, to make sense of and make a life within their social system, is essentially problem-oriented. Suttles (1968), though hardly a phenomenological sociologist, recognized this in his development of the concept of "provincial morality." In a much more contrived fashion, Garfinkel (1967) has made obvious that a disrupted reality is a problematic reality. How this disruption occurs, how it is met, and how it is repaired make up the questions of the research task. Our research is hardly intended to disrupt our subject's reality. On the contrary, we agree with the traditional canon of fieldwork: the less obtrusive we are, the more likely we are to feel that we are actually observing our subject "as it really is." Our research is, however, designed to observe and explore what is 'naturally problematic' for our subjects. In exploring this, we hope to see how their meaning structures and the supporting institutional frameworks operate[3].

There is a temptation in doing field research today to be overly

self-conscious as a methodologist. There is a great potential for criticism by those using research techniques whose legitimation rests on some approximation to (what social scientists take to be) natural science methodologies. Such ensuing hesitation or equivocation that one may feel in light of this could mean that no data will become relevant or nothing can be said from the data. More likely, however, the researcher will seek out data that comes to him only in the most 'cleansed' of situations. When everything is just right and the query is put just so, then what comes back becomes usable data. The present research seeks to avoid this pitfall, not by avoiding being extreemly self-conscious about methodology but by being aware that all that is observed is relevant data. All data expresses, in a more or less direct fashion, the solution to the practical everyday engagements of the subjects. By observing the 'naturally problematic' and the naturally occurring solutions, a great deal can be learned about the subjects, about the way they construct and cope with their life world, and the way they deal with and solve the more public problems[4] of their lives.

The most common opening to a conversation between two strangers in Douglas, Wyoming, is "Where you workin'?" One is invariably asked this by working men and their wives. One hears bartenders and bar maids asking this with a frequency that matches the number of new faces in a bar on any night. After some discussion, if the conversation is to continue, one hears: "Where you from?" Is this just small talk? First impressions are that it is much more. Those questions address,

in broad strokes, what is most problematic in these men's lives. A very elaborate system of problems, along with ways of addressing, thinking about and solving them seem to emerge around the questions of work and of comings and goings.

Not only in things men say -- usually in accord with, sometimes in contradiction to -- but in the way they act can one come to understand the problematic in these men's lives. There seems to be a very intricate use of avoidance by these men, whether it be the avoidance of previous commitments when one up and leaves a job and town. Avoidance seems to be a strong indicator of a problematic situation, and is also frequently a part of the solution. This can be explored only through extended research.

FOOTNOTES

[1]The authors, recognizing that there is some dispute over the meaning of this term, follow Charles Valentine's usage in his book, CULTURE AND POVERTY: CRITIQUE AND COUNTER PROPOSALS, Pp. 106-113. Univeristy of Chicago Press, 1968.

[2]This research is being sponsored and funded by the National Institute of Mental Health - "Center for the Study of Metropolitan Problems," Elliot Leibow, Director.

[3]We follow Cicourel (1964) on this point: "...the social scientist must attend to the meaning structures employed by the actors of the scene he wishes to observe and describe, while simultaneously translating such meaning structures into constructs consistent with his theoretical interests"(50).

[4]These public problems would include: remaining in one place for some time, the education of their children, their relationship to the ongoing community, etc. We have designated them "public problems" largely because it is these kinds of problems that are taken to be most relevant and in need of answers by social scientists doing impact work.

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