

## Nels Anderson A Profile

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## PRESENTATION / PRÉSENTATION

### Nels Anderson: A Profile

**Noel Iverson**

#### **Introduction**

DR. NELS ANDERSON (1889–1986) WAS among American sociologists a pioneer whose work is only now beginning to win the recognition it deserves, especially in Europe. His ethnographic studies of wandering workmen (*The Hobo*), frontier sectarians (*The Desert Saints*), and migrant laborers (*Men on the Move*) are seen as models of empirical research that provide insights into the lives of groups and classes marginalized by the wider society.

Anderson's life experience was as varied as his work. A child just as the frontier was ending, he knew first-hand life in the slum, the backwoods, and the Indian reserve, as well as work in mining, logging, and road-gang communities. Before he began his formal education in sociology at the University of Chicago, Anderson had been a newsboy, mule-skinner, mine worker, track repairman, coal forker, field hand, railroad maintenance carpenter, timberman, grade school teacher, concrete former, millwright, Army engineer and demolitions expert, itinerant peddler, and male nurse. After he received his Masters degree in 1925 from the University of Chicago he found work as a Juvenile Protection Agency investigator, a night club inspector, Municipal Lodging House employee, college teacher, and freelance writer (and ghost-writer). Having received a Doctoral degree in 1930 from New York University, Anderson entered government service as head of Labour Relations in the Work Relief Program, and when the war broke out he became an officer for the War Shipping Administration overseas. After the war his duties included service with the High Commission in Frankfurt and the State Department in Bonn. He helped reorganize free trade unions in Germany and ran a research centre for graduate students to study the needs of refugee families and of youth throughout the country, the nature of work and community organization in a



**Anderson named Emeritus Professor of Sociology, University of New Brunswick, 1979**

SOURCE: AUTHOR'S COLLECTION

coal-mining district, and the state of housing in Frankfurt. Upon retiring from government service in 1953, Anderson was appointed Director of Research for the Social Science Research Institute established by UNESCO, Cologne. At the end of his UNESCO assignment in 1962, Anderson went on a lecture tour in Sweden, Australia, and India. Two years later he at last returned to his first

vocation, university teaching: he accepted an invitation by Memorial University of Newfoundland to serve as Visiting Professor and Head of the Department of Anthropology and Sociology, where he remained until, in 1966, he was invited to become Visiting Professor of Sociology at the University of New Brunswick (UNB), where he offered a heavy load of courses until his retirement in 1977. Named Emeritus Professor of Sociology by the university in 1979, he continued to maintain an active scholarly life until a few weeks before his death on 8 October 1986 in Fredericton, New Brunswick.

Not long after Nels Anderson assumed his teaching duties at UNB, he and I became friends. During his post-retirement years, as Anderson continued to work on his publications and invited lectures, I became his editor-typist. My long acquaintance with Dr. Anderson led the Department of Sociology to ask me to give a talk on his life and work at the twenty-fifth Qualitative Analysis Conference, "The Chicago School & Beyond," held at the University of New Brunswick in May 21 to 24, 2008. What follows is the public lecture I presented.



I WON'T HAVE MUCH to say about Nels Anderson's accomplishments as a sociologist. They are impressive, especially in light of the fact that for most of his long life he held no university position, and was pretty much forgotten or unknown by academics in his chosen discipline. Instead, I will talk about the man I came to know during his twenty years at UNB. We spent a lot of time together, on and off the job. In the course of our growing friendship, Anderson came to confide in me in an off-hand, storyteller's manner, in which he revealed many details of his life and his feelings long hidden from his kith and kin. Little did I imagine when first we met in 1965 that he would leave a legacy, in the form of the Nels Anderson Research Fund, that promises to alleviate the burdens of generations of students in sociology. But rare would be the recipient of an Anderson scholarship who would have any idea who his benefactor really was. I hope to shed a little light on Nels Anderson, a man who made an unlikely journey from wandering workman to itinerant scholar.

Appearances to the contrary, Nels Anderson was a complicated man. He was easy to get to know but hard to fathom. He rarely spoke of his innermost feelings, of his hopes or disappointments. Even in his autobiography there is little to be found that tells us what kind of man he was. Yet, all were there, under the surface, to be revealed only to those he trusted enough to take into his confidence. His letters and conversations reveal the Anderson hardly anyone knew.

Like many individuals who feel ill at ease in the company of those who appear more sophisticated than themselves or in greater command of the situation, Anderson shunned encounters that made him feel awkward. He avoided talking shop with fellow students at the University of Chicago, distanced

himself from professors, and rarely took on the burden of making conversation. Long after he had served as head of labor relations in the work relief program, Anderson still remembered how he was slighted by “intellectuals” of the WPA (Work Projects Administration), one of whom, he said, would “look down on me.” Confessing that, “I looked kind of seedy,” Anderson also noted that he “didn’t know how to carry on a conversation.”<sup>1</sup> Early on Anderson learned that instead of making conversation he could simply monopolize talk by launching into a monologue, a strategy that works best with a small audience. His monologues, spontaneously delivered in my office next to his, provide the basis for much of what I am about to say about Nels Anderson.

Here was a man who was proud, gentle, and sometimes caustic; frugal and generous; unpretentious, yet sensitive to slights and criticisms; reticent, but at the same time bold in his thinking; funny, witty, and often ribald: he told me that he could always remember the “dirty” jokes he’d heard, but never the “clean” ones. Most were fooled by his manner and appearance, thinking him unobservant, not particularly “with it.” Arthur J. Viditch once said to me, at a reception following the presentation of an award to Anderson by the American Sociological Association at Boston, that Nels was a deceptive man: he *appeared* to be modest, but he was really a born ham.<sup>2</sup> Shortly after he had given an honorary address at St. Francis Xavier University, Anderson told me that he enjoyed giving a public lecture. He loved an audience: not only did his evening address exceed the time allotted by more than an hour, but in the question period that followed Anderson told many stories to a delighted audience. By 10:30 the chairman of the Department of Sociology finally closed the question period. Was Anderson by then ready to call it a day? Hardly, for he went on to attend the reception afterwards, where he continued to entertain his hosts with stories and witticisms drawn from his generous accumulation of experience. It was almost midnight before he finally retired, after an eighteen-hour day. He was then 92 years old. It was a good day.

His last invited address before a university audience almost proved to be his undoing. He had been asked by a Dean of Engineering to speak to a student audience on his chosen subject, “The Social Implications of Engineering.”<sup>3</sup> On

1. Personal conversation, 30 June 1980. All personal conversations took place in the university offices of Anderson and Iverson. The author took notes of these conversations, which he then typed up, usually within the hour.

2. Personal conversation, 25 May 1981.

3. The Dean of the College of Engineering Sciences and Technology, L. Douglas Smoot, extended the invitation on 21 January 1981, at the suggestion of Brigham Young Card, then a professor of sociology at the University of Alberta. Anderson was in Michigan giving a lecture when the invitation was first proposed in a long-distance call made in November 1980 by B. Y. Card, which Hugh Lautard answered. When Lautard told him of the invitation Anderson was surprised and apprehensive: How would he be received by his Alma Mater? Had he not been long removed from the good graces of the Mormon church? Anderson seemed not to appreciate that a new generation could not be expected to harbor the grudges of their grandparents.



**Anderson's Honorary Life Membership, Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association, Gordon Bowker Presenting, 1977**

SOURCE: AUTHOR'S COLLECTION

10 September 1981, Anderson found himself before the largest audience he had ever faced, some 2,000 students in engineering, technology, and industrial education, crammed into Brigham Young University's (BYU) big lecture theatre. Once the lengthy introductions were over, Anderson rose to speak in the little time remaining. He walked unsteadily to the lectern, which he then gripped tightly, and rocked to and fro as he began to speak. There were two small microphones affixed to the lectern, one on each side. They might have appeared as gleaming metallic snake-heads on stalks of flexible tubing, swaying just out of his peripheral vision as he moved his head left and right

while speaking. He began to push aside the right-hand mike, which bobbed back again, and each time he warded off the offending mike there was a booming crackle of the huge auditorium speakers, drowning out his faltering words. When Anderson was not fighting off the right-hand mike he kept up a steady tapping with his signet ring upon the left-hand mike, producing a sharp rat-a-tat-tat that echoed throughout the room. At first, his audience bore it stoically, with a little shuffling of feet.

Fully aware beforehand that he could not possibly get through his forty-six page paper in less than an hour, Anderson had decided to type notes of his lecture on small green slips of paper. Armed with his bundle of notes, he hoped to deliver his lecture in spite of poor eyesight. He soon realized, however, that this was not possible. A recent operation had reduced his visual capacities, and Anderson found he couldn't read his notes. He confessed to his audience that he could not see his prepared notes and thus would have to speak without them. This he proceeded to do, first by talking about his boyhood in Chicago and Provo, and then by describing his experiences in the trenches of World War I. He got a big laugh when he admitted that he and his buddy had won the war.

From then on his audience was with him, listening attentively. From my vantage point at the end of a short row of chairs to Anderson's right I could see unfolding what the audience could not: a little drama that at once reminded me of the priceless scene near the end of Chaplin's *Limelight*, in which Chaplin plays "Calvero," a manic violinist whose leg keeps disappearing up his capacious trouser as he frantically saws away on his violin before a concert audience. The audience's attention is fixed on Calvero's vain struggle to retrieve his unruly leg. Meanwhile, his accompanist, a near-sighted pianist played by Buster Keaton, is having troubles of his own: his sheet music keeps slipping down onto the keyboard, making his musical efforts ever more discordant as he tries to retrieve the falling sheets. The pianist rapidly loses his battle with the slipping sheet music while the violinist is defeated in his struggle to control his leg. Each remains oblivious of the other's plight.

Anderson's audience had grown more and more distracted by his battle with the microphones and by another battle, plainly visible to me but not to the audience: his attempt to keep his stack of notes from slipping entirely off the lectern! With mounting apprehension I counted the moments as Anderson, still tapping the microphone, attempted to control his notes, now useless, while all the while keeping himself focused on his lecture. Somehow, Anderson's troubles only added to the audience's fascination. Before them was a very old man, a man most had barely heard of, one of the last surviving members of the first graduating class at BYU, telling them about his student adventures, talking about BYU professors he had outlived, describing scenes new to their eyes. He spoke to them in frank, humorous, and self-deprecating language: it was an irresistible delivery. Anecdote followed upon anecdote; stories true and exaggerated were interspersed with remarks drawn from his prepared text. At

one point, mid-way through his rambling talk, Anderson caught himself just as he was about to say “darn”; laughter filled the hall. Later he forgot to not say “darn” or even “my God!” and no one seemed to mind. Several times his offhand remarks and jokes brought forth bursts of laughter and loud applause – as when he introduced me as his “bodyguard.” The final applause was deafening. Overwhelmed by the response, Anderson admitted afterwards that he was “scared” when he saw the size of his audience. Convinced that his speech was “a failure,” he worried about not having given his audience their money’s worth. He hoped to “make amends” for his “poor showing” by revising his lecture for publication, in which he would gratefully thank the University.

Anderson was a highly perceptive man, who missed little and could size up someone in a few well-chosen words: when he heard that a colleague who was not known as an embodiment of the work ethic had come into a large inheritance, Anderson snorted, “Now he’ll have an *excuse* for not doing anything.” Referring to the son of a professional man he knew well during the thirties, Anderson declared, “he never amounted to much. He had a job at the post office – the kind of job where you stand around with your tongue out for people to lick their stamps on.” And of the son of a Jewish friend of his who decided to become a psychiatrist, Anderson remarked, “He went into psychiatry, which attracts nutty people – who turn out that way.” Politicians were always for Anderson fair game. John Turner, Leader of the Opposition, was described by Anderson: “He’s a kind of guy who wants to be a big businessman. He’ll get a fortune for his kids to fight over.” He called social workers “sunshine spreaders,” noting that “the politicians hated social workers” during the Great Depression. And he could be blunt – some would say, cruel – in his judgment of others. Rexford G. Tugwell, an agricultural economist who, as Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s adviser and administrator, became a leading member of the “Brain Trust,” a group of Columbia academics who ushered in Roosevelt’s New Deal, was a man Anderson came to know well, perhaps too well. “Tugwell,” said Anderson, “sold out all the way; he did the popular thing.” Anderson did not mince words in expressing his ill regard for Tugwell: “I never liked him. He was a half-assed politician and a half-assed liberal, and you didn’t know *which* half to look at.”<sup>4</sup> Anderson may not have known of the junket to the Soviet Union that Tugwell had made in the summer of 1927 with a group of future New Dealers, who were received by Stalin for six hours. Tugwell’s leftist ideas, shared by other New Dealers, were also recognized at the White House, where Tugwell was given a nickname – “The Bolshevik.”<sup>5</sup> Anderson never had much time for Communists, whose influence in the government bureaucracy and the unions he found annoying for their duplicity. When he worked in New York City during WPA days, Anderson saw Communists using

4. Personal conversations, 18 June 1980; 14 December 1984; 18 June 1984; 21 December 1982.

5. Bernard Sternsher, “Tugwell’s Appraisal of FDR,” *The Western Quarterly*, 14 (March 1962), 67.



Negroes as “token” blacks: once they objected that the Negro sent to join their protests was not black enough! And whenever they were short of token blacks, the few available would be sent from group to group, routed as it were, for the occasion – like shunting the same few boxcars from siding to siding, remarked Anderson.<sup>6</sup> Whenever Anderson could, he avoided communists and fellow travellers, but when he could not, as with Tugwell, his relationship with them turned sour.

Anderson carried on an extensive set of relationships, mostly through correspondence, into his eighth and ninth decades. He wrote to members of his family, of course, as well as to his many friends and colleagues. Hardly a week went by when he was not composing a letter to someone, in longhand when he could no longer work a typewriter. He often wrote to strangers whose own labours, in the form of an article or a book, caught his eye. His curiosity about what was going on in the world, including the little world of the university, was undimmed by advancing age. He had a rare ability to talk to anyone; no matter how great or small the accomplishments of a person he might meet, Anderson remained in character, always himself. He could not put on airs to save his life. He detested those who regarded their social superiors with exaggerated courtesy, or their social inferiors with cold indifference. While he had little patience with the ill-behaved, whoever they were, usually he did not reveal what he actually thought about them. But not always: once his mocking humor almost got him fired. It happened when he worked for the War Shipping Administration. Jim Grady, the Assistant Director, was a stickler for correct procedure. One day he discovered that his secretary had left her post when alone on duty to go to the bathroom, a violation of office procedure. Grady upbraided her, called her excuse for leaving the office “lame,” and forbade any further such absences. There soon circulated throughout the entire corps of secretaries and administrators the following jingle by “Anonymous”:

We love coffee,  
We love tea;  
We love work  
And liberty.

Jim hates coffee;  
Jim hates tea;  
Jim won't let  
The girls go pee.

“Jim was mad as hell; he suspected me, but couldn't prove it,” said Anderson. Grady gave Anderson a poor rating, labeling him “uncooperative” and “arrogant.”<sup>7</sup>

6. Personal conversation, 11 March 1981.

7. Personal conversation, 23 December 1980. Grady soon forced Anderson out of his job with the War Shipping Administration. Anderson knew that Grady was a card-carrying Communist

We are familiar with how easily Anderson could talk to society's "low-down" individuals; his work with hobos makes that clear enough. He easily won their confidence by his own lack of pretension, his unassuming manner in approaching those whose speech and appearance marked them as society's "undesirables." He moved as easily among bums, vagrants, petty thieves, pimps, and prostitutes as, later in his life, among judges, senators, editors, professors, lawyers, and government officials. What many of us may not appreciate is Anderson's ability to move in the company of society's "higher-ups" with an outward assurance that his origins would seem not to have warranted. So, for example, this former hobo was invited to the White House to meet the President and the first lady, Eleanor Roosevelt. Was he the first and only ex-hobo to have been given this honor? Did this become for Anderson, as it might for many, the "high point" of his career as a government servant? Was this an experience that he would describe on numerous occasions, with the expectation that his audience would be duly impressed? No, none of the above. Anderson spoke little, if at all, of his invitation (it does not appear in his autobiography), and mentioned it to me only once, dismissing his introduction to the first lady with the observation, "Mrs. Roosevelt was 'taken in' by all the liberal groups"; she was "always putting pressure on her poor husband to *do* things." On the other occasion Anderson was invited to attend a social gathering at the White House the President himself shook his hand. Of this encounter Anderson could only observe that F.D.R. "had a technique of pushing your hand away as he shook it."<sup>8</sup>

Anderson was acutely aware of what are often referred to as "status pretensions." Those who display such pretensions appear at all levels of society, he observed, and are not only worthy of study; they are also worthy of satire. Anderson took considerable delight in taking the mickey out of "stuffed shirts" and "windbags," an inclination that began early in his life and sometimes found its way into print. When he was attending Brigham Young University, Anderson was asked to edit the college yearbook. Since the *Banyan* had always lost money, he promised that under his editorship it would not show a loss.

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(as were several officials of the WSA), who saw to it that his wife was hired by the agency. So when Anderson came to interview a banker from Colorado for a job with the WSA he warned the man that he would be wise to "watch out what you say around here, there are communists in the organization." Word of this reached Grady's ears, who called Anderson into his office and declared, "You aren't in tune with this organization. I suggest you resign." Knowing that if he were fired there would be a hearing that would expose Grady's communist sympathies, Anderson refused. Grady then offered Anderson a posting to Durban, an Allied shipping port on the southeast coast of Africa. But Anderson rejected the posting, knowing, as did Grady, that Durban was about to be closed down, once the Allies had cleared the Mediterranean and opened the Suez Canal. Grady then asked, "Where would you like to go?" Anderson suggested the Persian Gulf, which he knew no one wanted – they "were afraid of disease and felt that the Arabs would stab you in the back. But I knew that wasn't likely to be true." (Personal conversation, 2 July 1980.)

8. Personal conversations, 18 June 1984; 4 September 1980.

"I felt responsible for making it a success," he recalled. To promote interest in the yearbook, he and W. P. Cottam, the *Banyan* staff photographer, went through the college's collection of photographs to find "interesting material." They found a picture of two chimpanzees, seated facing each other, "each with his arm on the other's shoulder." Anderson assembled a number of "doctored" photographs for a talk he subsequently gave to a student audience. He had the photographs projected on a large screen as he offered a commentary, describing how they might be used in the yearbook. The caption of his photograph of the "two monkeys," he explained, would be: "Smoot and Lodge are not the only ones talking about the League of Nations." As Anderson well knew, Reed Smoot was an Apostle of the Mormon Church, revered by all upstanding Mormons, who did not subscribe to Darwin's theory. And the Church had taken the position that the United States should not officially endorse the League. Two of Smoot's daughters were in the audience that evening. Both took extreme exception to Anderson's light-hearted commentary about their father. "Nels compared you to a monkey!" they told him. Incensed by this affront to his dignity, Smoot immediately notified the university of his resignation from the Board of Governors and demanded an apology from Anderson. Anderson wrote a formal letter of apology to Smoot, explaining that it was all a joke and that he meant no disrespect. Although he assured Smoot that he never intended to print the offending photograph, which was offered only to inspire student interest in the college yearbook, Smoot would have none of it, declaring that he would not tolerate any such ridicule, that Anderson's motives were "base," and that his conduct had irrevocably sullied his, Smoot's, reputation. The yearbook sold well, for the first time becoming a profitable enterprise.<sup>9</sup>

A few years later, in 1926, *The American Mercury* published an essay on Senator Reed Smoot entitled "Pontifex Babbitt." The editor, H. L. Mencken, must have been delighted to run it. He might not have known that it was Anderson's way of getting even.<sup>10</sup> While I'm not able to report on Smoot's reaction to the essay,<sup>11</sup> he might not have been pleased to see himself immortalized

9. Personal conversation, 23 March 1982.

10. Mencken had asked Anderson to write a character sketch of Smoot, to disclose what "makes him tick." Happy to oblige, Anderson did so in a way that concealed from the eyes of Smoot's unsophisticated admirers the tongue-in-cheek tone of his article. So successful was he, admitted Anderson, that Smoot's detractors were no more delighted by his piece than were his supporters. (Mencken had also asked Anderson to send him a list of "hobo terms" for his celebrated *Dictionary of American Slang*; Anderson was happy to comply.)

11. Anderson's essay was not forgotten: it appears reproduced in part in William Mulder and A. Russell Mortensen, eds., *Among the Mormons*, (New York 1969), 433–441. The editors write that "Nels Anderson, mingling satire and respect, gives a revealing portrait of the Apostle-Senator in 'Pontifex Babbitt'"<sup>434</sup>; in a note he had scrawled on his photo copy of "Pontifex Babbitt," reproduced in part in *Among the Mormons*, Anderson reveals that "Some Mormons did not like this article. [The] last time Smoot stood for re-election (to be defeated) his campaign workers asked permission to quote the article and they did."

as “the champion of an almost theological *laissez faire*. Things are as they should be by divine arrangement.... With this naive philosophy Smoot would solve all the social and economic problems of the world. He would tell the crook to be honest, the unemployed to go to work, and all people to practice clean living, prayer, and loyalty to their leaders.” And as “The exponent of a harsh and unyielding economy in government house-keeping,” Smoot, “the son of a frugal, unimaginative race among whom thrift and hard work are the chief virtues of this life and the only assurances of salvation in the life beyond,” was recognized among his fellow Senators to be “a lion for efficiency, a tiger for economy and a wolf for detail,” wrote Anderson. Such was “his unrelenting determination to make of the government an efficient machine” that Smoot “made himself as popular on Capital Hill as a hangman.” His obsession with numbers – he was considered the most able economist in Washington – reports Anderson, made him “so much the statistician that he has almost ceased to be a human being.” Yet his Utah constituency valued Smoot for “his romantic, almost voluptuous guardianship of wool, [and] for his veneration for the sugar beet,” both vital to the state’s economy. Senator Smoot’s devotion to Utah’s wool and sugar interests was not, however, likely to invite censure in official Washington. Far from it. In a few trenchant words Anderson summed up Smoot’s life’s work while at the same time describing how federal politics are conducted: “In the very nature of things every Senator is the bosom of Abraham for some pet product of his home State.”<sup>12</sup>

Anderson’s mockery of those who preen over their social standing was a life-long past-time. Even his best-known study, *The Hobo*, proved irresistible as a subject of satire. It was reborn as *The Milk and Honey Route*, by Dean Stiff. It’s probably the only parody ever written of a Master’s dissertation by the author himself. For those who have not read it, allow me to cite a passage or two that illustrate Anderson’s wry humor. In a tongue-in-cheek disquisition on social workers who “mean well,” the author warns:

Beware of anyone with a burning desire to do good for you. Such a person is always moved by the desire to make you something other than what you are and what your hobo instincts intend you to be.

Dean Stiff then explains that,

Social workers are a recent development of the machine age. They are the ambulance corps of the capitalist system and as such they have one objective in all that they do. Whenever they see a man or woman not working they try to put him back into the harness.<sup>13</sup>

Advising the hobo who has to meet social workers that “it is always better to go to the women,” the author observes that “Most social workers are women, though you find an occasional man among them, but these are inconsequen-

12. Nels Anderson, “Pontifex Babbitt,” *American Mercury*, 9 (October 1926), 177–79, 181–82.

13. Nels Anderson (Dean Stiff), *The Milk and Honey Route* (New York 1930), 60.

tial, since they must spend so much of their time trying to prove that they are really men.”<sup>14</sup>

Finally, in a short chapter that reveals as much about the sexual mores of the time as it does the author’s sly amusement over the subject, the reader is introduced to a blunt fact about the hobo life: it is incompatible with marriage. Hence, driven as he is by “so-called Freudian urges,” the hobo must find substitutes for marriage and sex. Dean Stiff identifies two common forms of sexual sublimation, both in vogue, “the passive and the active.” He expresses regret over the decline of one popular passive method of sublimation, namely, the “peep shows”:

In the old days the peep shows were very numerous. That was when the art model parts were taken by real women. One peep show was about all that any good healthy hobo could stand of an evening. The reformers have finally taken the vigor and beauty out of this kind of amusement. Where peep shows exist they have degenerated to such a low level that not even the bums can be ruffled by them.<sup>15</sup>

Nels Anderson’s subversive humor was not confined to *The Milk and Honey Route*. All his life, Anderson revealed a talent for the one-liner, the zinger. Here is a sampling:

“Some dogs are like prostitutes: they’ll love anybody that comes along.”

“I thought all the heathens were in the university.”

“Mormons always travel in twos on their missionary efforts – lest one of them meet a girl and forget he’s a Mormon!”

“A mind too orderly cannot make room for new ideas.”

“In all of the social sciences there’s a straining to appear scientific, and you do it by playing with words.”

“In Europe you have an awful lot of professors who are hog-tied to certain ideas.”

“The only way you can be a Jesus man and a scholar is not to let one hand know what the other is doing.”

“You know, I don’t know how anyone can be a left-wing sociologist who is not also a preacher.”

“Druggists dispensed medicine according to a simple formula: ‘If the pain is below the equator, give them physic; if it is above the equator, give them quinine.’”

“There are still sociologists who talk about the ‘solution’ to social problems.”

Given his obvious literary talent, it is not surprising that, as a young and struggling scholar, Anderson seriously flirted with the idea of making a go at writing novels. He once told me that his first wife, Hilda, urged him to forget about becoming an academic and instead take up writing fiction – she envisaged her husband following in the footsteps of Sherwood Anderson, John Dos

14. *Milk and Honey Route*, 61.

15. *Milk and Honey Route*, 151.

Passos, or Sinclair Lewis. Anyone who has had the delightful experience of reading Nels Anderson's parody of *The Hobo*, or his *American Mercury* stories, can appreciate that had he turned his energies in an entirely literary direction the result might have been equally gratifying to his readers.<sup>16</sup> I say "might," because, as is not widely known, Anderson did try to write a novel, with disappointing results. In 1965 he began a fictionalized autobiography entitled *Arno Swann*. A year later he submitted the finished manuscript to Farrar, Straus & Giroux, whose editor, John Peck, found it "extremely interesting" but not up to "professional standards" of novel writing. Peck suggested that Anderson's varied life experiences belonged in autobiographical form, and might need two or three books to tell.<sup>17</sup> Anderson never got around to re-writing *Arno Swann*, which he couldn't bring himself to look at again.<sup>18</sup> Although the world may not have lost a fine novelist, one need only read *The Hobo* or *The Desert Saints* to know how good a literary stylist Anderson was. Kaare Svalastoga and Thomas Webb, who describe Anderson as a "pragmatic cosmopolitan," find his prose style to be "marvelously pithy, simple, and succinct," offering in evidence the final sentence of his *Urban Sociology*: "The technology is available for making cities clean, healthy, and attractive; the will must be there to use it."<sup>19</sup>

And how sharp and telling are Anderson's observations of the saved and the fallen going about their daily business. Anderson brought to his subject a humorous irreverence that his one-time editor H.L. Mencken found appealing. In describing his first religious experience, when at barely ten years of age he became a "Sunday-school addict," Anderson writes of how,

When I went to meeting or to Sunday-school at the Helping-Hand Mission, I heard talk about women who had fallen into sin. I used to feel sorry for them and I wondered how they looked when they "wallowed in the mire." I pictured great hordes of women in some part of the city steeped in sin, trying to get out of something that held them like quicksand. I never associated these fallen creatures with the women [in a house of prostitution] who fed me.

In the same essay Anderson reveals that as a young boy he had already formed a greater sympathy for "the women in the house of ill fame across our alley" than for the woman who always wept in church and cried over her sins:

I began to develop a very superior attitude toward the woman with the tearful testimony. But gradually I began to realize that I was living in the devil's playground about which there was so much talk every Sunday. I was disappointed. All this time I have been living in sin

16. Anderson joined the Writers' Club in Seattle, Washington, in 1925, while he was teaching at the University of Washington. "I was there because I had written *The Hobo*," he explains, noting that "many people who weren't sociologists have read *The Hobo*." He was not impressed with the Club's members: "They wrote animal stories, Canadian Mounted Police stories – the same characters appeared in different stories." (Personal conversation, 14 February 1986.)

17. Letter to Anderson, 15 March 1966. All letters cited are in the author's possession.

18. Letter to Peck, 22 March 1966.

19. "An Editorial Foreword," *Acta Sociologica* 12 (1969), 178.

and nothing had happened! I couldn't understand how people could get so worked up over so drab and monotonous a world.<sup>20</sup>

## Finding His Way

As a young boy Anderson was already a keen observer of the human condition. He also displayed the makings of the “pragmatic cosmopolitan” that he was to become. Eventually, he was to take the improbable journey from hobo to sociologist. One might say that it began on a freight train that brought him from Brigham Young University to the University of Chicago, itself a very long journey. What was it about his youthful experience that turned Anderson to books and made him the “outsider” who would one day pen his definitive account of the life of the itinerant frontier laborer, a life he himself had led? How was he able to draw so memorable a picture of the “nomad proletariat” of American society?<sup>21</sup>

When he was nine years old, Anderson told his father that he wanted to become a lawyer. His father, who had no love for lawyers – “They always get the farm,” he would declare bitterly – expected young Nels to quit school at grade four and follow his example. Land always gave a man security, insisted his father. But Nels knew he had no stomach for farming. In fact, he loathed farming as much as he hated the derisive nickname, “Farmer,” that his schoolmates had pinned on him. He wished desperately to continue his education. And so, determined to escape his father's influence, he ran away from home, setting out on foot from Traverse Bay, Michigan, to St. Louis, Missouri, where his maternal grandfather lived. Nels was then about fourteen, and he knew that his grandfather, who regarded Nels, Sr., as a “foreigner,” would take him in. Young Nels never made it out of the county: his father made inquiries in town, “asking people if they knew of a boy who was a stranger in these parts.”<sup>22</sup>

Upon his return, young Nels moved into a spare room in the house of “Aunt Bell,” the widow of a thriving local businessman, Mr. Grelick. It had been Nels' grade school teacher, a man named McManus, who had made the arrangement. Not long before Nels ran away from home McManus had tried, without success, to persuade his father to keep his son in school. But he did manage to persuade Nels, Sr. to allow his son to stay with Aunt Bell as her chore-boy. He enjoyed his many duties: feeding and grooming Aunt Bell's horse, driving the buggy when she went to town, minding the acetylene gas machine that fed all the house lamps, mowing the lawn, and tending the flower garden. In exchange Nels received room and board, clothes and school supplies, and

20. Nels Anderson, “The Mission Mill,” *American Mercury*, 7 (August 1926), 491–92.

21. See Nels Anderson, *On Hobos and Homelessness*, edited and with an Introduction by Raffaele Rauty (Chicago 1998), 8.

22. Personal conversations, 8 and 22 September 1982.

six dollars a month. Characteristically, he never spent his allowance: "I had nothing to spend it on; I never bought candy," he explained.<sup>23</sup>

Young Nels received something of inestimable value during the two years he boarded at Aunt Bell's: an appetite for "book learning" and the conviction that he could make something of himself, become somebody far removed from his humble rural origins. Both Aunt Bell and McManus encouraged young Nels to better himself. As he tells it, McManus was the kind of one-room school teacher who took a personal interest in the future of each of his students. He would urge his students to aim high; "he believed that any boy could become president of the United States if he set his mind to it," recalled Anderson. He suggested to Nels that whenever he was asked what he intended to become, he should say that he was going to be a lawyer. This would impress others and set a high standard for oneself, explained McManus. "It worked for me," Anderson admits, "for I kept thinking and saying I was going to be a lawyer until Swenson [of BYU] talked me out of it."<sup>24</sup>

Aunt Bell and McManus played a vital role in the intellectual and spiritual metamorphosis of young Nels Anderson. Knowing that Nels did not have to be held back in grade two for a third time (because his family had moved so quickly from place to place, young Nels had not had the opportunity to finish grade two), McManus helped the boy pass his grades two and three examinations in the same year. Now Nels could work on subjects that presented some challenge to his intellect. "I had learned to read on my own," he explained, "and never had any difficulty in reading." For the first time he found school work exciting and didn't want it to end: "I was always sad when school came to an end," he confessed.<sup>25</sup> Life at Aunt Bell's exposed Nels to "a kind of culture" that was quite different from that of his own family. He learned the "manners" of a middle-class household and had acquired a new way of speaking. When Nels returned home his brothers and sisters made fun of his strange "airs," while his father would look askance at his son and say nothing. There was no going back: Anderson had become a stranger to his family and would ever remain so. This feeling stayed with him, and was to make him throughout his life an outsider always looking in: to the little world of his own family, to the expanded worlds of his workmates and his chosen profession, and to that of the wider society. It is impossible to place Nels Anderson securely and unambiguously in any class or any status group of American society. Like the homeless men and the men on the move that he came to identify with and write about, Anderson remained rootless for much of the rest of his life.<sup>26</sup>

23. Personal conversation, 8 September 1982.

24. Personal conversation, 8 September 1982.

25. Personal conversation, 8 September 1982.

26. Anderson's refusal to become a farmer like his father signified an unwillingness to remain a prisoner of his impoverished rural background. His youthful decision was inspired by an ambition, one that he shared with many of his generation, to make something of himself. But



All of his life Anderson resisted the lure of formal groups and organizations, even though he found work in them. But he never was “of” them. Anderson became the kind of man that William H. Whyte found to be “endangered” in American society: the semi-detached servant of the large-scale organization who resists its lures, refuses to become an “organization man.”<sup>27</sup> Anderson was not much of a joiner. He never felt himself to be a member of any group, society, or organization with which emotionally he could identify. This feeling never entirely left him, not even when he had finally realized his dream of becoming a “real” professor. Three years before he died, while an emeritus professor at the University of New Brunswick, he published a short essay in which he reflected upon his student days at the University of Chicago. He called his essay, “A Stranger at the Gate.” In this essay Anderson describes his journey from Brigham Young University to the University of Chicago, undertaken at the suggestion of a professor of economics and sociology at BYU, John C. Swenson, who urged Anderson to study sociology at Chicago because “they work with new ideas.”<sup>28</sup>

Arriving from Salt Lake by freight train three months after he had graduated from BYU, Anderson found himself in the city of his boyhood, alone and nearly penniless. Knowing he must find a job, he bought a suit at a pawn shop for six dollars and, a day later, stumbled upon a large building that looked like a hospital, until the sign “carved in stone over the gate” told him otherwise: CHICAGO HOME FOR INCURABLES. He persuaded the elderly manager that, though a student, he could handle the job and was hired as a male nurse. When, shortly thereafter, Anderson undertook to register as a graduate student at the University of Chicago, he felt awkward about his chosen field, sociology, “because I could not use its vocabulary.” He avoided conversations with his fellow students, knowing that it was more his social awkwardness than his pride that kept him from forming “close, fun-oriented friendships at Chicago, in which one’s status as a student was attained largely through party life.” He knew that socially he was, and had ever been, “a poor mixer,” and so turned instead to the satisfactions of graduate school work. His choice of subject for his master’s dissertation reinforced his estrangement from his fellow graduate students, who regarded the denizens of South Halstead Street with distaste and called his hobo project “disrespectful.” Try as he might, Anderson found it impossible to join in talking shop with his classmates, whose glibness and familiarity with sociological concepts and theories he admired. His study, which he never discussed with his fellow students, was a source of amusement

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in launching his career by chronicling the life of the homeless man, Anderson was swimming against the current: he was soon cast by his associates in the role of “outsider,” and became for much of his life “a stranger at the gate,” never to feel entirely at ease in the world of middle-class professionals.

27. *On Hobos and Homelessness*, 27.

28. Nels Anderson, “A Stranger at the Gate,” *Urban Life*, 11 (January 1983), 396–406.



**Nels and Helen Anderson Awarded Honorary Doctor of Laws,  
University of New Brunswick, 1972**

SOURCE: STONE'S STUDIO, FREDERICTON, NEW BRUNSWICK

to them.<sup>29</sup> He learned to keep his nose down and attend to his work, which he found absorbing.

Nels Anderson was always dedicated to his work, which he claimed was never boring. But he was not dedicated in the sense that the careerist is, the social type that thrives on the ambrosia of self-aggrandizement and self-promotion; a type that is no stranger in the modern university, where “grantsmanship” now thrives. Nor was he ever caught up in the trappings of status suitable to the role of senior professor that he had finally achieved. It was not that he spurned his new-found status: he was simply unaccustomed to it. His lodgings and furnishings, the latter often borrowed, were minimal and Spartan. Here was a man so unmindful of the material accouterments that advertised the “polite” status of professor – such as a comfortable home at a good address – that he invited his new bride and second wife Helen, of “respectable” middle-class German parentage, to share his one-bedroom apartment in Lady Beaverbrook Hall, a UNB men’s residence. She had in mind a nice home with a well-tended lawn and spacious flower garden. And a maid. And a new car. It was the least to be expected of marriage to a professor of sociology on his 81st birthday, 31 July 1970.

Three days after they were married Helen announced she was leaving him; but their marriage lingered until Helen’s death in April 1976. After Helen died, Nels moved into a bachelor apartment just off campus, where he did all his own cooking and cleaning, including the occasional sprucing up of his modest wardrobe of sports jackets, white shirts, and an overcoat, all subjected to an expedient dunking in a bathtub of soapy water; partly rinsed and wrung out, all were dried on the shower bar. One afternoon in the fall of 1982, Anderson was visited by a young man who said he was enumerating voters for the upcoming provincial election. After an exchange of pleasantries, Anderson remarked upon the man’s pants, asking him how he managed “to get them to look so good.” The enumerator explained that he took his pants to the cleaners. Anderson then demonstrated how he looked after his own clothes, showing his visitor where he hung his pants to dry, after he’d washed them in the bath tub. As to how he pressed them, Anderson said, “I told him I would pat them flat with my hands and then fold them. He thought I was nuts,” laughed Anderson, as he recalled the neatly dressed enumerator politely receiving instructions on how to wash and press his own dress pants.<sup>30</sup>

Anderson never entirely abandoned the habits and survival strategies of the hobo. He and I spent three days in New York City attending a sociology convention. He was then in his eighties. We shared a room at a low-priced hotel – the Taft, as I recall – and soon gravitated to the Stage Delicatessen nearby, frequented by theater people and tourists like ourselves. The Stage Deli specialized in enormous sandwiches named after Hollywood and Broadway stars,

29. “Stranger at the Gate,” 398, 401–02.

30. Personal conversation, 23 September 1982.

such as a “Dorothy Lamour,” a “Helen Hayes,” or a “Red Skeleton.” The Stage Deli’s dream-like photographic display of dozens of “celebrity” sandwiches would appeal to any old hobo. It quickly became Anderson’s favorite eatery, but he never could manage to eat more than half of one of its five-inch-high corned beef sandwiches. The unconsumed half he simply wrapped in a paper napkin and placed in his jacket pocket, where it remained, well warmed by the July sun, until we returned to the Taft, whereupon it became a late evening snack. I didn’t dare bring up the subject of food poisoning, and was relieved to find that Anderson’s digestive system, apparently long inured to the risk, easily coped with left-over corned beef.

Anderson knew what it was like to be homeless and friendless, not knowing where his next meal might come from. On his first night in Chicago, after having traveled from Utah the hobo way, he found himself with insufficient funds to rent a room. As the night was chilly, he looked for a warm place to sleep. He found a place at the University of Chicago: a concrete platform situated over the heating plant.<sup>31</sup> He slept under the stars. He kept this secret for fifty years, telling almost no one how he had spent his first night in Chicago; as he explained, he was always “too ashamed” to admit that he had no place to sleep.<sup>32</sup>

For years, Anderson suffered from “money worries.” Anxiety about his economic future gave him an ulcer, he said. He spent many sleepless nights in Germany wondering how he would make a living when his UNESCO post came to an end: “I would walk the streets in Bonn, worrying,” he said. He was prepared for the worst: “I expected that when I got old [he was then 74] I would go down to the bowery and live among the bums. I would eat a doughnut now and then, and I knew that even if my family took me in they would soon find a polite excuse for getting me out.” His teaching assignments in Newfoundland and New Brunswick became his “salvation,” he said. Even so, he still felt insecure financially: about a year after Helen’s death he learned that he was entitled to a Canadian as well as a U S pension. Now he need not be prepared, when he could no longer teach, to migrate to the “main stem” of a large city – perhaps Boston – and “live cheap.”<sup>33</sup> It should be noted that he had already donated many thousands of dollars to the Nels Anderson Fund, which by 1983 had a capital base exceeding a quarter of a million dollars.<sup>34</sup>

Hobo culture and its mentality never entirely left Anderson. Essential to hobo culture is a studied “reserve about one’s personal life,” wrote Anderson, a lesson he learned well. So deeply ingrained in his character was this essential

31. According to C. B. Johnson, 1972, he slept “under a concrete ledge around the smoke stack of the university power plant.” See Lee Harvey, *Myths of the Chicago School of Sociology* (Aldershot, England 1987), 58.

32. Personal conversation, 16 June 1983.

33. Personal conversation, 4 August 1983.

34. Report, Office of the Comptroller, UNB, 8 June 1983.

reserve that in writing his autobiography Anderson stated that it was his wish not to be “overly autobiographical.” He regarded *The American Hobo* as a personal account of his own experiences, which he had kept out of *The Hobo*. Explaining how he wrote this landmark study, Anderson revealed that “I had concealed my hobo identity for fear of ridicule and simply to avoid being stared at. I knew that for many people ‘hobo’ meant unwholesomeness and an irresponsible life, and to them even sociology was suspect. Hence I tried to disassociate myself from the subject, unsuccessfully as it turned out.”<sup>35</sup> He claimed that it was his association with homeless men that prevented him from securing a university appointment after he had received his PhD from New York University, in 1930. “They thought that a man who knows hobos must know whores,” he explained. “That was why I never got a job in university.”<sup>36</sup>

When writing his brief autobiography, Anderson was careful not to reveal any embarrassing details about his own emotional life or his most intimate relationships. Instead of discussing his private life, he gave his readers a summary of his work life, told in a semi-detached style that preserved his sense of privacy. He also respected this impulse in others, which to him was a virtue: He shrank from “opening up” to others, never asked anyone “How do you feel?” and regarded the “Dr. Phils” of the world as boorishly “familiar.” Anderson was simply not the kind of man, one might think, who would write an autobiography. When he finally decided to do so, it became a strikingly impersonal account of his life, written as if by someone else, and entitled “The” American Hobo, not “An” American Hobo.<sup>37</sup>

35. Anderson, “The Education of a Sociologist,” typewritten manuscript, 12 March 1978, 5. Anderson’s concealment in his study of homeless men of his own hobo past has been cited as evidence that he did not employ the research technique later known as “participant observation.” Martin Bulmer points out that “the role he played was that of a hobo rather than of a research student.” But then Bulmer admits that “participant observation ... was not exactly what Anderson did.” He cites from Anderson’s Introduction to *The Hobo*: “I did not descend into the pit, assume a role there, and later ascend to brush off the dust.” (Chicago 1961), xiii.) See Martin Bulmer, *The Chicago School of Sociology* (Chicago 1984), 98. In assessing Anderson’s research technique Lee Harvey adamantly denies that it was based on participant observation: “Anderson did not live as a hobo but rather stayed in a hobo hotel in hobohemia” while he conducted his research. Since he did not pass himself off as a hobo, did not directly participate in the lives of his informants, and did not attempt unobtrusively to engage himself in the perspective of his research subject, argues Harvey, Anderson was not a participant observer. In both his autobiography and his essay, “A Stranger at the Gate,” Anderson clearly states that he did not pretend to be a hobo when he interviewed homeless men. Harvey explains that Anderson’s approach “was not participant observation of hobo life, rather, it was observation of hobos in an institutional setting with a heavy reliance on informal, in-depth conversations with residents” [of the “Home for Incurables”]. See Harvey, *Myths of the Chicago School*, 49, 58–59.

36. Personal conversation, 29 February 1981.

37. Anderson never mentions any sexual experiences he might have had as a young man, nor does he touch on the subject of his two marriages, his relationship with his only child, Martin, or the deaths of his grandson, Nels, Jr., and his second wife.

Anderson reported that “Absolute democracy reigns in the [hobo] jungle.... The jungle is the melting pot of trampdom.” In writing about “The Laws of the Jungle,” Anderson pointed out that, “As a rule ... the jungle is extremely hospitable and democratic.”<sup>38</sup> He could have been describing himself and the way he lived. The hobo life made a deep impression on Anderson at an early age. Later, his friendship with Ben Reitman, himself an ex-hobo, reinforced Anderson’s genial acceptance of, and identification with, society’s marginal men and women. Anderson had a deep sympathy for society’s outcasts, including, in his day, homosexuals (he called them “homos”); and he displayed no prejudice towards Native peoples, Jews, African Americans, and Asians. He once remarked that his mother had absolutely no racial prejudice; she got on well, he observed, with Indians and Negroes. She made no distinctions as to category of humanity, but was quick to judge an individual on the basis of his or her behavior.<sup>39</sup> Aware of the attitudes of early Mormons towards Indians and Negroes, Anderson recalled that the Mormons he knew in Utah when he was a young man regarded Indians not as people to be exterminated or abused, but simply to be exploited: “The Terrys [prominent Mormon ranchers, Clover Valley, in southern Utah] used to cheat the Indians, and say that the Indian’s time isn’t worth anything. But I couldn’t agree with them.”<sup>40</sup>

Although at age 19, Anderson was baptized on a cold January day in a mountain water hole for livestock by Tommy Terry, and thus became a Mormon, Anderson’s faith was always less than complete: “I was never a *true* believer,” he confessed in 1982. “I was one of those *listening* Mormons; I heard things that others didn’t notice.” Such as the Mormons’ treatment of Indians, as well as the response of church officials to his *Desert Saints*, which led him to declare shortly before his death: “Most of the people at Brigham Young University still think I’ve been a whoremaster all my life.” This outburst was not without cause: when Anderson worked in Washington, DC, such was his reputation as a student of skid row culture that visiting Mormons would ask him to take them to “leg shows.” “Show us the worst you got,” they would implore, fully expecting him to introduce them to the city’s most notorious “vice areas.”<sup>41</sup> Anderson found their request obnoxious and misdirected: it was not his habit to frequent Washington’s clubs and bars in search of pleasure and relaxation. Although not a teetotaler, he rarely drank, never learned to dance, and found no glamor in smoke-filled bars.

A self-confessed “nominal” Mormon, Anderson admitted that he had not gone to church since his Chicago days, when he was visited by two Mormons who asked him to stop work on his hobo project: they advised him to “take

38. *On Hobos and Homelessness*, 44–45.

39. Personal conversation, 22 December 1982.

40. Personal conversation, 10 August 1982.

41. Personal conversations, 12 October 1982; 8 November 1982.

a moral bath.<sup>42</sup> Toward the end of his life he was still concerned about the response of the church to the book he hoped to have re-issued, *Workers of Utah*, published in 1889 by George Washington Brimhall, and long banned by the church for its author's recognition that life on earth had evolved over a span of millions of years.<sup>43</sup> Anderson felt that he must be careful how he wrote the introduction to this proposed, but never completed, work, "so that I do not risk being put out of the church." He had not forgotten the rebuke of church elders, who said that Anderson had "sullied his soul" and passed up an opportunity to "say nice things" about Mormons. When *The Desert Saints* was published the rumor went around the Mormons of Provo and Salt Lake City that Anderson had acquired his information from Temple archives surreptitiously, a betrayal that rendered him persona non grata among devout Mormons.<sup>44</sup> But Anderson was not one to brood over his status as an orphaned child of the church, whose seminal work on Mormon life and religion remained unknown to most Mormons much younger than himself. He accepted with good humor his "outcast" status, knowing that his Mormon brethren are no less flawed than the rest of us. Occasionally, a pair of Mormon missionaries would pay him a call at his small apartment off campus. They invariably expressed surprise when he told them that he too was a Mormon and had written a book about them.

Intrigued that the rural sociologist Lowry Nelson had written to the periodical *The Nation* some time in the 1950s protesting the Mormon church's denial of membership to Negroes, Anderson looked up the exchange of letters on the controversy between Nelson and a defender of the Mormon faith. Anderson remarked: "There were a lot of people [among the Mormons] who

42. Personal conversations, 9 March 1982; 29 June 1982. Anderson remarked that this advice was often given to those who frequented the slums of Chicago. The Mormon brethren warned him, "If you go in the smokehouse, you come out smelling like smoke."

43. G. W. Brimhall, *The Workers of Utah* (Provo, Utah 1889). According to Anderson, Brimhall had been ordered by Brigham Young to go into the Grand Canyon with his family and attempt to homestead there for a year, which he did. A devout Mormon and subsequently the father of George H. Brimhall, president of BYU from 1904–1921, George W. had made the mistake of suggesting that nature must have taken millions of years to carve out the Grand Canyon. His book was banned by the church, which ordered all copies destroyed and declared it a sin for any Mormon to own one. In 1982, Anderson found a copy in the Library of Congress, which he had photocopied for \$24. Some forty years earlier, Anderson and a church historian, Leonard J. Arrington, had gone to the Library of Congress to see if a copy was in the stacks. One was. Delighted, they told the collections librarian about the book, which on their recommendation was placed in the Rare Books room (personal conversations, 25 May and 21 June 1982).

44. Personal conversations, 25 and 29 June 1982. In the Preface to the 1966 edition Anderson writes: "A story circulated in Dixie that I had tricked my way into the St. George Temple and without authority had read sacred Mormon records." One of the Twelve Apostles who reviewed *Desert Saints* for a Mormon periodical, notes Anderson, said to him: "'The book might have been great; if you had written more with the Spirit of the Lord, you would not have included some of the passages which to me seem negative.'" (Chicago 1966), xxii.



**Anderson in his UNB Office, 1970**

SOURCE: UNIVERSITY OF NEW BRUNSWICK

thought there was an abysmal dumbness among Negroes.” “They would call any Negro they saw, ‘Hey Rastas! Hey Sambo!’”<sup>45</sup> “A Negro arrived in Lewiston,” Anderson recalled. “Children ran when they saw him coming.” The white residents taunted him by chanting, “White man smells like castile soap, Old Nigger stinks like an old billy goat.” In a loud voice, the frightened young Nels repeated this jingle as the Negro began to approach his parents’ house. Nels broke and ran, his face “turned toward the advancing Negro,” and slammed into a wagon pole; stunned, his face smarting, he laid there as the “Negro came running and picked me up.” He brought Nels into the front room, and placed him gently on the bed. Nels’ mother invited the Negro to stay for coffee cake. Nels and his sister Celia could hear the two of them laughing and talking about St. Louis, where as a child Anderson’s mother had played with Negroes. The Negro paid the Andersons a visit twice more, the last time to say goodbye. Anderson observes:

He had been invited into no other house. He didn’t like to be where they called him Sambo or Rastus even when he said his name was George.<sup>46</sup>

45. Personal conversation, 22 December 1982.

46. Anderson, “The Private And Last Frontier,” *The Sewanee Review*, 77 (Winter 1969), 39–40.



As a young boy Nels became fond of his father's partner, "Old Joe" Bronjo, an elderly Nez Perce Indian.<sup>47</sup> Nels' father had heard from another immigrant traveling in a covered wagon, as were the Andersons, of the possibility of "working land shares with a certain Indian called Joe Bronjo." "A good opening," the man said, "but what white man wants to work with an Indian." Joe Bronjo, writes Anderson, "had been a leading warrior and was among the older men who persuaded the Nez Perce to stop fighting [the white man]." Anderson's father had formed "the firm opinion that the whites had treated them [the Indians] unfairly. Also they were poor people, as he had always been." Soon, his father and Joe Bronjo formed a partnership. The Anderson family moved into Old Joe's fourth cabin, the only one unoccupied, on Reservation land, where his father agreed to help Old Joe "work the land for half of the crop." Nels, Sr. and Old Joe felt they were "outsiders"; they soon became friends. Theirs was a respectful relationship: Joe Bronjo said to his partner "many times, 'You good man, I call you No-Cheat.'" After one year, when the Wall Street panic had made farming unprofitable, the Andersons left the Reservation and moved to Lewiston, where they bought an old "town house"; they maintained their friendship with Joe Bronjo, inviting him and his family to their new home. Young Anderson recognized at the time that this was unusual; "few white families invited Indians to their houses," he later observed.<sup>48</sup> In his advanced years Anderson described the profound effect of Joe Bronjo's kindly regard for him, a young white boy:

It was Old Joe who made me his playmate. When he was not with Father in the fields he braided rawhide lariet [sic] ropes which were sold to cattlemen. I was fascinated watching his hands at braiding. With short strips of rawhide he could not use, I tried braiding. He said nothing, but would move his hands carefully and slowly when I stood watching. Within days, after endless errors, I too could braid but my four-year-old fingers were not strong enough to press the overlappings down firm. He was the perfect teacher and my first hero.<sup>49</sup>

As Anderson remarked about his fondness for Joe, "I never had a lust for heroes. Indian Joe was one of the few exceptions and my admiration for him was total."<sup>50</sup>

47. Anderson, *The American Hobo* (Leiden, Germany 1975), 6–7.

48. "Private and Last Frontier," 29, 31, 37.

49. *The American Hobo*, 7.

50. "Private and Last Frontier," 35.

## Conclusion

Alfred Kazin once said of William James that his writing illuminates and reflects upon “the uprooted, ill-educated, morally abandoned people of our society....”<sup>51</sup> This also applies to the work of Nels Anderson.

Anderson was somewhat of a “huckster of details.”<sup>52</sup> His sociology was eclectic, a-theoretical, and thematic. He wrote about people and experiences close to his own life. He had no grand theory, no “big picture”; he offered no resolution of society’s problems, no nostrums – instead, he offered only, for the most part, closely-observed portrayals of the work-a-day lives of ordinary people. These shall long remain the core of his legacy. He was suspicious of all “isms” and contemptuous of those who felt that they had a plan to make the world a better place, and were bent upon implementing it. He shrank from “recommendations,” knowing that they always cost somebody something – often those who were earmarked to receive them. He had little time for those enamored of their own importance. He took a quiet delight in deflating blow-hards and bringing “do-gooders” and other utopians to ground.

Nels Anderson began his working life hawking newspapers on Madison Street in Chicago at age 12, and ended it trying to re-issue an old study of work on the Western frontier. In his lifetime, Anderson’s mode of transportation progressed from covered wagon to jetliner – although he quit air travel when he discovered that whenever airline employees clapped eyes on him they brought out a wheelchair (there is progress and there is humiliation). Anderson always had something new to look at; he never tired of work, and found in work his salvation. Almost all his skills were work-related, and although he studied leisure and wrote about it, it was never for him. He was drawn to those who built something with their own hands; he admired the tangible skills of engineers and technicians as well as tradesmen far more than the clever abstractions of lawyers, “intellectuals,” and “theorists.” His favorite poem was Kipling’s “Sons of Martha,” a paean to the work of engineers. (He was also fond of Kipling’s less-favored poem, “The Bastard King of England.”) Words, he felt, were meant for something useful and meaningful: for creating helpful images, not for spinning idle thoughts. “But he doesn’t *say* anything,” was often Anderson’s criticism of an author whose work he found to be trivial. Yet he himself was an accomplished word-smith and loved a well-told story. He understood that it is by the stories we tell one another that we weave and repair the fabric of our lives.

51. “The Exceptional William James,” *New York Review of Books*, 30 (10 November 1983), 4.

52. Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York 1980). Schorske calls the kind of journalist who shows no understanding of the larger pattern, the unity, described by the facts, as a “huckster of details”: this comes close, at times, to Anderson’s sociology, which is guided in its selection and interpretation of materials by underlying and largely unanalyzed interests, which he often marshals into loosely interconnected “themes,” as he did first in his hobo study.