What is a Vagabond?

In life, there are those people who live outside the normal working world. Whether they exit by choice, war, poverty, or just to seek adventure, we generally classify them into four classes: Hobo, Vagabond, Tramp, and Bum.

The hobo works and travels. He doesn't travel for the romance of the road—he travels because he must, chasing whatever jobs he can find. The word has mostly slipped out of use now, but in the 1930s, it named a whole class of men shaped by the Depression, men who hopped freight trains and slept in the makeshift railroad camps they called "the jungle."

A vagabond travels but doesn't work much. He has no home base, no regular work—only the road, and whatever cash it takes to go down it.

The tramp travels but doesn't work. He drifts on whatever road opens next. In Germany, they still call hitchhiking "tramping,"

A bum is someone who neither works nor travels. He isn't chasing jobs or horizons; he's working the angles for free meals, some alcohol, a warm place to sleep, whatever he can get. The word itself is not politically correct in today's world. Many of the "Homeless" working the freeway ramps with cardboard signs could be considered bums in this era of working the system.

It is not inconceivable that one could start as a hobo and, through the rough years of life, work his way down to being a bum.

What Made Me A Vagabond?

Ever since Adam was kicked out of the Garden of Eden, people have been on the move. Some people are born with wanderlust. Others are searching for something in life or perhaps running away from their problems.

For me, it was not one thing that sent me down the road as a vagabond. It was a chain of small events—collecting stamps at ten, a fourth-grade geography teacher who opened the world for me, a tour of duty in the Navy, and, most of all, the sight of two hippies on a California corner in 1969, backpacks full and the whole open road calling them forward.

I first saw them through the window of a Navy bus on the way to M-16 training before my deployment to Vietnam. The memory of those two stayed with me throughout my enlistment, and three years later—just weeks after my discharge—I was on the road to California.

In the ’70s, nobody taught you how to wander. You learned by moving—one step, one border, one mistake at a time. No Google, no guidebooks. Just the road as your teacher and information from other drifters as your only textbook.

How I Traveled

I traveled as light as a person could. The road demanded a small footprint, and mine was smaller still—mostly because I couldn’t afford much. No camera. No coffee. No cigarettes. Film, tobacco, and caffeine were luxuries for people with money, not for a kid drifting across borders.

I wore no rings. Carried no tent, no camp stove, no transistor radio. There were no phones, no ATMs, no GPS. I had no credit card, no travel agent smoothing the way, no hotel waiting with a reservation. I moved alone, with no plans, no return ticket, and—most importantly—no fear. I’d left all my fear in Vietnam years before.

What I Packed

My prized possession was a Trapper Nelson Indian Packboard — Seattle-made in the 1930s, five bucks at any thrift store, and just small enough to stash in a Greyhound locker. It was my home base on my back.

I carried a light down sleeping bag that was good to about 35 degrees, though the nights often dipped colder.

I bought a few American Express traveler's checks. They were necessary to get the best currency exchange rate outside the US and to use American Express offices around the world as mail pickup stations.

I navigated using Rand McNally maps whenever I could find them. They helped guide me to a better intersection when I was stranded without a ride.

I carried two plastic bags. One oversized bag I could crawl into as a makeshift tent or use as a ground sheet. And a smaller one to keep my backpack dry in the rain, or to hide it in the bushes when I went into towns. Condensation in the large one made the tent idea short-lived, and eventually I splurged on a ten-dollar K-Mart pup tent.

I had a library of one paperback book. It was common for backpackers to trade books when they crossed paths on the road. I personally liked classic stories, but I often ended up on the short end of the trade and got something like a western by Louis L'Amour.

I carried a nice maple recorder I purchased in Berlin. It was the only music I had along the trail, outside of my humming once in a while. I learned two songs in 15 years.

I also had a small pocket watch. I wondered at times why. Hitchhiking is not like waiting for a bus.

I also packed essential clothes, a rain jacket, a wool sweater, a fork, a spoon, a pocketknife, and a can opener.

I think my fully loaded backpack weighed in at about 30 pounds.