

# from *Riding the Rails*



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



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

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

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

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

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

## WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Dorothy Day

1897–1980



**WHY SHE MADE HISTORY** Dorothy Day co-founded the Catholic Worker movement and its newspaper of the same name. She was an important voice for pacifism and the poor.



As you read the biography below, think about how Dorothy Day's interest in the poor changed the lives of many people.

Dorothy Day was born in New York City in 1897. She received a scholarship to attend the University of Illinois in 1914. As she came to know the poverty stricken neighborhoods of South Side Chicago, she soon realized that she was interested in social change. Day left college after only two years and returned to New York. There she became involved in socialist issues and became a reporter for *The Call*, a socialist newspaper. Her sensitivity for the underprivileged became one of her life's passions.

Day became involved in demonstrating for social change. In 1917 she went to prison as one of 40 women protesters fighting for the right of women to vote. Day also believed in **pacifism** and wrote articles for *The Masses*, a magazine that opposed American involvement in World War I.

In March of 1926, Dorothy Day gave birth to her only child, a daughter. Day was deeply moved by the experience of childbirth and had her child baptized a Catholic. She stated, "I did not want my child to flounder as I had often floundered." Shortly after, Day converted to Catholicism herself and embraced her religion completely.

## WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. What major event changed the life of Dorothy Day?

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2. **Sequence** List several events of Dorothy Day's life in chronological order.

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Day's newfound religion **propelled** her to continue the work she had begun for the poor and underprivileged. In 1933 Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin founded the Catholic Worker movement. This movement combined the Catholic **doctrine** with a platform of social reform and war opposition. That year, they also began publishing the *Catholic Worker* journal. The newspaper encouraged readers to unite in a variety of activities to assist the poor. Within three years the publication had 150,000 readers.

Dorothy Day also organized hospitality houses for the underprivileged and poor. By 1936 there were 33 Catholic Worker houses across the country. The houses supplied food and shelter to about 5,000 people daily. Because of the Great Depression, many people across the country needed the hospitality houses to survive.

Day and the Catholic Worker organization opposed the United States' entry into World War II. She continued to demonstrate against inequality and violence through her last years.

Dorothy Day died in 1980 at the House of Hospitality she founded in New York City. She left a legacy of goodwill, peace, and charity.