

INTERVIEW

NELS ANDERSON-THE HOBO

by Elizabeth Smith

Professor Nels Anderson's office is in the centre of the sociology department where it is used as the coffee and discussion room. A coffee percolator and other utensils are kept at one end of a large table. The other end is for a work-table for graduate students. The door to the office is always kept open as a welcome signal for passersby but a few who enter apologize for interrupting. One student walks into the office, hesitates for a moment, and then departs. Prof. Anderson explains that the student wanted to use the desk but was afraid that he was intruding on the conversation.

"Nobody intrudes here. I wish people would get over that idea," he says.

From his youth Nels Anderson has worked very hard, and now, at eighty-two, he is not slowing down. When asked how many hours a day he replies, "I work from when I get up in the morning until I go to bed at night".

His current project is a sociology book for engineers he is writing with the help and criticism of Professor Frank Wilson in the UNB Engineering faculty. The book is developing from a course Prof. Anderson has been teaching to engineering students for the past three years. It is used as the text for the class and is extensively revised as it comes under criticism. As it enters its fourth year of revision there is no indication of when it will be ready for publication. Prof. Anderson says, "Everything I write has to be written several times". The book is a look at society through an engineer's perspective; about the work, the problems, the society of engineers.

Almost fifty years ago Nels Anderson wrote a book about a particular group of people whose life he had special insight into. This book, *The Hobo*, is still selling. Royalties for the first six months of this year amounted to \$162, and at five cents a copy, this means that 3,240 copies were sold.

The Hobo is the work most commonly associated with Prof. Anderson although he has written many other books since. A partial list of these books includes *Men On The Move* (1938), *The Urban Community - a world perspective* (1959), *Work and Leisure* (1961), *Urbanism and Urbanization* (1964), *Dimensions of Work - the sociology of a work culture* (1964), *Our Industrial Urban Civilization* (1964), *Desert Saints - the Mormon frontier in Utah* (1966), *Industrial Urban Community* (1968), *Studies in Multilingualism* (1969).

Nels Anderson was one of the first students at the famed Chicago School of sociology. He went there as a graduate student in 1921 to study with R.E. Park and E.W. Burgess, among others. Prof. Anderson explains the origins of *The Hobo*.

"Park got an idea to study society as it was. He proposed a number of studies of Chicago as it was, and each student was given a particular problem to study. I was engaged to study the hobo, the homeless man in Chicago. It was intended for a committee of gentlemen who were putting up the money. I did not write *The Hobo* to be published. If I had, I would probably have been self-conscious about it and it would have been spoiled."

In the introduction to the book written thirty-nine years after its first publication, Prof. Anderson explains how it came to be published.

"When I delivered it to Park and Burgess for their review, I had an unsure feeling because it seemed ordinary, a little naked, and lacking in literary style. But Park, usually slow to praise, put aside other work to read it, and without my knowledge, even without my thinking of such a possibility, interested the University in publishing the report."

The Hobo - the Sociology of the Homeless Man, was published as the first in a series arranged by Park for the University of Chicago Press and financed by a Rockefeller grant. The book became important because

within a decade of its first printing the hobo had disappeared from the American scene.

Nels Anderson was chosen to research the project because he had personal subject in the field. He had been a migrant worker for several years. He wrote term papers on transients because this gave him "the opportunity to write term papers on things the profs didn't know about to get good marks". About his own students he says, "I don't care what students write on. They write what they want to. I just want them to write so it makes sense. With a lot of them if they read them fifteen later they would be amused."

What led Nels Anderson to become a migrant worker? He left home at 14 because he was "a poor boy from a big family like most hobos". He travelled across the United States several times doing seasonal work that no longer exists, like, lumbering, mining, harvesting, shearing sheep and ice-making. His father had done much the same thing twenty years earlier when he had emigrated from Sweden.

"My father thought high school was a foolish thing. He believed all his boys should become farmers, and with more than five years education we would not want to work. It turns out he was right," says Prof. Anderson. The family moved from city to city, to several farms, to the mountains. As a consequence Nels Anderson and his siblings changed schools often (when their father could not avoid sending them) and were often put back a year because the teachers could not evaluate what grade to put them in. Nels Anderson was in grade one at least three times.

One job Prof. Anderson remembers with fondness was selling the "Daily News" in Chicago, on Madison Street. The newspaper only cost one penny in those days and half of that was profit for the paperboy. Many years later Prof. Anderson talked to the editor of the "Daily News" and said he would like to be a journalist. The editor advised him against it, but Prof. Anderson still feels he missed a great career.

After about seven years of wandering he arrived in Salt Lake City, Utah, where he worked on a ranch. The rancher took him in as one of the family and persuaded him to finish his schooling. Between 1912 and 1920 Nels Anderson completed four years of high school and four years of college, to obtain his Bachelor of Arts from Brigham Young University. During this time he converted to the Mormon faith. It is difficult to ascertain where he stands religiously now. Speaking about how happy he is at UNB he says,

"God looks after you. God didn't get to me till I was 75 years old. He's pretty busy so he just picks out a few people. Better not print that, everybody here is a Christian or maybe a Mohammedan. I'm not down on anybody, not even angels. Angels have got there work to do."

After graduation Nels Anderson took the advice of one of his professors and headed for the new school of sociology in Chicago. This journey was his last experience riding freight trains.

He found work as a male nurse in the Chicago Home for Incurables near to the university, but it was almost impossible to carry the work load from both. But luck was with Prof. Anderson, by a series of coincidences he met some people who were interested in the problem of the homeless in Chicago and anxious to finance a study.

Nels Anderson was the logical choice for this study. Everyone else in the department, faculty and students, were of middle-class background and consequently could not understand the situation from the perspective available to Prof. Anderson. *The Hobo* brought fame, if not fortune, and Nels Anderson went on to get a doctorate from the University of New York. His career has included twenty years in the government, nine years with UNESCO and a teaching position at Memorial University of Newfoundland. He came to UNB in 1966 in the position of "Visiting Professor in Sociology and Anthropology," a position he still holds.



photo by De Freitas

"The Hobo hurt me. A well-known women's college in Illinois asked me to meet the faculty and be interviewed for a position. I went down to Illinois but they didn't hire me. They gave the reason that if I knew so much about hobos, I must also know about criminals, vice and drunkards. They didn't want me to be around the girls. I didn't argue with them, but the real reason should have been that I didn't know enough sociology." Nels Anderson



photo by De Freitas

"Women's Lib is the same old argument with more colourful characters. I'm not against it or for it, but the trend is moving pretty well in that direction. I sort of sympathized with the Time magazine strike. Women can write as well as men, but most of the writers for Time are men. But I don't want to talk about movements. I don't think it is my business and its inappropriate." Nels Anderson



photo by De Freitas

"When I was a student at the University of Utah I had to review a book by Jane Adams. It was about slums in Chicago. It was a very interesting book - about the area in Chicago where my family had lived. I didn't know they were slums till I read that book. But I couldn't stand up and tell the class that I'd lived in that slum. Everyone in the class would have stared at me. I kept mum about everything." Nels Anderson