

TEACHER'S GUIDE

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MISSION 5: "Up from the Dust"

"Experience is the Best Teacher": Phoebe Eaton Dehart on Riding the Rails

Young women did not take to the road as often as young men, but contemporary reformers estimated that girls made up about ten percent of the 250,000 youth on the road during the Depression. Peggy Eaton Dehart grew up on a homestead in Wyoming and saw drought and grasshopper infestations reduce her family's earnings. But Peggy's decision to hit the road was not mainly economic; conflict with her father provoked her into leaving home with a friend when she was fifteen. Dehart was interviewed in April 1994.

My friend Irene Willis was boarding with my brother and his wife. Irene's parents had moved to Issaquah, Washington. She wanted to see them but had no money to travel and planned to hitchhike. She didn't want to go alone and asked me to come along.

I'd worked for two and a half weeks and collected \$2.50. Irene said we could earn money picking fruit in Washington. I wrote my mother a letter telling her not to worry. "Experience is the best teacher," I told Mom. . . .

We hitchhiked to Wheatland and across the Laramie Mountains to Bosler Junction . . . That afternoon we caught a number of rides that took us three hundred miles across the state to Cokeville, near the Idaho border. . . .

"Uncle Slim" and "Daddy Joe" introduced themselves: Slim Jack Fuller was thirty-seven and Joe Daniels was sixty. They came from Casper, Wyoming, and were on their way to the harvest in Washington.

When a train stopped for water, Slim and Daddy Joe found an open boxcar and helped us climb aboard. I sat swinging my legs out of the boxcar door as the train started to move. Slim slapped my shins. "Keep your feet down or you'll be jerked off into eternity," he said, warning that I could be hit by a switch.

We rode that train all day and night and most of the next day. It was a thrill seeing the wonderful scenery as we went along. At night Slim and Daddy Joe showed us how to roll up in the paper that lined the boxcar walls and stay warm.

Late the next afternoon we arrived at Nampa, Idaho. We had to change trains to go northwest. Irene and I waited in the jungle, while our friends went uptown to beg for food. When we'd eaten we went to join other hoboes sitting on a grassy amphitheater opposite the one empty boxcar that was going to Le Grande, Oregon. We were the only women among the group of fifty men.

By August 3, Irene and I had made it back to Nampo, Idaho, where we were arrested for vagrancy. The police fingerprinted us and locked us in a cell infested with bedbugs. In the morning we appeared in front of a judge, who fined us each ten dollars. We didn't have that kind of money. Watching the judge write something on a sheet of paper, we thought we would have to sit it out in jail at a dollar a day. Instead the judge gave us a voucher for a meal.

"When you've had your breakfast get out of town," he said. . . .



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On Monday, August 15, I got a ride across the Laramie Mountains and arrived home in time for supper. I was lovingly greeted and was never scolded.

I'd been gone for five weeks and had traveled over twenty-four hundred miles. I still had fifty cents in my pocket. I'd written three letters and eleven postcards to let my family know where I was. I didn't consider myself a runaway.

Source: Errol Lincoln Uys, *Riding the Rails: Teenagers on the Move During the Great Depression*, (New York: Routledge, 1999), pg. 91-96.

