

” They are people we are ashamed of”

Nordic immigrants in Seattle’s Hooverville during the Great Depression

One of the largest, probably also the most well-documented shack town in the US during the Great Depression, was the one situated by the old Skinner & Eddy shipyard in Seattle, which was inhabited between 1931 and 1941. As many other shack towns around the US at the time it bore the name Hooverville, as a nod to President J. Edgar Hoover. The population of this Hooverville peaked around 1935 with as many as 1200-1500 inhabitants who occupied about 500 tiny shacks. Almost all were unemployed and had to rely upon public charity, garbage cans and bumming of food from grocery stores for their subsistence. Almost all were men, most of them between 40 and 60 years old. A majority of the residents, around 60%, were foreigners from a little less than 30 countries, most of these European. But there were also minorities from countries like Mexico and the Philippines. Almost a third of all Hooverites were born in the Nordic countries, which was a significant over-representation in relation to the proportion of Nordic born Seattleites, which was only about 7%.

In my paper I will explore these Nordic immigrants who had ended up in Seattle’s Hooverville; who were they, what social and professional background did they have, why were they there and what can be known about their lives in Hooverville? The source material used for these questions is for example the National censuses from 1930 and 1940. I also use a non published master thesis in sociology from 1935 based on interviews and observations by a young student who lived for three months in Hooverville. Memories from Hooverville in Seattle have also been written down by its unofficial mayor, Jesse Jackson, and were published as an annex to a local study on social trends in Seattle from 1944. My other question is how the shack towns of Seattle and their inhabitants were depicted in the press. Here I have focused on the Swedish-American press in Seattle and also some Swedish newspapers. It namely turns out that Hooverville in Seattle was visited by some curious guests from Sweden, whose impressions were reported in the Swedish press. These articles, that to a great extend focused on the need and misery, also reached the Swedish-American newspapers, whose reactions were anger and dismay. These very strong reactions from the Swedish American press, and also from many of its readers, seem to have

emanated from the Swedish American middle class, and can be interpreted as a need for them to defend their status and reputation as good Americans. I conclude the paper with a short discussion of how this reaction also might help us to understand the lack of knowledge and relative silence on both sides of the Atlantic when it comes to poor working class immigrants from the Nordic countries in general and those who ended up in shanty towns in particular.

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