

Yachts, Railroads and Kool-Aid (2026 July 19)

Extended Comments to Antonia Malchik post, "Sordid little stories": Of class and living poor (Trespassing)

<https://open.substack.com/pub/antonia/p/sordid-little-stories>

Excellent. Thanks for sharing. The reality of class in free and equal America. Makes me, an eightyfive year-old cis-hetero white guy, recall my own working-class origin, being raised by a working mom, coping with my own marriages, kids, divorces, trying make ends meet, trying to make a life.

The war gave my father (and for a while my mother) a factory job that kept us above the FDR-era poverty line when I was a kid, but my father's gambling and related habits kept us borderline. I remember the sugary Kool-aid and high carbohydrate meals and the treat of cheapest cuts of meat, as well as my parents' stories of how much worse it had been during the pre-war Depression.

It wasn't until college and moving among middle class people that I really came to know the shame of being on a lower rung of the carrot-and-stick ladder — the being looked down the nose at because of my clothes, manner of speech, and the like; the being told by prospective girlfriends that her parents insisted she had to stop associating with me.

Getting involved in the nascent civil rights movement, I later understood, was a natural thing for me to do not just because working with friends and neighbors against blatant racism was the right thing to do, but because racism and class were obviously integrated.

Dropping into academic artsy-intellectual bohemia was a sort of escape, but the reminders were always there (like the time a co-editor of the school literary magazine took me to meet her father on the family yacht so he could offer me a swabbie's job helping to refinish the teakwood deck).

Dropping out of academe into beat-hippie artsy-intellectual bohemia and decades of voluntary semi-poverty, rubbing worn elbows with others who knew about socio-economic prejudice and precarity, who had walked more than a mile in Goodwill shoes, was some better, even allowed for some pride in being able to make it if not outside at least on the fringes of establishment style.

But of course the class awareness never goes away and has provided some foundation for my years of confronting the ongoing — and increasing — racism, sexism, classism and income-based snobbery of our time.

Writing and posting the above, got me thinking about Kool-Aid at another period in my life. A little too off-track from your article to add to the comments, but I thought you might enjoy it.

During summer break from grad school in '69, after dropping off a friend in Vancouver to evade the draft, my partner and I decided to explore some of BC with an eye to our own expatriation.

Since we were about flat broke (the cash from fruit-picking in Washington on the way north — including a day or two picking currants with Doukobhors — was about gone), we started at the employment office, where I got a work permit and an ok for a government job — working with a crew replacing Canadian Pacific track from Whitehorse to Vancouver.

That work permit turned out later to be a real life-saver, not because of the railroad job but because it gave me access to Canada's socialist medical system — but that's a story for another time.

We headed north to join the crew near the town of Chetwynd, up in the Peace River country. We parked and set up the tent near the work camp and lived there for the next couple of weeks while I worked replacing ties on the rail bed.

I particularly remember two things about that period. First is the crew, which was made up of a few more or less itinerant Canadians and a dozen or so Portuguese-speaking sailors who were said to have jumped ship in Vancouver and planned to settle in Canada.

Among the Canadians was a cocky Québécois (called "the Frenchie" by those with a Scots-Irish accent) who took it upon himself to teach me the job — which he did by physical demonstration combined with a good deal of belittling of Americans like myself who, he insisted, were not "real men," a category he himself exemplified by muscular prowess in the business of tie-pulling and spike-driving. A Cajun John Henry.

Of course he was right. I was a physically fit scholarly type, not an athlete. But my obvious deficiencies in the muscle department were overcome remarkably soon thanks to his taunts and to the second point of memory — the food.

Breakfasts at dawn and dinners after work were similar: large helpings of steak and potatoes, bread and butter, with eggs and coffee at breakfast and a few greens at dinner. For lunch, out on the job, meat sandwiches, sweets and apples. And at all meals, and inbetween, Kool-Aid, which we drank by the gallon. If we wanted straight water we could dip it from a nearby clearwater creek, but the Kool-Aid was always at hand, sweet and cold, in 10-gallon thermoses.

By the time we decided it was time to quit the job and explore more of BC for a place to migrate, I had put on several pounds — of muscle, not fat, and was pulling ties and driving stakes at the same pace as Jacques. I don't think I've ever been healthier.

Poverty, property and immigration.

Hang in there, Nia. Glad to see you're writing, and writing well. More power to you.

Onward!