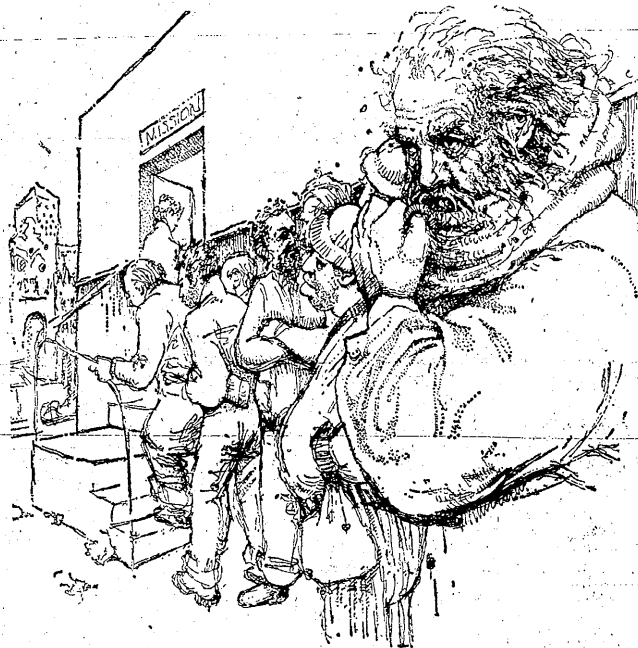


Exploring the World of the Urban Derelict

By Neil Henry

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By Peggy Gago for The Washington Post

Old Louie was a little guy with a gaunt, pink face and a bushy mass of white hair that stood straight up from his head. He was a bum and, like other Baltimore bums, he insisted he was leading a secret life. Whenever pressed or drunk, Old Louie declared that he was not truly down and out but rather a descendant of Manchu royalty traipsing incognito from flophouse to flophouse recruiting an army to overthrow Mao.

The other bums loved his tales, for Old Louie always seemed to have a bottle stuffed inside his jacket and would let the men have a sip if they cursed communism with the proper degree of venom.

Every night during chapel services at the mission, Old Louie squirmed and swore softly under his breath about heretics. One night, a visiting Baptist minister heard him swear a little too loudly and invited him to the altar to preach, if he could do better.

Old Louie surprised everyone by going up front with a bowlegged swagger and telling it like it was. He waved his arms, stamped his feet and hyperventilated the gospel. Most of his sermon was in Mandarin, but no one seemed to mind because whenever he ran out of breath he stammered, "Lettus pray." He ended the sermon with a bitter denunciation of Mao Tse-tung and a solo of "Rock of Ages," and afterward the men went to bed, praising Old Louie for saving a little face for everyone.

The next morning, his comrades found Old Louie dead in his bunk. One bum said he had a heart attack in his sleep. Others insisted that God loved Old Louie so much after that sermon that He brought him up to heaven to preach. In any case, Old

PART 1

DOWN & OUT

Inside the crumbling walls of Baltimore's Helping-Up Mission, where men recount the legend of Old Louie, eat macaroni and mumble in their sleep.

Louie was a legend at the Helping-Up Mission in Baltimore.

My first night there three old men—wheezing, coughing and cursing one another's versions of the tale—recounted the legend in a musty third-floor room, where I slept in a bunk right next to the one Old Louie was said to have died in. It was their way of making me feel at home.

The Helping-Up Mission is where I spent the first two weeks of an urban voyage as a homeless derelict. During this journey, which ended nearly two months later in Washington, I scavenged for food and sought shelter wherever it was available. I donated blood plasma for money, toiled as a laborer for Baltimore Gas and Electric, toted circulars door-to-door for

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DOWN & OUT

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a distributing firm, panhandled and pawned. I slept in missions, public shelters, a cheap hotel and on sidewalk heating grates.

The assignment was to exist among the poor and out of Baltimore, Washington and points in between. My only belongings were an old blue overcoat, woolen trousers, a hooded sweatshirt and a military registration card. These stories tell of the human drama I witnessed and the remarkable survival lessons the bums and vagabonds taught me everywhere I went.

In the shelterless suburban cold along Rte. 1 in Laurel, a street bum taught me how to sleep in a restaurant restroom without attracting public attention. In Bethesda at a secluded Montgomery County clinic for battered housewives and the homeless, I listened all night to the shouts and cries of that affluent county's wounded.

At a shelter in Northeast Washington, the bums warned me to beware of a burly security guard who clubbed several of them every night for sport. I slept on a heating grate in Foggy Bottom with three men who preferred the rats and the gold to contending with the degradation of the public shelters.

Along the way, I learned the street terms that resounded with the suffering and the joy felt by the bums of Baltimore and Washington—words such as popcorn, bojo, greasabag and hawk. I met men and women who later would be involved in robberies, murders and other crimes of passion and desperation. And, as this odyssey was nearing an end, I met one man who discovered my true identity.

On the seventh day of 1980, a day when Soviet troops were rolling deep into Afghanistan, I rode a train up to Baltimore, walked through the city's peep show and go-go bar district known as The Block, and entered a rundown hulk of brick and mortar called the Helping-Up Mission. It shared a lonely street with a novelty shop and a stationery store.

My pockets were empty, but my mind was swimming with intense feelings of adventure and fear. By chance, my arrival coincided with the opening of the mission's doors at five in the afternoon. I was directed downstairs to the basement, where I immediately discovered that one of my fears—that I would somehow look different from the others—was unfounded. A few of the men had faces that reflected decades of misery, but I was stunned to see young street kids, men in regular work clothes, one fellow, Bible in hand, in a tattered but neat three-piece suit, and several men who, with a little cleaning up and some work, could pass as film or stage actors.

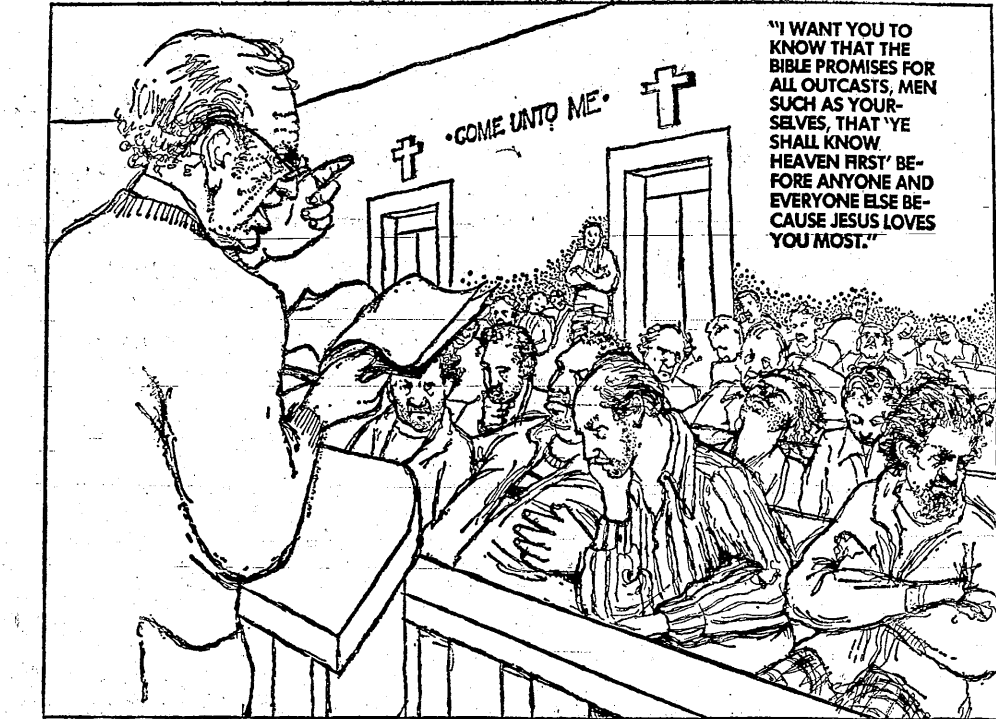
The lot of us lined up in the dank basement and checked in at a little podium where a red-faced, dour man, squinting beneath an antique green reading lamp, jotted down our names and handed out bed checks for the night. The smells of fungus and urine permeated the mission, from the third-floor dormitory right down to this basement.

At 7 o'clock we gathered for supper and, as it turned out, the menu rarely varied from what we ate that first night: macaroni and corn with bits of green beans in salty water and slices of white bread. After dinner, those of us with cigarettes adjourned to the den, which in this case was a little space out the back door where yellow brick walls and barbed wire under a wrought-iron fire escape.

It was here, according to legend, that Old Louie made his late night escapes to a corner liquor store. Old-timers who remembered him said Louie was the only bum around who couldn't go to the boiler and wake up drunk. The barbed wire went up, they said, after the night watchman caught Louie scaling the wall one night.

The barbed wire also prevented young hoodlums from the housing project three blocks south from invading the premises and beating up bums for the hell of it. After a few nights at Helping-Up I discovered I really had little to fear from my peers there. In fact many of these men, protected by money or influence, felt extremely vulnerable to outsiders.

One day Donald, an alcoholic ex-accountant, came across two blond, quart-size beer bottles in a paper bag outside the mission. He took a sip, discovered the bottle contained urine, and broke down, weeping and



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Peggy Sage

shaking his red fists at the young pranksters laughing at him from across the street.

These were some of the topics discussed in the den, where a cross-section of the mission society emerged every night in second-hand winter coats, tattered stocking caps and cracked shoes. To these men, Helping-Up was a hideout, a bottom of the bottle, a shelter and an overnight stop on the urban rail.

In the den, the dialects ran into each other like cross-cutting streams. Young black men shadow-boxed and taunted each other in inner-city slang, while Sam, a gap-toothed hitchhiker, damned his unemployment and scolded in a Boston brogue, "If I had my choice to spend eternity in hell or in Baltimore, I'd choose hell."

Everyone laughed at that except for the young man called Dracula. He was a frightening sight—tall, bony, with coarse, matted hair so dirty it was gray. He wore his long-shiny-black coat like a cape and every now and

men chuckled as Dracula went away, hissing.

At 8 p.m., conversations, reveries, and naps were curtailed by a loud clap of hands and a shout, "Chapel time!" Attendance was mandatory, a payment for food and shelter required. The men trooped upstairs to a large auditorium festooned with such quotations as, "The Bible Says Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and Thou Shall Be Saved."

In chapel, after the evening meal, some of the men immediately nodded off, so Hitchcock went to work. Hitchcock was a very proper middle-aged man who watched over the mission at night. Every few hours, as we slept, he patrolled the dormitory rooms making sure everything was peaceful. The orange sodium lights from Baltimore Street poured through the curtainless windows and the man's shadow on the walls was like a perfect silhouette of Alfred Hitchcock, hence his nickname.

Hitchcock was pleasant enough. Every morning, for example, he awakened us at 5 o'clock and recited sports scores from the previous night, detailing conferences, game sites, scoring averages, ad infinitum in a low monotone. But the man was clearly disturbed. Some said Hitchcock was once a powerful business man who had suffered shell shock in the Korean war and never was the same after that. At night Hitchcock could be heard out in the hallway talking to the light fixtures about baseball and space ships.

The bums called Hitchcock's thick, hand-forefinger the wake-up stick. Throughout the chapel service he patrolled the aisles, jabbing his wake-up stick into the shoulders, necks and foreheads of the irreverent snorers.

In time, I came to appreciate the mission's nightly chapel services. They were by far the most uplifting times of day and probably the best entertainment in Baltimore. Every night, after the men spent hour after hour wandering the frozen streets or walking miles to the other side of town for something to eat, there was someone new up front to preach, whisper, shout and croon the gospel.

We saw Lutherans in loud double-knit plaid jackets and white shoes singing hymns like a barbershop quartet; a screaming Pentecostal who whirled and jumped and had to hold onto a flag stand to keep from fainting; a soulful black chorus led by a brilliant, gray blue gown; a Baptist couple who brought along a pianist who provided introductory and background music to the sermon like an airport lounge entertainer, and bright-eyed young Christians who performed songs of their own creation and detailed the exact instants they were saved by Christ.

Something quite unexpected always happened during chapel. When the young Christians visited, they offered paperback Bibles to anyone who wanted one. They didn't expect too many takers, but the men loved them and fought over each other for the books. Most used them as pillows at night, but there were a couple of men out

on The Block the next morning trying to sell them.

Another night the Pentecostal preached about the decline of religious spirit in America and blamed the federal government.

You know what that Madalyn O'Hair went to do? She went to take 'In God We Trust' off the dollar bill. She is Satan. She is evil!!! he shouted, pounding his fist on a Bible. The men woke up at that and started mumbling to themselves about how sacrilegious this woman must be.

Then Donald, the ex-accountant, muttered, "How 'bout that Pat Harris, the Health, Education and Welfare secretary? She don't even like the prayin' in school."

"Bless your sinful heart, brother," the preacher answered. "Thank you for bringing that up. God will deal with her and that eeeevil supreme bench."

The next night another Baptist explained biblical predictions and said the world had reached the millennium and that the hordes from the north would soon come down to Jerusalem and blood would flow as high as a horse's neck.

"The northern hordes are the Russians, every Christian knows that," he said, adding that the crisis in Afghanistan was merely Satan's first step on a long march.

But, he insisted, pointing his finger in the air and raising his voice to a screech, that any one of us could stand up against Russia and Satan if we had God on our side because a human being plus God made a majority.

"Bull," muttered a man in the back. Sitting a couple of rows back from the heckler was Old Fin, a 70-year-old man with a great white beard who spoke in a Scandinavian-English gibberish. It turned out that Old Fin lost his farm in Finland to the Russians long ago and didn't take kindly to the heckler's remark. He suddenly went on a tirade about how barbaric the Russians were and said the Afghan rebels would show them a thing or two.

The most remarkable moment in chapel came one Sunday night. Sitting next to me was Paul, a thick-set man with long black hair brushed straight back from his forehead. An unemployed security guard, Paul carried his uniform around in a suit bag. He once was a deacon of a West Baltimore church until he was bounced for drunkenness.

That Sunday night Paul was so drunk he leaned over two chairs, forcing me to sit in the aisle. In the middle of the service Paul suddenly wobbled up to the preacher and whispered something in his ear. The preacher asked, "Are you sure?" and Paul nodded.

"Uh, friends," said the preacher, "We have a man here who has found the spirit and would like to sing a spiritual for you."

The bums let out a moan because they didn't want the service to last any longer than it had to. But Paul was insistent. He sidled over to the

woman at the piano and told her the song and she started playing the introduction. Paul came in right on time with a New York City Opera, Paul Robeson-style voice that started deep in the chest and gathered more and more steam as it went along.

It was stunning. We all stood and clapped and whistled when Paul finished.

A little later, while the preacher went on with the service, I asked Paul the name of the song he had sung. He looked at me with puzzled, boozed eyes a moment, then asked in utter perplexity, "What did I sing, anyway?"

Chapel was both an arena for the unexpected and a theater stage, and once, at least, a source of true inspiration. One night Marquet, a wrinkled old man with a bushy gray beard, showed up at the mission just before closing time. Harold, an elfish mission regular, was the only one who recognized Marquet, only because he and Marquet had served time at Doe's

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House, the Maryland Penitentiary. Harold said Marquet must have just gotten out of the pen because he himself was only released a month before.

During the prayer session before supper, Marquet went behind the check-in desk and pilfered \$32 in single bills from the mission donation box. Hitchcock spotted him and quickly called the cops. When the two young policemen arrived they started stripping Marquet naked right in front of everyone, but they couldn't find the cash.

Then they unfolded Marquet's scarf and all the bills suddenly floated to the floor like autumn leaves. The cops found only \$24. Then they looked up and saw Marquet chewing on something. They pried his mouth open and a brownish-green mulch fell out.

Sitting nearby was a man everyone called Basket, because he carried all of his worldly belongings in a yellow laundry basket. After the cops pried Marquet's mouth open, Marquet went wild, scooting around the floor on his hands and knees picking up bills and shoving them in his mouth, and in the

Neil Henry, a 26-year-old Washington Post staff writer, spent seven weeks this winter as a homeless bum in Baltimore, Washington and points in between. He began the assignment on Jan. 7, arriving in Baltimore that afternoon without a penny in his pocket. His journey ended two months later on the night of March 7. For a six-day period during the middle of the assignment, Henry came in from the cold to recuperate and transcribe his notes. His "cover" during his days down and out was that he was a struggling writer. But in his travels, only once was Henry asked about his background. This happened one night at the Helping-Up Mission in Baltimore, when a bum noticed Henry scribbling in a notebook. "Trying to write a book, eh?" said the man, smiling, after Henry gave his story. "Well don't try telling it to me. I done read it already."

process, before the police grabbed him Marquet knocked the basket over, spilling clothes, Bibles, newspapers and pencils all over the floor.

The mission was in chaos. Basket's eyes filled with tears and he began howling. While police led Marquet out, and the man shouted something about jail being better than the mission, anyway, several bums scrambled across the floor picking up Basket's belongings, consoling him with "There, there," and "Quiet, man, quiet."

In chapel that night everyone felt depressed. Not only did a man try to steal money from the mission, not only did he get caught, but the men also suffered from the shock of seeing Basket so anguished. Inspiration arrived when a short fellow from Highlandtown preached about outcasts in the Bible.

"Outcasts," the preacher said, "you find outcasts throughout the Bible because Jesus loved them most. The publicans, the Jewish tax collectors that everyone hated in Rome, the whores, the lepers—Jesus loved them most because they were despised by everyone else."

"You find 'outcasts' today, too. The whores, junkies, retarded people, blind-and-deaf, parole prisoners, murderers, rapists, thieves, pimps, people like Nixon and the shah of Iran, and yes, drunks and derelicts, people like you men here tonight."

"Jesus," the preacher went on, "loved outcasts. I want you to know, that the Bible promises you all outcasts—men such as yourselves, that 'Ye Shall Know Heaven First' before anyone and everyone else' because Jesus loves you most."

The sermon ended with a chorus of "Blessed Assurance," and the men went to bed feeling a little better. Of course, they didn't care very much about being put in the same company as whores and thieves and Nixon and the shah, but what the man said about heaven and getting their first was on time.

Every night after chapel we trooped upstairs to our bunks. The mission had four different sleeping rooms on two floors and each room contained a series of bunk beds lined up in rows. Each bed had one yellowish-brown sheet and two wool blankets. The cold air whipped through the window in Baltimore Street, so many of us slept in our clothes and wore gloves.

My first night at Helping-Up the old men rattled on and on about the legend of Old Louie. It wasn't until my second night that I noticed something truly extraordinary: these guys talked to each other in their sleep.

An hour after lights-out, most of us were asleep. The mission was quiet, save for an occasional "B" or "C" whining by and the normal coughing, hacking and spitting. During my second night, Shakey, who had a slight palsy, slept in the bunk beneath mine. Throughout the night the rickety bunk swayed. I sighed in resignation; and peered about the room for another bed to sleep in, but when I sighed a man on the other side of the room rolled over, mumbled a sharp curse, and resumed snoring.

That prompted another man on a top bunk near the windows to moan, the numbers "6813, 6813" over and over, before going back to sleep. But his comment provoked a quick "Kiss my a--" from another sleeper cackling on the other side of the room. This deep-sleep bubble would last as long as five minutes every night, before everyone fell quiet again.

At 5 a.m. Hitchcock lit the lights. We staggered downstairs to swallow our daily cups of tea and peanut butter sandwiches, and a half-hour later we were all on the street. A capitulation of ill-clad men, shivering toward the curious glitter of The Block. Some men headed for the blood banks, some turned off toward the labor pools on Poca Street, others went toward downtown to Trailways and Greyhound.

Each morning a few frozen words were spoken about making it through another cold day, getting by.

Next: Getting By