HI AM HOMELESS

July 24-29, 1988

Melissa Farlow/The Pittsburgh Press

By Douglas Heuck

Introduction

REPORTER Doug Heuck's first-person account of his 14 days of homelessness touched Pittsburgh Press readers in a most unusual way. Before the second installment began, the phones were lit. "How can I help," most asked. Radio talk shows and television newscasts for days focused on this newspaper reporter and his experience on the streets. On the bus, in the supermarket, on the corner, readers — with homes and without — pored over the story each day.

Heuck's purpose was simply to get closer to the truth of homelessness. In so doing, it seems, he also got closer to the heart of it.

Madelyn Ross

MANAGING EDITOR

Hunger, threats part of life among city's homeless

By Douglas Heuck

The Pittsburgh Press

(First of a series.)

FINALLY, A trace of dawn appeared over Three Rivers Stadium, and a few birds began to call. I was lying in a thicket in Point State Park in Downtown Pittsburgh. About 5 a.m., Monday, and I was homeless.

I had set out to do a story on the homeless of Pittsburgh, and rather than take a notebook to a soup kitchen, I wanted to live it. I'd spend two weeks on the streets and in the shelters, hoping to strip away myth and stereotype and uncover what's real.

In my double-ply garbage bag I had everything I would need for those two weeks: a wool blanket, three notebooks, two pencils, white thermal undershirt, a pair of shorts, harmonica, two books — "On the Road" and "Great American Writing" — toothbrush, vitamins.

I had slept the first night in a pair of steel-toe boots my father once used for farm work. The heel in the left was blown out. Dark dress socks, and a pair of stained green pants, torn at the left knee. A plaid cotton shirt — my late grandfather's — and a red and black coat worn through to the lining. On my head an old Cincinnati Reds cap without the 'C.'

In my socks were $8 in bills and in my pocket, $1.68 in change. Two tins of tobacco and a Swiss army knife my father gave me the day before as we ate lunch under the old wild cherry tree on the terrace of my childhood home in suburban Cincinnati.

I'd returned to the white frame house with picket fence to spend the weekend with my parents before I began my homelessness. I told them not to worry, but before I left home, I unscrewed the handle of a rake in the garage, laid it against a brick step and broke a third of it off with a heel blow. I would carry my bag with it during the day and at night hold it in my left hand as I slept.

In the next two weeks I would experience hunger, cold, friendship, and the threat of violence. I would meet people that the greatest fiction writer couldn't create. For me, the next two weeks would be an odyssey through a subculture that thrives in Pittsburgh's most public areas, but is curiously invisible.

What follows is my story and the stories of others I met, people down on their luck or confidence, dropouts by choice or calamity, or ordinary people who simply ran out of money.

"My life is such as it is," said a

I AM HOMELESS

man who lived in a bed chamber of discarded springs, oil drums and plastic along the banks of the Allegheny River. And so will be the nature of the stories to follow — such as they are — not filled with surveys and experts, not social science and theories, but instead a chronicle in six episodes of what it was like for me and might be like for you to live without a home in America's most livable city.

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" 'Scuse me sir, what time is it?" I asked the first person I saw, from a park bench in the sun I'd moved to for warmth. The elderly gentleman replied "8 o'clock" and continued his brisk walk. A dark-haired jogger eyed me warily as she passed. I stretched out.

Shouting awakened me.

A man bitterly complained about something, and as the fog left my head, I realized it was nonsense. He stopped nearby and held a conversation with a fictional partner. Arms flailing, he cursed and pleaded with the air.

IT WAS NOW 10:30, someone told me as they passed by, and I was suddenly fearful that I'd miss my meal at St. Mary's Church and the Red Door sandwich line. It was the only food line I knew of and I was hungry. From the Point, I hurried through the pedestrians to the corner of Stanwix Street and the Boulevard of the Allies. I walked with my head down, eyes averted, in case I saw someone I knew. When I turned the corner at St. Mary's, I was relieved to see 15 people still in line. I took my place at the end and, in a minute, I reached The Red Door.

"Here you are," the smiling woman said, handing me the brown bag containing a sugar cookie, a small chocolate cake, sticky bun, and two single-slice ham sandwiches, one with a slice of cheese, the other without.

I followed a guy to Market Square and sat on a bench. I ate all of the food, not knowing if I'd eat again that day. And I watched the men around me and wondered if I'd be accepted. The Pittsburgh Press building was only a few blocks away, and soon my colleagues began to file through the square as lunch hour began.

"Don't you wish you could shrink? Know what I mean? Down to the size of an ant. I could take you home then and you could live in my toy house. In a bed, all soft and nice. Would you like that? And you could have the whole house. And you could ride my toy motorcycle — if you could stay on it. Could you stay on it?"

A reporter I work with and who has been to parties at my house walked by without noticing me. She was the first of nine who would pass within 15 feet of me that day. None noticed. That evening an old girlfriend would walk by, look at me, and keep going without recognition.

After lunch, I walked to Horne's for a new paper bag. One guy had suggested it, saying I didn't need to carry a garbage bag. "Go to Horne's or Kaufmann's," he said, and I wanted to fit in, so I did. In Horne's, the customers either looked away or were horrified, but the three clerks were helpful, directing me to a machine where, by accident, I got three blue bags for 35 cents. A windfall, and I was happy to accept it in my new circumstance. Instead of returning the two extras or discarding them, I made my new bag triple-ply. It made me feel confident and girded for the future.

I sat on a bench for a period of time that I could only measure by the number of cigarettes I smoked. Two and a half cigarettes, probably 30 minutes. When I felt the urge to move again, I hauled my bag on my back and walked across the Sixth Street Bridge to the North Side.

Federal Street between the river and Allegheny Center Mall was new territory to me, and I walked slowly, looking at the shops and myself in the windows until I reached Bar 222. I had heard stories about the "triple deuces" from a Fox Chapel family a couple years ago. It wasn't their kind of place.

I took a stool by the door at the end of the long bar. Next to me sat a wrinkled woman whose skin sagged off the bones in her face. "I don't give a damn. I don't give a damn," she said to her empty bottle.

A tall guy slapped two quarters into the pay pool table. Smacked them in and smacked in the slots. He began ramming home the balls. When he missed, he cursed. "Damn it! Damn it!"

I was getting up to leave when he asked me "Play a game?" He was about my size, 6 foot 1, and 40 years old, and he introduced himself with a handshake. "Name's Edison. How's the world treatin' *you?* "

I SAID I'D spent the night in the Point and was worried about police, and he shook his head and said, "Something's gone wrong in the world when a man can't even sleep on the earth."

I told him the story I would tell most people, and I tried to make it as close to the truth as possible. I was from Cincinnati, had done farm work there and was new to homeless life in Pittsburgh.

"They say this is the most livable city in the country," I offered.

"If you got a job and a place to live," he said. He was an Army veteran, Vietnam War, and though he worked at an appliance store, that afternoon he found himself waiting for his sister to wire him money.

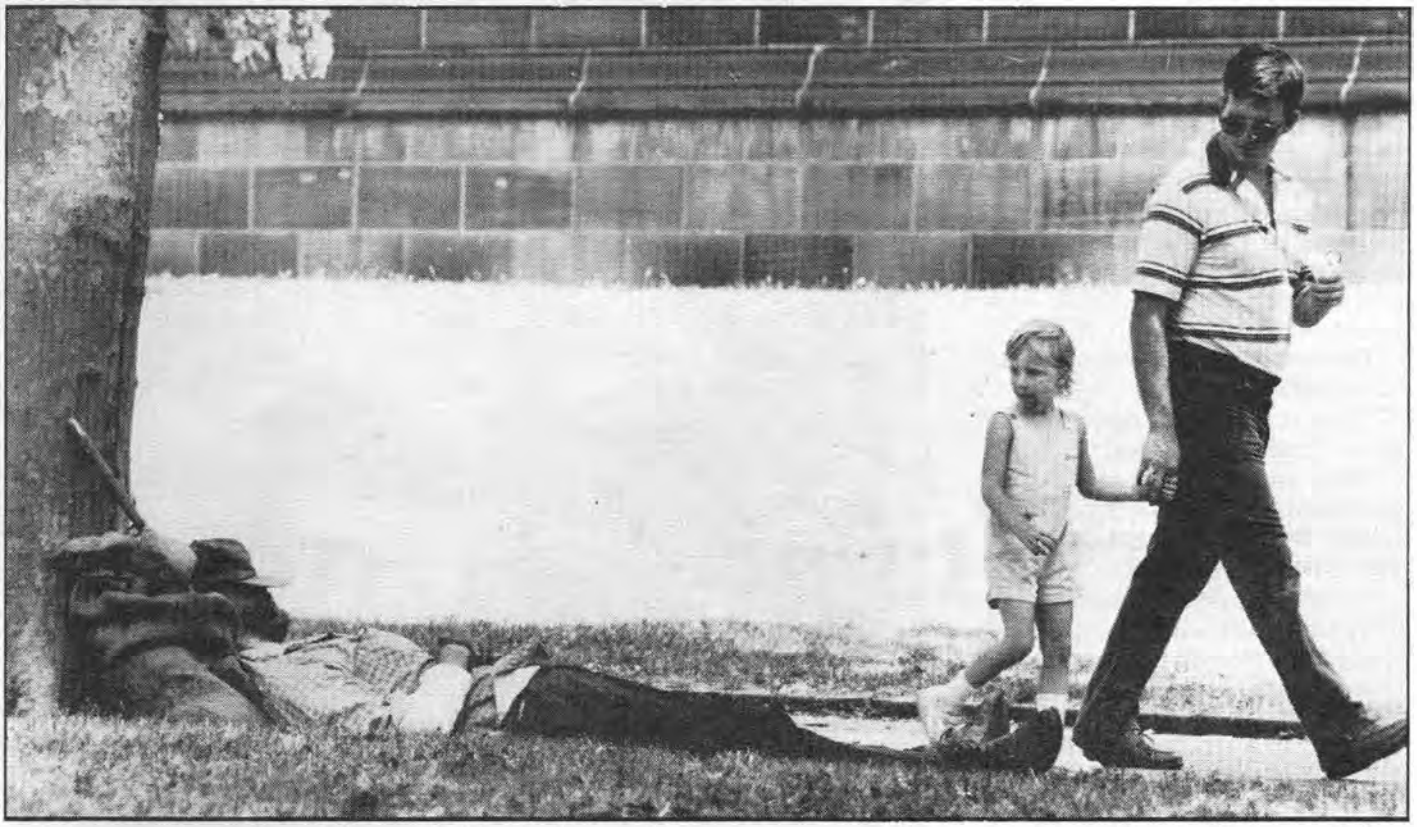
Edison Tom Green had been around. He knew shelter life and street life, and after we finished our third game, he said "I'll walk you up to where you can get food and a bed."

Without my asking he began to tell me how to get along in Pittsburgh. He told me to avoid sleeping in West Park at night, saying guys get beat up there. He pointed out the Light of Life Mission, where I could stay and get meals.

To make money, I could give plasma or partake in research in an experimental medical center, or I could go to the Strip District and unload trucks at night.

"What's the word they use for that? Lumping. That's it — that's what they call unloading. It's good money if you can get work," he said.

I AM HOMELESS



Melissa Farlow/The Pittsburgh Press

The reporter, like the city's homeless, slept where he could, under curious eyes by day, police searchlights by night.

About $55 a load, from 11 p.m. until 2 a.m.

"But it's dangerous down there. It's run by a clique, and the last time I was there a guy put his cigarette out in my face."

We went to another bar and, after a time, I revealed to him what I was doing, said I was interested in getting his story, and I wanted him to know who I really was. He was silent after I told him, and I apologized for the deception.

He nodded his head and stroked his chin. I said even if he didn't want to be a part of my stories I had greatly appreciated his help and advice. He nodded again and said "If you did an article, I could send it to my mother — show her I helped someone."

We resumed our conversation, and he advised me now not to go to the Strip. "But if you do, move slow and act dumb. That way you'll never get a truck, and you won't be a threat to them."

We talked for about five hours, and after he left, I walked across the street to the park. I hadn't slept well the night before and felt drained. There were still a couple hours left of light, and I lay down under a sycamore tree. I thought of Edison's struggles to get by and his isolation — "I'm a loner now, l-o-n-e-r."

I fell asleep quickly, head on my Horne's bag, arm around my stick.

"Mister, mister." A voice awakened me. "Mister, are you OK?" I opened my eyes slowly, remembering where I was. It was a little kid, who'd stopped on his bike. He remained about 10 feet away. He again asked me if I was OK. I told him I was.

"Those ants are going to crawl down that tree and eat you." He said. And I mumbled no they wouldn't. "Are you on a trip?" I was still groggy and at first thought he was asking me if I was on drugs. "What do you mean?" I asked him. "Are you on a trip?" I thought about it and whichever way he meant it, I answered "Yeah, I guess I am." Drugs couldn't be any stranger.

HE ZOOMED away on his bike but about five minutes later, I was half asleep, and I heard the chipper voice again. "Time to wake up, mister." I sat up and he asked me "Where do you live?" I said, "For now, right here."

He was playing with a plastic sword and I asked him if he knew any place where homeless people lived. He frowned and seemed confused. "Home," he said as if it were a stupid question. I asked him where that was, and he pointed to North Avenue and the Salvation Army and Light of Life Mission.

Then he looked up and said "Don't you wish you could shrink? Know what I mean? Down to the size of an ant." He was sitting right next to me, and his leg rested on mine.

"I could take you home then and you could live in my toy house. In a bed, all soft and nice. Would you like that? And you could have the whole house. And you could ride my toy motorcycle — if you could stay on it. Could you stay on it?"

Suddenly a man from the nearby basketball court shouted "Sean! *Get* over here!" The boy shouted back, "I'm talkin' to *him.*"

I AM HOMELESS

"Get over here!"

"You better go on," I told him, realizing my appearance. "I don't want your dad to get mad at me. Go on." I didn't want trouble, and there were 12 guys on the court.

He left and I was relieved, but he circled around and came back a minute later. He had a big heart, but his presence made me nervous. The boy said his name was Sean Moffit — an 8-year-old third-grader.

The basketball game stopped and his father called again.

"Now your dad's going to get mad at me," I said.

"Why would he get mad?" he asked and I told him because he was talking to a stranger, and parents don't like that.

He looked right at me and said "You're not a stranger, mister." I was getting my bag together for a quick exit and I told him yes I was. "Not to me. To me you're my friend. You may be a stranger to other people but that's because they don't know you."

I stood up and shook his hand and said he was a fine young man and began hurrying away. "Come back tomorrow," he called after me. "My mom likes poor people — She'll give you money."

I waved and was glad to see him head back to the angry father and crowd of athletic men. I was heading away, out of the park through deep left center field of a baseball diamond. I was out of hitting range when I noticed two of the teenagers on the diamond calling out to someone behind me.

"Hey cuz!" "Hey cuz!" It continued, so I turned around to see who they were calling to. Nobody was there. So it must be me, I figured. They were about 17 years old, and a few more of them started calling to me. I responded in a good-natured way, "Go ahead, I can catch," figuring they were warning me to be aware if a hit came my way.

No response. Suddenly others joined in the shouting, and in seconds the shouting turned to screaming.

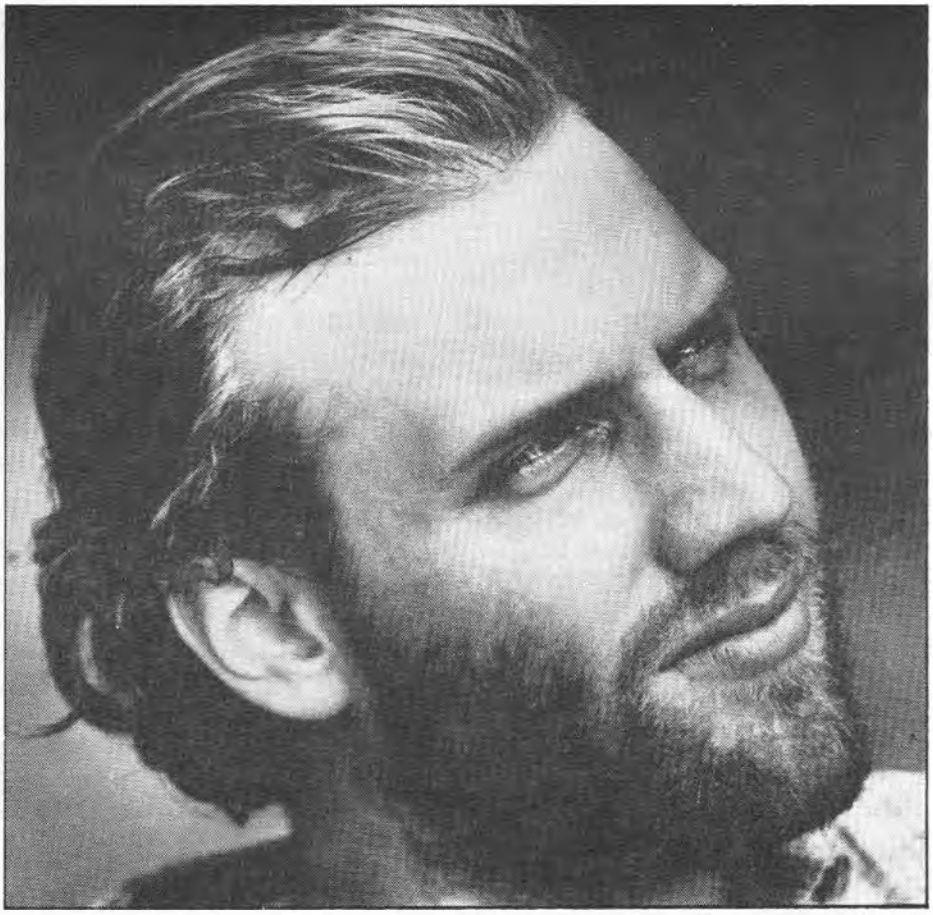
There were about 12 of them, and their faces were contorted.

"Hey trash man! Trash man! You Garbage!"

"Hey you bum!"

"You stinking son of a bitch!"

"How's your baggage? We'll help you with it, you stinking bastard!"



Melissa Farlow/The Pittsburgh Press

Reporter Douglas Heuck

I HURRIED AWAY, my heart pounding. They had been whipped up into a bloodlust in a matter of seconds, and I scuttled across the street toward Allegheny Center Mall. I could still hear them screaming. These kids hated me. I clutched my stick.

I thought I was clear of it, when I noticed a young guy coming up behind me. Coming up fast. He seemed intent on me, and I thought it was Sean's father. I expected that when he reached me I would feel a fist in the back of my head. I had to do something. I quickly stepped aside, spun around and faced him. Heart thumping. Adrenalin.

He didn't seem to notice me, clearly on his way to somewhere else. I sighed and pulled out a cigarette. I walked to the nearest bench. And to calm myself and do something I thought people wouldn't hate, I took out my harmonica and played for a while. It was dusk, and the fear ebbed. I was exhausted, and I rubbed at a scratch over my dirty left brow. I felt blisters forming on both feet. My right elbow hurt from the weight of my bag.

And I wondered what the other 13 days would be like and what else could happen that night. Would I make it?

I had planned to sleep on the North Side, but staying now was out of the question. Point Park again, I decided, and groaned as I got up to walk. I laughed when I thought that the day before I had considered a fake limp to make myself somehow authentic. I was limping already, and it was real.

It was one foot in front of the other as I approached the yellow Sixth Street bridge. I looked at the red paint scrawled at the entry to the pedestrian walk. "Trust Jesus," it said.

Trust Jesus? Trust no one. Let nobody come up behind without facing them. Be ready with fist and boot. I had never felt this alone. I was in a void. And as I thought of the people I'd met after one day as a bum in Pittsburgh, I muttered: "I am among the damned."

Tomorrow: Surviving the streets

All my money but 32¢ was gone after Day 2

By Douglas Heuck

The Pittsburgh Press

(Second of a series)

I WATCHED and listened the second day. Instead of two bologna sandwiches, I asked for four at the Red Door. I drank from public fountains. And I was broke.

All my money but 32 cents was gone after the second day, spent mainly on tobacco and beer. The last $5 went for a double feature at the Fulton — two French films — "Jean de Florette" and "Manon of the Spring."

The money would be gone soon anyway. Why not get some enjoyment from it? Why not raise a few eyebrows among the artsy filmgoers? I would seek work at the Strip District afterward and I heard that could get hairy, so this would be my treat.

Day Two of my two-week-long project to experience — in some small way — the lot of Pittsburgh's homeless. I was beginning to learn the ways of the street and how to survive. The initial shock was gone. More would follow.

At midnight, after the films, I walked to the Strip seeking to trade labor for cash, unloading trucks, I'd hoped. I asked some of the guys hanging around how the system worked, but they said they didn't know. One guy, in particular, was a Know-Nothing as he sat on the docks. There wasn't any work at all as far as he knew, but he'd never done it anyway, he said. He'd done it. I saw later, he was trying to catch a truck the same as I was.

I'd been warned to "move slow and act dumb" or I might get into trouble by taking work away from them. But I wanted work, I didn't want to just see. So I took the chance that my size and rough appearance would be an adequate bluff. I watched and did what they did. When trucks approached the Strip I got out there first to meet them, and I ran alongside moving my arms up and down in a charade of my intentions as I shouted to the drivers over the roar of the diesel, "Need any help?" The two drivers who said they did changed their minds after talking to warehouse foremen. At 2 a.m. I had nothing to show but aggravated blisters, a rigid calf muscle, and two handout peaches — one hard, one ripe. I ate both.

The next morning my left calf remained hard and sore, and I limped to the Steel Plaza subway station where I'd try to raise money with my harmonica. Seeking a spot where sound would reverberate and people

I AM HOMELESS

would pass, I settled on the platform, sitting against a column. I laid out a garbage bag and put my 32 cents on it to prime the pump.

Before moving to Pittsburgh three years ago, I lived in New York, and I played in the subway there once for half an hour. It was an experiment, and I made $4.80 before the police told me to move along.

I can work that instrument, and with confidence I leaned back and blew out songs I knew sounded good. "Red River Valley," "I've Been Workin' on the Railroad," "Oh Danny Boy," and random blues riffs.

I'd played them a hundred times before, but that day, jazzy or slow, loud or soft, it didn't matter. Nobody came over. Nobody gave money. Trolley cars came and went. People passed without looking. I played for 20 minutes and said the hell with it. Nothing.

BACK ON THE street, I parked myself at Mellon Bank Tower amid the starched-and-pressed professionals on their lunch break. I pulled out a bologna sandwich and began eating and reading the newspaper I'd picked out of the trash.

Watching over the corner of the page at the crowd around me, I was aware that, as conspicuous as I seemed, I was invisible. People looked at my Horne's bag, not me. Invisible, even to a man registering citizens to vote.

I watched him approach the suits and dresses to my right. "Excuse me, sir, would you like to register to vote? Excuse me ma'am," and so on. He made his way up a line of people on my right with his last stop being someone about eight feet away. Then he walked past me and talked to a man five feet to my left.

Skipped me.

After he was finished with the guy on my left, I limp-trotted over to him.

"Can I register?"

"Sure," he said, a little surprised. "Last Name?" Heuck. "First Name?" Douglas. He wrote it down on the form. "Party affiliation?" Independent. "Address?" I'm without one right now.

"Awww, I'm sorry sir, you need an address to register." What about absentee? I asked him. "No, I'm sorry, they still need an address. Here, when you get one, mail this in." He gave me the form and left.

I was aware that, as conspicuous as I seemed, I was invisible . . . even to a man registering citizens to vote. "Excuse me, sir, would you like to register to vote? Excuse me ma'am," and so on. He made his way up a line of people on my right with his last stop being someone about eight feet away. Then he walked past me and talked to a man five feet to my left. Skipped me.

I went to Mayor Masloff's office that day to see about a job with the city.

The secretary told me to go down to the fourth floor to personnel. I did, and a nice young woman showed me the openings and did I see one I liked?

I found one: "Clerk 2. Salary: $7 an hour."

She gave me the Civil Service application, and I began to fill it out. I told her I didn't have an address, and she said "We need an address to process the application." I would later learn that many people used Jubilee Kitchen — a soup kitchen in the Hill District — as their address.

I left, deciding to take a nap at a tiny park across the street from the Public Safety Building. An old guy named John was sitting there, and I sat about 8 feet from him on the stone ledge.

His oily hair was slicked back; his face thoroughly cured by the sun. He wore a gray stubble for a beard and like me, his face and hands were dirty.

"Hear this is a good town," I said. "Aaaaa. I'm sick of it — been here too long. I'm gonna get the hell out of here." I asked him where a guy could get work. "You lookin' for it?" I nodded. "Well there's not much."

He sat in a tweed coat with his legs crossed and leaned back every once in awhile to readjust on the hard cement surface.

"Why don't you go pick up a welfare check," he said. "They're easy to get — Hell, they throw 'em at you in this state — $97 every two weeks."

He didn't seem interested in talking more, so I laid down and took a brief nap. When I awoke, he was gone. I would see him several more times, though, and the last time I did, I was going to tell him what I was doing and ask if I could write a profile of him. I decided to test the waters first.

"You ever been interviewed by a reporter before?" I asked him.

He shook his head in disgust. "Yeah, they come around here, asking questions. I always give 'em a line of crap. They want to know your whole damned life story. Come up here in their cars with their cameras."

I scrapped the idea of profiling John.

EVERY AFTERNOON of that first week I'd spend at Market Square, watching my coworkers and friends walk on by and slowly getting to know my new colleagues.

A very hip but down and out guy stopped in front of me: "Hometown, got a cigarette?" I'd just gotten a free pack from the traveling Newport truck and I gave him one. He thanked me and left.

"Man I've heard of carrying the stick, but you're really doin' it," another young guy called over to me, referring to the stick that supported my bag of belongings. "That's the old-fashioned way," he said with an approving laugh. I smiled and agreed. I'd seen him there before, and we recognized each other.

I pulled a warm sandwich from my bag, and in a few minutes a woman sat next to me. I told her I was writing a series on homelessness and could I write down her story. "Go ahead," she said. "Write a sonnet about me — I always wanted that."

I AM HOMELESS

Melissa Farlow/The Pittsburgh Press

Living their lives in the most public of places, the homeless still are invisible. In Mellon Bank Plaza on Grant Street, the reporter was overlooked, passed by. Most people averted their eyes.

She said she lived in a shelter for women and spoke without stopping until she left a minute later. "I am homeless, homeless with nowhere to go. And I am 60 years of age. Look around, all you see is people who are homeless and familyless."

A cop driving around the square slowed, and suddenly she shouted at him. "Hey! Don't slow down. *Ain't* nobody doin' nothin." She had to go, but before she did, she told me her name — Diamond Lynn.

As we were talking, I'd been watching and listening as a saga unfolded a few benches away. It focused on a man and woman in their 30s or 40s.

"Dave, let's get married," I heard her say, and the rest of the afternoon they swore their love to each other to witnesses around them.

After a while he came up and asked me for money. I showed him I had 32 cents and gave him half. They got into a fight late in the afternoon, but by early evening, he was crying on her breast and she was stroking his head. They finally got up and wobbled across the street, hugging each other.

Theirs was the first love I'd seen on the streets. And when I interviewed them a few days later, I learned the probable cause of their worries.

I AM HOMELESS

"It's baby time," David Sauers said. Debbie, whom he said was his wife, was pregnant they'd just learned. Sauers was 42 and he'd been homeless for 3 years. Debbie, 34, had been out for 7 off and on.

"I just gotta get out of this state," he said. "I can't *make* it no more here." The two and their friend Billy planned to pool their benefit checks and hitchhike to New Orleans. Make a new start. She would get a job as barmaid, and Sauers and Billy would try for barge work. They didn't want to face another Pittsburgh winter outside.

"Try and live on the streets with a little baby — you know that'd be tough," Sauers said.

I asked her about taking care of the baby without a place to live, and she shrugged and smiled "They'd put us back on welfare. But I *am* really ready to have one, and I never found the right person 'til now. My mom said when I was a kid 'Marry a doctor or lawyer and you'll be financially set.' Me, I don't care if I live in a gutter if I've got love. We don't have much, but we love each other and we're healthy. My hearing's not too good. His is. His eyes aren't too good — mine are."

THEIR PROBLEMS were the cost of rent and food, but they said living on the streets wasn't bad, in the summer. "But in the winter, it's so cold that you have to get enough money to go to Wendy's and get a cup of coffee," she said. "Then you sit there for three hours trying to warm up. Then you gotta go out again. In winter you've got to drink to dull the pain of the cold. Drink and you can fall asleep. But they say that's really bad. That's when the frostbite can get you."

They said nobody they know chooses to be homeless.

"Not really," Debbie said. "I think everybody would like to have a place to live, somewhere you can come and go as you please. And when you're on the streets, you can only eat at certain times — what if you're hungry at 8 a.m.? I am *tired* of looking through garbage cans for food. Like last night, around 3 a.m., Dave was hungry so we went through the McDonald's garbage cans."

I asked Debbie what it was like to be homeless as a woman. "When someone knows you're by yourself as a woman, they start crackin' on you. Even guys I know. I say 'Hey that ain't me.' I'll go out and panhandle, but that's it."

I asked her, if her dreams could come true, what kind of home she'd like to have, and at first she said she'd never thought about it. Then she smiled and said, "Well, I guess like the old cliche, I'd like a nice house with a white picket fence and a two-car garage. You know what I mean?"

We parted and wished each other well. I have wondered since whether they'd ever make it to New Orleans.

Sauers added: "We do it every night. Hey, they throw away good stuff. And I'll pick it up."

The presence of opulence sometimes bothered Debbie. "You see all these people with zillions of dollars down here with their big boats cookin' steaks, and you're sittin' here in your dirty clothes you've had on for two weeks — you know how it feels? I think if you put some of these people with money and homes on the street, they wouldn't know how to survive. And some of 'em think we wanna be this way."

The only money they make comes from panhandling.

"Sometimes you get lucky," Debbie said. "Someone will give you $20. But it's tough. You know why it's tough? There are so many people doing it. They say 'Why don't you get a job?' Well, it's not that easy. You don't have a place to sleep. You don't have an alarm clock. You're scrounging. You don't have decent clothes."

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We parted and wished each other well. I have wondered since whether they'd ever make it to New Orleans. And when the temperature dipped to the low 40s that first week, I thought about Dave and Debbie sleeping out in the winter with a baby. Could I imagine living outside in winter? I pictured the soldiers at Valley Forge.

Earlier that week there had been a record low temperature — down to 47 degrees — and to fight it I wore everything I had: two shirts, jacket, boots, socks, pants with shorts over them. I made an outlaw bandanna of my white handkerchief so that my breath would warm my face. I pushed holes in the bottom of my garbage bag with my boots and pulled the bag to my waist. I put newspapers between me and the blanket. For the first four nights, I awoke with chills at dawn and then walked to my bench in Point State Park to let the sun warm me as I slept some more.

The cold and a near miss with a police spotlight — I crouched behind a bush just as they flashed it on me — prompted my introduction to shelter life the next day.

Tomorrow: The Mission and the Stab Lab.

'If Jesus were around, he'd pick guys like you'

By Douglas Heuck

The Pittsburgh Press

(Third of a series)

I WALKED UP the steps to the Light of Life Mission and before I could say anything, the big man at the entry said: "We feed you at 5:30 — at that side door."

I asked if the Mission was also a shelter for the night, and he said: "We take you in at 6:30." He was a tank of a man, and I obeyed him, turned around and went to a courtyard by the side door. My fifth night in my two-week assignment to experience homelessness would be spent in a shelter.

We hung around in the courtyard, standing, sitting, squatting on our haunches smoking, waiting for the food door to open, about 20 men with long and short hair, clean shaven and not, neat and ratty clothes, black, white, Hispanic and Oriental.

A woman in her 30s — the only woman there — stood near the back. She started shouting after a few minutes, "C'mon let's go! There's hungry people out here — open up!"

With that the door opened and in we went. Four tables with chairs on both sides. They dished out a bowl of cheese macaroni and two hot dogs. There were buns on the table and someone wanted ketchup, but didn't get any. People wanted seconds, but didn't get any.

A bowl of frozen pineapple something. A chocolate cake, tea and some candy that looked like a carrot.

The guys were talking, swapping stories about cab driving, truck driving, the Spinks-Tyson fight. Suddenly it was over, dinner was gone and we were out the back door.

Most of us waited out front for lodging to open up for the night. The little, talkative guy from California, with the nice tennis shoes and sun glasses, said there was a religious service that night which, "I don't prefer."

We were led into the room that would be the chapel, and the big man told us to sit quietly. But the guys were laughing — one was singing the Motown hit "My girl" — he was the entertainer, a young lively guy. Two read. Two gazed off. Most of us listened as two in the front argued about boxing. Their voices rose. "That's what I've been trying to tell you, but no, you won't listen. Isn't that what I've been trying to tell him?" He asked the rest of us to confirm that Otis was being unreasonable.

I AM HOMELESS

The big dude came in and said "Otis," motioning Otis out in the hall, and Otis went, complaining "Why do they always come down on me?" Guys shook their heads and chuckled quietly, as he got an intense lecture we couldn't hear. It was like summer camp, with the boyish thrill and fear of authority.

And it was the first time I'd see the camaraderie of the homeless.

The big man walked in and loomed over us at the podium. He knew everyone but me and a guy in the back row.

"You, what's your name?"

"Doug Hoyt — H-O-Y-T." I misspelled it to make it easier to pronounce but he couldn't hear me anyway and boomed, "Quiet down! You guys quiet down!" He looked back at me and said "You ever been here before?" No. "You got ID?" No. "What's your Social Security number." I paused and recited it. "Where were you born?" Cincinnati.

And with that the guys started talking. "Cincinnati, I was there once." And an old guy said, "You remember them Reds? Beating the Pirates 15 years ago? Johnny Bench, Pete Rose." They now knew something about me. An initiation, and I'd passed.

SHORTLY AFTERWARD, the service began with hymns, first one about the Lord's grace going out to all and then "Amazing Grace." I would have bet they'd make us sing that one. "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, to save a wretch like me."

A woman played the piano and three men led the 26 of us. The big dude filled the doorway behind us.

Then came the first sermon — by a white-haired guy from the suburbs. He was a little uncomfortable, especially when a guy in the front row kept asking if we could sing a song the leaders didn't know. But the white-haired guy was genuine and spoke softly and tried to impart enthusiasm and God. His sermon dealt with the kind of men Jesus picked as apostles.

"We all know what they were like at the end but nobody tells the story of what they were like before." The idea was that, "If Jesus were around today, he wouldn't pick the super-educated, he wouldn't pick the intellectuals. He'd pick everyday guys like you and me."

The next lay preacher was dark-haired, tall and thin, and he started with a guitar playing chord riffs at a frenetic pace. Simple songs we were to sing along with praising God over and over and asking for God to control our lives, and it reached a fever pitch, faster and faster and louder and louder and it woke some of the fellows up.

His sermon began loud and grew in volume as it aged. He admitted that God was a God of love, but said "people forget he is also a God of justice and wrath." He admitted that Jesus was the lamb of God, "but he will also be the lion of God." He opened the Bible to the book of Revelations, and assured us "Hell is real — it's a literal, real place," and I wondered whether he needed to tell this crowd.

It was a "Judgment day's a comin' " speech, and he often mentioned "a great white throne" that's greater than any throne on earth and he told us Jesus will sit on that white throne with a great big book. "Is that white too?" asked a black guy in the front row. "Pardon?" the preacher said.

"Is the book white too?"

The preacher kept going. "And you'll be judged first by your actions, and then by your deeds and then by your words, and then your thoughts." He luxuriated in that final kind of judgment. "Yes, he knows your thoughts, and on Judgment Day, they'll be blazing across the sky just like in Cinemascope!" It was a sobering thought just then.

By now his volume had grown and I had a headache. The guy next to me was cursing the length of the speech under his breath, and the speech had become a rhythmic bombardment. "You have to learn to *fear* God!" The wall behind him suddenly flashed red and blue.

It was a police cruiser stopped outside the window.

Finally he stowed the howitzer and left the podium after beseeching the men to come forward afterward while there was still time for salvation. No one did.

THEN WE WERE called downstairs to sleep. This call we answered. And we walked down the back stairway in a line to the basement where we'd bed down. We were told by the big man to put our clothes in the green duffle he handed us.

I was commanded to hand over my Horne's bag, which worried me because in it were a computer printout and some writing. I had no choice. I went to change and wondered what I'd do with my Press ID in my right shoe. So I took my right foot out of my shoe and sock at the same time and I shoved the sock deep in the shoe.

I was one of the last in line and same for undressing, and I had just finished piling my clothes into the bag when the man appeared. "I still got duffle bags out!" I gave him mine and stood there naked holding a towel over myself and a little bar of soap and a nightie that opened in back.

Shower time and I took one. I was concerned that I looked too healthy, too clean, but the other guys were by and large in good shape. Very muscular — thin. I stepped under the warm/hot water from a nozzle in the ceiling and it felt good. I noticed a big blister on my right foot. It was the first time I'd taken my boots and socks off since I began.

Some guys washed their underwear. Others joked. It was a locker room, but more restrained.

After drying off, I filed into the room on the left where 16 of us would sleep. I was in a top bunk in the back of the room, about 20 feet from the windows that told us Thursday night was still very young.

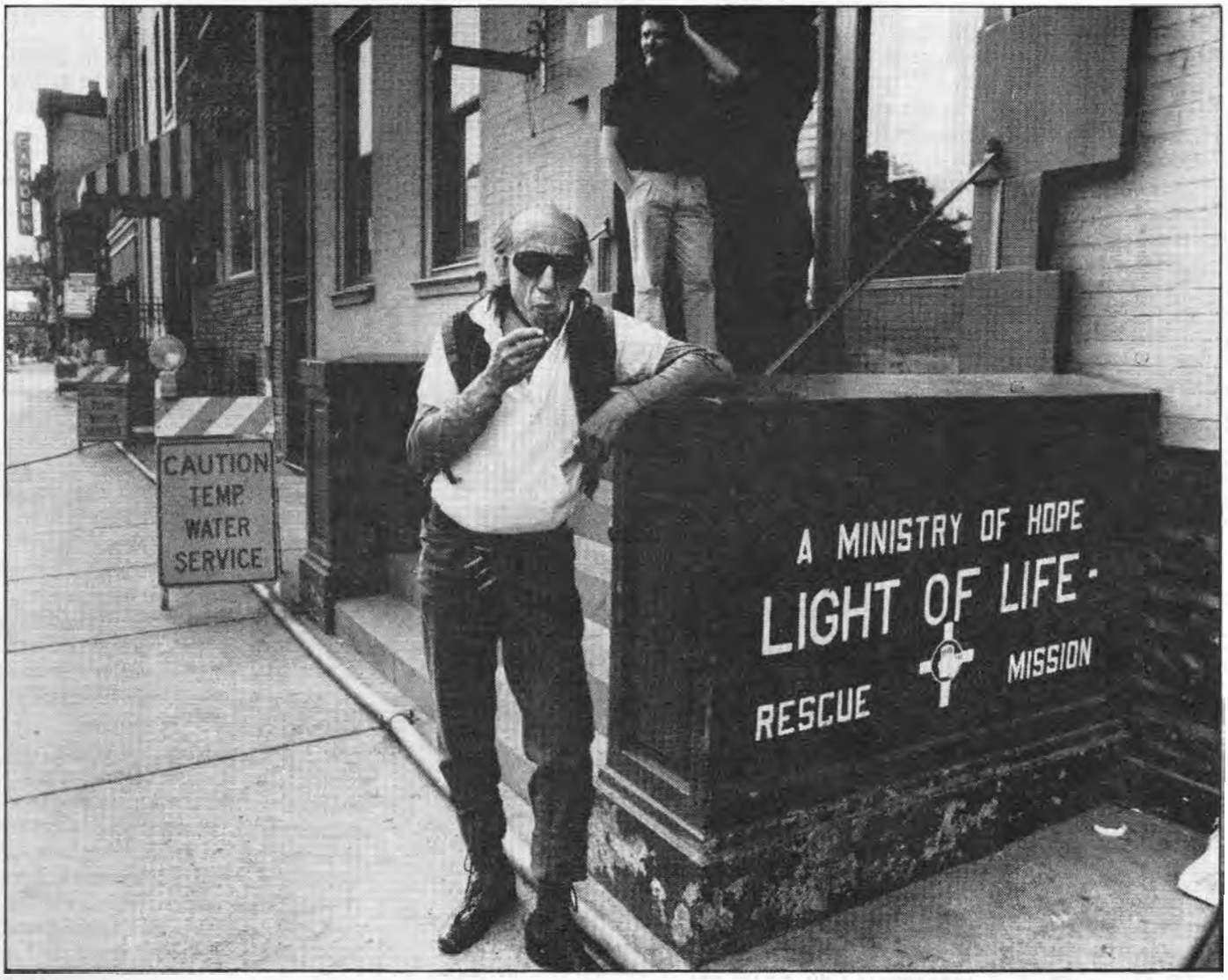
It was lights out at 8 p.m. I asked the big man if I could read for a while and he said, "When I say lights out — they're out."

One guy on a top bunk next to me had a Walkman he turned down whenever the big man came in.

"You the new guy?" the big man called to me. "Yeah." "The bathroom's in there." It was just a small kindness, but I appreciated it.

A young guy by the window across the room occasionally looked out. There were two small windows

I AM HOMELESS



Melissa Farlow/The Pittsburgh Press

Walter Witkus, a visitor, and project director Terry Molyneaux, in doorway, at Light of Life Mission, where rescue from hunger and the elements brings the homeless together.

about two feet by three obscured by bars and patches of opaque glass.

But from where I was, I could see out. It was street level, and I could see cars pull up and stop on North and Federal at the light.

Saw some nice cars out there — BMWs, Mercedes. And from my angle lower than street level I could see up over the passenger door of the passing cars. And there were some good-looking women on their way somewhere. But we were inside. Behind bars. And glad to be there.

So it was night, or our version of it. The only thing to do was try to sleep. And I was tired, very tired.

But the guy next to me had gas, and I could hear the tinny sound of his Walkman.

I couldn't sleep. At first it was the snoring. I realized it had been a long time since I'd heard a man snore. Soon there was a whole chorus.

Then came the coughing. Not occasional fits and passings — not smokers' hacks. This was what I imagined tubercular coughing must be. Deep coughs, out of breath. Trying to get phlegm up that just wouldn't come. Spasmodic fits and then gasping for breath. Trips to the toilet, spitting stuff up. I stared up at the ceiling and over at the prone silhouettes under white sheets — bodies on slabs in that shadowy darkness.

Once I awakened thinking the coughing sound was coming from me. It wasn't, but it continued and I was afraid of TB, and I buried my face in the damp towel I used as a pillow.

And I tried to fall back asleep, but I couldn't. I was afraid of germs swarming around me like fruit flies.

It went on all night. I thought "What's the point?" And I understood why people sleep on the street when they can. I swore I would the next night and I did.

WAKE UP AT 6 a.m. We got up and got our things fast. "Don't bring this back tomorrow," the big man told me as he handed me my Horne's bag.

I AM HOMELESS

We went outside, waited for breakfast — coffee, a roll, cereal and toast. Went in. Ate it. Got out.

On the streets, and it wasn't even 7 a.m. yet. A whole vast day in front and what to do with it.

Mr. Motown had mentioned the "Stab Lab," a way of making $20. I asked a drifter named Frank where it was, and he said "Follow me."

Frank had just gotten a cast off his broken right ankle. As we set off for the 2-mile walk to the Hill District, he held a bedroll in his right hand and crutches in his left.

I walked slow so he could keep up. He was 30, a well-dressed, burly guy with dark hair and a mustache. And a limp.

As we approached Allegheny Center Mall, I asked him if he knew of any toilets in town. He said no but agreed we should find one.

When we went in Wendy's, people watched us. You could feel it and see it out of the corner of your eyes. All looked away when I looked at them, except a young woman having her breakfast and reading The New York Times. In a navy business suit, and tortoise-shell glasses, she looked away too, but not until after we'd had eye contact.

Frank and I went into the bathroom, and inside was an old guy who'd been at the mission the night before. He was shaving and washing up.

I would use that restroom twice during the two weeks. I also used one at the Greyhound station twice, and one apiece at the courthouse, Roy Rogers, Salvation Army on the South Side and Stab Lab.

Between the mall and the bridge, I stewed over whether it was time to tell Frank who I was.

When I did, he shook his head, and said, "I'm just a drifter. There'd be no interest in me." I told him there would be and he began to tell me his story, how he'd been on the road for five years. He left home in Steel Valley, Ohio, after an argument with his father.

I asked him if his parents were still living. "I guess. I dunno. I ain't talked to 'em in five years. I got throwed out 5 years ago. Me and the old man don't get along."

He didn't know how many cities he'd seen. "A lot. They're all the same though. You just stay till you get bored. Then you move." Would he settle down? "No. What's to settle down for?"

Stab Lab is the street name for Pittsburgh Blood Plasma Inc., at 1600 Fifth Ave. in the Hill District. It's a place where you can trade yourself for $20 on the first visit and $10 after that as often as twice a week ... They admitted me, pricked my finger, weighed me, took urine, "To see if you're dead or alive — you're alive."

The pain in my left calf was gone. Frank, however, occasionally complained quietly of his pain. I gave him some cigarettes and took his bedroll so he could use his crutches.

He said he broke his ankle stepping off a curb and had been in a cast for seven weeks. I asked him about medical care. He said it wasn't hard to get. "They got something out West. It's called Access — insurance for tramps. It's free." I asked if he was a tramp. He didn't answer.

When we parted later that afternoon I asked if he would be interested in having his photograph taken — I would have to find a pay phone and call photographer Melissa Farlow to meet us. But he said "No. No. All I got's me, and I gotta take care of that."

IT WAS FRIDAY, June 30, and that day was one of general celebration among many of my new acquaintances. Many got welfare checks that day and it was the start of the July 4 weekend. I was elated because I made $20 at the Stab Lab.

Stab Lab is the street name for Pittsburgh Blood Plasma Inc., at 1600 Fifth Ave. in the Hill District. It's a place where you can trade yourself for $20 on the first visit and $10 after that as often as twice a week.

You needed photo ID to be admitted, and I took the chance of giving them my Pittsburgh Press ID, hoping they'd assume I'd lost my job since the date on the card — 1986. It was a risk to my cover, but I needed the money.

They admitted me, pricked my finger, weighed me, took urine, "To see if you're dead or alive — you're alive."

They gave me information to read about AIDS. I asked if I could get it there and the guy in the white jacket said "No, only if we used the same needle."

It was a big waiting room and 12 people sat there. I asked a young guy how it was going and he said "Rough, man, giving away my own blood for a couple dollars."

Twenty-eight more people reclined in the inner room. Blood bags on the ground and bags of red blood cells next to bags of salt water hanging high on the antenna-like metal stands 6 feet off the ground.

In a voice so plaintive that I felt for him, the young guy next to me called for a nurse. "Can someone take my needle out? I wanna get out of here." I felt considerably less sorry for him minutes later when, upon finding out it was my first time, he said, "Oh, it feels like a knife going in — just like a knife."

The nurse assured me it wouldn't as she scrubbed the inside of my right arm.

"Wow! He's got *big* veins!" my neighbor practically shouted. "I noticed," the nurse said. I asked if it was so unusual and she said, "It means you're a healthy person."

She stuck it in and it hurt and she told me "It might bleed back." She was right. Four days later, I would have a bruise of 12 square inches which would attract glances.

The process took two hours. They take a pint of whole blood, then separate the red and white blood cells and put the red back in you. They do that twice, and the red cells are cold when they flow back into your arm through the needle.

I walked out with a strange sensation. I was elated because the attendant had placed two crisp ten dollar bills in my right hand. I felt rich, and it was Friday night.

Tomorrow: Adrift in hobo jungle.

'You give me another dollar, I'll protect you'

By Douglas Heuck

The Pittsburgh Press

(Fourth of a series)

THE FIRST WEEK of homelessness was passing, and I was so immersed that I was drifting myself. Not that I planned to go on to city after city or stay out past the 14th day of my assignment, but monotony and questions of identity had gripped me.

I followed the routine: Walk to the Red Door for sandwiches. Save two of them for an evening meal. Walk up to the Hill to Jubilee Kitchen for a big, healthy meal with all the food groups. Stay near public fountains because it was getting hot. Get enough money for cigarettes. Watch for the Newport truck to come around with freebies. Stay sharp. Keep wary.

I awoke July 2 at Point State Park after fearing the police most of the night. A squad car had parked about 50 yards away, and its brights beamed through my thicket. If I moved, my shadow rose and fell on the bushes behind. So I flattened myself on the stoney ground, and slept expecting the tap of a nightstick or worse.

I was down to $1.50 only a day after making $20 at the Stab Lab. I spent it on a meal, cigarettes, soda and beer for myself and wine for two other guys. A guy named Terry, about 40 with a rough, puffy face, wanted to split a bottle and asked for a dollar. "I'm running from the law," he told me. "Little crap. Disorderly conduct. Public drunkenness. Figured I'd get out."

He wasn't from Pittsburgh, and he was a nice guy sober.

I gave him a dollar, sparking another guy to try me. I didn't want to drink with him either, but I gave him a buck. That wasn't enough, though. Not for him. He pushed and pushed for two, and I declined until his final pitch. "Man, you're new in town. You don't know anyone. I know everyone. You give me another dollar I'll protect you. You can stay with us here under the bridge."

A double-edged offer, and I decided to avoid making an enemy with this hustler. I would see him again hitting others for money, and though most of the people I met were loners, this young guy seemed to be one of the governors among the street crowd.

One thing I didn't spend money on Friday night was a prostitute. I declined her windy proposition on

Penn Avenue, saying I didn't have the money. She cajoled, "You got $20 don't you?" I said I had 20 cents, and she frowned and said "Ooooh." Shunned by a hooker.

VIRTUALLY BROKE, it was time to try panhandling. I got nothing in eight tries, and the responses ranged from "No, I can't," to "No," to shrugs and nothing. After the eighth failure, I looked at myself in a store window. My hair was like garter snakes in long curly ringlets. My hands were splotched black, grime under the nails. I looked worse than most of the homeless people I'd met.

I continued to the North Side, and I'd twisted my right ankle twice stepping wrong the day before, so I laced my boot tighter. Walking across the Sixth Street Bridge, I saw two friends from work. I couldn't tell if these women recognized me, so I asked them "Spare a quarter?" They passed, and then I told them who I was. One said "I never do." The other just looked at me.

I'd given myself a journalistic pep talk that morning to regain my edge, and I was determined to make progress that day. So I walked to Light of Life Mission. I wanted to try to find a family to profile, and I'd ask at the Mission if they'd help me.

"Hi can I help you," said Steve Herring, in charge of security at the Mission that day. I said yes and asked for Bill Quigley, the case worker I'd interviewed before I started the project. Quigley wasn't in and I asked if anybody in charge was.

"No," Herring said. "Is there something I can help you with?" I pondered it and said "Uh yeah, I'm a reporter from The Press and I spoke to Bill a couple weeks ago — I'm working on a project on homelessness."

He stared at me, then deadpanned "You're a reporter." I said I was and was about to continue when I realized he probably thought I was crazy.

"Here, you got a second? I'll explain it to you," I said and walked into his office. I crouched on the floor and took my right shoe off. I pulled out my Press ID.

He said, "This proves — if it's real — that you were employed there in 1986. It doesn't say in what capacity. You could have lost your job."

I laughed because the irony was shattering at that moment. "I don't blame you for not believing me — I'm just surprised. I've sunk in so far that you *don't* believe me."

He'd been homeless and said "Why would they OK such a project and OK the stress you're obviously going through?"

Again, I said "I don't blame you for not believing me," and he cut me off. "It's not that I don't believe you. It's that I'm questioning it."

I told him we were trying to get deeper into homelessness.

And then I remembered I had a computer printout containing an interview I'd done with Quigley. I fished it out and showed it to him — proof positive, I figured.

"And here, remember?" I added, pointing to other parts of the printout. "Remember the study by the Coalition on Homelessness about two weeks ago — it was in the paper. Here are notes from two of the coordinators — this was done on the computer back at work."

He looked it over, frowned and asked me, "Did you do this or did someone give it to you?" I did! I said from the Twilight Zone.

"Wait a minute," he said. "Are you saying you once worked for The Press or that you work for them right now?"

RIGHT NOW, I said. I told him again I'd been on the streets six days and that in another eight, I would return to my apartment in Wilkinsburg. And I told him he could verify it all at The Press. It was no longer important for the story, really, but for my own psyche, I needed for him to believe me. "Here you can call them up, I'll give you the number."

He declined, and I explained it all again. "Are you under cover or something?" he asked.

"Looks," he continued, "that's how they judge you. There are people with college degrees out there — if you're what you say you are you should know that — if you're a reporter, you had to go to college." I told him I did.

"It's rough — you should have known that," he said and I agreed and said people had treated me a lot differently than when I wore a suit and tie. "What did you expect?" he asked. I said I expected as much. "You shouldn't have expected — you should have known."

He seemed irritated about the project, and I said "Look, I'm trying to do something here that might do some good." And he said, "It might be a good story, but people will say, 'Oh that's a good story,' and then forget about it."

I left not knowing whether he believed me or thought I was crazy. I was between worlds.

I walked in the park for awhile and lay down in the grass. Then I got up and walked on and a man was motioning to me and calling out something. I couldn't hear so I walked to the picnic bench where he sat. He was telling me to go to Light of Life, and he looked at my clothes and showed me the ones he'd just gotten from Jubilee Kitchen, pulling on them as a tribute to their quality and strength. "Get some — you don't have to look like that," he said.

"George E. Brainard, 54 years old" he said extending his hand.

"Look at the nose, buddy. Goes anyway you want it to go. And the hands — three years Golden Gloves. Here's my medical card — I got my teeth in my pocket." It was true. Brainard was sober, but after I'd sat with him awhile, he pulled out an unopened bottle of Mad Dog and offered me a slug. I declined on previous orders from the boss at work.

I began to ask him if he would ever want to live in a regular house, but he filled in the end of the question. "To live nice? No, I'd rather stay here with the squirrels. What do you think I got my cardboard for?" He pointed at Light of Life. "Look right across the street. There are bars on the windows. You sleep in the basement. It's not a jail, but it is."

Brainard said, "We take care of street people," adding homeless people look out for each other "to a certain extent. Me and you got along. Sometimes it doesn't work. People look for a friend or someone from their town. See, now here comes three guys and they'd just as soon tear us up and kill us, but because there are two of us, they'll leave us alone." The three passed by. "They'll beat you to death. If you got money, they'll love that. If you don't they'll still beat you."

We arm wrestled to a draw and

Brainard laughed in his usual way. "Heh, heh, heh, heh." We parted and wished each other well.

I SAT BY THE Allegheny until past dark, putting off my return to the Strip District. I'd been there twice already, looking for people who supposedly lived in a hobo jungle along the river bank, behind a concrete wall at the edge of the sprawling parking lots. In the day, you could see the signs of life — couches, cardboard and matted down areas in the tall weeds.

At night, you could see nothing but a dark void of underbrush beyond the wall. I began my search under the railroad bridge behind the convention center, and as I squeezed between a pipe and a wall in the darkness, my foot hit something, and I jumped, bashing my arm against the wall. I'd seen rats there twice, and I quickly lit a match to let anyone or anything know I was there, but the vast darkness swallowed the match.

I headed up river, the Strip on my right and the dark growth to my left. Every 40 yards I called down into the darkness. "Hey buddy? Any extra room down there for a fella to sleep?" I'd wait and listen and then move on.

I called in three places, and I was afraid and relieved that maybe I'd never find anyone down there. And then at the next clearing, I called and I thought I saw something moving. I leaned over the concrete wall, peering into the growth. There was a couch below next to some large drums and a pile of garbage. Beyond, though, a shape was moving, a man, down the banks pulling himself up by a thin, horizontal tree. I called again and he walked toward me into a sliver of light. He was a thin man with long white hair and a white beard that flowed 6 inches from his chin. In a soft, quiet voice he said "Yeah, there's room."

I asked him if it was his place and he said "I stay here." Any other fellas down there? "Well, there's another guy — he comes and goes." I asked him which was the best way down and then said "My name's Doug," and he said "You can call me David."

I hopped over the wall and landed 6 feet down on a long, narrow plateau that dropped to the water. Trash was strewn everywhere, and the odor matched. I offered him a cigarette and he politely refused. The Allegheny below glimmered as the white, blue and red streaks danced their jig across the water. "People pay a lot of money for a view like this," I said.

He laughed quietly and said "My way of thinking, it's priceless. I've gotten so used to it that I don't like sleeping inside anymore. Not in the summer. It's not my way." He pointed to the boats below shooting their fireworks and smiled. "Almost Fourth of July."

For my bed, he cleared trash and leaves from a patch with his feet and said, "There — that's nice and level." Then he disappeared. I left my things, climbed the wall and walked to the Strip District — I wasn't ready to sleep there yet, and I needed to get away for a little while.

It was past midnight when I returned, and I jumped back down and lay on my blanket. I clutched my club. I could smell the trash. And I thought of rats and I hoped, "Just let them come when I'm asleep, not when I'm awake."

The thought made me pull my socks to my knees. And I thought of a rat crawling over my face and would it run off if I started or would it bite out of instinct. Would I awaken before it went for my eyes, and could I survive well enough with one eye? And just as I was reiterating the hope that I would be asleep before the vermin soiree began, I heard a thump and the sound of a heavy rodent walking about 20 feet away. Then screeching. I lay there for 20 minutes realizing there was nothing to do but sleep, and I did.

WHEN I AWOKE the next morning, David Smith was huddled over a fire.

The pit was two bricks about 6 inches apart, with two iron bars across the top for a grill. There was an old blackened coffee can on the bars, and in it was a bubbling, milky fluid. Stuck half in the can was a fishtail.

"What kind of fish is that?" I asked him, and he said, "Fishy fish." He was clawing fish flesh away from the carcass, when I told him I was a journalist working on a project.

"Writer. You know Jack London? Jack London was always happy when he was a drifter, a bum, a hobo, whatever the word is. But he was never happy once he became a millionaire. Had to settle down. I guess it's fun trying to make that million dollars, but once you get it, at least for him, his happiness was over. Couldn't take off — come and go as he pleased anymore."

He'd cut three fish steaks, and they lay on a dirty piece of cardboard. Flies were everywhere, but mainly on the fish. He'd cook part of the meat in the can, then take it out, leaving the soupy liquid on the fire. Then he'd eat the flesh, and he finally drank the soup.

I told him I'd been sleeping in Point State Park, and he said "I don't prefer that. I guess it's fine if you're just passing through, but you gotta worry about all the people. I guess you could sleep in a hedge, but I don't like it myself. Makes me feel like a beggar down there."

He'd been a hobo for about 17 years, a Pittsburgh resident from July 1 until mid-September, when he begins his six-week walk to Florida.

"You know, it's interesting," he said. "Everyone seems to be interested in street people, hobos. Something about it. People seem to want to quit their jobs when they see a guy with a bag walking in the sunshine. You get the feeling they want to quit the rat race."

He drinks from the river. "I get good water. I guess it could kill me, but when I die, I'll die happy. There was a time I wouldn't drink out of a glass if someone'd used it. I lost all that. though."

I asked him where he gets his food and he said "Well, it's like this. I make my rounds. Go through the cans. And I find things. Like that fish. I like fish. I find a lot of things. I go through the alleys. Sometimes find magazines or newspapers. I never know what'll be there. If something's there, it's there. If it isn't, it isn't. I like finding things. Like if I *find* 10 ten magazines, I could throw seven of 'em away. But if someone gave me a bag of doughnuts, I'd feel responsible to eat every one."

Smith is 53, and he said he got into his routine when he was 36. "Once you get that travel bug, you don't forget it — it's kind of the gypsy thing. It grew on me. It's a good life. I'm on my own. I got my own head. My life is such as it is."

His hair in the daylight was more light blond and brown than white or

I AM HOMELESS

gray, and around his head he wore a thin leather band that supported a goldish Our Lady of Fatima medallion the size of a half dollar. The medallion hung on his forehead. On the left breast of his shirt was a green ribbon. "Wearing of the green for St. Patrick's day. Just little things, but they add up."

He held his black rosary beads in his left hand the whole time I was there, and a bracelet encircled his right wrist. Dangling from the bracelet were fishing swivels.

"I would feel spiritually bereft if I didn't have my rosary beads. And I do have a Bible, but I'm not hot on it. It's as good a book as any. I figure if you're going to read Playboy, you might as well have your Bible along."

AROUND HIS neck, hanging to the middle of his chest was a cross made of bone. "Yeah I like to wear a cross. I've had this one about a year." The vertical bone was about 6 inches, the horizontal, 4. "This long one's deer bone — venison — and the shorter one's dog. You can buy a cross but they cost about $10 and they break easy."

I asked him how he made money, and he said "Some folks get the welfare, get an address, they pick up a check. Or Social Security or a pension. Me, I get a 10-pound bag of cans, take 'em down the road and get a couple dollars."

He has no other income.

"What you don't have in one hand you don't have in the other. I don't have a job. I don't pay union dues. I don't have a car, and I don't pay the mechanic. Sometimes a man don't know when he's well off. Whether these things have been taken away from me or spared me, I don't know which. Like marriage. I'm not happily married. I'm not unhappily married."

I left him shortly after 1 p.m., because he was going to church that day, and he had to take a bath in the river. And before I climbed up the concrete wall to the other world, Smith said, "I kinda like everything the way it is. The city, country, the shopping malls, plazas, I enjoy it. When I'm in the city, fine, I like the 7-Elevens. When I'm in the country fine, I like that.

"For me, it's thank you Jesus for showing me all of this wonder."

Tomorrow: A risk worth taking.

Melissa Farlow/The Pittsburgh Press

Time drifts for the homeless. In upper photo, Jim Long, 65, passes the day at a bus stop on the North Side. He's been homeless for a year, since he left the hospital, where he was treated for pneumonia and angina. Of Pittsburgh he says: "There's a lot of homeless people here, and I don't know why that is. Never figured I'd be one of 'em." In lower photo, Eddie Osley spends a lot of time near the Point, waving to friends as they drive by and sleeping under the bridge ramps above.

July 4th brought a different kind of independence

By Douglas Heuck

The Pittsburgh Press

(Fifth of a series)

INDEPENDENCE Day for me started in a McDonald's in Oakland, where I wrote, drank coffee and smoked generic cigarettes until it closed at 1 a.m.

When I left, I was so independent I didn't know where I'd sleep. But I knew I was tired, more exhausted than I'd been since I had begun my two-week-long odyssey into homelessness eight days earlier.

Trudging through Oakland toward Squirrel Hill, I passed a fraternity party at Carnegie Mellon University, and as I walked by, a young woman called to me from the terrace, "Hey dude, you wanna beer?" A joke, I figured, and I walked on. But then I stopped. I couldn't have cared less about a beer, but sleeping indoors? That would be fine. Somewhere soft would be a relief. The drought had made the ground like concrete, and my right hip was bruised from curling up on it.

I walked back, and as she spied me, the girl told her friends, "I just asked that guy if he wanted a beer." I told her not to worry. I was there for another reason. Then I called up to the three guys sitting on the brick ledge about 8 feet off the ground: "Would y'all have a couch I could sleep on?"

Instantly, moral dilemma registered on their faces.

One said to me, "I don't live here," but then turned to the two who did. "C'mon you guys — you can let this guy sleep on the couch can't you?"

They had a discussion, and one waved his hand sharply at me to come up. "All right!" the crowd of about 14 declared, and I walked up the stairs onto the terrace and followed him inside. He pointed to the couch. "You can sleep here." It looked soft, and I thanked my benefactor and shook his hand. "You might have trouble sleeping with the music," he said, but I assured him I wouldn't.

I sat down and had been there five seconds, when a well-dressed student came in and grabbed my benefactor, and said something I couldn't hear. "He asked us if we could give him a place to sleep," my benefactor said with a shrug. The other guy wheeled around and said sharply, "Can I *help* you with something?" I said I was tired and needed a place to sleep.

"Where do you *usually* sleep?"

"Out."

"Well, you see if we let you sleep here, it would be a risk. If something

happened *we* would be responsible."

"Nothing's going to happen. I'm tired, and I'm just going to sleep."

"But we have a lot of people staying here, and it would be a risk."

"Are you saying you want me to leave?"

"Yes."

"Are you in charge?"

"We're all brothers here. Any brother can decide, and I'm a brother."

I got up and hauled my bag onto my back. "You can appreciate the risk," he said. "Yes," I said. "It *would* be a risk letting me sleep on your couch." And he seemed relieved that I understood, and he said again, "It *would* be a risk." And I told him "I can *definitely* appreciate it," and I left. The others outside were quiet as I walked through them, back the way I'd come, back onto the street.

THREE YEARS AGO on July 5 I arrived in Pittsburgh to take a reporting internship with The Press. I didn't know anyone here, and work was to begin July 7. I stayed in a hotel the first night, and the next day I went looking for a more permanent room. I'd been told to check out the colleges, because during the summer frat houses were relatively empty. That summer three years ago, I found a room in a sparsely populated frat house at CMU. I stayed there 10 weeks, and felt welcomed. It was the same frat house — Delta Upsilon's — that I had just been asked to leave.

I walked, one foot in front of the other, up to Squirrel Hill, on and on. I slept that night on the grounds of the Jewish Community Center, awoke early and moved to the lawn of the Sixth Presbyterian Church across Forbes Avenue. And I thought about risk. The frat brother was right. It would have been a risk.

During the two weeks I was out, however, I found people who took the risk. When I would check into the shelter at the East Liberty Presbyterian Church July 8, the man at the door would ask me if I had ID.

"Uh, no," I said, and he said "No ID — none?" Nope. "You've got to have ID to even walk around. That may be a little problem." I told him I had a Social Security number, and he asked me if I had the card. I didn't, and he smiled and said "Well how would I know that's your number and not somebody else's? See what I mean?" I did.

He left and came back with the Rules: They would have me empty my pockets, no weapons, everyone takes a shower, and so on. "I'll take a chance on you," he said.

And as I left the next morning, that same man said, "Are you going to be coming back tonight sir?" I told him I doubted it, and he said, "Well, if you need a place to stay, you're welcome here."

That made a difference. He'd taken a risk, gone out of his way to make me feel as if I had a home.

People took risks on me mainly at the shelters and food lines. But others did as well.

On June 30, a friend who works at a parking lot Downtown drove me to Herrs Island in the Allegheny River to show me places near the old slaughterhouse where homeless people stayed. We found signs — recent fires, cardboard, and couches — but no people. He offered to buy me lunch, and we went to Coney Island diner in Lawrenceville.

I wolfed down two eggs-over-easy, home fries, bread and coffee, and two large cups of ice water. My friend finished and the waitress brought the check. Just before we got up, I noticed him puzzling at the check, and he got up and walked to the register. I had no money, and it wasn't my place to be present while they hashed out the check. I half expected them to be telling him not to bring me back around again — I looked like hell and smelled worse, so I stepped outside.

"Holy hell," my friend said when he came out. He had told the waitress she'd made a mistake, only charging for one meal, instead of two. And he told me what she said. "The other one's on the house — that guy, your buddy, looks like he needs a meal, looks like he could use it."

I wolfed down two eggs-over-easy, home fries, bread and coffee, and two large cups of ice water ... "Holy hell," my friend said when he came out. He had told the waitress she'd made a mistake, only charging for one meal, instead of two. And he told me what she said. "The other one's on the house — that guy, your buddy, looks like he needs a meal, looks like he could use it."

A WOMAN THE second day I was out took a chance simply by speaking to me as I sat at Market Square. She was a Pittsburgh lawyer named Diane, and she said, "I don't think we can call it the most livable city if there are so many people without homes. They say homeless people just want to drift. What do you think?" I said I thought most of them wanted homes. She agreed, and we spoke of several things. Throughout my trip, she was the only non-homeless person to ask me my opinion.

I would see her again July 2. She saw me first, waved and said "Hi." She and her son and dog were fishing on the Allegheny, and she invited me to join them and finish off three pieces of pizza they hadn't eaten. I did, and though I was ravenous, being treated kindly meant more than the food.

On July 4, others took risks. I panhandled 64 people in Squirrel Hill on Murray Avenue from Forbes to Nicholson Street and on Forbes from Murray to Shady.

Eight people gave me money, and half of those I almost didn't ask because I tried to approach only people who looked as if they had enough money to comfortably spare a quarter. One who didn't look affluent enough said, "Here, I hope this helps." It was 37 cents. And he came up to me two minutes afterward and gave me 60 cents more. "Hey don't mention it," he said. "Get a cup of coffee."

Others who gave wished me a nice holiday or didn't say anything. Twice, I had passed three old guys sitting on a bench without asking. The third time I asked them. The re-

I AM HOMELESS

Melissa Farlow/The Pittsburgh Press

Many of the homeless do not panhandle — their pride won't let them —but the reporter ran out of money and turned to the charity of strangers. Those who gave were gracious, but most refused. The most galling refusal was, "No thank you." Only one well-dressed woman in Squirrel Hill said, "Get a job."

tirees each gave a quarter and wished me a nice holiday.

The denial that was most galling was, "No thank you." And of the 200 people I panhandled during the project, only one person, a well-dressed woman in Squirrel Hill, would tell me, "Get a job."

I collected $4.24 in Squirrel Hill, and from there I walked to Shadyside. I rested in the shade at the corner of Wilkins and Fifth avenues. While I was there, a young blond guy in a red and black Porsche pulled up about 10 feet away. I asked him if he could spare a quarter and he said, "No," and pulled away.

In Shadyside seven people out of 70 gave me money on Walnut Street. A good-looking guy in his early 20s gave me $5. I thanked him, shook his hand and we wished each other a nice holiday. It was the second time someone had given me $5. A guy on Liberty Avenue, Downtown, with his wife and young child did a day earlier. When he gave me the $5, and wished me a nice holiday, I didn't know what to say, and I just looked at him.

Twice in Shadyside, people declined but came back to give me $1 apiece. I collected $9.18 there.

The last six people I asked were college kids. None gave. One said he was sorry, and as I walked away, his friend chided him, "Don't say you're sorry — you're not sorry," and the group laughed.

After a while, begging began to warp me. It became mechanical. When rejected, I said inwardly, "I don't care anyway," and outwardly I just focused on the next target. Even when they gave, I thanked them, but felt nothing.

I AM HOMELESS

After the rounds in Squirrel Hill and Shadyside, it took about an hour to stop seeing everyone I saw as "The Next Target."

As the end of my homelessness neared, I found myself in the unexpected position of knowing the ropes and being able to help others who were new in town. I met Stephens Preston III July 7 at the Salvation Army on the South Side, and the next day I walked him to Jubilee Kitchen, where they have a job board, food and clothing.

He was 25, and he had just walked and hitchhiked from Chicago, where he'd tried unsuccessfully to get a start for the past two months. Preston was from Birmingham, Ala., and he wanted to make it in a big city.

I SHOWED HIM the Stab Lab, the plasma center, but they wouldn't take him because he didn't have a photo ID, and so we crossed the street and I bought us each an orange juice at Wendy's. It was 8:30 a.m. Friday, July 8, and he asked the young woman behind the counter, "Any jobs available here?" She told him to ask the manager, which he did. The manager said "You wanta job or do you want to work?" And Preston said he wanted to work. The manager told him to come for an interview the next Monday at 9 a.m.

I pointed him toward Jubilee Kitchen, figuring they could best help him. I saw him there the next day, July 9, and he came to the long table where I was eating. He said he'd arranged a job as a dishwasher at the Upper Crust restaurant, and he had to see a man at Burger King that afternoon. He said a guy tried to jump him for change the night before, and that he'd ended up sleeping on a stoop outside Jubilee. One of the women there had arranged for him to stay the next night at St. Joseph's Shelter on Bedford Avenue farther up the Hill.

"And they gave me these jeans and this shirt. These shoes — they're nice, huh? And look at this suit. Looks like new, and it's my favorite color (green)." He folded it up and put it back in his plastic bag.

A volunteer at Jubilee gave Preston a ride to the Oliver Bath House on the South Side where he could shower before his interview. He asked me to come along, and I did.

I bought us each an orange juice at Wendy's ... It was 8:30 a.m. Friday, July 8, and he asked the young woman behind the counter, "Any jobs available here?" She told him to ask the manager ... The manager said "You wanta job or do you want to work?" And Preston said he wanted to work. The manager told him to come for an interview the next Monday at 9 a.m.

I didn't shower. I had the night before, and with that 99-degree heat I thought it was pointless. Preston showered. There was no soap, so he used detergent he found on a cabinet.

Then we made the long walk over the 10th Street Bridge through the heat to his interview. "I'm going to have two jobs and a place to stay — in a big city." His excitement would wax and wane in the heat that afternoon.

As we walked through Downtown, he shook his head and said, "I hate people seeing me like this. They look, then they look away. I don't like that."

I sat with our bags outside while he went into the Burger King interview. He came out and told me the man said he'd have to interview more people. "He said he'd call me, and I said, 'I don't have no phone.' I begged and begged, but he just said he'd call me. They never call when they tell you that — that's just like saying, 'You don't have the job.' I told him I could come down Monday to find out, and he said, 'OK come down.' "

After the interview, I was parched, and I wanted a soda. Preston had just gotten one, and I suggested we go into Roy Rogers nearby. He didn't want to, and I thought at first it was because he'd just had a drink. Then he got a little angry. "Man I *told* you I don't want people *seein'* me like this. You can't walk around with these bags. You can't go in a restaurant with a bag."

I agreed to show him where St. Joseph's Shelter was, and in that heat, we walked the 1.7 miles up the steep hill of Bedford Avenue. His bag was a lot heavier than mine — it felt like 35 pounds — and we swapped periodically. We dripped sweat, and he said, "Living like this is making me old."

We stopped for a drink of water at St. Joseph's Hospitality House on Bedford, and three old guys we talked with gave us $4. "You take it — you'll need it," I told Preston.

We arrived at his shelter and sat in the shade of an Oak tree, and he explained why he left home: "You push yourself. It's tough, but when you're at home, you don't do nothin'. That's why I went out on the streets. Most guys our age haven't accomplished anything. I'll have independence. I figure it'll take me a month to get my own place. That'll be nice — independence."

I gave him my phone number and told him if he needed help to call me. I left him resting against his garbage bag under that oak tree. I looked back, and he waved, and I waved. I hoped he would succeed and get his own place within a month, but from what I'd seen on the streets, I knew it wouldn't be easy. Breaks would be scarce for Preston. They were scarce for all of the homeless people I met. Once you were down, you weren't far from out.

When I met Richie Prisamon, he was a man in the abyss. He knew nobody, had no money, and carried all his belongings in a black leather bag about the size of an old-fashioned doctor's kit. He had pain, but no medical insurance.

He sported a grimace as he trudged up the stairs of the Salvation Army on the South Side. He would be staying in the same room with me and four other men that night, but he and I were the first there. As he put his bag on his bed and took off his shirt, he apologized that he would

probably make noise that night because of back pain.

He was 46, but he looked at least 56, and he said he was undergoing drug rehabilitation. "Coke and heroin — only the best," he said with obvious regret. "I'm from New York, and I was going to come out here and make a fresh start. But then my health started failing. All these years of zooming around have taken their toll on me."

I was happy to be at the Salvation Army, or "Sally's" as it's called, and the place was uplifting. Guys talked. There were pool tables, reading rooms with leather-upholstered chairs, clean sheets and pillows on the pre-made beds. And showers.

I got out of the shower and looked at myself in the mirror. The same man, thinner.

I washed my torn clothes and ironed them. I brushed my teeth. I went back and read, and I talked with the other men and listened to their jokes.

There was no lights-out time, and we sat up past midnight, laughing until tears about topics like supermarket dining — getting full bellies there, and if the police came, there'd be no evidence anyway. The men topped each other's most extravagant supermarket feat. One said he not only had a meal but also had downed a whole 12-pack of beer in Ohio without being noticed. Another said he'd made a Dagwood sandwich with ingredients from four different aisles. Another claimed he'd made Dagwoods too but went a step further by opening and spreading mustard and mayonnaise on them with a plastic knife he'd pulled out of a plastic package. "And if you're thrown in jail, it's a warm place for the night!"

Richie sat in the other room reading the Bible.

The next morning I carried his bag for him to the bus stop Downtown, where he would get a ride to the Veterans Administration Hospital in Oakland. I sat in the waiting room as they checked him.

He said he'd lived for 16 years with his first wife in a $139,000 home in Wayne, N.J., before their divorce. He'd gotten back into cocaine and alcohol heavily about two months before I met him — after finding his second wife with another man. And though he'd used drugs on and off since he was 16, Prisamon lost it after the incident. Lost his apartment, his car, his union job as an electrician. Everything, he said.

Prisamon had had his final conference with the doctor, and when he came out and sat down, he began to cry. They told him he had a urinary tract infection, a lump of arthritis at the base of his spine . . . "The guy told me, 'Your liver's gone. You can go on 10 percent, but you got less than that. You'll either die, or else you're in the right city' for a transplant, I guess."

He didn't know what was wrong with him when he went to the VA hospital, but he thought there was something wrong. He said a hospital south of Pittsburgh had checked him about a month earlier and said he had some minor liver problems and gave him medication. He thought his problems were more than minor, however, and they tested him for several hours at the VA hospital.

Periodically he would return to the waiting room and tell me more of his story. After leaving his second wife, "I wound up in a men's shelter in Newark. A terrible place," he said with a voice devoid of spirit. "More drugs and alcohol there than on the street. I kept resisting and resisting, and after two weeks, I said the hell with it, and I started drinking again and doing coke."

After that he went back to New York City and abused drugs in Harlem. It was there that an old friend took him to the Bronx, where a church congregation raised the money to send him to Western Pennsylvania for rehabilitation.

By the end of the afternoon, Prisamon had had his final conference with the doctor, and when he came out and sat down, he began to cry. They told him he had a urinary tract infection, a lump of arthritis at the base of his spine and a liver problem more serious than he'd thought. "The guy told me, 'Your liver's gone. You can go on 10 percent, but you got less than that. You'll either die, or else you're in the right city' for a transplant, I guess."

He pulled out his handkerchief and said, "I'm not shocked at the results. I know what I've done all these years. I just wish they'd have told me at the other hospital. That hurts. At least they're protecting me, here. Letting me know about my situation, letting me know I'm in a dangerous situation. I'm glad I came." He also said he was glad I was there, that I was the only one he had to talk to, and I felt sorry for him for having as his only confidant a newspaper reporter.

The VA hospital set him up at the YMCA on Centre Avenue in the Hill, and he would be interviewed later for admission to a VA program for the homeless. The hospital gave him medication and a new cane. And despite the prognosis just handed to him, Prisamon's mood improved.

"I'm from out of town, busted, homeless and hurtin' at the same time. Without the VA, my God, I don't know what I'd do. You start thinking nobody cares about you. And then just when you've bottomed out, this. I can't get over it. The people here have helped me so much. I've never got so much accomplished in one day in my life. They're so kind here."

When I said goodbye, he thanked me and smiled for the first time since I'd met him. "You people live up to your license plate."

I was happy he felt better, even if it was short-lived. I was a different story, however. The end of my homelessness was near, and I was sick of the project. Sick of the sweat. Sick of the despair.

Get me out.

Tomorrow: Going home.

I AM HOMELESS

Melissa Farlow/The Pittsburgh Press

Jubilee Kitchen in the Hill District offers a lunch — of the basic food groups — for free

When the end was near, the barrier fell, I wanted out

By Douglas Heuck

The Pittsburgh Press

(Last of a series)

The sun hung red and low, barely cutting the early morning haze as I walked from East Liberty to the Hill District July 9. My clothes dripped, saturated for days on end. The white sky was like a plastic blanket trapping me in the 90-degree heat.

I stopped along Fifth Avenue in Oakland under a sycamore tree and spat several times on a concrete ledge to get the dusty dryness out of my mouth and to keep the ants away. But the ants made a ring and drank my saliva.

During the last week of my two-week assignment to experience homelessness, I counted the days until my return on my hand several times each day. I had kept up a barrier against that most of the time, but when the end was near, the barrier fell away, and I wanted out. Like running the quarter-mile: For the first three curves you don't allow yourself to feel pain or even think of it or you won't finish the race. On the final turn and stretch, however, your mind and body focus on nothing else.

The day passed, and my final night on the street approached. I spent my last 45 cents on a draught beer at Chief's Cafe on Centre Avenue in Oakland, preparing to walk the last of about 12 miles I'd cover that day on foot. I sat in a booth and watched television. The first commercial I saw was for cat food. Seemed Morris the cat was sick of his food because it didn't look like liver or roast beef. And then the program resumed: "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous," a special on Hollywood, and Robin Leach talking about people "who only think big."

I wrote for a few minutes, and this was my last entry:

"What to say now that it's over. I wouldn't choose it. Wouldn't choose the street hassle and hustle. Wouldn't choose being ignored. Wouldn't choose begging and needles in my arms that leave me low on white blood cells and full of bruises. Not sleeping in parks where bugs crawl over me, and I'm fair game to a boot or knife. I wouldn't choose curfews and hunger and walking schedules for handouts.

"I wouldn't even choose the kind words. Being at the bottom. Wouldn't like to have to say 'thank you' for my food and shelter. Just the basic things I'm glad to leave. Like having to watch my belongings when I'm awake and having to sleep on them at night. Of course the presence of violence. The elements.

"I want to be alone tonight, and I still cannot go home. So I am going

to go as close to home as I can — let's face it."

I left the bar. It was Saturday night, and as I passed the corner of Forbes and Murray in Squirrel Hill, I said hello to the big guy who sells the early Sunday newspapers. As I have probably 10 times before, I asked him, "Anything worth reading in this one?" And his response amused me. "If you want to find out, you'll have to buy it." He'd never used that tone before.

I was headed for Frick Park, two blocks from home, and by the time I passed the cop at the entrance it was nearly dark. To avoid him I took a different path. I don't know why, but I trusted my sense of direction, taking a left fork then a right, up a hill, down another, but mainly up. Bats were out. Finally, I heard voices and came to a clearing where about 10 men and women in their early 20s were having a clandestine party. I accepted a beer from them, and sat on my bag. We could hear police radios, and they were nervous. A guy said that maybe I was the police, and another guy said "Yeah — he's under cover." And the group laughed at his joke.

"Actually, I am under cover, but I'm definitely not the police," I said, and they laughed again, and I left. I thought I was going to yard Regent Square, but it was dark and soon I got hopelessly lost among the random sounds, mosquitoes and twisting paths. Finally, I spread my blanket and fell asleep.

I awoke around noon July 10, and headed home.

My roommate wasn't around, and I didn't have a key, so I walked around back and climbed in the window. It was quiet inside, and I looked around. On the table was a mass of mail and papers as usual. There was the alarm clock. The Ringling Brothers poster. The plants had been watered. I shed my clothes in a pile on the living room floor and took a long shower.

It was finished.

That afternoon two friends bought me lunch: a bacon cheeseburger, tossed salad, french fries, and iced tea, and I began to tell them the story. I didn't know what would be interesting or surprising to them. I just knew what I had done.

"You've lost a lot of weight."

Now, it's impossible to look the other way. And I care even less what a panhandler spends his money on . . . food, shelter, cigarettes, booze, I don't care. But here, here's a buck. Buy a home in the North Hills with it.

I knew I'd lost weight because I'd had to retie the twine loop that had served as my belt, but when I got on the scale and saw 12 pounds were gone, it was a shock.

I'd gotten some sun, and I plagiarized what a homeless man had told me a week earlier: "The unemployed and the homeless are the best-tanned people in the world."

I said I'd had no trouble from the police, no harassment, never a harsh word even. And though this wasn't the experience of many homeless people I'd met, the police were the only people as a group who treated me no differently from how they usually do.

I proudly showed off my fingernails, long ones for the first time since I began working at the newspaper. I didn't know whether that meant there was less stress on the streets or whether my nails had been so dirty that I couldn't bring myself to bite them.

I told them about the camaraderie I'd experienced and how twice, guys approached me, convinced they'd seen me before. "Man, I haven't seen you since Seattle! How you been doin'?" Another made a similar comment about Columbus, Ohio.

And there was the grandmotherly woman who talked with me as we waited in the sandwich line at the Red Door. After we'd gotten food she walked up to me and began looking in her purse. I tried to stop her, but she said "No, you'll need this." She gave me three dollar bills. As she walked away, I asked her her name. She looked back and smiled and said, "Oh, it doesn't matter."

Before I'd done this, I had no idea what a service the shelters, food lines, and kitchens perform. None. The institutions and the people who work there struck me as the modern fishers of men, and whether the staff was gruff or smiling didn't matter. They gave sustenance and shelter. The scenes often were grim, but without the shelters and kitchens there would have been nothing.

I'd been at the Fourth of July fireworks at the Point, and I got chills and tears welled up as the crowd sang along with the recording of Kate Smith singing "God Bless America." Before I'd been on the streets, I hadn't realized the range of people who believe in the country, whether they share in the fragile dream or not.

And many of the homeless people I'd met were well aware of current events. They read the newspaper, and they knew their constitutional rights.

There was Clay, whose appearance is his identity in the minds of many people Downtown. He wears a shirt and shorts that hang in long tatters.

Clay and I spoke about Supreme Court decisions and his First Amendment right to wear what what he likes. We spoke about Edwin Meese, and though Clay had reservations about Meese's behavior, he said, "You're innocent until proven guilty — that's the American way, right?"

I told my friends about giving plasma and panhandling. My own policy about beggars before I started the project was pretty uniform. Whether I thought they needed it or not, I gave because I figured even if they were scamming me, someone who had to scam was pitiable. Sometimes, though, I would act as though I hadn't heard an appeal for money and keep walking.

Now, it's impossible to look the other way. And I care even less what a panhandler spends his money on. Spend it on food, shelter, cigarettes, booze, I don't care. But here, here's a buck. Buy a home in the North Hills with it.

At the beginning I'd been concerned about whether I could really pass as a homeless person. Somehow, I figured, people would know that I was different. But I passed easily. I *was* different, but so were they all — people with different backgrounds, attitudes, per-

I AM HOMELESS

Melissa Farlow/The Pittsburgh Press

The two-week odyssey nears its end: "What to say now that it's over. I wouldn't choose it. Wouldn't choose the street hassle and hustle. Wouldn't choose being ignored. Wouldn't choose begging and needles in my arms that leave me low on white blood cells and full of bruises. Not sleeping in parks where bugs crawl over me, and I'm fair game to a boot or knife. I wouldn't choose curfews and hunger and walking schedules for handouts."

sonalities. And that was the most profound insight I can offer. Different political beliefs, family situations, job histories, medical histories. Different feelings and concerns.

A quote often ran through my mind the second week. It's from a novel by Goethe: *"You ask what the people are like here. All I can say is, as they are everywhere else."*

I told them about a Scotsman I met at my lowest point during the two weeks, when I was wondering whether my project would be seen as an exploitation of homeless people. Could I really understand homelessness, when I knew I'd return home?

"So. You're *masquerading* as a homeless person?" The Scotsman asked when I told him what I was doing. A tanned Sean Connery lookalike, 6 feet 4 inches, 190 pounds, he was sitting shirtless in the sun on a wall at Point State Park when I'd approached him. "Well, you've found the right man for your story — hit the jackpot."

I had first seen him when I stayed at Light of Life. He was speaking Spanish to a guy, and I'd said hello and he'd said hello. But it was just chance that on July 6 I ran into him, one of the three most interesting men I've ever met, the others being a professor in college and the Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel. The Scotsman was 55 and had taught English and Spanish in Canada, Central America and Africa. He had a master's degree. Homeless for the past 10 years, Walter John Tallis chose the lifestyle.

"I always wanted to see if I could cut the mustard. All my life I've watched men grow older." He mentioned Shakespeare's "seven ages of man," and said, "at the end, man becomes the puking baby again. Most men become that, and I don't want to. I want to have courage all my life."

I asked him about hope and he said, "Hope, that's silly. It's nice to have when you have everything else. When you have an income, family around you, pension plan. But when you don't have any of those things, you better have courage.

"If you don't, that's when you start throwing yourself off bridges. These homeless people do it at Christmas, and the person who causes it is Bing Crosby. 'I'm dreaming of a white Christmas.' It's a time when people want to be together, to have someone. These institutions can only do so much. They can't hug ya and kiss ya and cuddle ya and squeeze ya."

"The average homeless person is . . . out there in the blue whistling Dixie. He's not invited home for Christmas. He's an embarrassment. And an embarrassment is forgotten, swept under the table."

He had bright blue eyes, and as he spoke the sun was directly behind his head, effecting an aura around him. "Everyone is alone, from the cradle to the grave. Viciously alone. That's why you need courage."

He had been married three times — once to an African woman he said he paid five cows and 50 chickens for — and he has three children. But Tallis said it's "very embarrassing" to see his children. "The average homeless person is the black sheep. He's out there in the blue whistling Dixie. He's not invited home for Christmas. He's an embarrassment. And an embarrassment is forgotten, swept under the table."

Tallis said the homeless have become a subculture. "And you know what that means, don't you? That means you don't get rid of them."

He said he believed many homeless people couldn't be helped or directed back to a "normal" life. The ones who could be helped, however, "need something to build, something to believe in, and nobody is giving them that. After six months to a year on the street, you grow into homelessness like you grow into a job. After six months, it becomes a part of you, like alcohol; it's insidious. It creeps up on you. And the person who is trying to climb out needs help. That first two months, he should be helped by every major authority in the city. They need to have their rent paid, a bus pass. Get them on their feet.

"And the overriding factor for most people is that it's degrading — the whole thing. If you're any kind of person with self-respect, and some of them don't have too much, it's degrading. Nobody knows me here so I don't have to hide my face in shame. But if I were born here, or had family here or had worked here. I think I would feel so ashamed — as if the Lord had forsaken me."

He said he was alone but seldom lonely, except for intimacy with a woman. He was a former athlete and soldier and we discussed Hemingway, Robert Frost and courage.

I asked if he thought homeless people chose their predicament, and he answered that if he were forced to answer in a court of law, yes or no, "The answer would be yes. Because these people, like any other, take the path of least resistance. The rents are expensive, and food bills are very high. Most of the jobs these people get are soul-destroying — short-term jobs. No benefits. Paid by the day. They ask themselves, 'Why should I do this? Why?' Even if they were the type of person to save money, they couldn't do it on minimum wage. The only way to save on minimum wage is if they stay in the shelter. And I have met many who were working and still living in the shelter, and it hurt me to hear people call them lazy bums."

It was his last day in Pittsburgh, and I walked him to the Greyhound station. To me, he was a man out of time, a wandering Titan whose goal was to live and live. He spoke of the myth of Sisyphus pushing his stone and how it got more difficult the older he became. And Tallis, too, was getting older.

I had spoken with him for five hours, and the longer we talked, the more I felt a kinship. It disturbed me. Perhaps an older version of me.

We were together only briefly, yet we were friends. Good friends, I felt. And as the time for him to leave came close, I said what came naturally.

"How could I keep in touch with you?"

A stupid question for a man without a home, and he smiled at it.

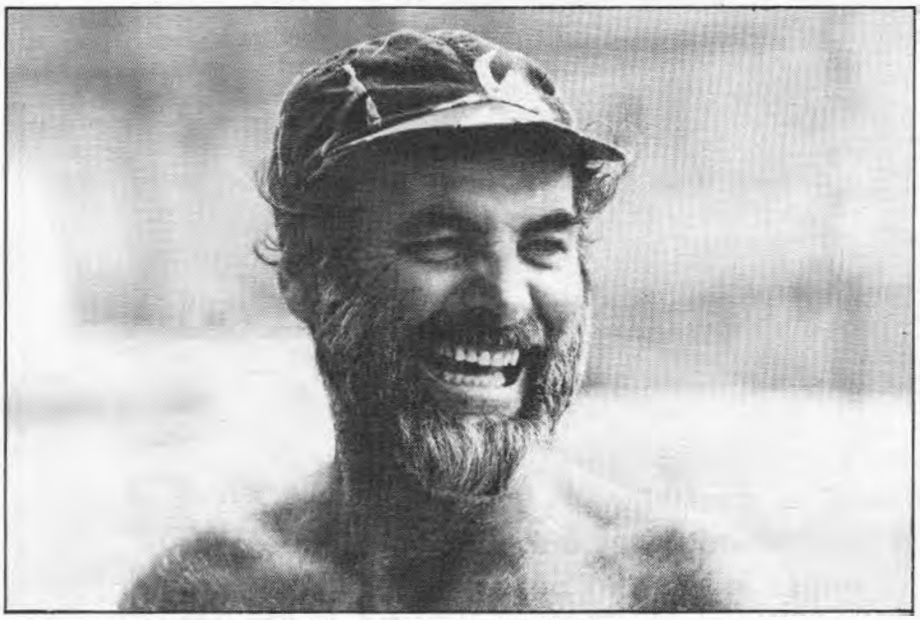
Seconds before the bus left, we shook hands.

And as he stepped aboard, he turned and called back to me:

"Write it from your heart."

I would try.

I AM HOMELESS



Walter John Tallis: graduate degree, speaks several languages, master story-teller, poet, and homeless by choice for 10 years. A philosopher-vagabond, he gave up on hope to concentrate on courage. Moving on after a 5-hour discussion, he left a lot behind. But no forwarding address.

Melissa Farlow/The Pittsburgh Press

About the author

DOUGLAS HEUCK, 26, was born in Cincinnati and educated in suburban public schools there. He received an undergraduate political science degree in 1984 from Kenyon College.

Before taking an internship with The Pittsburgh Press in 1985, Heuck was a freelance reporter for a weekly newspaper in Brooklyn, N.Y. In Pittsburgh, he has written news, feature and magazine stories.