

Tapping 'The Bank'

By Neil Henry

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To the bums of Washington, getting by meant flipping fingers through the coin return slots for spare change, scavenging sidewalks outside fast food joints for packets of sugar, and knowing what times the soup kitchens opened. It meant tricks such as clipping the corners of a five-dollar bill, pasting the "5" digits over the "1" digits on a one-dollar bill and trusting cashiers to be none the wiser.

For passengers of what was known as the city's Gravy Train—the corps of men and women who rummaged through garbage cans for food—getting by meant going where the crowds were, such as downtown on a bright Saturday or the Mall on weekends, when there was a good chance of discovering half-eaten burgers and half-finished drinks.

But most importantly, getting by simply meant knowing where charity and the soft-hearted resided. And for this there was no place quite like The Bank, which was what the down and out called St. Vincent de Paul's Rectory on North Capitol Street.

Every weekday afternoon, scores of derelicts gathered in the back alley that separates St. Aloysius Church from Gonzaga High School's football field. The rectory

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Getting by in Washington with the Singing Bums, the Jesuits, and the men and women on The Gravy Train.

was actually a tiny basement nook several steps down from the church's back door, which doubled as the derelicts' urinal.

The Jesuits who operated this basement sat like bank tellers behind wooden desks and handed out varying amounts of food and money, depending on whether the bums' imaginative tales of sorrow rang true.

The derelicts waited in the alley for as long as two hours for the Jesuits to open shop. A quartet of men calling themselves the Sing-

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ing Bums usually were here, emptying bottles of Wild Irish Rose—a \$2 liquor with 20 percent alcohol—and crooning soul hits of the past. Cowboy was the tenor, Smokey the bass and two others filled the parts in between, oohing, doo-ba-dooing, laughing and rhapsodizing in remarkable harmony.

"They stood behind me in line one day, their voices echoing out into the football field, and I listened to them while overhearing other derelicts rehearse their tales before going inside to meet the Jesuits.

"Another Saturday night at ah ain't got nobody, Ah gets no money cuz ah just got paid.

How ah wish ah had somebody to talk to.

Ahm in an awful way . . .
"He's in an awful way . . ."
"Ah'm in an awful way . . ."

"I'm just gonna tell the man the truth, Slim. I ain't worked since Christmas. I was a janitor up there 'round M Street, right, and the white folks invited me to go to one of their Christmas parties in the office. I said, hell, why not, right? I didn't know they was having bourbon and scotch, too. Got so damn laid out on that s--- they done laid me off."

"Jim Dandy to the rescue!
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"Had me a damn-good job at the Salvation Army."

"Pay you anything?"

"Bout five a week, but shoot—had a free room, pork chops, eggs, bacon, television . . . Damn, I blew that ticket."

"Messid it all up, huh?"
"Stayed out and missed curfew. Drinking this wine up near Trailways, right? Damn police put me in jail for drinking in public. You know that Army don't want me back."

"I got sunshine on a cloudy day . . ."
"Doo Badoobadooba Doo . . ."
"When it's cold outside, I got the month of May . . ."

"Doo Badoobadooba Doo . . ."
"I . . . guess . . . you . . . say, what can make me feel this way?"
"My girl."
"My girl."
"Talkin' 'bout . . ."
"I'm just gonna show the man my shoes. Look at these things."
"Boots ain't they?"
"Yeah, but the damn things too tight. Got em over at D.C. General, you know? Shoes cuttin' up my feet so bad they're 'bout to send me back."
"Not for money . . ."
"Heard a funny sound . . ."
"Took a look around . . ."
"And I . . ."
"Could see her face . . ."
"Smile as she came! Callin out my name!"
"So I . . ."
"Know where to go . . ."

"No man, the shakes is like this. Dogs know when you got the shakes. They come lookin' for you, wanting to bite your ass 'cuz they know you can't do nothin' about it. When you got the shakes 'everything's movin' too fast . . . the cars, buses . . . You like to grab folks and say, 'Slow down, damn! Slow down!'"

Eventually the doors opened and we crowded inside to await our turns at the tellers' desks. Behind the desks were piles of canned foods and bread, bags filled with Safeway vouchers, coins and Metro bus tokens. An elderly woman shuffled out of the room after her turn, muttering, "Loaf of bread. What the Sam Hell I'm gonna do with a loaf of Wonderbread?"

A little later I entered and sat before a young bearded man who looked at me with sympathetic eyes and asked, "What brings you here, son?" I told the man I was now in town from Baltimore and needed change until I could find a job. His hand dug around in the desk drawer and came back with a roll of shiny dimes. He opened the roll, counted out twenty of the coins, gave them to me, then called out into the hallway, "Next!"

The Bank was just one of many ways to get by in Washington. This was a city in which bums survived in different manners, depending on the neighborhoods—they frequented—downtown, Dupont Circle, or Georgetown for instance, where Zeke, Jerry, and Freddy lived.

Jerry was a mess. His gray hair was a long knotted mass of oil and grime, and he wrapped himself in the lining of an old beat-up overcoat whose label proclaimed, "Rogue's Delight." Freddy, his cohort, was bearded and walked with a crutch. While Jerry slept in a cluster of new town houses being constructed on K Street beneath the Whitehurst Freeway, Freddy slept in an abandoned car behind an Amoco Station next door to the Little Tavern on M Street NW, where



the manager had a sign up behind the counter honoring the "Bum of the Month."

Jerry and Freddy ate out of garbage bins in alleys behind Georgetown restaurants, but sometimes retired to the Golden Temple Emporium on Wisconsin Avenue, where the Sikhs occasionally provided them with vegetarian leftovers. Jerry and Freddy had resided so long in Georgetown they had become known among merchants and residents as the neighborhood bums, and needed only to stand on corners with their hands outstretched to collect spare change.

These two men often passed time outside the Little Tavern with Zeke, an old coddler with white hair who spoke in a vintage W.C. Fields voice and, depending on one's age, addressed listeners as either "young gent" or "old gent," and talked at length about the golden days of tramping when freight trains were made to be hopped and panhandling was an art instead of a public nuisance.

There was a saying in down-and-out Washington—often used in response to verbal sparring—that "you'd best stick to the category." Georgetown—for Jerry, Freddy and Zeke—provided a category, a quiet port in the cityscape.

The Reverend's category, up until

very recently, was the Rexall Drug storefront in the abandoned Ambassador Hotel, where several derelicts resided for a few weeks in February, along with many rats, on the first floor of the hotel. The Reverend's full name, which was stenciled to his plastic donation cup, was the Right Reverend Archbishop Pope St. Charles Tyler Cavanaugh of Northern Virginia, Virginia.

Through the bitterest cold of winter the Rev resided here along with a pushcart and four foot lockers. He was a very holy man who called his pushcart his ark. One afternoon a friend of mine happened to punctuate a long conversation with The Rev by patting him affectionately on the shoulder. The Rev sat bolt upright in his folding chair and whipped out a canister of blue liquid, which he squirted over his hands and shoulders, apparently to wipe out the worldly dirt my friend had given him.

The Rev got by fairly well. In his foot lockers were collections of canned food, Bibles, magazines, blankets and several butane burners to cook his meals. But true getting by, to this man, meant saving people. And saving people, to the Rev, meant waving his fingers and chanting and shaking his head at what he called "the devil's meat market" across the street,

where prostitutes, pimps and drug pushers held forth after dark.

The categories of many of Washington's down and out were defined not so much by location as activity. Nick was a 38-year-old alcoholic with thick red sideburns, who suddenly found himself down and out after he was kicked out of his girlfriend's Arlington apartment. By his account, there were outstanding bench warrants for his detention in D.C. and in Montgomery and Fairfax counties, where he failed to appear in court on drunk-driving charges. When I met him he was sitting in the dark back corner of a labor pool at 902 12th St. NW; he was on the lam from both the law and his girlfriend, who chased him out of her apartment with a knife after she found \$200 missing from her purse.

To Nick, getting by meant hustling and conning. For several months he ran an adult movie house out of his girlfriend's apartment, charging \$5 a seat for Swedish Erotica double-features. Late one afternoon, after he sneaked into his girlfriend's apartment to shower and eat while she was at work, Nick showed me and another derelict one of his films.

Sex was Nick's hustle. "The richer they are, the kinkier they are and everybody has a price," he often would say. His most bizarre adventure occurred several years ago in New York City, when Nick befriended a film director who brought him to his Lower East Side apartment. Nick said the director paid him \$50 that night to throw oranges at him, while the man ran around the living room naked.

In Washington, Nick sought homosexuals at secluded retreats such as Rock Creek Park, Dupont Circle, Dumbarton Oaks and the Terminal Hotel. One evening he came out of the Dupont Circle Bathhouse with \$10, which he bragged, was given to him by a man who had a sexual encounter with him inside a stall there.

The day I met Nick in the back of the labor pool he clipped two corners off two five-dollar bills and pasted them with Elmer's glue onto the corners of a \$1 bill. The fives were still good, he said, because their serial numbers were intact. Later he returned to the labor pool with a four-dollar profit from a nearby drugstore, where he purchased a cup of coffee with the fives.

"Town's fulla suckers," said Nick. The Gray Train was reserved only for the most rugged souls. On holidays, such as George Washington's Birthday, it was astounding that the only people on the streets at 7 a.m. were members of this train, rummaging through the previous day's refuse in the city.

In Washington, there were actually two trains—one male, the other female—passing each other continually, but always somehow on opposite sides of the street. These men and women commonly scoured for either reading material or in-between-meal snacks. I saw many of them eating regularly at Zacharias House, a soup kitchen on L Street NW.

Late every afternoon, more than a dozen of the shopping-bag men retreated to a mission hall on Seventh Street NW in Chinatown to relax and go over their findings that day. Every now and then a man would drop his hand into a plastic bag and bring out an item or two. Apart from the usual clothing and blankets, I noticed, at one time or another in this hall, a 1970-Tin University of Maryland course guide, a tin cylinder of tennis balls, a ball of shoestrings, a Howard Johnson's asstray, novels by Kafka, Hemingway and Long John Lee (a skin book), rolls of toilet paper, and costume jewelry. One man even had a miniature television set, though it couldn't be sold for certain whether he found it, stole it or bought it.

Tiny rode this Gravy Train. He was an elderly man with a large gap between his teeth and a long stocking cap whose balled tip was pinned to the front, making him appear like an Elizabethan jester. He carried a two-shopping bag, and every morning ventured from a Northeast public shelter and followed the route of Metro's subway line all the way to Foggy Bottom.

He scouted trash cans along the way, checked phone booths for coins and stopped in at each station—closed at that time of morning—to get warm and scavenge the bottom of escalators, for cigarette butts. Although the stations were closed, enough warm air wafted out to make Tiny comfortable.

More than anything else, it seemed, Tiny's life was a never-ending hunt for tobacco. One afternoon I saw him in the Chinatown mission hall, where he crossed his legs and pulled out a cornucopia of loose stem waxy air, which he inhaled through his nose and mouth at the same time, at the risk of scorching rather than long nose hairs.

Like Tiny and the rest, I became a packrat of urban freeways. I learned to check coin return slots—found more than a dollar in change this way—scan the pavement outside fast food eateries for sugar packets—knowing that the missions, shelters and soup kitchens rarely offered sugar to go along with their coffee, tea and grits—and to drink coffee at McDonald's instead of other fast food restaurants, because it offered nutritional half-and-half or milk to go along with the coffee rather than long nose hairs.

The packets of my coat overflowed with freebies, including gobs of sugar packets, metro tokens from St. Vincent de Paul, pieces of sugar candy from a Baltimore soup kitchen, pieces of crackling, plastic bags to wrap sandwiches, a lab pool identification card, and sundry other conspicuous but handy tidbits. I learned to walk with my eyes lowered to the sidewalk and come across many a piece of costume jewelry this way, including a 14-carat gold bracelet.

Getting by was a jumble of imagination, luck, alertness and intuition, and the 96-year-old Central Union Mission at Sixth and C streets NW was one place where the products of this jumble all came together. In the fifth-floor dormitory there, the night after undressing, revealed dirty T-shirts from all over the world—showing either that they got by in other locales or picked up some good throwaways. In just one night I saw shirts advertising Australia, Wyoming, Singapore (in Asian characters) and the International University in San Diego.

If there was one pursuit all of us shared in down-and-out, Washington it was panhandling. You weren't an honest bum unless you mooched, bummed and begged the public for coins and cash. To fear this art you had to hear and observe men like Andy, Skag and the Atlanta Roller in action, for they were the kings of Washington panhandling.

NEXT: The Art of Panhandling

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



Peggy Sage