

GORILLAS WIN MATING GAME

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DAILY NEWS

40¢

NEW YORK'S HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER

Saturday, May 30, 1992

SHANTY INFERNO

**Arsonists
target
poorest
of the
poor;
one
killed**



JACK BORTH DAILY NEWS

Investigators cover body of man killed when fire raged through homeless dwellings at foot of Manhattan Bridge.

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Shantytown fire kills 1

Arson feared in blaze

By DAN HAYS

Daily News Staff Writer

A pre-dawn fire ripped through a shantytown at the foot of the Manhattan Bridge yesterday, killing a homeless man and leaving a dozen others trapped in their ramshackle huts in what police have ruled a suspicious fire.

Residents of the modern-day Hooverville, on the Manhattan side of the bridge, said the blaze was set by two pistol-carrying drug dealers from a nearby public housing complex who bore a grudge against a resident who survived.

The fire erupted just after 5 a.m. in the sprawling homeless community called "The Hill" and quickly sent flames tearing through the shacks constructed from scraps of wood, cardboard boxes — and even a teepee fashioned from canvas marked "U.S. Mail."

When firefighters arrived about 5:15 a.m., many residents were barricaded in for the night and firefighters had to smash open locks before the inhabitants could escape.

Fire Department spokesman Tom Kelly said they had pounded frantically on the doors.

Calling the blaze "an inferno," Kelly said it was miraculous that only one person died. No other injuries were reported among the 35 people living in some 15 shacks furnished with collections of upholstered chairs, tables,



THE HILL: Homeless community at the foot of the Manhattan Bridge at Forsyth & Canal Sts. where a 5 a.m. fire yesterday left one resident dead.

HARRY HAMBURG DAILY NEWS

televisions and toasters.

The dead man was identified as Yokbill Lee, an elderly unemployed restaurant worker.

Residents said he had lived in the shantytown at Forsyth and Canal Sts. for three years in one of the more artful dwellings.

It was covered with canvas inscribed with Chinese characters, paper lanterns and a teddy bear, all of which were tied together with twine. But yesterday, all that was left was blackened rubble.

"He had a knack for building without nails," one hut-dweller said.

Some artists had also erected an Indian-style teepee

made of U.S. Mail sacks, which narrowly survived the fire. Nearby was a patch of earth with a sign, "Please don't step in the dirt we are growing a garden."

At the shantytown, a fire hydrant provides water and power comes from a gas generator.

The establishment, which has become a New York symbol of homeless people's ingenuity and creativity, is featured on postcards — which some of the residents sell — and has appeared in a Municipal Arts Society brochure.

Detectives of the Elizabeth St. station were checking information that two men identified as drug dealers, one of

whom was nicknamed Choco, had torched the shantytown after invading it about midnight in a hunt for a woman.

Residents said the two carried 9-mm. automatics and were looking for a man named Panama who lived in one of the shacks.

Another police source theorized the blaze was the result of a dispute over drug-dealing turf.

Kelly said an open flame was used to ignite rubbish to start the fire.

Eddie Sistrunk, 34, said he awoke, "looked up, and the whole side of the house was on fire." He said that when the two armed men visited earlier, they had warned,

"We'll be back."

Residents said about five women live in Hooverville.

Drug use was described as rampant, but Lee, they said, abstained from drugs and alcohol. He was described as a quiet, unassuming man who spoke six languages.

A correction

Alvarro Algarra, 24, who shot himself in front of police in Queens on Thursday, is in critical condition at City Hospital Center at Elmhurst. The News incorrectly reported yesterday that he had died.