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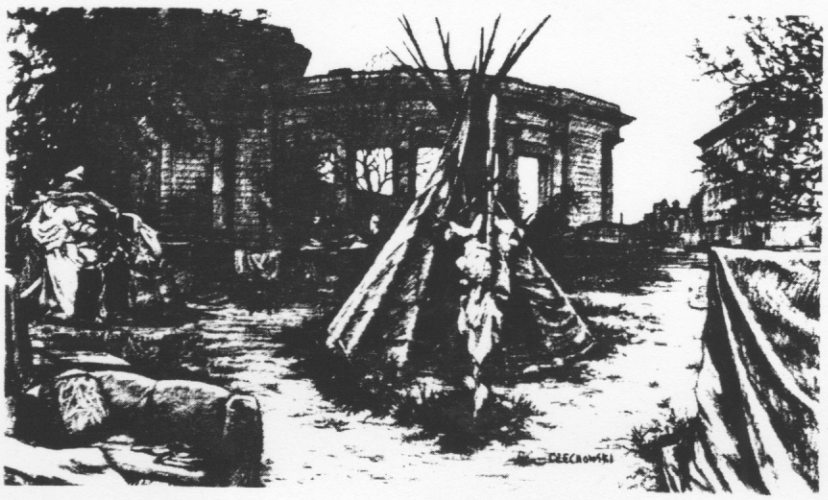
OUR LOCAL CORRESPONDENTS

SHANTYTOWN



ON a dusty hummock adjoining the Canal Street end of the Manhattan Bridge stands a makeshift community that in materials, construction, and basic layout bears a resemblance to the great shantytowns of Manila and Rio de Janeiro. For the last six months, I have been making periodic visits to this place in an attempt to find out who lives there, and how and why. Shanty living is a phenomenon that is creeping up on New Yorkers much as homelessness did in the early nineteen-eighties. Two years ago, there was a flurry of stories in the local press about an encampment of tents and lean-tos in Tompkins Square Park and the response of the police and residents in the surrounding part of the East Village. But it was generally assumed that the Tompkins Square saga said more about the political and cultural peculiarities of a neighborhood with a colorful history of class conflicts than about housing trends in the city as a whole. Over the past year or so, several smaller settlements have come to public notice after being deemed unsafe. The reopening of a long-abandoned railroad tunnel in Riverside Park brought brief renown to a tribe of what the tabloids labelled "mole people." A steel trestle supporting the West Side Highway near Fifty-eighth Street warped in the heat of a fire resulting from an act of arson in one of the illegal residences below. Most recently, at Seventy-second Street and the highway, a barricaded approach ramp containing another cluster of impromptu dwellings was found to be so corroded that it will have to be torn down. In these and other attention-getting cases, however, shantytowns have entered the news only as the city was preparing to evacuate them. Meanwhile, other such colonies have been forming, growing, and taking on an eerie permanence, largely without benefit of news coverage.

The last time that significant numbers of New Yorkers lived in this fashion was in the early nineteen-thirties, when the city was dotted with what were known as Hoovervilles. In the movie "My Man Godfrey," Carole Lombard plucks William Powell out of a vast Hooverville situated, fancifully, along the East River, near Sutton Place. One of the biggest of the real Hoovervilles—a community of approximately six hundred people, in which at least one baby was born in the winter of 1933—sprawled across an abandoned dump (now the Red Hook Recreational Area) on the Brooklyn waterfront. Another, consisting of some two hundred structures, was in Central Park, behind the Metropolitan Museum, on what is now the Great Lawn and was then the dried-out bed of an old reservoir. At night, some of the more enterprising residents went off to the Park's bird sanctuary to hunt for dinner. Americans saw the Hoovervilles as a frightening manifestation of an acknowledged economic calamity—the Depression; today, the nation is said to be emerging from the throes of a recession, but in the complex arithmetic underlying that assessment the number of people living in the streets, parks, and transportation facilities of the nation's cities is a statistic of no significance. The Hoovervilles were pretty much gone by the mid-thirties; it is far from clear that their modern equivalents (which have yet to be called Bushvilles, or given any other nickname suggesting a sense of national shame) will pass from the scene so quickly, for they seem to exist in a sort of fourth dimension of the economy, where waves of recession and prosperity are hardly felt.

BY the standards of Manila, Rio, or even Tompkins Square before it was cleared for a third, well-publicized time at the beginning of June, the Hill—as the settlement alongside the Manhattan Bridge is known to its residents and neighbors—is small: only about twenty people living in fifteen structures. Of all the city's current shantytowns, however, this one may be the most permanent-looking. A majority of the huts are made of wood, and most have locks. Some have been there for as long as four or five years. If such places advertised in the *Times*, the Hill would be in a position to offer easily affordable condominium homes in the heart of lower Manhattan.

Until last Thanksgiving, it was possible for someone speeding off the bridge to ignore the fact of human habitation there. At a casual glance, the Hill looked like countless other trash-laden "waste spaces," as they have been called, that adjoin the city's bridges and highways. Thanksgiving was when an Indian tepee, fashioned of United States Government mailbags, appeared on the site, instantly transforming it into one of the more arresting pieces of skyline in New York. Since the tepee's arrival, the Hill has become a minor tourist attraction. People who come upon it for the first time—many of them pedestrians making the downtown circuit of Little Italy, Chinatown, and Wall Street—are astonished to find such a community in such surroundings, and those with cameras tend to whip them out and click away, usually from a position of concealment behind a parked car or a phone booth. From a well-chosen angle, it is possible to capture the tepee and the other dwellings against a background that includes the twin towers

of the World Trade Center and an Anchor Savings Bank billboard promoting, in giant pseudo-Chinese letters, the "YEAR OF THE LOAN."

The Hill is not a place that welcomes unauthorized visitors. Strangers who set foot there can expect to be questioned, and if they have anything to do with the journalism business it may not matter what else they have to say—not, at any rate, if they want to accomplish anything in a hurry. "I can't get in the *Daily News* building, so you can't get in here," one resident told a *News* reporter who showed up recently. In my case, the result of a series of visits is a fragmentary picture, based on the testimony of a minority of the people living there about the things they cared to talk about.

One lesson that emerged quickly is that the word "homeless" blurs over some profound distinctions. The inhabitants of the Hill are people who insist on a degree of autonomy and anonymity not to be found in a city shelter, but they have also rejected the isolation and uncertainty of life on the street. Like other such settlements, the Hill "contrasts starkly with the received and still prevalent image of homeless individuals as 'disaffiliated,'" to quote from a recent study by a team of ethnographers working under Kim Hopper, of the Nathan Kline Institute for Psychiatric Research. Most of the people living on the Hill have been through other phases of what the world calls homelessness, and for them shanty living represents the discovery of a better alternative. Ace, a large man whose soft-spoken demeanor is difficult to square with the long history of violent altercations written across the planes of his face, has tried out virtually every form of overnight accommodation available to a New Yorker lacking conventional housing. A few years ago, he was living in a single-room-occupancy hotel and working as a truck driver for a plumbing-supply company. Ace is black, and everyone else associated with the company was Chinese—a fact that may or may not have contributed to a running dispute with the owner's son, which led to the loss of Ace's job and, in short order, the loss of his hotel room.

For a time, he lived in a vacant building at Ludlow and Stanton Streets—an arrangement that had the landlord's blessing, according to Ace, because he and his fellow-squatters took good care of the place and protected it from others, who might not have. Even after renovations began, the squatters stayed on. The workers would give advance warning whenever they were about to start gutting a new floor, and the squatters would pack their things and move up one flight. After the top floor became unavailable, they moved out. Ace's next extended place of residence was an abandoned entrance to the Delancey Street subway station. To enter this space, which had been converted into a storage room for old turnstiles, you climbed a stairway from the platform and forced your way around a wire-mesh gate. Here, too, landlord-tenant relations were reasonably harmonious (the subway maintenance staff often left a rest room open for the settlement's use), until the scene attracted an undesirable element of heavy drug users, whose unsanitary habits generated more passenger complaints than the Transit Authority could ignore. "People got out of hand, and the police ran us out" is how Ace sums it up.

Shortly before their eviction, an employee of the city's Human Resources Administration stopped by to make a pitch for the shelters—an appeal that remains fixed in Ace's memory because that very night, he says, a young man was murdered in a city shelter by a fellow-resident who was after the victim's sneakers. Before Ace moved onto the Hill, he lived in an abandoned car for a while, and then, when no other option presented itself, out in the open, in Sara Delano Roosevelt Park, north of Canal Street. He was in the hospital recently with what he calls "a touch of pneumonia," and, because he is HIV-positive ("That's a part of life," Ace says), the hospital authorities insisted that he enter a shelter as a condition of his release. He was sent to the one on Wards Island—a comparatively well-managed shelter, according to Ace. "I've been in a majority of them," he told me. "It's just like being in jail, and I did too much time in my life." After a single night's stay, he fled Wards Island and made his way back to the Hill.

On Chrystie Street, above Delancey, is a drop-in center for the homeless, which is run by the Bowery Resident Committee, a city-subsidized nonprofit corporation. The facilities include showers and toilets, and the center frankly uses them to lure people into employment counselling and other forms of more enduring help. The Hill's inhabitants rarely make an appearance there, though they live only a short walk away. For most of them, even a drop-in center represents an unacceptably close brush with the bureaucracy. They would sooner use the ground for a toilet than have to explain themselves to anyone in authority.

This is not to say that the city government has nothing to offer these people. But the services they depend on the most are ones that were not intended for them. Many of the huts have electricity, siphoned from one of the lampposts on the bridge. (A number of the residents have TVs and stereos.) Water is obtained from a fire hydrant on Canal Street. The Hill's trash is removed, sporadically, by sanitation crews in the employ of the Department of Transportation, which has jurisdiction over the Hill, as it has over many odd parcels of land under or adjacent to the city's bridges and roadways. Probably none of the assorted government programs intended to "help the homeless" matter as much to the Hill's economy as New York State's bottle-return law, which, although designed for another purpose, has created employment for thousands of homeless people throughout the city. While some people on the Hill regard can-and-bottle collecting as beneath them, others regularly scour the neighborhood and deliver their bounty to the Pathmark on Pike Slip, at the base of the bridge. Sometimes there is a line of collectors waiting patiently in the Pathmark parking lot, each with his own supermarket cart full of cans and bottles.

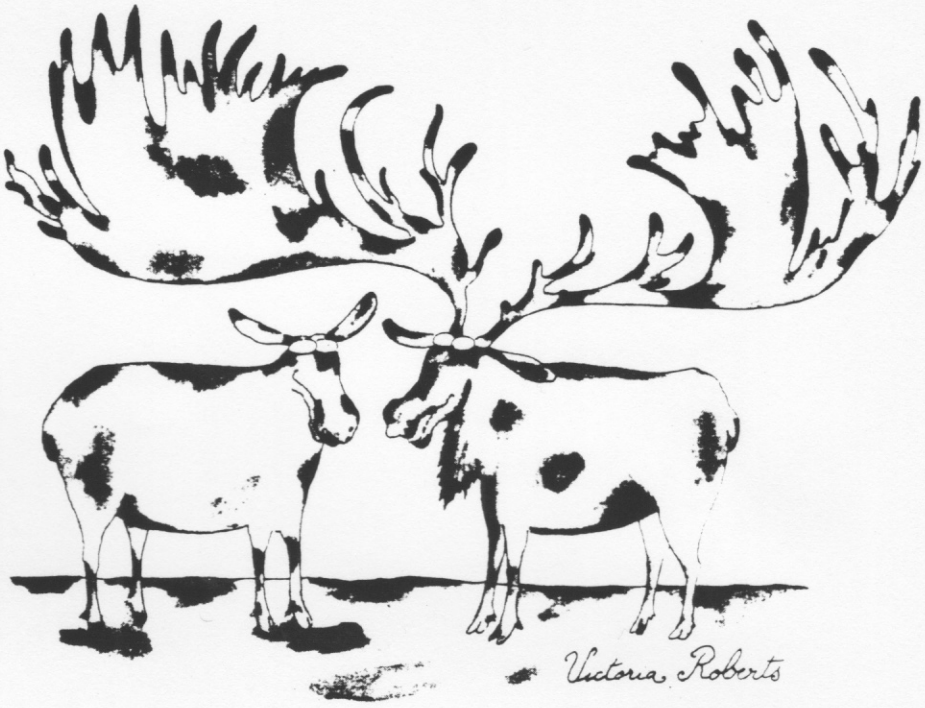
Most of the Hill's inhabitants are enterprising scavengers of abandoned furniture and appliances. They keep what they need, and sell, barter, or give away the rest. In some cases, these activities brush up against the line that divides scavenging from thievery; in other cases, they cross well over the line. As a result, the Hill has come in for a good deal of police attention.

The residents speak of an informal understanding with police officers from the local precinct—the Fifth—that any criminal activity is to take place outside its bounds. A point that has been impressed on them with particular vigor is that they are not to go into the cars that police officers park near the bridge when they are appearing in court. From time to time, the police have come by and searched the Hill for stolen goods. In the absence of any court ruling to the contrary, they seem to feel that dwellings on public land do not enjoy the protection of the Fourth Amendment.

Only slightly less feared than the police are H.R.A. outreach workers, who seek to sign people up for food stamps, welfare, and other benefits. Residents of the Hill are quick to say that many of these people are perfectly nice human beings. But they have a way of appearing at settlements shortly before other city employees show up with the not so friendly aim (and hardware appropriate to the task) of knocking the huts down. The theory, apparently, is that by making sure that people qualify for all the benefits due them the city eases its conscience about what is to become of them after they are evicted. Over the last year or two, the Hill has been swept by rumors of demolition on several occasions, and residents speak of a perhaps apocryphal incident last summer when the order had gone out and a bulldozer was actually on the way, but broke down somewhere in New Jersey.

Far more appreciated are the representatives of church groups and private volunteer agencies who come around to give out food and clothing. There are also people on the Hill who value the Needle Exchange, a service provided by the militant gay organization ACT-UP. The taking of drugs by intravenous injection is widespread on the Hill, and so is AIDS. The Needle Exchange allows people to trade in as many as ten used needles for new ones. (Someone with no needles gets a basic allotment of two.) The ACT-UP volunteers also distribute condoms, bleach, and cotton, and a clearly written pamphlet that explains how to wash your works. This is a program that enjoys no city funding; in fact, eight ACT-UP volunteers are currently on trial for illegal possession of hypodermic needles.

AIDS is far from the only health problem that looms large on the Hill. On cold nights, many of the residents stay warm—or as warm as they can—by first burning wood in a trash can outside and then carrying containers loaded with glowing embers into their huts. This is a technique that may not yield any out-and-out smoke, but it doesn't make for healthy air quality, either. Partly as a consequence, respiratory infections are a common problem on the Hill, as they are among homeless people generally; in recent months, the city has been experiencing an epidemic of tuberculosis among the homeless. The omnipresent noise of truck traffic coming off the bridge—dumpster-bearing flatbeds are particularly bone-rattling—makes sleep a fitful proposition, leaving people still more vulnerable to sickness. Since most of the Hill's inhabitants have no health insurance, the only maladies for which they can hope to get treatment are those severe enough to pass muster with the emergency-room personnel in one or another of the city's public hospitals, and the decision to put oneself at the mercy of such institutions is not one that comes easily to these people.



"Honest, Martha, I don't mean to crowd you."

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BOOKS on the history of New York City have plenty to say about what the Hill was like in 1909, when the Manhattan Bridge was opened to the public. It was part of a small park, known as Manhattan Bridge Plaza, with grass, trees, and a fountain. The park in turn, was part of a bold effort—along with a piece of neoclassical grandiosity called the Court of Honor (an arch modelled on the Porte Saint-Denis flanked by a colonnade with a Parthenon-inspired frieze of buffalo-hunting Indians)—to redeem the city from the aesthetic disrepute in which it had been languishing since the completion, six years earlier, of the neighboring bridge to the north, the brutally functional Williamsburg.

Information about the Hill's fate over the next seventy years or so is sketchier, for historians have yet to give to the neglect and deterioration of the city's great monuments of architecture and engineering anything like the attention lavished on their design and construction. By the late nineteen-seventies, however, the Court of Honor was coated with soot and graffiti, the Bowery side of the park had become a parking lot for a housing project called Confucius Plaza, and the Hill was a fenced-in, weed-filled lot. That, at any rate, is how Indian Jim remembers it. Indian Jim and his neighbor (and former roommate) Louie are the two clear examples on the Hill of what experts call "the old homeless"—pioneers who moved onto the streets be-

fore the eighties, when a wider slice of the population followed their example. Indian Jim and Louie also call to mind the term "Bowery bum," and, in fact, the Bowery was a haunt of theirs in the years before most of its bars and flophouses were driven out of business by the northward spread of Chinatown and the eastward spread of SoHo. By Indian Jim's lights, though, Louie's devotion to liquor fails a crucial test. Louie keeps cats, and every now and then, when he has exhausted the local garbage dumps and other free sources of supply, he has been known to go down to the Pathmark and buy a few cans of cat food, at twenty-five cents apiece. Indian Jim takes the position that wine is the only product justifying an outlay of cash money. "I'm the only real alcoholic up here," he likes to say.

A broadly built man with a scar across his left cheek, Indian Jim describes himself as "Dutch, German, and Cherokee Indian"—a dangerous combination, according to Louie. Indian Jim moved to New York in the early sixties, drawn here by the lure of employment as a steelworker on the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, and driven from his native Texas by domestic difficulties. He lays the blame for many of his subsequent troubles on New York's status as "an alcoholic's paradise"—a city too tolerant of drunkenness for the good of anyone inclined that way. "Twelve years ago, I was unemployed and loused up," Indian Jim said recently, seated on a stool at Al's, the last remaining bar along a stretch of the Bowery which used to teem with them. "It was summertime, so I throwed down a piece of cardboard up there, and I slept in the weeds." Indian Jim introduced Louie to the site. They ran into each other on the street, and Louie said, "Where you flopping?"—to which Indian Jim replied, "Up there in the weeds." For a number of years, the Hill was a place to sleep whenever one or both of them were out of a job and couldn't afford a room in an S.R.O.

If the word "homeless" serves any useful purpose, it may be as a description not of a living situation but of a way of being seen by the rest of society. Homelessness in all its forms intrudes on certain widely held notions about public space and the level of order, cleanliness, and good manners that people hope to find there. The homeless understand this. They understand that the rest of us, when we think about them, imagine a world without them. Indian Jim and Louie, like most homeless people (and most New Yorkers), assumed that if they put up a hut for themselves they would be crossing a line between the barely acceptable and the intolerable. About five years ago, however, they noticed a Chinese man who was sleeping in a cardboard box on the steps of a Greek Orthodox church on Forsyth Street, directly east of the Hill. Every night, he would return to find that his house had been thrown on the nearest trash pile while he was away. Tiring of this game, the Chinese man finally moved himself and a new box up onto the Hill, and soon he began to construct something more permanent. Indian Jim and Louie had been hiding on the Hill, using the weeds as protection not only from thieves but from police officers and other agents of officialdom. The Chinese man's example emboldened them. "We looked at him," Indian Jim recalled, "and we said, 'If he can build one, we can build one.' "

The Chinese man canted his home against the steep slope at the back of the Hill, and though it has grown considerably since then, it still cuts a low profile. While the other residents come and go by way of Canal Street, he uses the back entrance, on Forsyth Street, and from his neighbors' perspective his house is almost invisible, appearing as a low roof of wooden shingles held in place by stones. The house that Indian Jim and Louie put up was a more conventional shanty—four walls and a roof, all of scrap lumber. But it, too, was low to the ground—designed to attract minimal attention.

The first resident of the Hill to approach the task of construction with a cool indifference to the outside world's opinion was Juan Samuel Ramirez, who goes by the name Sammy. A hugely energetic man with a sinewy frame, a broad mustache, long, straight hair, eyes that dart around a lot, and a big smile, Sammy grew up in the countryside of northern Puerto Rico. He left school after the seventh grade, and as a boy and a young man he butchered meat and drove a truck for his father, who raised and sold goats and other livestock. An early marriage foundered when he and his wife, who was French and a Jehovah's Witness, quarrelled over the right use of Sammy's free time. He liked to spend his weekend days at the cockfights; she wanted him in church. One day, Sammy returned home to discover that she had gone to New York, taking their two small sons with her. He followed, hoping to remedy the break, and he put down roots here after his family moved on to France. For a while, he earned a living making belts, handbags, and other leather goods and selling them from a stand outside Bloomingdale's. Then the cocaine trade beckoned. "I just got lazy, and I said, 'Well, this is a better way to make a little money,' " Sammy recalled.

Three months on Rikers Island persuaded him otherwise. Soon after his release, he ran into a former girlfriend, who asked him where he was living. He told her he was sharing an apartment on East Fifth Street. "Where are *you* staying?" he asked.

"Oh, I got my own little place," she answered.

"Let's go and see your little place," Sammy suggested.

On the way, she began to prepare him for the untraditional nature of her residence. She was living on the Hill, in a hut made largely of cardboard, with a dirt floor. Startled at first, Sammy was soon thinking along more imaginative lines. "It just came upon me, and I've been here since" is how he explains his decision to move onto the Hill. To someone with his skills and drive—and with the hundred and seventy-five dollars a month he would save by moving out of the apartment on Fifth Street—the place had all kinds of potential. After living in his girlfriend's hut for a while, and wearying of plugging the leaks with socks and rags, he built a new hut next door, followed by a bigger one next to that, and, finally, a board fence around the two, forming a kind of compound. When one of his neighbors compared Sammy's place with the ranch on the old Western series "Bonanza," Sammy leaned a wagon wheel against his fence and wrote "La Ponderosa" across it.

To Sammy, it seemed only natural that a house should be tall enough to stand up in. But when his neighbors

saw what he was up to, they warned him that he was tempting the gods of the municipal bureaucracy to knock the whole settlement down. "Everybody was scared," he told me. "They said the cops were going to come. I said, 'I don't care.' " When it became clear that the cops were not going to come—at least, not in the apocalyptic sense—others were inspired to expand their houses or put up new ones.

Sammy has played a role in the Hill's recent history which might be likened to, say, Robert Moses' role in the growth of New York City from the nineteen-thirties to the nineteen-sixties. He was the first resident to bring in electricity from the lamppost, using a line of cable and conduit five hundred and seventy-five feet long and largely buried. Since demonstrating the possibility, Sammy has supplied several of his neighbors. But he has withheld the service from people who, in his judgment, might not be sufficiently attentive to the danger of fire—a constant hazard of life on the Hill, and one that, beyond the immediate threat it poses, can bring unwanted attention from city agencies capable of making trouble.

Until fairly recently, Sammy was renting out the first hut he built to a couple for five dollars a day—a sum that enabled him to buy ice for a snow-cone stand he was operating. Five dollars struck him as a modest rent, but others on the Hill, including his tenants, thought he had violated a sort of common law of homelessness dictating that cash ought not to change hands under such circumstances. Their feelings, along with a broader resentment of Sammy's position as keeper of the electricity and supplier of tools and other necessities, earned him an awkward prominence—a sort of King Rat status—in the community. On several occasions, Sammy's electricity (along with his subcontractees') was cut off, and he had to investigate the route of his supply to find the break. His tormentors would choose a point where the wires were taped together, and, after disconnecting them, seal the joint with tape again in order to render the deed invisible, thus greatly complicating Sammy's search. One night a few months ago, he awoke to discover that his house was on fire. While naming no names, Sammy is inclined to suspect that the fire was set by one of the people to whom he declined to give

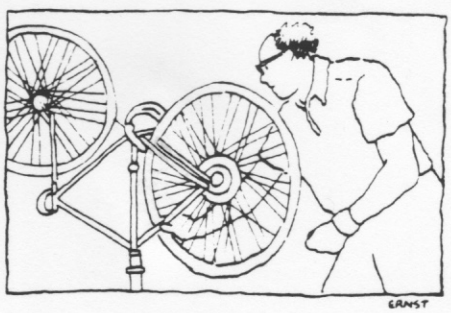
electricity. One possible moral of the story, he has theorized, is that he should not have been so generous—that if he hadn't given electricity to some, others would not have felt left out. "Every time I'm nice, this stuff happens," he has been heard to say. "When I'm just an asshole, everything's O.K."

In the three years that Sammy has been on the Hill, the community has tried to adopt a few basic rules of sanitation, discipline, and civility. During one of my visits, he spotted a neighbor relieving himself on the ground, a considerable distance away. "You're a cripple?" Sammy hollered. "You can't walk?" Turning back to me, he said, "I have to tell people they're surrounded by neighbors, not bushes."

There is a tendency to think of the homeless as idle, and the Hill's inhabitants include a few people who certainly live up to that expectation. But the spectrum extends far in the other direction. Sammy leaves early most mornings, and comes home late. His neighbors sometimes complain about the noise he makes chopping wood after they have gone to sleep. Except for the fact that he is—as the world defines it—homeless, he would strike people as a workaholic. "I call myself a one-man army," he told me. "I do a little of this, a little of that, a little of everything. I might not do it perfectly, but you have to satisfy yourself." Mostly, what he does is search for discarded books, furniture, and appliances, and then for likely buyers. "I walk around a lot, I accumulate things," he explained. Every few Sundays, he takes his goods to a flea market in SoHo. He says he never steals anything, and it is easy to believe him after seeing some of what he comes up with. On one of my recent visits, he proudly displayed an ancient vending machine for coffee, tea, and soup, of the type that dispenses the cups first and then their contents.

Sammy has a part-time job loading and unloading for a local tile company—a job that pays him not only in money but in skids, the ubiquitous wooden platforms used for delivery of heavy materials (such as tiles) and also for shanty construction. Such stratagems are typical of him. He used to work for a fruit vender on Grand Street. Now he gets forty dollars a week for storing the vender's stand in front of his house at night. Sammy figures that he makes nearly enough money to afford an apartment, but it is not clear to him that he would be better off with one. "I think I do better sometimes than people who've got their own apartment," he told me. "Sometimes they don't have heat, and I do." Sammy has a small collection of electric heaters, most of which are for sale, not for his personal use. His hut has double-layered walls, and enough foam in the interstices so that he rarely feels the need for a heater. "Sometimes, even in the winter, it gets so hot in here that I have to open the window to let some air in," he told me.

THE Hill has no board of directors or admissions criteria. The easiest way to move in is to know someone already living there. That way, the newcomer can get help in choosing a building site with reasonable drainage and in finding materials and putting up a hut. It would be difficult for a complete outsider to take up residence on the Hill—difficult, but not impossible. Proof of that is Yokbill Lee, who arrived about a year ago. He was born in southern China. When he was a boy, his family sent him to live with an aunt and uncle in Cuba, to help out in their grocery store there, and he emigrated to New York after the Cuban Revolution. Until several years ago, he had regular employment in the restaurant industry, as a dishwasher and a kitchen hand. Then, for reasons that seem to mystify him, he found that no one would give him a job. His hut is constructed, on the outside, largely of mattresses, cushions, carpeting, and other soft and absorbent substances, which are lashed together with ribbons and string. The exterior serves as a kind of pegboard refrigerator in the cold months of the year: on one visit, I found grapefruits, oranges, and a bag of rolled bean curd hanging there. In winter, Mr. Lee himself wears so many layers of clothing that he looks a little like his hut.



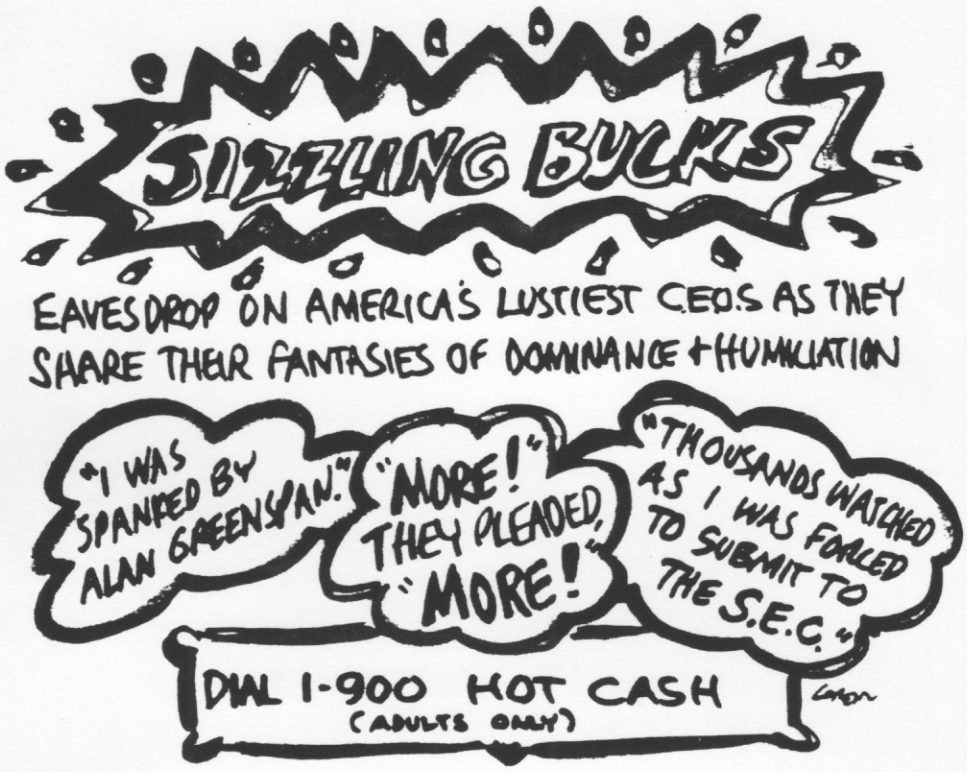
Every so often, Mr. Lee removes a swatch of interior wall, carries it outside, and puts it on the exterior, and in this fashion his hut is continually growing—to a degree that had his nearest neighbor, Sammy, so rattled recently that in a fit of fury he ran Mr. Lee off the Hill and warned him (they have Spanish as a common language) to stay away. Several days later, Mr. Lee made a cautious reappearance, removed the most recent offending addition from his hut, and, with Sammy's grudging approval, moved back into the remainder. On sunny days, Mr. Lee can often be seen up on his roof, rearranging its components or installing some piece of decoration—perhaps a paper lantern or an outsize Teddy bear. Otherwise unadorned portions of the hut are a canvas for his writings, in Chinese characters. On one panel of his house, not long ago, he had composed a kind of classified ad declaring his desire to hire several hundred thousand people at five hundred dollars a day. Mr. Lee told me (through an interpreter) that he had once had five thousand wives. "I had money," he said. "That's why I had many wives. Now I have no money, and no wives." Apart from the contretemps with Sammy, communication between Mr. Lee and his neighbors has been sparse. But that does not prevent them from proudly pointing out the architectural novelty of his hut. "Look all over—you won't find a nail in it," one of them said to me.

Mr. Lee volunteered the information that he is fit and eager to go back to work. He told me that he has repeatedly appealed for help to the Lee association, a support organization for the twenty-five-thousand-odd Chinese people of that name living in the metropolitan area. But the Lee association has been a disappointment to him, and it appears that in other respects as well he is alone in New York. This makes him an unusual—perhaps a unique—case on the Hill. Most of the residents have close ties to the outside world and its economy. Sammy has a sister who is a lawyer. Juan, who is also from Puerto Rico, professes to have one brother who is a police officer and another who runs a grocery. His father and mother own an apartment building in Greenwich Village, and Juan regularly goes there to do odd jobs and share meals. "My people give

me everything I want," he told me. "I'm the one who fucked up." Juan was gainfully employed picking up trash for a private carting company until he was sidelined a few years ago by a hand injury. He gets a disability check of a few hundred dollars every two weeks, gives most of it to his wife, who lives, with their two children, in a housing project on East Sixth Street, and keeps the rest for himself. To supplement his income, he collects cans and bottles. He has his own supermarket cart for this purpose, and knows all the likely spots. It takes him an average of about two hours, he told me, to gather a twenty-five-dollar load, and perhaps another two hours to deliver and redeem it.

Many of the people on the Hill have children, but few see much of them. Indian Jim left a wife and son behind in Texas, and hasn't had any contact with them in thirty years. One resident has a son living in New Jersey, for whom he was recently storing—as a present—a fine-looking toy car, big enough for a boy to sit in. One day, a nattily dressed man saw the car as he was driving by on the bridge, thought it would make a fine present for his own son, and, after parking on Canal, ascended the Hill to make an offer. After a brief round of negotiations, it seemed that his offer had been refused, but as he started to leave the owner of the car came striding after him with a new concession, and the sale was made—for four dollars.

Sammy hasn't seen his two sons in France since the seventies. He gets news of them, occasionally, in phone conversations with his mother, back in Puerto Rico. "Sometimes I feel sad, but what can I do?" he said to me. "They are there, and I'm here. It costs money to go there. I could call them by phone, but my pride won't let me call collect." With his girlfriend, Sammy has three daughters, each of whom was sent at an early age to live with their maternal grandmother, in Virginia. Sammy and his girlfriend have spoken of moving to Virginia themselves, but they have held back, Sammy told me, because of a methadone program in which she is enrolled. I was unable to get his girlfriend's thoughts on this question, or any question. She keeps to herself, apparently out of deference to Sammy's views regarding the place of women—views shared, it seems, by most of the men on the Hill, and endured by most of the women.



People move away from the Hill occasionally, but not as often as they talk about doing so. About a year ago, Indian Jim was struck by a car, and found himself in Beekman Hospital. A social worker came to visit him there, and offered to get him into a shelter. "I'll accept jail, but I'll not accept a shelter," Indian Jim replied. He demanded to see a negligence lawyer, but the hospital had a policy against allowing such people on the premises. "The other hospitals allow you to see a lawyer after you get hit," Indian Jim told me indignantly. After his release, though, he found a lawyer, and his hopes for the future have been tied ever since to the prospect of an insurance settlement. He has heard that an injury like his—broken leg, broken foot—is worth about ten thousand dollars, or six thousand after the lawyer takes his cut. If the money comes through, he plans to move to Florida, where he hopes to find a home with an orange tree in the back yard. In recent months, however, his lawyer has been warning him that he may have to lower his sights, because of evidence suggesting that Indian Jim was under the influence of alcohol at the time of the accident. Indian Jim says he will not stand for such treatment. "Reduce me, hell!" he exclaimed. "I know guys who've been out here drunk, and they got the full amount!" Every so often, he walks over to the lawyer's office, on lower Broadway, and comes away with fifty dollars, which represents not only money in the pocket but, he hopes, a sign that a settlement is still in the works.

About six months ago, word reached Ace that a former employer of his, hearing of Ace's misfortunes, had offered him a job. With high hopes, Ace left for Philadelphia to move in with his sister and take up a new career as a security guard. Several weeks later, he was back on the Hill. He had become embroiled in an altercation with his brother-in-law, he explained to me, and it had seemed advisable to leave town.

A good bet to get away, I judged early in my conversations on the Hill, was Ali, a native of Yemen, who had a remarkably confident and playful manner, considering his circumstances. Ali struck me as an anomalous presence on the Hill, even before he mentioned that he had received a master's degree in business administration from the University of Michigan. He seemed particularly out of place during the Gulf War, when, to compound the novelty of being the only Arab on the Hill, he had the temerity and the poor judgment to suggest that Saddam

Hussein might win. (The war enjoyed nearly the same high level of support on the Hill as it did in the nation as a whole.) Ali spoke of his current station in life as a temporary one, soon to be corrected. Among the factors seemingly working in his favor were a cousin employed at the Yemeni Embassy, in Washington (which was, Ali said, a possible next stop for him), the ability to generate cash (I once saw him with a wad of hundred-dollar bills in his hand, hiring people to help him put up a new hut), and a certain capitalist know-how, honed, he said, during a period as the owner of a supermarket on Mermaid Avenue, in Coney Island.

Ali was often away from the Hill, and when there he often seemed to have an imminent engagement. He repeatedly promised to sit down for an interview sometime. But the time never seemed to come, and I was still waiting for our interview to happen when I learned, in March, that he was in jail, accused of burglary.

One night a few weeks ago, Ali was back on the Hill, looking much less ebullient than his pre-incarceration self. When I renewed my request for an interview, he accepted with an air of "What's the difference?" and we walked to a Chinese restaurant a few blocks east along Canal. On the way, Ali warned me not to believe everything I had heard on the Hill. "Seventy per cent of what he told you is lies," he said, of someone I had already interviewed. "What *I* tell you is one-hundred-percent the truth." (When our interview was over, he volunteered that his percentage had been more like ninety.) The story he told me, over a plate of chicken curry, was uncharacteristically sombre in tone and harshly self-critical.

Ali's career in the supermarket business and its attendant middle-class existence in Brooklyn had been undone, it seemed, by a weakness for crack and trips to Las Vegas. Hopelessly in debt, he had sold the supermarket to a friend, and, with another friend, had carved out a new career for himself in the breaking-and-entering field. Ali's role, evidently, was an outside one, but the police had found him on the street one night carrying a fax machine and a couple of fancy telephones, and by the simple expedient of calling the number on one of the phones they established where the goods had been taken from. Ali eventually pleaded guilty to possession of stolen property and was sentenced to time served, which came to fifty-five days.

He had done his time in the Tombs, a facility for which he was full of praise. While there, he said, he had not only purged his system of cocaine but had eaten a good, clean Muslim diet, with an emphasis on vegetables and grains. Ali remarked that the best thing that could happen to most of the people on the Hill would be to be forced into a drug-free environment, as he had been. He had left the Tombs a new man, he told me. That same day, however, he had paid a visit to his former partner, and had taken up his crack habit anew. "You can't see somebody smoking in front of your face and just say 'No, I don't want it,'" Ali explained. He told me that it was only a matter of time before he gave up crack once and for all, but he seemed to be waiting for divine intervention. "I have decided, but now He has to decide," he told me.

Ali's parents are in the real-estate business in Yemen, and I inquired if they could be appealed to for plane fare home. He replied that he had written them for money many times in the past, and they had never failed him. (Although he is thirty-four, his usual explanation for needing money is that he is taking a course. When I asked him if his parents believe him, Ali laughed—one of his few displays of emotion in the interview—and assured me that they believe everything he tells them.) But he could not go home to Yemen just yet, he said, because he refused to let his family and friends see him in his current state. First, he would have to go off somewhere on his own and get himself straight, and to tide him over the period of detoxification, he calculated, he would need a sum in the neighborhood of, say, twenty-five thousand dollars. Then he would make a glorious return to Yemen. "When I go, I want to surprise my family—*boom!*" he declared.

LAST July, the New York *Post* ran a story describing the Hill as "the city's next battleground between squatters and rent-payers." The story quoted a local real-estate agent, who pointed with disgust to the trash cascading onto Canal and Forsyth Streets and complained that Chinatown had been made a dumping ground for problems that other neighborhoods would never put up with. It is easy to see things from his perspective, especially if you try to imagine what would happen if a shantytown plopped down on, say, Park Avenue in the Eighties. Of course, the homeless know better than to build in such a neighborhood; they go where they have some hope of not being disturbed. The Hill's inhabitants are living on a site that was all but abandoned before they got there. They have as much right as most non-homeless people, perhaps, to feel that they have improved on what came before, and more right than most to think of themselves as having built a community from the ground up. People fight a lot on the Hill, but they exhibit a degree of neighborliness not to be found in every high-rent apartment building. If someone is sick, others will urge him to go to the hospital, and help him get there if he needs help. If a van from a church or a social-service agency stops by with a handout of food or clothing, those receiving it are expected to think of the needs of those who don't happen to be around at the time.

These things were true before the arrival of Gabriele Schafer and Nick Fracaro, seven months ago, but they have become more evident since. Gabriele and Nick are the proprietors of the tepee. Nick has shoulder-length reddish-brown hair and looks like a cavalryman who has gone Indian. He grew up on a farm in Illinois. Gabriele has short dark hair, regular features, and a soft-spoken manner that nicely complements Nick's personality, which is more intense. She comes from West Germany. They met when, as fellow-students at the University of Illinois, they were cast as lovers in Jean Genet's "The Balcony," and the casting took. Another Genet production—"Deathwatch," at the Illinois State Penitentiary (on which they collaborated with an inmate theatre group called the Con Artistes)—was the springboard for the formation of Thieves' Theatre, a company that, according to its original, Genet-inspired statement of purpose, seeks "to embody and articulate the voice of those who are stigmatized, quarantined, disenfranchised" and "to lift

the barriers between us and them." For the company's second major effort, a production of "Marat/Sade" in Toronto, Nick and Gabriele assembled a cast drawn partly from the local punk community and partly from a society of ex-mental patients who had organized against the psychiatric profession.

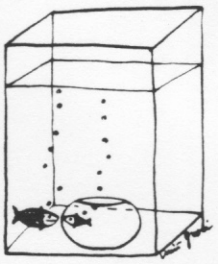
Nick and Gabriele share a job in a movie-production warehouse in Queens, and they have an apartment in Brooklyn, though lately they have been living mainly on the Hill. Nick likes to nurse an idea for a while before moving ahead with it. He had been making noises for months about a theatrical project involving the homeless—something that would link them with the nomadic tradition stretching back through the centuries, and assert a view of homelessness as, in his words, "a chosen way of life rather than an imposed condition"—when, early last year, Gabriele began executing some sketchy plans from a book called "The Indian Tipi," by Reginald and Gladys Laubin. When the tepee was finished, Nick felt a duty to put it up somewhere, and after a period of scouting around his eye fell on the Hill.

Their original notion was to live on the Hill for six months to a year while researching and preparing a production of "Despoiled Shore Medeamaterial Landscape With Argonauts," a work by the East German playwright Heiner Müller. "In the ideal of ideals," Gabriele told me, "we would move the tepee around the country, and it would be part of the performance. The tepee would travel in the summer, and the Hill would be the equivalent of the winter camp." With the passage of time, however, that plan has been, although not forgotten, shelved in favor of a more immediate and amorphous program whose exact nature is a subject of fairly constant discussion between them. "We're just trying to be up there, and to allow things to happen by being there," Nick told me. "We're researching our lives up there while we're living there, and we're looking at the reaction of people on the outside—to us and everyone else. It's both the epitome of our work in the theatre and, at the same time, the end of it. We're living in a tepee, without a script and without any performance dates."

One thing they are *not* doing, they

both insist, is social work. "We don't want to sound like do-gooders," Gabriele told me. "We stay away from that." Just the same, they have sometimes become fired up about some positive turn in the life of one of their neighbors, and, almost as often, discouraged when it has proved illusory—an outcome in which drugs have generally played a part.

During their time there, however, the Hill has changed in subtle but noticeable ways. The tepee, which they have declared a drug-and-alcohol-free zone, has become a sort of community center and a source of coffee in the morning. Nick has done a good deal of cleaning up, sometimes enlisting others in the effort. Gabriele has drawn portraits of just about all the residents, and put the pictures up on the inside of the tepee. In December, Nick and Gabriele invited their neighbors to a steak dinner on the occasion of the centenary of the massacre at Wounded Knee. On Easter Sunday, they bought a lamb, and Nick and Sammy skinned and butchered it, chopped up tree branches to make supports for a spit, and presided over a Puerto Rican-style barbecue with a sauce of Sammy's concoction. Nick has bought a number of disposable cameras and given them out to others on the Hill, who now join him in sneaking up on furtive photographers and snapping their pictures—a less provocative alternative to the previous practice of throwing rocks at such people. "Do unto others what they shouldn't be doing unto you" is how Ace (an enthusiastic participant) sums up the thinking behind the anti-photographer policy. The snapshots have been mounted on animal hides and hung, like scalps, on a pole outside the tepee.



In March, there was a rash of visits from H.R.A. outreach workers, and rumor had it that the city was preparing to raze the settlement. Hoping to find out what the story was, I called up the H.R.A., and spoke with one of the outreach workers who had made an appearance on the Hill. He told me that there was no ulterior motive behind the visits. He and his colleagues were merely concerned about living conditions there, he said, and they wanted the residents to know their options. He had tried to explain (in order to dispel a major concern of people in such settlements) that there are shelters where couples can stay together, as long as "they are in the same budget." He had tried to convey the message that a shelter is a temporary situation, leading to a room in an S.R.O., or perhaps even to an apartment. Despite these arguments, few people had signed up for any of the benefits he offered.

The Department of Transportation has had several shantytowns dismantled, but when I reached Joe DePlasco, a spokesman for the department, he told me that there were no such plans concerning the Hill. "We've taken a rather reformist position on this," he said. "We've tried not to relocate people. Unless there's a threat to one of our structures, it doesn't help us and it doesn't help them." The Manhattan Bridge has structural problems in abundance, but the Hill, it seems, isn't contributing to them.

In April, Gabriele put together an application for a grant, to be used largely to plant grass and do some landscaping on the Hill, and she approached a local foundation that sponsors self-help projects involving the poor. The response was discouraging. The foundation, one of its officials told Gabriele, preferred projects that would "bring change"—a phrase that in the homelessness context appeared to mean getting people off the street. After a friendly back-and-forth about what constitutes change and how to achieve it, Gabriele decided that she would give up on the grant idea for the time being and see what could be done without outside money. She bought some seeds and seedlings, and, with help from Nick and Louie, planted them in a plot of ground next to the bridge. Every day, tens of thousands of people drive by the Hill, and many of them get a good long look at the place as they wait for the traffic light at Canal and Chrystie to turn green. In recent weeks, they have been staring harder. To the spectacle of a shantytown with a tepee at its center has been added the fresh incongruity of a tiny garden, in which, some mornings, a couple of shanty dwellers can be seen sprinkling water over an assortment of summer flowers and a handful of pepper and tomato plants.

—JAMES LARDNER