

DRIFTING

They come from all corners of the country, rolling in on the rails



He shudders inside the tattered overcoat as rain leaks through the threadbare fabric. Adjusting the bedroll slung by a string across his back, he rakes fingers through his long rust-colored hair.

Two women under bright-colored umbrellas stop at the corner, waiting for the High Street traffic light to change.

"Scuse me," he says, staggering toward them. "I just need nineteen cents for a cup of coffee. Could'ya help me out?"

The women say nothing. One woman puts her hand over her nose and mouth and rolls up her eyes.

The light changes, the women cross the street.

"Thang-ya," he says, his empty hand catching rain.

He shambles up 13th Avenue begging from passersby. They ignore him.

A man stops, digs into the pocket of his blue jeans and presses a quarter into the beggar's greasy-brown palm.

"What's your name?" the man asks.

The beggar gathers the lapels of his overcoat in a hiss and squints.

"Why?"

"Give me back my quarter."

The beggar glances at the quarter, then at the man.

"Randy — my name's Randy," he says angrily,



closing his fist over the coin.

The man smiles and walks off. Randy hobbles up 13th to an alley.

Randy is part of an on-going transient problem for Eugene neighborhoods and the city's police, according to Sgt. Don Ellingson, a member of the city's COP Team.

Each day Eugene police arrest four or five transients on charges ranging from panhandling, drinking on an unlicensed premises, to public urination.

The typical transient has changed, Ellingson says. They are younger for the most part, between 18 and 25 years old. They're not old railroad bums but latter-day drop-outs.

These wanderers cause the most problems for police, Ellingson says. They tend to committ more violent acts. But those assaults usually take place within their own group of transients, he says.

"They roll each other a lot. The young ones find out an older one has a Social Security check and they roll him for it" The younger "drop-out" types do the stealing.

"The older transients used to follow the crops, picking cherries and whatever was in season. The younger ones don't do anything."

Skinner's Butte, Washington Jefferson Park, and the neighborhood parks, like 14th and Hilyard, are the places transients frequent according to Ellingson. There's no skid row in Eugene, so the transients "make a skid row of the parks," Ellingson says.

Andrian Stansfield, assistant supervisor for Eugene Parks and Recreation Department, reports more than \$2,000 in damages for 1980 to Skinner's Butte and Washington Jefferson Park. The damage

was done primarily to the restrooms and cottage, as well as shrubbery.

But Stansfield says the "problem is not the damage — people don't want to use the parks when transients are there."

Last summer, transients congregated in the park located in the 600 block of 14th Avenue in the West University Neighborhood. Residents cited incidences of panhandling, verbal harassment, and physical threats by transients.

Despite increased safety precautions and extra police patrols, the head of the West University crime prevention group, Charlotte Lemon, says the transients still inhabit the park. Several residents complained about their presence last fall.

"This spring," Lemon says, "we'll be alert a little earlier to prevent it from getting into the situation of last year."

Ellingson expresses some frustration when he talks about arresting transients. Each arrest costs taxpayers about \$46.

"It adds up," he says. "But in a couple of days a judge kicks them loose."

Hopping freight trains is basic transportation for many transients, Ellingson says, and the Eugene railyards are more lenient than some in larger cities.

Hoboes often hop off a train in Eugene — a main switching yard for Southern Pacific Railroad — and look for a free meal and a warm place to sleep. The city hasn't got many places like that for them.

One of these, the Eugene Mission, was set up primarily for the transient farmers.

"We started in the depression days with soup kitchens," says the mission's director, Ernest Unger.

He estimates the mission averages 110,000 meals a year, serving from 325 to 350 meals a day, about 10 percent over the number for last year.

The mission has 100 beds for men in its four dormitories and 25 beds for women and children in separate quarters.

Randy turns the pocket of his overcoat inside out and spills coins onto the counter. He carefully places the dirty bottles he's collected next to the coins. Next to the money is a quart of beer. Randy touches it lightly as the clerk scrapes the coins off the counter.

"Don't I get no change?" he asks.

The clerk folds his arms across his chest and stares back blankly.

Randy takes the bottle in both hands and slowly shuffles out the door into the night.



From top to bottom: A local transient makes his afternoon rounds, collecting "valuables" amid the Southern Pacific switching yards; the Eugene Mission has a special entrance for those in search of rest, warmth and food; transients pass through the campus area in hopes of acquiring spare change or cigarettes, but often only receive sympathy; alone, a drifter silently slips through town, always keeping an eye on the silver rail and his mind on distance. For him this is a good day; there is no rain.

By Cort Fernald
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