

Hobo Colony Lives Mole-Like in an Inferno of Pipes U

By DENA KLEIMAN

As tens of thousands of people stream overhead daily, a colony of reclusive derelicts leads a harsh existence in a little-known network of cavernous steam tunnels extending six levels below Park Avenue from Grand Central Terminal to the Waldorf-Astoria.

Living in the darkness relieved only by an occasional overhanging bulb, amid hissing steam pipes, oppressive heat and dripping water, as many as 40 tramps have lived for years in dungeons of filth, where days are measured by the rumble of passing commuter trains and dangers abound for the uninitiated.

The inhabitants, who stay for a few days or as long as several years, come from different walks of life. They range in age from 17 to 70. Many once had families, homes, jobs and responsibilities, but now they have sidestepped a more conventional life to live under-

'Warmer Down Here'

"It's warmer down here than it is in the hotel rooms upstairs," a 35-year-old man named John said in the tunnels beneath the Waldorf.

The terminal's police and maintenance workers at Grand Central know of the hobos' presence but rarely venture into the tunnels' inner depths to chase them away or to assist them.

"They know the place better than we do," said one officer on night tour at the terminal. "I'm scared to go down there."

The men—women are forbidden—sleep on newspapers and strips of cardboard in cubicles formed by iron pillars. They cook their food in tins on scorching metal pipes. Most emerge during the day to panhandle and scorch the streets for food. At night they return to their subterranean hideaway.

Despite their squalid surroundings, the men make valiant efforts to keep clean. They wash their clothes in scalding puddles. Some have brooms and try to keep their quarters swept. And several even shower under leaking pipes, after letting the water cool.

The superintendent of police at Grand Central, Walter Rescorla, said that, as far as he knew, no one was currently living in the tunnels, which house steampipes for the terminal. But a recent visit turned up a number of inhabitants.

An Assault on Senses

To a stranger, the tunnels appear hellish. They are devoid of natural light. Rats crawl. Giant roaches and fleas scurry at will. The thunder of trains overhead shakes the floor, the hot sticky air glues clothes to the skin, and the layers of soot make breathing difficult at times.

But to those who live in this hobo jungle, men who disdain free beds on the Bowery and Salvation Army lunches, it is a shelter from the street that offers space, privacy and sanctuary from harassment by authorities.

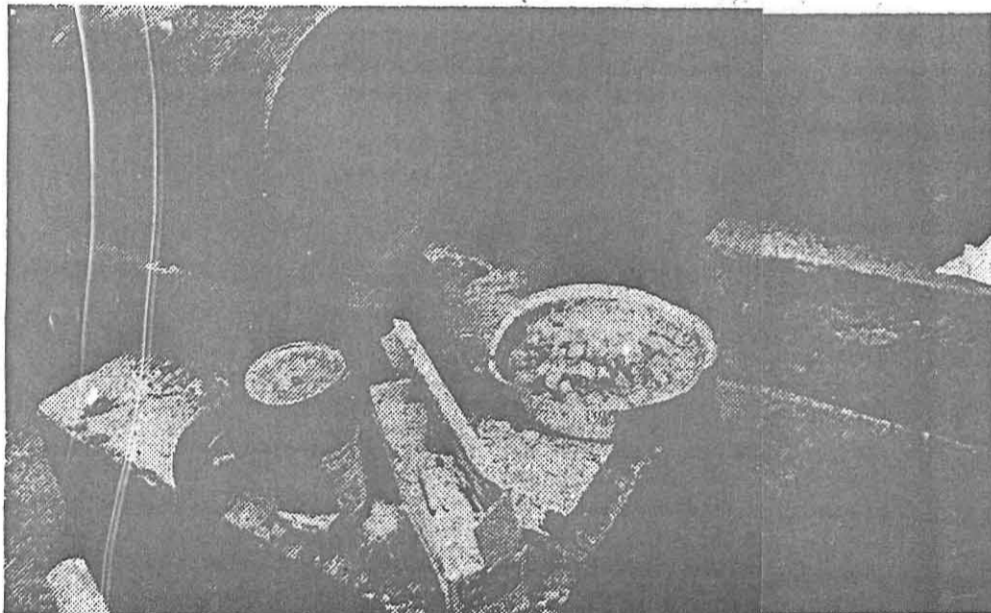
Like other homeless men and women who roam the city's streets, they have no need to starve. When asked why they do not accept welfare money and charitable services, they say that they prefer their freedom and privacy to the world of regulations and limitations on their movement.

While there was no evidence of the use of drugs in the tunnels, there were many indications of the drinking of alcohol.

In their caverns, the men live by their own rules. They set up lodging several hundred feet apart and stash belongings in well-concealed spots. At night, they use bathrooms on upper tunnel



While the rooms of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel cater to a different clientele above ground, a subterranean network of cavernous steam tunnels serves a colony of derelicts for sleeping, above, freedom and privacy, right, and even a kitchen for their evening meals.



levels that are used during the day by railroad maintenance workers.

Among the city's derelicts, the existence of the tunnels, which have been used by hobos for a generation or more, is not news. A 17-year-old youth named Rick, who has lived on and off in the tunnels over the last year, learned of them from his father, who has been sleeping in them periodically for years. Others hear of them at mission houses or in the streets.

There are many entrances to the tunnels. One well-frequented one is on 49th Street between Park and Lexington Avenues on the ground floor of the Waldorf-Astoria. Occasionally the embossed metal door is locked, so derelicts gain entrance at the Chemical Bank building on 47th Street, the Greenwich Savings Bank on 43d Street or numerous passageways in Grand Central.

Recently a reporter and photographer descended into the tunnels through a hole in a wall in Grand Central just

off Track 13. Beside it, scrawled in yellow chalk, is the word "Here." Down a shaky 15-foot ladder, another stairway led to a passageway beneath the tracks of the terminal's lower level. Because of its oppressive heat, the passageway is known to maintenance workers as the Burma Road. There the tunnels begin.

'Just a Place to Live'

In a 40-minute trek with flashlights in the pitch black, groping along sweltering walls caked with dirt, the visitors stretched over giant water pipes, scaled steep ladders and crouched under concrete beams, finally coming upon a 25-year-old man named Steve. He was lying in the dark in a cramped gully behind a double set of pipes and seemed startled by the visitors' approach.

Like several of the other inhabitants encountered on the postmidnight tour of the tunnels, Steve was reluctant to say where he had come from or how

he had received a gash in his forehead, which was covered with gauze.

"It's just a place to live," said Steve, who told of having stayed in the tunnels for several months, emerging by day to roam the city streets in search of money for food and wine.

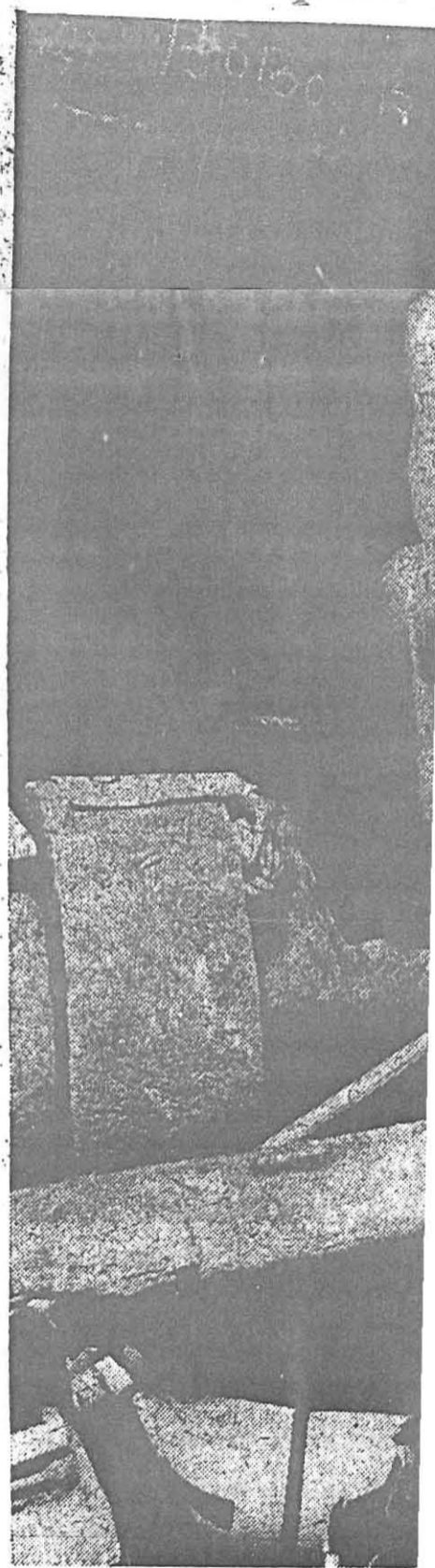
By night, he said, he cooks his meals in a lair stocked with mustard, salt, bread crumbs, Saran Wrap, aluminum foil, miniature bars of Amtrak complimentary soap and a broom.

On a steampipe that has been stripped of asbestos covering, he heats food and boils water for instant coffee. That night his dinner consisted of potatoes cooked in an aluminum dish. The night before, he said, there had been roast beef. "It depends on what we find," he said.

He has decorated his spot with sheets of paper, envelopes, a blurry, overexposed photograph and a calendar, all tucked into pipes. He sleeps with his coat and shoes on, keeping his wallet and a pair of eyeglasses close by his head.

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Inferno of Pipes Under Park Avenue



The New York Times/Don Hagan Charles

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Farther down the tunnel, other campsites were found. They consisted of piles of newspaper and strips of cardboard covered with assorted belongings. In one spot, there was a red quilt jacket, a jar of skin cream and a broom. At another site, a plum-colored scarf dangled from a pipe and a stick of roll-on deodorant lay on the floor. Littered here and there were empty cans of beer and drained wine and liquor bottles labeled Wild Irish Rose, Thunderbird and Night Train Express.

An Impromptu Laundry

Along the passageways, hidden in rafters, were other items: a pair of spectacles, a plastic bag of tobacco, an unopened quart of rum, 12 empty bottles of plum wine.

On a clothes line between two pipes hung a neat row of wash—two plaid shirts, several pairs of black socks. These, it turned out, belonged to a man

who gave his name as John, who said he was 35 and had lived in the tunnel for about three months.

Clean-shaven and thin to the point of gauntness, he had just awakened from a "bed" behind an iron pillar. The bed was a subway poster for Forbes Magazine, covered by a light blanket. Beside him was a ballpoint pen and a flickering red candle.

He said that he was a friend of Steve's. They met several months ago on their way into the tunnels. Although he and Steve spend their days apart and have separate quarters, they usually meet at night and share their food, he said. They do not know each other's last names.

John said that once he had worked for a railroad in Maine but or six years ago "things fr He did not say what had but he added that since been "on the loose."

"I guess you could see one day to the next,"

Of Hobos, Commuters and Baby Alligators

To the Editor:

The hobo colony discovered by your reporter to be living beneath Grand Central Terminal (news story Nov. 29) is no surprise to the long-time off-hour commuters who are of necessity familiar with derelict anthropology.

About four years ago, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority decided that they would no longer play host to these people in the station proper. The terminal began closing from 1:30 to 6 A.M. and the all-night commuter train service was discontinued.

In the early morning hours, it was clear that the derelict community was substantial in number. We, the early morning commuters, knew that they would have to go somewhere. Thus, the existence of the steam pipe community is no surprise. It is unfortunate that women derelicts are excluded from winter warmth and hot food, as well as freedom, privacy and independence.

Now that the hobos have a home, the terminal should be returned to 24-hour operation. It is unthinkable that our 24-hour city doesn't have 24-hour commuter train service. Persons who work off-hours are forced to drive into Manhattan, and suburbanites using the train for an evening's entertainment in the city are forced to go home at 1:30 A.M.

Since each trip to Manhattan has two facets, going and returning, off-hour auto trips mandated by the lack of train service may result in return trips unavoidably made by auto during the peak hours. All-night train service discourages some rush-hour driving.

The M.T.A. should cease to schedule commuter train service around the needs of derelicts, whose resilience in the steam pipe community proves that they are better off tolerated than harassed.

LARRY GOULD
Mount Vernon, N.Y., Nov. 29, 1977

To the Editor:

I was fascinated by Dena Kleiman's news article about the hobo colony deep beneath Park Avenue. Fragments of innumerable science fiction stories came to mind as well as visions of all those cast-off baby alligators growing to immense size and infesting New York's sewer system. All of that.

As I read it for the second time, I realized that Ms. Kleiman may have done a disservice to one of the city's last cohesive, viable neighborhoods. After this publicity, hordes of the bored, chic crowd will make for the "Hole in the Wall at Track Thirteen" disco, spray-can artists will have fresh surfaces for their graffiti, while OSHA bureaucrats will require heat shields on all steam pipes. Of course, representatives from various women's groups will demand equal opportunity for lady hobos (hobopersons?).

Blinking and squinting in the unaccustomed glare of flashlights, the hobos will be forced to the surface and be driven to take 9-to-5 jobs and to wear leisure suits on Sundays along with the rest of us.

RALPH ERIK SCHNACKENBERG
New York, Nov. 29, 1977

Colleges: The Importance of 'Middle Men'

To the Editor:

Rice University may regret having granted tenure until age 70 to Mathematics Prof. James R. Thompson, whose letter you published Nov. 24: His grasp of the realities of academic life is woefully deficient. Professors do not produce buggy whips, and obsolescence or supply and demand operate differently in the "knowledge industry" than elsewhere.

Assuming that academic administrators do discontinue "production" of Ph.D.'s in English and history, as Dr. Thompson suggests, what then will the tenured and highly paid full professors in the graduate schools do to justify their keep? They will have no graduate students, and hence no apprentice scholars to serve as underpaid research assistants or to teach

industry for high consultant fees. By Dr. Thompson's logic, it would increase academic "productivity": more lower-level students would be processed by fewer teachers, because no time would be wasted on the middle-level teacher/learners.

Before eliminating the middle men in the knowledge industry, Dr. Thompson had better rethink who most benefits from their presence. The situation is far more complex than he seems to realize.

JUDITH H. BALFE
Montclair, N. J., Nov. 24, 1977

Dept. of Bygones
