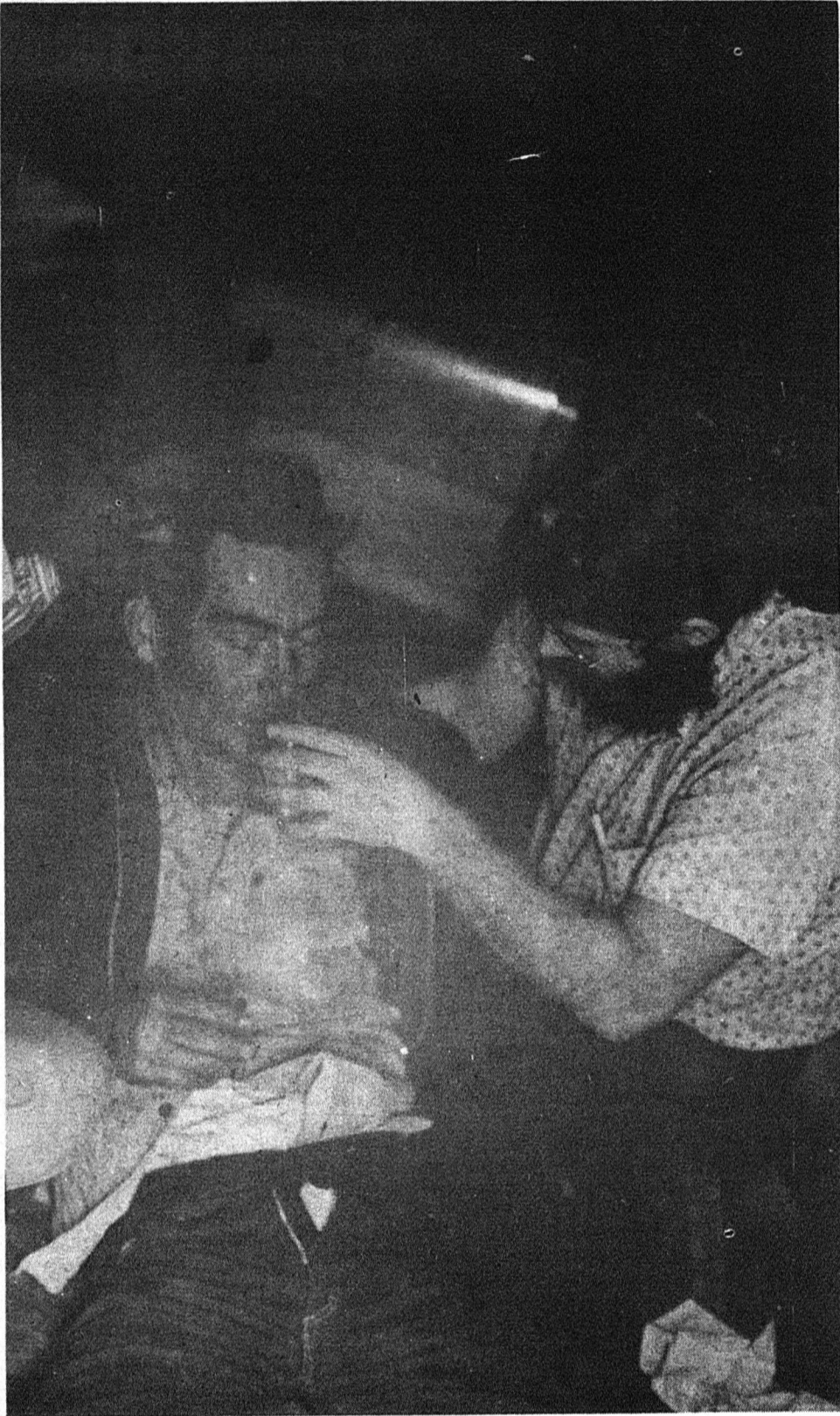


Life on a toxic treail a cycle not easb



by Ben Verdum

"This is Vancouver, isn't it?" The little man on the hard wooden bench does not believe me when I tell him he is not in a railroad station and that we are in beautiful downtown Edmonton, within spitting distance of the CN tower. He checks my story with some of the men, slumped on the benches around him. When they confirm it, he pieces together that, after a month of heavy drinking, he must have had another blackout and jumped a train, without knowing or caring where he was going, or why. He remembers being booted off the train for fighting, but beyond that, things are blurry. He groans when it dawns on him that this means he has lost his job and that returning to Vancouver will be difficult without money, or even a wallet.

But I have no time to talk to him, because from another part of the room, I hear the telltale clinking betraying that someone is committing the ultimate sin of drinking inside. I saunter over to the location of the sound and, after some argument, emerge victorious with a nearly full bottle of wine. I walk over to the sink and pour it out.

Every night of the week, between 100 and 150 men make their way to the United Church Men's Shelter at 101 St and 106 Ave., an overnight shelter for the drinking man who, because of his condition, cannot get accommodation at the Single Men's Hostel.

They give their name at the desk and walk into the room to find a place to sleep. The decor is early railroad station without frills. Wooden benches line the concrete brick walls and bare floor is soon covered with paper, cigarette butts and mud. Those butts which still contain tobacco are recycled and a constant search for smokable material is carried out by those who lack the money to buy the fixins.

From 11 pm to 7 am, three times a week, I am a combination of Father Confessor, baby sitter and peacekeeper. There are two of us on nightshift, secure behind a desk, taking names, breaking up fights or trying to prevent them, taking away bottles of wine and ejecting those who are rowdy or who persist in smuggl-

ing their bottles of Red Devil inside the building.

The majority arrive after bars close although there is a steady trickle throughout the night. For many, this place is the only home they have. Some have jobs, but most are total alcoholics, eking out their hand to mouth existence by panhandling or bottle collecting. They are a varied bunch and their ages range from 17 to Old Pensioners and their physical condition is poor, due to malnutrition and constant exposure to the cold.

This is not a job for the queasy, those who faint at the sight of blood. On skid row is a battle ground, the street is a prey on the weak and spill a lot of blood in the process. Air circulation inside the building is poor and the men's way of living rarely includes a shower. After a few hours, the room smells like the inside of a laundry bag filled with dirty socks. It is a blessing in disguise that few men remove their shoes or clothes (a precaution against losing them), thereby reducing the odor somewhat.

In case of a disturbance, someone is called for on the part of a supervisor. He can ignore the problem, hoping it will go away; he can interfere, and throw out some, or all of the participants, or he can call the police to have them do the job for him. On the average, the police are called three times a night but especially on the week when it might take an hour or more before they get there.

The level of aggression in the room is high and it is a rare night when we don't break up at least one fistfight. A few weeks ago, one of our steady customers comes in, scratching his head and cursing furiously. The other men diagnose his condition as lice and before I can say "boo," he is the center of a furious fight. Another man comes in and is immediately at the losing end of a fist fight. I break up and put him in the side room which is used to isolate those who can't behave. I check on him a little later and find he's in trouble again, this time someone is holding a pen knife about two inches from his face. I take the knife away and call a fuzz, who arrive, 6 strong, followed by

Photos Greg Neiman

