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## Displaced and Barely Visible: Archaeology and the Material Culture of Homelessness

### ABSTRACT

Every night nearly 800,000 people living in the United States are homeless, largely “invisible” to most Americans. Archaeological investigations of the material culture of homelessness in St. Paul and Indianapolis suggest that although causes of homelessness are complex, often related to broader issues of political economy, displaced people still manage to retain a cultural heritage of sorts. They carry some materials with them as part of a nomadic lifestyle, as reminders of “home,” while caching other elements in semipermanent camps, objects that reflect their cultural origins. The remainder of their material culture is geared toward shelter and subsistence and is largely disposable. Archaeological perspectives can provide information useful for providing aid to the homeless, especially for assistance outside of homeless shelters.

### Introduction

The homeless are largely invisible to most Americans. Residents may see the homeless every day in most urban areas but rarely try to understand who they are as people and what their lives must be like. Instead of not seeing the homeless or looking at them as just an irritating social problem, archaeological perspectives on the production, use, and disposition of material culture can provide clues about their lives and useful information that may better their lives. Homeless people indeed *do* have, use, and dispose of a material culture as they move across a landscape (Zimmerman 2004:134–135), and that disposal is patterned. In some cases their presence in an area has been relatively long-term, and they have set up what might be defined as communities with observable settlement patterns. Their use of resources and position on the landscape seem to resemble those of foraging peoples, but there are important differences. More commonly, their use of the landscape is short-term, moving in and out of an area, sometimes seasonally, but sometimes in response to everything from police

pressure to changing social programs designed to assist them. Homeless people show themselves to be remarkably adaptable to changing natural and social environments.

Such statements probably seem obvious, but the truth is that surprisingly little is known about homelessness. Many Americans assume that precisely because people are homeless they have no material culture, even when they see a homeless person pushing a shopping cart or carrying a plastic bag, let alone that items they carry might be precious to them. Many also assume that, except for the occasional night spent in a homeless shelter, the homeless live without protection from the elements and from other people. Such views are impressionistic and stereotypic, mostly because Americans *want* homeless people to be invisible. Caring, well-intentioned citizens seek to remove them as a social problem altogether, not understanding that, for some, homelessness is a preferred lifestyle. Once seen as being a major crisis in America, homelessness is no longer so because it has mostly been “defined away.” As Marcus (2006:2) notes, “The crisis passed, while the homeless remained.” Most do not really know the homeless, even though they may know a homeless person. Knowledge comes primarily from seeing local news reports about homeless people, seeing them in very public places when they panhandle or sleep in parks, or seeing them on television dramas.

The reality is that the adaptations of homeless people are highly variable due to the natural environments in which they live, their cultural origins, and a wide range of rapidly shifting cultural factors. For example, need for more substantial shelter may depend on climate but also may depend on what the homeless consider to be acceptable or preferable shelter and whether law enforcement or property owners will allow its use. The range of homeless populations may depend on access to sources of food, medical care, and interaction with nonhomeless citizens and law enforcement. Simply put, homeless persons’ behaviors and associated material cultures are complex.

This article can only be called investigatory, not definitive or comprehensive, an effort to understand homelessness from the disposition of its material culture. The study supports a vague

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hope that the information generated might prove useful in providing better provisions and delivery of social services to homeless people. This work is mostly descriptive and classificatory and, as such, may seem dated. Still, description and classification are necessary steps that point to ways in which archaeology can be civically engaged and can lead to policy shifts.

### **Anthropological Literature About the Homeless and Homelessness**

Although homelessness is mentioned in archaeological contexts as far back as dynastic Egypt (Dixon 1989:197), to date, homelessness has not been the subject of systematic archaeological study. At most, some studies allude to it within the context of urban or historical archaeology. For example, homelessness is at the core of research on historical almshouses (Baugher 2001; Huey 2001), and Spencer-Wood (2001) briefly discusses gendered, dominant ideology perspectives on the Victorian-period homeless. There are a substantially greater number of ethnographic and sociological studies of homelessness. These scholars tend to study homeless people in shelters and rarely away from them, most mentioning material culture minimally. One exception is Underwood's (1993) account of his time spent with the "bridge people" of Los Angeles, who live in camps much like those encountered in the Indianapolis project discussed below. Underwood stayed in these camps for days at a time, and he describes in some detail the material culture, as well as the foraging patterns, of the inhabitants.

Other researchers look at issues such as AIDS, impact on families, or employment (Glasser and Bridgman 1999; Hopper 2003; Marcus 2006). Broader social science studies that treat homeless people as social problems and emphasize policy are much more numerous. Only a recent dissertation by Valado (2006) provides cultural context useful to the project described here. She considers homeless persons' understandings and use of space in Tucson, *including* spaces away from shelters, and also discusses a few aspects of material culture.

### **Homeless Invisibility and the Genesis of this Project**

This project had its origins in a 2003 archaeological study and excavation which took place

within a quarter mile of downtown St. Paul, Minnesota. Zimmerman (2004) and a University of Minnesota Archaeological Field Practicum began excavations of garden areas downslope from the James J. Hill House. In 1891, Hill, the "Empire Builder" who engineered the construction of the Great Northern Railway, finished a sprawling 36,000 sq. ft. home on Summit Avenue overlooking the Mississippi River. Even the gardens were impressive, with two tall, massive, stone walls and a "mushroom cave" built into the lower wall. Outbuildings included three greenhouses, a gardener's residence, and a power plant for coal gasification to provide fuel for gas lamps in the house. After Hill died in 1916 and his wife five years later, the family gave the house and land to the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of St. Paul, which turned the house into a seminary, offices, and residence, but did little work on the gardens except for construction of a small grotto near the house.

After garden maintenance ceased, trees and brush filled in, and the outbuildings and walls deteriorated. As the site was so near downtown, the homeless moved into the area. Areas such as holes left by a tree fall and the mushroom cave in the garden wall became shelters, and the garden walls themselves provided windbreaks. The Minnesota Historical Society (MHS) got the property in 1978 and restored the house but left the gardens alone. Construction of Interstate 35E at the base of the slope prompted removal of the garden outbuildings (Figure 1).

In 2003 the MHS decided to renovate the garden and its walls. Archaeological research began in an effort to find any associated Hill family materials and to retrieve structural data about the walls and buildings. Large quantities of trash—clothing, sleeping bags, food remains—were scattered all over the surface of the gardens, with dense concentrations of debris in a few areas on the MHS property and on the adjacent slopes downhill from a nearby building that still serves the St. Paul Archdiocese. As part of the field practicum, students did a surface collection within sample blocks, and their collections were comprised entirely of trash. Test units spaced around the garden uncovered a few items from the Hill period, but the most commonly found material was the ubiquitous trash. Test excavations in the partially collapsed mushroom cave revealed more than a meter of fill, all but the bottom levels containing trash, as was the



FIGURE 1. The Hill House gardens with two garden walls, St. Paul, Minnesota. The primary project area was within the polygon. (Aerial photo from Minnesota Geospatial Information Office, modified by Larry Zimmerman, 2007.)

case in all other excavation units. Excavators encountered homeless people daily, present at the site when work began in the morning and sometimes still sleeping in the mushroom cave. The homeless never really disturbed the excavations, though occasionally they used them as a latrine or pulled rocks from the collapsed wall to use as fire rings (Figure 2).

The relevance of the discussion above is that the excavators did not recognize what they were seeing as having any archaeological importance. Field crews mapped and collected all excavated cultural materials, no matter their nature, but that nature was as “invisible” as the homeless people themselves. Except for a few objects clearly associated with the Hills’s gardens, everything was just “trash,” and mapping it was done mostly

for student training. Enlightenment came from an interview Larry Zimmerman heard on National Public Radio, one he could never track down for later citation, although he did find similar comments elsewhere (Woodward 2005).

The program interviewed a mother and her 12-year-old daughter who had recently become homeless but were able to move into a shelter for a time. When the reporter asked the mother how things were going, she acknowledged that there were issues but that things seemed to be okay. The daughter, likewise, said things were fine in the shelter but that she did not have any of her “stuff.” Stuff, of course, is what archaeology is about, and its temporal depth is only one aspect of the discipline’s concerns about material culture. Stuff is important to people: not only does it help them to



FIGURE 2. The Hill mushroom cave with bedding from a recent homeless occupant. (Photo by Larry Zimmerman, 2003.)

live, but it can be part of who they are as persons.

After Zimmerman heard the interview, the trash from the Hill House gardens became artifacts, and the homeless occupation of the Hill House gardens made a great deal more sense. The hole from the tree fall noted earlier was deep, with the large, fallen tree still in place. The tree provided some shelter for stored items and a wall for protection. With a tarp laid over the top, supported by logs and a removed MHS no trespassing sign, the shelter was substantial, with cooking gear, eating utensils, and a fire ring nearby. Downslope was a trash midden from extended use of the shelter. The mushroom cave had apparently provided shelter for decades. The front of the roof and part of the front wall had fallen into the cave, the cave floor becoming a living surface that over the years had developed a meter-deep midden. As the midden reached the height of the remnant front wall, trash spilled down the slope. Both mushroom cave and tree fall essentially

became rock shelters with long-term occupations, borne out in the excavations by recovery of glass, eating utensils, and other materials spanning about a half century. Over the rest of the gardens other concentrations of debris, fire rings, rotting sleeping bags, drug paraphernalia, and numerous other items demonstrated intensive occupation of the area. There was a surprising amount of used clothing that was in excellent condition, but its source was unclear (Figure 3).

There certainly was irony to the homeless living in the gardens of one the 19th century's major capitalists. In postexcavation public lectures about the project, a few images of the homeless materials in situ and after excavation elicited intriguing responses from audiences, as if the images had suddenly made the homeless visible and intellectually appealing to them. Though they found the information about the Hill garden work interesting, they apparently found the discussion of the homeless fascinating, and the vast majority

of their questions and posttalk discussion was about that work. Although they never suggested that the work might be socially relevant, the public's assessment of archaeology was proportionate to how relevant they thought it might be in their daily lives.

People began to point out places immediately adjacent to the Minnesota History Center, just a few blocks from the Hill House, that were used by the homeless. Many discussed the homeless in cities they had come from. Several talked about the use of material culture by the homeless, providing us with an answer about the clothing items found on the site. They eagerly pointed out that the Hill gardens were a few blocks from the Dorothy Day Center in St. Paul, a Catholic charity that provided the needy with used clothing, sleeping bags, and sometimes, food. Some of the clothing items apparently had seen little use, perhaps because they were ill fitting or had

gotten dirty, and the people left them behind as they moved on. Recognition of patterns of central distribution points and use/disuse suggested the potential for site catchment analysis, perhaps even use of forager models to account for some of the behaviors of the homeless, who, after all, appeared to be urban foragers.

### **An Archaeology of Homelessness in Indianapolis: Approaches**

Zimmerman's 2004 move from St. Paul to Indianapolis necessitated a shift in data sources, and startup was slow. The initial concern was to design a spatially broader, more systematic approach to studying homelessness than was possible for St. Paul. The homeless are commonplace in Indianapolis; a 25 January 2007 single-night count noted 2,061 persons, with 427 of them unsheltered (Christensen et al.



FIGURE 3. Tree-fall shelter, cast off clothing, and cooking supplies. (Photo by Larry Zimmerman, 2003.)

2007). Warmer weather counts would likely be substantially higher. Sheltered and unsheltered homeless people abound, with an estimated 71% (Center for Mental Health Services 2003) staying in the city center and immediately adjacent areas. Many panhandle or beg food, while others stay near the major shelters, Wheeler Mission Ministries in the downtown, and Horizon House, a secular day shelter located just east of the immediate business district. Certainly homeless people are in other areas, but key resources keep them near shelters, restaurants, and the hotels that bring in the convention goers who become panhandling targets. The sheer size of the area made a broad, spatial focus mandatory, and the initial task was to see where the homeless spent the majority of their time while unsheltered and not in the immediate downtown area. A bit farther away from downtown, the area around Horizon House provided a focus for a wide range of homelessness-related activities. Still, there was a need for a better understanding of the nature of homelessness in the area.

### Methodology

The primary approach for the Indianapolis project was pedestrian survey guided by Jessica Welch's knowledge of homelessness in the city. Intensely interested because she had been homeless herself for a time in another part of the country, Welch started by asking friends and acquaintances if they had seen any homeless people recently, and if so, where they were. This led her to the freeway embankments and railroad bridges just south of downtown, where she found several camps. She then volunteered at Horizon House, working at the front desk where she had direct contact with homeless people. Welch also learned about the wide variety of resources the shelter offered, as well as the roles and functions of other organizations that serve it. She accompanied Horizon House outreach teams on their evening rounds as they looked for homeless people. The teams have two goals: they look for people who have requested Horizon House services, to document that they are indeed homeless; and visit homeless camps to pass out water, food, and information about the shelter's services. These rounds helped her to become more acquainted with the best locations for survey and served to familiarize her with the daily lives of the local

homeless. Although she did not accompany them, Welch also learned a great deal about the other groups, especially the churches, which provide support to the homeless. The desire to do an in-depth survey of these locations raised concerns about investigator safety.

### Investigator Safety and Human Rights Issues

All archaeology should be done safely, but this project had additional dangers. According to the Center for Mental Health Services (2003), 66% of the chronically homeless (defined as homeless longer than two months) report substance use and/or mental-health problems. Three percent report having HIV/AIDS, while 26% report acute health problems other than HIV/AIDS, such as tuberculosis, pneumonia, or sexually transmitted diseases. Students working on the St. Paul excavations were required to wear leather, thick-soled shoes and leather gloves to decrease the likelihood of cuts, especially needle punctures from drug paraphernalia. The primary concern on the Indianapolis surveys, however, was the high probability of encountering homeless people in survey areas.

The vast majority of homeless people seek to do no harm to anyone, yet precautions were important. Generally, pairs or small groups conducted the surveys, with lone surveyors only in rare instances. Survey occurred only during the late morning or early afternoon, times when homeless people were less likely to be encountered (many were at the shelters or downtown). Investigators were instructed not to initiate conversation, other than perhaps to say hello, when they encountered homeless people, but they could speak if the people seemed to want conversation. Generally, investigators followed a protocol for both observation and interaction developed by Martha T. Valado (2005, pers. comm.) for a senior honors class project in Tucson in which she sent students to the field to observe the homeless. Investigators were instructed to enter no buildings in which homeless people stayed and no area in which they felt unsafe. While surveying a site, investigators stayed near their car, sometimes with one staying in the car and the other(s) in sight of the car.

Investigator safety was not the only concern. The privacy of the homeless also was important.

Investigators touched no object unless it was clearly discarded, and then rarely. As will be discussed later, this especially applied to caches of personal items. Only photographs were taken of campsites, and no individuals were ever photographed unless they were completely unidentifiable. Except for Welch's interactions with homeless clients in Horizon House, no lengthy conversations of any kind occurred, nor were any notes or recordings of conversations made. Finally, upon entering any campsite, investigators would often loudly ask if anyone were present and would not enter an area if they heard any response. The project was not ethnographic in any true sense of the word, only observation of the material world of the homeless away from shelters. Ethnoarchaeology is an eventual goal of the project and will require additional protocols that protect both investigators and subjects.

### Site Survey and Recording

The cultural landscape of homelessness is constantly changing, depending on season, availability, and access to locations suitable for occupation, and efforts by government officials or private property owners to curtail use by homeless people. These changes certainly had an impact on survey results. Initial random surveys provided an idea of the types of homeless sites and the range of materials that might be present. To a degree these were impressionistic but were used to develop simple site types and materials to be recorded. Photographs of all sites, many of them close-ups, documented materials and structures. Sometimes hand-drawn sketches detailed particular features.

The attempt to find an appropriate survey area began in late 2005 with intensive survey from August through December of 2007. Several sites located during 2005 or 2006 were almost totally gone during the 2007 intensive survey, and entirely new ones had appeared. For example, a major encampment located in a large weed patch (Unit 2Cii) along the interstate in 2005 was gone. The Department of Transportation had completely removed trees and weeds from the right-of-way. The team was fortunate to have photographed the occupation (Figure 4).

Based on several visits to the area around Horizon House by the authors, as well as Welch's experience volunteering there, the core focus for

research became an area of approximately 1 sq. mi. On its western boundary, N. Delaware Street, it incorporated Wheeler Mission, while on its eastern boundary, N. Oriental Street, it incorporated Horizon House. The survey area was divided into nine units, approximately 5 × 5 blocks in dimension, and each of these was divided into quadrants. Approximately is the operant word, in that streets, highways, railroad tracks, and structures often broke the pattern. For example, buildings sometimes covered more than one block. Combined Interstate highways 65 and 70 run north-south through the survey area. Seldom-used or abandoned railroad tracks run through the area in several places, important because the rights-of-way provide open, easily accessible spaces for homeless encampments. The survey area shifts from a dense business district on its western edge to light industry and abandoned warehouses on the east. The northern edge tends toward residential, especially rehabilitated homes and condominiums, shifting toward light industry and abandoned buildings on the south. The exception is an older residential area in the southeast corner of the survey area. The majority of the railroad tracks are in the southern three survey units, which contained the heaviest evidence of occupancy by the homeless. The proximity of the railroad tracks provides more places that are poorly maintained by landowners and less frequently scrutinized by law enforcement, ideal for use by homeless people. Residential areas often have fenced yards, as do some warehouse and industrial facilities, which are difficult or impossible for homeless people to enter. These areas were not surveyed, nor were several abandoned buildings or outdoor, brushy areas considered unsafe by investigators.

Three site types became apparent as the survey evolved. *Route sites* were areas in which there was scant evidence of camping or sleeping, yet evidence that people had been present for short periods of time. Evidence included, for example, painted graffiti and a few items of clothing, food, or human waste, but nothing to indicate sleeping or longer habitation. *Short-term sites* were those used only for a night or two, or even just for "hanging-out," perhaps with evidence of sleeping and food usage, but rarely cooking. If shelters were used, they were simple, such as plastic ground cloth or cardboard. Even clumps of tall weeds tied together at the top with those



FIGURE 4. The Indianapolis, Indiana, survey area, just east of the city center. Rectangle indicates largest concentrations of campsites. (Aerial photo from the City of Indianapolis/Google Earth, modified by Larry Zimmerman, 2007.)

in the center removed could provide a quick roof and privacy. *Campsites* indicated some level of intensive usage, perhaps for more than a few nights, often with substantive areas for shelter and sleeping, as well as food preparation. These contained evidence of cardboard or even more durable shelters, cardboard for sleeping on and/or under, and even mattresses. Food preparation and consumption was common, usually indicated by more than a haphazardly built fire and evidence of cooking. Camps sometimes contained cached materials and almost always had an extensive range of material culture.

### Survey Results and Interpretations

The survey documented 5 route sites, 40 short-term sites, and 16 campsites, the vast majority of them adjacent or very near the railway (11 campsites and 26 short-term sites). Route sites tended to be in outlying areas, especially near unoccupied structures. Usage tended to be by solitary individuals or very small groups. Certainly railroad tracks, being fairly direct and with little vehicular traffic, became routes for walking to and from downtown or the shelters. The team was unable and did not try to sort out railway

route sites because there was an almost continuous scatter of debris along the tracks between short-term sites and campsites. Route sites away from the tracks tended to contain relatively less-dense concentrations of materials. Alcohol containers were common, as were food wrappings, ranging from fast-food containers to candy. These were sometimes difficult to distinguish from “background” trash but often were away from areas in which permanent residents or local kids would hang out or deposit litter. Sometimes there would be an intense smell of urine. One good marker of a route was graffiti, but it was hardly exclusive to these sites and also was present near both short-term sites and campsites. Graffiti was usually pictographic or social commentary, likely carrying social and spatial meaning beyond the scope of this project to classify or interpret, but a common enough practice among subaltern groups (Giles and Giles 2007; Patel 2007). Sometimes graffiti was at least a mark of ethnicity or national origin, however. Along several of the routes Mexican place names or state names were marked on surfaces, reflecting the growing number of homeless Hispanic immigrants. Welch had encountered a group of Spanish-speaking men near one of these markers while on a Horizon House outreach trip and found that the organization serves many Hispanics. Other graffiti may be gang related, but no effort was made to interpret the significance of any of it. Where the routes led specifically was inconclusive, with no obvious direction except along railroad tracks, but they were often apparent between abandoned buildings and across vacant lots.

Short-term sites usually showed evidence of use by multiple inhabitants camped mostly as individuals rather than in groups. In a few instances male/female couples were observed and, rarely, two or more men obviously staying together. Most occupations seemed to be by single users, sometimes indicated by very temporary sleeping areas that could hold no more than one person. Most appeared to be ad hoc, but with some thought given to protection from elements or other people or perhaps to provide a modicum of privacy or comfort, as in the use of the area under three closely and permanently parked semitrailers. Materially, short-term sites might have a small pillow or two, a sheet of plastic, or a piece of cardboard large enough to sleep on or under. Sometimes scrub

trees or weeds provided a roof, shorter weeds providing padding underneath. Finding such sleeping arrangements in poison-ivy patches was common enough. Other areas were under street, interstate highway, and railroad overpasses. Some items of clothing were found, often shoes, and there was usually evidence of food consumption nearby, again ad hoc with little or no evidence of cooking. Two-thirds (26) of the short-term sites were along the railroad, with the others in or near unoccupied structures (6) or in outlying areas, sometimes in unexpected places.

Campsites usually were located near unoccupied structures (4) or the railroad (11), with only one found in outlying areas. Most were of a more permanent nature, with some kind of permanent roof, such as within a building, inside a large culvert opening or underground structure, or under a bridge. The four located in unoccupied structures were difficult to assess in that investigators normally did not enter them for safety reasons (the police normally chose not to enter these structures unless absolutely necessary). Because buildings and some underground structures were often large, the number of homeless people in them could be high. If similar to those in other cities, such campsites could be substantial and numerous, almost like small communities, as in the underground homeless camps near Penn Station in New York City (Toth 1995; Singer 2000). Camps examined in the current project were exterior camps, easily accessible to investigators. Campsites usually covered an area considerably larger than short-term sites and appeared to house multiple occupants. Some had structures with a semblance of permanence, ranging from carefully built stick windbreaks to sitting and sleeping areas with cardboard floors. One was a military-style bivouac with a cooking area; several structures of cardboard, wood, and plastic sheets; and a latrine system composed of 5 gal. plastic buckets with lids, and lined with plastic bags (Figures 5 and 6).

### Caching Behavior

A commonly observed practice in campsites was caching behavior, that is, an effort to store some materials and to keep them protected from the elements or out of the hands of others until they could be retrieved at a later date. Caching behavior is common enough among



FIGURE 5. Typical campsite located under an abandoned overpass with cardboard for sleeping and castoff clothing. A brick half-circle fireplace is at the end of the wall. (Photo by Jessica Welch, 2006.)



FIGURE 6. Another campsite style was a well-designed camp with more permanent structures, almost like a military bivouac. (Photo by Larry Zimmerman, 2006.)

hunter-gathers and foragers for whom logistic mobility is required, employed in situations in which individuals will be away from an area for a long period of time. Archaeologically and ethnographically it usually involves caching food resources, but caching other items such as unfinished stone tools or lithic source materials, for example, is also common (Lovis et al. 2005).

Although grocery-shopping carts sometimes serve as transportation for personal possessions and are likely the most recognized symbol of homeless people—Montague (2006) provides a photo essay and quasiarchaeological classification—in areas away from downtown, large, black, plastic garbage bags were the preferred material in which to cache items. In some well-protected areas, cardboard boxes sufficed. Often the bags were stuffed into areas difficult to access, in order to keep others away, such as

at the juncture of metal beams supporting an overpass. In at least one instance, a column of three stacking plastic and metal milk-bottle crates covered in plastic served as the cache. In a few abandoned buildings box caches were observed with the boxes carefully stored to avoid theft or weather. Investigators respected the privacy of the owners and did not disturb the caches, and some homeless people suggest that they themselves respect caches; others suggest that such respect is not the case. These caches supposedly contain family items or heirlooms, medications, books, favorite items of clothing, and a variety of other items difficult to carry around while the owner is away from camp. Although cache contents in this survey remain unknown, their widespread nature reinforces the notion that homeless people have “stuff” of their own that is sometimes of a precious, permanent nature (Figures 7 and 8).

### General Observations and a Few Surprises

Certainly the artifacts and their disposition reflected the broad range of contemporary American material culture, especially items related to day-to-day needs for subsistence and shelter. The most common items were related to food or liquid consumption and clothing. Nearly all sites had alcohol containers, ranging from beer to all varieties of hard spirits. Drug paraphernalia was not observed, which was unexpected. Fast-food containers were common, but so were other food items, including food cans and other food packaging. Shoes were left behind in virtually every short-term site or campsite, all of them easy to come by from Wheeler Mission or Horizon House donated materials, a pattern similar to that observed in the St. Paul study.

Styrofoam drinking cups were everywhere along routes, but especially in short-term sites and campsites. Most were small-size coffee cups

with a Hardee's fast-food logo and sometimes a Speedway convenience-store logo. A Hardee's restaurant is located almost in the center of the survey area and near Horizon House. A brief interview with the serving staff there revealed that homeless people often come to the restaurant on the way to the shelter or downtown in the morning, and on their return from downtown at night. Along the interstate highway, the Hardee's drive-through window opens early and stays open even after the restaurant itself closes. The homeless often appear at the drive-through window to buy coffee. Similarly, there is a 24-hour Speedway store, on the southern edge of the survey area, from which they also buy coffee.

Also common in short-term sites and campsites were sample-size bottles of shampoo, conditioner, lotion, underarm deodorant, toothpaste, and other items commonly found in hotels and in large department stores. Except for toothpaste, most were unopened. Investigation revealed that

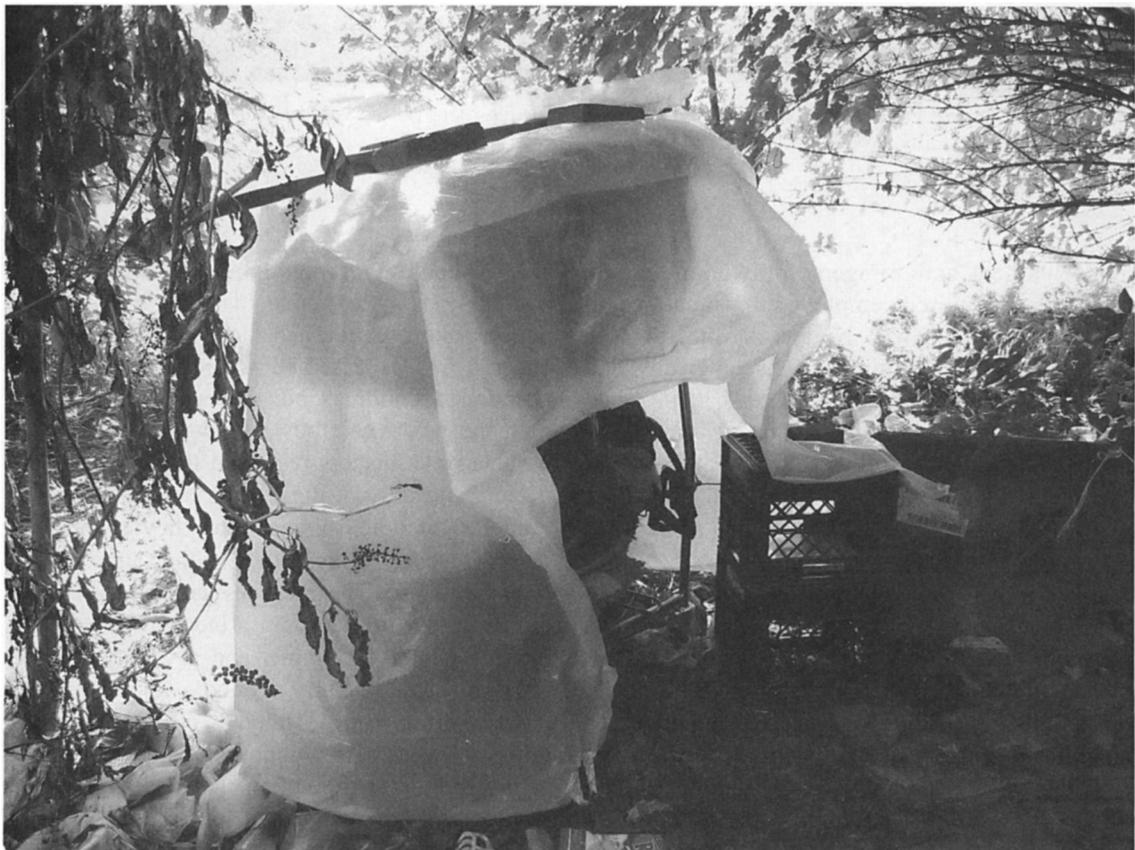


FIGURE 7. Caching behavior using a plastic-covered cart, milk crates, and bags. (Photo by Jessica Welch, 2006).



FIGURE 8. Covered plastic-bag cache (*left of bedding*) in a well-organized, open campsite. (Photo by Larry Zimmerman, 2009.)

churches, in the hope of helping the homeless, tell parishioners to collect all the samples from their hotel rooms each day, and then to bring them to church for redistribution by their outreach teams. The reason they were mostly unused seems obvious: there is little access to water in the camps and little need for personal hygiene items.

Some items or the places in which they were found surprised the investigators. A few examples might suffice. In one short-term camp along an abandoned railroad line, investigators found a cluster of pet-food cans (probably cat food; the labels were very worn) near remains of a small fire. Although homeless people sometimes have an animal with them, and several cats were spotted near campsites, the greater likelihood is that the pet food was eaten as an inexpensive and possibly tasty meal. In one substantial campsite under a railroad overpass, there was a brick floor, the remains of an old city street bisected

by the interstate, from which bricks had been removed to build a half-circle fireplace against a concrete wall. Plastic bags and cardboard boxes contained food remains including unopened cans, what appeared to be exploded cans, and crudely opened cans. Nearby were pieces of cardboard to provide a barrier against the hardness or coldness of the brick floor and concrete walls. In another instance, a wattle windbreak between two tree trunks provided shelter, and next to it was a bag of small, stuffed toy animals (Figure 9). There was also a surprising amount of reading material in the short-term sites and campsites ranging from Bibles to pornography, which leads to an obvious conclusion that homeless people do read in spite of stereotypes that they are uneducated or uninterested. While driving by survey areas, Welch had noticed several people reading paperbacks as they “bunked down” in the late-afternoon light. As a final example, a bicycle in



FIGURE 9. Wattle windbreak and a bag of animal toys. (Photo by Larry Zimmerman, 2006.)

one camp was claimed by a homeless person who announced to investigators, "I'm going to get my bike!" He did so and pedaled off.

### **Life Away from the Shelters, Archaeology, and Helping the Homeless**

As noted above, life in the shelters is reasonably well documented, but life away from them is not, except by the occasional news reporter or video documentarian who enters the realm. Short of ethnography, blogs done by the homeless themselves provide intriguing information, in which they describe their day-to-day experiences, activities, emotions, and sometimes, the material content of their lives. There is occasionally information that contradicts the current project's field observations. An especially good blog for understanding homeless material culture is *Survival Guide to Homelessness* (Mobile Homemaker 2008), which often discusses material culture issues, but there are others (Brown 2006; Barbieux 2008a), and they answer some questions. For example, the Homeless Family's Blog (2008) answers the question of why so many castoff shoes were on the sites: "One of the more common problems facing the unsheltered community isn't lack of shoes ... it's lack of properly fitting shoes." If shoes do not fit, they are cast off. The author goes on to suggest that instead of donating shoes, people donate gift cards from shoe stores and include enough for an extra pair of shoelaces, which may explain why so many of the shoes found on the survey were without laces.

Life clearly is not easy, and many in the dominant society do seek to help, especially the churches. Sometimes, however, dominant society members exhibit unthinking behaviors that affect the materiality of the homeless. The churches do good, but whether in the shelters or away from them, members seek to bring a belief system along with material aid, and their approach is not always appreciated (Barbieux 2008b). The materiality of their approach is not always sensible either, as in this project's example of providing personal-hygiene supplies. As with the hotel hygiene items, homeless people not infrequently discarded or even mutilated small Bibles brought to them by well-meaning parishioners. Finally, churches often take food to homeless people in the camps, but rarely take can openers (even the

small, disposable, military variety), which might account for the crudely opened or exploded cans found in the survey.

Cities sometimes seem similarly misguided. There is little question that homeless people pose frustrating problems for local government, from increased crime to sanitation concerns, to citizens feeling harassed by panhandlers. An ongoing problem, increased homeless presence on the streets, is often a result of gentrification, as affordable, if squalid, single-room occupancy hotels, rooming houses, and shelters are turned into condos in city after city (Kasinitz 1984). Some cities have tried to take more direct action aimed at the possessions of homeless people. In June 2008, a U.S. District Court judge approved a \$2.35 million settlement in a class-action suit against the City of Fresno and the California Department of Transportation for seizing and destroying the personal property of hundreds of homeless people in the city (American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California 2008). This trend is not recent. Starting in 1997, San Francisco mayor Willie Brown ordered city sanitation department sweeps to confiscate shopping carts and other property of homeless people, especially around Golden Gate Park. In 2006, 10 homeless people filed legal action to stop those sweeps. Of interest were the comments of one person, James B., whose cache was confiscated. It contained a sleeping bag, clothing, and rain gear, but more importantly, his HIV medication (American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California 2006). The earlier actions taken in San Francisco had caused similar losses of medications and personal property (Messman 2006).

### **Can Archaeology Help the Homeless?**

The problems caused by well-meaning parishioners or exasperated city officials are based on assumptions about the material culture of homelessness that archaeological approaches can at least clarify. Church members seek to bring the materiality and comforts of their own lives to the homeless, but rarely see material culture as part of a system. For the homeless not to have greasy hair or not to smell would make them easier to deal with, but the reality is that using hair conditioner is not at all realistic when one has no water. Underarm deodorant is not of much use when one has not had a change of clothes for

days. Bibles might possibly save the soul, but definitely make handy toilet paper. Donated clothing is useful, but beggars can indeed be choosy, especially when the clothing is ill fitting or gets dirty. To be useful, food cans require a way to open the can; if one cannot open the can, about all that can be done is throw it away.

City officials reflect the broader population and seem to have an idea that homeless people are without possessions. Widespread caching behavior demonstrates otherwise. When cities confiscate the garbage bags or shopping carts they assume to be filled with trash, they may be taking away medications that keep the person psychologically balanced or healthy. They also might be destroying the few remaining anchors to an individual's past life, not to mention the sleeping bag to be used that night.

Use of short-term sites and campsites might suggest that people do not know about shelters, but more often, it seems that they do not like the "costs" of staying in a shelter: the lack of safety and privacy, restrictive rules, or even having to undergo religious indoctrination in exchange for food or a bed. Yet the nature and distribution of artifacts in the sites suggest that many homeless people seek a degree of physical comfort and security as defined by the standards of the encompassing culture from which they came. This might translate into such things as interesting reading materials or even toys. Locations of most of their camps suggests that they seek to be in places in which there is relatively easy access to resources such as food, that is, from meals and clothing handed out at the shelters to a morning cup of coffee.

### Conclusions: What Next?

We consider this study to be preliminary in every way, but believe that it shows the utility of applying archaeological methods to help understand a contemporary social problem. Application of ethnoarchaeological methods would provide profoundly useful information, as would test excavations in some of the sites to see if there is time depth as there was in the Hill House gardens, and whether usage of material culture by the homeless has changed through time.

Homeless people exhibit few characteristics of foraging and collecting cultures, so calling them urban foragers might be inappropriate. They have almost none of the characteristics of either

simple or complex foragers as charted by Kelly (2007:294). Homeless groups are not kin based except in rare instances of homeless nuclear-family units. Classic foragers have kin-based networks of economic and behavioral obligations that serve as a survival safety net; but while homeless people can develop strong social connections and often assist one another, these ties can be as fleeting as anything else in the homeless lifestyle. There seems to be a growing trend in Indianapolis for ethnically centered groups, which may work as kin groups.

Finer distinctions can be made, and related issues should be explored. Following Binford (1990:139–140), foragers move people to resources, which is essentially how homeless people behave, while collectors move resources to people, which is how some of the church or agency-based outreach teams seeking to help the homeless operate. These may be conflicting, not complementary, approaches. Still, trying to apply some analytical models such as site catchment analysis (Roper 1979) or optimal foraging theory (Winterhalder 1981) might prove useful. Finally, differences may exist among the homeless populations in different cities, although they seem similar in St. Paul and Indianapolis. Regional differences may reflect climate, ethnic makeup, or other factors. Homelessness is an international problem, and comparisons might be revealing or at least intriguing.

Social problems represented by the homeless seem intractable, but understanding can come from a wide range of academic disciplines, including archaeology, which sometimes needs to do the "Archaeology of Ten Minutes Ago," as David Gadsby and Jodi Barnes called it in a 2008 historical archaeology symposium (Gadsby and Barnes 2008). Such an archaeology works at a boundary between past and present with a fundamental understanding that humans constantly create archaeological sites. Time depth is not the important variable, but the use and distribution of cultural materials are. An archaeology of 10 minutes ago becomes a way of thinking about the world of stuff in which humans live, and casts the human world as a place in which people interact with and accumulate material culture, from trash piles, to items on a knick-knack shelf, to paintings on a wall. Archaeology is all around us, constantly created in that brief moment between the past and the future, and is forever changing as it recedes into the past (Patel 2007:51).

Such a viewpoint about archaeology and its relationships to the very contemporary probably seems odd to many archaeologists and likely most of the public, but it should not be, as the current article advocates. As Victor Buchli (2007:14) asks:

When is the right time to do the archaeology of something? At the beginning of the 21st century our circumstances are different from other periods, in terms of the sheer overabundance of information and things in which we are immersed. ... But archaeological interventions are overtly political, often engaging directly with life's raw and painful nerves, such as homelessness, social exclusion, war crimes, and reconciliation. We have the technologies to access almost everything if we want to—and the freedom to be deliberate and strategic. But more importantly we have responsibilities towards the communities, individuals, and institutions directly implicated by archaeological work into the recent past in helping them come to terms with the obscured and often painful circumstances of contemporary life. Under these circumstances, archaeology should be socially relevant. It must earn its keep.

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