

# Neighbors on the Block

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Life in Single Room Occupancy Hotels

**Photographs by Laurence Salzmann**

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Mr. Taub  
Columbus Hotel, West 83rd Street, New York City, November 1970

## Mr. Taub

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**“The one day I’m going to be the happiest when I get out from here, ALIVE! I can’t take it no more. I never had no trouble before. I used to work, I finished my eight-hour work whatever it was; I was working hard all my life. I didn’t care what I was doing, long I’m making a dollar. I used to be doing all kinds of jobs. So when I went in this business...well, I was very sick and I couldn’t do any other job. I used to work outside, fourteen winters. My fingers got froze. I was cleaning windows, my fingers got froze, my toes, my ears, I got so sick I couldn’t do it no more. So I had a few dollars. This guy came along, one of my friends in the same business, he told me about an investment broker who had a place for sale. So I had a few dollars. I put it in. And I going to be sorry the rest of my life. Only what I draw here, I have my two kids, my wife to support. I’m making \$125.00 a week. And I risk my life every minute on the hour, while I’m here. You have a lot of aggravation, lotta’ trouble with these people, some of them not even belong to live in a decent house. The most of them, they are on dope, or they are drinking, and they are nothing , just trouble.**

**“I was born in Europe. All my life I was discriminated and when I was about nineteen years old they put me up in the concentration camp. When they war was ended, I survived, I came to America. Little by little, after so many years hard work, I saved up some money and I run into this business. But I think I was better off that time that I am today. But one day I be free, I gonna be outa here one day, I hope in life. I gonna get rid of the building.”**



Irene Sherwis  
The 3 Deuces Hotel, West 94th Street, New York City, Easter 1969

## Irene Shervis

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**“My father was named Isaac Brown, my mother was named Laura Brown. And we lived in a town in South Carolina, Carrington. My mother was the mother of fourteen children. My grandmother was the mother of twenty-five. I’ve been a mother twenty-three times and I been married fives times and neither one of those husbands helped me raise the children. Fourteen of them died from care, attention, hunger, but I did the best I could.**

**“After all of my children were grown, I had a son by the name of Robert Coleman. He didn’t want to live in Jacksonville; he was sixteen years old. He wanted to run on the ship and come to New York. Then he got to runnin’ from New York to Miami. Then the rest of us wanted to be where he was, I wanted to keep all my children together. When I came here to New York, the Welfare understood that I was coming and said that I could come. They said that I could only visit a certain length of time. Well, anyway, I never went back. And I begins to get my children all back together and we all lived together.**

**“I got married to a Mr. Shervis, Edgar Shervis. I married him in 1952 and died in 1955. Then my son left New York and went down to see about me and after the funeral, he told me that he want me to come back home. Come back to New York where they all was living.**

**“The Welfare put me here; I’m on a waitin’ list. All of my things was taken away from me and they have it in storage, I guess. I’ve never been in places like this before; I might as well say that I’m livin’ in a rattlesnake den. I don’t like it, but I’ll have to stay because there’s nothin’ that I can do but just to wait.”**



Edna Hunt  
Mt. Royal Hotel, West 94th Street, New York City, April 1969

## Edna Hunt

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**“I left my mother’s apartment and I got married. I married a man from New York City, a veteran in the First World War. We were married four years and then he left for parts unknown, nobody knows where he is. Went back to my mother on West 60th Street. My mother died in 1956; I had to start to go to rooming houses and hotels. I still obtained a job in different places and kept myself up. Then, two years ago I got ill. First, I am an epileptic and worked with ‘em just the same. Am asthma, had 32 operations, tumor and cancer; worked just the same. Now two years ago I contracted heart trouble and couldn’t work any longer. Social Service sent me to Welfare and Welfare is the one that sent me to 17 West 65th Street. When that was being torn down, Welfare sent me here to the Mount Royal Hotel, and I am still on Welfare.**

**“Back home, when I was sixteen years old, my mother and father was livin’, the rest of my brothers and sisters, I got married to also a veteran of the Navy which was in the First World War. We got along very fine together; I worked and helped him out in the “drury” factory in Attleboro, Massachusetts. He worked on the movin’ vans there in Attleboro. Then, after four years of that, he started goin’ round to dances with his cousin Billy, and here an’ there, come back home in the mornin’ time for breakfast and go ta work. My money I spent for food, rent, an’ everything. He was always spendin’ his money with his cousin Bill on dances an’ havin’ fun. So I got excited, packed up, and went home to my mother an’ father.**



Edna Hunt  
Mt. Royal Hotel, West 94th Street, New York City, March 1970





Edna Hunt

In her room, Mt. Royal Hotel, West 94th Street, New York City, March 1970



Pewe  
stoop of the St. Louis Hotel, West 94th Street, New York City, Spring 1969

## **Pewe**

**“My name is Pewe. That’s my nickname, and I came to live in one of these SROs.**

**“I am what is known as a habitual drug addict. I’ve been one for twenty-three years, not that I’m proud of it, but...that was life. That was what looks like was cut out for me. And...I went to the hospital for a cure, for what they called a cure. And when I got on welfare. And this is where they sent me. But that’s like the old tale about throwing the rabbit into the briar patch. When they put me here, they put me right in the midst of everything that I thought I was trying to escape, because that’s all that they have in the majority of these SROs: drugs, whiskey, prostitution. The reason that I can’t seem to get out, it isn’t that I don’t want to, but I mean you formulate a certain friendship in these places which number one, it’s hard to go to a place and be lonely when you know that you have friends somewhere else. But I don’t think that’s basically the reason. The reason is that we can’t get enough money. It’s either here or one of the thousands of other SROs...which are the same thing. I mean we can’t get in a decent neighborhood. We can’t even get in a decent hotel around the neighborhood, because of the rent.**

**“And the situation arises that these are not second, or third, or fourth class hotels. This is the first stop before the Bowery. And, so consequently the landlord is only interested in the dollar. He’ll rent a room, or rent a place to anyone...whether you come for prison, a hospital for addiction, or a hospital for mental disorders. And throwing them all together here...well, I can’t think of a word to describe it. It’s really catastrophe!”**



Lylah Tiffany  
Columbus Hotel, West 83rd Street, New York City, December 1970

## Lylah Tiffany

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**“I’m originally from Ohio, where a good many of our best presidents came from. My father was a famous family in his line, but it was a line that would not get famous universally, because people don’t use flour mills, do they, ...in everyday life and that’s what he invented, flour mills.**

**“In the past I did have a ten year stay in vaudeville doing a bicycle act with my first husband. So ...when I was offered a part in this play, ‘All the Way Home’, an actress part, which I’d never done before (I was eighty-one when I made my debut). So I did develop a stage presence and I was all right on the stage for ‘All the Way Home’ for a solid year. I was in it an entire year and then Susskind made a picture of it a couple years later and he got me for that same part. And it was on television the year after that, yet he got me in the same part, so I acquired a little bit of notoriety; well you might not call it that because actually it didn’t extend over a whole life, though it could have if I hadn’t got sick, with the emphysema.**

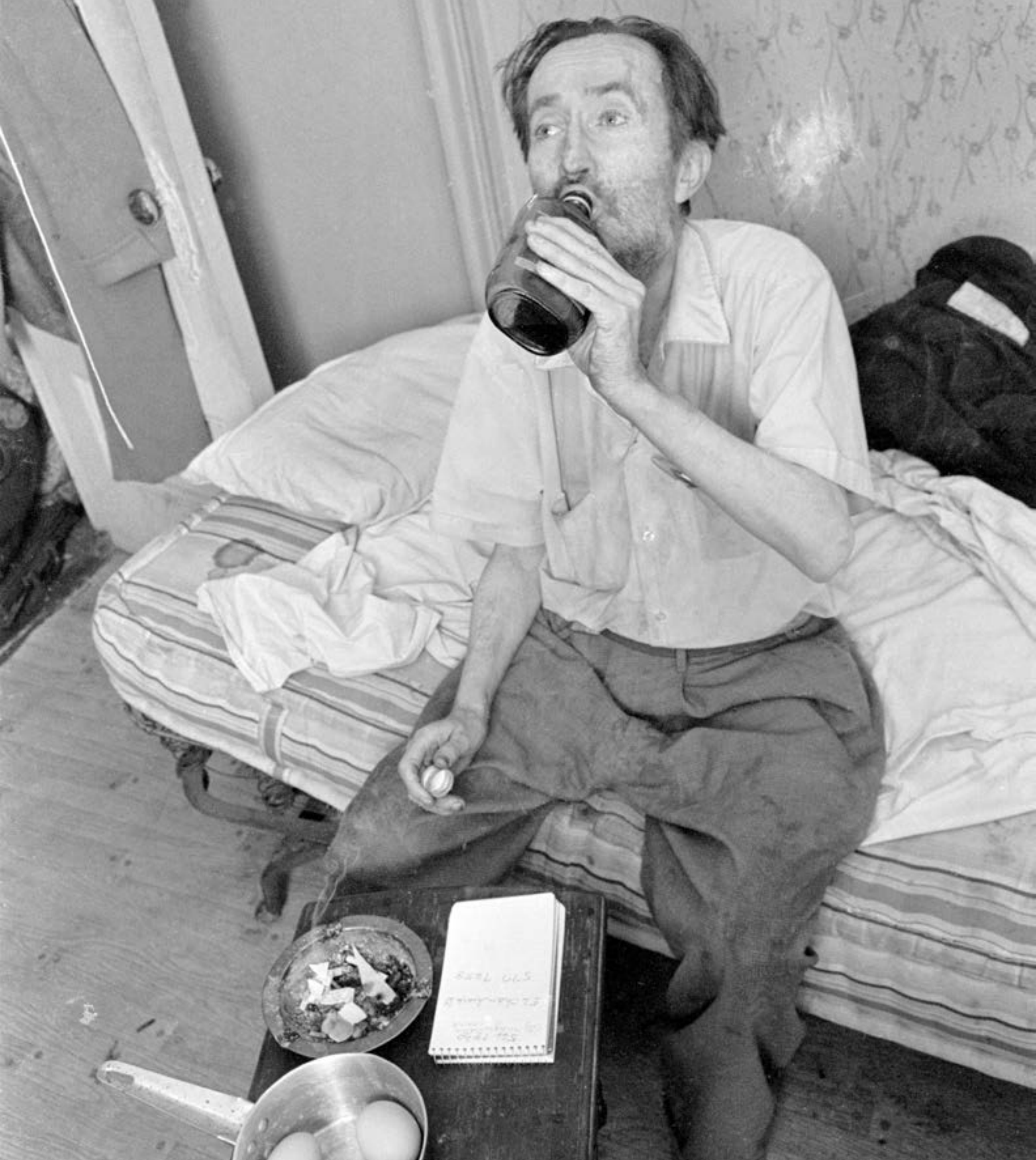
**“I’m perfectly satisfied all by myself if I could only get a place that I can breathe in. I can’t breathe where I am. Do you smell any fresh air in here? My God! And got an alley there right next to the house, about that close ...and everybody throws their dog dirt out the windows and if I open the window wide that’s what I smell. So I have to keep the door open in the hall to keep any air and that air is polluted too, but not quite so bad. So I want to get in a place where I will be comfortable and I don’t want anything, I don’t require anything. All I want is cleanliness and health and I’m strong enough, even though I’m about ninety-one years old, to live about twelve years yet, but I won’t do it in this place. I can’t.”**



Lylah Tiffany  
Columbus Hotel, West 83rd Street, New York City, December 1970



Lylah Tiffany  
Columbus Hotel, West 83rd Street, New York City, December 1970



Eddie O'Brien  
Mt. Royal Hotel, West 94th Street, New York City, April 1969



## Eddie O'Brien

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**“This is Edward O’Bien, I have to express myself about my background—I was born in a Harlem tenement on April 14, 1916. I, ah, my mother was a widow, my father committed suicide in a Van Dam Street apartment house. He was beating and abusing my mother, they were separated...she couldn’t stand any more of it; she took him in and out of the courts for years...My brother, Tommy O’Brien, fell to his death out of this Harlem tenement house, from the fire escape, on June 25, 1925, There were two nuns in the house who came soliciting alms; my mother became hysterical and tried to throw herself down into the yard on top of my dead brother. The two nuns had to pull her off the fire escape. I was the cause of the whole thing...ah, maybe this is one of the causes of my alcoholism, because I used to go the fire escape and then cross over the other window...and I told my bother Tommy not to look at me, but he did look at me and he tried the same trick and he fell down and he killed himself. I can’t go on...”**



Mrs. Muriel Cruz  
St. Louis Hotel, West 94th Street, New York City, Spring 1969

**Mrs. Muriel Cruz**

**“Having to live alone with epileptic seizures is very dangerous because, in the beginning of a seizure coming on, your tongue goes back and can choke you to death unless you have something to hold your tongue of someone to hold it down for you. And they come on with terrific headaches, migraine headaches. There’s no ending to it. God, no ending to it, man. And, the only thing you have to do is and be calm. You lose control of your urinary passage. The urine comes on you without even you being able to control it. And it’s disgusting. It’s not fun to live alone. Not with seizures. It isn’t. An’ unless you have seen someone with it and you’re caught with a seizure in the street, an’ the police before they call an ambulance for you, the first thing they ask you, ‘Have you been drinkin’, are you drunk?’ an’ it’s disgusting. Seven years is a long time and medications that they give you are all accumulating drugs and after awhile they act opposite, they act opposite. Instead of absorbing they act contrary. They calm nerves one way and upset inside, upside down the other way. An’ I have used four types. Accumulating drugs, that’s what you call them.”**

## Mrs. Muriel Cruz

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**“Having to live alone with epileptic seizures is very dangerous, because, in the beginning of a seizure coming on, your tongue goes back and can choke you to death unless you have something to hold your tongue or someone to hold it down you. And they come on with terrific headaches, migraine headaches. There’s no ending to it. God, no ending to it, man. And, the only thing you have do is sit and be calm. You lose control of your urinary passage. The urine comes on you without even you being able to control it. And it’s disgusting. It’s not fun to live alone Not with seizures. It isn’t. An’ unless you have seen someone with it and you’re caught with a seizure in the street, an’ the police before they call an ambulance for you, the first thing they ask you, ‘Have you been drinkin’, are you drunk?’an’ it’s disgusting. Seven years is a long time and medications that they give are all accumulating drugs and after awhile they act opposite, they act opposite. Instead of absorbing the act contrary. They calm the nerves one way and upset inside, upside down another way. An’ I have used four types. Accumulating drugs, that’s what you call them.”**

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### A Promenade

What a gay and wonderful sight to behold  
Sweet little Pops Bernard with his hands folded  
“Oops! I dropped my keys I think”—says he  
And turning around about, says he, I got it in one, two, three.  
As we walked gaily hand in hand  
Laughing and chattering—Hey say strike up the band  
Strutting like a young and happy roaster  
“What more could be added for a better Boaster?”  
The fun really began when I got a fountain squirt  
Water went up my nose instead of down my throat  
So then upon the swing, going to and fro  
Popsie Bernard says—”No! it isn’t yet time to go.  
Why should I? I am having lots of fun  
Life’s too short and the day have just begun  
“How old are you?” “How old Pops B Greengood??  
Young enough to live and be understood.

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### God’s Love to Man

Now in this bonny afternoon I suppose  
We shall have no moon  
The skies are floating to and fro  
and it seems like the rain drops is about to go  
If we may take a glance askance  
We shall see the trees about to dance  
They seem to be shaking their heads right and left  
Saying come unto me and don’t be bereft  
God’s given gift from above  
He has sent down his eternal love  
Stars are never never too far  
Earth, land, sky and trees all are God’s guiding love.



Mrs. Muriel Cruz' bureau  
St. Louis Hotel. New York City, Spring 1969



Nick Famiglietti  
Columbus Hotel, West 83rd Street, New York City, December 1970

## Nicholas Famiglietti

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**“I had an alcoholic problem. But I am happy so far. The way I feel now, I feel lost. I’d like to come and see you but every time I come there, them security guards give me a hard time.**

**“Joe Curran! Joe Curran! Remember “Little Nick”? Joe Curran! Joe Curran! Remember me? 1936 and ‘37? I was your watchman on 11th Street. When we went on strike, you struck with California and I struck with Santa Paulo. We all went on strike, remember that? Remember that, Joe Curran? Now you don’t even know me. Why? I can’t even come to see you, you’re so a big man. Remember? You married that beautiful girl from Santa Clara? Oh, you forget, but she died. She died of cancer, which I regret. And remember somethin’, Joe, your son’s in service. I know he went to Viet Nam, but I want you to know something: that I’ll always like you and I want to be respected and I want to get my pension. What I had put in the Union.”**



John Peyton  
Columbus Hotel, West 83rd Street, New York City, Spring 1968



## John Payton

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**“I was born in New England and I went to an old fashion’ good school in New England. And I worked all my life untill I broke my two hips. I arrived in New York in 1950 and was placed on the Welfare. I go to a senior citizen’s club in Manhattan where they have a program for culture and recreation and ah...a nice place to spend a day. Because when you’re not workin’, you have a lot of free time, and if you spend your free time just hangin’ around, drinking wine or ah, or hangin’ around in the park it’s no good, so therefore I’m very happy to be in this club and have the recreation.**

**“I decided to come to New York City because New York City is a good place for culture and recreation: they have a musical; they have a film festival at the New York City Library ...they have free concerts in the park; they have philharmonic orchestras in the park during the summer, and they also have opera in the park free in the summer.**

**“I am sixty five years old, retired and on the Welfare.”**



Alfred Cade  
Columbus Hotel, West 83rd Street, New York City, Spring 1969

## Alfred Cade

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**“The first reason I came to live in the hotel is I had finished with my course at the hospital and I came home, looked around for a place and they recommended, Welfare recommended, that I come to the hotel. I went to the St. Louey Hotel, 315 West 94th Street where I stayed for a while. An’then, ah, found out I could do little things in the Neighborhood Community Plannin’ Projects, so I got them, an’that’s what I’m on now...Community Plannin’Projects. Meantime, I’m waiting for my girl to come back; I think she’s been busted, but I am not so sure. However, she’s not the only pebble on the beach an’ I’ll find another one. Now...**

**I love you, I love you, I love you,  
Sweetheart of all my dreams.  
Oh, ,I love you, can’t do without you,  
You’re like a treatheart, it seems.  
Oh, you may do what you may,  
Or say what you may,  
I know that I’ll always love you this way, because,  
I love you, I love you Lily, I love you.  
Lily, sweetheart of all my dreams, dreams, dreams, dreams  
Dreams, oh, sweetheart of all my dreams.**

**“An’ ah, ain’t nobody should be satisfied to go along at the rate that the welfare people expect you to go: takin’ that, comin’ back for more. The idea is to expand on your project, see if you can’t do somethin’ else. For instance, I’ve been to school f’r three years at college. I’m gonna get, I’m gonna get my two degrees an’ maybe a third degree.**

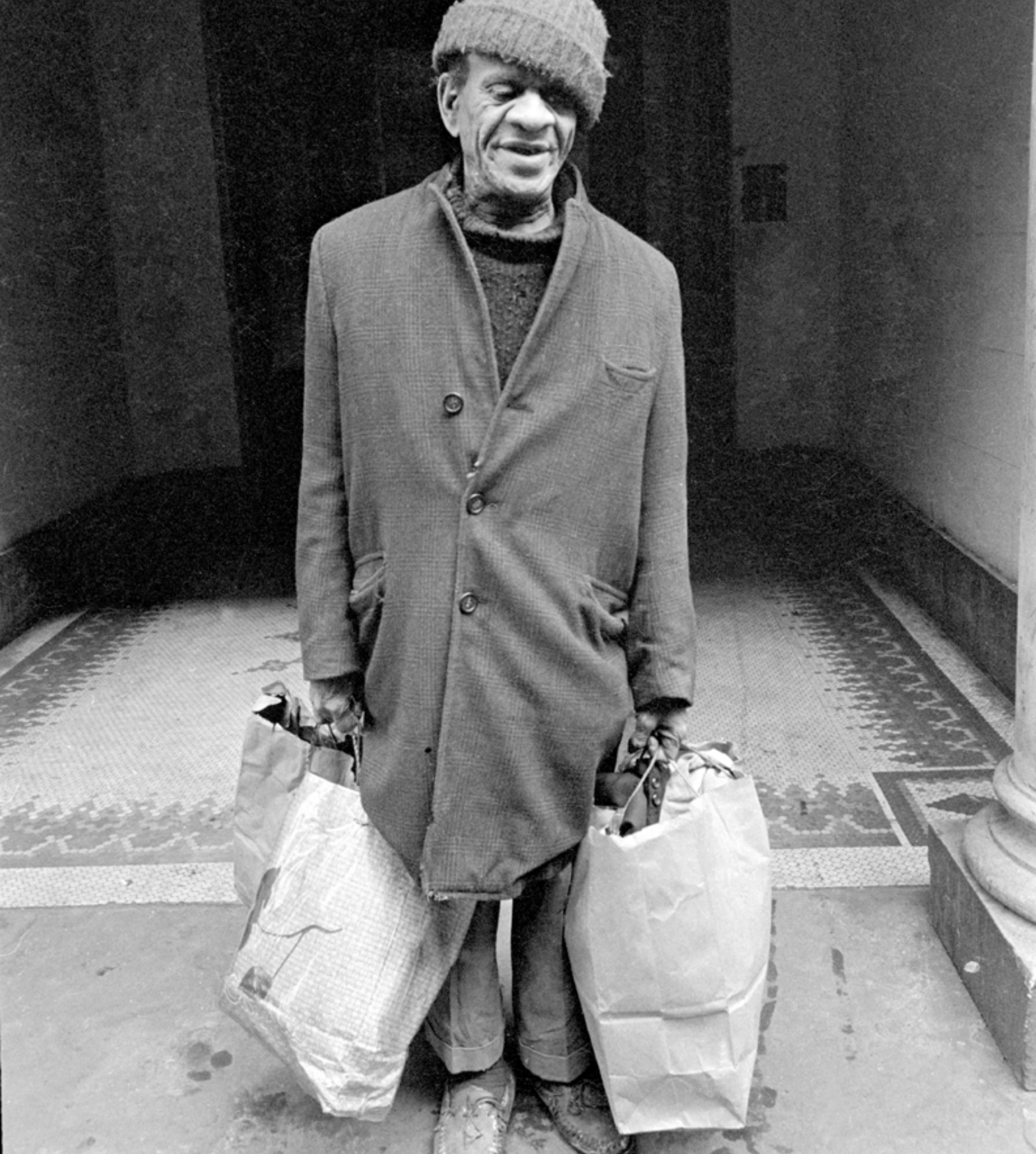
**“Still, I would like to get into the position where I didn’t have to bother with any of them an’ let those people who really need it, get there. If I had an efficient business of my own, I’d like to be doin’ that...like law, or music, or somethin’ like that, or writing, and I would like journalism.”**



Alfred Cade  
On Broadway, New York City, Spring 1969



Alfred Cade and Lili  
Mt. Royal Hotel, West 94th Street, New York City, Fall 1968



Alfred Cade  
Leaving St. Louis Hotel, West 94th Street, New York City, Spring 1969



Unknown resident who has been hit on the head with a pipe  
St Louis Hotel, West 94th Street, New York City



Mt. Royal Hotel, West 94th Street, New York City, Spring 1970





Laura and Earl  
ColumbusHotel, West 83rd Street, New York City, Spring 1969



Francis Brown and Earl  
St. Louis Hotel, West 94th Street, New York City, Spring 1968



Aida  
St. Louis Hotel, West 94th Street, New York City, Spring 1968



Doris and Earnst  
St. Louis Hotel, West 94th Street, New York City, March 1968



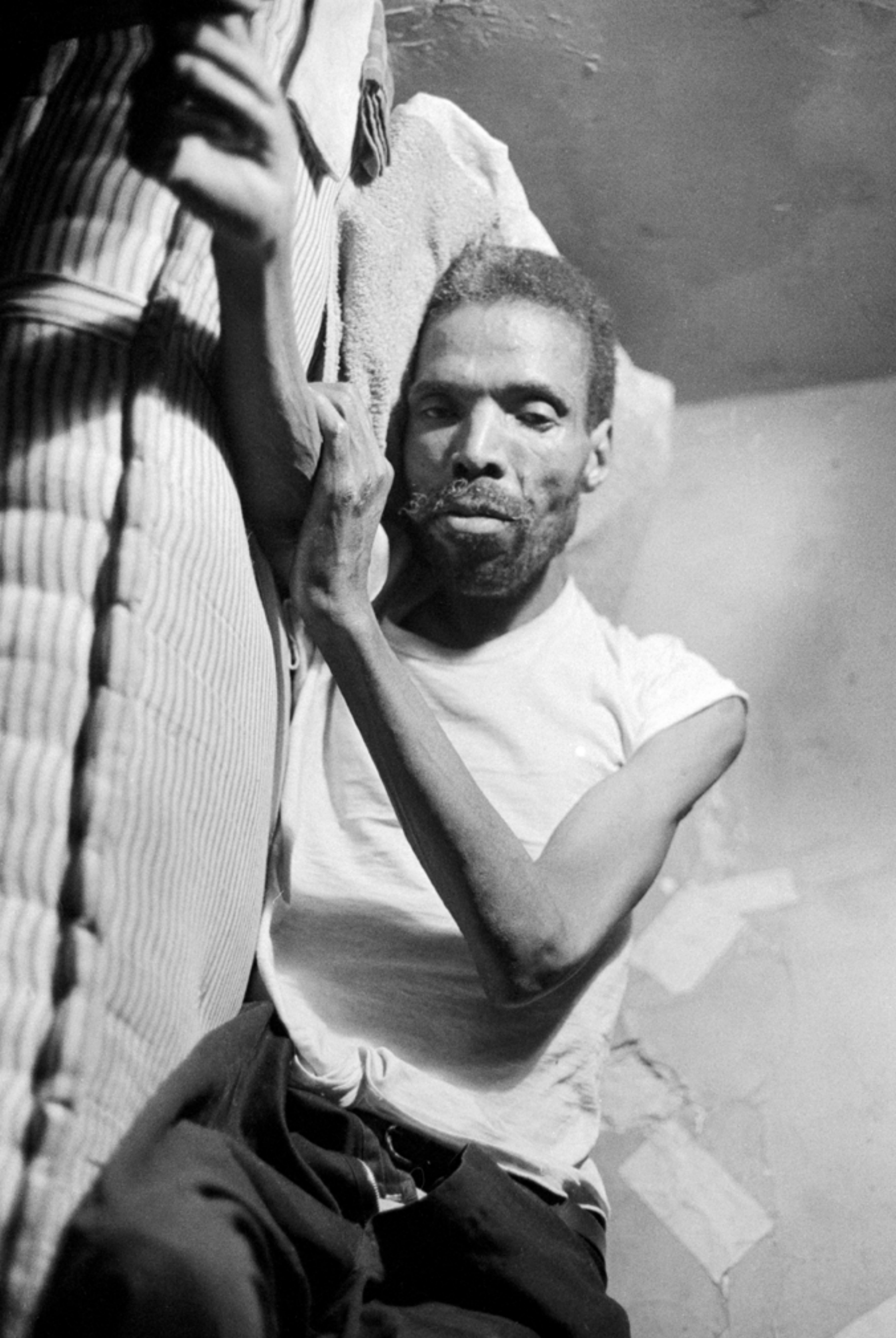
St. Louis Hotel, West 94th Street, New York City, Spring 1970



Pewe and Dottie  
St. Louis Hotel. West 94th Street, New York City. Spring 1969



Park benches, 95th Street and Broadway, New York City, Spring 1969



“Big Six”

Columbus Hotel. West 83rd Street, New York City, Spring 1968

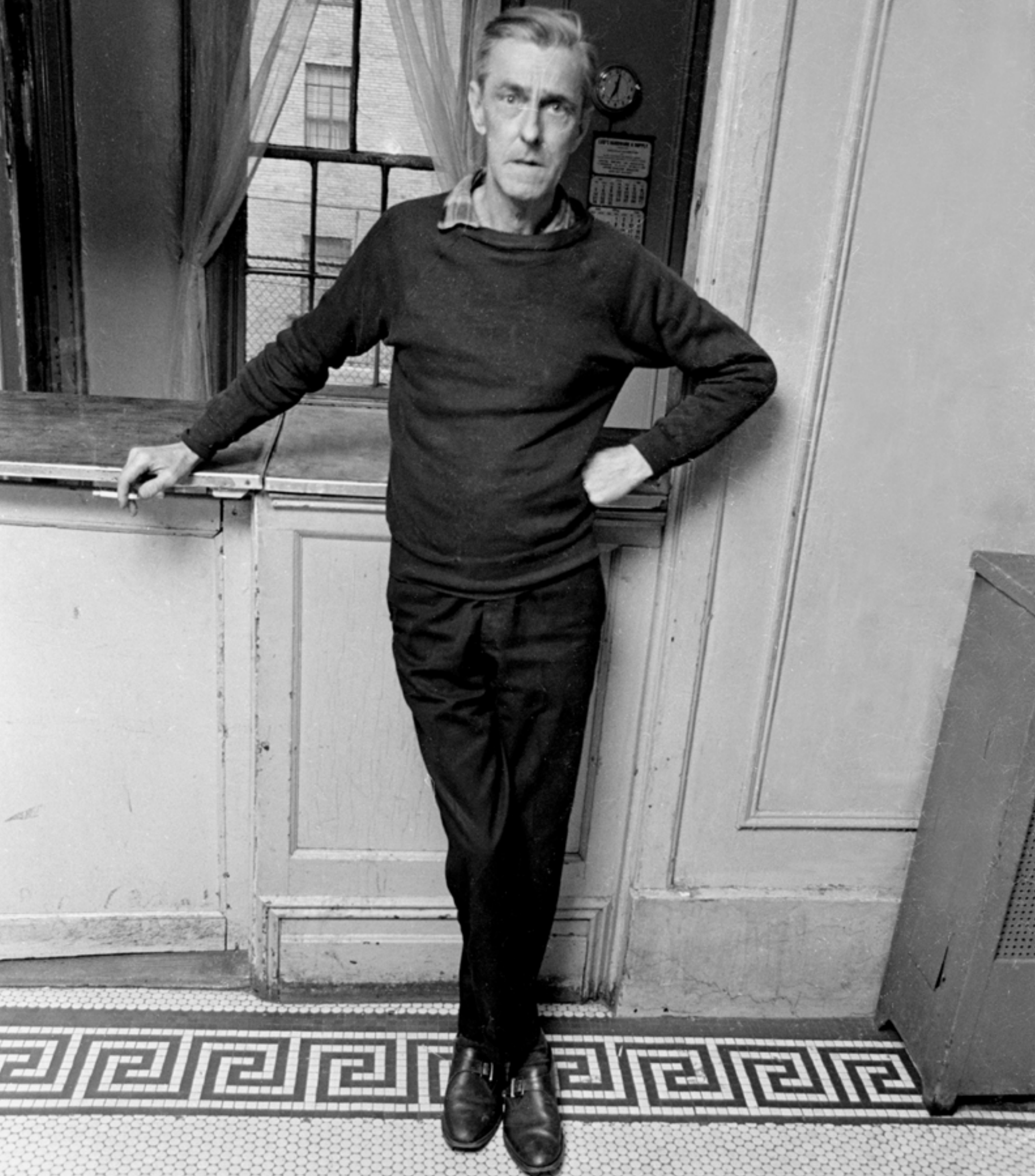




Irene Sherwin  
The 3 Deuces Hotel, West 94th Street, New York City, Easter 1969



Park benches, West 80's and Broadway, Spring 1969



Gene Dubin  
Valencia Hotel, West 95th Street, New York City, Winter 1969



Columbus Hotel, West 83rd Street, New York City, Summer 1969



St. Louis Hotel, West 94th Street, New York City, Spring 1970



SRO - Upper westside, New York City, 1968



Mr. Harding  
St. Louis Hotel, West 94th Street, New York City, 1968



Christmas time, SRO, New York City, 1968





Outside the Velencia Hotel, New York City, Summer 1968





NIXON -  
CAN YOU SPARE  
A DIME FOR  
PEACE?





















# Neighbors on the Block

Life in Single Room Occupancy Hotels  
**Photographs by Laurence Salzmann**

Introductory statement  
by Laurence Salzmann

An exhibit portfolio produced by the  
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Cultural Council Foundation.



I first became personally acquainted with Single Room Occupancy hotels when I got a job with a research service project operating in several of them on New York City's Upper West Side and administered by the Department of Community Psychiatry at St. Luke's Hospital.

As the name implies, a Single Room Occupancy hotel is a hotel where a single individual occupies a single room. Sometimes the room is shared with another tenant, in which case SRO could stand for Standing Room Only. With even one occupant, standing room is about all that's left in a room 10 feet by 17 feet.

In an era now hard to imagine, the hotels had been the posh residences of the rich, and evidence of their former beauty is still visible in some of the buildings: marble-paneled lobbies, tiled hallways, stained glass windows, and parquet floors. For the most part, the buildings have been left to decay for a variety of reasons: the high cost of maintenance, destructiveness of some tenants, and the general wear and tear of old age. It must also be remembered that many of the tenants are old and/or sick and are barely able to keep themselves together, much less accomplish even the basic housekeeping chores. More than one landlord has told me that to rehabilitate his building would cost over a million dollars!

A typical building is constructed on an H-shaped layout with four units on each floor, all opening onto the middle bar of the H. This bar houses the stairwell built around an elevator. Formerly each unit was a separate apartment; today they are broken up into as many as six or seven separate rooms, each housing a single individual. Each unit of six or seven has its own bathroom and kitchen facility, which are shared by the tenants of the unit.

The Department of Community Psychiatry at St. Luke's has been working in various hotels since 1963, bringing social and health services to the tenants and developing a model for future programs. The project which I joined in April 1968 hoped to apply the methods and services from the model to a sample SRO population to research the demographic, social, familial, and personally characteristics of this population, and finally to evaluate the whole thing. I might add - here that all of this data-our interpretations and recommendations



—are to be found in a two hundred page mimeographed volume lying somewhere on a dusty shelf. It is one more of those studies whose final impact lies buried beneath the broken spirit of its authors-unread, unheeded.

As part of my job, I was assigned to live in one of the buildings selected for study. I lived there for a period of four months, gathering data and observing firsthand the effects and effectiveness of the program. I began taking photographs. A photographer is little more real than a data-collector; that is, people can understand his purpose a little better and the photographs offer an opening for a relationship. As often as possible I made copies of the photographs to give the tenants. I was surprised to see what pleasure these gave. Most of the tenants had few belongings, and valuables were likely to be stolen. But a photograph was a treasure, which could go with them from hotel to hotel, to the hospital, or to jail, or could even help them to remember a friend after he was gone. Not everyone responded so positively. Some of the tenants who had small businesses going for them in the hotels (Sunday wine sales, dope, prostitution) believed I was an informer for the police and the photographs could be doctored to implicate them. Others were convinced that publications of the photographs would bring me fame and fortune and that they should be paid modeling fees. The owner of the building in which I lived became so suspicious of my picture-taking that he asked me to vacate my room. I learned that what most tenants know; a tenant has no right to continued occupancy. (I supposed legally he does, but since the tenants neither know specifically what their rights are, nor how to pursue that course of action, the result is the same.) When the landlord finds a tenant's presence no longer desirable, the unwanted tenant finds himself asked to move. If asking doesn't work, locking the tenant out of his room is the next step. Not wanting to be locked out of to endanger the project in any way, I acquiesced and moved.

Landlords, in fact, did come under close scrutiny in the study, and in many respects their plight was as pathetic as some of their tenants. In many instances they are a kind of caretaker, acting as an intermediary with different agencies on behalf of the tenants. They are bankers, -wardens, nursemaids. Ironically, many of the landlords were survivors of Hitler's concentration camps, now in the position of managing the living arrangements of our society's displaced and often despised persons.

I worked directly with the St. Luke's research project for three months. During the following summer (1968), I directed a film workshop for the tenants as part of the program, and over the fall and into the spring worked on two films about two people living in the hotels. Those were intense months. I still go back and back again. I have gotten to know many of the tenants of the three buildings in the original study, some better than others, and to those I am a frequent and welcome guest. In some ways I have come to think of the hotels as death ships, for after a fortnight's absence I return to hear the news that still another friend, or someone I knew, has died. I have learned though, as they all learned long ago, to mourn the passing of friends silently with little fanfare. So no fanfare will be made for Edna Hunt, Muriel Cruz, Francis Brown, and a few others I knew well. It is to those three in particular that I dedicate this collection of photographs.

Many of the tenants sit idly waiting in their coffin-sized cubicles for the day when they will have to wait no longer. Some shorten the wait with drugs, some with alcohol. Television has been a blessing for those who can afford it. For others the violence of the more pathologic in the buildings, or a fast-moving taxicab on Broadway provides the release. The quiet of idleness is broken by crashing wine bottles tossed from the upper stories to the inner courtyard below, and behind closed doors one often hears the shouts of rage, of love, or maybe just proof of life. On warm days the flow of life around them can be observed from Broadway's island benches or hotel stoops, and then the waiting is more pleasant.

From time to time I see newspaper articles exposing the scandalous conditions of another welfare hotel. The copy runs about the same, wallowing in description of the decaying structure, decrying the waste of public funds in such "rat holes" of misery. For the most part they print the truth, but they miss the heart of the matter—the people who live there.

I think my photographs capture them, and let each one shine out. I think a collection of such photographs might be a means of reaching others who might help to change these conditions. But there are a thousand and one causes begging for assistance and recognition: whales and war, drugs and disease, moon shots and abortions—so who can concern himself with a few sick and old people living in an SRO?

An intern made this point quite clear when one night a friend and I took old Sam to the hospital. Sam was so weak from sickness and lack of proper food he could no longer get out of bed, even to find a bathroom. A friend in the building had helped him as long as he could, but he could do no more. The room smelled of defecation and illness, and the landlord could no longer be responsible for him. So we took Sam to the hospital. The receiving intern refused to take him. The beds were full, but even if they hadn't been, why should one without hope, without a future, fill a place that another might require—one younger, a potential contributor to society, one with a future? Why should the doctor prolong a life such as Sam's? Sam might as well die at home in his room and nature's own good time.

So, at best, I would just like it known that they exist and that they are people too. Sometimes I think of what would happen if I worked all my life at jobs that paid a base living wage, with little or no security for retirement or disability. Where would I go, where would I live when I no longer had the means to maintain myself in my old age, or through a long illness—when friends don't know me, when I had outlived my family and my children didn't care to know me, or I them? Would I too end up waiting out my days in a room the size of some people's bathroom, waiting for my check to come to pay for it all, or would I open a window and just let myself fall?

## Film and Single Room Occupancy Hotels

### A Brief History of the Film Project:

The project began in June 1968 based on ideas of Laurence Salzmann, who was then working as a research assistant on the Ford Single Room Occupancy (SRO) Hotel Project administered by the Community Psychiatry Division of St. Luke's. Laurence was also living in an SRO at the time.

Laurence felt that films could provide a recreational activity for the tenants, increase their self-esteem, unite them more as a group, and provide a visual supplement to the research underway. In this respect the project was following lines proposed by Joan Shapiro, chief consultant to the Ford undertaking, who suggested combining a service to the tenants with additional information gathering.

As the opening film shows, there are over 400 SROs on the West Side of New York alone, with upwards of 300,000 tenants. A large percentage of these people were referred to an SRO because they could not take care of or support a family, could not hold a job, could not deal successfully with other people. Yet, in these aging buildings the tenants are forced to cooperate in sharing kitchens and bathroom; they are frequent contact with one another, and the need to help them make this contact enduring, perhaps fruitful, can be keenly felt by those who work with them. Their fearful, often hostile neighbors who live near these SRO's be led to understand life in the SRO, and encouraged to help improve it.

SRO'S provide a graphic demonstration of many of our most desperate urban problems. They are rife with crime. Loneliness is evident in all the faces, including the manager's. A depressing number of tenants are all too ready to label themselves failures, sidelined in the great game of social survival. They seek only convenient escape to ease them further towards unconsciousness. Reaching them with basic services, activating talents and experience now wasted, fomenting a productive interdependence: these are terrific challenges.

Footage shot by the tenants, was edited in rough form by Mr. Salzmann, shown every Tuesday night to the tenants. Their choice of subject matter is often funny and reveals how they picture themselves, how they conceive of "entertainment" (what they think people want to see). Their choices of actors can also uncover unexpected friends or contacts outside their normal group of friends.

The filming and screening appear to be of significant value. They give tenants something to look forward to, a fixed point of pleasure in their week, especially important to the alcoholics and addicts trying to control their habit. They provide a very loose form of task-oriented group therapy, encouraging cooperation and frank exchange of views on sensitive topics that they might not dare to broach without the handy excuse of the tape recorder. The films never fail to delight the tenants. Everyone loves to see himself and hear his friends' comments. Thus the doers, those involved in the shooting, always feel successful and can be encouraged to tackle other group endeavors. The watchers feel important too, and may be spurred to action in the next week's epic, or simple moved to realize something about their attitudes and environment by watching a movie about SRO life. The films may be used by social workers to introduce a discussion with a certain degree of objectivity. For instance: why is the hero of one film reduced to picking up cigarette butts? How might we avoid squandering all our welfare money during the first three days? Finally, the tenant-made films, crude as they are, can provide a vital initial link between the SRO and community. They can be a teaching aid in the training of social workers, providing a springboard for discussion. Used tactfully, they can be a way of bringing together tenant and manager, sensitizing him to tenant problems, appealing to his pride and letting him see the very positive role he might play in dealing with the tenants. Shown in other SROs, these films could build a feeling of solidarity among tenants, promoting exchanges of talent shows, combined outings, and friendships. In the simplest terms, they would keep a lot of people from feeling quite so lonely.



## Films

### Neighbors on the Block: Life in Single Room Occupancy Hotels

by Laurence Salzmann (photographer)

#### Alfred:

A companion film to Eddie (29 minutes) is shot in a crisper black and white and reflects its subjects looser, sunnier disposition. An African-American graduate of New York's elite Stuyvesant public school, Alfred spent 25 years in a mental institution before being released. It was no surprise that he was unprepared for unregimented daily routine and was soon eating out of trash cans because he'd given his welfare money away to Lil, a junkie prostitute, who would service him once every two weeks and then disappear. The narrative arc of the movie is Alfred's odyssey in search of Lil, his "lost love."

Heartbreakingly romantic, Alfred Cady would chase after his "sweetheart" with little success until the next check day, when she would magically reconcile in time to again lift all of his money. While Eddie is grim and gloomy, Alfred is sunny, singing and playing his empty stomach like a conga drum. The shots of him eating hot dogs from the trash or scavenging outdated meat from a special garbage truck are devastating.

Salzmann and Barton concluded that to affluent society, Alfred WAS garbage, so they followed sanitation trucks all the way to the pier where they're emptied and made those shots the signature of the movie. Both award-winning films, completed in 1969/70, were groundbreaking in subject matter and technique. They profile Invisible Men, castoffs of society whose spirit, wit, and courage still shine out and touch the world that would for the most part not care to acknowledge them.





## SRO: Eddie

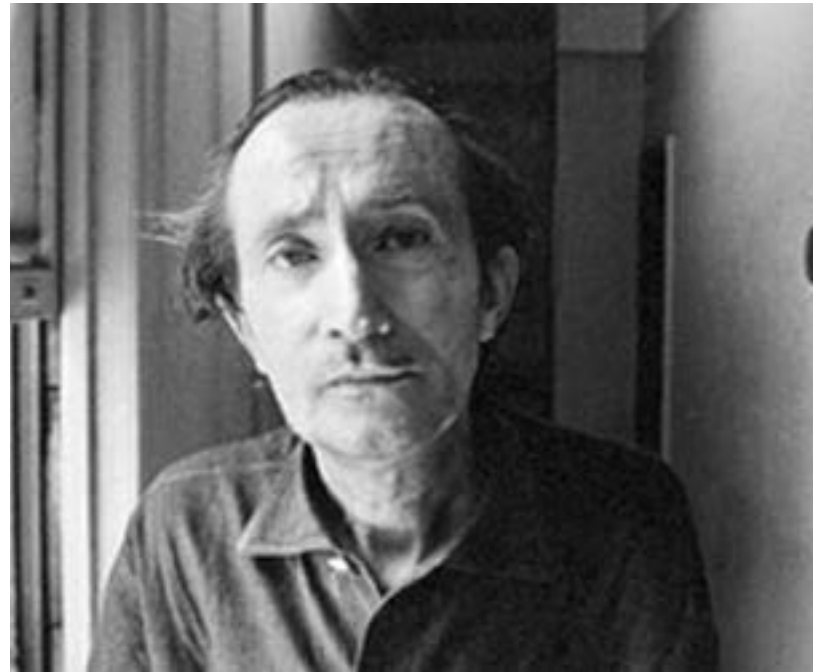
A film by Peter Barton and Laurence Salzmann was one of the first recipients of an American Film Institute Grant, 1971 (15 minutes).

Eddie O'Brian was an alcoholic living in squalor on West 94th Street. He was, like many of his neighbors in the hotels, dying. "I can't actually afford both eat and drink, too," he said. His mind was fragmented, his speech stuttering, half-incoherent.

The documentary's narrative is built around a simple, ominous event: Eddie's last friend Sam, is being thrown out of the hotel and re-institutionalized. Sam can't walk to the toilet any more and has been soiling his bed so they're throwing him out. To Eddie, this eviction is not just to the hospital but to the cemetery. He knows Sam isn't going to ever resume life outside the institution. Down both go to the elevator, which is used in the movie as a metaphor, a descent into hell.

Eddie has spent his life searching for connection. Molested by a priest when he was a child, he joined various groups – fascist, neo-Nazi, communist, über-Catholic - in search for a sense of belonging. He said, "I wanted to be part of something. People for some reason just don't like me so I stayed to myself. I walked miles on end trying to get away from myself..."

The climax of the movie is brilliantly edited experimental montage that attempts to mirror the disintegration of Eddie's brain through overlapping audio track and traumatic, quick imagery. The film is shot in grainy black-and-white that mirrors the soupy light in Eddie's tiny room.





Alfred Cade sitting between filmmakers Laurence Salzmann and Peter Barton - New York City, 1968

I worked directly with the St. Luke's research project for three months. During the following summer (1968), I directed a film workshop for the tenants as part of the program, and over the fall and into the spring worked on two films about two people living in the hotels. Those were intense months. I still go back and back again. I have gotten to know many of the tenants of the three buildings in the original study, some better than others, and to those I am a frequent and welcome guest. In some ways I have come to think of the hotels as death ships, for after a fortnight's absence I return to hear the news that still another friend, or someone I knew, has died. I have learned though, as they all learned long ago, to mourn the passing of friends silently with little fanfare. So no fanfare will be made for Edna Hunt, Muriel Cruz, Francis Brown, and a few others I knew well. It is to those three in particular that I dedicate this collection of photographs.