

Opening song: “Stevenson Hotel” by Casey Neill

Lyrics: “Stevenson Hotel, 106 Bowery, And George is the last man standing, He’s been here 30 years, In this flophouse up the stairs, He is not leaving, Oh no, He is not leaving, Oh no...”

Monami: In 2004, musician Casey Neill wrote this song “Stevenson Hotel” in response to a set of New York Times articles about a man named George Skoularikos. George was the lone inhabitant of the Stevenson come the early 2000s and the Stevenson was one of the few remaining flophouses on Manhattan’s Lower East Side. Just 40 years before there had been about a hundred single-occupancy hotels on a downtown street called The Bowery and over fifteen thousand men like George who lived in them. Within a handful of decades, that all changed.

Meredith: Welcome back to Just Housing, it’s good to be back together. As you listen today, you’ll hear us ask and answer why and how George Skoularikos became the Bowery’s last man standing. What is the history of New York’s Skid Row? Who were the men who lived there? How did the flophouses come to dominate the city’s lowest housing sector? And then how did they end up shut down and demolished?

Monami: So, Meredith, where should we begin? Can you start by telling us what we know about George himself?

Meredith: What we know is that George was a Greek immigrant and retired poet. He moved into The Stevenson in the 80s, when he fell into some bad luck. George had lost a service industry job

and racked up some medical bills. He couldn't pay his rent and got evicted. His move to The Stevenson was out of misfortune and necessity.

Monami: Then, is it fair to say that George's road to The Stevenson was archetypal?

Meredith: Absolutely. Most residents ended up in Manhattan flophouses due to similar circumstances. As the journalist Dan Barry puts it, "the Bowery became a place for thousands and thousands of men with nowhere else to go."

Monami: And as with his background, George's livelihood was also standard. During his time at The Stevenson, George subsisted off of disability and retirement benefits. He was a 74 year old pensioner and held no other job. Both pensions together added up to \$660 a month for George, but it was typical for flophouse residents to rely on retirement payments alone, meaning they would live off of even less. Some like George, however, received other types of pensions. A large proportion of the population within Bowery flophouses were retired military vets and received payment for their service.

Meredith: Were there any programs other than pension plans available to residents?

Monami: Besides pension plans, many of these precariously housed men that came to be known as "Bowery bums" paid for their rooms with money that the city gave them directly for the purpose of lodging. In the second half of the 1900s, the Department of Welfare distributed day-to-day food and lodging tickets to the housing insecure by way of police stations, restaurants,

and the single occupancy hotels themselves. Harvard historian James Peters estimates that, overall, governmental welfare assistance covered the cost of lodging for more than one-third of the men living on the Bowery. No matter how they paid for their beds, flophouse living was grim for these men.

Meredith: In an interview with WBAI radio, self-defined “educated bum,” named Leonard Russel described what life was like in the Bowery hotels.

Monami: When asked about the hotels and how they were inside, he said, “*Oh they’re beautiful. Chicken wire over your head. You think you’re in a chicken coop when you wake up coming out of ‘em drunk. The door you can’t lock sometimes. Don’t leave anything in your clothes. If you’ve got any valuables at all, put ‘em in your pillow. In your shoes. And then put your shoes in the pillow or the night clerk will grab it.*” And when asked if there were bed bugs or anything like that, he said, “*Oh, good gosh, why certainly. They help you out in the morning, they carry you out. You don’t need any bell boys, the rats’ll take your bags up.*”

Meredith: Though all Bowery bums experienced the same living conditions, there was somewhat of a social hierarchy present in the flophouses. Pensioners like George were in far better positions than others, argued Leonard Russel. Alcoholics or drug addicts living on the Bowery often had no money for food. They got their meals through the ticketing programs at the Municipal Lodging houses. Pensioners, on the other hand, could afford to buy a meal here and there. Sometimes, when Russel wanted to make a couple of bucks, he sold his free meals to his neighbors with pensions.

Monami: Alcoholism was rampant on the Bowery. Over the course of flophouse history, the disease almost defined the Skid Row experience. In a 1970s radio show called Pantechnicon, author Robert Thomsen who worked closely with the co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous Bill Wilson described the frequency of interactions between the organization and flophouse residents. Quote *“In the 1930s, when AA was just beginning, its membership was what they call the low bottom, the Bowery bum, the stereotype. Picture these were men who had been through everything and were just at the lowest.”*

musical interlude “Eastside” by pingnews

Meredith: And we should keep in mind that Wilson only spoke of the population of flophouse alcoholics that chose to enroll in AA. It feels likely that he described a small sector of the Bowery Bums here, and that most were nowhere near a path to recovery, wouldn't you think?

Monami: Yes, I'm sure of it. We even know of one man who shared with Newsday in 1961 quote, “I'm a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, but I'm not a reformed alcoholic. I'm an alcoholic.” It is clear that alcoholism was an active and present struggle for the Bowery population.

Meredith: I know Leonard Russel suggested that these alcoholics were able to procure food and lodging tickets from the city fairly easily, at least in his era, but is that really true? Did the city provide them with enough for sustainable living conditions?

Monami: Well, the situation was certainly touch and go. The food and bed tickets were distributed for daily use and required some time and effort to procure. We know that a lot of the men panhandled to rack in some cash. That others picked up unskilled labor gigs from time to time. The Vera Institute of Justice described the situation by stating, "... most alcoholics on Skid Row are sick, desperate people, who, unable to function in the normal workday world, have retreated to marginal life in run-down sections of our city."

Meredith: The men certainly seemed destitute. But the extremity of the language that Vera used is shocking.

Monami: Unfortunately, by 1961, the year that the Institute published this report, such condemning attitudes about the flophouse men were widespread. Though life on the Bowery had been considered the lowest of the low by this time, for the first half of the twentieth century, New Yorkers generally tended to regard the situation mostly with apathy and sometimes even with compassion. A 1961 article we found in *The New York Times* archive described that in the 50s and early 60s, however, the city's former, quote, "traditional tolerance of drunken vagrants" began to wane.

Meredith: The same newspaper article reveals that there was what the journalist called a "mass influx of derelicts" to the Bowery in the 50s. It likely fed into this change in attitude. Among the influx, the Times noted, were men who were said to kill for drinks. A man named Herbert Rhinehardt who worked for N.H. Lyons, a company that operated a chain of lodging houses,

described his view of the Bowery population shift. He explained the situation with the line “In the old days, a fight was a punch in the nose. Now it’s a knife in the ribs.” New Yorkers were becoming increasingly nervous about the Bowery Bums and their behavior. People complained of the bums’ tendency to “monopolize benches” and “frighten children.” They were said to carry contagious diseases and vermin. They supposedly “wandered into traffic,” and publicly urinated. The Bowery man had come to be viewed as both a nuisance and a threat. The 1961 Vera report stated blatantly, “The Skid Row alcoholic presents serious problems... to the people who live and work in the surrounding areas.”

Monami: So to quickly summarize, the claim made by politicians was that the population of alcoholics on Skid Row was growing and that New Yorkers had begun to feel threatened by the influx of these men and their behaviors?

Meredith: Well, interestingly enough, that’s just the story that well-off and powerful New Yorkers were telling themselves. We’ve unearthed some evidence that suggests that pointing to a change in Bowery population was a fabricated political move. A New York Circuit Judge of the 60s asserted, “There is growing recognition that... the stereotype of the Bowery man as an alcoholic and a bum is cruelly inaccurate.” He claimed based on an extensive study he was part of conducting that alcoholics were just a small portion of the flophouse population.

Monami: And yet, whether rooted in reality or not, New Yorkers rolled with the idea that Bowery bums were becoming increasingly drunk and increasingly dangerous. Soon, policy, programs, and legislation came to reflect this mistaken belief.

musical interlude “Eastside” by pingnews

Monami: By the middle of the 1960s, New York politicians and agencies had implemented several initiatives to address the Skid Row problem. The then Mayor of New York, Robert Wagner, who had called the flophouse men “an immovable obstacle” to Lower East Side rehabilitation, spearheaded the most famous initiative of them all: Operation Bowery.

musical interlude “Spy on Fire” by Disaster of Music

This 1961 program was an interdepartmental effort to deal with what Mayor Wagner termed the “human problems” of the Bowery. The work was shared between eight different city agencies. Because alcoholism had been deemed one of the leading problems of Skid Row, detoxifying the Bowery population was a top priority.

Meredith: This specific goal of Operation Bowery was designated as the “Manhattan Bowery Project.” There was to be a 50 bed detoxification facility created near Skid Row. At the center, the “immediate physical needs” of a Bowery alcoholic were to be met. He would sober up over the course of a few days under the guidance of a team of nurses, physicians, social workers, and other healthcare professionals. This response team would then determine whether he was ready for release or needed more permanent institutionalization. Because men could end up in the detoxification center by either self-admittance or by police roundup, part of the Manhattan Bowery Project included an increase in public intoxication arrests.

Monami: So, what was going on behind that increase in arrests.

Meredith: This issue of public drunkenness and arrests was highly disputed amongst different policymakers and their constituents over the course of the mid-twentieth century. It appears that the beginning of Operation Bowery marked an attitude of criminalization of alcohol consumption. By the mid 60s, over a quarter of the 200,000 arrests per year in the city were due to public drinking. Then, in 1966, there was an era when intoxication arrests were outlawed. By 1968, however, that ruling had been reversed and The NYPD began arresting many men for public drunkenness once again.

Monami: The criminalization of public intoxication was just one move made to clean up the Bowery. There was also part of a series of laws passed aimed at reforming the flophouses themselves.

Meredith: We see the first of these laws emerge in the late 1950s, when the deterioration and overcrowding of Bowery buildings was beginning to be publicly scrutinized. Local Law 24, passed in 1954, made the codes and regulations around single occupancy room hotels far stricter. The law led directly to the shutting down of a great number of flophouses.

Monami: Some of the new laws were financial rather than regulatory. Throughout the 50s to 80s, there were several property tax reforms that incentivized the conversion of SROs into other types of buildings. For example, in 1955, the city council passed the J-51 tax abatement, offering a

credit equivalent to the amount of money spent upgrading a building against increases in future property taxes for up to ten years. Jonathan Soffer, a professor of Urban History at NYU, found that tax incentives like the J-51 credit cost New York an estimated 100,000 units of its cheapest housing.

Both in government and popular culture, New York was reinventing itself through gentrification. Subsidies for the upgrading of tenements to luxury housing, service expansion in previously abandoned neighborhoods, tax credits for office development, and the promotion of tourism encouraged the creation of a new New York. A New York for a different group of people.

However, the city wasn't the only actor at fault. The landlords of these buildings, too, had tired of the nuisances of the flophouse community and were eager to act on the opportunity to convert their property.

Meredith: Take Edward Oshins, the owner of two Manhattan lodging houses. He shared with the *New York Times*, "I can't take the headaches any more of running these places. It's not my job to be a social worker or a psychiatrist." He saw others around him converting flophouses into other types of residences, and began looking to make the transition himself.

Monami: So there we have it, Meredith. This is how we got to a moment of flophouse foreclosure. In the mid twentieth century, the Bowery became known for its rundown conditions and the alcoholism of its residents. Many actors: The Mayor and the Department of Health, the NYPD, the SRO landlords, collaborated to combat what they viewed as a dire situation. Their

goals were twofold: to detoxify, reprimand, and relocate the Bowery bums, first. And second, to encourage the transformation of flophouses into artist lofts, commercial hotels, and high-end apartment buildings. A study at CUNY found that there were 129,000 SROs in 1960 but that number had fallen to 25,000 in 1978.”

Meredith: That’s almost the whole picture, Monami. But there is one set of key actors we’re forgetting in telling this story: the financiers. Who was paying for the Bowery conversions?

Monami: So, for the most part, we’re looking at the involvement of big developers. With the shifting attitudes about Bowery men and flophouses, real estate firms saw an opportunity to move into and gentrify the neighborhood. They began buying landlords out. And landlords knew how to work that game.

Beyond those big developers, however, there was some government money involved. The National Foundation for Arts and Humanities established by Congress in 1965, for example, provided \$100,000 grants to any building in the area being converted into artist studios.

Meredith: Okay, interesting. So was everyone pro-gentrification? Was anyone thinking about the flophouse residents themselves?

Monami: In the 60s, the only initiatives aimed at helping the residents seemed to be the detoxification centers. And by the early 70s, there were some efforts to curb flophouse conversions. In 1973, Mayor John Lindsay became especially concerned about the fate of the Bowery men. He founded the Mayor’s Office of SRO Housing to both halt conversions and to

strengthen tenant protection laws. But, his efforts were fairly unsuccessful and gentrification continued unhindered for years.

Meredith: And no one has cared to think of the Bowery's housing insecure men since?

Monami: well, no, not entirely. In 1985 the city seemed to have a moral reckoning in response to ever-growing homelessness. They put in place a moratorium on flophouse conversions. But, the ruling didn't last long. And Mayors Ed Koch of the 80s and Rudy Giuliani of the 90s were big proponents of gentrification. The availability of SROs only decreased throughout the rest of the twentieth century.

Meredith: And that lands us back at the turn of this century, around when journalist Dan Barry met George Skoularikos at the Stevenson and called him the flophouses' "last man standing."

Monami: It certainly does. And we've addressed almost all of the questions we laid out at the start of this chat. But there is one glaring thing missing in this narrative. What happened to George and the men like him?

Meredith: Their tale doesn't end so well, Monami. As we know from the 1985 crisis of morality, a lot of them ended up on the street and New York City's homelessness rates only continued to rise. Some, like George himself, spent the rest of their lives in legal battles. When his landlords tried to buy him out for \$50,000, he refused. When they offered \$75,000, he refused again. George felt that only a sum of around \$200,000 would adequately cover his medical fees and

rent of a new apartment. Without an agreement, George and his landlord went to court, as many flophouse residents and their landlords did. George's lawyer urged him to use the dangerous and crumbling conditions of the flophouses as a plea for a greater buyout sum. A lot of flophouse residents actually did accept lower sums in exchange for moving out. But George held firm. He promised to invoke his tenant rights to refuse eviction until a satisfactory agreement was reached. That's how he ended up staying at the Stevenson when so many before him had left.

Monami: And Casey Neill was right when he sang that George was not leaving. He didn't until he became quite elderly and ill, when he returned home to Greece in search of his death bed.

Closing song: "Stevenson Hotel" by Casey Neill