

Hi, Fred Nelson for Community Comment,

Four weeks ago I spoke of the local homeless problem. I see there has been some improvement with a new city ordinance in place prohibiting pan handling. I also mentioned that I have been approached by pan handlers several times since the new ordinance went into effect. Since then I have been approached twice more, once in Eureka and once in Arcata. I looked up the word "pan handle" which means 'to approach a stranger and beg for money or food'. From what I understand, the word "panhandler" was adopted in the late eighteen hundreds as many people thought the extended arm of a beggar resembled a pan handle. Other names associated with the practice are 'bum', 'beggar', 'tramp', 'moocher', 'scrounger', 'cadger', 'parasite', 'grubber' and 'sponger'. I remember a couple of pan handling incidents that took place in San Francisco in Nineteen Forty Five that left me chuckling. At the time, I was a crewman on a merchant ship that was docked near San Francisco's China Basin. My sister Liz was living in San Francisco at Post and Leavenworth Streets so, after a day's work on board the ship, I would walk from the Embarcadero to her apartment where I kept a change of clean clothes and Liz and I would have dinner together. This was war time and there were very few unemployed in San Francisco but you still had the unemployed alcoholics who pan handled for money to buy a cheap bottle of wine. During my walks to the apartment, I would be approached quite often. The usual pitch would be "can you spare a nickel for a cup of coffee?" One afternoon, on my way to the apartment, I was approached by this disheveled middle aged man. Keep in mind that I was not dressed well either as I still was wearing my work clothes. He launched into a 'song and dance', asking for the usual nickel, but with a lengthy dissertation of why he needed the money. At eighteen years of age, I am standing there thinking that it might be fun to turn the tables. When he finished, I launched into my own 'song and dance'. Don't ask me what I said as I don't remember, but it was a lot. As I was winding down, he reached into his pocket and came up with a nickel which he placed in my hand. Yes, I kept the nickel and continued on my way. The other incident was during a walk when I passed a young fellow sunning himself in a large window along the Embarcadero. I admired his honesty. He called to me and asked if I could spare Five dollars as he had just got out of jail. Five bucks was a lot of money in those days and I would probably have given it to him if I had that much in my possession.

Fred Nelson for Community Comment