

The Record

## A GOLD MINE IN PATERSON SCRAPPERS LOOT METAL FROM EMPTY BUILDINGS

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DATELINE           PATERSON

KEYWORD-HIT

It's a blustery afternoon and two men wheel a shopping cart toward the empty Christopher Columbus housing development.

Kane, a convicted robber, and Is, a heroin addict, are on a shopping trip of sorts. They are planning to steal window frames and copper piping from the run-down public high-rise.

"It's easy money, man," said Is, who had been working the project since October and says he can make a few hundred dollars a day.

Even before the 330-family development was emptied in September, it became a tempting target for thieves, scavengers, and vandals. The lack of security coupled with the mountains of aluminum, copper, and stainless steel in the four high-rises attracted scores of down-and-out hustlers looking to make a quick buck.

"Scrappers" have long been a fixture on the city's Northside as they wheel carts full of twisted metal and pipes to local scrap yards.

They make a living on leftovers. They say they strip abandoned and burned-out houses of their plumbing fixtures and electrical wiring, collect discarded kitchen appliances from curbs, and scour the trash of Bunker Hill businesses looking for rusted machinery or industrial piping. On occasion, they take construction material from half-finished duplexes in the area.

Some see themselves as "recycling entrepreneurs," but the authorities say the scrappers are vandals and criminals.

"Anything that is unlawfully removed from [public] property is wrong. It's as simple as that," said Felix Raymond, director of the Paterson Housing Authority. "There are security measures, and we provided what we could afford. Even while residents were living there, they were cutting off the water supply as a result of their vandalism."

As residents began to move from the complex, maintenance crews repeatedly visited the site last year to deal with periodic flooding and power outages as a result of stolen pipes and wires, said Raymond.

A court order required the Housing Authority to post as many as nine off-duty police officers at the site while families were still living there. But as the last of families moved out, the police left as well. The Housing Authority continued to monitor the site, and some scrappers were arrested.

The demolition contractor has reported no problems since it put a fence around the site and began around-the-clock security last month. The buildings are scheduled for demolition Jan. 17.

The Christopher Columbus project, known colloquially as CCP, was to scrappers what an Egyptian tomb is to archaeologists. They describe stumbling into vacant apartments and finding television sets, appliances, and enough good metal in the radiator, sink, and windows for a comfortable payday.

And there was the decent working environment: apartments with toilets and an expansive view of downtown Paterson.

"It's a gold mine," Richard, a 27-year-old scrapper, said late last year. "There is so much in there. I go there every day."

Scrappers say they are just trying to survive.

"I just got out of jail and have a kid and family to support," said Kane, 25, with a shrug. "This is income."

Is, who says he has spent time in the past working in fast-food restaurants, admits heroin has sapped his energy. Scrapping is dependable money, and he doesn't have to worry about a boss getting into his personal life.

Scrappers made their first forays into the Christopher Columbus apartments last year, using sledgehammers, hatchets, or other tools to break down apartment doors.

They joined drug dealers and vagrants in turning the development into a lawless outpost. Some brazen vandals even stole the flag pole and bronze plaque that was part of the Christopher Columbus monument.

The Housing Authority and police responded to worsening conditions by raiding the high-rise buildings and arresting more than a dozen people illegally occupying apartments. It also sent in welders to seal apartments after finding that vandals had broken into hundreds of boarded-up units.

Is and Kane, who have each been arrested once for scrapping, said the threat of jail did not stop them from returning to Christopher Columbus.

One afternoon, as a lone guard sat in her car in the complex's parking lot, banging and other sounds of demolition could be heard from inside one of the hulking towers.

The scrappers stashed their shopping carts in a hallway and used milk crates to get into second-floor windows. Armed with a crowbar, screwdriver, and plenty of muscle they headed for an empty apartment and began wrestling an aluminum window frame from its place. After a little grunting and a few good kicks, they got it out. Before entering another apartment through a broken door, Is spotted copper pipes protruding from a hole in a hallway wall. He yanked them out.

"A lot of people don't like messing with this," Is said later. "But it's more money."

The two men wheeled their booty to a scrap yard, getting 40 to 50 cents a pound for copper, 30 cents for brass, and 20 to 30 cents for aluminum.

Scrappers say the four or five recycling companies in the area ask

few questions about their haul and turn them away only when the police come around. But the companies say they reject anything that looks suspicious.

"They bring everything," said a scrap company worker, who asked not to be identified. "If we don't like certain stuff, we send them away. If you know where it comes from, then we chase them away. We are not looking for problems."

Richard says scrapping is a temporary fix. It has always been like that for the lifelong Patersonian \_ scrapping between the carpentry, plumbing, and moving jobs.

Richard says he and a friend made more than \$20,000 scavenging at the Christopher Columbus apartments, sometimes hundreds of dollars a day. Richard said that even after the two were arrested for trespassing just before Thanksgiving, he returned a few more times. He has a Jan. 13 court date on the trespassing charges.

"What's the harm in us going in there and taking stuff. . . . Instead of scrapping, they'd rather have us out here selling drugs or robbing people? By doing this, we're not hurting anyone. "