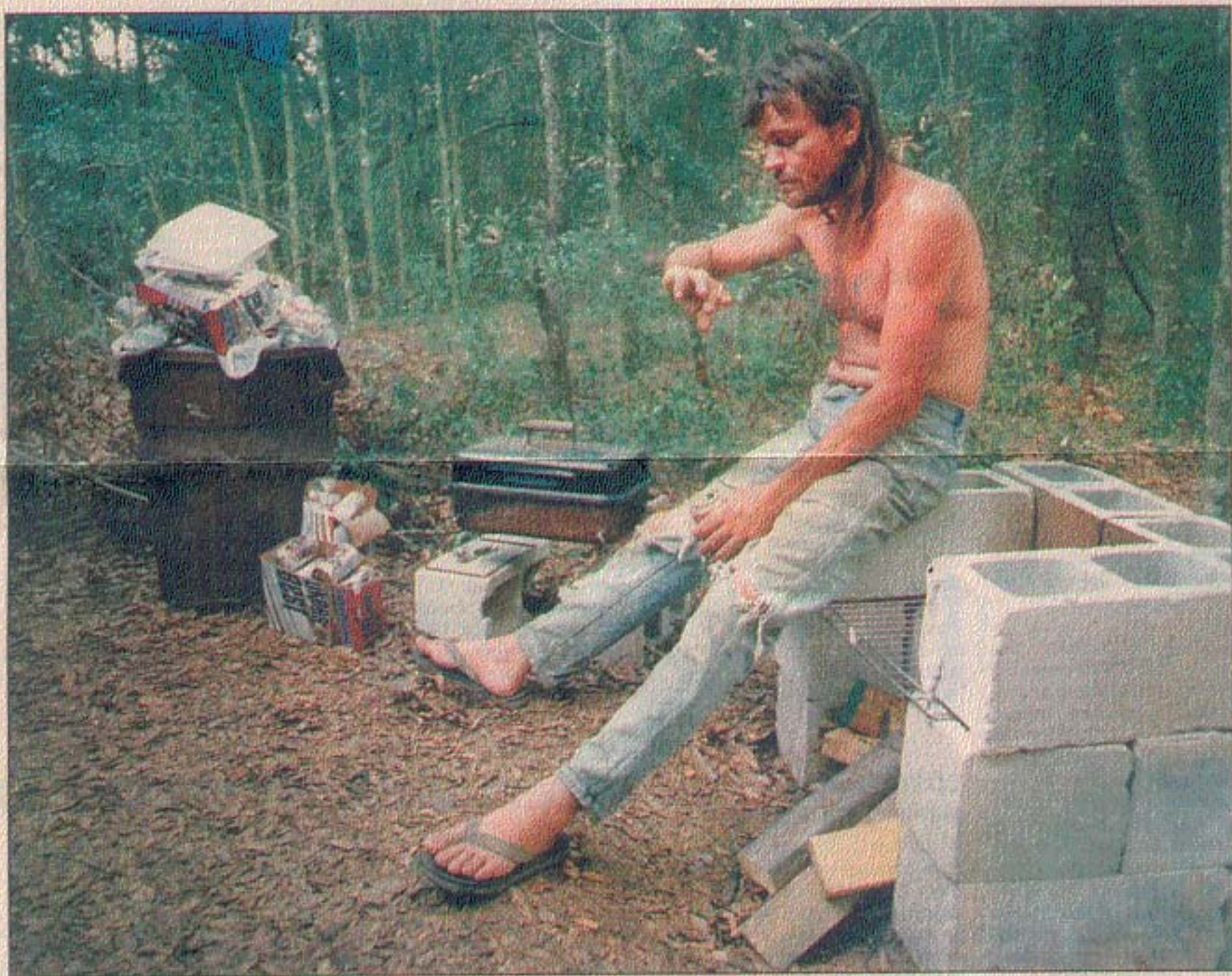


says he prefers to live as he does and is not looking for sympathy. He has camped in the woods for about three months.



LIVING

in the shadows



Photos by BRIAN THORPE

Tony Bakeberg, a day laborer who lives in this camp in woods near Hernando, says, "I'm not homeless. I got a home right here."

■ Some homeless people choose to live outside the mainstream. Many, though, are forced into homelessness by poverty or domestic violence.

By IAN JAMES
Times Staff Writer

HERNANDO — Back in the woods, just deep enough to be hidden, those without homes live in tents under the shady canopy of oaks.

Their encampments are invisible from the road. But round a corner on a footpath, and a makeshift home appears.

A tarp stretched between trees shelters a small tent from the rain.

For furniture, there are two worn chairs. For bathing, a bag shower hanging from a tree. For escape, cans of Milwaukee's Best, crushed and discarded in a garbage can.

Tony Bakeberg lives here. He is one of at least five people who call these woods near the town of Hernando home.

And he isn't looking for sympathy.

"I'm not homeless. I got a

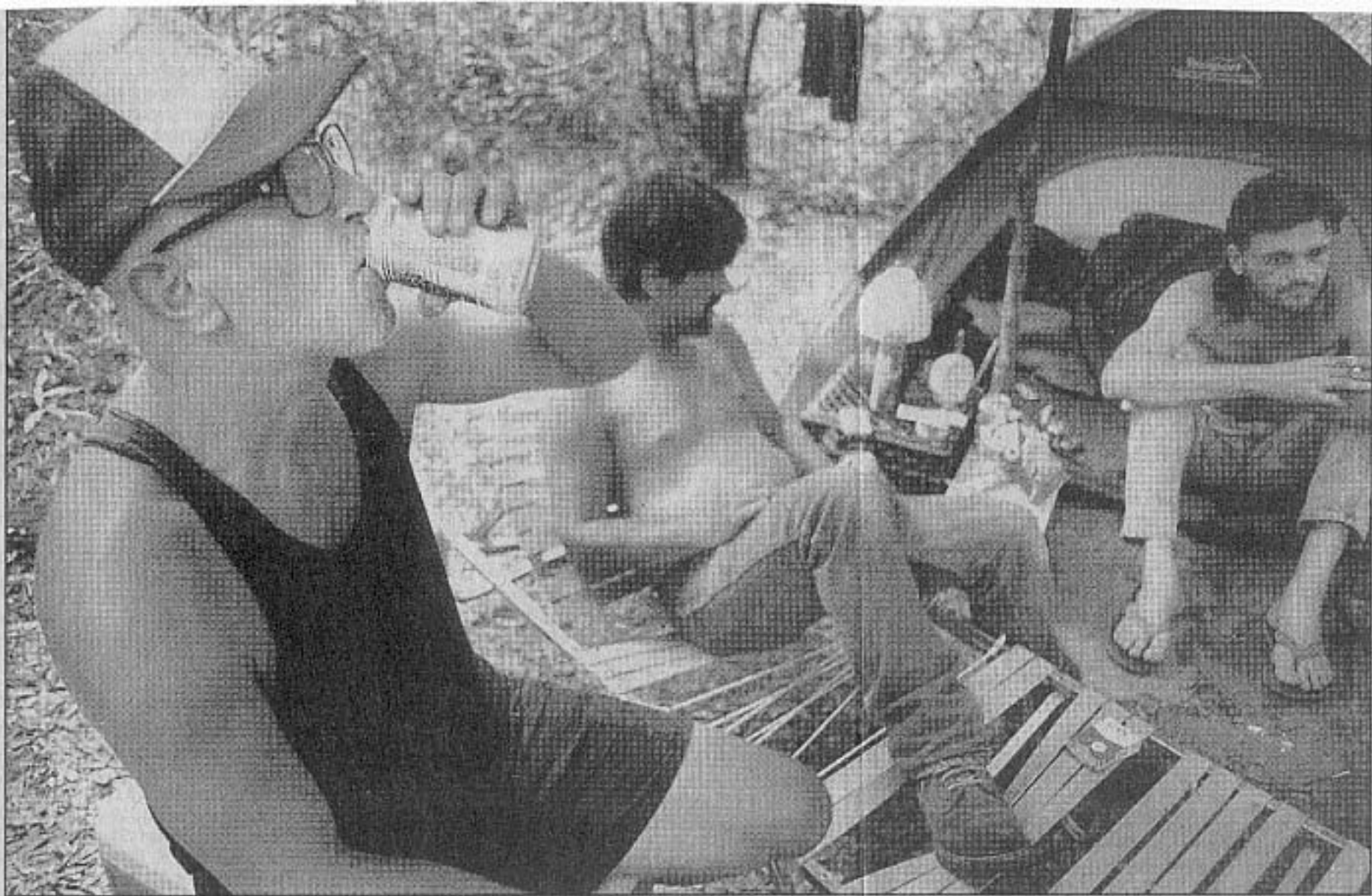
home right here," he said one recent evening as daylight faded on his camp. "I'm fine."

Talking tough is Bakeberg's way. But don't be fooled: Life out here is a matter of survival. There are insects, lightning and the ever-present threat of intruders. When Bakeberg sleeps, he keeps a piece of iron rebar nearby just in case.

At 33, he has known the walls

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Mike McGurn, left, and Mike Lewandowski visit Tony Bakeberg at his camp site Thursday. Neither guest lives in the woods, but McGurn says he might set up camp there soon because he likes the isolation. Bakeberg agrees, saying, "I don't want the headaches. I don't want a landlord. I can live out here for free."



Homeless

from Page 1

of a prison cell and has a criminal record marked by burglary and marijuana possession convictions. His shoulder blade bears a skull-and-crossbones tattoo with the word "BONES," a nickname he was given years ago because of his lanky figure.

He said he came to Florida in January on a whim, leaving North Carolina and hitchhiking south. About three months ago, he moved into the woods near Hernando. He has done day labor ever since.

One of his fingers is swollen at the knuckle, broken when sandwiched between pipes, he said. Open sores, a reaction to working with cement, make his handshake rough to the touch.

But he keeps rolling his own cigarettes and earning enough to eat at restaurants in town. Best of all, he said, "Out here, there ain't nobody telling me what to do."

If Bakeberg is one who chose this situation, there are many others in rural Citrus County who try to keep a home, but

find themselves similarly searching for a place to sleep.

Some live in cars. Some are hitchhikers looking for work. Others are families torn by poverty or violence.

The Sheriff's Office often gets 911 calls from homeless people looking for help. Sometimes it is food they want. Sometimes it is a place to stay.

Gail Tierney, a spokeswoman for the Sheriff's Office, said the usual procedure is to send a deputy to meet the people and direct them to churches or charities that may offer assistance.

One place they go is Acts 29, a temporary shelter at the Homosassa Springs home of Gary Haines. With a two-story house and a double-wide mobile home on Lima Avenue, Haines has room for dozens of transients. As of Friday afternoon, Haines said he was expecting to have only two guests that night, a man and a woman, both in their 20s.

But in the winter, when more homeless people are moving through the area, Haines said, it is common to have 10 or

more staying there. At least once a month, he said, a different woman with children comes to his door, often fleeing an abusive husband. Nowadays, more families seem to be seeking help.

"It's been getting tougher and tougher to make ends meet," Haines said.

To meet that need, another man, DuWayne Sipper of Hernando, has plans to start a shelter for the poor.

Sipper has tried to persuade the County Commission to let him use the old county jail in Inverness for his shelter, but commissioners have said they would prefer to raze the building and use the land for parking or more county offices.

The resistance hasn't made Sipper give up.

"I'm fully convinced that, no matter where the mission is, the people will come," he said.

But Sipper also knows that not everyone would want to come.

Bakeberg and his comrades, who jokingly call themselves the "woods dogs," told Sipper when he visited the forest

recently that they don't particularly want to stay in a shelter.

"I'm really, most generally, happy," said one homeless man who would not give his name. "I'm not into all this stress of society."

Later, while eating a dinner of fried chicken with Sipper and others, the same man returned to the subject of contentment.

"To a degree, I want to be out here. But to another degree, I don't," he said. "You start getting depressed sometimes."

To get from one place to another, Bakeberg and the others have only their legs. They often walk along the Withlacoochee State Trail, both for convenience and a bit of isolation.

"We try to stay in the shadows as much as we can," Bakeberg said. Not out of shame, but because, he said, "I got my ways and nobody seems to agree with my ways — attitudes about life."

It started with his father. Bakeberg said his father never could understand why he kept moving instead of settling down

and getting married. Bakeberg said he had once been in love, but it didn't work out. So he went off on his own. Traveled. Worked odd jobs. Slept in camps and friends' houses from Michigan to Virginia Beach.

And he ended up here. At first, he stayed in Hernando because he had little money for moving on. Now, he said, he stays because there is no better place to go and he has little interest in following the mainstream.

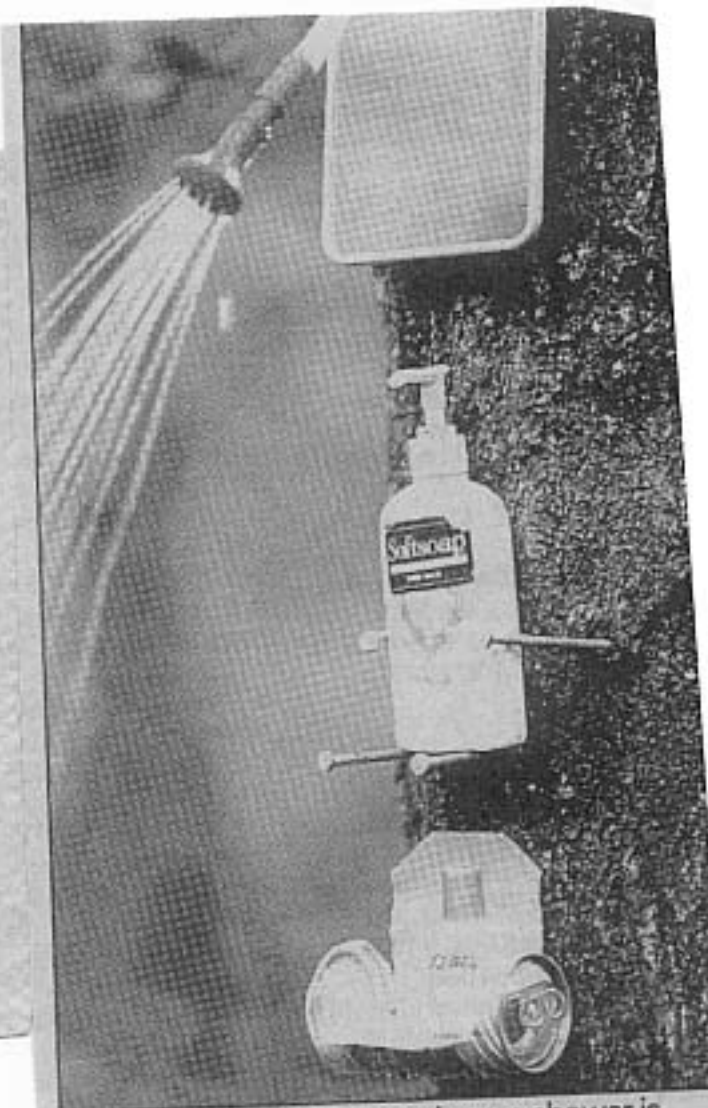
"I don't want the headaches," he said. "I don't want a landlord. I can live out here for free."

This kind of freedom has its price. As Bakeberg crossed his legs, his knees showed through torn jeans and his bare toes clung to dusty flip-flop sandals.

He put down his can of Milwaukee's Best and rolled another cigarette.

And he turned to a friend who had come to visit. Almost time to walk to the store and buy more tobacco, he told him.

"I got money," Bakeberg said. "I still got about six bucks."



Bakeberg's gravity-powered camp shower is complete with a shampoo holder fashioned from cut-up can and a soap rack made of nails.