



**THE BEGGAR** — Gazette staff reporter Gary Green sits in front of Woolco, playing his harmonica, strumming his guitar, and begging for coins. He collected \$1.56, which he has donated to The Gazette Empty Stocking Fund. (Gazette photo by Terry Ketron)

# Begging

*A hard way to earn a living*

By GARY GREEN  
Gazette Staff Reporter

"Chester, you get away from here," shrieked the mother as she swatted her toddling son on the behind and began dragging him down the sidewalk.

"That man might be dangerous," she scolded.

"That man," a lone beggar, sat playing his guitar and occasionally wheezing a wail from his harmonica.

For a little more than two hours Friday afternoon I became a beggar.

With my felt hat, jeans, T-shirt and denim jacket, I sat in front of Gaston Mall with a tin cup, playing the guitar and blowing through the reeds of my harmonica.

I collected \$1.56 and some strange experiences.

Wearing sunglasses to avoid eye-contact with potential givers, I positioned myself near the front door of Woolco in hopes of attracting the highest number of givers.

Around the body of my guitar was painted, "These six strings neutralize the tools of oppression."

So there I sat, trying my best to look poor, weak, oppressed and afflicted.

I tuned my guitar just slightly out of key from the harmonica.

"Don't want to sound too good," I told myself as I began playing old Baptist hymns.

"Life is like a mountain railroad," I sang.

It was a good shopping day for Woolco and traffic moved steadily in and out of the glass doors.

The woman jerking her son away was the first to walk by my begging seat.

From my spot to the edge of the sidewalk there was more than eight feet of walking space, but the next group evidently could not find room to walk. As



they passed they walked around me in the road. After they had passed me, they returned to the sidewalk.

I played quietly. No one stopped to put coins in my cup.

I reached into my own pocket and flipped a quarter into the cup, hoping that a passerby might see it and get the idea.

No luck. Twenty minutes passed.

I decided to change the theme of my songs. This time I wailed out "Blowing in the Wind", the rabble-rousing ballad of the sixties.

Still no luck. Ten more minutes passed and people continued to walk in the road to avoid getting near me.

Finally, I tuned the guitar up to the standard key and decided to sing a song about being a beggar. I soon learned that the louder I played the more attention I got.

Two little boys had been riding on the dime-operated hobby horse. They stepped down and began to inch near me.

After a couple of minutes one of the boys cautiously walked up and peered into my cup.

"Is this where the money goes?" he asked as he dropped a penny inside.

"Yep, thank you," I coughed, trying to appear ill.

From across the parking lot a little girl who had been sitting on top of her parents' parked station wagon began to clap her hands.

"And Daddy Frank the guitar man was blind," I sang as the next stream of people passed.

Some stopped for a minute, others passed.

I began to see a pattern developing.

An older man stepped up and tossed a coin into my cup, then faded into the passing crowd.

I played louder and another man flipped me a coin.

The pattern continued and I could tell what a passerby's reaction would be before they got to me.

Children would always stop, and most of the time would be yanked away by parents.

Hardworking people with wrinkles on their hands, faces, and shirts would stop and drop a coin or two.

Middleclass and upperclass people in their shiny double-knit outfits would stick their nose toward heaven or pretend to look the other direction and walk by.

Some of them stepped into the street to get away.

Housewife types would scurry by while working-girl types would snob their way by, looking down on me from the corner of their eyes.

Student type girls would giggle and give me a big smile but no money.

Men reacted differently.

Student type boys laughed and imitated a country singer. Almost cruelly, one laughed and called to me, "Pick a purty song fer us, Conway."

Older businessmen types reacted two different ways. Some acted like their youthful counterparts and jerked their eyes away.

It was older men, past middle age, who gave the money. Most were working men and most could probably remember the depression and days when beggars were more common, or perhaps when they felt like beggars.

Each time a man dropped a coin he would deliberately avoid eye contact with me, even though my dark glasses shielded me.

Their attitude was not one of charity but one of understanding.

No one spoke to me.

The louder I played the bigger the crowd grew until at one point it was actually a crowd rather than passersby.

A group of young people emerged on one side of me and a handful of oldsters stood on the other.

Then from the group stepped an old friend whom I had not seen in four years.

"Hi, I heard you're working at The Gazette now, doing this for a story?" he asked.

"Don't blow my cover," I chucked as the other people vanished.

The \$1.56 I collected will be the first contribution to The Gazette's Empty Stocking Christmas Fund — with thanks to the anonymous donors.