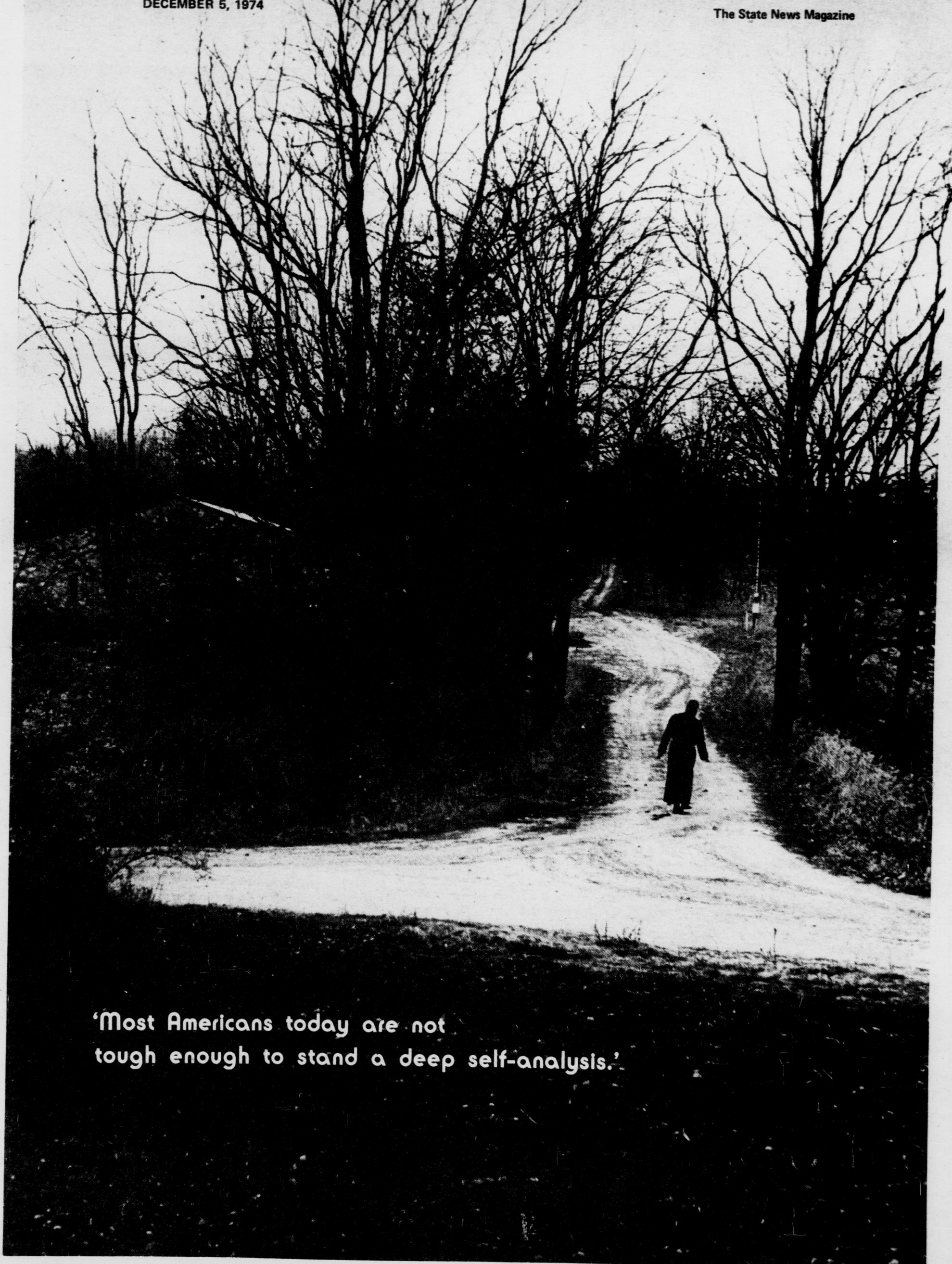


# COUNTERPOINT

DECEMBER 5, 1974

The State News Magazine



'Most Americans today are not tough enough to stand a deep self-analysis.'



# Dear Abbey: a love story

Keeping the faith  
at Three Rivers

By PETE DALY  
State News Staff Writer

A motel it isn't.

St. Gregory's Abbey is located on 800 acres of rolling and fields five miles from Three Rivers, a town south of Kalamazoo. It is one of 15 Episcopal monasteries in the United States.

It is also a place with weekends booked solid through 1976 for visitors wanting to see what it's like to be a monk. Some are curious, others deeply religious and some consider staying.

But when the visit is over only 18 men stay, and while St. Gregory's is not as traditionally medieval as purists may wish it to be, neither is it as similar to a Holiday Inn as first impressions may show.

The monks there say they have come to dedicate their lives to God. And they are serious about it.

"The life of monk is actually one long love affair with God," said their leader, a man who came to the monastery five years after it was founded in 1946. He is known only as Father Abbott.

"The most rigorous part of being here is facing your own ego," he said.

The monks believe that to be truly close to God, a person must genuinely know and be at peace with himself. Much reference is made by Father Abbott and the other brothers to modern concepts of psychoanalysis, which they say can relieve a person's inner distress only temporarily. This is where the role of God enter their lives.

"Most Americans today are not tough enough to stand a deep self-analysis like the monks practice here," Father Abbott observed. "Probably we Americans have been trained with too many escape mechanisms, such as taking another pill or changing the channel on the TV."

After sublimating the individual's ego before God, the central theme of the monastery is to set up a commune or family-type existence, which is as self-subsistent as possible.

"Nobody legally owns anything here personally," Father Abbott said. "It is communistic, in a pure sense of the word."

The monks arise five days a week at 3:30 a.m. for the first of seven 'offices' they will attend that day. Office is a short session

---

*"The most rigorous part of being here is facing your own ego."*

---

of prayer and chants done communally in the chapel. On Sunday, the get up around 5:30 a.m.

Once a week a monk can sleep in until 7:30 or 8:00 a.m.

Some of the income for the monastery comes from its farm, where cattle are raised for sale to feedlots. Though farmwork is a tradition of monasteries, the monks at St. Gregory's actually have very little to do with farming. A full-time farm manager is employed by the monastery. The monks spend only a few hours a week helping feed the cattle or harvesting hay.

Each monk spends about one or two hours a day doing regular housework around the monastery. They may also work on maintaining the grounds, which are impeccably kept.

The monastery is not self-supporting in spite of its cattle business. It has a small sideline making Christmas cards, which it is famous for. Much of its \$70,000 annual operating cost must come through donations, some of which come from the large number of weekend visitors over the year.

Visitors include a spectrum of religious ideology, such as Buddhists and Dominican nuns, a number of proclaimed atheists and a few independents who come perhaps to do a little window shopping.

A honeymooning couple once spent a weekend at St. Gregory's though it was probably in a camper. Usually, women visitors must stay in St. Dennis, a remodeled farmhouse, and they are not allowed inside the monastery.

"We expect our visitors to comply with our rules and to try to attend all the offices and masses, just like the monks do. Otherwise, our monastery would become just a vacation spot for a lot of people," Father Abbott said.

One rule visitors learn immediately is silence. No boisterous or unnecessary talking is heard. Even the most unmonklie visitor seems to automatically talk in whispers, if at all.

The case of the African geese well illustrates this rule.

The geese, a gift to the monks, originally had free run of the grounds. But geese are apparently not cut out for the contemplative, silent life of a monastery, preferring instead to march about together in military fashion, honking belligerently all the while. The geese were soon banned to a nearby barnyard, out of earshot of the monks.

The monks do not spend all their mental energy on God. They

(continued on page 3)



Father Abbott has been at St. Gregory's Abbey since 1947

Photos by  
Craig Porter



## A silent contemplation of history

(continued from page 2)

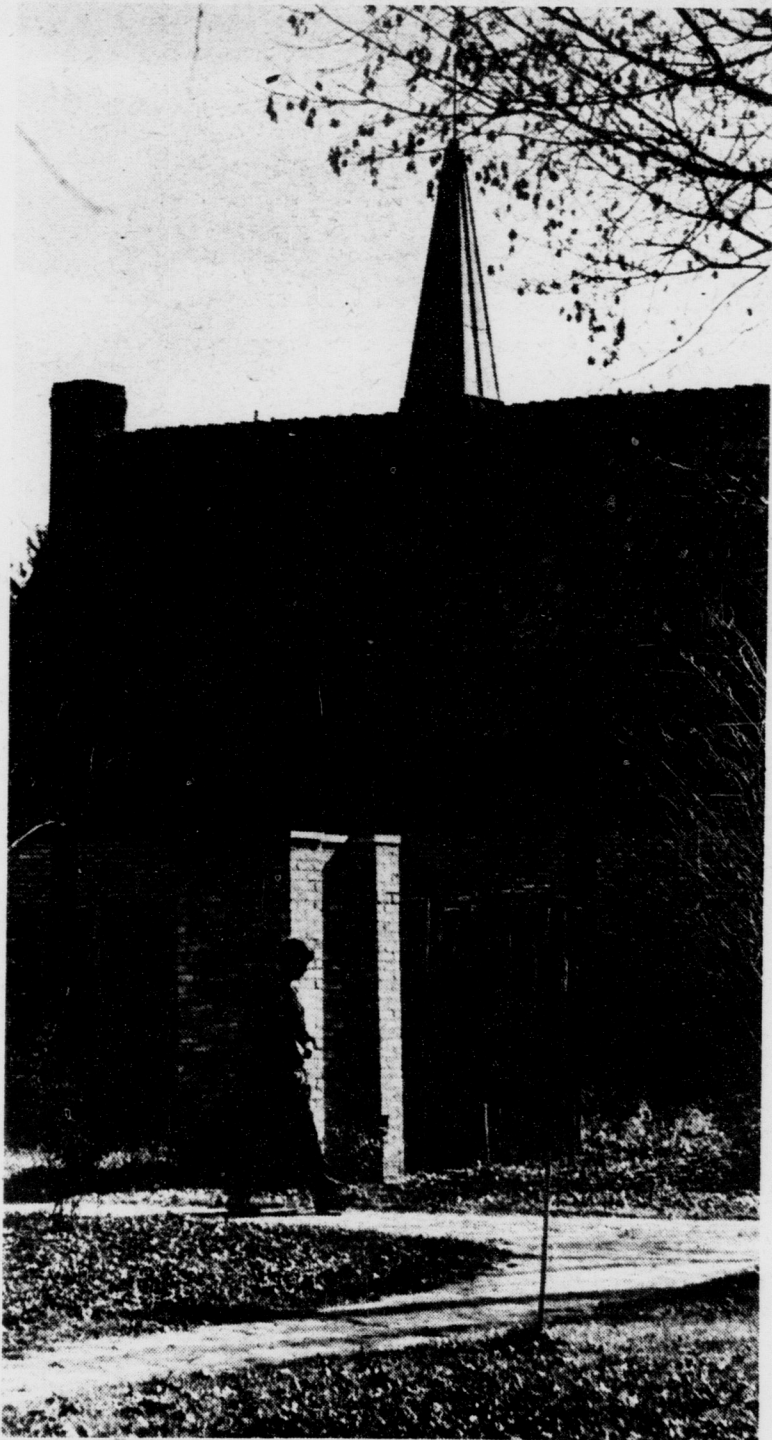
also read voraciously, either to keep themselves informed or for amusement. Their library of 10,000 volumes includes paperback spy thrillers and turgid tomes on the lives of the saints.

The monks even devour literature along with their simple but well-prepared meals, usually consisting of meat and potatoes. While monks and male visitors eat together in silence, another monk reads to them from a lectern in the dining room. Recent selections were "Hunting the Divine Fox," humorous essays on traditional religious thought and "Monarch," a story of grizzly bears in Alaska. Another book begun recently proved so boring that the monks took a vote to select another.

Thought communal living is paramount at St. Gregory's, and democracy an important concept in decision-making, it is not all that easy to become a monk. Father Abbott suggests that it takes a special breed of person to survive the lifestyle. The turnover rate of residents at St. Gregory's backs him up.

"Of course, we can't accept just anybody into the monastery," Father Abbott said. "It's not really hard to get in, but sometimes we try to talk people out of it, especially those who are far too idealistic. For example, someone might say 'all my life I have wanted to give my life to God.' That's unreal, and it is usually just an attempt to escape reality through God. There is no escape from growing up."

The dropout rate for a monk at St. Gregory's Abbey is high, with less than 20 per cent remaining there for life. A visitor wonders who will stay and how long as he talks with the younger



...There is also time for introspection.



Communal participation is a major part of monastic life...

monks, some of whom have been at the monastery only months.

"I will stay here for the rest of my life," Michael said. A timid little man of 24, he came to St. Gregory's last summer. Michael had previously spent some months in a monastery in New York City.

"It was too loud there. The street noises don't let you meditate," he said quietly.

Tyrone and Ron are also newcomers to St. Gregory's. Both had held well-paying jobs in business management and led "swinging lives with lots of friends and partying."

But each wanted something more out of their lives. They gave up the high life for a quieter business pursuit that Ron sells with a modicum of window dressing.

"If you don't have God, you don't have anything," he said.

The monks don't really shuck all material pleasures. They have a stereo they use to play classical music, "but no Grateful Dead music," Ron said.

One of the monks raises prize winning orchids. Another is involved in photography and others play musical instruments. A television is used only sparingly by the monks to watch the evening news, and an older monk may occasionally watch a popular program like the *Waltons*.

They also court social awareness, numbering the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *Time* and even *Playboy* among the publications they receive at St. Gregory's.

Ron was aggravated by the recent ordination of women as Episcopal priests in Chicago.

---

*They have a stereo they use to play classical music, "But no Grateful Dead music," Ron says.*

---

"A woman can never be a spiritual leader as effectively as a man," he said.

"Did you see that picture in the *Chicago Tribune*, showing all those people crowded around the altar? There were old women, little kids, winos..." Ron was disgusted.

Women as sexual figures are conscientiously excluded from the monks' personal lives. They feel sexual energy can better be spent in striving for a closer relationship with Christ.

But what happens in the minds of the younger monks when they see an attractive woman?

The idea is to react blindly to the appealing image of woman, though the monks confess humorously that drastic measures can be taken.

"Well, you can run around the track or take a few cold showers," Tyrone advised.

"We take a lot of cold showers," Ron chuckled.

St. Gregory's is not a bastion of prudes, however. The brothers have been known to imbibe spirits on feastsdays, and occasionally they will drink for pleasure, as a group, with moderation as the measure of enjoyment.

"We had one guy here who was an alcoholic," Ron said. "When he didn't make chapel for a couple days the monks went to his cell and found him out cold, with empty bottles all over. Nobody could figure out where he was getting it."

(continued on page 8)



# Of pumpkins and friends

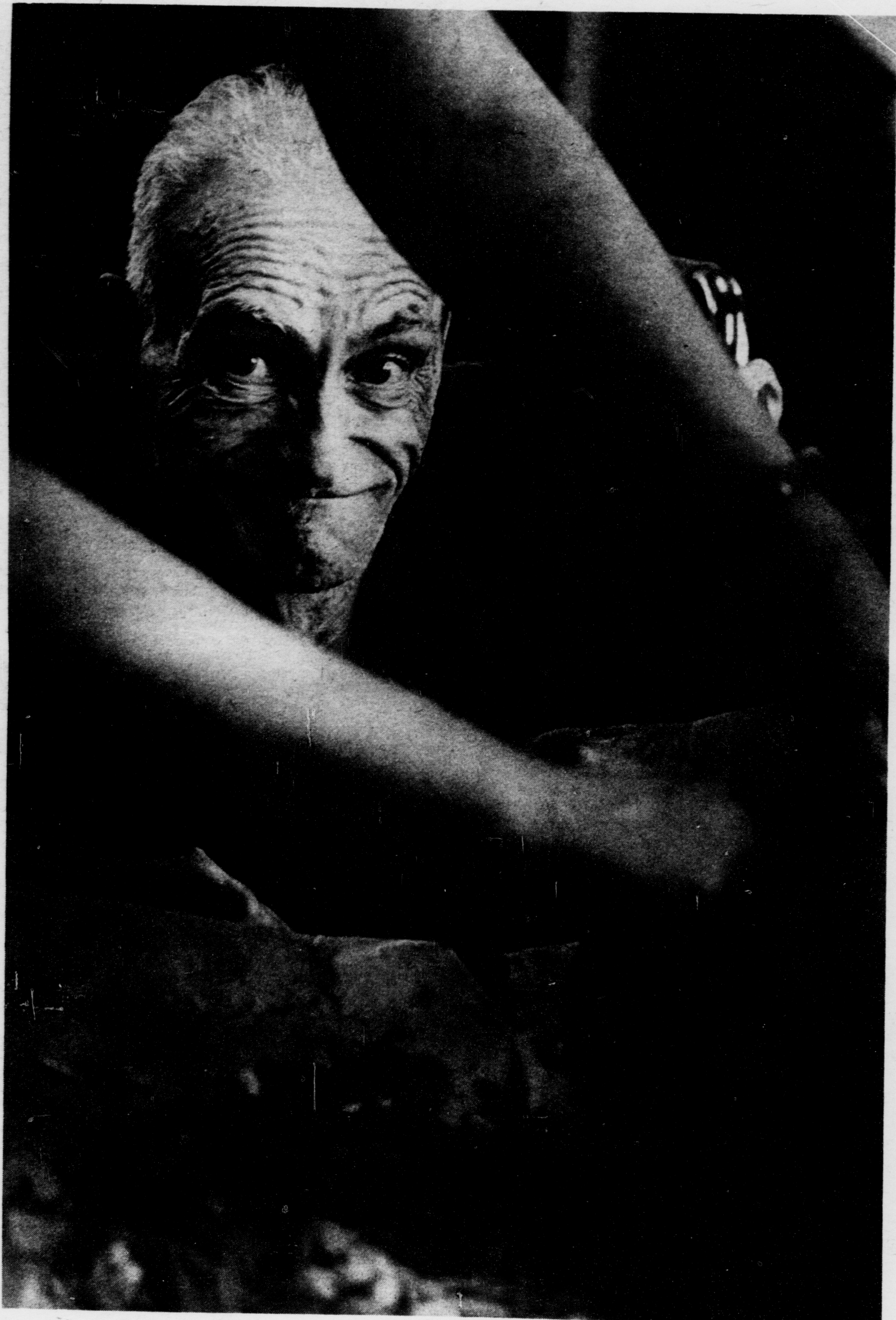
*This is Edward Sheap.  
His friends call him  
Eddie.*

*He and about 185  
others live at the Ingham  
County Medical Care  
Center east of the MSU  
campus. The center  
started as the county  
poor farm in the 1850s  
and has since been called  
the county infirmary and  
the extended care facility.*

*Last Halloween, MSU  
volunteers visited the  
center and helped Eddie  
and a few other residents  
to make jack o'lanterns.  
The volunteers, who visit  
the center each week, use  
a variety of horticultural  
means to interact with  
the residents.*

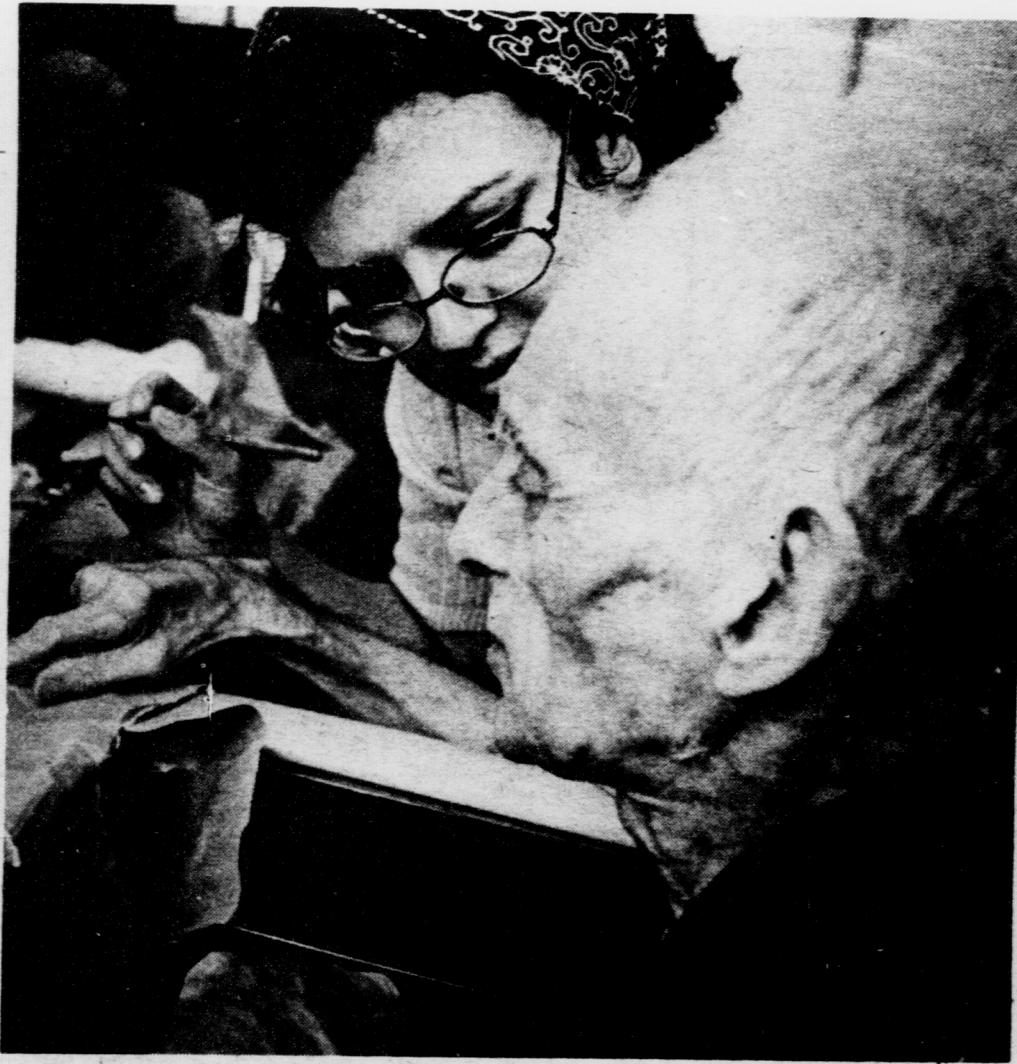
*The creation of a jack  
o'lantern takes only a few  
minutes, but it is the time  
spent, not the result, that  
matters to a person whose  
days go by with little to  
do and few people to see.*

*Eddie gets a jack  
o'lantern, but he and the  
volunteers who visit him  
get much more just being  
together.*



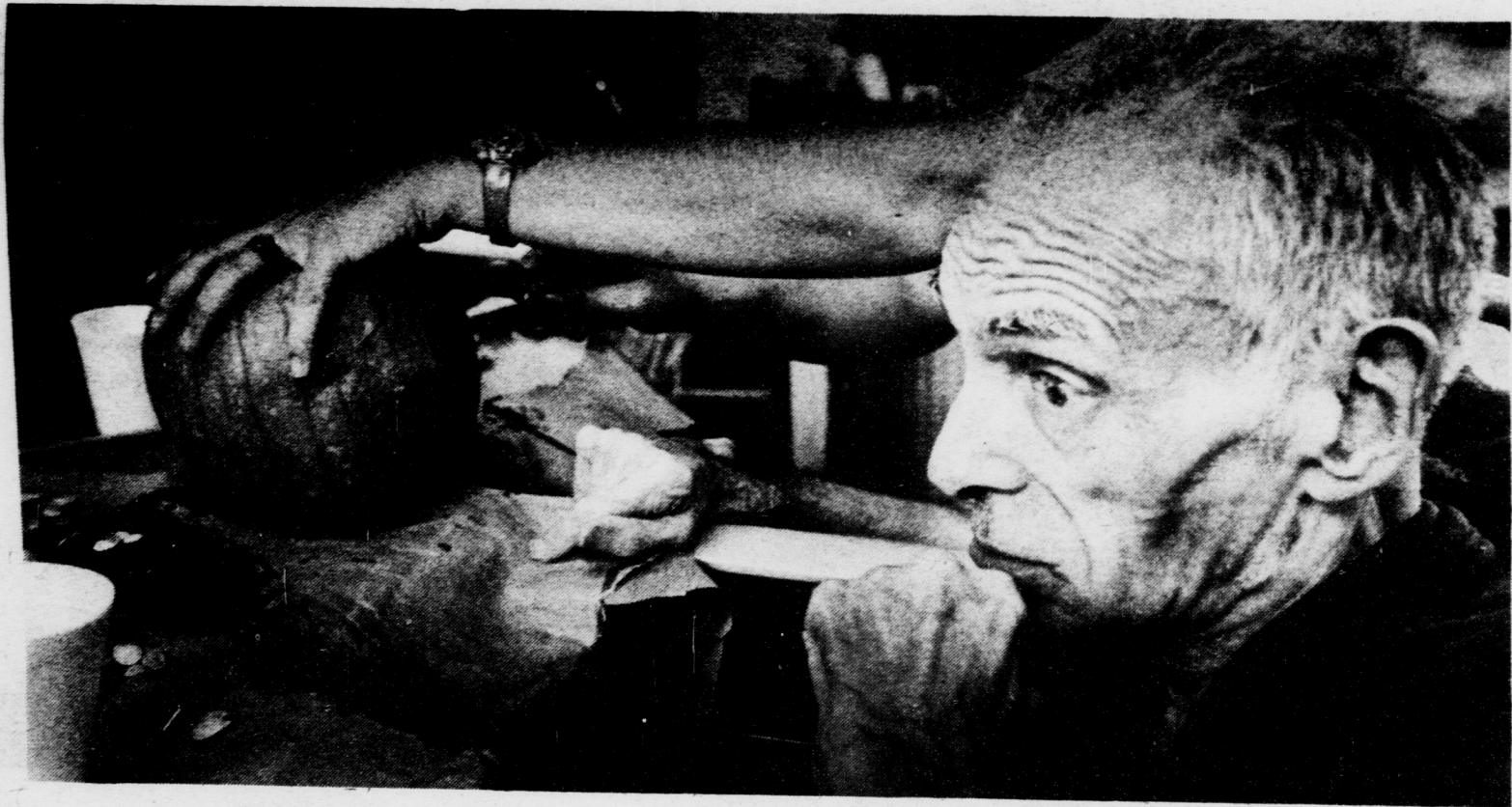
*Photos by Craig Porter*





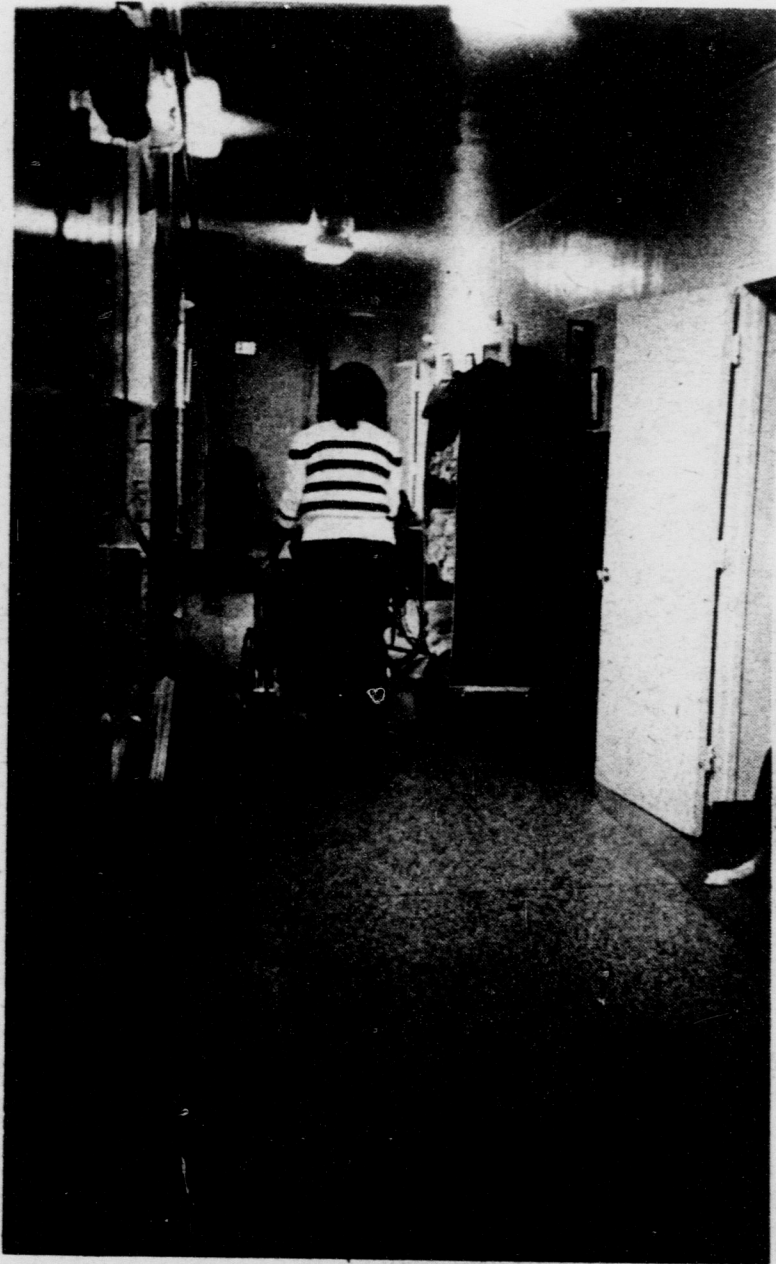
In a small room where residents grow plants and meet with volunteers for recreational activities, ideas on how the finished product will look are exchanged, and cutting begins.





Though concentration may wander at times, the finished product evokes a satisfied smile.

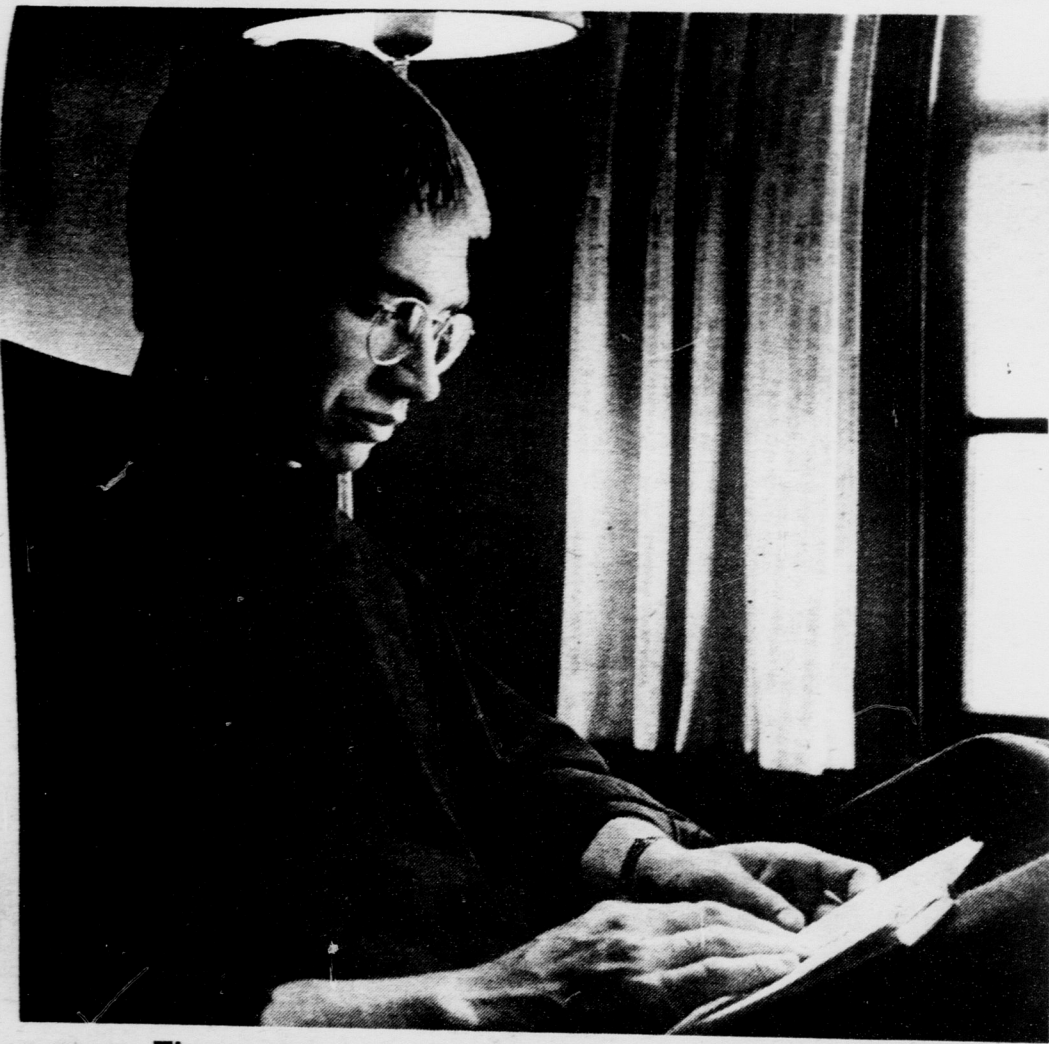




*When the volunteer pushes Eddie back to his room, only the pumpkin stays. Eventually the pumpkin will rot and be thrown away. What lingers are the memories of the afternoon spent with friends and the anticipation of the next session a week away.*







Time to make use of the monastery's extensive library...

## Accentuate the spirit but remain human

(continued from page 3)

The monk was finally expelled.

Life at St. Gregory's is monitored by a system of rules written by St. Benedict in the 6th century. The brothers are aware of the vicissitudes of time, however, and one rule that suggests monks do not sleep with their knives at their sides "lest they cut themselves in their sleep" draws reverent guffaws.

The essential rules that make a monk's life one of silence and seclusion appear to come easy to these men, but not for their family and friends left behind. A parent's outrage at their son's "Throwing his life away" often is grim reality for a monk.

"I haven't gotten a letter from home since I came here," Ron said. His father recently suffered a stroke, and as Ron prepared to hurry home an older brother phoned him.

"My brother told me, 'how dare you come home now, after all the grief you have caused Dad?'" Ron confided.

Tyrone said some of his former friends have written him, but not always in a considerate tone.

"When you join a monastery, you really find out who your friends are," he sighed.

Some of the monks' best friends are the long-term visitors, usually religious men who may stay for a week or a few months.

Father William Teska is an Episcopal chaplain from Minnesota State University who has been on a year's sabbatical leave. He will spend

a month or two at St. Gregory's before moving on to visit secular friends out West. He also intends to stay at another monastery in New Mexico this winter.

Bill Teska is not like the typical monk. He has long hair tied back in a pony-tail, and when working outside wears cowboy boots and dungarees topped with a big floppy hat with a tiny red star pinned to it.

A practicing socialist, Teska helped organize a pair of secular communes in Minnesota. He has plans to found a religious-oriented community. He appreciates St. Gregory's for its collective

might experience in a dorm," he said. "You might find yourself gradually bugged by the way somebody else wears his shoes."

With these kinds of typical problems, the brothers' democratic process may play a role. For instance, a recent cat controversy finally ended in a general vote that banned the monastery's several cats from the living and dining quarters.

"We called for a vote after I caught a cat eating bread on the kitchen counter," growled Ron, a member of the anti-cat faction.

And even monks have to get away from it all once in a while. After a few years, a

*"It's just like what you might experience in a dorm. You might find yourself gradually bugged by the way somebody else wears his shoes."*

atmosphere.

"Collectivism is going to be more of a reality in the future," he said.

The collective life style of monks, however, is not automatically peaches and cream.

The monks are quick to point out that although they live lives oriented toward Christ, they are just plain people with everyday personalities.

"Even here you will have your blue Mondays," Ron said.

Father Abbott said there are the typical irritations at the monastery that come from constant association with the same people.

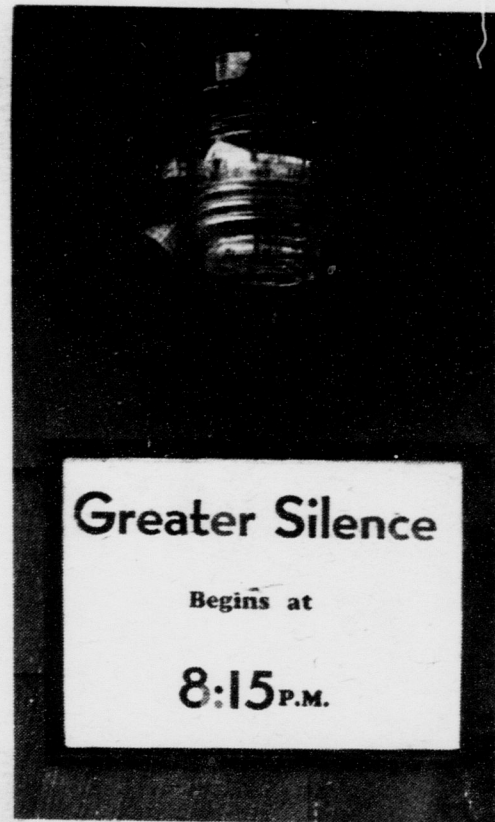
"It's just like what you

monk may take a two-week vacation to visit family, friends or even other monasteries. Monks that need a break more often, or cannot afford to pay their own transportation costs, can spend a few days in the Hermitage, a small cabin situated on a lake far back on the monastery land.

In the isolated atmosphere of the Hermitage the routine worries and frustrations of the monk slide away as he reads, meditates or just soaks in the hut's small sauna bath.

Tyrone laughed when one visitor remarked. "You monks really are human, aren't you!"

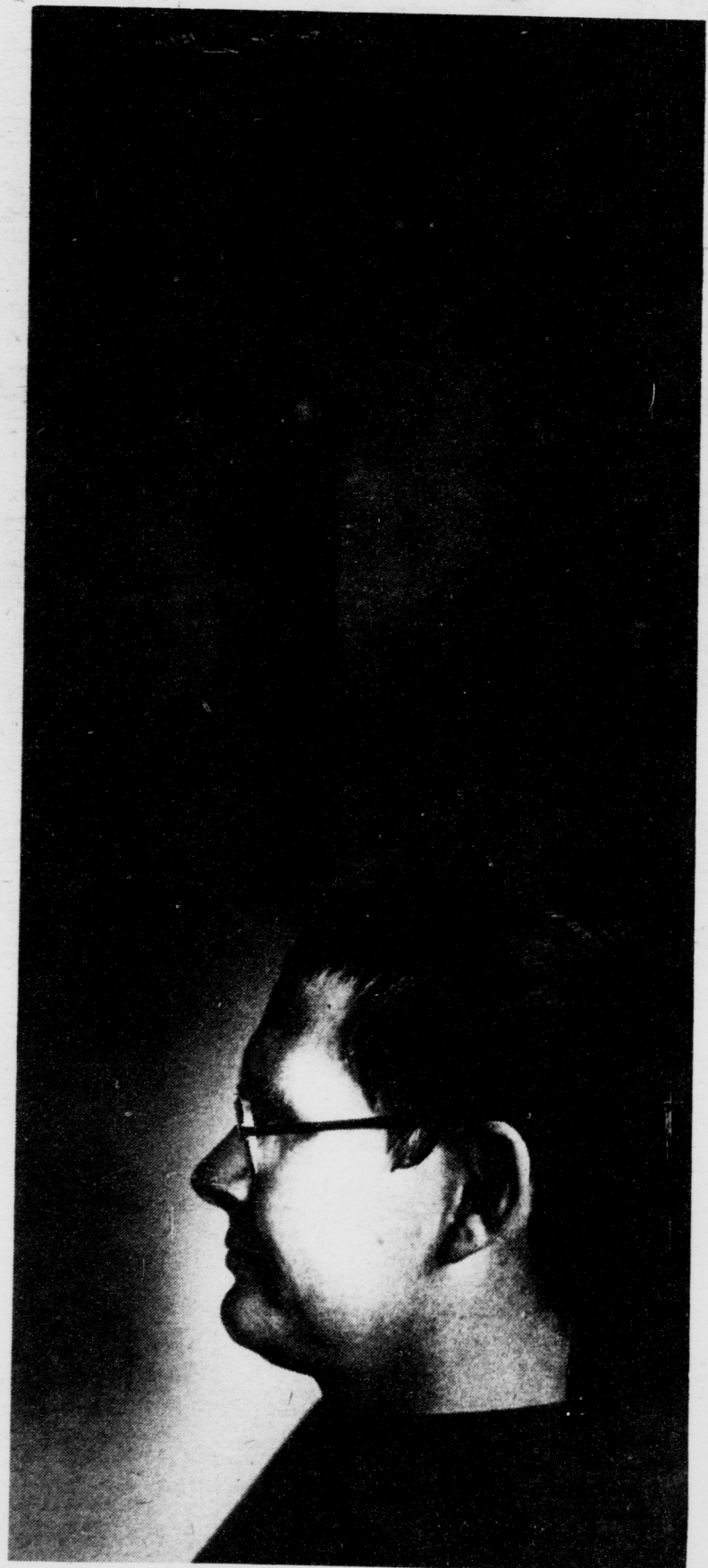
"When we left the world to come here, we brought a lot of it with us," he said.



Greater Silence

Begins at

8:15 P.M.



...or to be alone with a deeper sense of self-analysis.