

saturday You & yours



Fred Shepherd has lived alone in his house without modern conveniences for 29 years. His sign translates: 'Take care under the forbidden forest.'



Shepherd's planted hundreds of trees and flowers since coming to his five-acre forest in 1948.

Nature a religion for happy hermit

Photostory by Ed Heal of The Free Press

Fred Shepherd is a hermit. He has no electricity, running water or modern conveniences most people say you have to have to live. His only mode of transportation is a standard men's bicycle and his only method of heating his modest home is an old, small, wood-and-coal-burning cook stove.

Shepherd has lived alone in his board and batten house set on five acres of ground south of Sparta for 29 years, ever since he and his wife separated.

He does not dislike people, however, and his friendly nature comes through when he greets you.

His home sits about half-way back in his property and after driving down a grassy lane you come to a gateway where signs proclaim "Hermit's Abode" and "Vorsicht Unter Den Verboten Wald," which, although some persons have different translations, to Shepherd means "Take Care Under the Forbidden Forest." The sign is probably an influence of his German-Irish ancestry. Almost every foot of the property is covered with trees, the vast

majority Shepherd planted since coming to his home in 1948 from St. Thomas. Beneath the trees are hundreds of wild and domestic flowers he also has planted and the whole place has an air about it that the person living there really cares for his land.

Nature is the reason he decided to live as a hermit.

"I wanted to get away from screaming crossings," Shepherd said. He worked until his retirement as a brakeman with the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway. "I wanted to get closer to nature not to segregate myself from people. I haven't divorced myself from society."

Scattered in several locations along paths through the trees are benches where visitors can relax and enjoy the surroundings.

There is little doubt that he is proud of his "forest" and anxious to share its beauty with you. A gleam comes to his eyes and his pace is lively as he walks along his pathways pointing out various species and their ages.

Inside his home he makes you welcome and lights up the wood stove to take the chill out of a damp, cool day.

Sitting in his favorite chair and rolling a smoke ("I smoke to help the tobacco farmers"), he tells you he spends most of his day

doing household chores and gardening. In the winter he likes to do oil paintings and he always does a lot of reading, but it's getting harder — at 70 his eyes aren't as good as they used to be and the light of an oil lantern is not good.

"I'm very interested in what's going on in the world and in politics," he says. With respect to religion, "I guess I'm an atheist but I believe everyone should have the right to their own beliefs. I worship nature."

When the daylight fades Shepherd lights up an oil lantern and places a mirror behind it. "I get twice as much 'hydro' this way," he laughs. "These lanterns have their advantages. I have a sister who visits me and always says 'did you scrub the floor?' With the light of the lantern she can only see about six feet around."

"I spend a lot of time contemplating life. Sometimes I sit here and think it's so nice and peaceable. Other times I say this is a hell of a life. I've got to get out of here and have some fun. I went to a party a couple of years ago and was dancing with a young woman to some rock music. She said, 'how do you feel?' and I said 'great'. Next day I felt like a corpse — sore arms, sore legs. I'm always glad to come home."



Filling the stove, the house's only source of heat.



This wagon wheel wouldn't fit Shepherd's transportation — a bike.



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