

Hermit likes life the old-fashioned way

By Pat Brennan, Toronto Star.

SPARTA — Fred Shepherd would have been quite comfortable in ancient Sparta — his lifestyle in new Sparta, a pictureque village near St. Thomas, isn't much different.

When Ontario Hydro cut off Shepherd's electricity, he thought he would try to get along without it. That was 35 years ago.

Now 73, Shepherd says he is happy living just outside this village in his 150-year-old board-and-batten house with the gingerbread trim, as long as he has his wood stove, kerosene lamps and the nearby outhouse.

Shepherd doesn't live alone. He shares the evergreen forest around his home with a herd of deer, as well as the chipmunks, red squirrels and birds that regularly wait on his doorstep for a handout.

Christmas trees

At this time of year, he also shares his little world with families coming to cut Christmas trees in the forest he planted many years ago.

"Some of the people pay me for the trees, but I also give some away to families hard-pressed these days with the economy. The best pay you can get is happiness, and it makes me happy to see other people happy," Shepherd said.

Although he calls himself a semi-hermit, "I am not isolated from the world."

"I read everything I can get my hands on, from Mickey Mouse to Plato, and I get two newspapers a day. I put a mirror beside the kerosene lamp and that increases the light for reading at night."

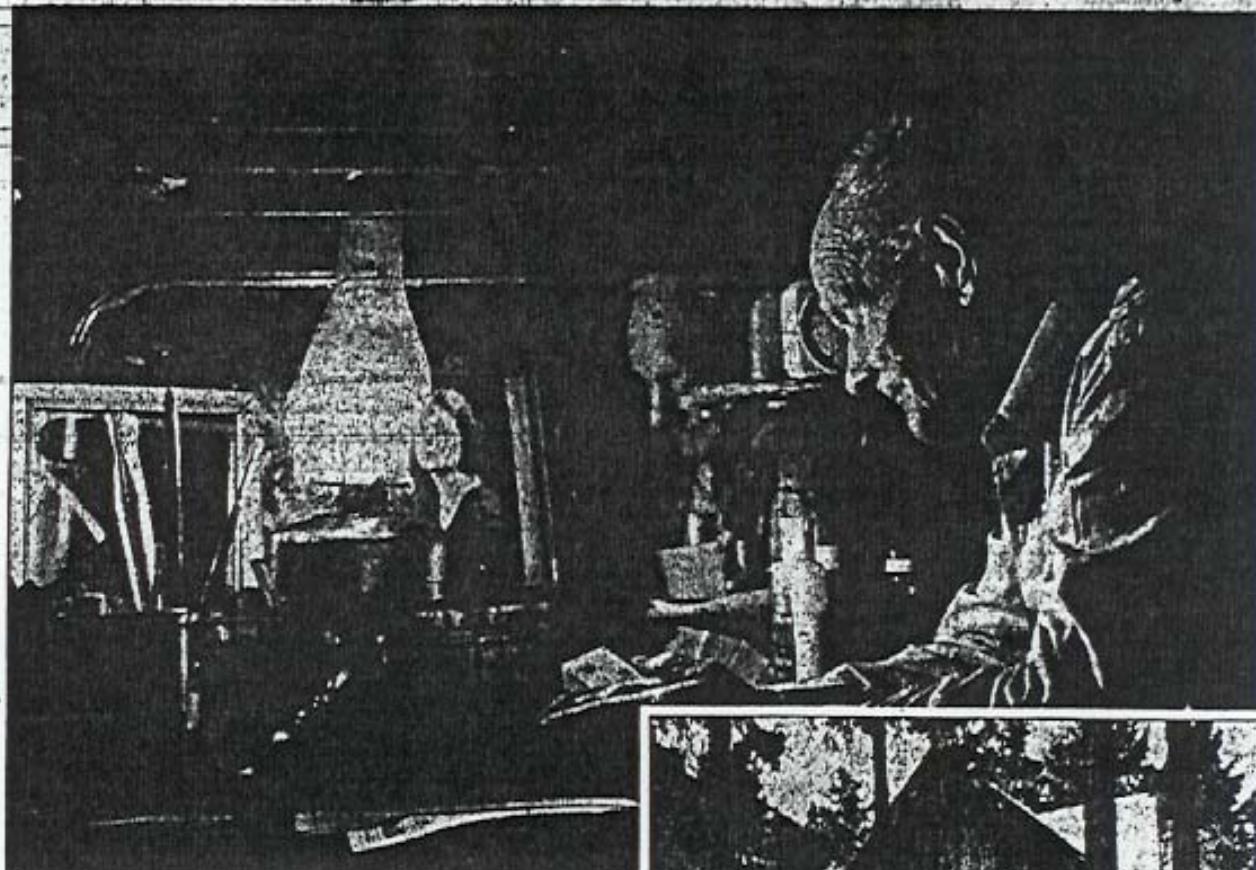
Five children

The one modern convenience he has surrendered to is the telephone.

"I'm on the phone a couple of hours a day. I have a lot of friends to talk to and I have a big family in the area."

His wife left him in 1948, taking their five children with her. He is in close touch with three daughters living in Ingersoll and St. Thomas, as well as brothers and sisters in St. Thomas.

To visit them, he hops on his new five-speed bicycle and peddles 21 kilometres (13 miles) into



BRIAN WILSON

Past lives on: Fred Shepherd gave up on electricity 35 years ago and says he doesn't regret it as long as he has his kerosene lamps and wood stove.

St. Thomas. "It's just the right distance for a nice ride and far enough not to make it a habit."

"I like living alone, but not at Christmas. I will go into St. Thomas to be with my family on Christmas Day."

Most of the rooms in the house are closed off to preserve heat. "Usually it is warm enough in my bedroom, but there will be some nights I'll have to sleep beside the woodstove."

Shepherd smokes but says he isn't addicted. "I've given up smoking for several hours lots of times."

"I don't go to church, but I try to be a good person. I had to go to the hospital a few years back and the nurse wouldn't put me down

as an atheist, so I told her to make me a Baptist."

"I have good neighbors and one of them takes me to Toronto once in a while. I was there recently and you sure have a pretty city there. I don't think they should make any changes, although the traffic is pretty loud."

Shepherd is a supporter of the New Democratic Party. "I think capitalism has run its course and socialism is becoming the dominant force in the world. It won't take away my independence or anybody else's, but socialism will help a lot more people than capitalism does today."

He loves to tell stories, particularly about his days riding the rails during the Depression.

