

# The Hermits of Vancouver Island

By Barney McKinley  
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Belgian Benedictine Father Jacques Winandy, founder and spiritual leader of the new hermit colony on Vancouver Island, meditates in wilderness solitude.

**They serve God and their fellow men in the solitude of a Pacific Coast wilderness**

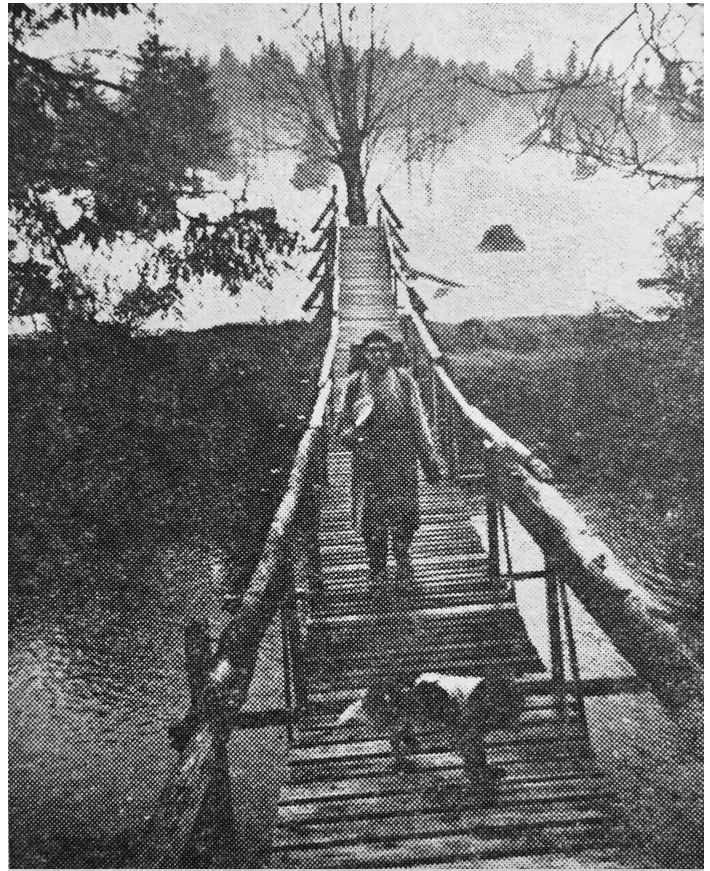
In a Vancouver Island retreat on the west coast of Canada, a rare colony of Western World hermits are living lives of prayer and contemplation in a rain-forest solitude. The six are Belgians, French, and Americans. Each lives in an isolated cell, built mostly from the lumber of abandoned buildings on the former farm where the colony is located.

The hermitage is 14 miles from the nearest town, 4 miles from the crossroads settlement of Merville, population, 108.

The hermit colony was founded in September, 1964, by a Belgian Benedictine monk, Father Jacques Winandy, once abbot at Clairvaux, Luxembourg. He found the site after an 8 year search.

A Religious since he was 19, the 58 year old Father Winandy, internationally known authority on the Scriptures, had long cherished the desire to live in solitude. His wish was nurtured by his reflections on the life of St. Benedict, 6th century author of monastic rules widely followed to this day.

Although each hermit has his own schedule of work, contemplative study, and prayer and although they live in cells far apart, there are a few regulations. Members place themselves under the guidance of a spiritual father, Father Winandy, thus to guard themselves “against errors and illusions of self-will.” They also pledge to help each other spiritually and materially, but without creating a community organization. They meet only about once a month to vote on such matters as admission of new members.



This flimsy but adequate bridge across the Tsolum river was built by the hermits with the help of a district logger. It is the only physical link between the colony and the outside world.

They regard the strong tendency of Westerners to organize, centralize, and legislate every detail of life as “distractions from their aims : the renunciation of sin and the search for God,” Father Winandy says in his soft Flemish voice. But he denies that the Vancouver Island hermits are fleeing a society they dislike. “Our flight from the world is not an egotistical withdrawal from responsibilities,” he insists. “ We don’t leave the world because we hate man or the things God made.”



Father Winandy and Bishop De Roo, whose Victoria diocese covers the entire island, discuss the future of the colony. The bridge is high to overarch the spring floods.

“The hermit lives separate from everyone, yet united to everyone. But he makes his best contribution to humanity by remaining quietly in his cell, attentive to God in silence of prayer and the humility of sacrifice.”

In the remote Vancouver Island colony, the hermits find the solitude of their seeking. It is located on a flat of land, three miles from the sea, cut off from the outside world by the oft-flooded Tsolum river and Wolf creek, Coho salmon and steelhead streams that in spring and summer override the silence. In winter heavy snows complete the isolation.

In the summer it's a pleasant place of flowers and berries and soft winds from the sea.



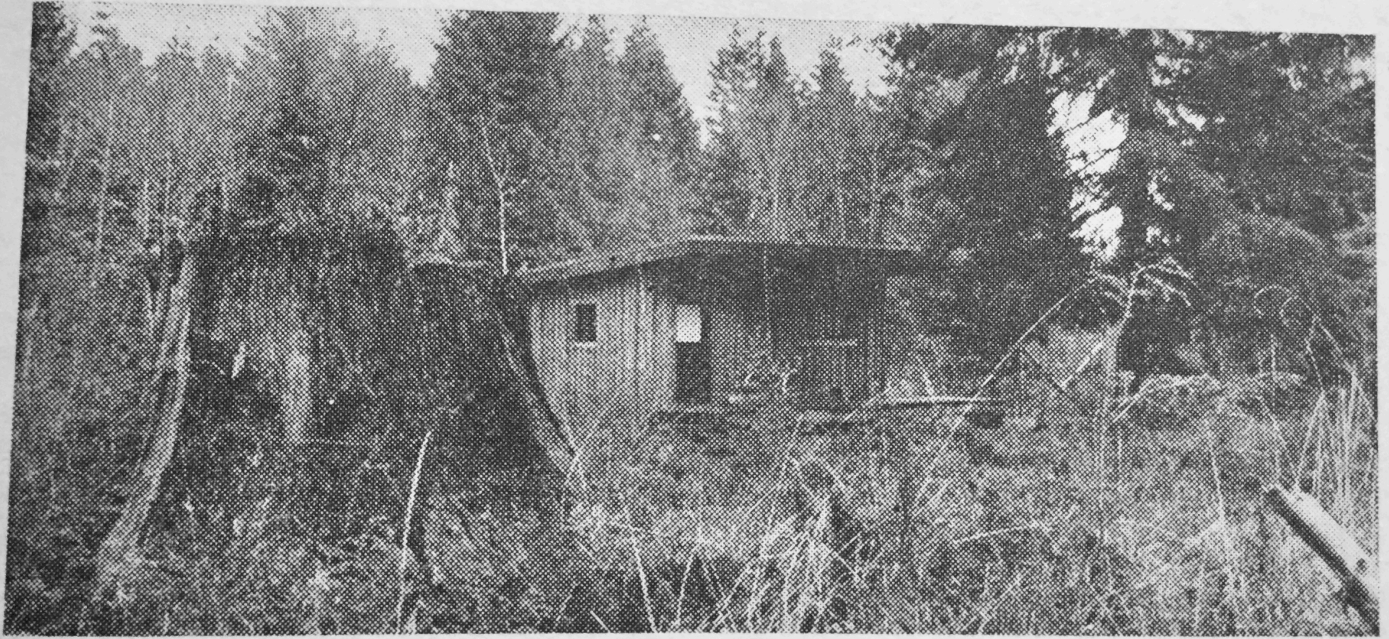
Hermit Matthew Casey built this round cell for himself. He got a bargain in two-by-four's, but they were all six feet long. So he used them as uprights in his dwelling, which is remote from the huts of other hermits.

Father Winandy founded the colony after failures in Switzerland, Martinique, in the French Indies, and Texas. "As soon as I saw Vancouver Island I knew the search was over. I hope God will leave me here until my death."

The search for the hermitage had begun after his resignation from Clairvaux, where he had been abbot for 10 years.

On the Canadian island he found approval and encouragement from the young and progressive Bishop Remi J. De Roo, whose diocese covers the island. The deal for the site, about 140 miles north of Victoria, capital of British Columbia, was completed within a month. The C. N. Montague real estate firm of Victoria, which handled the deal, entered it as one of the most remarkable on its books. Money for the purchase and for the critical first days of the colony came from an anonymous millionaire benefactor in Milwaukee.

The hermits' link to the outside world is a bridge over the swift-flowing Tsolum, constructed with the aid of a neighbouring logger. It is hump-backed and often slippery, but the hermits cross it bravely by bicycle or on foot to the crossroads store for flour, kerosine, and other necessities.



Hermit Jacques Brandt lives here. His dwelling is mostly of salvaged lumber; nevertheless a snug shelter. It houses bookbinding equipment, his bunk, and plain furniture.

The Vancouver Island hermits are expected to live mostly on a vegetarian diet, though it is not mandatory. To keep up protein needs they eat sparingly of butter, cheese, and eggs. Meat is not expressly forbidden, but its use is discouraged, partly because of the high cost. Nor is it forbidden for a hermit to take a fish from the streams in season.

As abbot, Father Winandy enjoys quarters only slightly more substantial than his fellows'. He lives in one of the original farm buildings, restored and cedar-lined by one of the other hermits, and furnished with wooden chairs, a narrow cot, and the plain table at which he studies and writes.

Like all the hermits, Father Winandy makes his own bread, grows his vegetables, and buys only staples like meal and powdered milk. He estimates it cost him 66 cents a day to live.

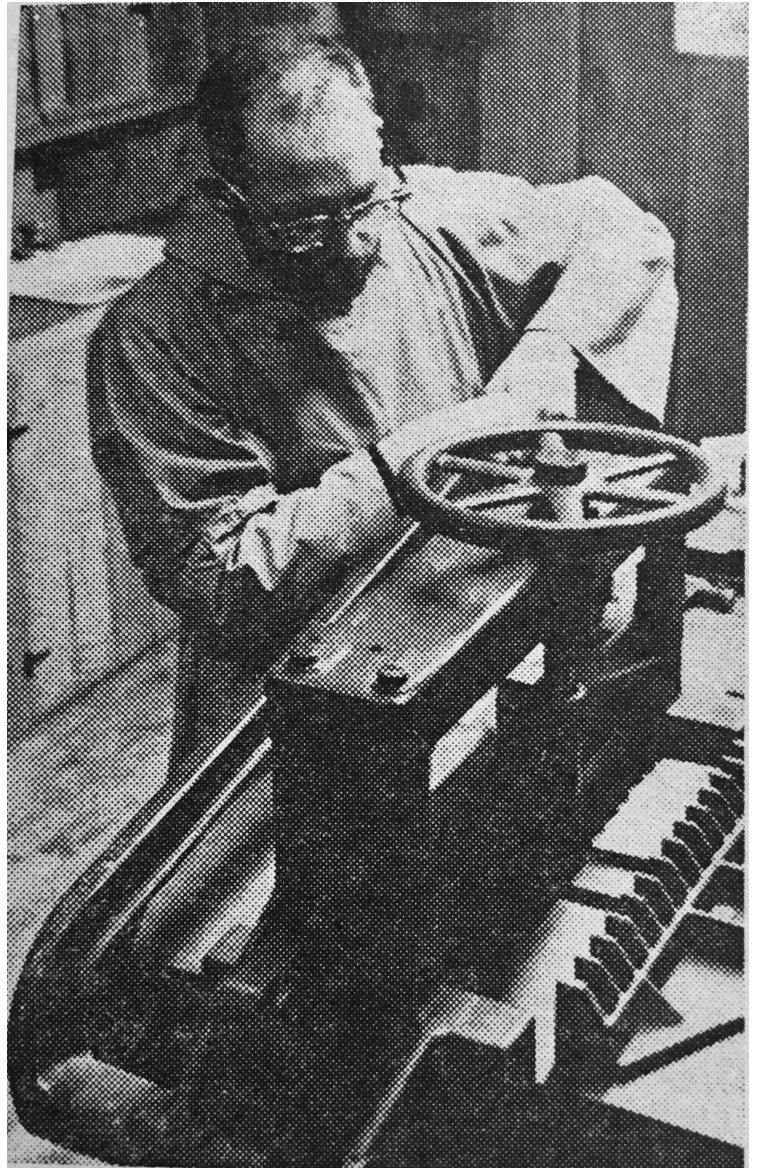
The 20th-century hermits wear a habit similar to that of Trappist monks, though colour is up to the individual. They are mostly bearded men, but clean and neat in appearance.

Austerity is the guiding rule in dress as in all other matters at the hermit colony: no tobacco or liquor, almost no wine or beer; no soft beds, knickknacks, air conditioning, radios or television, newspapers or magazines.

Each hermit must earn his own way, preferably by the work of his hands, and each one pledges to live as a poor man. He cannot even own the cell he lives in, even if he puts his own money into its construction.

But there are no vows, except private ones, and no one has to stay. Some have left, including a lay member, who went back to the city of Vancouver, and was reported planning to get married. And though it hopes someday to have official Church approval as the Hermit Order of St. John the Baptist, the colony at present has only permission to carry on as an experiment.

Earning their own way poses a problem for some. They find it difficult to add a money-earning job to the daily tasks of gardening, cooking, washing, mending, cleaning, chopping wood.



Bishop De Roo has issued instructions the hermits are not to be called on for diocesan duties except briefly and in case of dire necessity.

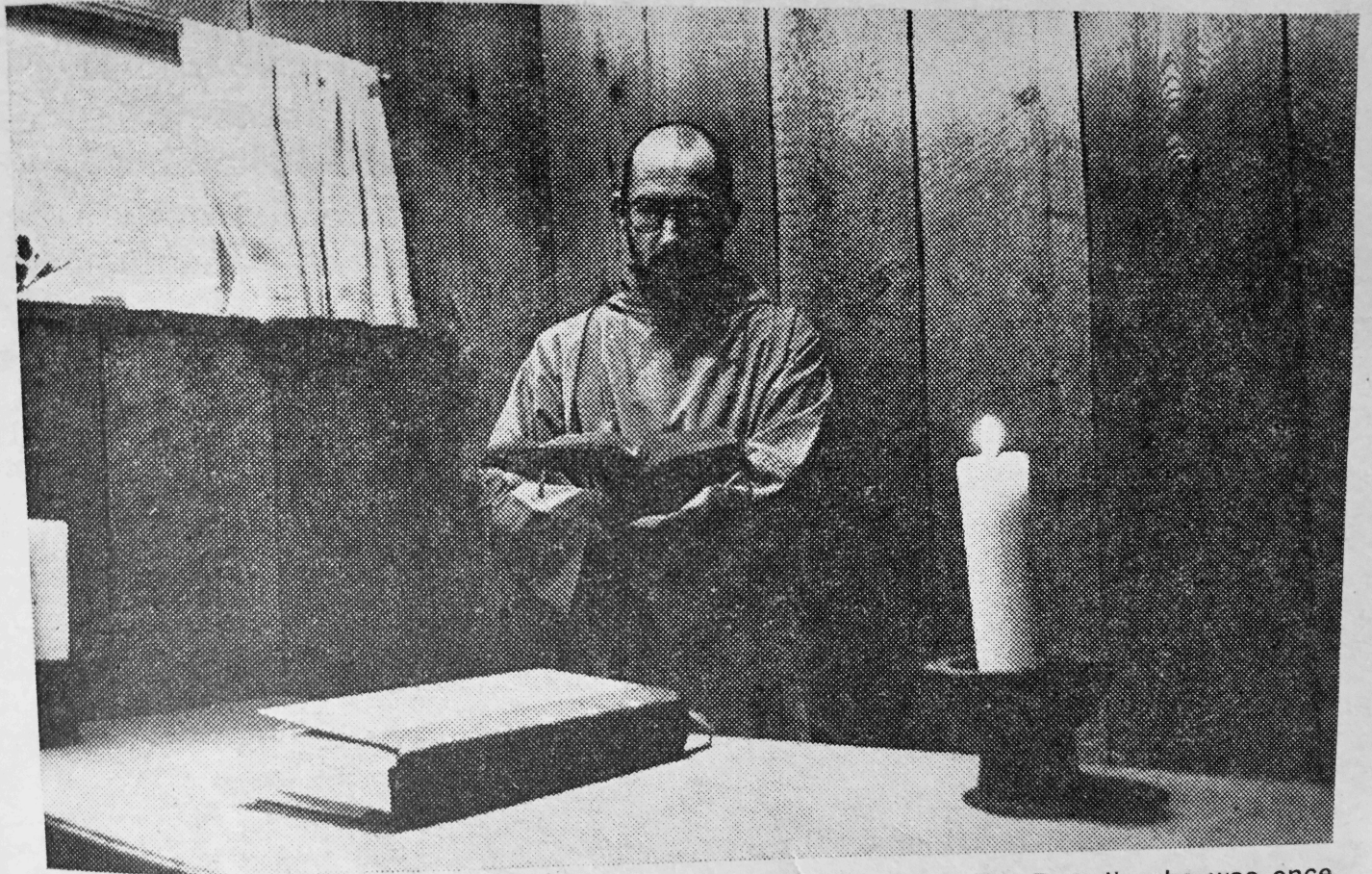
One of the Vancouver Island hermits who has a good source of income is Father Charles Brandt, a former U. S. Air Force navigator from Kansas City, who operates a book bindery in his dwelling.

Hermit Casey feeds his goat at small barn he built of old lumber and shakes. He had two, but one vanished into the hills the day it arrived at the colony.

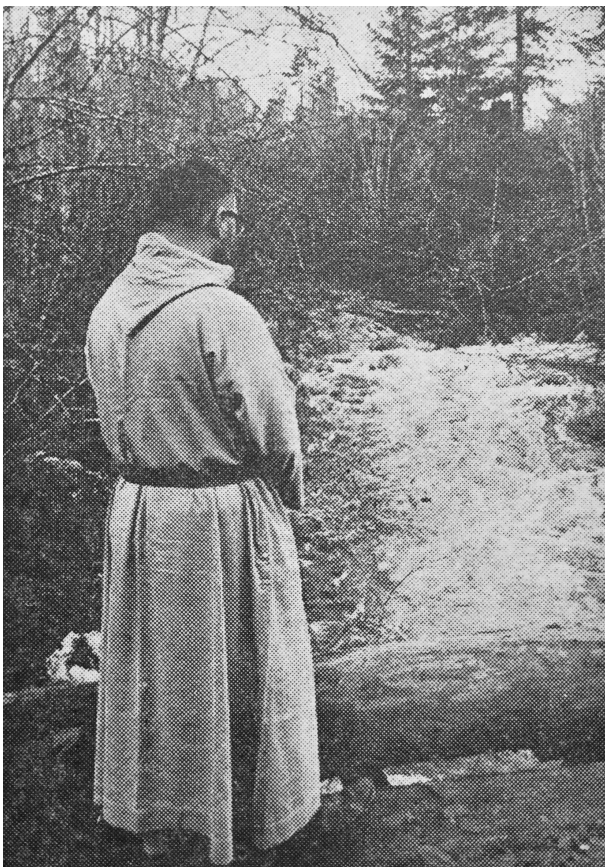


Brother Matthew Casey, a 28 year-old Trappist from Syracuse, N. Y., is among the colony's more resourceful. He is now on a pilgrimage to Rome and the Holy Land on foot, after a first step by jet plane to Belgium. But last summer he earned \$1,000 with Father Winandy's blessing, as a fire spotter at a lonely forest protection tower.

The energetic Brother Casey, who is expected back at the colony after his pilgrimage, is also noted for arriving with two hens and a nanny goat.



Notice rough plank walls of hermit cell. This is in chapel of Father Brandt, who was once a U.S. Air Force navigator.



Hermit De Aguiar is a colony pioneer, the only member who arrived with the founder, Father Winandy. He gazes at turbulent Wolf creek, flowing through hermitage grounds.