

The salmon expert who's Canada's only hermit priest

By Helen Mitchell

Clergymen of all denominations today are coming out of their pulpits and shedding their robes to seek direct involvement in the problems besetting their local communities and the world. It seems odd, then, that a bright, energetic sort of man like 46-year-old Father Charles Brandt from Kansas City, Mo., should choose this point in history to become a hermit priest on northern Vancouver Island — one of the very few hermit priests the Roman Catholic Church has had in two or three centuries.

But Father Brandt, though he has found solitude in the tiny one-room hermitage he built in a thickly wooded area at the junction of the Tsolum River and Wolf Creek, a few miles north of Courtenay, has not entirely turned his back on the world. He fills in for priests in the diocese who are sick or absent, supports himself by bookbinding, and has become so well-informed on the life cycle of west coast salmon that he lectures on them in schools and service clubs.

This unusual man came to Vancouver Island in March, 1965, after a varied career: he studied to be a biologist at Cornell, majoring in ornithology, became a navigator in the U.S. Army Air Corps during World War II, an Anglican clergyman before he embraced Roman Catholicism, a Trappist monk at New Melleray Abbey, Iowa. None of these satisfied him and he came north seeking seclusion in which to pursue a life of religious meditation.



Helen Mitchell Photos

Father Brandt studies salmon (and catches some big ones) near his cabin on Tsolum River, where he also binds rare books.

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For those who need solitude in which to commune with God, the hermit life has always had its attractions. In the early days of the Christian church hermits lived in the desert, walled up in a cell with only a window. Later in the Middle Ages, the cell was connected with a church. Today the tradition is carried on by the Carthusians, a small, austere order of monks who live in a community but keep to their own cell and garden, rarely meeting except at worship.

Father Brandt's life is neither so stark nor so secluded as this, but it is far from luxurious. When he'd found the place he wanted in the woods he built his hermitage, entirely by hand, of rough cedar planking. Its one room contains a bunk and the barest minimum of furniture. The only concessions to

modernity are a toilet and sink and electrical heating. The heating is not for Father Brandt, it is for the rare books and bindery materials, which must be kept at the right temperature. A tiny chapel adjoins the main room.

Shortly after his arrival on Vancouver Island he was made a deacon of the diocese of Victoria, then on November 21, 1966, he was ordained into the Roman Catholic priesthood by the Most Reverend Remi J. de Roo, Bishop of Victoria, in an impressive ceremony that must be almost unique in the annals of the western church. Addressing the large congregation that witnessed the rites in Canadian Martyrs Church, Courtenay, Bishop de Roo said, "It is obvious that this man's ministry will not be for a regular parish. We might say that the whole diocese will be his

parish."

During his years on Vancouver Island Father Brandt has supported himself by his considerable skill as a bookbinder, which he learned during his stay at New Melleray Abbey. He makes fine bindings and restores old volumes for rare book collections in university libraries. He has just completed restoration of a 1448 Czech Bible valued at many thousands of dollars and has received a special grant to restore the Woodward Biomedical Library of the University of British Columbia.

Recently Father Brandt has applied his talents in another direction. The streams that run by his little forest hermitage support a yearly run of pink (humpbacked) salmon, as well as coho and steelhead. In the summer of 1968 the Federal Fisheries Research Board

established a pink salmon project on Wolf Creek and the priest was employed as an assistant technician and guardian of the hatchery. His abilities as a biologist have come to his aid and he is now sharing the information and knowledge he is acquiring about the life cycle and habits of west coast salmon with highschool students and service clubs, to whom he gives a series of illustrated lectures.

Asked what the purpose of the hermit life is in a society with one foot in the space age, he comments: "There are those who go aside to listen, to enter into solitude. It is something they must do. We call it a vocation."

In an age that has seen so much war, Father Brandt sees the hermit life as reaffirming that "true peace and fulfillment stem from the life of the spirit."