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Quebec's Cheesemaking Hermits Live Quiet Life in Monastery

By Pierre de Boind
The first powdered snow was coming out of a leaden sky. Below, Lake Memphremagog lay like grey mist with the Quebec town of Magog at its tip. The thickly-wooded hills stood in silence.

In the abbey of St. Benoit du Lac, Brother Rene, a sturdy bespectacled man in his thirties, stirred a great vat of curdling milk with a wooden paddle. At that moment, the soft slap of cheese paddle against curds seemed to be the only sound in the world.

Beyond the abbey's walls, the United Nations was pondering the bloody riots in the Congo. There was strife in Algeria. Montreal, 90 miles to the west, was hotly discussing its recent lively civic election. South of the border, about 15 miles away, the most publicized presidential election in American history was in its dying hours. But inside the monastery, the 70-odd monks and brothers maintained a peaceful oasis of industry and worship.

Silence Broken
Finally a second brother whispered over his cheese paddle, "The postman told me Kennedy was elected."

That was all. No comment — not even a smile. The Benedictine monks of St. Benoit du Lac do not take a vow of silence, but they are bound by the sixth century rule of their founder, Saint Benedictine, to speak only when necessary. This fragment of conversation was apparently essential — but then, immediately, the problem of the current batch of l'Ermite cheese again became all-embracing.

For a moment, it seemed like a scene transplanted from the Middle Ages. Most of us mentally associate the monastery with ancient times and, indeed, monastic life is older than Christianity. The Egyptians practised a form of it, Saint Augustine founded the first Christian monastery in the fourth century A.D. But many still sus-

pect that monastic life died with the Reformation.

In fact, the monastery never disappeared and, if anything, is regaining its importance among many religious denominations. Roman Catholic monasteries are common in Europe and there are about 20 such places in Canada. The Anglican church has several in England and one in Bracebridge, Ont. In France recently, Calvinists and Lutherans formed a unique monastic house at Taize.

Self-Support
And although study and contemplation are among the prime objectives of monastic life, St. Benoit du Lac's cheese industry is not at all incongruous (cheese is also made at the Trappist monastery of Oka near Montreal). Monasteries are traditionally self-supporting. Some raise pure bred cattle. Others rent land to farmers. Some sell their own paintings or illuminated manuscripts. A musically talented monk may give concerts in the outside world. The Bracebridge monks derive money from their print shop and from sermons delivered in the vicinity.

So, at St. Benoit, each day is a mingling of work and devotions. It begins at 4.30 a.m. with prayers and Mass. By 6.00 a.m. the monks are at work. For priests there are studies, art and executive duties in the monastery. The brothers labor with their hands in the printing shop and on the farm, where they grow apples and vegetables and raise pigs. The monks who are priests are ordained ministers. The brothers are men who have become monks to serve God with technical skills.

Much of the study in St. Benoit's 50,000-volume library goes into theses and articles, for consumption by other theologians and philosophers. Their paintings — often modernistic — are usually religious. The illuminating of books — a centuries old tradition in Benedictine monasteries — is for those used in the liturgical rites at the ab-

bey. None of these activities raise very much money. So the 400 pure bred pigs and the brothers' Christmas cards and cheese help support the abbey. The Christmas cards, mostly designed by the monks themselves, are fast becoming known across the country.

Subtle Flavor
The two types of l'Ermite cheese — a Roquefort and a Swiss — are served in railway dining cars and top-ranking hotels, sold in most specialty food shops and supermarkets across Canada. Gourmets say the Roquefort has a more subtle, less salty flavor than any similar cheese made in Canada. The Swiss is milder and more creamy than the Roquefort. The monks of St. Benoit are masters of their trade.

As I watched, Brother Rene suddenly ran his fingers through the curdling milk in the 200 gallon stainless steel vats, expertly feeling the curds for the exact consistency prior to draining off the whey. Brother Rene was once a printer but, on coming into the monastery, took a liking to cheesemaking, stayed with it and now is in charge of the whole process.

I sat down on an empty oil drum while my host, Father Jacques Bolduc, a priest of the order, explained what was going on in the vats. Father Bolduc, a philosophy teacher at the abbey, is also a sort of executive officer under whom cheesemaking is carried out.

He motioned to the vats. Milk was being heated to 90 degrees. As the brothers stirred, it began to congeal into a smooth yellow fat. To this point, said Father Bolduc, the procedure was well known, and almost as old as mankind. Cheese originated when some early Chaldean herdsman let milk go sour and made some by accident. Roman legionnaires had it in their rations. Olympic wrestlers ate it during training. Genghis Khan's troops made cheese from mare's milk.

In all cheesemaking, the milk is first curdled, by natural action or by adding rennet. Then the whey is taken off. Lastly, the cheese is ripened by the action of bacteria, and the type develops the flavors. This is the secret of various kinds of cheese and the reason each cheesemaker jealously guards his formula.

Break Curd
Brother Rene used a large wire mesh to break up the creamy curd in the vat. As he dragged the mesh, the curd broke into millions of tiny particles. He plopped a floating thermometer into the tank, examined it seriously, then grinned with satisfaction. He turned a tap at the tank's bottom. The whey flowed into another tank for pigs' feed.

Later, the cheese would be dried, stuffed into aluminum tins like cake tins, and matured with the aid of bacteria. This comes in the form of a grey fluid. To help the bacteria work, the cheeses are pierced by a machine with long spaghetti-like steel rods.

At that point, a farmer arrived with a load of milk and Brother Rene stepped out to the delivery shed to test it. Until recently the monks kept their own cows, but found it uneconomical. Now local farmers supply them. Each batch must be examined before payment is made; the percentage of fat sets the price. Some local farmers have tried to make their own l'Ermite cheese, and the monks have offered to help mature the samples. So far, the experiments have been unsuccessful.

Caverns in Earth
While Brother Rene tested the milk, Brother Jean-Paul fueled the abbey's truck at the monastery's pump, preparing for a cheese delivery to Montreal. Father Bolduc took me to the small cheese-storage caverns which the

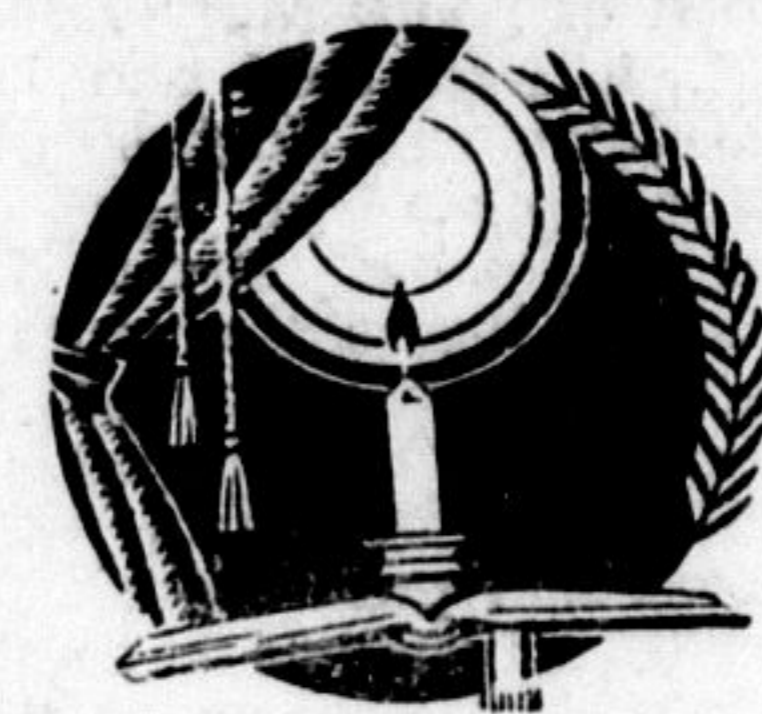
monks have hewn from the earth behind the factory. The damp, cold atmosphere is essential to the aging process. Here, on shelves, stood rows and rows of maturing cheeses. Some would remain there up to a year. Others would come out in six months.

In another room — this time at normal temperature and, happily, without the pungent maturing-cheese door — another brother was applying the famous l'Ermite labels (a monk with bowed head) to cheeses which are sold in supermarkets in packets of varying sizes.

The chapel bell sounded. The monks immediately filed out for lunch, silent save for the scuffle of their boots on the stone floors. The meal, like all monastery meals, was eaten in almost total silence. The abbot entered and tapped on his table with a gavel. The monks chanted their grace. He tapped again, and they sat. The lecture began, chanted in high-pitched tones. The meal was frugal — little meat, plenty of cheese, eggs and vegetables. The monks afterwards cleaned and polished their own cutlery. The abbot again tapped his gavel. They rose, and after grace, filed silently out to chapel.

Hours of Prayer
Between five and six hours a day are spent in official prayer in

HERE LIES



People don't normally expect to find humor in cemeteries, but the English of earlier generations and most Americans today find that an epitaph can be a thing of sardonic wit. A member of The Diners' Club Magazine staff, a graduate of Goul School, has assembled these choice bits of grave markings from various English and American cemeteries.

FROM A TOMBSTONE IN SUTTON PARISH CHURCHYARD

Here lies my poor wife, Without bed or blanket, But dead as a door-nail, God be thank it.

ARABELLA YOUNG (Shropshire, England)
Beneath this stone, A lump of clay, Lies Arabella Young, Who on the 21st of May, 1771, Began to hold her tongue. And here is the epitaph John

Drayden wrote for his wife: Here lies my wife, Here let her lie! Now she's at rest And so am I.

JOHN BUN
Here lies John Bun, He was killed by a gun, His name was not Bun, but Wood, But Wood would not rhyme with Gun but Bun would.

A HUSBAND'S EPITAPH
As I am now, so you must be, Therefore, prepare to follow me.

THE WIFE'S EPITAPH
To follow you, I'm not content, How do I know which way you went?

And here is the legend that Marc Connelly, the author of "Green Pastures", has prepared for himself:
Here lies Marc Connelly. Who?

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