

PAM IN PORTLAND

By the end of October I shall have been in Portland a full six months. A sobering thought - especially since it seems more like six weeks. Where did all the summer go? (Where have all our summers gone, for that matter?) Falls, too.

Not that I am complaining. There were all those visits from delighted - and often envious - friends. There was the realization that I was slowly beginning to remember names as well as faces on the village streets. There was the making of new friends in Portland itself; learning to play bridge again; more recently, - taking lessons in Japanese flower-arranging from Doris Graham - a very good discipline for me, since my previous approach to flowers tended to reflect too much of my natural exuberance; and then, of course, my beginning explorations of the countryside and the lake. There was also the afternoon when, suddenly hearing an enormous outburst of fire-sirens I stood frozen in horror: "My God, I've just moved here, and it's all going to burn down!" I had, of course, forgotten that it was the day of the annual Fireman's Parade. There was the chicken barbecue - practically in my backyard, which I greatly enjoyed. Also the corn-roast, which I foolishly chickened out of because the weather looked dubious.

But now the warm and lovely days are almost over. The winter will soon set in, with lots of time for contemplation and also, I hope, lots of work at my typewriter.

Contemplation, in fact, has already begun. I have been reviewing all my reasons for deciding to move to the country. Mostly, as I said in previous columns, it was to escape from the noise, pollution, and congestion of city life.

A question - above all - of SPACE.

While brooding over this I came across an article I had read several years ago in Tom Wolfe's *The Pump House Gang*. Its last article is called "Sliding Down the Behavioural Sink," the phrase "behavioural sink" having been coined by the anthropologist, Edward T. Hall. In common with a lot of other people in his own field, as well as biologists and ethnologists, Hall has proven beyond a doubt that all creatures - human and animals, as well as birds - must have a specific amount of space around them. Otherwise, they either die, or go mad, or both.

There have been a series of astonishing experiments with a variety of animals. One of the most hair-raising was conducted by the ethnologist, John Calhoun, which involved forty white domesticated Norway rats. They were put into a pen divided into four sections, connected by ramps. It left them with all the space they needed as well as everything in the way of material necessities.

Calhoun kept them there until the population doubled, after which the pen slowly turned into a madhouse. Its ends were taken over by two male super-rats, who each collected a harem of eight to ten wives, and then drove the remainder of the population into the middle sections. Here, mayhem broke loose. All the normal forms of rat-behaviour and rat-courtship broke down. Family life disappeared and rat-babies were either neglected or abandoned. There were rat-gangs, rat-violence, and a great deal of very odd sexual behaviour. Occasionally, some abandoned rat-lady from the elite sections of the pen would decide to go slumming in the middle sections, after which she was never allowed back into her upper-class haven.

This alarming little experiment certainly suggests some uncomfortable parallels with contemporary big-city life. Surely the increasing incidence of crime and meaningless violence is directly related

to overcrowding, unemployment and bad housing for the poor and not-so-poor. Not to overlook the continuing erosion of those good-old-fashioned virtues of kindness, consideration, and love-thy-neighbour. What neighbour? Of course, Tom Wolfe was thinking about New York, and our Canadian cities, thank God, are still a long way from the kind of horrendous problems to be found in the Big Apple. Nevertheless, in the two-and-a-half years I spent in Toronto before I escaped down here, there were quite a few times when I, too, felt like a beleaguered rat - or perhaps, more accurately - beleaguered mouse!

Mind you, I was never mugged or robbed, but that was because I took precautions. If I was out late at night I was either with someone else or I took a taxi. But there were daytime problems to cope with as well. For example, Toronto has one of the best, if not the best, transit systems on the continent. In comparison

with the filthy and graffiti-covered trains of New York its subways are squeaky-clean. But just try getting caught in the rush-hour when you are carrying two, heavily-laden shopping bags, and the platforms are so crowded that your only prayer is (a) you won't get pushed onto the rails (b) you can get on the train, and (c) you can get off.

Try the equally famous buses and streetcars, where you will find yourself closer to more of the human race than you could ever possibly desire. And all of it talking at the top of its voice in about six different languages. Meanwhile, as you find yourself trapped between two gigantic ladies (built, apparently, of cement blocks!) the conductor is yelling his continuous refrain: "Now then, don't block the entrance, pu-leezel....move down the car, pu-leezel!....and leave by the MIDDLE DOOR! Thank you!" He has to be joking! Again, for shopping convenience, try that vast and glittering emporium, the

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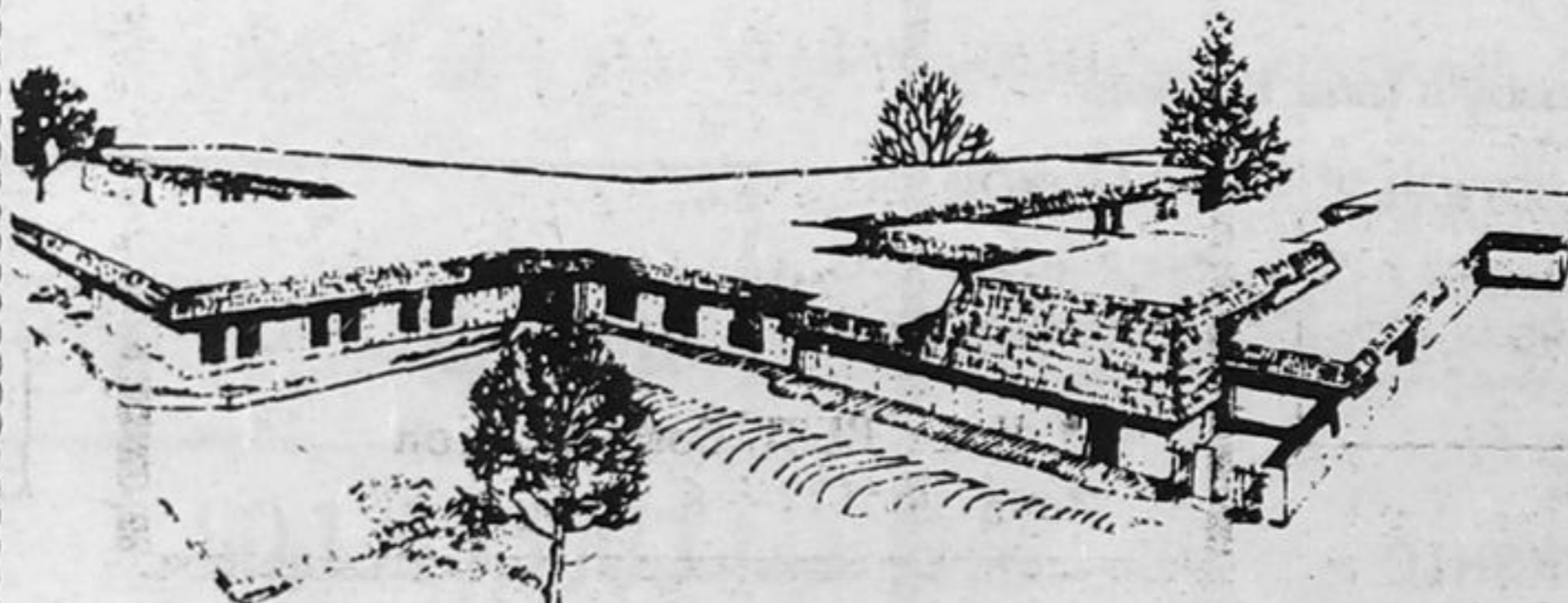
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