

# The Friendly Forest

*brother John*

**T**HE BASEMENT OF ST. GABRIEL'S, THE OLD MONASTERY farmhouse, is stacked floor to ceiling with firewood. The efficient little Napoleon stove in the Franklin Room will provide heat for St. Gabriel's and adjacent rooms during the long Vermont winter. Soon, cords of firewood stored in the vehicle barn and under its protective eaves will be available to feed the large *Econoburn* furnace that fires the central heating system of the monastery.

The forestry program at the Priory is a vital and happy activity in the life of the Weston Priory Community. It is a pretty smooth operation. The woodland surrounding the Priory buildings provides a generous local resource of energy to assure the warmth and comfort of the Community from November to late spring. Brothers relish the invigorating work of the wood harvest. A professional forester supervises a ten year program for the Priory forest approved by the environment conscious Land-use Program of the State of Vermont. Each year a section of Priory woodland is designated for selective harvesting. The forester, with an eye for healthy regeneration, carefully selects and marks the trees to be cut. Chain saws buzz, trees are felled and limbed, and the powerful Priory skidder drags the timber to a site where it is processed and set out to dry. Eventually the logs are cut to shorter lengths, split on the hefty Priory-made log splitter, and then cut to furnace size on the tractor-run buck saw.

The whole process is time consuming and takes many hands. Loading the wood onto carts and transferring it into shelters is a final step in the process, creating a happy experience of working together—the famous work bee! Fortunately there are generous friends who cheerfully lend their assistance along the way to make the project possible.

The beautiful forest surrounding the Priory buildings is a cherished gift that enriches the life of the brothers. The careful preservation, development, and use of this resource have become a spiritual practice and responsibility of the Community, happily shared with friends and guests. All this has a distinctly Benedictine characteristic.

The forestry program at Weston does have a history! Like the story of creation, it began with a good bit of turbulence and chaos, if not with a big bang. Of course, the place was not empty and void, as one view of creation would have it. Inspirations frequently arise in an atmosphere of ambiguity, tumult, and at times a little confusion.



*The Priory buildings and the Green Mountain National Forest, seen from the facing Mount Terrible*

The program really began with Father Bede, the second Prior of Weston (1957–1958) who hailed from Conception Abbey situated in the rolling fertile plains of the Missouri farmlands. Father Bede loved the Priory location in the Green Mountain National Forest. Like other industrious monks before him, he was determined to tame the wilderness—where “every mountain would be laid low and the crooked roads made straight.” He foresaw the day when the Priory would be known as “the biggest farm in the County!” Bede fully endorsed the ancient Benedictine motto, *Ora et Labora* (Prayer and Work). Neither was to be neglected. Both were to be fostered.

On a fine spring day in 1957, the Community assembled for the morning prayer of Prime and the Work Chapter. For the city-bred young brothers, the day already seemed half-spent. The schedule was strenuous. Vigils at 4:00 A.M., followed by Lectio Prayer, Mass, Lauds, breakfast, and finally at 8 A.M., the prayer of Prime. Prime was an eloquent name for the prayer that began work-time—it was prime-time!

Gathered in the chapel, the brothers chanted a few more psalms and a hymn, listened to a reading and a spiritual exhortation by Father Bede and then anxiously awaited their work assignments. The Prior announced a new endeavor: a forestry program that would create a “sugar bush” for the burgeoning syrup making industry for the Priory. The program would also provide timber for adding a new wing to the existing cow barn. Hired men were already engaged in constructing a rustic sawmill that would process the soon to be harvested logs.

Father Bede appointed Father Robert (presently known as brother John), the newly arrived novice from the diocese of Burlington, to be head forester. No one contested his qualifications. For seven years he had been a parish priest, many years in the seminary, and yes, onetime lifeguard at North Beach in Burlington! He did however learn how to make hay, as-

sisting an elderly couple in the rural parish of Hardwick and Greensboro Bend in northern Vermont.

Following the Prime Chapter, Father Bede led the novice forester up Old County Road toward the barn site north of the Priory buildings. Over his shoulder, Father Robert carried a trusty axe, the sole equipment then available for the forestry program. Shortly before the pasture surrounding the lonely cow barn, Bede veered from the road into the thick woods. He located a dense unmarked woodlot enclosed by a stone wall. The novice was instructed to chop down everything that was not a sugar maple tree. These were scanty instructions for an urban novice whose knowledge of the forest was rudimentary. There were hardwoods and softwoods. Some had needles, some had leaves. But this was pretty much a jungle. Beech, birch, oak, poplar, black cherry, red maple, soft maple, hard sugar maple, and a full range of others all tangled together. But how to distinguish them? By their leaves shall you know them, came the helpful scripture insight of the Prior!

Father Bede left his forester to his own devices and the forestry program was launched. For several days there was furious chopping, felling and limbing in that little acre. About the third day, Father Bede beckoned to Father Robert as they exited from the Prime Work Chapter. In a conspiratorial voice Bede confided that there had been a phone call from the National Forest Service. The Priory Forestry Program had run afoul of the law. The monks were cutting trees on the adjoining National Forest land. If they did not desist immediately from that activity they would be subject to fine and prosecution. The Priory Forestry Program was put on temporary hold. There was no need to make a big issue of it or to upset the Community with such news. Father Robert would simply be promoted to oversee the creation of a badly needed new septic system for the Priory. From head forester to chief plumber! The septic system fared much better than the forestry program; it served the Community needs for forty years before it finally expired and was replaced by a more environmentally sound successor. But that is another story. And over the years there were many stories to follow – all based on reality and clothed in hilarious myth, laced with imagination.

So, how did the forestry program come to be what it is now at Weston Priory? Was it perhaps something of perseverance and the integration of all those stories with a sense of humor that was the catalyst between Prayer and Work? Is it perhaps the serious, playful practice of humility that keeps imagination and creativity alive? Is it re-discovering day after day the playfulness of a child? What is it that fascinates the child, holds a child spell-bound, amazed, lost in wonder? A simple flower! How can this be possible? What humble power sees the hidden connection of all things? In a flower? – the soil, sun, air, the water; the bee, insects, the bird, even the whale; the stars, moon, the universe? No – there is no separation between the child and the flower. All is one. ■