

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FIREWATCHER QUILT

Richard Sisto interviewing **Fred Hicks**

Transcribed from tape and edited by **Robert E. Daggy**

Sisto: Freddy [Hicks] was a good friend of Thomas Merton, Father Louis as the local people knew him. Among other things, Freddy was the dairy man at Gethsemani for many years and a forest ranger. Over the years he had many dealings with the monks and he especially had a lot of dealings and, of course, friendship with Father Louis. One of the incidents we have read about, I think, in the biography and in Merton's journal was the time Freddy found Father Louis in a bit of a problem and helped him. Fred, what was going on that time?

Hicks: At that particular time, Father Louis had started a little fire to clear some brambles and brush near his hermitage there at Gethsemani. The dryness and the weather and so on had let it get out of control. So my tower man advised me that I should come and check it because it looked like it might be a problem fire. So I did, and I found Father Louis in the midst of a fire which was about to get out of control. And he was all in . . .

Sisto: He was in a bit of a dither, wasn't he?

Hicks: Dither, yes, trying to put this thing out. That's good — dither - thank you very much. Anyway, trying to get this thing put out, he was "fit to be tied" as we say here in the hills of Kentucky. He had stretched himself to the point where he was in a problem. So anyhow, when I found this to be as it was, I asked him to move aside and let me handle the situation and relieve him of it. It looked like he needed to . . . you know, be relieved.

Sisto: Wouldn't you say it looked like he was almost going to pass out? His face was all red?

Hicks: That's right! The poor man wasn't going to let the fire get out of control and do any extra damage, of course. And, in the meantime, he was about to spend himself completely, I thought, in the way he was trying to put it out. So I asked him if he would please move back out of the way and let me tend to the situation and relieve him of all the problems that he had there. Which he readily did.

Sisto: Right. Did he have any idea what he was doing in trying to get the fire out?

Hicks: It had become a problem to the point where I rather doubt that he was aware of what might come to be or happen or whatever. He was in a situation that was about to overpower him. The heat and the smoke and fighting the fire had reached a point where I thought he might not be able to cope with the situation. After a minute or two of conversation, he agreed to go back out of the way and let me handle the situation — which I did. Then I went in and put out the fire with Fr. Louis agreeing that that was the right thing to be done, you know. And then everything was all right, but I thought when I stopped him and asked him please to move out of the way (and I still believe this to be true) that he might not have been able to handle the situation and might have succumbed to the fire itself rather than let it get out of control and burn the woods and his hermitage and so on.

Sisto: Well, of course he was very appreciative of you doing this.

Hicks: Oh sure, after a day or two when I next met him and the situation presented itself, "Fred," he said, "I am terribly grateful for you and what you have done for me." I said, "Well, that's in my day's work, you know. That's what they hire me to do and pay me to do." He said, "Well, in this instance, this is way over and beyond what you talk about and if it hadn't been for you I feel like, now, things would have been rather bad for me and for the fire, too."

Sisto: And did he offer you any compensation?

Hicks: Well, he said that some day he wanted to repay me for all the good I had done for him. And I said, "You don't owe me a thing. I was glad to do what I did." He said, "That's not nearly enough because it means so much to me." Well, at a later date, I came to his little hermitage there and he was in trouble with a neck problem. He was laying on a hospital bed, and I said, "Father Louis, what ails you today?" He said, "Oh, I got a little neck problem, but it will be fine." He said, "What can I do for you?" I said, "Well, I don't know, but you seem so in place in your bed and everything seems so good for you."

Sisto: Comfortable, yes?

Hicks: Yes, comfortable and so on. I said, "I would like to maybe some day be as comfortable as you are in that bed." I said, "I'll tell you what I want you to do. When you die and go away from here, you will me your bed." He said, "I'll do that, Fred, I'll let you have my bed."

Sisto: Of course this was kind of a joke.

Hicks: Yes, we were joking at the time and I thought, well, you know . . . But anyhow at a later time after the situation presented itself, as probably you all well know, I get a call from some of the brothers at the monastery and they said, “Well, Fred, you own Father Louis’ bed. You’ve become an heir to Father Louis’ bed.”

Sisto: He willed you his bed?

Hicks: So he had willed me his bed in a manner of speaking. And I said, “Oh, no, no, no, we were just having a conversation and”

Sisto: Let me ask you this. How many years before would you say this fire situation happened? How many years before he died? He died in '68.

Hicks: It was at least five or six years before his death. And I had completely forgotten it. But the good Father Louis, he don't forget anything! So, he had made arrangements with his people to take care of this situation and so on and then the brother at this time told me, he says, “Good Father Louis wants you to have his hospital bed.” And I said, “Well!”

Sisto: And you got it?

Hicks: And I . . . yes, that's right. He said all arrangements had been made and I got the hospital bed and all. I said, “Well, if that's his wishes, that's all right.” From then on that's how the thing progressed to be. His bed was sent to me and I have it in my possession now. And I'm very, very grateful. He was a very great man and I have a world of respect for him and all of his teachings and so on and so on.

Sisto: Fred, thank you very much. I think our listeners will enjoy this as they're looking at the quilt. The quilt is about this story and it's one of the many things that happened in Father Louis' life.

Hicks: Well, thank you very much and thanks — still — to Father Louis for being the man that he was.

Sisto: Amen!