

MERTON CONNECTIONS:

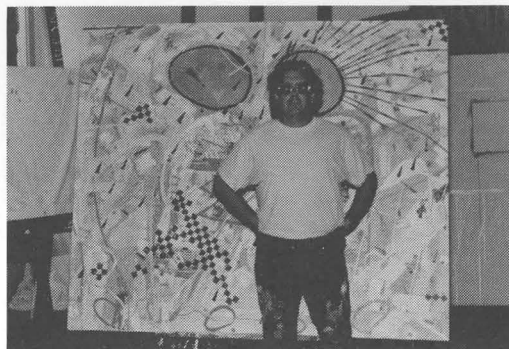
The Monastery of the Holy Spirit, Bobbie K. Owens, Least Heat Moon, & *The Fourteen Carat Molehill*

by **Robert E. Daggy**

In the years since coming to the Thomas Merton Studies Center I have often, as I have said many times, been amazed at the connections that exist — and that pop up — with Merton. Several months ago an artist, Bob Owens by name, came to visit the Merton Center. He had been working in Toronto, had recently moved to Columbus, Indiana (noted in this area as an architectural center), and was arranging to have a one-man show at the Yvonne Rapp Gallery in Louisville. He said that he wanted to give one of his paintings to the Merton Center as a way of expressing his gratitude for the impact which Merton had had on his life. *Connection:* As I looked over his resume, I noticed with some surprise that he was born in New Castle, Indiana, where I was born, though some years earlier and I did not know him or his family. He returned in June with not one, but two paintings — “Light for Merton” and “If I Could Dream Like Merton” — which he has given to the Center. *Connection:* I was beginning to plan this issue of *The Merton Seasonal* which was to feature items about the Monastery of the Holy Spirit at Conyers, Georgia, and writings by monks of Holy Spirit. I was struck when Bob Owens, who was unaware of this, pointed out that the white triangles in his paintings are his expression of the presence of the Holy Spirit among us. His “Light for Merton,” which is featured on the cover, seems an appropriate introduction to this issue devoted to Holy Spirit Monastery.

Marc Irish, who lives in Sacramento, California, is one of those many people who “collect” Merton and he has contributed a short article to this issue called “Collecting Merton.” He has, from time to time, been most helpful in calling my attention to items which he has found in his foraging through bookstores. *Connection:* Again, as I was planning this issue, Marc Irish wrote to tell me of a book — *Blue Highways* by William Least Heat Moon — which had a section that discussed Merton in the framework of a visit to Holy Spirit at Conyers. Excerpts from Heat Moon’s account lead off this issue.

The Abbey of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit at Conyers, Georgia, was Gethsemani’s first daughterhouse, founded in 1944. Merton himself describes the foundation in *The Waters of Siloe* (pp. 232-240). He relates, obviously with some amusement, that Georgia, archly non-Catholic, seemed the “logical place” to



BOBBIE K. OWENS

Dom Frederic Dunne, then abbot of Gethsemani, for a Trappist foundation. Dewey Weiss Kramer has written *Open to the Spirit: A History of the Monastery of the Holy Spirit* (Conyers, Georgia: Monastery of the Holy Spirit, 1986) and, with her husband Victor A. Kramer, has compiled *An Oral History of the Abbey of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit* (Decatur, Georgia: Deweylands Press, 1985). Victor Kramer makes a case for more such interviews in "A Call for Additional Oral History: Merton, The Guestmaster, 'The Fat Boy,' and Monasticism." *Connection*: While preparing this issue, Murray Young of New York City called and related a story that happened to him in March, 1954. He was then reading *The Seven Storey Mountain* and attended a Broadway play, *King of Hearts* with Jackie Cooper. A person, whom he describes as "heavy," sat down next to him and, in the course of conversation, confided that he was teaching in a Catholic parochial school. Young then told him he was reading *The Seven Storey Mountain*, and being Jewish, wondered if his neighbor could explain some Catholic points. The neighbor was surprised that Young was reading the book and immediately said: "Interesting! You see I'm 'the fat boy from Buffalo.'"

Three monks of Holy Spirit figure in this issue: Father Joachim Tierney, guestmaster at Gethsemani who greeted Merton in 1941 and who was one of the original twenty monks sent to Holy Spirit, is also featured in the Kramer article. Father Edmund Brand, who entered Holy Spirit in 1946, has contributed a long poem and, as archivist, provided the photographs of the monastery. Brother John Albert is represented by an essay and by three poems. Two reviews and a letter to the editor by Edward Rice complete this issue.

Connection: Merton items pop up at times when one least expects them and they add to the already huge Merton corpus. Arthur W. ["Bill"] Biddle of the University of Vermont spent some weeks this summer at Gethsemani and did some work in the Library. He happened to come across a book by Ira Wallach, author of the rather popular *How to Be Deliriously Happy*. This one is *Hopalong-Freud and Other Modern Literary Characters* (New York: Henry Schuman, 1951). In it, Wallach parodies and spoofs several then au courant authors and literary forms, ranging from Lin Yutang ("Perhaps it is presumptuous of me to write of life and how to live it.") to story-cook books ("Here is Etienne's inimitable method of making 'Tubbed Lambchops.' I use this recipe whenever unexpected guests come and there is little in the house, for Tubbed Lambchops are simple, quick, easy to prepare, and relatively inexpensive.") to L. Ron Hubbard ("**Diapetics** is the modern science of the mind which enables everybody to cure everybody else of everything, just by reading this book.") to Truman Capote ("Of course, father was still around, just as much as when he had been alive, or perhaps more so, because now his spirit was pervasive and it seeped through the chinks in the kitchen, invaded the curtains, floated lazily up to the chandeliers under which mother had danced as a girl, with twelve feet of hair and a white dress trailing behind her."). The recent popularity of *The Seven Storey Mountain* did not escape Wallach's merciless eye and he included a chapter called "The Fourteen Carat Molehill." This is the earliest parody of Merton (who has not been parodied a lot) which has come to my attention and certainly Merton himself was aware later in his life that his early writings were susceptible to such parodying. Wallach calls it "Confessions of a young sophisticate who exchanged this crass world for a bed of nails and medieval underwear." A sample:

I fled to my hotel room where I seized upon a Sears-Roebuck catalog, having no other reading matter at hand. I soon perceived that the catalog's technical excellence covered a soul-corroding poison. Yet reading it was a great grace. I was suddenly face to face with my own sins. I knew that I, my own degraded soul, had been responsible for World War II, the floods in China, the famine in India, the early frost in Minnesota, and the mediocre Broadway season of 1949. It was too big a burden for any man to bear . . .

Connection: To paraphrase Brother John Albert on p. 10: "When others parody the artist is in harmony with himself."