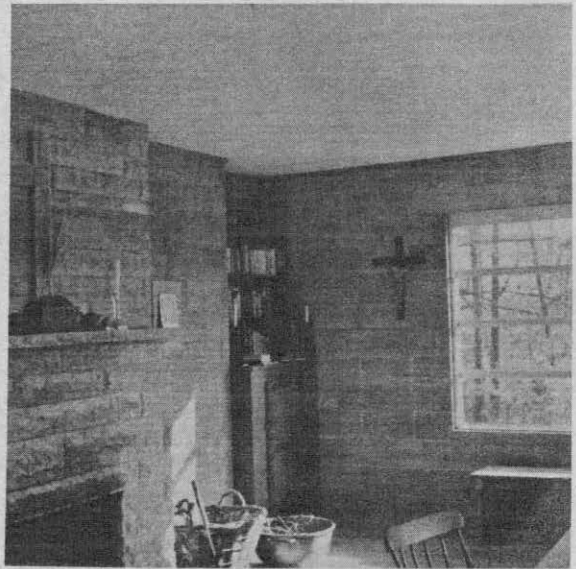


THOMAS MERTON AND BASKET WEAVING

Thomas Merton rather lovingly photographed from various angles baskets woven at the Abbey of Gethsemani. One example of these photographs, part of the Thomas Merton Collection at Bellarmine College, appears on the cover of this SEASONAL.

The weaving and sale of baskets had provided activity and revenue at the Abbey in the pre-cheese making era. But with increased emphasis on cheese making and increased funds from the sale of cheese, basket weaving declined as a major Abbey activity. By Merton's day novices no longer learned to weave baskets. With his often tongue-in-cheek attitude towards Gethsemani's cheese industry and with perhaps a twinge of nostalgia for a dying Abbey craft, he urged resumption of basket weaving in his 1966 book *CONJECTURES OF A GUILTY BYSTANDER*. Whether Merton actually found basket weaving a tenable activity for novices or whether he was being humorous is itself a conjecture, but it is certain that he found a beauty, an art, in Gethsemani's baskets and recorded it in his own photographs. The following section is taken from pages 17 and 18.



*Corner of the Main Room of Merton's Hermitage
Basket by the Fireplace*

I want as many of the novices as possible to learn how to weave baskets. Brother Gerard is an aged monk who has made baskets for a long time, and he is now seventy-four. I want some novices to learn from him how to make baskets before he dies, or before he grows too old for anything of the sort.

Brother Basil and Brother Isaias will learn first to make baskets. Then others will learn. Brother Gerard cannot teach more than two at a time because there is no room for more than three to work in the potato cellar, where he weaves baskets.

"I moved a lot of the trash over to one side," said Brother Gerard. "It is warm in there. It will be nice in there. It is right in the next cellar to where I was last year." I received permission to speak to him about the baskets. He received permission to speak to the novices, but they did not get permission to speak to him. They made signs. He asked them, however, to tell him their names. "Speak," he said, "just for that only. Your names." That was enough speaking. They went ahead with the baskets. This afternoon the sun is warm. They are out cutting willows.

Brother Gerard said: "Brother Stephen was one who made baskets. Of course, he was French. He made all the baskets for everyone. But he died suddenly. We were all left without any more baskets. Anyone who wanted baskets had to get out and make his own. Well, I was in charge of the wardrobe and all the old baskets were falling to pieces. So I would repair them, and get a good look at how they were made, and then I began to make them for myself. That is how I learned to make them."

"I am making some for the foundation in California. The ones they took out with them are all broken up. Brother Procurator was out there and he just came back saying they needed baskets badly. So I said: 'All right, I will make them eight big ones.'" He held up eight fingers, laughed quietly and went away.