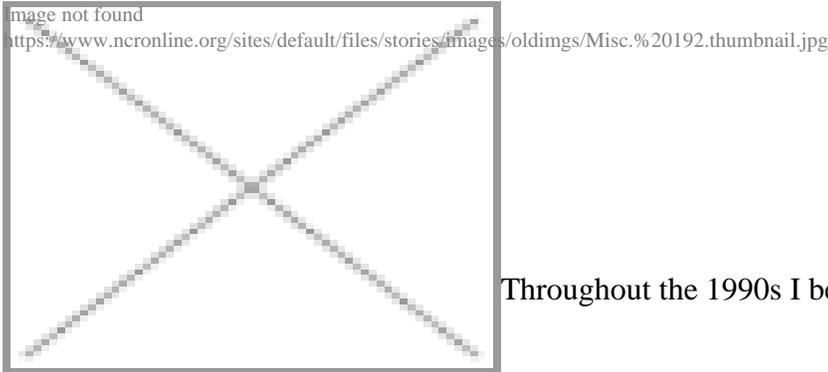


## 'You're so heavenly minded, you're no earthly good'

Rich Heffern | Mar. 2, 2011 Eco Catholic



Throughout the 1990s I became involved in a dispute between the

Trappist monks Our Lady of the Assumption Abbey in southern Missouri and some of their neighbors.

The monastery was founded in the 1950s by a contingent from New Melleray Abbey in Iowa. A St. Louis newspaperman had given the Trappists a 5,000 acre tract of land that he owned and has used as a hunting preserve. He had constructed a stone lodge on the grounds near the Bryant River. The monks moved into the abandoned lodge and built onto it, even adding some army surplus barracks for extra space.

Their aim was to live off the land, so they also built a carpentry barn, large tool sheds and a milk cow operation, and put in an extensive orchard on a hilltop. In the 1960s after the failure of the milk operation, they constructed a plant for making concrete blocks on the banks of the river. This operation brought income. The cattle were sold and the orchard abandoned. In the late 1960s they built a new monastery at the top of the hill above the old buildings.

In the late 1970s I lived in the area and worked with three others doing contract forestry work through the state's Conservation Department. We were hired to do timber stand improvement on the monks' extensive forest acreage. We worked along Shingle and Teeter creeks thinning the stands of white and black oak and hickory so that healthy trees could flourish. We would stop to eat our lunch on the ridgetop, reclining on the soft beds of leaf litter with the wan winter sunlight illuminating the silvery trunks of the white oaks around us. Little flocks of chickadees, tufted titmice and kinglets would forage around us, calling out to each other, in the dogwood and spicebush trees.

In the 1990s the monastery signed its forest acreage up in a federal timber stand improvement program once again. This time they turned loose one of their over-eager brothers, armed with a chainsaw, who would, instead of thinning the tree groves, thoroughly decimate them. He would take out most of the trees in a stand, cutting them down then painting the stump with herbicide to prevent further growth.

I once walked through an area he had worked over, a pine grove near one of the hermitages the monks had established above Teeter Creek. The brother had felled every one of the pines on the hilltop. Their withered needles and slender trunks formed a pick-up sticks-like maze on the ground.

Bob Liebert and his family own a homestead on upper Teeter Creek adjoining the monastery land. Bob and his wife Jan run an herb business from their home. Bob grows medicinal plants of all kinds, then makes tinctures and oils from the herbs and sells these in health food stores and from his Web site. In some cases he wildcrafts the herbs, roaming the forest to locate stands of ginseng, golden seal, skullcap, black cohosh or wild ginger.

Alarmed at what was happening on the monastery land, he beseeched the abbot and the county's Conservation Department forester, asking for a more earth-friendly approach to the handling of the monastery's timber. At one point in the dispute, he physically separated the chainsaw from the brother and held it for ransom. I wrote the abbot and called the monastery several times talking there with a sympathetic monk, the late Fr. Theodore Koster, who told me it was a "personnel problem." A number of the monastery's neighbors wrote and made phone calls reminding the abbot of the enhanced fire danger caused by so many dessicated and rotting tree carcasses littering the ridges and hillsides. Forest fires are common in the late winter and early spring months. This directly threatened the monastery's neighbors.

It took years to get these practices stopped. Finally a new abbot, Fr. Mark Scott, listened and hired [a sustainable forestry expert to advise him](#) [1]. In the meantime most of the monastery's timber holdings were severely over-managed, causing loss of forest cover, extensive habitat destruction and land erosion.

Johnny Cash wrote a song once titled, "You're So Heavenly Minded, You're No Earthly Good." It seemed to me that this dispute with the monks was a perfect example of that. Not that the monks there don't do good things, because they do. The monks knew well the liturgical year, the Marian feasts, the Gospels, *lectio divina*, the lives of the saints, the writings of the church and desert fathers and mothers, yet didn't seem to know much about where they lived, how their neighbors eked out an existence in that hardscrabble land, how annoying the forest practices were, or how destructive this mismanagement was to their lands.

Surrounded by some of the most superb woodlands in the Midwestern United States, they didn't "get it" that this forest was a delicately-balanced, richly diverse, extravagantly beautiful ecosystem that deserved the utmost respect, courtesy and care.

Even now, one can go to their Web site and pull up a photograph of a white and black-robed Trappist heading off toward an idyllic pine grove, and not know that beyond the thin border by the monastery itself or the road through the monastery lands, there was once -- and to some extent still is -- a thoroughly wasted forest.

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[1] [http://natcath.org/NCR\\_Online/archives2/2004c/082704/082704r.htm](http://natcath.org/NCR_Online/archives2/2004c/082704/082704r.htm)