

Into the frying pan

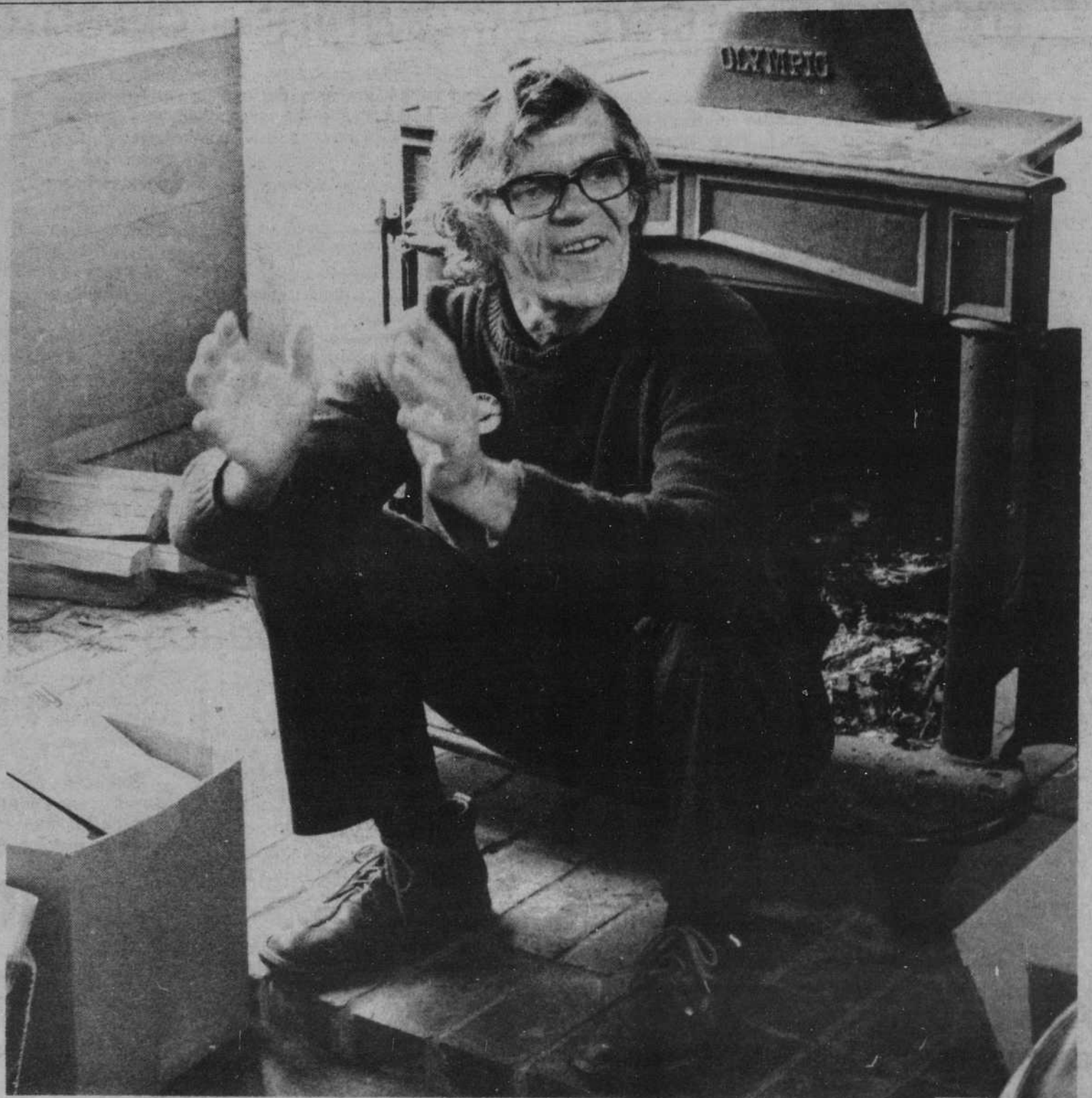


Photo by Alan Silverblatt

John Fry, former pastor from Chicago, jumped out of the pulpit and into the 'frying pan', a monthly magazine of ideas, humor and social advocacy. "We deal in social issues in a real way,"

says Fry. "We don't have to make points with our readers." Fry and his partner, Mary Alice, say the third year publication is growing steadily.

Publication deflates religious fire and brimstone

By JOHN CROWLEY
Of the Emerald

Pastor John Fry decided in 1968 that the most Christian duty he could perform was to get out of the pulpit.

His church agreed it was a great idea. Now, with Carol Alice, Fry publishes "frying pan," a magazine of ideas, humor, and social advocacy. "We handle what might be called radical ideas, but without radical bombast," says Fry. "We deal with social issues in a real way."

Headquartered in a cozy hillside home on Mary Lane in Eugene, "frying pan" appears monthly with 40 pages of news and comment on topics such as sexuality, strategic arms, feminism, taxes, sports, and religion — heavy on the religion.

Fry, former pastor of Chicago's First Presbyterian Church ("It's a big, hot-dog church, not a chickenshit little church," Fry boasts), feels a special obligation to puncture the hypocrisy of organized religion. He's been there.

In June of 1968 Fry was called before the Senate Investigating Committee to answer charges of misuse of Anti-poverty Program funds in the community action program his church administered. The conservative senators were upset, Fry says when through the program the "wrong people" began developing a political consciousness.

"We were working with lower-and middle-class black people, people who are often perceived as criminal, lazy, welfare cheaters, and so on. Through our job training program, they were developing a greater sense of self-worth, a more positive awareness and control of their own destiny."

Although later vindicated, Fry's de-

fense of his and other community action programs throughout the country proved highly charged. He escaped the order, he remembers, "just barely, without being cited for contempt."

He didn't survive his church's discomfort with his political notoriety. "They dropped me like a hot potato."

Years later he met Carol Alice at a social analysis class in Salem. Alice, a veteran of the underground journalism movement (she published one in grade school), had started working for Juvenile Corrections in Lane County.

The two found they shared many of the same tastes (and distastes). Since both were in a position to tackle a new project, they decided to invent a magazine. "Frying pan was born."

"Frying pan" rather defies description. Frying pan correspondent Bill Whipple summed it up nicely in the November issue. "Frying pan" is, he asserts, "opposite of Mary Worthism," that simplistic mentality built on two-dimensional reality and priggish platitudes.

"Mary Worth-ism," he writes, "isn't the exclusive property of comic strips and soap operas. It has ecclesiastical inclinations. Churches often find it oozing around the baseboards. Sometimes they seem to be drenched in it. . . 'frying pan' believes that a condescending moral absolutism doesn't belong in either the church or the world."

In a comfortable, wood-heated workspace on a Eugene hillside, Fry and Alice fight Mary Worth and her like with the help of high-quality contributions from their steadily-growing readership. They now mail out 3,000 copies a month around the globe.

"We don't have to make points with

our readers," Fry says. "Our goal is not to address readers as consumers of entertainment or news, but as actual, intelligent, moral agents in their own right. We feel an obligation to provide them with interesting, accurate, candid information. That's our part. What happens then is up to the reader; it's unpredictable, but we know it's going to be good."

Beside deflating Christian pomposity, Fry and Alice feel the obligation to do something to thwart the spreading madness of the strategic arms race. Communication, they believe, is the ticket.

There's got to be a new, neutral language," Fry states. "One that everybody can understand. On the one side there's the strategic arms discourse; on the other, the moral discourse, and the two don't touch. They can't communicate."

"We'd like to pioneer an intermediate realm of discourse to discuss strategic arms so that both elements can communicate."

But "frying pan" forays into the whimsical, too. Between its covers the reader is likely to encounter a piece on speed racing with a rubber raft, a tongue-in-cheek review of seminary course offerings, and advice to the lovelorn.

The publication, now in its third year is growing according to Fry. "We're still in our first phase, and thinking very carefully about changing our page format. It's very important for us to take it easy, to have fun."

"If something we're doing isn't fun," adds Alice, "we stop and examine what's going on and try to get back on the track. If we're not having fun, the magazine suffers."

Fry agrees. "No one wants to read something solemn and stuffy."

Their readers apparently agree. They

gladly shell out \$10 for a year's subscription (more if they can afford it, less if they can't), and re-subscribe at a rate "that any magazine in America would envy," according to Fry.

Not that the editors are striking it rich. Unsalaries, they depend on their commercial typesetting operation to pay the bills. Publishing on ordinary newsprint keeps costs down, too.

Publishing in Eugene doesn't hurt either. "Eugene is the happiest postmark you can put on a magazine," Fry confides. "It's got the best reputation, deserved or not, in America. People think it's the greatest place to live."

When not mailing out good vibrations, Fry writes books. His fifth and most recent, *The Great Apostolic Blunder Machine*, has just been published by Harper & Row. In it, Fry agrees with Kierkegaard's description of Protestantism as "mediocrity laid end to end," and explores the refusal of Christianity to concede the possibility (that) all the churches in the world could close down tomorrow and Christianity would still be alive the next day.

He cites as his credentials to deal with the subject his abject failure to conform to the orthodox Christian criteria of success. This, he maintains, provides him with the critical distance necessary to credibly state his case ("Critical distance is my middle name").

Not that Fry has totally abandoned the traditional church. He preaches occasionally as a favor, and cites his church's liberal major-medical plan and retirement benefits as reasons not to sever his ties completely.

But in "frying pan," Alice and Fry continue to battle Mary Worth-ism wherever they find it.