



“It’s the best crap game in town.”

Story by Martha Miller
Photography by Mark Davis

Father Clifford Stevens likes to compare himself to Hugh Hefner.

Like Hefner, Stevens wants to build a mansion. But Stevens doesn't want to fill "his house" with scantily-clad women, wine and song. Monks and prayer and Gregorian chant will inhabit his mansion.

"If Hugh Hefner could build a mansion," says the fiery, 60-year-old priest, "then surely I can build a monastery." And he has. Sort of.

For the past year, Stevens has been living in a wooden barn on a rolling hillside in northeast Nebraska near Oakdale. The barn is Stevens's house, office, chapel, conference room, sanctuary and, he is quick to tell you, the first step toward his \$3.5 million Tintern monastery.

Inside, Stevens sinks his 5-foot, 4-inch frame behind a large, wooden desk littered with letters and papers concerning his 35-year-old dream to build a monastery and start a new order of monks — the first order since the 13th century. It's a dream that neither financial setbacks,

dwindling contributions nor rescheduled completion dates have been able to shatter.

And indeed, the history of Tintern does read like a dream, a wispy medieval vision that somehow — miraculously, maybe — maintains a fragile tie to reality. Stevens points to this history in turning aside the doubters.

- January 1979. Charlotte Taylor and members of the Clemensen family heard of Stevens's desire to build a monastery and offered him purchase rights on a 240-acre plot of farmland southwest of Oakdale in the Cedar Creek area.

- One month later, Joe and Emma Velder of St. Petersburg presented Stevens with the down payment.

- In 1984, bankrupt farmer-turned-carpenter John Fry of Tilden and his 13 children volunteered to build Stevens a barn.

- The night before Fry started construction, an elderly farmer died and left Stevens \$140,000.

- When a local bank started cutting off Stevens's credit

(Above) The Tintern Monastery has only one sign directing visitors to the isolated dirt road leading to the front door. (Right) Stevens drives his four-wheel drive truck across his land to a scenic bluff overlooking the grounds. (Opposite page) Stevens prepares for the morning services in the attic chapel.

