

Missionaries learn jungle lessons

By TERESA BANAS

The rule of the jungle is this — if you use your head, you keep your head. And Warren and Mary Wiesner have been doing just that for 14 years.

The Wiesners are missionaries working in the highlands of New Guinea, a few hundred miles south of the equator. Working in the country's interior brought them face to face with primitive bush people whose traditional practices may be hard to understand for folks in developed countries.

Matter-of-factly, the Wiesners will tell you that the people they worked with have practiced cannibalism. However, the practice is not as prevalent today as it once was. Occasionally, it surfaces following a tribal war victory. They added that the government (once under Australian rule — the country is independent today) has tried to quell the practice to promote tourism.

The Wiesners visited the Detroit suburbs last week and said that in those 14 years, they have only "scratched the surface" in helping the natives. In addition to bringing the Life of Christ, they also provide food, medicine and education. However, it was their reborn Christianity that originally prompted their quest into the bush.

MRS. AND MR. WIESNER plan to return to New Guinea this summer, following a year's leave.

In that time, they have traveled the country to recruit others, specifically those who are skilled in medicine, education and engineering.

While in town, the pair appeared anxious to return, contrasting Michigan's cool climate with the warm days in New Guinea.

Asked why they have remained overseas, Wiesner summed up their feelings: "Like it — I don't. Love it — I do."

Wiesner said they are the first missionaries to settle in that part of New Guinea, which he officially named Wagramatti on government maps. The village is 200 miles into the interior, west of the Pacific Ocean.

Mrs. Wiesner, 65, a teacher, said her work began "from the ground up" in teaching the natives to read, write, count and spell. She concentrates on "Pigeon English" in a country that has some 700 different dialects and languages.

They also attempt to control diseases such as malaria, leprosy, tuberculosis and tropical ulcers with medicine supplied by the government.



Missionaries Warren and Mary Wiesner (Staff photo by Art Emanuel)

Acceptance came slowly, they said.

"In 14 years we've just begun to influence them," Wiesner, 58, said. "They want us, they like us. But if they could get the same thing without us (referring to medicine and education), they'd tell us to go."

Wiesner describes the natives as fearful people who have a respect for strength. They have no tolerance for weakness or fear and their language has "no words for kindness, and concern."

"I taught them a story of Judas and Jesus and guess who they liked. Well, the question itself will tell you — Judas, it's treachery."

However, they added that safety is "no problem" unless there's a tribal uprising.

The natives are small, with the tallest reaching five feet seven inches. Their clothing is slight, but appropriate to the warm climate. Ornamentation ranges from dried grasses, animal bones, shells and feathers. Women wear bat wing bones pierced through their noses.

According to Mrs. Wiesner, help-

Wagramatti, they found that men and women slept in separate quarters. In that area "there's nothing lower than a woman," he said.

Their families sell women into marriage at a young age or trade them for goods and gifts. They added it's difficult to convince their families women should be educated, although all this is changing.

Women are responsible for all gardening. In some cases, they even live with pigs, which are valued property. Women are expected to nurse them as children. This is a practice the Wiesner attempt to discourage, if only for the sake of stopping diseases.

Child raising becomes a village-wide affair.

"It's group discipline," Wiesner said. "Any grown-up can discipline a child. And they (children) grow up to respect all adults."

Among harvested resources which have become a source of income for villagers are coffee, timber, coconuts and a substance that's manufactured as plant insecticide.

Their diets includes kau kau, a sweet potato, jungle mushrooms, corn, peas and beans. Meat is found in wild pigs, tree kangaroos and emu.

THE WIESNERS, who have no children of their own, said they may stay in New Guinea for another 10 years. Wiesner works as a non-denominational minister. He was ordained in the Episcopal Church at the age of 30. It was a big step from the days when he was an agnostic who went to church "because it was good business."

He was attracted to overseas mission work while stationed in Portsmouth, Virginia, where he worked as the director of a servicemen's Christian center.

ness is a way of life. "It's a payback system," she said.

Tact is also unknown in their culture. "They're honest in their form of speech," he said. "They're very outspoken," she added. "They don't lie to keep your friendship."

POLYGAMY IS NOT uncommon. "You can have as many wives as you can afford," they said.

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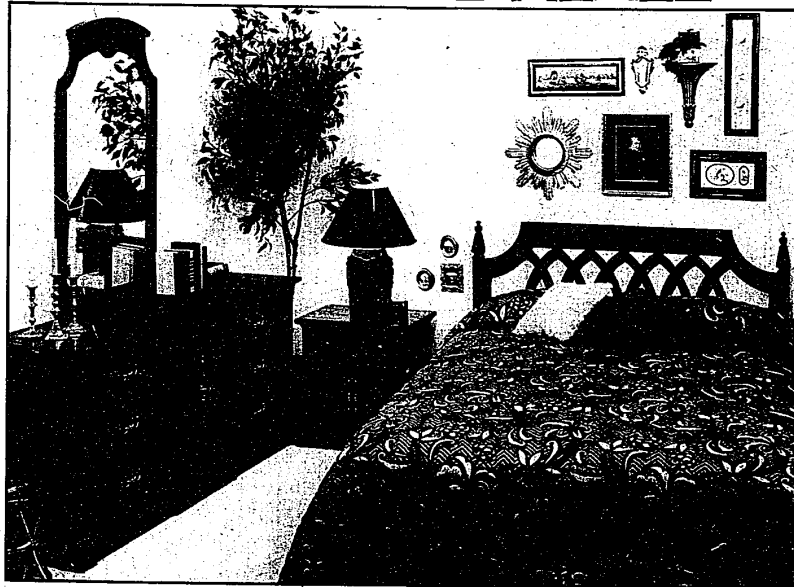
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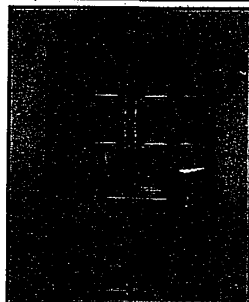
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