

# Wild Goose

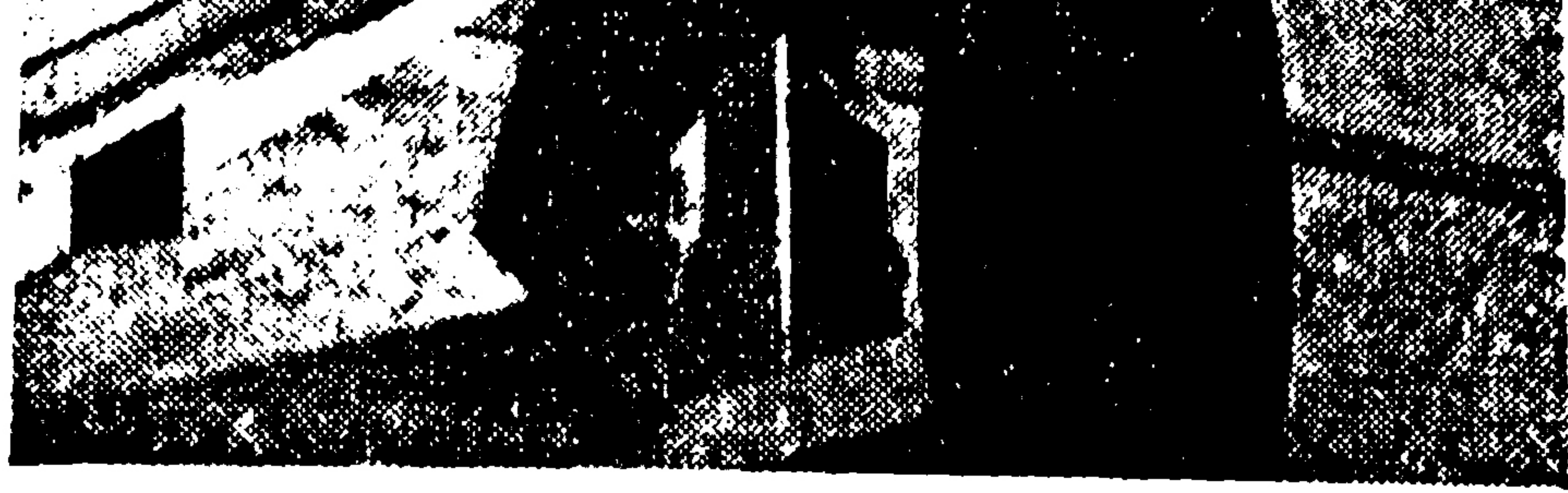
**Frances H. Flaherty**

The American

**S**ELDOM do we receive a letter as heartwarming and revealing as this one from Frances H. Flaherty, wife of Robert J. Flaherty, whose documentary films, *Nanook of the North*, *Elephant Boy*, and *Man of Erin*, have received world-wide acclaim. We had asked for a simple description of her summer home in Vermont. Her reply was comparable to a personal visit. We are, therefore, publishing her letter just as it came to our desk so that you, too, may enjoy fully the neighborly, just-dropped-in-for-a-chat tone which permeates every phrase, every sentence. *Architectural Editor.*

**A**s you know, we are a far-faring family—a family of wanderers, gypsies. We have owned no more than we could carry on our backs or on the backs of porters. Wherever we have stopped for our motion-picture work, we have made a home of sorts out of whatever was at hand. This ranged from a two-room trader's shack in Samoa to a Maharanee's palace in Mysore. I think the idea that we should ever have a permanent place of our own hardly occurred to us. How could we possibly afford to have a home? And if we did, what kind of a home could we afford? But I felt the war coming on and decided that now, at last, the family had to have a roof, and probably a garden and chickens. I left the rest of them in England, and breathed not a word of my intentions, for I was too jittery about the whole adventure to stand the chorus of doubting Thomases I knew I should raise.

I landed in New York in a lovely September equinoctial storm—it was the year of the New England hurricane—and I remember the sharp, bracing feeling it gave me to come back to this, my own tremendous sun and sky and rain. A friend drove me to Putney, Vermont, where there was a youth hostel where we could stay. We called a real-estate agent, and I told him, haltingly, what I might perhaps like to find, if . . . etc. Without further ado he took us along a winding, wooded road to an open hillside overlooking a breathtaking view. And there I was . . . and I



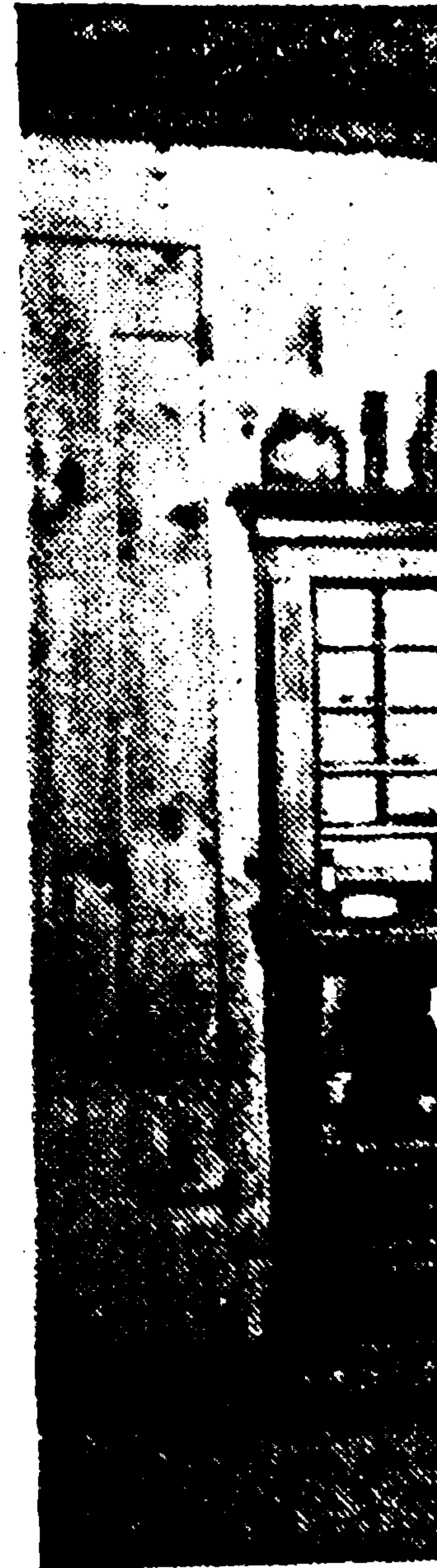
knew it by the almost suffocating turmoil of my feelings . . . straight as a homing pigeon had I come to this hillside home! No one had bought the place because no one wanted such a nondescript house and barn, so much in need of a good cleaning. But for the next two years this was my job.

We began with an outbuilding—the “chicken house”, though I’m not sure that chickens ever lived in it. A rough board floor and wallboard walls were all that was needed to make a room to live in while we worked. Indeed, we could make a second room out of the corncrib—and did; then gave it a verandah to enjoy the view better. The chicken house is still one of the houses I love best on the place. The corncrib became the perfect castle-of-their-own for my two young grandsons.

The Little House, as we called the nondescript four-room structure, was to be our center. It would be there for any member of the family needing to dig in for a while, for a rest or holiday or “just because”—a pied-à-terre, summer or winter, for any one, two, or three of us. But in summer we would burst out into spaciousness, bigness—the sheer luxury of room and to spare! This would be the Barn, with a big attic, a big basement for workshop and a darkroom. There’d be a deep freezer, farm size, the biggest we could buy. The hayloft would be our living room with one wall all window, open to the view, and the opposite wall all



**Son-in-law  
winner, 1**



**In well-c  
makes fr**



fireplace for the four-foot logs we would bring in from the woods. This was our dream, and the miracle was that it came true! We are greatly indebted to Sam Ogden, the architect, for this. Sometime, perhaps, you'll do a story about Sam and the Vermont village he bought and remodeled for himself and his friends. (*We already have. See AMERICAN HOME May, 1947. Editor's Note.*) His methods are those of a craftsman. He works along with his local carpenters and masons, designing as he goes, trying out ideas and materials. There is, for instance, the paneling of our big barn living room—just old weathered boards, salvaged from broken-down sheds and barns, but weathered to a lovely silvered gray. Nothing could be more fitting, more restful to live with, or make a better background for our photographs or my son-in-law's paintings. Above the boards, the almost white wallboard between the dark beams brings out the room's essential structure and fine proportions. But the gray boards had a surprise for us. Wherever we touched them, we could feel them vibrate to sounds in the room. Our whole room was one big sounding board. For our music, which is our recreation, it was, as you

may well imagine, magnificent. To the furnishings of this large room, the family added its ten cent's worth. It's size was not the headache we had feared. A concert grand piano was going begging because of its size. A local junk shop had three large, useful pieces, but I had to wait a year before the owner was finally induced to part with them. One piece we did treat ourselves to the luxury of having—was made especially from a pair of oak planks we happened to pick up. The design of the table was taken from an old Bavarian peasant table. Rude benches, to push under or pull out, were made from planks found under the barn. The legs had been stanchion posts in the stable.

As war deepened, our family gathered from near and far. From three we became nine or ten. We needed the house for both summer and winter. So the barn got a coat of shingles and a big Vermont furnace—the kind used in churches. At last and in truth, we were at *home*. An inscription over the fireplace announced and adjured us in beautiful Gaelic—"Wander No More". But alas, over the peak of our newly remodeled barn flew a different emblem, the old gypsy emblem—a wild goose on the wing.

# Wild Goose on the Wing

Frances H. Flaherty

The American Home - July, 1947

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**Gypsy emblem flies above remodeled  
burn of Mr. and Mrs. Robert J. Flaherty  
of Brattleboro, Vermont**



**Firm determination to have a home for her family wrought "before" and "after" miracle shown**

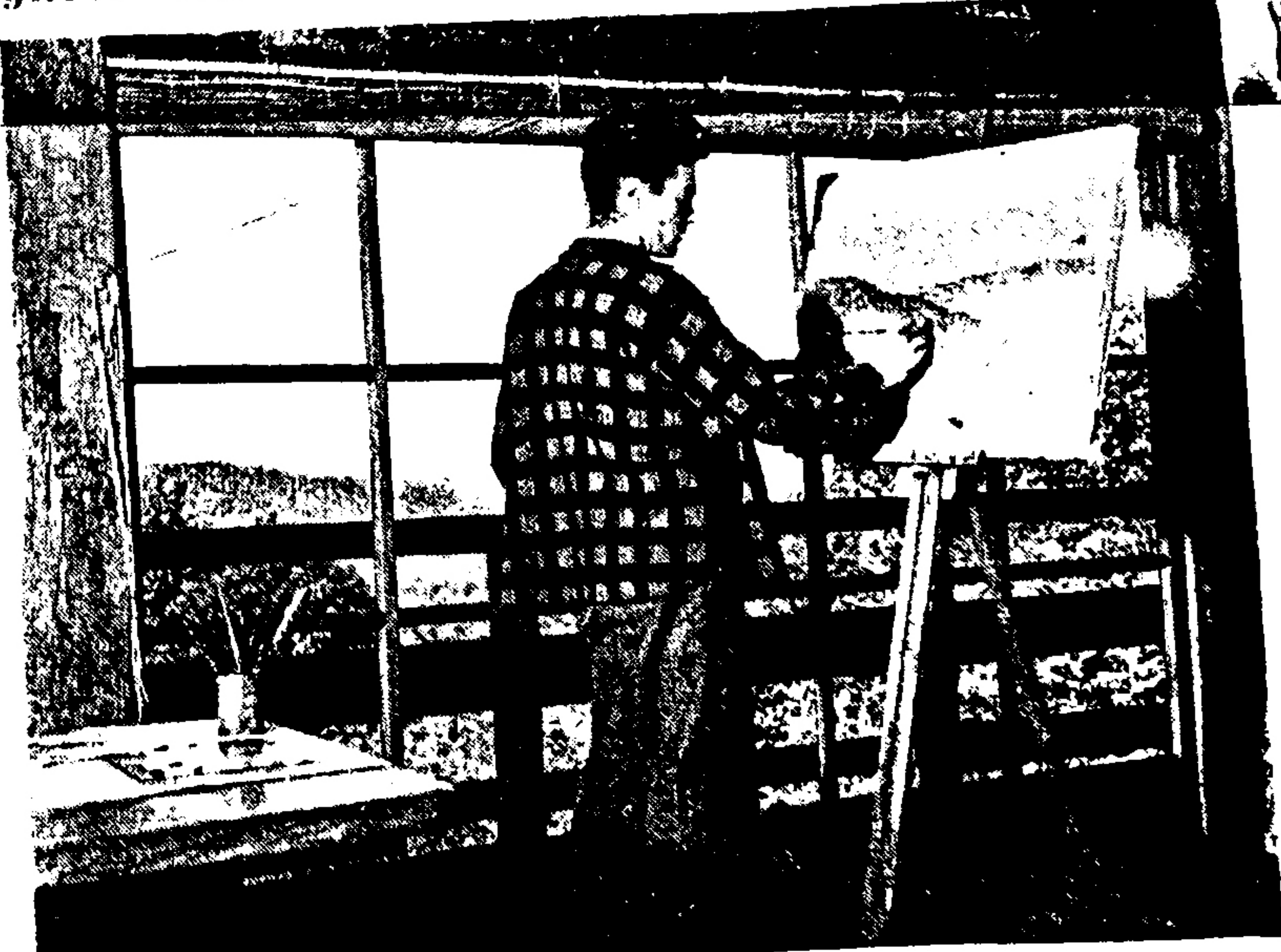
*Vermont*





Photographs by Fred Gund

*Mr. and Mrs. Flaherty go over stills of documentary motion picture in living room . . . at left, daughter Barbara in basement darkroom*



*Son-in-law, Don Burns, Guggenheim Fellowship winner, paints view seen through window wall*

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*In well-equipped basement workshop, Don Burns makes frames for his recently completed paintings*