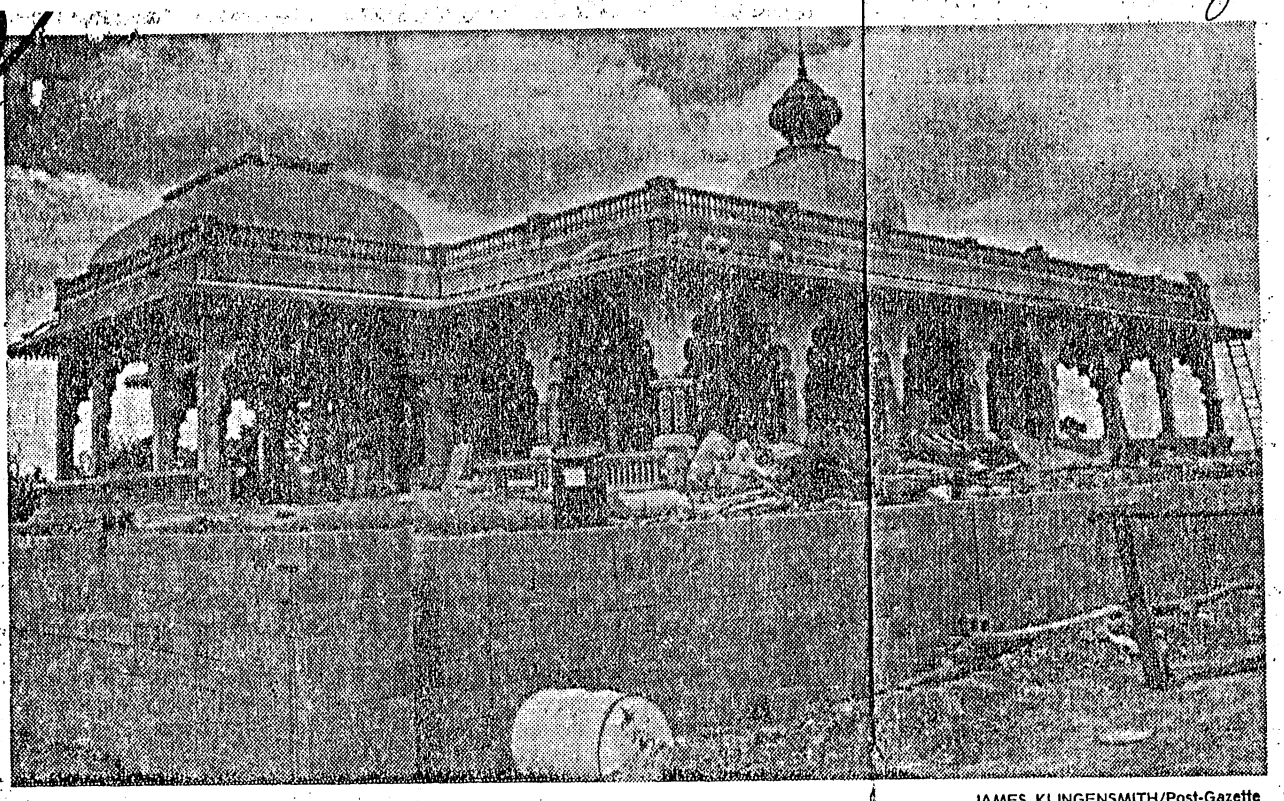
June 19-1978



JAMES KLINGENSMITH/Post-Gazette

High on a hill outside Moundsville sits this under-construction monument to His Divine Grace.

W.Va. Krishnas Study of Contrasts

Controversy Surrounds Thousand-Acre Commune

By DAVE WARNER
Post-Gazette Staff Writer

MOUNDSVILLE, W. Va.—They came with money—big money—they acquired land—lots of it—and they instituted a Hindu-based culture and religion which is jolting in this most American of areas.

They are the members of the Hare Krishna religious sect, who have become one of the biggest—some say the biggest, next to Consolidation Coal Co. —land owners in Marshall County, W.Va., south of Wheeling.

In the midst of an area which abounds with farms, coal mines and chemical plants, the Krishnas are in the process of building a most splendid temple-monument to their deceased leader, and have already built one opulent temple, two apartment houses and a dairy herd of 150 cattle.

The Krishna land—totaling from 1,000 to 1,500 acres—is populated by from 175 people, according to a sect leader, to up to 1,000 residents in the summer, according to the Marshall County sheriff's department.

They lead an essentially agrarian life, growing the crops they consume and making the structures which surround them.

Peace and tranquility do not necessarily follow. The Krishnas are armed —and armed well, police say—following two shooting attacks by outsiders. There have been controversies involving raw sewage, dead cattle and human disease.

In Moundsville, some seven miles south of the Krishna land, the townsfolk agree on one thing at least: "Don't eat the food," they caution when learning that two visitors are headed for what's officially known as New Vrindaban. The original Vrindaban is the town in India in which the Hindu god Krishna, it is believed, first appeared some 5,000 years ago.

The Moundsville folk, whose reaction to the commune seems to range from amusement to outrage, caution that severe diarrhea awaits the commune visitor who partakes of the freely offered Krishna food.

Meanwhile, up on McCreary's Ridge, the Krishnas dominate.

The show piece for this group of vegetarians is a temple which sits high on a hill perhaps a mile from the main commune center. It's not finished, but even so the opulence is obvious. The amount of marble—imported from Italy and India for the most part—is staggering. It's on the walks, the floors, the ceiling.

This religious, social and financial empire in the midst of Americana is overseen by a man who calls himself Swami Kirtanananda, a 5 foot 5 , slender, unkempt looking, somewhat flippant former resident of Westchester County, N.Y.

How old is the Swami?

"I am eternal," he says initially. "Forty-one," he slips in later.

Swami, whose name used to be Keith Ham, claims to be a former history professor at Columbia University, New York. He says he's been in the Hare Krishna movement for about 12 years, and in the hills of West Virginia for about 10 years. For the record, Columbia University says it has never employed anybody named Keith Ham, or Swami Kirtanananda, for that matter.

"I was the first one here," he recalled.

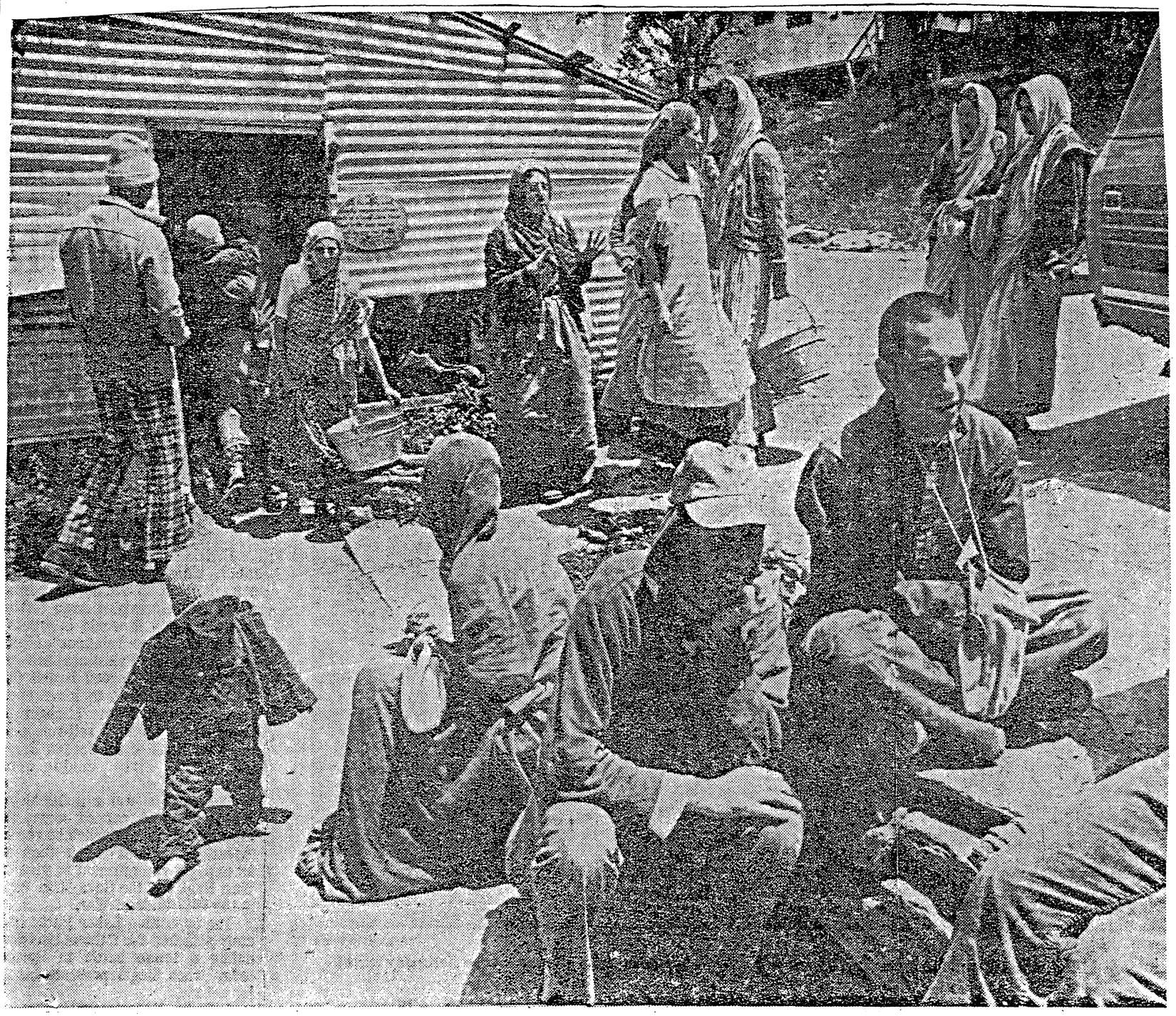
(Continued on Page 2, Column 1)

OVER

International
New York City

POST-GAZETTE
PITTSBURGH, PA.
M-215,000

JUN-19-78



JAMES KLINGENSMITH/Post-Gazette

Devotees, as followers are called, gather outside a small temple near the center of the commune. Shaved heads for men is the rule.

ed at a commune school by commun teachers.

He denied that parents are unable t stay with their children beyond the ag of 4, as is said in the town of Mounds ville by some.

But police tell a different story They said some Krishna women fee very bitter about the fact that they ar unable to stay with their children be yond that age.

Swami also denies the story tha residents at the commune must turr over all their private wealth to the community, including rights to future inheritances.

"If you want to join, you can give what you want," he contends.

Might the rumors about the com- munity becoming a national Hare Krishna center be true?

"It might be a world center," he says. But he smiles, enigmatically.

Perhaps only Krishna knows.