Fun-loving oldsters
Found on tv only

by Bruce Stevens

(Preceeding article in this issue suggests that we need to check media reports against reality in an organized fashion. The writer below checks on a documentary that appeared on the Ontario Education Station, CICA, which portrayed life in a senior citizens' home as a fun-loving experience.)

A recent documentary on aging shown on Channel 19 gave the viewer the message that old age was the best time of life. People over seventy were finding a new life in a second marriage, octogenarians were playing shuffleboard, bowling, dancing and singing. A group of women were forming a chorus line, banging pots and pans and playing musical instruments. The cameras closed in to show the smiles and laughter on their faces. These were the people from the Cummer House, a home for the aged at the corner of Willowdale Avenue and Cummer Street in North York. According to the narrator "old age is psychological".

The following day, I visited Cummer House to receive an injection of the wonder drug because I wanted to taste the fountain of youth once more. An interview with A.W. Duman, the manager, squashed my hopes. He assured me that there was no youth drug but, "we enjoy looking after the old people and cater to their needs." I asked him one more question, and sat back for a period of 30 minutes while he talked enthusiastically about the care for the aged.

"Admittance to the home depends on the financial position of a person. A form with a questionnaire determines who is able to support his stay and who is admitted without allocating any monies. (The form was not available for my perusal). The rate of care is $16.55 per day. If a person is unable to pay, he/she gives their old age pension cheque to the home and receives an income of $43 per month. Out of the $43 a person has to pay for cigarettes, razor blades, haircuts, snacks in between meals, clothes and other trinkets.
Upon entering the home all personal property is locked
in a safe to ensure safe keeping. Anyone wishing to leave the
property must sign in and out. All residents have identifica-
tion on their persons and a health record for cases of emer-
gencies. There is a physician who is on call 24 hours a day
and a number of nurses on eight-hour shifts. Mr. Duman felt
the aged were "well cared for."

My next talk was with an elderly gentleman named, Jim
Monroe. He told me that when a person with money is entered
into the home, he/she signs the rights of their estate to the
home. If a person's capital is deleted and they own a home,
the home is sold and the owing balance is forwarded to Cummer
House.

Seven out of ten residents are women. Beer or
wine is allowed on the premises and occasionally they have
a wine and cheese party. Most of the old people watch tele-
vision eight to ten hours a day because of physical and social
disabilities. There are 4 residents to a room which measure
20 feet by 20 feet with a closet for each person and their
personal belongings which measures 4 feet by 2 feet by 7 feet
and for privacy, an overhead sheet which stretches around the
perimeter of the bed. One washroom to a wing which has 4 baths,
and 12 toilets and wash basins. Each wing houses a television
room. All of these facts were confirmed on my tour of the home.

There is also a separate apartment building which has
individual rooms. In it there are three types of apartments.
A one-bedroom with kitchen (normal size), a one-bedroom with
sitting room, and a single room with washroom. The persons
who lease an apartment have their choice of preparing their own
meals or eating in the dining room with the other residents.
The one-bedroom apartments are only leased to married couples
or relatives of the same sex. The single room apartment, which
measures 14 feet by 12 feet has a washroom which is shared by
a neighbour in the adjacent room and so, people who lease
these apartments are of the same sex. Each person can lock his
neighbour's wasroom door from the inside to assure complete
privacy. Problems arise when someone forgets to unlock the
door when he is finished, or one party does not do his share
of housekeeping.

The rental fees for the apartments range from $110 to
$190 per month. If a person rents an apartment with meals, a
fee of $65 is added to his rent. All rents are geared to a
person's monthly income and all leases are on a monthly basis,
due to income change. (One person was asked to leave because
he inherited $50,000). If a person's income exceeds the maxi-
mum figure allotted, the monthly lease is broken. However,
opposite effects can also occur. Recently a woman became ill and had to give up her apartment. She was sent to the intensive care unit and had to sign the form mentioned earlier in my report. I learned that she died a week later. Thus, all charges for her care would be submitted to her estate.

For social activities the aged congregate in the lounge or TV room building. The lounge is used mainly for conversation about the happenings in the building, and the TV room is one form of entertainment. Certain weekly television programs are watched religiously, and when I was interviewing one gentleman he asked to be excused. His favorite program (bowling) was on TV., and he did not want to miss the excitement. I asked if anyone viewed the documentary on the aged which showed how happy the people were at Cummer House. Nobody knew anything about the film.

In my opinion, if one had a choice, the apartments would be the better accommodation. If a person enjoys the odd drink, he/she can sneak in a bottle or two but he doesn’t let his neighbours know too much of his business. "We have people here that report everything that goes on out of the ordinary."

The people at Cummer House may be old, but they are not stupid. As the old saying goes, "Just because there is snow on the roof it doesn’t mean the fire’s out."

While touring the home's main building, I bumped into Mrs. A. She told me she cannot play her violin any place in the building without asking permission. However, whenever there is a concert, she plays willingly. If she has a visitor who stays after eight, her roommates complain bitterly. The same occurs in the television room where people give ugly stares. If she wants to read in bed, the other complains of the light being on. "It is not like home you see, you can’t blame these people, they get grouchy in their old age."

I would have to say it is not like home where privacy and freedom are taken for granted. The aged while living in a well-maintained home are subject to regimentation, shared accommodation and the abuse of other residents. It may be a stop-over before death but, it is not companionship of a loved one or a family. It is not all fun and games as shown on the television screen. Moreover, it takes a month of recuperation after a physical activity is performed by most of the home's elderly. Thus, the fountain of youth still remains a TV myth.