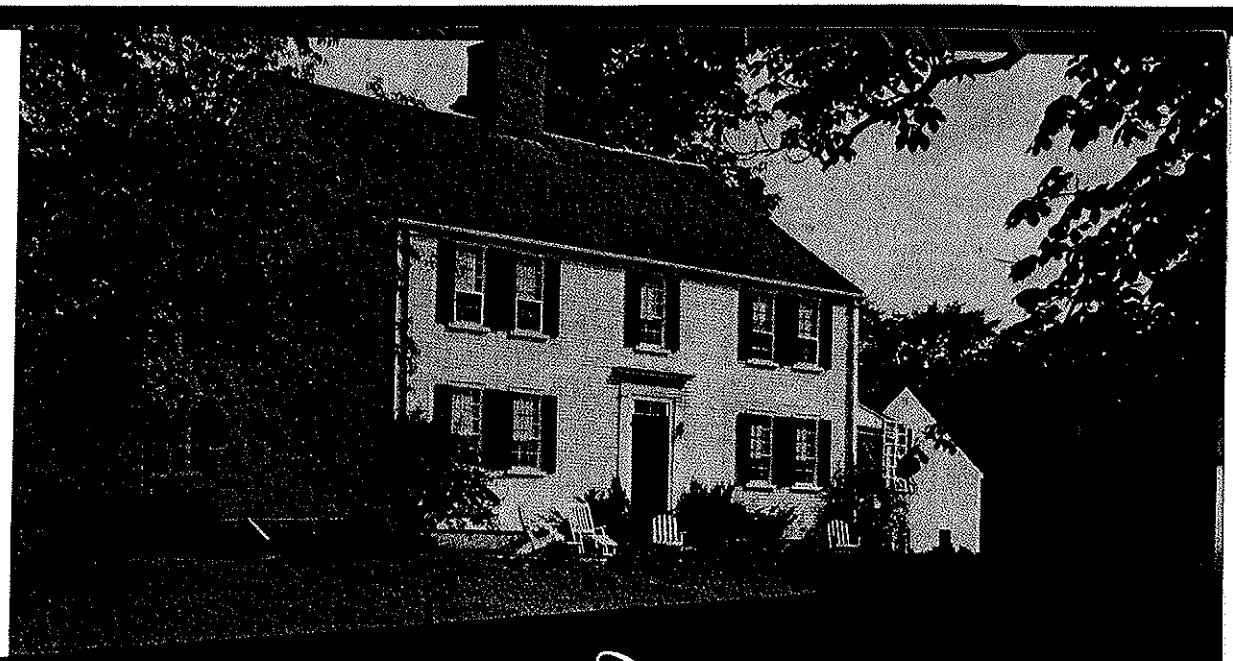

Home of the Month ...

By Deborah Blossom

Photographs by Douglas Armsden

TO A GENERATION who have grown up with central heating, electric stoves, and air conditioning, the homelife of a century and a half ago seems synonymous with inconvenience and discomfort—if not downright misery. There comes to mind the picture of a family huddled about the fireplace in the poorly lit and inadequately ventilated little room which serves as kitchen, living room, and dining room for them all, while the wind whistles through the cracks in the walls, and, perhaps, the wolves howl not far away in the forest.

Such a picture becomes absurd, however, when one walks through a house like that of Mr. and Mrs. Walter Collins O'Kane of Durham. Built in 1808, it offers its present owners the same roomy comfort, painstaking craftsmanship, and solid good looks which it has provided for nearly 150 years.

History has it that a log cabin first stood on the site of the O'Kanes' home, built by Eli Demeritt some time before 1700. It had one room and no cellar and was later replaced by a two-room log house. The present house was built by Captain Sam Demeritt, grandson of Eli, and it is believed that he utilized some of the materials of the log house in the present dwelling. The hearths of several of the fireplaces are English-made tiles, for example, which could well date back to pre-Revolutionary times, and some of the cupboards are of older construction than the house itself. But though Captain Sam may well have been frugal enough to save from his old house whatever he could use in his new, he was not so penny-pinching as to tolerate inferior materials or workmanship.

The house was not intended as a showplace in the sense that some of the great old mansions along the coast were, advertising and underlying their owners' wealth, business acumen, and social standing. It was built as a family homestead for the untold generations which were to come. Its great hand-carved beams, as straight and unrotted now as they were nearly a century and a half ago, could support a building two or three times the size of the big house, and the hand-carved pegs which hold these beams together are several times the size of a railroad spike. The white clapboards, narrow, hand-made ones, are original, as are the wide sills on the nine-over-six windows.

It is a house which was built for comfortable living. At first there was just the main section of nine rooms around the great eighteen-foot square center chimney with a lean-to out back. Later, when a son was married, a large wing was added consisting of a kitchen-living-dining room, back bedroom, and upstairs garret, so that the young couple could have a place of their own.

The O'Kanes, who purchased the house in 1923, made few major changes. The removal of one wall combined two rooms into their present living room, while a shift in the stairs leading to the cellar provided space for a large closet and a first floor lavatory. Long shelves in the basement—once used for the hundreds of jars of preserves and canned goods every housewife stored up for winter—were used to make closets and the cabinet which holds Mr. O'Kane's hi-fi phonograph, and the smallest upstairs bedroom was transformed into a bath, but otherwise the size and shape of the rooms are unchanged. With but a couple exceptions they are big rooms, full of light from the many-paned windows, and with ceilings which are surprisingly high for the period.

It must have been a comfortable house, even in the days before central heat, for its walls are thick, its floors tight-fitted. In the older section of the house the windows have Indian shutters, single downstairs, double up, which slide

Mr. and Mrs. Walter Collins O'Kane enjoy the shade of their tremendous chestnut tree on terrace. Family calls terrace "The beer garden."

snugly across the panes of glass. In almost every room there is a fireplace. In both the present living room, once the original kitchen, and the dining room, which was the second (ell) kitchen, they are the tremendous, walk-in type of fireplaces with the old cranes still intact, and Dutch ovens behind concealing paneled doors. Fascinated by the length of the mantels, we asked their measurements: in the present living room, 9'2"; in the dining room, 9'5".

"When we came here this was bricked up," Mr. O'Kane said, pointing at the living room fireplace set deep in its paneled length of wall. "I kept poking around with a knife. I knew there must be paneling under there someplace."

"We peeled off six layers of wallpaper," Mrs. O'Kane went on. "There were coarse plaster and handsplit lathes and under that three more layers of paper pasted right on the wood itself. And finally when we did get down to the paneling, it was painted red and was full of nail holes." Now a soft ivory, it has been brought back to its original beauty and clarity of line. Wallpaper in this, the living room, is a neutral shade, an excellent background for the paintings by a Hopi Indian artist which Mr. O'Kane brought back from one of his studies of the tribe—research which later resulted in his two books on the Hopis.

Straight curtains at the living room windows are old gold, while the rug is a solid, soft green. Furnishings are a pleasant blend of antique and contemporary . . . an old pine table, a cheerfully flowered green sofa, cases full of records. On the long, narrow mantel over the fireplace Mrs. O'Kane has arranged a collection of old brass candlesticks. Starting at each end, the pairs march toward each other in order of descending size, ranging from very tall to tiniest miniature, too small, even, to hold the candle from a birthday cake. Hung on the wall above the mantel is a curious spring contrivance which was identified as a most antique doorbell, dating back to a time when no electric power was available for the whine of buzzers. From a pull outside the front door, a fine wire runs through the hall and the parlor to the little bell in what was once the kitchen where, if the visitor has exercised sufficient muscle, the bell rings.

The hallway into which the doorbell-pulling guest would enter is one of the most unusual and colorful entries in the state, made so by its brilliant and fascinating French wallpaper which was hung in 1809. Perhaps "hung" is inexact, for the paper came not in rolls but in oblongs which were carefully pasted together. The pattern is an exotic one of cathedral windows and ostrich plumes, and the colors are browns combined with the most brilliant of purple-blues. "I was told that the blue was made from ground-up cobalt," Mrs. O'Kane told us. "Of course, if it were in a big room, you couldn't stand it," she added, smiling. The colors are as brilliant today as they were 146 years ago. The front hall rug and the carpet which covers the narrow winding stairs are in matching shades of blue and brown and were handhooked by Mrs. O'Kane, who has, over the years, made most of the rugs in the house.

Blue is her favorite color, and it is blue which predominates in her own bedroom, once the parlor, to the left of the entrance hall. Woodwork is white, and the walls, which are papered, not painted, are the blue of a summertime sky. The bed was her great grandmother's. A most interesting article of furniture is the small desk. Designed for the captain's cabin on a whaling ship, it is entirely of teakwood and is built on the bias, one end being deeper through than the other, to fit as much work and storage space possible into a very limited corner.

Off the front hall on the right is the present "parlor" with its fine paneling, antique loveseat upholstered in blue velvet, great square grand piano, and antique fireplace fixtures and Christian doors. It seems a room from the past, its colors clear and unfaded, yet brought somehow intact into the middle of the twentieth century.

Opening the doors of a cabinet, Mr. O'Kane took out a cameo. It belonged, he said, to Grandmother Sarah Brandt, who married Henry van de Water in 1837. Carrying the cameo in his hand, he led us through the living room into the nearly square, nineteen-by-twenty-foot dining room. On the wall hang portraits of Henry and Sarah, and there, entirely recognizable on what must have been Sarah's best gown, is the cameo.

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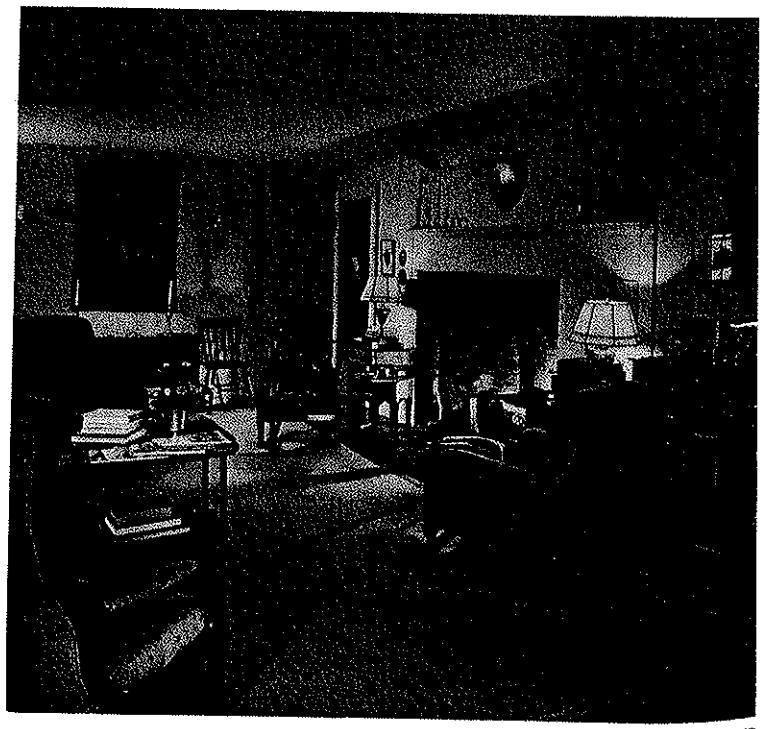
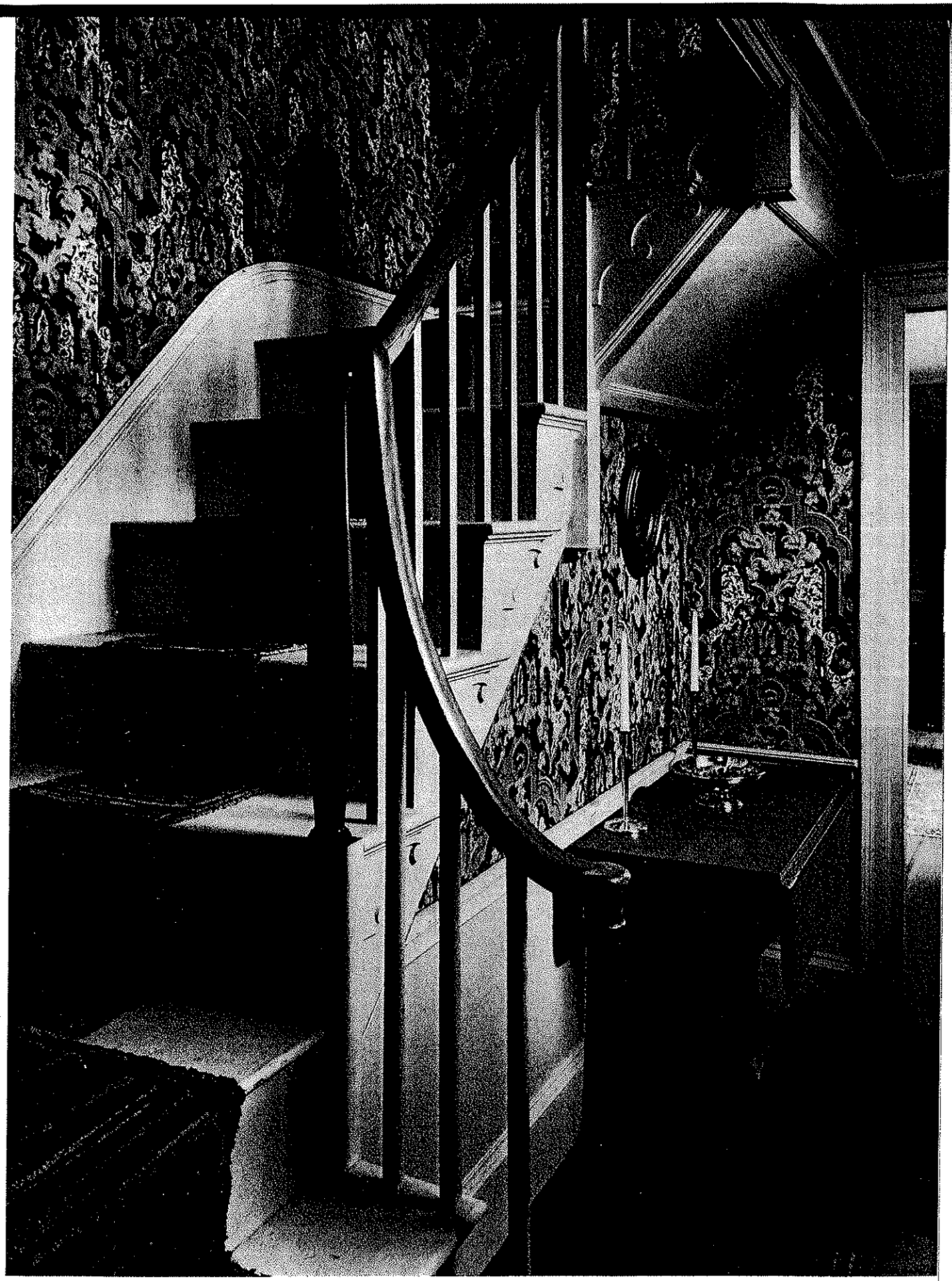
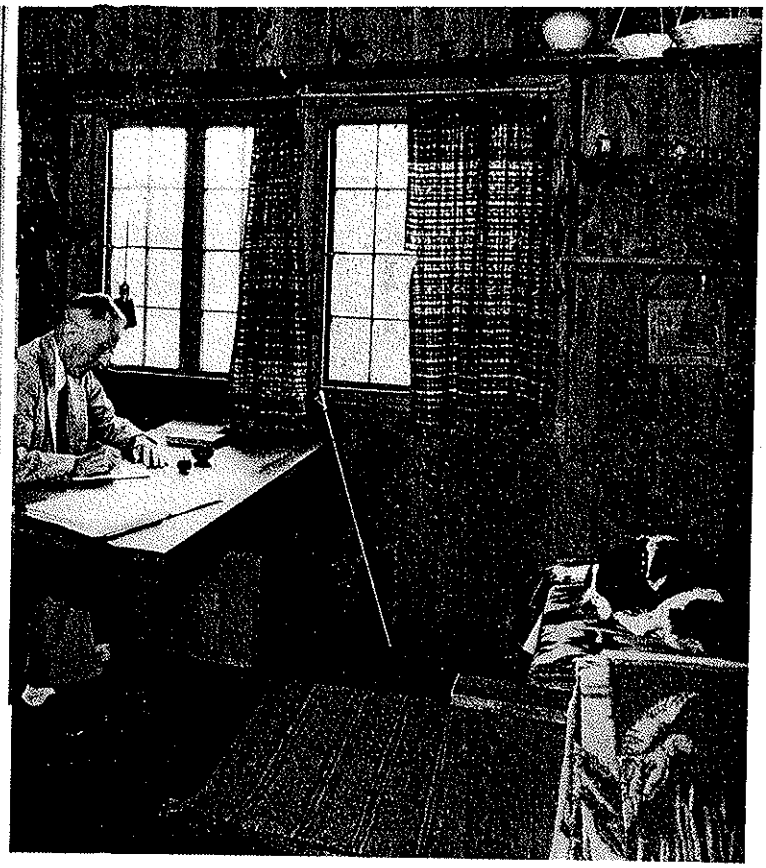


Originally the kitchen, living room has walk-in fireplace, which was bricked up when O'Kanes bought the house in 1923. They uncovered paneling—then painted red—under layers of wallpaper and plaster.



Antique wallpaper is nicely set off by delicate colonial balustrade. Colors of paper—brown and blue —are still bright as ever. Blue pigment was made from ground cobalt, Mrs. O'Kane says.



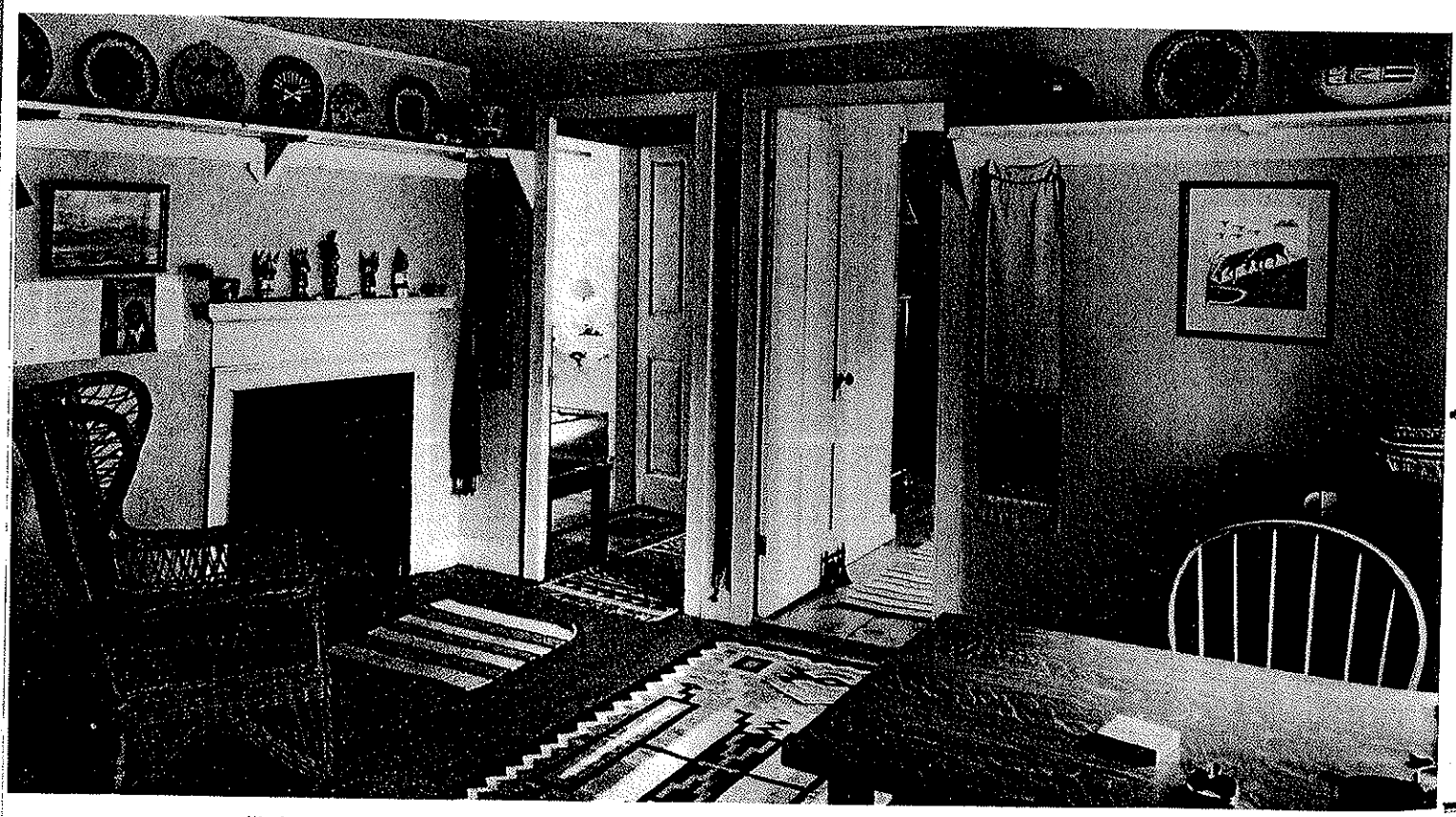
Mr. O'Kane at work in small, weather-proof shack away from house. Originally the property consisted of 350 acres, but the O'Kanes have given all but a few acres to UNH farms.

Underneath the portraits stretches what must be the most unusual buffet in the country. The O'Kanes found it in the attic and carefully transported it downstairs. A giant grain chest over twelve feet long, its sides, bottom, and cover are each made of just one board.

In the eight-foot tall china cupboard is displayed a wedding present given to the pictured Sarah and Henry, a complete set of Chelsea china. The chest beside the big fireplace was one in which Mr. O'Kane's father kept his tools, while the clock on the mantel is the one with which Mrs. O'Kane's grandparents set up housekeeping. A door beside the fireplace opens to show the narrow, steeply climbing stairs which lead to the garret above.

No door, however, opens from this attic into the second floor bedrooms, perhaps because the ell was added at a slightly later date. Once these rooms were none too many for the four O'Kane children. Now the children come back with their own children, and there are even great-grandchildren to fill the bedrooms of the old house. The main attic with its great beams and two-foot-wide floor boards has been fitted up as a dormitory to accommodate just such an overflow. A whole family reunion can have dinner together in the big dining room without crowding and sit afterward to talk in front of the living room fireplace.

For the O'Kanes such hospitality is the natural result of their genuine affection for their fellow human beings, yet as a writer and scholar Mr. O'Kane has occasional need for peace and solitude. His latest published book *The Cabin*—a delightful, easy-moving volume of woods notes—reflects this side of his personality. It is based on years of observations made at the O'Kanes' Wonalancet retreat, and he has another cabin on the grounds of his Durham home, where he retires to write.



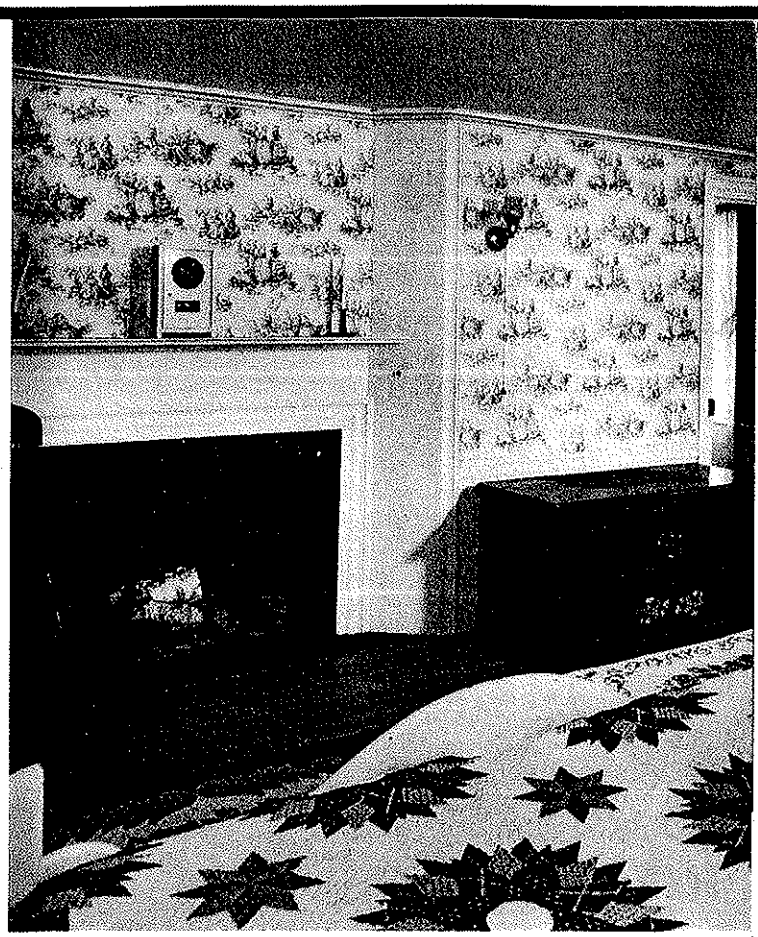
"Indian room" reflects Mr. O'Kane's interest in the Hopi tribe of Arizona. A photographer as well as a writer, Mr. O'Kane has made a series of excellent color studies of the Hopi people.

In addition to *The Cabin,* he has published eight volumes —two children's narratives, three books on mountains and mountain climbing, one in his professional field of entomology, and two on the Hopi Indians, on whose culture he is an expert. Together, they give an indication of the variety of his interests, but they do not tell the whole story.

Born and educated in Ohio—as was Mrs. O'Kane—he got into the Spanish-American War by falsifying his age, and his life since then has been packed with activities of all sorts. A number of years were spent in the field of journalism; he was a reporter, and for ten years he was circulation manager of *Woman's Home Companion.* He has explored Panama—before its days as a republic—Guatemala, Quebec, Labrador, and he knows the mesa and canyon country of Arizona as well as he knows New Hampshire.

The fact that he is a retired college professor and that he fought in the Spanish-American War would give one the impression that the O'Kanes are elderly. Nothing could be more false, for they are both vitally alive, enormously active, and, if anything, their scope of interests has broadened since his retirement. At the moment Mr. O'Kane is putting the finishing touches on a companion volume to *The Cabin,* and they are both looking forward to a coming trip back to Arizona where he will collect further material for another study of the Hopi Indians.

But Durham will remain their home as it has been for the past forty-five years. For no matter how much one may wander and explore, one needs a place to come back to—a corner of the earth that represents permanence, that establishes a basis for three-dimensional existence in what is rapidly becoming a four-dimensional world. If any home can do this, certainly it is the O'Kanes' substantial colonial farmhouse—itself a symbol of the substance of the Yankee way of life.



"Mariner's Compass" bedspread is showpiece of guest room. Made over 100 years ago for Mr. O'Kane's grandparents, it is all hand-worked and contains countless thousands of stitches.

Twelve-foot grain chest, found in the attic when O'Kanes bought house, makes an unusual buffet. Top, bottom, and sides are made of one board each. Portraits are of Mr. O'Kane's grandparents.