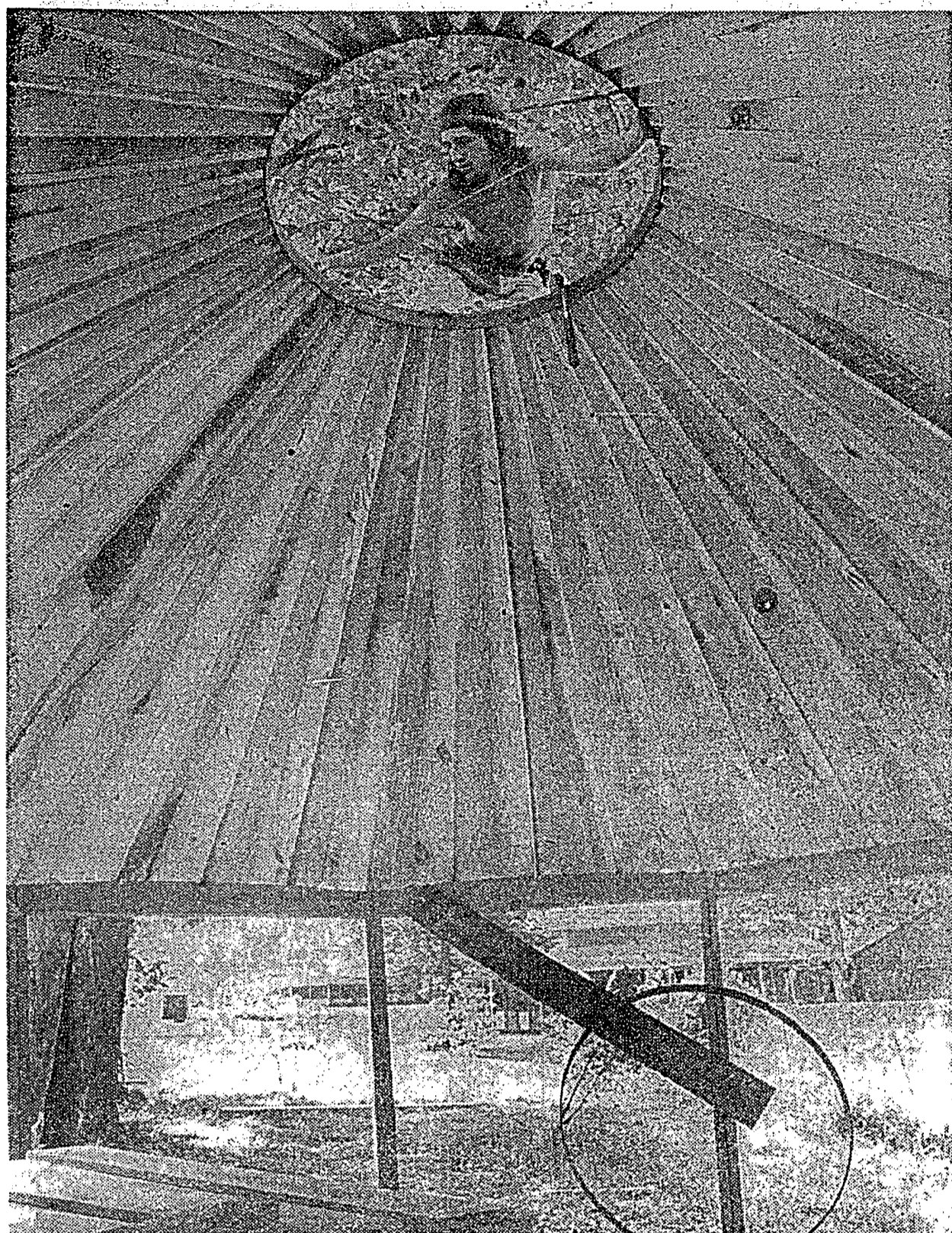


Security Is a Warm Yurt

By Sarah Booth Conroy
The Washington Post, Times Herald (1959-1973); Aug 20, 1972;
 ProQuest Historical Newspapers The Washington Post (1877 - 1993)
 pg. K1



By Matthew Lewis—The Washington Post
 David Raitt measures the skylight in a yurt where the compression ring can be seen around the opening. The ring and the tension band or cable hold the yurt together in the same way that steel bands hold a barrel.

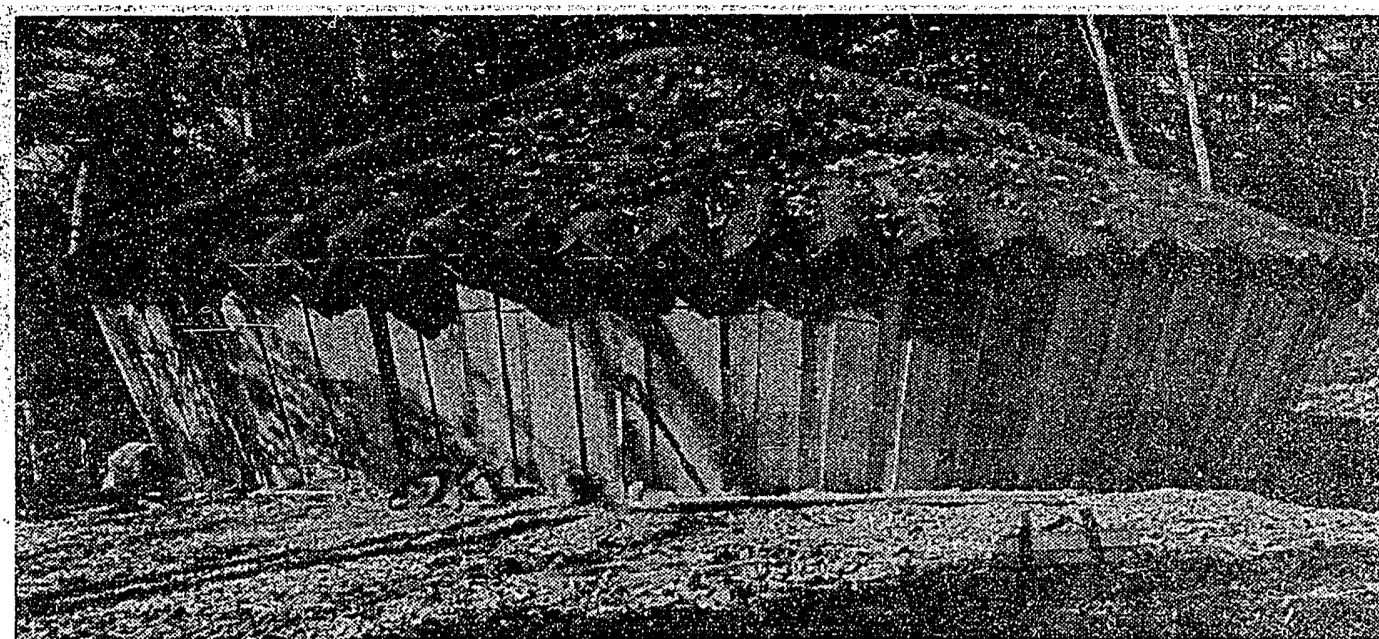


Photo by David Raitt

Yurts are usually roofed with sod over a layer of plastic. The first layer is put on with the grass side down, the second with the grass side up. This yurt was built in New Hampshire by a yurt commune.

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Form and Function

From the outside, a yurt looks like a troll's house. The eaves zigzag around the top of the wall. The roof is covered with sod and planted with flowers.

When you come into a yurt through the small, insignificant door, you feel its shelter, its safety. It feels secure for several reasons. There are no windows for your enemy to peer in. The structure is round and not very large, so you can see everywhere at once with the eye's wide-angle lens and know your enemy is not there. The walls slant outward as they go up, so you can lean against them for a long time without being tired.

At the point in time when the walls seem to be too confining, you discover the circle of light between wall and roof, and follow the slanting roof beams to their eye of glass, of light which opens the yurt to the sky and frees the mind to unlimited space.

"The yurt has spiritual space—height for the mind to fill," said Bruno Lefevre, who builds yurts.

Members of a yurt commune, with the help of several Washington yurt worshippers, are building six yurts at Glen Echo amusement park. When the last square foot of roof is sodded, the yurts will be used for craft demonstrations and sales. Four of the yurts are 16 feet in diameter. Two are 32-footers.

The yurt, one of the oldest forms of shelter, is the newest down-to-earth housing development. The structure steals its tension band or cable, its compression ring and its name from the Mongolian portable pole, felt and hide nomadic shelter. Actually, the principle has long been used in barrels in the West.

The college-age men who are building the yurts at Glen Echo are four of seven men and two women who live with a number of goats and a few other friendly beasts in a yurt commune (they'd rather call it a community) in Franklin, N.H. The goats pasture on the roof.

The yurt commune grew out of a school, built by its students three years ago, between Northfield and Franklin, N.H. William S. Coperthwaite, who is responsible for adapting the Mongolian yurt into a permanent house, taught the students how to build the yurt. When the school was disbanded at the end of the year, two of the students, David Raitt, 19, and Marc Hansen, 20, inherited the yurts.

"Since then, we have gathered about seven people—two girls—who are into working with their hands, who understand about living in the yurts," explained Raitt, sitting on the side of one of the partly finished structures at Glen Echo. The community hires out, from time to time, to build yurts in other places. They recently went to Medenhill, Miss., west of Jackson, to teach a housing cooperative how to build yurts. They also helped build yurts for another experimental school in Maine.

"We don't just build yurts," said Raitt. "We always teach other people how to do it, so know-how is passed on. It's folk knowledge."

When the community isn't building yurts, it makes wooden spoons and cooking utensils to sell at fairs. They do other things as well, including working leather, quilting, arc-welding, tree removal and such.

"Our yurts are very simple," said Raitt. "We don't have plumbing — we use chemical toilets and recycle wastes into compost for fertilizer. We use oil lamps for light. We heat with a wood stove."

The sod roofs, of two layers of grass, give good insulation.

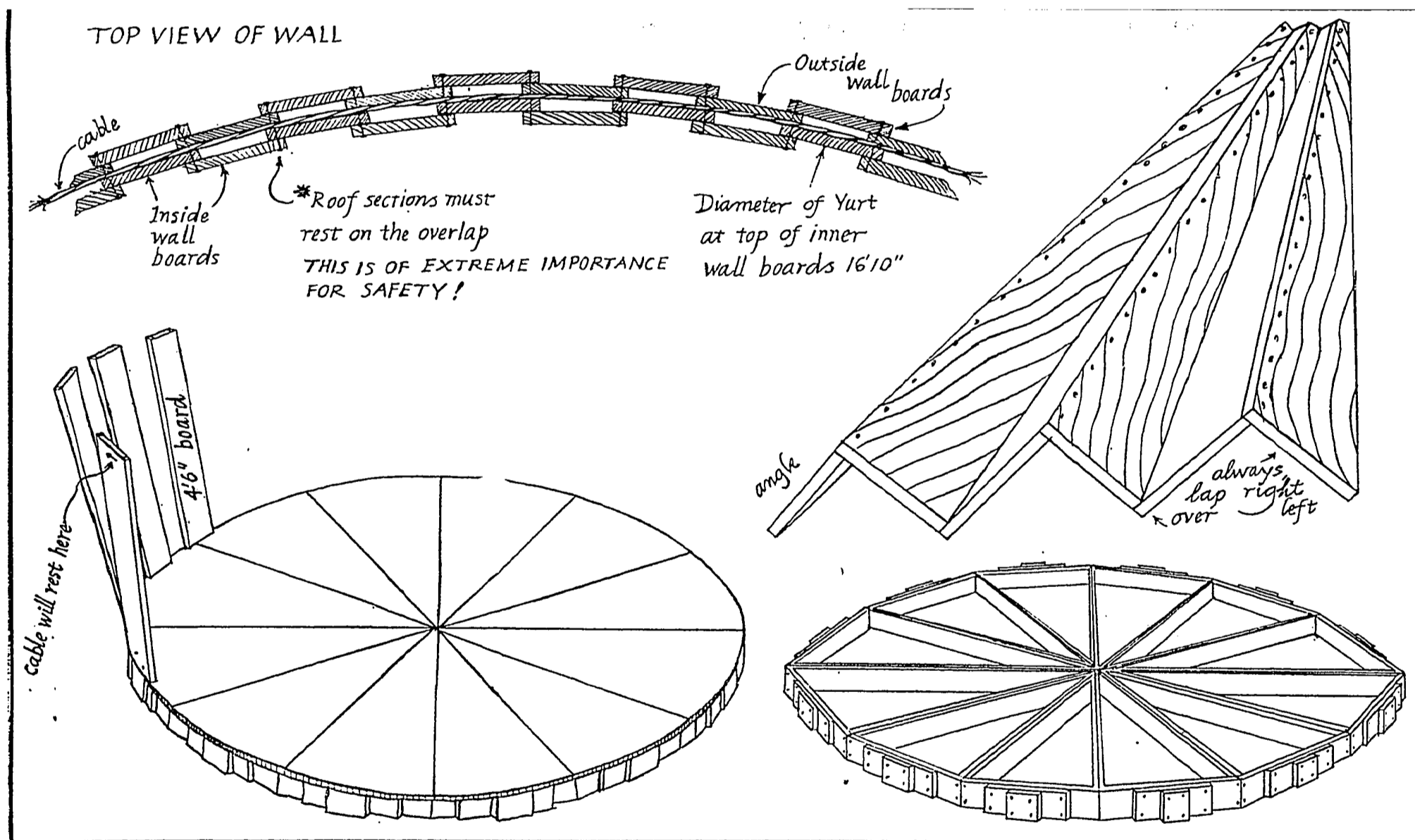
Raitt built all the furniture for his yurt, a necessity since ordinary furniture doesn't fit too well. "Everything has to be triangular. But once you get over the need for corners in a house, it works very well. After all, a circle encloses more space than a square."

A year ago the Department of the Interior planned a huge "humanisphere" on the Mall, which never came off. They commissioned the American Craft Council to find craftsmen to demonstrate their skills and to find shelters in which they would work. The council hired Yurts Design, a company owned by Coperthwaite.

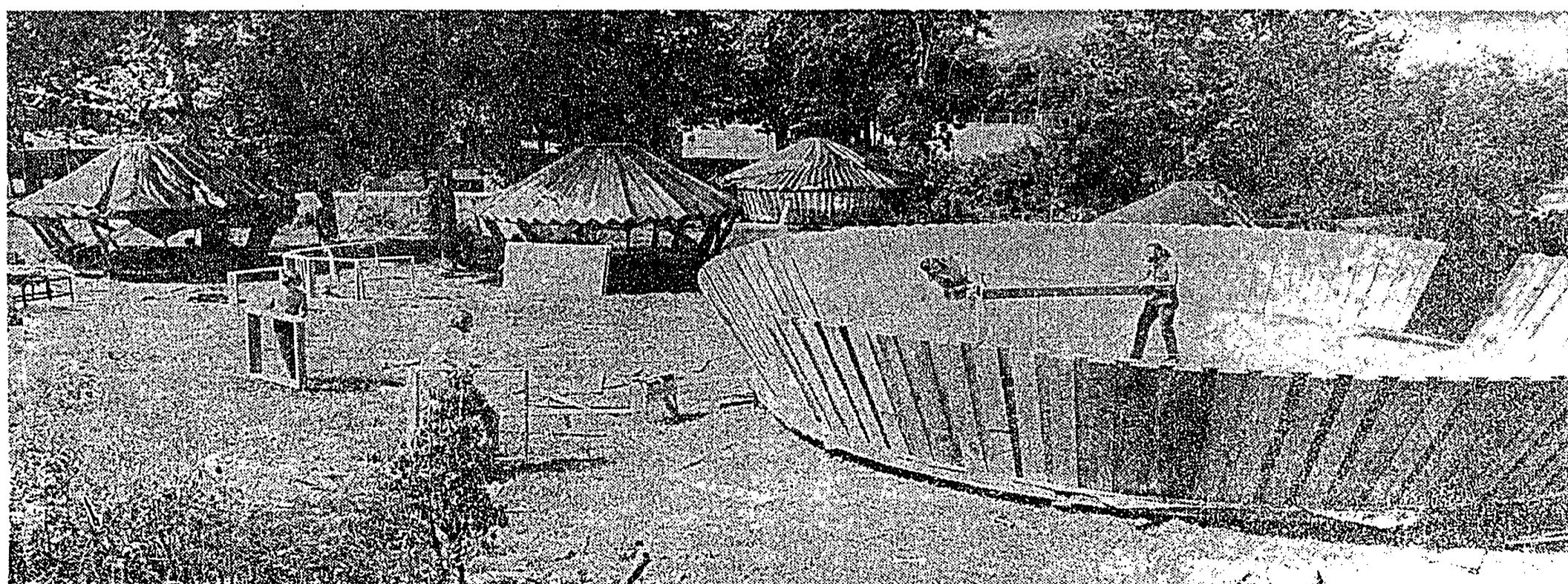
After humanisphere was deflated — the Department of the Interior doesn't explain what happened to it — Coperthwaite went on about the other projects of his Yurt Foundation.

In the meantime Raitt, industrial designer Lefevre and their crew had prefabricated (in Glen Echo's deserted Kiddyland) the six yurts. The parts were stored in Glen Echo for the year, with Raitt coming down every few weeks to worry about mold. Finally, after much sitting on people's desks, and threatening deterioration, Raitt convinced the Department of the Interior to put the yurts up at Glen Echo. Glen Echo, administered by the National Capital Parks Service, embarked this summer on an ambitious crafts demonstration project.

See YURT, K2, Col. 7



Sketches from William S. Coperthwaite's yurt instruction manual. The top drawing shows how the tension cable holds the wall together. Most yurt builders use a double cable of 3/8-inch guy wire discarded by utility companies, fastened with a turn buckle. The sketch at top right shows the roof structure. Bottom left, shows how the wall boards are fitted into the floor. Bottom right is a sketch of the floor support.



By Matthew Lewis—The Washington Post

In the foreground is one of two 32-foot yurts going up in Glen Echo park. Behind it are the 16-foot yurts.

Building a Yurt

YURT, From K1

Raitt and Lefevre group organized now as Synergic Design International, Inc., is currently finishing the structures. Lefevre, who evolved the system of yurt prefabrication from Coperthwaite's design has been commuting to Glen Echo from Tufts University. He is a teaching assistant at Tufts in a course in environmental design and planning.

"I am now trying to patent certain elements of the yurt design," said Lefevre. "Coperthwaite also has filed for patents on the barrel principle of the yurt.

"Raitt and his crew have rapped with me for hours about how they feel about yurts. They say they don't want to be capitalists and make a lot of money, they just want to build yurts and give them to people and teach people how to build their own. They don't want to work every day, but just

when they need to support their lifestyle.

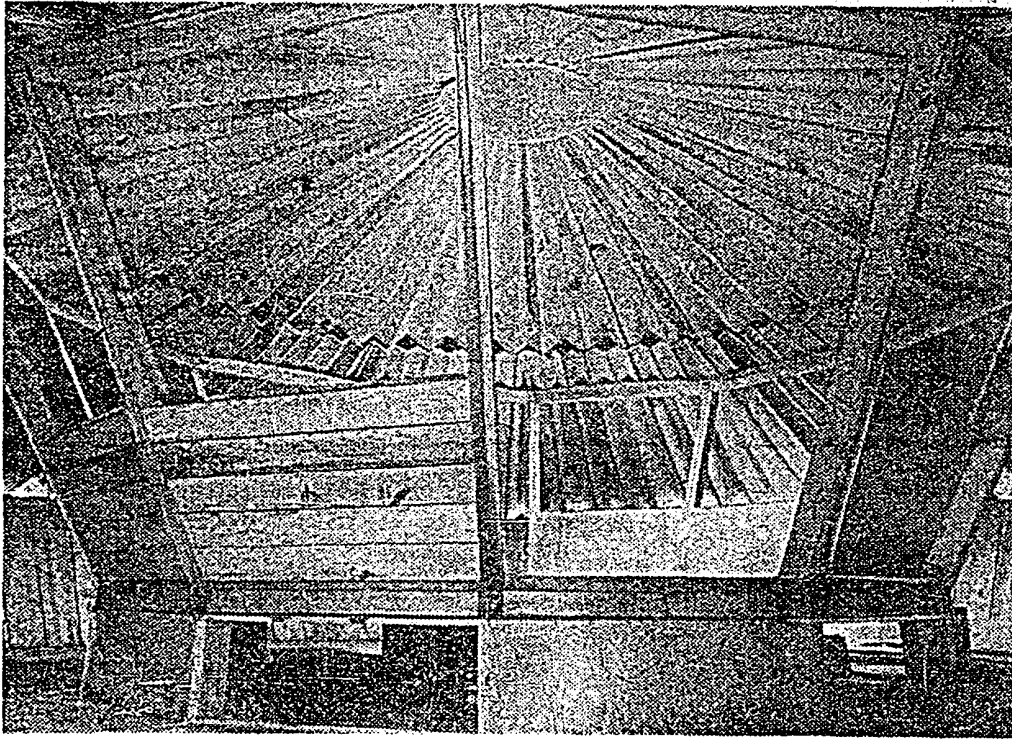
"I guess what I want to do is to see that the kids are not hassled, and to make it possible for them to work the way they want to."

"I would like to have a lot of yurt centers—in Washington, in Maine, all over. I would have several groups of people with Raitt's lifestyle, so if one would not like to work this week, I could send another. I would like everyone who really wants a yurt to be able to have one."

There is some speculation that the yurt may join the A-frame as a standard vacation house shape.

Until this millenium comes, Lefevre will answer inquiries at Synergic Design, International, 18 Bowdoin St., Cambridge, Mass. William S. Coperthwaite sells do-it-yourself plans for yurts by mail at Bucks Harbor, Maine, 04618.

Locally, Helikon Design Corp. makes a similar prefabricated vacation home.



By Matthew Lewis—The Washington Post

Interior of a yurt being built at Glen Echo to serve as a craft shop. Light comes from a skylight and from triangular Plexiglas sections around the edge of the roof.