

Alzheimer's Disease: This century's medical mystery

With hope, Dennings find a way to cope

There are no outward signs that this lovely Park home is any different from its ... there are only a few signs on the inside ... something is different. But those are

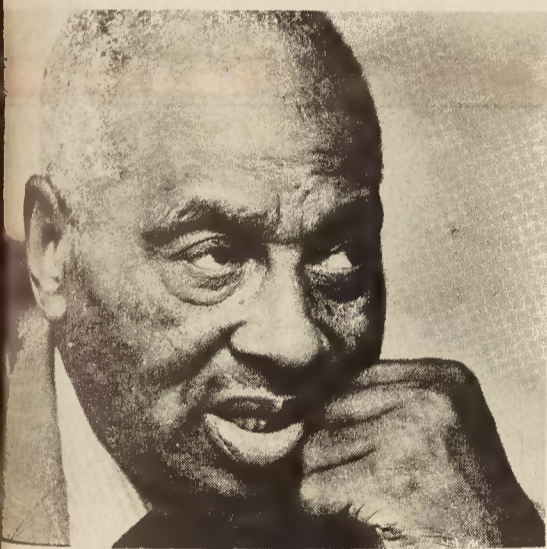
of dead flowers with a bright red bow ... Valentine's heart sits on a table near the ... greet visitors. On the table close to the ... a few red leaves hang on the dead stems ... Christmas poinsettia, and directly in front ... a fresh bunch of Easter flowers sits ... covered with a week's worth of dust. ... of a TV game show can be heard ... back room.

corner, not far from the couch, sits a ... with a picture of a lovely young lady, ... the smile of a high school graduate.

Mr. C. Denning doesn't remember getting ... the flowers, nor does she remember the ... she dusted. When asked about the ... graph on the bookcase, Mrs. Denning calls ... of her sister.

Mr. T. Denning reminds his wife, 67, that ... picture of the couple's only daughter, ... "Well, whatever. I get so confused," says ... Denning, nodding her head as if she ... bers when, in actuality, she doesn't.

Denning has Alzheimer's disease. ... three million other Americans, she has ... degenerative brain disorder that first ... a loss of memory, progresses with the ... speech and the ability to walk and results ... usually of pneumonia.



"It's the worst thing I have ever come in contact with. You can't explain it to anybody. If I had just one-half hour to discuss anything with her... I never will reach her anymore."

Alzheimer's disease strikes people of every ... and socio-economic group, and the ... of cases has expanded rapidly with the ... of the nation's elderly population.

According to an article in *Newsweek*, ... Alzheimer's disease has become "the disease of ... About 7 percent of the people ... in the United States are severely disabled ... claims the lives of more than 120,000 ... each year, including actress Rita ... and artist Norman Rockwell. It has ... the fourth leading cause of death among ... after heart disease, cancer and stroke.

Denning says he first discovered that ... was wrong with his wife in 1976. ... didn't know at first what it was," he says. ... she would write down everything. She ... extensive notes and repeated the same ... For instance, when she would give me a ... list, she would write eggs, can milk, go ... five or six items and then repeat the first ... I didn't think much of it at the time. ... went on for six to eight months. Finally, I ... doctor to see her."

After test after test, and still nobody ... determine what was wrong with his wife, ... Denning. ... they ruled everything out that was known," ... "Finally, they said it was Alzheimer's ... But they couldn't be sure. The only sure ... find out is a brain biopsy (an examina- ... brain tissue to determine if the disease is ... We didn't see the need of that. It's fine ... research. They don't know what causes it or ... don't know a treatment. So there is no ... put them through that."

Denning recently, says the *Newsweek* article, ... Alzheimer's disease was considered an exotic ... Only recently has medical science ... unravel the Alzheimer's riddle. ... Aloise Alzheimer, a German

neurologist, encountered a woman who showed all the signs of severe dementia -- memory loss, disorientation and hallucinations -- even though she was only 51. After her death, he examined her brain and discovered that part of it contained clumps of twisted nerve cell fibers that he called "neurofibrillary tangles."

Alzheimer first thought the disease existed only in the young, but in the 60s, research discovered the same disorder in the elderly and it became apparent that the disease was neither presenile nor rare.

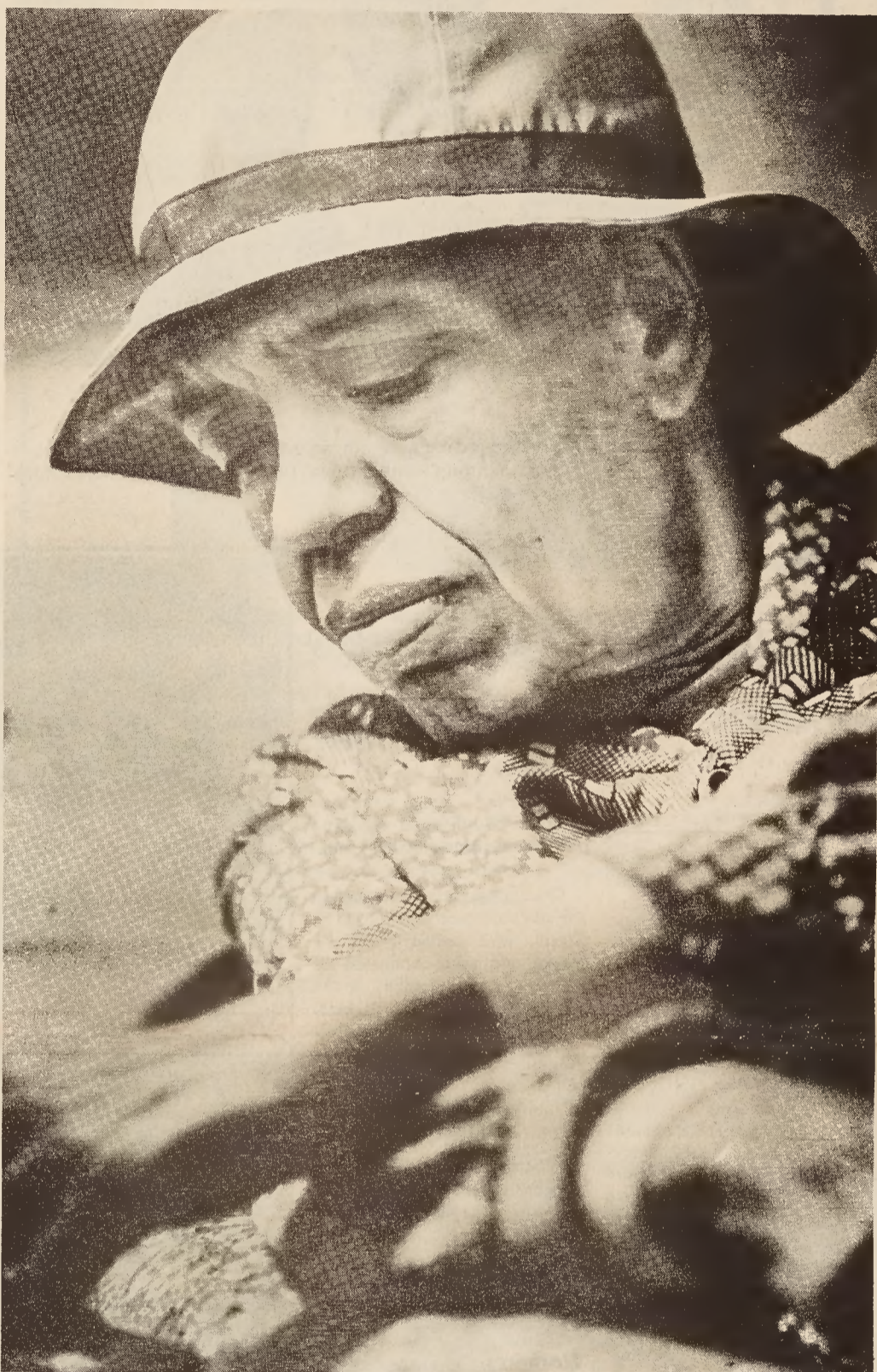
Alzheimer's disease usually occurs after age 65, but it can strike in the 40s. Early symptoms include trouble with language or personality changes, apraxia (difficulty in performing rote gestures, such as hair combing) and trouble making judgments, such as dressing for winter in midsummer.

Mrs. Denning is still in the early stages of the disease. She can't remember what she ate for breakfast or dinner or even if she is hungry. She can't remember members of her family or friends or how to care for herself.

But she remembers with ease things that happened in her early childhood, says her husband.

"Her memory of recent events is completely wiped out," he says. "All of us suffer some memory loss, but this is different. She's not trying to fool you; it's just completely wiped out of her mind. There is a loss of brain cells. There is no replacing it."

For example, Denning says his wife's brother often will come to visit her and stay for hours. Shortly after he leaves she will complain that her brother never comes to see her. She also went



That was before Denning felt comfortable enough to tell strangers about his wife's disease.

While attending one of his conference sessions, Denning left his wife with the wives of some of the other men attending the conference. When she tired of the group, she told them she was leaving and wandered off. When Denning came back for her and found her missing, he was devastated.

"It was just a nightmare," says Denning of the incident. "I got in a patrol car with an officer and rode all through the campus (the college campus where the conference was held), looking for her. Finally she went to a place and wanted to call me at home. Of course, she wasn't going to get an answer there. Then she

called her sister in Washington."

When they found Mrs. Denning hours later, she was in downtown Reno.

Denning, a quiet man who seems to use laughter and humor to cope with his pain, realizes that his wife won't be getting any better.

"She is going down, down, down," says Denning. "It's not getting any better. She used to be real stout, now she's thin. Lots of times she won't eat."

"It's the worst thing I have ever come in contact with. You can't explain it to anybody."

"If I had just one-half hour to discuss anything with her ... I never will reach her anymore. You don't know what it's like when both parties can't converse."

"Sometimes you think, why does it have to be this way? It's really a terrible experience. But a lot are in worse shape (than Mrs. Denning)."

Both Mr. and Mrs. Denning belong to a local Alzheimer's support group. Those attending the meetings are in various stages of the disease. Not only has Denning learned a lot about the disease by joining the group, but he also has learned what to expect as his wife's disease progresses.

"You try to accept it," says Denning when asked if he can accept the future. "But it's hard to do."

Denning says he would advise anybody who has a family member with Alzheimer's disease to accept it.

"Don't get discouraged because there is no

Please see page B14



Story by Robin Adams

Photos by James Parker

Above, Mrs. Dennings sits quietly by herself; below, the two pose for a family photograph.