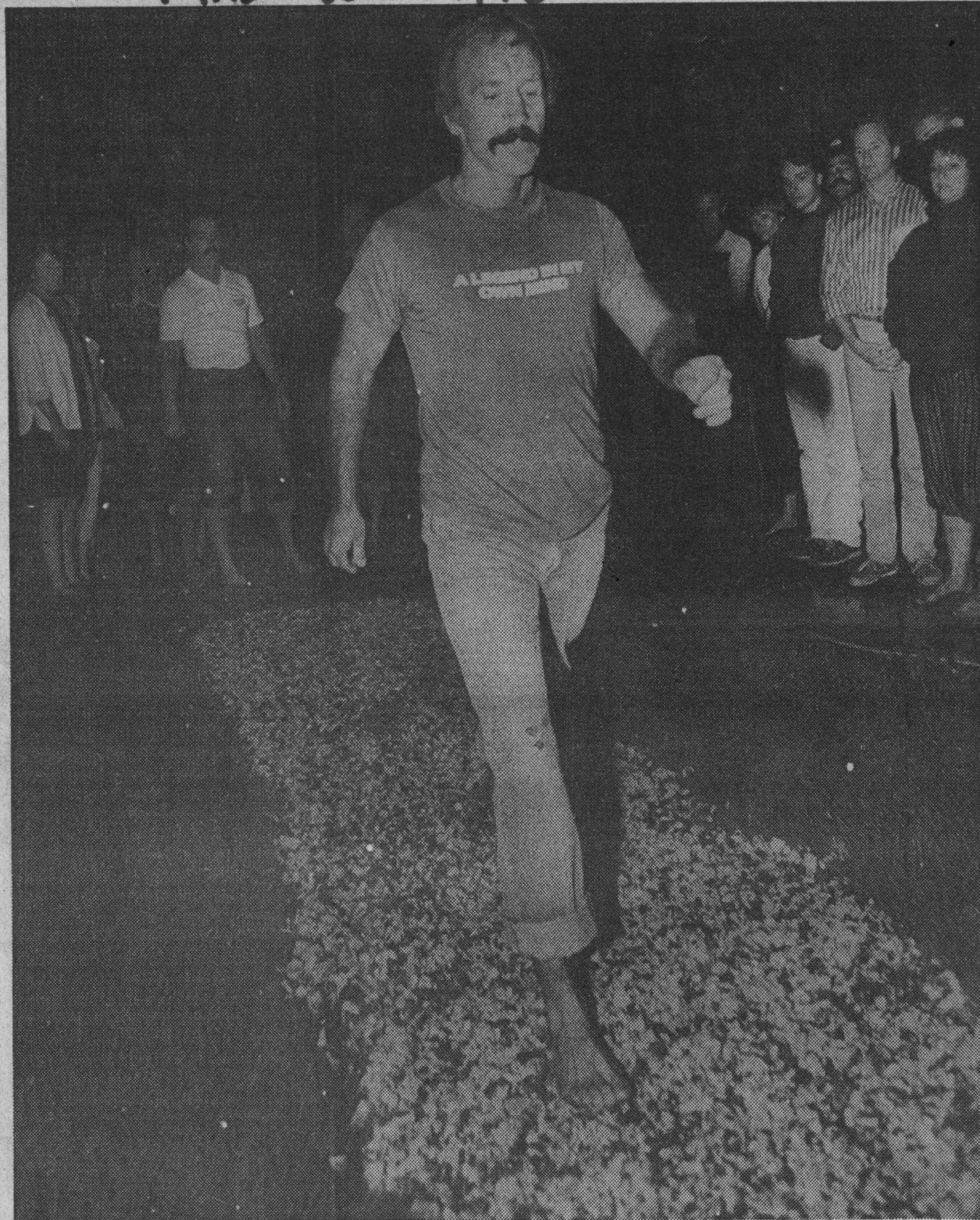


# Reprogramming human behavior

FIRE WALKING



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

## It's more than just playing with fire

7-1-84  
By DON MILLER  
Sentinel Staff Writer

FELTON — "Grandfather fire, may I walk?"

On a dark, moonless night lit only by the glowing coals from a blazing fire, a group of 70 or so middle-class people, ranging in age from mid-20s to 60s, stand upright, eyes closed, hands outstretched in a trance-like state and silently ask themselves that very question.

*Grandfather fire, may I walk?*

John Grinder stands alone at the outer edge of the group. Grinder has been leading the group to the fire's edge for three and a half hours. Now it's time for the show.

"Thank the response for the energy," Grinder says softly. The fire licks the edges of the pit which encloses it. "Thank it ... ask it to come again ..."

The people who are standing have come to Mt. Cross, off Highway 9 between Felton and Ben Lomond, to experience fire walking. By night's end, many will have done just that — walked on a bed of glowing embers spread out on a patch of turf, 15 feet long, four feet wide.

Grinder is co-founder of a therapeutic technique called "Neuro-Linguistic Programming" (NLP for short); a rapidly growing methodology incorporating communication skills and hypnosis. Grinder and Richard Bandler developed the technique at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in the 1970s. Grinder was a well-respected linguist at UCSC from 1971 to 1977. Bandler, who is no longer associated with the movement, was trained in psychotherapy.

Grinder and Bandler began research into what they termed "patterns of excellence" in the methods of outstanding psychotherapists. They also studied with psychiatrist Milton Erickson, who, before his death in 1980, spent a half century developing a unique style of hypnosis.

Neuro-linguistic programmers seek to establish rapport with "clients" through deciphering a series of subtle, unconscious, signals. An NLP therapist, for

instance, might take on the posture, the rhythms of breathing, the facial expressions of the person before him.

Grinder and Bandler felt these processes could be used to establish trust between therapist and client — and could provide access to a subject's inner thoughts and decisions. Ultimately, NLP could influence the client's behavior.

Having steeped themselves within the accumulated wisdom of renowned psychotherapists — family therapist Virginia Satir, Gestalt's founder Fritz Perls, and anthropologist Gregory Bateson — Grinder and Bandler applied their techniques to professional fields such as law, medicine and business. They wrote several books explaining NLP. The money rolled in, as they began charging up to \$100 an hour to train novitiates in the discipline.

In recent years, Grinder has carried the NLP banner directly to the belly of the beast — the melting pot of the marketplace. He has set up training seminars which enable graduates to open NLP "centers" and further spread the gospel.

An NLP graduate named Alan Dampsey is opening a center in Aptos. Dampsey recently came to Santa Cruz County from New York City.

And what does fire walking have to do with all this?

Grinder says he learned the technique from an NLP student named Tony Robbins last year. Robbins has since become something of a firewalking superstar in Southern California.

The group which has gathered at Mt. Cross, people from all over California and a few from out of state, listen intently as Grinder takes them on a metaphorical journey into the meaning of fire.

Fire walking, with all its seemingly physical impossibilities, has been practiced in many parts of the world throughout recorded history. In Singapore, fire walking climaxes an annual festival at a Hindu temple. The festival honors a goddess who is thought to grant the petitions of penitents. Many people are badly

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John Grinder, co-developer of Neuro-Linguistic programming, walks on hot coals.



# Reprogramming human behavior

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burned, but such injuries are thought to show the true miraculous nature of a successful navigation of the burning coals.

How can anyone, faithful or not, remain unscorched by the 600-1,200 degree embers? A 1977 article in Scientific American speculated that firewalkers' feet are protected by the "Leidenfrost point," the same effect that makes drops of water dance on a skillet.

Water, however, is not quite the same as human flesh. So what allows people to walk on fire?

Many scientists and students of esoteric healing techniques agree it is some power of the mind that protects the firewalkers, some method of releasing the full abilities of the brain to heal and protect.

Proponents of NLP feel certain the answer lies within their hard-to-define discipline.

Outside, two attendants tend the fire, tossing split pieces of fir on the burning pyre. Inside, Grinder patiently takes his eager audience through the steps which, depending on a mutual decision of Grinder and walker, will have them walking across coals in a matter of hours.

About half the group has had some previous NLP training. Everyone has paid \$125.

In addition, everyone here has signed a

release form absolving Grinder, Dampsey and the NLP Center from any legal responsibility if they should be burned or injured by the fire walk.

Grinder is comparing fire walking to mountain climbing, saying, "They both need a tremendous amount of focus."

"It's an invitation from the universe to achieve a certain congruence. The point tonight is to find the ally within you which allows you to make the decision to walk or not to walk," says Grinder.

After one older man tells him he has come because he has "faith" in Grinder, Grinder replies, "Let us be absolutely explicit about this — the judgment as to whether you should walk is yours alone."

Grinder talks about fire's purifying effects, how a fire restores a forest, clearing underbrush, renewing the soil.

And then it is time to go outside, to the fire.

Grinder is seated alone on the steps of a small plywood stage, two bare light bulbs burning dimly behind him. The would-be firewalkers surround him, seated on a series of benches that ascend stadium-like from the fire which burns in a circle in the middle of the outdoor amphitheatre.

Grinder's words are spoken softly, the long pauses in between punctuated only by the licking of the flames. "I think fire hypnosis must be one of the oldest forms of hypnosis," he is saying.

"The fire on the outside can call the fire within."

All eyes, shadowed in the spidery darkness, point into the fire. "This can be a sacred occasion," says Grinder, soothing, soft ... "The act we're doing has always been spiritual. Fire is the crucible ..."

After about 20 minutes, Grinder asks the group to discuss their "internal experiences" of deciding whether to walk or not to walk.

His listeners do as they're told, splitting up into groups of two to "listen carefully." In one such discussion, a woman says, "If I pay attention to my body, it's going to give me unmistakable signals. But I won't know until I'm in front of the fire."

The two attendants, Ted Buffington and John Passanante, both from Los Angeles, remove some of the hot coals from the pyre and take them by wheelbarrow to a strip of turf behind the amphitheatre. As people finish walking through the fire, Grinder says, they must remember to wipe their feet on the turf to make certain no embers are still attached to their feet as they come out of their "state."

He asks them to walk the fire three times in their minds.

A long silence ensues. A stream gurgles somewhere off in a canyon. A slight breeze rustles the redwoods. A dog barks. The fire continues to blaze ...

When the process is completed, Grinder gives the audience a "technical strategy" for fire walking. This includes keeping one's eyes up and focused externally (not looking into the coals); repeating a mantra to "stabilize your internal state" (Grinder suggests the words "cool moss"); and breathing deeply, adopting a "style" of walking (rapidly, or a slow shuffle through the flames ...).

Again Grinder has them practice, internally, the walk. Several people stand, at rigid attention, eyes closed. Grinder then poses the "Grandfather fire" question, a device, he has said, which allows each individual to gain personal permission to fire walk.

Buffington is still wheeling coals from the fire pit. He stops for a moment and whispers, "The whole concept is an exercise in letting go. Their body will do whatever it takes to protect them. They have to go inside to realize how powerful they are."

The experienced walkers go first — Grinder, Buffington, Passanante and Dampsey all stride confidently across the coals. The lightbulbs have been extinguished; the only light in the darkness is the red glow of the pulsating coals.

Grinder stands at the head of the line as people gather shoeless, pant legs rolled up, at the front of the fire bed. He speaks softly to each walker, asking them about their internal state. Depending upon their response, he decides whether to allow them to walk.

Most of those who've sat through the three and a half hours of preparation have made their decision — they want to walk on the fire. And they do.

When they complete the walk — some bouncing quickly in two or three jumps, others striding purposefully in six or seven steps — they are greeted on the other side by Buffington and Passanante, who tell

them to wipe their feet and to think of their favorite color.

Most get hugs or kisses. "You can do anything," says Buffington to many of the firewalkers.

One woman goes scurrying across the coals. "Aye — aye — aye," she yells in pain. *You can do anything.*

Another woman crosses carrying her purse. The woman who had been yelling in pain is off by herself. "My feet hurt," she says. "It was scary as hell." She's from La Selva Beach and works as a dancer. She hobbles off into the darkness.

Jerald Anderson from San Francisco has just completed his walk and is sitting down, massaging his feet. "It felt a little hot at the end," he says. "I lost my concentration. I'm glad I did it. I didn't have to do it. It's a final proof." Anderson says he's had extensive NLP training.

Paula Frye had come down from San

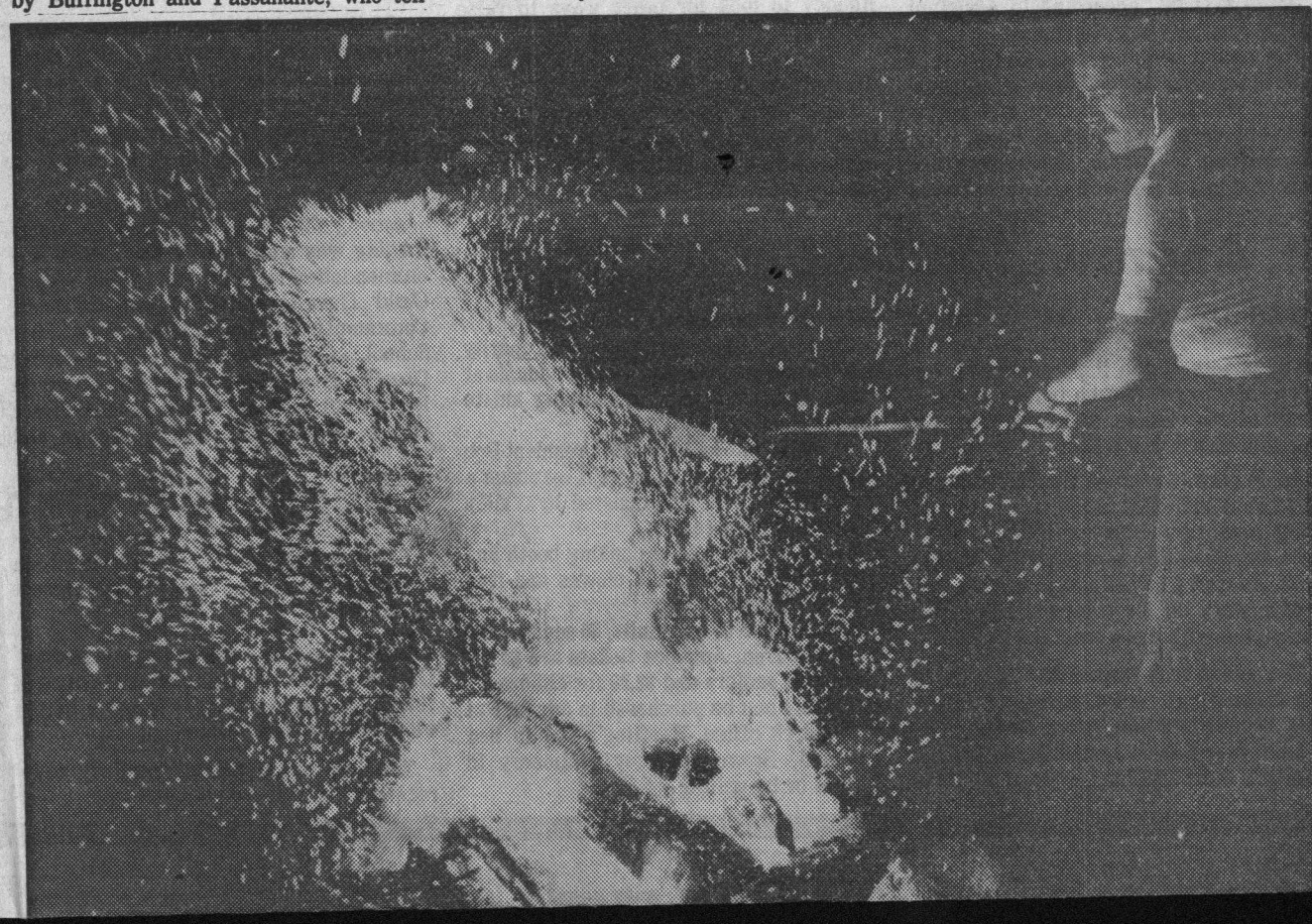
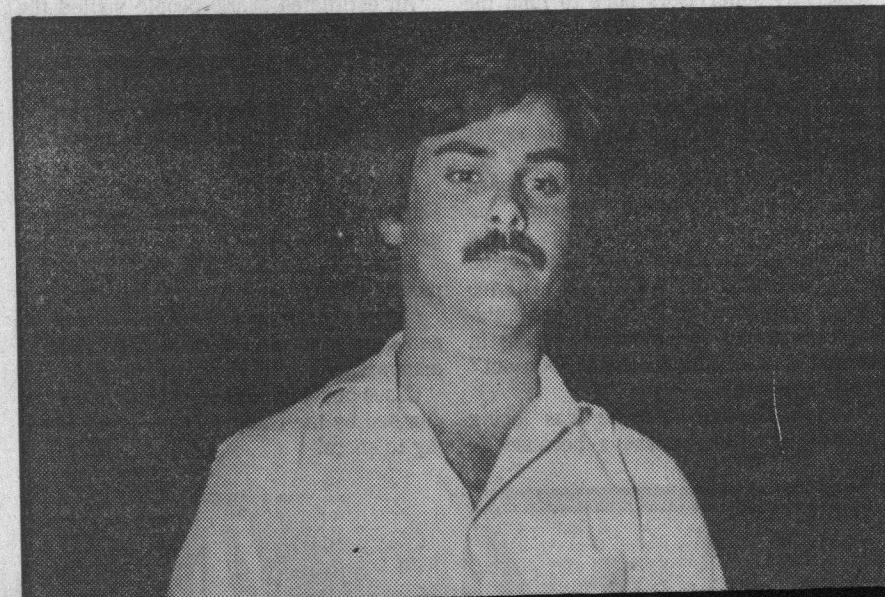
Francisco with Anderson, where they were attending an NLP workshop.

"About halfway through," she says, "I thought, 'It's kinda warm.'"

"I didn't expect it to be hot," says a Seattle man, Carl Allen. His left foot hurts, he says. "I broke my state. It was nothing at the beginning. About three-quarters of the way I came down on my left foot. It was God damn hot. It surprised me." He points to the blisters on his feet.

It is near midnight. Fresh coals are brought in, the fire glows again. A few people are still lined up, standing patiently, eyes closed as Grinder checks their state and pronounces the benediction. Someone is laughing, one woman is weeping with joy. From the darkness come the words *I can do anything.*

**MONDAY: A look at Neuro-linguistic Programming; its founders, and the ethical and moral questions involved.**







John Passanante concentrates while hot-footing across embers

the fire pit. He stops for a moment and whispers, "The whole concept is an exercise in letting go. Their body will do whatever it takes to protect them. They have to go inside to realize how powerful they are."

He says he's walked upon fire over 200 times. Then he leans in and says, "Would you like to walk? I can put you in the state very quickly."

There is no time to answer. The sacred coals are ready and the fire walk is to begin.

## Did the firewalkers burn feet walking on coals?

As a follow-up to last weekend's fire walk seminar at Mt. Cross, three persons were contacted several days later and asked their reaction to the experience.

Paula Frye and Jerald Anderson, both of whom said they had blistered their feet walking across the hot coals, had come down to the fire walk from San Francisco where they were attending an NLP workshop.

Frye, who works as an NLP trainer and conducts stop-smoking workshops, said, "It was great. What I got out of it was a real sense of mind over body. I did get one blister but in 24 hours it was gone."

"It gave me a sense I never have to be sick in my life. The implications are beyond my comprehension."

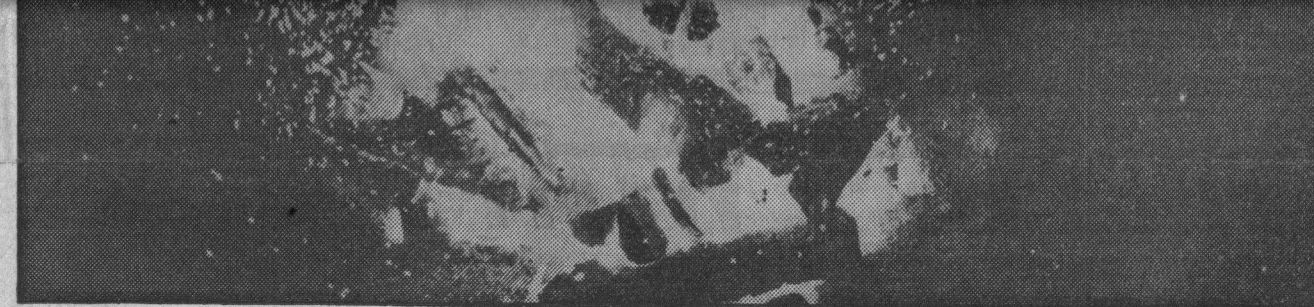
Anderson is a medical technologist; he also is an NLP practitioner.

"I forgot to follow instructions all the way through and I got burned. I went in and talked to my body and said, 'What the heck is this?' The next day I got up and everything was fine. A couple of red spots but no blisters."

Anderson said he considered John Grinder "a master hypnotist," and that he remembered nothing after stepping out onto the coals.

"I ignored Grinder," Anderson said. "I knew he could make a mistake. It was the first time I'd met the man. I remember the lady in front of me deciding she didn't want to go. I was waiting for her to step aside. I checked my congruency and stepped out."

T. Michael Walker, who teaches English at Cabrillo College, said he walked over the coals three times. He had never taken any NLP training before.



Getting the fire just right

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

"My feet feel great," Walker said. He said he did get a blister on the inside of his left foot but by the next day it had disappeared.

"The first time I walked, I did it like he (Grinder) said. The second, I did it without looking at the coals. The third

time, I looked at them directly.

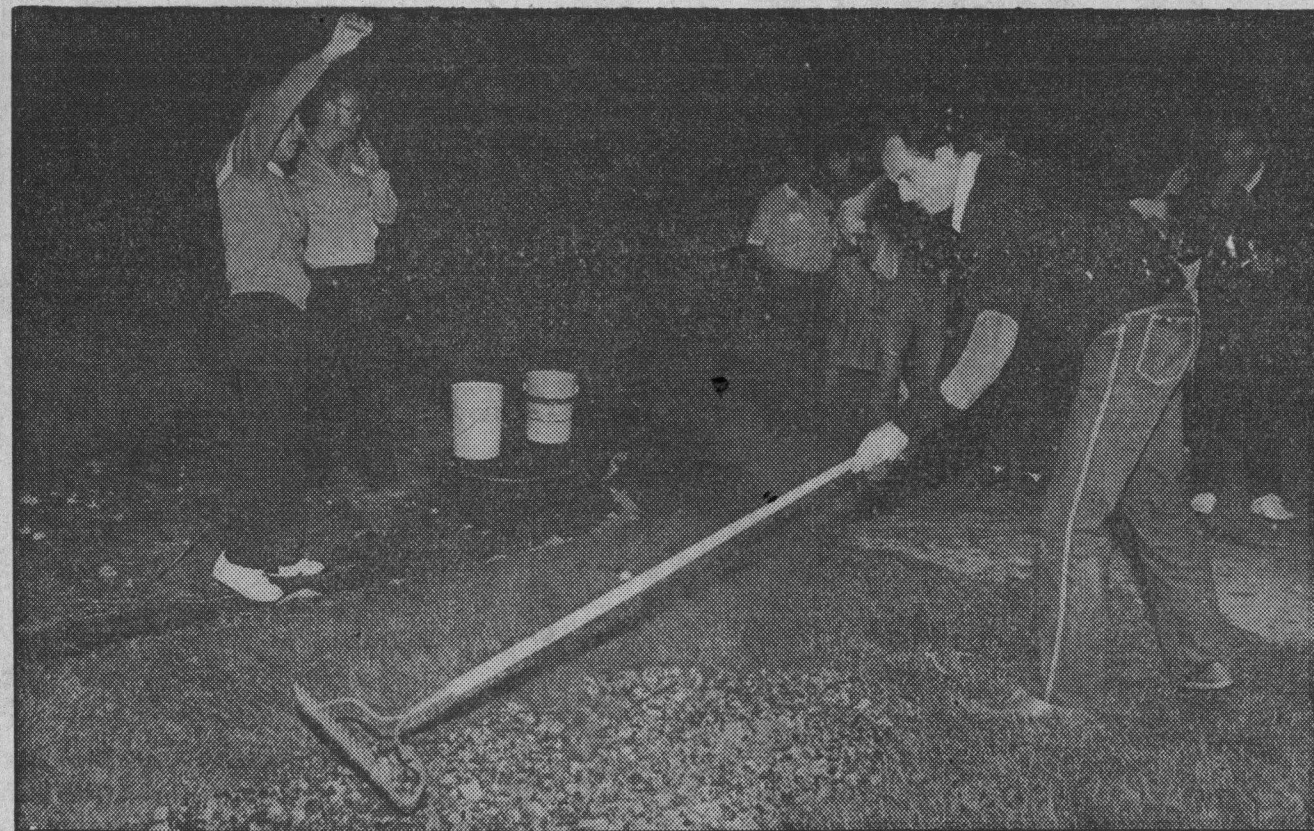
"I was impressed. I don't care about NLP but I carried that state with me the next three days."

Walker said he felt Grinder acted "with integrity. He's charismatic, witty and has a scintillating intellect. You can misuse

anything. There are always those people — the true believers."

"Fire walking is just one more way of searching. It's part of the transformation of consciousness that's happening at the moment. A lot of folks are into that."

By DON MILLER



Getting the hot coals ready for walking.