

Faith, Politics, and Community at the Dickeyville Grotto

The southwestern corner of Wisconsin is a beautiful series of rolling hills, hidden valleys, rocky bluffs, rivers, and caves, all part of Wisconsin's "driftless region" not flattened by glaciation. Bordered by the Mississippi River, this former lead-mining region is today farmland and cheese-making country.

In Dickeyville, one of the area's small towns, is Holy Ghost parish, the home of a remarkable piece of folk architecture. Situated between the rectory, church, and cemetery is the Dickeyville Grotto, a structure so amazing that I have seen unsuspecting drivers come to a full halt in the middle of the road to gape. What stops them short is a 15-foot-tall false cave, decoratively covered with colored stone and glass, dedicated to Mary the mother of Jesus, to God and country.

Although the name implies a singular structure, the Dickeyville Grotto is actually a series of grottos and shrines. It includes the grotto dedicated to the Blessed Mother, the structure seen from Highway 61; a shrine dedicated to Christ the King; a shrine to the Sacred Heart of Jesus; and a Eucharistic Altar in the parish cemetery, formerly used for annual outdoor Corpus Christi processions. The large Patriotic Shrine depicts the

history and love of country represented by Columbus, Washington, and Lincoln. All of these creations display decorative embellished cement ornamentation, achieved by placing patterns of colorful materials in the concrete when it is still damp: shells, stones, tiles, glass, petrified moss or wood, geodes and gems. Iron railings with the same distinctive decorations border the walkways between the different shrines and grottos, unifying these separate structures.

All roadside shrines in Wisconsin reflect their time. In the 19th century, illness was a major concern. In the northeastern part of the state, French-speaking Belgian settlers built small chapels in thanksgiving for the recovery of an ill family member. Today in Kewaunee County, one can visit these chapels, no longer used for community prayer but proudly maintained as part of local

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Like the Dickeyville Grotto, the Holy Family Grotto in St. Joseph, with its embedded cement flags, was built in the 1920s to represent Catholic allegiance to both God and country. Photo by Anne Pryor

Walloon heritage.

On Highway B in the rich farmland of central Wisconsin, a sign reading "Welcome to Visit Our Chapel" invites the traveler to enter a three-sided structure. A motion detector triggers a taped message explaining that the Memorial Expellee Chapel, built in 1995, is dedicated to beloved relatives who were slain or expelled from the Sudetenland due to the Yalta and Potsdam agreements.

At least two embedded cement grottos in Wisconsin, the Holy Family Grotto in St. Joseph and the Dickeyville Grotto, reflect American religious politics in the 1920s. Until the election of John Kennedy as the United States' first Catholic president, the patriotism of Roman Catholics was often questioned due to misunder-

standings about their allegiance to the pope (Stone and Zanzi 1993). To show that Catholics could love both church and country, Fr. Mathius Wernerus, the Dickeyville Grotto's builder, created two stone pillars on either side of the main grotto. In colorful tile and stone, one pillar depicts the U.S. flag and spells "Patriotism"; the other shows the papal flag and spells "Religion."

While the Dickeyville Grotto began as the story of 1920s Catholic patriotism, today it speaks more of community pride in local history. When Fr. Wernerus was the pastor of Holy Ghost parish, he relied on the devoted volunteer labors and donations of his parishioners, young and old, to help him build his masterpiece. In the care and management of the grotto today, current pastors do much the same. The results are strong personal connections to the grotto held by all ages of parishioners. Fr. Jim Gunn, pastor of Holy Ghost parish from 1995 to 1997, explained, "People have the pride, so it's not something that somebody else did but it's something that 'I had a hand in' as well."

Holy Ghost parishioners participate in the grotto's upkeep in various ways. A parish Grotto Committee has been successful for many years in keeping the grotto financially sound. One source of income is the donations made by the 40,000–60,000 visitors who tour the grotto each year. Another is the income from sales at the grotto's gift shop. Because the grotto is run as a nonprofit organization, any excess funds generated go to charity work or for special needs in the parish or town. As Fr. Gunn explained, "The grotto tries to pour back into the community as much as possible."

By 1995, the grotto needed extensive restoration. Cement and embedded stones were coming loose and falling out, iron railings were falling apart, and decades of weathering had compromised



The Dickeyville Grotto is actually a series of shrines consisting of gardens, fountains, and sculptures made of stone and embellished cement. Photo by Anne Pryor

the beauty of the shrines. Despite the general financial health of the grotto, such a large project was beyond its means. As grotto manager Marge Timmerman recalled, "We thought, 'Where is the money going to come from for all this repair?' And then out of the blue comes this man and he says, 'I feel

God led me to this place. I'd like to help restore this grotto.'"

This local hero had been visiting his daughter, a student at nearby UW–Platteville, when he happened upon the grotto. A devout Christian, he explained to Timmerman, "God has been so good

to me and my construction business that I feel he led me here to do this to thank him." The Grotto Committee accepted his offer of a crew to lead the restoration and paid for only the materials. Parish members eagerly participated in the project, donating funds, learning techniques, replacing missing stones, and cleaning years of discoloration off the shrines. Excitement was so high and so many people volunteered that Timmerman recalled, "Sometimes there was almost too much help."

When Fr. Wernerus constructed the grotto, he collected many natural materials from local caves and fields, solicited manufactured materials from Midwestern industries, and encouraged his parishioners to donate common household objects, all of which he used to decorate the cement. Parishioners were happy to participate in this way, even though material wealth was scarce in those post-Depression years.

During the restoration, Fr. Gunn put a box outside his rectory door for parishioners to donate items just as their 1920s counterparts had done. Even though the grotto's storage shed was filled with materials left over from Wernerus's own collection, Gunn solicited these new donations so that the current generation of parishioners could later point with pride to what they or their family had contributed.

Additionally, Fr. Gunn made sure to include the children of the parish in the restoration process, just as Wernerus had done. Current parish elders recall work-

ing with Fr. Wernerus when they were youths. Henrietta Hauber washed rocks and helped to "put things together." Esther Berning placed glass shards in the wet cement. Henry Mellsen helped carry completed sections out from the rectory basement in the spring. Today's parish children participated in the restoration by placing stones and shells in the iron railings' damp cement.

With the restoration completed by 1997, the grotto's structures are in fine physical shape and will not need such massive attention for a long time to come. An integral part of the grotto that does annually require a great deal of attention, however, is the gardens. Filling the space around and between the different shrines in the grotto, the gardens give the grotto its park-like essence and were an important part of Fr. Wernerus's overall design. Parishioner Delia Schroeder organizes each year's group of gardeners, with an individual or family taking one of the gardens to design, plant, weed, and maintain. Using a mix of annuals, perennials, and statuary, they proudly add to the grotto's beauty and tranquility. These volunteers tell of working in the gardens from before sunrise to after sundown. A local joke about their diligence says that they're out there waiting for a weed to come up just so they can pull it.

The last area of the Grotto Committee's responsibilities is planning for the future. Many parishioners talk of expanding the grotto by building another shrine, possibly in honor of Our Lady of Fatima or the Right to Life movement. Such discussions are the source of debate about how to approach the grotto's management: is

the grotto one man's masterpiece that should be maintained as is and not changed, or is the grotto a community creation that should absorb new artistic endeavors and reflect current religious and political issues? This question is not easily answered in Dickeyville, requiring a balance between the many opinions of parish leaders and grotto volunteers with generations of connection to the grotto.

The Dickeyville Grotto is an extraordinary display of religious faith, secular allegiance, personal genius, and community pride. A visit to this southwestern Wisconsin roadside gem is well worth the trip.

Work Cited and Suggested Resources

"Grottos and Shrines, Dickeyville, WI." N.p., n.d.

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