

Alabama - Br. Joseph Zoettl - Ave Maria Grotto

BIOGRAPHY

- 1878 Brother Joseph Zoettl, O. S. B. born in Landshutt, Bavaria. Baptised Michael Zoettl, in St. Martin's Church, Landshutt.
- 1892 At the age of 14, sent there by his stepmother, Zoettl enrolled as a student at Saint Bernard Abbey, the first and only Benedictine monastery in Alabama.
- 1897 Zoettl pronounces his vows as a monk of St. Bernard Abbey. Because of an injury at the abbey which left him a hunchback, he was only able to be a lay priest.
- 1910 He was placed in charge of the Abbey's boiler house. This required 24 hour attention, but left him with a lot of free time. Apparently his first hobby construction was a model train and track set constructed in the Power house. The engine was attached by a string to one of the fly wheels used to generate electricity so that the wheel rotated pulling the train along the track. At a work table, he built hand sized grottoes and ash trays for sale at the gift shop, and had made over 5,000 when he quit counting some 20 years before he stopped making them.
- c.1912-15 Br. Joseph built his first replicas of shrines. In a room adjacent to the furnaces, he developed his hobby of building shrines, using rejected pieces of building material such as tile, pipe, glass and brick. The first were erected on the monastery recreation grounds and were intended for the enjoyment of his fellow monks. The shrines were moved when they began to attract too many visitors.
- Buildings were constructed at a table and then assembled at their permanent site. He used simple hand tools including hammers, pliers, brushes scissors and flatware. The main material was concrete which he ornamented with marbles, seashells, costume jewelry, chinaware, pottery, bits of glass, bottles, bicycle reflectors and tiles, Small dimensional figurines of animals and people were included. Colors were mixed in with the concrete.
- c1915-25 The first buildings, known as 'Little Jerusalem', were constructed. They were (are) composed of re-creations of buildings from Jerusalem and Palestine during biblical times. They were mostly under two feet. Later cathedrals and basilicas reach four and five feet at the tips of their towers and some stretch to eight feet. The Chapel of St. Therese was built.
- 1932-34 A new site was prepared for the buildings of Little Jerusalem. The abandoned Old Rock quarry was landscaped by Br. Patrick O'Neill. The Grotto itself is 27 feet high, 27 feet wide and 27 feet deep. It is decorated with scenes from the Holy Land. A circular path was laid out for visitors to follow, and bushes trees and grasses were planted. The Grotto occupies a heavily wooded bluff above Eightmile Creek. It was constructed to Brother Joe's specifications. Railroad spikes and chicken wire were suspended from the ceiling which Br. Joe later turned into stalagmites. Sections of the Grotto contain buildings modeled after existing structures in the United States, predominantly missions constructed by the Franciscan Fathers as well as structures representing ancient Rome. These sections contain the earliest buildings and were moved from the recreation ground.

Altogether, the site consists of a four acre landscaped Park with approximately

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125/150 miniature buildings and shrines, monuments and sculpted works, designed and built by Brother Joseph Zoetl over a period of almost 40 years.

- 1934 The Ave Maria Grotto was opened to the public and dedicated on the quarry site.
- 1940 By this year around 85% of the Grotto's present structures were in place.
- 1950 By this time 95% of the present structures were in place. Constructions include real buildings, as well as purely conjectural structures such as the Hanging Garden of Babylon, Noah's ark; and the Tower of Babel. A further category of objects includes buildings without known prototypes (e.g. caves and wayside shrines similar to roadside shrines in Europe). Secular monuments include the Red Cross. Scenes designed specialy for children include Hansel and Gretel and the Temple of the Fairies.
- 1954 One of the Brother's most famous miniatures St. Peter's Basilica was constructed. An old bird cage was used to form the dome. Specific sites include: Bethlehem; St. Peter's Shrine; Monserrat Abbey, Spain; Castle Trausnitz and St. Martin's Church, Landshutt, Bavaria; Statue of Liberty; Red Cross Tower; St. Bernard College Buildings; Cathedral of Mobile, Alabama; Missions including San Juan Capistrano, Carmel, Santa Barbara and Mission Dolores; The Round Tower, Rhode Island; The Alamo; St. Peter's Basilica; Rome Monte Cassino Benedictine Abbey, Rome; St. Scholastica of Subiaco; St. Anselm's; Pantheon; Rotunda of St. Stephen; The Colosseum; St. Paul's Outside the Walls; St. Agnes; St. Lawrence; St. Domitilla; The Vestal Temple; Tomb of St. Petronilla; St. Sixtus Chapel; The Leaning Tower of Pisa; The Statue of St. Francis Cabrini. The National Register nomination form lists all buildings and dates of construction where known.
- 1958 Brother Joseph built his last model, the Basilica Church of Lourdes.
- c. 1958 Br. Joe stopped work on the grotto due to ill health.
- 1961 Br. Joseph Zoetl dies.
- 1984 The Ave Maria Grotto was listed on the National Register, representing Alabama's first nomination of a folk art environment to the National Register of Historic Places. The nomination was prepared by Linda Bayer.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BAYER, Linda.

1983 a. "Ave Maria Grotto nominated". The Preservation Report, Vol. XI, No. 3. Alabama Historical Commission, Nov, Dec.*

1983 b. "Ave Maria Grotto", National Register Nomination form.*

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PLAISANCE, Aloysius, OSB, Ph.D.

? An Illustrated Self Guide of the Ave Maria Grotto, featuring a Picture of the Monk Builder. *

? "Ave Maria Grotto is listed on the National Register. SPACES: Notes on America's Folk Art Environments. *

visitors' guides to the Grotto

(* - references in SPACES archives)

CONTACTS

Linda Bayer
Huntsville Planning Department
P.O. Box 308, Huntsville, Alabama 35804
(205) 532-7353

Brother Augustine Campion
Director of Grotto Operations
St. Bernard Abbey
Cullman AL 35055 (Also, Brother Lawrence Bouchea - helped Bayer with nomination).

Ellen Mertins
National Register Coordinator
Alabama Historical Commission
725 Monroe Street
Montgomery, Alabama 36130-5101

Al Head, Executive Director
Alabama State Council on the Arts
323 Adams Avenue
Montgomery, Alabama 36130

Carol Dubie (referred by Linda Bayer)
National Register
Washington, D.C.

The Benedictine Society of Alabama
St. Bernard Abbey
Cullman, Alabama 35055

Probate Record Office (for records)
Cullman County Courthouse
Cullman, Alabama

OTHER SIMILAR ENVIRONMENTS

1.) Garden of Eden - Lucas, Kansas (N.R. 1977). Like the Grotto, it represents specific themes; the Grotto, however, represents these themes through buildings.

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2.) Holy Ghost Park - Dickeyville, Wisconsin. Both environments were created by German immigrants who spent their adulthood in their respective churches.

3.) New England Village - Stonington, Maine.