

MOTHER CABRINI SHRINE

By OPAL LONGINO

The Mother Cabrini Shrine in Jefferson County, Colorado, is located on the Eastern Slope of the Rocky Mountain foothills, just west of the town of Golden on the north side of I-70 as it enters the mountains. The property was owned by Golden, and discovered by Mother Frances Xavier Cabrini, who negotiated purchase in 1910 as a summer camp for the Queen of Heaven Orphanage in Denver. With two barns on the property, a farming operation was originally set up with poultry, dairy cows and other livestock. Living quarters were arranged in the loft of a large barn for the Sisters in charge and visiting girls from the Orphanage who enjoyed the fresh air camp in addition to tending animals and doing chores while permanent quarters were built



Mother Cabrini, who founded the *Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus*, was instrumental in establishing a school with convent and the orphanage in Denver as a service to immigrant Italians in Colorado. Born on July 15, 1850 in Sant' Angelo Lodigiano in the province of Lombardy in Northern Italy (at that time a part of the Austrian Empire), she was the 10th of 11 children of Agostino Cabrini and Stella Oldini (wealthy cherry farmers) of whom only 4 of the children reached adulthood. They were members of the Lombard nobility. Influenced by her father who read stories of missionaries to his children, from an early age Frances desired to become a missionary to China. When old enough to apply, she was rejected by religious orders because of her frail health. At 13, she was enrolled in a boarding school in Italy to become a teacher. After graduation she worked as a teacher and later director of an orphanage in Italy. At the age of 30, she and five other women who had taken religious vows with her in 1877, founded the Missionary

Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus on November 14, 1880 at Codogno, Italy.. She became Mother Superior of the Order and continued in that position until her death. She adopted the name of Frances Xavier Cabrini when she took religious vows in honor of Saint Xavier. (Photograph from Denver Public Library collection.)

After headquartering their work in Rome for several years, the Catholic Church in New York was urging a mission be sent there to support Italian immigrants flooding that area in great poverty, facing hardships from discrimination and low wages. Although Mother Cabrini had sought approval from Pope Leo XIII for their request to establish missions in China, his advice was that they go to New York instead. So she set off with 6 of her missionary Sisters for New York, arriving in March of 1889. Despite problems of getting established in a new culture, an unfamiliar language, and little income, with the assistance of local Sisters of Charity, they established an orphanage for Italian children with a convent for the Sisters and a free school in the Lower East Side of Manhattan where the poorest Italians lived. As their group grew, they founded a larger orphanage along the Hudson in New York in 1892. At that time with a need for hospitals for immigrants in New York, they ventured into health care work as well.

Returning to Europe in 1898, some of the Sisters established missions in Paris, London and Madrid. Latin America was not neglected with a unit in Nicaragua. Argentina in South America where other members of the Cabrini family settled was also included with missions of the Order. Hospitals in Chicago and Seattle were highlights as she traveled widely throughout the Western United States, extending educational, child care and health facilities where settlements of immigrants were found needing their services..

Mother Cabrini was particularly fond of the Rocky Mountains of Colorado where many needy colonies of Italian immigrants worked in mines and on railroads. The Sisters staffed a convent and parish school in Denver in 1902, and in 1905 two young orphans were the beginning of the Queen of Heaven Orphanage which grew to have as many as 317 girls housed in a large building on Federal Avenue in Denver. The summer camp in the mountains was a pleasant addition for the girls.

THE STONE HOUSE

It was during Mother Cabrini's last visit to the summer camp near Golden in 1912, that she and a builder, Thomas Eckron drew up the plans for the Stone House that would serve as a dormitory for the resident Sisters and the girls. The house was to be built of native rock. Each day the girls would take a cart drawn by a donkey to load with stone at a nearby quarry for the next day's building activity.

Commenced in the fall of 1912, it was completed in 1914. The ground floor was used as a chapel, the upper floors as an open dormitory. The Denver orphanage was closed in 1967, and the girls placed in foster homes when the highway department sought the property for the route of Interstate 70. The Stone House was named to the *National Register of Historic Places* with a \$138,000 grant from the Colorado Historic Society for it to be restored and renovated and became a year round retreat facility..



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THE HEART OF STONE

During that last visit in 1912, Mother Cabrini took several Sisters and girls by horse and buggy to the base of the highest hill, which Mother Cabrini dedicated as the "*Mount of the Sacred Heart*". The girls gathered white rocks to arrange in a heart near the top, now covered by glass at the base of the 22' statue placed there in 1954 on an 11' base..

A stairway of 373 steps along the path to the top was hurriedly completed in advance of the arrival of the statue, to be lined by stations of the Cross with mosaics made in Italy. and many benches as well as flowers, plantings and trees along the way. Coins dot the top of the glass covering the heart. A lightning storm in 1909 damaged the statue which has since been repaired..



THE GROTTO

Earlier Sisters had complained of the need to carry water from a stream at the bottom of the hill, but Mother Cabrini pointed out a place to dig where there was a stagnant pond and a small building. A plentiful spring was discovered to provide ample water. A rock replica of the Grotto of Lourdes of France was built near this spring in 1929, which was demolished and replaced in 1959 by the present shrine built of sandstone. Here in a quiet atmosphere of candlelight before the Mother Cabrini altar, many come to pray and present their many requests.

The spring has been developed into a pleasant spot where any many pause from a refreshing drink and some may chose to take along water as a memento of the visit. Also nearby a rosary garden has been developed in the shaded area.



THE NEW CHAPEL

The Sisters lived with the girls in the Stone House until 1970 when a new convent was completed, including a beautiful chapel on the upper floor, with a meeting room for retreats, a gift shop and housing for resident Sisters and overnight accommodations for guests on the lower floor. Beautiful stained glass windows adorn the chapel.



When Mother Cabrini died on December 22, 1917, in Chicago at the age of 67 in the hospital established there earlier by her Order, 67 missions had been founded by the *Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus*. Many missions across the world have been named in honor of Mother Cabrini

After her death, Mother Cabrini was beautified on November 13, 1938 by Pope Pius XI with reference to a miracle that revealed a child whose sight was restored after being blinded at birth by excess silver nitrate in the child's eyes. She was canonized in Rome in July, 1946 by Pope Pius XII which recognized the healing of a terminally ill member of her congregation. She was the first American declared a Saint by the Catholic Church and named the patron saint of immigrants. A national shrine was dedicated in her honor in 1955 in Chicago's

Lincoln Park near the site of the former Columbia Hospital where she died. She is entombed under glass in the altar at St. Frances Cabrini Shrine in Manhattan, a part of Mother Cabrini High School.

The day after she was canonized in Rome, approximately 1500 people attended a service at the Immaculate Conception Cathedral in Denver, including many clergy as well as state and city officials and 82 girls from the orphanage in white dresses and veils to pay homage to this new Saint. A life-size statue was brought from the orphanage to the cathedral for the occasion and stands now in the grotto shrine.

One year later on July 6, 1947, the first annual pilgrimage was held at the Mother Cabrini Shrine in Jefferson County on the anniversary of her canonization. Widely publicized, from across the country thousands of pilgrims came to pay tribute to this first American Saint. The procession to the service in front of the grotto included a large number of orphan girls in white dresses strewing flowers along the path, followed by officials from around the area and thousands of celebrants who gathered on the rocky hillsides to observe.

Benefactors are too many to list, but one person must be mentioned as critical to establishment of a shrine to Mother Cabrini at the summer camp. Denver native, John J. Campbell, in 1946 and 1947 proposed the Shrine be dedicated there, and it was approved. The grounds were much in need of renovation, but Mr. Campbell was appointed chairman of a committee to plan and guide the improvements. From the beginning, untold hundreds of individuals, organizations and businesses have stepped up to provide funds, equipment and services when needed, constantly widening and paving the original rough and rutted roads, improving parking facilities and adding modern electrification and plumbing throughout - as an example the 8,000 gallon glass lined tank was given by Adolf Coors III to enhance the water system.

Tourists have flocked to the Shrine which has continued to develop and beautify the grounds with many features including a memorial garden near the chapel, a rosary path near the Grotto, and a museum near picnic grounds.

Mother Ignatius Miceli, M.S.G., came to teach at the orphanage as a young member of the Order, continuing later to oversee development of the Shrine. She wrote an in-depth history of the Shrine which featured many of the local participants of the Order. Her book entitled *Cabrinian Colorado Missions* (Pub. 1996 by D & K Printing of Boulder, CO) is a very interesting compilation with many of her own photographs.

Material for this article was gathered from on-line information as well as the archives of the Denver Public Library where a large collection of news articles and other historical documents have been preserved, including material from the Rocky Mountain News and Denver Post newspapers and also the Denver Catholic Register.. Information from Mother Miceli's book added to verification of other sources.

This author has had the pleasure of attending retreats at the Shrine and enjoying the beauty of the location. Photographs are from my visits.