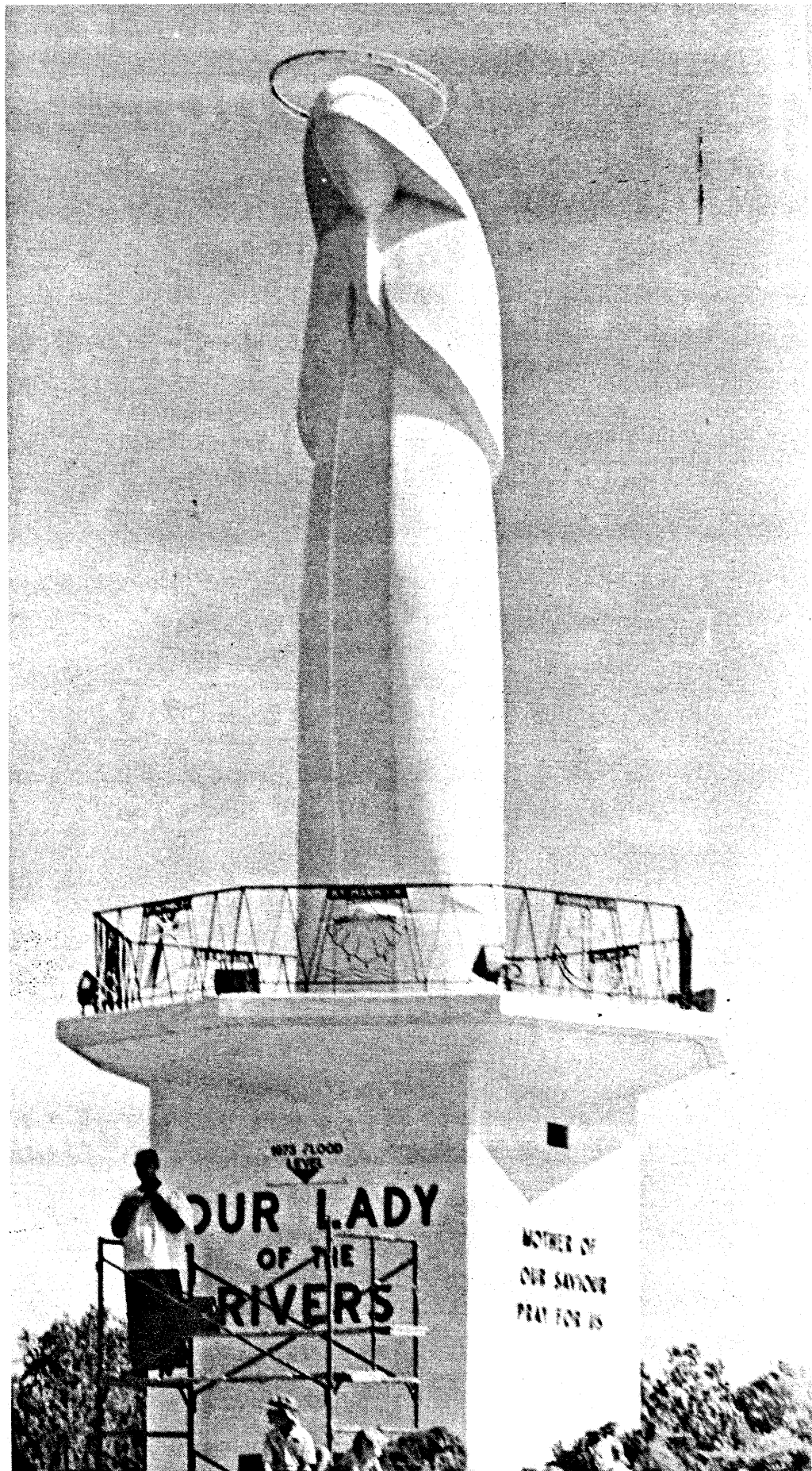


The Blessing of the Fleet

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The Shrine of Our Lady of the Rivers towers above the crowd at Portage des Sioux for the annual Blessing of the Fleet.



Boats in all shapes and sizes line up to receive their blessings for another year on the rivers.

It happens every year, the buds burst forth, the birds return from the south, the grass turns from winter brown to glistening green, and Father Edward B. Schlattmann, "The River Priest," returns to Portage des Sioux for Missouri's Blessing of the Fleet.

The biggest event on the Mississippi River in the St. Louis area each year launches the boating season. Since its inception, the inland blessing of recreational crafts has spread to many other lakes, rivers and marinas across the country.

On the morning of the big event, the boaters "hit the deck" early to decorate their boats with balloons, crepe paper, pretty girls—and each year at least one craft carries the traditional Dixieland jazz band. From 40 harbors one can hear the bantering back and forth among the crew members while preparing their boats for the parade—and to contest hotly for the best decorated craft award.

On shore thousands of landlubbers gather to picnic and to cheer for their favorite boats. They collect on both sides of the Mississippi River, crowd around the base of the Shrine of Our Lady of the Rivers, and on the walkway that unites the shrine with the shore. Here at the base of the shrine Fr. Schlattmann patiently stands for hours blessing each boat as it passes.

Portage des Sioux, a narrow slip of land cradled in the confluence of three large rivers—the Illinois, the

Missouri and the Mississippi—gained its name when the Sioux Indians used it as a portage route between rivers to foil enemy pursuers. When Francis LeSieur established his trading post, he envisioned it growing into a great center to serve the vast area surrounding these rivers. But the expected commerce went north to St. Charles and south to St. Louis, and Portage, as its inhabitants now call it, became a pleasant farming community.

In 1938, Navigation Dam No. 26 was constructed at nearby Alton, Illinois. The resulting Alton Lake inundated parts of several streets along the river, including LeSieur Street in Portage. Floods, always a serious consideration in communities along the banks of any large river, now became more numerous and more treacherous as the levees along the Mississippi River grew higher and longer.

The flood of 1951, at first, seemed no more frightening than any other. But Father Schlattmann said, "When the pressure of the water and debris broke the railroad trestle, that really got the people praying." Father Ed called the members of the Legion of Mary to pray incessantly that Portage would be saved.

"That was a terrible flood, wiping out whole sections of surrounding towns. It was headed right for Portage . . . Well, the water got to the point where the repair shop is, at the crossroads . . . and the water, instead of coming down the road like a car would, separated . . . and

went above the town and below the town—not in the town at all." Father Schlattmann's voice echoed the excitement he still feels years after the episode.

"That was the saving feature. Only one house on the backroad was seriously damaged," he continued, "I mean to the point where it was knocked down . . . and nobody was actually hurt (or) lost their lives."

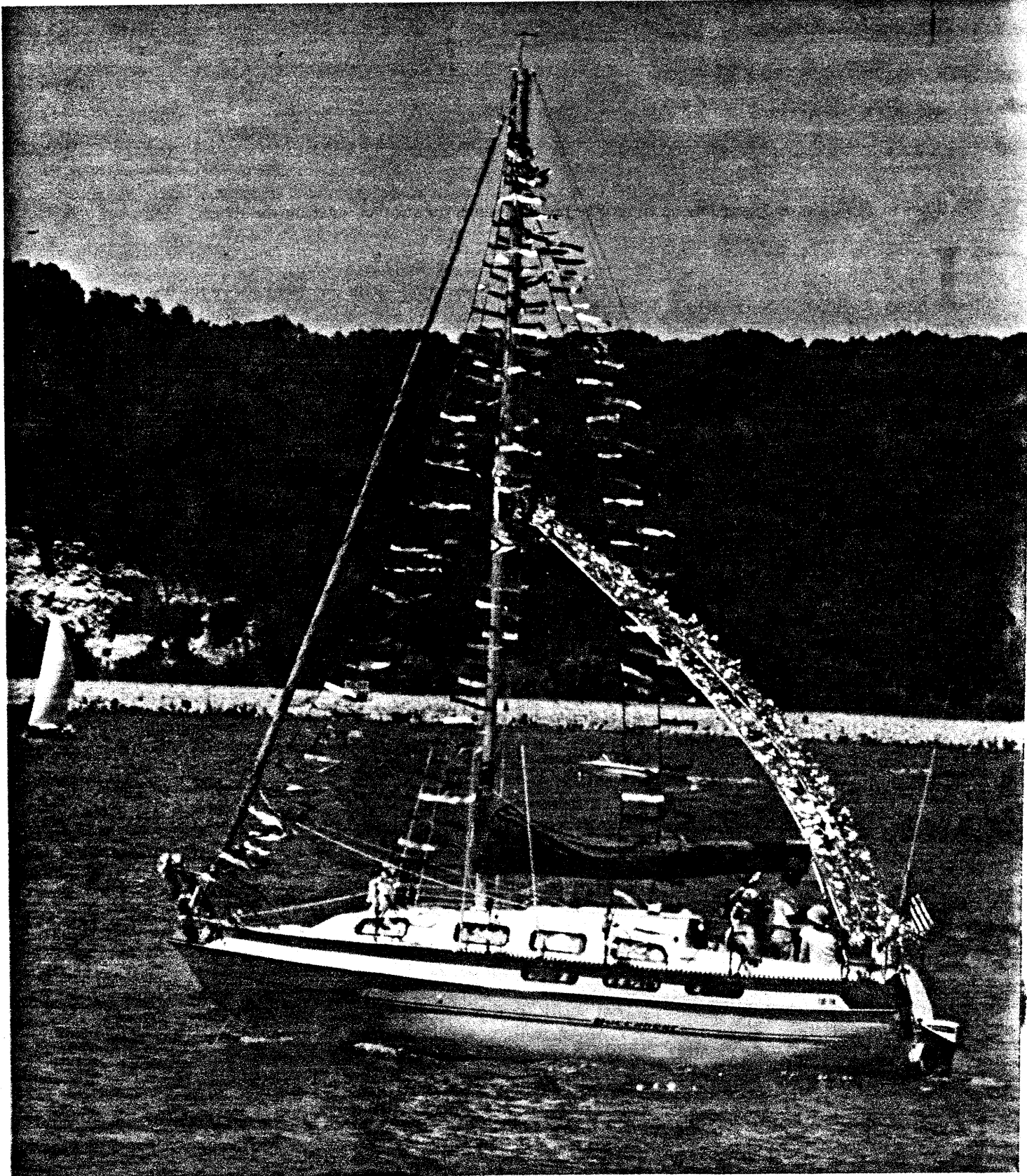
To the inhabitants of Portage this miracle demanded some show of thanks to God. Father Ed "hit upon the thought and coined the phrase, 'Our Lady of the Rivers,' because all three rivers in this area . . . all flooded at the same time. That was what made this flood so terrible."

"I suggested a plaque be put on the outside of our church—St. Francis Church—for our thanksgiving, or a small statue of Mary be put outside. I actually went to the cemeteries in the area to see if they didn't have an outdoor statue that they didn't want any more. We could put this outside the church and it wouldn't cost us anything," Father Ed explained.

"Well, then these men—the boaters—heard the title, 'Our Lady of the Rivers,' and they liked it. They said it would have to be on the bank of the river. We all laughed at the thought of a three-foot statue on the bank of the Mississippi River! It couldn't be seen by a row boat!"

So the seeming inadequacy of mere vocal prayers, the introduction of the title, Our Lady of the Rivers, and the boaters' enthusiasm

Tradition calls for decorations from stem to stern.



Enthusiasm is the key to the success of the annual Blessing of the Fleet in St. Louis.

all played integral parts in bringing forth a shrine that in a way initiated the Blessing of the Fleet ceremony.

A committee of 20 people was formed, consisting of residents of Portage and neighboring communities. Father Schlattmann held back, even attempting to stop the idea from growing because he "was fighting the idea of collecting that kind of money. Another thing I was concerned about—I was sure non-Catholics wouldn't be interested in a statue of Mary."

At the meeting held to launch the project "there were Jews, Catholics, Protestants, and some with no religion at all. They were bankers, boating people, businessmen, barge people—I can't think of them all. To my last concern a dentist merely responded, 'Well, isn't Mary the mother of my Christ as well as yours?' That cinched it. They voted unanimously to go ahead with it." Father Ed's voice quivered with emotion.

Their efforts took six years to reach fruition. At one point when it seemed impossible to get the necessary publicity to give impetus to the drive, Father Schlattmann received word that one of the supporters, Larry Wickett, was dying. He asked that Father put in his obituary notice the statement, "Donations may be made to the Shrine of Our Lady of the Rivers, which will be erected on the banks of the Mississippi River at Portage des Sioux."

That started people asking, "What is this shrine?" As interest grew so did the number of jars and cans displayed on counters of stores, dry cleaners, yacht clubs and bars—all soliciting funds for the shrine. A study committee decided upon a 25-foot statue of lightweight material capable of withstanding weather extremes. Fiberglass was the answer. The Rev. Joseph McIntyre, C.M., contacted Mrs. Norma McClory of Mattoon, Illinois, who designed the statue, im-

pressive in its simplicity.

Enthusiasm continued to grow within the statue committee even after years of working to raise the funds for the shrine, and it overflowed into peripheral ideas. While obtaining necessary permits and donations of river land on which to raise the shrine, the need for an event to highlight Safe Boating Week evolved.

Frank Burkarth, who was in the sea food business at that time, recalled, "Fishermen are superstitious-like or religious. Every year in the spring and also in the wintertime in those areas where they go out all year round, they won't take their boats out unless they get them blessed. . . . The padre could be a minister, a priest a rabbi—whoever could go to the harbors. They (the fishermen) would have a parade where the boats passed by. On certain days the padre would go into the harbors and bless those particular boats with the sign and I would be invited to it. They would have food and drinks and celebrate all that evening. The next day they'd go out to sea—those who were able," Frank laughed as he told the story.

"I was in the Coast Guard Auxiliary at that time, and we were always looking for a way to get people interested in boat safety. Just telling them to study the rules, learn the light list, and all that . . . they wouldn't do it. But if you got them interested in something active, like a parade, they'd have to learn those rules of the road," Frank continued.

So the idea for the Blessing of the Fleet was born. "We had no idea it would grow like it did," Father Schlattmann said.

"I don't even think everyone who goes to the parade goes to get his boat blessed—but just to be there in all that excitement," Frank added.

The Shrine was dedicated on October 13, 1957, with the flooded portion of LeSieur Street serving as a base for the statue. Today the

Blessing of the Fleet has grown into a full day's celebration. The number of boats entering the parade varies each year. With good weather and an average rainfall, the number of vessels has soared to more than 700.

Since 1979 a nonprofit organization, the Blessing of the Fleet, Inc., has sponsored and regulated his event. To heighten the excitement, two Safe Boating queens chosen by the United States Coast Guard Auxiliary Division III and Division VII, with their maids of honor, are present. With crowds cheering from both shores of the Mississippi River, from the walkway to the shrine and from the base of the shrine, Father Schlattmann blesses each craft as it passes.

At the same time the judges designate the boats which are possible winners. These boats are pulled out of line by the Blessing of the Fleet patrol boats. Trophies will be awarded to the winner of the best decorated boat from each category—cruiser, houseboat, runabout, sailboat, as well as the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary facility craft. Upon notification, the winning captains show their delight—by the release of hundreds of balloons, loudly tooting horns, rousing cheers, rendition by the Dixieland jazz bands, wailing sirens—any safe way to spread the word, "We won! We won!"

The Shrine of Our Lady of the Rivers is open to tourists all year long. The Corps of Engineer has designated the shrine a Private Aid to Navigation, which means it is listed on all their river charts as a navigational aid and that a light on the statue must burn constantly.

"It is our expense (to keep the light burning)," remarked Father Ed, "but it really is a sight to behold when the barges come along at night and put their powerful spotlights right on the statue. It's beautiful! Positively beautiful!"

So is the Blessing of the Fleet—to be in or just to watch. □