

Dimberg

OUR LADY OF THE RIVERS

"A memorial to Mary will be a reminder to all people of her saving grace when our town faced the perilous waters." These were the words of Father Edward B. Schlattmann as he asked the people of Portage des Sioux to contribute to erect a little statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary on the side of their church after Mary had saved their town from a disaster. The country priest's wish never came true; it, however, turned out to be a beautiful twenty-seven foot statue of Mary, Our Lady of the River, which is situated in the Mississippi River on a six-hundred foot causeway at Portage des Sioux, Missouri.

Portage (as most people call it) is a small river town of about 280 people and is ~~forty~~^{thirty} miles north of St. Louis. It lies on the west bank of the Mississippi; and the Illinois River approaches it from the north while the Missouri River comes in from the west. It is now a popular boating and water skiing area.

The story is told that the town got its name, Portage des Sioux, from an incident when a band of Sioux Indian warriors who were trespassing on the Missouri Indian's hunting ground, found out that an ambush lie in wait for them at the confluence of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. The Sioux rowed their canoes down the Mississippi and got off about where the town is now. They then carried their canoes directly across two miles of land to the Missouri and then went up it. Thus they avoided the confluence and the ambush.

Originally, the town was founded by a Spaniard named Saucier. The French took control before 1799 and turned it into a mission and a trading post. Lewis and Clark stopped there to get most of their supplies for their expedition. And the Jesuits were in charge of St. Francis Church from 1823-1875. Father Van Quickenborne, the founder of the Missouri Province, died there in 1837.

The story of these people's hope and trust in Mary started in July of 1951, when the Midwest was attacked by torrential rainstorms which caused severe floods that left forty-one dead and over a billion dollars in damage.

Now when the Missouri River overflows near its mouth, it just shoots directly across land to the Mississippi River and the town of Portage is right in its way. According to the water level at St. Charles this was to be the worst flood in its history; so the pastor, Fr. Schlattmann, asked everyone to pray to Our Lady for protection. The town which is about sixty per cent Catholic co-operated fully and they sought Mary's help under a new title, Our Lady of the Rivers.

The flood increased daily and for two weeks the waters going over the fields sounded like Niagara Falls. About a mile up from the town, the road that leads into it slopes down. When the surging river finally reached its crest after about two anxious weeks, the waters were being divided by this road rather than flowing down it. So the town was litterly turned

into an island and its only communication to the main land was a boat. The town was then left high and dry and no one was injured and only one house was slightly damaged.

In thanksgiving for their lives and the town, the pastor wanted to erect a little shrine next to the church in honor of the event. A riverboat captain, who was a non-Catholic, was the first to ~~get the ball rolling by contributing~~ and asking that a larger statue be built. The problem was then raised, whether the shrine was to be only a Catholic or whether it would be a non-sectarian project in which anyone who wanted to, could contribute. In reply Fr. Schlattmann said, "Mary, after all, belongs to all peoples and to all generations...and she wants it!"

Mary did want it, for the \$50,000 was raised that was needed to build the statue. It was constructed by a company in Minneapolis and is made out of plastic which is reinforced with glass fibers; it is entirely weather resistant. The statue was erected in the summer of 1957 and dedicated shortly afterwards by Bishop Flavin.

Our Lady of the Rivers today reigns over the area and she will always guide and inspire the hearts of her people.

Our Lady of the Rivers, thank you!