

The story of Our Lady of the Rivers began in the year 1951 when the Missouri River was flooding badly. The river had swept out of its banks and was crossing the lowlands just above Portage des Sioux to join the Mississippi. With the tremendous volume of water flowing across the countryside, it was feared that a new channel would be formed which would wipe out many farms as well as the town of Portage des Sioux itself.

The pastor of St. Francis Church at Portage des Sioux called his parishioners to pray that the flood waters would recede. After the flood waters had receded, the pastor, Father Edward B. Schlattman, suggested a tribute of some kind be erected in thanksgiving, and to implore divine protection against future floods. The idea caught on.

Weekend boaters who use the Alton Lake for recreational purposes became interested and agreed to help the townspeople raise the money necessary to erect a permanent reminder of the 1951 near-tragedy. People from many faiths and from all walks of life donated money, time, and labor to the project.

The statue of Our Lady of the Rivers is made from fibre glass. The base of the statue is of reinforced concrete extending down to river bedrock. The concrete base is 20 ft. above the water and the statue itself is 30 ft. high, so that Our Lady of the Rivers rises 50 ft. into the air. The statue weighs about 2,300 lbs. The brilliant whiteness of the statue is built into the fibre glass. It will not fade or tarnish.

The artist who designed the statue--Mrs. Anthony ^{McClory} ~~McClory~~--knew that sunlight reflecting off the water would distort the usual facial features, detracting from the overall beauty. This is why the form of the statue is so interesting. You will notice that the face is not clearly defined. The eyes, the nose, and the mouth are not as you would ordinarily see them. The features are soft, the lines are simple. The overall effect is that of serenity.

Woven into the railing which encircles the base of the statue are eight wrought iron symbols. Like the statue itself, the symbols are one of a kind and exist no where else. There is a spiritual value associated with each of the symbols--the sun, moon, stars, an scallop shell, a fish, a lily, a sword, an anchor, and a dove. Each symbol is documented by the appropriate biblical reference. Some are nautical symbols, some are derived from nature. All reflect the wealth of nautical beauty and the natural beauty of the Portage des Sioux area.

A few years ago, the famous traveler, Lowell Thomas, and the nation's top newspaper editors picked 43 spots as suggestions for Americans to visit on their family vacations. The Shrine of Our Lady of the Rivers was included. Veteran river men say there is no more beautiful sight, (from Minneapolis to New Orleans,) than the Portage des Sioux area with the Shrine and the palisades on the opposite side of the river. The view is especially beautiful in the fall of the year, when the leaves turn red and yellow, making it appear that the bluffs are on fire.

with the autumn color that rivet of

Each person becomes the artist to visualize the face of O.L. which changes w. diff. lighting & shadows. This also prevents damage to image by snow etc.

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The town of Portage des Sioux, location of the Shrine, is one of the oldest villages in Missouri and one of the most historic. The name of the town came from a legend. The story goes that an angry band of Osage Indians were in hot pursuit of several canoes of Sioux Indians. Both groups were paddling furiously down the Missouri River. As the Osage Indians rounded a bend in the river they were surprised to find that the Sioux were no where in sight. Concealed by the thick underbrush, the Sioux watched silently from the shore. As the Osage swept out of sight, the Sioux hoisted their canoes over their heads and carried, or PORTAGED, them across the narrow neck of land that separates the Missouri and the Mississippi Rivers. This crafty maneuver saved them their scalps. Where the Sioux completed their portage later became a trading post, and eventually the town of Portage des Sioux. Lewis and Clark, Philipine Duchesne, the Indian chief Tucumseh, all figured in the town's history.

The shifting balance of power that led to the chapter of American history dominated by the Louisiana Purchase had Portage first under French power, then Spanish, French again, and finally in 1803 under the American flag. Certainly one of the town's biggest moments occurred when thousands of canoes lined the Mississippi River at Portage in 1815 when all the warring Indian nations under Chief Tucumseh signed an important peace treaty with the United States government.

✓
Lewis
Clark
The eight placques, four on each side of the causeway, call attention to such historical highlights as the story of the three flags, the establishment of the first free school west of the Mississippi, how Portage got its name, the search for the Northwest Passage, the forts and block houses that protected white settlers from the Indians, the great Indian peace treaty, the explorations of Pere Marquette and Louis Joliet, and the establishment of St. Francis parish at Portage. ✓

The rock causeway leading from the shore to the statue actually rests on top of a submerged street. Much of the water around the Shrine was farmland at one time. This land became submerged when the Alton Dam was constructed between 1935 and 1938. As the dam was built the water began to back up to the north, and a great expanse of water began to form for more than forty miles upstream. At some places this body of water is three miles wide.

Six miles above Portage des Sioux the Illinois River joins the Mississippi at Grafton, Illinois. About two miles behind Portage des Sioux is the Missouri River, which meets the Mississippi fourteen miles down stream. The statue of Our Lady of the Rivers gets its name from the fact that three major rivers -- the Illinois, the Missouri, and the Mississippi -- all meet within a few miles of the site.

One of the colorful displays the Alton Lake puts on for visitors occurs in mid-summer, usually in early July, during the annual Blessing of the Fleet ceremony. As many as 500 cruisers, outboards, sailboats, and even commercial vessels gather for a parade down the Mississippi, past the Shrine, then back to the 40 or so boat harbors they came from.

The Blessing of the Fleet ceremony is better known in coastal cities than in inland towns like Portage des Sioux. For centuries, fishing fleets have gathered in this ceremony, imploring Heaven to protect and bless their hazardous

search for fish in ocean waters. The idea is pretty much the same at the Portage des Sioux ceremony--to minimize accidents and deaths on the Alton Lake. The only difference is that the Portage ceremony takes on a gay character, with banners, pennants, tooting horns, and pretty girls. It is held in conjunction with National Safe Boating Week.

The fleet begins forming about 1 P.M. in the harbors. Following a strict schedule worked out by the U. S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, the boats form into flotillas. They pass islands with quaint names like "Scotch Jimmy" Island and "Eagle's Nest" Island. They come from Alton Lake harbors that carry names like Sioux, Palisades, Venetian, Twin Lakes, and North Shore. Each boat is gaily decorated and some even feature Dixieland bands in the River tradition. As they approach the Shrine, the noise diminishes and a priest on the upper base of the Shrine blesses the boats as they pass silently by.

On the day of the Blessing of the Fleet and throughout the year the constant stream of visitors to the Shrine should give Father Schlattman, and the other dedicated people who have made Our Lady of the Rivers a reality, a sense of satisfaction in knowing that their efforts are bringing inspiration and enjoyment to so many people. To generations yet unborn, the Shrine will serve as a symbol of our generation's appreciation of the beauty and bounty of Nature and the blessings which we have received from the Divine Creator.

2700 Mile Graveyard