



SKAMANIA
COUNTY
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY

-and the-

COLUMBIA
GORGE
INTERPRETIVE
CENTER
MUSEUM

*The living
past is
always
present*

History of the Rosary Collection

Chapter 1: Brief History of the Rosary Welcome to the Museum!

The Don Brown Rosary Collection, the world's largest of its kind, is displayed in the Spiritual Quest Gallery on the top floor of the museum.

Nearly 4,000 rosaries are exhibited, along with other religious artifacts identified with Pacific Northwest history. The collection represents the life's work of the late Donald A. Brown of North Bonneville, WA, a founder of the Skamania County Historical Society.

The rosary exhibit is not maintained as a place of worship but rather as a display of an almost universal art form. In the western world, the rosary is used in Roman Catholic devotions, and in eastern religions, similar prayer beads are employed as an aid to pious meditation by Mohammedans, Buddhists and other religious groups.

It is said perhaps three-quarters of the human race is given to their use. In the simplest of terms, the beads of the rosary are a means of counting the number of times a repetitive prayer has been recited.

Before the Christian era, Jews were accustomed to reckon their prayers on beads, and this custom was probably adopted by early Christians long before the time of the priest Dominic (1170-1221), founder of the Dominican Order, who first propagated the rosary as it is now employed.

According to Catholic legend, St. Dominic was admonished by the Virgin Mary to preach the rosary as a special defense against heresy and vice. The Feast of the Rosary of the Blessed Virgin (Duplex Major, first Sunday in October) was instituted by Clement XI to commemorate the success of the Christian arms against the Turks in 1716, and has reference also to the Battle of Lepanto in 1571. Our Lady of the Rosary observance remains on the Catholic calendar.

Chapter 2: About Don Brown

The Don Brown Rosary Collection is the result of one man's lifelong devotion to sacred art. Mr. Brown was born April 27, 1895, in Tualatin, OR, and died in a tragic traffic accident in Eugene, OR, December 14, 1975, at the age of 80. Most of his adult life was spent in North Bonneville, WA, near Bonneville Dam on the Columbia River, where he managed family-owned property known as the Brown Tract. It was there he built his rosary collection into international fame.

In an article that appeared in The Skamania County Pioneer just prior to his death, Mr. Brown wrote: "Perhaps the common question asked by visitors to my rosary chapel in North Bonneville is how I ever happened to originate such an unusual collection? Its beginning was in 1917, when I was living in The Dalles, Oregon, but my interest in this beautiful devotion came about years before during a confinement in the Mercy Hospital in North Bend, Oregon, with a severe attack of pneumonia, my younger years beset with poor health.

"It was here that I saw the rosary being worn on the habits of the Sisters of Mercy. While my love for sacred art seems to have been born with me, the rosary has always held a special fascination for me. I consider my former years of illness a special blessing since the rosary was the beginning of the faith of my adoption."

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Mr. Brown began collecting rosaries while living in The Dalles and continued after moving to North Bonneville in 1920. He embraced the Catholic faith in 1929, and was baptized at the St. Thomas Catholic Church in Camas, WA. He became a Dominican Brother in the order founded by St. Dominic. As a layman, his name was Donald, but he chose the religious name of Dominic after his patron saint.

Although English was his only language, Mr. Brown carried on an extensive correspondence with individuals of similar interest throughout the world. A Spanish-American friend in Los Angeles translated his Spanish letters; a friend in St. Paul, MN, translated his German letters, and another friend translated his French letters, and so on. Language was never a barrier.

As his collection became known throughout the Catholic world, many rare and beautiful rosaries arrived unsolicited at his modest home. He provided an excellent example to all collectors by establishing a numbering system and meticulously maintaining a catalog. He carefully noted the donor, place of origin, type of material used, and the description of the church, shrine or historical incident with which it was identified. He did error in not always indicating the date of the gift and the exact measurements. A permanent number was then attached to the rosary for easy reference. In August 1973, it was designated by Ripley's Believe It Or Not as the world's largest collection of its kind.

A volunteer is busy in-putting the catalog information into a computer. The goal is to have the entire catalog system available in book form. Watch for that announcement in future news releases and on this web site. It is no small task!

Mr. Brown is also known for his dedication to preserving the history of Skamania County. In 1926, he and his father were instrumental in founding the Skamania County Historical Society. His goal was for the history to be preserved in a museum, and in 1973 this was achieved. He donated his rosary collection to Skamania County with the requirement it be displayed for the public, creating the need and justification for a museum.

Chapter 3: One-of-a-Kind Spiritual Collection Finds Home

A county-funded museum was established with the historical society as the advisory body. Space was allocated in the basement of the courthouse annex for local Native American and pioneer artifacts, with a separate room for the rosary collection.

This small county museum eventually evolved into the Columbia Gorge Interpretive Center Museum, a wholly owned subsidiary of the Skamania County Historical Society. The rosary collection is owned by the county but maintained and preserved by the society.

During the process of deeding his collection to the people of Skamania County, the issue of church-state separation was discussed. It was resolved in that the collection has representations of many faiths. The collection and his writings are the only remaining tangible objects that represent his life. Mr. Brown is recognized as one of the founders of the society and what better way to commemorate his life than to have his unusual collection exhibited.

Chapter 4: About the Rosaries

It is worthy to note that visitors of many faiths are astonished at the beauty of the exhibit. It has been appropriately referred to as a "priceless jewel box." What gives the collection its jewel-like charm is the fact the counting beads

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of the rosary may be made of almost anything: glass, bone, ivory, wood, precious metals, olive and fruit pits, exotic nuts, semi-precious gems, plastic, yarn, leather and bullets.

Although the rosaries in his collection are from all over the world, Mr. Brown did very little traveling. However, he did spend a great deal of time at The Grotto in Portland, OR, and once in 1961 made a pilgrimage to Mexico City, returning with new treasures. He was not employed and the supervision of the Brown Tract was not demanding. This left him with few distractions from the pursuit of his singular hobby over a period of more than six decades. The collection was the primary focus of his life. However, he did write a column for the local weekly newspaper about the history of the area, which was published over a two-year period. He maintained a collection of correspondence from pioneer families that seemed to disappear after his death. We assume they were destroyed along with the correspondence relating to the rosaries. He remained active in the historical society as long as his health permitted, and his published column remains as respected historical reference. The collection is divided and displayed by the size of the rosary. The smallest are made from beads the size of a pin head. The next size is in the form of a ring meant to be worn on the finger. Chaplet rosaries vary in size from a bracelet to a short necklace or choker. The most popular and familiar size is from 19-30 inches long. The next size up is worn about the waist as part of the habit. The largest size is meant to be hung or publicly displayed as a reminder to pray and of the beauty of the rosary. For example, the largest one in the collection is sixteen feet long and is made of Styrofoam balls. It was made by students in Malden, MA, for a school play. Mr. Brown always cherished it because children made it.

The majority of the rosaries were donated by people who just wanted to assist Mr. Brown in collecting and preserving rosaries. For that reason, he referred to them as “friendship tokens.” However, there are a few with historical significance. An example would be the one received from Father Flanagan of Boys Town. Father Flanagan’s signature is inscribed on the back side of the crucifix. There are rosaries from Lawrence Welk, an early TV personality; Al Smith, the first Catholic to run for the office of president, (and lost in 1928); one donated in memory of Robert Kennedy, who had left it in a small church in Bavaria; and one donated in memory of Dag Hammerskjold, Secretary General of the United Nations from 1953-1961. In 1995, the museum received one from Lou Holtz, the football coach at Notre Dame University.

The most significant rosary, in Mr. Brown’s opinion, is the rosary donated by President John F. Kennedy. It is the only one which was solicited. Mr. Brown wrote to the campaign headquarters in 1960 when he heard Senator Kennedy was running for president. He received a small wooden-bead rosary from Al Bugg, campaign manager, who indicated the future president had used it during WWII.

The collection continued to grow, at Don’s request, following his death in 1975. However, the exhibit cases are now full. We can no longer accept rosaries or other religious artifacts due to the lack of space in the gallery and in storage. Donated funds are encouraged and would be used for the maintenance of the collection and the museum. You, too, can become a part of the legacy. Contact the Museum (800) 991-2338.

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