

Don Brown Rosary Collection

Columbia Gorge Interpretive Center Museum

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World's Greatest Rosary Collection Represents Life Work of One Skamania County Resident



**Donald A. Brown,
April 27, 1917.
Founder of the
Skamania County
Historical Society
and collector of the
world's largest
rosary collection.**

The Don Brown Rosary Collection, the world's largest, is displayed in the Spiritual Quest Gallery of the Columbia Gorge Interpretive Center in Stevenson, Washington, under the aegis of the Skamania County Historical Society.

Nearly 4,000 rosaries are displayed along with other religious artifacts identified with Pacific Northwest history. The display represents the life work of the late Donald A. Brown of North Bonneville, Washington, 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 Muhammadans, Buddhists and other religious groups.

It is said perhaps three-quarters of the human race are 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, the 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.

The unique 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, Oregon and died in a traffic accident in Eugene, Oregon on December 14, 1975 at the age of 80. Most of his adult life was spent in North Bonneville, Washington 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 which appeared in the Skamania County Pioneer prior to his death, Mr. Brown wrote:

"Perhaps the most common question

asked by visitors to my rosary chapel in North Bonneville is how did I every happen to originate such an unusual collection?

It's 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."

Mr. Brown began collecting rosaries while living in The Dalles, Oregon and continued after moving to North Bonneville in 1920. He embraced the Catholic faith and 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, Minnesota translated his German letters, and another friend his French letters, and so on. Language was never a barrier. Sight is not to be a barrier either. For the blind or sight impaired, the Center offers on site the information about Mr. Brown and the collection in braille.

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. His only omission was he didn't always indicate the



The St. Thomas Catholic Church, Camas, Washington, as it was in 1925 when Don Brown was baptized.

date he received a gift. A permanent number was then attached to the rosary for easy reference. In 1973, it was designated by Ripley's Believe It Or Not as the world's largest collection of its kind.

The original catalog is now available in the form of a touch-screen computer program installed in the gallery. Rosaries may be referenced by donor name, type of material, country of origin, or catalog number.

Mr. Brown was 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 the rosary collection to Skamania County with the requirement it be displayed for the public, creating the need and justification for a museum.

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 has now been replaced by the Columbia Gorge Interpretive Center, a wholly owned subsidiary of the Skamania County Historical Society.

During the process of deeding his collection to the people of Skamania County, the issue of Church-State separation was questioned. It was resolved in that the collection has representations of many religious groups including Muhammadan prayer beads. In the opinion of the historical society, the collection is the last remaining materials that represent

Mr. Brown's life.

He is recognized as one of the founders and what better way to commemorate his life than to have his unusual collection exhibited. 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 jewellike charm is the fact the counting beads of a rosary may be made of almost anything - glass, bone, wood, precious metal, olive pits, exotic nuts, semi-precious gems, even knots of thread or leather.

When the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers

activated the Second Powerhouse project at Bonneville Dam, the entire town of North Bonneville was purchased and the area excavated to permit the flow of the water from the new facility. The Columbia River was widened and it inundated the site of the town, the Brown Tract, and the home which once housed his collection.

Although the rosaries in his collection are from all over the world, Mr. Brown did very little traveling outside the Gorge. However, he did spend a great deal of time at The Grotto in Portland, Oregon and once in 1961 made a pilgrimage to Mexico City, returning with new treasures. He was not employed and supervising the Brown Tract was not demanding. This left him with few distractions for 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 remained active in the historical society as long as his health permitted, and his writings remain as respected historical references.

In the gallery are also religious items chiefly acquired in the Northwest as churches were remodeled or rebuilt. For example, the altar at the back of the gallery is from the St. James Mission Church at McMinneville, Oregon, dating from 1850. The altar cloth was crocheted by a Mrs. Winton of Goldendale, Washington, c. 1872. Included is a statue of St. Dominic, originally from Rome, but a gift to Mr. Brown from the Holy Rosary Church in Portland, Oregon.

The kneeling bench or pre dieu was first used by the Most Rev. Father Blanchet, D. D., the first archbishop of the Oregon Territory. Mr. Brown also used it for his own prayers which explains the contemporary kneeling pad. A figure of Our Lady of Zapopan, carved in mesquite wood, c. 1815, is displayed near the altar. This he acquired on his trip to Mexico. The organ was donated by the St. Paul Church in St. Paul, Oregon and dates from 1900. The American flag is depicted by 39 rosaries made from white

pine of the Black Hills of South Dakota. Look for a statue of Our Lady of Fatima. It came to the collection from the Bishop of Leiria, Portugal, in whose diocese the Fatima shrine is situated.

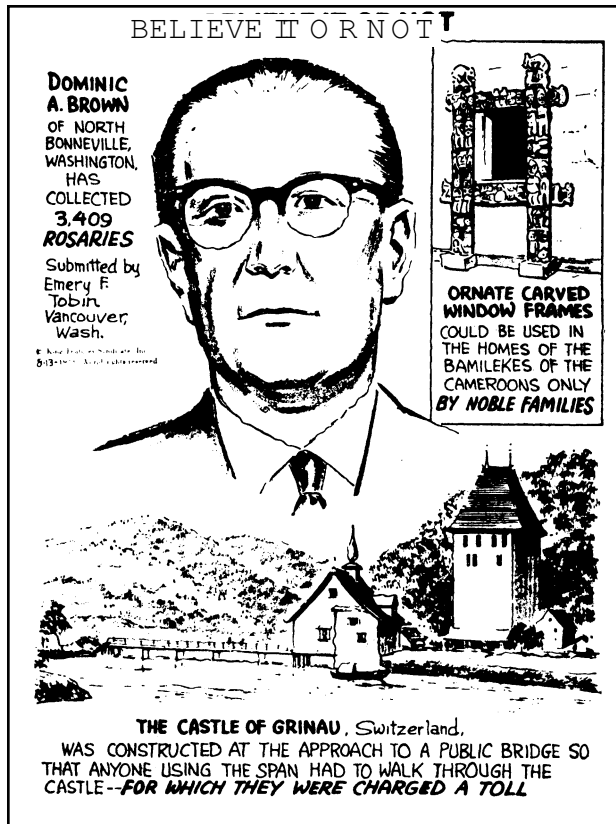
The rosaries come in six different sizes and are displayed according to size. The smallest rosaries are made from beads the size of a pin head. Then there are the ring rosaries, worn on the finger. Chaplet rosaries vary in size from a bracelet to a choker necklace. These may be seen at the front of the gallery. The most popular and familiar size is from 19-30 inches long, more the size of a necklace.

The next larger size 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. The largest one in the collection is hung on the wall near the altar. It measures over sixteen feet long and was made of styrofoam balls by children in Malden, Massachusetts for a school play. Because children made it, Mr. Brown considered it one of his favorite.

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, a few have historical significance. For example, he received rosaries from Father Flanagan of Boys Town; one from Lawrence Welk, an early TV personality; one from Al Smith, the first Catholic to run for the office of President in 1928 and lost; one donated in the memory of Robert Kennedy, who had left it in a small church in Bavaria and when they heard of his assassination, they sent it to Mr. Brown. There is also a rosary dedicated to the memory of Dag Hammarskjold, Secretary General of the United Nations from 1953-1961.

Soon after the Center opened in 1995, Lou Holtz, football coach for Notre Dame, generously donated a personal rosary.

The most significant and important rosary, in Mr. Brown's opinion, was the rosary donated by President John F. Kennedy. It is the only one in the collection which was solicit-



“Ripley’s Believe It or Not” clipping, Aug. 17, 1973

ed. Mr. Brown wrote the campaign headquarters when he heard Senator John F. Kennedy was running for President. He received a small wood bead rosary claimed to have been used by the Senator and future President during WWII in 1960. This rosary may be found in a case to the right of the computer station placed in red lined box, numbered 2157.

Here are a few examples of what a visitor might discover about a particular rosary by using the computer program:

Rosary 4: From the Fontane Monastery, Rome, Italy. Made of trapa seeds, also called Jesuit nuts. The trapa is a native of tropical and subtropical areas including central Europe. They are aquatic plants sometimes called the water chestnut. They are cultivated for food in China. The rosary has a cross made of the seeds to which is attached a tiny nickel case containing a miniature rosary. The case and miniature rosary are from France. This one is hung on hanger #347.

Rosary 98: Handmade of the seeds of the catalpa tree by D. A. Brown. In place of the dividing Pater beads are attached small staurolites or “Fairy Crosses.” Says a bulletin issued by the U.S. Geographical Survey, “Perhaps the most curious material found in the United States is staurolite, otherwise known as Fairy Stone. Staurolite is an ironaluminum silicate found only in Virginia, the reddish-brown and brownish-black crystals occurring in well-defined crosses.” More specifically, it is $\text{HFeAl}_5\text{Si}_2\text{O}_{13}$ in prismatic orthorhombic crystals twinned to resemble crosses. It is generally found embedded in crystalline schists. The rosary is displayed on hanger #407 in the case to the immediate left of the computer station.

Rosary 287: A souvenir rosary from the Orthodox Monastery at Murom in Central Russia, c. 1890. The beads are wood covered with purple silk thread. The attached tassel is made from petite blue glass beads. Look for this one placed on the bottom of the case to the immediate left of the computer station. #98 is hanging above it in the same case.

Rosary 422: A large rosary composed of handmade beads of the prehistoric submerged forest famous in the legend of the Bridge of The Gods of Columbia River history. Look for the photograph of the submerged forest on the mezzanine level near the exit door of the Creation Theatre. The rosary is on hanger #356.

Rosary 516: A rosary from Palestine made of small round olive wood beads and crucifix with obvious symbolic meaning. Gift from Rt. Rev. Msgr. E. J. Flanagan of the famed Boy’s Town, Nebraska. The back of the crucifix bears the personal autograph of Father Flanagan. It is on hanger #412.

Rosary 637: A rosary composed of Job’s Tears beads found on Leetonia Beach in Florida entwined on the twig which had been washed ashore in a storm. The rosary is still preserved on the twig as found by Sister Mary Michelia of Notre Dame College, South Euclid, Ohio. It is on hanger #45.



The *Spiritual Gallery* section with the Don Brown Collection is designed to interpret the collection as the life work of the founder of the historical society in the Columbia Gorge Interpretive Center.

Rosary 723: *A unique rosary hand carved entirely of deer horn by Mr. Regis Boileau of St. Germain, Quebec, Canada. It is on hanger #403.*

Rosary 792: *This was the first rosary blessed by Pope Pius XII. A friend of Mr. Brown, Father Salvatore Burgio, CM of Emmetsburg, Maryland was in Rome in 1939 as a conclavist for Cardinal Dougherty and therefore was at the Vatican for the election*

of the Pope. Immediately after the Pope was vested and gave his first blessing, he was asked by Father Burgio to bless several rosaries. This was the first one which was then sent to Mr. Brown as a gesture of friendship and a blessing to his marvelous collection. It is hung on #412.

Rosary 1324: *A fifteen decade rosary composed of rather crude handmade beads of white bone and hand-chained by sister Lucia*



The John F. Kennedy rosary is one of the exceptions in the collection: most were given by ordinary people and affectionately referred to by Mr. Brown as “friendship tokens.”

de Santos, of Fatima fame, was made at the special request of her older sister Senora Maria dos Anjos Valinho of Aijustrel, Portugal. Purchased and then gifted to Mr. Brown by Kevin F. McCarthy of Concord, N S. W., Australia, an acquaintance of Senora Valinho. It is on hanger #375.

Rosary 1906: *This rosary is from the Benedictine Abbey of Ettal, Bavaria, and was blessed by the famous stigmatist Gapuchin Friar, Padre Pio, of the Monastery at San Giovanni Redondo in Italy. Presented by Father Richard Bauersfeld, O.S.B., of Ettal. Also in the collection is a relic case contain-*

ing a rose pedal which was on the altar when Padre Pio said his last mass. The rosary is on hanger # 152.

Rosary 1961: *A rosary composed of black composition beads, each containing a colored portrait of a different Madonna under isinglass, with the title in Latin on the reverse side corresponding to the Litany of the Blessed Virgin. Origin: Rome. Donor and date not recorded. Look on hanger # 409.*

Rosary 2008: *A rosary given by Pope Pius XII to Rev. John M. O’Neill, S. T. D., Bishop of Grand Falls, Newfoundland, just ten days*

before the death of the Pope. Later, sent to Mr. Brown by Father O'Neill. With the crucifix is attached a medal bearing reliefs of Pope Pius XII and the Holy Family which was blessed by the Pope and given to Rev. Father Malcolm C. P., of Rome, Italy. Presented to. D. A. Brown by Father Malcolm. On hanger # 411.

Rosary 2757. *A most unusual rosary sent to Mr. Brown by a young medical student in Yugoslavia. It is made of round lead bullets as the beads, near the size of our 104 piece, with small brass rifle shells used as dividers, each mounted cross-wise. There is a large heavy copper plate heart centerpiece engraved with the date "1915." The cross of the rosary is composed of three large brass rifle shells, each hand-engraved as follows: "Ruskit" (Russia), "Bugarskit" (Bulgaria), and "Serbskit" (Serbia). On hanger # 298.*

Rosary 2840: *A rosary commemorating the Old Testament of the Bible. The five decades are to honor the first five books of the Bible, and the ten beads of each decade commemo-*

rate the Ten Commandments. There are seven dividing beads to honor the first six day of Creation and the seventh (Sabbath) on which Jehovah rested.

Also included are symbols to indicate the Tabernacle, the Holy of Holy of Holies, the Ark of the Covenant, the "menorah" (seven branch candlestick), the Table of Shewbread, a pole cross on which has been mounted a brass serpent commemorating when Moses raised this to the children of Israel in the wilderness, and a beautiful Star of David inlaid with abalone shell decorations. Made by D. A. Brown. No date. On hanger #362.

Rosary 2870: *A rosary of faceted jet black beads with large hollow doubled capped Pyrex glass dividers, the contents of which is a formula of inert gasses and mercury mixture. When placed in motion and in a dark room, these dividers have a reddish glow, just like the firefly. The light source will last a life time. A gift to Mr. Brown from the Firefly Jewelry Company, Eugene, Oregon. on hanger #269.*

The Don Brown Rosary Collection continued to grow, at his request, following his death in 1975. However, the cases and gallery are now full. We can no longer accept rosaries or other religious artifacts. Donated funds are welcome and are restricted to assist with the maintenance of the collection in its special gallery. You are encouraged to contact the Columbia Gorge Interpretive Center and learn how you can become a part of the lasting legacy Mr. Brown began in 1917. The Center is a 501-c-3 non profit organization and donations are tax deductible. Call (800) 991-2338 or (509) 427-8211. Write: Rosary Collection, CGIC, P. O. Box 396, Stevenson, WA 98648. info@columbiagorge.org