

DESCRIPTION OF DON BROWN ROSARY COLLECTION

**By Sharon Tiffany,
Director of Skamania County Museum**

I'm Sharon Tiffany, director of the Skamania County Museum, and I welcome you to the Don Brown Rosary Collection.

Mr. Brown was born in Tualitan, Oregon in 1895 and came to Skamania County in 1920. He began collecting in 1917 after a short stay in a Catholic hospital. It began out of curiosity and developed into a strong devotion for the rosary.

By the 1960's, it was known as the world's largest collection representing every continent, if not every country, in the world. Oddly enough, he never left the United States himself, but people heard of his collection and would give him rosaries that represented their travels. For that reason, I believe the collection is also a monument to people's generosity, and he fondly referred to them as his "friendship tokens."

He donated the collection to Skamania County in 1973 assisting in establishing the need for a county museum. There was discussion of keeping church and state separated, but the final analysis was that this was the unique feature we needed . . . our attraction beyond the normal expectations of pioneer and native American artifacts. Also, Mr. Brown was the founder of the original Skamania County Historical Society in 1926 and was instrumental in its re-organization in 1959. He published an historical column in the county newspaper over a two year period, which is still referred to because of its accuracy and completeness. The rosary collection could be regarded as the first extensive collection in the county, which is also well documented, properly catalogued, and represents the work of one of the Society's founders.

Please direct your attention to the metal-framed free standing jewelry case in the middle of the room. In it we have placed the rosaries that the museum staff considers to have the most historical significance.

On the top shelf to the extreme left, in a small velvet box, is a curiosity. The skull of the "Crucifix Fish," or sailcat, is displayed with a postcard explaining that the bone structure appears to have the small shape as a crucifix. The fish is commonly found in the Mediterranean Sea. To the right, is a black rosary donated by Lawrence Welk, a familiar name to most of us! And below it is a wood rosary from Father Flanagan. Look closely and you will see that he signed the back of the crucifix.

Next, is a small delicate wood rosary made as a memorial to Robert Kennedy soon after his assassination. It came from Germany. Following, is a copy of the letter that came to Mr. Brown after he requested a rosary from President Kennedy, when as

Senator, he first declared his candidacy for the highest office of the United States. A small wood bead rosary was sent to Mr. Brown with documentation that Pres. Kennedy used it during WWII. It is on exhibit at the temporary headquarters for our new museum, the CGIC. To assure the public that all our collections, including the Rosary Collection, will go with us to the new museum, a portion of the collection is on exhibit there, as well as a statue of St. Dominic, and a few artifacts from the St. James Catholic Church in Vancouver, Wa. There is no admission fee and it is open Wednesday through Sunday afternoons. If it is important to see the complete collection, a visit to the Center is a must! Just ask the attendant how to find it. It is within walking distance.

Now, look to the left of the Kennedy correspondence and find the one in a small red lined box. It was made in honor of Dag Hammerskjold, who was Secretary General of the United Nations when John Kennedy was president. I don't want you to be misled. He was not Catholic, so he did not use the rosary, but gave his permission for it to be made. He was killed in an airplane accident in Africa; many feel it was sabotaged. The three rosaries: the memorial Robert Kennedy's, John Kennedy's and Dag Hammerskjold's, represent three internationally known men who all met tragic deaths.

The rosary on the very end of the top shelf was used by The Honorable Al Smith of New York, who was the first Catholic in 1928 to run for President and lost, many believe, over the religious issue. He gave that to Don in the early 1940's.

On the second shelf to the right of center is a fifteen decade black rosary and the tag is numbered #1. Hope you can find it! This is the rosary that started the collection in 1917. Every rosary has a tag with a number that refers to the catalogue system. The catalogue has been copied onto cards and they are in the file cabinet behind the door. He used a very simple numerical system: 1 to nearly 4,000.

If a rosary interests you and you can't read the number or find it in the catalogue, feel free to ask the attendant for assistance.

On the bottom shelf almost below #1 is the oldest rosary. It dates from 1770 and comes from Upper Bavarian. It is silver filigree around an ebony cross with amber glass beads. Note the beautiful fire and black opal rosary next to it! A quick survey of the case as well as the room, indicates that rosaries can be made from most anything and ARE! A multitude of natural and made-made materials are used . . . ping pong balls, peach pits, olive pits, plastic, carved wood, deer antler, bullet-shells, seashells, and many semi-precious jewels. Roy Craft, a close friend of Don's, liked to refer to this room as "the jewel box of the Gorge".

On the right hand side of the room in a wall case are rosaries hung above and below the picture of Columbus. Now, the ones above the picture represent every place in the Old and New World that Columbus visited and worshipped. Obviously, at one point Don was interested in Columbus' biography and traced his extensive travels through the use of rosaries. I don't want you to be misled concerning the age of these rosaries. Remember, I pointed out to you that the oldest rosary dates from 1770, so none of these date from the time of Columbus — they are just representations of his travels. The rosaries hung below the picture of Columbus have antique coins attached. If you are a numismatic these will be of particular interest to you, as well as the coin collection in the wood framed floor case in the center of the room. On display in the floor case are coins as well as church medallions.

A point of interest also is that this room is set up very much like his living room was in North Bonneville. And he was open to the public as his effort to promote the rosary. In other words, his living room did not contain living room furniture, nor did he own exhibit cases. The rosaries were hung on the walls with drapery rods, hooks, and nails. The altar, organ and other pieces were arranged very much as they are here.

The largest rosary in the collection is hanging in the right hand corner to the right of the altar. It measures over 16 feet long and is made of spray painted styrofoam balls. This size of rosary, he told me, had no practical purpose but was hung to remind you of the beauty of the rosary and to pray. It was made by students attending a parochial school in Massachusetts and used in a school play. When the production was finished, they wanted to present it to the visiting Archbishop. He got away before they could do this, and the Sisters soothed their disappointment by convincing them to send it to Don Brown, who they had heard was trying to collect as many as possible. They figured a collector would take good care of it, and he cherished it because children made it.

The altar is from the St. James Mission in McMinnville, Oregon and dates back to Territorial Days. We will trust that you will not touch the altar cloth nor any of the items on the altar in preference to roping it off. I hope you will honor our trust and hope you agree that roping off an area in this small of a room consumes space and looks "tacky".

The altar cloth was crocheted in 1872 by Mrs. Witton of Goldendale, WA. The cloth is washed by hand once a year in distilled water and soap, not detergent — carefully rolled to squeeze out the excess water — and laid on towels to dry. This is good advice for anyone wanting to keep heirlooms. If you have noticed brown stains in your linens, that means the minerals in the water used have collected in one spot and left a damaging stain. The solution is to use distilled water. (just a good tip for preserving your hand work pieces.)

The Bible is his family Bible and is open at the Genealogical page. Note Don Brown was baptized in several different faiths, but became a Roman Catholic in 1927 and was baptized at the St. Thomas Catholic Church in Camas, WA., a small town in Clark County about 32 miles west of Stevenson.

The lamps on either side of the altar are sanctuary lamps. The one on the right comes from the St. James Catholic Church in Vancouver, WA., the first Mission Roman Catholic Church in the Pacific Northwest and was first located within the walls of Fort Vancouver.

A few people have questioned the memorah on the Catholic altar. I, too, was curious and asked Don why he had them. With a twinkle in his eye, he said he had friends in all faiths and these were a special gift from some Jewish friends. As memorial to their friendship, he wanted the candlesticks left as placed on his altar.

Basically, everything in this room has been left as he placed it. This is an unusual experience for a donor to be allowed the privilege to set up an exhibit. A note of humor is that we also have the world's largest number of bird cage hangers! Portland, Seattle, and several other places were bought out just to install this collection!

Don Brown studied with the Dominican Brethren and was a member of the third

order. As I understand it, that is as high as a lay person can go. He was not a priest as some people have assumed.

The organ was a gift to him from the St. Paul Church in St. Paul, Oregon and dates from 1875. He always played it for interested visitors, and requested that after he was gone, that someone in the group play it in his memory. There is no switch; it has to be pumped and a few stops pulled in order to make music.

Two basic questions I feel need to be answered, at least for the children. After I got accustomed to the impression the collection made on me, I asked him what was a rosary? In the simplest of terms, it is a string of beads that a person keeps track of the number of times you repeat the same prayer. In this collection, there are six different types or sizes, but we won't get into the differences now. The second question was why did he do all this collecting in the first place. His answer was that he was afraid that someday the use of the Rosary would be deleted from the normal Church devotions. He wanted to be certain that part of the church history was preserved, so he considered his life's work as one of a preservationist and not just an eccentric old man.

Thank you for your interest and I invite you to tour the remainder of the museum and if possible, also visit the temporary headquarters of the CGIC. The attendant can also advise you on other activities that may be scheduled or other places to visit for your enjoyment. Do come again!