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# Monumental expression of faith



Jack Hoffman

Indian River, Michigan—  
"Just how big is it?" is the often asked question about the world's largest Crucifix located here on the immaculate grounds of the Cross in the Woods Shrine.

The standard reply is, "so large that the sculptor could sit in the palm of Christ."

Size, of course, is but one of the many elements that has made the Cross in the Woods such a compelling attraction for the millions of visitors who have stopped to inspect the gigantic statue of Christ hanging on the cross at the rear of the Shrine grounds, adjacent to Burt Lake State Park. Most agree, whatever their religious faith may be, that the view is a moving one.

It has become one of Michigan's best known and loved monuments.

First, some statistics:

• The redwood cross is so massive, its erection on a 22-foot high mound, representing the hill of Calvary, required use of a huge crane, many workmen and large amounts of patience in the summer of 1954. It is 56 feet high (5 1/2 stories), 22 feet wide, and weighs 14 tons.

• The cross was made of a single California redwood tree, believed to be 2,000 years old when it was cut. It may have been living when Jesus walked this earth.

• It wasn't until five years later, in 1959, that the bronze sculpture was added to the cross.

• The sculptor, world-renowned Marshall M. Fredericks, did much of the preliminary work on the statue here in the United States. But the casting took place in Oslo, Norway where Fredericks operated a foundry.

• The arms of the massive, 31-foot sculpture, which weighs seven tons, had to be removed for shipping. Even more muscle and care was needed to erect the assembled sculpture than in erecting the redwood cross. The work took 10 days.

A regular stop for bus tour groups and vacationing families from around the world, most visit in summer, when the grounds and walkways are aglow with the splendor of flowers and shrubbery. But it is in the quiet of winter, when snow covers

the landscape, festooning the trees with white cotton, that we most enjoy this Indian River attraction. It is then, too, that thousands of Christmas lights twinkle from the trees at the front of the Shrine indoor sanctuary.

A visit in any season, any weather, however, is special.

We remember a few years ago, while shooting pictures in the rain during an outdoor service in front of the cross, the words of the then director and Shrine priest. His robes soaked, his audience huddled under umbrellas, he lifted his hands skyward and joyfully exclaimed, "Oh, what a glorious morning to sing the praises of the Lord. Welcome everybody." Down came the umbrellas, and almost on cue the rain stopped briefly and for a few minutes the sun illuminate the wet priest and the figure of Christ behind him.

Like his predecessors and those who followed, resident priests have been Indian River's persuasive champions of tourism.

It began with the Right Reverend Charles Brophy of Grand Rapids, former pastor here.

A visionary and an "excellent PR man," Father Brophy saw a need to draw attention to his fledgling church "in this land of Indians" to help in its growth. Knowing something about the work of Kateri Tekakwitha, the Indian maiden who died at the age of 24 more than 300 years ago, he was aware that one of her trademarks was the stick crosses she erected in the woods whenever she traveled in New York and Canada.

Today her name is carried by many girls of the Indian River area...and few of them are Indians.

First mass of the new church here was said on Memorial Day, 1949...the day Father Brophy unfolded his dream of an amphitheater church and the cross.

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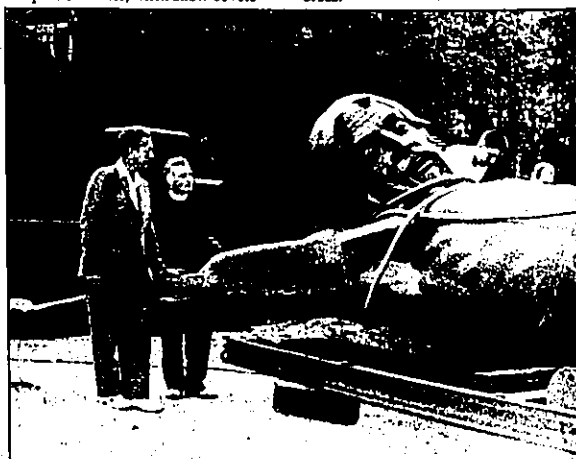
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BRONZE SCULPTURE—World-renowned sculptor Marshall Fredericks (left) oversees the raising of the statue of Christ in 1959. Ten days of painstaking labor were required to erect the seven-ton sculpture.