

St. Joseph's grotto to get some TLC

Group of Boy Scouts plans to help renovate contemplative spot above St. Joseph's Cemetery

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There is a shrine on a hillside overlooking an old church and wide expanse of lawn in Spokane Valley.

Those who look up toward it as they drive along Trent Avenue, just east of Sullivan Road, can easily see it, or part of it – the cross and the tall statue of St. Joseph that emerge from the basalt outcroppings that rise high above the headstones and lawn at St. Joseph's Catholic Cemetery.

But this grotto offers much more up close. Atop the rise lies what is known as the castle, a small stone structure originally designed for small, contemplative gatherings, and where once there were gardens and ponds. The pathway up to it passes by several niches in the rock, where religious statues once stood. Today, there are just a few remaining – a stone St. Francis and a ceramic blue and white Holy Mother, the latter contributed from the garden of a parishioner.

The 10-foot wooden cross still stands among the remnants of where the Stations of the Cross were once located. And, of course, the statue of St. Joseph is displayed. For the many people who come to see the grotto every year, there are places to sit and think or just look out at the view of Spokane Valley to the south.

The cemetery below was created in 1891 at what is now 17825 E. Trent Ave., and the first burial, that of Permlia Rotchford, took place there that year. St. Joseph's mission church was erected on the cemetery grounds in 1892 after 12 years of attending mass in the homes of pioneer families including the M.M. Crowleys and John Dashbachs, marking it as the oldest Spokane Valley congregation.

When the wooden church burned down in 1928, it was rebuilt of brick the next year, and when a new St. Joseph's Catholic Church was constructed in Otis Orchards in 1995, the old church became a cemetery chapel where funeral services can be held.

But before then, in the 1950s, parishioner Henry Arbes thought it would be splendid to construct a grotto on the hillside above the cemetery for contemplation and worship; he designed and worked on its construction for several years, with the dedication taking place in



The statue of St. Joseph and a 10-foot wooden cross emerge from the basalt outcroppings that rise high over the headstones and lawn above St. Joseph's Catholic Cemetery off Trent Avenue in Spokane Valley. Below, a grotto shrine on a hillside overlooking the old St. Joseph's Church and Cemetery features this small castle, a stone structure originally designed for small contemplative gatherings. The Spokesman-Review (Photos by J. BART RAYNIAK The Spokesman-Review)

Landmarks

» Landmarks features historic sites, buildings and monuments that often go unnoticed – signposts for our local history that tell a little bit about us and the region's development.

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1956.

"The only problem was that the mortar he used was not a good mixture, so the shrine area has not held up well to the weather," said Dennis Fairbank, executive director of the Catholic Cemeteries of Spokane, which took over management of the cemetery in 1992.

Over the years, the Knights of Columbus have come in and done renovation work on the area. This Saturday, George Czerwonka and a group of 20 Knights and a number of Boy Scouts will be on hand to repair the cross and install lighting, clean up some of the niches, remove brush, dig out old irrigation pipes, stabilize the walkway and stairs, paint the railing and clean out crumbling mortar and replace it.

"We haven't been here for eight years," Czerwonka said, "and we really should do this more often. But it is a good thing to do, as a way to give back to the church and to the community. Not just Catholics, but a lot of people from the Valley are buried here."

Fairbank said such Spokane Valley pioneering families are the Sweeneys, Blessings and Pringles are buried there – as is Henry Arbes and his family. And so are Czerwonka's in-laws, Eugene and Frances Beckvold.

It was Eugene Beckvold who was responsible for erecting the "rattlesnake" sign at the base of the pathway up to the grotto. The idea, Czerwonka said, was to, shall we say, encourage people to remain on the pathway and not scramble over the rocks.

Rattlers really aren't a problem, said Czerwonka, but he did once encounter a king snake when he was working on the wooden cross.

The idea was, and remains, according to Fairbank, to give the grotto more religious significance, to enhance it as an area for reflection and prayer.