

Padre of the Desert

By Margaret Phillips
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Byron and Walter Jo-Jo Hansen, nephews of Father Crowley, unveiled the monument dedicating Crowley lake in honor of the Desert Padre.

The desert country owes much to its padres -- Garces, Kino, Escalante, Salvatierra, Ugarte, Font -- these are just a few of the many robed knights of the church who blazed trails in the arid Southwest for the trapper, the gold-seeker and eventually the settlers who came to this region at a later date. But while we pay tribute to the Catholic fathers of the 17th and 18th centuries for the zeal and courage of their quest for souls, the heroic qualities they possessed still live in the hearts of succeeding generations and of today. Father Crowley, Padre of the Desert, who met an untimely death in 1940, deserves a niche in the same hall of honor as is occupied by those padres of an earlier period.

Gusts of gold and red aspen leaves sailed overhead, thick as early autumn snowflakes, and a sharp breeze ruffled the beautiful blue waters of the new lake. Two little boys quickly drew back the veil, revealing the stone monument dedicated to the memory of the Padre of the Desert.

If the spirit of the Padre looked down on the scene, he must have been deeply touched, for it was just such a ceremony as he himself might have planned. The Padre possessed a supreme sense of the dramatic and the

whimsical, and elements of both were to be found in the occasion, with Catholic, Jew and Gentile joining to do him honor.

When the very Rev. Monsignor John J. Crowley was killed in an auto accident very early in the morning on St. Patrick's day in 1940, his friends of the desert and mountains proposed to carry through to completion his plans for an All Souls Memorial chapel in Death Valley; but they wished to dedicate it to the memory of the Padre of the Desert. The plan was not approved by the Catholic Church. It would be unseemly to pay such tribute to any individual priest, his friends were given to understand. These friends set about to find other ways to perpetuate forever the name and memory of the Padre of the Desert.

When the City of Los Angeles named in his honor the huge new lake formed by impounding waters in Long Valley, it was a special tribute to a great man from a great antagonist. Once the representatives of the city had literally shaken a fist in the Padre's face, but he won from them respect and admiration. From his own people he won love.

Probably never before has any man come to our desert and in the space of a few years won tremendous love and devotion from a large and widespread group of people. If you try to learn the reason for this great love, everyone will give you a different answer, according to his own viewpoint, for Father Crowley possessed that universality as a person which Shakespeare possessed as a writer. He was always sincere, always himself, yet as much at home chatting with a blasphemous old stonemason in the desert as exchanging verbal daggers with Dr. Haines, chairman of the department of water and power of the City of Los Angeles.

Born among the storied lakes of Killarney in Ireland, John Joseph Crowley came to America as an immigrant boy of eleven, one of a large family with little means. He grew up in Massachusetts, attended Clark University, Holy Cross College and St. Mary's Seminary, Baltimore. Ordained for the priesthood in the diocese of Monterey, he served for a few months in 1919 as assistant in St. Agnes parish, Los Angeles.

Because he was so obviously fitted by disposition to make a fine husband and father, I once asked him if he missed the family he might have had. In his reply to this direct question, he gave the only admission of loneliness which I ever knew him to make.

"Yes," he said. "No man ever enters the priesthood without the consciousness of a great sacrifice. But if I had a family of my own, I could not possibly be 'Father' to everyone as I am now. I don't even dare to become intimate with any special friends, or some others of my people might feel that my attention was all taken up and that I had no time for their problems."

With a larger than ordinary capacity for love, he poured his affection on the great, austere, dramatic land of desert and mountains around Owens Valley. Even before he saw Inyo, he yearned toward it when he heard the call issued for a volunteer priest to go to this lonely and little known place in 1919. The county had never had a resident pastor and the four churches its priest would serve were spread over 10,000 square miles. Young Father Crowley accepted the call. Archbishop Cantwell informed the volunteer that he would not be allowed to stay more than two years, as it would make any man queer to stay more than two years in Inyo.

Little Santa Rosa Church in Lone Pine, his headquarters, threw up its spire toward Mt. Whitney, highest peak in the United States. Off to the east, and still in his parish, was Death Valley, lowest point in the nation. The extravagance of nature in putting such extremes into one parish was a constant delight to him, even when everything else was hard.

Irish courage and humor sustained him through the discouraging first days in the field. He had no rectory and "lived in his suitcase" he related, spending most of his days and many nights plowing through sand ruts in a Model T. Sometimes he had a cot in the backroom of one of the churches and sometimes he stayed in a hotel. Services were held alternately at Bishop, Lone Pine, Barstow and Randsburg.

When a permanent priest was placed at Barstow, Father Crowley was asked to return to Los Angeles as assistant to the Bishop of Los Angeles. He preferred to stick to the job he had chosen in Inyo. Every year he was urged to return to the city and each time he declined.

To take care of his large congregation in Bishop, he was authorized to build a new church. The week after it was completed, Los Angeles launched its buying campaign of 1923-24 in Owens Valley. As the ranches were bought by the city, their irrigation water was turned into the Los Angeles aqueduct. All Inyo would be turned back to desert, rumor said. Hundreds of families sold to the city and moved out, while others were ready to fight to stay on their lands. The Padre was deeply concerned over the problems of his people and the empty new churches, with their mortgages now hopeless of payment.

In 1924 Bishop MacGinley appointed him chancellor in Fresno, and he had no choice but to accept. For ten years he served there, winning great honor and recognition, but in 1933 he fell ill from overwork. For eight months he lay in the hospital.

Lying in his bed, he thought over the things that had happened to Inyo with the passing years. Desperate farmers had dynamited the aqueduct in 1927 without doing any good for the country. More and more people moved away, farms returned to the desert, and merchants went out of business. At the end of the buying campaign Los Angeles owned 80 per cent of the valley lands according to area, or 90 per cent according to tax valuation. Citizens saw no hope for home building in the future.

The churches which the Padre had built for Inyo had smaller congregations, debts as large as ever, and no prospects of paying them off. He longed to bring back people and welfare to the churches he had founded. Through the bedridden months, plans formulated in his mind. In 1934 Father Crowley was able to be up a bit, and for the sake of his health, he was allowed to choose the field in which he would work. A semi-invalid, he returned to the desert and recovered rapidly.

To bring prosperity and members to his churches, he had two aims, to make the people of Inyo realize that their scenery was now their greatest commercial asset, and to bring about co-operative relations with the City of Los Angeles. If the antagonistic neighbors could become friendly, perhaps Los Angeles would sell back some of its property in Owens Valley and the little desert towns could again become self-respecting, home-owning communities.

For a long time the Padre talked his problem over with Ralph Merritt, a close friend and a businessman with a brilliant mind. They planned a new organization for the county, to be made up of progressive and forward looking men from each town, men willing to forget the past and plan enthusiastically for the future. Twenty-one men organized as the Inyo Associates, formulated a definite program for community betterment and appointed a number of committees, including one for the improvement of relations with the City of Los Angeles. As representatives of this group, Father Crowley and Ralph Merritt appeared before the Los Angeles board of water and power.



The Padre was beloved for the whole-hearted manner in which he entered into the spirit of every event. When Lone Pine citizens dressed in old time garb for their Mt. Whitney - Death Valley celebration, the Padre found himself the garb of a priest of many years ago and wore his costume all during the week of the festivities.

"The very fact that the people sent their priest down made the board members sit up and take notice," Father Crowley smiled.

The Padre of the Desert was a modest man, but he knew the force of his own personality; and he enjoyed the confusion that his presence created at the board meeting. The board members were surprised by the stature of the man who had come up against them. When they attempted to pass the situation off by inviting the Padre to send them a definite statement, a written outline, of what he wanted, the priest drew from his pocket a well-formulated 13-point program, stating the exact requests of the people of Inyo. The interview closed with sharp words between the Padre and Dr. Haines, chairman of the board of water and power.

The board investigated the Inyo Associates and found them solid businessmen. It had been taken for granted in Los Angeles that all Owens Valleyans were dynamiters, just as it had been taken for granted in the valley that all Angelenos were dirty politicians.

Most important of the requests which Father Crowley presented for the Associates were two: that the city should appoint a single responsible representative to handle the board's affairs in Owens Valley so that matters would not be endlessly footballed from person to person and department to department, with promises broken all the way along; and that the city should sell back valley homes to private owners. A great deal of quiet work by Father Crowley and Ralph Merritt began to bear fruit in increased good will, especially as the personnel of the board changed.

In September, 1938, these activities culminated in a tour of the valley for members of the Los Angeles city council and the board of water and power, with a big dinner in the evening where the Los Angeles men could meet personally with the business men of the valley and learn at first hand of the needs of Inyo. The Padre's sense of the dramatic was at its best in playing up the striking and romantic possibilities of such a meeting. The dinner was held around a huge open campfire in the dusk, at Whitney Portal, with the towering rock walls outlined against a starry heaven and the scent of tall pines in the air.

The exchange of wary courtesies began to give way to genuine friendliness. One councilman rose and stated that he did not see why the people of Inyo should worry about purchasing houses when they had for a home the protection of these mountain walls and the beautiful dome of sky overhead. Just then the first drops of a rain shower began to fall.

"Because the roof leaks," the Padre was quick to reply, as pleased with nature's cooperation as if he had planned even this detail. The meeting adjourned to the parish hall in Lone Pine.

Late in 1938 the first deed was delivered in Big Pine for the sale of city-owned property back to a private owner. Only town properties were sold, no ranch lands, and the city retained the underground water rights; but this was sufficient to re-establish morale and make the beginnings of a new economic life. The Father could feel that his flock would be provided roofs that would not leak.

Claude H. VanNorman had been given complete charge of the valley affairs for the city and people found that they could depend upon the promises be made. Tax suits with which the county had been annoyed were dropped by the city. An amazing new spirit of cooperation developed.

But as in all good desert stories, the basic fight was for water. When the mushrooming City of Los Angeles was outgrowing its water supply, engineers felt that Los Angeles needed all the resources of the Owens River watershed to protect the city's million. Obviously, they also felt that the end justified the means.

For a long time some people had contended that building a dam across the mouth of Long Valley, north of Owens Valley, would insure an adequate supply of water for both Inyo and Los Angeles. Getting the dam built was essential to the Padre's plans. The city had voted the money and drawn the blueprints but no steps were taken to start the project. One night the city's chief engineer, attending an Inyo Associates meeting, attempted to walk out on a discussion of the dam. In a deadly serious joke, the Padre had the door locked and refused to let him go. Before that meeting adjourned, the city engineer not only pledged that the dam would be built, but he set the date for operations to begin. This is the dam, finished after the Padre's passing, which was named in his honor.



At his Fisherman's Mass, a special service held early in the morning on the opening Sunday fishing season, the Padre blessed the fishing tackle of Cathrine Byrne. Next in line is Aim Morhardt, Bishop teacher.

The Padre was supremely proud of the beauties of Inyo and its neighboring county, Mono. If the land could not be turned again to farms and orchards, he wanted to see it made into a playground for vacationers. Working as chairman of the businessmen's groups, he brought about the organization of a publicity association to tell the world of the country he loved so well. Only he could have brought together in harmony the various sectional groups, which had been bickering for as long as anyone could remember. To the people involved, it seemed a miracle to find themselves doing teamwork with neighbors who had always been quarrelsome rivals.

Calls for the Padre's time were more and more pressing. He was holding regular services in Inyokern, 68 miles south of Lane Pine; Death Valley, 105 miles east, 2nd Mammoth, 104 miles north. Each Sunday he read mass in both Lone Pine and Bishop, with additional regular services in Keeler. His was the largest parish in the United States, and he never failed an appointed service. Weekly he wrote a newspaper column, "Tumbleweed,"

followed as eagerly by the general public as by Catholics, for its wit and keen dramatic observation of human nature and of Inyo.

He was so sensitive to the remarkable features of the land that he never failed to see incidents which might cause others to notice the country that he loved so well. In 1936 he planned and managed almost single-handedly a ceremony to celebrate the completion of a new road connecting Mt. Whitney and Death Valley. A gourd of water taken by an Indian runner from Tulainyo, the nation's highest lake, was carried successively by burro, man, stage coach, auto, train and airplane and poured at last into Bad Water, Death Valley, in a "Wedding of the Waters."

As a prank, he gathered a photographer, a pretty girl, and several fishermen for fishing pictures on Owens lake, widely known to be so mineralized it cannot support fish life. The pictures included one of the Padre ready surreptitiously to apply a paddle to the rear of a bending fisherman. He took an altar boy and read mass in the shelter house on top of Mt. Whitney. When fishing season opened on Sunday, he arose to have mass before daylight so that the faithful could save their souls and still be on the streams by sunrise. For good measure, he blessed the fishing tackle that it might bring luck to the fishermen. He accompanied a photographic expedition into the mountains and read his prayer book as the horse joggled him over beautiful Sierra trails.

The warmth and wit and fantasy of all his Irish ancestors bubbled in him, disciplined by the severe training of the priesthood. A protestant friend, trying to describe his feeling for the Padre, said, "You know, generally, when I see a preacher coming, I'd rather cross the street than meet him. But Father Crowley was different. I liked to shake hands with him."

To have people worship God and at the same time be in communion with the inspiring handiwork of nature was his special ambition. He planned to erect the 14 stations of the cross, built as rest houses of native stone, for a pilgrimage from Death Valley to Mt. Whitney, symbolizing the ascent from hell to heaven. He had selected spots which gave the most magnificent views of desert and mountain. Some of his friends hope that this project may be carried out in his name.

In this spirit is a little monument of desert rocks, built beside the road where he died, by usually unemotional C.C.C. boys, as a spontaneous gesture of love.

Sometimes I sat in the quiet church and watched the Padre's heavy, rough, scuffed boots treading firmly under the black surplice as he recited the stations of the cross, his voice weary from many miles and many deeds. Again, in a crowded banquet room, I watched him sparkle, holding the group in the hollow of his hand, guiding them as he willed.

When I first came to Inyo and heard the Rt. Rev. John J. Crowley called "The Padre," I begrudged him the name. The padres belonged to a vanished race of giants, I felt. They were men of vision, empire builders, beings at the same time of the earthiest earth and the most sublime heavenly devotion. The title was a sacred one to which no man of our generation had the right.

As I came to know him, this man became in my heart, too, "The Padre."