

Tales of The Desert Padre: Fr. John J. Crowley '15

By William E. Webster '48

He gave his life to a barren desert valley that had been stripped of life by the Los Angeles irrigation system. In doing so, Fr. John Crowley '15 became a legend.



Alongside state Route 14 in the California high desert country, a stark memorial—a white, rust-stained cross made of plain metal pipe bearing the inscription, “Father John J.

Crowley”—rises from the arid, mesquite-covered plain some 23 miles north of Red Rock Canyon State Park. This simple memorial marks the location where Fr. Crowley died in 1940, killed while driving his ancient Ford along this lonely stretch of highway. A graduate of Holy Cross, his story is the stuff of legend.

My family had passed that simple memorial many times on our way to camping and fishing locales in the Eastern Sierra Nevada country. Further north, we had driven by Crowley Lake, which, I later learned, had been named for him.

A Catholic priest who served in the desert area in the 1920s and '30s, Fr. Crowley has been cited in the book, *Water and Power*, by William L. Kahrl, as one of the most influential advocates of tourism in an area desperately in need of economic development during the Depression years. The reference piqued my curiosity; later, while browsing in a bookstore in the Owens Valley, I discovered a book entitled, *Desert Padre*, by Joan Brooks and learned that Fr. Crowley was a graduate of Holy Cross. This discovery inspired me to learn more about this

wonderful man.

To appreciate the role Fr. Crowley would play in Owens Valley, one needs to understand the geography and history of this area situated between the Sierra Nevada Mountains to the west and the stark White and Inyo mountains to the east. Starting in the 1870s, early settlers trapped the Owens River to irrigate fields and orchards in the remote valley and created, for a short time, one of the most productive agricultural areas in California. That would change, however, when the gigantic irrigation projects diverted the water from the valley along 223 miles to Los Angeles, resulting in that city's phenomenal growth and the corresponding decline of the Owens Valley farms. (The incident is the subject of the movie *Chinatown*.) Before long, the verdant valley was returned to desert conditions where the vegetation consisted largely of greasewood and sagebrush. It was in this harsh environment that Fr. Crowley would live during his years of service to the area. With the demise of agriculture as an economic base, Fr. Crowley turned to tourism as a potential means of helping the valley residents survive. And it is to these efforts that he would devote the final six years of his life.

John J. Crowley was born on Dec. 8, 1891, in County Kerry, Ireland. His family emigrated to Worcester in 1903. Crowley entered Holy Cross in 1911 and became an active participant in college

life, contributing stories, essays and poems to *The Purple* and serving as the journal's editor in chief during his senior year. This literary flair would stay with him throughout his life as he wrote for various local and diocesan publications during his 22 years in California.

After graduating from Holy Cross, he entered the seminary in Baltimore, Md., with a reference from Rev. Joseph N. Dinand, S.J. Ordained in 1918 in Fall River, Mass., he left shortly after for Los Angeles, borrowing 50 dollars from his bishop to purchase his train ticket to the coast. He served briefly in two parishes before he volunteered, in 1919, to serve in a parish located in the desert region of four different counties—Mono, Inyo, Kern and San Bernadino. His initial parish covered 30,000 square miles, an area equal in size to all of Ireland. His northernmost church was in Bishop, 200 miles from its southern counterpart in Barstow. And in those years, this remote area had few paved roads. Driving between his scattered parish meant bouncing over gravel and sand. The parish contained both the lowest spot in the United States, Death Valley, and the highest, Mount Whitney. In his first 16 months, Fr. Crowley put over 50,000 miles on his Model T Ford. Adapting quickly to his new environment, he kept a sleeping bag in his car for emergencies and donned the uniform that would be his trademark: riding boots, khaki riding pants and a khaki shirt under which he wore his clerical collar.

After serving in this desert parish for five years, he became pastor of St. John's Cathedral, Fresno, in 1924. During this time, Fr. Crowley was instrumental in starting St. Columba's High School there; as part of a major diocesan fund-raiser, he arranged for Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig to appear in an exhibition baseball game.

Ten years later, Fr. Crowley returned to Eastern Sierra County and the Owens Valley. He was disheartened by what he found.

With the water supply diverted to Los Angeles, many of the region's residents had despaired and abandoned their farms and homes. With frightening speed, the Valley had turned from a thriving community into a sun-baked wasteland. The people that remained were embittered. Moved by the grief and poverty he encountered, Fr. Crowley made it his mission to try and save Owens Valley. It was a daunting undertaking.



Studying water-flow charts and the scandalous history of land acquisition by Los Angeles, Fr. Crowley became convinced that, had the Long Valley Dam been constructed in the correct location, there would have been enough water for both the city and the valley. He also realized that the only way to reverse the disaster was to unite the valley people. So, he made it his business to get to know every man, woman and child living in the Owens Valley, whether they were his parishioners or not.

As writer Irving Stone pointed out in a famous Saturday Evening Post article, "(Fr. Crowley) worked constantly for religious tolerance. Protestants forgave him for being a Catholic, and the Catholics forgave him for having so many Protestant friends. Somewhere along the line, the padre became The Padre, an understanding father to whom the frightened, the weary and the confused could come for comfort and help."

The desert padre began spending 16 hours a day in his battered jalopy, driving from town-to-town in an effort to unite the valley residents to regroup and rescue the community. Tourism, Fr. Crowley believed, was the answer. The region offered hunting, fishing, skiing and some of the most spectacular scenic views in the nation.

His parish was now mostly Inyo County. Each Sunday he would celebrate Mass in the county's two major towns, at 7:30 a.m. in Lone Pine, and then, at 10 a.m., in Bishop, a grueling drive of 60 rocky miles. His duties also included ministering to the tiny mining community of Keeler and the missions in Death Valley as well as serving as chaplain to the young men of the Civilian Conservation Corps. It was during this period that he wrote over 200 columns entitled, Sage and Tumbleweed, under the nom de plume, "Inyokel," a play on words both geographic and humorous. His stories appeared first in the diocesan paper in Fresno, and later, in the secular press, as their popularity grew. In this column, Fr. Crowley addressed an amazing variety of topics but always with humor and humanity. The pieces remain remarkably fresh and timely today.



The Crowley family at Father Fred Crowley's ordination in 1934.
L to R: (seated) Sister Petra, Sister Josephine, Sister Paula, Mrs. Nora Hansen.
L to R: (standing) Rev. John J. Crowley, Rev. Fred Crowley, Rev. Thomas Lyne (uncle from Ireland), Rev. George Crowley, S.J. and Frank M. Crowley. (Lou Pracchia photo)

During this time, the country between Lone Pine and Whitney Portal, the trail ascent of Mount Whitney, became a favorite location for Hollywood filmmaking. This area, known as the Alabama Hills, is familiar to filmgoers as the shooting location for Gunga Din, King of the Kyber Rifles and the

Hopalong Cassidy pictures. Fr. Crowley developed friendships with some of the most famous stars of the era. Cary Grant, Victor McLaglen and Douglas Fairbanks Jr. were his dinner companions during the filming of *Gunga Din*, but his very best friend was Mexican character actor Leo Carrillo, who shared with Fr. Crowley a great love of children.

As part of his ongoing efforts to publicize the Eastern Sierra as an ideal tourist location, Fr. Crowley organized an extravaganza in October 1937. The three-day celebration entitled, “The Wedding of the Waters,” commemorated the completion of a paved road from Death Valley to Whitney Portal, linking the lowest spot in the country to the highest—in the then 48-state nation. In a clever publicity move, Fr. Crowley filled a desert gourd with water from the highest lake in the country. The gourd was carried first by a Native American, then transported, on horseback, by one of the first men to climb Mount Whitney. Next it was taken in a stagecoach, driven by the descendant of an original stagecoach hand who was accompanied by the governor of California. The gourd was passed along to a covered-wagon driver who was a descendant of the ill-fated Donner Party, and then handed over to the engineer of a narrow-gauge railroad. After a short run on the rails, the gourd was passed to the driver of a new 1938 Lincoln Zephyr. At the end of this ride, President Roosevelt pressed a telegraph key that sent word of the celebration to the rest of the country. The Zephyr driver passed the gourd to a World War I combat pilot who flew to Death Valley where the gourd was emptied into Bad Water Sink, the lowest body of water in America. “The Wedding of the Waters” was featured in papers across the nation, bringing the publicity Fr. Crowley had sought. Recently, the Public Broadcasting Company’s Los Angeles affiliate sponsored a reenactment of the ceremony. The widow of Hopalong Cassidy was present for the activities.

Fr. Crowley was indefatigable in his efforts to attract tourists to the Owens Valley. Each year on opening day of trout season—which he managed to have declared a county holiday—he blessed fishing equipment. In another publicity effort, on Sept. 14, 1934, he climbed Mount Whitney and became the first priest to celebrate Mass on the summit. Pictures of the Mass appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*.

The priest’s flair for publicity paid off. Tourists began to flock to the valley, and the once-hostile residents began to welcome them. Using constant media pressure, Fr. Crowley finally secured a hearing with commissioners of Los Angeles regarding the plight of the Owens Valley. At one point, Fr. Crowley actually locked chief water engineer H.C. Van Norman in a meeting room until the exasperated engineer conceded to requests to build a new dam that would restore water to the impoverished desert.

While returning from a publicity trip to San Francisco in Sept. 1940, Fr. Crowley struck a steer that had wandered onto the highway. His car was forced into the path of an oncoming truck, and he was killed instantly.

When the new Long Valley Dam was completed, the reservoir it created was named Crowley Lake in honor of the desert priest. It remains a popular fishing spot today, attracting thousands of people each year for trout season. It is interesting to note that 60 years after his tragic accident, Fr. Crowley remains a legendary figure, recognized as the visionary leader who saw the potential for the region, and as a man of faith who dedicated his life to helping its inhabitants.

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