

“Brother Joseph and the Grotto”

By Cliff Vaughn

In April 1937, *The Commercial Appeal* in Memphis carried an article about “Little Jerusalem,” a collection of miniature buildings on the grounds of Saint Bernard Abbey in Cullman, Ala.

“Little Jerusalem” was its popular name, however. The four-acre park – containing a large artificial grotto surrounded by concrete, miniature structures like the Temple of Jerusalem and the Tower of Babel – was formally dedicated in 1934 as Ave Maria Grotto.

By 1937, Ave Maria Grotto was drawing thousands of visitors a year thanks to word of mouth and coverage like what appeared in the Memphis paper. And virtually every article about the attraction rightly highlighted the story of its creator, Brother Joseph Zoettl.

Brother Joseph was, like the structures he built, diminutive. Various accounts put him at 4’8” and 4’10”. When the lengthy article on Brother Joseph and Ave Maria Grotto ran in Memphis, the Benedictine monk was already 59 years old. But he was still seeing the world – and creating his own little world – from a child’s point of view.

Though he was being recognized in *The Commercial Appeal* as “the author of all this fragile beauty,” his road to such recognition was a difficult one.

Brother Joseph (born Michael Zoettl) was Bavarian, having come to the United States when he was 14 in 1892 via the newly opened Ellis Island. While still a youngster at the Benedictine monastery in the Alabama woods,

something became evident: He had a hunchback. Circumstances meant he would not be a priest-monk, but rather a lay brother. That meant manual labor and rigorous assignments both at the monastery and at various parishes through the southeast.

Brother Joseph eventually wound up running the new powerhouse at the abbey – a tough task that nevertheless gave him time to tinker. In 1918, his gift for building miniatures out of cement was revealed – but it would still be another 16 years before that gift, embedded in a remote corner of Alabama, became celebrated the world over.

“I give you my word there is nothing more naively beautiful on this continent than this grotto,” wrote T.H. Alexander in the Memphis article. “He is a master at blending and mixing colors, and his materials he has ground out of bits of glass and on an old coffee mill.”

Brother Joseph colored his cement and decorated his structures with all manner of recycled, found and donated materials: rosary beads, marbles, seashells, broken china plates, cold cream jars, fishing net buoys and so much more. The little man was not only a monk; he was also a folk artist with an astounding vision.

Brother Joseph continued to build until his health gave way. He fashioned his last structure, an impressive version of the Basilica of Lourdes, in 1958. He died in 1961, having built more than 125 miniatures, still there for the delight and contemplation of all.

They are the work of this “silent apostle,” so named because he was a man of few words. Shy and retiring, Brother Joseph never sought the glory we want to assign him. Grotto stories hold that Brother Joseph would duck behind a bush to avoid attention, or say he was only the gardener.

Brother Joseph used his hands, not his tongue, to let the kingdom of God break in and break forth for visitors to the abbey. He, in his own little way, still reminds us, and invites us, to become like little children.

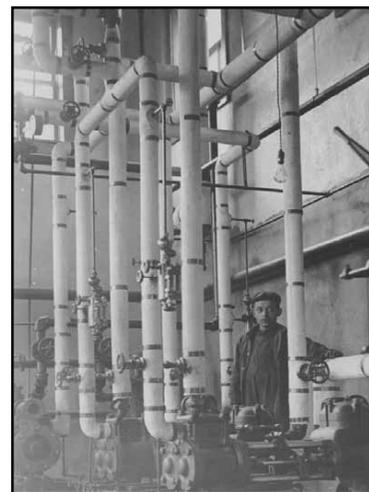
Cliff Vaughn is the writer-director of “Brother Joseph and the Grotto,” a new feature documentary on Brother Joseph Zoettl, creator of Ave Maria Grotto. More information is available at www.brotherjosephmovie.com.



An older Brother Joseph at his work desk. Note the photo of Saint Peter’s Basilica in the background. Brother Joseph made his miniatures based on photos, postcards and illustrations, having personally never seen the vast majority of the structures he reproduced. Courtesy Saint Bernard Abbey.



Brother Joseph’s miniature of the Carmel of Lisieux, home to Saint Theresse (the Little Flower), to whom Brother Joseph was particularly devoted. Courtesy Saint Bernard Abbey.



A younger Brother Joseph in the abbey powerhouse, which became his main work assignment in 1911. Courtesy Saint Bernard Abbey.



An archival photograph of Ave Maria Grotto, on the grounds of Saint Bernard Abbey in Cullman, Ala. Courtesy Saint Bernard Abbey.