

# The Grotto on the Mount Mercy University Campus







## William Lightner's Our Mother of Sorrows Grotto

Every now and then one man creates with his own hands and mind, something unusual, beautiful and expressive. Just such a construction is William Lightner's (Our Mother of Sorrows) grotto and shrine begun in 1929 and today donated to all who will see it. Mount Mercy has a great artist treasure.

Cedar Rapids Gazette, August 10, 1941



William Lightner's Our Mother of Sorrows Grotto is a rare remaining example of Iowa visionary architecture and of the early twentieth century Midwestern grotto tradition. Recognized by The National Register of Historic Places, The Smithsonian Institution, The National Endowment for the Arts and The Iowa Arts Council, the site continues to contribute to the University and Cedar Rapids community as well as to international academic scholarship on visionary art and architecture.

In 1929 William H. Lightner (1885-1968), a master builder, craftsman and artist, began his twelve-year odyssey designing and constructing the Our Mother of Sorrows Grotto and park. Lightner used his exceptional sense of design and sophisticated building techniques to create his personal vision in highly skilled stone inlay and Italian mosaic.

What began as a single structure built in homage to his conversion to Catholicism (after meeting his future wife, Catherine) and a response to a request by the Sisters of Mercy, became a multi-structure obsession. A focal point of the original complex was a monumental wall shrine containing mosaics of the seven sorrows of Christ's mother and an Italian marble statue of the Virgin Mary by noted sculptor Marcello Rebecchini. Radiating out from this monument, Lightner created two commanding Roman entry arches, an elaborate bridge, and a temple-like monument to the Ten Commandments, which he erected on an island in a lagoon. The bridge was intended to represent his personal crossing to faith. The Ten Commandments structure was the centerpiece of the Lagoon with each of the commandments inscribed on the base in mosaic.

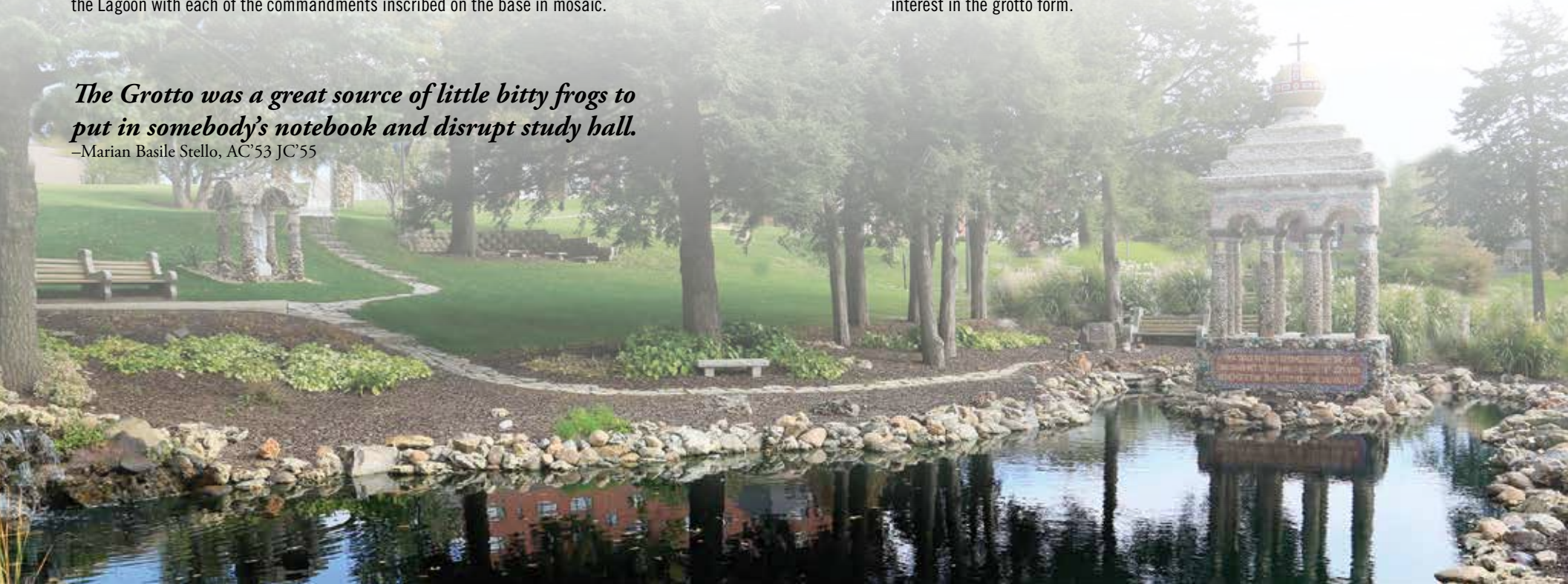
***The Grotto was a great source of little bitty frogs to  
put in somebody's notebook and disrupt study hall.***

—Marian Basile Stello, AC'53 JC'55

William Lightner's Our Mother of Sorrows Grotto was created in the tradition of such famed visionary art environments as Father Paul Dobberstein's Grotto of the Redemption in West Bend, Iowa, and Simon Rodia's Watts Towers in Los Angeles. Lightner was one of a handful of Midwestern artists, including both Dobberstein and Father Mathias Wernerus (Holy Ghost Shrine in Dickeyville, Wisconsin), who continued a centuries-old European tradition of creating environments for contemplation in and of nature. His is one of a few large grottos built to "transmit the prevailing spiritual beliefs in an atmosphere of supernatural beauty, a place for the spirit to be moved and stored." (Lisa Stone and Jim Zanzi, *Sacred Spaces and Other Places*, The Art Institute of Chicago Press, 1993)

These grotto environments were "... created to provide an unanticipated place for personal (or collective) reflection and enjoyment: to express a sense of historical time, and to enliven and sanctify a place by its presence. (Stone and Zanzi, *The Follies Journal*: No. 11, Winter 2011, UK)

In "Concrete Visions: The Midwestern Grotto Environment," Image File, 1990, Lisa Stone, Conservator at the School of The Art Institute of Chicago states that the re-introduction in the early twentieth century of concrete technology and availability of bagged concrete profoundly affected the landscape of the Midwest in two ways: the development of the skyscraper, in the form of grain elevators, and its sacred counterpart the Midwestern grotto environment, built as a result of a growing popular interest in the grotto form.





## Lightner

William H. Lightner traveled more than 40,000 miles throughout the United States and Mexico and contacted suppliers around the world in search of the more than 300 unusual varieties of stone and mosaic glass used in creating the Grotto structures. Over 1200 tons of stones were used, and his personal cost exceeded \$40,000 (in 1930s). The four structures remaining reveal Lightner's visionary sense of design, as well as providing a multitude of geological specimens, including coral from Hawaii, petrified wood, lapidolite, white quartz, blue azurite, and rose quartz from Colorado and the Black Hills of South Dakota.



Lightner was a respected architect, artist, and builder responsible for many outstanding buildings in Eastern Iowa including Warde Hall on the Mount Mercy Campus. A professional boxer and skilled carpenter early in life, Lightner went on to become a partner in his family's contracting business, Lightner Brothers' Construction, president of the Master Builders of Iowa and a presidential appointee to The National Building Standardization Committee during the 1950s. For Lightner, however, the multi-structure Our Mother of Sorrows Grotto became his life's work and his artistic masterpiece.



Since the 1930s, the Our Mother of Sorrows Grotto has been an integral part of the life of the Mound Farm Neighborhood and that of the Cedar Rapids community. From its beginning the Grotto's ten acres became a neighborhood gathering place and a picturesque setting for weddings and pageants. The Grotto drew 700 visitors a day during the Iowa State Centennial Celebrations when seven scenes from the state's history were reenacted there. Every year until the 1960s the annual May Crowning and Pageant was held on the site. In 1967 Time Magazine featured an image from that pageant in an article on Midwestern higher education.

After Lightner's death in 1968, the Grotto and Lagoon fell into ruin. Vandalism and the elements became more than the Sisters or the college could combat. Lightner had left no financial support to preserve his legacy. The Lagoon was drained and the large shrine razed in the early 1970s.

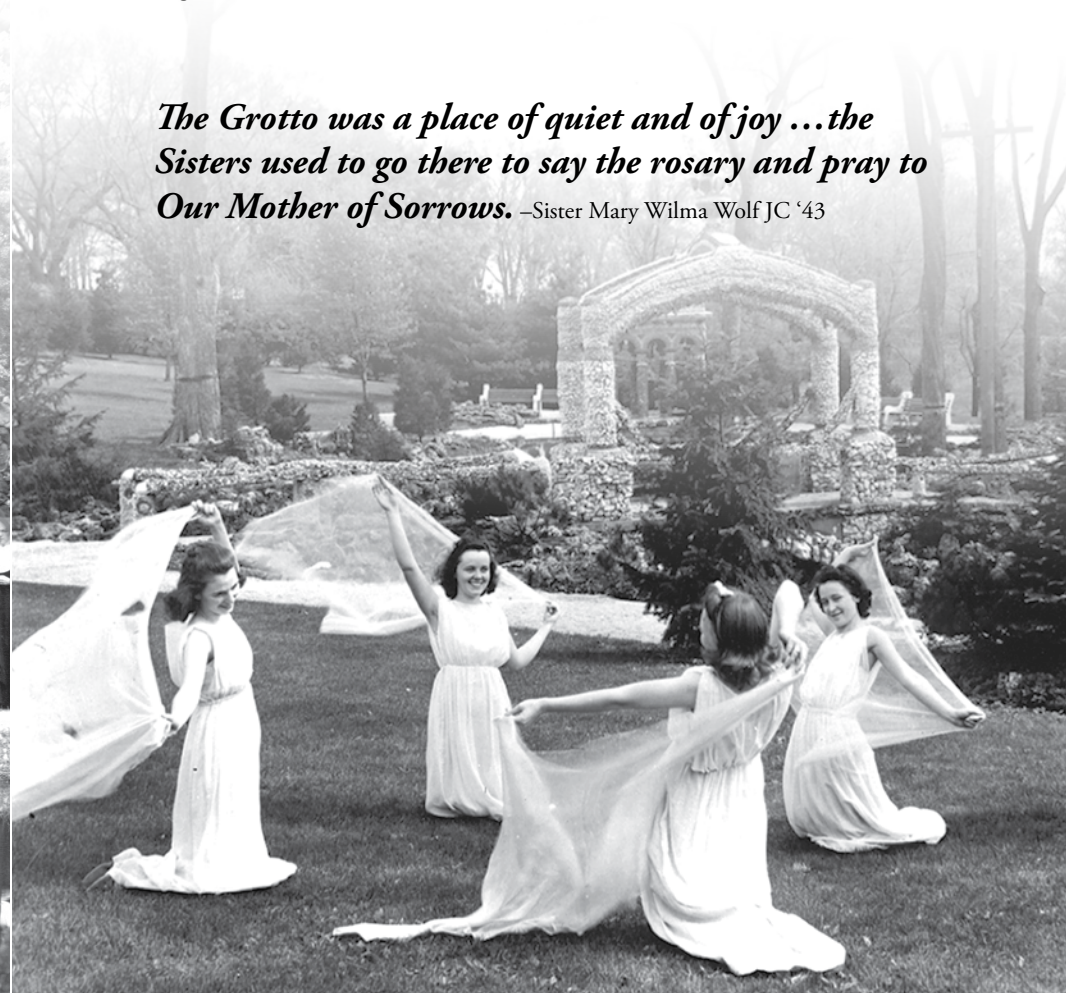
By the mid-70s the international art community began to recognize the value of a number of visionary environments built by untrained artists. Professor Jane Gilmore

came to the college in 1974 and took an interest in Lightner's work. Under the direction of the late Anton Rajer, an initial restoration project for the Grotto's four remaining structures was undertaken in 2001-02 with help from a \$10,000 matching grant from the Smithsonian Institution's American Heritage Preservation Save Outdoor Sculpture (S.O.S!) Initiative. Central to this project was the re-establishment of the Lagoon as a smaller pond and the re-installation of the Italian marble Virgin, giving visual unity to the site once again.

Mount Mercy University again received major restoration support in 2011 with a \$10,000 Iowa Arts Council Grant to restore the Warde Arch, and in 2012-14 with a \$30,000 National Endowment for the Arts ARTWORKS grant to complete further restoration of the remaining structures on the site. Under the direction of Conservators Don Howlett and Lisa Stone of Preservation Services, Inc. this project was completed in May 2014. In 2014 Our Mother of Sorrows Grotto was also added to the National Register of Historic Places.



*The Grotto was a place of quiet and of joy ... the Sisters used to go there to say the rosary and pray to Our Mother of Sorrows.* —Sister Mary Wilma Wolf JC '43







The Sisters of Mercy, who had already opened a hospital, a school for girls and a nursing school in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, in the late nineteenth century, purchased Mound Farm (then outside the city limits of Cedar Rapids) in 1906, a move that would lay the groundwork for Mount Mercy Academy and later the junior college, which was opened by the Sisters in 1928. Mount Mercy went on to become a four-year liberal arts college in 1960, co-ed in 1969, and a University in 2010. Mount Mercy University is now a Catholic university founded by the Sisters of Mercy and operated by an independent, non-denominational board of trustees. It is open to women and men of all beliefs in pursuit of baccalaureate and graduate education. Though the Grotto site is owned by the University, it is open to the public and has long been used as a neighborhood park.

Time and weather will continue to take their toll on the Grotto. We take our jobs as stewards of this important site seriously. Private funding is the primary source of support for the University's continued efforts in preserving the Grotto's historic and celebrated structures. As history tells, the preservation efforts have earned the support of many national organizations and countless alumni who have contributed their time and efforts to the ongoing cultivation and protection of the Grotto.

Grotto preservation is supported by a legacy fund from the late Ortha Harstad, the Friends of Our Mother of Sorrows Grotto, the MMU Art Club, the Sisters of Mercy and Mount Mercy University. Special thanks also to the Lightner family, the Cedar Valley Rock and Mineral society, and Rinderknecht Construction.

You may make a gift online at [www.mercy.edu/giving](http://www.mercy.edu/giving) or mail your contribution to: Office of Development and Alumni Relations, Attn: Grotto, 1330 Elmhurst Drive NE, Cedar Rapids, IA 52402-4797. For additional information call us at 319-368-6468.

Contributions may be designated to the Grotto Fund, or the J.J. Feld Grotto Reflecting Pool Maintenance Endowed Fund.

Thank you! Your support ensures this historic treasure lives on for future generations.



# MOUNT MERCY UNIVERSITY

The Mount Mercy University campus and the Our Mother of Sorrows Grotto are open to the public daily at no charge. For more information and bibliographies, archival images, films and community activities, visit [www.mtmercy.edu/grotto](http://www.mtmercy.edu/grotto).

Photographs by David Van Allen  
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