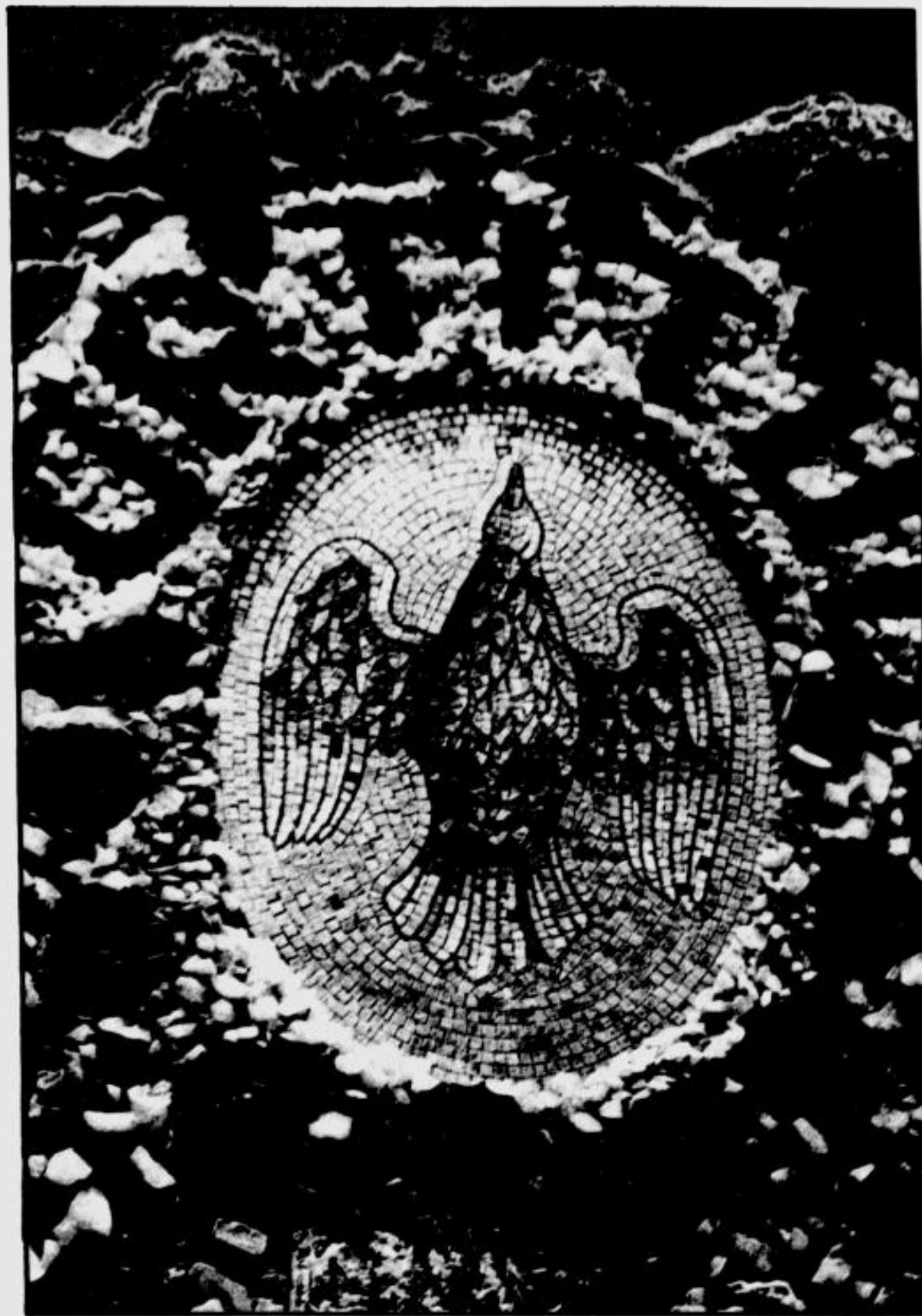


# The Grotto

*Fifty years ago the good people of Dickeyville dedicated their grotto, a mass of natural and man-made objects that fulfilled the promise and vision of their priest. Rocks of ages, they are.*







**DICKEYVILLE.**  
Wis. — Nobody who lives here seems to notice the Dickeyville Grotto anymore — proof enough that come Sunday, the creation of Rev. Mathias Wenerus will have graced this town for 50 years.

"It's so much a part of the town, it's just like another building," said Mary Kay Malloy, the Grotto's manager.

On the streets of Dickeyville about a dozen miles north of Dubuque, the locals come and go, and nobody gives the Grotto a second glance. Or a second thought for that matter.

"You'll have a hard time getting anybody to talk about it," said one fellow, knocking back a beer in Muller's Tavern. "It's there, and that's about it."

Grotto gawking in Dickeyville is left to the tourists. They drive through Dickeyville on their way someplace else, and the Grotto jumps out, all glittery and — well, everybody says you really have to see it.

There have been descriptions: A Shrine to God and Country. A Beautiful Experience.

It also has been described as the contents of a dime store run through a

cement mixer.

This latter description comes from those who have never heard the story of the priest who was trying to keep a promise.

"I guess the beauty of it is that anybody would have that much patience and love of God and country to be able to put that much into it," Malloy said.

Oh, it was a big job. The Grotto took 6,000 bags of cement and six or seven train carloads of stone, 30 tons to a car. It was all the work of Rev. Wenerus, who was pastor of the Holy Ghost Catholic Church next door. His incentive was The Promise, no less than a promise to God.

Art Weiderhold tells the story. Weiderhold is 83 now, and he lives in a Cuba City, Wis., nursing home. But back in 1925 when Wenerus started the Grotto, Weiderhold was his main helper.

The idea came up after the priest's brother, who lived in Germany, quit going to church. Wenerus promised that if God would bring his brother back to the fold, he would build the Grotto.

"He worked darn hard. I'll tell you that," Weiderhold said. "I put in a lot

of hours, too. I hauled many a rock and mixed many a bag of cement."

Wenerus molded the basic cement structure, then started looking for the special touches. He descended alone by rope into the dark, unexplored Crystal Caves of Iowa in search of stalagmites, stalactites, fossils and other odds and ends. He imported colorful glass, dishes and tiles by the barrel.

These things he sprinkled all over the Grotto. He formed flowers, crosses, flags and words like Joy, Charity, Chastity, Goodness, Modesty.

A promise to God is not to be taken lightly. Wenerus stopped working when he died.

"It's too bad or he would have done lots more," Weiderhold said. "He was going to put a glass roof over it. He was going to build another Grotto."

Wenerus died at 58, the year after the dedication on Sept. 14, 1930.

Now the tourists come and stand and stare, and the people of Dickeyville pass by without noticing. But Sunday, Sept. 14, 1980, they will stop again and note the Grotto at an outdoor mass.

And yes, when they gather at 10 a.m., they will remember the story of the priest who kept a promise.



Staff photos by  
Steve Gustafson,  
story by  
Jeff Woods