

This Week in Saratoga County History

Johnny Mancini: Hero of Ballston Lake

Submitted by Rick Reynolds July 31,2024

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Grotto built by Johnny Mancini

Have you seen the Grotto of the Redemption in West Bend, Iowa? It is a series of nine grottos depicting scenes in the life of Jesus and is believed to be the largest grotto in the world. The value of the rocks and minerals contained in this grotto is estimated to top \$4 million.

A grotto is a shrine, usually Catholic, that is built into and/or made from rocks. Grottos can be natural or man-made.

But, do you know that there's a grotto in Ballston Lake in upstate New York? Man-made; totally made from rocks; but certainly not at such a grand scale as the Iowa grotto. The story of this man-made masterpiece is a complicated one, it is the story of a boy's sickly childhood, a compassionate priest, a grateful man, and a tragic death.

Johnny Mancini was born on April 23,1919 in Ballston Lake NY, one of 3 children. He suffered from tuberculosis at an early age and the residual effects of that illness left him far weaker than a normal boy growing up. His parents must have realized that he needed help and, when he was 11 years old, decided to have him move into the home of the neighborhood parish priest, Father Daniel Hogan.

Father Hogan was a unique man who had founded the Our Lady of Grace Catholic parish, offering masses for the first couple of years at a nearby amusement park and in a local Ballston Lake home. By 1923, he had worked to build a church building in which to create a permanent Catholic community in Ballston Lake.

Before being ordained and while in school, Father Hogan starred in numerous sports and probably would have been offered a slot in major league baseball had he not decided to become a priest. But, his greatest love in sports was boxing and, in the basement of his new church, he started a boxing school to help wayward and sickly boys as they tried to find their way in a tough world. Johnny Mancini was one of those boys.

Father Hogan worked his boys hard. He trained them. He followed their academic progress. He taught them proper behaviors. He took them on trips to see the great boxers of the day. He had them perform their boxing skills in shows for the public. He also taught them to sing, something the boys did as part of their travelling boxing performances. It must have been an incredible experience, not only for Johnny, but for all the boys.

Johnny excelled at boxing. And he excelled in school. He was President of his class in both Junior and Senior years at the Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake School. Upon graduation, he entered Siena and there spent two years.

While living with Father Hogan, he began a project that, unwittingly, has become a lasting legacy to himself. At age 14, he started collecting cobblestones which he planned to fashion into a grotto on the church property. He worked on the project for three months, all under a tent, refusing to let anyone see it until it was complete. When finished and uncovered, there was a grotto on the grounds of the church, a grotto dedicated to Father Hogan, the man who had helped him recover. When asked about it years later, Father Hogan merely regretted having had the grotto built in a distant location from the church. If he had known that it would be such a work of art, he would have chosen a more prominent location on the grounds!

After building the grotto and while at Siena, Johnny developed an intense interest in flying. In 1939, the Siena Aviation Club created a Civil Aeronautics Training School and the boys in it began to learn all about flying. In the course of two years in which 5000 boys across the country took part in programs to learn to fly, 77 boys were trained at Siena. These boys, including Mancini, got their first learn-to-fly experiences at Albany Airport. (By the way, everyone participating in the program had to wear a parachute—just in case.) They all awaited the day when they were told to “take it up alone.”

Also, while at school, he inherited a sporty convertible, a 1927 Model T, from an elderly couple and he would drive it 45 minutes to and from school each day. People knew him because of the car he drove. When asked what’s the difference between his car and an airplane, his answer: “Very little. They both get me where I want to go.” A car and a plane, equal in his eyes.

On October 31, 1941, he, like so many others who were watching the world consumed by a major war, joined the Army Air Forces. Almost immediately, he started training to become a pilot and, by the next year, he was a pilot.

His task was to do photographic and visual searches in the Pacific region during the war and, by all accounts, he did them well. His flying abilities were exemplified by the fact that he was entrusted to fly Elliott Roosevelt, father of Eleanor and brother of Teddy, at times.

On April 22, 1943, one day before his 24th birthday, he took off from Guadalcanal in the Pacific Ocean during a time of thunderheads and squall lines in the area. He was piloting a Lockheed F5 Lightning plane, typically used for reconnaissance missions at the time. Unfortunately, he was never heard from again, listed as “missing in action,” and declared officially dead December 17, 1945.

Posthumously, he was awarded the Air Medal, bestowed on an individual for single acts of heroism, and the Purple Heart, presented in the name of the President for heroic acts during wartime.

His legacy: grit, determination, willingness to work for what he wanted. And desire to give back to those who helped him. Johnny advocated on behalf of Father Hogan and, in time, the Army named Hogan an “Honorary Member, Aviation Cadet Detachment” at the Army Flying School in Moore, Texas. Johnny thus honored his mentor. And, of course, Johnny also left us with the grotto which still stands proudly on the property adjacent to the current Ballston Lake Baptist Church, Ballston Lake, New York. The grotto is truly a tribute to Father Hogan and to Johnny Mancini himself.

Sources:

Draft Registration Card, Selective Service System

Siena News, 1940

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Various articles from the Saratogian, Times Union, Troy Times, all in a collection but undated
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