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Archdiocese
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REVIEW ON TAPE



July 18, 2008

Locally made documentary tells story of Florissant shrine

by Barbara Watkins, Review Staff Writer

Historic Old St. Ferdinand Shrine in Florissant is the subject of a documentary to be shown next week during the St. Louis Filmmakers Showcase.



Rebecca Venegoni Tower

FINAL TOUCHES — Preparing to go over the documentary 'American Pioneers,' before its upcoming debut in the St. Louis Filmmakers Showcase are, from left, Mike Algarda, key grip; Bill Bray, president of the Friends of Old St. Ferdinand Shrine; and filmmakers Bruce Marren and Leah Gantz. 'American Pioneers,' the story of Old St. Ferdinand Shrine in Florissant, will be shown Wednesday, July 23, at the Tivoli Theatre in University City.

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"American Pioneers," the story of the people who founded and sustained Old St. Ferdinand Shrine, will be shown Wednesday, July 23, at the Tivoli Theatre in University City.

The 35-minute documentary was made by two local artists, Bruce Marren, a freelance film and video producer, and Leah Gantz, a



creative-arts coordinator.

"The shrine is so unique and historic, it just seemed like a well-kept secret," said Marren, a member of St. Ambrose Parish on the Hill. "We thought it would make a great documentary."

Mark Kempf

A LOOK AT THE PAST — A group of re-enactors portray a scene from the early history of Old St. Ferdinand Shrine in Florissant during a presentation last year. Similar scenes are part of the documentary, 'American Pioneers,' the story of Old St. Ferdinand Shrine, to be shown during the upcoming St. Louis Filmmakers Showcase.

The shrine, listed on the National Registry of Historic Places, is the oldest standing church in the Louisiana Purchase Territory, dating from 1821. Both St. Rose Philippine Duchesne and Jesuit Father Peter DeSmet served there. Its site in Florissant is one of the earliest European settlements west of the Mississippi River.

"American Pioneers" is part of a film festival double bill with another Catholic-themed documentary, "That All May Be One," a film about the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet.

The double feature begins at 5 p.m. with "That All May Be One" (54 minutes long), followed by "American Pioneers."

Marren and Gantz had worked together previously on a documentary about Gaslight Square, the old St. Louis entertainment district. They learned about the shrine while researching that documentary, when they were told the crystal chandeliers installed in the shrine in a 1966 restoration were made by a firm from Gaslight Square.

"We talked to Bill Bray (president of the Friends of Old St. Ferdinand Shrine) and realized that the shrine would make a great documentary," Marren said.

"The first step in this kind of project is to write a grant," said Gantz. That process took about a year. "We submitted the grant to CALOP (The Commission for Access and Local Original Programming), which had given us a grant for the Gaslight Square documentary."

After several months, CALOP gave them a grant for the shrine project. The filmmakers also received some private donations. They soon got to work.

Life in women's, men's religious communities is basis of two films

In addition to "American Pioneers," the story of Old St. Ferdinand Shrine, the upcoming St. Louis Filmmakers Showcase at the Tivoli Theatre in University City features two other documentaries with a Catholic theme.

Sharing double-billing with "American Pioneers" at 5 p.m. Wednesday, July 23, is "That All May Be One," the story of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet.

"That All May Be One" was written, directed and produced by Karen Kearns, associate dean of arts, media and communication at California State University-Northridge. The film is 54 minutes long.

In her director's statement, Kearns said she was inspired by a newspaper article about the declining number of religious sisters.

"I was able to secure approval to shoot the documentary because of families ties," said Kearns, who is

"We wanted to let people know about the shrine and its enormous history," said Gantz.

Marren directed and edited the film and did a lot of the videography. Gantz was the principal writer.

To tell the shrine's story, Marren and Gantz turned to area Catholics with a vast knowledge of the shrine's history.

That included Bray, of the Friends of Old St. Ferdinand Shrine; Jesuit Father William Barnaby Faherty, historian and author; Sister Margaret Munch, historian of the Religious of the Sacred Heart, the order of St. Rose Philippine Duchesne; Sister Maureen Glavin, also a member of the Religious of the Sacred Heart and head of school of the Academy of the Sacred Heart in St. Charles, the school begun by St. Rose Philippine Duchesne; and Mary Keeven, tour guide at Old St. Ferdinand Shrine.

Also interviewed in the film is Robert Carriker, history professor at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Wash., and an authority on Father DeSmet. Carriker is a St. Louis native, a 1958 graduate of Bishop DuBourg High School and later St. Louis University.

Bray, who has been a volunteer at the shrine since 1978, called the film a wonderful idea.

"Old St. Ferdinand Shrine is the oldest standing church of any denomination between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains," Bray said. "We're hoping to keep the shrine going ad infinitum. Hopefully, 200 years from now people will still be appreciating it."

Bray explained that the archdiocese deeded the shrine over to the Friends of

the cousin of Sister Joan Lampton, a local member of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet.

"The (Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet) order is particularly fascinating because the nuns decided to renovate their 1840 motherhouse on the bluffs of the Mississippi River rather than raze or abandon it. This remarkable decision represents the nuns' commitment to their dear neighbors and their ruling dictum, 'That All May be One,' taken from St. John's Gospel," Kearns explained in her director's statement. Kearns said, "I'm honored they allowed me to tell their story."

Also showing during the filmmakers' event is "St. Benedict's Rule," a 75-minute documentary about Conception Abbey in Conception, in Northwest Missouri.

"St. Benedict's Rule" will be shown at 2:15 p.m. Sunday, July 20.

Jay L. Kanzler Jr., director of "St. Benedict's Rule" and an Episcopal priest, said "The film is a documentary first and foremost about monastic life: What is a monk, why do men become monks, what is the life of a monk? The monks of Conception Abbey are wonderfully faithful, honest, interesting and, at times, very humorous."

"St. Benedict's Rule" also deals with a tragedy at the abbey, a shooting in June 2002 that left three people dead — two monks and the shooter, a 71-year-old man — and two others wounded. Kanzler said, "My focus is not to sensationalize the tragedy but rather to show how the monks were affected by the tragedy. Was their faith challenged? Were the victims angry? What was the overall impact on the community? The answers were insightful and sometimes surprising."

Tickets for film festival presentations are \$10 each, \$8 for students, at the Tivoli box office, 6350 Delmar Blvd. in University City, or online at tickets.landmarktheatres.com.

Old St. Ferdinand Shrine in 1978. "We Barbara Watkins have four acres of ground and buildings. We own, maintain and preserve it. We have people of all denominations visit. Everyone appreciates it."

The film calls the Friends of Old St. Ferdinand Shrine "new pioneers" who stepped in to save the historic church.

The documentary is built around a narrative and interviews with the various experts. It illustrates the story with actors in period costume re-enacting key scenes in the history of the shrine. Some of the actors are members of Living History Re-Enactors Inc.; some are friends and relatives of the filmmakers.

Sister Margaret and Sister Maureen were particularly interested in the shrine's connection with St. Rose Philippine Duchesne, called in the film "an inspiration to all."

Sister Margaret said, "Many people in the archdiocese don't even know that much about her. Her life was on fire to spread the love of the heart of Jesus. Zeal was one of the qualities she was noted for."

Bray, who fittingly is a member of St. Rose Philippine Duchesne Parish in Florissant, said, "She lived longer at the shrine than any other place here."

Sister Maureen called the documentary "a labor of love." And Bray said, "They did a fantastic job — even the title, 'American Pioneers.'"

After "American Pioneers" debuts July 23 in the film festival, it will be shown on HEC-TV, an educational channel on Charter Cable.

"That's a requirement of the CALOP grant," Gantz explained. "HEC-TV has exclusive rights for three months. After that we can do what we want."

Bray said he would love to see copies available for local schools.

Tickets are \$10 each, \$8 for students, at the Tivoli box office, 6350 Delmar Blvd. in University City, or online at tickets.landmarktheatres.com.

For more information, call Chris Clark, director of Cinema St. Louis, at (314) 289-4152.



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