

Nov. 29, 1998----

RAYMOND, Ill. A guiding light blesses all who travel Interstate 55 in southern Illinois this holiday season. It comes from a statue of the Virgin Mary at the edge of a wheat farm on a west frontage road. The Our Lady of the Highway Shrine is a life-size marble figurine imported from Carrara, Italy.

Next year marks the 40th anniversary of the shrine.

The inscription reads:

Mary Loving Mother of Jesus/Protect us on the highway.

Retired farmer Francis Marten has maintained the shrine since it was installed in 1959 along old Route 66, between exits 72 and 63. The statue cost \$400. A cobblestone walkway and a wooden grotto were built with \$600 worth of donations.

Marten has been steadfast in his commitment to the roadside shrine. It is what he does, it is part of what he always will be. Any other reasons for his devotion remain veiled in a certain darkness.

Visitors can't purchase Our Lady of the Highway Shrine postcards, T-shirts or shot glasses. After gentle persuasion, Marten might accept a donation, although he said he has never received anything more than a \$10 bill.

Marten turned 85 on Nov. 8. He is in failing health.

"I don't like people making a big deal out of me," said Marten, as he sat in a recliner in the living room of his home, directly north of the shrine. Wearing faded blue overalls, he looked out the front window at the 1930, 1950 and 1970 stretches of Route 66 and continued, "I was born on a farm, I've lived here all my life and I don't have many years left. I'll die here."

Carl Marten, 44, is the youngest of Francis and Ruth Marten's eight children. Ruth died in 1985. They were married 47 years. Carl helps farm his parents' property with his brother Lee. Carl and his wife, Marlene, will take over operation of the shrine after his father passes over.

"My dad still pays the bills," said Carl, standing in front of the statue on a brisk afternoon, a few days before his father's birthday. "He pays the spotlights that kick on at night, the light bulbs and the electric bill. He had it landscaped six or seven years ago."

"And there's one man from St. Louis who drives to Springfield once a month. He puts fresh flowers on the shrine when he comes by." In the summer, hollyhocks blossom and grow 4 feet high at the base of the shrine.

The shrine was installed by the Litchfield Deanery Catholic Youth Council. Marten's daughter Loretta belonged to the group. Her father gave the CYC permission to install the shrine on his property.

At the same time the shrine was installed Francis put up a dozen Burma-Shave influenced Hail Mary signs along a 1/8 of a mile border of his farm. Traveling south they read: "Hail Mary" . . . "Full of Grace" . . . "The Lord is with thee . . ." When I-55 was built in 1970, the state tried to make him take down the signs. They failed. "It wasn't state property," Francis said. "We even had it surveyed. It was our property. Those signs were in the right place."

Carl has no indication if the Our Lady of the Highway Shrine has actually brought good fortune to travelers. Carl recalled, "There was a guy who said 'Hail Mary' prayers as he drove by. It's just to make somebody think about God. The bishop of Springfield has been by it hundreds of times.

"For several years in May (the month of Mary), we would have a pilgrimage. People would come here on a Sunday. They'd walk down the highway and pray a rosary along the way. They would finish the rosary in front of the shrine and say a few more prayers. Now we get people from other states and nations because of the Route 66 associations." The Martens' guest book has signatures from Los Angeles; Sydney, Australia, and Salt Lake City, Utah.

In January, Pope John Paul will visit St. Louis, an hour away from the Our Lady of the Highway Shrine. Could he? Might he?

"I doubt it," Carl laughed. "It would be great if we could pull that off. Get the Popemobile going down Route 66 . . ." His voice trailed off. His father listened with a satisfied smile. Sometimes the strongest light comes from within.

CHICKEN LITTLE: Robert Hastert Jr. was remembering his father during a recent conversation in the stable-like dining room of the White Fence Farm restaurant on Joliet Road in Lemont when the topic turned to the farm's secret chicken recipe. His father died of cancer on Oct. 22. He was 83. Robert Hastert Sr. purchased the roadside restaurant off old Route 66 in 1954.

We just about got Hastert to disclose the farm's legendary mildly spiced, light crispy crust recipe.

"My dad was in the poultry business in Aurora," said Hastert, 62. "I used to deliver

chicken even before I had a driver's license. I drove a chicken truck around, many times to a place called the Chicken Joint, which in the late 1940s was one of the first fast-food operations there ever was.

"I'd see this pressure cooker, like your grandmother had - a round pot with a spigot on the top. When it got hot enough, the steam would come out of the spigot. So I'd watch this kid - and he was a kid - flour the chicken, put it in the pressure cooker, cook it, take it out, put it in the cooler and when somebody ordered it, they'd fry it." In the old days, chicken shacks used fattening lard. Today the White Fence Farm uses a clear canola oil, with no fat and no grease.

Hastert continued, "My dad bought the Harmony House (restaurant in Aurora) and he didn't know what he was going to serve, and I told him about the chicken. He was impressed. I went over and gave the kid \$200 and asked if he would work for us for a week. So he came over and taught me and the other cooks how to do the chicken."