



A group of faithful form a candlelight procession around the shrine to the Virgin Mary in South Oakland.

Traffic noise doesn't interrupt serenity of neighborhood shrine

By Malt Walcott

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The endless stream of commuters whizzing by on the Parkway East have no idea they are passing what some consider to be the site of a miracle.

Even the Rev. Peter Debo, who, on a recent Friday, said Mass at the site during the Feast of the Assumption, didn't know about it until he was asked to attend the service.

"I always pass here when I go to Duquesne, where I study, but I never knew there was a shrine here," Debo said.

Yet, within view of Downtown, faithful Catholics from miles around gather to find solace and hope at a shrine to the Virgin Mary in South Oakland.

Unlike the massive shrines of Lourdes and Fatima marking appearances of Mary, the South Oakland shrine's beauty is its simplicity.

The original shrine, a 2-foot sculpture of Mary adorned with flowers, has been supplemented with crosses marking the Stations of the Cross, a brick altar with a crucifix for Masses and a wooden structure for devotions to a Polish nun who is said to have had her own vision of Mary.

The twists and hills of Pittsburgh's streets hide the shrine well. To find it, you have to turn onto Wakefield Street, a one-way brick street, get out of your car, walk down a wooden walkway and go through a gate.

Only then does the little garden appear.

The site overlooks the parkway just before the Bates Street exit on the inbound side.

In winter, when the leaves have fallen from the trees, worshippers have unobstructed views of Downtown, the South Side and the Birmingham Bridge.

The location has its down side: All the traffic can make it hard to hold a conversation, be it with God or man.

Bill Strathman, 50, of Upper St. Clair, who played the music and led the singing at the Feast of Assumption Mass, said the cars made his job difficult.

"This is the hardest outdoors in the world," he said. "With the noise, you can't hear anything."

But worshippers say the noise doesn't bother them.

"If you're sad about something, it's so peaceful," said Mary DiMatteo, 69, of Oakland. "All I have to do is look at the Blessed Mother and talk to her and I feel better."

How South Oakland became a destination for pilgrims from across the region is not quite clear.

According to one version of the story, a South Oakland woman, perhaps named Sophie Toma, saw a vision of the Virgin Mary in her bedroom in the 1950s. Toma later erected a shrine in a schoolyard, but Mary told Toma to move it to a house at 6 Wakefield St.

Around the same time, according to the story, a steelworker at the old Jones & Laughlin works on

Second Avenue saw his own vision of Mary on the cliff above what is now the parkway during his lunch hour.

Together, he and Toma traveled to South Oakland, only to find the house at 6 Wakefield St. had been demolished.

The man recognized the site where he saw his vision, which was just below 10 Wakefield, and as Toma went to examine it, she waited for a sign from Mary. There, according to the story, she got stuck in a mud puddle and placed the shrine at that location, inscribing it with the date "11-22-1956."

"Whether the Blessed Mother appeared here or didn't, that's not really critical, not really important," said one visitor, Marty Marek, 35, of Bethel Park. "This place is a place where people come to pray to God and pray in peace."

That was not the only miracle said to have taken place at the site.

DiMatteo said that about 30 years ago, when visiting Sophie McMurtry, who then maintained the shrine, she noticed the sun's rays reflecting off a nook in the cliff.

There, McMurtry found a silver rosary of unknown origin, which is now used at the annual Mass.

Another time, recounted Marek, after visitors began to adorn the shrine with flowers, "Sophie said we have to have water to water the plants, dear Lord."

Lo and behold, like the rock that quenched the Israelites in the desert, McMurtry noticed a tiny stream trickling out of the cliff just

west of the shrine, Marek said.

Volunteers now use the brook to water the flowers that Josephine DeNardo of Oakland arranges there.

McMurtry lived in Swissvale and every week for decades, without exception, until her death last year she took two buses to the South Oakland shrine.

Several of those attending a recent Mass brought their own stories of dreams, apparitions and miracles.

Three times in 1990, Jim Gallagher of Carrick, dreamt of a shrine of the Virgin Mary, and in visiting three such shrines never found the one from his dream.

Then, at a celebration in a local church commemorating the appearance of the Virgin Mary at a site in Bosnia, "two women I never saw before walked up to me and said 'Did you ever go to the shrine in Oakland?'" said Gallagher, 74. "I felt I had to go, and I've been coming ever since."

In addition to the annual Mass for the Feast of the Assumption, worshippers gather to say the rosary on the 22nd of every month to mark the anniversary of the shrine's establishment.

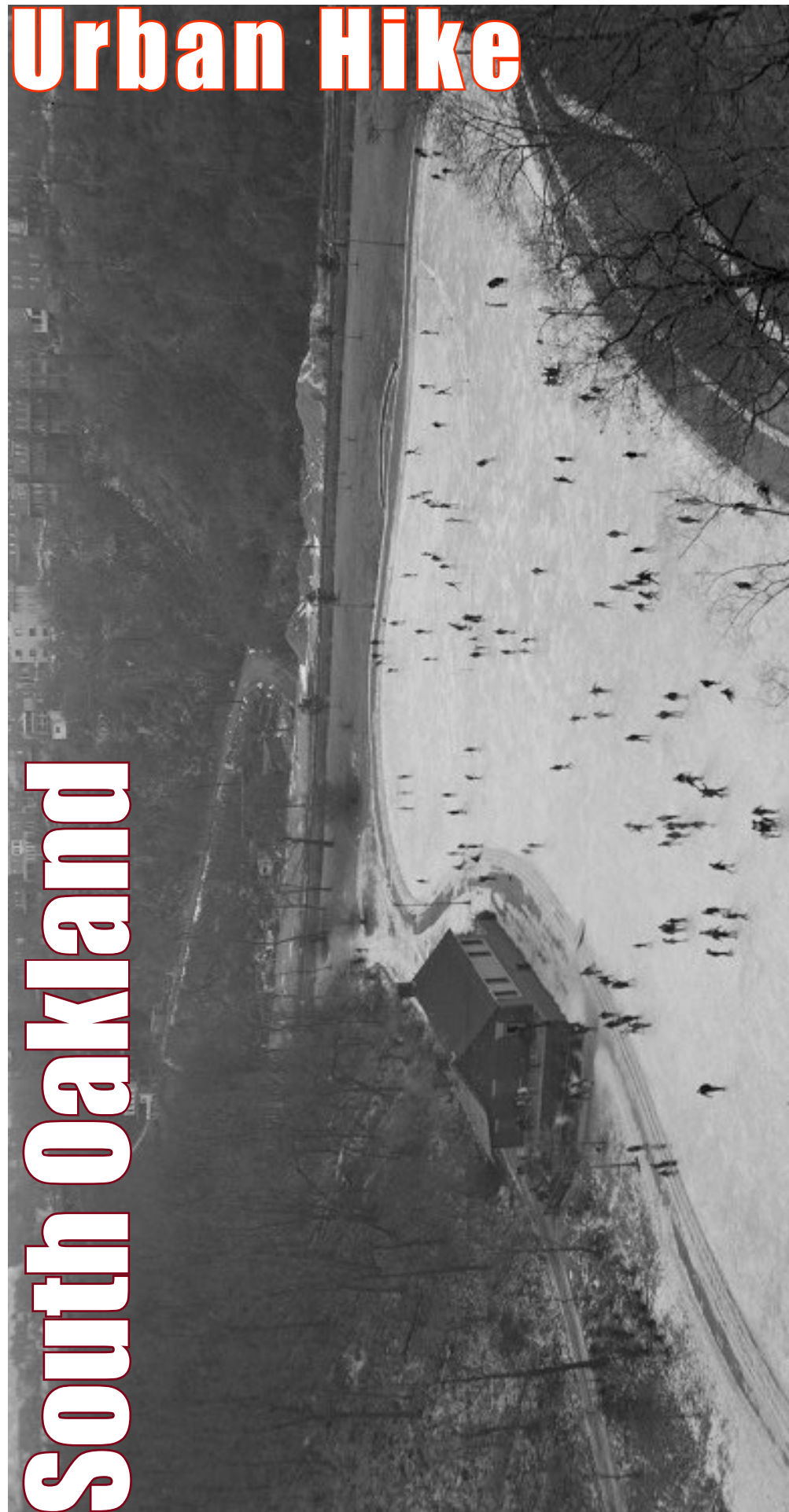
South Oakland residents, in an informal network, take turns cleaning the shrine.

It is never vandalized, residents say.

"I think God takes care of it," said Yolanda Samartini, a neighborhood resident. "We just give him a hand."

Urban Hike

South Oakland



South Oakland

