

A shrine at Blessed Kateri's home

By Richard B. Scheiber

The spirit of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha hovers over upstate New York in many places. St. Lucy's parish in Syracuse has long been the traditional parish for Native Americans of the area, and to the east you'll find the spots where Kateri was born, and where she was baptized and lived nearly half her brief, saintly life.

The village of Fonda, a little more than halfway between Syracuse and Albany snuggles on the north bank of the Mohawk river. Across the Mohawk, at Auriesville looms the well-known Shrine to the North American Martyrs, near where the Lily of the Mohawks was born in 1656.

But in 1666 a French and Indian war party from Canada burned all the Mohawk Indian castles on the Auriesville side of the river and the survivors, including the orphaned Kateri, who lived with her paternal uncle (her parents and brother died in a small-pox epidemic) moved their castles, or villages to the Fonda side.

It was here Kateri was baptized in 1676 and it was here, in the village of Caughnawaga where she lived for 10 years until, persecuted for her faith, she fled to Kahnawake, Canada, where she became the first American Indian to take a vow of perpetual chastity. She died there in 1680 at the age of 24.

The place where Kateri lived for so much of her life, Caughnawaga, near Fonda has been marked since 1938 by the Fonda Memorial of Catherine Tekakwitha. The village site was discovered in 1950, a Holy Year, by Father Thomas Grassman, a Conventual Franciscan priest and founder of the shrine. In that year, Father Grassman unearthed the post-molds where the stockade around the Indian settlement at Fonda had been, and between then and 1957, with the help of numerous volunteers excavated the rest of the site. Today, it is the only completely excavated Iroquois Indian village in the country.

Visitors to the village, which sits on a hill above the Mohawk-Caughnawaga museum and the shrine chapel, can see



The shrine to Blessed Kateri located at Fonda, NY.

clearly the outlines of the twelve long-houses and stockade which existed there 300 years ago.

The museum and chapel are located a quarter mile west of Fonda, housed in a 200-year-old barn renovated in 1938 under Father Grassman's direction. The upper floor of the building holds the chapel of St. Peter's, commemorating the chapel in which Blessed Kateri was baptized, and the lower floor museum features an impressive display of Amerindian artifacts from all the Americas, but particularly from the Iroquois country.

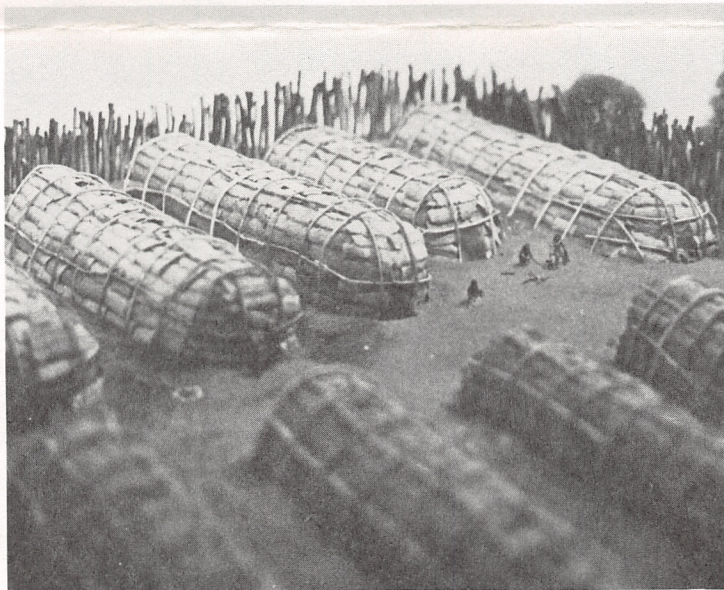
Director of the Shrine today is Father Nicholas Weiss, OFM, Conv. who served at Syracuse Assumption parish from 1967 to 1969. According to Father Weiss, The Franciscans took over the shrine grounds in 1938, 12 years prior to the first excavation efforts at the village on the hill. Father Grassman was the first director, and it was he who saw to the shrine's growth until his death in 1970.

Latest addition to the grounds is a bell tower near the chapel and museum, dedicated earlier this year by Bishop Howard Hubbard of Albany.

Though the Tekakwitha location has a long history, it was not actually a shrine to the Indian maiden until 1980 when Kateri was declared Blessed by Pope John Paul II on June 22. Only then could she officially be venerated. Blessed Kateri is patroness of peace and ecology.

October 30 closes the shrine's 1983 season, which will open again with Mass on Saturday, April 30, 1984. For further information, contact Father Weiss at the Fonda Kateri Shrine, P.O. Box 627, Fonda, NY 12068.

Credit: The Catholic Sun Syracuse, N.Y.



At left, a model of how the Indian village looked during Kateri's lifetime, and at left, the site as it appears today.