

(HISTORY PAGE)



St. Benedict's Monastery

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Nestled amongst the giant spruce trees at the foot of Flat Top mountain, where Lime Creek empties from the Elk Range into the upper meadows of Capitol Creek Valley, rests St. Benedict's Monastery.

It is a secluded and silent sanctuary, home to a community of Cistercian (Trappist) monks, whose life is devoted to prayer and the manual labor needed to sustain their community's needs. "In our Cistercian community relationships we become the presence of Christ for one another", said former Abbot Fr. Joseph Boyle.



The lineage of St. Benedict's goes back to the Middle Ages, 1098, when the first Cistercian Abbey, Citeaux Abbey, was built in central France. During the Protestant Reformation and the French Revolution many monasteries were closed, confiscated, and the monks and nuns dispersed. The Trappist monks, from La Trappe, France, (of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance) sought refuge first in Switzerland, then Russia, back to France, and then to North America. After an 11 year struggle in Nova Scotia they returned to France, except for one monk, Fr. Vincent de Paul Merle, who founded Petit Clairvaux in Nova Scotia. In 1900, the community moved to Providence, R.I. on the Solemnity of St. Benedict and founded "Our Lady of the Valley". But in 1950 a fire destroyed the monastery and so the community, then 140 monks, founded a new home in Spencer, MA, where they established St. Joseph's Abbey.

Following WWII, there was a swelling number of vocations filling the Catholic religious orders in the U.S., and St. Joseph's Abbey had a large and growing number of monks. So they began the search for a suitable place to build a new monastery of their Order in the west, with enough land to ranch and a few hundred head of cattle, which could provide the means for being, as far as possible, a self-supporting community.

In March 1954 the search party from St. Joseph's looked at land in the Snowmass area. However there was a private road that crossed over the

ranch land, so that was a problem. They also considered a grape-producing piece of land in the Napa Valley, but that proved to be too close to another proposed Cistercian monastery. Then in October, 1955, Dom Edmund Futterer, Abbot of St. Joseph's, again sent monks to look at the Snowmass land because that private road, belonging to the Slaten family, was now for sale.

In early February, 1956, the purchase was made. Most of the 3,100 acre site was owned by Gordon and Lena LaMoy, who had raised four children and 343 head of cattle on the ranch. Additional acreage on the mesa across the road was bought from the Maurin family for growing hay for the cattle. Soon other parcels were added – the Gobo Ranch and the Gates Ranch.

The main ranch house and barn in which the LaMoy family had lived and worked, and which are still in use today, were built in 1907 by Charles J. Hart. The fine detailing of the brick and window trim on the house and the master craftsmanship in the structure of the barn are noteworthy for their excellence.



Winfield and Cecil LaMoy had come from Gunnison in 1945 and bought the Hart ranch. There they raised their two sons Gordon and Danny. Gordon met Lena at a high school dance in Basalt. Lena had grown up on a ranch in Woody Creek where her grandfather, from Italy, had settled and where Lena's parents had ranched growing potatoes, hay, cattle and chickens. Lena and Gordon married and raised their family in the Hart ranch house, but in 1956 they were ready to sell.

The monks who came out from Spencer in February, 1956 to start the new community, who knew next to nothing about ranching, first stayed in the old Capitol Creek Upper Schoolhouse before moving into the ranch house.

They now had over 40 miles of ditches to maintain, 600 acres of pasture land to irrigate plus 600 acres of hayfields and 343 head of beef cattle to feed with a horse-pulled wagon - all at a high altitude. They soon hired Gordon LaMoy to teach them how to run a working cattle ranch. In those days the monks used a Cistercian sign language amongst themselves, but Gordon was allowed to speak to them.



Photo courtesy Ferenc Berko Archive, berkophoto.com

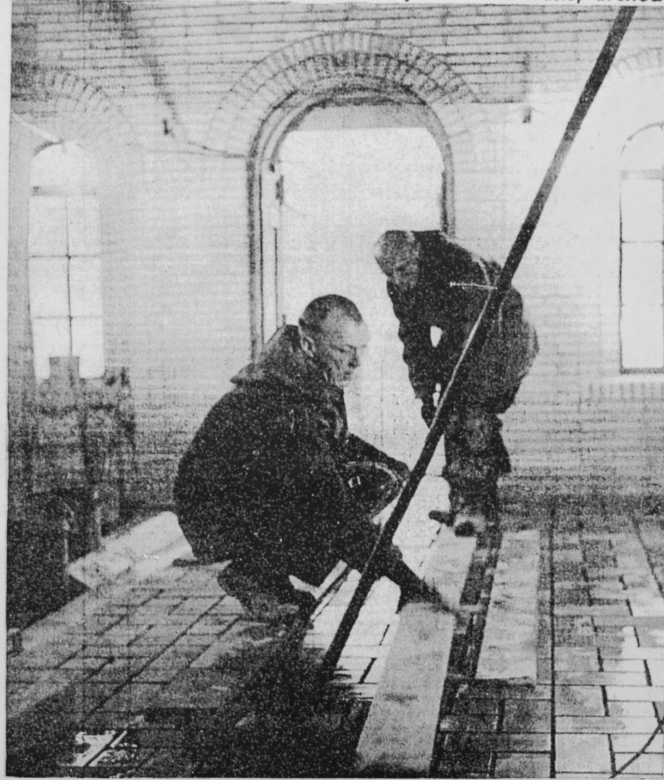
It was a rough gravel road up the valley then. The few working ranches up Capitol Creek Valley had been through many challenging economic times -- the silver boom days in Aspen when they supplied the Aspen residents and their animals with dairy, meat, grains, and hay products. Then came the potato economy, the coming and going of the two train systems along the Roaring Fork River, and the sheep and cattle businesses.

By April, 13, 1956, the monks from Spencer were living in the ranch house. In May 480 acres of adjacent land belonging to the Maurin family was purchased for growing hay. A number of monks from Spencer came out to help with the building, so the number of monks rose to 24. The visiting monks stayed in the upstairs loft of the barn, where the sunlight shone brightly through the spaces between the boards. Their straw mattresses were made from the mattress press on site.

And now it was time to start building the monastery in the meadow up at the base of Flat Top mountain. Br. Blaze Drayton, a trained designer who drew up the architectural plans for Spencer in 1952, drew up the plans for the new St. Benedict's abbey, which was to be called Our Lady of Colorado Abby. It was basically the same architectural floor plan – that of a 12 c. Cistercian Abbey, with the chapel facing east and the cloister facing north and south and the kitchen and refectory at the far end of the building. The beauty of Cistercian architecture is its unadorned simplicity with its spacious design and an inner sense of quiet. The Salve window in the chapel, which was originally meant to be a meeting room, was created by Dutch-born artist Sylvia Nicholas, the daughter of the glass artist who designed the Salve window at Spencer. The bricks - a Roman brick that is longer and narrower than a standard brick - were shipped up from Denver's Robinson Brick Company. Under the tutelage of Br. Gerard, acting contractor who was also from Spencer, the monks – 35 by then, worked as skilled bricklayers and electricians and proceeded at a remarkable pace .

“So we did the brick work and the electrical... I came in time to wash off the mortar from the bricks, doors and windows”, said Fr. Joseph Boyle. He was just out of high school in New York city when he arrived to join his brother Charles at the new monastery. “I planted almost all of the trees. I was a novice and that was my job – to go out into the forest and get trees”. And the clean-up of building materials was done in irrigation boots – without lots of wool socks.

A major attraction during the past two years was the Trappist Monastery under construction in a sheltered valley of rolling pastureland along Capitol Creek above Snowmass. Designed and constructed by the monks with only a minimum of outside aid, the large building is of roman brick in the traditional old-world monastic style. Thick walls, arched



windows and peaked cupolas remind visitors of the ancient religious retreats in France and Italy. Although the two monks, above, and their brothers were still hard at work completing the building, the majority of the monks arrived this week to take up residence, and the building and grounds were closed to the public last Sunday evening. Times Photo

By November, 1958, just two years after the initial purchase of the ranch, the community moved in to the new monastery complex.



Photo courtesy David Hiser

The ranching of beef cattle meant growing their own hay and alfalfa, caring for the Percheron draft horses – Dolly, Dick, Rags, and Goldie, which were stalled in the barn and hitched to the hay sled for bringing feed out to the cattle.

To increase the community's income, a candy business was undertaken. But the high altitude caused the candy to crack when it was shipped to lower elevations. The community then decided to venture into the cow-calf operation, but that also proved to be an unworkable situation. So the cattle were sold in the mid-60's and two Quonset huts were built behind the main monastery building to house 10,000 laying chickens. In 1967, the monastery began selling monastery eggs to the local restaurants and markets in the valley. This proved to be a successful venture, and for 18 years, the eggery supported the monastery.

However, the 1970's, following Vatican II, were a challenging and difficult time for monasteries in general as many members left the monastic life. With the emphasis changing from asceticism to a more contemplative way of life, the monks at St. Benedict's built some new private rooms hoping to invite new members. But by 1978 there remained only seven monks at St. Benedict's. Spencer eventually sent several monks out to help and a few of them stayed.

In the mid-80's Fr. Thomas Keating, returned to St. Benedict's after serving for 20 years as Abbot at St. Joseph's in Spencer, began hosting his legendary ecumenical dialogues at the monastery. Called the Snowmass Conference, it was an experimental dialogue between all the major religious traditions of the world. Foremost spokespersons for the major religious traditions worldwide came to the monastery for dialogue. Retreats in Fr. Keating's Contemplative Outreach program were first held in the ranch house in 1985. With the overwhelming response to his ideas, a retreat center was planned which could house 20 retreatants in individual hermitages and in a large central retreat house with a dining room and a prayer hall for guests and gatherings. Groundbreaking for the retreat center was in October 1992 and it was consecrated in July 1995.

The retreat center continues to give solitude, silence and contemplative prayer immersion to an international guest list of practitioners of contemplative prayer, whether in group retreats or on private retreats.

Just inside the entrance to the main monastery building is the Snowmass Bookstore, a bookstore with an in-depth collection of spiritual books of many traditions and beliefs.

Other than the bookstore and the retreat center, the monastery is a private area for the monks only - for their residences, studying and prayer. No-one is permitted in this private area.

During this time of restrictions with the COVID virus, the monastery chapel, retreat center and bookstore are closed to the public. Appointments can be made to visit the bookstore at given hours, and the retreat center can be contacted through the monastery website for information on private retreats. Sunday Mass in the chapel is currently closed to the public due to the Covid virus. Notice will be given when the COVID restrictions are lifted.

For further information, please go to:

snowmassmonks.com

snowmassbookstore.com