

Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel

When people hear Melrose Park mentioned, the first thing that may come to mind is the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. It is the longest running religious festival (began in 1894) in the Chicago area. It is a three-day festival that is full of religious significance and a celebration of food.

On February 20, 1894, the Societa Di Signore Italiane Di Maria Santissima Del Carmine was founded by ladies primarily from Laurenzana, Provincia Potenza, Italy. This Society's purpose was the inauguration of a "Festa della Madonna" similar to one celebrated in their hometown in the Old Country.

Their leader, Mrs. Emanuella DeStefano, personified the zeal of these ladies. Her husband had been seriously ill, and Emanuella made a pledge to the Madonna that in gratitude for the return to health of her husband, she would establish the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Melrose Park.

Melrose Park was 12 years old when the first Feast was celebrated, July 16, 1894, on the DeStefano farm at Twenty-fifth and North Avenues. Hundreds of recently arrived Italians came to the first Feast to honor the statue of Our Lady, which Emanuella had commissioned a Neapolitan artist to create. It is a replica of the famous statue of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, which was venerated for centuries in Laurenzana. Celebration of this Festa gave a feeling of belonging and was a link with the Old Country and its traditions.

In 1895 a small wooden chapel was built on Twenty-fourth Avenue near Lake Street to house the statue and to cater to the needs of this small Italian community. Rev. Thomas Moreschini, O.S.M., of Assumption Church in Chicago, celebrated the first Feast Mass and then Sunday and Holy Day Masses. The Feast continued to grow and attract new participants.



The Feast; circa late 1930's. It is the longest running Religious Festival in the Chicago area

In 1901, the chapel was ceded to the Catholic Bishop of Chicago; and in 1903, Rev. Antonio Petillo was sent to establish Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish. Fr. Petillo was unable to attain his goal and left in July, 1905. That September, Rev. Benjamin Franch, arrived in Melrose Park with a zeal matching Emanuella's.

Development of the new parish required control of the Feast. Emanuella struggled with the idea but finally gave in and donated the statue she so loved to the parish. Father Franch remained at Mount Carmel until his death nearly 50 years later.

Fr. Franch founded the Congregazione Parrocchiale Maria SS Del Monte Carmelo in 1906 to finance a new church. These people also helped prepare the Feast, a proto-type of the later Feast Committee. In 1907, the chapel was moved to 1101 N. Twenty-third Avenue; and in 1908, a new, larger, beautiful church was built to befit the growing number of Festa devotees.

The Feast was always held on the date nearest Our Lady's day, July 16. Solemnities would begin with Novena, starting nine days before. The Feast began developing its own traditions, some of which are still practiced. On Thursday eve, before the Feast, as devotees exited Novena, a marching band would serenade the Virgin and then march through the streets of the parish. On Saturday evening, they would again play in front of the church and march through the parish, but also play a concert.

Out-of-towners would begin arriving in Melrose Park early on the morning of the Procession. They came in all manner of conveyances, from all over the Chicago area. They would "camp out" on the lawns of the homes along the Procession route.

Fireworks would salute the exit of the Madonna from church after Solemn High Mass. Before 1926, Our Lady was carried on a platform adorned with an arch of flowers and a satin embroidered canopy was carried behind the Statue. In 1926, Fr. Franch hired an Italian woodcarver to reproduce an elegant Baldachino, which is still used. As the Madonna would pass, some people would sing her praises, as was done in the Old Country. Then came the thousands of people who would march behind the statue of Mary, some marching barefoot, carrying large candles, praying and singing in thanksgiving or supplication. The route traveled south on Twenty-fourth Avenue to Main Street and back north on Twenty-third to the church.

In the evening there would be another band concert, crowning of the Queen of the Festa, and magnificent fireworks that brought the Feast to a close.

Despite the Italian origin of the Feast, other ethnic groups have been involved. Fr. Franch encouraged the Lithuanian community's involvement and in March of 1914, St. John Baptist Lithuanian Society was formed. The next year, St. Anne Lithuanian Society began. Both societies marched in the Procession. Devotees of the San Rocco Society and the San Michele Society began marching. The latter carried a statue of the patron, St. Michael the Archangel, at the lead of the Procession for years. Today, many Hispanic residents are deeply involved in the Feast.

In 1921, the first Feast Committee met and elected Mario Abate President. By 1925, the growing number of groups marching in front of the statue created a need for a Grand Marshall to organize and train men to guide the Procession in an orderly fashion. Sebastian Lorenzo became Grand Marshall in 1930 and served 40 years.

Since 1925, decorative, illuminated arches have been set up over Twenty-third Avenue from Lake Street to Cortez Street, and the committee decided to serve food and drink and have amusements for the children.



The 120-year old tradition of the Procession of the Madonna is still carried on by today's families

Madire Christiane was founded in 1922 for mothers of the parish. Meetings were conducted in Italian. A blue ribbon medallion at the neck set off their distinctive tan dress and brown veil. They carried a candlehouse in procession until 1960, when they merged with another sodality.

In 1936, Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Sodality was formed and marched in procession wearing white dresses and red tams. They made a candlehouse and carried it in the Procession until 1960, when they merged with Madri Christiane to form the Altar and Rosary Society. Melrose Park devotees of St. Anthony of Padua began marching in 1956. Young boys dressed in a Franciscan habit would carry a flowered Rosary.

When World War II began, area Italians flocked to Our Lady's feet, praying for the safety of their sons and for the end of hostilities. Thousands marched behind the Virgin, and many are the stories of aid obtained through intercession of Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

In 1944, the Golden Jubilee of the Feast was celebrated. New crowns were purchased for the statue in commemoration of the 50th year. That year the statue left the church riding on a float with children dressed as Angels.

Because of the large crowd expected that year, an outdoor altar was constructed near Twenty-fifth and Augusta; and a Field Mass was celebrated there. The tradition of the outdoor Mass was continued until 1981.

By the late 50's and early 60's, interest in the Feast had faded. Death reduced the number of participants, and some people felt that the Procession was an "old time" custom not relevant to today's way of life. But around 1965, people realized that some traditional beliefs and customs are timeless; and the Procession enjoyed new impetus.

In 1966, the old church was razed, and Our Lady was moved to the school gym while her new home was being built. In 1968, the new church was dedicated with a place for Our Lady in an intimate chapel near the entrance. At this time, the Blue Army of Our Lady of Fatima began marching; and members of the Italian Catholic Federation began coming to the Feast in great numbers.

One old custom was to present the Statue of Our Lady with a votive offering as a token of gratitude for a favor granted, giving up a precious object to the greater glory of God! To commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Feast in 1969, Fr. Adam Torresan, the Pastor at that time, arranged with an Italian jeweler to fashion new crowns for the statue. Utilizing the gold and precious gems from those votive offerings, two beautiful 18k gold bejeweled crowns were created. After the Field Mass, a group of children-angels and crown bearers-approached the altar and Fr. Adam crowned the statue.

Many former residents find their way back each year to participate in the Feast and the Procession. The Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel will be tied to the heritage of Melrose Park for as long as there is a Melrose Park.