

McCarthy story 'romantic'

By SUE CAUSE

The name McCarthy has been a fixture on Lincoln's business scene for some 65 years.

James McCarthy, born in Lincoln in 1883, quit school in the fifth grade. He started working in a saloon in the Commercial Hotel when he was 17, and after a series of astute real estate investments, he died a wealthy man in 1951.

"His story is very romantic," says James McCarthy's son, James Thomas McCarthy. "He was a person who got up early in the morning and worked a 17-hour day most of his life."

Often referred to as Jim McCarthy while in Lincoln, James Thomas McCarthy is also known as Father Thomas, the religious name he chose when he became a Benedictine monk with St. Leo Abby in Florida in the late 1950s.

Today, Father Thomas, 60, divides his days between the abby, where he leads religious retreats, and Lincoln, where he manages the McCarthy family real estate holdings.

Some of the family's commercial structures include the building across from First National Bank on Clinton St., property across from State Bank of Lincoln on Broadway St., the row of businesses across from Kroger's on Woodlawn Rd. and

the Arcade Building opposite the county courthouse.

James McCarthy went into real estate insurance when Prohibition closed down the Commercial Hotel saloon.

He broke ground for the Arcade Building, at the site of a former livery stable, in 1929. The building quickly became a showcase facility for Illinois downtowns.

"The arcade area was the subject of great study when it was first completed," said Father Thomas. "It was representative of what could be done with alleys, although we never referred to it as an alley. We called it the Arcade Terrace."

Father Thomas designed the garden area outside the entrance to Guzzardo's several years after the construction project was completed.

He also had a hand in remodeling the old Lincoln Hotel, more recently the site of Alvey's Drugs.

The McCarthys' last commercial construction venture, the row of stores on Woodlawn between Wareco Gas and Hardee's, was started in 1947 and completed in 1950.

"We could see that the traffic pattern on the road would be one

of the busiest spots in Lincoln because of Rt. 66 and the connection between Peoria and Decatur," Father McCarthy said.

"We built the buildings close to the highway because my father thought people ought to be able to drive by and see the merchandise in the windows. Of course, we would have been better off today with more parking in front."

Although Father Thomas would have preferred to study art as an undergraduate at the University of Illinois, his father prevailed upon him to become an architectural designer.

"Dad said, 'You are not going off to the third story of a building with a skylight and starve to death.' He said I should study something practical such as architecture."

Still the younger McCarthy pursued art as an avocation, often exhibiting and selling his works. Then, in 1958, he started to fulfill two life-long dreams, that of entering the priesthood and pursuing art more vigorously.

"I always wanted to be a priest, even when I was little. I just always knew I'd end up in religious life. I'd dream about being in a Franciscan habit," he recalled.

Father Thomas specifically

chose St. Leo Abby because the order allowed him to paint. He taught art at St. Leo College for many years, while he obtained his master's degree in art as a part-time student at Illinois State University.

His master's degree work forced him to change his style, and, by his own admission, his works became "too non-objective and not very salable. It just didn't have appeal as pictures," he stated.

Six years ago, Father Thomas and Steve Buse, a student at Lincoln College, restored the murals in the ceiling of the courthouse. Most of his art today consists of pencil sketches.

His chosen lifestyle blending the priesthood, art and real estate management is "exceptional" even for his abby.

"I'm a bit of a dilettante (a term he loathes), because of the fact I mix art and religion and because I'm not as serious an artist," he says as his thought trails off.

A present project consists of compiling many of his homilies into a book for publication. "I don't know anything about writing, I just do it," he says.

It's obvious that this soft-spoken priest/artist enjoys the paths his life has taken.

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"So many people are so displeased with their lives that they don't want to live another 20 years," he observed.

"But life is so much fun. It's more fun now than it was 10 or 20 years ago. I've become more objective and able to enjoy compassion. There is something about age that gives you a certain distance."

Father Thomas hasn't put any distance between himself and his hometown.

Ever since his childhood, when his father was one of the early presidents of the Lincoln Chamber of Commerce and a chamber board member for some 18 years, his father's devotion to Lincoln was clearly etched into the younger McCarthy's fabric.

"Lincoln is essentially a farming community, and what is attractive to people as a place to live is Lincoln's small population, low incidence of crime, good parks and a good number of churches," Father Thomas said.

"I think it is important for people to have some ground to live on. I think it's unhealthy for people to live in file cabinets in city skyscrapers. There should be so much area of earth per person so that a person can relate to the earth. For these reasons, I think Lincoln is the ideal place to live."