

# A joyful life as a Benedictine monk: Brother Edward Fischesser

written by Dwain Hebda |

Brother Edward Fischesser, OSB was bent down scratching the dirt, tending to a flower bed when when a big truck slammed to a dusty halt outside the entrance to Subiaco Abbey.

"I guess the guy was from Texas, because he had on a hat and was smoking a big cigar," Brother Edward remembers, a chuckle rumbling up from his throat. "He said, 'What is this place'? And I told him it was our monastery. He said, 'Monastery? Do they still have those anymore?'

The chuckle turns into a giggle. "I told him, 'Well, WE do,'" as the giggle turned into a hearty laugh.

Throw most of your notions of what a life of service is, or can be, when you speak to Brother Edward for the first time. Whatever you think you know about a monastic existence — spartan, penitent, dour — he is happy to add that it is also an adventuresome, fulfilling and robust life. "I've always believed that if people knew what a wonderful life this is, there would be a lot more people wanting to get in," he said. "Most people think of it as a life of penance and I guess it is, but then every life is a life of penance to some degree. Take someone who is married — it's not all laughs and neither is this."

But for the parts that are worth laughing about, count on Brother Edward to lead the parade with a sense of humor that is genuine and infectious. Nearly 50 years of vocational life across two orders has provided plenty of stories, which he tells with palpable enjoyment. He'll tell you, for instance, that his German surname literally translates to "fish eater," so "throw me a fish and I'm happy."

Or the time he was working outside only to look up and see a man peering down at him. After several minutes of the man not moving or speaking — just staring — Brother Edward asked if he could help him.

"The guy said, 'Are you allowed to talk?' I said, 'Oh yeah. In fact, most of us you can't get to shut up.'"

Edward Fischesser was born to working-class parents in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1947. The eldest of four boys, he had early designs on following in his father's footsteps as a carpenter or some other trade, when in high school he started to gain an interest in the possibility of a vocational life. A visit to a local Franciscan monastery sealed the decision, although it was a moment driven more by the chance to work with horses than being knocked off one.

"I was really impressed with the group that was living there and with the place in general," he said. "Back in those days, the monastery operated a big farm and I liked the fact that I'd be able to do farm work."

"Then one day, the provincial came to our room and said he had some good news. We all thought he was going to let us go home for a break but instead he said, 'You're all going to go to college.' I'd have rather had all my teeth pulled out at the time."

It would be many years before Brother Edward would complete his degree in elementary education, but that didn't prevent him from being assigned to one classroom after another in Ohio, Illinois, New Jersey and finally Arkansas. Where some might have experienced a severe culture shock coming from years of urban assignments to the now-closed Morris School for Boys in Searcy, such was not the case for Fischesser, at that time known as Brother Simon.

"Searcy was someplace I always wanted to go," he said. "We were out in the country and

surrounded by woods and farmland. I liked working on the farm where we raised cattle and pigs and hay. It was not a foreign thing to me at all.”

When the Morris School closed in 1993, he spent a year in his native Cincinnati, pondering his next move, one which ultimately led him to Subiaco and a new order, the Benedictines.

“The abbot told me to come down and try it out for a year so that I could get to know the people and they could get to know me,” he said. “At the end of that time, I decided I wanted to stay.”

The process of changing orders takes three years. By the time he applied, he had already been celebrated as a jubilarian as a Franciscan.

Arkansas had now given him a home, returned him to his baptismal name and it was also where he got to revive a childhood passion for Native American artifacts, an interest started with four or five stone spearheads and knife blades his father had picked up on job sites. Then in middle school, a burial mound was excavated in the area and a visit to the site cemented the young Edwards’ fascination with such artifacts. In the rural wilds of Arkansas, Brother Edward not only found ample picking grounds, but a fair number of fellow brothers who shared his hobby.

His collection today numbers arrowheads and other points in the hundreds, plus numerous examples of bead work and pottery from the Caddo, Mississippian and Quapaw tribes, indigenous to Arkansas. Many he found himself or on outings with his fellow monks, others he traded for or bought. He still likes to go out and pick for artifacts, although he said wider interest in the hobby has made them harder to find.

“Every so often, you see something they miss. If you know what you are looking for, you can find something neat even if it is a little broken,” he said.

Brother Edward pauses at the thought that the same could be said of the people to whom he has ministered in his vocational career. Among his various stops have been orphanages and schools that took in troubled youth. For a man who specifically stayed out of the priesthood because “I never felt like I was in a position to give somebody else spiritual direction. I have enough trouble with myself,” he nevertheless was able to find value even in those with a little breakage.

“We all have our flaws,” he said. “I’m sure to some of those kids, I was a little cracked or broken, too.”

When asked what it meant to hear of a former student being ordained or to receive the occasional package as he did recently with an arrowhead and a note enclosed thanking him for the impact he had as a teacher, Brother Edward shrugs.

“Looking back, there were some things I think I could have done better but at the time I think I did the best I could with what I had,” he said.

 [Click here to see the index of stories in \*Arkansas Catholic's\* Vocations 2012 special section.](#)