



Written by [James Heiser](#) on May 28, 2010

## New Cross Controversy Erupts in Illinois

After the protracted battle for the so-called "Mojave Cross" in California which was finally settled in the Supreme Court in favor of the continued display of the cross, a new challenge to the public display of the central symbol of the Christian faith is emerging in southern Illinois. The Bald Knob Cross of Peace near Alto Pass, Illinois is roughly 350 miles from Chicago, but that's not stopping a resident of the "Windy City" from being offended by a small government grant intended to restore the cross.



Retired radio talk show host, Rob Sherman, is threatening a lawsuit unless a \$20,000 grant provided for restoration of the cross is returned to the state. [According to an Associated Press article](#), Sherman, who is an atheist, is threatening a "long and expensive" lawsuit.

Work began on the cross in 1959 and was completed in 1963, with most of the funds coming from small donations. According to the AP article:

Easter services have been held on the mountain since 1937. Rural mail carrier Wayman Presley and pastor William Lirely envisioned a huge cross there that would be visible for miles and serve as testimony year-round.

Their fundraising efforts got a big boost in 1955 when Presley was featured on television's "This is Your Life." Donations poured in. Schoolchildren and Sunday school classes collected coins for the cross.

Widow Myrta Clutts called the cross "the greatest idea I'd ever heard" and pledged \$100 to the project when she didn't have \$10 to spare. Clutts considered her pig Betsy an instrument of God when the animal gave birth to 21 piglets, three times the normal litter. She sold 14 of the pigs, paid her \$100 pledge and had \$400 left to pay her bills.

Presley set up a barn on Clutts' farm, where more than 1,700 piglets were produced from Betsy's original litter. Each was given to farmers who raised them and donated money from their sale — by some accounts, at least \$30,000 — to the Bald Knob Cross fund.

[According to the website](#) of the nonprofit corporation that oversees the cross notes that when the cross was completed in 1963, "over 900 heavy gauge steel panels with a bright white porcelain veneer was affixed to the framework creating a spectacular night sight which could be seen for 7500 square miles after it was illuminated with 40,000 watts of lighting. The Cross quickly became the most popular tourist attraction in Southern Illinois, attracting visitors from literally all over the world."

The wear caused by time and weather over the past five decades have become evident on the eleven



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story cross, and so an effort was launched to restore it. The supporters of the cross have managed to raise \$360,000 toward the restoration effort, of which \$20,000 came in the grant that is at the center of Mr. Sherman's complaint. According to the AP:

Pitching the project as the renovation of a major tourist attraction "is a nice cover story," Rob Sherman said in a telephone interview Wednesday. But the retired Chicago-area radio talk show host who successfully fought Illinois' "moment of silence" in public schools said he thinks it would be more appropriate to use the money for such public interests as schools and roads. If it isn't returned, he promised "a long and expensive" lawsuit.

Regardless of the final disposition of the small grant at the heart of the controversy, one may anticipate that the news attention given to Mr. Sherman's complaint will aid the efforts of those who trying to raise funds for the restoration of the Bald Knob Cross. And unlike the Mojave Cross, which was stolen after its advocates won their case before the supreme court, the massive cross in southern Illinois will be far harder to displace.

As was [observed in \*The New American\* coverage](#) of the Mojave Cross controversy, the Supreme Court ruled that the Constitution "does not require the eradication of all religious symbols in the public realm." The question which arises in each such circumstance is what steps Christians will take to uphold the public display of their faith.



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