

Ageless St. Mary's Church, Springvale, 100 Years Old

Thursday, Aug 8, 1957

Pictures on This Page

A little white church, that doesn't show its age, is 100 years old this year, nestling quietly in a secluded, rolling country side. That characterizes nearby St. Mary's Catholic church in Springvale township.

Even today, the church is located off by itself on a town road that is seldom traveled, 11 miles southeast of Ripon and four miles east of Brandon.

St. Mary's congregation was founded some time in 1857 when Irish pioneers, seeking to continue their worship in the Catholic faith, met for services in the home of James and Mary O'Reilly. They worshipped in homes until they built the church in 1857. Construction of the church in 1857 is substantiated by the records of the Fond du Lac county register of deeds which show that the building was constructed at a cost of \$1,500.

Name Pioneer Founders

Names of staunch, deeply religious Irish families in the community are commemorated in stained glass windows that light the building. These pioneers, in addition to the O'Reillys, include:

Daniel Green, John and Mary Havey, James Pettit, William and Louis Badtke, Peter and Catharine Fallon, Mr. and Mrs. Theodore Kobeal, James and Mary Havey, John and Elinore Duffy, Michael Kelly, William Wilson, James and Anna McDonald, Patrick and Bridget Liner, John Moran and family, Mr. and Mrs. Michael Havey, and Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Pettit.

One of the early members of the church was Andrew Pettit, grandfather of Leonard Pettit, 75, lifelong Springvale farmer. Leonard, a member of St. Mary's all his life, has served as treasurer for more than 40 years. Ben J. Sabel is secretary.

Homestead Land

There are more level lands in the community than those which these Irish pioneers settled, but the country with its lush grass, thick woods and hills probably reminded them of their native Ireland. So, families of them came, originally hailing from county Cork, Carlow, West Meath and others. They wrested farms from the wilderness on lands given them under the federal homestead act.

The area included extensive tracts of wilderness and villages and churches were few and far between. When St. Mary's Congregation was organized and the church built, it was the only Catholic church in the vicinity. As many as 50 families attended the church. Today the congregation numbers considerably less. In early years the church held serv-

ices throughout the year but now masses are conducted only from June 1 through the last Sunday in September.

Remarkable fact about St. Mary's survival is that in its 100 years it has always been a mission and never had a resident priest. Churches in different cities have supplied the priest, including Watertown, Fond du Lac, Milwaukee, Ripon and Waupun.

Snow Slowed Travel

In the days before snow plows parishioners went to St. Mary's by horse and sleigh in the winter time in spite of deep drifts. Much of the time it was faster and easier to drive across country rather than the road.

One local resident who lives on a farm in Springvale township, recalls the winter trips to church with her parents:

"It was a long, cold ride to church, but it was one I will always remember. In order to keep warm, families heated several rocks in the oven of the kitchen range and then packed them in several places in the sleigh robes, keeping warm all the way."

Had Pot Bellied Stove

A long wooden shed stood near the church for years, sheltering the horses while church was in session. For many years the heating plant of the church, supplanted only recently by an oil heater, was an old fashioned pot bellied stove.

The Rev. Joseph Platta, pastor of St. Wenceslaus church for 41 years, started serving St. Mary's mission shortly after he arrived in Ripon on July 15, 1916. He recounts tales of rugged winter trips to the church, pointing out that it often took three hours to make the 11 miles. His driver was Tom Sullivan, a local milkman.

Rev. Platta will never forget one incident. They were driving across country, presumably on solid ground, when the sleigh broke through the crusted snow and fell in a large excavation. The vehicle had landed in the basement of a home that had been removed from its foundation. Undaunted, the pair unhitched the horses and pushed the sled back out of the hole.

Church History in Polish

Some of the history of St. Mary's church is printed for posterity in the Polish language, in two volumes, each 300 pages long. This was done by Rev. W. Kruszka, Ripon priest at St. Wenceslaus, when he served St. Mary's from 1896 to 1903. Rev. Kruszka wrote of the happenings of his parish and interspersed in the many pages are frequent mentions of St. Mary's and its congregation. This book was published in Milwaukee in 1924.



LEN Pettit, Springvale township farmer, has served as treasurer of St. Mary's Catholic church for more than 40 years. He is one of the oldest living members of the church.

Probably the priest who served the mission the longest time is the Rev. S. J. Dowling, now retired in Berlin. Rev. Dowling, who recently observed his 60th anniversary in the priesthood, was the chaplain at the Wisconsin State prison in Waupun for many years. It was under Rev. Dowling that the sacristy of the church was built.

Monsignor Henry Riordan of St. Joseph's church, Fond du Lac, served St. Mary's for some time. He left the mission when he organized the Catholic church in Brandon and supervised the building project. This church was built in 1921 with a number of families transferring to Brandon from St. Mary's.

Waupun Serves as Mission

Since 1938, St. Mary's has been a mission of St. Joseph's church of Waupun, and records have been kept, reports the Rev. Mathias Schmieders. The Rev. William Bader, assistant pastor at St. Joseph's, holds mass at St. Mary's. Recently, while Rev. Bader has been in the Waupun Memorial hospital, Rev. Arnold Dearing, hospital chaplain, has served the mission. Rev. Bader returned from the hospital last weekend.

Because early records of St. Mary's are not available, it is not possible to present more of the early history or to supply an accurate record of the names and tenures of the priests.

Oldest living member of the church is Thomas Smith, 93, who lives with his son, Loy, a farmer in the town of Springvale.

2 Priests Buried

The adjoining St. Mary's church cemetery holds two priests. One, a relative of present-day Pettits,

A
1
n
ir
—
wa
me
A
Re
ca
s
cer
ye
sta
are
the
die
lon
Th
18
7
stil
the
the
18
cen
7
be