

Tiny 1858 church clings to tradition



Dorothy Bliskey photo

Rev. Guy Gurath tries out the horse-drawn buggy that some parishioners had driven Mass at St. Mary's Church in Springvale on a recent Sunday morning.

Days may be numbered at St. Mary's of Springvale

By Dorothy Bliskey

For The Reporter

SPRINGVALE - If parishioners have their say, Masses will not be discontinued at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Springvale Township.

On a recent Sunday morning, the Rev. Guy Gurath, temporary pastor, celebrated his first Mass in the church. A standing-room-only congregation had filtered in, fearing it might be the last Mass held at their church, which was built 142 years ago.

Someone even arrived by horse and buggy for what they expected to be a solemn Sunday - perhaps the last active Sunday for the Springvale church. Prior to the start of the liturgy, the crowd chuckled as even the horse appeared anx-

ious. Its whinny could be heard through the main doorway, which was propped open for natural air conditioning.

As the Mass progressed, a reprieve appeared to be building. The mood was especially upbeat. But one could have heard a pin drop as the packed pews of parishioners took in all that Gurath had to say.

"I was here earlier in July to look around," Gurath told the congregation. "The cemetery looks like a scene right out of that wonderful movie, 'Gone With the Wind.'"

He recalled how Archbishop Rembert Weakland and Bishop Richard Sklba had been to the church in the past, and how impressed they were with its unique sense of history. St. Mary's of Springvale, after all, is believed to be the oldest unchanged wooden church in the Milwaukee archdiocese.

Built by Irish immigrants in 1858, the church has no electricity, no heat, no running water and no piano to accompany the singing of hymns. The only rest room is a three-seat

outdoor privy in the cemetery.

"There are people who come to our church every summer for a unique experience - some who aren't even Catholic, and others from far away who are here visiting relatives or friends," said Karen Madigan, a Rosendale-area member. "Catholics in the area come on a regular basis in the summer...we all look forward to it."

As Gurath continued his homily, he talked of the peacefulness of St. Mary's. He had decided, after hearing the people's wishes, that he would be willing to conduct services at St. Mary's, rather than at the year-round sister church in Brandon. There was applause when he announced that the doors will be open for worship at least through Aug. 13.

It doesn't matter that the doors are left open, that mosquitoes feel free to enter, that songs are sung without accompaniment, or that the bathroom is outdoors.

The faithful in Rosendale-Brandon are hoping that St. Mary's summer Masses don't become a closed chapter in