

By PATRICK KUBISIAK
Reporter Staff Writer

RIPON — When immigrants started to stream into the United States and the upper Midwest they were peoples with languages, traditions, lifestyles and religious beliefs that were different from those of their immigrant neighbors.

They settled in enclaves with a strong belief that God, their own hard work and the boundless potential of their new country would bring them success and a better life than they left in Europe.

That strong belief in God and need for His assistance, coupled with a certain heartache of leaving the "old country" often lead the immigrants to quickly build churches, both as a place to worship and keep in touch with those of the same nationality.

The Town of Springvale in Fond du Lac County has just such a church, started with just such a scenario. That church is St. Mary's Catholic Church of Springvale, begun 125 years ago by Irish settlers.

According to Mrs. Jerry Callan, who along with her husband John spent three years compiling the history of the church, it is the "oldest unaltered wood structure in the diocese (of Milwaukee) still in operation."

Land for the church, located appropriately on Church Road off County Trunk O, was donated in 1858 by James and Mary O'Reilley. The first mass in the area was celebrated in their house in 1847.

Since that first mass Mrs. Callan was able to tally 36 priests who served the area and St. Mary's. She noted that a lack of records for a number of years made it impossible to trace some of priests who were there.

While compiling the church's history the Callans used parish lists, the earliest available is from 1887. Church records from St. Mary's and other area churches where the serving priest came from, plus information in the Ripon and Fond du Lac Public Libraries and personal contacts provided the substance of the history booklet.

St. Mary's has always been a mission parish without a resident pastor. Priests have variously come from Fond du Lac, Ripon, Milwaukee, Brandon, Waupun and Watertown to celebrate mass there. Mrs. Callan noted that at one time a single priest named Kelly served St. Mary's along with churches in Kingston, Markesan and Brandon.

Sunday mass is held at 10:15 a.m. with a priest from St. Joseph's in Waupun presiding. Father Eliot Comstock has been coming to St. Mary's since 1982. The new administrator at St. Joseph's, the Rev. Robert St. Martin, helps with duties at the country church.

The Springvale church has no heat, electricity or plumbing.

With that in mind it is only open from the first Sunday in June till the Labor Day weekend. When it is dark in the church two kerosene lanterns suspended on chains from the ceiling are lit.

After the last service of the summer the parish members, "only parish members" stressed Mrs. Callan, have a picnic on the church grounds. She likened it to "a family get-together."

During the months St. Mary's is closed its parishioners attend and share expenses at St. Brendan's in Brandon.

Mrs. Callan said the opening of St. Brendan's by the Rev. Henry G. Riordan from Fond du Lac in 1921 lead to the closing of St. Mary's in 1924 for over 18 months. During that time many parishioners went to Ripon or Brandon to church.

The church may have been closed, but its members still gathered there, elected parish officers and conducted business. It reopened in April 1926 with 22 families, one less than attends today.

The church has a capacity of about 150 persons. It was packed in July for a special anniversary celebration attended by Archbishop Rembert Weakland.

The church's history has both high and low points. Mrs. Callan gave anecdotes of each.

Even though the church has only a part-time status, it is used for funerals, weddings and baptisms. The first baptism of record is that of

Catherine Havey on Nov. 19, 1866. Mrs. Callan noted that Havey later become a nun, one of many religious vocations from the parish.

The parish's oldest members, Howard and Loy Smith, 86 and 85, respectively, are related to Catherine Havey.

The third oldest parishioner is Lester Madigan, 80. Mrs. Callan said about 60 percent of the church's members are Madigans or related to them.

Two other religious vocations from the church were fellows from the Pettit family who became priests, Mrs. Callan said.

Mrs. Callan stated St. Mary's is "a dedicated parish" which has "people who want to keep it going." That dedication has a part in two somber incidents of church history.

Henry Reilley, a descendent of the couple who donated the land for St. Mary's, was working with the Rev. George Jentges in 1935 to straighten fence posts in the cemetery which surrounds the church when he died of a heart attack.

Richard Sabel, who lived just up the road from the church, died in its cemetery on July 3, 1980, when the tractor he was operating to fill dirt around a grave tipped on him.

Besides the regular members who attend St. Mary's on Sundays tourists and those previously attached to the church come to fill in the pews. Singing during the services is mostly acappella, said Mrs. Callan. Once in a while, however, like at the anniversary celebration, the church's pump organ is played.

Present and past members of the church show great dedication to it. Mrs. Callan noted corresponding with Francis Pettit in California about church history. He is a descendent of one of the church's founding families. Pettit still considers himself a member of St. Mary's. His grandparents celebrated their golden wedding anniversary at the church in 1913.