

Springvale church hasn't changed much since 1858

By Dorothy Rindy
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BRANDON — Summertime brings a bit of "old time religion" to the township of Springvale.

St. Mary's, a small Catholic church that rests peacefully in the lush, green, rolling farmland area between Brandon and Rosendale, is open only during summer months: St. Mary's is believed to be the oldest unchanged wood struc-

ture in the Milwaukee archdiocese.

Built by Irish immigrants in 1858, the little church holds about 150 people.

St. Mary's setting and atmosphere are reminiscent of bygone days. There is no electricity, no heat, no running water and no piano to accompany the singing.

Doors are often left open during the service — allowing for natural "air conditioning" and revealing the rich wooded

area outside. Bird songs drift in through the open door, adding background music to the hymns sung by parishioners.

Church pews, the original from 1858, were designed for a generation of smaller people. Three to four average-size adults can fit comfortably in each pew. Free-standing kneelers lack the padded comfort found in more elaborate churches.

Except for some fresh paint and redecorating, the wooden

church remains unchanged.

Sunday Masses are led by the Rev. Russan "Russ" Cole who is full-time pastor at St. Brendan's in Brandon and assistant pastor at St. Joseph's, Waupun.

Sunday Mass is a casual affair as Father Russ converses with his church members on a first-name basis, calling on them individually and frequently during the service. He ties their comments into his sermon after cleverly asking for

input such as, "Well, Justin, what are you thankful for today?"

"Father Russ has a way of making the church service fun and casual, yet he still manages to get a serious message across," said Barney Madigan, a lifelong member.

Sunday Masses will continue to be celebrated at 10 a.m. through mid-September.

Area family's history is woven with St. Mary's

Many parishioners, like Barney Madigan of Rosendale, are descendants of families on the original membership roll. His great-grandfather, Thomas Madigan, moved to the township of Springvale in 1859 to escape the great potato famine in Ireland. He began farming a piece of land next to St. Mary's Church.

Stories about the church were handed down through Barney Madigan's grandmother.

"It used to be that families at St. Mary's paid pew rent...about \$1 per week," Madigan said, noting that the entire family sat together in an assigned and numbered pew. "Everyone knew where they were supposed to sit," Madigan said.

After the Brandon church was built, there was a time be-

ginning in 1924 when St. Mary's closed down for a while. Parishioners had no choice but to go to neighboring churches for their worship services.

"The Madigans chose a church that was predominately of German descent," Madigan said. "It was quite a change because at St. Mary's of Springvale everyone was used to sitting together as a family in an assigned pew. The Germans did it differently. The women and children all sat on one side of the church and the men on the other."

"My grandmother was shocked. She said 'Why, why do the Germans sit there that way? We always sit together!'"

"My grandpa answered, 'Well, that's so the men can sleep in peace,'" Madigan recalls.



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▲ Father Russan "Russ" Cole talks to the children during a Mass at St. Mary's, Springvale.