

## HISTORY OF ST. PATRICK'S CHURCH WEST PERU, NEW YORK

On the quiet brow of a hill overlooking Lake Champlain and the Green Mountains beyond, stands the "Patent Church," "the little church on the hill," "the little white church," as St. Patrick's Church, Patent Road, West Peru, has variously been called through the years. "It's so beautiful and peaceful here," parishioners and visitors alike will often say wistfully, gazing at the modest frame building surrounded by an old graveyard, a stone grotto, and Stations of the Cross set in a frame of trees and woods.

Sometime before 1840, a group of families who had come from Ireland were similarly moved and decided they must have their own church there to fill the needs of their faith. They worked hard on their subsistence farms, fighting fierce North Country winters. Nearby Mt. Etna, now called Huckleberry Mountain, gave them iron ore for their scattered smelting furnaces; the woods gave them the resources for lumber and charcoal to sell or to use for their own needs. But nourishment of the soul was vastly important to them also, and they had to look to the circuit priests if they were to become a separate parish.

They found their hope in Rev. John Rooney, a person Irish like themselves, whose home parish starting in 1839 was the First Roman Catholic Church in Plattsburgh, later known as St. John's. "Indefatigable...rough and energetic," he "suited the wilderness far better than less emphatic characters," one source declares. His territory for ministering to the faithful stretched from below Keeseville in the south to everything east of Chateaugay in the north. This, remember, was in the days when men had to find their way on horseback or with horse and wagon on byways that were little more than rude paths, with few if any signs to mark the way. As happened in other areas, he probably said Mass in their homes around the Patent before the dream of their own church came true under his inspiring encouragement and leadership.

And so on June 19, 1841, a deed was officially made out between James McGinity, a property owner and parishioner, and the "Commity of the Catholic Church of Watsons Patent." McGinity, according to wording in the original deed, accepted one dollar for the property.

Just who constituted the "Commity" is not known, but sources indicate that, in addition to McGinity, parish family names of the time included those of Brown, Callahan, Dolan, Downs, Dugan, Fitzpatrick, Hogg, Morgan, Murray, Quinn, and Sloan. Certainly some of these names formed the committee referred to in the deed.

A tradition holds that these early families lived on cornmeal and milk so that the builders of the church would have the food they needed. Another tradition maintains that the church was actually built in 1840, a year before the land was deeded to the church. A possible explanation is that Mr. McGinity was willing to deed the land over only if a church were indeed built, and seeing the structure become a reality satisfied his conditions. However, since the deed is the only document of the time relating to the founding of the church, 1841 has therefore become the official founding date.

Many current parishioners remember the old white altar which was replaced in the early 1960's. The altar came from the "Red Store," a building owned by Henry Delord on his Cumberland Avenue property, rented and used as the first Catholic Church in Plattsburgh. That congregation, under the same untiring Father Rooney, completed its own church at about the same time containing its own altar. It was then that the altar from the Red Store was moved into the new church on the Patent, where it remained for more than a century.

In 1858, St. Patrick's became a mission church of the Keeseville parish and was now not so far from its home church as before. The earliest original document from this association, which lasted until 1881, is a type of ledger. The last page of the book, faded and barely legible, lists payers of pew rent for 1855. Of those names that are readable, some new ones show among the old: Foy, Hughes, Conway, McRairy, Boswell, and Murney. The first page of the book that remains - many were cut out and removed - is headed 1863. In bold, flowing script, the pastor, Rev. William Carroll wrote: "Names of members of the Catholic Church on the Paten [sic] who contribute towards the support of their pastor," with his signature following. The back side of the page, still in his writing, contains 36 names, presumably heads of households, as was the custom of the time.

Mention of the little church was also beginning to appear in secular publications during this era. In Beers' 1869 Atlas of Clinton County, the Peru map duly noted "R C Ch" at the proper spot on the Patent Road. In 1880, Duane Hurd's History of Clinton and Franklin Counties, New York, listed the following information for the Patent Church: it had "25 families, 100 souls," and the church building was valued at \$1,000.

It is not known why St. Patrick's ceased being a mission of Keeseville, but in 1882 the priests from the Cadyville parish began servicing the church, starting with Rev.

James McGowan. During his pastorate in 1891, the congregation and some outside benefactors gathered funds for a bell. One source states that Patrick Boswell brought the bell up from the railroad station with a team and wagon and stored it in his granary until it was installed. Not long afterwards, the church bell rang out over the hillside for the first time, summoning the worshipers to the little church as it does to this day.

Two years later, in 1893, Rev. Peter H.J. Ryan assumed duties for what was to be a twenty-year pastorate at Cadyville and the Patent. Because St. Patrick's shares a page in the diocesan record book with St. Paul's of Bloomingdale, it seems at first as though St. Patrick's, like St. Paul's, was a mission church of St. Rose of Lima Church in Alder Brook for the years 1895-1898. However, it is clear from the Cadyville parish records and from the Patent Church's "Pew Rent" ledger of that time, now in possession of John and Rita Downs, that Father Ryan was the priest ministering to the Patent flock. His hand was recording marriages and baptisms into the book at Cadyville, among them many from the Patent parish, as well as the pew rents into the ledger the Downs have. The writing is unmistakably the same, and in fact his name appears in the ledger several times. There is no question, therefore, despite the unclear page in Ogdensburg, that he was St. Patrick's pastor throughout the entire twenty years.

Katharine Boswell, who was baptized by Father Ryan in 1900, remembers him vividly from her younger years. The priests came just once a month to the mission church in those days, but they stayed longer than just the hour for Mass. Father Ryan usually arrived on Saturday by horse and wagon on the long drive from Cadyville and stayed overnight at her parents' home. Patrick, her father, usually retired early, but Father Ryan enjoyed late conversation and needed help taking off his high leather boots before he went to bed. As a result, the host did not get much sleep Saturday nights. During times of special instruction for First Communion and Confirmation, the priest might arrive Friday afternoon in order to teach the children their prayers and catechism Saturday mornings, staying an extra day. Indeed, he sometimes stayed until Monday.

The very first priest to use an automobile for trips to the Patent was Father Ryan's successor, Rev. John Kelly. Sometime during his tenure, he switched from horse and rig to the more modern motorcar. His successor, Rev. Joseph Pontur, who did not drive at all, would arrive in an open touring car driven by his housekeeper, Miss Frances Weir, a woman who stood over six feet tall and wore fancy hats.

In 1931 the long association with Cadyville ended, and St. Patrick's then became a mission of St. Augustine's in Peru. The pastor there was Rev. Louis Brisson. After a period of time, some unknown difficulties arose, and Father Brisson closed the Patent Church. The Dean of the Diocese asked him in 1934 if he would consent to transfer the care of the mission to another parish. "Positively not!" the priest answered in a letter to Bishop J.H. Conroy, and St. Patrick's remained in his ministry, but it also remained closed. Now the faithful of St. Patrick's had to journey elsewhere for Mass. In 1938 James Fitzpatrick, whose parents and grandparents were buried in the cemetery at the Patent, wrote the bishop requesting permission for private collections to be made to reinstate the lapsed insurance and to maintain the church, since it had fallen into disrepair. That offer was refused, since only the local pastor could authorize such fund-raising, but the bishop was clearly concerned and made some inquiries into the needs of the Patent families to "make better provision for the care of the church." Starting February 1, 1939, Reverend Daniel Finnegan, an Oblate priest, became administrator of St. Augustine's. Less than two weeks later he was able to write the bishop, "There is a great interest being shown in the restoration of this Church and a willingness on the part of many non-catholic as well as catholics to help. I can assure you that there will be no difficulty in securing money, material and labor for the repairing of the Church." Card parties, church suppers, and collections of every kind were in progress. The combined enthusiasm of the people and Father Finnegan, their new spiritual leader, resulted in Mass again being celebrated at the church. Rev. Arthur Trudel, who became pastor in May of that year, was able to write in the financial record for 1939 that the "West Peru Church was completely renovated with new roof, new floor, and painted inside and out." Today some even remember Rev. Edward Burns, a young assistant at the time, joining the others on the roof until he hit his thumb with a hammer.

The one hundredth anniversary of St. Patrick's Church was celebrated on August 28, 1941, with a chicken supper and parish get-together at St. Augustine's Hall in Peru. It was also a fund-raiser "to keep the church open in spite of financial difficulty," according to a newspaper account, and grateful acknowledgment was made to Catholics and non-Catholics alike who had donated food, time, and services. A festive affair, the day included a concert by Father Kelly's Holy Name Band from Ausable Forks.

By this time St. Patrick's had become a mission of St.

Catherine's in Clintonville. To cap the importance of the anniversary but more importantly to assure exemption from federal taxes under civil and canon law, the church was officially incorporated that same year on December 1. Records indicate that Rev. George Donnelly was pastor and Herbert Darragh and Hugh Boswell were trustees at the time. It was believed that the church had originally been incorporated in 1842, but there was no available record of it, and so at last the omission was rectified.

In the mid 1940's, two things occurred that were to have a tremendous impact upon the Patent parish. In 1944 Rev. Harold P. McCabe was designated pastor at Clintonville, and in 1946 Frances Xavier Cabrini became the first U.S. citizen to be declared a saint of the Catholic Church. This "Citizen Saint," an Italian immigrant and member of the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart, had labored tirelessly in North, Central, and South America, Italy, England, France, and Spain, founding hospitals, religious orders, orphanages, and schools. She effected many cures in her lifetime, and after her death, miracles occurred through her intercession. After her canonization, Father McCabe, who had a great devotion to her, saw in the people and land of St. Patrick's fertile ground for a shrine in her honor. As Father Rooney had done more than a hundred years before, Father McCabe inspired the small group of his Patent parishioners to begin the great task. Under the direct supervision of chief mason Phillip Duprey, men selected stones from the church grounds to form a grotto just south of the church building. When it was completed, a statue of the saint was placed on a pedestal in a recess above the altar under the arched stone canopy.

Under sunny skies at 3 P.M. on Sunday, August 31, 1947, the shrine was blessed and dedicated by the Bishop of the Ogdensburg Diocese, Most Rev. Bryan J. McEntegart. Members of the Plattsburgh Council of the Knights of Columbus formed a guard of honor, and twenty Christian Brothers from Mount Assumption Institute formed the choir. Religious from throughout the diocese and pilgrims from a number of states, 2,000 persons in all, listened to Father McCabe's welcoming address and Rev. Joseph Doyle's description of a life of the saint who sought "to do not the possible, but the impossible." In his address the bishop, after commenting on the beauty of the setting, urged those gathered to emulate the saint and expressed the hope that many would journey to the shrine in the future to gather blessings from her intercession. The ceremony closed with Benediction and veneration of a relic of the saint. A reception was held afterwards in the home of Herbert and Peg Darragh on the Patent Road.

The bishop's words were prophetic. Father McCabe began holding regular public novena devotions each Sunday, and by the time the first Mass was celebrated there in October, it had "already drawn thousands of pilgrims to the Patent to seek spiritual and bodily health through the intercession of Mother Cabrini," according to an article in the diocesan paper, the North Country Catholic. Cold weather eventually forced outdoor services at the shrine to end for the year, although Mass, of course, continued throughout the winter at St. Patrick's. With the coming of spring, outdoor novenas resumed. In June of 1948, a headline in the Albany Times Union declared, "Shrine Draws Many Visitors." The article cited the register, which indicated that on May 30 "approximately 1,000 persons visited the shrine, coming from a distance as far as Detroit, Michigan, and Edmonton, Alberta."

The pastor and his flock began to realize that the small plot of church land was not large enough for the increasing numbers of pilgrims. Land boundaries around the church and shrine were expanded. A parcel across the road was deeded to the church by the Ralph G. Boyd family in 1948 as was land adjoining the shrine belonging to James Walker. In 1949 Hugh and Lillian Boswell donated additional property, further increasing the size of the acreage next to the church and shrine. The Boswells stipulated that no buildings were to be erected on the property in order to keep the original nature of the land. A small building, however, had been constructed across the road for a snack bar. Women of the parish made sandwiches and baked donuts for refreshments. Beginning in 1949 it also served as a small apartment for Father McCabe, who started ministering to the faithful at the shrine on an almost daily basis during the summers. Bishop McEntegart again made his way from Ogdensburg to the Patent in 1952 to bless stone Stations of the Cross erected on the additional land next to the grotto, again the handiwork of mason Phil Duprey. By this time, statues of the Sacred Heart and Our Lady of Fatima, gifts in 1949 by Katharine Boswell and Kathryn and Sadie Conway respectively, and embellished with Duprey's stonework, graced either side of the shrine.

People of all faiths - individually, in families, and in large organized groups - were coming to pay homage to St. Frances Cabrini. Busloads of people from New York City regularly arrived every fall, forerunners of the buses from Canada that today still come bringing worshipers. Father McCabe started conducting "The Mother Cabrini Hour" on radio station WEAV in Plattsburgh to spread devotion to the saint. Almost daily, he received testimonial letters telling of help and cures from persons who had visited the shrine or sought Mother Cabrini's intercession. In response to numerous requests, he expanded the number of Masses and other religious services: three weekday Masses in addition to Sunday Mass, recitation of the rosary, Holy

Hour each First Friday of the month for world peace, weekly Stations of the Cross, continuing novenas, Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, and veneration of the relic.

Father McCabe was transferred to a new assignment by the Bishop in 1955, but the faithful still traveled to the shrine in great numbers. It was perhaps inevitable, however, that priorities of succeeding pastors would change. In summer months, more and more campers from both sides of the border were staying at nearby Macomb Reservation, a state park that had been the site in former times of a military reservation. Joseph O'Hara, a parishioner at the Patent and park manager of Macomb, encouraged Father Joseph Quinn, then pastor, to add a Mass at Macomb when he came from Clintonville to St. Patrick's on Sunday. A new altar was built in the old amphitheater there, and Father Quinn offered Mass in both places during the summer until he was reassigned in 1961.

At this point, Clintonville itself became a mission church of Immaculate Conception in Keeseville "because of the shortage of priests in the diocese," Bishop James J. Navagh wrote Father Trudel, who was still pastor at St. Augustine's. St. Patrick's was therefore transferred back into the care of St. Augustine's in Peru, its parent church today.

Over time, some firsts occurred at St. Patrick's as with any church. Electric lights were used for the first time in 1945, and in 1956 an automatic oil furnace was installed in the basement. No more would a woodstove's fire burn a wall and have to be doused by parishioners dashing outside and scooping up handfuls of snow, as once occurred during Mass.

Although this rural mission church has sometimes been forced to close temporarily through the years, the determination to keep the parish community going has manifested itself in a number of ways. Perhaps in earlier times but certainly during the middle decades of this century, church suppers helped raise the funds needed to keep the church open. Older parishioners can remember these occasions held at the church hall in Peru, the Mannix homestead, and the homes of Mary and Barney Downs, Herb and Peg Darragh, and George and Libby Duprey. In this same spirit, current parishioners cooked and served a St. Patrick's Day dinner at the Peru Knights of Columbus Hall this year, with labor and financial help from the Knights as well.

In good country tradition, work bees have been a mainstay in the care and upkeep of the church. Under Rev. William Lavallee, they were often followed by parish

picnics, where young and old could relax after the hard work and enjoy each others' company and home cooking. As of old, parish members have freely repaired, cleaned, scrubbed, polished, scraped, painted, decorated and landscaped their beloved place of worship to this very day. Sometimes it has been just a small core of the faithful; at other times, outside volunteers have given of their energy too, as the Knights did recently with work on the sidewalk to the shrine. From the time the shrine first opened, Hugh and Lillian Boswell spent every Sunday afternoon overseeing the sale of candles, an important source of funds for the small parish; since the 1960's, Grace Lucia has become the caretaker for this task. Grace's husband Herman, whose land adjoins the church property across the road, tended the fields and fences for years as long as he was physically able. Organists have also volunteered time and talent. During the early part of this century, Anna Mary Fiske Downs played the pump organ; more recently, on the Hammond electric organ purchased in 1953, Cecile Coffey and the current organist Vicktoria Morey have continued the tradition. For a time, the church cemetery had to be closed because huge boulders made it impossible to dig more graves. Parish volunteers in 1983 helped move tons of fill so it could be enlarged and reopened. A request by Rev. Joseph P. Trombley and community effort resulted in the new altar at the shrine in 1988. The old altar had been built at a time when the priest's back was to the congregation. Parishioners brought stones, the O'Neill Redden Drown Funeral Home donated the marble top, and Clayton Becker constructed the altar. Trustees through the years have shouldered responsibility for decisions and have joined in the manual labor. The present trustees, John Downs, Jr. and Barbara Marcotte Licourt, are always, like true leaders, among the first to volunteer for whatever their parish needs.

In recent years two spiritual milestones have occurred. Since 1987, ecumenical sunrise services with the Peru Community Church have taken place on Easter morning in the appropriate setting of the shrine. For the first time ever in 1989, members of the little congregation made an overseas pilgrimage to the Marian shrine at Medugorje, Yugoslavia, with the parochial vicar, Rev. Francis Coryer.

The heritage of a common faith binds this community together. It is fitting, on this sesquicentennial anniversary, that the present pastor, Rev. Clyde A. Lewis, is a descendant of the Lyons family, one of the early families of the parish. It is most fitting also that the Most Rev. Stanislaus J. Brzana, Bishop of the Diocese of Ogdensburg, is chief celebrant of the anniversary Mass on August 25, 1991 at the Patent Church. The shepherd and his flock rejoice as one.

Over the span of one hundred fifty years, many changes have taken place at St. Patrick's. The white altar from the Red Store is gone, and new statues grace the present altar. The old windows with pointed Gothic arches have been removed, and rounded windows with clear glass bring nature inside. The roof and siding have been replaced, and the old outside steps that used to lead up to the front door have given way to ramps, making it easier for all to enter the church. But a building is not the church. Its people are the essence of the church, and the same faith and spirit of the founders lives on in the people today. With St. Paul they can say, "I have kept the faith." As they gather in the same lovely spot as those who came before, they know this is God's special place of worship for them.

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