

Ghost Churches: Memorial To The Past

By Father Robert F. McNamara

This is another of Father McNamara's little tours into the history of the Rochester Diocese. His 800-page centennial history of the Diocese, with a Foreword by Bishop Sheen, is to appear early in the centenary year, 1968.

We have often heard of ghost towns in our American history. There are also ghost churches in the history of American Catholicism: churches that were built to serve the needs of a congregation, but later on disposed of when the congregation diminished or moved elsewhere.

Sometimes these churches have vanished so long ago that their very existence has passed out of the memory of the neighborhood. Others still stand, but are no longer used for church services. The next step will be their destruction. Then, years hence, their existence, too, will fade from memory.

Some people collect antiques. One of my hobbies is to collect ghost churches, lest they be forgotten. The list I give today is probably not complete. Readers may be able to furnish more information—or even pictures.

One of the earliest ghost churches on record was the chapel built in 1838 at Brushville (now Tuscarora), Livingston County, to accommodate the Irish laborers engaged in building the Genesee Valley Canal. It was used for four years. After that, the Catholics had either moved on or had settled at Mount Morris. The Brushville chapel was probably a mere shanty-church, with a built-in impermanence.

A more stable, but none the less equally humble church building was Our Lady of the Holy Rosary, erected around 1839 on Sandy Hill, just south of Perkinsville, by the pioneer German farmers who had begun to move into that district a few years before. The church was probably a log structure. It was in use for over four decades. The site is marked with a cross, and there are apparently still some graves there in the little churchyard. Another early rural church was erected by Irish farmers in 1844 at Greenwood, Steuben County. This, too, has been long since razed; but its graveyard is still intact. The Greenwood church has yielded to St. Mary's in nearby Rexville. Rexville likewise has a mission chapel at Troupsburg, southeast of Rexville. This has also long since been demolished. It functioned from around 1866 to around 1883.

Dutch Hill

Five ghost churches date from the years 1870-1890. The oldest of them was St. Mary's, on "Dutch Hill," west of Elmira. A number of German farmers lived in the neighborhood, and St. Mary's was a mission of St. John the Baptist German Church in Elmira. St. Mary's functioned from 1878 until 1905 or 1906. Similar circumstances led to the establishment of St. Simon's Church, Springwater, Livingston County. Catholics who were

farmers settled on the west hill outside the village.

In 1881 Father Simon Fitz Simon, pastor of St. Patrick's Church, Dansville, constructed for their benefit a little church up on the hillside beside the railroad track. It was assigned to St. Michael's Church, Livonia, as a mission, around 1894, and in 1898 became a mission of St. Joseph's Church, Wayland. The need having ceased, the little chapel was sold around 1905. For some time it was used to store grain. It was razed so long ago, that when the present writer first inquired about it in Springwater, only one "old-timer" recalled its ever having existed.

All Saints Church in Fowlerville, Livingston County, was a mission of St. Mary's, Genesee, from 1884 to 1901, and of St. Columba's, Caledonia, from 1901 to 1910. It had outlived its usefulness by 1910, so it was closed in that year, fell into decay, and was demolished two years later. There was likewise a little chapel at Big Flats, in Chemung County, from about 1885 to about 1900. It was a mission of St. Mary's Church, Corning. The building was disposed of at the turn of the century, and remodeled into apartments.

Another rural churchlet in the Southern Tier was St. William's, at Cameron Mills, Steuben County. It was opened in 1886. In 1903 it was sold. The price asked testifies to the size and condition of the building: two hundred dollars! This had been a mission of St. Catherine's Church, Addison.

Chapels Built

Two chapels-of-ease were constructed in the first decade of this century that have now ceased to exist. St. Edward's chapel was open in the west section of Auburn in 1905, to serve as an annex of St. Mary's Church, Auburn. In 1918 it was sold to the Franciscan Conventual Sisters of Syracuse, who had accepted the invitation to found Mercy Hospital at the site of St. Edward's. The little chapel made way for the hospital building; but the hospital chapel itself filled the same needs.

In 1907, St. George Chapel was constructed at Summerville, on the shores of Lake Ontario, just north of Rochester, for the benefit of summer cottagers. In the 1920's it became the property of the newly established St. Thomas the Apostle Church, Irondequoit; and St. Thomas used its facilities until the new parish church was finished on Colebrook Drive. It continued in its role as a mission chapel thereafter until the parish sold it in 1959. The building was razed by its present owners only in 1967.

Our Lady of Sorrows was an Italian mission church opened in 1914 on Niagara Street at Duke Street. Its purpose was to take care of the overflow of Our Lady of Mount Carmel Italian Church. During much of its career it had a rector, with assistant, in residence. But in 1938, this church was closed as

a church and reopened as the Genesee Center, one of the settlement houses operated by Rochester Catholic Charities. At the closing, the rector, Father Patrick Moffatt, and his assistant, Father Albert L. Simonetti, were transferred to nearby St. Francis Xavier Church, which was made into an Italian parish (although it had hitherto always been German).

Maybe Our Lady of Sorrows doesn't really deserve to be called a ghost church, because the building is still standing. You might say that same thing about at least three other churches which are still in existence but are no longer used for services.

St. Patrick's Church in McLean, Tompkins County, is one. The church was built at the cost of \$1,000 in 1851. It was for some years a mission of Immaculate Conception Church, Thera; later on it was entrusted to St. Anthony's Church, Groton. In the 1870's it had a population of about two hundred members. Later on, the number went into a decline.

New Parish in Dryden

In 1962, Bishop Kearney established a new parish at Dryden, Tompkins County, to include within its boundaries the old mission of McLean. St. Patrick's church still stands; but it will soon be sold. In an Ontario Lakeside neighborhood northwest of Rochester, is Star of the Sea Chapel, erected in 1907 for the benefit of vacationers. In 1964, it was absorbed by St. Mark's, a newly established parish. St. Mark's parishioners held their services in the Chapel until the completion of the new church. Since the dedication of St. Mark's, in 1968, the lakeside chapel has been sold.

Since World War II, two parishes in Livingston County have lost their identity by absorption. In 1959, St. Patrick's, Dansville, founded in 1849, was absorbed by St. Mary's, Dansville. The St. Patrick's church building and rectory have only lately been given as a gift to the Village of Dansville by the corporation of St. Mary's Church. In Mount Morris, Assumption parish was absorbed, in 1961, by St. Patrick's parish. Assumption was an Italian mission church, opened in 1914. The building which it formerly occupied is now serving other purposes.

Santa Maria de Mercede, however, is a real ghost church. This was dedicated at Cuylerville, Livingston County, in 1914. It was a small church built on property given by the Sterling Sait Company for the benefit of its workers, who were principally of Italian background. This burned down in the late 1930's.

One more church to round out our list: the vacationers' chapel of Our Lady of Lebanon, on the west shore of Canandaigua Lake. It was constructed in 1919 and disposed of in 1934.

You will have noticed that most of these ghost churches were small mission chapels, or else smaller parishes that outlived their practical value. Their demise was therefore no indication of a falling away from the Faith. It was rather the result of population shifts, or the termination of language and national problems, or the arrival of better means of transportation to more central parish churches.

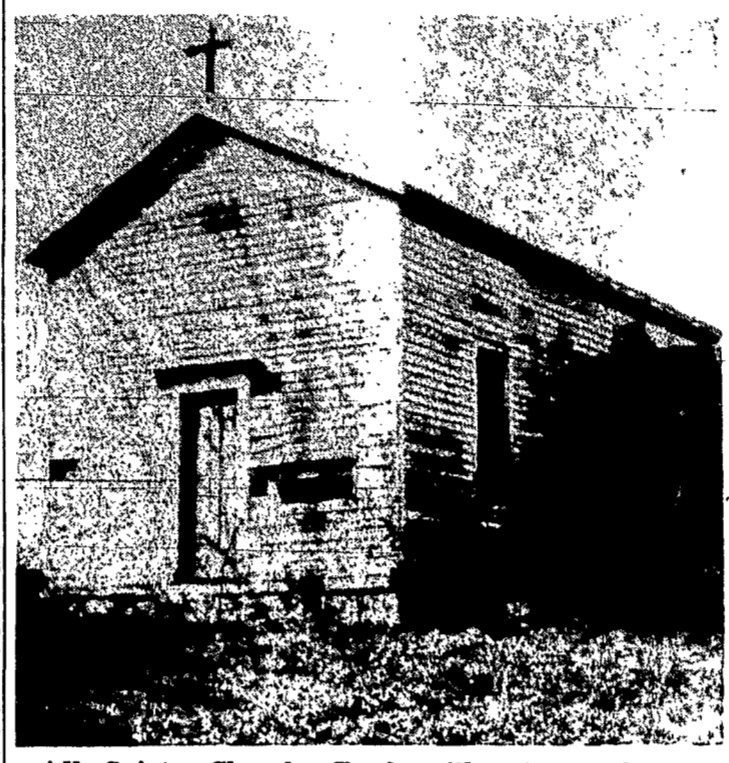
Biggest Ghost Church

There is nothing wrong, therefore, about church buildings ceasing to be. Indeed, Rochester's first cathedral, St. Patrick's, is our biggest ghost church. It was begun in 1864, finished in 1870, enlarged in 1898, and sold and leveled in 1937. An Eastman building now

stands on the site: the corner of Platt Street and Plymouth Avenue, North.

No, what makes the church is not the walls. It is the congregation within, and the sacred rites they perform. A home is a church Kyriakon—"house of the Lord") if and when it is used for the liturgy. So, for that matter, is a cave, or a barn, or a concentration camp, if they are used for liturgical purposes.

Sometimes ghost churches can be replaced once again by living ones. Thus the little ghost church at Big Flats has long since gone, closed down because the Catholics who lived there had diminished. But in late years Big Flats has become a growing inter-city suburb, located as it is in the valley between Corning, Horseheads and Elmira. It is reported that property has been bought in the neighborhood for Catholics use. Before many years we may see finished in 1870, enlarged in 1898, and sold and leveled in 1937. A little mission chapel once gave up the ghost.



All Saints Church, Fowlerville shortly before demolition.

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Former Catholic Chapel at Big Flats (Photo taken in 1948)

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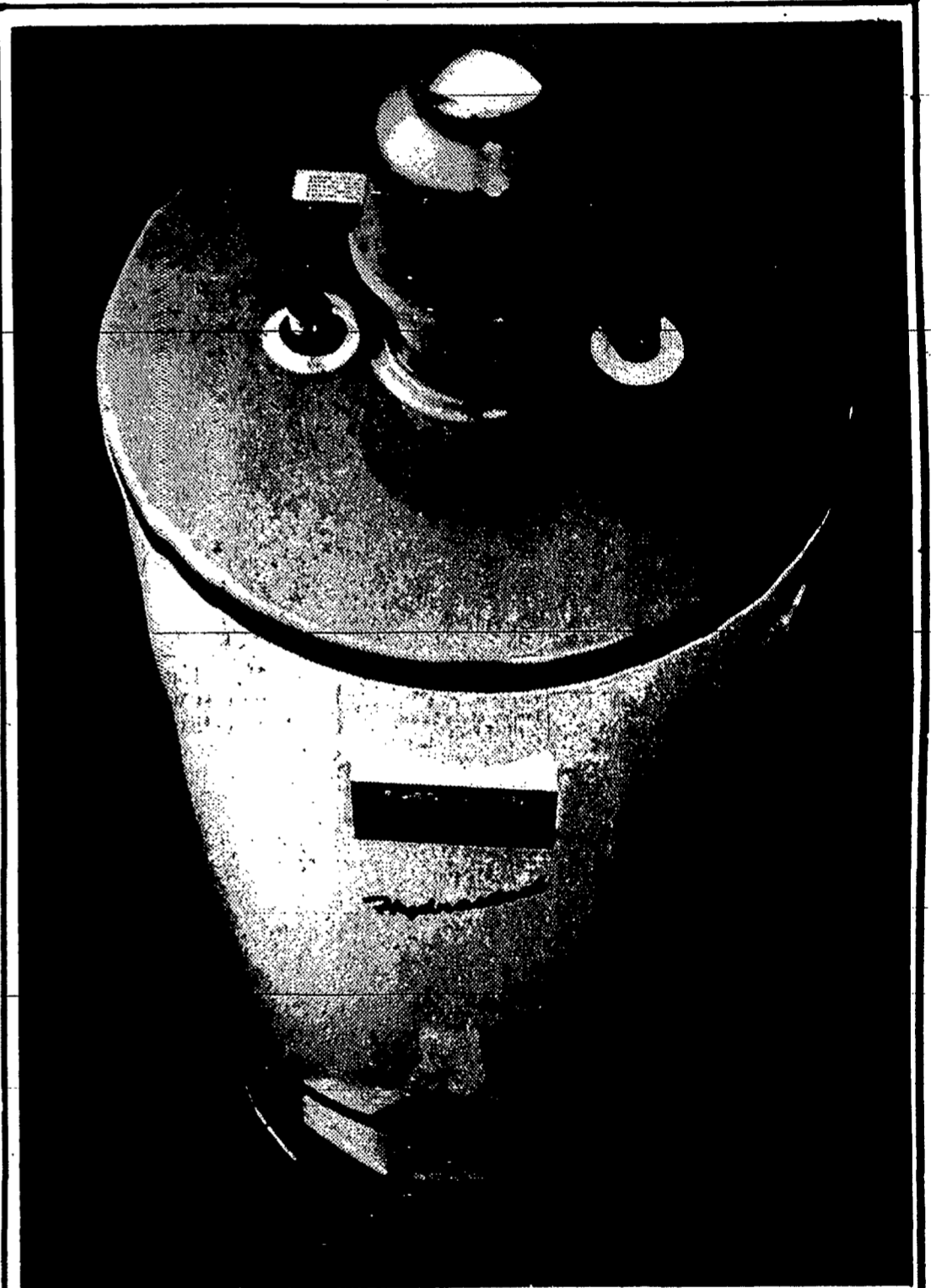
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Bringing Gifts

Parishioners of St. Patrick's Church, Mt. Morris bring gifts of food articles for the needy to Mass, said recently by assistant pastor, Fr. Thomas Watts. Anthony Maggio, left, presents bread-and-wine-to altar boy son Craig Maggio while John Maggio and sister Colletti bring food gifts for the needy to the altar during the offertory. (Photo by Fred Beuerlein)



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