



Workers begin task of cleaning out rubble.

Recovery Work Begins

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People were coming and going all day at the rectory, and finally Mrs. Ann Annabel, cook and housekeeper, had to lock the door to keep curious passersby from wandering in.

Three girls answered the telephone all that Dec. 27, taking messages of sympathy for Father William Tobin, pastor, and accepting financial pledges from concerned parishioners.

The James D. Barrett Funeral Home, also on Lake Street, gave a \$500 check for repairs.

Father Edward Foy, pastor at St. Peter and Paul, Elmira, offered the use of the rectory and facilities at both Sts. Peter and Paul and St. Cecilia to Father Tobin and Msgr. Leo G. Schwab, who resides at the rectory. No decision has yet been made.

Two Rochesterians arrived that afternoon and set up makeshift headquarters in the rectory living room. They were John Ritzenthaler, diocesan comptroller, and John Norton, an insurance representative.

They explained the early progress made in estimating the fire loss.

"The first step," Ritzenthaler said, "is to clean out the debris and find out what the total loss was. Next we'll get the roof capped off to insure that nothing more happens to the building."

He gave a "present rough estimate" of \$225,000 damage and emphasized the word "rough."

"It's still hard to give an accurate estimate because there's so much that has to be cleaned out yet," he said.

All photographs by Susan McKinney unless otherwise indicated.

Ritzenthaler and Norton concurred that an arsonist probably started the blaze at the 81-year-old edifice. "The tabernacle and ciborium are gone," Ritzenthaler said, "and the fire started in several spots. All indications say that arson was the cause."

Outside the rectory window, workers were loading pews onto a truck. Norton said that they were being taken some place where they could undergo "a slow drying process," and possibly be saved from warping and rotting.



Worker amid the sacred and the profane.

Arsonist

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learn how entry was made into the building. One police officer said it had been determined that the thieves left by a rear door. A trail of blood led to the rear door from the altar, where apparently someone had cut himself. Police said they took samples of the blood and also found matches and inflammable materials, not described.

After the fire was under control, the building looked bombed out, its yellow brick walls standing with broken

stained glass windows, the roof collapsed, the steeple charred.

The church fire was the second major blaze downtown in less than two weeks. On Sunday night, Dec. 16, a three-story business building went up in sheets of flame. The causes still are being investigated.

St. John's was in the Elmira business district, and many downtowners attended noon Mass there weekdays. There are 228 families registered on the church rolls, for a total of about 700 regular parishioners.

Fire's Aftermath: Neighbors Stunned

By JOHN DASH

Elmira — The winter sky gloomed over the rubble-strewn shell of St. John the Baptist Church last week, the scene reflecting the spirits of the passers by and parishioners who once worshipped there.

The cloying odor of damp ashes filled the air.

Joan Bacon Murphy felt that part of herself was gone. "It's hard to believe," she said. "It's just like I had lost somebody I loved." She and her daughter Therese stared numbly at the ruins. They were the third and fourth generation of a community which called the church home. Mrs. Murphy's mother was organist. Her father is a trustee and it was at St. John's that she had received all the sacraments.

For 20 years, it was homey, small and cheerful, to the parish cook Mrs. Ann Annabel. "Father Tobin is awful good," she said. "He never refused to help. He is good to anybody who comes to the door. I can't see how anybody could have a grudge against him."

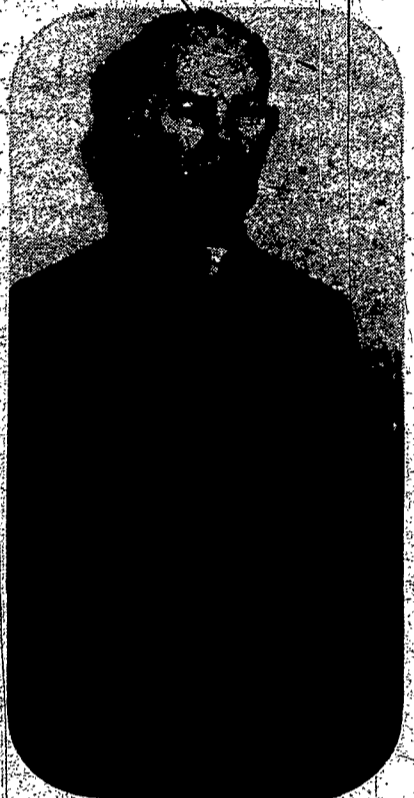
The four fires which raged through the small brick structure were but one part of a bizarre puzzle to Fire Lt. John Nicholson and police investigator Philip Shea. The hands of a Christ child figure in a Christmas creche were broken off. The tabernacle at the high altar was ripped out and stolen. Bloody marks were seen on the sanctuary carpet.

Lt. Nicholson says he doesn't like to think "there are people walking around like that."

Richard Ganascioli, one of the many who attended noon Mass on weekdays, urged prayer "for the guy that did this." He was "very sad that this happened."

At the end of day, a little boy stood on the steps to the front door, peering wide-eyed into the charred interior, and spilling over with questions about what had happened. On the street, cars filled with solemn-face people pulled slowly past.

It seemed that the youngster was the only one in the city who didn't know what he had lost.



FATHER TOBIN

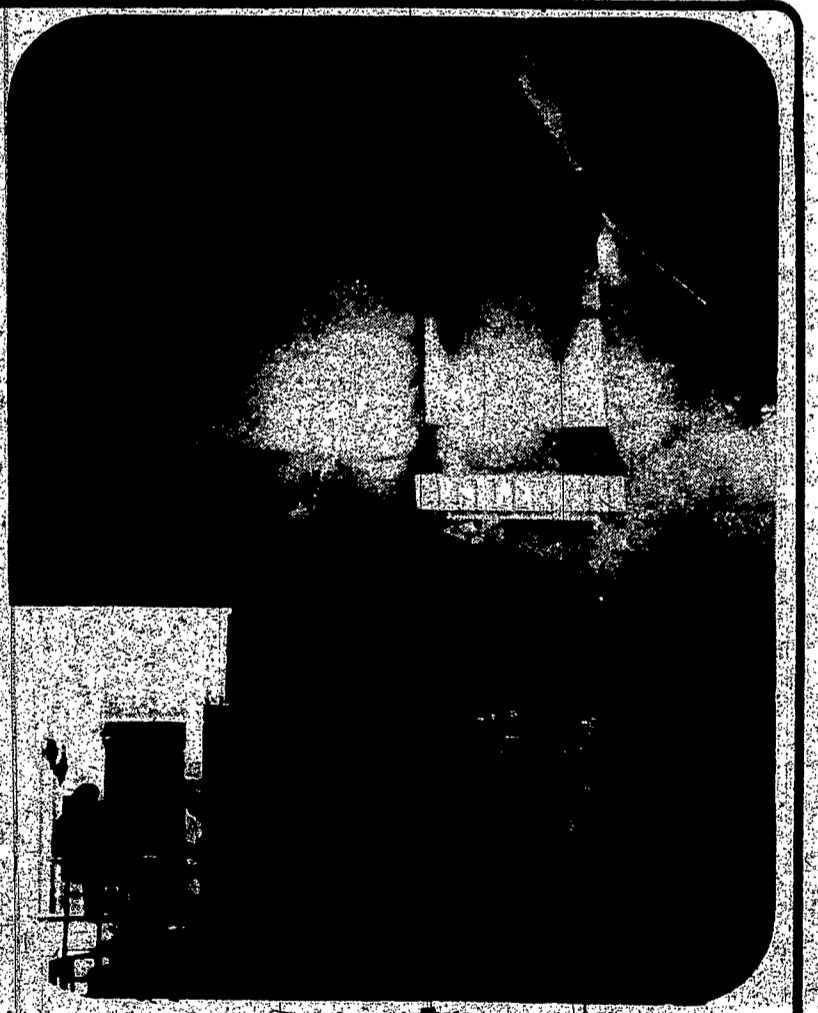


Photo courtesy of Elmira Star-Gazette

Church before the fire and during blaze.

Second Fire at Parish

Elmira — Last week was the second time that the congregation of St. John the Baptist lost its house of worship. The 107-year-old German community also saw fire destroy its church, then located on Dickinson Street, in 1899.

The parish was organized in 1866 by German Catholics who attended Sts. Peter and Paul, the first church in the city.

The congregation purchased the Dickinson Street property and in 1868 the building was consecrated by Bishop Stephen V.

Ryan, the second bishop of Buffalo.

The first pastor was Father Serge Schoulepnikoff.

Until the opening of a short-lived parish school in 1875, the following priests served as pastors of the Church: Fathers G. Erhardt, E. VonRupplin, S. Gruber, A. Bachmann and T. Neibling.

Father J. Strelke opened the school and served the parish until 1886.

His successor, Father A. Geisenhoff, closed the school in

1890. Two years later, and three years after the first fire, Bishop Ryan again consecrated a church for the congregation. Father F. Traudlein was pastor at the time.

Father John B. Stemmler was named pastor in 1903 and served in that post until 1942.

Father Stemmler opened a catechetical center in 1903. He was succeeded by Fathers Theodore Winterroth, Joseph Gorman, Raymond Hesel and John Leary.

Father William Tobin is the present pastor.