

The Poetry and Drama In the Life of a **COUNTRY PRIEST**

By PAT PETRASKE
PHOTOS BY DAVE WITBECK

The sun hadn't yet decided to face the day but the station wagon was already idling quietly in the morning darkness. With his constant traveling companion, a 14-year-old dog named Punch, the "country priest" was off.

"Some farmer's wife from Mt. Morris counted 125 potholes along this stretch," laughed Father Edwin Wedow as the car bounced its way through pasture land toward early Mass at St. Lucy's in Retsof. He is one of two priests in the diocese to head three parishes. His are St. Lucy's, St. Thomas the Apostle in Leicester, where he lives, and St. Raphael in Piffard.

Life in the country is not that different from city life except for the distance one has to travel, Father Wedow observed. He logs 22,000 miles a year, using up two tanks of gasoline per week. So far "the gas shortage isn't too bad," he said.

"But the people tend to be friendlier, less sophisticated. It's more homey here," he resumed. His words were illustrated at a stop to distribute Communion to one of his parishioners who had suffered a heart attack. A "kuchen" or coffee cake was given to him "for the road."

Ah, the joys of the country, smiled Father Wedow as he carefully placed the gift away from dog and took to the road again.

His "country" is located in Livingston County, known as the green belt of the diocese. Here is where produce and lumber were gathered and shipped on the barge canal by way of Moscow Landing which now is called Leicester. Humming a few bars, the pastor explained how the farming community was renamed after a World War I song, "It's a long way to Tipperary... goodbye Leicester Square."

"Moscow Landing sounded too communistic," Father Wedow noted.

Four and a half miles away is St. Lucy's parish, established in 1911, whose new church was built in 1965 on a 3.4 acre site donated by the area's source of livelihood, the International Salt Co. Over a few more hills is St. Raphael's. Piffard church-goers had to trudge up a hill to attend Mass until the parish decided to buy the old Dutch

Reformed Church in the valley.

Father Wedow describes himself as a "P.R." man, "professional religious," who attended St. Andrew's Seminary and St. Bernard's Seminary and later became assistant pastor of St. Francis DeSales in Geneva. It could also mean "public relations" as he jokes and soothes his way through the problems and triumphs of his parishioners.

"Oh, you're beautiful anyway," he quipped to Elizabeth Farrell, 92, who fretted that her hair wasn't properly done for the priest's visit. Attempts at a Ukrainian greeting to Wasyl and Anna Chomyn brought chuckles, "You better not try it Father, it's pretty hard," said Mrs. Chomyn. "Everyone likes him," she said of the priest.

Back to the rectory for lunch, Father Wedow introduced "the one who does more work than I do," Father Charles Reynolds, who retired in 1971 after 31 years as pastor of the three village parishes. A former semi-professional baseball player, Father Reynolds remains active as chaplain of the railroad and the county jail. He recalled one particularly mild winter which was bad for the railroads since little salt from the area had to be shipped out. "There was only one person to blame, they said the chaplain wasn't praying enough," the railroad buff chuckled.

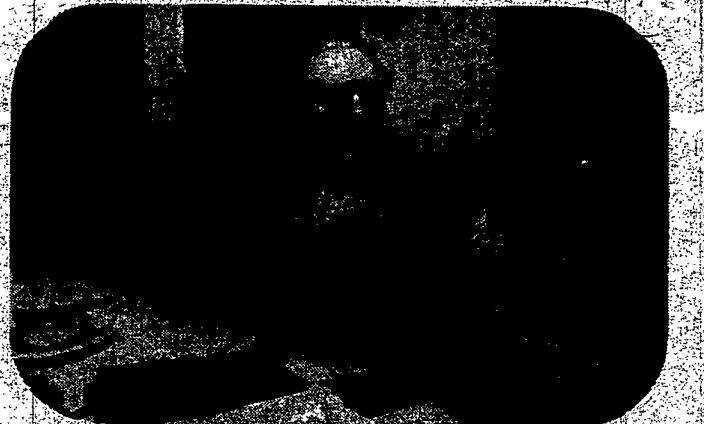
A day in the country wouldn't be complete without a trip to a farm. "I know a cow, a heifer and calf," said Father Wedow claiming "no pretense about being a farmer. I learned a lot of things by watching Hollywood Squares," he explained.

Despite the cleanliness of the barn and the modern milking machinery, the good old fashioned smell and cows named Barb, Elsie and Beauty convey a sense of the past. Tom and Andy Muscarella still like to boast about their cow, Macsfarm Emphasis Echo Beauty, who won honorable mention at the state fair. Father Wedow's duties have included the blessing of homes. He said he was also available to bless prized live stock.

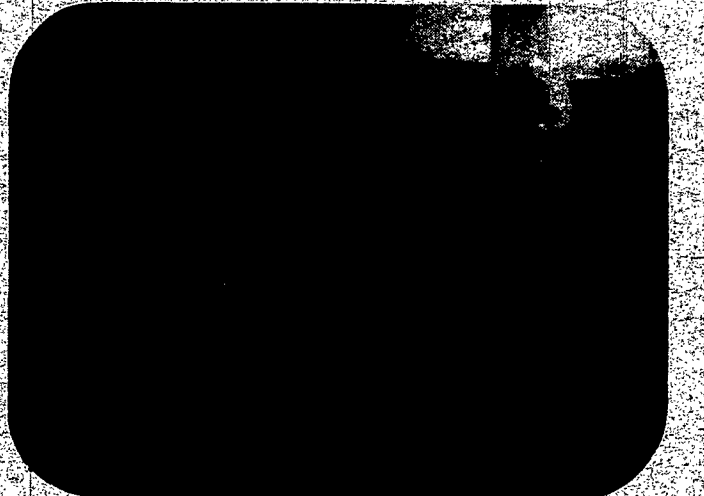
Winding his way back home with Punch sitting peacefully as usual in the back seat of the car, Father Wedow reflected on his philosophy as a priest. "I can save my soul by helping others," he said. "It's lonely and frustrating at times," he admitted. But he has a place he wouldn't want to trade.



Thomas Dunn



Father Charles Reynolds



[Above] Father Wedow with Punch, [right] Wasyl Chomyn