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Lightning Destroys Rexville Church

By Martin Toombs
Southern Tier Editor

Rexville — The fire fighters were still at work last Tuesday afternoon, extinguishing a smoldering roof section of the destroyed St. Mary's Church, but the parishioners were talking about the only future they can foresee: rebuilding.

The 1 a.m. lightning bolt which started the 104-year-old church on fire June 9 did more than destroy the building used by the parish's 80-family congregation.

Founded in 1845, St. Mary's is one of the older parishes in the diocese. For many of its congregation, the church had seen years of weddings, first Communion and funerals. Asked how long he had been a parishioner, John Leonard Jr. of Troupsburg answered, "Five generations."

Conversations around the burned-out structure included references to past events in the church, and the parish's struggle to maintain the building, which was larger than it needed, but which they were committed to preserving.

So it was with that emotion that the parishioners learned early Tuesday morning, June 9, that their church was on fire. The spire, a sign visible for miles for more than a century, was struck by lightning.

The explosion woke many in the area, and sent part of the steeple 100 yards away, where it started a tree on fire. The first fire unit to arrive, West Union, soon discovered that it couldn't reach the fire, burning at the top of the 135-foot steeple. Emmett McNeill, a member of the fire department and St. Mary's Parish Council, reported that "by the time we had enough water, it was too little, too late."

While more fire departments arrived, 10 before the

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A shocked Father Burr surveys the damage.



Kevin O'Brien, parish council president, had been part of the crew which removed items from the church during the height of the fire.



Photos by Martin J. Toombs

THEN (May 1980)

NOW



PEARL Takes Aim at Credits for Religious Education

By John Dash

Brockport — If a coalition of religious and community groups wins its suit, young people taking "Character Building" at Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary School here won't receive the usual one quarter of credit at Brockport High School.

The coalition, the Monroe Citizens for Public Education and Religious Liberty (PEARL), has filed the suit against state Education Commissioner Gordon Ambach in an attempt to

keep state public schools from giving credit for religious courses taken outside the public school.

The suit was filed June 4 in U.S. District Court. In June 1980, the state organization of PEARL sued New York City school officials for offering such credit.

A memo, dated May 7, 1981, from Jean M. Coon, deputy counsel of the State Education Department, to Commissioner Ambach's Interfaith Advisory Council,

stated that that case was "dismissed . . . on the ground that no real controversy exists in that on the record of this case there is no showing that any school district has implemented a released time program for which diploma credit is given or that the State Education Department has approved such a course."

The dismissal, the memo said, "does not of course finally determine any constitutional issues but only ends this one case."

The attorney noted however, "Plaintiff's attorney, by letter asked the Court for leave to amend the complaint to implead an unnamed upstate school district where it was contended such a released time program was in operation. The Court apparently chose to disregard what was an unorthodox attempt to cure defective pleadings."

According to Martha Laties, chairwoman of PEARL, offering religious courses for credit is a

violation of the First Amendment.

At the heart of the argument is a 1978 regulation which stipulates that upon proper submission of a syllabus and by approval of the local Board of Education, regents credits may be given for religious classes.

According to "School Law," by William J. Hageny, "If pupils released from school attend religious instruction under the auspices

of a duly organized religious body, the school may grant credit for such instruction at the rate of one-fourth unit per year, not to exceed one unit in all. (Because most released time on the secondary level is now on an informal basis, this procedure is seldom used.)"

In the local case, Nativity pays the cost of transporting 112 Brockport High School students, in free periods during the school day, to and from the church where the

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