

Blaze challenged parish's faith, faculty recalls

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Mary Beth Fuehrer greets dozens of children, some giggling, some smiling, as she walks down the second-floor hallway of Holy Rosary School.

"Good morning, Miss Mary Beth, God bless you," exclaimed a line of students outside the first-grade classroom. One blonde boy rushed forward and hugged the principal, showing that the students' sentiments were far from forced.

"We're very proud of our school," Fuehrer remarked as she continued down the hall, adding, "we don't have one drop of asbestos anywhere!"

The school is sans asbestos because it was built in 1983. Fuehrer's comments recall a gloomier time in the parish school's history, a time that many teachers find themselves talking about as Holy Rosary Parish marks its centennial this year.

Holy Rosary's previous parish school, built in 1904, was devastated by a terrific fire that ignited on the frost-bitten morning of Saturday, Dec. 19, 1981. A fire inspector at the time blamed the blaze on "possible malfunction in the electrical system."

Rochester's *Democrat and Chronicle* noted that the fire "melted electrical wiring and sped to devour the rest of the building ... First it destroyed the basement, then it ate its way up the old wooden beams and partitions to the first floor. It took the heart of the first and second floors and beat the firefighters to the roof. The roof gave way, taking the old red clay tiles with it into the steaming water in the basement."

Mary Carboni, who taught eighth grade at the time, recalled that the day before the



Courier File Photo

Firefighters work to save Holy Rosary's Parish school during the December, 1981, blaze that devastated the structure.

fire, the school had completed its Christmas celebrations.

"We had just put on a spectacular Christmas play. It was just so joyful an experience. And then the next morning, the school was gone. It was just such a shock, she said."

After receiving a call about the fire, Carboni decided to check it out for herself. "I just went down and joined the throng watching the school go down," she said.

Among those watching were Fuehrer and Sally Verecke, an early-education aide. "I couldn't believe it," Verecke said. "Until I saw it, I really didn't believe it."

Fuehrer, vice principal at the time,

thought it was the end of the school community's life, but was comforted by a colleague who told her, "it's just things, not our life."

Nonetheless, the old school held fond memories for many of the teachers, including Dolores Mengel, who had taught various grades there since 1959. "It was like a second home going," she said.

Mengel said that the fire's effect was toughest on the school's new principal at the time, Sister Brian Madigan, SSJ. "The first thing I remember seeing after going (to the school) from the house was Sister Brian. There she was leaning against the church, tears streaming. This was her school going, and she had only been there

three months."

In the Holy Rosary Centennial Committee's parish history, Sister Madigan was quoted: "There is still an odor of smoke on the (school) photographs reminding us of that sad day."

Yet, even as the "sad day" progressed, the parish began working to rebuild their school, the history noted. Bishop Matthew H. Clark and the pastor, Father Robert A. Meng, contacted Monsignor J. Emmett Murphy, pastor of Holy Apostles Church, whose school had been closed. By noon that day, the trio had agreed that Holy Apostles would reopen as a school for the 230 Holy Rosary students.

Carboni, whose entire eighth-grade classroom was destroyed in the fire, took the survival of one item to be a good omen amid the devastation. "(The firefighters) just salvaged the crucifix in the room. It was a moving scene to watch that coming out after everything had been lost," she said.

Emboldened by the promise of a "substitute" school, parishioners and volunteers from throughout the diocese united to clean up the old building, spending the Christmas season washing smoke-stained desks and collecting any useful books left in the burnt structure.

Carboni had to mentally recollect everything in her roll books and grade records. Mengel, who taught kindergarten at the time, was luckier. Her room was spared in the fire, and its contents were moved virtually intact to the Holy Apostles' building.

Holy Apostles was also the home of the city school district's Head Start program, and Mengel remembered that the Head

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