

# Parish's Christmas spirit rose above flood

By Richard A. Kiley  
News editor

ELMIRA — Parishioners at Ss. Peter and Paul Church had much to be thankful for on Christmas Day, 1972, the year Tropical Storm Agnes sent swirling, muddy waters from the Chemung River flooding through Elmira and surrounding communities.

Even though hundreds of parishioners and thousands of city residents lost most if not all of their possessions during the worst flooding disaster ever to hit New York state, there was no loss of life in the Southern Tier's largest city.

"We had little or nothing that Christmas," recalled Mildred Ziminski, who has been parish secretary at Ss. Peter and Paul for 24 years. "I remember it was very simple but nice. Nobody died (in Elmira) from the flood ... You can live without things, but it's much harder to go on when you lose someone close to you."

Although Ziminski and several other parishioners had to think hard to recall the events of the Christmas six months after the great flood, no one had trouble remembering the events of Friday, June 23, 1972. That was when rampaging flood waters tore through Elmira, Corning and the surrounding areas.

Among the first buildings bombarded by the murky, brown waters were the rectory and church of Ss. Peter and Paul Church — which many observers called the worst-hit of any diocesan church — and St. Joseph's Hospital. For three days, the hospital was an island unto itself.

According to personal and newspaper accounts, eight feet of water filled the nave of the church, and the flood left behind a carpet of thick mud throughout the edifice.

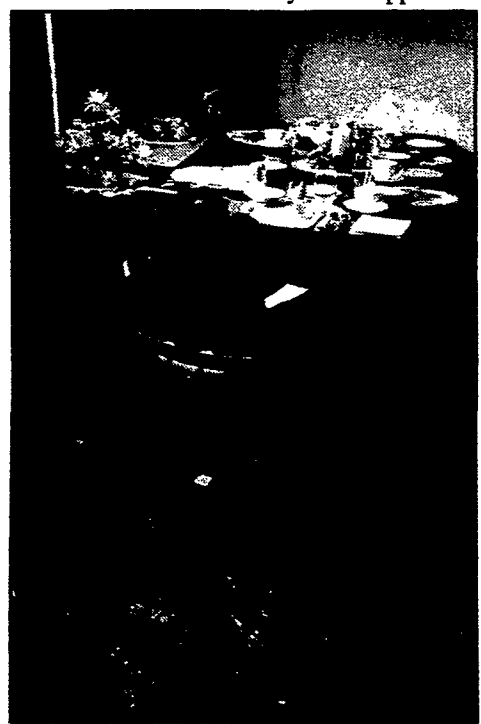
The convent and rectory were in similar shape after the floors buckled. Raging waters turned the convent chapel into a memory, and completely ruined expensive audio-visual equipment being stored in the convent.

As if the flood wasn't an extraordinary event in itself, the *Courier-Journal* reported many strange events during the catastrophe as well.

At Ss. Peter and Paul convent, for example, a dining room table fully set with china, silverware, glasses and flower decor apparently floated neatly atop several feet of water and settled down neatly in place when the water receded — with the table settings still in place.

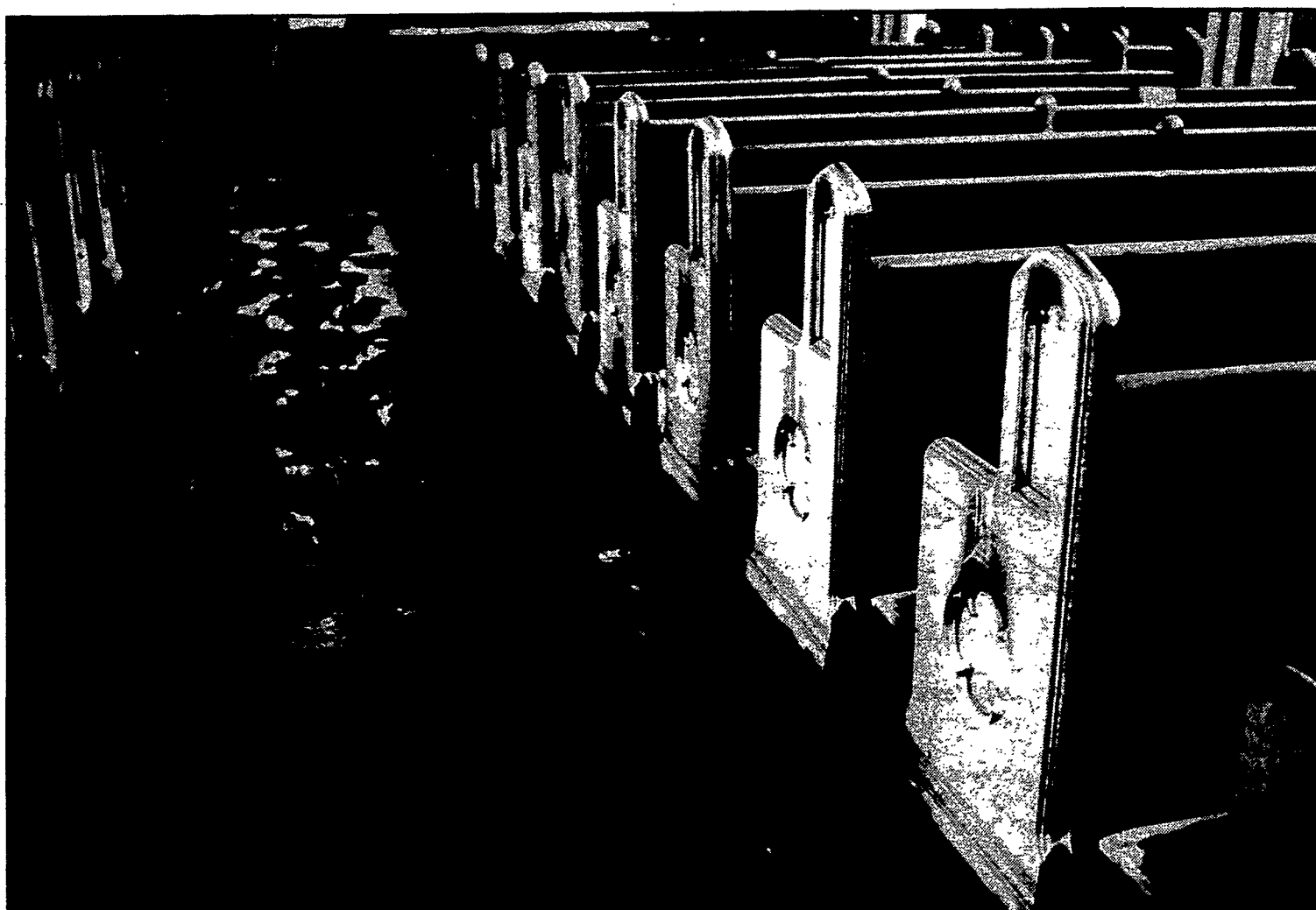
Another account by a *Courier* writer told the story of a workman who saw a horse in Big Flats climb on top of a five-foot fire wall. The horse, which still had to raise his head full length to stay above the water, survived.

Father Edward J. Foy was appointed



File photo

Flood waters lifted a table at Ss. Peter and Paul convent up to the ceiling and then returned it to the floor — with the settings in place.



File photo

Pews as well as missalette were knocked askew by flood waters in Ss. Peter and Paul Church, which many observers called the most devastated diocesan church in Elmira. A mud carpet covered the floor for months.

pastor of Ss. Peter and Paul Parish just a week before the flood, and his appointment took effect the day the disaster struck. One of his first duties as pastor was to assess the significant damage at his new church.

"So many people were affected by it, but we had so much cooperation from people in the area and from people far away," said Father Foy, who is now retired in residence at St. Mary's Church in Corning. "Many people were living in trailers for a long, long time."

But the cooperation of people affected by the flood and of those who wanted to help in its aftermath was overwhelming, Father Foy said. As city residents tried to help each other cope with the disaster, bus loads of people came from all over the state to assist in whatever way they could.

The monks at Mt. Saviour Monastery in Big Flats came down to offer assistance to those in need. To supplement what was being done through sweat and hard work, diocesan officials were quick to respond to families' needs.

The diocesan Office of Human Development helped more than 110 families get back into their residences during the first year alone, and the diocese also set up the Bishop's Southern Tier Flood Relief Fund.

Such parishioners as Rocco Picarazzi were also instrumental in helping Elmira get their lives back together. Picarazzi, who owned a local construction business, estimated that he spent 90 hours a week for more than 10 years in helping more than 200 families return to their homes.

Thanks to Picarazzi, many city families — including his own — had a home to enjoy during the Christmas of 1972. In fact, Picarazzi had to turn down pleas for help from officials at Ss. Peter and Paul because "families come before churches and schools."

"Because of my own family and others, I wasn't able to do much on the church at that time," said Picarazzi, who now helps elderly people in Elmira as a construction loan technician for the city's Community Development Office. "More work was done on the school at the time of the flood so the kids could go back in September."

Picarazzi remembered the church's condition after the flood waters abated. "It was pretty well gutted. There was con-

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File photo

The side altar at Ss. Peter and Paul was toppled by flood waters. At the height of the flood, the church was filled with eight feet of water.