

Photo spurs many thoughts

By Bishop Matthew H. Clark

Last Saturday, Aug. 25 at Saratoga State Park, we descendants of Nelson and Helen Bills gathered for our 25th annual family reunion. Helen and Nelson, who are my maternal grandparents, had 13 children — five girls and eight boys. Ten of the children, five of the boys and all of the girls, grew to adulthood. Of those offspring, nine married and raised families. Remaining with us from that generation are my aunt, Mary Bills Ryan Willard, the widow both of Andrew Ryan and Edward Willard, and my mother, Grace Bills Clark.

My mother and my Aunt Mary, who is now 90 years of age, were both enthusiastic participants at the party on Saturday. Mary is not quite so mobile as she used to be, so family members were careful to seek her out for the customary greetings and hugs. The same was true with two other aunts, Betty Ratigan Bills, wife of Alfred, and Margaret Mitchell Bills, spouse of Edward. Both are senior to Mary. I don't think they would mind my telling you that they are 92 and 94 years of age, respectively. They are beautiful, faithful women.

One of the special memories of the day for me was that of Mary, Betty and Margaret sitting in their wheelchairs around the altar table and participating with great gusto in the Eucharistic liturgy with which we opened the day. I am not sure that the three of them realize how powerful a witness to perseverance in the faith and loyalty to family they gave all of us that day. For all of my generation, and for those who came after us who were present that day, I want to express deep thanks.

We tried to get an accurate count of those who participated on Saturday. The figure we came up with was 182. We made no effort to get a count by age groups. I wish we had because I would love to know how many children 14 years of age and under were present. They were there in great number. And they

were beautiful kids!

It was a pleasure to watch as they moved through the day meeting new friends, renewing acquaintances with their contemporaries — some of whom they had not seen since last year's reunion — playing games, dancing and making countless trips back to the snack tables. If Mary, Betty and Margaret suggested faithful love to the rest of us that day, the children bespoke new possibility and freshness of life.

Margaret Carter, a cousin from California who is one generation behind me, brought an old photograph to the reunion which was new to most of us and appreciated by all. It was a 1941 photo of nine of the 10 children of Nelson and Helen, together with four of their spouses and a few other friends and relatives. You can understand what it meant to us on that occasion to have a photo picturing those wonderful people as they looked almost 50 years ago. I know that I found it a touching experience to see this photo of my parents taken when they were more than 20 years younger than I am now.

At the sight of the photo and since, more thoughts have gone through my mind than I have time or space to write about now. I know that I was not alone in that reaction. Enough people at the reunion expressed a desire to have a copy of the picture that we are trying to have some made.

Even as I write this morning, I think of the details of the day. I think of my nieces, Margaret and Kathleen, who organized games for the little ones. I admired the job they did and remembered that not long ago they were counted among the little ones. I think of my sister Helen, who forgot only one thing for that picnic — the hamburgers!

You can imagine how that oversight will become part of the lore of future family reunions. I remember the moment in the latter part of the day when a few of us began to sing some of the "old



songs" and when the few soon became several and then many.

It was a good time. It's a good family. I count myself deeply blessed to be a part of it.

Peace to all.

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