

Pictures tell story of a parish's half-century

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

GATES — If a picture is worth a thousand words, then the eight photographic display boards detailing the 50-year existence of St. Helen's Parish could be the subject of an encyclopedia.

The display boards stood at the church's entrance throughout the past jubilee year telling the story of a vibrant Catholic community through dozens of photos and newspaper clippings that had been donated by parishioners.

Taken from the display boards, the photographs reproduced on this page hint at just a few of the scores of anecdotes that make up the parish's life.

That life had its roots in a mission parish founded in the 1930s and served initially by a priest from Rochester's St. Augustine's Parish. Throughout the '30s a priest traveled each Sunday to St. Helen's small wooden chapel to celebrate one Mass, according to a history compiled by parishioners.

Then in 1940, Father John Beecher Sullivan took on the post of pastor at St. Helen's, which was enjoying its first year as a full-fledged parish. The new pastor lived in the back of the church until the rectory was built, and a small body of first- and second-graders began attending classes in the church hall in 1943. Three years later, the parish bought a nearby house, which became a convent for Franciscan sisters.

In 1959, parishioners pledged more than \$250,000 to build a new church and rectory, which was completed in 1963 — two years before the death of Father Sullivan. The late pastor was succeeded by Monsignor Patrick J. Flynn, who oversaw the parish's expansion in the 1960s. The growing parish started a nursery program and established a school cafeteria during the priest's tenure.

Due to illness, Monsignor Flynn resigned his pastorate in 1978, and Father L. John Hedges was appointed to head the parish that same year. He held that position until 1988, when the current pastor, Father Michael J. Bausch, was assigned to the parish.

Today, St. Helen's claims more than 1,600 households, and exhibits a hospitable, friendly spirit, as noted by a recent letter Father Bausch received from Trinity Ministries Center in New Jersey. The center's co-director, Bill Burkert, helped facilitate a spiritual renewal week at the parish, and he gave glowing compliments to St. Helen's parishioners.

"The atmosphere of the parish was friendly and welcoming with people eagerly walking over to talk to us," Burkert wrote, adding that "the laity seem to be comfortable in taking responsibility for various outreach ministries."



Class picture, above:

The smiling faces in this photograph belong to the first- and second-graders of St. Helen's first school, located in the church hall. Standing watch over the children are Sister M. Corrine, who taught both classes, and Father John Beecher Sullivan, the first pastor.

Joan Skeet is the bespectacled second-grader standing in the back (fourth from left) next to Sister Corrine. Today, Skeet's last name is DiChristina, and she has raised four sons in Chittenango, New York, where she teaches at a public elementary school.

"We had an oil burner stove that would flare up once in awhile," DiChristina recalled of her days in the one-room school where the two grades were taught. "Flames would come up and we would have to come home."

The St. Helen's graduate remembers willingly helping to keep the school and church tidy. Sister Corrine — "a sweet thing," according to DiChristina — would ask for volunteers to clean the bathroom or shovel snow off the parish's sidewalks.

"It was your place to learn, and therefore, your place to clean," DiChristina said of her school. Cleaning duties helped build the students' character, she noted, lamenting the fact that she can't ask the same of her fourth-grade students in Chittenango. "Today, we can have them hardly clap the erasers," she joked.



Family portrait, at left:

The happy, young couple in this photograph from Mother's Day, 1975, had just witnessed the baptism of a future lector at St. Helen's — Christopher Sichak, now a 15-year-old sophomore at Aquinas Institute.

His parents, George and Margaret, are flanked by Christopher's maternal grandmother, Corinne Wilkes, and his paternal grandfather, George Sichak Sr. The two grandparents served as godparents on the day of Christopher's baptism.

The Sichaks joined St. Helen's in 1971
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Album cover, at right:

A small group of teenagers who wanted to start a parish discussion group was the impetus behind Joy, a folk group that began in the spring of 1970 and a year later recorded the album pictured to the right.

"We thought it would be kind of a neat thing to do," Kathy English remarked of her days singing soprano as a founding member of Joy. "That's when the church started doing different things with music, especially guitars."

A guitarist herself, English (whose maiden name is McKelvie), was credited with writing the group's introductory number, "Hi, We're Joy," which contained lyrics with a message, such as: "We have found the secret of living. Life is all a matter of giving."

"I just started picking out the tune on my guitar and thinking up the words at the same time," the 17-year-old McKelvie told the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle back in 1971, claiming she wrote the song in two hours.



English fondly remembers her three years with Joy. "It was a great experience to be able to share that kind of music (with parishioners)," she said, pointing out that Joy also performed numerous concerts at senior citizens' homes, churches and hospitals. "You know, we probably spent just as much time away from St. Helen's as we did at St. Helen's," she commented.

Today, English directs a children's choir at St. Patrick's, Victor, where she is also a member of the adult folk group.

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