



## 100th Anniversary

For the past year, parishioners of Elmira's St. Casimir Church have been celebrating special events from the community's first century. Clockwise from top: four Sisters of St. Joseph who taught at the parish school in 1956 are presented with a new car funded by the St. Casimir Recreation Club; the interior of the church during Christmas, 1962; and the late Father Henry F. Adamski who spearheaded the effort to renovate the church.



## Elmira parish helped members preserve Polish heritage

By Leslie Ann Baynes  
Freelance writer

ELMIRA — In 1890 a group of Polish immigrants in Elmira incorporated a small wooden structure on Davis Street as their new parish. The church community was placed under the patronage of St. Casimir, who was highly revered by the Polish people.

St. Casimir's Parish has celebrated its centennial throughout 1990, saluting 100 hundred years of Catholic life with a distinct Polish flavor.

The Southern Tier church will mark the yearlong commemoration of its centennial this Sunday, Nov. 4, with an 11 a.m. Mass celebrated by Bishop Matthew H. Clark. The Mass will be followed by a reception and luncheon.

Today, more than half of the 650 families belonging to St. Casimir's still claim Polish heritage. Remarkably, Father Eugene Weis, pastor of the parish since 1987, is the first non-Polish priest to lead the St. Casimir community in its long history.

St. Casimir's first pastor was Father B. Swinko, who was succeeded by Fathers Theophilus Kozlowski, John Machnikowski, V. Zaleski, Anthony Plucinski, John Gulcz and Ignatius Klejna.

"We're a traditional people; we're Polish," said Raymond J. Winieski, parish historian and descendent of one of the

Elmira church's founders.

St. Casimir parishioners celebrate their heritage in a variety of ways. On Oct. 14, they hosted a Polish "Dozynki," a fall festival similar to a German Oktoberfest.

Each June, the community hosts its annual parish festival, which is occasionally accompanied by a Mass said in Polish. Even the music used in liturgies symbolizes the roots of the parish, which often combines English- and Polish-language choirs to sing hymns during services.

The first wooden structure housing St. Casimir's liturgies was replaced in 1912 under the pastorate of Father Stanislaus P.M. Rodzaj. Noting that the church's neo-gothic interior is unique, Winieski said "people are awed by the beauty of it." The church is especially known for its carved wooden altars and pulpit.

Within the last year, a renovation committee directed the landscaping of St. Casimir's grounds, and the renewal and preservation of its interior.

Although one would not know it by looking at the church today, the edifice and its community have weathered many storms throughout the last century.

The depression, World War II and post-war eras were rough times for the St. Casimir community, made up primarily of blue-collar workers. By 1947, the church had incurred a debt of well over than \$100,000.

Father Ladislaus Szczepanski, who spent his entire priestly career — from his appointment in 1925 as a newly ordained assistant to his retirement in 1970 — at St. Casimir's, was pastor of the church for nearly half of its history. Under his leadership, a group of parishioners launched a campaign to reduce the debt, which included a sizable mortgage. This objective was finally achieved by 1950. One of the primary groups responsible for that success was the St. Casimir Recreation Club, which was given the honor of burning the mortgage certificate.

A parish school to meet the community's needs began to gather in the basement of the original church in 1903. After the construction of the present church in 1912, St. Casimir School took over the vacated church. However, a growing number of students strained its capacity.

Under the pastorate of Father Joseph A. Balcerak, a school building opened in 1929 under the direction of the Sisters of St. Joseph. The sisters lived in a convent which was opened on the grounds in 1922.

Alice Fredericks, a member of St. Casimir's for 62 years, recalled the school's opening. "We were very proud. My son was a baby in my arms at the dedication, and both of my children went to St. Casimir's," she said. "They didn't speak anything but Polish until they began to mix with the other children."

When the great flood of 1972 hit Elmira, St. Casimir School became a haven for those uprooted by the raging waters of the Chemung River. Flood victims, who lived

in the gym and auditorium of the school for almost three weeks, were cared for by the women of the parish.

Consolidation of Catholic schools and churches in Chemung County began in the early 1970s. Now, the former St. Casimir School is the junior high for the Holy Family Catholic School System.

The pastor of St. Casimir from 1970 until 1987 was Father Henry F. Adamski, who spearheaded the move to renovate the church. A point of sadness for the community came last year, said Winieski, when Father Adamski died just before the opening of the renovated building.

Despite the changes in their parish, school and community, many members of St. Casimir Parish maintain Polish family traditions. At Easter time, a blessing of food takes place on Holy Saturday. During the Christmas season the parish distributes "oplatek," a wafer broken during families' Christmas Eve dinners.

Helen Cloke, a longtime member of St. Casimir's "Wanda Circle" Society, is pleased that many of these traditions have survived throughout the years. The Wanda Circle is itself named after a traditional old-country legend. Wanda, a Polish girl, sacrificed her life to warn of an invasion. She remains a symbol of Polish fortitude and heroism, especially from the feminist perspective. Cloke was a charter member of the group in 1922, and she is still a proud member of the Elmira church.

"I love this church," she said. "I'm Polish and proud!"

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