

Group seeks to honor Irish-Catholic Civil War hero



Colonel Patrick Henry O'Rorke, shown in a photograph dated sometime after 1862, played a significant role in the Battle of Gettysburg, where he died. The photograph is courtesy of Michael Albanese.

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — On the afternoon of July 2, 1863, a brigade of Union troops faced a possible defeat at Gettysburg, Pa., at the hands of Confederate soldiers swarming up a hill known as Little Round Top.

Already the rebels had broken the federals' right flank, when a black-haired Irishman named Patrick Henry O'Rorke rode up on his horse, leading a Union regiment he ordered to dismount and charge the oncoming enemy.

"Here they are men. Commence firing," the young colonel told the men in blue as they ran down the hill's slope toward the Confederates. As the combatants closed on each other, a rebel bullet cut through Colonel O'Rorke's neck, and he fell dead among the rocks that marked Little Round Top.

Yet some say the colonel's valiant action turned the tide of battle in favor of the Union forces.

Today, almost 130 years later, a group of Civil War history buffs, Irish-Americans and Catholics are working to

create a monument to O'Rorke, an Irish-Catholic immigrant who spent most of his life in Rochester. O'Rorke's family moved to the United States in 1842 when he was between the ages of 6 and 7.

As Brian Bennett would tell it, O'Rorke's life represented the achievements of millions of impoverished, uneducated Irish citizens who came to this country in the mid-1800s only to face religious and ethnic discrimination.

"It should really (be) emphasized that at the time, the Irish were very much looked down upon," remarked Bennett, a member of the Col. Patrick O'Rorke Memorial Society.

"Through a combination of education, good luck and just individual talent, (O'Rorke) rose to become what he was," added Bennett, who wrote an April, 1991, article on the colonel's brief life for *Civil War* magazine.

Instead of commissioning a standard bust of O'Rorke with memorial inscription, society members hope to raise funds to create an "interpretative display," Bennett said, noting that such a monument might feature a series of in-

formational panels that would be exhibited in an area library. The society is aiming for 1993, the 130th anniversary of the colonel's death, as a target date for completion of such a memorial.

The son of a poor common laborer, O'Rorke entered West Point in 1857, as one of the oldest plebes in academy history. He graduated first in his class and, ironically, became one of the youngest colonels in the U.S. Army of the Potomac, Bennett noted in his article.

O'Rorke was popular figure with his men, a brave fighter in battle, and a rising star in the army when he was cut down at Gettysburg, Bennett noted. His young widow — who entered the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Hartford, Conn., after the colonel's death — had her husband's body transferred from a battlefield grave at the famed site to a final resting place in Rochester's Holy Sepulchre Cemetery.

EDITORS' NOTE — For information on joining the Col. Patrick O'Rorke Memorial Society, write Katie Shelly, 56 Woodbine Ave., Rochester, N.Y. 14619.

Veterans

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recognized as the national birthplace of Memorial Day in a congressional resolution signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1966.

As tourists and town residents walked in and out of Waterloo's Memorial Day Museum on Main Street, Richard Graham and his family spoke at length about his great-grandfather's veterans' group, citing town records that related John Graham's war service and contribution to Memorial Day.

"We're reasonably sure ... his group started Memorial Day in Waterloo," Graham said, adding that visiting Waterloo 125 years later "meant a lot to us."

Many of those veterans lie buried with John Graham in St. Mary's Cemetery, where Father James R. Cosgrove celebrated an early morning Mass May 30, 1991, for scores of participants commemorating Memorial Day. The liturgy evoked images of other outdoor Masses —

Masses that provided sacramental nourishment for Catholics on the march throughout the nation's wars.

"The practical reasons behind such rituals, kneeling in prayer before battle to ask forgiveness for earthly transgressions, helped a man set his mind and heart right at the same time," Benedict Maryniak observed in an April, 1991, article on Catholic chaplains and Irish volunteers in *Civil War* magazine.

"Conducted amid the fires of battle," Maryniak continued, "such rites enabled soldiers to lift themselves above their human weaknesses, their frailty, and allowed them to advance to battle secure in the knowledge that they had no need to fear a meeting with God."

While trudging through western Europe fighting the retreating German Army in World War II, U.S. Army Sergeant Ralph Bleier kneaded his rosary beads in one hand, while carrying his weapon in the other, preparing for any potential "meeting with God."

"I had a rosary in my pocket at all

MEMORIAL DAY



Civil War veteran General J. B. Murray of Seneca County, along with Henry C. Welles, was credited with founding Memorial Day in Waterloo in 1866.

times," recalled Bleier, who serves as Monroe County historian for the Catholic War Veterans, and is adjutant for Our Lady of Perpetual Help Post 1156.

"I would be, when I could, saying a rosary," he remarked, adding that he always believed the war would end in May, the month of Mary. Germany surrendered to the Allies on May 8, 1945.

Bleier's faith in the intervention of the Blessed Virgin was so strong that one day during the war he walked into a church to make a pact with her.

"I prayed if I made it through the war, I would make a shrine," Bleier said.

Though he returned from war without any permanent injuries, Bleier admitted that he didn't start building his Marian shrine until 1985.

"I thought of it often — that I wanted to do it," he said, as he pointed to the small statue of Mary sitting in a display case he built. The shrine now occupies a corner of Bleier's Greece back yard.

Faith in God has always occupied a cor-

ner in the heart of John Murray, a parishioner at Sacred Heart Cathedral. Murray, who served as a U.S. Army infantryman in World War II, noted that most of his colleagues shared a strong belief in God despite the horrors they constantly witnessed.

"There were two things that were important to you," Murray said, half jokingly. "One was your steel helmet that you tried to crawl into when they hit you. The other was your faith."

Asked if witnessing death and destruction ever made him question his faith in a good God, Murray initially replied, "I never had any problems with that."

A moment later he added, "It would come up in discussions once in awhile. There was no way of finding out." Only death could provide that answer, Murray commented, "and no one wanted to find out the final solution."

Interestingly, Murray received something akin to the ultimate Catholic tribute for his efforts in the fight to take Italy — an audience with Pope Pius XII in Rome.

"He refused to have audiences when the Nazis were there," Murray said, adding that during the audience, the pontiff "did send his blessing to those present and their families at home."

The blessings of the pope — or any priest for that matter — rarely rang in the ears of James Cannito when he served as a combat medic on the front lines of the Korean War.

"We didn't have any chaplains," recalled Cannito, a parishioner at St. Jerome's Church in East Rochester. "The only time I saw a chaplain was when I got back to the rear."

Nonetheless, Cannito said he took home from Korea a Catholic faith stronger than that with which he arrived. "I prayed a lot," he said. "Somebody must have heard me, because I came home."

But what of those who didn't come home? How does a veteran square his or her survival with the wartime death of so many others?

"What does it mean for someone to give up their life so that you can lead your life?" is a question sometimes pondered by Vietnam-era veteran Timothy D. Streb. Currently serving as a sergeant major in the Army reserves, the parishioner of Holy Trinity in Webster may have answered his own question with this observation:

"I believe that freedom is not free," he said. "Memorial Day is especially important to remember those who gave their everything so that we can enjoy the freedoms we have — especially the freedom of religion."

Sister Mary Francis Borgia Linehan, SSND

Sister Mary Francis Borgia Linehan, SSND, a former teacher at three schools in the Rochester diocese, died on Friday, April 12, 1991, in Lourdes Health Care Center in Wilton, Conn. She was 78-years-old.

Born in Roxbury, Mass., on Nov. 23, 1912, Sister Francis Borgia joined the School Sisters of Notre Dame in 1934 from her home parish of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Roxbury.

A professed member of the order for 57 years, Sister Francis Borgia served as an elementary, high school and commercial school teacher over her 52-year teaching career. In addition to serving at schools in Buffalo, New Hampshire and New Jersey, Sister Francis Borgia taught at Holy Fa-

mily, Rochester (1933-43), St. Joseph Commercial School, Rochester (1943-61), and Bishop Kearney High School, Irondequoit (1964-68).

Sister Francis Borgia moved to the motherhouse in Wilton in 1985 to serve the community of sisters.

A Mass of Christian Burial for Sister Francis Borgia was held on April 15, at the motherhouse chapel in Wilton. Interment was in St. Mary Cemetery in Bethel, Conn.

Donations in memory of Sister Mary Francis Borgia Linehan may be made to the School Sisters of Notre Dame Development Fund, 345 Belden Hill Road, Wilton, Conn., 06897.

Sister Margaret Patricia Saunders, SSJ; 94

ROCHESTER — Sister Margaret Patricia Saunders, SSJ, who served as a housekeeper in various convents for 54 years, died on Friday, May 17, 1991, at the Sisters of St. Joseph Convent Infirmary. She was 94-years-old.

A Mass of Christian Burial for Sister Margaret Patricia was celebrated in the motherhouse chapel on May 20. Interment was in the sisters' section of Holy Sepulchre Cemetery.

A native of Ithaca, Sister Margaret Patricia entered the Sisters of St. Joseph

from Immaculate Conception Parish, Ithaca, in 1920. Among the convents in which Sister Margaret Patricia served were St. Michael's in Penn Yan for 18 years; Corpus Christi in Rochester for three years; and Nazareth Academy Convent for 33 years. She retired to St. Joseph's infirmary in 1976.

An avid reader, Sister Margaret Patricia also enjoyed knitting and baking.

Sister Margaret Patricia is survived by nieces and nephews, and her fellow Sisters of St. Joseph.

Correction

A news story on page 3 of the May 30 *Catholic Courier* incorrectly reported the site of a Black Catholic revival in Rochester, scheduled for July 22-24. The revival will take place at St. Augustine's Church, 410 Chili Ave.