

Long history of change characterizes Owego parish

St. Patrick's marks 150-year milestone

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

OWEGO — Here's a parish that has gone from accommodating the Irish Catholics who arrived in the 1840s to the IBM professionals who have flocked to the area in recent decades.

St. Patrick Church, 300 Main St., has a diverse and extensive history. And while the Rochester diocese is just getting around to celebrating its 125th anniversary, St. Patrick's already passed that milestone more than a quarter-century ago.

Founded in 1842, St. Patrick's holds the distinction of being the oldest diocesan parish in the Southern Tier. It was first affiliated with the New York archdiocese, and subsequently the Buffalo diocese, before becoming part of the Rochester see near the turn of the century.

During St. Patrick's formative years, the parish consisted chiefly of immigrants who had fled the life-threatening potato famines in Ireland. They settled in Owego after railroad transportation became available to the Tioga County village in the 1840s.

The original St. Patrick's structure was built at its present location in 1850. This wooden building was replaced in the late 1880s by the current brick edifice.

Expansion at St. Patrick's was prevalent around 1930, when a new rectory was built and remodeling took place in the church, convent and school.

In 1958, the parish and the Owego community in general experienced sudden growth when IBM opened a Federal Systems branch there. Thousands of jobs were created and a number of out-of-towners came to live in Owego.

Name: St. Patrick Church
Location: 300 Main St., Owego.
Year founded: 1842
Number of families: 1,098
Significant historical dates: First church completed in 1850; current church built, 1890; St. Patrick's School, 309 Front St., founded 1859.
Special celebration: Church's rededication in August, 1993, with Bishop Matthew H. Clark presiding. Ceremony marked end of \$750,000 renovation project.



Owego's St. Patrick Church, founded in 1842, holds the distinction of being the Southern Tier's oldest diocesan parish.

According to Father Thomas H. Watts, who served at St. Patrick's for 17 years, the new residents' input became a strong asset.

"This was a small village, and these people used their talents from the corporate world in many ways. That was great for the parish," remarked Father Watts, who served as associate pastor at St. Patrick's from 1970-73, co-pastor from 1973-85, and pastor from 1985-87. He currently serves as pastor of both St. James Church in Waverly and St. Pius X Church in Van Etten.

Further changes came about at St. Patrick's in the aftermath of Vatican II, with new spiritual and support pro-

grams rapidly appearing. Among them were the Christian Family Movement, Cursillo, Legion of Mary, Catholic Daughters of America, Marriage Encounter and Right to Life.

"It's hard to explain — it was a great spiritual awakening, not only in the parish but also in the village," Father Watts commented. "I've never seen anything like it, that outbreak of the Holy Spirit."

The most notable recent development at St. Patrick's occurred during the last year: an extensive refurbishing of the church timed to coincide with the parish's 150th anniversary.

The project came to its official conclusion in early August, when Bishop Matthew H. Clark presided at a rededication ceremony.

Costing more than \$750,000, the renovation has resulted in major upgrades to the church ceiling and basement. Other changes have included restructuring of the pews and music area; the creation of two small chapels; improved access for the handicapped; and a new building entrance.

This massive effort was overseen by Father William G. Darling, who succeeded Father Watts as pastor in 1987.

Father Darling, currently on sabbatical in Israel, could not be reached for comment. However, for a March 12, 1992, article, he told the *Catholic Courier*: "There have been a large number of parishioners who didn't want anything changed, but as a little more plaster has fallen off the walls, they've realized that we need to do this."

"We were very concerned about following the guidelines of Vatican II," he added.

Indeed, now more than ever, the St. Patrick's building and community have a much different look than they did when Mary Mead was a young girl.

The 79-year-old Owego resident has been a parishioner at St. Patrick's since 1918, a time when "we were brought up on a farm and the main thing in Owego at that time was the church."

In spite of all the changes and growth, she remains as loyal to St. Patrick's today as she was during her childhood.

"It's my church and my parish," she said. "I wouldn't change it for anything."

New feature

In this special edition we inaugurate a new semimonthly "Parish Profiles" feature. These three profiles — and those in subsequent issues — will offer readers a glimpse into the distinctive character of each diocesan parish.

As we schedule upcoming profiles, we want to ensure that parishes in the midst of special celebrations are recognized at the appropriate times. So, if your community will celebrate a significant anniversary (25th, 50th, 75th, etc.) or other special occasion within the next three years, please call Rob Cullivan (Monroe/Livingston counties), Lee Strong (Finger Lakes) or Mike Latona (Southern Tier) at 716/328-4340.

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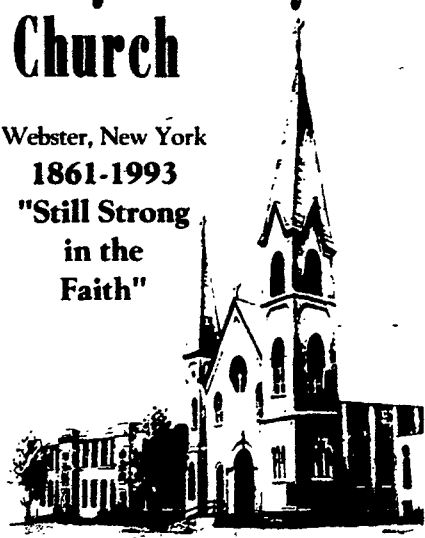
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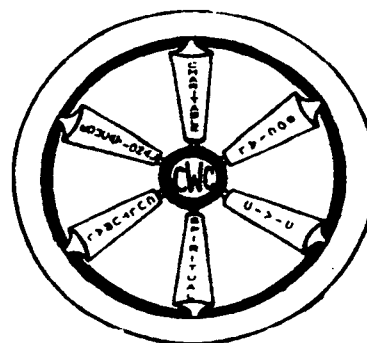
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