

147 Years

Parish's spirit spreads to people of Waterloo

Lee Strong
Senior staff writer

Drive into the Seneca County Village of Waterloo, and one of the first things you might notice is the stone tower of St. Mary's Church rising above the rooftops.

The prominence played by the tower at 25 Center St. seems to symbolize the role the parish plays in the Waterloo community as a whole.

"I think there is a terrific spirit in Waterloo — a wonderful Catholic spirit and the church is central to it," declared Father Albert Shamon, St. Mary's pastor from 1973-85.

Over the years, that spirit has manifested itself in a variety of ways. During construction and renovation projects, parishioners — often faced by lack of money — regularly contributed materials, talents and labor. When the parish school was in danger of closing in the early 1970s, parishioners rallied to increase enrollment, add classes and create an education fund.

"The parish is a family," noted Father James F. O'Connell, pastor from 1959-73, and pastor emeritus from 1973-75. "I found them a wonderful people. They had great spirit."

Part of that spirit is demonstrated by the extent of Marian devotion, suggested Father James R. Cosgrove, the parish's pastor since 1985.

St. Mary's boasts three different rosary groups, Father Cosgrove reported. In the parish cemetery, parishioners created a rosary mound. And a number of parishioners have travelled to Medjugorje in the former Yugoslavia, site of reported Marian apparitions.

"I think the fruits of it are (the people) are active in a more spiritual and religious way," the current pastor said.

At the same time, the parish has a deep sense of its own history, observed Joan Stetz, who chaired the committee responsible for renovation of the church during the early 1980s.

As part of the renovations, statues and the stations of the cross were painted, and portions of the old altar rail were used to build the altar at which Mass currently is celebrated. Earlier renovations attempted to preserve the original decorations and the interior of the church.



A statue of the Virgin Mary stands outside St. Mary's Church, located at 25 Center Street in Waterloo.

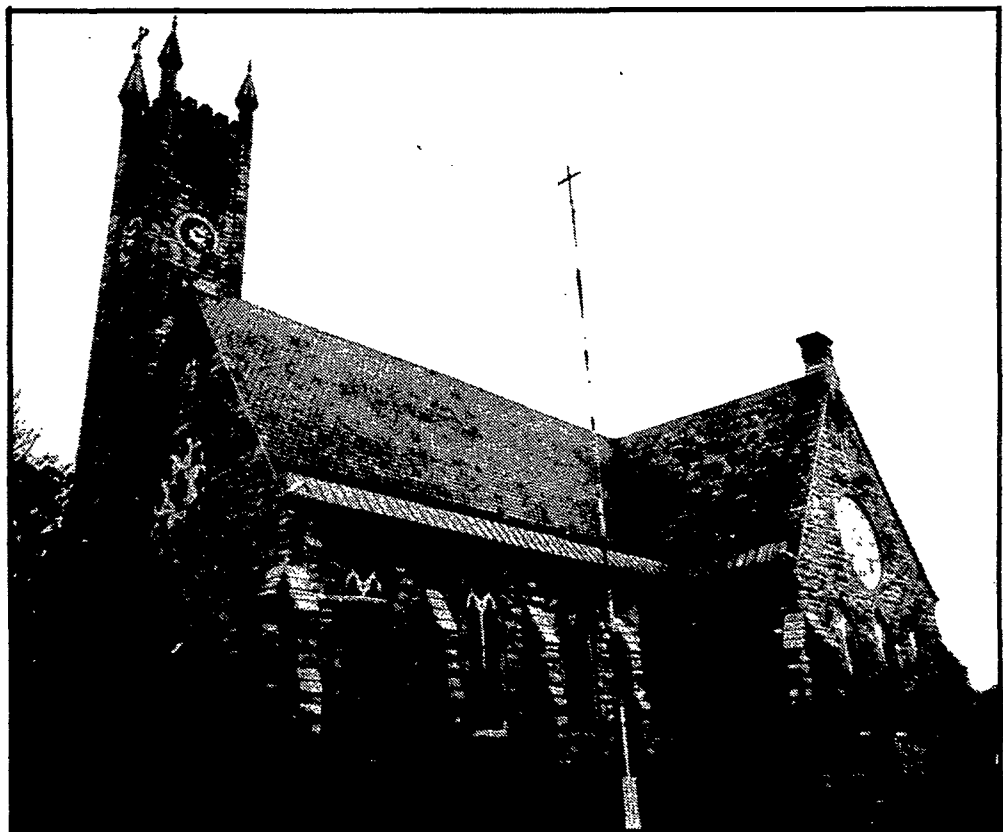
"I think we tried to keep what the older people have provided us with," Stetz said. "We tried to preserve as much as we could."

Although Catholic presence in Seneca County goes back to Jesuit missionaries in the 17th century, the parish itself was established in 1846 when Catholics in Waterloo — mostly Irish immigrants — purchased land on Center Street and erected the first St. Mary's Church. The first Mass in the church was said Nov. 3, 1846, by Father William Carroll, who served the parish from 1846 to 1854.

St. Mary's was a mission church for many years, served by a succession of non-resident pastors: Father Michael Gilbride (1854); Father William Gleason (1854-59); Father Martin Kavanaugh (1859-60); Father William Stephens (1860-61); and Father Denis English (1861-63).

Father Terrance Keenan (1863-69) oversaw construction of the first rectory and the official incorporation of the parish on Nov. 5, 1868.

He was succeeded by Father Louis Lambert (1869-88), who began construc-



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Established in 1846, St. Mary's in Waterloo was founded by Irish immigrants. Father William Carroll celebrated the church's first Mass Nov. 3, 1846.

tion of the current church. The Neo-Gothic edifice — featuring pointed arches and windows, and ornate decorations — is still praised for its architectural beauty, Father O'Connell acknowledged.

"I think it's a jewel," Father O'Connell said. "The church is a gem — one of the finest examples of Gothic architecture in that area."

The construction of the church took many years due to a series of recessions and the relative poverty of the people, noted parish historian Richard Schreck. The cornerstone was laid in 1873 and the main portion of the church was dedicated in 1889, but the tower was not completed until 1900.

Father John J. Hickey (1868-95) succeeded Father Lambert. Under him, the interior of the church was completed. Father William Harrington (1895-1907) oversaw completion of the tower and installation of the parish organ. He also began a parish school in the old church building, and purchased land on which the original St. Mary's School would be built by his successor, Father C.F. O'Loughlin (1907-29).

In 1929, St. Mary's welcomed its longest-serving pastor, Father George T. McCall. During his 29-year tenure, he oversaw the redecoration of the church (1948) and repairs to the church roof. He also helped his people through the depression, Schreck recalled.

Father O'Connell continued that generosity when he became pastor in 1959, Schreck said. The pastor spent his own money to help the people and on such construction and restoration pro-

jects as work on the church floor.

Among those projects was construction of new rectory, convent and school buildings. The projects left the parish with a \$600,000 debt. Father O'Connell proudly pointed out that parishioners cleared that debt by 1975.

When Father Shamon arrived in 1973, he put his energy into keeping the school open and creating an education fund. As a result, the school's enrollment doubled over the next few years, and currently remains near the level achieved under Father Shamon.

Father Shamon also undertook restoration work in the parish, relying on parishioners for as much as the work as possible. Individuals and groups volunteered, Father Shamon said, noting, "They all seemed to work together for the church."

Since his arrival in 1985, Father Cosgrove said he has seen that spirit of cooperation continue. The parish school is thriving, as are the religious-education and youth-sports programs. And such groups as the Knights of Columbus and the Catholic Daughters of the Americas help provide community service.



Name: St. Mary's Church
Location: 25 Center St.
Date founded: 1846
Date incorporated: 1868
Baptised Catholics: 2,000
School enrollment: 247
Significant dates: Current church dedicated, Dec. 22, 1889; school began in old church building in 1904; old four-room school opened on Jan. 11, 1911; new school building opened in 1960.

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