

Eastern-rite parishes honor St. Nick all year

Ukrainians gear up for centennial

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

ELMIRA HEIGHTS — At this parish, St. Nicholas is not simply a bearded fellow who slides down the chimney on Christmas Eve.

Each year on Dec. 6, parishioners at St. Nicholas Ukrainian Catholic Church, 410 E. McCann Blvd., enthusiastically celebrate the feast honoring their patron saint.

And for Walter Korchynsky, the St. Nicholas observance carries on a strong tradition practiced among a number of Ukrainian Eastern-rite parishes like his.

"I remember as a child you'd get up on Dec. 6 and there would be gifts under your bed," said Korchynsky, who grew up a parishioner of Johnson City's Sacred Heart Ukrainian Catholic Church. He became a parishioner at St. Nicholas in 1974.

For the past 10 years, Korchynsky has portrayed his parish's patron saint in a skit held at the church every feast of St. Nicholas. The skit recounts the saint's history, and Korchynsky then distributes gifts to children attending this celebration.

Irene Moffe, who served as an organizer of the recent feast of St. Nicholas event, has fond memories of several previous celebrations.

"Oh yes, I remember them from since I was a little girl," said Moffe, 41, a lifetime parishioner at St. Nicholas. Her parents, Paul and Anastasia Romanushyn, are still parishioners there as well.

St. Nicholas Parish has a longstanding history not only in Elmira Heights, but also in the Byzantine-rite Ukrainian Catholic Diocese of Stamford, Conn. Founded in 1895, it is the oldest parish in that diocese.

It was nearly 100 years ago, after a wave of immigrants from Ukraine to the Elmira area, that the original St. Nicholas Church was erected — for a cost of \$1,200 — at the corner of West 14th Street and Parkwood Avenue. In 1910, that building was moved to the corner of Horseheads Boulevard and East 11th Street.

In the aftermath of World War II, another large influx of Ukrainians came to the United States from eastern Europe. Membership at St. Nicholas reached an all-time high during this period, forcing the parish to seek out a larger facility.

The current church's cornerstone was blessed on the feast of St. Nicholas in 1957; construction was completed in 1958.

In recent years, parish membership has dwindled to approximately 150 families. Father Joseph Martyniuk noted that he knows of only three immigrant families who have entered the parish since he became pastor in March of 1992.

Moffe acknowledged that Elmira's struggling economy has most likely played a part in this trend.

"(The immigrants) might be going to the larger cities. We don't offer much in terms of employment," she remarked.

Yet Korchynsky noted that his parish's longevity reflects its ability to endure through difficult times. "I'm not too worried about it. We've been here since 1895, so we'll survive," he remarked.



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Walter Korchynsky (left) portrays St. Nicholas during a Dec. 5 celebration.

Parish Profile

St. Nicholas,
Elmira,
Rochester



Of St. Nicholas' three current weekend Masses, two (5 p.m. Saturday and 8 a.m. Sunday) are said in English while the 9:30 a.m. Sunday High Mass is celebrated entirely in Ukrainian.

Moffe noted that there are some variations between Eastern-rite and Latin-rite Catholics. Although Christmas is observed in both rites, for example, the feast of St. Nicholas and the feast of the Epiphany on Jan. 6 are acknowledged more extensively in the Eastern rite than in the Latin rite.

Overall, however, Moffe said that "we're basically the same — the same pope, the same liturgical year."

She and Korchynsky added that members of nearby Roman Catholic churches often mingle with St. Nicholas parishioners at each other's festivals.

In addition to annual rituals such as festivals and feast of St. Nicholas observances, St. Nicholas Parish is also set to begin gearing up for a huge, one-time-only event: its centennial celebration in 1995.

"We're looking forward to doing it with great pomp and circumstance," Father Martyniuk said.

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Melkite church to relocate to Gates

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Claimed by both Eastern and Western Christians as the patron saint of generosity, St. Nicholas of Myra reportedly liberated unjustly imprisoned men; provided dowries for impoverished women; and saved the lives of three innocent youths condemned to die.

This rather busy fourth-century bishop of Lycia was so famed for generosity that his legend traveled far from Asia Minor to Germany, where he was transformed into a provider of secret presents to children on the eve of his Dec. 6 feast.

"There are some stories that he had been left orphaned by affluent parents," said Father Kenneth Sherman, pastor of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker Parish, a Melkite Greek-Catholic parish located at 370 Remington St. "As a youth, Nicholas was charitable to other orphans."

Father Sherman noted that he emphasized the bishop's childhood giving when he preached on St. Nicholas' life to the parish's children.

English-speakers corrupted the saint's name into Santa Claus, who reputedly extends the bishop's generosity to the world's children every Christmas Eve.

Readers should note that St. Nicholas gradually migrated over the centuries from his warm Asian homeland to the

harsher, colder climate of the Arctic. Early this century, immigrants from an area that now comprises Syria, Jordan, Israel and Lebanon also left their warm Asian homelands for the harsher, colder climate of Rochester.

Over the years, their church building lost many of the Western Christian elements that had characterized it initially when Roman Catholics had helped their Eastern brethren build their church.

For example, statues are traditionally absent in Melkite churches, but had been donated to the parish by area Roman Catholics. According to a 1987 parish history, the statues — along with other "Latin" furnishings — were gradually removed over the years.

Today, the church's simple exterior belies its intriguing interior where an iconostasis — a wall of icons — before the altar distinguishes it from the Western churches dominating the area.

Founded 66 years ago, this church Middle Eastern immigrants built actually belongs to the Melkite diocese headed by Bishop John A. Elya, BSO, DD. Its headquarters are located in Newton, Mass., but diocesan boundaries are national, Father Sherman said.

"Wherever (Bill) Clinton is president, John is bishop," he explained.

According to the parish history, Bishop Elya's predecessor, Bishop Joseph E. Tawil, DD, LLD, encouraged the parish's 150 families to purchase a new church building.

The bishop's vision will begin to be realized Jan. 3 when the parish sells its current buildings to Heavenly Tabernacle, a Protestant congregation.

Yet Father Sherman acknowledged that his congregation has yet to find a temporary space in which to worship.

Regardless of the inconvenience caused by its temporary dislocation, Raymond G. Shaheen, chairman of the parish building committee, noted that the current edifice's location no longer suited the parish's needs. Parishioners have moved west from the city into such suburbs as Gates, where the parish has purchased 8.2 acres of land on the corner of Elm-grove and Spencerport roads, he explained.

The new site should eventually encompass a church, a rectory and athletic fields, Shaheen noted.

Through fundraisers, memorials and other development efforts, the parish has raised enough funds to build the rectory, which is being completed on the site, Shaheen said.

But construction of the new church, slated for next spring, will cost at least \$400,000 — an amount the parish must still raise, he said.

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