

DIOCESAN NEWS

Memories rush back 25 years after Tier flood

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

Twenty-five years later, thoughts of the Southern Tier flood stir Sherry Gehl's emotions as strongly as ever.

"I must tell you, I get choked up whenever I talk about this," remarked Gehl, a parishioner in the Corning-Painted Post Roman Catholic Community.

It's difficult for her to remain emotionless after enduring the June 1972 flood, which damaged or ruined thousands of buildings, caused \$750 million in damage and took 21 lives.

Gehl was among a number of Tier residents who reflected soberly on the flood's 25th anniversary. Barbara Becker, also a Corning-Painted Post parishioner, agreed that the flood left a permanent im-

print on her community.

"I think it kind of changed our lives," Becker said. "You found out there were more important things than material items. Church services became so much more meaningful."

"It was the event that changed the course of development in Elmira and Corning," said Father Francis Davis, a retired priest who served as pastor at Elmira's Our Lady of Lourdes Church during the flood and was later pastor at St. Vincent's Church in Corning.

The problems began mounting in western New York when Hurricane Agnes manifested itself in a steady rain that lasted several days. By June 22, 1972, rivers and lakes were at peak level.

Mary Ann Baker, who was night supervisor at St. Joseph's Hospital in Elmira

that evening, recalled that she had briefed her staff on evacuation procedures as the nearby Chemung River swelled.

"But I never thought it would go over," Baker admitted.

The next morning, Baker found herself traveling to the hospital by boat — "We went over the tops of cars," she said — to assist in the evacuation of patients.

"Many of them were frightened. But it was handled absolutely beautifully by the (staff and emergency workers). I've never seen such a camaraderie of people coming together," said Baker, who now directs the cancer center at St. Joseph's. She is a parishioner at Our Lady of Lourdes Church.

Although renovation of the hospital would last more than a year, Baker said that services were restored much sooner.

"It was actually up and running quickly. It only took a couple of weeks; it was amazing," Baker said.

On the other hand, Ss. Peter and Paul Church — located right across the street from the hospital — was not so lucky. Masses were held in the school gym for about two months after the flood, Father Edward Foy said.

"There were 11 feet of water in the church, right up to the Stations (of the Cross). The altar floated down the middle aisle," noted Father Foy, a retired priest who had just been installed as pastor of Ss. Peter and Paul the day the flood hit.

Father Davis recalled that "there was a sobering effect on everything. You couldn't do business downtown."

However, Father Foy said that relief efforts began almost immediately in Elmira. He recalled with a chuckle how breweries filled bottles with safe drinking water rather than beer, and left several cases on his doorstep.

"It looked like we were selling it," Father Foy remarked.

Corning residents received similar help from the beer companies. Gehl noted that it was quite unusual "to see all these kids drinking out of beer bottles."

Gehl praised a Rochester family who helped scrape mud off her home's floors and walls. Similarly, Father Foy said Ss. Peter and Paul was supported by bus-loads

of cleanup volunteers from Rochester. He added that the parish received thousands of dollars through special collections taken throughout the diocese.

Local volunteer efforts were plentiful as well. Father Davis said that Father Gerald O'Connor, assistant pastor at Our Lady of Lourdes in 1972, "was very instrumental in restoring many homes." Father O'Connor is now pastor at St. Catherine of Siena in Addison, St. Stanislaus in Bradford and St. Joseph's in Campbell.

Donna Palermo pointed out that prompt responses to the flood helped prevent further catastrophes. She noted that the Army Corps of Engineers skillfully operated the water gates at the Genesee River dam located in Mount Morris, Livingston County.

"The Genesee flows north. If they were not on the ball, Rochester would have been flooded," stated Palermo, who serves as business manager at St. Patrick's Church in Mount Morris.

The Corning-Painted Post parish marked the disaster's 25th anniversary by hosting an ecumenical prayer service June 22. In addition, the Steuben County cluster recently began extending the same kind of help its own residents received in 1972. The parish has undertaken fundraising efforts for St. Mary's Parish in Grand Forks, N.D., which was devastated by a flood earlier this year.

Becker, who said the fundraiser is "a wonderful thing," is well aware of the need for other communities to pitch in during times of crisis.

"It's like an invisible support group which helps you to survive," Becker acknowledged.

Remembering the famine



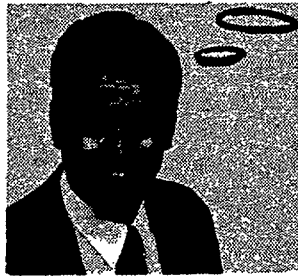
Matthew Scott/Staff photographer

Bill McGarry of Rochester reflects on a monument that memorializes victims of the Irish Famine, and names engraved in an accompanying stone. He was among about 100 people attending the June 21 dedication of the monument at St. John Fisher College, Pittsford. Division 7 of the Ancient Order of Hibernians raised funds for the memorial. The famine claimed millions of lives in the 1840s and 1850s, and was one of the factors that led to the mass migration of the Irish to the United States.

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Prayer Suggestions: Mass, Rosary, Fasting, Day Offering, Eucharistic Adoration, Offering, Sufferings, Divine Mercy Chaplet

July, 1997

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
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