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A voyage through history

When Kathy Urbanic sought to write a history of St. Stanislaus Church in Rochester in 1980, she uncovered some key material in a rather unusual place.

"We found the blueprints of our church stuffed in the rafters of the rectory basement. These were invaluable, of course," said Urbanic, who serves as public relations director at Nazareth College.

The blueprints, she said, were eventually reproduced in her 1990 book, *Shoulder to Shoulder*, which chronicles the first century of Polish immigrants in Rochester.

And when Marian Ross began compiling the history of St. Joseph's Church in Penfield, she recalled that the available archives were "just a boxful of old books."

Despite these challenges in bringing their parishes up to date, archivists and historians — all of whom are volunteers — said their work is well worth their time.

"It certainly was the most gratifying thing I ever did in my life," said Ross, who co-authored the 1995 book *A History of St. Joseph's Parish*.

"I really like to dig into these things and see what treasures are there," said Patricia Welch, who is compiling a history on Ithaca's Immaculate Conception Church for the parish's 150th anniversary celebration in 1998.

"It's a detective story, looking for clues. It's an enchanting voyage, really," remarked Father Robert F. McNamara. The retired diocesan priest wrote the official history of the diocese, *The Diocese of Rochester: 1868-1968*, and has also written "a bunch" of parish histories and assisted on numerous other ones. Additionally, he serves as diocesan archivist.

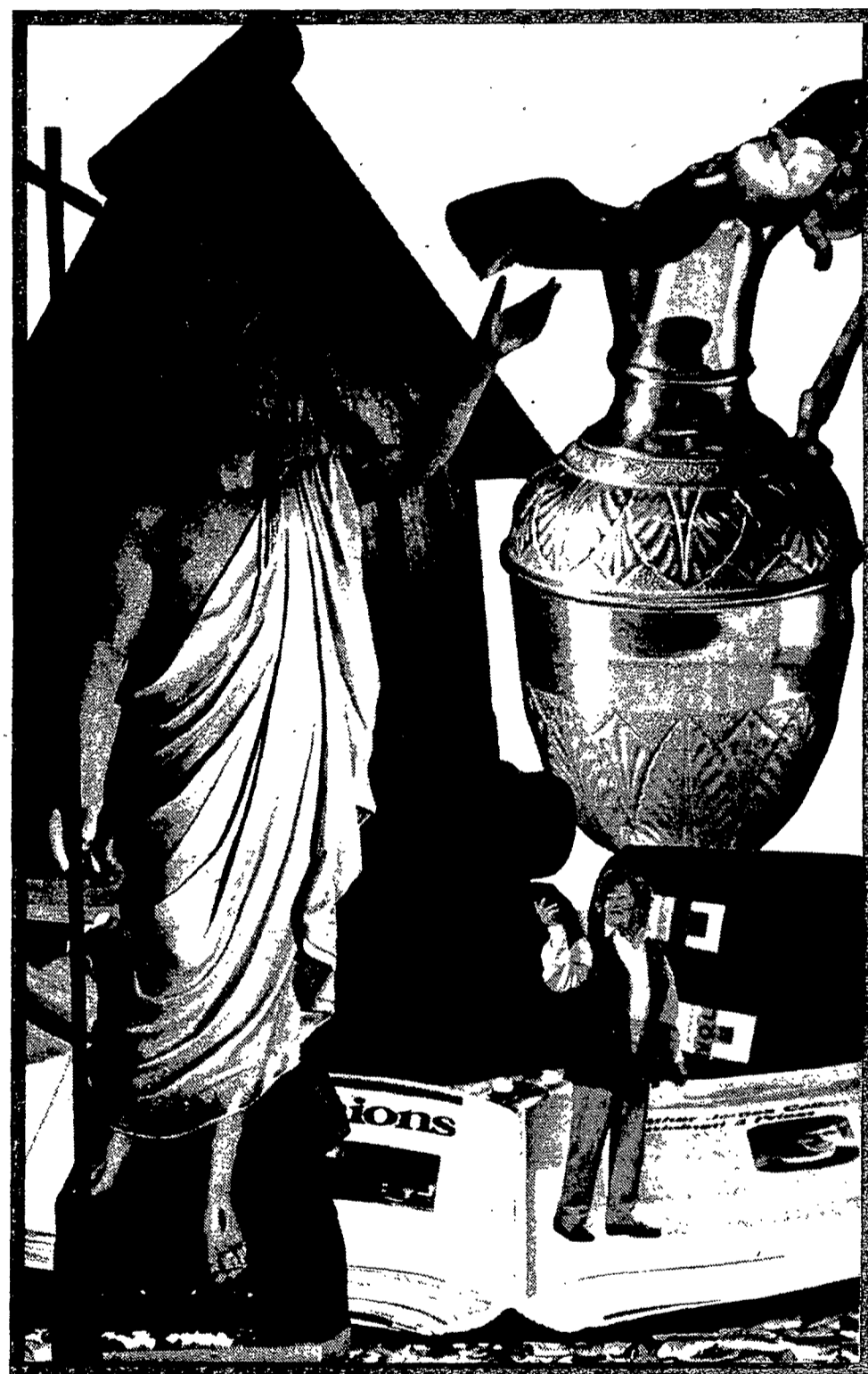
In Bill Maddock's case, the detective work has been made trickier because of a significant time lapse since the last updating of parish history.

Maddock is working on a history of St. Michael's Church in Lyons in conjunction with the parish's 150th anniversary next year. He discovered the last time one was written was in the 1950s, by none other than ... Bill Maddock.

"I did a brief history when Monsignor (John) Neary was pastor. Some of the other pastors had kept excellent history records, but nothing was ever published," Maddock said.

Who should apply?

Who qualifies as a parish historian and/or archivist? Father McNamara said that an ideal candidate might be somebody with a strong grasp of writing and history, such as a retired schoolteacher who has resided in the



Corpus Christi Church historian Margaret Wittman "walks" through artifacts from the history of the parish.

parish for a number of years.

Urbanic — who helped teach a workshop for archivists and historians last year at the diocesan Pastoral Center — noted that a love for one's parish is just as vital.

"If you have some sense of the life of the community, and the willingness to roll your sleeves up and gather the information and pull it all together, I think that would go a long way," Urbanic said. "I don't think you have to have the professional background."

Sister Connie Derby, RSM, added

that such a person should also be willing to log considerable volunteer time.

"I don't think it ever has been, or probably ever will be, a paid position," said Sister Derby, the diocesan archives' executive assistant, referring to parish historian positions.

Lisa Haehn, who co-wrote the St. Joseph's Parish history with Ross, noted that a longtime parishioner can maintain historical data easier than a priest, who may not stay at the parish as long and therefore not be as enraptured with its history.

"Sometimes the pastors do not realize the importance of the documents. I have talked to other archivists who have expressed a similar sentiment," Haehn said.

Urbanic said that parish historical data is in jeopardy "when an administrator who doesn't value the history says, 'Clean this clutter out.' You almost need a watchdog. It really falls to the members of the congregation to take on this work."

Building a foundation

Ideally, before a written history is addressed, Urbanic said that "the archives should get pulled together first."

There is no rigid formula concerning the contents of a parish archive. Parish historians and archivists most frequently mentioned photographs; old parish bulletins; newspaper articles; parish records; and personal correspondence by former pastors. However, an archive can also include such artifacts as statues; priest's clothing; chalices; and trophies from Catholic Youth Organization championships.

Milton Schmidt, a member of St. Margaret Mary Church in Irondequoit, said he has continually developed his parish's archive since the mid-1980s. The project began, he said, after he was approached by then-pastor Father Michael Conboy.

"In the attic there were boxes and boxes of papers, even contracts from the original church," Schmidt recalled. "(Father) Conboy hit me one day and said 'Would you like to sort this stuff out so it doesn't get thrown out?'"

Schmidt put these materials, separated by decades, into albums going back to the parish's founding in 1929. They are available for viewing at the parish office, he said.

Similarly, Margaret Wittman has assembled albums at Rochester's Corpus Christi Church over the past 10 years. The photos, articles and other documents — spanning more than 100 years — were put into volumes and placed on the rectory living room's bookshelves.

"I think we're on volume seven now. I used anything that mentions Corpus Christi," Wittman said. She added that the parish's administrator, Father James Callan, plans to use this material toward compiling a written history.

Wittman said some of her material has come from "older parishioners who drop articles off." She has also visited the diocesan archival room, located at the Pastoral Center in Gates.

Maddock has traveled several times to the Pastoral Center in Lyons, and has come up with correspondence from former pastors and old pho-

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