

Tragedy yields cherished tradition

Jennifer Burke/Catholic Courier

Mike Burke received a frantic phone call at 2 a.m. on Nov. 1, 1980. It was his father, Vincent, telling him to hurry, the barn was on fire. They rushed into their trucks and down the street to the burning barn, went around the firemen blocking their way and attempted to free the dairy cows trapped inside.

By that time, the structure was already fully engulfed, and it was too late to save the cows. It was a miracle that the two men managed to escape alive — the weight of the hay in the loft overhead and the fire damage caused the roof to collapse mere seconds after they left the building.

Mike's wife, Carol, and Vincent's wife, Kathleen, rushed down to the farm after their husbands. They could see the flames from the 100-year-old barn blowing across the road from a half-mile away.

The family spent the rest of the night helping the firemen hose down the surrounding buildings and farmhouse to keep the fire from spreading. They had lost a herd of dairy cattle, all of the milking equipment, three buildings, 6,000 bales of hay, a McCormack grain drill, two hay wagons and their livelihood, all in one night.

I've known this story for as long as I can remember. Mike and Carol are my parents, and Vin and Kathy are my grandparents. This story is a part of my life, even though it took place almost a year before I was born. Families create their own unique histories, through their stories, their shared experiences and their traditions, and it was out of this tragic experience that my favorite



Mike Crupi/Catholic Courier

Each Christmas season, the Burke family of Spencerport invites family and friends to attend a Mass in their barn (right), which replaces one destroyed by fire in 1980.

tradition was born.

It was too expensive for my family to get back into the dairy business, but they had built a new barn by the next fall and were still in the business of growing and selling hay. It was a time of uncertainty for my family, however, and they feared that the unthinkable might happen again. As Christmas approached, my family's pastor at the time suggested holding a Mass in the barn to dedicate it and give thanks for everything we still had.

My family thought it was a good idea, so in late December 1981 about 50 friends, relatives and neighbors gathered in our barn for the Mass, which soon became a yearly event. As a child, I looked forward to the Barn Mass almost more than I

looked forward to Christmas — almost — and it is still one of my very favorite parts of the holiday season.

In the days before the Barn Mass, my dad, aunt, brothers and cousins unstack all the hay they so painstakingly stacked a few months earlier and set the bales out in rows, which will serve as the "pews" for the Mass. Using the bucket of an old John Deere tractor, they hang from the rafters a felt banner with a picture of the Nativity.

By the time people arrive for Mass, three or four relatives or family friends are usually in an empty horse stall warming up on their guitars, and a long picnic table has been set up for use as the altar. People come bundled up in heavy winter coats, hats, scarves and mittens, carrying blankets for their laps and asking each other if they remember the time it was so cold that the Communion wine froze in the chalice.

I can't say how anyone else feels during the Mass, but I know that it's a powerful experience for me. I'm guessing it is for them, too, since they keep coming back. As I sit on a bale, surrounded by the people I love most, I can hear the horses moving quietly in their pen behind me as I watch the priest celebrate Mass. As I smell the hay and the animals and feel the love shared between myself and my family, I think about the infant Jesus, and how he may have smelled hay and felt love when he came into the world. I pray with everyone else through the Mass, the music and the community.

To me, the Mass is always a reminder, at a time when I desperately need one, that Christmas is not about shopping, wrapping gifts or going to parties. It's about love and peace and harmony and Jesus. There is not even one time that I haven't felt all those things while sitting on that bale of hay.

After Mass, the altar settings are put away, a plastic tablecloth is spread and out come the cookies and snacks each family brought to share. It gets a little bit noisy then, with people mingling, kids climbing in the hay and others petting or antagonizing the horses and goats.

As I look around me and see faces I've known since birth, and others I've only known for a few years, I see people who've come together not just to sit in a cold barn and eat cookies, but to share in what — to me — is the experience of Christmas. I see people who have come together to share in a few moments of peace and love, of hope and thanksgiving, and to be brought back, once again, to the true meaning of Christmas.

Staff writer Jennifer Burke is a parishioner of St. John the Evangelist Parish in Spencerport.

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