

HISTORY OF SAINT STEPHEN CATHOLIC CHURCH

Before St. Stephen Parish existed, the Catholics of the village of Port Carbon built a log cabin mission house at the site where the present church stands. This area was picked because the parishioners felt it was the highest point in the community and could be seen from as far away as the village of Palo Alto.

There was not another Catholic Church between Pottsville and Tamaqua, so Jesuit missionary priests rode through these sections, once a month, to tend to the spiritual needs of the people.

St. Stephen Parish was established July 17, 1847, by Bishop John Neumann (who is now a canonized saint). It consisted of Port Carbon, most of Palo Alto, Lower Mill Creek, which was known as Spencerville, and a part of Upper Mill Creek, which was known as Coaquenac; Belmont; East Bear Ridge; Eagle Hill; Cumbola; Kellys; New Philadelphia; Lake Run; Silver Creek; Valley Furnace; and Middleport.

The following brief history of the village of Port Carbon is being provided to familiarize you with locations and the building of St. Stephen Church: The community of Port Carbon was established in 1826; in 1829, coal was discovered in Salem Hill. Port Carbon consisted of many small groups of homes, each known by a certain designation. Acre and Lang Streets were known as Acretown. Part of Jackson Street was called Salem Hill Section. The area around the John L. Miller playground was Rhodestown; Wood and East Washington Streets was Black Valley; west of the railroad on Pottsville Street was Dutchtown while further west was Mechanicsville. The Market Street section was Lawtontown. The upper section of Palo Alto was part of Port Carbon. Outside of Port Carbon, Belmont was the most populated community because East Bear Ridge Colliery was in operation there. Parishioners from this area were miners of Welsh descent. St. Stephen Church was built in the area called Irish town. To build the church, the miners took turns digging the foundation and the dockworkers (parishioners), who were laid off for many weeks because the Schuylkill Canal would freeze over, hauled stone from the mountainside. Several years after the church was built, the front section, three windows deep, and the steeple, were added. Again, the work was done by miners and dockworkers. Their work was so skillful that it was almost impossible to see where the new section was added to the original structure of the church.

Maurice Woods, great-grandfather of Ruth Cauley Hollywood, drove his mule team to Danville to bring the first pastor, Father Daniel Magorien, to Port Carbon. Father Magorien originally came from Ireland, as did the ancestors of most of the older parishioners.

The late Cardinal Dennis Dougherty, in a letter to Father Farley on the occasion of the 100th Anniversary of the parish, stated that one of the reasons for establishing St. Stephen was to provide for immigrants from Europe, and especially for Irish immigrants, who started coming in large numbers to this country in 1847, the first year of the terrible famine in Ireland.

Father Magorien was tall and a very big man. Because of his size, he didn't fit in an ordinary horse-drawn carriage. He had a special carriage made that was higher and wider. This carriage, pulled by a gray horse, was a familiar sight among the parishioners scattered throughout the valley.

When the church was complete, one of the first things Father Magorien did was to buy land for a parish cemetery, located at the north end of Coal and First Streets which became known as the "old cemetery." Everyone who was buried beside the Mission House, where the present rectory stands, was moved and interred at this new location.

Father Magorien, a very strong man, worked shoulder-to-shoulder with the parishioners to build the rectory. He used his personal funds to complete the building. This progressive man of God made sure his parishioners observed their religious duties. The story has it that people from Middleport, Silver Creek, Valley Furnace, New Philadelphia, Lake Run, Cumbola and Belmont would walk barefoot, carrying their shoes and stockings, congregate at Wheelers' Well on Valley Street, wash their feet, put their shoes and stockings on, eat the lunch they brought with them and then attend Mass. Older parishioners often talked about these gatherings and referred to them as "the march to 5 o'clock Mass." Christmas was an especially beautiful time. People from all sections of the parish would walk to Mass, each group having a leader, carrying a lit pine torch, which symbolized the Star of Bethlehem.

In 1877, Father Magorien's health began to deteriorate and Father Peter McEnroe was assigned as administrator and took up residence in a temporary rectory at the corner of Pike and Lang Streets. Father McEnroe was succeeded by Father John O'Rourke as administrator from 1881 to 1883. Father William Moran followed in 1886 and served as pastor after Father Magorien died.

When Father Magorien died, parishioners wanted permission to inter him under the altar, which he built for them, but Father's wish was to be buried in the old cemetery among his loved ones, whom he cared for during the 39 years of his pastorate. In later years, a monument was placed at this grave site. It is said that through his piety and example, Father Magorien was at least partially responsible for the growing number of vocations to the priesthood among the young men of the parish. Among a few of these priests who were known for their work throughout the archdiocese were: Father L. J. Wall, ordained in 1882, who later became a pastor of his own parish, our St. Stephen, from 1889 to 1893; Father James A. Holohan, ordained in 1889, came from Middleport and served also as St. Stephen Pastor from 1893 to 1896; and Father O'Connell who was a native of Port Carbon, ordained in 1894. Father O'Connell became Pastor of St. Stephen in 1896 only two years after becoming a priest. He was also the third home grown parishioner to become Pastor of St. Stephen. Father O'Connell was considered a business executive type of person. In 1901, he had the church renovated for \$4,000.00, which at that time was a considerable amount of money, most of which was raised by the families of the parish. Among the things he accomplished was the installation of the present stained glass windows. Father O'Connell was community minded also; and through his efforts, assisted by the townspeople, a monument was erected in memory of the men who served in the Civil War. It was placed on a hill known as "Nanny Goat Rock" because of all the settlers' goats that grazed there. It was later renamed "Monument Hill."

Pastors that followed Father O'Connell were: Father Joseph Whitaker, 1910-1914; Rt. Rev. Msgr. Charles Kavangh, January 1915 to December 1915; Father Daniel A. Daly, 1915-1945; Father Bernard C. Farley, 1943-1952; Father Joseph Herley, 1952-1964; Father John J. McNamara, 1964 to the present 1997.

An important event in the history of St. Stephen Parish occurred in December of 1886 when five Sisters Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, under the direction of Mother Mary Joachim Ryan, arrived in Port Carbon to establish a parochial school. School was first conducted in some spare rooms in the rectory. The initial enrollment was 99 students. Finally, after ten years, a new four room frame school building was erected under Father O'Connell. Father Daniel A. Daly added three classrooms to the main building in 1920; and three years later, an addition to the school was built to accommodate high school students. A fully accredited four year high school and commercial unit afforded the advantages of higher education to the children of St. Stephen Elementary School and those of nearby villages. During the school year of 1934-35, the school enrollment rose to 330 students for the grade school and there were 94 high school students. In 1986, the centenary of St. Stephen School was celebrated. The Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary have served our parish youth with faithful devoted love and dedication all of that time and continue to do a remarkable job to this day here at St. Stephen Parish.

St. Stephen Parish celebrated its 100th Anniversary in 1947. Father Farley started the refurbishing of the church interior. Father James T. Walmsley, an assistant at the parish and four parishioners: Thomas Lonergan, William Bell, Thomas Colan, and Joseph Wynkoop, were extremely helpful in this renovation. Several other men of the parish dug a cellar out of the solid rock under the sacristy. At this time a fire burned out the sacristy and all its furnishings at a loss of \$15,000. According to the annals of our local Good Will Fire Co., No 1, the date of the fire was February 23, 1947. Father Farley held a successful financial campaign and repairs and renovations were completed. There was a three day celebration for this 100th anniversary, including a beautiful Mass and a church full of parishioners.

1965 was a memorable year in the history of the Catholic Church and in all Catholic parishes. Vatican II brought about many changes for us. Mass was now being offered in the English language and lay people were now permitted to do some of the Scripture Readings at Mass. The first lector at St. Stephen was Joseph Mehalko and the first lay person to distribute Holy Communion at our Masses was Edward Tray.

In 1964, Father John J. McNamara succeeded Father Herley, whose health had failed, first as administrator and than as Pastor at St. Stephen. During Father McNamara's tenure at St. Stephen, both the school and the church have been extensively renovated, the church for a second time, in 1997, in preparation for the parish sesqui-centennial. To demonstrate how times have changed and costs have increased from Father O'Connell's time, the most recent renovation of our beloved church building was in the \$130,000 range.

Down through the 150 years of its existence, St. Stephen Parish has enjoyed a happy marriage of good, loyal priests, devoted and skilled Sisters and Lay teachers, and hundreds and hundreds of

dedicated parishioners--a true community of Christian Faith! Though the Pastors of St. Stephen are mentioned often in this history, because they were leaders, the lay people of the parish are the unsung heroes and heroines who volunteered, often anonymously, for the countless tasks in the smooth operation of the parish both physically and spiritually.

Because St. Stephen is the only Catholic Church in Port Carbon and environs, the ethnic make up of the parish is as varied as our country--a true melting pot of many national origins practicing the same Catholic faith. From its beginning, priests, Sisters and Parishioners of St. Stephen have shown a tremendous spirit of self-sacrifice in order to have and maintain a church and school as teaching instruments for the preservation and spread of our Holy Faith. As we near the Third Millennium of the Christian Era, we are confident that in the Providence of God, we will continue this loyal and loving service to our God and our neighbors for at least another 150 years!

SOME INTERESTING FACTS OF PARISH HISTORY

The first recorded Baptism in St. Stephen Parish occurred on July 16, 1847. The first child baptized was Mary Donnelly, the daughter of Richard Donnelly and Jane Kane. The sponsor was Mary McNulty.

On the same day another child was also baptized. The child was Magi Donoghoe, the daughter of Patrick Donoghoe and Catherine McGonigal. The sponsors were James Love and Margaret Bannen. The Rev. Daniel Magorien administered the Sacrament to both children.

The Sacrament of Confirmation was first administered on July 22, 1849, by the Rt. Rev. Francis Patrick Kenrick, D.D. There were 162 in the first Confirmation class. The first one recorded as recipient of Confirmation was Mary Ann Armstrong.

The first Marriage in St. Stephen Church took place on July 23, 1847, when Thomas Crollly took Margaret Horan as his bride. The witnesses of the marriage were Jeremiah Kelly and Mrs. Horan. The Rev. Daniel Magorien officiated.

Over the period of One Hundred and Fifty Years, up to September of the year 1997, there were 9,326 persons baptized in St. Stephen Church. Over the same period of time there were 2,124 marriages.

The oldest person baptized in St. Stephen Church and still living until just before we went to press was Anna Carpency of Mill Creek. Anna was baptized on February 9, 1913 and she passed on to her Eternal Reward on August 7, 1997. Next in line after Anna and still with us is Margaret Post Krotine of 120 Jackson St. who was baptized on July 13, 1913 by Father Joseph Whitaker.

The oldest living married couple who are parishioners of St. Stephen are William and Catherine Stepanavage of 416 Rock St. They have been married for 67 years.