

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF ST. JOSEPH'S CHURCH IN RENOVO, PA.

St. Joseph's Parish is rich in tradition and history. Catholic services were held from the time the town was incorporated in 1866. Father John C. Gilligan, the "pioneer priest" who established Immaculate Conception parish in Lock Haven would also have traveled up-river by boat, where he conducted services in private homes in the area that later became Renovo. The Parish was organized into the Harrisburg Diocese in 1869, with Father Kaelin as pastor. Father Edward Field, who replaced Father Kaelin, built a 75 x 25-foot wood frame "church" on Larch Street. The deed was recorded April 6, 1869.

The second pastor of Saint Joseph's did not seem to stay long. Father Thomas J. Reilly was named the third pastor in October of 1871. He apparently contracted smallpox during the epidemic in the spring of 1872 and died in September of that year.

This first church was obviously not ment for long term use by the parish. The second parish church was started on May 20, 1875 by Father Francis Xavier Schmidt and was 36 x 64 feet long with "wings" on both sides. The church was constructed of brick and the seating capacity was about 480 people, with a second floor galler for additional seating capacity. Bishop Shanahan of Harrisburg consecrated this second church on October 19, 1876. Because of the rapid growth of the town of Renovo, this church would be used for only sixteen years.

The ground-breaking for the third and final Church took place on May 11, 1892, with the laying of the cornerstone on August 14, 1892 and the solemn dedication took place on Sunday, June 27, 1897. The cornerstone, containing a tin box with appropriate Church data inside, was moved into place by Bishop McGovern of Harrisburg and Father G. L. Benton, Monsignor and Vicar General of Harrisburg Diocese (native son of the parish). A golden trowel was used to place some mortar around the cornerstone and foundation. The lettering on the cornerstone "A.M.D.G., signify the Latin abbreviation meaning "For the Greater Glory of God." Father J.J. Gormley, named pastor in 1888, is credited with building this present Church.

The description of the third home for Saint Joseph's Parish-Family indicates a building 125 feet long by 65 feet wide. The ceiling is 40 feet high without a single interior pillar or support, thus permitting an unobstructed view of the altar from any point in the church. There is a thirty-five foot space between ceiling and roof that a unique beam-work support, holds up walls and roof, reinforced with exterior buttresses. Quite an accomplishment before the use of steel beams and girders. The seating capacity was for 800 people.

The red brick exterior walls rise 80 feet to the apex of the roof, with two asymmetrical towers. One tower rises from the lower eaves of the church roof to a point even with the apex (ca. 80 feet). The other corner tower rises perhaps half again as high as the apex (ca. 120 feet). From pictures over the years two different styles of crosses have adorned the front apex of the roof and the taller, bell tower. The first was a simple Roman Cross, the latter is a Gaelic Cross. The length of the building is supported by buttresses which form small alcoves.

This home of Saint Joseph's Parish was considered the most magnificent church in the state, and the only (of first) church-building in the United States of its size for its time (before the popular use of steel) to allow such a large open area for worship. The style is considered "Romanesque," and was designed by Wagner and Reitmeyer, of Williamsport. The original cost was \$45,000.

After the Second Vatican Council, the sanctuary alcove was renovated. The central niche of the main altar was removed and is now part of the setting for the cemetery chapel in Saint Joseph's cemetery, Hyner, Pa. In 1956 a large crucifix became the central figure above the main altar. Then the base of the main altar with its high relief wood carving of the Last Supper, was moved forward to its present position. A gold crucifix and six matching high altar candle-stands were imported from Paris. The crucifix dominates the priest's sacristy and the six candle-stands are now displayed on the steps below the high altar. These candle-stands were later adapted for use with spring loaded candles.

The right side, facing the sanctuary alcove, contains the statue of Saint Joseph, our parish patron, (donated by Frank H. Moyer). The left side, facing the sanctuary alcove, contains the statue of the Blessed Mother (donated by the Saint George's Society). The Blessed Mother and Saint Joseph's statues were moved into the main sanctuary alcove and placed on wall hanging pedestals as part of the renovation after the Second Vatican Council. The Blessed Mother's altar has become our altar of residence for the Blessed Sacrament contained within the tabernacle. It was at this time that Sacred Heart Statue replaced Saint Joseph on the opposite side altar.

The Stations of the Cross, fourteen high relief ("alto relief") in oak frames, adorn the walls of the nave, seven on each side. These depictions of the last hours in the life of Christ were imported from Mayers and Company, of Munich, Germany. We still use these original stations donated by Mr. and Mrs. William Dwyer in our Lenten devotions.

The Baptismal Font, a cylindrical piece of white marble, donated in memory of Margaret Louise Shope, has been a part of the entrance of infants and converts into the Catholic faith.

Another completing addition to the Church was its large Pipe Organ made by the A.B. Felgemaker Company of Erie, Pa. which was placed in the small choir gallery some time between ~~1897 and 1899~~ OCT. 28, 1905

Father Peter J. Fox, in 1913, for the aesthetic and spiritual enhancement of the church and parish, commissioned the painting of murals and angels which still adorn the sanctuary walls and church ceiling.

The bell which strikes the noon and evening hour each day, and peals for Sunday Masses, was installed in the Church bell-tower in 1924. This bell was donated in Memory of William George McCrea, by his parents and sister. The bell was cast by the McShane Bell Foundry Company, Baltimore, Md. It measures 46 inches wide at its base, and 33 inches in height.

It was on May 27, 1901, that the Diocese of Altoona was established, which included Renovo and St. Joseph's Parish. On October 9, 1957 the Diocese of Altoona was re-named the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown.