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St. Mary's Church in Little Falls celebrates 150 years

By Sheila McCoy Staff Writer sheila.mccoy@mcrecord.com
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It is with excitement members at St. Mary's Church are getting ready to celebrate its 150th anniversary, Sunday, June 24, at 305 Fourth Street SE in Little Falls.

The celebration kicks off with Mass starting at 10 a.m. and a free pork chop dinner at noon with festivities until 3 p.m., all are welcome, said Tri-Parish Pastoral Assistant Kaitlin Pohland.
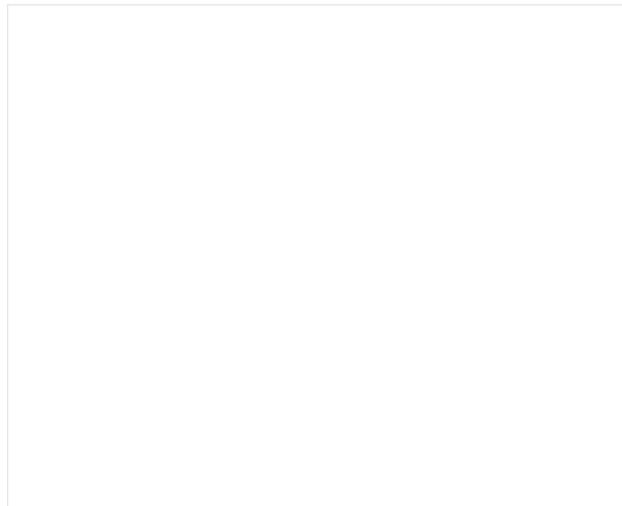
Pohland asks those who plan to attend the pork chop dinner to call (320) 632-5640 to let St. Mary's know the number of people who will be attending. By knowing how many, it helps them to know how many to cook for, she said.

Visitors will also have the opportunity to learn more about the churches' history, view photos and take a closer look at artifacts.

Thin Ice, a band made up with people from the community, will provide live music.

There will also be several kids' activities, along with a bean bag tournament that begins at 1 p.m. Registration starts at 1 p.m.

The event will end at 3 p.m. with ice cream served by the Morrison County Dairy Princesses.

"It will be a fun, relaxed day to enjoy and celebrate many years of faith," Pohland said.

What makes the celebration of St. Mary's Church unique is that it isn't about the building itself. It's the fact that the Catholic community on the east side of Little Falls has been present for 150 years.

"There are actually four churches, five if you count St. Mary's that make up the 150 years," Pohland said.

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For several months Pohland among others have devoted their time to search the history of the different churches. Along the way, it was discovered that some blanks in history needed to be researched and filled in, Pohland said.

It began in 1868, when Father Ignatius Tomazin organized the first Catholic parish in Little Falls. Most of its members were French Canadians that had left the St. Andrew's Church in Belle Prairie.

"St. Andrew's later became known as Holy Family," Pohland said.

Father Tomazin's parish purchased an old Methodist church building on the east side of the 400 block of Fourth Street NE in Little Falls.

The members of San Salvador once again faced change in 1892. Father Arthur Lamothe had decided not only to rename the church, but to demolish the structure and build a completely new church.

"San Salvador became St. Francis Xavier Parish as a tribute to Father Francis Xavier Pierz," Pohland said.

A separate church for the Germans was established in 1886. The first Mass was held by Father William Lange in the Morrison County Court House on Christmas Day. The new church, which was located on Fourth Street Southeast was completed within a year, Pohland said.

All seemed well for many years, but tragedy struck Feb. 28, 1946 when the church burned to the ground.

"We don't really know what caused the fire, but we know it started in the attic," Pohland said.

In the years before the fire at Sacred Heart Church, yet another church was established. That time for the Polish speaking community.

St. Adalbert's Catholic Church was built on Seventh street Southeast in 1896. Father John Guzdek served as its pastor.

Tired of the division of the churches, the St. Mary's Parish was formed, Aug. 2, 1944, when Bishop Busch made a decree that the St. Francis Xavier and Sacred

Heart parishes unite.

Although the two parishes were essentially in the same location, the division among the French Canadian and the German people continued. The two buildings became known as St. Mary's north and St. Mary's South.

"Everything was in German on one side and in French on the other. I have documents where it's all in German or in French," Pohland said.

Throughout her discovery of the church's history, Pohland discovered that some people's marriage certificates said they were married at St. Francis Xavier, despite the fact it was many years after the churches merged.

"Nobody told them that the records would be under St. Mary's because they would be upset," she said.

St. Mary's Church was built where the Sacred Heart Church once stood. The new church building was dedicated June 12, 1957.

Although St. Mary's Church started handling the administration side of St. Adalbert's Catholic Church, the church didn't merge to St. Mary's Church until 1970 after the church building was sold. It was demolished six years later, Pohland said.

Having enjoyed the journey of discovering more history, Pohland is very thankful to all who have been willing to help.

"Huge thank you to all the parishioners at St. Mary's who have helped plan it all and who are willing to devote their time that day. We couldn't have done it without all these volunteers," she said.

Tags | St. Mary's Church, Little Falls, 150 Years, Kaitlin Pohland, St. Andrew, Holy Family, Father Tomazin, San Salvador, Father Francis Xavier Pierz, Father William

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