

History of Misere Reveals Trying Times, Rift in Parish

Through the use of a picture, the Record-Herald recently sought to set records straight as to the spelling of Misere, an area located in Door county just beyond the Kewaunee county line. The picture also showed St. Michael's Catholic church. M. S. Tlachac, Algoma, who spent his early life in that general area and taught school not far from St. Michael's, was interested in the picture, particularly in view of the interesting historical background of the church. In the following article he shares the history and reveals, too, that "wars between north and south" are not limited to countries.

Most of the Belgian settlers in that area came with an influx of immigrants in 1853 and took up homesteads.

It was not long before they felt the need for a house of worship where they could go to church. Consequently, several of the settlers banded together and decided to build a church. They built a small log structure on a site about midway between the present St. Michael's church in Misere and St. Hubert's in Rosiere.

The area surrounding it was mostly still a wilderness and only a trail led to it. Later, when the area was surveyed to lay out a road, the church was found to be quite a distance from it. It was only a mission church, served by White Fathers of St. Norbert's Order. Priests from Bay Settlement and Champion came monthly to serve the spiritual needs of the parishioners. Some years later a permanent pastor was assigned to the congregation, but since there was no rectory, he lived among the parishioners until a rectory was erected.

Then in October, 1871, something occurred which changed all this. It was the year of the big Peshtigo fire, commonly known as "the big fire of 1871."

The autumn had been unusually dry, as no rain fell from the month of July that year. The surrounding forests became a tinder box, the scanty harvest had been gathered in the barns, and corn was in the shock.

For several days a blue haze hung in the sky. Then suddenly one day the air turned into

tongues of fire. The roar of the flaming forest was frightening. The poor settlers, white as ghosts, rushed from their houses believing the terrible day of judgment had arrived.

Possessions Destroyed

Within a few hours many of them lost their homes, barns and other possessions. Some of them escaped with only the clothes they wore. The community lay in ashes.

In the Peshtigo fire of 1871, much of northeastern Wisconsin was burned over and it is said that in no Wisconsin community did the tragic scourge of fire descend with such fury, devastation and death as it did upon the Belgian settlement in Door county. In this holocaust, the log church burned and was a complete loss.

Undaunted by this tragedy, the settlers decided to rebuild the church but on a different site.

Those parishioners in the southern part of the congregation favored a site on the county line, known then as Rosiere. There appear to be several reasons. One was that eventually the county line would become a main traveled highway. Another one and perhaps more enticing was that they heard the government was planning to establish a post office in Rosiere. "What a convenience that would be," they said. "When we go to church, we can pick up the mail (of which there rarely was any)." They also heard that some blacksmith planned to start a blacksmith and wagon shop in Rosiere. It appeared as though Rosiere was destined to become a thriving community. It seemed a proper place to build the new church.

However, those parishioners on the north end of the congregation differed on the ground that they would have farther to go to church. In those days of foot travel or transportation by oxen, a mile was a long distance.

Controversy Results

This resulted in a controversy between the northerners and the southerners. The pastor sided with the northerners and it resulted in secession which split the congregation virtually in two. The northerners decided to form a new congregation and build their own church. They obtained sanction from the bishop to go ahead with their plans.

Most likely a plot of ground was donated as the site and building of the new church was begun in earnest soon after the "big Peshtigo fire." It was built by donated labor.

This time the parishioners said, "We will make it fireproof and build it of bricks so

that it will stand a hundred years!" They were right in their belief. A rectory was built near the church. The church, consecrated as St. Michael's church, still stands.

Most every community in those days had one or two persons who were willing to take upon themselves leadership in promulgating any civic movement or project which would be beneficial to the community. In the Misere area in this respect must be mentioned the name of the late Desire Englebert, grandfather of the chief of the Algoma fire department. He, with others like him, took the lead in promoting progress and advancement in the community. They were community spirited!

Mr. Englebert, then in the prime of his life, gave unsparring service to help organize the new congregation and build St. Michael's. He was as well a successful farmer who never failed to take advantage of any new farming method and he was also extremely interested in local school affairs.

Stayed With St. Hubert's

Not all parishioners who lived in the northern area joined St. Michael's. Some of them, by virtue of long connection with their church, remained with St. Hubert's in Rosiere. Among them were some of the Massarts, LeCloux, LuMayes, Del-forges and Trembles.

In the meantime, the parishioners were busy working St. Hubert's at Rosiere. Work started soon after the big fire and for a time it seemed to be a race to see which would be completed first. This church, too, was constructed of brick to make it more fireproof after what was experienced during the big fire. The church stood until 1932 when it was replaced by the present structure in Rosiere during the tenure of the late Rev. C. J. Smits. Thus it was that there became two churches and two congregations, St. Michael's in Misere and St. Hubert's in Rosiere.

St. Michael's in Misere continued with a resident pastor for about 20 years when the rectory was destroyed by fire. Efforts to rebuild it failed. The country was in the throes of a depression in the early 1890's, better known by oldsters as the "Cleveland Times." Farm prices were ridiculously low. Wheat, which was the staple farm crop, was selling as low as 25c a bushel; potatoes, 10c a bushel; hogs, 50c to \$1 a head; eggs, 3c a dozen, and farm churned butter was selling in the market at 5c a pound.

The settlers had no money and were in dire financial stress. They could not pay their taxes. To go to the expense of building a new rectory, they said, was impossible. The bishop, hearing of their plight, decreed that until times returned to normal, St. Michael's was to be a mission church of Rosiere. It remains so to this day.

Although St. Michael's is showing the passing of time and its near 100 years of existence, it is surprisingly well kept in the interior by a few devoted women of the parish.

In reverence to the dead, the cemetery is also well maintained.

Again One Fold?

Many of the descendants of the original parishioners have passed away or moved elsewhere, leaving a small number of families to support the church. Efforts have been occasionally made to annex the congregation to St. Hubert's in Rosiere so that there will again be one fold and one shepherd.

Who knows? Perhaps in the not distant future St. Michael's church may pass out of existence and along with it, some interesting local history will be lost.