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St. James: Limestone jewel atop the hill

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When Father Irenaeus St. Cyr came on horseback 175 years ago to celebrate the first Mass in the Sag area in rural Illinois, probably no one realized that they were participating in a historic moment.

That unusual Eucharist offered in a log cabin situated on an Indian trail was the beginning of the oldest Roman Catholic church building in the Archdiocese of Chicago. The log cabin soon became the first St. James Church at Sag Bridge. After 20 years, workers on the Illinois canal, who became the first parishioners, moved the cabin up the hill to land donated by John Sullivan and James Murphy and started building a church made of yellow limestone.

They wouldn't think about using any other material because the quarries were nearby, the donors and builders worked in the quarries, and the yellow limestone church located up the hill with the canal and a river at its feet surrounded by trees would look nice.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the church was built with what the first immigrants brought with them — their hands ready to work and hearts filled with hope and faith. It took six years of hard and dedicated labor, which included digging out and carrying the yellow limestone all the way up the hill, for their vision to be materialized.

By placing the church inside a cemetery, immigrants faithfully duplicated an Irish tradition in this new land.

“Having the church totally surrounded by the cemetery is unique in Chicago. It is reminiscent of Ireland,” said Deacon John Wilkinson.

The cemetery, in which more than 5,000 bodies are interred, is distinctive.

“Out there, it is easy to find the original marble and limestone tombstones,” said Father Edward Gleeson, St. James' pastor, as he led a tour through the cemetery, pointing out which of them the descendants replaced and which are original. “There are a great number of children buried here. Cholera, smallpox, influenza and bacterial infections were out of control in those days” said Gleeson, as though he knew everybody buried in this cemetery and as though each of them was a family member.

Last month, St. James at Sag Bridge Church finished a 14- month long 175th anniversary celebration, which started in August 2007 with Bishop Gustavo Garcia- Siller blessing the new openair café, which is used often for parish cookouts, and pancake breakfasts, said Gleeson.

As part of those celebrations, the parish also hosted Bishops Joseph Perry, John Manz and Francis Kane. Mass was offered by Cardinal George on Sept. 28 to complete the commemoration of the anniversary year.

The church sitting on the hill is exceptionally charming. Dark wooden pews, stained-glass windows brought from Germany with the Irish saints (equal number of women and men) and the circular glass window symbolizing the eye of God can make those walking in feel lost in time and space and ask themselves if they have perhaps stepped into a European church of another century.

The quality of the church building unfortunately didn't protect it from hard times. Over the last 31 years, since Donna Slosowski, the administrative assistant, has been a parishioner, the 1991 tornado was the most dramatic and left the church seriously damaged. "It took the roof off and slammed the church down. Part of the fencing came down too. It was right before Easter, so we were not able to hold the Easter celebration inside our church" Slosowski said.

As a result of the tornado, an outside group started a preservation society. A lot of its members were descendants of people buried in the cemetery. They started to secure funds to renovate the church.

Thanks to their action and the effort and hard work of many, the renovation of the church was completed and the church now is a jewel in the Archdiocese of Chicago.