

Religion

Tornado is ill wind that blows in good for church

By Susan DeGrane

One day last March, Rev. James Davitt of the St. James Church at Sag Bridge, believed to be the oldest functioning parish in northern Illinois, struggled to open the door to his rectory.

A storm had been brewing all afternoon. The tall hill in Lemont on which the church sits, once the site of a French fortress and before that a look-out point for Indian tribes, suddenly was under assault.

"It looked bad," Davitt said.

A tornado loaded with dirt and debris touched down in front of the rectory. Davitt watched as a solid granite urn was lifted from its base atop a stone pillar.

The March 27 tornado lifted the roof off the historic Catholic church and set it back down, slightly off center. After the storm passed, daylight streamed in through the top of the church.

Today, the church is still trying to set things straight.

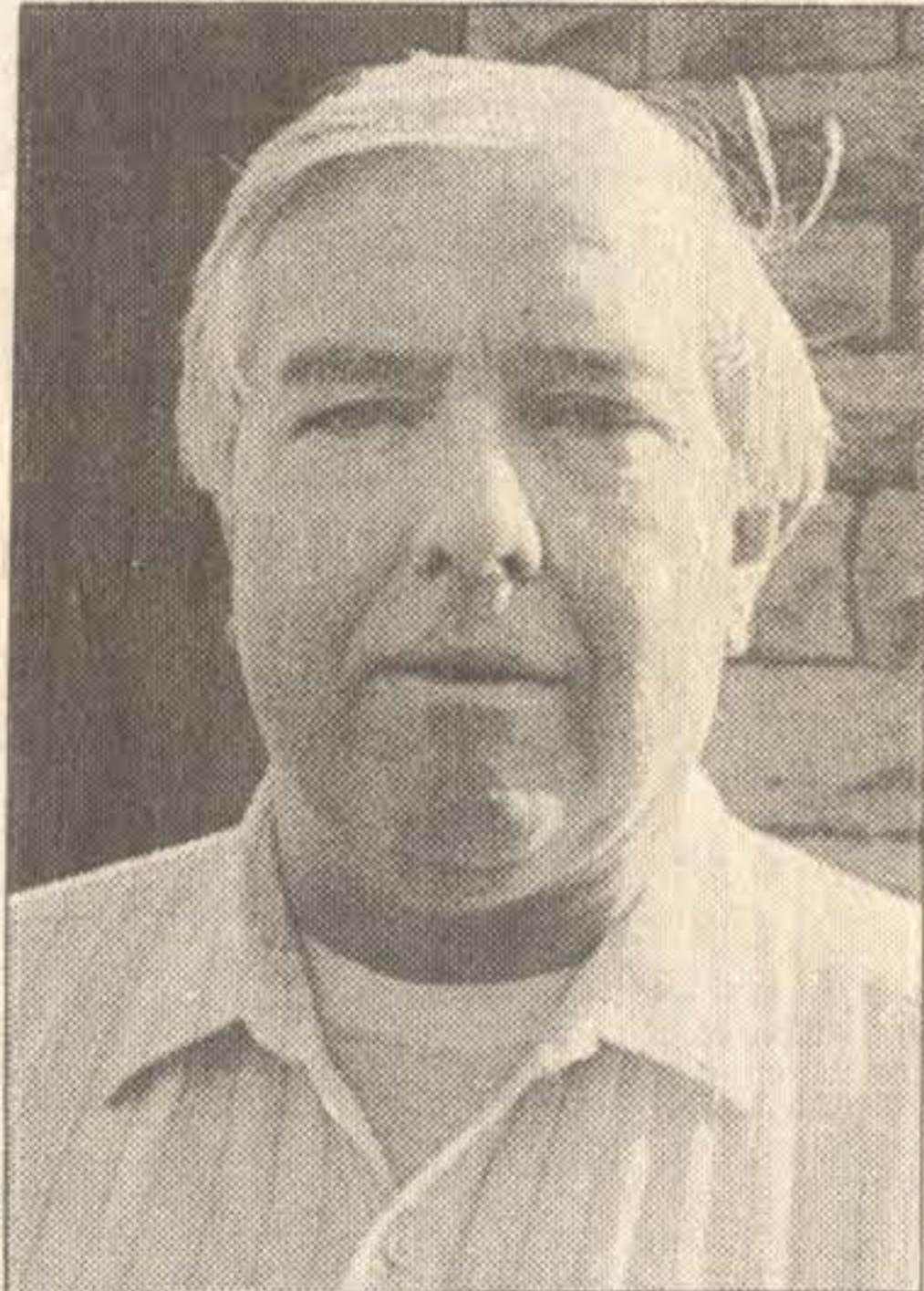
A few days later, a group of traveling Mennonites raked away the debris from the cemetery. Soon after, contractors began repairing the church roof. But several big stumps still clutter the cemetery because moving them would disturb some older graves. And the lightning rod on the church steeple remains disconnected.

Light fixtures on the rectory still show signs of the storm's fury. The tops of the lamps tilt upward where the force of the wind removed screws that held them together.

Some good may have come out of the storm, however. The damage heightened efforts to preserve the church, which was built in 1837.

Soon after the storm passed, the St. James Preservation Society was formed.

The not-for-profit organization



Rev. James Davitt stands in front of St. James Church at Sag Bridge, damaged by a tornado last year.

has 30 members. A few belong to the church's 200-member congregation, some are history buffs from neighboring communities and some have relatives buried in the St. James cemetery.

So far, the group has raised about \$29,000, of which \$25,000 came through the efforts of WLUP-AM disc jockey Kevin Matthews. The rest came from private donations.

"You might say the storm raised our concern, but our purpose is really to preserve the church and grounds for a long time to come," said Eileen D'Angelo, president of the preservation society.

The church and cemetery are on the National Register of Historic Places and located within the Illinois-Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor, which also makes the site eligible for federal and state grants.

D'Angelo said the preservation group eventually will submit grant applications.



Tribune photo by John Irvine

The sign on the gate of St. James Church at Sag Bridge informs visitors the church cemetery is closed because of tornado damage. A group formed to help preserve the church.

D'Angelo, a member of the church, explained that the small parish has kept the church alive and functioning, but that a bigger financial base is needed to maintain its historic attributes.

An elaborate mosaic mural once decorated the walls, D'Angelo said. "The congregation can't afford to have something like that restored and repainted," she said. "Any kind of design like that would be expensive. The preservation society will work to provide for things like that."

In the late 1830s, when blasting began for the Illinois-Michigan Canal, the St. James

congregation became concerned that the structural integrity of the church might be threatened. Consequently, four buttresses were erected to reinforce the two side walls.

Now those buttresses appear to be pulling away from the walls, and the mortar is disintegrating. Determining whether or not the buttresses are integral to the church structure will be part of an engineering study that the preservation society will authorize, D'Angelo said.

While weather and time account for most of the wear and tear on the building and surrounding cemetery, vandals also

have become a problem. In recent years, some of the older, historic grave markers have been overturned and broken.

For the last several years, a police guard has been posted to protect the church grounds on the most vulnerable night of the year—Halloween.

But now the landmark has a larger group of protectors.

"You might say we're guardians for St. James," D'Angelo said.

"The preservation society isn't just going to be around for a year. We have plans to be here well into the future to preserve this piece of history."