

## A blessed past

### St. James Church celebrating 175th anniversary

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By LOUISE BRASS Staff writer

The old stone church sits gracefully on top of a hill outside Lemont, surrounded by the sloping cemetery where many who made its limestone walls by the sweat of their brows are buried.

The stories of those who dug limestone out of the ground in nearby quarries in the 1800s, and the story of the church itself, seem inseparable.



From left facing camera, Deacon John Wilkinson and the Rev. Edward Gleeson pray and listen as Vicar Bishop Gustavo Garcia-Siller blesses the new parish addition St. James Cafe in Lemont.

(PHOTO BY ROBYN SHELDON)

St. James of the Sag Bridge Roman Catholic Church, founded in 1833, has about 400 parishioners today, and hosts all the usual feasts and family gatherings, weddings, confirmations and baptisms like any Catholic church.

But this church could be considered a repository of the history of the area.

St. James is called the "Jewel of the Chicago Arch Diocese" and has just begun a 14 month-long 175th anniversary celebration. The activities started Sunday with Irish dancers, bagpipers and a visit from Bishop Gustavo Garcia-Siller of Chicago.

The bishop blessed the new open-air café located next to the flower-filled grotto honoring the Virgin Mary.

The parishioners frequently hold cookouts in summer time, their pastor said, so the new café will get a lot of use.

On Aug. 19, Bishop Joseph Perry will celebrate the 10 a.m. Mass at the church, followed by a cookout in the new café, which resembles a large picnic shelter.

"This is a parish. A lot of people don't understand that. They think it's a cemetery," the Rev. Edward Gleeson said. He has been pastor of the church for four years and a priest for 38 years.

It's unclear how many deceased actually occupy the cemetery, which rests on eight acres, but he estimates that there are 1,500 graves.

"The cemetery was started in 1837. The church was built in 1853. We are in unincorporated Lemont Township," he said, as he led a guided tour through the grounds.

A man named Murphy, once the richest man in Lemont, is buried here, as well as a policeman who was killed by "the bad guys" early in the 20th century, Gleeson said.

Today the parish is made up of an eclectic group of families from Willow Springs, Burr Ridge, Lemont, Homer Glen, Lockport and Chicago.

Their number doesn't fluctuate much decade by decade, Gleeson said.

Besides country charm, there are plenty of modern amenities here. Any parishioner who has difficulty making it up the hill from the parking lot, which is at the lower side of the gated property, can opt to ride up in a golf cart for Mass, he said.

The church building is so picturesque, with dark wooden pews and larger-than-life stained glass windows, that Gleeson receives about 700 requests annually to hold weddings at St. James.

Usually he refuses. He only conducts about seven each year.

You have to be a practicing member to hold such an important event as a wedding here, said the pastor, who still hears confessions in the original wooden confessional box.

The interior of the church has been renovated, with much of the major rejuvenation work being necessary after a 1990 tornado tore off the roof.

Above the altar is a circular stained glass window symbolizing the eye of God. Near the altar is a large painting of St. Michael the Archangel. A candle burns perpetually in front of the picture.

The location of the church is especially conducive to memorable Holy Week and Easter services, Gleeson said. A Stations of the Cross walk is enacted on Good Friday, along the lane beside the church where bronze Stations of the Cross are set into 14 stone markers.

St. James at Sag Bridge Church, named after the natural Calumet Sag Channel, was founded even before there was a Chicago Archdiocese.

Besides its spiritual importance, the historic nature of the site is an attraction for those researching family ties.

Denise Rutter, a Homer Glen genealogist, has accessed St. James's cemetery for information for a number of people who have contacted her from other states, hoping to link up their family trees to branches of Will County or Cook County ancestors.

"St. James is a complicated cemetery, with so many identical Irish names, you really have to know your dates," Rutter said.

Dolomite is the Lemont limestone that was used to build St. James, which is pretty unique to this area. It is nicknamed Athens Marble, she said.

"This particular composition is different than Indianas or the Erie Canals. It's very consistent and light in color and it's very durable. The Dolomite also makes St. James pretty special too because it was the stone dug out of the I&M Canal," Rutter said, by the very people who sometimes lost their lives in the dangerous work.

"Of the look-ups that I have done, three within the last year were for people with ancestors buried in St James. None of them were from this state and none knew that their family was buried there," said Rutter, who offers free genealogy work for people all over the world with ancestors from the Lemont, Homer and Lockport area, she said.

According to the parish, 5,000 to 7,000 bodies have been interred at the cemetery over the years.

"It is said for every mile of canal built, at least one canal worker perished," said Donna Slosowski, parish administrator and bookkeeper, who worked extensively on the parish cookbook, together with the St. James Ladies Guild.

The earliest recorded grave is for Hannah Ford, who died in 1837. A Mrs. Ring, who lived on Archer Road, was buried here in 1850 and a man called John Daley was buried in 1854. Many of the children interred here died of cholera, smallpox, influenza and bacterial infections.

Michael Zimmer, former sheriff of Cook County, warden of the Joliet State Penitentiary and chief administrator of the County Hospital, is also buried in St. James Cemetery, as are six American Civil War soldiers.

The cemetery became listed on the National Registry of Historic Places, after parishioner Nancy Thornton researched the history of the location and made the application.

While the members of St. James are proud to look back at this church's rich history, they also look very much to the future, Gleeson said.

They have designed a new flag showing the church's Gothic basilica shape with steeple, which will fly at the site, right next to the gold and white papal flag and the Stars and Stripes.

Also next year, the modern stainless steel statue of Our Lady of the New Millennium, which stands 38 feet tall and weighs more than 8,000 pounds, is expected to make the trip to the top of the historic hill for the anniversary celebration, Gleeson said.

The anniversary Mass will be held next year, on Sept 28, 2008. Francis Cardinal George will celebrate the 11:30 a.m. Mass, according to Gleeson.

*Contact Louise Brass at [lbrass@scn1](mailto:lbrass@scn1). or 815-439-7557.*