

Oldest church looks over Lemont area

by Bernie Biernacki

"Top of the mornin' to you all," said Bill Collins in greeting the 10 a.m. worshipers at the historic St. James at Sag Bridge church this past Sunday, March 17.

The welcome was more than fitting for the day. Although the day might have been overcast and drizzly, it was the time for the "wearin' of the green." It was St. Patrick's Day and for more than 150 years the Irish saint has been remembered and honored in this little church that sits atop a hill near the junction of the Calumet Sag Channel and the Illinois and Michigan Canal and the Des Plaines River, just east of 107th Street and Archer Avenue.

It was the natives from "the Ol' Sod" who came to this area back in the beginning of the 19th century to build the canal and to make a new life for themselves and, eventually, their families. Bringing little with them except for their determination and faith, the immigrants desired a place for a bit of peace and meditation.

So in the early 1830s St. James at Sag Bridge was founded.

During the first 20 years or so, worship was done in a building made of logs. But after much toil and sacrifice, the building that still stands was erected.

"I'm very proud to say that this church is the oldest standing (Roman) Catholic Church in Cook County," said the Rev. James Davitt, its pastor, after Sunday's mass. "Old St. Mary's in Chicago's Loop may be an older parish, but its original building is long gone."

Along with the church building, built of the same quarry stone as was the canal, is a small cemetery where many of the canal workers found their eternal rest. The cemetery land was donated to the church by James and Bridget Murphy (4 acres) and John and Johanna Sullivan (also, 4 acres) in about 1858.

The cemetery is now operated by Holy Sepulcher



CORRIDOR HISTORY — St. James of the Sag Church at 107th St. and Ill. Hwy. 83 provides a look back, though the markers in the cemetery, at the families who worked on the canal project.

PHOTO BY DAVID DUROCHER

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Cemetery in Worth.

When you walk up the steep path from Archer Avenue, through the huge wrought iron gates, it's almost as if you've stepped back in time or at least stepped over to Ireland, to an old country church.

By today's standards St. James is little more than a chapel. It is small, having a central aisle and two side aisles and a tiny choir loft. More than three people crowd the vestibule. The Stations of the Cross are set in stone markers that ring the outside of the church.

"Despite its size, St. James really is a very nice and peaceful place for prayer and meditation," said the Rev. Davitt.

While the Irish may have founded St. James and many of their descendants are still parishioners, today's parish family is made up of Italians, Polish, Germans and other nationalities.

Dominic Violante, a choir member, said the parish draws its people from Lemont, Willow Springs and from throughout the entire area.

"We are all like family here at St. James," Violante said.

The St. James family wants to see the church meet the 21st Century with the same style

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*— Dominic Violante,
choir member*

that it has the last two centuries and are ready and willing to contribute to its upkeep.

"You know that our church building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places back in 1984," the Rev. Davitt said. "We're also proud of the front gates. They used to be at the main entrance to Western Electric's Hawthorne Works in Cicero and the torch pillars once stood in front of Chicago's old city hall."

But the pastor hasn't much time for the past, as he has the present to deal with. Another mass and then a big evening.

"No, we celebrated St. Pat's Day on Saturday," the pastor smiled. "Today, we'll be celebrating St. Patrick's Day like they do in Ireland. It's a religious holiday there and tonight we'll be confirming 15 of our young people and three adults at a special service at St. Patrick's in Lemont."