

How Did They Build a New Saint Joseph Church in the Mid-1930's?

How could our forebears, parishioners at Saint Joseph Parish, build a new church building in the mid 1930's? Olney and nationally, if not the whole world was in the depth of a great depression. Banks had failed, factories were closed, homes and farms were lost to mortgage foreclosures. Small businesses failed, farmers were getting 35 cents a bushel for hand shucked com, hogs were bringing \$2.50 per hundred weight (2 and one half cents a pound). Unemployment was at an all time high, money was extremely short.

If you had the money, a new Ford V8 sedan could be purchased for \$550, or a new electric refrigerator for 17 cents a day on time. The plight of the Okies portrayed in Steinbeck "The Grapes of Wrath" had many parallels right here in Richland County. Times were bad and not improving. Many young farmers were traveling 100 miles and more up north the shuck com for one dollar a day, dawn to dusk.

Why did the parish need a new structure? In the early 1860s in the fourth or fifth year of the parish a small frame church was built on the south east corner of North Fair and East Butler. In 1892 the church was jacked up, put on rollers and moved seven blocks to the South Elliott location. As time took its toll on the building and the parish grew, the old church was replaced with a new sanctuary on the top floor of the school building. All those stairs were not the best for the handicapped or elderly. And can you imagine carrying a casket up those stairs? As the parish continued to grow, the second story church became more inadequate.

They faced a definite need and a very definite shortage of available funds due to the times. So, how did it happen?

The answer is to be found in the person of a 40 year old parishioner, Mabel Weidner Litzelman, wife of Yank Litzelman, who with her husband owned and operated the Litz Hotel on East Main Street across from the Carnegie Library. Mabel purchase an Irish Sweepstakes ticket in 1935 for \$2.50 and won the grand prize, \$142,500, in 2008 dollars that reads \$2,159,497.89!!!

The Irish Sweepstakes was and is a national lottery based on four horse races, with the proceeds going to hospital construction in Ireland. What did Mabel do when informed she had won? Finished cooking in the Litz Hotel kitchen for the noon crowd in the dining room! What a woman! ! Then she went to church with her husband, and with tears in her eyes said "My God did this for me", When interviewed by a Saint Louis Post Dispatch reporter, she said there were two things she was going to do, help my church and get a Packard. And so it was.

A problem, since gambling was unlawful in the USA, the winnings could not be delivered to the Litzelmans but had to be picked up in Ireland, yet the government would gladly tax the winning here, a mere 32%, a far cry from today. The Litzelmans had to stay in Olney and run their business. What a work ethic! They hired a local business man, Zean Gassmann, to make the ocean voyage to collect the money. Zean was the son-in-law of the benefactors of the first Saint Joseph School, Dr. & Mrs. George Weber. Zean married their oldest daughter Gertrude. Zean and Gertrude's daughter Trudi was born on August 21, 1935 while her father was enroute to Ireland. The Litzelmans very generously donated a substantial amount of the \$68,000 of our present church's construction cost. It is hoped by narrating this story the generosity of the Litzelmans will be long remembered.

The information for this narrative was gleaned from word of mouth discussions with parishioners and non-parishioners who remembered the events, personal conversations with Henry Gassmann, Trudi Gassmann Reynolds and Mary Stonecipher, and from The Saint Louis Post Dspatch and area newspapers of the day.