

## History of St. Anne's Parish

1899-1990

St. Anne's Church, located on the corner of Spalding and Fourth Street, in Spring Valley, is one of the historic landmarks of the city. The half century of its existence is a golden record of sacrifices, labors, and loyalty of the Lithuanian – speaking Catholics.

It was about 1885-1890 that the Lithuanian people began to settle in Spring Valley and the surrounding town. The newly opened mines attracted these immigrants who were simple honest folk not afraid of hard work, in order to make a decent living.

At this time since they were few in number, their spiritual needs were taken care of by the Polish Parish of Sts. Peter and Paul. Naturally, since many of them could not speak the Polish language, it was apparent that they would sooner or later have to establish their own church and seek the services of their own priests.

In the year 1896, a delegation selected from the Lithuanians went to Peoria to see His Excellency Bishop J. L. Spalding and presented their problem. His excellency, after hearing their case, granted them permission to establish their own parish. Immediately, the people began raising funds for the new church, and in a short time the necessary funds were raised enabling them to start work on the new church. That same year, two lots were purchased on the corner of Fourth Street and Spalding Street, ground was broken, and work began on the new church.

The new church was to be a wooden structure about 60 feet long and 35 feet wide and cost \$2500. The name selected was St. Anne because by common consent of the people, the person donating the largest amount of money towards the erection of the new church would have the honor of selecting the name. Mrs. Anna Wimbiscus was the privileged person, and she chose the name of her patron saint, St. Anne.

The first mass was said in the spring of 1898.

During this time and up to 1899, the Rev. M. Peza, pastor of Sts. Peter and Paul administered to the spiritual needs of the Lithuanian people. Then in 1899, the Rev. J. Servetka was appointed the first pastor. However, he remained only about

a year and was succeeded by Rev. A. C. Ambrozaitis who also remained only about a year and was succeeded by the Rev. Francis Valaitis.

Fr. Valaitis' pastorate proved to be of longer duration and most beneficial to the young parish. He was young and energetic and did not spare himself in taking care of the spiritual needs of the people. It was during his pastorate that the immigration of Lithuanians to the coal mines of Spring Valley and surrounding towns was at its peak. It was during this time, St. Anne's parish boasted of over a thousand families. St. Anne's Church was the mother church to the Lithuanians living not only in Spring Valley, but also the surrounding towns and cities of LaSalle, Peru, Oglesby, Cedar Point, Toluca, Granville, Seatonville, Ladd and Cherry, not to mention the many people who lived on farms.

One of the first tasks of Fr. Valaitis was to purchase a rectory near the church, for when he came to the parish, the priests had been living a block away from the church, at 106 E. Fifth Street and so on June 6, 1904, the parish bought a home from Dr. Matthew J. Coveny located at 111 Fourth Street, just across from the church.

But there were also heartaches and sacrifices. In 1908, the church caught fire and the high altar was completely destroyed. Despite this tragedy, they continued, and they enlarged the church, redecorated the interior, and put in a large beautiful Gothic altar, and two similar small side altars. Misfortune struck again, and in 1909, there was a tornado. The tornado practically tore it off its' foundation. Once again, they went to work and repaired and strengthened the church.

Fr. Valaitis also tried to build a school but died in 1911. He was priest at St. Anne's from 1902-1911. The Rev. A. Deksnis was appointed pastor of St. Anne's Parish in March 1912. During the interim between Fr. Valaitis' death and Fr. Deksnis' appointment, the Rev. Geo. Kolesinski served as administrator.

Fr. Deksnis completed the task of establishing the school and purchasing the home for the Sisters and seeing that the school was properly equipped for the work. However, this expenditure of time and money did not return its' proper dividends. The school closed only after about two years of operation. The small number of children attending the school did not warrant the keeping of the Sisters, and so the school became the parochial social center and parish hall.

It was also during Fr. Deksnis' first year as pastor in 1912, that the parish established its own cemetery, located on the outskirts of the north-east section of Spring Valley.

Likewise, during the first years as pastor, Fr. Deksnis organized sodalities which the people had known in their homeland. For the men, he organized the Society for the Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. To the American people seeing the men in church wearing surplices over their street clothes, was a novelty, but to the men it was a source of pride. On the big feasts of the church and during the 40 Hours of Devotion they were the vanguard of all the processions, marching with their banners and lighted lanterns. They were a source of inspiration.

The sodality for the women was the Society of Sacred Heart. This society was more of a benefit society, for upon the death of a member the society paid \$25.00 to the family of the deceased, the money to be used to defray expense of the funeral, or for masses.

A third society formed by Fr. Deksnis was a national one – the Lithuanian Roman Catholic Alliance of America. This was strictly a benefit and insurance society. Today this society is a regular insurance company and is governed by Federal and State Laws. But in its' earlier years, it was a real Godsend to the immigrants who could speak but little English and were skeptical of all agents.

The successor of Fr. Deksnis was the Rev. S. Bystrais who was appointed pastor of St. Anne's parish, which occurred in November 1917. Fr. Bystrais served five years, from 1917-1922.

Succeeding Fr. Bystrais was the Rev. S. A. Waitys who served as pastor not quite a year; October 1922 to September 1923.

Upon Fr. Waitys' transfer from St. Anne's parish, the Rev. Albert J. Rupsis was appointed pastor by His excellency Bishop Dunne. During Fr. Rupsis' long pastorate, the parish ran the gamut of prosperity and depression. Despite the good will of the people and the hard work of the pastor, the parish was going down. The mines, that in earlier years attracted so many immigrants, began closing, and the few factories in surrounding towns could not offer work, and so the people began moving elsewhere to seek a livelihood. As evidence of this mass exodus, we have the records which show that in earlier years Spring Valley boasted a population

close to ten thousand, now it claimed only about five thousand. Then the nation-wide depression of 1929 came, and it left its mark on St. Anne's as it did on every parish in the land. Yet, despite all of these adverse circumstances, the parish weathered the storm and faced the future with renewed hope.

During the lean years of the depression in the 1930s, it was a struggle to raise money to support the church. A group of valiant women would suggest a money raising event and word would have to be spread about to get volunteers. Not many had phones at this time, but refusals were rare. Mrs. Stacia Wilkaites suggested forming a sodality to meet monthly, pay dues and to select volunteers to head planned events.

The idea became a reality when Father Rupsis called a meeting and St. Anne's Sodality was formed on February 11, 1935. The resulting benefits of this sodality were two masses offered for a deceased member thirty days and sixty days after death.

But the worries and hard work continued to take a toll on Fr. Rupsis and the latter years of his pastorate found him in ill health. It was ill health that forced him to tender his resignation to the Bishop in June of 1939.

In the year 1940, the men of the parish under his guidance made a much-needed improvement upon the church. The tornado of 1909 left the church in a bad way. A complete remodeling and reinforcing job were done.

In June 1941, the parish bought the Rollins' residence next to the school hall, thus putting the church, parish hall and rectory together.

Likewise, during Fr. Kwinn's pastorate, the parish debt was paid off. In preparation for the Golden Jubilee, permission was obtained to start a building fund for remodeling the interior of the church, and the work began in the fall of 1946. The Men's Holy Name Society and St. Anne's Sodality merged and became known as St. Anne's Society in 1965.

After Fr. Wm. Kwinn's death in 1966, Fr. Joseph Skirkus, who was a resident priest at St. Anne's since 1950, was appointed pastor. He retired in 1973 and moved to Hayward, Wisconsin. During his pastorate, a new roof was put on the church and a new heating system in the rectory.

Upon Father Skirkus' retirement, Fr. Francis Kura was appointed by the Most Rev. Edward W. O'Rourke, Bishop of Peoria. Father Kura administered to the people of St. Anne's until his unexpected death on January 26, 1990.

Now after 92 years, St. Anne's church was closed. Only memories remain of the past Baptisms, Communions, Marriages, Confirmations, Funerals, May Crownings, Forty – Hour Devotions, CCD classes, annual church picnics, bake sales, and many social events and giving Father Kura the chance to return to Lithuania for the first time since he came to this country as a young man.

Looking back, St. Anne's parish was truly blessed and for that they are thankful. Their final mass was on Saturday, March 31, 1990. At the final mass, Bishop John Myers urged St. Anne's parishioners to find another church and join and make it theirs. Many of the parishioners were recognized Sunday, April 1, 1990 with a closing dinner held at Pitstick's. They were each given a candle to remember their church.

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