

# The Grand Dispatch

A brief history of Beckley Beach and the surrounding area.  
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## The Sacred Heart Chapel and Community Centre at Beckley Beach

### The Church came early to Port Maitland!

As early as 1626, Port Maitland was host to Roman Catholic missionaries. It is likely that the first Mass ever said on the north shore of Lake Erie took place at Port Maitland. The following reference is found in a book published in 1992 by The Dunnville District Heritage Association titled. Grand Heritage; "The first record of white men paddling down the Grand River past Dunnville and down to Lake Erie was that of two French priests Father Jean de Brébeuf and Father Joseph de la Roche Daillon. With two coureurs-de-bois, Grenolle and Lavallé, they set out from Georgian Bay on October 18, 1626 and reached the Grand River on December 8. They canoed down the Grand and stayed in the lake area for three months."

Forty-three years ago to be used as a reference. This paragraph is incorrect. The Sulpician Priests did visit Port Maitland, but did not stay there. They camped at Port Dover. The Canadian Please see Vol 3 No. 2 June, 2000 of Grand 1, 1956, we refer to the Grand Dispatch for correction. WAW  
 Rev. Francois Galinée encamped along the shores of Lake Erie (Port Maitland) for five months and eleven days during the winter of 1669-70. About a mile and a half inland on the margin of a small stream a large hut had been erected by the small band of French explorers who had accompanied these priests. One end of this building was reserved for a chapel where Father Dollier celebrated Mass three times weekly. On Sundays and festivals, High Mass was chanted and a sermon delivered. This group claimed this land for the French King, Louis XIV, planting a cross and affixing the King's arms to this religious emblem. From here this band journeyed westward to Pelee Island."

### The Chapel of the Sacred Heart of Jesus

In my church, my priest regularly reminds us as vacation time approaches that God does not take holidays and even though we find ourselves in an exotic resort or at the cottage, we still need to take care of our spiritual needs. This is the situation that the early Port Maitland cottagers found themselves in the 1920s and 1930s. In the early days of Beckley Beach, most visitors were Roman Catholic, owing to the fact many of them had a working relationship to my Grandfather Wm (W J) Joseph Warnick (39, 41, 43). W J, was the superintendent of the TH&B Railway, owners of Beckley Beach.

**You didn't have to be Catholic, but it didn't hurt!**



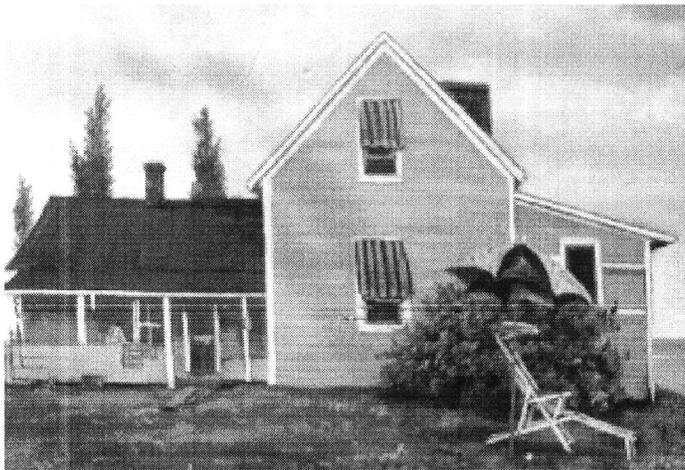
William J. Warnick, promised parents and Camp Directors: "Your children will get to Mass"

Wm. A. Warnick Collection

My Grandfather was one of few Roman Catholics in management at the railway during his time. Now don't get me wrong, this is not an article about old religious conflicts and incivility toward others. There was a time when people of differing creeds knew

their place! My Grandfather, was no different from many others. He knew his place. As he had obtained his cottage at Port Maitland in 1916, and was a person of some influence with the railway, he used this influence to open up Beckley Beach to his friends, "mostly, but not exclusively Roman Catholic friends."

My grandfather; like my priest believed that God does not take holidays and Sunday Mass was an obligation even while vacationing. In the 1920s and early 1930s the method of transportation to Dunnville for Mass at St. Michael's was generally by boat as the road on the east side of the Grand River was barely a footpath. The Catholic families would gather at a dock, possibly the old ferry dock or maybe at Henrietta Siddall's (11). There they would board launches such as the Maitland Queen, owned by Roy Moss or the Silver Spray, owned by John Percy Siddall and travel the river to Dunnville. At that time there were still a number of locals running tour and cargo services up and down the river. This was not an easy way to get a large family to Mass each Sunday and would take most of the day. Even the most die-hard Catholic still wanted time to spend at the beach on Sunday afternoon!



In 1932, Mass was held on the front porch of WJ Warnick's Cottage

William A. Warnick Collection

In 1932, in order for the Roman Catholic cottagers to look after to their Sunday obligation of attending Mass and still have some of their Sunday free, Mass was held on the front porch of my Grandparents' cottage. The following June Art Dougher and Roscoe Livingstone both of Stromness were hired to build a community centre/chapel. The 1937 St.

Michael's Parish Almanac tells us that in July 1933, Mass was said for the first time in the new chapel of the Sacred Heart of Jesus by Fr. George Goodrow.



Sacred Heart of Jesus Chapel before being inclosed

Photo courtesy: Patrick Hayes

### Some call it "Little Rome!"

Priests have been available to the residents of Beckley Beach, since the early 1930s. A number of priests summered at Beckley. Fr. Felix J. McHugh, and Fr. Pat O'Brien from St. Patrick's Parish in Hamilton as well as Fr. William George Goodrow from Dunnville all shared in saying Mass at my grandparent's cottage. Priests who said Mass at the chapel were Monsignor George Cassidy (47), Fr. F. P. Kehoe and T. J. Clancy both pastors at St. Michael's in Dunnville, Fr. Bernard Harrigan, Fr. Bernard Cox, - a nephew of WJ Warnick- Fr. Jim A. Ford (65), Fr. John A. O'Reilly (26A, 30A) who later returned to Dunnville and become pastor at St. Michael's. His brothers Joe and Frank of course were also priests and often said Mass in the chapel. Bishop Joseph F. Ryan, (62) "Bishop of the Diocese of Hamilton," who leased two lots but never built at Beckley Beach was a regular visitor at Jack and Nell Kelly's cottage (33). It is believed that Fr. McHugh leased a lot along the lake but like Bishop Ryan never built there. Fr. Vincent Dermody (58A) built his cottage here and often said Mass in the chapel. Bishop John M. Sherlock, the present Bishop of the Diocese of London Ontario, along with Fathers Kyran Kennedy, Fergus Duffy, John and Larry Walsh have at one time or another jointly owned my grandparent's former cottage. Even today Beckley Beach has a number of priests that have cottages

here. They are Fathers Ron and David Cote (39) and Omer Fagan (32A). Ironically, Father Fagan is currently the pastor at the "Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish" in Teeswater. With all the priests that have located here it is no wonder some suggest that the name should not be Beckley Beach but rather "Little Rome!"



An overflow crowd at Mass in August, 1933

Photo Courtesy: Joan Moore

## Bishop Ryan; "God may expect a bit More!"

It is understood that while saying Mass Bishop Ryan suggested that God may expect a bit more than sand floors and no walls in his little chapel. Soon after the men of Beckley Beach got together and contracted Art and Roscoe once again, this time to bring the chapel up to the Bishop's standards for the summer of 1937. A concrete step was installed at the entrance of the 24x40-foot structure. Roscoe's son Pat, recalls placing a currently dated penny in the concrete leaving a permanent record of the year the chapel was closed in. Not all the work was done by paid help. Roscoe Livingstone was Art Dougher's right-hand man, but Joe Warnick (37) recalls as a young fellow helping Roscoe to shingle the roof. At the time many of the cottages were being put together from lumber removed from old boxcars that W J Warnick had shipped to a siding at the Canada Coal docks. Oddly enough, the lumber for the reconstruction of the Chapel was purchased from a local lumber yard. It is very likely that the lumber was purchased from Wm. Shirton Lumber Company in Dunnville. Sides were added to the original open structure which now included double front doors flanked on three sides of the chapel with screens and shutters. The substantial roof and beamed ceiling were supported by 2x8's nailed together to form posts. Four across the front of the structure - five along

the sides. The top plate consisted of three 2x8s also nailed together making a very secure support for the roof which was faced with a 1x8 kiln dried BC fur. The floor was built of 3/4 inch thick by 2½ inches wide tongue and groove, kiln dried BC fur. This was a well built and sturdy structure! At the rear was the altar "enclosure" which was built with large folding doors which were locked when not in use and kept closed when there was a community meeting or bingo game (often called "Housie")

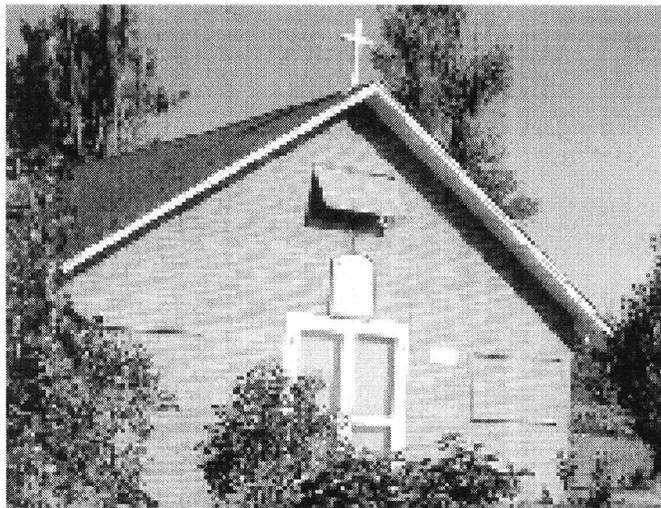
<sup>2</sup>A large sign was painted prominently on the clapboard "V" and read:

### **"Chapel of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Mass every Sunday - 9:30"**

The altar enclosure contained an altar and tabernacle against the back wall. A large framed oil painting of the Sacred Heart hung above the altar-a gift of Michael J. Hayes (19, 21). -Thus the name "Chapel of the Sacred heart of Jesus." - The altar was a step up from the floor of the chapel and altar boys knelt on the step so the toes of their shoes touched the chapel floor. The folding doors when closed separated this altar along the step. In addition, flanking the altar were large closets with doors more or less hidden from view one on either side. Altar Boys prepared to serve in the right-hand room and the officiating priest donned and stored his vestments in the left-hand room. When the priest was ready to begin Mass, he would signal the boys to come to his side so they could formally process with him and the congregation would rise. The boys had a set of bells to ring proclaiming the beginning of Mass.

We remember the many who took loving care of the little church by the lake. Names like Mike Hayes, Jack Sinnott (39) and Philip Erb (49) (a non-Catholic at that) comes to mind. Who could forget Clarence Schierer (49), Philip Erb's son-in-law? Clarence acted as sacristan and caretaker for as long as I can recall. Clarence was never at a loss for words and was a most hospitable gentleman. Someday, I must do a story about Clarence and his perfect little yard with all his lawn ornaments. My grandmother Kate Warnick, with Mrs. Frances Sinnott, Mrs. Teresa

Boyle (54) and Mrs. Marie Grightmire ( 42A) are but only a few who put in hours cleaning painting and making altar linens.



Sacred Heart of Jesus Chapel: Circa 1968

Photo Courtesy: Patrick Hayes

### The sweet fragrance of Bacon!

Who of us over fifty years of age cannot recall going to Mass at the chapel on a warm, even hot summer morning and hearing the gentle rustling of the lilacs as the soft breeze coming off the lake trickled ever so leisurely against their leaves? In those days Catholics were obliged to fast from midnight before communion. Oh, could we smell the sweet fragrance of bacon frying and the bouquet of coffee being perked in some nearby cottage. Father would be in the middle of his homily which he had prepared especially for his summer parishioners when he too would get a whiff of a nearby breakfast! One might suspect a few of his well-thought out lines were hastily removed! I wonder if the neighbors knew the suffering their breakfast was inflicting on us poor Catholics?

In the days before the chapel was built and before W J Warnick opened his porch for Sunday Mass, he is remembered for his efforts to get the boys from Camp Teekontah and the girls of the YWCA Camp Owaissa, to Mass in Dunnville. He assured the camp directors and parents that he would find transportation to Dunnville. In those early days, it is highly unlikely the Catholic girls attending a YWCA camp would be permitted to attend if their parents did not have assurances their girls would get to

Mass. My personal recollection of attending Mass at the chapel took place during the 1950s and 1960s. I recall the uniformed girls from Camp Owaissa being marched to the chapel just in the nick of time for Mass. Then with equal precision and haste were marched back for breakfast. I suspect breakfast had little to do with the haste to return to camp. My suspicions are that it was thought best to keep the girls apart from the boys of Beckley Beach!

The Sacred Heart Chapel has served as a community centre, always being available to all for meeting and fund-raising events. In the summer of 1937, the first meeting of the Beckley Beach Cottager's Association was held under its roof. Many other events would take place there in the years to follow. Saturday night bingo and housie were common happenings in the 1940s.

### The end of an era.

By 1969, transportation to Dunnville for Mass was no longer a problem. With paved roads and modern cars, St. Michael's was only a few minutes away. Catholics now had the option of attending Mass on Saturday evening thus easing the Sunday morning rush. In the June 29, 1969, Sunday bulletin, Fr. John O'Reilly announced -"It is impossible to provide Holy Mass on Sundays at the Beach Chapel this summer. . . and Fr. Michael O'Reilly will be alone and required at St. Michael's. . . We regret this of course, and trust all understand that the extreme shortage of priests causes this change from former years."- The previous Sunday, Fr. John informed his parish that "Fr. Michael has been appointed pastor at St. Michael's as of July 1, 1969".

On November 10, 1975, the great lake ship Edmond Fitzgerald sank in a heavy gale on Lake Superior. On the same night, Beckley Beach experienced the storm as well. The resulting high water and strong winds lifted the chapel from its sitting place of forty-four years, leaving it partly sitting on the uneven ground balancing with diagonal corners lifted off the ground. In putting together this article, I have asked several people about the demise of the Chapel and have been told various stories. Few remembered it

being lifted by high water and moved several feet from its original location. That was how I recalled seeing it while visiting Beckley Beach shortly after this storm. I will use Pat Hayes's words in response to my inquiries to describe some of the damage he recorded.

*"Anyhow (about the concrete slab) I purposely took the picture with the slab in the foreground showing it to be where it always was (still imbedded in the sand) and the entire Chapel at least 10 - 12 feet back up the hill, tilted and turned halfway around. I assume the structure was lifted by the waves of the storm as were so many of our cottages and came to rest in its new position when the water subsided."* Unfortunately, Pat has not been able to locate this picture.

The storm placed the chapel squarely on lot forty-five which I believe belonged to Bill Mahar. It is understood that Bill had hoped to convert it into a cottage and rent it out. After some investigations it was determined that scrapping it was the route to go. Wanting the lumber Ken Jones (34) negotiated a price of one hundred dollars to buy and demolish it. Lumber from the chapel has been used for a number of projects at Beckley, including the addition to Florence Wilson's (25) cottage, while some of it went to building a shed for Ken's daughter Karen Redding (67). Ken now has a work shelf in his garage at the cottage built from remaining lumber. The sign from above the door announcing the time of Mass now hangs in Don Denman's cottage. (36)

To a Roman Catholic there is not likely a more sacred item in a church than the tabernacle. While demolition was taking place Ed Boyle paid Ken a visit and discovered the tabernacle still intact and attached to the Altar table. Ed asked "Ken, do you want the tabernacle?" Ken replied "Well there is not wood in it! . . . I've got a good size pinch bar here, maybe I can take it off for you now!" Needless to say Ed found himself a bit distressed and excited. All Ed could think to say was "NO! I'll do it! I'll do it!" Ken kindly offered to appropriately remove it and gave it to Ed the next morning. With pride, Ed placed it in his cottage on the lake shore.

Ed Boyle kept the tabernacle in his cottage until the disastrous storm of December 1, 1985 when his cottage was destroyed. He found the tabernacle badly damaged and

beyond repair. Giving it the respect it deserved, he took it to the lake shore and burned it until all that remained was a small pile of ashes. A shallow hole was dug and the ashes placed therein. The storms of Lake Erie have without a doubt taken its ashes into the lake thus concluding our association with the Sacred Heart of Jesus Chapel at Beckley Beach. Without being aware, Ed ceremoniously ended something started in 1626 by Father Brébeuf and Father Daillon.

## Dispatch Celebrates Second Year

The Grand Dispatch commemorated its second anniversary with all the staff gathered to celebrate another successful year. I have fun putting together The Dispatch, but with the help of Karen Homes, Connie Morley and Fr. Ron Cote, it becomes a bit more professional than if I were to attempt it on my own. Once again Fr. Ron has offered a few words of wisdom and good humour. Enjoy!



Karen Holmes and Connie Morley help by proofreading. Bill Warnick Editor. Fr. Ron Coté writes great anniversary articles.

Wm. A. Warnick Collection

## Fond Memories

The editor has asked his cub reporter to dash off a few lines to mark the second anniversary of the Grand Dispatch. Not having received either a cheque or fan mail after my first article, I really question whether my future lies in the field of journalism. But I will press on, undaunted.

The history of the chapel brings back fond memories of a couple of summer visits to Beckley Beach probably in the years 1940 and 1941. Father John O'Reilly was our pastor in Guelph, and brought about twenty altar servers at a time to spend a week here. Besides the O'Reilly cottage (30A), there was a bunk house (no longer here) and a mess hall up the hill (26A). All we had to bring was two loaves of bread each and spending money, which we deposited at Curtis' store (32). (Jack Curtis' father had his sons operate the tuck shop, probably to keep them occupied, and close to home, lest the young ladies around the beach prove too much of a distraction).

Memories include three swims a day, Mass in the chapel before breakfast, a softball game in the evening, and nightly campfire at the beach. We fished off the eastern pier on Thursday for our supper on Friday. Field Day marked the end of each camp session, and included children of cottagers as well. The memories are vivid and precious, and helped attract me back in 1977 when the Leonard family decided to withdraw from lot #39. What goes around comes around!

R. J. COTE

P.S. This reporter, after discreet inquiries, has determined that Conrad Black is devoting his full time to making a success of the National Post. The Grand Dispatch can breathe a sigh of relief for now. A takeover bid is only a remote possibility.

### **From Old Newspapers and Books Etc., Etc.**

**Canadian Vessels Register; 135 years ago (1865)** The scow Stromness was built at Stromness where she was registered. She is owned by Lachlan McCallum. Her capacity is 80 tons. She is the 19<sup>th</sup> vessel built at Stromness  
Subscribing owners: Lachlan McCallum sole owner, sold to Chester H. Carter of Port Colborne dated Oct. 15, 1865, who sold to Thomas Canton of Thorold dated April 15, 1873. She was destroyed in 1886.

1. Information found on a sign entering West Port Maitland "1650 -Jesuit Missionaries"

2. Mass was not always at 9:30 as the sign notes. During the 1950s and 1960s, Mass began at 11:00 a.m.

### **Looking for someone!**

Does anyone know where either Gary, Terry or Donald McDonald or their sister Denise is? They are grandchildren of Mrs. O'Reilly's lot 30A. If you know where they are, will you please let me know?

### **Financial Support**

Thanks again to Paul Dermody, of P. X. Dermody Funeral Homes for your continued financial support of this history letter.

### **Special Thanks**

Special Thanks to Patrick Hayes, Noreen and John Mater, Ken and Norma Jones, Ed Boyle and Joe Warnick.

### **In Memoriam**

**Dorothy Wilson:** Died February 2, 2000 Wife of Robert Wilson; daughter of the late Andrew and Elizabeth Marr. (40)

### **Anyone wanting a Dispatch?**

If you know anyone who wants "The Grand Dispatch," I mail them for the price of postage.

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