

## ***Requiem for St. Joseph's***

(This story originally appeared in the July 2004 edition of *The Mountain Island Monitor*.)

Gather around, I have a story to tell.

Once in a time long before today, six Irish Catholic families came to work the gold mines along the banks of the Catawba River. Now, they are gone and mostly forgotten, their lives lost to the irretrievable mystery of yesterday. But, their legacy lives on.

It was their deep desire for a place to worship and an altar to kneel before, that led them to found a small mission church that still stands by NC Highway 273, near Mountain Island, north of Mt. Holly.

In 1843, the church, built by the immigrants was named St. Joseph and Mary. This sacred chapel was hard won, hand hewn and paid for by simple folk. Their commitment to building a church subsequently led to the founding of Belmont Abbey University by Benedictine Monks.

From their Irish ancestral homes, County Cork, Tipperary and Dublin, they sailed into the port of Charleston, S.C. where not long before their arrival two Catholics were discovered and quickly tarred and feathered. The six families consisted of four families headed by the Lonergan brothers, plus the Duffey and Cahill families.

In the early years of the 1800s, the land around the Catawba River was honeycombed with gold mines. Most of the mines were individually owned and bore names such as Oliver, Farrar, Rumfeldt, Sam Beattie, and Capps Hill. In addition, there were mines with adventurous names: The Black Cat, The Caledonia, Queen of Sheba, King Solomon and Gold Hill Mines.

The Piedmont was unsettled and wild. The immigrants shared the land and the rutted trails with mountain lions, wolves, herds of white-tailed deer, elk, and men driven by the desire for gold, which did in fact exist, but not in the quantities found in the California of Alaskan rushes later in the century.

From Charleston, they forded the currents of the Santee River until they reached the Catawba River; along the way they traded with the river Indians. Upon reaching the western banks of the Catawba River, they settled near Rozzelles Ferry.

These families had been recruited by Chevalier Riva de Finola to homestead and work his gold mines along the Catawba River near Riverbend. Chevalier Riva de Finola was a man of wealth who owned several mines in this vicinity. He has been described as a flamboyant character of French and Italian descent. He was a devout Catholic who invited the Irish to worship in his elegant home. Around 1835, de Finola's Catawba River mines were closed by court injunction. It was not written in the injunction but it was suspected that the mines were closed because the mining was washing mercury into the river. Mercury (quicksilver) was required to wash the gold from the placer deposits in the area. This resulted in high levels of Mercury contamination in the river.

Following the closing of his mines, Chevalier Riva de Finola left the area leaving the Irish Catholics without a place to worship. However, William Lonergan purchased several acres from the departing de Finola. Lonergan would later donate part of this land to build St. Joseph and Mary's Mission, the second Catholic Church built in North Carolina.

In 1838, Father T. J. Cronin, a native of County Cork, Ireland, was ordained to serve the Catholics in North and South Carolina. As circuit priest, he traveled throughout both states along treacherous miles of untamed trails in a two-wheeled, one-horse carriage. He had no home and did not know each morning where he would sleep that night or if he would eat that day.

### **Church of dreams**

Father Cronin brought both mass and the church sacraments to the Irish families along the banks of the Catawba River. In Father Cronin they shared the dream of a church. Under his guidance, money was collected throughout North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia for the church. One of the most generous benefactors of the mission church was Judge William Gaston, a justice on North Carolina's Supreme Court and for whom Gaston County is named.

Finally, the Irish Catholic families had saved and collected enough money to build their church. As people did back then, they came together, felled the trees, oak, walnut, hickory, chestnut, and sawed the trunks into lumber. Notching each weatherboard to fit into the next, they designed a church in the architectural style of Federal Greek Revival. They plowed their fields, harvested the crops, stored their food and wood for winter, and met on Saturday to labor until the church was built. When the roof was raised and the light panes were placed in the windows, they constructed simple pews, a priest's chair, and an altar. They added a balcony supported by posts on either side of the center aisle. When the church was complete, they hauled quarried stone and, using the skills they learned from their fathers and forefathers in Ireland, built a stout wall around their holy place.

Before the church was finished, however, tragedy struck. Father Cronin contracted yellow fever and died. Within two years of his death, his body was moved to rest in the yard of the church.

It had been decades since the Irish families had worshiped in a church and knelt upon an altar. They so cherished their church that they engraved the Latin words, *Habemus Altare* (we have an altar), above their altar. This parish that began with six families now included the Phelan, Coxe, Miller, Mulligan, Meyers, Rafter, Ryan, Kerns, and Hawkins families. The church became the religious center of the area and all were welcome. There was no electricity, no running water, only shelter and a place to worship.

The four Lonergan brothers were so pleased with their parish, their homestead and their church that they sailed home to Ireland to invite others to join them in this new country.

They were lost at sea. They never knew if it was on their return trip home or the trip to Ireland.

Father J. P. O'Connell was the last pastor for the tiny parish church. He was priest to the parish during the Civil War., which took its toll on the tiny congregation. Of all the founding settlers of the church only Pierce Cahill survived the Civil War. In 1876, Father O'Connell bought the Caldwell Plantation and gave it to the Benedictine Monks to found a monastery in Belmont. Following the war the church was referred to only as St. Joseph's. As the seasons passed the area Catholics began to attend Belmont Abbey to worship and St. Joseph's fell into a long slumber.

### **No vandals**

Although neglected for almost a century, the church never fell victim to vandals. In the 1970s, under the direction of Bishop Michael J. Begley, the exterior, altar and pews were restored to its simple grandeur. St. Joseph's has been designated a National Historical site by the State of North Carolina and the U.S. Department of Interior. Since October 1993, Carl Heil and his friends have been the loyal, volunteer caretakers/historians of this sacred space. Mr. Heil and friends attend to St. Joseph's two or three mornings a week. Arrive before noon, should you wish to visit with them. It is a treat to sit by the stonewall and listen to Carl speak of the history of St. Joseph's.

— Monitor columnist *Judy Rozzelle* is a resident of historic *Shuffletown*.

Both Catholic and non-Catholic groups are invited to tour the grounds. Call 704-825-9600 to arrange a time.