

'Little Church on the Prairie'

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Not many country churches are still active, but St. Placidus Church of rural Gann Valley continues to thrive, and parishioners will celebrate their 125th anniversary on Sunday, Aug. 26.

This Catholic church, known also as the Duncan Church, is located one-half mile south of the Hand County line, then 3½ miles west off Highway 45, or 10 miles north 3½ miles west of Gann Valley.

Duncan was a post office located 13 miles northwest of Gann Valley. It was located at the site of the late Alvin Lawver home. It was established by J.J. Duncan in 1883 and was discontinued the last day of 1913. Although "Duncan" is long gone, but the name remains in conjunction with the church.

If nothing else, St. Placidus parishioners have been persistent. Today's church is the third "St. Placidus" to stand on that spot.

There were few Catholic families in the beginning, and the first Mass was said at the sod house of Charles and Honora Cain, located 1½ miles southwest of the present church.

In 1884, Cain built a sod house on the homestead site. The Catholic religion was very important to the family, and every two-three months, Father Pius Boehm, OSB (Order of St. Benedict) came from Stephan Indian Mission.

By 1887, traveling by horse and buggy on the 26-mile journey, he came to the Duncan area once a month. During the winter, his transportation was a horse and sleigh.

This was the beginning of the establishment of the St. Placidus Duncan Church, as more Catholic families moved into the area, the decision was made to build a church.

Patrick B. Hayes donated 2½ acres of his homestead in north Buffalo County, for a church and use as a cemetery.

The church was built when the men had time to work on it, with women from the community furnishing the lunch. Lumber for the church was sawed by hand, and square nails were used.

Even before the building was completed in 1899, Mass was held in the new church. The first wedding took place there April 19, 1898. Patrick Hayes and Matilda O'Donnell Cain were married, with Father Pius officiating.

Mass was held once a month, and devout members came by horse and buggy-or sleigh. Some came from many miles away, rising early to make the long trip, and not returning home until mid-afternoon.

Even after a church building was erected, Mass was still held at the home of Richard and Mary Jane Hayes when the weather was cold, because the church was difficult to heat.

Over the years, the church members were responsible for keeping the building clean, doing the linens, keeping things in repair, and paying the bills.

An altar society was formed in 1920.

Over the years there have been, and continue to be, Christmas programs and many other gatherings at the "Little Church on the Prairie" – including potlucks, picnics, raffles, card parties, and public dinners.

On June 14, 1924, a terrible windstorm or tornado struck, and ruined the church. Father Pius asked the Catholic Extension Society for \$2,500 to rebuild. The Society sent \$500.

However, the farmers and ranchers worked to build a new church, using teams of horses to dig a basement. The basement walls were made of rocks in cement, and cement was poured on the basement floor. Because there was no electricity, boards were sawed by hand. And the new church was built, with help from the congregation's Protestant neighbors.



The new church was bigger and taller, and could be seen for many miles. The first Mass was said in the building August 9, 1925.

On July 1, 1926, a strong electrical storm moved through the area, and the church was burned, and only a few items could be saved.

It was a blow, but once more, building began on the same site, and the third church, still used today, was completed in 1927.

The members of the parish have continued to volunteer much of the labor to maintain the church, cemetery and grounds.

By 1932, there were approximately 35 graves in the cemetery, and a Cemetery Association was formed. Since 1969, the Gann Valley Legion, Abernathy Post #16, holds graveside services at Duncan on Memorial Day.

After being a mission of Stephan since 1887, St. Placidus was joined to St. Joseph's Church at Fort Thompson in 1961. In 1984, the church was joined to the parish at Wessington Springs.

The first time a Bishop visited St. Placidus was November 16, 1980, when Bishop Paul V. Dudley confirmed seven young people.

For the church's 100th anniversary in 1987, the basement and entry were renovated with new carpet and new walls. The steps were repaired and the cemetery was provided with a new sign, and markers were re-cemented.

The church was named to the National Register of Historic Places in February 1999.

Twenty-five years later, the church remains a vital, constant part of parishioners' lives.

Ellen Speck, one of the anniversary planners, says the August 26 celebration will begin with a 10:30 a.m. Mass. Bishop Paul J. Swain, Sioux Falls, and Father Jim Friedrich, Wessington Springs, will officiate. Father Friedrich serves the church on a weekly basis.

Following the service, there will be a potluck dinner. Beverages, dishes and buns will be provided. Following the meal, the celebration will include games, displays, and perhaps some surprises.

Speck said, "The church is now air conditioned, there is an indoor bathroom, and the building is handicap-accessible. We will also have a tent erected outside."

She says their church history booklet is being updated, and some souvenirs will be available.

"We're also asking that anyone who has pictures or history information, bring and share. Many people have ties to St. Placidus, and many have family members who are buried in the cemetery. We're asking friends, family, former residents to come and help us celebrate 125 years of faith in our little church."

For more information, contact Ellen Speck, 293-3473, or Kathy Yost, 293-3474.