

## The First Twenty-Five Years.

Saint Barbara Parish - Polish National Catholic Church, Houtzdale, PA. CAP at Orchard Lake.



Saint Barbara's Parish was originally founded as a Polish Roman Catholic Church in the year 1889. It was the Will of God that the Polish immigrants who settled in this coal mining region should have their own house of worship. Choosing the protectors of coal miners as their patron saint, the Polish people established a parish that would serve the needs of Catholics in this area.

A wood-framed church was erected on the corner of Clara and George streets, which, although scorched by fire twice, served the congregation for over eighty years. A cemetery was also opened in Brisbin, where a number of the men who died in mining accidents now rest in eternal peace. A social organization, known as the Polish Educational Society, was formed in order to aid those who sought citizenship in this country. Countless church societies were organized including: St. Stanislaus Lodge, St. Barbara's Lodge, The Rosary and Altar Society, The Blessed Virgin Man-Sodality, The Parish Choir, Holy Name Society, and the Altar boys Guild; all organized to promote further fellowship among the members and religious fervor in their personal lives. A new rectory was constructed in the mid-forties, which was to be the first phase of a new church complex.

Spiritually, Saint Barbara's Parish never really did close. With tear filled eyes, and a throbbing pain of sorrow in their hearts, the members resolved to make efforts to see that their church was reopened.

Appeals were made to the pastor. Letters, visits and petitions were directed to the Bishop in Erie, the Papal Delegate in Washington and other church dignitaries, but they all fell on deaf ears. Even peaceful demonstrations, prayer vigils and mass meetings could not influence or persuade the irrevocable decision of the Church authorities.

The parishioners literally took over the closed church building and conducted their own services of hymns, the rosary and other prayers each Sunday until they were barred from using the building. This only strengthened their determination to succeed by holding services in front of the closed church doors. Bad weather was no barrier to their determined spirit of faith, and even though the group dwindled in number and faced harassment and persecution, they continued to meet each Sunday. In February, 1971, the church was ordered to be demolished by the administrator, Father Kuziora.

The informal services were then transferred to the Lions Club, where the parish took on once again a more formal organizations, yet without a priest, Holy Mass and the Sacraments could not be celebrated. Appeals were made to the Polish National Catholic Church for assistance and acceptance. In September, 1971, the first meeting of the parish and church officials took place at which St. Barbara's Parish was reorganized as a Polish National Catholic Church. Conducting this first business meeting of the new parish was the Very Rev. Ben Mazewski, Dean of the Pittsburgh Seniority. Elected committee officials included: Pres. Mr. Stanley Swidersky, Vice Pres. Mr. J. Waksminski, Secretary Mr. R. Redzenski, Treas. Mr. J. Swistock. Directors included: Mr. B. Murawski, Mr. A. Wojtowich, Mr. B. Kowalcyk, Mr. C. Laskowski, Mr. J. Popovitch, Mr. M. Deao, Mr. L. Krysiak, Mr. R. Frankovich and Mr. B. Kawa.

On Sunday, October 3, 1971, as the Polish National Catholic Church prepared to meet at the 13th General Synod, St. Barbara's Parish officially re-opened with Holy Mass celebrated by Father Joseph Pron of Johnstown, in Holy Trinity Episcopal Church. The following clergy also served the parish for the following two months on weekends: Father Leonard Koshinski, Father Felix Pyzowski, Father Marcelli Pytlarz, and Father Bernard Nowicki. On the feast of Saint Barbara, December 4, 1971, the first permanent pastor was installed, Father Thaddeus Peplowski.

Just as our patron, Saint Barbara, rose to heaven to a more glorious life, so did the parish rise to a more glorious church. On the feast of St. Joseph, March 19, 1972, his grace the Prime Bishop, Thaddeus Zielinski, broke ground and blessed the site of the new church. Nearly 1000 people were present for this joyous occasion. On June 3, 1972, construction began on the entire complex. On Saturday, October 15, 1972, His Excellency, Bishop Daniel Cyganowski, Bishop of our diocese, blessed the cornerstone and church building.

The parish continued to flourish, even though many members moved away to seek employment in the industrial areas of the countr, "the little while church" on Clara Street stood out as the immaculate building, well kept, clean, neat and truly a place of inspiration and devotion, the pride of its communicants. A building fund was initiated to further expand the excellent work and zeal of these dedicated Catholics. However, the death toll of this parish was already in the plans of the Erie Diocese back in 1959, when the last resident pastor, Father Katarzyński, was removed and the parish became a mission church of St. Lawrence Parish, with Father Leonard Kuziora as administrator. Fear of losing their church alarmed the members. They were assured however, that this move was temporary and plans for their new church would soon be in development.

Empty words fell on the ears of a distraught congregation, for rather than planning a new Saint Barbara's Church, an entirely new project came into making. The elimination of all three catholic parishes in Houtzdale, in order to form a new parish entitled "Christ the King". St. Barbara's Church was to suffer the liquidation first, on Sunday, November 8, 1970, the church was officially closed. After the last Holy Mass, the Most Blessed Sacrament was removed to St. Lawrence Church, thus

physically closing an era of great Catholic service to the Polish community. Sunday, June 24, 1973, the Main Altar of the Church was consecrated by Prime Bishop Thaddeus Zieliński with the assistance of Bishop Daniel Cyganowski. During the ceremony, the rectory and parish hall were also dedicated.

Saint Barbara's Parish is once again a very active part of the living, holy Catholic Church. Its three building complex is situated on a five and one half acre tract of land located on Emery Avenue in the Park Hill section of town. The church ground was given to the parish by the Lorbetsky Family, while Mr. John Redzensky deeded over three acres of land in Gulich Township which is now the parish cemetery.

During the first year of the new parish, the following societies came into being: St. Joseph Choir, Women's Adoration of the Most Holy Sacrament Society, Young Men's Society of the Resurrection, Branch #40, Youth Association, St. Barbara's Lodge #353, Polish National Union. Through the years St. Barbara's also has had a Senior Citizen's Council, Barburki and Gorale folk dance groups, a mop-pet ministry and Aid to Poland.

The School of Christian Living was organized in January, 1973. Religious plays, Musicals, Concerts, and Programs are presented regularly by our children, youth, and choir. On January 10, 1973 a Radio Mission Program was sponsored as a means of teaching God's Word. Half-hour programs were broadcast over station WPHB -- 1260 AM for a number of years. Various presentations were made over channel 10 WTAJ-TV, Altoona also.

A Polish Cultural Studies Program began in 1977 thanks to a grant by the Frank and Stella Wawrynowic Family. The tradition of painting Pisanki eggs has continued every Eastertide as a part of this program. The Moshannon Valley Junior Senior High School has instituted a Slavic Cultural Course in their curriculum and recommends that students participate in the Pisanki classes. A dinner and program at St. Barbara's is also a part of this elective class, which is popular among the students.

In sports many trophies attest to the outstanding abilities of our athletes, male and female alike. Various volleyball, softball, and bowling leagues, drill teams, track teams and basketball leagues have won honors for our Parish. The baseball field beside the church is enjoyed by the whole community being used for Little League, T-Ball, and Softball Tournaments every year.

The past twenty-five years have witnessed annual Polish and Harvest Festivals, Smorgasbord Dinners, Dances, featuring top name polka bands which brought thousands of people to our Parish hall and grounds. Because of the ever expanding summer activities, an outdoor kitchen pavilion, booths, lavatories and playground equipment were installed. These park facilities have brought hours of joy to all ages at various events.

The Very Reverend Thaddeus Peplowski served our parish until he was elected and consecrated Bishop of the Buffalo-Pittsburgh Diocese in the fall of 1990. With the departure of St. Barbara's first pastor the parish started a new era in its history. As with any growing body change is both positive and negative. The parish has experienced both sides of change. But through the Grace of God our parish has continued to be a viable member of the Body of Christ, our National Church, and our community.

Since Bishop Peplowski left for the Cathedral parish in Lancaster, NY, St. Barbara's has been served by four priests: Rev. George Grube, Rev. John Neyman, Rev. James Flynn and Rev. Vincent Cieslewicz. Rev. Flynn served twice as administrator in that time period. In 1996 Rev. Cieslewicz was appointed

as pastor.

In the twenty-five years that St. Barbara's has been in its new location on Emery Avenue in Woodward Township it has remained a very active part of the living, holy Catholic Church. The following is number of people who have received some of the Sacraments at St. Barbara's Parish: Baptism -141; First Holy Communion - 114; Confirmation - 97; Marriage - 75. Eighty-two souls have returned to Our Heavenly Father since the parish was reorganized in 1971.

We have no guarantee of a tomorrow so each day the Parish of St. Barbara's continues to serve the Lord. Through the Grace of God and daily prayer we will continue to serve the Lord Jesus Christ and to spread His Good News for many more years to come.