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SUTTER CREEK CHURCH BURNS IN MASSIVE FIRE

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Amador County's oldest Catholic Church, Immaculate Conception Church in Sutter Creek, was severely damaged by fire last week but can be reconstructed according to an engineer's report.

The church's roof literally exploded into flames shortly after firemen arrived on the scene about 10 PM, Friday night, according to Gary Sherrill, Sutter Creek fire chief. When the fire was eventually controlled four bare walls and a heap of rubble stood open to the sky. "I have no idea what caused it," said Father Niall Harrington, pastor. "I heard the fire alarm just after I went to bed and I got up to see where the fire was. When a fire breaks out here everybody helps out. When I got to the scene," he said, "I discovered it was our church. It was quite a shock."



Photo from Sutter Creek Paper

The tiny white church (founded in 1884) surrounded by a cemetery which records names going back in the beginning of the Gold Rush days, was a favorite with artists and tourists alike. It was newly decorated about five years ago, and new carpets and pews were installed at a cost of about \$5,000.

"It is the thought of the stained glass windows that I find most heartbreaking," said one old townsman. "They were donated by families which go back a long way."

Firemen saved a number of statues and prevented extensive damage to the organ. The

Immaculate Conception Church Destroyed by Fire on February 2, 1972

local Episcopal Church has offered the use of its building to the Catholic community while the burned church is being reconstructed.

The Sutter Creek fire is the second Catholic Church fire in Amador County in 10 years. On January 26, extensive damage was caused by a fire in the rectory of Saint Patrick's Church in Jackson. A possible connection between the two fires is being investigated but faulty furnaces seem to be the cause in each case, according to Mr Albert Gregorek, representative for the Sacramento Diocesan Insurance plan.

The mishaps are the first claims on the one month old diocesan insurance plan in which Sacramento diocese has set up its own insurance corporation.

"The fires will not mean serious trouble for the new plan," explained Monsignor Cornelius Higgins, chancellor. "No matter how many losses we have the diocese will never have to pay more than \$150,000 in any one year. We have a catastrophic insurance policy that takes care of anything above that."

TOWN'S SPIRIT WON'T LET CHURCH DIE

The faded red stone path leads up the hill through the graveyard to where Immaculate Conception Catholic Church stood for 116 years. Father Niall Harrington walked up at a melancholy pace, stopping beneath the charred archway, looking out at the bare ground where his church had stood for so long. Eyes veiled, he murmured, "This is the first time I've been back since that night."

Built in 1860 by Gold Rush miners of hand-quarried granite and nearby pines felled with rough axes and hammered together with square nails, the church was one of the first in Amador County. Modern motorist touring the Mother Lode were drawn by its classic lines and surrounding cemetery, where weather beaten tombstones tell the hard life story of those early days. "Mary Mahoney, age 1 year, 5 months, 25 days. Timothy Mahoney, age 6 months, 3 days. Michael Mahoney, age 11 months, 29 days. Lost on earth to bloom in heaven."

The tiny house of God survived sun and rain and generations of boisterous children running through its narrow aisles. Then late the night of February 4, 1972, in the middle of a pouring rainstorm, fire brought the fine old church down. "I cried when I saw it burning," said a 60 year old Sutter Creek native, one of the town's wealthiest businessmen. "I was baptized there, my kids were baptized there, my sisters married there. The church had a personality all its own, something you couldn't capture in an ordinary place. It felt like a church, it made you feel welcome, warm, like you belonged."

Two school children, one an altar boy, the other who often played organ at Mass, told how they stood on their porch that night, watching the church go up in flames and cried. The Methodist

postmaster of this town of 1500 about 45 miles southeast of Sacramento shook his head and related the “terrible sick feeling I had when Sutter Creek lost that church. Nowhere else did you get the feeling you got there. With the red walkway, the red carpet inside, it made it feel like a red gateway to heaven. You entered it with respect, he said. “The church gave you that, for it and for yourself.”

A retired insurance executive, born in Sutter Creek but who worked most of his life in the Bay Area, a non-Catholic, tried to explain why the community so loved the church. “It had been here 116 years. And it was beautiful. Its lovely stained glass windows were donated by miners in memory of their loved ones. The church was built with feeling, with devotion. And you could feel it, like it was alive.”

And even though the building itself perished that rainy night, the spirit that built it still flourishes in Sutter Creek where people know their neighbors and the town’s men have for decades walked down Main Street every Friday morning.

“It was a silent night that rainy February night in Sutter Creek,” said Father Harrington, “a holy night to see so many people risking their lives in the flames to save things, to save memories. And from the morning after, when a prominent Mason came to my door with bills in his hand and said, ‘Build it again,’ I have known we would rebuild.”

The people of the town, Catholic and non-Catholic, came together after the fire to organize a fund drive. One of the first contributions came from the Methodist Sunday School children who gave \$59. Catholic youngsters sold cupcakes and lemonade one day not long after and contributed.

The Sutter Creek Methodist Church had a dinner, attended by supporters from as far away as Lovelock, Nevada, and the building fund was increased by \$1900. “This has been a lesson in working ecumenism,” said Father Harrington, strolling down a narrow street lined with well-kept Victorian homes.

“We have daily Mass in the Episcopal Church, weekend Masses at the Methodist Church, and Saturday night at the high school. And although we’ve offered, they refuse to accept payment for lights and upkeep. But then this has always been an ecumenical town, a town that does more than just talk about loving thy neighbor.”

The white-headed 59 year-old priest paused to look fondly at the golden-grassed hills not far away, and his slight Irish brogue became more pronounced as he reminisced. “When I arrived here 23 years ago, it brought me immediately to gratitude that I had such a church, for it showed me the character of the people. I never want to travel after Sutter Creek – I have found my treasure in life in the warmth and sincerity of its people, all 1500 of them, and the 230 in the parish are very loyal to the church; they have echoed the tremendous devotion of the builders in the way they have kept the church up. And the goodness, the kindness of everyone working together to rebuild.”

He stopped, turning as a woman touched his arm. Slightly breathless, she smiled shyly and said hello. "I'm just a lousy Protestant, Father, but I wanted to ask about the church. How is it going? You're going to rebuild it, aren't you, just like it was?" He assured her it would be and when pressed whether a replica could capture the warmth that everyone had remarked on, he replied confidently:



Photo from the Diocesan Archives

Immaculate Conception Church, Christmas 1952

"We're using a lot of the old church – most of the English cathedral glass windows, the altars, the bell, and the statues. And more important, we are building it with the same care, love and devotion that made the old church alive and warm. The new one will live, too."

It will take \$150,000 to make Immaculate Conception live again -- \$100,000 for the church, the remainder to construct a parish hall which the congregation has voted to build at the same time.

NEW CHURCH TO BE DEDICATED

Catholic Herald, July 20, 1972

The restoration of the Immaculate Conception Church in Sutter Creek, which was destroyed by fire last February, has been completed and on Sunday, February 11, the new church will be dedicated at the 11 AM Mass with Bishop Bell presiding.

A reception will be held following the Mass at the Amador County High School Cafeteria until 2:30 PM. Father Harrington and the members of the parish extend a cordial invitation to everyone to attend these festivities.



Photo by John E Boll 2012

Rebuilt Immaculate Conception Church as it Stands Today