

MAHANOEY CITY CHRONICLES

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LITHUANIAN CHURCH CENTENNIAL

1988 is the centennial year for the Lithuanian Catholics of Mahanoy City. One century ago this month, Sept 30, 1888, the cornerstone was laid at the start of construction of Saint Joseph's church, the same edifice that still serves as their house of worship.

Mahanoy City was just 10 years old when the first Lithuanian immigrants arrived in 1876. The men, hard workers that they were, had no difficulty finding jobs in the mines, and they, along with those who came after them, were backbones of the anthracite industry until the day it collapsed in the mid-1950s.

The flow of immigrants to Mahanoy City from the little Baltic nation was slow to gain momentum during those early days. This is evident in the fact that by 1886, a full decade after the first arrivals, the local Lithuanian colony numbered only 70 persons in a borough of 8,000 residents.

Like all the ethnic groups who came as immigrants, the worship of God had high priority in the lives of the Liths. During their early years here they attended other Catholic churches, but, like the other nationalities, they longed for a church of their own where they'd feel at home with the conversant language and customs.

The movement for a Lithuanian parish began with a petition to Archbishop P.J. Ryan, spiritual leader of the Philadelphia Archdiocese, asking him to appoint a priest who spoke Lithuanian.

The archbishop complied and on August 3, 1888, he chose Rev. Peter Abromaitis to head the new parish of Saint Joseph. The pastor arrived in town on August 19 and began conducting services for his flock in Gorman's Hall.

Meanwhile, Father Abromaitis wasted no time in the task of developing the parish. He purchased four lots at C and Mahanoy Streets for \$3,600 and launched construction which began with Archbishop Ryan presiding at the blessing of the cornerstone on Sept 30, 1888. This is listed as the official date of the parish beginning.

However, it wasn't easy raising the \$80,000 needed to build the church, and the difficulties caused the project to drag on for five years. Preferring not to borrow funds from a lending institution and have the added debt of interest, the pastor devised a plan whereby the parishioners provided interest free loans to pay for the project.

The work was completed in 1893 and Archbishop Ryan presided at the church dedication on June 3 of that year. The following year saw completion of the rectory at a cost of \$6,000.

Quite a few of the people who helped found the parish were still alive when the 50th anniversary was celebrated in November 1938. A list of living charter members at that time included:

Mrs. Mary Zablackas,
Simon Wracinskas,
Mrs. Eva Augustaitis
Mrs. Elizabeth Navickas
Mrs. Catherine Zardeckas
Mrs. Mary Kaunas
Mrs. Mary Pollack
Joseph Dulskis
Mrs. Eva Recklaitis
Joseph Stankevich
Mrs. Magdalena Alesandravich
John Pleckaitis
Mrs. M. Danisevich
Mr. And Mrs. Anthony Kripas
Mrs. Victoria Pangonis
Mrs. Catherine Marchalonis
Mrs. Anna Lasky
Mr. And Mrs. John Zelonis
Mrs. Mary Shatas
Mrs. Sal Rynkewicz
Mr. And Mrs. Matthew Janushkas
Mr. And Mrs. Vincent Zagarinsky
Mrs. Catherine Grigas
Mrs. Helen Kenesky
Mrs. Mary Paserpsky
Mrs. Cecil Daugirda
Mr. And Mrs. Peter Jenkerta
Mrs. Mary Vaitekunas
Joseph Valukonis
Mr. And Mrs. Joseph Lukoshevich
Mr. And Mrs. Frank Bakshis
Mr. And Mrs. Frank Jurkevich
Mrs. M. Shumskas-Jakubauskas
Frank Sharaka
Mr. And Mrs. D. Boczkowski

The first altar boy was Frank Boczkowski whose family founded the famous Lithuanian newspaper, SAULE, which Frank later edited.

Father Abromaitis served as pastor until six months after the church dedication. On Dec 3, 1893, he

left for another assignment but returned 15 years later for a second tenure.

In its 100 year history, the parish has had only nine pastors, one of whom, Rev. Pius Chesna, accounted for half of that period. The succession of pastors from the beginning has been as follows:

Rev. Peter Abromaitis, August 3, 1888 to Dec 3, 1893
Rev. Simon Pautienus, Jan 1, 1894 to May 24, 1908
Rev. Peter Abromaitis, May 25, 1908 to May 12, 1910
Rev. Simon Pautienus, May 13, 1910 to Oct 10, 1911
Rev. Vincent Dargis, Oct 11, 1911 to March 15, 1916
Rev. Henry Valaitis, March 16, 1916 to Nov 9, 1916
Rev. pewter Augustaitis, Nov 10, 1916 to April 30, 1920
Rev. Pius Chesna, May 1, 1920 to June 9, 1969
Rev. Anthony Wassel, June 10, 1969 to present

Parochial education was initiated in the parish history when Father Abromaitis set up classes in the church basement. As many as 80 children at one time received tutoring there from Mr. John Chesna.

The school at B and Mahanoy Streets was constructed in 1907 at a cost of \$15,000 but due to friction between lay trustees and clergy over control of the church properties, the building was not used as a parish school for 18 years. In the meantime, the Mahanoy City public school district leased the building for classroom use to relieve overcrowding in the other schools.

Saint Joseph's school finally opened for parish students in 1925 with the Sisters of Saint Francis of Pittsburgh serving as the faculty. A convent costing \$30,000 was built to house the sisters at the rear of the church on South Street.

Saint Joseph's parish had a unique role in local banking history when Father Pautienus, with the cooperation of parishioners, raised \$100,000 in capital for the founding of the Merchants Banking Trust Company of Mahanoy City in January 1912.

Father Pautienus was the bank's vice president and a number of his parishioners were on the board of directors. The bank constructed a new building in 1923 (now the Teen Canteen quarters) and the deposits reached a million dollars. It was strong enough to survive the 1930s Depression which caused many banks to fold, but it went out of existence in September 1942 by merging with the American Bank.

The parish has two cemeteries.

One is the currently used burial ground on the Pottsy Hill (Broad Mountain) amid the various other local church graveyards. The other, no longer in use, is located on the North Mahanoy (Locust) Mountain alongside the Brandonville highway near Craigs Patch. The site is heavily overgrown and hasn't been used for burial purposes for many years, one of the reasons reported problems caused by the underground water table.

The friction which upset the parish for more than a decade came to a head when Father Chesna took over the pastorate in May 1920.

The difficulty stemmed from the presence of a board of trustees composed of laymen who took the responsibility for administering the parish assets. Similar difficulties were experienced by a number of other parishes in the area during the same era.

Father Chesna, a native of Lithuania, was a strong-willed man who stood his ground against all challenges. The parish trouble came to a climax in 1921, the second year of his pastorate, when the issue wound up in the country courts.

Three stories in the local papers tell the tale:

1988 July 27, 1921: A case that grew out of the factional feud in Saint Joseph's Lithuanian Church
1989 was brought before Squire Melusky last evening when Adam Kluchinskas, a trustee of the
1990 church, charged Joseph Zalis, 522 W Centre St, with breaking a lock and forcing entrance to
1991 the parish cemetery.

Mary Zalis, daughter of the defendant, died on July 15 and funeral arrangements were made for the funeral on the 18th. On the evening before the funeral, Zalis went to the home of Kluchinskas and asked for a key to the cemetery so that he could bury his daughter the next day.

Kluchinskas asked if Zalis had paid all church dues, and the latter produced receipts to show that he had. Kluchinskas then demanded that Zalis pay him \$2.75 as an added fee for repairs to the cemetery. Zalis refused to pay.

The morning of the funeral the cortege proceeded to the cemetery but found the gates locked. John Shulonis, cemetery sexton, turned a deaf ear to the requests of Zalis and Father Chesna, pastor, to open the gates. The priest, when persuasion failed, told Zalis he was at liberty to break the lock, which he did with a pick, and went ahead with the burial.

Squire Melusky held Zalis under \$400 bail for the case to be decided in court.

- March 17, 1922: The court of common pleas at Pottsville granted a preliminary injunction against Adam Kluchinskas, Mike Aukstakalnis, William Kritchenis, Adam Soduskas, Joseph Shukatis, William Zardeckas and Casimir Stelpinas, claiming to be trustees of Saint Joseph's Church, to restrain them from the following acts:

Using the parish school and hall for a pool room, cigar store or any other purpose not related to Church business. Interfering with interments in the parish cemetery which are authorized by the rector. Charging rental for pews or preventing members of the congregation \ or others from attending church services as was done on Sunday, March 12.

- Oct 23, 1922: In the case of Saint Joseph's Church of Mahanoy City, Judge Bechtel issued an injunction which permanently enjoins the trustees from collecting fees for pew rent, burial permits, use of the school building or interfering with the choir, altar society or other church societies who have authorization of the rector to use the premises.

Thus, the pastor and his supporters had won, and the court was a turning point which settled

the issue of jurisdiction and calmed the troubled waters so that the parish was able to progress peacefully through the succeeding decades.

The friction of the era didn't dissuade the parishioners from enjoying the contacts of social life.

One of the popular parish groups of the 1920s was the Saint John Lithuanian Pioneer Society, which sponsored various social events during the year. Their annual January formal in Nork's Hall (now Gil's) was a highlight of the local winter season.

A newspaper description of the 1924 affair noted:

“The guests arrived in automobiles, the girls wearing beautiful gowns and their gallants attired in strict evening attire or the popular tuxedo. At 11 o'clock the hall was well-filled and it was a charming scene as the gorgeously gowned women in various colored dresses flitted about the spacious dance hall which was decorated in blue and white. Dinner was served at midnight, after which the dancing continued until an early hour”.

The dance committee members were Charles Kenesky, Martin Stucker, John Paserpsky, Joseph Matulaitis, John Semanitis, Anthony Shukitis, Edward Rufus, Joseph Drabnis and Walter Galinskas.

Father Chesna was born in Vilkaviskis in 1889 and came to America in 1910. He was a nephew to Father Pautienus who served as the second and fourth pastor of Saint Joseph's.

Before coming to Mahanoy City to assume his first and only assignment as pastor, he served five years as an assistant, which included two years at Saints Peter and Paul Parish, Tamaqua, two at Saint George's in Shenandoah and one at Saint Casmir's in Philadelphia.

He retired on June 9, 1969, to the position of pastor emeritus and died in 1981 at age 92. His grave is in the Lithuanian cemetery at Englewood on the west side of Frackville.

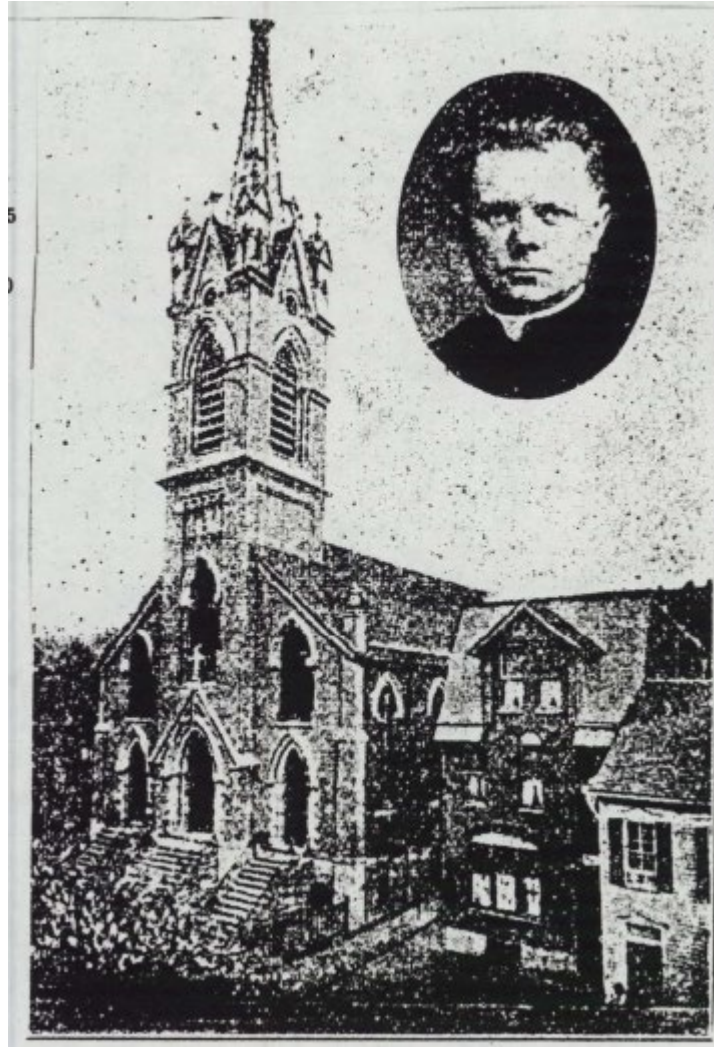
Saint Joseph's Parish also has been served by a number of assistant pastors since the late 1920s, the most memorable of whom was Rev. Al Bartkus who now holds the position of rector of the Lithuanian Catholic Seminary in Rome.

Rev. Casimir Rakauskas also was a well-known curate, having served during the late 1930s and 1940s, and another was Rev. Leon Peciukevicius in the 1950s.

Rev. Anthony Wassel has been the rector since Father Chesna left, and his pastorate has been marked by a deep devotion to the things of God. He initiated the annual Corpus Christi (Body of Christ) solemn procession on the streets of town; he has arranged special periods of prayer for the welfare of the community in times of danger and stress; he has hosted appearances by widely known saintly people with special gifts for curing the afflicted; he hosted meetings of people seeking ways to counteract the evils of pornography.

Father Wassel's most important achievement in the lives of the Catholics of the area has been the establishment of a chapel in the rectory basement where the Most Blessed Sacrament (the Body of Christ under the appearance of bread as the Saviour enacted at the Last Supper) is kept on display for perpetual adoration. Any time of the day or night, whoever desires to spend a few minutes in the presence of the Eucharistic Lord, may simply stop in at the chapel.

Lithuanians from the dawn of their history as a nation have a proud heritage as a hard-working and freedom-loving people. They brought that heritage here and added to the melting pot that has made Mahanoy City the town with the spirit that will not die, a spirit that has been so evident during this year of its quasiquicentennial.



100 YEARS OLD - No longer does Saint Joseph's Lithuanian Roman Catholic Church have the steeple that it did when this photo was taken in 1924. The pastor, pictured in the insert, was a youthful Rev. Pius Chesna who was named rector four years earlier and was still there when he retired in 1969.