

CEMETERY NOTES -May, 2000

INTRODUCTION

The following notes regarding the Holy Cross Cemetery were obtained from facts, such as records, Cemetery stones, and the stories that were passed from one generation to another. Whether the stories tell the facts in part or in total is not the only important thing, important though it be. It is the stories themselves giving the history life and a connection with each other and those gone before - words passed from one to another across the ages.

POINTS of INTEREST

The early landscape of Holy Cross was significantly different in the late 1800's than it is today. A wrought iron chain link fence, punctuated with spear like metal posts, ran the length of the property on the east side starting approximately 30' northeast of the Church and running north to the end of the property.

A three-sided pole shed was to the south of the Church, just west and south of where the flowerbed is today. It acted as shelter for the horses of those that traveled to attend Mass at Holy Cross.

In addition, just a little further south at the point the main road turns to the east, there was a one-room schoolhouse for the area children. The school boasted of an enrollment of approximately eight students including those with the names of Dullard, Phelan, and Rooney among others. The children graduating from this country school and wishing to continue their education would enter the high school at Farrar.

THE CEMETERY

At the southeast edge of the Cemetery, was an approximately 14' square grassy area enclosed by a metal fence of two ½' rails on all four sides, intersected by arrow like rods, passing through pre-cut holes in each rail, giving it a picket fence like appearance. There is some discrepancy in information as to the intent of the Memorial. Some say it was to honor the seven members (two adults and five children) of the Charles Phelan family killed in the Valeria cyclone of May 24, 1896, while others say it was the Unknown Soldier Memorial. The Memorial was dismantled sometime during the 1960's (approximately) and is no longer in existence. (For more details on the Valeria cyclone see the final page of this Cemetery history).

The land to the north of the Church was (and is) the Cemetery. It included a low area on the west central and northwest sides that was very wet, rich soil and covered with an unusual grass called slough (slew) grass. It grew to approximately 6', was heavy, sharp-edged and very tough. So tough in fact, that the horse drawn sickle mower and scythe had to be kept extremely sharp in order to cut it. (Quite a job, considering that all the cycle blades had to be sharpened by hand.) The grass was very good to use as

insulation and was used by some for livestock shelters. The Cemetery grass was cut once a year in August. After mowing, the grass was pitched loose onto a hayrack and hauled away.

THE CARETAKERS

The first of those to formally attend to the task of caring for the Cemetery in the early 1920's was the Cory family: the father Chancy and 3 sons, Ralph, Jay and Allen. The Eddy Rooney family (Eddy and his sons John and Mike) was the next of the Cemetery caretakers. Following the Rooneys, came the McGill family, with brothers Jim, Jack and Danny taking on the task during the early 1940's through approximately 1945. Sometimes Jim's young son James (Dick), approximately five years of age, accompanied them. They completed the job with the use of a 5' horse drawn John Deere mower. These families, according to some of the family's spokesman, usually received some monetary compensation and a load of hay for their labors.

In later years, the care of the Cemetery became easier with increasingly bigger and stronger power mowers. The Cemetery, although County owned, is still well cared for by members of the Parish and presents a very pleasant appearance to visitors and passers by. The caretakers at the present time are Jim Shaw and his son, Larry.

Interestingly, after the gravel road paralleling the Cemetery on the east was raised and the field on the east was tiled, the wet ground of the Cemetery began to dry out and the slough (pronounced slew) grass disappeared. It is difficult to find the tall, heavy grass today. Those that saw the 'slough grass' say they have not seen anything like it before or since, even in the other wetlands that remain in the surrounding areas. It apparently only now exists (to our knowledge) in restored areas owned by various governmental agencies.

The northwest quarter of the Cemetery has a bit of a legend surrounding it. As folklore would have it, in the early days of the Cemetery, there was some sort of epidemic at Enterprise, a small coal mining community several miles from Holy Cross. It is not clear what disease was the cause of the 'epidemic', only that those deceased were brought to Holy Cross Cemetery during the night and buried clothes, bedding and all. There are no names, no markers, only by word of mouth, and the newly dug graves gave evidence of the grim tale to those visiting the Cemetery then. The story has since been passed on from one generation to the next.

Also, it should be noted that many of the miners of that era were of very low income and could not afford a formal burial. Their families in the Holy Cross Cemetery in the northwest corner too, would bury the deceased of some of these people, as old stories would have it.

THE OLDEST GRAVE

The oldest grave in Holy Cross Cemetery is that of a four-year-old boy named Michael Ryan. He died in 1874, of causes unknown. Apparently, Michael had been buried on his father's land before it officially became Holy Cross Cemetery, as the land was not deeded over until Sept 12, 1876. Lying beside him is his seven-year-old brother Willie, who was born some years after Michael. Both boys were the sons of William Ryan.

The Benefactors Number One - William Ryan

William Ryan, was the donator of the land for Holy Cross Church and Cemetery. Because of his donation, he was given the right to name the Church Holy Cross, after the Church of his childhood in Ireland. His young son, Michael, being buried in this land years before William donated it to the Church as Holy Cross Cemetery, is believed to be a contributing factor for his donation of this land area (in addition to what he donated for Holy Cross Church) for a Cemetery.

With the donation of the land, the Ryan family was also granted the right to be buried in the area of their choosing with the deed stating 'the family burying ground with all the rights of homestead'. They chose the area of the highest point of the Cemetery, near the young child Michael's burial site. William is buried near the family stone, a large gray one near his young sons' stones. The inscription reads just 'Ryan'.

William's descendants are numerous today as in his era. His blood line can be traced to families living in the general area at the present time with names of Ryan, Gannon, Phelan, Rooney, Tynan, Shields, Halligan, McCurnin, Markey, and many more.

The Benefactors Number Two - John Shaw

The original wooden structure of Holy Cross was burned to the ground. Various Stories have circulated over the years as to how this tragedy occurred, but none were substantiated. However, at this point the members of Holy Cross required a new house of worship and a meeting was called.

Again the facts are varied—some of the "tellers of the tales" of our history, say the parish priest, Father G. C. Jermaine officiated at the meeting, some say it was the Bishop at that time, Bishop Thomas Drumm. Apparently, neither was in favor of building a new Church. As the case may be, it came down that the officiator (we'll refer to as the Bishop) said it looked unlikely that they would be able to build a Church. Times were hard and money was scarce. But there must have been an air of determination at this meeting, that spoke clearly, the people wanted another Church because the Bishop proceeded to ask, "How does this congregation envision paying for a Church?" John Shaw, a local farmer and spokesman for the congregation said, "Well, we thought we'd pass the hat and we'll get enough." Whereupon the Bishop queried, "And just how much do you plan to give Mr. Shaw?" In answer, John replied, "All of it!" And he did. The exact amount required for the brick structure you see now is unclear. There are different costs mentioned in the stories that were passed on—however, the most frequent number between \$18,000 and \$18,500.

Ironically, the only time John entered the new Church for a service was for his funeral Mass. He had been ill with cancer at the time the legendary meeting, which gave new life to Holy Cross, took place. John was born May 7, 1867 and in February of 1921 at the age of 54 he married Bridget Sheehey. They had one child that died in infancy. John died January 30, 1930. John Shaw's stone is four rows in from the southeast side of the Cemetery and the fourth large stone in that row, starting from the south is a large gray one—then three stones to the south will be a flat stone, at ground level, and is that of John B. Shaw.

PLACEMENT of the STONES

As you look to the north across Holy Cross Cemetery, you will notice the landscape gives the appearance of being divided into two parts. The larger population of grave stones being on the southern part while there is a smaller group of stones just north of the driveway. As the story goes, the stones located in the northeastern corner were placed there at the individual's request, as they came from northeastern Ireland and wished to be buried in the same location in this Cemetery at Holy Cross.

There is a row of stones mid-way in the southern part of the Cemetery that is called, "Phelans' Row". All those in that particular line of stones, beginning to end are either Phelan by blood or marriage.

THE LAND

The land surrounding Holy Cross Church and the County Cemetery attached, became farmland by the hard work of pioneer men and women that wanted a piece of land to call their own and were willing to claim the land from the wild. The lives, education, friendship and the vocations of the good men and women of this area and most of all the lovely Church here called Holy Cross, are the wonderful fruits of the labors, devotion and faith of these pioneers.

Interestingly enough, now that the land has served its purpose, it is being laid to rest in its natural state, having been returned to wild grasses and wild flowers by the Natural Heritage Foundation. That only enhances the natural beauty and wonder that surrounds Holy Cross Church. One's senses are gently piqued by the sound of an occasional bird chirping during the Mass, smells of the fragrance of the land, the feel of God's own air conditioning of breezes blowing side to side through the open stained glass windows, on a summer Sunday morning —constant reminders to those of us here at Holy Cross, how blessed we are to be a part of God's gift to us.

As you can tell, we are quite proud of our little Church and never cease to take the opportunity to tell people about it and its history. We welcome you and all those who are interested in Holy Cross, its story and its people.

VALERIA CYCLONE MAY 24, 1896

Kills 7 of 8 Members of the Phelan family - May 24, 1896

Moving to the east, this F4 tornado passed just north of Des Moines, Iowa at about 11 PM. Six, possibly seven, members of one family were killed at the north edge of Valeria. They were caught in the open, running to the storm cellar. Five others died in a nearby home. A steel railroad rail was reportedly driven 15 feet into the ground. The death toll was at least 21.

The year 1896 may have been one of the worst years for tornadoes in the history of the USA. There were at least 40 killer tornadoes, including the only one to cause more than 100 deaths in two separate cities.