

Spotlight On Archives

GOOD SAMARITAN PARISH ARCHIVES

Sister Sally Witt, CSJ

In 1994, parishes in the Diocese of Pittsburgh were merging, and it was not surprising that the five ethnic parishes of the Borough of Ambridge were formed into one. Ambridge, located some eighteen miles northwest of Pittsburgh, covers less than two square miles. The American Bridge Company, which bought land there in the early 1900s and provided the bulk of employment, had left in the early 1980s. The population had declined, and, as was ordinary in the mill and mining towns of Western Pennsylvania, young people had necessarily gone elsewhere for employment. The process carried its own pain, and the dissolving of ethnic parishes was one more proof that the flourishing parish life in the days of steel was not going to return.

The new parish was called Good Samaritan, and although its formation was not unusual, the parish did something that was quite unusual. It began a parish archives. Parishioner Maria Notarianni credits Father Sam Esposito, pastor at the time, with being the inspiration for the Good Samaritan Parish Archives. She recalls his sense of religious history and his realization, which parishioners shared, that the history of the dissolving parishes was the story of the interplay of industry, ethnicity, and faithful Catholic life. It was the history of Ambridge, and an important part of the history of the Pittsburgh Diocese and the church. The social service minister, Divine Providence Sister Marise Hrabosky, shared Fr. Sam's vision, and he asked her to head the project. Sister Marise easily gathered a group of parishioners dedicated to the effort.

The five parishes were: St. Veronica, founded in 1904 for Catholics in Ambridge; Divine Redeemer, founded in 1906 for Slovak Catholics, joined in worship by those who were Polish, Croatian, and Slovenian; St. Stanislaus, founded in



Good Samaritan Parish Archives Director Maria Notarianni

Source: Sister Sally Witt, CSJ

1914 for Polish Catholics; Christ the King, founded in 1926 for Italian Catholics; and Holy Trinity, founded in 1929 for Croatian Catholics. Eventually these parishes had three elementary schools, St. Stanislaus, which opened in 1919; Divine Redeemer, opened in 1920; and St. Veronica, which opened in 1923, adding on a high school in 1924.¹

Members of the Good Samaritan Archives Committee knew that the unused buildings held a treasure of records and memorabilia. They took the needed time to gather what was valuable—whatever would tell the story of each parish, of its parishioners and their lives. At the same time, they painted and prepared a former classroom in the closed St. Veronica School building. Sister Marise called on the archivist from her congregation, Sister Sandra DeNardis, C.D.P., to provide professional advice. From Sister Sandra they learned about archival boxes and folders needed to protect documents. They learned about requirements of temperature and humidity in preserving papers, photos, and artifacts. They spent three years in careful preparation until the Good Samaritan Parish Archives was dedicated on May 20, 2007. It was one of Father Sam's final services at Good Samaritan, as he had already received his next assignment and would leave shortly.

Today the Good Samaritan Parish Archives houses bulletins from each of the five former parishes, including those from St. Stanislaus that were printed in Polish until the 1950s. It contains St. Veronica High School yearbooks, and the contents of the cornerstones from all the parishes. It has a relic of St. Maria Goretti from Divine Redeemer School. The handwritten journal of Father Stanislaus Labujewski, pastor of St. Stanislaus from 1914-69, is part of the archives. Within his journal, at the close of every year, “Father Labby” wrote comments, and at the end of 1918 he remarked on the difficulty of the worldwide flu.

Just as history itself is living, so is an archives. Contributions continue to arrive, some from the former parishes and many from the present parish of Good Samaritan, which also has records in the archives. Just like all archivists, Notarianni and her staff have to delineate what belongs and what does not. One strong criteria is the fundamental question: Does this item help to tell the history of the parishes? Sometimes, for example, people have religious items that were significant to their families but were not part of the parish, like a family Bible or a statue that was important in their home. These are not items for a parish archives. On the other hand, people continue to discover photos from parish events, and these do belong in the archives. In 2019, the former St. Veronica Convent was demolished. A stained glass window from the chapel and a brick from the building are



Jim Notarianni in the Good Samaritan Parish Archives

Source: Sister Sally Witt, CSJ

now in the archives. Some stained glass from St. Stanislaus, Holy Trinity, and Christ the King are in the renewed Good Samaritan Church, while other stained glass windows are in the archives.

Sometimes researchers ask about sacramental records, only to learn these are not kept in parish archives. According to the policy of the Diocese of Pittsburgh, records of sacraments are kept in the offices of Good Samaritan and the other new parishes formed in the 1990s. The diocese, however, is in another phase of renewal at this writing, and parishes are in groupings that bring larger areas together. Good Samaritan is part of “The Great Grouping,” which also includes St. John the Baptist in Baden, Our Lady of Peace in Conway, and SS. John and Paul in Franklin Park. The final plan for these parishes is scheduled to be completed in July 2022. At that point, sacramental records will go to the Diocese of Pittsburgh Archives & Records Center.



Good Samaritan Parish Archives display honoring Sister Marise Hrabosky, CDP

Source: Sister Sally Witt, CSJ

However, genealogical researchers have found the Good Samaritan Archives helpful in a number of ways. They have discovered their family members’ names in parish bulletins or have found their pictures in yearbooks. Notarianni treasures a collection of thank you notes from researchers who have learned about the faith of their families from these records.

While an archives can provide records to clarify an event, it can also offer nuances. For example, Good Samaritan has continued the tradition of holding the St. Anthony Novena every year in June. The oldest parish record of the St. Anthony Novena is from 1932 in Christ the King Parish, where it originated. Thus, while it does not prove that it was the beginning of the novena, it is certain that the novena has been held since then. The parish itself was founded in 1926 and the church was built in 1927. As Jim Notarianni, volunteer and husband of Maria, pointed out, the novena could have started earlier. It is clear that it was in practice in 1932. Who knows what records might be found to clarify this or shed light on any aspect of parish life! Records of the past can have amazingly current implications.

The archives room and the walls of the hallway near it also have displays. An orange cassock with a red cape, once the liturgical dress for altar servers at St. Stanislaus, hangs in the room along with ethnic costumes. A flyer for the first Mass in Ambridge, offered on May 8, 1904, is framed and on display. It announces that Mass was set for 9:00 at the Ambridge Savings and Trust Building, with confessions scheduled for 8:00.

Jim Notarianni credits the parish ethnic festival, started in 1996, with keeping the awareness of tradition alive. The festival, held every Labor Day weekend, has been especially strong with Polish, Croatian, Slovak, Italian, and Irish tradition. The 2021 festival included Latino culture, with a Mariachi Mass at 4:00 p.m. on Sunday. This is the newest ethnic group to come to Ambridge.

The archives is open for visitors on certain days during the festival, on other special occasions, and by appointment. The Facebook page, which extends far past the boundaries of the Pittsburgh diocese, is always available, and Maria Notarianni updates it weekly.



Father Joe Mele, then pastor at Christ the King, and Frank Aloe, novena chairperson, lead the annual St. Anthony Novena Procession in the late 1980s — a tradition that continues today.

Source: Good Samaritan Parish Archives

As with many archives, the consistent work takes place outside of public attention. The staff for the Good Samaritan Archives is smaller than it was at first, but some of the original volunteers continue. Current volunteers include Angie Catanzariti, Dolores Harrison, Nancy Salopek, and Becky Homich. Their initial mission endures; it is “to preserve the diversity, history, heritage and traditions of our parish.”² Working as all archivists do, Notarianni directs them in preserving, describing, and making available the record, in this case, of a bustling ethnic community that was once in the shadow of a major steel-making industry. As Robert Aloe, fundraising and accounting assistant for the parish grouping, noted, “Those who forget their past do not have a future.” Since being established in 1994, the Good Samaritan Parish Archives has held strong to the memory of the past. Its organizers know there is never a time when this or any parish is not making history.

Endnotes

¹ Rev. Samuel J. Esposito, “100 Years of Catholic Faith: Preserving Our Faith, a Look to the Future,” *Good Samaritan Church: Liturgy for the Blessings of the Church and Dedication of the Altar*, December 11, 2004.

² “Good Samaritan Parish Archives,” Facebook, accessed August 17, 2021, <http://www.facebook.com/Good-Samaritan-Parish-Archives-439153726246009>.