

*The History of
the St. Anne
Novena*



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THERE WAS A HAPPENING AT ST. ANNE, ILLINOIS ON JULY 26, 1972. It could have occurred at Durer, Germany, at Gand, Belgium , at Bologna, Italy , at Apt or Auray, France or at Quebec, Canada... but it happened in the United States, only at St. Anne, Illinois. In each of these cities or villages, there is a shrine dedicated to St. Anne.

Only July 26, 1972, more than 4,000 faithful from all over the United States and three Provinces of Canada assembled for the 91st annual pilgrimage to the Illinois Shrine of St. Anne, to celebrate her Feast Day, to conclude an eight day novena, to venerate an authentic relic of the sainted Mother of the Virgin Mary, to seek the intercession of the Saint in their spiritual or temporal troubles, or to express their gratitude and thanks for benefits received.

Actually, there were two happenings on the 1972 date for the participants also celebrated the Centennial of the Church of St. Anne, founded in 1852, built in 1872, and in its life, survivor of severe trials and tribulations which would have been the death of most churches.

THE VILLAGE OF ST. ANNE, FOUNDED IN 1852 IS ABOUT TEN MILES SOUTHEAST of Kankakee off Route 1. It owes its origin to the migration of French-Canadian "coureur du bois" over the easy two mile St. Joseph - Kankakee River portage. Their entry began in the 1700s and in ever increasing numbers reached thousands from 1840 to 1860. Two of these were the first white men known to visit the St. Anne area in 1822 . The first settlers were Ambrose and Antoine Alla in 1848.

In 1850, Father Charles Chiniquy of Montreal was asked to go to Bourbonnais (founded in 1832), to help establish the band of French-Canadian immigrants. He visited Fr. Renee Courjault at Bourbonnais and, in 1851, took six residents there to a site near the Allain brothers and the settlement began . In two years, it had grown to 200 persons and increased steadily for ten years. In 1972 , it still retains its strong French-Canadian heritage.

THE CHURCH AT ST. ANNE WAS ESTABLISHED IN 1852 WITH FATHER CHINIQUY as the first pastor. He built a log church and school which were to become the factor of greatest interest in the community. In 1853, Father Courjault was called away from Bourbonnais for a time . While he was gone, Father Chiniquy served both churches. After Fr. Courjault returned, a bitter quarrel developed between the two pastors which resulted in severe church discipline. Courjault was returned to France and Chiniquy was excommunicated but refused to acknowledge the church action until 1856 when the official notice was nailed on the church door.

In reading the history of the affair, it is clear that Father Chiniquy had been a controversial figure and one who stirred violent enemies or fanatic loyalties. In 1856 when he left the church, a number of his congregation followed him to an "independent Christian Catholic church" which in 1860 became the Presbyterian Church of St. Anne . The true and complete facts about the schism will probably never be known.

The church sent numerous missionaries to St. Anne from 1856 to 1859 to attempt to win back the apostate members who sided with Rev . Chiniquy, but with little success. Visiting priests from St. Marie served the church from 1859 to 1871. Father Michel Letellier took charge on Feb. 23, 1871. The records indicate the poverty of the church, in an old frame building, with almost no ornaments. Father Letellier determined to build a new church and with the help of citizens and farmers, work on a stone church began at once. They hauled limestone from Momence, gave their money and labor, and before 1873 when it was completed, the new French-style building with a high sanctuary and tall steeple was in use. Father Letellier stayed at St. Anne until 1881 and in ten years saw the revival of the church so sadly torn apart in 1856.

The village was growing and with it the congregation. The interior of the church was completed with elaborate decorations, a new rectory was built. Then-another severe blow. In June, 1893, the church was hit by lightning and the steeple and interior was destroyed by fire. A temporary chapel was built at once and within a year, using the walls of the old church, the new one was ready for Easter services in 1894. A new pipe organ was added in 1909 and the church was thriving.

Then, another disaster occurred on May 20, 1911. Lightning again struck and destroyed the steeple and set fire to the church. As a result, the interior was damaged and the organ was ruined. Within a year of this disaster, the repairs were completed, but the tall steeple was replaced with a low tower covered with copper and lightning conductors.

The second half century of the church passed with relative peace, but the adjacent Convent and School established in 1883 was burned to the ground and was replaced with a new academy in 1923 . At one time, the academy, church, parish house, and parsonage occupy two square blocks in St. Anne . These with a series of fine and able priests and loyal congregation, as well as the widening fame of the Shrine, pointed to the success of the church.

THE BEST BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SHRINE IS PROBABLY FOUND IN THE 1922 HISTORY of the Parish, Church and Shrine. Here are excerpts:

“In the New World, the Shrine of St. Anne de Beaupre has gained world wide fame ... The French-Canadian settlers, accustomed to making pilgrimages to the Quebec Shrine, long desired to have an Illinois Shrine to which they could wend their way on the Saint’s Feast Day, to honor her by their homages and prayers. It was in 1886 that the village of St. Anne first attracted the attention of Catholics. On July 26, 1886, Father A. Bergeron, Pastor of Notre Dame in Chicago, brought by special train the first band of pilgrims to the new Shrine which had in its possession a relic of St. Anne ... St. Anne in a short time became well known as a Shrine and has since attracted thousands of visitors ...

“In 1894, a new relic was secured in Rome ... it was authenticated by the late Cardinal Taschereau of Quebec and now reposes in the Shrine ... On pilgrimage days and during devotions of the novena, pilgrims are given the opportunity to venerate the relic.

“In the course of many years, hosts of pilgrims have come and gone annually to give thanks for restored health or favors obtained.”

Seeing the Shrine for the first time, one is impressed and moved to see the rows of votive candles before the figure of St. Anne, and an ancient wooden wheel chair and a number of crutches and canes along-side. The church history continues:

“A notable instance of a person being benefited ... was that of Miss Matilda Cunnea of Chicago in 1894 . She had come to St. Anne to make the novena, unable to walk, a victim of paralysis ... and on St. Anne’s Day, having venerated the relic , she arose from the invalid chair ... and walked from the church restored ...

“A novena to St. Anne is held every year, beginning July 18 and ending on the 26th, St. Anne’s Feast Day ... The morning of the closing day is taken up by masses ... In the afternoon is the grand procession ... headed by priests and acolytes ... and banner bearers of the various confraternities ...

“The spectacle is a touching one ... mingled with the priests and nuns ... are the sick and afflicted, carried in chairs and on the arms of parents or friends ... Under a canopy, the relic is borne after the throng ... After the return to the church the relic is passed by a priest from pilgrim to pilgrim ... a ceremony known as the veneration of the relic.”

The Houde-Klasey 1968 History of Kankakee County, in its conclusion says: "Many changes had taken place in every section of the County . . . But in St. Anne, an annual pilgrimage which had begun long before the turn of the century continued ... with a minimum of change. It was ... the annual pilgrimage on the Feast of St. Anne, Mother of the Virgin Mary ... and as usual on July 26, pilgrims travelled to the Catholic Church at St. Anne and the Shrine of "Le Bonne St. Anne." The picturesque village of St. Anne has always been widely known as a rallying point for French-Canadian Catholics ."

