

# This Is Where It All Started

Just east of the small hamlet of Vroomanton, on the 8th Concession of Brock Township there is a small cemetery called St. Malachy's with a designating sign, small cairn and plaque dedicated to the pioneers of the area who are buried there. However, sixty-two years ago it was a different story. There was a flourishing Mission Church named for the Irish Saint Malachy on the site, and nearly a quarter of a century before that a parish serving eight townships from Port Perry and Uxbridge in the south, to Uptergrove in the north and from the Town Line (Manilla Road in the east, to Cook's Bay on Lake Simcoe to the west. Vroomanton was chosen as the centre of this mission because of the large number of Catholics in the area. Many of the settlers in this area came from Europe, mostly from the British Isles and Ireland, others were veterans who had received land grants from the government in payment for their service during the war of 1812, which ended on Christmas Eve 1814.

From 1820-1830 this area was administered from Kingston by Bishop McDonnell and was looked after by itinerant priests, Father Dempsey and Father Church who managed to come from Toronto. Some priest such as Father Edward Gordon, are said to have crossed the ice on Lake Simcoe to tend their flock. In 1835 a land grant was applied for and received for a piece of land at the now south-east corner of Highway 12 and the Argyle Road. This is where the first St. Joseph's church was built.

From 1843 onward, priests administered the area from Whitby, making the journey by horseback. Due to long distances, Mass was only said once a month in each area. One of these priests was Father John Baptiste Proulx, who was responsible for all Catholics residing in Ontario County. A legendary figure in missionary work, he went on to become the first Domestic Prelate in Toronto Diocese. One of the old stained glass windows at St. Joseph's church is dedicated to his memory.

In 1846, Brock Mission received two acres of land from Mr. Sterling Pangman, on the 8th Concession of Brock Township, just east of the village of Vroomanton, for a church.

An additional 1.5 acres was bought from Mr. Pangman and another 1/2 acre was purchased from a Patrick Keenan. This land was set aside for the cemetery (earliest legible headstone 1847) and the rectory (completed by 1856). In 1867 Father Braire the pastor at that time replaced the frame rectory with a spacious brick house, costing \$1300. Father Proulx built a frame church which was completed by 1854 and was named after the Irish Saint Malachy, a monk and Bishop of the twelfth century. On December 8th, 1854, a notice appeared in the Toronto Mirror, announcing that Mass would be celebrated by Father John Walsh (first pastor) at the church in Vroomanton.



Fr. John Walsh

Father Walsh began the construction of the frame buildings at Beaverton and Virginia, but had to resign because of ill health. They were completed by Father Lee, who is also remembered in one of the stained glass windows at St. Joseph's. The first St. Joseph's church was built in 1856-1857 on the eastern portion of St. Joseph's Cemetery on the land grant received in 1835. Mr. Millar McCrorie, who lived in Beaverton until he was 99 years old, told us that he witnessed the laying of the cornerstone of St. Joseph's in 1909. He also said that the wood from the church ended up as the drive shed behind the present rectory. Between 1852 and 1857, a frame church (St. Anthony's) was built in Georgina Township on the Sixth Concession, now Highway 48, in Virginia on a two acre lot given by Anthony Charpentier. A report from Bishop Lynch describes the "little mission of Georgina, in great part French" where His Lordship was received "with joy". The church had been prepared with rustic simplicity, the walls, the altar and the route taken by the Bishop to the church, decorated with pine boughs.

Soon after in 1870, the size of Brock Mission was reduced by the removal of half of Mara Township to the north and the removal of Scott, Uxbridge and Reach Townships to the south. This is confirmed by parish records which indicate Brock contained five churches in 1873 and in 1875, only three. Thus from 1875 on, our parish would no longer have an assistant priest due to the decrease in revenue, and reduced region, but would be served by only one priest, the pastor.

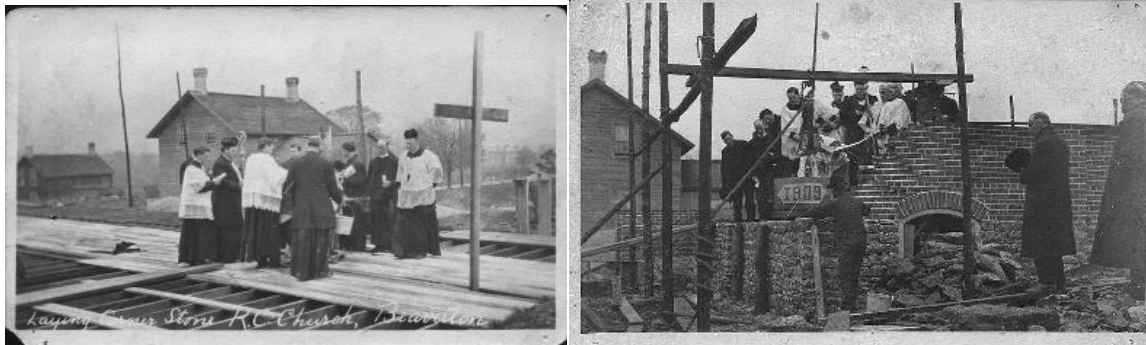
In 1881, Father Francis Rohleder, succeeded Father Braire (recognized in the stained glass windows at St. Joseph's). Father "Fred" taught many of the parishioners carpentry and gardening, planting and fruit tree grafting. His knowledge was extensive and given to all with pleasure."

In 1903, at a cost of \$600, a brick church with stained glass, memorial windows, replaced the frame structure in Virginia. Many pioneers of the area are resting in the adjacent cemetery.



**St. Anthony's Church Dedication 1903**

In 1909, the brick church in Beaverton was built and the following year 1910, the rectory at St. Joseph's was built net door, close at hand to the church.



### **Laying the Cornerstone at St. Joseph's 1909**

For the next 30 years, St. Malachy's served as a mission church. On May 14, 1942, while the caretaker was burning leaves, a spark became lodged in a crack in the wooden shingles on the roof of St. Malachy's destroying its structure in a few hours. The story goes that asphalt shingles were purchased and stored in the basement waiting to be put on the roof. The Pastor, Father Toomey and the congregation thought that the damage was too great to repair.

For the next 10 years, weekly mass was said in the homes of parishioners in the area. Finally in 1952, under the direction of Father Joseph Murphy, it was decided to build a small church in view of travelers passing by on Highway 12. The Doyle family donated the land and the construction of the new St. Malachy's Church became a reality for the estimated total of \$500. It was built by a contractor from Virginia, with the help of volunteer labour. Parishioners donated the windows and furnishings. Unfortunately there was no running water.

### **St. Malachy's on Hwy 12, 1961**

In 2000, under Father Wilfried Lenius' supervision, St. Malachy's church furnace, electrical and foundation were considered unsafe and repairs too costly. The church was demolished. The Sanctuary furnishings, altar, candle sticks, lectern and the large votive candle were all sent to Immaculate Heart of Mary church in Port Perry as they were rebuilding after a fire and greatly needed these furnishings. It is with fitting and with pleasure that the furnishings from the last St. Malachy's Church should still be in service. In August 1991 Bishop Clune, in the cemetery at Vroomanton and on the original site of St. Malachy's, said a rededication and Mass. It was the first time Mass had been celebrated on the property in 49 years. Afterwards, all had a social time.

# Life Goes On

During the post wartime (1945-1950) St. Joseph's experienced a great influx of people from Holland. They were a positive asset to the Parish community by their hardworking values. Most of them are now retired, and a second generation has taken over their farms. Sometime in the middle of 1900's, we acquired the services of Fannie Roach as organist and she held the position for over forty years. During the late 1970's Marg Bernier took over as organist and currently holds this position.

During the service of Father Robert Ouellette (1980-1985), a new vestibule was added to St. Joseph's which greatly aided the appearance and access to the church.



## St. Joseph's 1978 and 1988

St. Anthony's Church has remained basically the same but some changes have taken place. In the 1960's the altar was changed because of Vatican II; in the 1970's the Highway was widened and we lost some of our front lawn; in the 1980's the vault and outhouse were demolished and the parking lot extended; in the 1990's a well and a bathroom were installed and the sacristy was remodeled. Dennis Salt prayed for a new organ. Through the generosity of parishioners the present organ was bought and paid for in the first 6 months of 2002.

Dorothy and Leonard Matt are examples of the dedication and hard work of the parishioners. They were presented with the Bene Merenti Medal by Cardinal Carter for having served St. Anthony's Church for 60 years.

The church and rectory at St. Joseph's is being restored to preserve the historical and architectural merit under the direction of Father Lenius, the pastor, and his team in anticipation of our 150th Anniversary. A generous donation by a parishioner has

enabled us to renovate the sacristy in the church. Both St. Joseph's and St. Anthony's have been repainted and have had new carpet installed.

When one thinks of the huge area Brock Mission has served, it comes to mind that there certainly must have been more than one place that the priests of long ago would say Mass. This also makes us realize the great numbers of dedicated, hardworking people and families who have participated over the years in the formation of St. Joseph's Parish.

## **St. Joseph's Catholic Women's League**

St. Joseph's Catholic Women's League The Catholic Women's League (C.W.L.) was organized in May 1951, at a meeting held at Sutton. Fr. Joe Murphy , pastor of the parish at that time, felt that the organization which was more popular in the cities, would work well in the rural areas as well. The first President was Mrs. Cliff Noble of Sutton. Vice presidents were Mrs. Tom McRae, Mrs. H.C.D. Maine and Mrs. Len Matt. Secretary was Mrs. T.L. Jones, Treasurer Mrs. Lorne Osborne and Councilors Mrs. D. Woodrow, Mrs. P. O'Brien, Mrs. S. Baltaglia, Mrs. Peter Mitchell and Mrs. Ernest Greenwood. During the first year, there were 49 members.

For the next 50 years the Catholic Women's League was the driving force behind many parish activities. These included fundraising by holding strawberry socials, bake sales, bazaars, raffles. The ladies held church dinners, receptions for special occasions (funeral lunches, confirmation receptions, receptions welcoming our summer visitors). Meetings usually began with Mass. The women participated in the World Day of Prayer, Day of Recollection and Retreats. Education was important to CWL members. Many women taught catechism and first communion classes. At conventions & regional meetings, they supported CWL proposals to different levels of government. The Missions were remembered as well in prayers, money and such things as warm blankets, mittens and other clothing. The CWL members cleaned, sewed and served the church in every possible way.

We salute the many women such as Francis Mangan, Jennie Mitchell, Nellie McRae, Dorothy Matt, Lillian O'Neill, and Annie Burnie who gave so much to this parish through the years.

Memberships dwindled as lifestyles changed. Many women were busy with work outside the home and with children involved with many outside activities. In 2001, in its 50th year the CWL was disbanded. Many women are still active in the parish and in many of the same ways but new groups have been formed to carry on the legacy of our faithful and dedicated ancestors.

# **Holy Family School & Catholic Education**

In September of 1990, Holy Family Catholic School, under the guidance of Father Frank Skumavc, became a reality. It began in portable classrooms on the church property with offices in the church basement. Then in September 1996, the school moved into their new building on Simcoe Street in Beaverton. Up to the early 1960's, religion was taught by Sisters such as Mother Raymond for two weeks during the summer.

## **Acknowledgements**

Many thanks to Mrs. Margaret Bernier for compiling this history with help from

- "A Brief History of Brock Mission" by Mrs. Lorene Tunstell (1991)
- "The Beaverton Story, Harvest of Dreams" (1984)
- "Mr. Millar McCrorie" (1900-2000)
- Remembrances and memories of various people in the community
- Beaverton, Thorah, Eldon Historical Society.