

Local Life

Saving sacred places: St. Rose blossoms again

By Heather J. Carlson

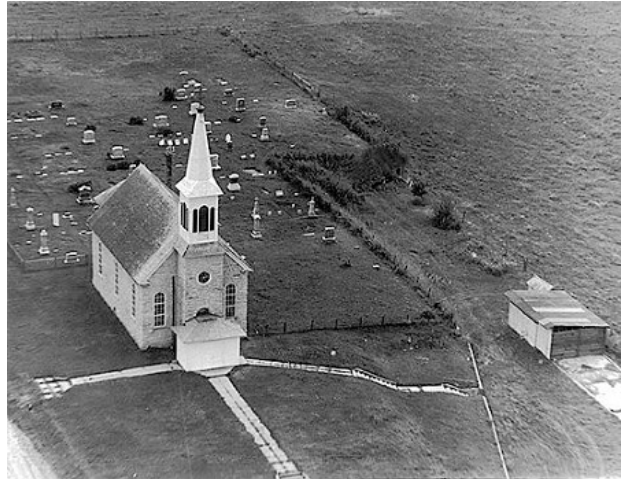
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KENYON -- It's a story that still captivates Jill Palof.

In the 1870s, a small but dedicated group of Irish immigrants settled in Cherry Grove Township and, stone by stone, built St. Rose of Lima Catholic Church.

Palof believes that history is worth preserving.

"We want to be able to save the building for future generations to be able to share the story of Irish immigration to Goodhue County," she said, "so that people can walk and touch and see inside a place that was built by the hands of people who left their homeland to come here."



St. Rose of Lima Catholic Church, circa 1940s.

St. Rose of Lima Catholic Church is among the growing number of abandoned rural churches in Minnesota and across the country in danger of disappearing. There is the story of Rice Lake Methodist Church, which sits in the Dodge County ghost town of Rice Lake. It was built in 1878 and appeared destined to be demolished. But residents in the mid-1970s joined together to buy the building and in recent years have begun to restore it, recently installing a new foundation. Then there is Westfield Lutheran Church near Blooming Prairie. The once abandoned church now hosts special services three times a year that draw standing-room only crowds.

"It makes me feel good to see people come," said Evelyn Trom, one of the residents who has worked to save Westfield Lutheran.

A major challenge to these preservation efforts is often a lack of state and federal grants available. Religious institutions frequently do not qualify for these government funds because of separation of church and state, said Bob Jaeger, executive director of Partners for Sacred Places, a national, nonprofit dedicated to helping save religious structures. Jaeger said it can also be a challenge convincing other donors -- especially corporations -- to support these preservation efforts.

"The religious scene in America is very fractured. We're so divided and split up, it's a task to convince folks that many of these places are in fact public resources and that we all depend on them and we all have a stake in them," Jaeger said.

Since 1989, Partners for Sacred Places has been working with congregations and church leaders to save these buildings. In the Twin Cities, the nonprofit teamed up with the local Lutheran

Synod and worked with 10 congregations to help preserve aging urban churches. The group is now hoping to expand those efforts statewide.

A key part of the nonprofit's training for congregations often centers on helping parishioners understand the importance of showing others the church's broader significance.



"We emphasize learning and articulating the story of why this place is special, why this has a larger value and why people should care so that you are not appealing simply to those 50 people who left," he said. "You are also appealing to your neighbors, former members who have moved on, business people nearby and others who, if they hear this story can absolutely agree, this is a place they want to see stay open."

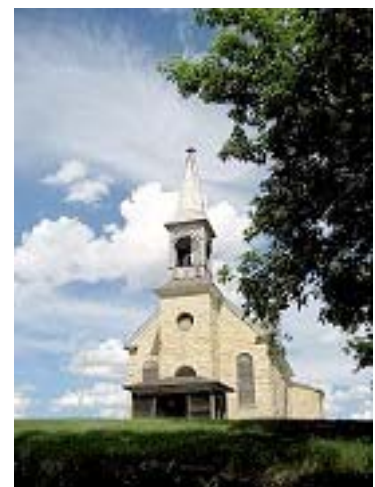
St. Rose of Lima Catholic Church, circa 1940s.

That is an approach that seems to be working for those trying to save St. Rose of Lima Catholic Church. Six years ago, the 130-year-old limestone church was placed on the state's Ten Most Endangered Historic Properties list by the Preservation Alliance of Minnesota. Since then, a group of residents has founded the nonprofit Friends of St. Rose to save the building. The group began researching the church's history and discovered its importance in telling the Irish immigrant story in Goodhue County. The members even persuaded Archbishop Harry Flynn to allow the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis to sell the church to the nonprofit for \$1.

The Friends of St. Rose have since been busy fundraising and repairing the vacant church. Improvements have included plastering and painting the Sanctuary, installing new cement steps outside the Sacristy and re-shingling the roof. In November, a new furnace was installed. The group now is hoping to restore the church's ceiling and windows.

Palof, a Catholic who lives a mile from the church, said the group's goal is to preserve the church so it can be used for weddings, funerals and other special events. The nonprofit's vice chair said that restoring the church is also a way to honor the faithful who built it.

She added, "The past parishioners have always been my greatest motivation -- to continue the memory of people who are buried at St. Rose and not let their work fall apart."



Improvements at St. Rose of Lima Catholic Church have included plastering and painting the sanctuary, installing new cement steps outside the sacristy and re-shingling the roof. In November, a new furnace was installed.