

St. Mary parish Maidstone, 1846-1996

150 years to celebrate!

By Rosemary Halford

It has been said that in order to develop their full potential, people need roots and wings. If parishes also enjoy those same basic needs, then the parish of St. Mary, Maidstone, certainly is well placed to help its parishioners develop and flourish. History we have and history we celebrate, especially in this anniversary year of 1996. It was in 1848 that the Jesuit mission to the Irish Settlement actually began keeping its own parish records. The Jesuits of Assumption parish—Notre Dame de l'Assomption de la Pointe de Montréal—continued to serve the parish as they had in the earliest stages of community growth from 1824 to 1846. The whole area was heavily forested and what is now Highway #3 was simply an Indian footpath that Colonel Thomas Talbot ordered improved as a condition of land settlement. The settlers were Irish Catholics who must have suffered a level of isolation difficult to comprehend in our own age of easy transportation and communication.

1846 marks the major turning point when baptisms, marriages and deaths were recorded in our own parish register. At this stage it is not clear how often people trekked the 12 miles to Assumption church and how often their sacramental needs were met by Jesuit missionaries perhaps on their way to serve the Belle Rivière or Chatham Catholic communities.

The first wooden mission church was rather rudimentary and was replaced by a brick building around 1848, by which time a cemetery had also been established. The faith and fervor of the local people was notable.

For example, one Jesuit missionary recorded that he went to the Irish Settlement to celebrate Mass, expecting that all the sacramental necessities were in place. He was horrified to discover that no hosts were on hand so he and a local housewife quickly improvised with flour, water and two irons. Another missionary noted that the local people had little in material goods but were most generous to the church.

The building of the present brick church in 1874 clearly involved sacrifices on the part of the local people and their pastor. We are fortunate to have in our parish archives an original letter sent by the pastor, **Fr. James Ouellette** in April 1875 to his cousin. Fr. Ouellette had recently been transferred to Maidstone Cross. He describes the area as "wild bush" and notes that the church is still not finished, that \$4,500 is due in six months and that the total debt of \$10,000 is weighing on his shoulders. He does not enjoy the level of comfort that he had in his previous posting and states, "I was asked to come here to battle with difficulties, and I can assure you, if difficulties will make a man happy, I am the happiest man in God's world."

Fr. Charles Collins, a Basilian priest de-



The present St. Mary's Church, Maidstone, erected in 1874

scended from one of Maidstone's oldest families, wrote in the 1930s a history describing how the parish community flourished. One example is music. According to Fr. Collins, a commitment to choral music is a tradition at St. Mary's that goes back at least to the opening of the present building. Fr. Ouellette, harried as he was by the debt incurred in the building of the church, gave considerable attention to the development of the choir since he believed that "if the choir gets going, all else will take care of itself." He was, it is recorded, "rewarded with excellence." No doubt the fine acoustics of the new church played no small role in this achievement; to this day the traditional design of the structure lends itself to a bright crisp quality that is valued by all who sing or record there.

Over the past 150 years the community of

Maidstone has changed from the "Irish Settlement" to an agricultural centre and now a bedroom suburb/farming community with parishioners of every nationality. As well, the church has been transformed from the one described in 1852 by the Jesuit **Fr.**

Jaffre: "I have another new church at Maidstone in which mass is celebrated but where there is neither any interior decoration nor money to procure it." Within the last year, the sanctuary of the building that dates from 1847 has been renovated and provides a beautiful site for worship and celebration.

Celebrations for the 150th anniversary of the parish are varied and ongoing; there are cookbooks, mugs, and a choir cassette or CD available for sale. A parish photo directory has been prepared and a parish history book is being re-edited to include events of the past 20 years. During Lent there were discussion groups and reflections by parishioners at Sunday Masses. On May 5, 1996 highlight will be a Marian Hour of Praise from 10 to 11 a.m. The week of June 1-9 has been designated as 150th Anniversary Week with parish history displays in the hall and social activities after each Mass. During the week there will be special Masses and lunches for the school children and for seniors. June 9 at 11 a.m. Bishop Sherlock will celebrate an anniversary Mass; lunch and various activities will follow during the afternoon. **Fr. Larry Mousseau** and the parish family invite all former parishioners to join us. Plans are under way for the string section of the Windsor Symphony Orchestra to present a concert at the church during the late fall of 1996.

For further information about activities and anniversary items phone St. Mary's at (519) 737-6869; the best time is Tuesday and Thursday mornings.