



PARISH PROFILE

Willey parish features close, committed community



St. Mary Church, Willey

PARISH INFORMATION

Pastor:

Father Tim Johnson

Parochial vicar:

Father Tim Boekelman

Mass time:

Sunday, 9 a.m.

Address:

421 E. Bluff St.
Carroll, IA 51401-8683

By **RENEE WEBB**
Globe editor

WILLEY – In a town where the population is just over 100, the parish there has just over 100 families – but that count varies from year to year according to the pastor.

St. Mary Parish began to form in 1881 with the donation of five acres of land. The church was built in Willey a year later. For some time it was known as the Pleasant Valley Catholic Parish.

Father Tim Johnson, pastor, said the church was a center of the town back then and continues to be today. The town, which was primarily settled by German Catholics, has but one intersection and that features a four-way stop.

“There continues to be a great amount of family that has stayed in the area,” he said.

Father Tim said parishioners at Willey have a very strong faith.

“There is a strong dedication to the faith itself and the practice of the faith with people attending Mass,” said Father Tim. “There is also a strong dedication to the upkeep of the church itself – taking care of it and refurbishing it over time.”

Besides a connection to the church, he has witnessed a connectedness among the people.

“If someone is struggling or hurting, people know about it and they reach out to them,” he said.

It’s also a parish community who give willingly of their talents. While some parishioners struggle to find musicians, the parish has several organists and the pastor is impressed how no one ever leaves Mass early. They stay in the pews until the last note of the last song. Then they still don’t leave, they visit.

“They care about each other’s families and what they are doing,” he said. “It comes down to neighboring and is a reflection of what they have shared throughout history.” He pointed out that four years ago, in 2007, St. Mary’s celebrated its 125th anniversary. To prepare for that special milestone, the church was remodeled. Since that time other updates have also been made such as rewiring the church. Currently, a landscaping project is underway that features the church’s former steeple bells as well as a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

The present church was built in 1910. It was dedicated to the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

In his time at the parish, Father Tim has heard countless stories of an earlier pastor, Father H.J. Dries who baptized hundreds of babies and taught in the school.

“It appears that he did a lot to form the sense of community here,” Father Tim said.

Willey’s first parochial school was built in the autumn of 1887 with the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration of La Crosse, Wis. staffing the school. Because of the interest of the immigrants in Catholic education, an addition to the first school became necessary in 1894 and a second in 1897. A new brick school was built in 1907 for the sum of \$10,242.

Originally, church services were in German and German was taught in the school. By 1920, English became more prominent.

A new era for Catholic education in the Carroll-area began in 1954 with 10 parishes joining to establish Kuemper Catholic High School. In the fall of 1968 St. Mary’s was consolidated with St. Joseph’s School in Dedham, forming Willey Grade School with an educational center in each parish. In 1985 demolition of the old school and construction of the present building was started. The new one-story brick school was built and completed Sept. 2, 1986. This building held classes until the fall of 1990, when Dedham-Willey school was consolidated with Holy Spirit School in Carroll. In 1996 Holy Spirit School and St. Lawrence consolidated to form the present Kuemper Catholic Grade School.

Besides the consolidated Catholic school, religious education classes are also offered in Carroll rather than at the parish level.

“It’s designed to share resources,” Father Tim noted.

Despite the fact that this rural parish has collaborated with area parishes to meet some of its catechetical needs, the parish very much maintains some of its long-time traditions such as the annual Corpus Christi Procession, Nativity program and pork chop dinner. The dinner is organized by the parish guild.

“There is a strong dedication to the children and the children’s future,” said Father Tim. “Through the generosity of others and memorials, we have tuition assistance for those who attend the Kuemper Catholic School System and we offer scholarships as they move into college.”

The parish is also known for nurturing many vocations. Approximately 17 men answered their call to priesthood, including Bishop Frank Greteman. Women of the parish also answered their call with approximately 40 women religious coming from Willey families. The Matthias Schumacher Family alone had 6 daughters become sisters and twin boys become priests.

For a few years, Holy Spirit Sisters lived in the rectory and were part of the parish life and now, since May, sisters from the Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity (SOLT) reside at the rectory and have also become active member of the parish.

Long-time traditions help enrich faith lives

By **RENEE WEBB**
Globe editor

For St. Mary Parish in Willey, some long-time traditions help keep the faith of its parishioners alive.

Father Tim Johnson, pastor, said the tradition-rich practice of a eucharistic procession on the Feast of Corpus Christi and a newer and yet still 20-plus year tradition of a Nativity program are two examples of long-held activities in the parish. These events help build community and enrich the faith.

Mary Schreck, a St. Mary’s parishioner, pointed out that there are three Corpus Christi chapels in the cemetery and various parishioners have donated items and time to keep them well maintained through the years. This tradition has been part of the parish for about 75 years.

With this procession, the priest carries the monstrance with the Blessed Sacrament under a canopy made of silk. First communicants, dressed in their First Communion attire, walk with the priest. Rosary leaders lead the prayer with stops made at three chapels and the cemetery where a decade of the rosary is said. A blessing is offered and songs are sung. The procession ends with the final decade of the rosary in the church.

“The ladies of the parish clean the chapels and we decorate them with flowers and candles,” Schreck said.

Father Tim pointed out that one of the Corpus Christi chapels was refurbished about a year ago and it was rededicated to the late Frances Grossman, who died in the last year.

“Frances remained single all of her life and took care



St. Mary’s parishioners participate in annual Corpus Christi procession.

of her mother. She was the sacristan of this church for many years. Her family took great pride in maintaining the furthest chapel on the edge of the cemetery. We dedicated it to her memory and her family’s memory,” he said.

In addition to Frances, Schreck credited Maxine Schultes for keeping this tradition alive for many years.

“They put so much work into it for the past 30 years and then passed it on to a few of us,” she said. Schreck has been involved in planning the celebration for three years now with members of the parish guild.

The rural setting surrounded by fields and a country ball field, she noted, adds to the beauty of the procession.

Parishioners and non-parishioners alike are invited to participate in this celebration as well as attend the annual Nativity program that involves all children of the parish through high school.

Jane Heithoff, one of the parish musicians since the 1970s, started up this program that has become a staple of the Advent season since 1990 after a parishioner asked her to put something together.

“I got a script and made costumes,” she said. “It’s always our high school students who do the main part of the play. The grade school students will help with the music (both vocal and instrumental).”

The students are even involved in setting up and taking down the stage and decorations.

Through the years, some things have been added and the music might change but the main script has remained the same.

“In the last couple of years, kids that were in our nativity, their children now are our baby Jesus,” Heithoff said.

This year’s program will be held at 6 p.m., Dec. 11, in St. Mary’s. Refreshments will be served following the program. Everyone is invited to attend.

She has found that this program helps people focus on what is really important in the Christmas season and is a great way for the young people to share their talent with the parish.

“These types of activities keep the parishioners connected with one another,” Father Tim said.

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