



Gathered Fragments

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Catholic Roots

By Blanche McGuire

The tangled roots of Catholic history often begin at home. You don't need to visit great libraries or track trends and migrations through complex histories or databases. Using ordinary family, civil or church records and stories, you can see how Catholicism influenced the lives of your family through generations.

In my family, Catholic stories ring clearly through the years....for better or for worse. Here's a sampling of the holics I found on my family tree.

There's Michael, a combative man who paid extra taxes to the British crown in colonial Maryland. His tax records clearly mark him as "Papist." He never stopped suing his neighbors. And he never gave up his faith.

Nor did Christian, the aptly named German farmer whose home served as a Mass House when public Catholic worship was forbidden in the colonies. Over the decades, his home was blessed by countless weddings and baptisms.

John and Christina, a young German couple once became godparents for a newborn baby boy. That baby grew up to become Bishop of Buffalo.

And there's Rachel, a pioneer woman who pledged a dollar to support visiting priests and did all she could to foster the Church. Most people leave money to their children. Her collected money from hers to give to the church and the poor.

How about the enterprising McGuires who donated land for a



Catholic cemetery and had it consecrated? Until the first human took up residence, they used the land to pasture cows and confound visiting clergy.

One of my distant grandmothers brought Prince Gallitzin to Western Pennsylvania to care for a dying woman. Other relations named their sons after him. Somehow, the noble names of the Demetrius and Augustine got transformed in the Cambria County mountains. In those parts, most folks called them "Met" or "Gus." And there were other little boys with distinguished names like "Heyden" or "Gibson," named after parish priests, of course!

Michael, one of my German forebears, inherited the family farm if and only if he took his mother to Mass whenever she wanted. If he ever protested or charged her, his legacy was forfeit. Of course, no one knows how often Mama wanted to go.

And on another branch is Kate, a young girl who began working as a live-in maid in a grand house in Pittsburgh. Every Sunday, her Irish mother took the train from a distant location to make sure Kate attended Mass. Or so the story goes.

I never knew my mother's mother, whose name I bear. But I once saw her inscription on a book's flyleaf. She had copied St Teresa's prayer "Let Nothing Disturb Thee." Across the years, her message of faith remains undimmed.

Finally, there's the inspiring story of Charlie, a young altar boy in the 1890's. The priest had just blessed the Easter water and entrusted it to Charlie and a companion. Their mission was to carry the consecrated tub from the rectory to the church. But one of the boys stumbled and the Easter water flowed downhill. Desperate for a miracle, the boys spied a nearby horse trough full of clean sparkling water surely blessed by the Lord for emergencies. Or so we can hope. For the horses' water graced many homes in the year to come.

Lecture on Mercy Hospital's History, April 29

April's featured lecture is "Mercy Hospital: A History of Caring for the Community," by Kathleen Washy, archivist at Mercy. Washy, a longtime board member of the Catholic Historical Society, will draw from the institution's 154 years of service in Pittsburgh. The lecture will take place April 9 at 2:30 p.m. in Synod Hall, 125 North Craig Street in Oakland.