

In the Wake of Hungarians in Alberta- Bashaw

Situated in between Buffalo and Red Deer Lakes, located in the middle of never ending wheat and canola fields, the community of Bashaw is approximately 135 km southeast of Edmonton off the number 2 highway towards Calgary. Only the dilapidated catholic church and the adjacent cemetery that daringly defies the passing of time, honor the first immigrant Hungarian settlers.

When the first Hungarians set out to the Western Canadian Province of Alberta in the late 1890's, they could not even fathom the adversities they would have to face. Motivated by the prospects of receiving 160 acres of uncultivated land to forever call their home and with immense will power, they embarked on the near impossible: to cultivate the land under bitter weather conditions and without proper tools, out of the virgin landscape of rocky forests, native prairie grasses, brush and marshland. Living in primitive huts made from rectangular slabs of prairie grass, called "soddies" (or dwellings carved in dirt) they defied the brutally harsh, inhospitable winters that were often fatal to new immigrants, especially newborns.

The first Hungarian settlers arrived primarily from the county of Tolna, Dunafoldvar vicinity, and Fejer county. The Meister and Mraz families were among the first to settle in and around Bashaw. The Meisters arrived in 1894, while the Mraz's settled in 1895, followed by the Örom (Orom), Dubics (Dubitz), Kerék (Kerik), Pulai (Pollay) Gallai, Tóth, Pék, Pintér, Fillinger, Földi, Rózsa, Fazekas and Csire (Cire) families. Generally, the families had four to six children each. The influx of immigration culminated in the early 1900's to end by 1927. Many of the descendants have continued to live in the region and are proud of their Hungarian ancestry.

For many years, they could not even dream of having their own church where their religious heritage could have been practiced, so from time to time they got together at the family home of the Kereks, where Father Beillevaire, the catholic pastor of the region provided religious service and counseling. Having conquered the most basic natural adversities in around 1909, Janos (John) Mraz Jr. offered 5 acres of his land for the construction of a church and cemetery (3 acres for the church and 2 acres for the cemetery). Later in 1910, this became the Saint Michael's Catholic Church and cemetery. The

building is often referred to as the Manfred Hungarian Church after the name of the region (Manfred). It became the first catholic church of the region and the only Hungarian chapel of the Province of Alberta at the time. It was built entirely of the donation and volunteer labour of the Hungarian settlers: the Kerék, Öröm, Dubics, Földi, Mráz, Bor, Fillinger, Pulai, Gallai, Cinger, Gyulai, Rózsa, Pék, Pintér families. Four other non-Hungarian catholic families of the area also donated funds for the construction.



The original St. Michael's Church (1910).

The consecration of the church took place in 1910. For this occasion, Istvan (Stephen) Dubics (Dubitz) and his wife offered a 2 meter high stone crucifix with the following inscription: "Imádunk téged Krisztus és áldunk téged, mert a Te szent kereszted által megváltottad a világot." ("We adore you O Christ and bless you, because by your Holy Cross you have redeemed the world"). This crucifix used to stand in front of the entrance to the church, but later it was relocated to the cemetery where it still stands and proudly proclaims the deep faith and Hungarian heritage of the immigrants to Bashaw and area.



The church, built with tremendous love and community spirit, stood open from 1910 for anyone wanting peace and quiet, and where the populace from the surrounding region could regularly come and pray on Sundays even

without a pastor. Initially, there was church service only once a month. Later, when Bashaw was assigned a regular parish priest, Sunday Mass was celebrated on every second Sunday. Saint Michael has never had a Hungarian priest, but in spirit it has always preserved its Hungarian nature.

A highly respected and beloved parish priest of the chapel was Father Dittrich, who served at St Michael's from 1938 to 1959, and who is still fondly remembered. He introduced religious education in the summer months with the help of catholic nuns, and gave First Communion and Confirmation in the Chapel. Father Dittrich also organized the Corpus Christi Mass and Procession of the region in Bashaw, which turned out to be an unforgettable, grand event for every family. This was a red-letter-day in every family calendar. With his departure this event stopped, but was reinstated again in 1995, much to the joy and gratitude of many. Teary eyed members of the congregation remembered the good old days, when the procession took place once again for the last time in 2006.

This church has witnessed many unforgettable wedding and christening celebrations. The first double wedding took place on January 8th, 1913, when Father Benedict Van Wetten from Wetaskiwin married John Mraz Jr. (the donor of the land) to Erzsebet (Elizabeth) Orom, and Ferenc (Frank) Orom to Katalin Foldi. This history of the St. Michael's Hungarian Church was written based on the reflections and historical research of their grandson, Larry (Lorinc) Dubitz, to whom we would like to express our thanks and gratitude.

In 1935, the steeple was severely damaged by a major thunderstorm, so it was replaced by a wooden cross, which adorned the chapel till 1955. Slowly but surely, the building started to show the passing of time until in 1955 it underwent major reconstruction and renovation. This allowed the installation of a modern heating system and the electrical wiring provided light for the comfort of the parishioners.



The second St. Michael's Church (rebuilt 1955/1956).



May 22, 1971. marked the date of the last wedding in the history of the church. It was memorable and heartwarming to witness the wedding celebration of Anna-Rita Dubitz, granddaughter of Frank and Katalin Orom, who were the first couple wed here 58 years ago. The memory of the olden days was relived as the stagecoach pulled by a team of horses delivered the newlyweds to the Dubitz farm.

Heart wrenching news was received in 1975 that the church was to be officially closed by the Catholic diocese for lack of parishioners. Contemporary lifestyle allowed churchgoers to attend the bigger church of the nearby small town which rendered the small rural establishment in the farm community obsolete. Its doors stayed open till the mid 1980's for anyone wishing to spend a quiet moment. However, due to the disappearance of several valuable relics and religious objects, finally a padlock closed the main door shut.

1989 was registered as the “year of nostalgia” among the Hungarian descendants of the area, when the doors of St Michael’s church re-opened again for the golden wedding anniversary of Lorinc and Margit Orom. They were first married in this church with the blessing of Father Dittrich 50 years prior, and were fortunate to have been blessed again by him.

This church was not only the hub of the community, but a decisive, characteristic feature of the endless wheat and canola fields. A visitor arriving from the direction of Ponoka could see from far away, something mystical, something the merciless decades have not been able to eradicate thanks to the helping hands of all those clinging to their Hungarian heritage.



Saint Michael's Church in 2018

We will have to say good bye to this beautiful landscape etched into our collective memory in the fall of 2018. We are witnessing the last hours of this historic chapel that has so much history and so many memories connected to it.

(It should be noted that the land of the Mraz family where the church stands was sold in 1948 due to Family illness to Riske's Family who in turn are selling it this year (2018) to Jason Schultz.)

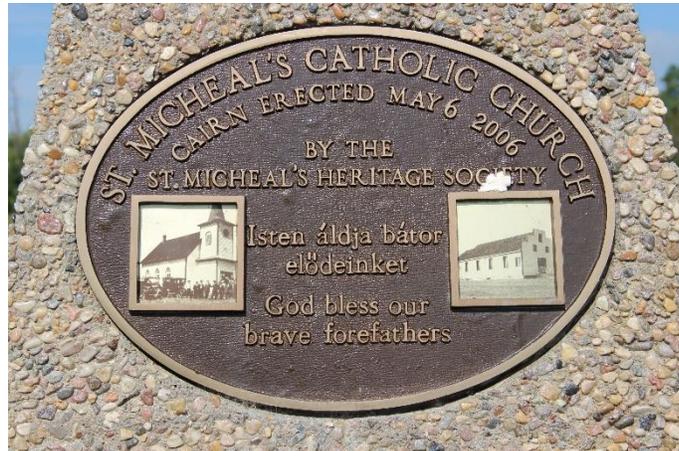
Even though the chapel will be gone, the adjacent cemetery, also the legacy of the Mraz family, still remains to attest to the Hungarian heritage of the immigrants of Bashaw.



The obelisk at the entrance of the cemetery

The Manfred Club, established in 1951, was formed primarily to take care of the church building. After the closure of the chapel and with its mandate gone, it was reorganized in 1994 as the St. Michael's Manfred (Hungarian)

Heritage Society. Currently its principal objective is the maintenance of the cemetery, cleaning the graves every year. In the future they plan to landscape the area and create sufficient parking. Because the cemetery is active, the descendants of the settlers would like to be buried together with their forefathers in this consecrated land. Honoring the Hungarian origin of their ancestors, acknowledging their diligence and perseverance an obelisk was raised at the entrance of the cemetery in 2006.



For us Hungarian-Canadians living in Alberta it is a duty to express our heartfelt appreciation and respect to the descendants of the first settlers for their dedication to preserve their ethnicity. Furthermore, we would also like to draw attention to this extraordinary community who have for so many years, actively treasured and preserved their Hungarian heritage.

Compiled by JULIANNA P. STEIN
from the memoirs and historical research of
LARRY DUBITZ, a retired teacher in the Bashaw area
Photo: Dr. STEPHAN POROSTOCKY
ALMANET- Hungarian Ethnographic Society of Alberta
Translated by ESZTER SAVANYA

