

# Church alone in "no-man's" land

BY SUZANNE HANSON

It seems an unlikely location for a church, perched atop the hill; a lonely sentinel to guard the wind-swept fields that surround it. Perhaps it was the very location of St. Peter's Catholic Church that led to its eventual closure 10 years ago. But there was a day when the Catholic church, located in Norwich Township, southwest of Newark, was supported by an active parish taking in families from Norwich, Mount Elgin, Burgessville and Otterville areas.

## CHURCH CLOSED

Although the congregation disbanded when the church closed in the Spring of 1971, its parishioners scattering to join churches in Tillsonburg, Woodstock, Courtland, Delhi, Scotland and LaSalette, the Catholic Women's League of St. Peter's has continued to meet and has remained active throughout the years.

There was a lapse in the operation of the CWL from the time the church closed in 1971 until 1974 when it was re-organized. Oddly enough, it was at the instigation of the St. Mary's CWL in Tillsonburg that the St. Peter's ladies resumed their meetings.

The gavel and charter of St. Peter's CWL was uncovered by the St. Mary's ladies one day and they encouraged the St. Peter's CWL to re-organize. The ladies had believed that the charter had been returned and that to re-organize would mean reapplying for a charter. With the discovery of the original charter and gavel they were able to continue and resumed with the encouragement of Father Spencer in 1974.

Its membership of about 30 members (20 active) meets once a month, except for July and August. While it is basically a social group, it does support the Tillsonburg and District Association for the Mentally Retarded and a family in India. In addition to its regular meetings, it

hosts a special get-togethers at Christmas and in the Spring for the entire family.

In June the annual outdoor mass for the entire congregation is held. That mass is the only one still celebrated by the congregation of St. Peter's.

Such get-togethers help to foster a sense of community said Mignonne Trepanier, a member of the CWL. "If we didn't meet we wouldn't get to see one another," she said. Most of the former members of the St. Peter's congregation are now involved in different churches, different activities and different schools so it is difficult to maintain the contact they once had as a congregation.

## MISSES CHURCH

She is one of the former parishioners who misses the presence of the church, which was so central to the Catholics in the Norwich area.

But attempts throughout the years to have the church re-opened have failed. There was no support from the parish in Tillsonburg, to which St. Peter's had been a mission church in its last years, and some of the families themselves were opposed to the move.

The church had been blessed with a large and active congregation and was financially stable when it was closed. The isolation of the church and the difficulty in reaching it during the winter months and the shortage of priests were all given as reasons for its closure.

Being a mission church of the Tillsonburg parish, St. Peter's had no priest of its own and relied on the two priests from Tillsonburg to come out to conduct its masses.

According to 1978 figures there are roughly 2,500 Catholic families in what was then referred to as the "no-man's land" around St. Peter's. That church is central to the majority of those families, many of whom regret that more was

not done to keep the church open.

There are many who miss the sense of community fostered by the church and many who have wished it had been kept open because of the historical significance of the church.

## EARLY HISTORY

The early population of the area around Newark was of Irish origin with such names as Furlong, Kirwin, Garvey, Duffy, Sheahan, Carlin and McNally common among the residents.

Among the earliest in-

dividuals to come to the area were the McNally brothers. With their sisters they had come from Monaghan, Ireland to Buffalo in 1820.

Searching for a place to make their home, they intended to journey to Pennsylvania. But just at that time, a recent settler in Dereham Township, Frank Stroud, was in Buffalo where he had purchased a large flock of sheep.

In need of someone to drive the sheep back to his home, a distance of some 120 miles, he happened to meet

the McNally brothers, Peter and Michael, who accepted his offer.

So pleased were they with the locality when they arrived, the two brothers immediately purchased from the crown the right to settle on a section of land in North Norwich Township. They soon built themselves a log home and sent to Buffalo for two of their sisters who came to keep house for them.

Soon many others of Irish origin came to take up land

(Continued on Page 11)

(Continued from Page 10)

in the vicinity, laying the early foundations for the establishment of St. Peter's parish.

In 1853 the Roman Catholic Episcopal Corporation of the Diocese of Toronto purchased a lot in the village of Norwich, possibly with the intention of building a church on it.

Perhaps Peter McNally did not like the idea of having a church in Norwich, as in 1854 he deeded a portion of his land to the Diocese of Toronto. It was on that land,

in the same year, that a church was built under the pastorate of Father Carryon of Ingersoll.

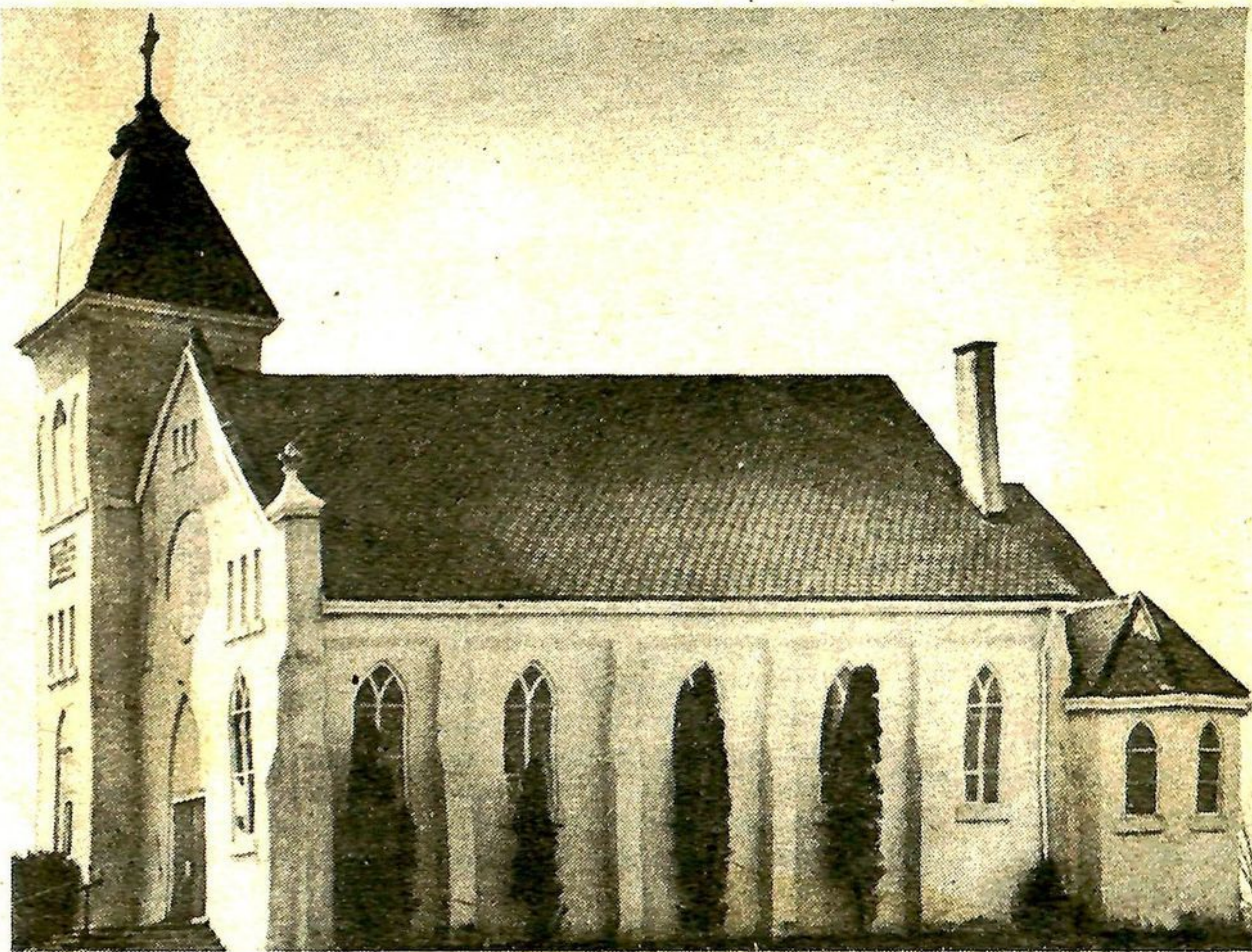
The Norwich congregation had a brief rise to fame in 1863 when the territory was so divided that Norwich became a parish with Woodstock and East Oxford as its missions. Father O'Donovan was appointed the first (and only) pastor.

But the glory of the Norwich parish was short-lived. Whether Father O'Donovan couldn't stand the loneliness of the Norwich Township

surroundings or whether he was recalled is not known, but he returned to Ingersoll after a few months and Norwich reverted to the status of a mission. It remained as such until it closed in 1970.

Throughout its history, the Norwich church was a mission of Ingersoll, then Woodstock and finally Tillsonburg.

The original frame church was replaced by the present brick structure in 1894 and formally opened in October of that year.



## Lonely sentinel

It's an unlikely location for a church - out in the middle of nowhere - and its isolation was part of the reason St. Peter's Catholic Church, near Newark, was closed by the Tillsonburg parish in 1971. (NG Photo).



## Parishioner remembers

Tune McNally, 83, of RR 1, Norwich, remembers the days when St. Peter's Catholic Church near Newark housed a thriving Catholic congregation. The church was built on granted land, donated by Peter McNally, an ancestor of her husband, Mac McNally. (NG Photo).

Tune McNally, now 84 years old and a member of St. Peter's, remembers when she first came to the area of the Norwich church as the bride of Mack McNally 62 years ago in 1919.

Originally from Kelvin, she had always attended Our Lady of LaSalette, a much larger church than St. Peter's.

"It was quite a change coming to Norwich," she

said.

She was a regular church-goer and an avid member of the CWL receiving her 50-year pin. She too was sorry to see the church closed.

"We certainly had some good priests here at Norwich," she said.

St. Peter's is also able to boast having produced two priests, Father Dugan and Father Ronan. There were also three or four Sisters.

Newcomers to the parish years ago were impressed with the community spirit present. That community spirit and sense of togetherness has not died despite the dispersal of the congregation. The survival of the CWL is testimony to that fact.

For many, the fellowship of the lonely church in "no-man's land" will never be forgotten.