

Mermentau Church's Dedication Marks Milestone in the Parish's 70 Year History

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MERMENTAU Nov. 23. Today November 23, is a historic date for this community. The recently completed St. John the Evangelist Church will be dedicated in a ceremony at 9:30 a.m. His Excellency, the Most Reverend Jules B. Jeanmard, D. D. Bishop of Lafayette, will officiate.

The Rev. J. J. H. Cramers, pastor, said that hundreds of friends from over this entire section of the state are expected to join members of the Catholic clergy and the parishioners of St. John the Evangelist in marking this occasion.

Father Cramers will celebrate the Mass, while the Rev. Fr. W. J. Labbe, former Pastor at Mermentau, will give the dedication sermon. The choir of St. John church will be assisted by members of the choir from St. Joseph during the Mass.

The clergy and laity will meet in front of the church after a solemn which the Bishop and clergy will procession and Bishop Jeanmard will dedicate the church and bless the walls from the outside after which the Bishop and clergy will enter the edifice, dedicate the Altar and bless the walls from the interior. Then the members and guests will enter church for completion of the solemn dedication ceremony.

Following the dedication, Father Cramers will honor the Bishop and visiting clergy with a banquet.

The new church, of handsome red brick design was constructed at a cost of \$80,000, with Diboil and Kessels of New Orleans as architects and Bruning Construction company of Crowley as contractors. Work was started on August 1, 1951, and moved along rapidly until the church was completed during the latter part of this summer.

First Mass was celebrated in the new building on September 28, 1952. Father Cramers stated that the first baptism in the new structure was on September 27 of this year. The baby baptized was Scott Owen John Guidry, son of Vincent Guidry and Laura Lee Quebodeaux Guidry.

Up to the present time, there have been no weddings or funerals in the new church.

Early History

Tracing the Mermentau church history back to its earliest beginning, "The Catholic church in Louisiana", reports the work of the Jesuit Fathers from Grand Coteau, along with Rayne, or "Ponpeville" as it was then known, as the first in history of this area.

The same "Catholic Church" history relates: "A parish established during the administration of Archbishop Napoleon Joseph Perche was that of St. John at Mermentau. The Town grew up on the east bank of the Mermentau River at a point where travellers in the Old Spanish Trail crossed it. The name is from an old Indian chief, Mentau, who, it is said, hunted and fished along the banks of the river.

"This section was first served by the missionaries who came from Grand Coteau, and the first Mass celebrated in Mermentau, as far

Abbaddie, S. J. It is known that he gave Holy Communion and married many couples on the same day about 1863.

"An interesting side note is that one of these baptisms was that of Jean Castex, Jr. head of the prominent Castex family of Mermentau.

"Father Anthonioz, S. J., followed Father Abbaddie in attending to Mermentau in the cost-war days. and many of the children of that time attended catechism classes in Rayne for a period of three months to prepare themselves for Holy Communion. At Coulee Trive, now Estherwood, there was a Solemn Communion at the residence of C. Gary, a Spaniard, and for the Communion the children were prepared by "Grandmere LeBlanc".

"About 1882 or 1883, Archbishop Perche established Mermentau as an independent parish and assigned Father J. Chasles as first resident pastor. He built the first church, but in 1886 the rectory burned down and all the early records went up in flames.

"After the fire of 1886, it was decided to move the church. A majestic oak marks the place. This project had to be abandoned, because in the process of moving the church, it almost fell apart.

"The Parish of Mermentau under Father Chasles included (south) Cameron parish, (west) Calcasieu Parish, (north) Eunice, and (east) more or less up to Rayne.

"After the fire, Mermentau had no residing pastor until 1909. The spiritual welfare of the people of the parish was looked after by Father Van de Ven, Father Doutre of Rayne, Father Silvan, OSB, Father Devirat and Father W. Geens. Father Geens was succeeded by Father Van Alfess who built the church in Mermentau around 1902 which is now being retired in favor of the new brick structure. Father J. Peeters also worked untiringly in the parish.

Chapel Built

In still another section of the church history, the following brings Mermentau church history more up to date: "The chapel erected after fire destroyed the first Mermentau church in 1886, was very small, measuring about 25 by 12 feet. According to Msgr. Peeters, when he said Mass in the diminutive church, only the celebrant, the women and the children could find room. The men were obliged to stand outside. The building was later used as a garage for the pastor.

"In 1909 Father Fontaine was made resident pastor of the church. Before his appointment, a new church had been built to replace the small chapel which had been moved to the present site of the Mermentau church. This property had been donated by Mrs. Marie U. Duhon and Mrs. Jean Castex on January 14, 1889. The transaction was handled by Father Sylvanus, OSB, of St. Leo's Church near Rayne.

Shortly after Father Fontaine's appointment, the church was struck by lightning and completely destroyed. Mass was then said in the Castex warehouse. Soon a new church was built and a rectory erected through the efforts of the Simon family and others. During Father Fontaine's time the parish extended from Mermentau River to Bayou Queve de Tortue and north to Bayou Plaquemine. The zeal of Father Fontaine manifested itself in the establishment of a Catholic school. With the help of Miss Marcelle Goudeaux and her two sisters, the school continued for two years but had to be abandoned after that time.

Father Fontaine was followed by Father Van Eyck, who remained at Mermentau two years. Father A. Verhoven was the next pastor and under his administration and statues were installed in the church. After 10 years in the parish, he was transferred and Father C. J. Van Merrienboer followed. His successor was Father W. A. Perreault.

Coming more up to date with history of the local Church, Father M. Veekman served as pastor from 1944 to 1946, and he was succeeded by Rev. Fr. W. J. Labbe during the period from 1946 through 1950.

Today's pastor, alert, active, kind ther M. Veekman served as parish and community, the Rev. Fr. M. Cramers, was sent to Mermentau in 1950, and under his leadership and through his inspired vision, the start was made on the structure which will be dedicated today.



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