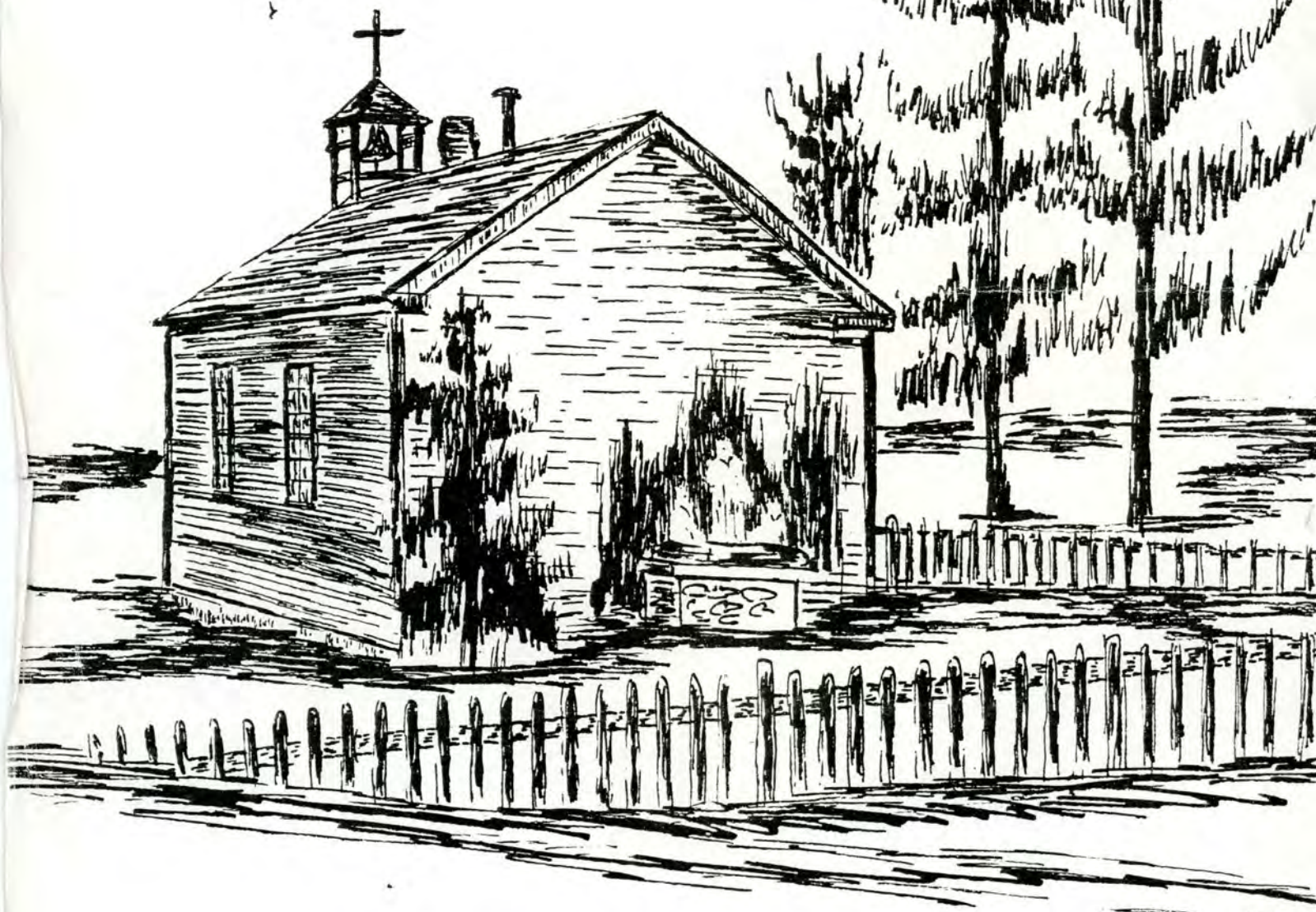


(John)
Mary So Parker
Bill Beilas

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ST FRANCIS SOLANUS INDIAN MISSION
BUILT 1859
PETOSKEY, MICHIGAN

sessner

The Church of St. Francis Solanus

The oldest building now standing in Petoskey is the Church of St. Francis Solanus on West Lake St. It was completed in 1859, under the guidance of Fr. Louis Sefferath, missionary to the Indians from 1858 to 1862. Bishop Baraga engaged a carpenter named Trotochaud to build a church there. St. Francis Solanus is the oldest Indian Church still standing south of the Straits of Mackinaw.

The Indian Village on the north side of the bay was L'Arbre Croche founded in about 1827 by a Fr. Badin. It was moved south from its original location at Middle Village. About the same time, 1825, the Indians from the Muheuh Ne-Sing (Bear Lake later Walloon Lake), the source of the Bear River, moved to the Mouth of the Bear River and started a village. It never was a very large village, as most of the Indian population was located in or near L'Arbre Croche. The missionaries from L'Arbre Croche would visit this side of the bay four or five times a year to teach and preach.

The present church, completed in 1859, was built to replace the small birch bark church built in July 1833 by the Ottawas and blessed on August 1, 1833 by Fr. Frederic Baraga.

In April 1856, Fr. Lawrence Lauthishar requested and was given permission by then Bishop Baraga to construct an Indian Church at Agaming (Petoskey), and a deed to the site was registered on December 5, 1857. The completed framework was torn down in the spring of 1857 by a differing faction and Bishop Baraga instructed Fr. Lauthishar to cease work on the "Agaming Church".

On June 28, 1858, Bishop Baraga went to Petoskey to inspect the work being done on the mission church. According to his diary he promised some boards and nails to the carpenter, Trotochaud. There must have been a considerable number of Catholic Indians there because he mentions in his diary that in the evening he heard confessions till half past eleven. But the church was not to be build on the site where the construction first began.

The maliciousness of the differing factions made the building of the church impossible. Bishop Baraga went to Agaming on June 8, 1859 and learned first hand from the carpenter, Trotochaud, of the vandalism at the building site. Trotochaud offered an acre lot further removed from the Protestant Mission. The Bishop accepted the suggestion and the offer and engaged him to build a small church there, 30 feet long, 20 feet wide and 12 feet high. Despite the trouble, the church was constructed and on July 23, 1860 Bishop Baraga said mass there, blessed the church and the cemetery around it. It is the only building still standing that was build in Baraga's time in the Old L'Arbre

Croche District. It is one of the oldest buildings in Northern Lower Michigan. Unfortunately, neither the birch bark church nor the present church were officially named until 1884. Yet in Bishop Baraga's diary is an entry dated August 26, 1861, "At 7 O'clock in the morning we rode to Agaming to St. Francis Church where I said mass and preached".

Prior to the arrival of the Franciscans in 1881, the Indian Church had been abandoned for about four years. On October 26, 1884, Fr. Pius Niermann had the church restored "within and without". The church was then named St. Francis Solanus after the great Indian Missionary. The Motherhouse of the Notre Dame Sisters of Milwaukee furnished vestments, linens, mass cards etc. The property lines were set up and a title deed was attained by Fr. Pius.

In 1931, Fr. Aubert Keuter, missionary to the Ottawas from 1929 to 1936, had the church restored. The church was rededicated on August 27, 1931 and completed on October 30, 1931 and the blessing of the cross was November 2, 1931. The church was restored to commemorate fifty years of the Franciscan Fathers in this area. The work on the church was done by an Ottawa Indian Organization, "Ma-Wandji-Di-Win-Te-Kak-Wi-Tha", a society that put things in order. These are, I believe, the names of the men who worked on the church: John Cogeyewan, Frank Ashhyepagash-Green Leaf, James Carey, John Kewaygoshkam, Charles Green, Steven Mundson, Titus Kosequot, Peter Nam--os. Since 1931 the mass has been offered every year on or about the fourteenth of July, the feast day of St. Francis Solanus.

In 1959, the Little Indian Church celebrated its 100th anniversary. In honor of this occasion, a new roof was added, a fresh coat of paint put on, the picket fence repaired and even the white crosses marking the graves of the early Christian Indians were restored. From Italy, a marble statue of a Franciscan Missionary blessing two Indians was donated by Mrs Lucille Parker. It was placed on the newly erected altar.

Since 1959, the church again is showing signs of decay due to its age. Several groups have donated their time and materials in order to keep the little church standing.

The most recent group is Boy Scout Troop 7 of Petoskey. Due to the expense of keeping the Indian Church repaired, they welcome any and all donations. They hope to keep the church standing to be able to celebrate its bicentennial in 2059.