

Collection #
P 0841

**ST. MAGDALEN CATHOLIC CHURCH PHOTOGRAPHS
CA. 1941**

Collection Information	1
Historical Sketch	2
Scope and Content Note	4
Contents	4

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COLLECTION INFORMATION

VOLUME OF COLLECTION: 1 OVB photograph folder

COLLECTION DATES: Ca. 1941

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RESTRICTIONS: None

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ALTERNATE FORMATS:

RELATED HOLDINGS:

ACCESSION NUMBER: 1941.0313

NOTES:

HISTORICAL SKETCH

St. Magdalen Catholic Church was founded by German settlers near New Marion in Ripley County, Indiana, with the erection of a log church in 1847. The original structure was replaced by a church constructed from stone in 1861. The second church building stood for eighty years until it was destroyed in 1941 to make way for the military installation known as the Jefferson Proving Ground during World War II.

The St. Magdalen [sometimes spelled Magdalene] community had its beginnings in 1834, four miles south of New Marion. By the time the log church was built, membership consisted of twenty-eight families. Although predominantly German, the congregation also included French-Alsatian and Italian immigrants who had settled in that area of Shelby Township.

Many improvements were made to the 1861 stone church, particularly during the time that Father Jacob Andrew Michael was pastor, from 1877 to 1903. For example, a spire was added to the church in 1878 and in 1883 a new rectory was built. In 1900 the church reached its peak membership of 124 families with five hundred individual members and a school enrollment of ninety-six students. Some children walked three or four miles to and from school each day. They were taught German along with the usual subjects. Most of the children of the parish attended St. Magdalen Catholic School until it was closed in 1917 due to declining membership after World War I began. In 1921 Father George J. Scheidler renovated the church and added a sanctuary and vestibule.

Father Sylvester J. Bloemke, the last pastor at the stone church, arrived in 1934, when the church was heavily in debt due to the Great Depression. He initiated fundraising events, such as card parties, dances, and dinners, to eliminate parish debts. He hired two nuns to come every summer to teach Summer Bible School to the children. The church was debt-free when it was razed in 1941.

Father Bloemke wore work clothes around the parish property as he performed many maintenance duties such as mowing grass, taking care of the cemetery and even helping to dig graves, shoveling snow, and building the fire to heat the church in winter.

Officially, the last Sunday morning Mass at the stone church was held on 16 February 1941. The sermon was given by Bishop Joseph E. Ritter of the Indianapolis Archdiocese. It was estimated that 1,300 people attended that service. Cars were parked great distances from the church in both directions, and extra chairs and the standing room area could not accommodate all the worshippers that day. After the Mass, people gathered for lunch in the church basement. The Bishop and Father Bloemke completed plans for the removal of church property. These plans had to be revised when it was learned that one parishioner, Mary Effinger, had passed away that morning and had asked to be buried from the church and laid to rest next to her husband, Joseph, who had died suddenly, just one week earlier. On Tuesday, her funeral Mass was held, and she was buried next to her husband in the cemetery that was about to be relocated.

Even after the official "last Mass" by the Bishop, Father Bloemke continued to hold services in the stone church until the last day that the government had decreed that all property had to be vacated. Father Bloemke's last Mass at St. Magdalen was held on 13 April 1941, using a folding table, with only about a dozen people in attendance. It was reported by Jerry Cord, a parishioner who assisted Father Bloemke during that service, that

“After Mass, Father B. packed his Mass kit, put it in the rear of his car, and crying like a baby, left St. Magdalene forever.”

Sylvester John Bloemke was born 27 January 1902 in Richmond, Indiana, to Elizabeth M. Eldman Bloemke and Edward J. Bloemke, a grocer. Sylvester was ordained at St. Meinrad Seminary on 25 May 1926 and served the Catholic church in southern Indiana throughout his career. His first assignment was at St. Mary’s Church in New Albany, followed by his position at St. Magdalen. He was transferred to St. Peter Church in Franklin County, when St. Magdalen closed. His next assignment took him to St. Vincent DePaul Church in Bedford, followed by St. Paul’s Church in New Alsace. He served at St. Anne’s Church in Hamburg, Franklin County, from 1966 until his death. He was killed in a car accident in which he had been driving in the wrong lane on U.S. 50 near Aurora in Dearborn County, on 18 June 1971.

The original St. Magdalen cemetery was situated near the log church. After the stone church was built, a new cemetery was created near it. Tombstones from the original cemetery were incorporated into the foundation of the new stone church. After the Jefferson Proving Ground forced the removal of the stone church, its cemetery was moved to North Madison, adjacent to St. Patrick’s Cemetery.

The Jefferson Proving Ground took 55,000 acres, including 299 farms and several churches and businesses in parts of Ripley, Jennings, and Jefferson counties. When St. Magdalen was razed, the fixtures were removed and sent to other churches in Indianapolis and Hamburg. The stone church had been considered one of the most beautiful churches in the area.

After the church closed, parishioners from St. Magdalen scattered to various churches and other locations. Some had moved elsewhere after the proving ground had taken their homes. In April 1945, a bank building was purchased in New Marion and converted into a church. In 1947 St. Magdalen received official permission to organize, one hundred years after the log church had been dedicated.

In 1995 the U.S. Army terminated its use of the Jefferson Proving Ground. The land became the Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge. On 1 December 2013, the parish of St. Magdalen merged with the Prince of Peace parish in Madison, Indiana.

Sources:

Indiana, U.S., Death Certificates, 1899–2011. <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com> Accessed 3 September 2022.

Jachimiak, Barbara R. *A History of Saint Magdalene Catholic Church, 1847–1997: A Glimpse at 150 Years of History at the Two Churches of St. Magdalene*. Madison, Indiana: JPG Heritage Partnership, 2005. Pamphlet Collection: pam BX4603 .N51 J3 2005

“Native Catholic Priest Dies in Crash Near Aurora.” *The Palladium-Item* (Richmond, Ind.), 18 June 1971, page 9.

Prince of Peace Catholic Church. “St. Mary Magdalen Cemetery” <https://www.popeace.org/index.php/parish-info/catholic-cemeteries/98-articles/233-st-mary-magdalen-cemetery> Accessed 3 September 2022.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife. "Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge" <https://www.recreation.gov/camping/gateways/4057> Accessed 3 September 2022.

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

This collection consists of seven black-and-white photographs of the St. Magdalen Church in New Marion, Indiana that existed from 1861 to 1941. The photographs show the stone church, rectory, school, and cemetery, and include a portrait of the last priest, Father Sylvester J. Bloemke, who served in this church building. The photographs are all mounted on one board.

CONTENTS

CONTENTS

Seven photographs mounted on a board (photos by Kay Studio of Osgood, Ind., [ca. 1941]):

- 1) Rectory
- 2) School and Church
- 3) Cemetery
- 4) Church
- 5) Rev. S.J. Bloemke
- 6) Interior of Church
- 7) Rectory and Church

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OVB Folder 1 of 1