

St. Joseph's Church and One Room School - A Labour of Love

By Bonnie Ryan, with contribution by Toni and Wesley Ryan



As many visitors can attest, no trip to St. John's is complete without a visit to the most easterly point in North America, Cape Spear National Historic Park. However, as you embark on the journey to Cape Spear another piece of history quickly becomes evident. At the fork in the road at Blackhead Village stands an unassuming little white building surrounded by a picket fence. This is St. Joseph's Church and One Room School, and is the place where my story begins.

St. Joseph's was originally constructed as a one room school in the summer of 1879; however, when a stone church next door foundered due to disrepair in the late 1800s, the little building became both the church and school. At least four generations of my family attended this building.

St. Joseph's continued as a church and school until the mid-1960s. During that time, the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador began phasing out the small rural schoolhouses in favour of more centralized, fully equipped educational facilities. In 1965, the school was closed and the building underwent renovations that led to it being turned exclusively into a church. Mass was held on Sundays until 1990, when declining attendance and a shortage of priests led to the closure of the little church. I am the last generation from my community to have grown up attending Sunday mass in St. Joseph's, the memories still lingering after 16 years.

As a child, I remember a handful of women from the community gathering their buckets and walking up to the church to "give 'er a good cleaning". Being a little girl, I loved to tag along and play among the pews while my mother and others washed and swept. I loved to hear them tell stories about years gone past and the colourful people that had long since passed on. But more than anything, I remember the feeling of belonging, the feeling of community.

Next to the building, there grew a sizeable patch of fireweed flowers. In late July I would sit in the pew on Sunday mornings and watch the tall stalks of pink flowers blowing outside the church window. I also remember vividly, one particular Christmas Eve, it was standing room only in the church. Carols were sung, and on the walk home a gentle snow was falling.

My mother told that when she was a little girl, mass and school were all held in the one large room in the building. Children played hide and seek behind the altar during recess and on Sunday, when mass was being held, the desks would be moved into a storage room and wooden benches placed in the classroom to serve as pews.

In the early days, the priest would arrive by horse and carriage from the nearby Petty Harbour, bringing with him eggs and bacon to be cooked for him on a small wood stove in the church. There were no modern washrooms. Two outhouses were situated in the back of the building in a group of spruce trees. If you wanted a drink of water, the spring well across the road produced the most pristine water you could find.

After the building closed in the early 1990s, it sat idle until 1996. By this time, the structure was in sad shape, the rear being badly decayed and literally falling apart. I, my sister and several other concerned residents decided that we had to try and save the building. We formed a committee, incorporated, and started our journey. Countless hours were spent preparing for bake sales and contacting any government representative and organization with a sympathetic ear for funding. Now, after 10 years of dedication and patience by the committee and the community, the building has finally been restored.

Today, we are open during the summer tourist season as a museum. The interior has been restored to the 1930s, my mother's childhood days. Children find it fascinating that this was once a school. Adults find it amazing that a church would operate for such a small number of parishioners. History is great to watch on a screen or read in a book, but nothing teaches like walking into a small wooden building and hearing the hollow sound of your feet on the plank floor, and to think about all the souls whose feet walked on this floor ahead of you.

Built when villagers traveled to St. John's by horse and carriage, on foot, or by sea in a dory, St. Joseph's has seen its share of history. Over the years, automobiles replaced the horses and pavement replaced gravel roads. It has stood through two world wars, watching as Bren Gun Carriers travelled the road for placement at Cape Spear during the Second World War. It stood when Newfoundland was a colony, and was still there when it became Canada's 10th province, and it still stands today.

People often say that a building is only wood held together by nails. They say that they do not understand the attachment or love that someone has for an "old" building. But a building like St. Joseph's embodies the hard work, community spirit and caring of generations of people, from the fishermen that originally built a badly needed schoolhouse 127 years ago to the carpenters that restored the building with modern power tools in 2004.

Generations of children decorated the school during Christmas and knelt before a priest for confession on Sundays. Many happy souls filled it on Christmas Eve and wished each other a Merry Christmas as they hurried home after church. Many of these people have long since passed, but the little church and school stands as a monument to generations of people from a tiny village in Blackhead Bay.