

Assumption BVM Parish will celebrate its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2023.

To commemorate this event, the ABVM Parish Magazine will feature a series of four articles tracing the history of the parish from 1873 until the present day.

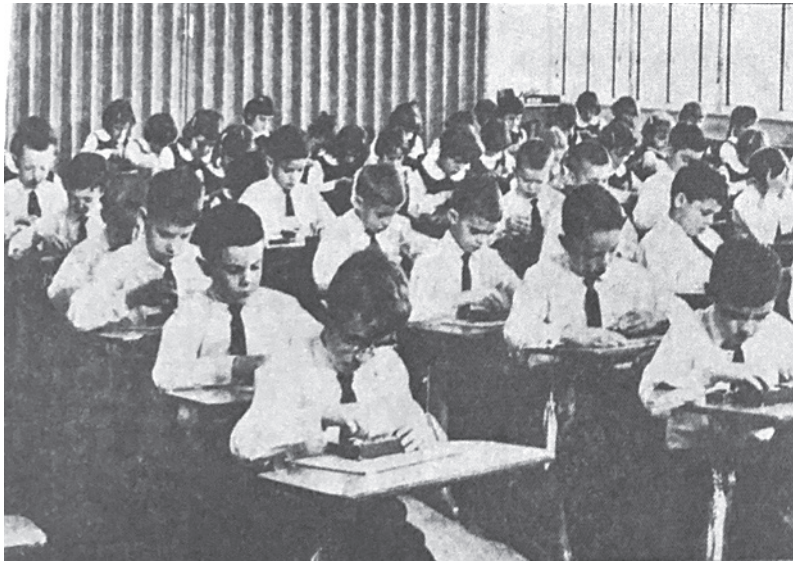
The second of these articles begins below.

**SPECIAL FEATURE**  
**THE HISTORY OF**  
**ASSUMPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY PARISH**  
**WEST GROVE**  
**BY JOHN LYNCH**

NOTE: When our parish was first created in 1873 and our school first opened in 1922, their names were St. Mary's of the Assumption Parish and St. Mary's of the Assumption School.

In the 1990s, Monsignor Graf, the pastor during this time, changed the parish and school names from "St. Mary of the Assumption" to "Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary." However, you have seen and will see both St. Mary's and ABVM used throughout our historical recounting because of the sources used to tell our story.

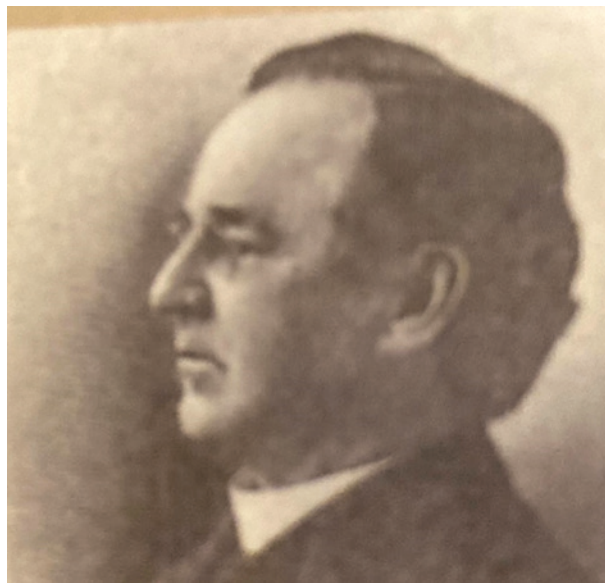
**ABVM IN THE NEW CENTURY**  
**PART II 1902–1970**



*Classroom at ABVM School circa 1960<sup>2</sup>*

## THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE NEW CENTURY - 1902–1970

“In 1850 Catholics made up only five percent of the total U.S. population. By 1906, they made up seventeen percent of the total population (14 million out of 82 million people)—and constituted the single largest religious denomination in the country.”



*Rev. Peter F. Daggett 1901-1918<sup>2</sup>*

When Father Peter F. Daggett arrived in West Grove after being appointed pastor of St. Mary's of the Assumption following the death of Father James Kelly, he inherited a growing parish of faithful and devoted Catholics. A number of families of Irish descent in the congregation had relatives who had emigrated to America during the Great Potato Famine barely fifty years earlier. As emigration from Italy and other countries increased, these immigrant families also made St. Mary's their home. As children grew into adulthood, married, and raised families of their own, multiple generations of families were baptized, received the sacraments, and participated in the social and cultural life of the parish.

The parishioners' loyalty was not merely a casual association with St. Mary's; rather, parishioners

perceived the parish as an extension of their families and felt a strong sense of belonging, duty, and affection for the pastor and the other parishioners. Nor was the church merely a building. Instead, as it was the center of their spiritual and community life, it was the center of their own lives as well.

Father Daggett was well aware that the construction of a new church during Father Kelly's pastorship would have been impossible without the extraordinary generosity of parishioners. (The church building had been built at a total cost of \$14,750 in 1873, and all remaining debt was retired by 1893).<sup>2</sup> He also understood that prudent management of financial affairs was essential.

Between 1880 and 1900, the United States was undergoing tremendous economic growth, illustrated by the doubling of the gross domestic product during this period.<sup>3 4</sup> While this growth benefitted many, most St. Mary's parishioners were not wealthy. While a small number of individuals and families were prosperous, most worked in crafts or trades, owned small businesses, or were laborers. Others worked in transportation, manufacturing, or government. Meeting the needs of the growing parish would require continued generosity and careful planning.

When Father Daggett arrived, he moved into the rectory (the former Twohig residence) that was adjacent to the church property on Evergreen Street. Realizing the need to enlarge the rectory and consolidate church facilities on the church property, he developed plans to build a new rectory. Fewer than two years after his arrival in 1901, the new rectory was finished. Ten years later, in 1911, Father Daggett completely redecorated the church building—now 38 years old—and added a sacristy.<sup>2</sup>

Father Daggett's success was made possible by the sustained giving of an increasing number of parishioners as the parish grew. Large, multigenerational families provided financial support, which often continued even after family members had moved. Many members of the Sullivan family had professional and business success in Philadelphia, New York, and Detroit but still contributed significantly to the parish years after moving.<sup>2</sup>

Father Daggett also created parish organizations that would improve the lives of his parishioners during his pastorship. He established a chapter of the Holy Name Society to promote devotion and reverence to the Holy Name of God and Jesus and helps members grow in holiness and obtain their personal salvation, and he organized a dedicated choir with an organist.<sup>2</sup>

## THE HOLY NAME SOCIETY

By 1915, the St. Mary's chapter of the Holy Name Society had enrolled 42 men. Led by four officers and a board of councilors, the chapter met on the first Sunday of each month.<sup>2</sup> The purpose and activities of the chapter encompassed the Holy Name Society's purpose statement: "The Confraternity of the Most Holy Names of God and Jesus (Holy Name Society) promotes reverence for the Sacred Names of God and Jesus Christ, obedience and loyalty to the Magisterium of the Catholic Church, and the personal sanctification and holiness of its members."<sup>6</sup> The statement also requires the Society members to practice the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. While this organization may seem quaint or even irrelevant today, it was founded to defend against very real and serious threats to the Catholic faith.

The Council of Lyon, in 1274, decided to promote a special devotion to the Holy Name of Jesus in response to claims made by Albigenses and others that Jesus Christ was not divine. Pope Gregory X notified the Dominicans (Order of Preachers) by a letter on September 20, 1274, that they were to preach this devotion. Pope Pius IV formally approved the Society in 1564 as an indulgenced confraternity under the supervision of the Dominican Order.<sup>5</sup>

In the 20th century, the Holy Name Society and Knights of Columbus in the United States joined forces to organize Catholic clergy and laity to counter anti-Catholic propaganda and political campaigns. Between 1900 and 1920 in New York State, the Catholic population of Long Island grew by 40%. Threatened by the growing influence of Catholics and misled by claims that Catholics were disloyal and antipatriotic, many Protestants supported efforts by the Ku Klux Klan and nativist politicians to pass anti-Catholic legislation.

The Holy Name Society and the Knights of Columbus recognized that Catholics would need to mount a united response to the Klan's efforts. In addition to conducting letter-writing campaigns, hiring lobbyists to promote Catholic positions, and supporting calls for investigating Klan members of Congress, they organized mass rallies to bring together Catholics from all walks of life.<sup>7</sup>



*Holy Name Union marching in Washington D.C. in 1924. The Holy Name Union was collection of individual Holy Name Societies in the diocese of Harrisburg Pennsylvania – Library of Congress Keystone View Company. Holy Name Society Parade on Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington D.C. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017648005/>.*

“On June 24th, 1923 the Holy Name Society held a rally in Bay Shore in honor of the Sacred Name of the Savior of Mankind. The demonstration was expected to draw 25,000 but attracted an estimated 40,000 people. To accommodate people who planned to attend the rally, the Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) ran a special schedule that added five trains and additional stops. On the day of the rally, the LIRR had to add a total of nine additional trains. Among the attendees were New York City police officers, New York State troopers, several fire house companies, and the parishioners of Catholic churches within the Brooklyn dioceses. They gathered at the Bay Shore train station and marched to the event carrying American Flags with a band playing the national anthem. The guest speakers, Dr. John G Coyle – the state director of Knights of Columbus – and priests from surrounding parishes, delivered speeches that brought awareness against the threat of intolerance towards Catholics and embraced the patriotic spirit [*sic*] of American Catholics.”<sup>8</sup>

On April 6, 1917, the United States entered World War I.<sup>9</sup> One can only imagine the burden this conflict imposed on the families of those who served. Following the war, a memorial plaque was dedicated on Evergreen Street to the West Grove residents who served.



*World War I Plaque West Grove Pennsylvania*

Father Daggett had been ill for several years. As his health deteriorated, he traveled to Philadelphia for an operation but was told he was too weak for the procedure. Father Daggett died on July 18, 1919. His body lay in state in the church building prior to a Solemn High Requiem Mass. Sixteen priests assisted at Mass, which was attended by an overflow crowd of parishioners and friends.<sup>2</sup>





*Rev. Miles Keegan 1918-1931<sup>2</sup>*

Father Keegan was a very talented and busy priest. Ordained in 1902, he served in several parishes, including Langhorne—where he built a new church and rectory. While serving as pastor, he was also associate editor of *The Catholic Standard and Times*, the archdiocesan weekly newspaper.

### The Virtue of Humility

“What Hast Thou That Thou Hast Not Received?”—1 Cor. 4: 7

A striking example of the priceless value of the virtue of humility is abundantly furnished by even a hasty perusal of the Epistles of St. Paul. Wonderful to say, the example is no other than the person, who, under God, is the author of the great document. The converted Saul, the pompous, impetuous persecutor, has ceased to be all that, and by a miracle of God is changed into one, who in moments of greatest triumph, cries out, “What hast thou that thou hast not received?” “Not I, but Christ.” “By the grace of God I am what I am.” To know one's self is to be humble, and in the converted life of St. Paul is found a model of self-effacement pleasing in the sight of God and man.

To be humble before God, it is not necessary to crawl into a shell and hide one's self away. Our not doing is often the child of pride or laziness. We fear criticism because we cherish pride. Even the proud man despises pride in his neighbor, while humility is a thing of beauty in every eye.

The humble man is not a dullard or a backward creature, being walked over by his fellows. He is a doer of the wonderful. He radiates God whether he talks or is silent. He is a power that attracts, never dispels. Colonel Lindbergh, dwarfed the almighty Atlantic, he made our transoceanic cousins neighbors at our door. He swayed the heads of mighty monarchs, the whole world was astir at his mighty influence. He was courted and feasted by the great powers everywhere he landed. He became the idol of nations, but, in it all, his mighty triumph over land and sea was the spirit of humility. He effaced himself and in the

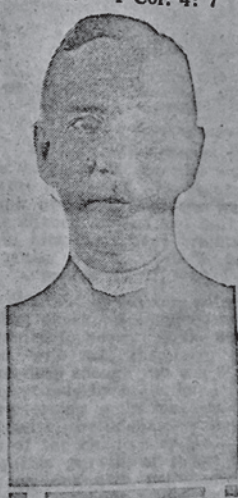


Photo by Biles  
REV. MILES A. KEEGAN.

*Newspaper Column by Rev. Miles Keegan*

*Newspaper clipping from parish archives*

Once he became pastor at ABVM, it became evident that he was adept at raising money. In 1920, he decided to liquidate the parish debt. In over four days, he solicited and raised almost \$9,000,<sup>2</sup> the equivalent of \$133,324 in 2022 dollars!<sup>10</sup> To reach this goal, 65 individuals and families contributed \$100 each in addition to smaller contributions made by others. This generosity is further evidence of the growing material prosperity of ABVM's parishioners.<sup>2</sup>

Retiring the parish debt was critical if Father Keegan were to proceed with plans to build a parish school. Not surprisingly, funding was secured, plans were drafted, and the school building was completed in time for the opening day in September 1922, with an enrollment of twenty students and a faculty of Benedictine Sisters.<sup>2</sup>

Father Keegan's interests and influence were wide-ranging. Because of his interest in music, he recruited new talent for the choir and two new organists. He was civic-minded, so he worked with business contacts and civic leaders to attract new industry to West Grove. He was ecumenical, so he counted, as friends and colleagues, religious leaders from many different denominations. To commemorate his silver jubilee, over 140 parishioners and guests—including business and government officials and clergy from other denominations—attended a community celebration at the Hibernian Hall.<sup>2</sup>

Father Keegan continued to be a great pastor as well as community leader, despite being in poor health. On Christmas Eve, while hearing confessions, he became gravely ill and was taken to St. Francis Hospital in Wilmington, where he died two days later on December 26, 1931. Following his funeral, he was buried in St. Mary's cemetery in West Grove.<sup>2</sup>



*Rev. Edward F. Kelly 1932-1962<sup>2</sup>*

The Rev. Edward F. Kelly was the assistant rector of St. Monica's in South Philadelphia when he was appointed pastor of ABVM in West Grove. Due to the generosity of the parishioners and the financial acumen of Father Keegan, the parish was debt free, allowing the new pastor to focus his effort elsewhere instead of paying interest and principal on outstanding loans. For eight years, ABVM did not make any major improvements to the parish other than installing a new organ, which a parishioner donated in memory of his deceased parents.<sup>2</sup>

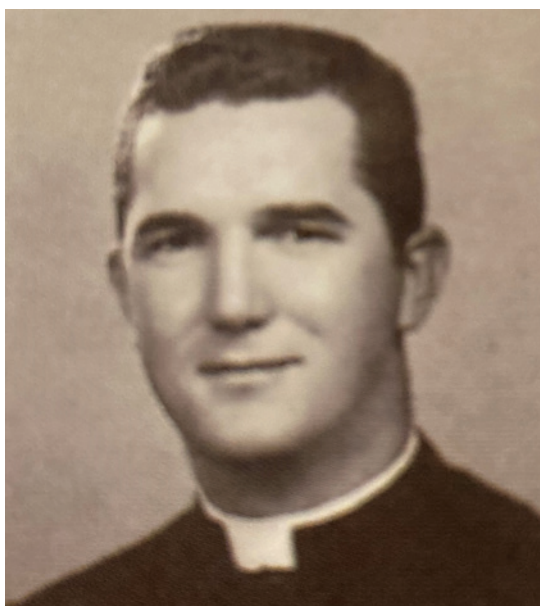
By 1940, Father Kelly had begun making additions and improvements to the church building. In July, Cardinal Dennis Dougherty (1918–1951) authorized Father Kelly to purchase a plot of land on Evergreen Street for \$820 to expand the capacity of St. Mary's Cemetery. Shortly after the purchase, a perpetual-care committee was formed and assumed responsibility for the cemetery's care and maintenance. A group of parishioners, under the direction of Joseph Sciarra and Frank DiCristoforo, built a stone wall at the front of the cemetery. These same parishioners also gifted the labor and the cost of the wall materials.

In 1939, the Second World War began in Europe.<sup>11</sup> The United States remained neutral until 1941. Then the conflict engulfed the country and brought great trials and suffering to many families in the parish. As happened after the First World War, the service and sacrifices of those who served were memorialized by the West Grove community.

From 1946 to 1964, the United States experienced the “Baby Boom” as the birth rate soared.<sup>11</sup> In response to this trend, school systems across the nation made plans to expand to meet this demand. ABVM parish was no exception. So, in addition to his everyday pastoral duties, Father Kelly devoted much of his time and attention to expanding the ABVM school.

In 1945, Father Kelly reached an agreement with the Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary to provide teachers for the school. Beginning that fall, four nuns came to the parish school to teach twenty-four students, replacing the Benedictine Sisters who had been the teaching staff since 1922.<sup>2</sup>

As enrollment increased over the next several years, the need for more classrooms and for larger living quarters for the Sisters became more pressing. (The school and convent shared the same building!) Father Kelly’s workload increased as plans to build a new school got underway, so a curate, Father Thomas P. Craven, was assigned to ABVM in 1957.<sup>2</sup>



*Rev. Thomas P. Craven 1957-1962<sup>2</sup>*

Father Craven was a charismatic and multitalented priest. He was fluent in Spanish, was a frequent contributor to the Archdiocese of Philadelphia's *Catholic Hour* radio program, and inspired others with his enthusiasm and devotion to his work. Upon his arrival, he began broadcasting a program, *Living the Faith*, on a local radio station and started to organize and sponsor fund-raising activities for the parish.<sup>2</sup>

In 1958, Father Craven sponsored a new religious group for women in the parish, calling it "The Assumption Guild." In addition to the Guild's religious goals, it also aided fund-raising and sponsored social activities. One novel—and very successful activity—was a Fashion Show run by the Guild beginning in 1960. The inaugural show netted a profit of \$1,100. The shows continued for several years.<sup>2</sup> Bonnie Bolla gives more details in her interview highlights.



*The Assumption Guild presents a check for  
the proceeds from a fashion show sponsored by  
the Guild. — Newspaper clipping from parish archives.*

The Guild also successfully operated “The Thrift Shop,” a resale shop; regular parish dances; an annual Auction Sale; an annual rummage sale; and the Spaghetti Supper.<sup>2</sup> Today, the Spaghetti Supper is the Annual Spaghetti Dinner, held in April.

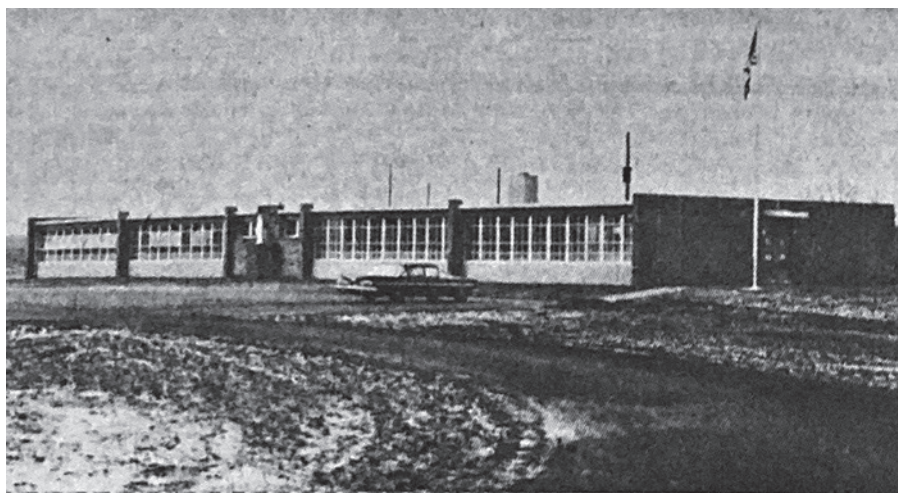
In 1959, the Guild donated a Sick Call Set for use with Catholic patients at the Community Memorial Hospital (Jennersville Hospital). This occasion was captured in the local newspaper.<sup>2</sup>





*The Assumption Guild donates a Sick Call Set for use with  
Catholic patients at the Community Memorial Hospital in Jennersville, Pennsylvania<sup>2</sup>*

Thanks to Father Craven's fund-raising efforts, the parish was able to purchase land and begin the construction of a new school. On June 7, 1959, a groundbreaking ceremony for the new school took place.<sup>2</sup>



*Newly completed school, circa 1960<sup>2</sup>*



*Rev. David J. Walsh 1962-1966<sup>2</sup>*

Father David J. Walsh became pastor in 1962. According to those who knew him, he had a reserved but warm and caring disposition. He frequently consoled the sick of the parish in hospitals and in their homes. Father Walsh was also respected for his financial management of the large debt the parish had assumed from the construction of the new school. Father Walsh was able to pay off all outstanding debt by the time he left for a new assignment in 1966. He accomplished this through many fund raisers, including two large annual events he introduced to the parish.

From 1962–1966, on two weekends in July, the parish held the St. Mary's Church Fair, featuring games and refreshments for children and adults. The event took place on the parish property on State Road next to the school. With only the school and an empty residence (demolished in 2018) on the property, the venue provided plenty of space for both the fair and parking. The school was also utilized for some of the fair activities.

In addition to the extremely successful fairs, in August 1965, the St. Mary's Horse Show Association inaugurated an annual Horse Show. All the horse events and activities also took place on the school grounds.





*Rev. John J Kilgarriff 1966-1970<sup>2</sup>*

Father Kilgarriff also had a brief pastorate; he arrived in December 1966 and was reassigned in June 1970. He was a devoted and kind priest. During his time at ABVM, he introduced “The Million Dollar Adventure,” a highly successful raffle that raised large sums of money for the parish. He is also fondly remembered for adding a 12:15 p.m. Mass on Sundays.<sup>2</sup>

**Oral History of mid-1960 ABVM with Bob and Marge Erling  
and Bonnie Bolla, longtime parishioners of ABVM**



*Circa 1982 Parishioners Reunion – Photo provided by*

*Gene Fogarty. Bob and Marge Erling, and Bonnie Bolla are among the attendees.*

*First row: Gene Fogarty, Eileen Fogarty*

*Second row: Marge Erling, Larry Davis, Bonnie Bolla, Barb McGee,*

*Mary Ellen Nantais, Linda Kelly, Bruce DiVincenzo*

*Third row: Carol Maguire, Donna Romanowski, Melissa DiVincenzo, Karen Orpneck, Flo Hobdell*

*Fourth row: Kathy Kilmer, Russ Kilmer, Andrea Sweeney, Bev Butash*

*Fifth row: Chris Reinert, Rich Orpneck, George Pennypacker, Rita Pennypacker*

*Sixth (last) row: Gene Kelly, George Rowlyk, Craig Nantais, Bob Erling, Joe Nangle,*

*Bern Sweeney, Dave Butash, Sue Rowlyk*

*John Lynch spoke with Bob, Marge, and Bonnie on July 21 for over an hour. They have been members of the parish since 1963.*

## **Interview Highlights (edited for clarity)**

### **How the Erlings Met**

**JOHN:** How did you and Marge meet?

**BOB:** We were from Scranton. I came down here with the State Police, and a short period of time later, I made the best decision of my life and married Marge. [In Scranton,] I was living a quarter of a block away from a very, very nice Italian restaurant. Marge, her sister and brother-in-law, and family ran the restaurant. Of course, she was very young at the time.

**JOHN:** That's a wise choice. You married someone who ran a restaurant!

### ***Why the Bollas Joined ABVM***

**JOHN:** How did you come to be a parishioner at ABVM?

**BONNIE:** I came down here when I married Gabe. Of course, we wanted a Catholic church. I married Gabe in August 1963. I was from Lancaster, and my husband was from McAdoo, Pennsylvania.

### ***A History of the Spaghetti Dinner***

**BONNIE:** After the older ladies gave up the Spaghetti Dinner, it was taken over by the Avondale Fire Company. And then Bob and Bernie Shore decided to bring it back. Father St. Clair wasn't too much for it. Bernie said, "I don't know why, because everything whatever we make will come back to the church!"

It was done in the school. We were doing dishes in the hallway. We had a room by the office where they ate. This was before the big room. We used to have dances there. The school was four classrooms. It was a family. Everyone worked together.

### ***Million Dollar Adventure***

**JOHN:** What was the Million Dollar Adventure?

**BOB:** What was the Million Dollar Adventure? It was the small group of dedicated individuals that used to sell raffle tickets. Prizes ran from a little bit up to as much as \$25,000.

**JOHN:** This was all within the parish? In 1964, \$25,000 was worth maybe \$250,000 today!

**BOB:** Molly Turello and the Simpsons and other parishioners were involved in this. It was a big success. Father Kilgarrieff was one of the starters; he had done this in other parishes. We did this about 3–4 years.

### *The Fashion Show*

**JOHN:** Please don't be offended by this question, but what made you think you were equipped to do a fashion show? How did this all work? Nothing seemed to deter you!

**BONNIE:** We just jumped in. We walked down the stage; we had a ramp. We went to the 410 Shop in Avondale, run by Louise Stroud. She had the clothes. We charged admission. There were desserts. We had 15–20 models.

**JOHN:** Who picked out the clothes?

**BONNIE:** Louise Stroud. We went down to her store and tried things on. We did have fun.

### *Dances*

**BONNIE:** They were held in the little school. We had live bands. One night there was a blizzard, but everyone stayed until the the very end. Harry VanderKratz plowed us the roads so we could get out.

**JOHN:** Who was Harry VanderKratz?

**BONNIE:** He owned the gas station that is now the Sunoco station.

**JOHN:** So, he was at the dance with his plow? This is amazing.

**BONNIE:** We didn't have anything else to do. That was our entertainment.

## REMINISCENCES OF ADELINE CONNER (edited for clarity)



*Adeline Conner – family photo*

What an honor and surprise to be the “Oldest Living Member” of our parish. I came to ABVM as a young mother in my midtwenties when my husband and I moved from Kennett Square, where I grew up. I wasn’t too sure about moving all the way to West Grove, but I loved old St. Mary’s Church.

Confession on Saturday and Mass every Sunday...if the weather was bad, most families walked. There was no excuse for missing Mass.

We sat on the left side near the back. There was the Conner pew, the Boves, the Craigs, the Torellos, the Queppets. And, believe me, we filled those pews as our families expanded.

Most families sent their children to St. Mary's School where, despite the combined classes, the education was excellent. The classrooms were on the main level of the convent, with the IHM Nuns living space above. The bell would ring, and the Nuns would hurry upstairs for lunch. Just as quick, the double windows facing the playground would be flung back so the Nuns could supervise recess while they ate. Overcrowding was an issue. The older students moved to the basement, and plans were made to build a new school.

Father Thomas Craven was sent to assist Father Kelly, the longtime pastor. His health was failing, but with the assistance of two strong men, Father Kelly was lifted from his wheelchair and managed to put his foot on a shovel at the groundbreaking ceremony to rounds of cheering and applause.

The parish was run by volunteers, and if your child went to Catholic School back then, your boys were altar boys and the girls sang in the choir directed by Sister Helen. Holidays were hectic. We would get to Midnight Mass early to drop off the kids and settle in our pews. Then just before Mass started, the ushers would shove us over and stuff latecomers in those tiny creaky pews. They were rumored to be the actual seats from Old St. Mary's in Philadelphia, where the Declaration of Independence was written.

We had a lot of wonderful priests through the years and with them came change. The beautiful altar rail where we knelt for Communion came down, the statues were rearranged, and the Stations of the Cross were chiseled and modified. The lovely fresco on the ceiling flaked and crumbled, but the church was still beautiful.

After moving to the new church, we used the old church for morning Mass. Ann McMahon, Peg Hoops, Babe Markel, Mary O'Connell, and I attended regularly, and Monsignor Graf affectionately called us the "Church Ladies." Often, we stayed after to dust the pews and stuff the missalettes. It wasn't unusual to receive a phone call from Monsignor asking us to attend the funeral Mass of a parishioner who had little or no family.

I still recall the feeling of dread when Father Graf stopped me after Mass to ask me to become his weekend cook! My kids laughed because I cooked to please my husband, who liked dry and burnt and tough. Lucky for me, that is exactly the way Monsignor liked his morning meal!

Father Depman joined us when he could, but Father Murphy preferred a good run to a good breakfast, so I hung up my apron. Of course, I still worked the Spaghetti Dinner into my late eighties from Thursday to Spaghetti Dinner Sunday. I've rolled enough meatballs to pave my way to heaven.

I discovered the most remarkable connection to our parish while my mother-in-law was in St. Francis Hospital for a serious illness. While she was there, my father-in-law (baptized as a baby), sisters-in-law, and my husband became acquainted with an elderly IHM nun, Sister Gabriel. When she learned we were from West Grove, she told the story of a little girl who approached her outside of St. Mary's Church. The child asked, "Hey, Lady, can we go to your church?" To our surprise, that girl turned out to be my husband's sister! Because of that little girl and Sister Gabriel, my husband and his mother and sisters were baptized and became a part of this beautiful parish, and here I am to tell the story!

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