St. John's Lutheran Church was first established in 1849 by German settlers in what's now known as Rich and Bremen townships.

INSET: Built in 1874, the limestone building located at 4247 W. 139th St. is in need of approximately $80,000 worth of repairs to the exterior portion of its steeple.

PHOTOS BY TODD MRZOCKA / 22ND CENTURY MEDIA

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Go Back
Tinley Park resident wants to ensure church’s future

CODY MROczKA, Editor

At about 144 years old, St. John’s Lutheran Church on 183rd Street in Country Club Hills is one of the oldest buildings in the south suburbs, rising from the nearby ashes of the Great Chicago Fire roughly three years prior.

The congregation dates back even further to 1849, predating its hometown by over 100 years, when German immigrants settled the land then known as Cooper’s Grove and nearby Bachelor’s Grove, areas now known as Rich and Bremen townships.

Throughout the years, generations of families and pastors have come and gone, but the church building has stayed nearly the same. The ones that have stayed like Tinley Park’s Tom Miller whose been a parishioner since he attended the conjoining school in the 1960s are now behind an effort to ensure the historic worship center remains standing tall.

“The church bell that’s still up there, every Sunday we pull it by rope,” said Miller, who also serves on the church’s cemetery board. “No one’s got an electric bell ringer here. The place don’t even get an air conditioner.”

The congregation is attempting to raise $90,000 for a necessary and major repair on the steeple, which was last worked on around 40 years ago. A majority of the costs are related to getting equipment and manpower several stories high to work on that portion of the building, Pastor Peter Dorn said.

“The steeple was badly in disarray and need of repair, so we decided to do the project in two parts,” said the Queens native whose been preaching and teaching at St. John’s Lutheran Church and School for the last 13 years. “The first part has been completed and paid for, but that depleted all of our resources and now we’re looking to finish the project.”

In 1976, the Country Club Hills Bicentennial Commission of the American Revolution researched the church’s construction in a commemorative book about the town. “Stone blocks for the building (church) were [mined and] hauled from the Joliet quarry by teams of 24 mules on a trip lasting several days,” according to a citation by the City of Country Club Hills.

“St. John’s Lutheran Church was recently used as the setting for the Independent film “Heavens to Betsy 2,” which helped bring light to the congregation’s fundraising efforts.”

“Photo by Cody McRozka / 22nd Century Media

“On the way up to the 144-year-old building’s steeple is the church bell still pulled manually by members of the congregation who have been in Country Club Hills since 1849.”

“The stone blocks for the building were transported to the site by teams of mules and were hauled from the Joliet quarry by teams of 24 mules. The mules were then used to pull the stone blocks up the steeple,” Miller said.

The steeple is supported by a set of massive wooden beams that span the width of the building. These beams were originally used to support the structure of the church’s main sanctuary.

“Those original beams are still in place today, and they are a testament to the craftsmanship of St. John’s congregation,” Miller said. “They are a reminder of our commitment to preserving this historic building for future generations.”

“The community has changed a lot, at the same time, we still have some of the original families here,” Dorn said. “So, you’re balancing the needs of the newcomers and those that have been here for 150 years. The other problem you have is you’re doing 21st century ministry in a 19th century building.”

For Miller, he simply can’t ever see himself at another church or in another congregation. He wants future generations to enjoy the building where he’s spent so much time around family and friends.

“It’s been here for so long,” he said. “We just wanted to try and keep this thing going.”

Those interested in donating to the steeple restoration project can do so at sjch.com/steeple or by check to St. John’s Lutheran Church, 4231 183rd Street, Country Club Hills, IL, 60478.