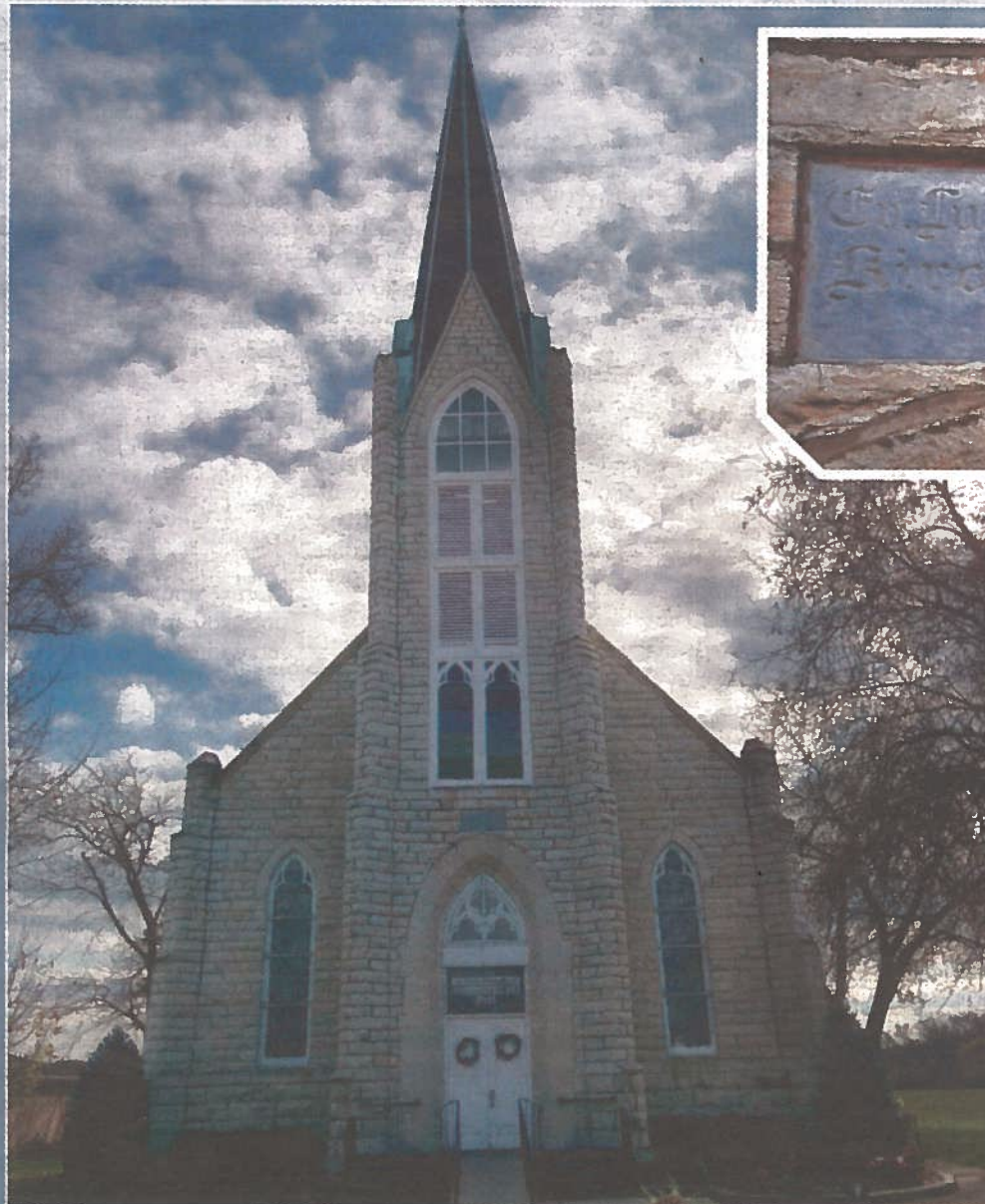




The Tinley Junction™

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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. 183rd St. is in need of approximately \$90,000 worth of repairs to the exterior portion of its steeple.

PHOTOS BY CODY MROCZKA / 22ND CENTURY MEDIA

Church with ties to Tinley Park seeks help for steeple restoration, Page 3

REACHING UP, REACHING OUT

GOING UP Consolidated High School District 230 plans to increase its 2018 tax levy, Page 6



SELFLESS SCOUTS Tinley Park Girl Scout Troop 65163 adopts 70 families from Lockport's SOS Children's Village Illinois, Page 7

GOODBYE, TINLEY PARK Editor bids Tinley Junction readers farewell as he pursues another career, Page 13

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BIG FINISH 2018

NEWS COVER STORY

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 got 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 com-



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. PHOTOS BY CODY MROCZKA / 22ND CENTURY MEDIA

memorative 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. "The blocks were moved by log rollers as they were too heavy for any wheeled vehicle. The entire building was raised by hand with only the use of ropes and pulleys."

Those original limestone blocks, some weighing hundreds of pounds, still makeup the foundation today, though the building has been adapted three times in its long history. The original wooden staircases go all the way to the top of the steeple where a single window looks out clear over the nearby residential houses. On the steeple's insides and leading up to the bell are the initials of former

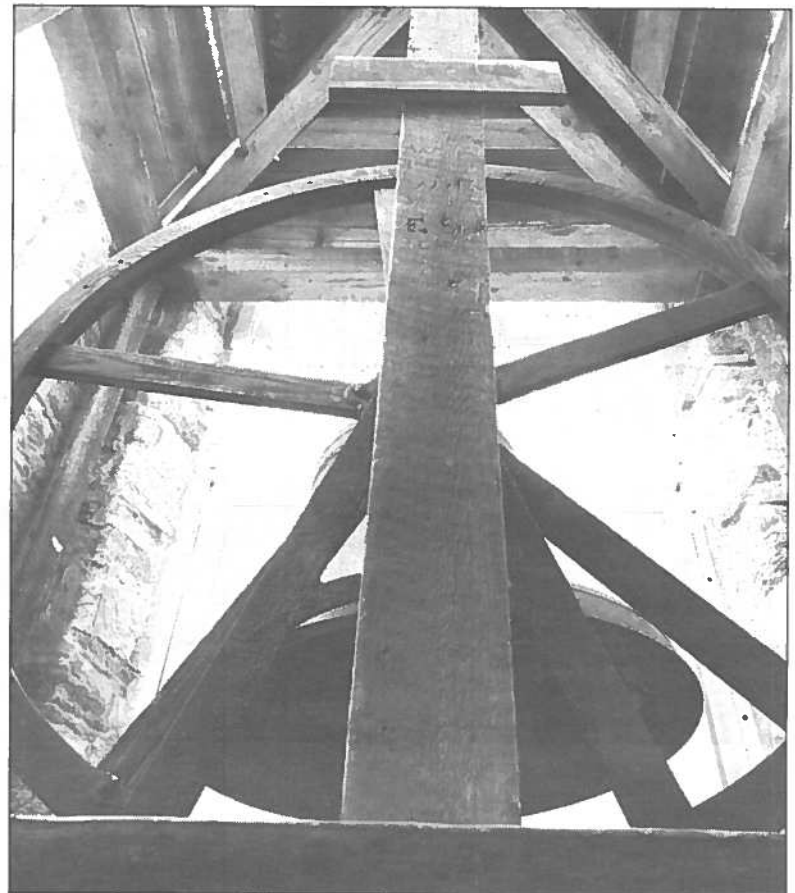
students like Miller and his brother Neal, also of Tinley Park.

"You can go all the way to the top to the steeple, but the ladders are from 1849 and they're rickety as all get out," Miller said. "It's like \$50,000 to get a lift and get a man up there (to work on the steeple), it's just way too steep."

The most interesting part of the property which is shared by the church, school building, a small family home formerly used by pastors, and acres of grassland is the cemetery, established prior to the Civil War and still in use today.

"If those people could just get out of their graves and talk to me," Miller said. "The stories they could tell about this place."

New life was breathed into the congregation when independent filmmakers decided to use the lo-



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.

cation as a setting for the movies "Heavens to Betsy" and "Heavens to Betsy 2," with the latter using the church in a major way including on the movie's poster as well as parishioners like Miller as extras. "Heavens to Betsy 2" just came out at the end of November and saw limited screenings in the Chicago-land area, including at Frankfort's Imagine Theatre.

"The lady who was in charge of costuming and location grew up in this church and got married here," Dorn said. "The first movie they showed this building, but the second movie this building was an important part of the movie."

Balancing the church's history with its present day situation and future aspirations are some of the key challenges Dorn is working on, as well as adjusting to a changing congregation.

"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 sjcch.com/steeple or by check to St. John's Lutheran Church, 4231 183rd Street, Country Club Hills, IL, 60478.