

ST. ANNE'S PARISHIONERS WON'T LET CHURCH DIE

Columbia (CA)-St. Anne's Catholic Church, erected in 1856 by gold miners in this historic Mother Lode town, has been abandoned twice but refuses to die. The small, stately, redbrick edifice with a bell tower standing on a hill overlooking this old gold camp is said to be the oldest brick church in California. By 1910 the population of Columbia had dwindled to but a few, and St. Anne's--sorely neglected and in great disrepair--was closed and boarded up.

Church Stripped

The remaining handful of parishioners stripped the church of its original valuables--statues, a marble baptismal font made in Italy, the Stations of the Cross, the organ, pews and kneelers, the altar, prayer and song books--and stored them in their homes for safe keeping.

In time the front and weather and vandals ripped off back doors. Cows and horses, not worshippers, took shelter in the old church. A stark reminder of the past was the lichen-covered tombstone engraved with the names of 50 early members of the St. Anne's dating back to the 1850s.

In the mid-1920s, church officials decided to sell the church and move their remains and grave markers from St. Anne's to the Catholic cemetery in nearby Sonora. But San Francisco attorney William Solari and others whose families had established and been members of the old miners' church had other ideas. The attorney's father, Peitro Solari, migrated from Italy to the gold camp with his wife, Rose, and operated a grocery store in Columbia. He died and was buried in the church cemetery in 1887.

Artifacts Returned

William Solari and a group of Columbia residents Sons and Daughters of the Gold West, raised money, restored St. Anne's and brought the hill back to life. All the valuable artifacts in storage in private home without exception were returned to the church.

In 1947 history repeated itself. St. Anne's was condemned again. Time had taken its toll and the structure was not earthquake proof.

Services were no longer being held in the church. Parishioners removed all the valuable artifacts including the pews and kneelers and stored them in their homes as their parents and grandparents had done 64 years earlier.

In 1979, Catholic Church authorities sold an historic church in Jamestown, not far from Columbia and placed St. Anne's on the market for sale. Dr. Rafael Solari and his brother, Jerome, an attorney--both from San Francisco and sons of William Solari and grandsons of Pietro Solari--and members of eight other Columbia families who were parishioners of St. Anne SOS (Save our St. Anne's committee) to once again come to the church's aid.

"We going to raise enough money to make St. Anne's structurally safe and restore her to her original beauty," Angela Brown, 40, told church authorities. The Solari brothers contributed \$10,000 to start a rescue fund.

During the last 10 years \$90,000 has been raised for the earthquake proofing and restoration of St. Anne's. It has been a slow and steady process with Masses being said from time to time, and baptisms, weddings and funerals conducted in the church.

There is a new roof. Steel beams have been installed to ensure the building's stability. Walls and ceilings have been strengthened, and a new electrical system was installed. Artist James Fallon's original altar paintings have been restored.

Bell Rings Loud and Clear

The church bell, cast in New York, shipped around- the Horn to San Francisco and brought by wagon to Columbia in 1857, rings loud and clears once again for every church activity.

"We could have mass here every Sunday and fill the church if only there were a priest available. But there is a shortage of priests and this is a small parish," said Glenn Rouse, 77, a director of SOS with his wife, Marie.

Mass is said in St. Anne's at least once a month by Father Michael Kelly of St. Patrick's Church in Sonora and by other visiting priests. And the 133-year old church on the hill overlooking Columbia continues to be a living, vibrant church, a tribute to the miners and their descendents who refuse to let St. Anne's die.