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Priest focused on youth to bring parishes closer

By JEFF WOOD
Times Staff Writer

LITTLE FALLS — Major challenges faced the Rev. Ed Ramacher when he was assigned to his first two parishes.

In 1945, at St. Mary's Church here, the 27-year-old assistant pastor was faced with the challenge of building bridges between segments of a recently merged congregation.

At Sartell, in 1950, head pastor Ramacher had the task of starting the new St. Francis Xavier parish.

Ramacher met both challenges in an unusual way.

He organized winter sports areas, where families could enjoy outdoor recreation free of charge, hoping to involve them in their parish.

When the French and German Catholic churches in Little Falls merged in 1945, there was much disenchantment and discord.

Then along came a newly ordained priest, fresh from Pontifical College Josephinum in Worthington, Ohio.

With the help of the pastor, the Msgr. Leo T. Keaveny, Ramacher set about healing wounds and building bonds within the congregation.

"I said, 'Monsignor we have to do something to get these people together,' " Ramacher recalled over lunch at the Pine Edge Inn Monday.

To get people together, Ramacher decided to focus on the youth of the congregation.

One Sunday in the winter of 1945, Ramacher, on the spur of the moment, drove a group of teen-agers out into the countryside east of Little Falls in search of a good tobogganing hill.

They discovered the ideal spot on a farm owned by Andrew Jarosh, four miles southeast of Little Falls.

Throwing himself into the project, Ramacher organized work parties to build tobaggan slides on the natural, tree-covered hills at the Jarosh farm.

"The Little Falls people were great," Ramacher said. "They'd do anything you'd ask."

A notice in the Little Falls Daily Transcript announced the opening of "Winter Wonderland."

The following Sunday, approximately 100 people braved temperatures of 13 below zero to slide down hills. Merchants supplied hot dogs and hamburgers and the Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls provided hot chocolate.

The project mushroomed in the succeeding weeks and months to include downhill skiing, permanent toboggan runs, ice skating on a blue-dyed rink, a ski and toboggan tow, a 72-by-24 foot lodge and eventually, incorporation.

By 1948, Winter Wonderland was no longer a parish project, but big business for the community of Little Falls.

"Of course we put Little Falls on the map in those days. We had beautiful parades with all the area queens," Ramacher said.

In January of that year, the first Winter Wonderland carnival was held. Six thousand people turned out to watch an ice show put on by the Minneapolis Figure Skating Club and the crowning of the first Miss Wonderland, Ione Hall, by WCCO radio commentator Cedric Adams.

In January of 1949, 15,000 were on hand to watch Bebe Shopp, Miss America of 1948, crown Jean Lindell of Brainerd as Miss Wonderland.

That same winter, Ramacher was voted Minnesota's outstanding young man of the year and given the award by then Gov. Luther Youngdahl.

In 1950, Ramacher was transferred to Sartell to help establish the new St. Francis Xavier parish.

With the driving force behind Winter Wonderland gone, the recreation area faltered.

"When I left, there was such a hole they couldn't keep it going. I hadn't delegated much responsibility so there wasn't enough people around who knew what to do," Ramacher said.

The log lodge, dubbed the Ski Esta Inn, was cut in half and moved to a site north of Little Falls by the Jaycees, who wanted Winter Wonderland closer to town, according to Racher.

Soon after, the Winter Wonderland project faded and died out.

Winter Wonderland in Little Falls had reached its zenith just as a new and different winter sports area — this one in Sartell — was ready to open.

For Sartell's St. Francis Xavier parish, Ramacher's winter sports area idea proved to be a rallying point, a drawing card for the parish.

Winter Haven, as it came to be called, had many of the same features as Winter Wonderland — free family entertainment in nature's playground.

And the loving touch of the Rev. Ed Ramacher.

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