

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

St. Paul Apostle Catholic Church Project

Parishioner Experience

O. H. 525

JOHN "MICKEY" BURKE

Interviewed

by

Jerry Hiznay

on

October 29, 1984

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INTERVIEWEE: JOHN BURKE

INTERVIEWER: Jerry Hiznay

SUBJECT: Formation, funding, organizations, pastors,
structures, key members, choir, bus club,
Vatican II changes

DATE: October 29, 1984

H: This is an interview with John "Mickey" Burke for the Youngstown State University's Oral History Program on the history of St. Paul the Apostle Catholic Church in New Middletown, Ohio on October 29, 1984, at 4:00 p.m.

Mickey, first of all, could you tell me a little bit about yourself in some general background?

B: I am married to the former Cathryn Yasechko. We were married June 3, 1944. I live here on Calla Road. I have lived here since April 1948. We have five children from age thirty-nine to twenty-three. There is Gary, Mary Catherine, Joey, Lou Ann and Margaret. I am retired now. I was self-employed since 1954. I was a self-employed electrician. I retired and I am recuperating and keeping busy.

H: Have you been a life-long resident out here?

B: No. I was born in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania and raised in Washington, D.C. I went into the service in 1941 in June. While in the service, I met my wife-- February 13, 1943. In May 1943 I had been sent to the Aleutians. I had been in the Aleutians for a year. When I came back, Cathryn and I were married--while on leave. I stayed in the service until December 1945 and went back overseas in the spring of 1945. When I came back after getting out of the service, I stayed in Washington for a couple of years and worked for the Potomac Electric Power Company. I did that in 1946 and we moved here in 1948.

- H: When did you become involved with the formation of St. Paul the Apostle Church?
- B: Being here before the church started . . . I was right here. In fact, I was a patient in the hospital at Cleveland. I knew that there had been some inquiries about the need of a church. There had been talk about it. I happened to be in the hospital in Cleveland at the time. The fellow next to me was reading his home paper. He jumped up and said, "Father Pawlewicz is leaving Ravenna and going to a place called New Middletown. Where the heck is New Middletown?" I said, "Oh, my goodness, that is out place." That was the first that I knew officially that a parish had been started here.
- H: Were you active on that small group of individuals who took the surveys to find out how many Catholic families were in the community?
- B: No, I didn't participate personally in that. My wife was involved with it making inquiries between her and her dad, and talking about it from time to time. I just wasn't involved in going out to take the census.
- H: When was Father Pawlewicz appointed officially to start the formation of the church?
- B: It was in July; as near as I can remember it was 1952. I have the date right in my mind.
- H: July 1953?
- B: Yes.
- H: What other individuals besides your father-in-law and your wife were involved in the early formation?
- B: Once we got Father here we got started and there were any number of people involved in such things as putting on picnics, raising money and getting things pretty well started. We picked the ground. Before they picked the ground, they looked around and looked at many pieces in many places here in the area for the location of the church. My father-in-law had looked at a piece that was a part of a farm that they were willing to consider for the church.
- H: What type of early fund raising drives were there? How did they go about raising the funds for building the church?
- B: We had a number of picnics that started right here in the woods right below us where we are sitting. My father-in-law

and all of the farmers at one time had a platform. They used to put on picnics at the Farmer's Association. The platform was still intact and they set up the platform and temporary booths. It was a small bazaar you might say with a picnic and dancing. That was part of the fund raising then. We did such things as raffle off a freezer. This is prior to the time that we got into the church. After we got into the church ground itself, we had picnics and a few bazaars on the church grounds. Later they moved the picnic grounds below Calla Road here. It is where the trailer park is. We had picnics in that area too. It got bigger. It got a little bigger than here. They had a pavilion there for bigger dances. There were many picnics out there. We had raffles.

- H: On the construction of the church, what men of the parish were involved in that?
- B: I was on the first council. The church was built . . . We had a contractor. Phillip Decicco was the general contractor at the time of the building of the church. After many meetings with the bishop, they took the plans and decided to build the church. We built what we have as far as a church. There were different people that had worked for him and other subcontractors here.
- H: Were a lot of the subcontractors from the area members of the parish?
- B: Yes. Tony Ohlin was the plumbing contractor at that time. Several of the men that I know who were working for Phillip Decicco at the time. Many of us were around there doing different things, unskilled things from time to time. He had his own crews in there. Kochis Electric did the electric work. It was the crew that actually constructed the church.
- H: Since you mentioned that you were on the first council, what other men were on the council?
- B: There was Steve Shirilla who is deceased now. Stanley Rutana and Rich Billock and I were on the council.
- H: What did the first council really do?
- B: The council in those days is different from the church council today. There is a lot more to being a councilman today than there was in those days. We had good rapport with Father Pawlewicz. He was nice and easy to work with as I remember. We didn't do all of the planning and things that I know goes on in the parish council today. It has changed since the church today.

H: There wasn't as many committees back then?

B: No. We go back to the old church as I am talking about it; it is there. The biggest part of the decisions made didn't have anything to do with the liturgy. Only occasionally we would count the money on holidays as far as that went.

H: Did you have frequent meetings or was it once a month?

B: We used to get together when there were different things to be done. Everytime we had something they would get ready to have a picnic or a dinner or whatever, we had a lot of things going on in those days. We had some dinners and a few things. We were around. I can't remember being a formal part of the parish as in today. I think council has regular meetings today. I can't remember it being so strong.

H: Going back to those first years before the church was built, you held masses in the elementary building? What was the first midnight mass like? Can you recall?

B: We had midnight mass at the school. We used the grade school. One thing that I remember quite a bit, each week a group of us would set up the altar. We would get the linens and all of Father's vestments. Father, himself, had no place to live at first. He lived here and there. He lived in East Palestine. He would go to St. Nick's during the week to have mass until later. Actually, he had no home until the parish bought the present home as near as I can remember about 1954. All of his vestments and all we used to take and the linens home. One would take and bring them home and get it cleaned and have it ready for the next Sunday and have it there in time for mass. The altar boys had to wear cassocks and they kept them at home.

H: Once the church was built then, what was the first midnight mass like?

B: I know we didn't have the pews; we had chairs. Everybody was so happy. Midnight mass was always quite a celebration.

H: For parochial education then, where did the kids go if they wanted to go to a parochial grade school?

B: East Palestine had a school. There weren't many from here going to Catholic schools. My first one, Joe, when he was in fourth grade he went to Holy Family. Mary Catherine went to the eighth grade. Gary has grade school here in Springfield. That was our first encounter with the school when Joey was in the fourth grade. In fact,

maybe you two were classmates. Were you not?

H: Right.

B: That Mrs. Voloson . . .

H: None went to St. Nick's then?

B: No. Ours didn't. At that time, Holy Family was just getting started. I think some of them went to Holy Family a few months or a year before ours did, I'm not sure, or just part of the year. I know some of the people sent their children to St. Nick's. A couple of them sent them to East Palestine.

H: Since you mentioned Father Pawlewicz as the first pastor, what was Father Pawlewicz like?

B: To me he was a real good friend. I had many happy hours with him. He was quite a friend. I enjoyed him.

H: Did he have good rapport with the rest of the parish?

B: Yes. I think I have heard many priests say that there are one-third that like them, one-third that don't, and one-third that don't care. I am sure of it with most priests that I have dealt with, but not everybody.

H: How many years was he pastor?

B: He was here from 1952 until he died in 1965. That was January 13, 1965 that he died.

H: He was here a good bit of time.

B: Yes.

H: He was here almost half of the parish's existence.

B: Those were the days when there were a lot of things to be decided and you tried to please ten people.

H: What were some of the early organizations that the parish had, the last church council?

B: We had the ladies' guild. We had a men's club. We had the Holy Name Society. Prior to being here we had to use St. Anthony's in Bessemer. They had a big Holy Name Society there at that time. We had a men's group here. We had a group. There was always something for the men to do.

H: According to the dedication book, there was a Holy Name

Society.

B: Was there? Okay, maybe we did.

H: How long did it last? I know today there isn't one.

B: I know. I am trying to remember as a Holy Name Society whether we recognized ourselves. I can't think of the dates really when it was and when it stopped being a Holy Name Society. It went right in and later on we had a bus club. The same men were in this and they called themselves the bus club. We had a choir pretty early in the church. That was another one of the men's groups that we had.

H: Who was their choir director?

B: First one we had was a man from East Palestine. His name was Herman Sloover. He came up and introduced himself to us. Some of us had already sang in the choir in different places from time to time. Herman came and organized us and stayed with us for quite a while. I think John Brentin followed him. That is as close as I can remember. We had a little pump organ that we used at the time. We carried it around from home to home for choir practice until we got into the church. I can't exactly remember the date that we bought the new organ.

H: In the building of the church, were a lot of the funds raised through pledges?

B: Oh, yes. We went around and made pledges. It seemed like everytime we went around, people would see us coming and they would wonder what we were recruiting. It was hard to go visit anybody without them thinking you were coming to collect either that or the high school drive or the cathedral drive because there was an out-pour. There was always something. It seems as though we were always collecting.

H: How many families were there in the first few years of the parish? Today we have around six hundred families.

B: I imagine we had a couple of hundred. We had two masses. At one time, we had one mass.

H: How many masses . . .

B: I know we had two masses right here. We had the 9:00 and 10:00 masses. We started out with two masses. I'm not sure. I think we only had one mass in the school. I can't remember two masses in the school. I am going

- H: Being that this community was a rural farm and Protestant dominated, how were the early days of the church accepted out here? Was there a lot of static or were they amiable and very supportive and acceptive of the church?
- B: I know there were different times that the things were different out here. You probably get a better picture of some of the early days prior to the church being here from someone else that was raised here better than me. For me, I didn't feel as much, if any, as somebody else who was raised as a child in this neighborhood without a church here.
- H: What families would be best to ask that question to?
- B: There are a lot of families especially the Slovak families. They are the ones who could probably tell you. They had more feeling of the rejection as being Catholics. Unfortunately, people sometimes weren't able to speak the language back then.
- H: Since you have been around from the early days of St. Paul's, when Vatican II made its changes in the mid 1960's, how did those changes affect St. Paul's? How did the people of St. Paul's react initially to the changes brought out by the Vatican?
- B: As we all know, change is a hard thing to come about. I know you still hear people that aren't happy about the things that we are doing today that we have been changing from time to time. We moved the altar. We turned the altar around. That was a shock to a lot of people. Our church was pretty well decorated to the history of St. Paul. That was one of the first things that happened the time after Father died and things got changed around here. We came one day and the church was painted and then all of the paintings were gone. Many people were disrupted over this. We will always have feelings at the time we want to change something. It is not going to satisfy everyone. I remember the change from Latin when we stopped singing. That made a lot of people unhappy. Certainly a lot of people were happy to not to have to listen to us sing off-key like that. At the same time there were people who missed it and I know they missed it. That is some of the things that we have to live with as far as being a church.
- H: How long did the women wear their hats? After Vatican II did they stick to the old . . .
- B: That is hard to think about. You see so few people wearing hats today that it was something about . . . I had almost

forgotten about that now that you mention it. I could see people coming in and putting handkerchiefs on their hair.

H: That definitely influenced the hat industry in the country.

B: It did.

H: They had to have lost a lot of money.

B: Sure. That was almost like eating fish on Friday with the fishermen.

H: Father Haidet would have been pastor at the time that the Vatican II changes were really starting.

B: That was 1965. Things were coming because we moved the altar. He put the first . . . We didn't have the altar facing him in 1965.

H: How did he deal with the changes? In his introducing to the parish, was there a lot of preparation done to explain the changes?

B: Not a thing. I think more things happened than were explained. I think as we went on there has been more. However, there were classes that many people went to. I went to them myself at Cardinal Mooney. The bishop went through with most of the plans or changes. We had classes on them. I'm sure that many people did not absorb it until it happened. I think we talked about it and heard about it and then after that happened . . .

H: Using your own personal viewpoint, how do you think the changes have either benefited or hurt the church?

B: I like the changes in the church. I am happy. I used to sing as far as the Latin and all. I feel better with the English today. I like the new English. In fact it's close to the liturgy but more personal and the more I like it. I feel that it has been a step for us. Many people haven't taken the step as freely as me. I enjoyed the liturgy much more today than I did back in the old days when we used to sing. I feel it was more of a performance back in those days than a celebration what it is made to be.

H: For historical value, how do you respond to the fact that the Pope, John Paul II, had given the okay for an occasional celebration of the Latin mass?

B: I feel like that as I do about how many people who could speak the language such as our national churches. They have many places where the sermon is in their tongue

and vernacular. I can see it. I know there is a need. In fact I think I know why . . . If they had not chopped it off real quick, we might not have gone into the vernacular as quick as we did. A lot of people didn't like that. I can think back to where you said about the changes before. I think that was one of the hardest things for many people to accept that change from Latin to English.

H: Getting back to the history of the church, when was the first confirmation held out here?

B: I should know. I can't remember the exact date. I remember it. All of my children were confirmed here. I was just trying to remember dates. Right off the top of my head I can't remember the first confirmation.

H: Bishop Walsh was here?

B: Yes, he was here many times. He was here to lay the cornerstone; he was here for confirmations, and the dedication of the church.

H: I had a chance to meet him personally when I was a first grader. He seemed to be a person with great reverence and respect and definitely . . .

B: And warmth.

H: And warmth.

B: I can remember when Father lived on Main Street. I remember one of the priests that was the pastor at St. Anthony's in Bessemer. The priests were all sitting with the bishop and they were having a friendly visit right in the living room. They said that they couldn't have a closeness with their bishop at the time as we had with Bishop Walsh.

H: Going back to the first church, what was the inside of the church like then?

B: With the exception of the back of the altar, we had the story of St. Paul in the painting.

H: Murals?

B: Murals, right. We had this artist do this. He stayed here. We had a little motel on Main Street. He stayed there. It was something. He would wake up at 1:00 a.m. or 2:00 a.m. and he would be painting. He was doing his painting from the basement of the church. He would paint when the Spirit moved him, I guess. They had them right in back

on the right-hand side of the altar on the back wall back of St. Paul, St. Paul being struck from the horse. We had an eye right up over top of the center. It was the eye of Christ looking. It was the eye of God looking at us. There were angels on the side. It was a lot of beauty. There is a reason for this. Many people know it, I think. Too many times people will concentrate their thoughts too much on the paintings and the murals of the things in church and not pay any attention to what is going on at the altar.

- H: It had to do a lot with the fact that before Vatican II with the mass being in Latin a lot of people had no Latin background. That had to be . . .
- B: That was their instructions. Our stained glass windows . . . If you look at any of the big churches or cathedrals you go through, you will see the whole . . . Some places you will see all of the decades of the rosary portrayed. It goes back to the days when people couldn't read. They did their vigil reading. That was their Bible to some people who couldn't read. They would follow the architecture of the church and the beauty of the church and everything that is there. You could go through a lot of the Old Testament. All of the scenery would be a thebas. It is a lesson in Bible history.
- H: We have had numerous pastors. Which ones have stood out as good spiritual leaders? Each person had their own strengths and weaknesses. Which ones have had the greatest rapport in your opinion with the parish?
- B: First of all, I haven't seen a priest that I haven't liked. Each one has had his mark with me. There are different feelings that I have for each one. Father Brobst, I liked him. They all have been good. They all have been, like each one of us, with their own personality. They are nice. I have had good relationships with them.
- H: How have you seen St. Paul's the Apostle as a parish over the last thirty years? How has it grown?
- B: There are many things that we have had here. We have more people. I have one thing that I want to say, it is not unhonorable. Something would be nice, we haven't had a vocation from this parish.
- H: We have one right now.
- B: We have one in the making now. That is one thing that our parish needs. I think it is on its way. We had one in for a couple of years. He wasn't a member of our parish when he went in. He was a product of our parish.

We had another one that went in but it wasn't his calling. We do have a nun. We have one sister. We have Sister Bridget Nolin. That is the one thing that I wish we had more of. It reminds me one time when someone was saying to my wife--I happened to be listening--"Gee whiz, I wish the bishop would send us a young priest. Why don't we get another priest, some young priest that can help build up the piracy?" My wife said, "I had two boys and neither one of mine went. Did yours?" Somewhere along the line, something hasn't . . . I don't know if it is our fault or not, but it just hasn't materialized.

H: When the CCD Center was built, was there ever any hope for it to become a parochial grade school?

B: Yes. I think many of our early people at the time when we were building it thought that we would have a school. I have to say that I didn't think that we were large enough for a school. I was raised in Catholic schools. I had an idea of the costs to maintain a school. I just didn't think that we were strong enough to have a Catholic school. I guess that is why we haven't had a school. I know that schools are a great thing for a parish if the parish can afford it. We aren't big enough for it.

H: Is there anything else that you can think of that would be helpful for the early history of the parish? Is there anything like that you can add?

B: There are many things that I haven't clarified. I have stumbled over them and can't remember.

H: Are there any individuals?

B: There are so many people. It would kind of be hard to go through and mention all of the people. I would love to be able to think of everybody that helped us all of the way through. It is just so many people. We all know that we didn't get where we are at by one individual or one small group. It was accomplished with all of us working together to get where we are.

H: How early does the bingo history go back in the church?

B: I was there. I worked many times on that too. That wasn't long after we got the building out of the way. We got the basement and the bingo was started. In fact, I remember Vince Carney was the one who brought the . . . I think he donated the first bingo equipment that we had. That was in the early days of bingo.

H: Are there any changes that you would like to see either in the Catholic church of St. Paul's or are you happy with the way things are?

B: Change is like the season. Who knows what is going to come in the spring. It will be different and certainly the church is going to be changing. There are going to be things changing in the church. I hope that I will be as happy with whatever comes about. This is the best way that I can say it. I noticed in church we are a moving people and it is going to change.

H: I would like to thank you for your time.

B: Thank you. I enjoyed being here with you.

END OF INTERVIEW