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MONSIGNOR JOHN McGARRY LOOKS BACK SIXTY YEARS

By Father James Murphy, printed in the June 21, 1973 issue of the *Catholic Herald*



Monsignor John McGarry

A priest whose early years in the ministry are rooted in the gold mining origins of the Sacramento Diocese will celebrate the 60th anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood next week. Monsignor John McGarry, who spent the first 10 years of his priesthood along the gold dust trails of Northern California carrying the Word and Eucharist to the mining towns of Yuba, Sierra and Plumas counties, will be the guest of honor at Our Lady of Lourdes parish, Colusa, where he has been pastor emeritus since 1968. His friends and acquaintances have an unusually long and varied priestly life to pay their respects to, a life that spans the pontificates of six popes and the teams of five bishops in Sacramento.

“Father McGarry became the pastor of the Downieville parish in 1915 and was such until the spring of 1926,” says a recently published book on the gold mining days of Downieville. “He was the last priest to visit the other churches of the parish in northern, southern, and western Sierra County on horseback. He is still remembered for the striking figure he made – always well-groomed on his beautiful horse.”



Photo by John E Boll 2012

Historic Church of the Immaculate Conception, Downieville

The present day pastor of Downieville, Father John Maloney, recently took the old monsignor and this reporter to the sites of some of those once booming mining towns – La Porte, St Louis, Howland Flat – now little more than simple monuments marking historic spots along an unused trail that was never meant for cars.

He would have gotten there faster on his old horse, monsignor commented with a little exaggeration, as the car crawled over the rough terrain. Well, not quite!

In the old days it took six hours to ride the 29 mile trail from Downieville to La Porte, he admitted. He did the rounds of that part of his parish about once a month in those days. And the rounds took the best part of a week: after staying a night or two in La Porte he moved on through Howland Flat to Gibsonville which was another six hours riding, and finally another full day's journey to Johnsville before heading back to Downieville for Sunday.

The trails he used wind their way through countryside that would match any part of the world for sheer beauty: wooded hillsides and peaceful canyons decorated by rivers that proved to be as alluring in their deposits of gold nuggets (one nugget weighing 26 pounds was found) as they were in their wealth of wild beauty. But to try to get through this area was another matter as the early trail blazers found out. On the trail from Downieville to La Porte alone I had to cross three canyons and climb two ridges," Monsignor McGarry said. "That was during the summer months," he added. In the winter, when the place was snowed in, he simply did as much visiting as he could on skis. "Skiing was the first thing I had to learn when I went here," he said.

One of his most memorable experiences of Downieville was his efforts to get to the place after his appointment in the winter of 1915, he told us. He had been assistant pastor in Grass Valley when word came from Bishop Thomas Grace of his first appointment as pastor. Just before Christmas he set out by stagecoach for Downieville with a sketchy idea of the mining world from his years experience in Grass Valley. The first night he bedded down in Nevada City. Next morning, when he looked for a ticket on the coach to Alleghany, the next leg of the journey, he was told the coach was full and nobody had any idea when the next coach would be going that way. "You couldn't fit a packet of cigarettes on that coach, it was so packed with Christmas parcels," he said.

After arguing with the driver, the young priest, just two years out of Ireland, was allowed to stand on the drawing shaft behind the six horses and lean on the front of the coach under the driver's feet (the driver sat on a high seat on the front of the coach). It wasn't very comfortable, but he was glad to get it, he said. "I was dressed in a good suit and collar, not suitable for that kind of trail," he said, "but it was a delightful day for riding. The weather was nice and clear."

Going up steep hills the passengers had to get off and walk through the ankle deep mud while the horses struggled to drag the coach up the rain drenched hillside. Downhill everyone remained in their places except Father McGarry who was advised to walk. On one hill, however, the driver took pity on the young priest and let him stay in his place on the draw shaft. Father McGarry was sorry. The coach brakes failed to work and the horses began to race downhill.

“I had gripped the two iron rings (he held on to those for balance) the wrong way but was afraid to change my grip in case I should fall under the coach,” he said. “Then I began to sweat – remember I had my heavy coat on. I will never forget that experience.”

When the young priest finally arrived in Alleghany that night, tired and covered with mud, he found that it was worthwhile. The people of the town were enjoying a Christmas party and when word got around that a new priest had come into their midst Father McGarry soon became the center of attention.

“I got to know more people that night than for the following six months,” he said. “I was so at home there that I stayed for Christmas. He finally got to Downieville for New Year’s Day.



Photo by John E Boll 2013

**Our Lady of Lourdes Parish, Colusa
Where Monsignor John McGarry was Pastor from
1947 -1967**