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BELL TOLLS FOR TINY ST JOSEPH CHURCH IN AMADOR CITY

Article by Margaret Allender, Printed in the October 28, 1980 issue of The Sacramento Bee



Photo from the Sacramento Bee 1980

People Gather for the Auction of St Joseph Church, Amador City in 1980

AMADOR CITY, Amador Co. – It took less than 10 minutes to end a century-old tradition in the state's smallest incorporated community. In that brief time Sunday afternoon, St Joseph's Church left the domain of the Roman Catholic Church and became a Mother Lode vacation home for a Stockton family.

Many townspeople who remembered attending Mass in the small, white, Victorian-styled church on Fleeheart Lane joined prospective buyers in a crowd of about 100 people as the church-disposal action began.

The crowd pressed close to the weather-worn steps and stragglers climbed the two flights of decrepit wooden stairs from the street as St Joseph's bell rang out in its last official proclamation.

Nell Stark of Sutter Creek, the auctioneer, invited prospective bidders into the bare and dusty church, which had stood vacant for 16 years since services were consolidated in Sutter Creek's Immaculate Conception Church, about three miles to the south.

Stark and the Rev. Albert O'Connor, pastor of Immaculate Conception, stood before the white altar and addressed the group, which overflowed into a small choir loft which once held an organ.

It was, O'Connor said, time for the diocese to sell the property as the church was no longer needed to service a population which had dwindled greatly since the end of the last century when the gold mines filled the Mother Lode town with workers and families.

He read a deed, pausing to decipher the elegant longhand used to record legal documents in 1877 when John and Sarah O'Rourke sold the 96-by-82 foot lot to the archbishop of San Francisco for \$100 in gold coins. The 700 square-foot building was erected promptly on the lot and was renovated in 1924, bringing electricity to the church.

A rustic structure without water or sewage connection, the church is in a residential zone and could not be considered for commercial uses, O'Connor said.

With spectators peering through small panes opened in frosted glass windows, the bidding opened hesitantly at \$25,000. With almost imperceptible movements, bidders responded to Stark's efforts and pushed the price up another \$6,000. "So here for \$31,000, we have the end of St Joe's, Stark pleadingly asked, and got no higher answer.

With their \$31,000 bid accepted, Rex and Jeannie Buethe of Stockton became owners of the property. They had visited the site after seeing the sale notice in the newspaper Saturday. With Charles Bloom, a Stockton contractor friend, they decided the location would be a perfect second home.

Buethe said he expects it will cost \$20,000 to make the church livable as a home. Jeannie Buethe said the family is not Catholic but had no reservations about living in the church.

"We've always been attracted to unusual things. And we like the Mother Lode," she said. "I sure never thought we'd get it, though."

O'Connor said he was glad the building would be put to use. "It seems like an excellent use of the property," He said.



Photo by John E Boll 2014

Former St Joseph Church in Amador City, Now a Private Home

For some of its former parishioners, the sale of St Joseph's was a sad event. "I think it's a shame," said Joseph Garibaldi. "If the Sutter Creek people hadn't wanted the 11 o'clock Mass it still would be open and the old-time regulars still would come here."

"It was so cute, with those stiff-backed little pews. You really sat straight at St Joe's," remarked an Amador City woman.

"You came here for 11 o'clock Mass," recalled Wilma Yount of Sutter Creek, speaking of the hard-working parish priest. "It was 11:05," Stark said. "Always just a little late."

Proceeds from the sale will go to the Immaculate Conception building fund.