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## **Interview Transcript**

*Sacred Spaces of Greater Cincinnati*

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### **Mike Crusham**

Archivist & Tour Guide, Old St. Mary's Church

Interview conducted by Meg Hanrahan, Producer, Voyageur Media Group, Inc.,  
at Old St. Mary's Church, 2007

From the 1830's till about 1860, the German migration that started as a trickle became a torrent. They endured many hardships in their country with religious persecution as well as their young sons fighting the battles with the different principalities in Germany and the early settlers here wrote home and said "Come to the new Over-the-Rhine, the river runs through, much the same it does in our father land," and they came. Some sheepishly, some with great intentions, all looking for a new life, a new lease on life and they found it here in this Nation. These German people coming didn't know the language when they arrived in Over-the-Rhine, so they were determined to build a German-speaking church; Holy Trinity, which no longer exists, was built in 1834 in the West End. But because it was such a trek for the people in this area in Over-the-Rhine, it was really a lot of trouble to go to church, so they chose this piece of property here on Main Street and built their church in 1842.

The building of the church was a hands-on construction project done by these immigrants. They were very, very qualified artisans and craftsmen. While the men chopped the timbers in the Pendleton Woods for the crisscross beams in this building, the ladies were busy baking the bricks in their ovens; not only the bakers were baking them. We noticed this in our later restoration: the porosity and the shape of the bricks placed great credence to the fact that that's actually what happened. It was passed on as legend but we were thrilled that we found out it was true. Pendleton Woods was a knoll with old oak trees. That was before St. Paul's was built. Incidentally St. Paul's was built just a few years after this church, with the influx of these German people, St. John's and St. Paul's had to be built within the next five years.

They all gathered together in a neighborhood and they all stuck together, all Germanic people. You need only to cross the canal to get your best bratwurst and your best sausage and so forth and of course they were very big tradesmen. They had a lot of capabilities and whereas the Irish were poor dirt farmers, these people really built a city. Originally, the church was 66 feet wide with 142 feet in length and it became so intense with the population, 48 feet had to be added to the church in future years. It was a very plain church and everything was hands-on, as we mentioned, but we received a lot of things from the Germanic or even any kind of European nations. The windows, of course, were original and they were changed in 1890 but they have a significance of their homeland with the floral patterns rather than ecclesiastic patterns as many churches have. The confessionals came from other churches, a lot of the statues came from the other churches and we have a vast majority of wooden carved statues that many churches do not have today; all carved in the old country.

As you approach the altar, it seems you're looking at a lot of marble and stone. Actually, everything beyond the communion rail is of wood. It was either faux marble or painted to look like marble or carved by these German craftsmen. The statues behind the altar, of course, are carved wood. And the picture you'll notice in the center of the altar is movable. It can be dropped down for different feasts of the church, the holy days, with March 25th of St. Mary's of the Annunciation is one and it is lowered, much the same as old windows with the ropes and the lead weights, with the help of three or four members. They can be popped out of their position, lowered and stored behind the altar, and the [painting for the] next feast day rises up for the next six months or so. We have three of these paintings left, the 4th one was damaged, it was a Christ on the cross and we never located that.

The gold filigree that you see at the top of the altar itself is all of carved wood also and we remodeled all these in the 1990s, regilded everything with gold leaf. The church has seen many renovations and of course they went on for years until the growth we mentioned. A lot of things were changed as the church grew older and as the shrines were donated to the church: the coffered ceiling where the rondels of the saints that taught about the Virgin Mary were added later. The altar was moved back when it was extended, and the paintings that you see, the murals above the altar were done about in the 1890s, and other features, like new pews were put in. What did they do with the old

pews with the German type of character? They put wainscoting on the walls, you see on the side of the church, never wasting a thing.

Our most recent renovation recalls the reason for this church's being, because many, many hands were involved in the renovations. The company that did the last renovation in 1990s was Evergreen and they solicited the help of anyone who would help. We were permitted to do a lot of the cleaning and even in some cases, some of the touch-up painting. Some of the ladies were even allowed to touch up the faux marble on the altar pieces. So, we all were very much involved in this. We are involved in Over-the-Rhine today with our Mary Magdalene house and our training for new fathers. So, it has constantly been a hands-on, volunteer type of a church.

Whereas some people might fear being in this location of the city where we have so much turmoil and unrest -- the riots proved themselves to be very, very difficult for the area -- we'd like to pay note to the fact that though windows were broken in the neighborhood, not one of our beautiful stained glass windows were touched. And father expounded on this at the mass the next day; God helped us.

The church itself has gone through many transitions: through history, from the old German hysteria back in World War I and even in World War II: even riots between the people in the streets here in front of the church during 1917 when the Kaiser was doing his thing in Germany. There was a lot of turmoil in the area and today, we also have turmoil that is of a different kind. But the people that come here have no fear because they know God is protecting Old Saint Mary's. Why would we still be here if it weren't for the grace of God? Really, the hands-on thing we talked about and the donations of the people; we had many, many angels, who have helped us with our renovations.

We have great benefactors because of the beauty of the church and the types of sacraments we have. I might mention that the traditionalists are the people that come to this parish because we do have that Latin mass which holds us together. The German mass is a leftover from the old days and it gives us a lot of color and a lot of background as being the only German mass in the city and then we also have the new mass. So, we satisfy as many as 350 or 400 parishioners or associate parishioners at Old Saint Mary's.

Our steeple is 170 feet high and it was the highest thing when it was built here in Over the Rhine and it contains three bells; Mary, Joseph, and Little Ann. Little Ann was used as a toll bell for fires that were in the area and the people themselves actually did a fire watch up in the tower during the old days. Most of the things that you see in the church were donated from foreign places or places overseas. But we had artists who've have said the paintings they've done in this church were remembered to their deathbed: Wilhelm Lamprecht did our mural at the top of the altar, the two murals and one was the decision of Mary to be the mother of Jesus when the world was created. And also on your right side is the crowning of Mary in heaven. Wilhelm Lamprecht on his deathbed said he was proudest of the work that he had done in Cincinnati with Saint John's and Saint Mary's and also the motherhouse of Mount Saint Joseph, the crowning of Mary in their church or chapel.

The stations, we are not absolutely sure but they may have been in many churches but we received them as a gift and I always say, "We're a hand me down church but we're very glad to have what we get" and you'll notice they are very beautifully wood carved and hand painted. We can't trace exactly where they originated from but we think they're from Europe.

The first bell that was temporarily in the tower was cast by Levi Coffin. Levi Coffin was a very big champion of the Underground Railroad where he secreted many, many people up to Canada through this area. He even had a rooming house over on Broadway with the Quakers where they would hide them during the day and secrete them out; secretly move them at night to their freedom in Canada.

The altar itself is original and when the addition was made, everything was moved back and it's all in the original state that it was in when it was built in 1842.

My daughter worked for a while in the office here at Old Saint Mary's. And one day, as we secretly went through the attic and the tower, I tripped over a large stone in the attic. We got a flashlight and found out, as she said, it was probably the keystone that held up the stone arch that was in the original church. It was lying up there since the 1890s, very dirty, but a good scrubbing with household bleaches and so forth got it looking the way it was and we proudly show it now in the church; one of my proudest finds.

Before the renovations were done of course, many, many years of candles, smoke and dirt was covering a lot of the artworks. Some of the murals was hardly discernible in front of the church. We had to light up some of the

rondels so the people could see them, and they came out gloriously in the restoration. But what really, really amazes us is on Palm Sunday when we had just done the ceiling. Everyone assumed it's just a flat painted ceiling. Once it was cleaned, the trompe l'oeil style of depth perception just popped right into your eye on that Sunday. Everybody just went "ah."

The reliquary is one of our prized possessions. The reliquary on the right side of the church was donated by the Holy Spirit Chapel, which was torn down when they built the twin towers of Procter & Gamble. We received this as a gift, this reliquary, which contains contents of lockets that hold a drop of blood, a piece of flesh, of piece of clothing that may have touched a person that led a sacred life and they have been collected as far back as 1200-1300 a.d. from Europe and then we got it here in our church and we were very, very pleased to receive them. It's about 1200 lockets. The ladies in the church did all the research on them.

The pipes in the organ came from music hall. When they took the organ pipes out of the music hall back in the 70's, I believe, they went with their trucks and they brought them all up to our old St. Mary's and they are included in our organ now up in our loft. There are so many left that are stored up in the priest house attic right now, but that's the way they were--the Germans -- it's their church and that's the spirit of the whole thing.

The pulpit that you see in the church, beautifully carved in Europe, we received as a gift also. It even has the Holy Spirit Dove in the dome at the top. It was originally situated midway in the church, so the speaker could be heard all through the church. Later, that was moved. With amplification and sound, we didn't need it there so we installed it in the front of the church. That's a very precious item. It's one of our finest pieces in the church. We got a few termites in that at one time but I think we won that battle.

In 1844 our Pastor had a reason to visit Europe, and while in Rome, he was presented with a very fine gift from the dignitaries of the church. It's a glass box containing bones and a vial of blood of a martyr that gave their life for Christ and was brought from one of the catacombs. It's installed in the window in the middle of the altar of the church since 1844. She's called "Santa Martura", which means Holy Martyr.

People think, because of our area, "Why do you have so many masses?" We have the wonderful Latin mass at 9:15 with its own type of congregation. We have that German mass at 11:00, which is very well attended by the most recent German immigrants that are here. And we also have an English mass, the modern English mass, at 12:30. We also have a 7:00 o'clock on Sunday night, which is less attended but we have a 12:10 mass everyday of the week except for Sunday. These different groups are probably what congeal the Parish into one very cohesive group of people that holds the church together. Everybody works together to get done what has to be done and we've been very fortunate to keep the church alive all these years.

The Blacks and the Irish all lived down here along the Deer Creek Commons, where the creeks are, over by the slaughterhouses. And then they'd get jobs on the river, then they worked into the society, through the police department, the post office, civil service; and we have today a good mix.

I always like to blame the migration of the Germans to the hilltops on the five inclines they built that made them all move up the hill to safer, cleaner, 15 degrees cooler hilltops; all the factories were down here. And the Germans all left because they became successful. Now, we have no Germanic-type of look to Over-the-Rhine. The wonderful epithet of Over-the-Rhine had such a different connotation today than it had before. It's almost like a slum now, but it was very beautiful in those days because they all had their little cottages and their beautiful homes they built; greatest collection of 19th century architecture in America, and some of it is gone because of the West End being gone. They were very proud of their homes, and they worked hard, they played hard, they sang hard, and they had the exercise programs [the Turnverein], the Fest, they called everything Fest, you know. But they started this fitness of body, and fitness of soul, and fitness of the arts, and enjoyment of food.

As they arrived here in this country, their choice was really Over-the-Rhine because it was a poor old neighborhood. It was out of the city, the rents were cheaper, and they were gathered together in that area a Germanic people. But as they progressed or used their talents and their capabilities in manufacturing and production, they became the key people in the city. Bringing in the raw materials from the hinterlands down the Miami and Erie Canal, the production of these great artisans, and craftsman, and the shipping at the river, made us the 6th largest city by the 1860's, just through their ingenuity and their hard work ethic. Then, of course, later on they all moved to the hilltops after they became successful, but we're proud that we still have this church to represent Over-the-Rhine. It's the only thing German that's left down here.

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