

Founding fathers of St. Simon's Church gather outside the building in this early photo.

Eastern Orthodox Christian history here is rich one

Editor's note: This is the first in a series on the people who founded Ironwood's St. Simon's Church, and the church.

By **RON TRETHEWEY**
Globe Correspondent

Their reasons for coming to this country were the same as most immigrants.

They were looking for greater opportunity — economic opportunity to be exact.

And Tony Michaels' father, Sam, was one of a group of settlers from Lebanon to find their way to Ironwood.

"They all came about the same time, around 1912, Michaels said. "This was a time in the Middle East before they discovered oil, so times were tough. Most of them lived off the land, in fact at one time it was called the Paris of the Middle East.

"Renowned since biblical times for its cedar forests, the mild and moderate climate of Lebanon produced a rich and abundant variety of fruits and vegetables, but the work was hard and economic opportunity just wasn't there for

everyone."

Michaels related that people would ask how these Lebanese people ended up settling in the western end of the Upper Peninsula.

"I guess they landed in New York and my father said they asked the immigration people there where the best place was to look for jobs and they told them the U.P. because the mines were opening and lumbering was prosperous and jobs were plentiful and because jobs on the railroad were numerous, they ended up here," he said.

And so they came, the founding fathers of Lebanese descent.

According to Jack Jacobs, a practicing attorney for McDonald-Jacobs-Silc and Fauerbach, who is now retired, there was Isaac, Albert, Abraham, Jacobs, Simon, Nicholas, Michaels, Bashara, Elias, George, John, Hydar and Khoury, many of them Biblical names that were used down through the ages.

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Most Lebanese became merchants in Ironwood

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And when they got here most of them settled on the northside of town around Harding and Michigan streets, according to Michaels.

Most of them, however, never did become miners or lumberman, Michaels said.

"Instead, most of them, like Albert, John and Khoury became merchants and businessmen because that was mostly their parents' background in Lebanon. They were mostly entrepreneurs in the old country," said Michaels.

One of them, John Albert, a son of one of the founding fathers, George Albert, is a successful downtown merchant to this day.

Tony Michael's father became a railroad man for the Chicago Northwestern Railway. He put in many of the rails back in those days before he was promoted to section foreman.

It was a free train ticket offered by the railroad to Tony's father and the family that almost led to them becoming Californians.

"The railroad supplied free train tickets for California and my mother and father went out there," he said. "My father found California with its moderate climate, its orchards and wine vineyards, for instance, Napa Valley, a lot like Lebanon and my father wanted to stay, but my mother didn't want to look forward to the trouble of moving, especially with us kids, so we came back.

"However, this was before the California boom, which came after World War II when a lot of the veterans from the war, who were stationed there, came back to settle," he said. "In those days real estate was real cheap. You could have made a killing out there."

Anyway, these Lebanese immigrants took their religion, Eastern Orthodox Christianity, which dates back to the early 1900s with them to Ironwood, too, according to Jacobs, who writes: "In

the beginning religious services were held in various homes and baptisms, weddings and funerals were conducted by visiting priests."

Next: Building a church.

Church welcomed residents of Gogebic Range

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"The women raised the money through crocheting doilies and auctioning them or conducting raffles," he said. "They also put on buffets and big church suppers."

"In those days people had big dining room tables and buffets and most of the time covered them with doilies, so they were very popular."

Then, with money in hand, the men went to work. "The men built the church," he said. "I don't know if there was one master carpenter. I think they just all pitched in."

According to Michaels, the parish had a hard time securing priests, or getting priests to visit very often.

Some of the Priests assigned to Ironwood and the area were of the fair weather variety, Michael said.

"A lot of them would come in the spring and leave in the fall when winter came," he said.

"They loved our summers."

When they weren't able to get priests, they would have services among themselves and singing responses from the cantors was at the center of the service.

"We had some cantors with beautiful voices," he said.

"George and Elias Simon had fine voices and so did Albert Isaac. He had a beautiful voice."

"These original church fathers knew the old Byzantine Orthodox religion."

Dorothy Albert, wife of Dr. Sam Albert, of Ironwood agreed. "We had cantors, one on each side of the church and they would sing to one another."

"A lot of us younger members couldn't understand the words, but the music was beautiful to hear."

"They prided themselves in their music," she added. "Most of them learned their reading and writing from the priest, for the priest was the scholar of the villages in the old country (Lebanon) and under the priests they became altar boys and then cantors."

Albert recalls a humorous story she was told. "It was about my great uncle, who married Mike Khoury's sister," she said. "He was small enough to go up the spire to put the bell up there."

Many hands built church

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By RON TRETHERWEY
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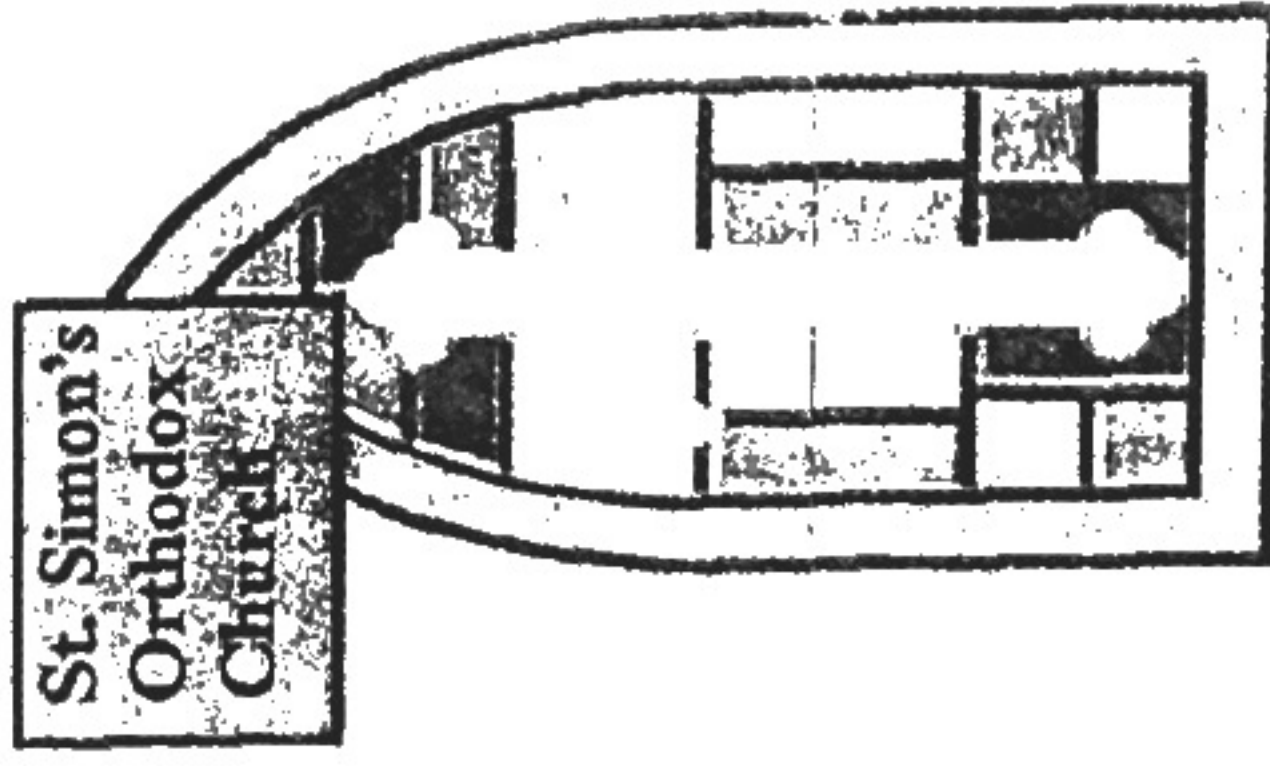
On April 7, 1914, the site of the St. Simon's Church property at 234 East Harding Avenue was purchased from Ben and Richard Tretthewey for \$300.

The church was facing east, while the homes on the north side of that block face south, which left plenty of room behind the church.

The founding fathers had a purpose for all that land, but ended up not using it, according to Tony Michaels.

"Like many old churches during those days and before community cemeteries were established, they planned on using it as a cemetery for their church people, but they never did use it," he said. "The families ended up burying their dead in separate family parcels in the Riverside Cemetery."

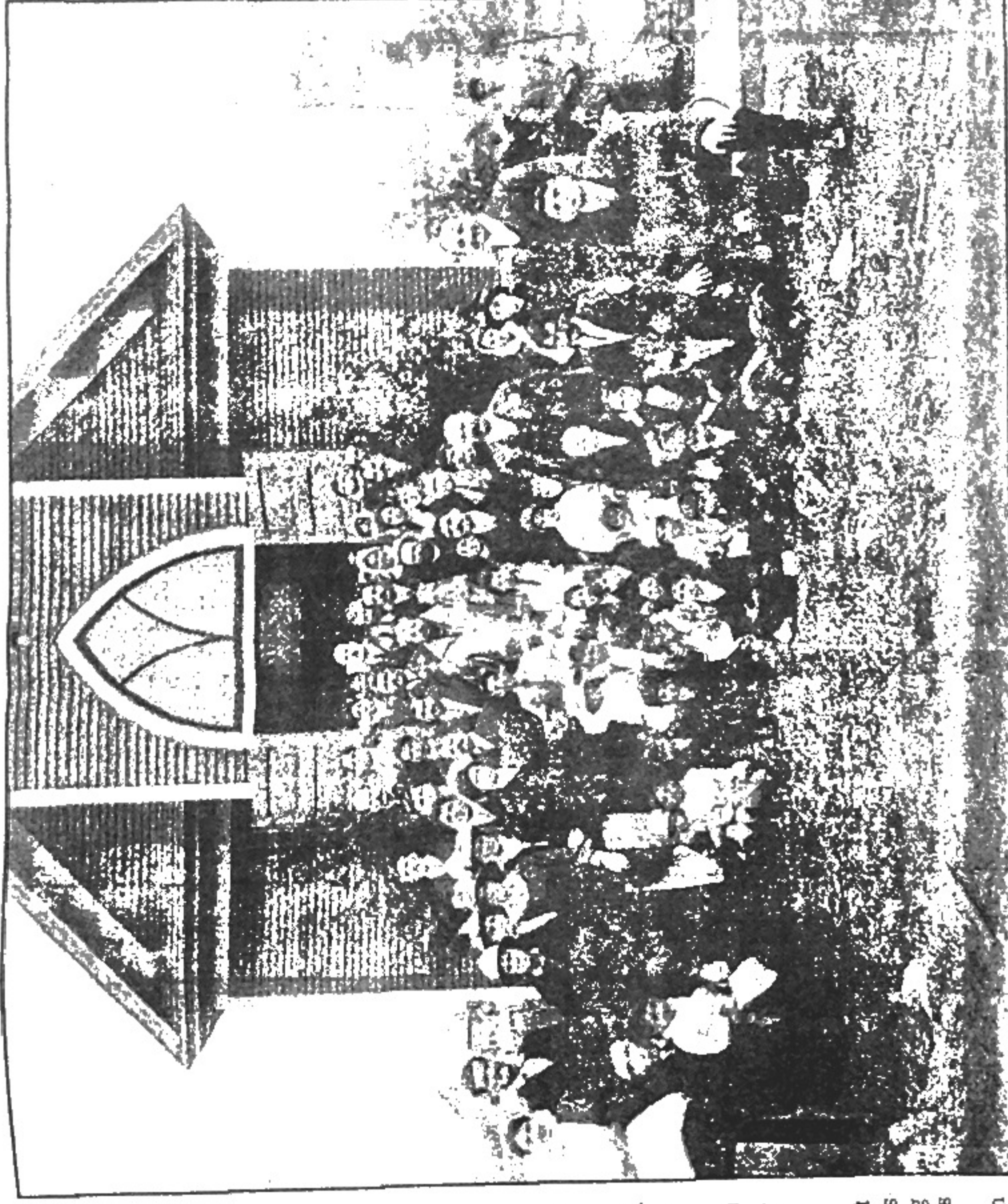
Shortly after 1914, the church described by Jacobs as the "modest building" and "one of the oldest Christian Churches in the



Midwest diocese consisting of 11 states," was built.

Michaels said it was a cooperative effort of both the men and women and the husbands and wives.

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Members of St. Simon's Church gather early in the church's history, perhaps at Easter. The man crouched at left is the late John Albert, a jeweler in downtown Ironwood for many decades. He holds a young child. His brother, Moses, is at left, standing behind four women.

According to church members, they've had priests of various nationalities. In fact, there was one Englishman.

"His name was Peter Horton-Blair or something like that and he was supposed to have come from English nobility," Michaels said. "He converted to Orthodoxy and was here around 1950 or just before we (he and his wife Gertrude (Kovacevich) got married in 1953. He died here in Ironwood."

The church branched out to include some of the Serbian Orthodox, but they didn't begin to come until the late 1940s and early '50s.

"Father John Matheison was

very instrumental in getting the Wakefield Serbian people like the Popovichs and Miskovichs to attend," said Dorothy Albert.

"The Serbians were welcome at any time, but I think that being most of them were from Wakefield, that transportation kept them away," offered Michaels.

Mary (Miskovich) Erickson, who married husband Gordy in the church in 1960, agreed.

"In our case that was true," she said. "Back 50 years ago, there were few cars and we had such a large family we couldn't fit everybody in a car or truck. In those days, the Priest would come to the home."

"In fact, when I was about eight I remember they would come to our house and we would have Catechism there."

Erickson remembers parts of her wedding in the tiny church clearly.

"It was a very long and ritualistic service and we had more than 200 people there," she said. "We had a family of 12 children and there were other Miskovich families, too. We filled the church ourselves."

"The ceremony is very ritualistic and they don't bend the rules for anything," she added. "The things I recall most about our wedding were that Gordy and I wore crowns studded with colored stones and gold and they tied our hands together with a soft cloth and we had to walk around the altar table several times."

"I remember they would come to our house and we would have Catechism there."

Dorothy Popovich and her family, who lived in Plymouth Location in Wakefield, began to come in the late '40s and early '50s when Father Matheison was there.

"He really got us to come," she said. "In our family it wasn't the distance. In those days, the church provided not only religious services, but also a social gathering. So many Serbian Orthodox people sought to extend their cultural ties in this country."

In Duluth, there was a Serbian Orthodox Church community.

"Besides, they had church in Ironwood usually only once a month, so many times we would go to the Serbian Orthodox Church in West Duluth and for special occasions like Christmas and Easter we would always go to Duluth."

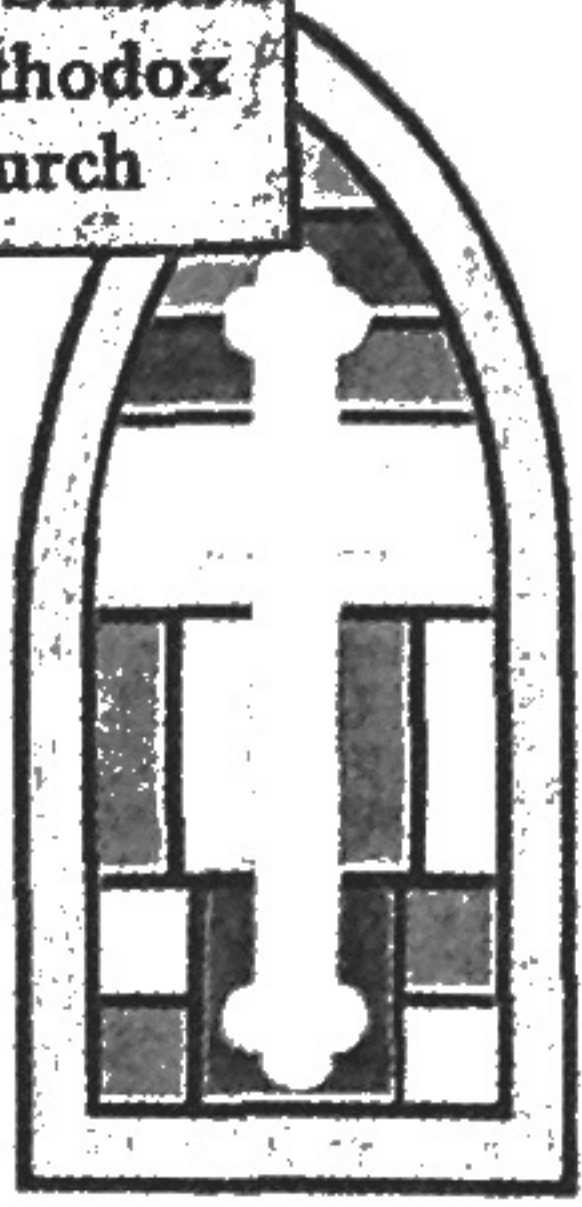
The elder Popovichs are gone now, but Dorothy still goes to church once a month, the second Saturday, in Ironwood, where Father Paul Blankenstein has been coming from Iron Mountain for the past 17 years.

"We share Father with the Iron Mountain Church," offered Michaels.

According to Michaels, improvements have been made to the church over time when the money has been available.

Next: Years bring changes.

St. Simon's
Orthodox
Church



Tiny church is still active

An ancient faith

Editor's note: This is the third in a series on the people who founded Ironwood's St. Simon's Church.

By RON TRETHEWEY
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Tiny St. Simon's Church, of Ironwood, continues to move forward.

The church installed new pews about 10 or 15 years ago and before that a balcony was added to house an organ and the choir, which at that time consisted of two people.

A new steel roof was put on three years ago.

In June of 1996 the church had an historic day when Dimitri Khoury, of Toledo, Ohio, the Midwest Bishop of the Antiochian Orthodox Church, visited St. Simon's to bless an icon made by fellow member James Burns of Mellen, Wis.

A converted Roman Catholic and a certified iconographer in 1995, Burns is creating several more hand-carved icons for the church.

Burns started training as an iconographer in 1991.

"It includes a period of study under a spiritual advisor and then you work under another iconographer," he said. "First, I had to do a cross, then Jesus Christ, followed by the Virgin Mary."

"Then I had the work approved by Bishop Job of Chicago," he added.

He has finished three of the icons, including the one at St. Simon's and is presently working on one for St. Mary's Russian Orthodox Church in Cornucopia, Wis., the oldest Orthodox Church in the Midwest and a registered historical church, according to Jacobs.

"The icons are relief carvings of spiritual meaning," Burns said. "I have been working in old growth hardwoods and then I inlay other woods on that to produce the different colors. There is no painting done."

"I start with a basic board, which is redwood and then I inlay other different color woods, including red mulberry on top and glue them," he added. "I follow that by rubbing in tongue oil, about 14 coats and then cover that with varnish. It works as a preservative, keeping the wood from cracking and warping."

It takes Burns approximately 80 hours for each icon. He is preparing six other icons for St. Simon's, including the Angel, Mary, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

According to Jack Jacobs, there were over fifty Orthodox families in the 1940s, before that figure dipped drastically in the early 1970s. There are currently about 20 families.

The church has its own graduate seminarian in Rick Michaels, son of Tony and Gertrude Michaels.

The younger Michaels is eligible to become a priest, but according to Orthodox law, if he decides to marry he must do so before he is ordained, according to his father.

A graduate of the University of Michigan in political science and history and a graduate of the seminary at Crestwood, N.Y., he must make a decision, according to his father.

"If he decides not to marry and remains celibate, he has an opportunity to serve in higher roles in the church," said the elder Michaels. "He must be single to be promoted to bishop."

At the present time, Michaels, now 41, is conducting teaching sessions and seminars and retreats for the church at the invitation of the church's priest. He is at home presently after holding seminars at Livonia, Mich., and Madison, Wis.

"I have been taking these seminars by invitation in this country and Canada for about 12 years now. Most of the retreats are on weekends, so, in addition to teaching the basics of our faith and religion, I also do a sermon or two at the priest's request," he said.

Right now Michaels uses Ironwood and his parents' home as his base and takes on retreats and seminars by request.

In providing some general background information regarding his church, young Michaels explained the meaning of "eastern" in identifying orthodoxy as the Eastern Orthodox Church.

"By the time Christianity was established as the official religion in the Roman Empire, there were two capitals: Rome in the West and Constantinople in the East. Since most of the orthodox faithful have roots in this Eastern area of the historic Roman Empire, the Church is identified as the Eastern Orthodox Church," he said.

Michaels said that in 1054 the Church in Rome and the Churches in the East split over theological issues.

According to Michaels, the word Orthodox also has a theological meaning. "It means right praise, right glory or, more specifically, right belief," he said.

He also explained why the Eastern Orthodox Church and the altar inside also face east.

"It symbolizes the fact that when Christ comes again, he will come from the east. He will rise from the east," he said.

According to Michaels, the wearing of the crowns during a wedding suggest the high calling of man and woman.

"God made man the crown of his creation. Man and woman were created last," he said. "It's a symbol of man's high calling, being made in the image and likeness of god."

As for the tying of the hands, "it symbolizes that God made them into one likeness and that they will cleave to each other and become one flesh," Michaels offered.

Michaels illustrated the link by using the Hebrew word Ish-haw. "Ish means man and haw woman," he said. "Ish (man) is the root word, while haw (woman) is a suffix or addition."

"The woman is the helpmate, but she is the one who makes the man complete, so in that there is union and wholeness," he added.

Michaels also describes the meaning of the bride and groom's walking around a table in front of the church three times.

"That represents the Holy Trinity — Father, Son and Holy Spirit," he said. "The marriage is supposed to achieve the same meaning as the Holy Trinity — three persons in one. Here, as well, unique persons, husband and wife, share one nature and express this union in mutual love."

A favorite verse at Eastern Orthodox weddings is Ephesians 5: 25, which suggests that marriage is one of the highest callings.

"It reads," Michaels said, "Highest love you will ever have. As Christ has loved the Church and has given himself for it."

Michaels interprets: "It is saying that he (man) is the head of the household and he will sacrifice himself for his wife. Its headship is really its service and its power is the power of love."

According to Michaels, Eastern Orthodoxy has a long history in this country dating back to 1794, through the work of St. Herman of Alaska. The first Bishop of of Alaska and North America was St. Innocent, enlightener of the Aleuts and Apostle to America. He was installed as bishop in 1832.



Mary Abraham, sister of Nora Juntunen, is the bride in this wedding photo taken at St. Simon's Church, around 1920. The church continues to practice its ancient worship rituals at the same site today.

Church shares ancient beliefs in modern world

"The first Orthodox building in the mainland United States was established at Fort Ross, Calif., in 1812," he offered. "Our long existence here is tied to Russian Orthodoxy."

The second longest Orthodox mission, strangely enough, Michaels said, was established in Finland.

"It probably has a lot to do with Finland's close proximity to Russia and Russia's influence on them," he said.

Michaels also said the Orthodox church has a strong missionary vision in publishing.

"We have several large publishing houses, like 'Light and Life' in Minneapolis, Minn., which translate the service books and worship services into the languages of the countries in which they're practiced," he said.

Under the Patriarch of Russia, during the 19th century and through the early 20th century, the American mission enjoyed considerable autonomy and local control. The paternal care of the Russian Church did much to promote American Orthodoxy.

"The Russians were the first to missionize in America and they took their direction from the political establishment in Russia (the Czar)," he said. "However, during and after the Russian Revolution, which brought political chaos and loss of control in Russia, Orthodoxy branched out into ethnic control. The Syrian and Lebanese, the Greek, the Serbian, Albanian, Romanian and Greek began setting up their own Orthodox Churches."

"Now you can divide Eastern Orthodoxy into two groups, Eastern Europe and Middle East."

Michaels says his church uses the same civil calendar, but its Christian calendar is a bit different.

"We celebrate Christmas the same day, but our Easter comes on a different Sunday and it's based on two factors. One, it comes after the spring vernal equinox and secondly, it comes after the Jewish Passover," he said.

"As Moses passed over the Red Sea to the Promised Land fulfilling an Old Testament prophecy of going from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land, so in Christ, Christians go from the slavery of sin and death to the Promised Land of the Kingdom of

God; they go from death to eternal life," he added.

Tony Michaels feels enthusiastic about his church's future.

"I feel good about the future of our church and about religion as a whole," he said. "We are getting converts. Years ago we would lose members of our church to other churches through marriage, but in recent years we have been getting new members to come over to our church."

"A lot of people like the traditions and rituals of our church," he added. "It's a conventional religion. I think church attendance all over the world is coming back. More people are seeking Christianity."

Although the tiny St. Simon Eastern Orthodox Church has been tucked away rather unobtrusively on Harding Avenue since 1914, it has stood the test that time has placed on it. It has spoken the word, established the faith and ministered to its members well, and should continue to do so in the next century.