

A View from the Pew

May 2014

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I would imagine that my mother's story would begin in Wertheim, Germany. It was there that my great-grandfather, Emil Scherf, decided to come to America to begin a new life. With his wife, Margaretha, their little daughter, Rose, and his wife's mother and father, Anna and Casper Loeb, they boarded a ship and arrived in New York City. Whatever possessed them to come to Buffalo will only be known to God, but baggage in tow, they boarded a boat and headed to Buffalo via the Hudson River and the Erie Canal. Now I should mention, they had to stop for a time in Medina, New York, in order for Grandma Scherf to deliver her second daughter, Anna. Can anyone measure their hardiness in not only making that long voyage, but coping with a newborn to boot?

Upon arriving in Buffalo, the family moved into a home at 138 Demond Place. Demond Place no longer exists, but it was in the vicinity of the former Trico facility. Fortunately, for the family, there was a beautiful church very close to them which they began attending faithfully around 1864. Of course, we all know that was St. Louis Church. However, it was not the church we currently attend, but the second St. Louis, which was destined to be destroyed by fire. Father Sorg eventually became their pastor.

The Scherf's 8th and last child was my grandmother, Caroline. When my grandmother married my grandfather, Peter Berst, they moved into a home at 425 Pratt Street. This home is the only remaining home still standing on that street and it is where all six Berst children were born.

Now, my grandmother had already had four sons and she prayed to Blessed Mother for a daughter. Grandma promised that if she had a girl, she would name the child, "Mary". Well, the rest is history. My mom was the 5th child and only daughter of those six children.

My mom was baptized at the font of St. Louis and when she came of age, began attending St. Louis School. Many a time, I heard her speak of her love for the nuns that taught her. It was considered quite an honor for a student to carry books home for the Sisters, whose convent was further down Edward Street. Also, back in those days, in good weather, all children were expected to go home for lunch. There were no buses, either. You walked both ways. No one complained because it was just expected.

My mom was left-handed but always wrote with her right hand. You see, my mom always told me the Sisters would not allow anyone to become left-handed because they felt you would be at a disadvantage. So, my mom always signed her name with her right hand but did everything else with her left. The children usually attended the 9 AM Mass on Sunday and then went home to have their dinner. In those days, dinner was at noon and it was the big meal of the day. After that, the children returned to St. Louis on Sunday afternoon for Sunday school. My mom said Father Laudenbach would stand in our beautiful pulpit and ask the children questions about what they had learned in class. He always started at the beginning of the alphabet and that meant my mom would usually get "nabbed" for an answer. You had to be on your toes because if you did not know the answer, you got little sympathy from the pulpit and even less when you got home.

My mom was proud of the fact that four boys and one girl in her class entered the religious life. As a graduation gift, each student was given a large wooden crucifix from Father Laudenbach. That crucifix is still displayed in my home today.

One day, new neighbors moved next door to the Berst's on Pratt Street. They were the Young family. The son, Earl, took a liking to my mom, and she to him. Earl and Mary Young were married in St. Louis Church on September 14, 1940. I would like to tell a little side story to all this. My mom's cousins were the Wagner's, who also attended St. Louis. One of the sons, Eugene, (who was in my mom's class) entered the priesthood and went to the seminary in Europe. While there, World War II broke out and the seminarians had to flee for their lives from the Nazis. My mom always said Father Eugene would never talk about his ordeal. Father Eugene was ordained and he performed the marriage ceremony for my parents in St. Louis Church. My mom often said, it was Father Eugene's first marriage ceremony and it was a good one. It lasted 25 years until my father's death in 1965.

My parents knew the Fruit Belt was beginning to change so my dad decided to head for the suburbs. My mother and father, my sister and I, and our Grandpa Berst moved to the Town of Tonawanda in May of 1951. My sister was 4 years old and I was 2 months old. We started going to a different church because in those days, you went to church in your own neighborhood. Now, my mom may have lived in the suburbs, but she missed the city and the friendliness of the people. At every opportunity she would head for the old neighborhood to go shopping and every once in awhile my parents would go to St. Louis for Mass. After my dad died, my mom worked for a time and she eventually ended up at Freddie's Doughnuts where she was employed for 16 years until Freddie's closed in 1989.

Now, some of you may remember the Blizzard of '77. During the blizzard, you ate, slept, shoveled and watched the mini-series "Roots" on television. That television event got me fascinated with the idea of discovering my own family's roots. I began to question my mom about the family and she told me as much as she could. Of course, the subject of St. Louis came up. One weekend, I suggested to my mom that we go to St. Louis for Sunday Mass. When we entered St. Louis, we were aghast. Next to the big, beautiful crucifix was hanging plaster and peeling paint. However, even though St. Louis was in need of much repair, the church was so much more than that.

All those people from the past that had built our beautiful church, worked on the stained glass windows, carved the gorgeous pulpit or had simply attended Mass there faithfully week after week, their spirits were still there, the spirit of St. Louis. We wanted to keep attending Mass there not only because our family from long ago did, but also because of the warm atmosphere and friendly greetings we always received from everyone. So my mom and I began to come faithfully week after week. Father Mosack was there and weekly collections were around three or four hundred a week. Then Father Mosack was transferred.

Now, no one knew anything about our new pastor but we were about to find out. Monsignor Schwinger arrived and things began to change. Improvements began to be realized and the collections picked up. The sandwich program and the fund drive started. More people were coming to Mass at St. Louis. St. Louis was coming back and my mom was there to see it. My mom and I wanted to become official members of the parish. So on March 18, 1980, we made things legal and became registered parishioners of St. Louis Church. Even when Monsignor Schwinger's mind began to fade, he still remembered my mom. Mrs. Young, he would say, I always remember you! How kind he was. My mom and I went to Monsignor's retirement party and had a great time.

Now things were about to change again. The parishioners had a meeting in the downstairs hall with a representative of the diocese about a new pastor. I can still hear Rae Reines telling this priest from the diocese, we want a pastor for this parish, we are not sharing a priest with anyone. And by golly, we got a gem. When we heard Father Robert Mack was coming to be our new pastor, we cheered. Now things started rolling at St. Louis. Larger numbers of people were coming for Mass and even more improvements were being made to the church and grounds. Bake sales, spaghetti dinners, the Garden Society, yes, things were really looking up. Then Bishop Cunningham arrived and the restoration of St.

Louis began. My mom often wondered where we would sit each week as another portion of the church was worked on.



Baptism, First Communion, Confirmation, Marriage, yes, my mom was there for it all and now she would see St. Louis restored to its old glory. My mom still had one last chapter to complete before her book on St. Louis was complete. On December 17, 2010, Monsignor Sal, with Monsignor Robert Mack at his side, conducted a beautiful, dignified funeral Mass for my mother. It was a cold, gray day. As I sat next to her casket, at the time of the Consecration, a beautiful white light shone in through the stained glass windows. My sister gave me a poke and said there goes Ma. I knew that to be true. God had come for my mom, who was a faithful member of his church. Monsignor Sal conducted the graveside service for my mom and closed the book on her life.

I have tried to write a simple story because my mom and the family were simple. Simple, in that they did not do anything famous or are not known to anyone other than God. However, they were mighty in their faith, along with the many other nameless parishioners down through the years. It is all of them and all of us now that make up the Spirit of St. Louis. Long may that spirit live.