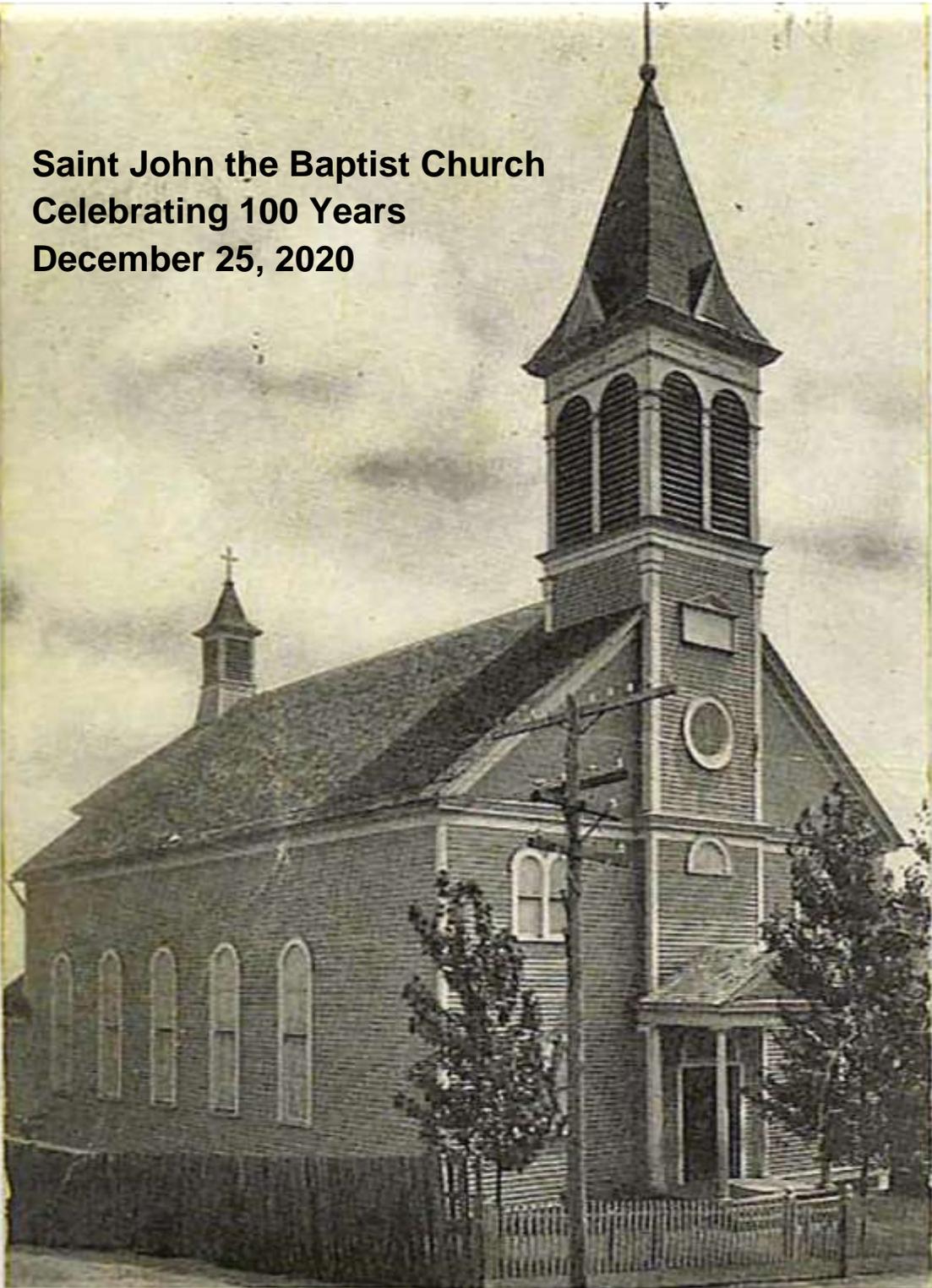


**Saint John the Baptist Church  
Celebrating 100 Years  
December 25, 2020**



St. John the Baptist R. C. Church, Plymouth, Pa. 517.

## **HISTORY OF THE DEDICATION OF THE SECOND ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST CHURCH BUILDING**

*by Michael W. Novrocki*

December 25, 2020 is an important milestone in the history of St. John the Baptist Parish. At the Mass During the Night this Christmas Eve, the current church building in which our parish worships will be 100 years old. It was dedicated at the Christmas Midnight Mass on December 25, 1920. But the story of how the parish got to the point where it could even celebrate in a brand new church on that Christmas Eve is one of pain, sacrifice, and reward that is as old as the ages. The following recounts the story of how it all came about.

In 1919, Father Paul Kopicki was the young Pastor of St. John the Baptist Church. His arrival at St. John's came because of a period of turmoil within the equally young parish and its most disruptive episode to date. During the later part of 1918, a disagreement, the source of which is unknown, arose between certain members of the parish and its pastor at the time, Father Franciszek Wieszok. The ultimate reason for the disagreement has been forgotten through the years, but older members of the parish who were still living twenty years ago had remembered as children that there were many unkind words exchanged between Father Wieszok and a number of parishioners. It was a painful time. It was also occurring at the same time that something else was causing much pain: the Spanish Flu. In the Fall of 1918, the Wyoming Valley, along with the rest of the country, was in the throes of the height of this pandemic, something to which Americans in December 2020 can relate. Many people in the area had lost family members and friends to the pandemic by the Fall of 1918, and the parishioners of St. John's were no exception.

The conflict between Father Wieszok and the parishioners had escalated to the point where it had the potential to rock the foundation of the parish, which at that time, was not even twenty years old. Members embroiled in the controversy were threatening to leave St. John's. Reverend James Gryczka, the neighboring pastor of St. Hedwig's Polish Roman Catholic Church in Kingston, learned of the difficulty at St. John's. Sensing the grave nature of the situation which had the potential to bring an end to the parish, Father Gryczka looked at his young assistant, Reverend Paul Kopicki, and knew that Father Kopicki had the personality to settle differences and mend relations. Father Gryczka showed his care and concern for his neighboring

parish by sending Father Kopicki as an emissary to St. John's to help smooth out the problems that had arisen.<sup>1</sup>

Father Kopicki, although a newly ordained priest of only 25 years of age at that time, had already spent time in Washington, D.C. at the Catholic University of America studying Canon Law. He was known for his intelligence, but also for his sensitivity, sincerity, empathy, and a gift for diplomacy. Eventually, Father Wieszok left St. John's, returning to Poland. Father Kopicki stayed and was appointed Pastor of the church. Perhaps as a sign from above emphasizing Father Kopicki's role as peacemaker, his pastorate at St. John's began on Armistice Day, November 11, 1918. On that day, World War I ended, and peace came to the rest of the world as well.<sup>2</sup>

To put into context the events that had occurred by the end of Father Kopicki's first year, the parish had gone through a pandemic, a world war, and an internal crisis that almost dismantled it. And it had survived all three. But the trials for the young parish had only started. At the beginning of Father Kopicki's second year of his pastorate at St. John's, the worst tragedy in the history of the parish occurred. On the night of December 18, 1919, only a week before Christmas, employees of the Plymouth district of the Hudson Coal Company were meeting on the second floor of St. John's School, watching an exhibition of motion pictures showing first aid work. (At that time, St. John's School was a building behind the church on Third Street.) During the meeting, a fire started in the school building, the cause of which was never definitively established.<sup>3</sup>

An article about the fire which appeared in The Wilkes-Barre Record the next morning states that the blaze was set off by a furnace boiler explosion, although the men in the meeting hall claimed they did not hear any explosion.<sup>4</sup> It was a cold night, and the church janitor went down to the basement to add coal to the furnace. A popular explanation that was circulated

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<sup>1</sup> Stacia Niescier-Feddock, St. John's Parish History (Larksville, PA: unpublished manuscript, January 1974), 2-3.

<sup>2</sup> Niescier-Feddock, 3; Silver Jubilee of Rev. Paul A. Kopicki [commemorative booklet], (Larksville, PA: January 18, 1942), 5, 9. (English translation of Polish sections by Dr. Charles Kraszewski). This difficult episode in the history of St. John's may have been a common "growing pains" dispute over administrative authority that also played out in the early history of many other Polish-American parishes. It was usually settled, as it was at St. John's, with the arrival of another priest who was able to calm the waters and mend relations. For more information on this subject, see Jay P. Dolan, The American Catholic Experience: A History From Colonial Times to the Present (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1985), 181-85.

<sup>3</sup> "Larksville Church and School Destroyed," Wilkes-Barre Record, December 19, 1919, p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

among the parishioners for years was that the janitor was smoking a cigar, and when he approached the furnace to add coal to it, a spark from his cigar somehow started the fire. However, this story was never substantiated.<sup>5</sup> The newspaper article does assert that the janitor was the first one to witness the fire and sounded the alarm, which alerted the men to evacuate the school. All of the men escaped the building unscathed. However, the wind soon carried the flames from the school to the wooden belfry of the church, and from there, the fire burned down into the church interior. Flying sparks also ignited the rectory on Nesbitt Street, which was located at the site of the current rectory. Fire departments from Larksville, Plymouth, Kingston, and Edwardsville were unsuccessful in containing the blaze and had the added disadvantage of not having a ladder long enough to enable them to scale the belfry. In the end, the church and the school were completely destroyed, along with part of the rectory. Father Kopicki faced an incredible loss estimated at \$40,000 in damages.<sup>6</sup> As a result, the parishioners were left that year without a church to celebrate Christmas. By the end of 1919, not only could the parishioners say they had gone through a war, a pandemic, and a parish conflict, but now they could add the loss of their church building to their list of challenges. The end of the second decade of the parish was as grim as can be.

However, what is most inspiring in this story is how the parishioners reacted to all of these setbacks. Instead of hanging their heads and giving up, they decided to show a strength and resilience that is most admirable and should perhaps be noted as we reach the end of a challenging 2020. Shortly after the church was destroyed, Father Kopicki stated a goal of building a new church and appealed to the parishioners to come together to achieve this goal. His appeal bore great fruit, thanks in much part to his ability to rally the parishioners. They responded wholeheartedly.<sup>7</sup> First, each parish family decided to make a great sacrifice and contribute \$75.00 towards the construction of the new church.<sup>8</sup> Next, after the rubble from the burned buildings was cleared, men of the parish, most of whom were coal miners, dug the foundation for the new church without outside help.<sup>9</sup> Construction of the new church officially

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<sup>5</sup> Sarah Gorski (parishioner), telephone interview by author, October 10, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> "Larksville Church," 35; Silver Jubilee, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Silver Jubilee, 5, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Catherine Kratzer-Monchak (parishioner), telephone interview by author, December 4, 1998.

<sup>9</sup> Regina Moyer (parishioner), personal interview by author, November 24, 1998, Larksville, PA.

began with a ceremony in May 1920, on the same site as the original church, at the corner of Nesbitt and Third Streets in Larksville.<sup>10</sup>

Father Kopicki certainly rose to the task in managing the construction project. In some respects, he was the ideal person for it. He possessed an eye for architecture, and was able to use his talents to design a new church. He chose a Spanish gothic design and planned it by keeping in mind the history of the Roman Catholic Church as well as the history of St. John's. In accordance with scriptural tradition, the new church was designed with similarities to a Jewish temple, standing on twelve pillars, representing the twelve tribes of Israel. It also had New Testament symbolism of Christ's Twelve Apostles. Father Kopicki designed the church with a steeple, so that the people's prayers could rise to God. Also illustrating the religious significance of the number twelve, there were twelve beautiful stained glass windows placed on the sides of the church, which it is believed Father Kopicki obtained from Germany. They were funded by parish societies and individual members.<sup>11</sup> Originally, there was also a thirteenth window behind the choir loft, in the center of the front wall of the church exterior.<sup>12</sup> There were also fourteen Stations of the Cross placed along the walls of the church, which were donated by individual parish members, families, and groups.

The new church was designed as a larger and more elaborate version of the original edifice. Like the original church, it had a belfry so that the bells of St. John's could be heard from one end of town to the other. The altars, of white trimmed with gold, were very artistic. Life-like statues also adorned the new church. The new main altar replicated the main altar in the original church by having as its focal-point a crucifixion scene. That scene consists of statues of our Lord on the cross, His Mother, St. John the Evangelist, and a kneeling Mary Magdalene. Statues of Saints Peter and Paul were placed on each side of the crucifixion scene. Side altars in the new church were dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate

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<sup>10</sup> Silver Jubilee, 9; A local chronicle of early history of the Wyoming Valley (Edward Phillips, History of Wilkes-Barre, Luzerne County [Wilkes-Barre, PA: unpublished manuscript, circa 1955]), lists May 18, 1921 as the date construction began on the new church. The year is proven to be wrong and is actually 1920. Therefore, the groundbreaking may have occurred on May 18, 1920.

<sup>11</sup> Rev. Msgr. John C. Masakowski (former Pastor and acquaintance of Father Kopicki), interview by author, October 7, 1998, Larksville, PA.

<sup>12</sup> Photograph of exterior of St. John the Baptist Church, December 1920. By the early 1950's, cracking appearing around this window had the potential to lead to further cracking down into the vestibule and damage the church beyond repair. As a result, Father Kopicki had a limestone wall placed over this window.- Rev. Joseph Rusin telephone interview February 23, 1999, and personal interview, July 31, 2000.

Heart of Mary, each with those statues. There would be more statues added in later years, but the aforementioned are those the new church contained at its dedication. Additionally, the side altar to the Immaculate Heart of Mary was designed with a sepulchre beneath so that the faithful could tarry at the Lord's tomb on Good Friday and Holy Saturday. The new church also contained a chandelier as the original church did, but it is larger and more decorative. It is laden with historical symbolism as well. It was hung from the center of the church ceiling and contains bulbs which represent the tears and sweat of the coal miners who established the parish.<sup>13</sup> It also reflects the symbolism of the number twelve, with the first ring of the chandelier containing twelve teardrops, the second ring with six, and the third ring with one solitary teardrop. The original lights in the new church (which would be replaced some years later) were placed in the sanctuary and above each pillar, and appeared to closely resemble the "teardrop" lights in the chandelier.<sup>14</sup>

There were other decorations in the new edifice which are no longer present. These included two angels, each holding a lighted candelabrum, which were placed on each side of the main altar to adorn the sanctuary. There was a new pulpit, beautifully designed with images of Christ and the Four Evangelists. Each image was separated by pillars that were miniature versions of the twelve pillars on which the church stands. Such replicas of the pillars could also be found within the wooden communion rail, statue pedestals, the main altar, and both side altars.

Other aspects of the new church included a beautiful choir loft, to continue and enhance the parish's love of music and singing. It originally had an exquisite pipe organ, which would eventually be replaced years later in 1973, before the parish's 75th anniversary. For parish functions, the new church also contained a hall in the basement to house socials, dances, and meetings. The hall also included a stage for parish shows, plays, and performances.

This story culminates on the night of December 25, 1920. It was one of the greatest milestones in the history of the parish. On that night, at the Christmas Midnight Mass, Father Kopicki officially dedicated the new St. John the Baptist Church building, the edifice in which we currently worship, and have done so for the past 100 years.<sup>15</sup> The opening of the new St.

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<sup>13</sup> Niescier-Feddock, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Photograph of interior of St. John the Baptist Church, December 1920.

<sup>15</sup> Silver Jubilee, 8.

John the Baptist Church was covered in the 1920 Christmas morning edition of The Wilkes-Barre Record. It proclaimed that the new St. John the Baptist Church “is one of the finest buildings in the valley. The interior . . . has been beautifully and artistically finished in modern decorations and fixtures.”<sup>16</sup>

It must have been an especially emotional Christmas for the parishioners. The year before, the fire left them without a church on Christmas. The year before that, they had already been on a psychological roller coaster, going through a pandemic, a war, and a controversy that was almost the undoing of the parish. But on this Christmas Eve, they were able to see the fruits of their labor and dedication: a new, better church, completed in only seven months’ time! They built this church not of wood, like the original, but of solid concrete and limestone because they wanted a lasting foundation of worship for generations to come.<sup>17</sup> There are many lessons to be learned from this story, but perhaps most important is that their resilience should inspire us, especially after the year we have experienced with its many challenges. The parishioners that came before us did not let severe setbacks or challenges stop them or extinguish their faith. And neither should we. May we take encouragement and inspiration from their story and think of them as we look around and worship in the church they constructed for us who would survive them, all these 100 years later.

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<sup>16</sup> “Initial Service in New Church,” Wilkes-Barre Record, December 25, 1920, p. 14.

<sup>17</sup> Niescier-Feddock, 3.



St. John the Baptist R. C. Church, Plymouth, Pa. 517.

**St. John the Baptist Church  
1907**



**Earliest photo of the interior of the original St. John the Baptist Church**

# **LARKSVILLE CHURCH AND SCHOOL DESTROYED**

## ***Fire Breaks Out in Hall Where Hudson Coal Company Employees Were View- ing Pictures On First Aid Work Loss Will Reach \$40,000***

St. John's Polish Church at Nesbitt and Third streets, Larksville and the adjoining school building on Third street, were totally destroyed last evening by fire which originated about 9:30 o'clock in the heating apparatus in the basement of the school building while many employees of the Plymouth district of the Hudson Coal Company were witnessing an exhibition of motion pictures showing first aid work in the hall on the second floor. Although there was some confusion when the alarm was sounded by the janitor, all escaped from the building unscathed.

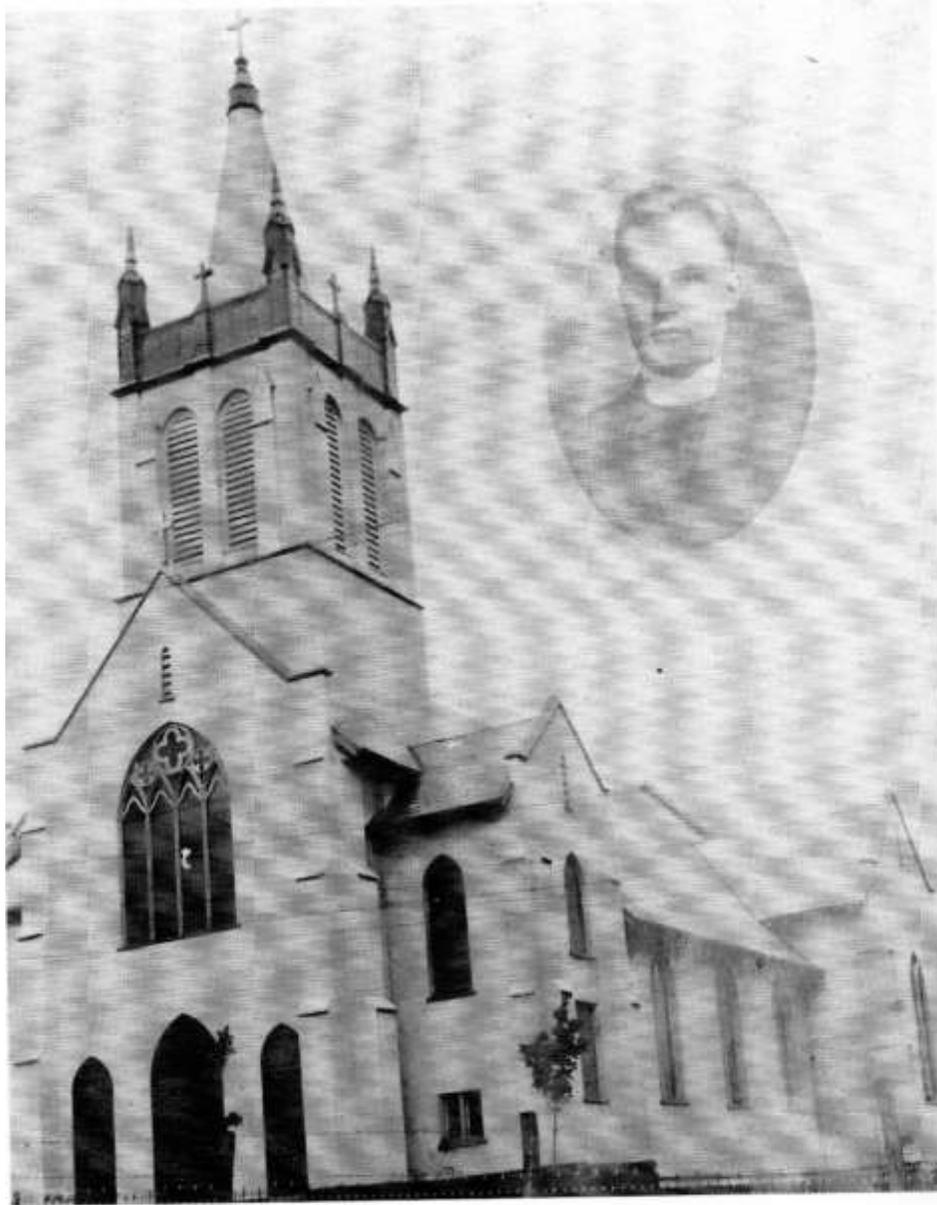
The wind soon carried the flames to the wooden belfry of the church and the fire burned down into the interior of the church, which, like the school building, was of frame construction. Engines from the Kingston, Edwardsville and Larksville fire departments and Plymouth truck responding to the fire were unable to play a sufficiently powerful stream upon the blaze to extend to the belfry and thus prevent the

flames from spreading so as to envelop the remainder of the structure. The stationery pump of the Luzerne Company silk throwing plant was also used. The fire fighters were also under another disadvantage of not having ladders long enough to enable them to scale the belfry.

Flying sparks ignited the roof of the parochial residence on Nesbitt street, but this was immediately extinguished and at midnight the fire fighters believed that that building would be saved. The loss is estimated at about \$40,000 and it is believed that it is partially covered by insurance. The pastor is Rev. Paul Kopicki.

It is believed that the fire was caused by the explosion of a boiler, but men who were inside the hall at the time ~~said later~~ that they had heard no explosion. It is said that the janitor, who had been viewing the motion pictures, descended to the basement and shortly thereafter sounded the alarm.

**Article headline from Wilkes-Barre Record,  
Friday morning, December 19, 1919**



**Exterior of new church upon completion, December 1920  
(Father Kopicki in insert)**



Interior – St. John the Baptist Church

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<p> <small>on the midnight hour, "Gloria, O            Little Babe of Bethlehem;" solo, "God            Shall wipe Away All Tears;" audience,            "Angels From the Realms of Glory,"            soloists Miss Viola Davis, William R.            Lewis, Zacharia Jones, Lieut. Allen            Lockard.</small> </p>	<p> <small>when you think            Rialto. Come            show, without            town, Wm. S. I            mount special            mon's newest I            Cop."</small> </p>
<p><b>Initial Service in New Church</b></p>	
<p> <b>The new St. John's Church on Nes-</b>  <b>bitt street, Larksville, officially opened</b>  <b>last night at midnight when services</b>  <b>were conducted by Rev. Paul Kopicki,</b>  <b>pastor. The new church replaces the</b>  <b>one destroyed by fire on Dec. 18, 1919,</b>  <b>and is one of the finest buildings in the</b>  <b>valley. The interior of the building</b>  <b>has been beautifully and artistically</b>  <b>finished in modern decorations and</b>  <b>fixtures.</b> </p>	
<p><b>First P C</b></p>	
<p> <b>REV. ROE</b>  <b>Sunday—10:30</b>  <b>Christmas servi</b>  <b>and Christmas</b>  <b>Services.</b> </p>	