

Father Philip Ruh, OMI.

Father Philip Ruh: Missionary-priest, and Builder

by Gloria Romaniuk

The early Ukrainian and Polish settlers arrived in Cook's Creek around the turn of the century. They put up simple log houses for themselves and then quickly set to work building houses of worship. There was no real hamlet or village; the homes were scattered along the section roads but soon three churches were built. The Polish settlers built the Roman Catholic Church of St. Michael which is near the present day junction of Sapton Road and Cook's Creek Road. The Ukrainian Catholic built St. John the Baptist Church less than half a mile north of what is now the Church of the Immaculate Conception. Two miles east of the Polish church they built a second structure, more accessible to the families who lived northeast of Cook's Creek itself.

It seems strange that two Ukrainian Catholic church buildings were erected so close together in a discernibly unpopulated area of open prairie and brush. Those who can still remember the first years of settlement, which are not well-documented, believe that the settlers were trying to recreate their Old Country village patterns, with a church at the heart of each community or land-holding estate.

By 1929, the Ukrainian Catholic parish had grown to 350 families. The two little wooden churches could no longer accommodate them. The roads were still rutted, swampy mud tracks. There were no phones and no electricity. There was, however, a determined parish executive who would not accept "No" for an answer. They repeatedly petitioned their Bishop, Wasyly Ladka, O.S.B.M., to appoint Father Philip Ruh as their parish priest and to assign him the task of building them a new and larger church.

Father Philip Ruh, O.M.I., was 46 years old when he came to Cook's Creek in the spring of 1930. He had been in Canada for nearly 20 years. He was strong physically, psychologically and spiritually. He had braved ten years of rugged missionary work in Alberta, virtually escaping death by a hair on more than one occasion. He was colourful, dauntless, and despite very limited formal training as an architect, by 1930, he had come to be regarded as the pre-eminent builder of Ukrainian Catholic churches in Canada.

Father Ruh's building career began humbly enough. During his first years in the Alberta wilderness it became clear to him that the Ukrainian people needed churches. Beginning with improvements to their simple wooden structures, he soon began to develop a grander vision. In the time prior to 1920, he organized work on two grottos in Alberta, he extended the orphanage in Edmonton, and built two small churches and a hall. In 1920, he was asked to build a monastery for the Basilians in Mundare. It was this assignment which really launched his career as an architect-missionary. For the next 40 years he was sought repeatedly as an architect while he continued in his role as a missionary-priest.

When Father Ruh was finally assigned to the parish in Cook's Creek, Alberta was long behind him. He had already built three highly stylized and very remarkable churches in Manitoba. The transfer to Manitoba came in 1924, when he was asked to build St. Mary's Church in Mountain Road. This huge, elaborate wooden structure was built within eleven months, and when the interior was fully decorated several years later it was an exquisite example of the Eastern style transposed to Canada. The Mountain Road church was followed in 1925, by the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Portage la Prairie. This towering structure was also richly decorated, displaying the Ukrainian style of icons and religious paintings. The third church, smaller but also expressive and inspirational, was the Church of the Holy Ascension in Winnipegosis which was built in 1928-29.

Demand for Father Ruh's service as an architect was increasing during the twenties but he still had responsibilities to perform as a parish priest, first in Mountain Road and Portage la Prairie and later in Cook's Creek. He decided to develop a system of what he called his "master carpenters". He began to train young men in the various communities where he was building so that once the task was underway the master carpenter could complete the work by following Father Ruh's self-styled blue-prints. Those of his blue-prints which have survived clearly demonstrate that Father Ruh did not follow standard architectural convention. His blue-prints often contained bits of sermons or points of religious teaching as well as construction-related information.

When he came to Cook's Creek from Portage la Prairie in 1930, Father Ruh brought along with him a master carpenter and the carpenter's wife to serve as cook. The three would work together for the next 30 years during which time, ministering to his home parish of Cook's Creek, Father Ruh was instrumental in building at least twenty churches or church-related buildings. His career total is believed to number 30 structures from Alberta to Ontario, an extraordinary number in itself, but even more remarkable if one considers the difficulty of the times.



John Lehr

The Church of the Immaculate Conception, Cook's Creek, Manitoba, from the grotto.

In 1930, no one dreamed that the hard times of the drought and depression were just beginning. When the horses began to scrape out the basement of the new St. John the Baptist Church, there was great excitement. There were many young people in the parish. This widely-reputed new priest was dynamic; he was serious; but he was also fun. He organized the usual parish functions, but he also organized teas and plays and bazaars to raise money for building materials. He scheduled the families into work shifts. He had the men haul stones and boulders from their own fields as well as from the quarries which were ten miles away.

It took 22 years to complete St. John the Baptist Church. It was finally consecrated in 1952, and later was renamed the Church of the Immaculate Conception. It is a massive structure, in cruciform shape, with a base measuring one hundred and forty by one hundred feet. There are nine domes with the central cross reaching one hundred and fourteen feet above the ground. The standing capacity of the church is one thousand people but five thousand were present at the consecration which was celebrated by Archbishop Ladyka and his Auxiliary Bishops.

Two years after the consecration of the church, Father Ruh began what he called his last great effort to honour the Blessed Virgin Mary. In August, 1954 he inaugurated the first annual Pilgrimage to celebrate the Assumption of the Virgin, and he began to erect a new structure: the Grotto to Our Lady of Lourdes with a Calvary, or Way of the Cross. This lies to the north of the church itself.

The Calvary and Grotto were intended to replicate Lourdes, France. Father Ruh visited Lourdes at least three times in his life and was deeply inspired by the mountain grotto where the Virgin had appeared to little Bernadette Soubirous in 1858. He wished to provide the Ukrainians in Canada with a pilgrimage centre of their own. In this he succeeded. Every summer large numbers of pilgrims attend the celebration which last for three days in mid-August.

Ukrainian Cultural and Educational Centre, Winnipeg.

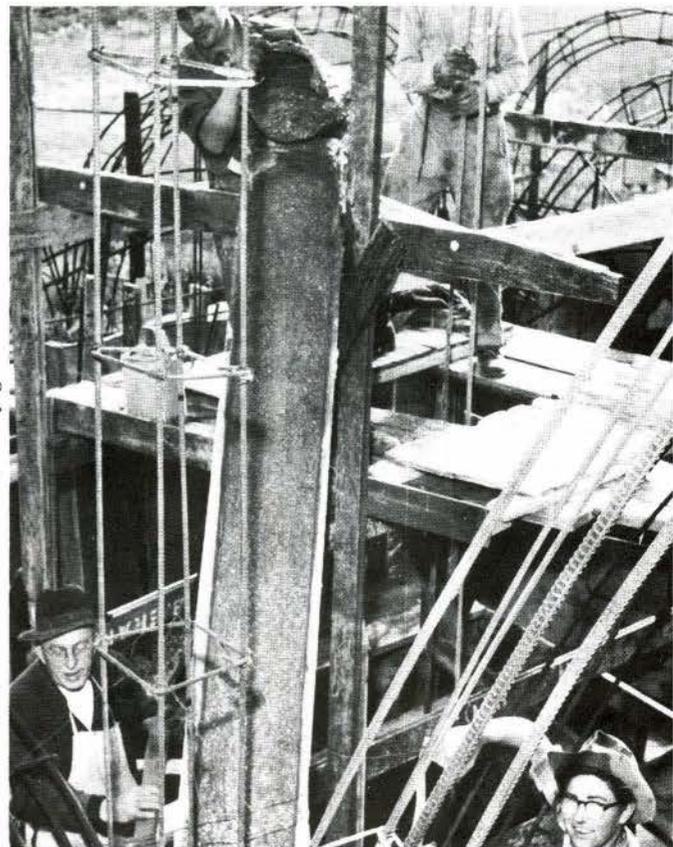


Breaking ground for the church at Cook's Creek. Father Ruh at centre with spade and pipe!

Father Ruh's health began to fail in 1960. By that time he had been a priest for 50 years and had served the Ukrainians in Canada for 48 of those years. Wherever his projects had taken him, he worked right along with the labourers, taking great pleasure in the actual process of building. He worked tirelessly to raise funds as well, enabling most of the parishes to build their churches without heavy debt but rather through a well-organized program of volunteers.

A great deal of fund-raising energy initiated the Grotto. Parishioners who had known Father Ruh in different parts of the country donated towards this last monument. A group in Toronto, for instance, drew from the St. Catherine's and Grimsby areas where many former Ruh parishioners had settled, to raise thousands of dollars. But the vision was not to be fulfilled. Father Ruh died before the Grotto was completed and he left no plans of the Grotto to guide the parish after him. The Knights of Columbus of St. Josaphat Council No. 1438 worked diligently for several years to bring the Grotto to a sufficient conclusion, but without the architect the original concept was not fully obtained.

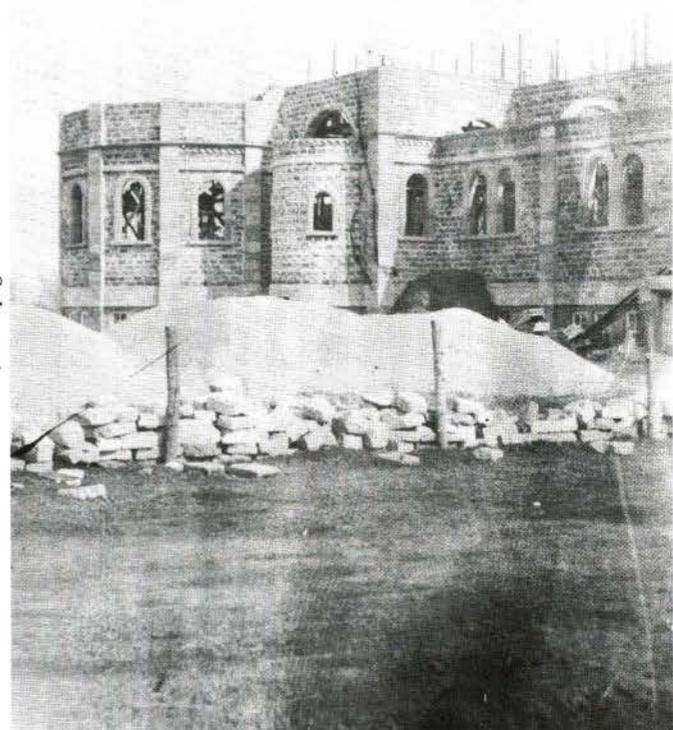
The Church of the Immaculate Conception and The Grotto have now been designated a historic site of the Province of Manitoba. Father Philip Ruh, architect of some 30 structures across Canada, lies buried in the cemetery just north of the Grotto. □



Ukrainian Cultural, and Educational Centre, Winnipeg.

Pouring concrete for the grotto, Cook's Creek. Father Ruh at bottom left.

Ukrainian Cultural and Educational Centre, Winnipeg.



Cook's Creek Church under construction, 1940s.

Gloria Romaniuk is currently researching *The Life and Works of Father Philip Ruh, O.M.I.* with the aim of publishing his biography in 1988, the year of the Christian Millennium in Ukraine. Gloria is a graduate of the University of Winnipeg in Anthropology and Religious Studies.