

49. Sich-Kolomea

Dormition of Saint Mary Ukrainian Orthodox Church

Sich was the term used by the Cossacks for a permanent military encampment or fortress, several of which were established on the southern reaches of the Dnipro River, the most famous being the Zaporozhian Sich on Khortytsia Island. It was the name given to the Sich school district, established northeast of the Kolomea school in 1907. Kolomyia, a raion (county) center in Ivano-Frankivsk Oblast, Ukraine, provided the name for the school district immediately north of Royal Park, organized in 1906 by Peter Svarich, whose family homesteaded in the area.

The roots of Ukrainian Orthodoxy in the Sich-Kolomea area trace back to the denominational rivalries that emerged as early settlers established organized religious life. In the fall of 1903, the Kolomea district hosted a service by pastors John Bodrug and Alexander Bachynsky of the newly formed Independent Greek Church. The gathering, arranged by Peter Svarich, took place a week after Alberta's first Independent Church service in the Zawale district. The missionaries celebrated a Divine Liturgy at the home of Wasyl and Anna Cherniawsky, who later became strong supporters of the "Seraphimite" movement, named after the controversial Russian Orthodox "bishop" who led the Independent Church.

Many early settlers had emigrated from Greek Catholic villages in Sniatyn County, Western Ukraine. Dissatisfied with sporadic pastoral care from Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, and Russian Orthodox clergy, they sought alternatives. Some were drawn to the Independent Greek Church due to its progressive social teachings, while others rejected Latin influences in the Uniate Church. In early 1904, Bishop Seraphim visited Alberta and ordained several local settlers as Independent priests, including Joseph Cherniawsky, who briefly served





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his home community before being assigned to Saskatchewan.

Formation and Construction of the First Church

Following Bishop Seraphim's visit, a meeting was held at the home of Timofij Worobets, where 14 farmers committed to constructing a church, with four more joining later. The congregation elected Hrytsko Wynnychuk as president, Michael Cherniawsky as secretary, and Yeremij Semotiuk as treasurer. With limited funds, they built a simple log structure with an onion dome on four acres of land donated by the Cherniawsky family, who also set aside part of their property for a cemetery.

The Sich-Kolomea congregation, the second Independent Church in Alberta, faced stiff opposition from Greek Catholic and Russian Orthodox clergy. Despite challenges, the Independent Greek Church gained a foothold in the area, thanks largely to Peter Svarich's promotional efforts. However, clergy ordained by Seraphim often struggled to gain respect in their home communities, prompting many to serve in distant settlements.

Religious Conflicts and Tragic Events

By the early 1910s, tensions within the Independent movement intensified. The 1912 murder of Joseph Cherniawsky, an Independent minister near Goodeve, Saskatchewan, shocked the community. Believed to be a crime of religious passion, his body was found mutilated on railway tracks, allegedly disposed of to conceal evidence. A local Catholic fanatic, Ivan Oryshchuk, was arrested but later acquitted. Widely considered a martyr of the Independent Church, Cherniawsky's remains were later reburied in the Sich-Kolomea cemetery.

By 1919, disillusionment with Protestantizing reforms led many Sich-Kolomea members to abandon the

Independent movement. The Ukrainian Presbyterian Church's increasing influence caused rifts, and Russian Orthodox missionaries were occasionally invited to hold services. Congregational sources suggest that the Independent clergy ultimately abandoned Sich-Kolomea.

Transition to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada

In March 1920, Rev. Dmytro Stratychuk, a missionary for the newly formed Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church of Canada (UGOCC), visited Sich-Kolomea, marking its transition from the Independent Church. The first UGOCC liturgy was celebrated in the original Independent church. Later that year, 32 members met at the home of Timofij Worobets to formally reorganize under the UGOCC. Among them was Michael Cherniawsky, a key proponent of the new Orthodox affiliation.

Between 1924 and 1925, the original church was destroyed by fire, possibly due to arson. Archbishop Ioan Theodorovich celebrated the first Hierarchical liturgy in Sich-Kolomea on February 19, 1925. Shortly thereafter, a meeting was held to discuss constructing a new sanctuary.

Construction of the Dormition of St. Mary Church

At the congregation's annual meeting on January 20, 1926, a building committee was formed, and members were delegated to visit The Nativity of the Mother of God Ukrainian Catholic Church in Chipman to assess the work of contractor Joseph (Jarema) Janishewski. On February 1, 1926, the congregation signed a contract with Janishewski to build the church a mile east and half a mile south of the original site. The project, costing \$7,500, was completed by July 31, 1926.



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On September 4, 1926, Archbishop Ioan Theodorovich blessed the new sanctuary, assisted by Reverends Dmytro Seneta, Ivan Kusey, and Timothy Horbay. The dedication attracted approximately 1,000 people. Sich-Kolomea remained an integral part of the Vegreville parish district, with some town residents continuing to attend services due to family ties or their preference for worship in a rural setting.

Stabilization and Decline

By 1937, the congregation reported 12 registered members, increasing to 22 by 1939. Membership peaked at 38 in 1951 before gradually declining due to assimilation and rural depopulation. Services remained steady,

averaging 12 to 15 per year through the 1940s and 1950s.

By 1968, membership had fallen to 18. However, the community celebrated when one of its own, Stephan Semotiuk, was ordained as a priest at St. Mary's Church in 1969. Over time, financial constraints led to deterioration, prompting a preservation effort in 2001. The church was designated a Registered Historic Resource of Alberta, and restoration work began in 2002.

Today, Dormition of St. Mary Ukrainian Orthodox Church remains a functioning place of worship and a monument to the resilience of the Sich-Kolomea pioneers and their descendants.



Priests

Joseph Cherniawsky (Independent)
D. Stratychuk (1920)
I. Kusey (1920-1924)
D. Seneta (1924-1926)
I. Mayba (1928-1932)
L. Berezitsky (1938-1941)
M. Kryschuk (1961-1969)
E. Maximiuk (1997-present)

Location and Feast Day

Northeast of Mundare at SW 5-54-15 W4, on the northeast corner of Range Road 159 and Township Road 540. *GPS Coordinates:* 53.629311, -112.188451
Their *Feast Day* is celebrated on August 28.

Founding Members

M. Charuk	M. Petruk
W. Charuk	T. Petruk
M. Cherniawsky	Y. Semotiuk
N. Cherniawsky	N. Semotiuk
W. Cherniawsky	I. Semotiuk
T. Didyk	T. Worobets
H. Onyschuk	A. Yermie
M. Orchyk	A. Zaparniuk
I. Petruk	

Cemetery

One mile west of the church (site of the original Independent Church) at SW 6-54-15 W4. *Cemetery coordinates:* 53.634326, -112.212720



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