

52. South Slawa

Dormition of Saint Mary Ukrainian Orthodox Church

The origins of South Slawa Church trace back to 1909, just two years after the district was settled by immigrants from Galicia, Western Ukraine. At a meeting held in the home of M. Hymanyk, a group of residents decided to build a church to serve the growing community. Completed in 1910, the sanctuary was initially used by ministers of the Presbyterian-backed Independent Greek Church, commonly known as the "Seraphimite" formation after its founding bishop.

Although the Independent clergy initially retained most of the Byzantine liturgical traditions, church leaders intended to gradually replace them with Protestant elements. This shift sparked controversy, especially when Rev. I. Danylczuk declared that vestments, candles, and incensories were unnecessary. Parishioners protested and barred him from officiating in their place of worship. Later, a priest from the Russian Orthodox Mission visited but strongly condemned the congregation for having accepted "Seraphimite" ministers. He proclaimed that a devil had taken residence among them and needed to be exorcised. His remarks alienated the parishioners, and he was forced to leave. The fate of the original South Slawa Church remains unclear, as no further mention of it appears in historical records.

In 1923, devout members of the original South Slawa congregation learned about the activities of Rev. Ivan Kusey, who was organizing Ukrainian Orthodox communities in the Willingdon area. They invited him to celebrate a liturgy, and the service, delivered in Ukrainian, moved many attendees. On September 17, 1923, a meeting was held to formally establish a Ukrainian Greek Orthodox parish. The newly formed executive committee was immediately



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tasked with constructing a church, and \$102.15 was collected in donations. An additional \$40 was raised to cover clerical services.

A log structure was soon erected by volunteers at a cost of \$119.85 for materials. Vestments and candleholders were purchased in 1924, and on September 27, 1925, Archbishop Ioan Theodorovich officiated a liturgy at the newly completed church. A large crowd attended, contributing \$40 in donations.

Growth and Reconstruction

At the annual meeting held on December 19, 1925, bylaws for the congregation were drafted, and land was purchased from John Hymanyk for \$20 to establish a parish cemetery. As the congregation grew, a decision was made on January 3, 1931, to construct a larger church. Logs were sourced from an island on the North Saskatchewan River, five miles north of the site, near the former location of Fort d'Isle, a Northwest Company trading post from 1801-1804. The logs were squared at John Zalaski's sawmill, and construction was overseen by Andrew Sakowsky and Metro Nahorniak, with a hired chief carpenter leading the work.

When the first rafter was raised on the east wall of the new structure, a wreath of flowers, gathered by 12-year-old Nick Zalaski, was tied to it as a symbolic wish for the church's longevity and prosperity. Completed in 1933, the new sanctuary was named Dormition of St. Mary (*Uspenia*). The cruciform church, situated on a knoll with a commanding view of the surrounding countryside, featured a large central dome with two smaller domes adorning the narthex and sanctuary. In 1938, a bell tower was added to the southwest corner and fitted with a bell. The interior was gradually enhanced with an iconostasis, a chandelier, and other liturgical furnishings.

Peak Years and Challenges

Between the mid-1930s and early 1950s, South Slawa congregation thrived. In 1939, ten liturgies were celebrated at the church. The number dropped to eight in 1946 but increased to twelve in 1947 and 1948, then to thirteen in 1949. Throughout this period, South Slawa was served by priests based in Myrnam, five miles to the south. This arrangement occasionally caused friction. When Rev. M. Flak was assigned to the Myrnam district in 1951, tensions arose due to political differences between the two communities. Myrnam's parishioners supported Rev. Flak's staunch anti-Communist stance, while South Slawa members, seen as more left-leaning, were less welcoming of his rhetoric.

In 1953, the congregation held twelve Divine Liturgies and reported 28 members. By 1955, membership had declined to 20, though the number of Sunday services increased to thirteen. Rural depopulation and an aging congregation gradually eroded the vitality of St. Mary's parish. A chronic shortage of available priests in the Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church of Canada (UGOC) further exacerbated the challenges, as evidenced by frequent letters from frustrated South Slawa parishioners to the Consistory.

Historic Recognition and Continued Use

In 1982, South Slawa Church was designated a historic site by the Province of Alberta. In 1985, the exterior of the church was repainted, and its doors and windows were replaced. The well-maintained sanctuary remains in use for regular services, weddings, funerals, and the annual Feast of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary.

The South Slawa congregation also owns the Taras Shevchenko Ukrainian National Hall,

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located half a mile west of the church. This hall has hosted parish functions, concerts, and theatrical performances over the years.

Completely refurbished in 1989, its stage features a beautiful backdrop painted by artist P.W. Romaniuk in 1942.



Priests

Independent Church:

P. Patserniuk (c. 1909)
A. Wilczynski
I. Danylcuk (1917)

Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church of Canada:

I. Kusey (1923–1928)
I. Mayba (1928–1932)
D. Stratychuk (1932–1933)
I. Hykawy (1938–1940)
T. Horbay (1935–1938)
S. Symchych (1940–1943)
L. Diachina (1942–1946)
I. Shvets (1946–1951)
M. Flak (1952)
S. Hredil (1952–1958)
M. Kryschuk (1958–1961)
A. Chrustawka (1961–)
W. Melnychuk (1966–1968)
P. Zubrytsky (1969–1973)
S. Semotiuk (1973–1974)
P. Zubrytsky (1965–)
M. Sawchenko (1985–1994)
W. Sapeha (1994–)

Location and Feast Day

Northeast of Myrnam, at SW 2-55-8 W4. *GPS Coordinates: 53.715864, -111.092719*

Their Feast Day is August 28.

Founding Members

First Congregation:

M. Hymanyk
V. Zalasky
I. Triska
P. Pookhay
P. Fodchuk
D. Fesyk
W. Cherniavsky
W. Horobec (likely Worobec)
K. Grykuliak
O. Malakhovsky
I. Havrylia

UGOC Parish Initiators:

M. Hymanyk
J. Makssymuk
M. Solowan

Cemetery

Located adjacent to the church, on land purchased for \$20 in 1925.



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