

61. Wandering River

Saint Elias Ukrainian Orthodox Church

Ukrainians from the Smoky Lake area, originally from Bukovyna and Belarus, began farming in the Wandering River region in 1929. By November 24, 1930, a meeting was held at the home of John and Annie Skoreyko to establish a Ukrainian Orthodox church and cemetery.

With the guidance of Fr. Tymofii Horbay, a two-acre land application was submitted at NW 30-71-16 W4. However, land ownership became contested several years later when a priest from the pro-Soviet Russian Patriarchal Orthodox Church laid claim to jurisdiction over the property. Despite this, the congregation remained committed to their faith, and on April 23, 1933, after Fr. Horbay's final service, they formally adopted St. Elias as their patron.

Early church services were sporadic, including weddings officiated by Fr. Ivan Mayba in 1934. That same year, parishioners petitioned Fr. Hieronim Hrycyna in Edmonton for more regular services, fearing Anglican and Catholic efforts to recruit Orthodox settlers. Fr. Hrycyna responded by visiting the community, where he likely consecrated the cemetery.

Since no National Hall was built in Wandering River, worship services were often held at George Strembitsky's home. By 1938, work had begun on a small log church, which was blessed by Fr. George Tsukornyk in 1939.

Struggles for Control and Land Rights

In 1938, conflicts arose when sympathizers of Fr. M. N. Cependa, a known supporter of the Soviet-backed Russian Orthodox Church, attempted to seize control of the congregation. They sought to have provincial authorities recognize the Patriarchal Orthodox Church as the rightful owner.



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Fr. Horbay, writing to the Consistory in December 1938, indicated that some local Communist sympathizers had only superficially professed Orthodoxy and were working to support Fr. Cependa. In response, George Rosychuk, a strong advocate for the Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church (UGOC), helped to remove the pro-Cependa executive. The congregation's land title was officially secured in their favor on February 21, 1941.

Post-War Period and Division

The congregation struggled financially throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Reports from 1953 indicated that annual services were the norm, but with the assignment of Fr. P. Zubrytsky to Lac La Biche, services at St. Elias increased to six per year.

Despite this growth, Fr. Cependa remained a divisive figure. In 1954, against the Consistory's wishes, some members invited him to hold a service. This defiance persisted until May 25, 1958, when he was once again invited by the parish secretary to lead a memorial service. To prevent this, another member deliberately left with the church keys, yet the service proceeded after the lock was forcefully broken. The Consistory responded legally, sending cease-and-desist letters and warning that Cependa was trespassing.

By August 1959, the parish secretary defiantly wrote to the Consistory:

"We cannot send any money as we didn't borrow any from you. This building was built by the people without any help from you... We do not agree to pay any money anywhere."

Ultimately, Fr. Cependa's death a short time later ended the dispute, allowing the congregation to function without internal divisions.

Later Years and Decline

By 1965, reflecting a shift in demographics, the Consistory allowed Anglican burials in the cemetery. As younger generations moved away, the Orthodox population declined. By 1972, only two services were held, and the year-end balance was \$102.40. Services ceased entirely by the late 1970s, though Fr. Kubin attempted a revival with new executive members in 1978.

With further depopulation, St. Elias Church fell into disrepair, and its entrance was permanently sealed with boards. However, a visit in June 2022 revealed that the roof had been re-shingled and the grounds maintained.

Today, the church remains unused, but annual *Provody* memorial services continue, drawing families from near and far to honor their ancestors.



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Priests

T. Horbay (1930–33)
Ie. Hrycyna (1934)
I. Mayba (1935–36)
G. Tsukornyk (1938–39)
H. Wasyliv (c. 1940–52)
W. Senishen (c. 1944–52)
P. Zubrytsky (1952–56)
A. Teterenko (1956–57)
H. Kryshthanowich (1957–58)
M. Chomenko (1958–61)
M. Stetzenko (1958–60)
E. Stefaniuk (1962–67)
S. Hredil (1967–70)
L. Kubin (1970–75, 1981–82)
L. Diachina (1975–79)
V. Lakusta (c. 1979)
D. Maceluch (1979–81)
S. Soroka (1982–86)
H. Fil (1986–2000)
M. Domaradz (2000–)
J. Puk also provided pastoral care.

Location and Feast Day

Southeast of Wandering River 5.5 km,
on the south side of Township Road
714, at 714045 Range Road 170, 1.5 km
east of Highway 63, at NW 30-71-16 W4.
County of Athabasca. *GPS coordinates:*
55.177714, -112.467743 | Their *Feast*
Day was August 2.

Founding Members

| | |
|--------------------|---------------------|
| N. Antoniuk | F. & A. Rebkowich |
| H. & P. Bereska | M. & S. Rohalsky |
| S. & N. Berezka | G. & S. Rosychuk |
| J. & K. Drebnenki | H. & V. Rosychuk |
| T. & M. Dwerenchuk | J. & D. Rosychuk |
| G. & L. Fotty | N. & A. Rosychuk |
| N. & M. Gawryletz | S. & J. Rosychuk |
| W. & K. Gawryletz | M. & A. Ruptash |
| O. & H. Gordey | Z. & S. Senetza |
| J. & M. Gordichuk | J. & A. Skoreyko |
| B. & K. Kokotylo | G. & A. Snihur |
| M. & K. Kostiuk | M. & K. Stogrin |
| J. & F. Lupul | B. & A. Strembitsky |
| J. & A. Mykytiuk | G. & M. Strembitsky |
| B. & E. Ponich | N. & S. Watamaniuk |
| S. & M. Ponich | P. Watamaniuk |
| D. & P. Puhatch | G. Wolansky |

Cemetery

Adjacent to the church, the first burial
dates to 1932. Several non-Ukrainians
are interred, including WWII veterans.

Cemetery GPS: 55.177988, -112.467547



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