

A Glimpse Of The Mansfie

By PAUL L. WHITE

Mansfield has had several church fires of major proportion:

Two Congregational churches located at the site of the present Tucker Furniture store on Park Avenue West burned to the ground. A fire in the First Methodist Church on the east side of the square caused extensive damage.

The destruction of the second St. Peter's Roman Catholic church on the northeast corner of South Mulberry St. and West First St., one hundred feet north of the site of the present St. Peter's Elementary School, was long remembered in Mansfield as it was one of the first large-spired churches in the city to be felled by fire.

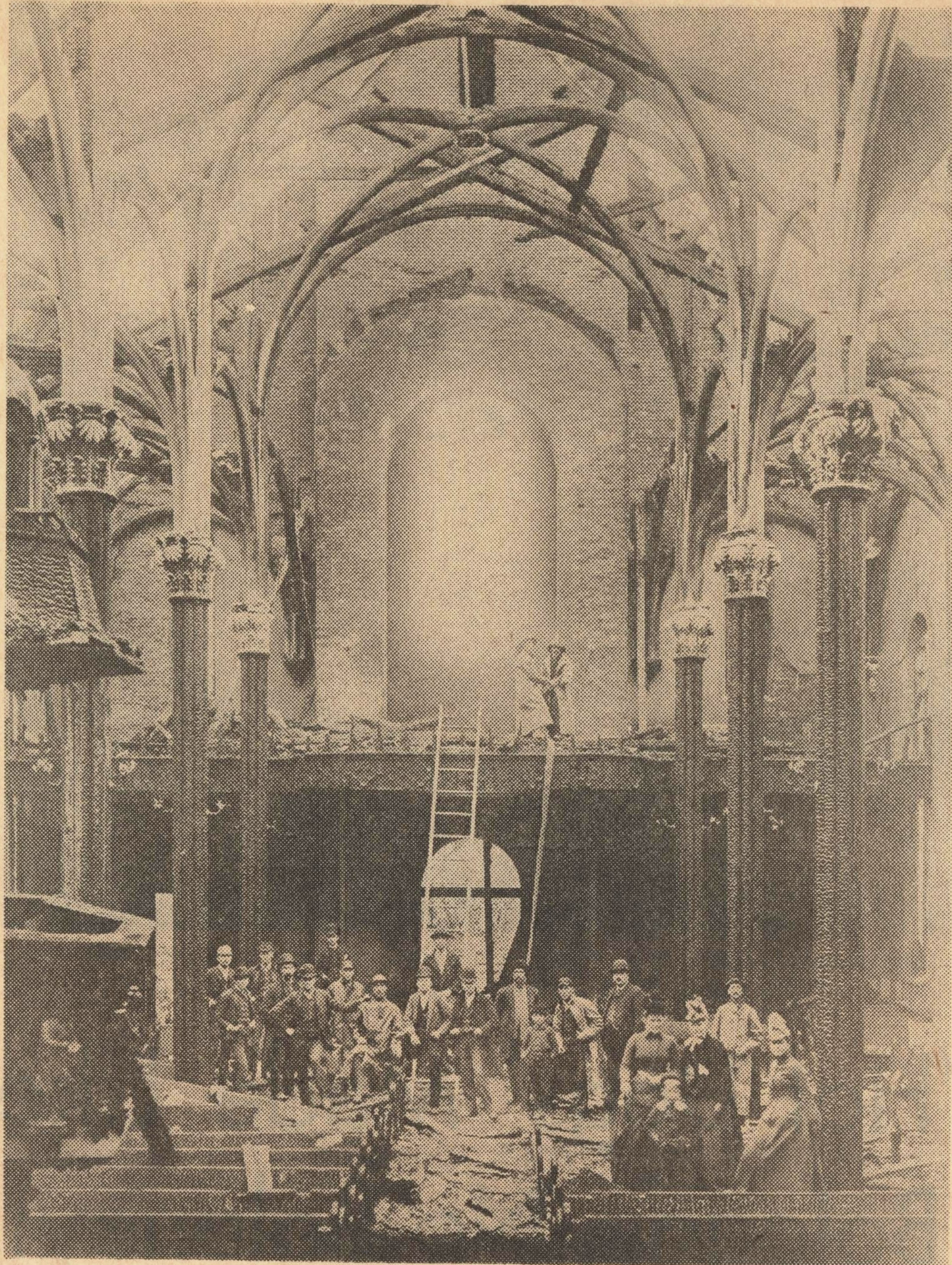
Rev. Father Andrew Magenhann took charge of the St. Peter's Church on Sept. 7, 1869, and immediately started to build a magnificent spired brick church to replace the old Presbyterian meeting house (facing Marshall Ave. near South Mulberry St.) which had been remodeled into a Catholic church in 1850.

The cornerstone of the new spired church was laid July 9, 1870 according to the Shield and Banner of July 14, 1870. The church was completed in August, 1871 and the half-ton bell from the old church was placed in the tower. Bishop Roscrans of Cincinnati couldn't be present for the cornerstone ceremonies so the services were conducted by Father Mackey of Marion and Father Buff of Toledo, with Father Magenhann assisting.

The new church was a splendid asset to the community perched atop Catholic Hill (West First St. hill) where the sound of the tolling bell could reach out to all parts of the small city.

Across Mulberry St. was the small frame parochial school where the children could easily cross over for church during school days.

On April 9, 1889, while the



This 79-year-old photograph by Mansfield photographer E. J. Potter shows the gutted interior of St. Peter's Catholic Church after the tragic fire on April 9, 1889.

children were playing outside during the 10:20 a.m. recess, they heard the Rev. Father Magenhann's housekeeper shouting in their direction but could not understand what she was yelling. Many of the children glanced toward the parsonage and noted nothing wrong. It did not occur to them to look towards the church which had not been used for several days for

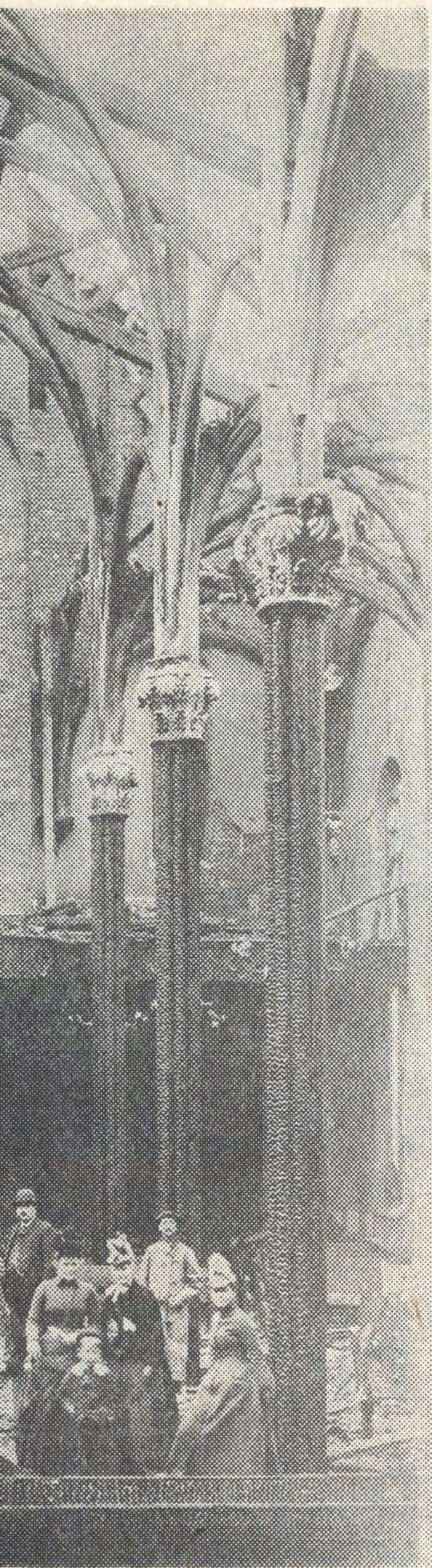
services since Father Magenhann had left for a trip to Cincinnati.

A few minutes later some of the children noticed a wisp of smoke rising from the roof of the church and hastened to inform Prof. Carl Adams who responded immediately by turning in the fire alarm from box six at the corner of West First and Mulberry Sts.

The Fire Department came in fast time and quickly had several hoses playing water on the roof. The slate roof, however, prevented the water from reaching the fire and the pressure was not adequate to reach the roof from the inside.

One intrepid fireman crawled up on the roof by making axe holes for foot-

Mansfield That Was



ographer E. J. Potter shows the
r the tragic fire on April 9,

The Fire Department came in fast time and quickly had several hoses playing water on the roof. The slate roof, however, prevented the water from reaching the fire and the pressure was not adequate to reach the roof from the inside.

One intrepid fireman crawled up on the roof by making axe holes for foot-

holds. The dense smoke soon drove the firemen out of the building. Ladders were hoisted to the north end of the building when the comb of the roof ignited. Streams of water were directed on the parsonage to prevent spread of the fire to that building.

A crowd of people gathered at the scene very quickly and were awed by the rapid progress of the flames. Soon the fire reached the belfry and curled upward from the tall slender spire. As the news reporter described it, "making a fearful picture for the spectators below."

Soon the steeple was wreathed in flames and at 11:09 the spire dramatically toppled to the ground with a loud crash. The old bell which had served two churches was smashed to pieces. Fortunately the spire fell between the church and parsonage and not out in the street into the crowd.

A desperate attempt was made to rescue the grand organ just inside the door but to no avail. Fireman Louis Mathes was struck on the head by a heavy wood beam as he entered the building and had to be removed to his home where he regained consciousness with "a large lump on his head which shows where the timber struck him," as the newspaper reported.

In one short hour the building was a smoking hulk with only the walls standing. The crowd stood unbelieving that the fine church could be consumed so quickly.

The cause of the fire was never determined. Rumors placed some of the children inside the building during that morning but Prof. Adams dispelled this rumor. One theory blamed it on a gas leak which was ignited by the ever burning candles. It was determined that the fire started in the Sacristy in which were kept the robes worn by the priests' servers.

Most of the silver candlesticks and other valuable ornaments were kept in Father Magenhann's home so they were saved. The building and fixture loss was placed at around \$40,000 but insurance only partially covered the cost. Several hand-carved statues were rescued.

The fire was a sad blow to the congregation for they still had a large debt to clear on the church.

A letter to the newspaper editor blamed low water pressure for the inability to quench the blaze. However, a rebuttal stated that the water works pushed 135 to 140 pounds per square inch through the lines but the hose nozzles were not small enough to force the water to the height necessary. Also it was pointed out that too many hose lines were attached to one fire hydrant.

Father Magenhann arrived in Dayton early on the morning of the fire and had a premonition that all was not well. He was so concerned he bought an afternoon paper which informed him of the fire. He boarded the first train available to Mansfield.

The church services were held in the county Common Pleas Courtroom although other congregations in the community offered the congregation the use of their churches.

Father Magenhann personally owned the property on the northwest corner of West First and Mulberry Sts. for which he was offered \$15,000. He deeded the property to the church on Easter morning and soon another combination church and school was being erected on the site of the present parking lot.

As a result of the fire, City Council approved legislation to hire a full time Fire Chief at a salary of \$60 per month. The newspaper noted, "At this fine wage many good men will be enticed to the job."

(Photo courtesy Richland County Historical Society.)