

*St. Michael's Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church, 1899.*

— Courtesy of Provincial Archives

**ST. MICHAEL'S UKRAINIAN  
GREEK ORTHODOX CHURCH**

# ST. MICHAEL'S UKRAINIAN GREEK ORTHODOX CHURCH

St. Michael's Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church, located in Gardenton near the Roseau River of southeastern Manitoba, stands as a symbol of the Ukrainian immigrants' ardent faith and determination to preserve their religion in the new land. Built in 1899 by Ukrainian settlers from the province of Bukovina, St. Michael's was the first permanent Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church to be completed and consecrated in Canada. The structure, which has been in continual use since its consecration, although on a part-time basis after 1934, is reminiscent of the style of religious architecture which dominated the Ukrainian countryside.

Christianity was introduced into the area which now comprises the Ukraine by the Orthodox Church centred in Constantinople. In 988 A.D. the Kievan prince, Volodimir the Great, officially accepted the religion for his kingdom. By the sixteenth century, however, much of the Ukraine had fallen under the domination of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. While most of the country remained loyal to the Greek Orthodox Church under the jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Constantinople, some churchmen, especially in the Western Ukraine, were influenced by Catholic Poland and accepted the authority of the Pope in Rome. The Uniate or Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, formed in 1596, retained most Orthodox rites but recognized the spiritual leadership of the Pope. In the eighteenth century two western Ukrainian provinces, Orthodox Bukovina and Catholic Galicia, were annexed to the Austrian Empire. These provinces were the home of the Ukrainian immigrants who came to Canada in the late nineteenth century bringing with them the two religious traditions of their homeland.

In the nineteenth century the Ukrainian peasants of Bukovina and Galicia lived in abject poverty on the estates of wealthy landowners. They were denied education above the elementary school level and gradually saw their small land allotments diminish further in size with each generation. Taxes were high, wood for fuel scarce and expensive. Few young men relished the thought of three years compulsory service in the Austrian army. For most, emigration became the only solution.

Ukrainian emigration to Canada began when Vasyl Eleniak and Ivan Pylipiw arrived in Quebec from Galicia in 1891. Friends and relatives soon followed, and they established the first Ukrainian settlement in Canada at Edna-Star, Alberta. Few of their countrymen, however, knew of the opportunities in the new land before Dr. Joseph Oleskow of Lviv visited western Canada in 1895 and published his pamphlets, *On Emigration* and *About Free Lands*, which were read widely throughout the western Ukraine. Large scale migration began in 1896 when over 1200 settlers came to Canada. The first Bukovinian to arrive was Wasyl Zahara from the village of Bridock. Zahara had had difficulty obtaining an exit visa from the village authorities, having to make nine trips to the sheriff before being allowed to leave. Even then he had to promise to return his sons to the village when they reached military age. He left Hamburg with ten families from Galicia under the leadership of Cyril Genik, and arrived in Winnipeg on July 25, 1896.

At the immigration hall in Winnipeg the group joined with other Ukrainians who had arrived a few weeks earlier. They were assigned a Scandinavian interpreter, John Wendelbo, to assist them in finding land in southern Manitoba; German was the medium of communication between Genik and Wendelbo. On July 31, 1896, the interpreter and six men elected by the group to choose homesteads set out from Winnipeg. Impressed by Mennonite settlements in southern Manitoba, the delegation returned to Winnipeg after about a week and quickly persuaded the others to select land near Stuartburn. While the soil was not as rich as that in other sites further west, each section contained many acres of timber — a commodity considered invaluable by the Ukrainians. The group of twenty-seven families proceeded to Dominion City by train on August 11, 1896, before journeying by wagon to their homesteads to establish the first Ukrainian settlement in Manitoba.

Wasyl Zahara chose land near present-day Gardenton, his first home being made of poplar logs with a roof of thatched straw. Unable to afford machinery, most pioneers cleared the land with axes, grubhoes and spades.

In 1897, Ukrainian immigration totaled 4,999. By the end of that year the Stuartburn



community, swelled by the influx of settlers, exceeded 250 families. Over 100 of these families came from the province of Bukovina, most from the village of Onut. Many satellite communities arose in the surrounding area.

In the isolated Ukrainian settlements of western Canada, religious services were often administered by travelling missionaries from various denominations, but the settlers of Stuartburn soon longed for a priest and church of their own. Marriages, funerals and baptisms were performed without benefit of clergy, and solemnized later by a visiting priest. In 1896 the settlers learned of the arrival in Canada of the Greek-Catholic priest Nestor Dmytriw, associate editor of the American-based Ukrainian language publication, *Svoboda*, and invited him to celebrate Easter with them. Father Dmytriw, the first Ukrainian Greek-Catholic clergyman in Canada, had already promised to celebrate Easter at Edna-Star, Alberta, but offered to visit Stuartburn on Palm Sunday, 1897. He was warmly welcomed by the settlers, both Catholic and Orthodox. They had erected a cross and altar for the blessing of the palms, but a terrible blizzard forced the people to celebrate Mass in the store of a local french-speaking merchant. The Canadian government subsequently appointed Dmytriw as an immigration agent and interpreter, which allowed him to administer to the spiritual needs of the settlers, who could hardly afford the cost of maintaining a priest themselves.



*Ukrainian Easter Celebration in Gardenton (New Stuartburn), 1915. The Women are dressed in traditional costume for the occasion.*

— Courtesy of Manitoba Archives

The arrival of Father Dmytriw inspired plans to build a church and obtain a permanent incumbent. On his second visit in 1897, Dmytriw consecrated two cemeteries, one Catholic and the other Orthodox. The settlers elected a Greek-Catholic Church committee and decided to build a church the following spring but to erect a small chapel immediately. The church, named the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church of the Holy Ghost, was completed in 1900, after the opening of St. Michael's, which was consecrated in the fall of 1899. At the same time, other Ukrainian settlements were planning churches and several of these share the distinction of being among the first in Canada. In Edna-Star the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church was completed in July 1899, although religious services were not conducted in it until June 1900. In 1898 two small chapels were erected in the Dauphin area and one



*St. Michael's Church and Bell Tower, c. 1915.*

— Courtesy of the Manitoba Archives, W.J. Sisler Collection

of these, located at Terebowla, now Valley River, was later rebuilt into a permanent church, also named St. Michael's, in 1902.

While the Greek-Catholic settlers of Stuartburn were busy planning their church, their neighbours from Bukovina in the New Stuartburn area, now renamed Gardenton, also began preparations for their own Orthodox building. They had been visited on St. Michael's Day, November 1897, by a Russian Orthodox missionary from Minneapolis, the Reverend Maliarevsky. He had performed the marriages of four Greek-Catholic couples as well as an Orthodox couple, and of a Bukovinian and a German Mennonite who had converted to Orthodoxy. The settlers formed an Orthodox church committee which filed a petition with the Dominion Government for a special grant of twenty acres for the church and cemetery. The Letters Patent for the land were issued by the government on May 25, 1899. The grant, on the south side of Roseau River, ended a heated debate among the settlers as to which side of the river was the best location. The site had already been used as a cemetery when a family had stopped there to bury their child. Located on an elevated ridge of sand and gravel, the church would be a dominant feature of the countryside.

The Ukrainian pioneers, finding materials similar to those of their native country — timber, clay, grass — and using the minimum of tools — felling axe, saw and broad axe for shaping logs — were able to build a church which drew directly upon their ecclesiological tradition of wooden folk architecture. During the winter of 1897-98 the settlers hauled logs of oak, ash, cedar and tamarack from the bluffs along the Roseau River to the site. Wasyl Kekot, a skilled carpenter from Bukovina who had settled in Gardenton, supervised the construction. Under his guiding hand, forty-three volunteer builders fashioned a church building that was to be characteristic of their Bukovinian homeland.

The structure was built of logs, and the spaces between them filled with swamp moss by the women. Lacking only an iconostasis, or altar-screen, the church was finished in May 1899. The names of each of the volunteers was proudly recorded and sealed within the altar.

Originally the church was covered by a simple low-pitched gable roof of wood and thatch — a traditional architectural feature of churches in Bukovina. The middle section of the church jutted out on both sides to form the traditional central frame of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

Two years later, in 1901, wood siding was placed over the logs and shingles added. A frame two-storey bell tower containing three cast-iron bells was built in the churchyard in 1906. Standing just south of the church, the style and plan of this structure typifies traditional Bukovinian belfries — a square box-frame placed on a larger frame, separated by the *piddashshia*, i.e., the wide eaves supported by



curved brackets or consoles. Below the eaves of the upper pyramidal roof runs a small arcade of circular-topped openings through which the peel of the three cast-iron bells resound.

Although no contemporary records of the actual building of the church have been found, two pages of a journal were discovered in the altar frame. The document, probably sealed in the altar when the church was consecrated, indicates the church "was built in the year 1899 . . . In May by these people whose names are inscribed on this list."

The church bears the name of St. Michael, the most popular and traditionally the most powerful saint in the Ukrainian Church calendar; patron saint of the reigning princes of Kievan Rus, and possessing many attributes which date back to pre-Christian deities. As the village of Onut in Bukovina was the most common birthplace of the builders, the church was popularly named "Onutska."

Unable to obtain a resident priest the people worshipped as best they could. The services were often conducted by local deacons who were able to read the Bible and psalter. Also, Russian Orthodox missionaries made irregular visits. Requests for a priest were sent to the Bishop in Bukovina, but he was powerless to assist the settlers since, under canon law, the titular Russian Orthodox Bishop of Alaska, resident in San Francisco, had sole jurisdiction over the Church in North America. When this Bishop was approached by the settlers in 1899 he forwarded their letter to St. Mary's Orthodox Church in Minneapolis. The Reverend Constantin Popoff received the request and consented to visit Stuartburn regularly.

Popoff travelled by train to Pembina where he was met by the settlers and transported the thirty miles to their village by horse and buggy. He arrived during the first week of October 1899, and conducted his first service in the home of a farmer. News of his arrival spread by word of mouth through five townships and Popoff's next service, held in the new church, drew over two hundred Ukrainian



*The bell tower, built near the church in 1906, is topped by the Orthodox cross.*

— Courtesy of Manitoba Archives.

settlers of Bukovinian origin. It was probably at this celebration, on the second Sunday in October, that the church was consecrated. Reverend Constantin Popoff left Gardenton on October 14, but returned periodically over the next five years. When St. Demetrius' Church was built across the river, his visits also included this parish.

Popoff was followed by the Reverend J. Sichinsky from Winnipeg and later by the Reverend Mr. Soliansky who lived in Gardenton from 1906 to 1910. Many Russian Orthodox dignitaries worshipped in the little church, the most notable being Bishops Alexander and Platon, and Bishop Tikhon in 1904, who later became the Patriarch in Moscow, and of the entire Russian Orthodox Church.

By 1914, the hastily-built structure was badly in need of repair. The low-pitched gable roof had originally been thatched but the dried grass was soon replaced by wood shingles. By 1915, however, the roof was leaking extensively in many sections, a result of buckling caused by the weight of snow. The settlers hired local farmer Menholy Chalaturnyk, who with his assistant George Tostavaruk, remodelled the church in the spring and summer of the next year.

Chalaturnyk had emigrated at the age of seventeen from the Bukovinian village of Blidok in 1905. Working as an itinerant labourer in the Gardenton area, the young immigrant had lived with the family of a skilled carpenter from the old country before establishing himself on his own land. It was from this old craftsman that Chalaturnyk learned the art of carpentry.

The new roof structure on St. Michael's represented Chalaturnyk's first attempt at church construction. Relying on his memory of churches in the old country for his model, he focused his creative efforts on the complex task of designing and erecting a new roof with a central cupola. It was not that a domeless church was considered unacceptable, for many churches in Bukovina had traditionally been covered with roofs which carried no projections. At a later date Chalaturnyk was to design and build domeless churches similar to the original roof of St. Michael's in the nearby settlements of Sundown and Sirko.

Obtaining materials from local lumber yards, the young carpenter and his assistant George Tostavaruk, worked on the project in their spare time, after doing the daily chores on their own farms.



*The interior of St. Michael's Church, popularly known as "Onutska." The small wood-burning stove provided the only heat and the church was lit by candles in the chandellers.*

— Courtesy of Manitoba Archives





*Many of these wooden-framed icons were imported from Russia and donated by parishioners.*

*— Courtesy of The Carillon, Steinbach*

Completed by the fall of 1915, the great dome, or cupola, rises above the central frame of the church. The drum is octagonal, pierced at its base by two small square windows on the north and south sides. Capping this is a single *zalom*, or recessed pyramid, edged by a strip of decorative trim and covered by tin. For the sake of ornament and balance, Chalaturnyk placed two smaller cupolas at the ridge of the hipped roofs, over the outer frames. These too are encased in tin, and like the large central cupola crowned by Greek crosses.

Chalaturnyk made other renovations to the design of St. Michael's Church in 1915, when he removed the entrance door from the south side near the west corner and built a new double-door porched entry at the west end. The old doorway can still be discerned around the window which replaced it.

The present church structure is basically the original, with the exception of the roof and entrance. The plan is the type most popular in the Ukraine: three frames (distinct room-like sections) lying on an east-west axis, with the central frame slightly larger than the adjacent two. In common with Canadian

buildings of the Ukrainian folk tradition, the log walls of St. Michael's rest almost directly on the ground, with the exception of a few stones which form a slight foundation. The logs are linked together at the corners by dovetail joints.

The cupola design illustrates a rising awareness of a Ukrainian national identity amongst the Bukovinian settlers. The "onion-shaped" cupola of the renovated building is a general feature of churches throughout the old country while the original design of the roof was more unique to Bukovina. Having grown up in the isolated villages of the Carpathian foothills separated for centuries from the rest of the Ukraine, few Bukovinians, upon their arrival in Canada viewed themselves as being a part of the Ukrainian people. Only after two decades in Canada, after close contact with pioneers from other Ukrainian provinces and exposure to a thriving press, did the Bukovinians begin to identify with the wider concept of the Ukrainian nation. Thus, it is not surprising that the designer of the 1915 roof of the church selected a style which is more common to religious architecture throughout the entire Ukraine.

The first service in the renovated church was held some time that fall upon the arrival of the Russian Orthodox missionary. No new articles were purchased for the interior as the settlers could not afford any. The interior reflects the splendor and love of brilliant colour and decoration found in the Eastern Church. Entering through the front door, the worshipper is drawn into a processional series of proportioned spaces. From the entrance to the iconostasis, movement is unobstructed by seating, with the small exception of a few benches placed against the walls for the elderly, because the congregation stood during the service. Moving forward from the small porch, one steps up into the west end frame — a barrel-ceiling room lined by brightly painted woodsiding. Small hand-fashioned shelves and a variety of icons enclose the east corners; a brass chandelier hangs from above. Passing beneath the devotional expression "Our Hope is in God," which is inscribed above the bowed partition opening, one enters the great domed space. Overhead, gold stars on a background of midnight blue bespeckle the undersurface of the dome. The transition between the octagonally segmented dome and the rectangular room below is cleverly achieved by the insertion of four triangular squinches. Two magnificent chandeliers are suspended from the dome ceiling — one is double-tiered brass and crystal; the other wood, iconographically carved with stylized wings.

The iconostasis, or altar-screen, which divided the congregation from the mysteries of the sanctuary, was designed by Wasyl Chornopysky. Framed icons cover it from the floor to the dome. On the framed icons, many of which were donated by the parishioners and imported from Kiev, St. Petersburg, Moscow and Odessa, appear the names of Russian Church censors, and on some, the name of the senior censor Archimandrit Vladimir. The iconostasis is pierced by the traditional three openings, with the swinging gates of the central portal decorated with fretwork. Chornopysky also carved the colourful candelabras, scripture stand and table as companion pieces to the large wooden cross, dated 1902. Pennants and banners donated by the early parishioners stand against the partition walls of the central nave.

Several fine objects lie upon the altar within the sanctuary. The large Holy Gospel, printed in Church Slavonic, is bound in red velvet with engraved metal plates and clasps. The chief carpenter of the original church, Wasyl Kekot, had carved an intricate wooden cross, dated 1897, for the church's consecration. Two years before the reconsecration ceremony held the fall of 1915 he fashioned a new crucifix. Both crosses, displayed in the church, exhibit exceptional skill and beauty.

St. Michael's formally joined the newly formed Independent Autocephalous Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church of Canada some time after 1918. The church continued to be served by priests from this organization even after the congregation moved into its new building, which was constructed in 1934 to serve the expanded population of Gardenton. After the opening of this new church, services were conducted in the original structure annually on St. George's Day and St. Michael's Day. On August 18, 1974, it was dedicated as a provincial historic site and since that time an annual celebration has been held, usually on the third Sunday in August, with leading clergyman of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada participating.

Completed in May, and consecrated in October 1899, St. Michael's Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church at Gardenton was the first permanent Ukrainian church to be constructed in Canada. It stands today as a reminder of the rich cultural heritage and craftsmanship the first Ukrainian settlers brought to the new land.

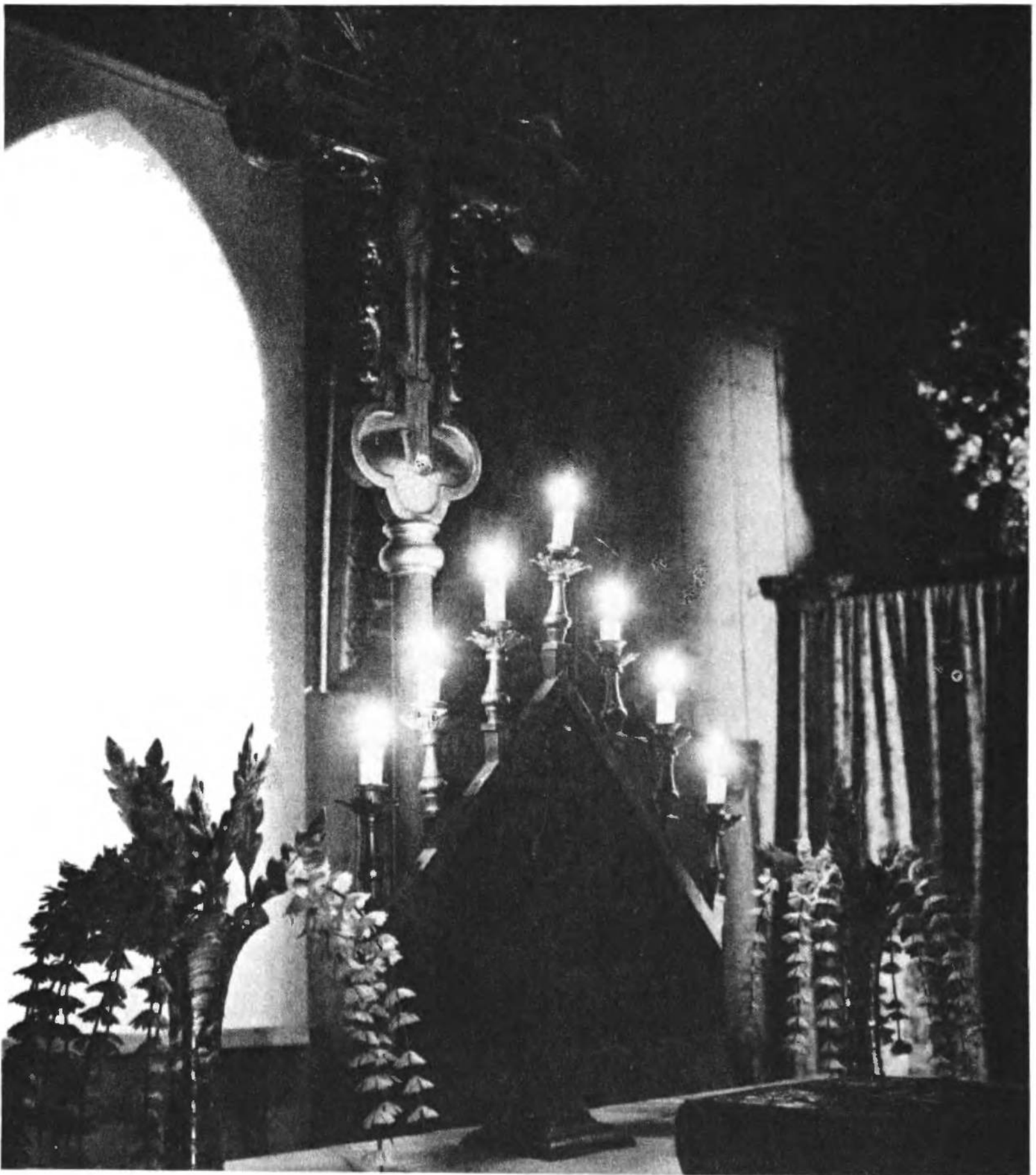


## Suggestions for further reading:

For a general overview of Ukrainian settlement and history in Canada see M.V. Burke's **The Ukrainian Canadians** (Toronto: Van Nostrand, 1978) and Paul Yuzyk's **The Ukrainians in Canada** (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1953).

Regional and local histories of interest include John Panchuk's **Bukowinian Settlements in Southern Manitoba** (Battle Creek: the Author, 1971), Peter Humeniuk's **Hardships and Progress of Ukrainian Pioneers; Memoirs from Stuartburn Colony and Other Points** (Winnipeg: the Author, 1977), and Michael Ewanchuk's **Spruce, Swamp and Stone; a History of the Pioneer Ukrainian Settlements in the Gimli Area** (Winnipeg: the Author, 1977).

A short history of St. Michael's Ukrainian Orthodox Church entitled **Seventy-fifth Anniversary of St. Michael's Ukrainian Orthodox Church; Gardenton, Manitoba, 1897-1972** was prepared by the Church's Jubilee Committee and is available at the Legislative Library, Manitoba Archives Building.



*A large wooden crucifix, wooden candelabra and the velvet-covered Bible in cyrillic script.*

— Courtesy of *The Carillon*, Steinbach



*This carved wooden Cherubim hangs from the chandelier at the front of the church. It is peculiar to Ukrainian Orthodox Churches in the Province of Bukovina.*

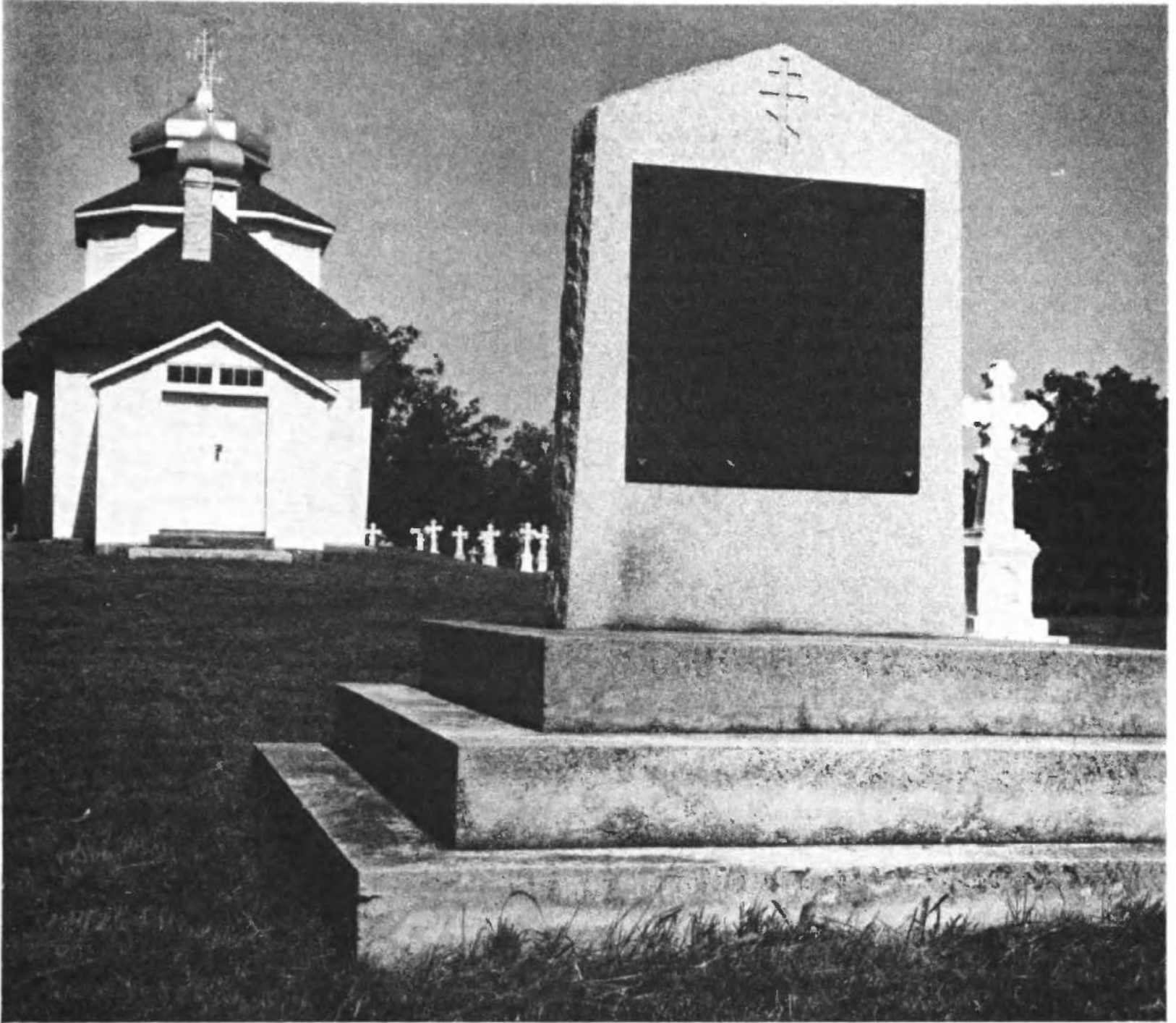
— Courtesy of *The Carillon*, Steinbach





*Behind the Church the graves of the first settlers are marked by headstones bearing the Orthodox cross.*

— Courtesy of *The Carillon*, Steinbach



*This cairn was erected by the parishioners in July 1956.*

*— Courtesy of The Carillon, Steinbach*





## ST. MICHAEL'S UKRAINIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

St. Michael's Orthodox Church, consecrated October 14, 1899, was the first permanent Ukrainian church erected in Canada. Until the parish joined the Greek-Orthodox Church of Canada in 1922, it was served by a Russian Orthodox Mission.

The church was built by immigrants from northern Bukowyna, now the western Ukraine, who settled the Gardenton area after 1896. Measuring 48' x 22' x 33', the structure exemplified Bukowynian pioneer craftsmanship in architecture, interior decoration and religious furnishing. St. Michael's served as a focal point of spiritual and cultural life in the first Ukrainian settlement in Manitoba and remains a symbol of the continuity of the Ukrainian identity in Canada.

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This plaque located on Hw

## **OUR HERITAGE**

We have received great gifts as our heritage in Canada — beautiful rivers and parks, rolling hills, trees and grassland; the rich resources of nature are ours to protect, cherish and enjoy.

Wherever man has been, there are marks of defilement and destruction — let us resolve that this shall not be our legacy to the twenty-first century. Let us rather honour and emulate those who went before us as pioneers, who gave of themselves, building and creating, enriching the land. They have earned our thanks, and while we cannot repay them, we can respect their achievements and resolve that we will try to follow them in action and in attitude.

For this we set aside this special place in our Province, a site that is part of history.





**Historic Resources Branch**

**Hon. Norma L. Price  
Minister**

**1981**