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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Church of St. Joseph (Catholic)

other names/site number _____

2. Location

street & number 7897 Elmer Road not for publication

city or town Elmer Township (Meadowlands) vicinity

state Minnesota code MN county St. Louis code 137 zip code 55765

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Ian R. Stewart 7/23/02
Signature of certifying official/Title Ian R. Stewart Date
Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer
State of Federal agency and bureau Minnesota Historical Society

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

- entered in the National Register.
 See continuation sheet.
- determined eligible for the National Register
 See continuation sheet.
- determined not eligible for the National Register.
- removed from the National Register.
- other, (explain): _____

Edson R. Beal 9/6/02
Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

Name of Property

County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property

(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

| Contributing | Noncontributing | |
|--------------|-----------------|------------|
| 1 | 0 | buildings |
| 1 | 0 | sites |
| 0 | 0 | structures |
| 0 | 0 | objects |
| 2 | 0 | Total |

Name of related multiple property listing

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

RELIGION: Religious Facility

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

VACANT: Not in use

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

NO STYLE

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Concrete

walls Wood: Weatherboard

roof Asphalt shingles

other

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
B removed from its original location.
C a birthplace or grave.
D a cemetery.
E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
F a commemorative property.
G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

Settlement

Period of Significance

1913-1928

Significant Dates

1913

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Unknown

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
previously listed in the National Register
previously determined eligible by the National Register
designated a National Historic Landmark
recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
Other State agency
Federal agency
Local government
University
Other

Name of repository:

Church of St. Joseph

Name of Property

St. Louis County, Minnesota

County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 5 acres

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1 15 517064 5214294
Zone Easting Northing
2 15 517064 52142300

3 15 516851 5214230
Zone Easting Northing
4 15 516851 5214294

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Daniel J. Hoisington

organization Hoisington Preservation Consultants date 1 March 2002

street & number P. O. Box 13790 telephone 651-415-1034

city or town Roseville state MN zip code 55113

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A Sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

Additional items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name Church of St. Joseph c/o Margaret Ralidak

street & number RR6955 Hwy 5 telephone 218-427-2690

city or town Floodwood state MN zip code 55736

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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Elmer Township, St. Louis County, MNSection number 7 Page 1**7. Narrative Description**

The Church of Saint Joseph is located on a five-acre parcel of land in rural Elmer Township, Saint Louis County, Minnesota, on the southwest corner of the intersection of Elmer and Church Roads, Saint Louis County. The village of Meadowlands is located approximately two miles to the east. The surrounding land is sparsely settled and used for agriculture, with the Saint Louis River flowing approximately two thousand feet to the east. The church building is set back twenty-five feet from the Elmer Road, shielded by spruce trees. The west portion of the lot is wooded.

The church is a simple, unornamented, one-story building. The plan is rectangular, approximately twenty-four by forty feet on an east-west axis, with an entrance on the east façade. Horizontal weatherboard sheathes the wood-frame building. Fascia and corner boards are simple millwork. The church installed a concrete foundation in 1948, replacing earlier wood timbers.

The east façade has three bays with a center entranceway flanked by two double hung, one-over-one windows. The entrance was originally an open porch with a front gable. The church enclosed the entry at an undetermined date and replaced the paneled front doors around 1990. At that time, the church placed concrete piers under the entry. Simple wooden steps with metal rails approach the entrance. The south façade shows three windows similar to those on the east façade. All windows use translucent glass that is quite old but not original.

The building has a steeply pitched roof with asphalt shingles. The steeple has an open belfry with the original bell still intact. In 1990, the church repaired the steeple, bracing it with steel and replacing the cross. There is a brick chimney on the north slope of the roof. Based on an early photograph, a top section of the chimney was removed.

The sacristy extends off the north side. It is a one-story room, approximately ten by fourteen feet, with a hipped roof. Around 1990 the church placed concrete pillars under the sacristy, which had separated from the main part of the church. There is a relatively new paneled door on its east façade. There are single double-hung, one-over-one windows on the east and north facades.

The interior retains a high degree of integrity. The floor plan is rectangular with flush wooden sheathing on the walls, ceiling and floor. With few minor exceptions, the church furniture is original. The seating plan, utilizing wooden pews, uses a center aisle leading up to the altar. A simple rail delineates the altar area. Fourteen pictures, depicting the Stations of the Cross, ornament the walls. A single kerosene lamp hangs from the ceiling. The sacristy is entered through a door in the northwest corner. This spare room has a built-in cabinet on the west wall.

The building retains its integrity in both setting and construction.

Saint Joseph's Cemetery is located on the east half of the property, across Elmer Road, in gently rolling grassy terrain. The oldest marked stone in the cemetery dates from 1909. Although a historic

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photograph shows a simple wooden arch across the road from the church entrance, it is no longer standing. The cemetery is still used for interments.

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8. Narrative Statement of Significance

The Church of Saint Joseph, located in Elmer Township, Minnesota, is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A, significance to the broad patterns of our history, in the area of Settlement. The church is a representation of the settlement of the "cut-over" area of Minnesota in the early twentieth century. During the last decades of the nineteenth century, logging companies harvested most of the prime timber in northern Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. To sell its cutover land in northeast Minnesota, the Duluth and Iron Range Railroad (D&IR) created a Land Commission office and paid agents to attract settlers.

In 1909 a Chicago land agent recruited some twenty-five families to purchase land near Meadowlands, Minnesota. These settlers, most newly emigrated from Austria-Hungary, moved to the area as members of a loosely organized "Saint Joseph's Colony." To encourage the settlement, the company donated land and cash for construction of a Catholic church and cemetery. The period of significance ranges from the construction of the church in 1913 through 1928, when the D&IR ended its intensive land sales operations in the Meadowlands area.

The property relates to three statewide historic contexts, including "Railroads and Agricultural Development, 1870-1940," "Northern Minnesota Lumbering, 1870s-1930s," and "Iron Ore Industry, 1880s-1945." Saint Joseph's Church meets National Register Criteria Consideration A.

Economic Changes

Between 1890 and 1910, mining companies opened Minnesota's Mesabi Iron Range — a rich deposit of ore spread in an arc one hundred miles northwest of Duluth. Cities sprang up in the wilderness, including Hibbing, Virginia, Eveleth, and Coleraine. Several railroads opened lines to the mines, including the D&IR (1874, 1882) and the Duluth, Missabe, and Northern (DM&N) (1891). However, the land between Duluth and the Iron Range cities remained sparsely settled. Meadowlands Township, for example, listed no permanent residents in the 1900 Census, with only three residents in Elmer Township.¹

This changed in 1906 when the DM&N completed a line from Alborn to Coleraine, expanding its reach further in 1910 with a short line to the Hull-Rust Mine in Hibbing. Expecting substantial traffic,

¹ *Thirteen Census of the United States, Population Reports by State, 1910* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1910). Note that Saint Joseph's Colony was originally located in Meadowlands Township. Elmer Township annexed the area west of the Saint Louis River when it organized in 1920.

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the DM&N double-tracked the Hull-Rust Short Line and laid a second track on the Alborn branch southward. This opened Meadowlands (T53-R19) and Elmer (T53-R20) Townships for settlement.²

The (D&IR), another railroad company, benefited from the improved transportation into the region. In the legislation chartering the D&IR, the State of Minnesota granted the company ten sections of land (designated as "swamp land") for every mile of track — an important incentive. Significantly, the law did not require the land to be contiguous to the rail line. Over the years, the D&IR accumulated more than a half million acres in northern Minnesota.³

Initially, the railroad company gained income on the properties through the lease of timber rights. By 1900, however, Wisconsin and Minnesota timber companies had logged over the land. The D&IR faced an economic choice: either let the land stand idle and allow for a second timber growth or sell the land. The railroad company chose the later course, as it gave a quicker return on investment.⁴

Selling the Land

Competition was stiff. Dozens of companies opened land offices to promote sales in the cutover areas of northern Wisconsin and Minnesota. There were several options. Some companies pooled their resources and created cooperatives to handle land sales. This route was used to create the American Immigration Company, a joint venture of seventeen prominent lumber companies that included Laird Norton, the Mississippi Logging Company, and Weyerhaeuser and Rutledge. Other speculators established firms independent of timber and railroad companies, negotiating rights to sell land or purchasing large tracts for resale. For example, the Gates Land Company acquired and sold more than 465,000 acres, including a tract of 50,000 acres transferred from Cornell University.⁵

The D&IR chose to sell its land directly to actual settlers, stating:

² Robert Balach, "A History of the Duluth, Missabe and Iron Range Railroad," M.A. thesis, University of Minnesota, 1968; Frank A. King, *The Missabe Road* (San Marino, California: Golden West Books, 1972), 89.

³ William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1930), IV, 11-12.

⁴ Agnes M. Larson, *History of the White Pine Industry in Minnesota* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1949); Benjamin H. Hibbard, *A History of Public Lands Policies* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1924), 542-43, 565-66.

⁵ Lucile Kane, "Selling Cut-over Lands in Wisconsin," *Business History Review*, 28 (September 1954): 239; Robert Gough, *Farming the Cutover: A Social History of Northern Wisconsin, 1900-1940* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 35-37.

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The entire policy of the Duluth and Iron Range Rail Road Company is to settle up St. Louis County with a desirable class of farmers; men who will settle on the land and improve it and get the land under cultivation as quickly as possible. Absolutely no land will be sold to speculators.⁶

Luther B. Arnold, Land Commissioner for the D&IR, directed a concerted effort to encourage sales in the cutover area, focusing on the land between the Iron Range and Duluth. He had worked in a similar capacity for the Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Pacific Railway, before joining the D&IR in 1899. Concurrently, he acted as trustee for the sales of Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific Railroad land. The department developed promotional material and sent paid agents to large cities such as Milwaukee and Chicago to stimulate interest. Typically, these agents received a commission of roughly ten to fifteen percent.⁷

Selling northern lands was not an easy task. Company publicity combated popular perceptions of northern Minnesota. One agent, speaking to the National Farm Convention in Chicago in 1911, noted, "We have the so-called 'dry cold' that [allows] living comfortable and gives rise to the expression...that you don't feel the cold even when the thermometer indicates 10 below zero." A company publication trumpeted the benefits of northern Minnesota over cheap lands in North and South Dakota: "Just make a note of this. There are no blizzards in northeast Minnesota. There are no cyclones. There are no drouths. There is an abundance of fuel."⁸

Brochures were replete with testimonials. James Peterson purchased forty acres in Meadowlands in September 1908. After his first year, he wrote a glowing letter of endorsement for the Land Department:

In response to your inquiry as to the Meadowlands Settlement, will say that I moved here from Nebraska January 6th, built my house and moved in it Jan. 25th. I found it somewhat colder here than in Nebraska but was able to work out-doors every day from January 6th until spring.

In regard to crops raised here will say that all root crops do exceedingly well, including potatoes. Small grains mature here in one third less time than in Nebraska. The three acres that the University Experimental Station at St. Paul has laid out in one of the ten acre plats here for demonstration purposes should prove of great benefit to settlers as it will save them the expense of working out or trying out certain products and cultivations.

⁶ "Sectional Land Map of Saint Louis County, Minnesota, showing the lands owned by the Duluth & Iron Range Rail Road Company," D&IR Railway Company Records, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS).

⁷ Henry A. Castle, *Minnesota: Its Story and Biography* (Chicago and New York: The Lewis Publishing Co., 1915), II, 778; Lucile Kane, "Selling Cut-over Lands in Wisconsin," *Business History Review*, 28 (September 1954): 239.

⁸ "Sectional Land Map of Saint Louis County, Minnesota," D&IR Railway Company Records, MHS.

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I am in Meadowlands to stay and will back any statements made in this letter.⁹

Typically, a prospective buyer obtained information on available land from the department office in Duluth and purchased the land directly from the company. For example, Ellis Speece recalled that in 1908, he caught a train from the Twin Cities for Duluth and went directly to the land office. The land office agent took him to Meadowlands, and showed him several tracts of land. Speece completed the deal on the spot.¹⁰

Saint Joseph Colony

In 1909 D&IR Land Agent E. Xavier Erlinger recruited some twenty-five families in Chicago to settle just west of Meadowlands. Company literature referred to the settlers as "a colony of 35 German Catholics, known as the St. Joseph's Colony." The colony was not a formal legal entity and kept no financial records or minutes.

The colony was a marketing device used by the D&IR, modeled after similar cutover land promotions. The establishment of a colony was one of the simplest means to sell the land. For example, one company organized the colony of "Cloverlands" near Merrill in Wisconsin's cutover lands, advertising for settlers in German-language newspapers in Milwaukee and Chicago. The Good Land Company attracted some forty-five immigrants to farms near Bayfield, Wisconsin, using Bohemian, Slovak, and Hungarian agents. The D&IR Land Department helped to settle a Finnish colony along its tracks near Embarrass, Minnesota.¹¹

D&IR literature referred to Erlinger's recruits as "St. Joseph's Catholic Colony," but the relationship between the Land Department and Catholic Church is not clear. However, the railroad donated land for a church and cemetery to Bishop James McGolrick of the Diocese of Duluth.¹²

Although there is no formal list of the Saint Joseph colonists, D&IR records show that twenty-five residents of Cook County, Illinois, bought company land in Meadowlands Township between 1909 and 1911. However, several purchased property several miles from the Saint Joseph's Colony, as designated on company maps, and were undoubtedly not part of this group.

⁹ "Sectional Land Map of Saint Louis County, Minnesota," D&IR Railway Company Records, MHS.

¹⁰ Ada Frances Coons Branson, editor. *History of Meadowlands, 1900-1975*. Printed privately, 1976.

¹¹ Robert Gough, *Farming the Cutover: A Social History of Northern Wisconsin, 1900-1940* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 36-37; Lucille Kane, "Selling Cut-Over Lands in Wisconsin," *Business History Review* 28 (1954): 236-47.

¹² "Sectional Land Map of Saint Louis County, Minnesota," D&IR Railway Company Records, MHS; Deed #224 between the Land Department and James McGolrick, dated 31 May 1910.

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The first members of Saint Joseph's Church were generally recent immigrants (only four came before 1900) from Austria-Hungary, who spoke either German or Magyar. Combined with Moravians and Bohemians, these nationalities were among the most recent immigrants to the United States and bore the brunt of depressed urban conditions following the Panic of 1907.¹³

Most Saint Joseph's colonists came north as family units. D&IR literature suggests that they shared a common experience, stating:

...We located on our lands about thirty families, most of them having some previous farm experience. These people were brought directly from city occupations and placed on lands just west and adjoining Meadowlands in what is known as St. Joseph's Colony.¹⁴

The D&IR sold the land in forty acre sections at \$15.00 an acre. It provided financing, with the plan calling for payment of interest alone for four years, then payment of the principal over eleven or twelve years. For example, Joseph Ringhofer purchased forty acres on 1 December 1909 for \$600. After an initial down payment, he paid interest of \$33.60 for the first four years, then paid interest and principal until completing the plan in 1923. Xavier Erlinger, referred as the President of the Colony by the D&IR, acquired a forty-acre lot adjacent to the church. Although he left the area by 1920, his son, Otto, remained on the farm through the 1920s.¹⁵

Church of Saint Joseph

With a donation of \$500 from the D&IR, the colonists built the Church of St. Joseph in 1913. The church initially was a mission of Saint Clement's Parish in Duluth. In 1917, after the parish

¹³ Robert Gough, *Farming the Cutover: A Social History of Northern Wisconsin, 1900-1940* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 36-37. "Sectional Land Map of Saint Louis County, Minnesota," D&IR Railway Company Records, MHS.

¹⁴ List of members of St. Joseph's Church, 1913 and 1918, in possession of Margaret Ralidak. The 1920 U.S. Census lists the place of birth for most early members as either Hungary or Eisenburg. Eisenburg is the German name of the Western Hungarian county Vas. The western part of Vas had a large majority of ethnic Germans and became part of Austria in 1921.

¹⁵ Duluth & Iron Range Railway Company, Land Department Records, Record of land sales and monthly receipts, 1891-1925, 2 volumes. Minnesota Historical Society; George G. Howe and R. H. L. Jewett completed the original survey in 1874. The property was re-surveyed on 20 July 1922. No plat map was filed for Saint Joseph's Colony. Saint Louis County Recorder Office.

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incorporated, McGolrick transferred title to the Church of Saint Joseph, Elmer, for the sum of one dollar.¹⁶

At the time of construction, the settlers erected a small social hall and woodshed on the church property. The community used the hall and woodshed as a schoolhouse until St. Louis County School #147 opened in 1913. The church and hall became a center for the community — the only public buildings near the Elmer depot until construction of a town hall in 1927.¹⁷

Why did the D&IR contribute to the establishment of Saint Joseph's Church? Apart from the church, the D&IR did little for the new settlers. Some years later, Arnold wrote:

At that time no roads had been constructed and we cleared only a half an acre on each twenty or forty acre tract of land. Most of these people had only sufficient funds to make a very small first down payment on the raw land and to build small inexpensive houses and attempt to start clearing. We had no organization for supervision of such activities.¹⁸

It is possible that the prospective settlers extracted a promise from the company before they moved north. However, the cash donation toward the construction of the church building came three years after the initial land sales. This suggests that the D&IR saw the contribution not as the conclusion of a transaction, but an investment in the long-term future of its land sales.

First, the company benefited from long-term social and economic stability in the area. Typically, purchase contracts ran for twelve years. Reselling land from forfeited contracts was expensive, and company-financed improvements encouraged the settlers to remain on the land.¹⁹

Second, the Land Department had reason to believe that a good relationship with the Bishop of Duluth, James McGolrick, would improve prospects for future sales. During his career, McGolrick brought thousands of Catholic immigrants to Minnesota through colonization programs. Following

¹⁶ Warranty Deed, Book 331, page 120, filed 29 June 1910; Warranty Deed, Book 406, page 481, filed 25 January 1917. Saint Louis County Recorder Office; "German Settlers Built Elmer Church," *Duluth Register*, Special section, April 1960.

¹⁷ Interview, Margaret Ralidak, 12 October 2001; "German Settlers Built Elmer Church," *Duluth Register*, Special section, April 1960. The social hall, a simple one-story wood frame structure, was abandoned by the 1930s and is no longer standing.

¹⁸ "Specialty Farms for the Small Acre Farmer," (Duluth: D&IR Land Department, 1922).

¹⁹ Lucille Kane, "Selling Cut-Over Lands in Wisconsin," *Business History Review* 28 (1954): 236, 244.

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his appointment as first Bishop of the Diocese of Duluth in 1888, he dedicated his efforts to bring immigrants into northern Minnesota.²⁰

In 1909 McGolrick negotiated an agreement between the Minnesota Catholic Colonization Society and the D.S.B. Johnson Land Company to establish colonies in Becker and Hubbard counties — turning some 173,000 acres over to the Bishop for distribution. In September 1909, the *Duluth News Tribune* heralded Bishop McGolrick's plans to place 25,000 of the big cities' poor on the land.²¹

McGolrick's interest was more than a simple desire to boost the membership roles. The Bishop hoped to provide cheap land to poor city dwellers, believing in the efficacy of farm life to improve the soul. Archbishop John Ireland echoed his vision, wrote,

No better or greater work for the welfare, spiritual and temporal, of Catholic immigrants can well be thought of than that of guiding them to regions where they can secure to themselves, at comparatively low prices, homes on the land, and where by grouping them in compact settlements, you are able to provide for them priests, churches and schools, and guard themselves and their children against peril to faith and morals.²²

D&IR promotional literature echoed the Archbishop, stating:

While working in the cities these people were able to get a small amount of money ahead at a time and then some crisis such as sickness, loss of position or shut down of the institutions where they were working, would come and eat up the pittance which they had been able to lay by.

These people now have nicely improved farms, good houses, good roads, good schools, good churches, social life, and they either own their own their farms outright or have equities in them showing that the present worth of each family varies all the way from \$2,500 up to \$10,000. Could they have saved this amount in town?²³

Early Years of Saint Joseph's Colony

The first years of the colony were difficult. In the early spring of 1910, the settlers moved into tents at the side of the Elmer Railroad Station. On the morning of April 26, they learned about the harsh weather when a heavy snow storm collapsed their tents. The weather scarcely met the rosy predictions

²⁰ Raymond J. Cossette, "The Catholic Church in the City of Duluth, 1869-1890." M.A. Thesis, Saint Paul Seminary, 1965; Philip J. Silvers, "James McGolrick, First Bishop of the Diocese of Duluth," M.A. Thesis, Saint Paul Seminary, 1964.

²¹ See Jerome Rausch, *The Crosier Story* (Onamia: Crosier Press, 1959), 143-146.

²² Rauch, 144-145.

²³ "Specialty Farms for the Small Acre Farmer," (Duluth: D&IR Land Department, 1922).

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of D&IR brochures. John Horvath recalled, "In 1910, July 4th, my neighbor, Mr. Hazel, came to see my garden because his was all frozen. My garden wasn't at that time but later on it froze destroying all the good crops." In that first year, snow fell in the middle of October.

Most settlers ran small mixed-use farms, selling their products at the farmers' markets in Hibbing and Duluth. However, these markets were not easily accessible. On his first trip to the Hibbing market, Alois Ringhofer recalled that it took ten hours to haul his 135-bushel load of potatoes with a team and wagon. Many supplemented their income by picking wild berries.²⁴

There were few opportunities for outside employment. Some settlers worked at nearby lumber camps. In 1913, Andrew Johnson purchased timber rights for land near Elmer from the DM&N Railroad Company. Johnson erected a railroad branch line from Elmer and employed several men on his crews. The Land Department employed a number of men as well.

Still, by 1912, L. B. Arnold was pleased with the progress of the colony, reporting to the company:

We expect to locate 100 families in St. Joseph's Colony. The company has donated \$500.00 for a church, and by the coming fall this colony will have its own church and school.²⁵

Masaryk-Meadowlands

Few additional settlers followed the Chicago colonists — certainly not the one hundred additional families predicted by Arnold — so the land commission turned to a new target. In 1917 it sent agent Frank Kozumplik into the Czech community in Chicago, promoting the colony of Masaryk-Meadowlands — named after the founder and first President of the Republic of Czechoslovakia, Tomas Masaryk. This colony encompassed the unsold western lots of the original Saint Joseph's Colony.²⁶

In the 1910 census, no households list Czechoslovakia or Moravia as a country of origin in Meadowlands Township. By 1920 nearly sixteen percent of Meadowland Townships' households came from Moravia or Czechoslovakia, with the majority acquiring lots in the Saint Joseph's Colony area. Several Czech and Bohemian settlers appear on the 1918 Saint Joseph's Church membership rolls, including the Gajdostik, Kozumplik, Konecky, and Krivak families, constituting nearly a quarter of the total membership. One D&IR employee recalled, "A good many land sales were made.

²⁴ Elmer Pioneer Reunion. "Elmer Pioneer Reunion, August 11, 1940 at Elmer School," (Virginia, MN: 1940).

²⁵ Quoted in Ada Frances Coons Branson, editor. *History of Meadowlands, 1900-1975*. Printed privately, 1976.

²⁶ See "Masaryk-Meadowlands," Broadside; "Masaryk a Meadowlands," Brochure (Duluth: D&IR Land Commission, 1923); "Specialty Farms for the Small Acre Farmer," (Duluth: D&IR Land Department, 1922).

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The Bohemian settlers were substantial, industrious people, and were prospering in a modest way.” Historian C. Winston Chrislock refers to these settlers as Minnesota’s “final Czech community.”²⁷

Recruitment among the Czech was so successful that the Land Department hired Paul Sramek as an assistant agent in 1922. As the Saint Joseph’s/ Masayrk land sold, the company directed new settlers to lands just south of the village of Meadowlands. Sramek became a prominent community leader, serving thirty years as mayor of Meadowlands.²⁸

Infrastructure

Arnold recognized that the D&IR needed to provide more support for new settlers if they were to develop a stable economy. In 1918, he wrote,

We must stand back of our settlers, and if owing to some unforeseen condition of weather, season, or something of the sort, the crop is a failure, we will have to stand back of him for another year. We will furnish credit.²⁹

In addition, competition between various companies across the cutover areas intensified between 1916 and 1920 as agriculture boomed and land values increased dramatically, reflecting a national trend after World War I. To attract new buyers, the D&IR made a substantial commitment to build the local economy. Arnold hired Wallace Ashby to double the size of the D&IR Experimental Farm, located only a mile east of Saint Joseph’s Colony. Ashby brought experience to the job, plus excellent connections to the Agriculture Department, where his uncle, Henry Wallace, served as Secretary between 1921 and 1925.

The company invested heavily in the community’s infrastructure, providing warehouse space and small movable bunkhouses to ease the new settler’s transition. The company helped to organize a Farmers’ Cooperative Creamery and a cooperative telephone company. It built a 12,000-bushel potato storage facility.³⁰

²⁷ C. Winston Chrislock, “The Czechs,” in June Drenning Holmquist, editor, *They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State’s Ethnic Groups* (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1981), 337-339.

²⁸ Chrislock relates the testimony of an early settler, who described Kozumplik as a “fast talker who lured scores of Czechs to Meadowlands.” Chrislock, 339; also see *History of Meadowlands*, 46-49, 52. The Western Bohemian Fraternal Union Hall in Meadowlands, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, represents this Czech settlement.

²⁹ *History of Meadowlands*, 52.

³⁰ “Meadowlands and St. Joseph’s Colonies,” (Duluth: D&IR Land Department, 1918); “Meadowlands, Bulletin for 1922,” (Duluth: D&IR Land Department, 1922).

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To promote other crops, Arnold brought in a California agricultural expert to work with area farmers to grow lettuce and cauliflower. The Land Department built a large packinghouse and experimented with refrigerated cars with the intention to sell to Chicago markets. For three years, local farmers shipped some thirty carloads of vegetables annually. However, it proved economically unfeasible due to shipping costs.

In 1922 Arnold proudly described the advancement of the Meadowlands/ Elmer area:

During this time the land office has organized a splendid organization and is now able to offer land within a few miles of these very farms on which these people struggled in the beginning, located on the best highways, with consolidated school for the children, school busses to take them to school, telephone systems, churches, social organizations, entertainments, the best of agricultural and development supervision, and farms cleared and equipped ready for operation. This means that the new farmer is not obliged to go through the pioneering work.³¹

It proved to be the economic apex, however. After 1920 American agriculture slumped into an economic decline that did not end until World War II. This depression hit the marginal farms of the cutover especially hard. The land proved less productive than advertised. In Masayrk-Meadowlands, one early settler recalled, they "found bogs and forests instead of the [promised] prime agricultural land." Others relate that the ground was swampy and required several years of work to be made productive.

Wallace Ashby, manager of the D&IR Demonstration Farm, tried to explain the demise of local agriculture, writing,

The 1920 agricultural depression caused farm prices to fall and remain abnormally low. On the other hand, company officials, and probably the University people also, overestimated the productive value of the soils in the area, and underestimated the difficulty of bringing them into production. Another difficulty was that many of the settlers...were handicapped by lack of capital and hard luck.³²

Land sales dropped precipitously, paralleling an economic collapse across the Minnesota and Wisconsin cutover area. In 1928 the D&IR closed the Demonstration Farm. Ashby noted, "The closing of the project must have been hard for Mr. Arnold. He had great faith in the Meadowlands

³¹ "Specialty Farms for the Small Acre Farmer," (Duluth: D&IR Land Department, 1922).

³² *History of Meadowlands*, 60; also see Father James Golden, "Meadowlands Parish Dates to Land Agent Days," *Duluth Register*, April 1960. One recent historian of the Wisconsin cutover echoed Ashby, writing, "It was people's ill-founded faith in agriculture and their ill-advised attempt to attract farmers to land better suited to growing trees" that brought "the area's residents to the brink of ruin." Mark Davis, "Northern Choices: Rural Forest Country in the 1920s, Part I," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* (1996): 5.

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area and had given good support to the development project, the settlers, and community activities.” By the 1930s, agricultural experts pronounced cutover farming a failure, with one USDA report lamenting the “Daniel Boone” complex that irrationally led settlers to Minnesota’s cutover lands.³³

Saint Joseph’s Church and Elmer Township

While the railroad company and the agricultural experts abandoned the work of colonizing the cutover lands, those who moved north and purchased land did not. In 1920 the settlers organized Elmer Township (T53-R20), with five members of the original Saint Joseph’s Colony serving on the Town Board. The new township included the Saint Joseph’s Colony area, annexed from Meadowlands Township. The township built a town hall in 1927. New Deal programs briefly brought relief to the area as the WPA erected the telephone lines and built drainage ditches in 1936.³⁴

The church continued to serve a pivotal role as a community gathering place with Sunday Mass, funerals, baptisms, and weddings. From 1923 to 1928, the Monsignor Buh Mission House in Duluth supplied priests. In 1928 Father Rudolph Hildebrand was appointed the first resident pastor of Meadowlands, and the church became a mission of St. Mary’s, Meadowlands.

Following World War II, membership at Saint Joseph’s Church dwindled. Faced with a shortage of priests, the Diocese of Duluth dissolved St. Joseph’s Parish in 1962, transferring its members to St. Mary’s Parish, Meadowlands. After that, mass was celebrated once a month and at occasional baptisms, weddings, and funerals. In 1990 several descendants of the original settlers formed the Saint Joseph’s Restoration Committee to care for the building. By 2001 the building was no longer used for religious services and was officially suppressed under Catholic canonical procedures.³⁵

Summary

In a recent study, two historians wrote,

The economic cost of the campaign to colonize the cutover land was high; its cost in human terms can never be quantified. Those who came...hoping to establish farms faced years of unremitting

³³ David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Roy M. Gilcreast and William F. Musbach, “Land Use Problems and Policies in the Cut-over Regions of Minnesota,” (St. Paul: U. S. Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, 1939), 3, 13.

³⁴ Elmer Pioneer Reunion. “Elmer Pioneer Reunion, August 11, 1940 at Elmer School.” (Virginia, MN: 1940).

³⁵ Frank Sramek to Rev. Dale Nau, 21 February 2001, Church of St. Joseph, Elmer, file, Diocese of Duluth. Elmer Township population remained stable, reaching a high of 316 in 1940. After a slow decline following World War II, population dropped from 207 in 1970 to 73 in 1990.

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labor with indifferent odds of lasting success. Some settlers came prepared for hardship; others clearly had no conception of the challenges that faced them. While the stumps, stones, and hard winters drove many away, it must be remembered that others persevered.³⁶

The Church of Saint Joseph is an institution established to provide a religious base and a sense of social stability and permanence during the period of initial settlement of the cutover lands in northern Minnesota. It illustrates the interconnected interests of railroad companies and religious organizations to attract property hungry immigrants to a region of marginal agricultural quality. The church provided spiritual support to those whose work to improve the land was difficult and whose hold was often tenuous.

³⁶ Susan O. Haswell and Arnold R. Alanen, "Colonizing the Cutover, Wisconsin's Progressive-Era Experiments in Rural Planning," *Landscape Journal*, 14 (Fall 1995): 171-187.

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10. Geographical Data

Verbal Boundary Description

Commencing at a point 210 feet East of the quarter post on North line of Lot 2, Section 17. Township 53, Range 19; thence south at right angles to the section line last mentioned 210 foot, thence West and parallel to said section line 1088 feet, thence North 210 feet to section line; thence East 1088 feet along section line to place of beginning, containing five acres, exclusive of area of the road now cut out and partially constructed over and across and extending in a Southwesterly direction from North line of NE 1/4 of NW 1/4 of said Section 17.

Boundary Justification

The nominated property includes the entire parcel historically associated with the Church of Saint Joseph, Elmer.

Church of St. Joseph
Elmer Township
Saint Louis County MN

Site Map
Prepared by Daniel J. Hoisington
12 October 2001

Property boundaries - - - - -

