Church has seen its share of celebrities

▸ St. Bridget's will be focus of Sunday's 'Christmas in Old Whistler Village'

By JOANNE McKNIGHT
Correspondent

What in the world could a turn-of-the-century folk hero and a modern-day astrophysicist possibly have in common? The answer: Both were baptized at St. Bridget's Catholic Church, the focus this year of the Whistler Historic District Association's annual "Christmas in Old Whistler Village" celebration.

St. Bridget's was rebuilt in 1874 after a storm destroyed the original building, which had been dedicated in 1867. Among the many baptized there during the church's long history was Casey Jones, the railroad engineer immortalized in ballad and legend.

In an era when the rails offered the fastest, most reliable means of passenger travel and freight and mail delivery, in a business in which speed and punctuality meant money and reputation, Jones had volunteered to replace a sick engineer on the Cannonball Express' southbound run from Memphis, Tenn., to Canton, Miss. When he saw the rear of a train extending from a siding into the Cannonball's path, he stayed with the engine, slowing it as much as possible before it smashed into the freight cars.

Only Jones, who was found in the wreck with his hands on the brake lever, was killed, and only his determination to stop the train prevented many more deaths that night of April 30, 1900.

According to local lore, Jones had a brother who ran a boarding house in Whistler in the late 1800s when the railroad community was the second largest in Mobile County. Casey, it is said, often dropped in to visit his brother on runs through the South. Perhaps it was during one of those stopovers that Jones decided the time was right for his baptism; St. Bridget's records show that he was baptized there Nov. 11, 1886, under his real name, John Luther Jones.

Although never praised in song as Casey Jones has been, another former member of St. Bridget's has made his mark on the world. Edward Lilley, an altar boy in the 1930s and '40s, grew up to serve on President Kennedy's Science Advisory Panel, evaluating Cold War weapons and nuclear war communications systems. Lilley was very active in the early space program and designed equipment for the first U.S. planetary mission, the Mariner space probe sent to Venus in the '60s.

Lilley was educated in Whistler's public elementary schools, then attended University Military School on Old Shell Road before going to Spring Hill College. He received graduate degrees in physics and astrophysics from Harvard University and taught at Yale and Harvard. He is credited with the discovery of complex molecules in interstellar space, as well as having developed a precise radio method to measure distances in the universe.

Still, with all his accomplishments, some of Lilley's most vivid and cherished memories are those he shares with his brother John of their days as altar boys at St. Bridget's.

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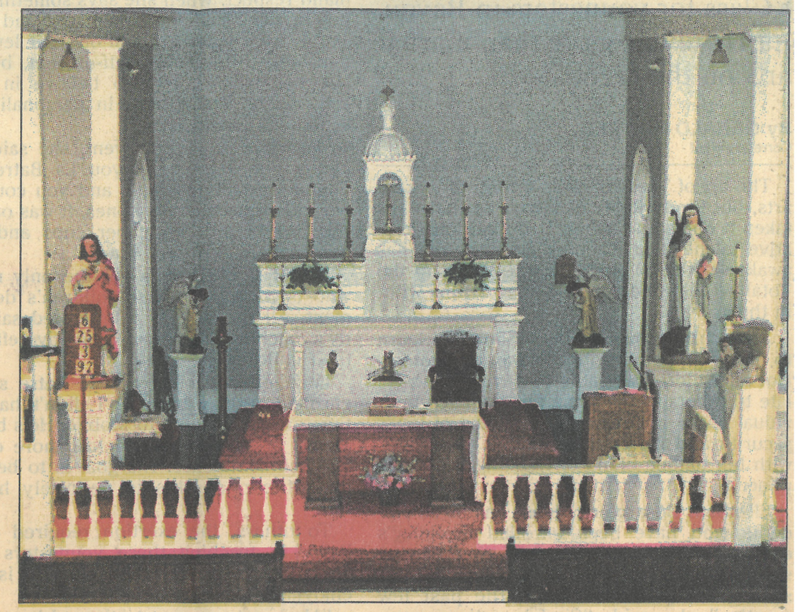

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The sanctuary of St. Bridget's Catholic Church is of a traditional design. The tabernacle is on the farther of two altars; the one in front allows the priest to say Mass facing the congregation. Before 1963, Mass was held at the back altar.

Church

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"We thought it was a high honor to serve midnight Mass on Christmas Eve," Lilley. "For the citizens of Whistler during the 1930s, Christmas Eve Mass at St. Bridget's was both a religious and a social event, attended by Catholics and Protestants alike."

According to Lilley, St. Bridget's choir offered a concert of traditional Christmas carols from 11:30 until midnight Christmas Eve. The church filled early, and pews were so crowded that many of the celebrants were forced to stand in the floor area below the choir.

"The church was ablaze with candlelight and decorated with poinsettias," Lilley said. "Christmas Eve at St. Bridget's looked like a Norman Rockwell painting. And, he added, "in the packed congregation, there was always the faint but distinctive aroma of good Southern bourbon."

The years of World War II hold a special memory for Lilley. "Father Littleton," he said, "would invite the altar boys to his study on the second floor of the rectory to listen to the war news on an old Philco vacuum-tube radio." One by one, the older altar boys left for service in the armed forces; some, according to Lilley, did not return.

On Dec. 10, from 3 to 6 p.m., St. Bridget's will open its doors and share its rich history with visitors and former members from all over the Mobile area, according to Shirley Sharik, president of the Whistler Historic District Association. The public is invited to tour St. Bridget's Catholic Church at 3625 West Main Street in Whistler and then enjoy Christmas music and an old-fashioned tea in the parish hall next door.

The admission fee will be $1, and Sharik said all funds raised will be used in the preservation and restoration of homes and buildings in Old Whistler Village's historic district.