

As published in Sister Teresa, editor and compiler,  
*The Eye, Arm, Spine of the Wilderness* (Mount Maple, KY:  
Mount St. Joseph Ursuline Convent, 1956).

SPEECH BY REVEREND JOHN H. WESTHUES  
on the subject of  
THE HISTORY OF GLENNONVILLE  
Before the Historical Society of Dunklin County  
Kennett, Missouri  
May 30, 1947

The spirit of courage and determination never dies in the hearts of men. No matter of what age of the world we turn, we can always find sterling examples of these qualities in the lives of individual men. We can go back to the time before Jesus Christ and there find these qualities of character in such men as David, Job and Isaias. We can find them in men like the Apostles of Our Lord. We can find them in the great soldiers, the great statesmen, in the great leaders of the world. We find courage and determination wherever we turn among men. For God has given man a heart which can house these qualities of the soul and develop them. There are always some men who employ to the fullest these God-given powers.

Men who have developed these qualities of courage and determination are found in the history of the colony of Glennonville. In fact, courage and determination are the colony's foundation. Courage and determination are what made it what it is today.

To realize this, we only need to take a mental journey to southeast Missouri, to Dunklin County, as it was in 1900. We would find that then the land of this section of our state was mostly covered with water and swamps. At one time it had very good timber, but the lumber companies have long since had their equipment in there and have now left it as cut-over timber land. On small areas of higher ground in 1900, we would have found what the few natives called "tie-knolls." On many of these spots old abandoned sawmills could be found, evidence of the trail of the lumber man who had come, had taken his product and then moved on. The land had been left to the water, to the mosquitoes and to few people who lived there as "tie-hackers."

It was to this land that a Catholic priest came in the year 1905. His name was Frederick F. Peters, of the Archdiocese of St. Louis. With

him were two companions, Ed Bihr and Jim Hogan. Their mission was to found a colony—a Catholic farming community. Archbishop John Glennon had purchased 12,000 acres of this land for that purpose. The tract lay in the northern part of Dunklin County, on the east side of the St. Francis River.

Father Peters, as clearly as though it were today, recalls how the three of them came by horseback to this tract of land for the first time. They traveled from Malden westward over an old lumber trail which was mostly covered with water. As they came up over a small rise, the land of the future colony lay in front of them. All that could be seen were the cut-over forests, the swamps and the mosquitoes. Father Peters' reaction was to quote the words of the Book of Genesis as it described the world before anything but the inert mass had been created: "The earth was void and empty. . . . And the spirit of God moved over the waters." Genesis 1,2.

During the weeks that followed, Father Peters and his companions examined the tract of land more closely. They found that it was about eight miles long and three to four miles wide. All of it was cut-over timber land. "There were no accommodations of any kind. There were no roads, no houses, no shelters." Four old settlers lived on the tract, having their huts on the banks of the St. Francis River. They cultivated small fields and raised a few cattle. The crops they raised were corn, cotton, grass for hay and a small garden for potatoes, tobacco and beans.

"The water supply came from wells, dug about twenty-five to thirty feet deep, and held open by wood casings. The houses of the few primitive settlers were made of logs, filled out with clay and mud, containing a fireplace in the center of the room. There were home-made tables and chairs and few purchased articles." The cattle and hogs which they owned wandered throughout the woods, and, as the new settlers were to learn, were frequently the prey of prowling wolves and wildcats.

The land itself was very poor, being the type of white clay that is commonly called crawfish or buckshot land. It was practically all sour and its productive power was very low. The valuable timber had been taken from the land and it required much time and labor to convert it to agricultural purposes.

Undoubtedly the prospect of founding a farming community here was most discouraging and seemingly impossible. But Father Peters had

told his superior that he would give it a trial, and that he did. The task began on November 10, 1905.

An old sawmill site called Paragon was selected as the center and headquarters of the colony. Here, many years previous, the Moss-Tie Company had set up a large sawmill. An old log trail led away from it back through the woods. There was also a railroad track here which had been used to transport the cut lumber from the mill. Father Peters relates how this track was taken up while he was away, secretly and at night, without permission of the owners of the land on which it lay.

This site of Paragon was selected mainly because the Tie Company had left its machinery there. The reason for this was that it would have cost more to take it out of that country than the machinery was worth. With this machinery Father Peters and his two companions had their first major task. It had to be dug out and reset, a truly gruelling and back-breaking job. However, the effort was worthwhile. For this mill sawed the lumber that went into the buildings of the neophyte colony. The first building was a small house in which Father Peters and his two companions lived.

During the year that followed, much of the lumber that was to go into homes of the expected settlers was sawed. During this year Mr. Williams of Campbell accepted an invitation to come to establish an axe-handle mill at the colony's headquarters. Also Egloff and Company from Indiana were to start a barrel-heading and barrel-stave mill.

And so, late in the year 1906, the time had arrived for the coming of the settlers of Glennonville. Father Peters, not by advertising but by personal letters, invited farmers he knew to come to southeast Missouri to become the first inhabitants of the colony of Glennonville. "Quite a few came from Howard and Cole Counties, in Missouri. By accident a man from Indiana, Aloys Michel, came to Glennonville and was so impressed with it that he settled there and induced many others to follow. Likewise, a number of settlers arrived from Kentucky, following the family of John A. Smith."

Father Peters tells many interesting tales of these first years of the colony. He still has a hearty laugh as he relates a Fourth of July experience. The settlers had invited the natives to Glennonville for a fireworks display. The invitation was spread far and wide. As a result, the evening

of the Fourth found an unheard-of number of people gathered in the village. Herds of cattle added to the general excitement and confusion. They had wandered in very close to stand in the hovering smoke that arose from the many fires, finding here relief from the flies and mosquitoes. Besides the cattle were the many horses and mules that had carried the natives to the village. Animals were tied to every tree available.

As the program progressed and the display became more and more violent, with louder firecrackers and larger Roman candles, the cattle as well as the horses and mules became very nervous. A large skyrocket proved too much for them and a general stampede started. Scarcely a horse stayed at the village, no matter how securely it might have been tied. Father Peters says it was many a day before all the natives found their animals. When they did, it was usually with their wagon wrapped around a tree.

The time the first driven well was sunk and proved able to produce water was a surprise for them all. They believed that their open wells were the only possible way to get water out of the ground. How surprised they must have been to taste that cold, clear water that came from the deep underground.\*

The same was true when Father Peters surveyed for the building of a road directly to Malden from the colony. Many an "old Head" said it could not be done because of too much swamp water and too many water holes along the way. In a very few months these same "old Heads" were driving their teams over a muddy yet firm road to Malden—a trip that before could only be made on horseback. That road today is a firm blacktop.

These first years were very busy years for everyone at the colony. The families upon arrival would select a homesite. Then began the job of clearing the land and of building a home. This work, particularly the sawing of the lumber, was personally supervised by Father Peters. He found it necessary, if the colony was to pull through these difficult years,

\* According to a statement from Father Peters, this well was sixty feet deep and was the first driven well in the State of Missouri. This well was driven on Ben Siebert's farm, and is still producing the same amount of cold, clear water.

to be ever-present as foreman of the sawmill, as advisor for the homesites and home building, and especially as the colonists' spiritual father—to bring courage to them and God's grace in time of trial and disappointment.

The sawmill, the axe-handle mill and the barrel-stave mill proved to be the salvation of the colony as it struggled for existence during these years. The farmers could make nothing from the crops raised. In fact, they raised scarcely any crops at all. There was not enough suitable land to give them food for the table, let alone products to sell. Their income came from the logs they hauled to these mills. This income was very small but it proved sufficient for those who had courage and determination, for those who had faith in Father Peters, their leader.

The mills ran steadily for eight years. The colonists hauled their products, or rather dragged them to the Frisco Railroad, which lay three miles to the east. At the end of this period, the timber suitable for their products were nearly gone; and, as soon as the lumbermen realized this, they, too, were gone.

However, their task in the project had been fulfilled. They had made it possible for some eighty families, who had moved in during this time, to clear most of their land, to build their homes, and to make a beginning at farming in northern Dunklin County.

A task which throughout these years lay ever-present and menacing before the colonists was that of improving the land after it had been cleared so that it would produce crops. The greatest hindrance to this were "the long spells of wet weather and extraordinary rainfall, which caused frequent overflowing of the land by the floodwaters of the St. Francis River. The resulting loss of work and of crops was so great that many settlers frequently became discouraged; yet they remained, trying hard to make ends meet, and suffering hardships and privations patiently.

To remedy this frequent loss of crops and labor caused by the high water, the colonists petitioned the County Court to have a large drainage system dug through the colony lands at the expense of the farmers. The assessment for the benefit of this ditch, which was dug in 1908, amounted to \$85,000. That was a tremendous sum for farmers in their situation, but it was a most necessary expense. It was to be paid in yearly payments of such an amount that the entire debt would be paid by 1928.

Proof of the success of the colony can be seen by the fact that the assessment was paid in full on time.

The drainage system greatly aided the area, insofar as it carried away normal swamp water and lowered the level of the water considerably. This enabled the farmers at least to work the land. And, as year followed year, its condition improved and finally better crops resulted. Corn was raised; wheat was attempted. However, it was soon discovered that Dunklin County was too far south to raise good wheat so it was dropped entirely. Winter oats and barley proved to be the best grain crops. Cotton was not raised for the first fifteen years, but has since become the main cash crop. Cattle, hogs and poultry were also raised abundantly.

This is all the material side of the colony of Glennonville. Important as it is, it is truly secondary to the spiritual. For spiritual things concern God, and God must always come first. And He did at all times in the colony of Glennonville. Father Peters was scarcely settled in Paragon when he offered Mass in the Commissary building of the Moss-Tie Company. His congregation was composed of his two companions, Ed Bihl and Jim Hogan. The use of this building as the place of worship continued as the colonists moved in. It was here that Archbishop Glennon administered the Sacrament of Confirmation in 1910.

Religion was a vital factor in the lives of these people. They set out to build a church as soon as possible. Father Peters drew the plans for it in 1905, and with the help of the parishioners, sawed the lumber from which it was made. The church was finished in 1910, and has proved to be truly well built. It is still serving the community today.

The church has been the center of the colony during all these years. It was here that the people received the necessary strength and courage to carry on in these daily trials and discouragements. Naturally Father Peters was even more closely associated with this phase of their life as their priest and spiritual father. He was ever ready to attend to their spiritual needs, ever ready to administer the Sacraments. Many were the times he traveled by boat, horseback or on foot to help them as they lay dying. He was truly their spiritual father, their man of God.

In line with the vital part which religion played in the lives of the people of Glennonville, was that played by the home. Home life to them meant everything. As a result, their homes became striking examples of strong Christian family life, closely united, God-fearing, substantial.

In these homes one lived for all, and all for one. Each had his own individual job to do, his own task to perform, as the family worked out its livelihood. There was no place for backsliding or selfishness; no place for luxuries, or the many extra things that enter into our more modern lives. The essentials were there: food, clothing, shelter, but that was all. Their lives were not warped nor made unhappy because of this. In fact, it was just the contrary. Their lives were full and rounded and happy. They lived by "the sweat of their brow"; but in doing so, they were living as God intended fallen men to live and so they found peace and happiness.

Recreation, however, definitely entered into their lives. In order to give the young folks an opportunity to meet and to spend sociable evenings together, Father Peters had a hall built, and there they spent many an evening in dancing, playing games, eating sandwiches, enjoying homemade ice cream. The dances were mostly the old-time square dances, waltzes and polkas. These were the days of real enjoyment. Entertainment was natural, modest and appreciated by young and old alike.

The annual picnic, held each year since 1908, was always a period of great enjoyment. Since it was a yearly gathering, it was looked forward to by everyone. Here the people of Glennonville met old friends and formed new acquaintances, listened to political speeches, applauded the band while unconsciously keeping step with its music. Young and old enjoyed chatting, laughing, singing, playing and relating old innocent adventures of their youth until the beautiful sounds of "Home, Sweet Home" were heard. With this, after a half hour of shaking hands, bidding good-bye, promising one another home visits, the crowd dispersed. Then, with the disappearance of the buggies, surreys and clattering wagons—stillness, calmness, serenity, settle upon the picnic grounds.

In every community there is the task of educating the children. From the very first this was present in Glennonville, for children were there. Small families are the exception in God-serving communities. Small families were and still are the exception in Glennonville.

In 1905 there stood a small one-room building on the public school grounds. In attendance at the first session were about fourteen children. The number grew very rapidly, so that soon the people were obliged to

build a new school to accommodate an enrollment of fifty pupils. In a few years the number had grown to one hundred and twenty so that the people built a second two-room school, thus making four rooms which accommodated one hundred and fifty children from six to fourteen years of age.

Then there arose the necessity, in the early twenties, of building a new High School. This came in 1926. The first few years they were content with a Junior High School, but soon it was made into a full and complete High School, with some fifty to sixty students. More teachers were added in order to give the children an opportunity to finish the complete high school course. At the present time, the school employs eight fully accredited teachers—the Ursuline Sisters of Maple Mount, Kentucky, who teach all the subjects required for a High School Certificate. A new addition to the High School is being built at the present time, in order to make it possible to teach additional subjects required by the State. Education was and is an important part of the life of the colony of Glennonville.

And so with the passage of years, the community has made advancement in the fields of religion, education, home life and farming. God abundantly blessed every endeavor.

Great material improvements have come during the last few years. Almost every home now enjoys the services of electricity. This has been made possible by the Rural Co-Operative—an organization begun in southwest Missouri in 1838. It has since proved to be one of the most successful of its kind in the country, having today 1,250 miles of line in operation and serving nearly 5,000 members. Its success is due to the men who conceived the idea and put it into operation. Father Peters was one of the leaders then and serves on the board today when the Co-Operative is ready to begin construction of the three million dollar power plant just outside of Poplar Bluff.

Another great improvement came to the colony of Glennonville with the building of the Wappapello Dam in 1940. The original drainage system was never sufficient to take care of the flood waters of the St. Francis River. The farmers, as a result, lost about every third crop. To remedy this, a committee was appointed in the county to induce the Government to impound the flooded waters of the St. Francis River at Wappapello in an artificial lake. The men of this committee worked

faithfully for five years with Congress to obtain an appropriation for the building of the dam. It was completed in 1940, and since that time has saved millions of dollars for the settlers of the St. Francis River bottoms. It has enabled farmers of Glennonville, for the most part, to pay off their debts, to free their homes and lands from mortgages, to improve their houses and to install modern conveniences. They have also been able to buy modern machinery with which to cultivate the land. Wappapello Dam has made it possible for Glennonville to become a prosperous farming country and community.

Finally, an improvement that has benefited the colony to a great extent is the development of the county road system. It has become one of the finest in the state, and has put the community of Glennonville in contact with its neighboring towns. Again, credit must be given Father Peters and others of the county who were so persistent in their efforts to obtain good roads for their people.

So we complete the history of Glennonville. We see that it has been solidly established, that it is now prospering, that its future is most encouraging. Its ninety-eight families, which number about five hundred people, have secure and permanent homes. Many of its young people are finding their livelihood there. None of them will ever become wealthy there, but they will find a living that embodies peace and security, and, therefore, happiness. The colony of Glennonville is a success.

As we look back through its history, we can see the courage and determination that made it what it is today. We can also see that courage and determination of the many was kept strong and vibrant by the courage and determination of one particular individual—Right Reverend Monsignor Frederick F. Peters. May God, Who has kept Father Peters fifty golden years in the priesthood, and forty-three courageous years as leader of Glennonville, keep him now and in eternity—rewarding him for his service to God and to man.

\* Note: The quotations unless otherwise noted are from "The Golden Jubilee Book" of the Reverend Frederick F. Peters.

† AUTHOR'S NOTE: The history of Glennonville in "The Golden Jubilee Book" is taken almost wholly from the pen of Mr. P. G. Wingo. There are a few excerpts from Monsignor Peters.