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FATHER JOHN McGOLDRICK OF WILLOWS A Sportsman Priest

By Rebekah Aronson, printed in the May 15, 1980 issue of the *Catholic Herald*



Father John McGoldrick
Pastor Emeritus of St Monica Parish, Willows

Who would have thought Father John McGoldrick, assigned to St Monica parish in Willows over 30 years ago, would emerge as a hero to sportsmen throughout the state?

At 47 years of age, the priest was sent to the Glenn County seat by the late Bishop Robert J Armstrong to supervise construction of an attractive, artistic, Catholic complex in the farm-oriented community. But this modern church-rectory-convent-catechetical facility, which totaled \$780,000 when built 20 years ago, was not his sole contribution.

An avid sportsman, the priest viewed the potential use of farmlands surrounding Willows as prime pheasant hunting land, even though 80 percent of the properties were posted "NO HUNTING."

Professing dedication by the hunters to recognition of the sacredness of private property as well as respect for the farmers and their animals, McGoldrick succeeded in signing up for hunting privileges and land of every owner from Willows to Orland. He and other hunters took out a million-dollar insurance policy backing them in case of accident. And so began the "Willows Pheasant Club."

The very first day of the newly established club's hunting found a local farmer's \$185 prize heifer shot and killed. Within a half hour the man was reimbursed for his loss.

As founder of the club, Father McGoldrick brought about a fellowship between farmer and hunter. He soon became known throughout the state, the subject of literally every West Coast sportsmen's magazine and newspaper sports page. In 1960 the California Sportswriters' Association presented him with the California Sportsman of the Year award.

Despite five heart attacks, and with the aid of a pace-maker, he continues to be an active and enthusiastic sportsman. Aware of an urgency to preserve wildlife for the enjoyment of future generations, he is indirectly involved in support of a bill which will set aside marginal lands as refuges.

Also aware of the lack of utilizing good hunting dogs for highly efficient retrievers – the tracking down of wounded birds – Father McGoldrick is the proud owner of a pedigreed Labrador and draphaar, and breeds them for pups which he generously gives away to dedicated hunters.

But while he emphasizes the importance of hunting and fishing for relaxation to ensure greater mental and physical health, McGoldrick is first a priest. Now in his 49th year of priesthood, he notes his profession as one he has "thoroughly enjoyed and which I would not trade for the world." Though officially retired seven years ago, he refuses to quit and continues his daily visitation rounds to the hospital, convalescent homes, and private dwellings, as he has done for almost 50 years. The forgiveness of sins through the sacrament of reconciliation he regards as "the most rewarding and fulfilling experiences of my priesthood."

One of 12 children from Ballymore area in County Sligo, Ireland, Father McGoldrick shares this vocation of dedication and commitment with two brothers. Next month will mark the golden jubilee for his brother James, a Jesuit at the University of Seattle. Another brother, Michael, now deceased, was a well-known priest of the Sacramento diocese, responsible for the building of a rectory in Dunsmuir and for construction of churches in Mt Shasta, McCloud, and Weed. Later he was founder of All Hallows parish in Sacramento.

Since coming to California in 1931, John McGoldrick has served in Woodland, Plumas County, Galt, Yreka, and for the past 31 years in Willows.

He remembers the great depression when gas was 11 cents a gallon, breakfast 28 cents, and a steak dinner 58 cents. And how well he remembers living in a Portola hotel that had 37 rooms and one bath! But most of all, he remembers with great appreciation, the peoples of the mountain counties – Germans, Swiss, Italians. These warm, friendly and generous “friends” made life rewarding, even when the going was tough.

He recalls that, when pastor in Plumas County, he badly needed a rectory at a time when depression was choking the economy. Mills in the area donated so much lumber that he was able to build not only a satisfactory home as well as a hall in Portola, but had enough timber left to erect a church in Quincy as well. Only one of the lumber contributors was Catholic.



Photo by John E Boll 2012

Holy Family Parish, Portola

This senior priest carries within his storehouse of memories painful experiences that have greatly added to his extremely humane nature. He recalls with sorrow the painful atrocities he witnessed as a youth in Ireland, such as eviction, when an alien landlord aided by British police would expel the Irish from their homes for failure to pay taxes.

John McGoldrick wept openly relating the story as though it had just happened, how when he was eight years of age, he watched his next-door neighbor and best pal, Tommy Walsh, along with Tommy's two parentless siblings – all afflicted with tuberculosis – being thrown out of their home. Feather-filled mattresses, their only "beds" were hauled out of the house and cut up. The parish priest, Felix Burke, rode up on a huge red horse and beat off the landlord's agents with a stick. Chocking down tears, he told of how his mother took in the youngsters, even though she had twelve of her own to raise, as McGoldrick's father had died when he was but four.

Among other painful memories which so clearly appear before him was the witnessing at 12 years of age the horror of a baby torn from its mother's arms and thrown into the fire of a town that was being burned down.

At fourteen, while hauling oatmeal to the market place for his mother, he passed by a tree where he discovered a fugitive, hanging by his feet from a tree, with his tongue tied around his neck. Although the past has in no way dampened the spirit of this jovial, optimistic, outgoing character, he is seldom without a witty comment or humorous story to relate. He contends, "The memories of these atrocities never leave one's soul."

Father McGoldrick refers to the "great American people" as the most wealthy and generous in the world. And contends that, as Bishop Armstrong once said: "The American people will be saved by their generosity." And those American people – any people for that matter – who have come in contact with this delightful individual will agree that he himself has greatly enriched this society by his very presence.



Photo by John E Boll 2012

**St Monica Parish, Willows where Father John McGoldrick
Served As Pastor for 30 Years**