

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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Newport, Arkansas

The Rev. William Jacobs, written by his wife, Marian

During World War II, the clergy shortage was acute. In early 1945, the Bishop of Arkansas, Bland Mitchell, and I visited several small town parishes, all needing a full-time priest. Although I had been ordained recently and was serving as assistant priest in a large downtown parish church, St. John's Episcopal Church in Knoxville, Tennessee, Bishop Mitchell saw the potential for growth in both of us — the church and me.

St. Paul's, Newport, Arkansas, had been without a resident priest for several years. The congregation was alive and well, eager for direction and growth. An additional inducement: the Missouri Pacific Railroad ran through town and continued north to St. Louis where my fiancée, Marian Shanley, lived. So I accepted the call to St. Paul's in late winter of 1945. Marian and I were married the following June, and settled into a challenging and rewarding six-year ministry.

Newport was a town of six thousand people, surrounded by flat farmland ideal for raising cotton. In summer, even after the sun went down, the temperatures were hot. "Best for cotton growing," our neighbors would say. We young newlyweds, unfettered and optimistic, survived in spite of living on the top floor of an apartment building with a flat roof and no air conditioning.

Geographically, the town is located approximately ninety miles northeast of Little Rock and about ninety miles northwest of Memphis, Tennessee. Without nearby city attractions, and curtailed by wartime gas rationing, Newport was a little oasis. We depended on our own social and civic activities for entertainment and stimulation. Friendships were easily made, and we soon developed a comfortable closeness to people of all ages inside and outside of the parish.

As their priest, I was privileged to share the joys, frustrations and sadness of life with the people of the parish. I baptized them, I married them, and I buried them. I sat with them in the hospital or the nursing home, praying with them that they might find ". . . a happy issue out of all their afflictions." And finally I read the burial office and comforted the bereaved. Those bonds with my parishioners, encompassing laughter, joy, sorrow, and tears, remained intact throughout the rest of my ministry, even as I moved on to parishes in Springfield, Illinois and Des Moines, Iowa. There were different names and different faces after we left Newport, but essentially the same rituals took place as part of ministry.

As I remember milestones in my ministry, one unique evening service in Newport will always be foremost in my mind's eye. I had been asked to conduct a service on Christmas Eve 1946, for the German prisoners of war housed in the prison camp located on the outskirts of town.

The prison authorities had planned a Protestant service. The lessons and sermon were to be read in German by designated prisoners. There would be no instrumental accompaniment, so an *a cappella* choir of prisoners would provide the music. I would be relying on my college German, and hoped that I could give the final blessing in their native tongue.

I was an outsider, the only stranger in the service. How could I give solace and comfort on this holy night to these men so far, far away from family, friends, and their native land? I was reminded of the plaintive cry of the Israelites so many centuries ago in Babylonia:

“How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?”

So I drove through the quiet town of Newport on that Christmas Eve, praying that this service commemorating the birth of Christ would be memorable and somehow a consolation to those prisoners.

I thought of my wife, and of our new baby, Elizabeth, comfortable and safe in our snug apartment, awaiting my return.

The service moved smoothly, the men eager to participate. Finally, the last hymn; the men raised their voices in breathtaking, perfect harmony:

“Stille Nacht, Helige Nacht . . .”

Then silence. Many of us wept. Through my tears, I read the final blessing in halting German:

Gottes unergründlicher Frieden bewahrt Eurer Herz und Geist in dem Wissen und der Liebe Gottes und seines Sohnes Jesus Christus . . . Amen.

(The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord . . . Amen.)



Bill retired in 1985 after serving as priest at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Des Moines, Iowa, for twenty years. In 1984, St. Paul’s sponsored an 82-unit housing complex for low-income elderly or handicapped persons. It was named “Jacobs Place” in Bill’s honor.

Bill and Marian Jacobs live in a small but comfortable apartment at Deerfield, a retirement community in Des Moines. Two of their three children, Elizabeth Jones and Bill, Jr., also live in Des Moines. Their son, John, lives with his wife and two children in the Boston area.

Five years ago, Bill fell and broke his neck, and has experienced some memory and ambulation problems. Marian has recaptured some of their memories in this edition of *The Vintage Voice*. She continues to work part-time as a certified vocational expert in Social Security disability cases on appeal, thus leaving time for a weekly tennis game.

