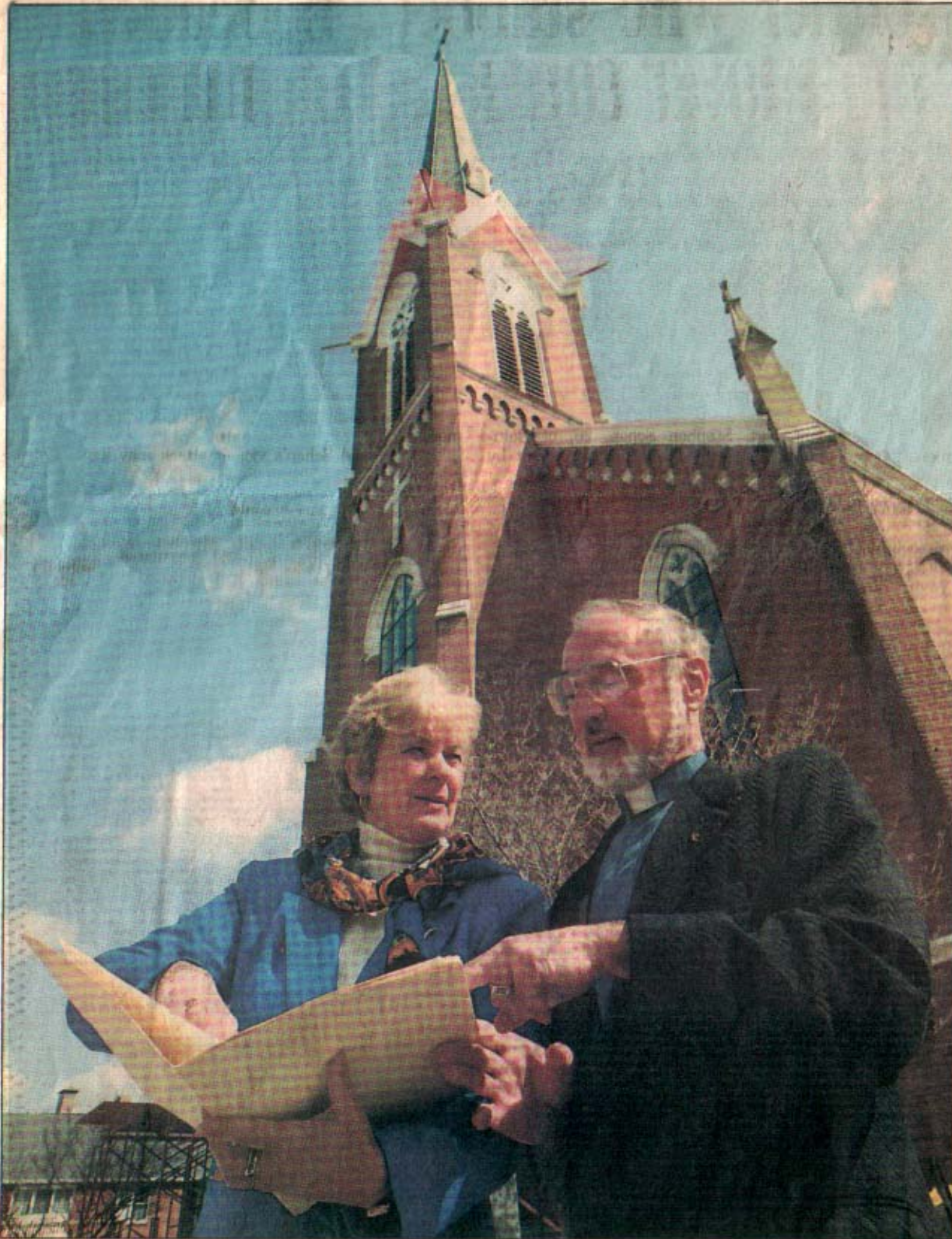


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Jeff Hinckley/Dispatch

Fran Ryan and Monsignor Ralph Huntzinger look over a file concerning the St. Mary's steeple, which towers behind them.

St. Mary's Church to give new life to 100-year-old steeple

By Robert Albrecht
Dispatch Assistant City Editor

The church spire that reaches heavenward from "Grand Old St. Mary's" in the heart of German Village is, after 100 years, in need of repair.

And the many Catholics for whom the 197-foot-tall steeple provided a memorable backdrop for the important events of their lives are being asked to help pay the bill.

A \$135,000 improvement project, recently approved by Bishop James J. Griffin, calls for a new coat of slate, copper work and repairs to the interior.

That's 135 times the cost to erect the steeple in 1893, according to parish records.

The first signal that the spire needed attention came with the fall of a 6-foot section of flashing, said Monsignor Ralph Huntzinger, pastor. The flashing landed in the street, he said.

Before anyone could be hurt, the priest and some of his concerned parishioners ordered scaffolding set up at the church's front door to protect against tiles or anything else that might fall.

An engineer has assured him the steeple is structurally sound, Huntzinger said. Contractors will start work in a week or so. The improvements will not affect the spire's four clocks or the bells of St. Mary's, Huntzinger promises sentimental loyalists.

Fran Ryan, a 1952 graduate of St. Mary's High School, is one of those sentimentalists. The recently retired chairwoman of the Franklin County Democratic Party is leading the fund raising.

"I came here from Pittsburgh for my junior and senior years. I fell

in love with the place," she wrote. Her letter on behalf of the steeple went out to alumni and former parishioners in early March.

Not all who feel an affection for St. Mary's, established by German immigrants in 1865, have learned or worshiped there, Huntzinger noted.

When the bells fell silent one time a few years ago, a non-Catholic neighbor called Huntzinger to ask what was wrong. Told that expensive repairs were needed, the man said he understood, then sent over a check for \$500.

"We almost have a responsibility to the neighborhood" to keep the chimes and clocks in working order, Huntzinger said.

The steeple work is a tall order for Durable Slate of 1050 N. 4th St. The job will take 10 weeks and could require up to 10,000 tiles.

Sara Downey, Durable's vice president for public relations, said the tiles are to be of Buckingham slate, quarried in Virginia; as roofing tile, it typically lasts 200 to 300 years, she said. To make sure the tiles stay where they're put, workers will secure them with stainless-steel hooks and copper nails. And, for good measure, "they'll put a dab of adhesive on the back" of each tile, Downey said.

Such enduring materials and methods are meant to keep old St. Mary's grand. That phrase itself is old. In a centennial history published in 1965, parishioner William Gutmann explained that the late Monsignor Edmund Burkley applied it to the church that he served for 60 years as a companion phrase to "Good Old Columbus Town," a nickname George Karb gave his city while he was its mayor, from 1912 to 1919.