

St. Pat's longtime organist retires

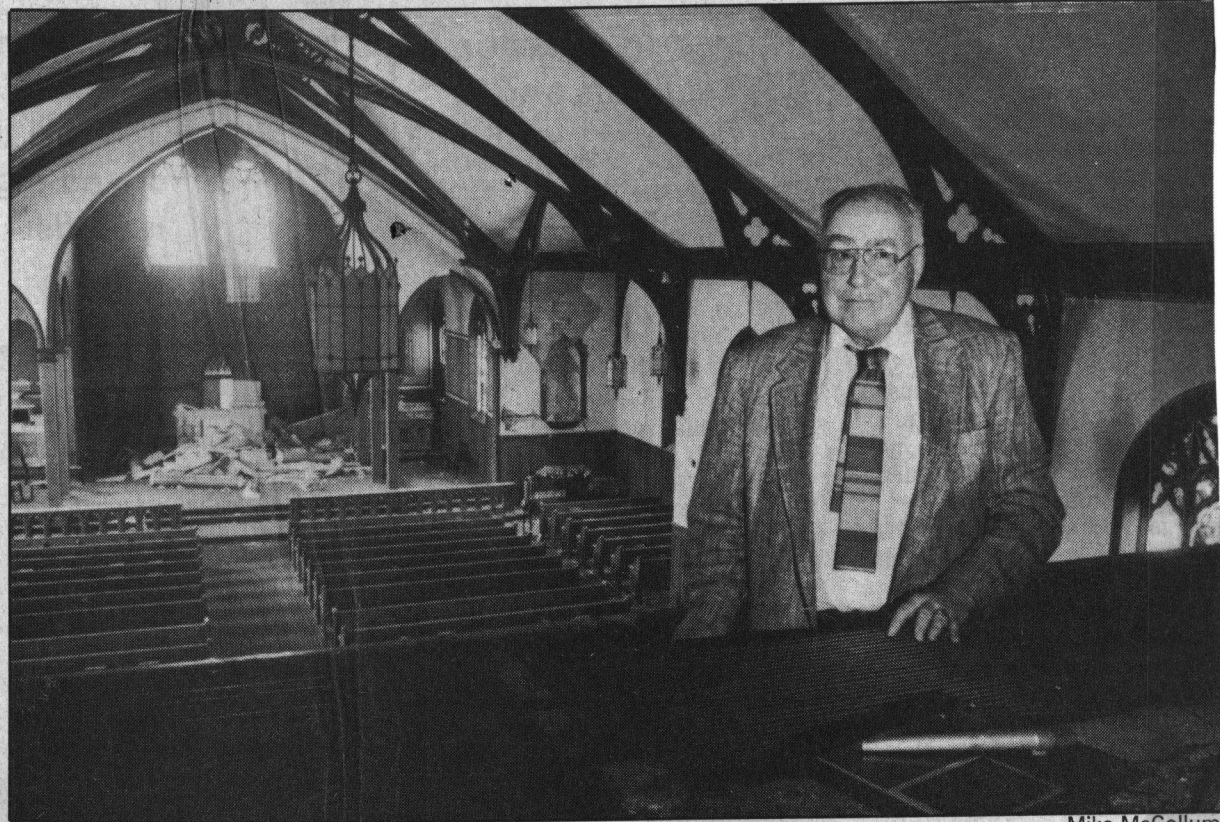
John Flynn steps down after 44 years

By JEFF HUDSON
CORRESPONDENT

John Flynn climbs the stairs, as he's done many times over the past 44 years, up into the steeple, toward the organ loft in St. Patrick's Church. Slowly and carefully, he steps over the chunks of fallen plaster that have partly melted into the wet carpet, past the bricks and debris that still lie on the steps. Overhead, the blue plastic tarp that keeps most of the rain out of the truncated tower rustles quietly in the breeze.

Flynn takes his time. He's a big man, and at age 74 he measures out his movements deliberately. This reporter, noticing the crack and bulges in the walls, is feeling a little nervous about spending so much time inside the old brick church building, which has been closed since October 17, 1989.

"Oh, it'll be all right," Flynn says, "as long as we don't have another earthquake."



Mike McCollum

John Flynn stands beside the organ console in the loft at St. Patrick's Church; on the console is a pipe from the organ, which was mounted on a plaque and given to him when he retired earlier this week. In the background is the wreckage of the old church altar, smashed in the October 1989 earthquake.

He finally reaches the organ loft. Flynn shuffles over to a secret hiding place, and feels for the key that will unlock the organ console.

The key isn't there.

"Probably got knocked down in the earthquake," he says.

No matter. Flynn moves slowly back to the console. There is some damage to the organ: Several of the metal pipes, three and four feet tall, are bent over at strange angles — warped images a la Salvador Dali.

Flynn remembers when the organ was new.

"I was an instigator in getting that," he said.

Back in 1975, he even took a trip to Highland, Ohio, to watch it being built. Made by the Wicks company, it has 17 ranks including about 1,700 pipes, with direct electric action. Before that, Flynn spent 30 years playing an old Marr Coltron organ at St. Patrick's.

Flynn was born and raised in Ohio, studying organ in his native Cincinnati under J. Alfred Schehl, and later at the Conservatory of Music in Toledo under John Gordon Seeley. But service in the Navy brought him west: "I arrived on May 1, 1943 — my birthday — at Treasure Island (in San Francisco Bay). I'll never forget it."

Flynn was so taken by California that when his tour in the Navy was up, he asked to be discharged

here. After casting around San Francisco for a while, he came to Watsonville in 1945.

"I hate to say it, but it was a hick town," Flynn said. "I was used to big towns — Cincinnati, Chicago. But now, I wouldn't leave it for anything."

Flynn took a job at the old Pajaro Valley Bank (now the downtown branch of Wells Fargo), evaluating auto loans. But within a year, he'd added on a job playing the organ at St. Patrick's.

"I was scared to death" the first time he played here, he recalls. Over the years, he's served with many different people — "Father Batt, Father Durken, Father O'Connell, Monsignor Murphy, and now Father Miller," he said.

During that time, Flynn encountered just about everything that can befall an organist. There were ciphers — bits of dust caught up in the mechanism, causing the pipe to sound even though the organist isn't asking for it.

"I'd just pull the pipe out" and fix it later, Flynn explained.

Other times, the electricity would go out — during the worship service.

"I'd just lean over and say, 'No power!' They could tell, because there wouldn't be any lights, either," he said.

And then there were the "peculiar requests," as Flynn calls them.

"There was a guy who died, who asked that 'Raindrops Keep Falling On My Head' be played while he was being buried. I thought that was one of the weirdest."

Flynn figures that he must have played at literally thousands of services.

"I used to play three (services) a Sunday," he said. "And we used to have novena services, and Holy Hour." To say nothing of weddings and funerals.

Flynn kept up his studies, becoming a student of Richard Purvis, organist at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. He also found time to help organize the Monterey Bay Chapter of the American Guild of Organists, and served as the group's first dean.

He also taught — both piano and organ — and at one time had as many as 60 students. In order to teach the organ, he got a Conn electronic organ for his house (the church organ wasn't always available). But Flynn seldom touches the Conn these days.

"I'm a pipe organ man all the way," he said.

Flynn retired from his career in banking 17 years ago, but kept on playing the organ. He lives within walking distance of the church, so it wasn't at all out of his way.

Like most people, he was caught by surprise when the earth shook in 1989.

"I was at home," he said. "I was too petrified to do anything. I reached up and tried to keep the microwave oven from falling on me. I had a new electric typewriter then, but that fell down and broke.

"I didn't realize how bad it was at the church until I heard it on the radio."

Six weeks later, Flynn was allowed back into the church to fetch the sheet music and other papers.

"I was shocked, in a state of shock," he said.

Not only was the organ damaged, but the church's altar and marble canopy had been wrecked.

The church resumed services across the street, in the gym at Notre Dame School. Flynn switched to the piano.

"We got an electronic organ for a while," he said, but people weren't pleased with the sound, so they went back to the piano.

St. Patrick's is now about halfway to its goal of \$2.5 million for rebuilding. Included will be a restoration of the organ, which Flynn hopes to supervise. He officially retired Feb. 3, and was honored at a special dinner earlier this week, but still holds the title of "organist emeritus." Flynn hopes to be the first to play the restored instrument when the building is rededicated.