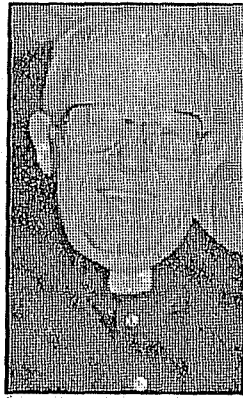


Father Fisher



Father R. Smith



Father K. Smith

3 priests killed as fire destroys downstate rectory

By MARK NICHOLS
STAR STAFF WRITER

Starlight, Ind. — Three Roman Catholic priests who had remained friends since graduating from a seminary 30 years ago were killed Saturday when a fire destroyed a rectory.

Killed in the fire at St. John the Baptist Catholic Church here were the pastor, the Rev. Richard M. Smith, 57, and two visiting priests from Indianapolis.

They were the Rev. William S. Fisher, 60, an associate chaplain at St. Francis Hospital Center in Beech Grove, Ind., and the Rev. Kenneth E. Smith, 56, a former associate pastor at Holy Name Catholic Church in Beech Grove. Father Smith was disabled and had been on sick leave with residence at St. Paul Hermitage in Beech Grove.

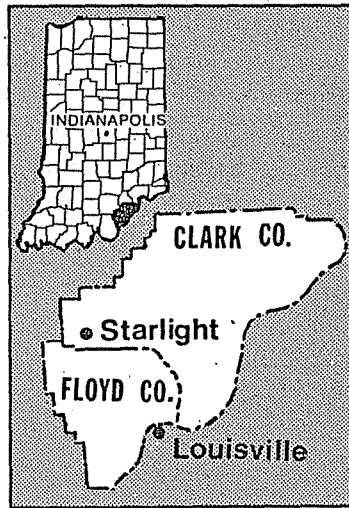
Investigators said the two Smiths were not related.

Neighbors living across the street from the rectory in this small Clark County community said they were awakened about 5 a.m. by a newspaper carrier who saw flames and smoke inside the old, two-story brick residence.

Paula R. Andres, a member of the church who lives across the street, said one of the neighbors attempted to call the rectory, but the line was busy.

Others summoned volunteer fire departments in the area and attempted to enter the house to rescue the priests, but found doors and windows along the side and back of the house locked.

"We got our four extinguishers and ran across the street, but there was no way to get in," Mrs. Andres



STAR MAP

Rectory fire in Clark County community of Starlight.

said. "We got up in the windows and couldn't see anything. The smoke was so thick and heavy."

Paul E. Brewer, chief of the Borden and Wood townships fire department, said about 50 fire-fighters were called to the scene to battle the fire for nearly two hours in dense fog.

He said the closest fire units, about eight miles away, arrived on the scene about 10 minutes after they were called at 5:08 a.m.

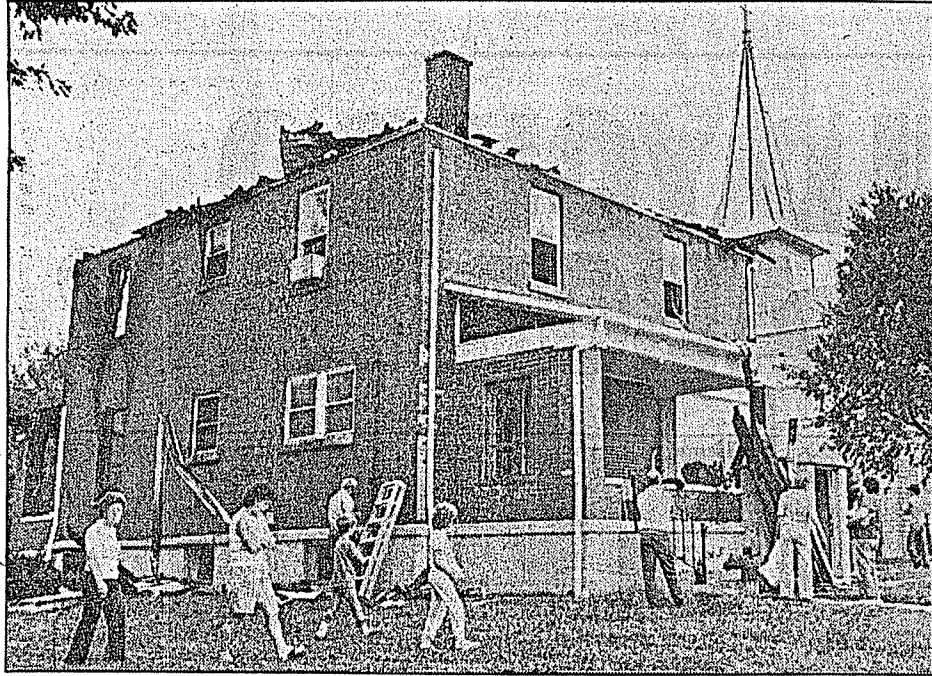
Brewer said his department used water pumped from a tower about a half-mile away from the fire.

But other departments said they were forced to use other resources, such as a fire hydrant nearly three miles away from the site and a lake in the area.

Brewer said the fire started in a

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ASSOCIATED PRESS

Neighbors and parishioners at gutted two-story brick rectory where three priests were killed.

Priests

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first-floor office study, possibly from an electrical short in a copying machine. He said arson investigators were checking evidence at the scene, but that foul play was not suspected.

Authorities said the fire had raced up the ceiling of the office study through a second-floor bedroom and into the roof by the time they had arrived.

Brewer said that while much of the 64-year-old rectory was destroyed in the blaze, the 71-year-old church which stands next to the rectory was not damaged.

Fire officials estimated damages at \$50,000.

Because of the dense smoke, firefighters were not able to enter the building and retrieve the bodies until about 6 a.m.

Brewer said the two visiting priests were found in smoky upstairs bedrooms adjacent to the bedroom destroyed by the fire, while the church pastor was found in the downstairs study area near where the fire apparently began.

Brewer said he had no idea why Father Richard Smith was in the office. But Mrs. Andres and other neighbors believe he may have been trying to save church records, which reportedly were kept in a downstairs safe.

Investigators said the two visiting priests also were apparently trying to escape and that one had a telephone in his hand when firefighters found his body.

Clark County Coroner Edwin M. Coots Jr. said all the victims died of smoke inhalation and suffered some burns.

Friends and associates said the three priests had become friends while studying at St. Meinrad Seminary in southern Indiana during the mid-1950s and had remained close throughout their careers.

The Rev. Thomas K. Stepanski, a chaplain at St. Francis Hospital Center, said Father Fisher had picked up Father Kenneth Smith from the hermitage Friday and was excited about spending the Labor Day holiday weekend with his companions.

"He had worked the last three weekends and was really looking forward to a weekend off," said Father Stepanski. "He said he was taking Kenny because he thought it would give him a chance to get away, too."

Church officials noted that there has never been a tragedy in the Indianapolis Archdiocese which has claimed the lives of so many priests.

"The loss of Fathers William Fisher, Richard and Kenneth Smith is one which we all share with all who knew and were served by them in their 30 years of priestly ministry to the people of the Archdiocese of Indianapolis," said the Most Rev. Edward T. O'Meara, archbishop of the Indianapolis archdiocese.

"I extend my profoundest sympathy, love and prayers to the families, parishioners and people that these three priests of the Archdiocese served."

Father Richard Smith and Fa-

ther Fisher both were ordained Feb. 2, 1955, in St. Meinrad Archabbey Church. Father Kenneth Smith was ordained May 3, 1955, in the church.

All had lived or served as priests in Indianapolis at one time.

A New Castle native, Father Richard Smith served as assistant pastor at St. Mary-of-the-Knobs and Sacred Heart Catholic Church of Clinton before becoming assistant pastor at Our Lady of Lourdes Church in Indianapolis.

He also was an instructor at Seccina Memorial High School in Indianapolis from 1965 to 1967.

He was pastor of St. Anne Catholic Church and St. Dennis churches in Jennings County before returning to Indianapolis in 1971 to become pastor of St. Joseph Catholic Church.

He was named pastor of St. John the Baptist church, which has a membership of about 120 families, in 1976.

"We are a very small and family-like church and everyone loved him," said Mrs. Andres. "When we all heard about the fire, about 75 percent of the families had someone there. But there was nothing we could do. It was just a numbing feeling."

Father Fisher, an Indianapolis native, served as assistant pastor of the St. Andrew the Apostle church in Indianapolis and St. Michael church in Brookville before becoming chaplain at Winona Memorial and Methodist hospitals in Indianapolis in 1967.

In 1970, he left Methodist to become chaplain of St. Vincent Hospital along with Winona. He also served as pastor of St. Mary church in Rushville before becoming associate chaplain at St. Francis Hospital Center in 1976.

"He was an Irishman, a man of wit and committed to his ministry," said Father Stepanski. "He always had a joke or a light story and if he knew a person, he knew him well. He was fun to be around."

Father Kenneth Smith also was born in Indianapolis and served as assistant pastor of St. Charles Borromeo in Bloomington and St. Philip Neri in Indianapolis.

He had worked as an instructor at Ladywood School in Indianapolis and also served as assistant pastor of St. Mary Church and teacher at St. Mary Academy, Latin School and Marian College in Indianapolis.

He had been chaplain at Good Shepard Convent and Our Lady of Grace Academy and Motherhouse and chaplain pro-tem at St. Paul Hermitage.

In 1979, he became associate pastor at Holy Name church, but was forced to take a temporary sick leave.

He had served in residence at Mary, Queen of Peace hermitage in Danville before returning to St. Paul Hermitage in 1981.

Sister Mary Gilbert, administrator at the hermitage, said the priest was very outgoing and a scholar of church history who often taught and shared his knowledge with other residents.

She said he recently had brought his father, Reginald Smith,

to the hermitage because he wanted to make sure his father was cared for in the event he died.

Services for Father Kenneth Smith and Father Fisher will be 11 a.m. Wednesday in Holy Name church, where calling will be from 2 p.m. to 9 p.m. Tuesday and 9 a.m. until services begin Wednesday.

Arrangements are being handled by Feeney-Hornak Mortuary.

Services for Father Richard Smith will be at noon Tuesday at St. John the Baptist church in Starlight, where calling will be from 2 p.m. to 9 p.m. Monday and 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. Tuesday.

Coots and Sons Mortuary is handling arrangements.

Survivors: parents, Joseph and Kathleen Smith; brother, David A. Smith.

Church officials said masses would be held at the church in Starlight this weekend. Mass was held Saturday evening at the church with the Rev. Wilfred Day of Jeffersonville officiating.