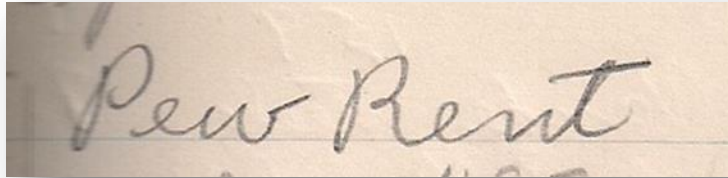


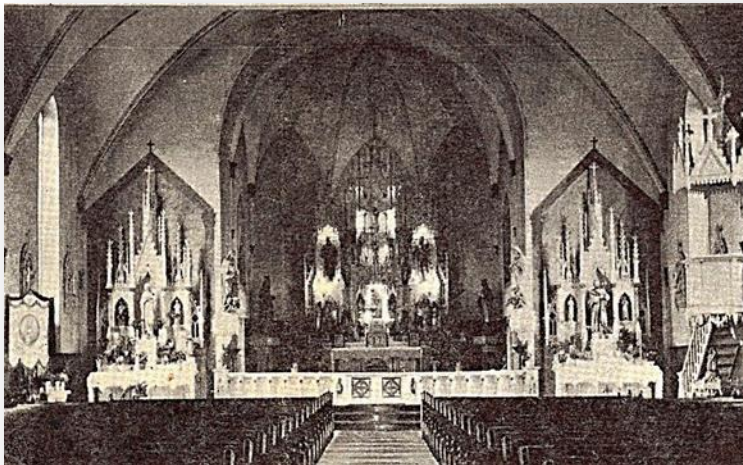
❧ *Pew Rent* ❧

One of the more interesting terms that Tonie Claas used frequently in her writing was that of “pew rent.”



It's an unusual description for a practice that has a long history. It dates back hundreds of years, to our European ancestors. It was a practice that was in place at St. Anthony Church (and probably many churches in our country).

And St. Anthony had a lot of pews to rent.

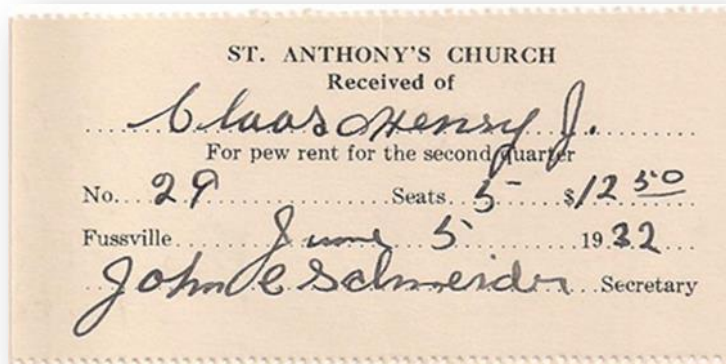


In my growing up years, pew rent was a term that I took for granted. I heard my parents talk about it. I knew that it was money that was given to our church. But why “pew rent?”

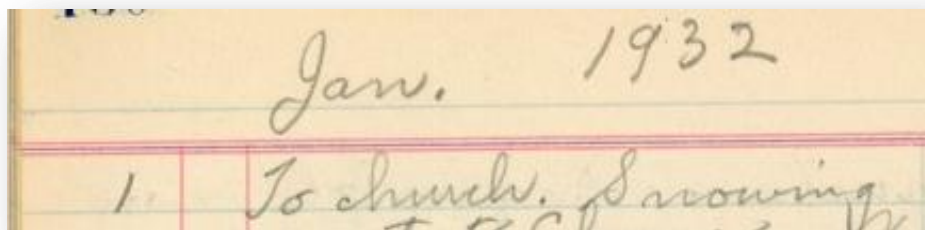
It was the practice in our church, and in many Catholic churches to publish the list of each parishioner's “pew rent”

amounts. (It was always curious to me to see how much pew rent every family gave.) It wasn't considered unusual nor was it an invasion of anyone's privacy. But how did that term originate?

In researching Tonie and Harry's journals and documents, I came across a number of receipts provided by St. Anthony's Church, receipts for “pew rent.”



Digging through Tonie's journals, I found lots of references to activities at St. Anthony Church in Fussville. So when the year 1932 began, just as every other year in Tonie's journals began, it started with "To church."



January 1, 1932 – "To church. Snowing."

It was tradition to attend Mass on the first day of the new year. Actually by the Church's rules, it was an obligation. New Year's Day was observed as the "Circumcision of Jesus" in 1932 (that was kind of an uncomfortable event to be observing but that's a story for another time). It was always a good way to begin the year by going "to church."

It seemed that there was more to "pew rent" than simply giving it the name for the family's annual contribution to the Church. The receipt above was issued for a specific, numbered pew (Pew #29) located somewhere in St. Anthony. And the pew rental provided for space for five seats. So, what was this financial arrangement all about?

Over the past several years, we've all experienced the impact of the Covid pandemic. In many ways, it affected many things as we tried to go about living our lives. So, what did that have to do with "pew rent?" If you were a regular church attendee, in March 2020, you probably were told that you could not attend your church in person. After a couple months or so, you were told that you could return to church, but only in limited numbers, and you might have had to register in advance, or you might have had to sit in designated

seats. While this wasn't a throwback to the days of pew rent, there were some parallels to it. So, how did the concept of pew rent ever start?

So first, a bit of history. In early Christian churches, people had to stand throughout the Mass; there were no seats. (Actually, even today there are generally no seats in Orthodox churches.) It was tiring and not very comfortable, particularly if the Mass ran long. The alternative was kneeling, and while this may have been seen as an act of penance, it also provided a bit of relief for tired bodies.

It wasn't until the time of the Protestant Reformation that seats began to appear in churches. Protestants came up with the idea that they could bring their own benches sitting through long sermons. It was certainly preferable to standing. The idea caught on in Catholic Churches (we've always seemed to have a lot to learn from our Protestant friends). Eventually, churches added rows of seats or pews, the cost of which was covered by individual parishioners. They were then entitled to use their numbered pew at any Mass or service in that church.

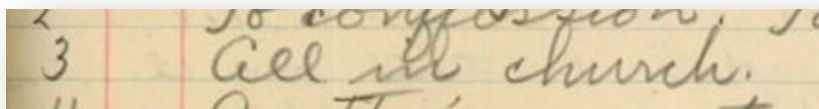
In exchange for an annual payment, they could claim "first dibs" over their pew, so no one else could use them, particularly if this was in a prominent location in the church. For some people, it was important to be "seen." This eventually became a way to raise funds for churches. The church could lease or "rent" the pews to church members on an annual basis. (Those who couldn't afford to rent a pew might be given a spot in the less prominent cheap seats.)



The reminders of numbered church pews are mostly gone.

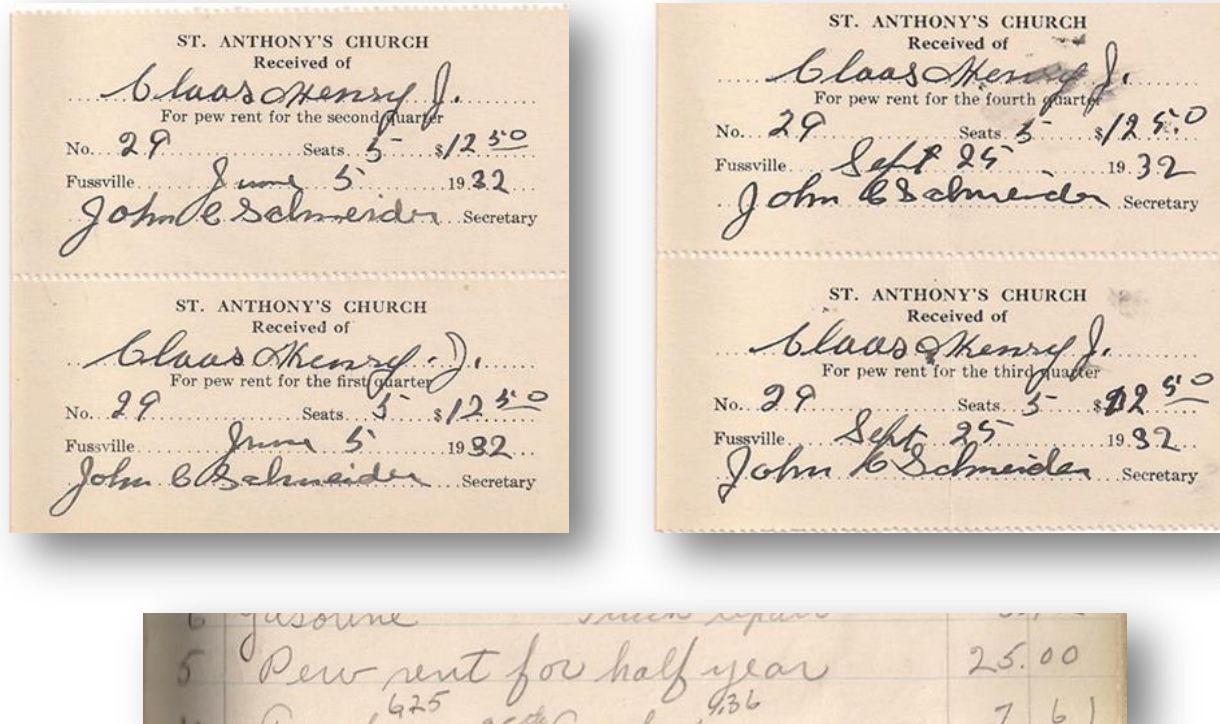
In my home church, the remnants of those metal numbers on the ends of pews have been removed. You might still find them in some churches built prior to the 1950s. If you're in one of those churches, check it out.

So, for Tonie and Harry, they "rented" pew #29 at St. Anthony Church. And from the notes in Tonie's journals, that pew got quite a bit of use. In 1932, just as in every year, going "to church" meant making frequent trips to St. Anthony. It was much more than a Sunday thing.



February 3, 1932 -
"All in church."

Tonie documented every time that she or Harry or one of her children made the short trip down the lane to Lilly Road, then to Good Hope Road and over to Fond du Lac Road (now Appleton Avenue) to St. Anthony Church. In fact, during that year, she mentioned 93 separate events at St. Anthony attended by one or more Claas Family members (Sunday Masses, holy day Masses, confessions, Lenten events, funerals, weddings, to name just a few). The Claas Family was getting its money's worth for that pew rent.



June 5, 1932 - "Pew rent for half year ... \$25.00"

We're not exactly sure when the terminology changed and when the concept of "pew rent" was dropped from our church lexicon. It might have been in the 1960s around the time of Vatican II, for you Catholics who might remember the impact of that historic council.

But if you go to a pre-1950 church this weekend, you might want to take note of any markings or scars etched into those pews. Look for the numbered remnants carved into the pew ends. In your imagination, you might listen for the many stories, prayers and memories these pews hold. Like the stories embodied in the receipts for \$12.50 issued to: "Claas Henry J." in 1932. If only those pews could talk.