

Michigan Every Day **By Patrick Sullivan and Carole Eberly**

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The case of the missing nun cracks open

Sister Mary Johns had a troubled life. She moved into a convent at age 9 when she was orphaned. At age 18, she took vows to become a nun. In her early 30's, she became ill and it was thought that Sister Mary Johns should move from Detroit to Isadore, a tiny spot in Leelanau County, where the northern Michigan climate might improve her condition.

In Isadore She joined a small church community that was led by Father Bieniawski, his sister and two nuns. Also in Isadore were the priest's Polish housekeeper and her daughter. At first, it looked as though the change of scenery was good for the sister. She liked her new surroundings and loved to spend time outdoors picking flowers. Sister Mary Johns was on one of those walks when she was last seen in August 1907. Father Bieniawski returned from fishing on Lake Leelanau to learn that Sister Mary Johns had disappeared. He made a quick search through the grounds and the buildings but found no trace of the nun.

The sheriff was called and hundreds of parishioners searched the area for weeks. Those who knew her were certain she would not have merely have run off. Bloodhounds were brought in, psychics offered their services, and the search continued. Some thought Sister Mary Johns may have wandered into a large cedar swamp at the base of Lake Leelanau.

The mystery deepened when an unsigned letter arrived claiming that Sister Mary Johns had run away and should be left alone. The letter had a Chicago postmark. Months passed. Then years. And the case of the missing nun faded away.

Eight years later there was another lead. A woman confessed to a priest in Milwaukee that she had murdered a nun and buried her underneath a pile of lumber in the basement of a church in Isadore.

Oddly, no action was taken and more years passed. The crime was finally uncovered during a botched effort to cover it up in 1918. A new church was planned for Isadore and Father Edward Podlesweski, who had replaced Father Bieniawski, removed bones from the basement and buried them in the cemetery. He wanted to avoid the embarrassment the discovery of the body would have caused.

Bud Father Podlesweski was having an affair with a 19-year-old girl. When the affair was discovered by the girl's father, the girl told what she knew about the bones found in the basement. Warrants were issued for the arrest of Father Bieniawski and his housekeeper, who were living in Manistee. As the investigation unfolded, it was determined the priest knew nothing of the murder of Sister Mary Johns and that the housekeeper, Stanislaw Lypszynska, had acted alone. Authorities said Lypszynska confessed in jail to a woman who spoke Polish, planted in an adjacent cell to pose as a fellow inmate with a sympathetic ear. The housekeeper later denied giving the confession. The housekeeper was convicted on Oct. 18, 1919. Apparently she killed the sister out of jealousy; Sister Mary Johns spent too much time with the priest.