

# **St. Mary's Parish History**

## ***Some parts taken from 2007 booklet***

### **(1857 - 2007)**

#### **Beginnings**

Founded in 1856 Saint Mary's church has a rich history, and has played a vital role in the community of Mayville. The Rev. Father Rehrl, first missionary of all the old churches around the area, attended for many years. St. Mary's Church had its official beginning on September 22, 1857 when a warranty deed to purchase land for a church was drawn up between Jacob Zervas, Joseph Schwartz, Anton Buchan, and Joseph Boehmer trustees of the Catholic Church Santa Maria bony conciliar of Mayville tone of Williamstown county of Dodge and state of Wisconsin parties of the first and John Martin Henni, Bishop of the city of Milwaukee party of the second part. On this deed, the church is given the title "Roman Catholic Church, Sanctae Mariae boni consilii of Mayville." Thus, our parish was established under the patronage of St. Mary of Good Counsel. At that time, among the early settlers who took an active and earnest interest in the advancement of Catholic affairs were Messrs. Henninger, M. Ziegler, Boehmer and Schwartz.

Soon a small wooden church was built. When Mr. and Mrs. Henry Boehmer celebrated their 40<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary in September 1897, it was noted that they were the first couple to be married in St. Mary's church, so they would have been married the same month the deed was drawn up. That would mean the church was built in record time. Perhaps construction began before the deed was signed.

Four lots on the east side of High Street were purchased to serve as a Catholic cemetery. To facilitate access to the cemetery from the church, church trustees eventually purchased a strip of land one rod wide that led from the rear of the church property east to High Street.

The new parish was first served by Rev. Casper Rehrl, a missionary in this part of Wisconsin who was the founder of a number of churches. Eventually Rev. Hensler served as the first regular pastor, followed by Revs. Lang and Metzger until 1875. These priests may have been circuit riders who served several parishes in this area.

A rectory was established (it is not known when) in a house we believe was located south of the church. The parish may have built a new home or purchased an existing building. There is no record of the parish owning the land on which the house stood.

According to Homer Bishop Hubbell in his 1913 history of Dodge County (Dodge County Wisconsin Past and Present), the first parish school was organized in 1868, and by 1870 the school was housed in a building in the second ward (the area of the city east of the river). The school was in operation until 1875, having three teachers during that time, including Dr. G. H. Balg.

From 1875 until 1881, the Rev. Father Woelfl resided there as permanent pastor. Sometime during Woelfl's ministry, a brick building was constructed just north of the church and used as a school for about two years. More construction followed when a new brick church was erected, completed in 1881, at a cost of \$5321.71. The old wooden church was sold for \$55. After Father Woelfl was transferred to another parish, Mayville became a mission to Theresa and was attended from that

parish by the regular incumbent until 1896. The pastors in charge of the mission during that period were the Rev. Fathers Lette, Huber, Vogt, and Ollig.

In its earlier years this parish, though limited in its membership, had its own church. This was kept in constant use until the year 1881 when the second church, a brick edifice, was erected. This work was accomplished under the direction and personal supervision of the pastor then in charge, the Rev. Father Woelfl. Records indicate that by 1885 there were 78 membership units involved at the parish.

By 1885, efforts were still being made to have parishioners donate funds to pay off the debt incurred by church construction. Financial difficulties were evident in late 1886, when parishioners were told at a special meeting that some parishioners had not paid the yearly pew rent (church dues), and that the parish was \$150 behind in paying the pastor's salary. There were fewer than 80 members (units) in these years. A committee was appointed to assess members amounts large enough to raise \$650 per year for the operation of the parish. At a previous meeting, it had been decided to sell the rectory to Mrs. Ohlinger (Ollinger?) for \$550 dollars and remodel the school building for use as housing for the pastor.

Fr. Woelfl had been transferred in 1881 to another parish, and St. Mary's then became a mission of Theresa, served by a series of pastors of St. Theresa. These would have been listed as the Revs. Wm. Lette, Joseph Huber, Phillip Vogt, and Rud. Ollig. Lest we think that, being a mission, St. Mary's was not well served, we read in the July 28, 1896 issue of the Dodge County Pionier that "Rev. Ollig preached his farewell sermon at St. Mary's. "He was here 31 months, overseeing the parish as a mission. The little city and its people, the church and parishioners were very dear to him, which makes the departure difficult for him. For his part, Rev. Ollig was a dutiful pastor who will long be remembered."

## **Progress**

On August 2, 1896 Rev. W.J. Heder arrived in Mayville to begin a pastorate that would extend to 1915. By all accounts he was a zealous and energetic man, well-liked by his parishioners and by other local citizens. During Fr. Heder's tenure, the church was remodeled, a pipe organ installed, the cemetery improved, a school built in 1904 and a rectory constructed in 1915. The sister's convent was built circa 1916. It housed the Sisters of St. Agnes, who staffed the school at that time, and continued to staff it until 1978. During this time the mission church of St. Malachy, Horicon, was also cared for at regular intervals by Father Heder.

Soon after Rev. Heder arrived, in September 1896, three new bells were installed in the church tower, and in December clocks were placed there, a gift of Dr. and Mrs. Balg, former Mayville residents who were then living in Milwaukee. The smallest of the old bells was purchased by the city council for use as a fire bell.

The following summer, a 12x24 foot addition to the church was built to serve as a sacristy. A basement was constructed under this addition, and there the boiler for the new steam heating system was placed.

In 1901, parishioners contributed \$1400 for the purchase of a new pipe organ, and on October 24, the organ builder, B. Schaefer of Schleisingerville (Slinger), installed the instrument with the help of a six-man crew.

## **The Second School**

A piece of land north of Naber Street was purchased in October 1903. The following year construction of the school was begun and the cornerstone laid on the midsummer. The July 5, 1904 Dodge County Pionier called the ceremonies "impressive." The main speaker was J.M. Kasel, a professor at St. Francis Seminary, and "a large crowd of people... listened to the orations and musical program." Festivities included a procession around the city featuring the uniformed Knights of St. George's Catholic Church of Milwaukee and members of Catholic societies of Mayville and surrounding communities.

Even more impressive were the dedication festivities, which began the evening before Thanksgiving in 1904 with the arrival by train of Archbishop Messmer and a number of clergymen from Milwaukee. They were met by Rev. Heder and St. Mary's trustees, Andrew Bachhuber and L.S. Keeley, accompanied by men of the congregation and the Mayville Cornet Band. The archbishop and clergymen were escorted to waiting carriages for the journey from the depot (at the corner of Dayton and Fremont, now N. Walnut, Streets) to the church. The men and the band marched in parade, escorting the carriages.

Members of the congregation had assembled at the church, ready for the blessing by the archbishop, preceded by a processional sung the choir. After the welcoming ceremony, the archbishop and visiting clergy retired to the rectory.

Thursday, Thanksgiving Day, was bright and clear. Delegations of Catholic Knights from neighboring cities gathered at the hall of the local Catholic Knights, and from there marched through Main Street to church, led by the band.

Awaiting the marchers were the Archbishop, the clergy, and children of the congregation. All proceeded to the school where the clergy chanted "Veni Creator Spiritus" (Come Holy Spirit), and the Archbishop pronounced a blessing upon the building and all who shall be instructed within its walls. The parade then marched back to the church for a solemn High Mass, which included sermons in German and in English. After Mass, the ladies of the congregation served Thanksgiving dinner in the school rooms.

The Sisters of St. Agnes, with a motherhouse in Fond du Lac, staffed the new school from the beginning. It appears that in the early years, two Sisters were engaged to teach the eight grades. They may have been housed on the upper level of the two-story school. Eventually a convent was built southeast of the school building, perhaps in 1916, to house the school staff.

## **New Rectory, New Pastors**

Fr. Heder was transferred to a parish in Racine and left in January 1915. Visiting priests served the congregation for a few months until Rev. Joseph Ritger arrived in March. A new rectory had been built north of the school during the previous year, and Fr. Ritger was its first occupant. Ritger was pastor here for seven years. Poor health made it difficult for him to continue serving the Mayville congregation, and he was transferred to East Troy. Rev. Rudolph Kramer arrived to become the pastor in 1922.

Within a few years, Fr. Kramer, in addition to his pastoral duties, had to oversee a number of repair projects. In 1924, both the school and the parsonage boilers needed repairs, and sidewalks were laid around the school and parsonage. In 1925, \$2792.51 was spent for repairs and redecoration of the church and construction of a small addition to the north wall for use as a confessional, a project that took three months to complete. In 1927, a decision was made to erect a new, shorter tower to replace the steeple on the church; the steeple was leaning to one side and was judged unsafe. The firm of Rhode-Kapelle was engaged to dismantle the steeple and build the new tower. On a happier note, Fr. Kramer celebrated the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his ordination in June 1928 with a Jubilee Mass and banquet with a congregation numbering 250 members (units).

In January 1939, Fr. Kramer suffered a heart attack at the beginning of a Sunday mass. During his recuperation, several Augustinian priests, Fr. Conrad Renneisen and Fr. Louis Reuss among others, came to assist with pastoral duties. An assistant, Rev. Cletus Uhen, was assigned to the parish late in 1942. Fr. Kramer retired in 1943 due to failing eyesight, and was replaced by Rev. Robert Bier.

Fr. Bier was most conscientious in his attention to pastoral duties, but perhaps he is remembered by those were St. Mary schoolchildren as the priest who played baseball with the boys at recess and showed entertaining movies in the classroom as a Friday afternoon treat. He may be remembered by parishioners for beginning the Tuesday night Mother Perpetual Help novenas, which continued for many years. During those wartime years, he often took time during the novena services to read aloud letters he had received from men in service. During his tenure, work was begun to construct a basement under the church to provide a much-needed gathering space.

Rev. Cyril Spiegelhoff, who had served as a U.S. Army chaplain, became pastor of St. Mary's in June 1946. He soon organized a CYO (Catholic Youth Organization) for teenagers and was able to use the newly completed meeting area in the church basement for instruction and social gatherings for young people. A complete redecoration of the church was undertaken in 1947; the project, begun in spring, was finished just before Christmas. An oil painting of the Mother of Perpetual Help, treasured by the parish because it was given by King Ludwig of Bavaria soon after the parish was founded, was restored to its place above the main altar.

Rev. Joseph Brasky was appointed pastor in 1950. Rev. John Rausch was later an assistant to Fr. Brasky, and was able to take care of pastoral duties when Fr. Brasky became ill in 1954.

Rev. Oliver Zinnen, a former Navy chaplain, became pastor in August 1954. Rev. Edward Vogel was the assistant pastor beginning in March 1965. He was followed by associate pastor Rev. Robert Glisch in 1968, and Rev. Robert Maney in 1971 until Fr. Zinnen was transferred that year.

### **The Third School**

St. Mary's School had just 125 students enrolled in 1946. Just twelve years later in 1958, during Fr. Zinnen's tenure, students numbered more than 200. Because of lack of classroom space, first and second graders were attending school only half days. A decision was made to build a new school. The site chosen was just to the east of the existing school, and by spring of 1959, parishioners were busy removing trees in preparation for construction. The building was not ready for occupancy at the start of the school year, but in January 1960, in the midst of blowing snow, the 222 pupils moved their belongings from the old school to the new. The old school was dismantled in March.

Dedication of the school took place on Sunday evening, May 22. Fifteen guests, including Archbishop William E. Cousins, were served dinner at 6:30 p.m. After dinner, there was a procession from the rectory to the school, where a dedication and blessing by the archbishop took place. The ceremony included the blessing of a large crucifix with a hard-carved corpus from Oberammergau. The dedication was followed by a procession to the church, where the archbishop gave a sermon and presided over Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. Afterwards Archbishop Cousins greeted parishioners at the front of the church.

## **A New Church**

Fr. Zinnen as pastor in 1971. Already in 1964, there had been discussion of the need to retire the debt on the school and amass a fund for construction of a new church. By 1971, parishioners faced costly repairs on a 90-yr-old building that was too small for the size of the congregation, now numbering 524 membership unites. With a \$147,000 nest egg in the building fund, parishioners voted to build a new church. There was discussion as to where to construct the edifice, with four or five sites suggested at various places in the city. It was finally decided to purchase the land immediately south of the church from the Weinberger family, allowing space for parking once the 1881 church was razed.

Construction began in the summer of 1972 and was completed the following year. Dedication ceremonies took place on November 4, 1973. Musical selections before the dedication featured an instrumental ensemble, the organ, and a 20-voice choir. Archbishop William E. Cousins, the principal celebrant, blessed the outside walls after a procession to the church. Then the cross-bearer and acolytes led the archbishop and his ministers to the sanctuary, followed by the choir singing the Litany of the Saints, the clergy, and the people who took their accustomed places. After the completion of the Litany and special invocations, the archbishop blessed the interior walls and the floors. He then celebrated the Mass of Dedication.

The 1881 church was razed. The bells, a gift of the Ziegler family, were saved and installed in a bell tower that was built in 1974 on the south grounds. The area where the old church had stood was developed as a parking lot. The parish had acquired Lot 4, on the south side of Naber Street about mid-block, in the early 1950s, and in 1974, purchased Lots 2 and 3 to the west. Eventually the houses on Lots 2 and 3 were razed and years later the area was developed as parking space.

The church roof developed leaks in the area where the steeple was mounted, and the steeple was permanently removed in the mid-1990s when the roof was repaired.

## **Celebrating A Long History**

When Fr. Gunther retired in 1981, Rev. Charles Verhalen became pastor. Soon after his arrival, the parish participated in the first session of the RENEW program. Second and third sessions took place in 1982-1983. Parishioners celebrated the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of St. Mary's Congregation in 1982.

During Fr. Verhalen's pastorate, a new Reconciliation room was constructed in 1982, utilizing what had been closet space. In 1984, the roofs of the school and gym were refurbished as well as the outside walls of the classroom area.

In June 1993, St. Mary's parishioners welcomed a new pastor, Rev. Charles Wester. He also became pastor of St. Andrew, LeRoy, in 1998 when the parishes entered into a formal collaboration. At that time, he moved to the St. Andrew rectory in LeRoy while maintaining his office in the Mayville rectory. The parish offices had been moved to the vacant convent building in 1994.

The two parishes hired their first Director of Religious Education, Sr. Zita Kripavicius, O.P. in 1997; she served here for two years. Kathy Ritger was then hired, and she has ably directed a comprehensive Christian formation program since then. <sup>i</sup>

Members of both parishes welcomed a seminarian/intern, Oriol Regales, who enthusiastically entered into parish life and activities in 1998-1999. Mary parishioners attended his ordination to the priesthood in May 2001

One of our own parish members, Willis Heideman, after several years of study and preparation, was ordained to the diaconate in June 2002, and has since served as deacon at St. Mary and St. Andrew. He also served as administrative assistant to the pastor until July 2007.

During Fr. Wester's tenure, St. Mary's School was expanded to include kindergarten, preschool and day care programs. Space for these programs as well as grades one and two was created in St. Andrew's school building. Grades three through eight remained at the Mayville building, which now had room for the development of a computer center.

Rev. Thomas Biersack became pastor when Fr. Wester retired in June 2005. Under his direction, parish members celebrated the sesquicentennial of St. Mary's Congregation, bringing Good News to Mayville citizens for 150 years.

## **Cemeteries**

The first parish cemetery was established after the congregation was organized. Three-and-one-half lots were purchased on the east side of Naber Street for burial purposes. It is not known whether the area was carefully laid out to show gravesites or whether perhaps burials were done in a somewhat haphazard fashion. At any rate, difficulties were later apparent. The printed report of the 1924 annual meeting of the congregation states the following: "The secretary then stated that in the 1990, the Pastor and Trustees had a plat made of the old cemetery, under the name of Calvary Cemetery which was duly recorded in the office of the register of deeds. The cemetery had, however, been started many years before, and it would appear that either the former burials had not been taken into consideration or the lot lines were ignored after the plat was made, as there were more lots disposed of then [sic] that plat shows, making it almost impossible to keep an accurate record of these lots, or to give a proper description on perpetual care agreements."

A committee was appointed to employ an engineer to make a replat of the cemetery "showing all lots and blocks, and in so far as possible, the single graves; that the new plat or replat be then recorded at the County Seat of Dodge County, Wisconsin and recognized as the official plat of what shall be known as St. Mary's Old Cemetery." However, the parish financial report for the following year shows no payment to an engineer or other expert for services, so it would appear that the replat was never carried out.

Meanwhile, the congregation had purchased three acres south of Graceland Cemetery from Robert Westerholt in 1920, and a new cemetery had been established, promising burial space, it would seem, for years to come. But, looking ahead, members of the congregation bought another tract of land, a bit more than four acres, from Earl and Lucille Wendorff in 1966. This area, west of the tract purchased in 1920, was opened for burials in 1989.

## **Societies**

It is possible that parish societies for men and women were established early in the history of the parish, but no records can be found to verify their existence. A list of 27 names tells us who belonged to the Men's Society in 1884. We know that by 1904 a branch of the Catholic Knights had been formed here and was active for a number of years. A men's Holy Name Society was organized in 1921. It was still sponsoring parish events in the 1960s. The present Knights of Columbus Notre Dame Council 8817 was formed in 1984.

Records show that a Young Ladies Sodality was in existence in 1900. A Ladies Sodality was started in 1903, and over the years was variously called Ladies Sodality, Ladies Club, Christian Mothers, and Christian Women. The group was active until the 1980s. Records show that St. Mary's School Society, a women's group, was in existence in 1912 and still active in 1993. It is not known when the group was organized nor when it ceased to exist. Possibly School Society was yet another name for the Ladies Sodality. A circle of the Daughters of Isabella, St. Ann's Circle No. 374, was organized here in 1926 and was in existence until 1975.

Other organizations that were active during the 1900s included the Legion of Mary, the Good Samaritan Guild, and the Mission Society.

In the early years, there was no convenient place on church grounds to hold meetings, and organizations rented meeting rooms in various downtown building or sometimes met in members' homes. After the school was built in 1904, meetings were sometimes held in the school, but that did not seem to be a popular choice. Not until a basement was constructed under the church in the 1940s did the parish have a proper gathering place. The 1959 school included a gymnasium, and that has often served as a meeting place.

After the organization of the Parish Council in the 1970s, and subsequently a number of committees to deal with parish matters, parishioners began to serve the congregation as committee members helping to oversee operation and upkeep of parish buildings, for example, or dealing parish and community human concerns, or planning fundraisers, or assisting with Christian Formation programs. The possibilities for service are many and do not necessarily involve belonging to a club or society.

## **Fundraisers**

Because parish archives include a ledger from St. Mary's School Society, we have a good idea what that hard-working ladies in this organization did to raise money. They regularly put on cinch parties, cinch being the popular card game early in the twentieth century. They held apron sales, and of

course, they sewed the aprons themselves. Bake sales brought in funds, as did several bazaars held over the years.

Money raised by this group funded things like furniture, rugs, and curtains for the rectory and convent, cleaning of the school, repair of the school furnace, school mortgage payments, and a myriad of supplies for the school, rectory and convent. It would seem that whenever there was a need for something, the pastor turned to the women to request funding, and they obliged with a check.

Card parties were popular fundraisers during much of the 1900s, cinch giving way to games like sheepshead, five hundred and bridge. The Holy Name Society for many years sponsored public card parties which were well attended. At one time, a common event was the pillow case card party, at which prizes were fancy hand-embroidered pillow cases made by the parish women.

Women of the parish raised funds in various ways over the years: luncheons, fashion shows, bake sales, quilt sales. A very successful event was the annual bazaar held each December from 1975 through 1986; parish women and men worked year-round to create items for this sale. One year the bazaar was written up in the Milwaukee Journal newspaper, which resulted in customers coming from far and wide.

An annual festival has been held for many years in late summer or early fall, featuring a chicken barbeque dinner, musical entertainment and games. For some years, an auction was also held in conjunction with this parish festival.

One of the newer events is Casino Night, featuring food, games, raffles, and a silent auction, all designed to raise funds for the operation of the parish school.

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<sup>i</sup> Kathy Ritger retired from the Director of Religious Education position in 2021.