

## Centennial History Article

*This parish history appeared in the program commemorating the centennial of the present church in 1975.*

Stillwater on the St. Croix is noted, among other distinctions, as the birthplace of Minnesota, for it was here in 1848, in a building on the southwest corner of Main and Myrtle Streets, that the convention was held for the formation of the new Minnesota territory. However, the more profound identification with Stillwater is the lumber industry which dominated the area for nearly seventy years. The first sawmill near Stillwater commenced operation in the spring of 1844. In the decade following the opening of Stillwater's first mill, at least half a dozen mills sprang up throughout the valley, exerting a lasting influence on the religious community to which the migrants came in search of work. The real impetus for growth came about in 1854 with the opening of "two large flourishing mills" at Stillwater, the Schulenberg and Boeckler Mill in north Stillwater and the Hersey and Staples Mill, located on North Main Street. The formation of these two large companies signalled the first great wave of immigration to Stillwater during the mid-1850s. A great many people came from the Mirimachi region in New Brunswick, Canada, and from Maine, where logging was also the chief industry. Besides the significant migration from New Brunswick and Maine, people came from other states, from Germany, Switzerland, Ireland, Quebec, Scandinavia, Italy, and all other points of origin. Most of the New Brunswickers and nearly all of the Irish immigrants who came were Catholic. Their presence here formed a Catholic community and eventually led to the organization of St. Michael's parish in the year 1853.

As early as 1849 and 1850, there had been some Catholic influence here when Father Ravoux, a French missionary priest from the newly-formed diocese, offered Mass at the James Heffernan, Sr., Patrick Lloyd and Jacob Brown homes on the North Hill. When the Fathers of the Seventh Provincial Council, held in Baltimore in 1849, decided to make a diocese of the Minnesota territory, they selected St. Paul as their diocesan city and in 1851 sent a young French missionary, Joseph Cretin, to be the first bishop. In that year St. Paul had a 10 x 18 foot log cathedral, four churches, and one thousand Catholics. Among the French missionary priests were Father Augustin Ravoux and Father Marcellin Peyragrosse, both of whom said Mass in the early history of St. Michael's. There is record of a Mass said by Bishop Cretin in 1850 in a building located at Second Street and Nelson's Alley. Before construction of the first church building in 1853, Mass was said by Father Peyragrosse, who travelled here regularly during 1851 and 1852.

The first St. Michael's Church, with Father Daniel Fisher as its pastor, was located on the North Hill just north of the northwest corner of Fourth and Mulberry Streets. This frame structure, built in the fall of 1853 with thirty families comprising the parish, was enlarged by Father M. E. Murray in 1856. The original section was then used as the sacristy. During Father Murray's pastorate, a rectory was built in 1855 at 224 North Fourth Street and was retained and rented for twelve dollars a year after its move to the present location and was eventually sold to Patrick Fitzgerald in May, 1894, for \$75.

St. Michael's parish has had a cemetery from the time of its beginning. In 1853 burials were made on the property known as the North Hill Burying Ground, which was the square block bounded by Second, Laurel, Fourth and School Streets. In the late 1860s the cemetery was moved to its present Bayport location, which may have been the city of Stillwater's original "potter's field," in the Secret and Perro's section of South Stillwater (now Bayport). When St. Charles' parish was formed in Bayport in 1943, the cemetery was then placed under the jurisdiction of that parish.

In 1855 when the parish was new, 1,482 persons comprised the population of Stillwater, 700 of whom were bachelors; in 1875, the year the present church was completed, the population of Stillwater was 5,749. By the 1890s, at the height of the logging era, the population would exceed 8,000. Those persons responsible for the building of the new church no doubt anticipated the prodigious growth of the community and thus of the parish.

Father Murray died in January of 1870 and was succeeded by Father Maurice E. Murphy, who had been ordained the previous year and was described as "a young and energetic man who threw himself heart and soul into his work" and was the spirit behind the move to locate a new church building on a prominent height where its tall spires could be viewed up and down the valley. Not only had the first church proved inadequate in size, but a more formidable structure was desired; we are told that it was Father Murphy's inspiration to build "a lasting monument to the glory of God and to the faith and zeal of the Catholics of Stillwater." Sensing the future growth of the city, he selected and purchased the present site as more convenient and suitable.

On June 22, 1873, the cornerstone of the present church was laid, Bishop Grace and Father (later Bishop) Ireland participating. The Stillwater Gazette reported: "A procession of two thousand people over a mile long, fifteen hundred people afterward dined at the German School on Pine Street." E. D. Neill described the period 1870-73 as "a time of great inflation and speculation, an unusual period of material progress and development." It is ironic that this project was begun in that year, as 1873 signalled the collapse of Jay Cooke's Banking House in New York City and the resulting depression which lasted until 1878. Though the depression was considered less severe in Minnesota than in other parts of the country, its effects were still felt.

The church, constructed of Stillwater sandstone with trimmings of Kasota sandstone and measuring 70x150 feet, was dedicated on Sunday, August 15, 1875, though it was not completed for services until late September. The cost of the construction was \$80,000. Again, Bishop Grace came for the ceremony along with 700 people from St. Paul and 350 from Minneapolis, helping to form the 3,000 member procession. There was a blanket for twelve hundred people, held this time in the church basement.

A most distinctive feature was added to the church eight years later. On July 28, 1883, St. Michael's chimes were played for the first time. A "Catholic Fair" at Music Hall, held the previous July, had raised \$500 towards the chimes. The Daily Sun reported: "An open air concert by Professor James Mellon, the genial chime ringer of St. Vincent's Church in Baltimore, manipulated the hand pedals for the ten bells in the hour-long concert" (sic). The original inscription on the largest bell reads, "My name is Michael the Archangel,

praise the Lord all ye nations. In this tower they have placed me, A.D.1883, to toll the knell of departing souls, to restrain the lightning's stroke, to celebrate the Sabbath of the Lord, to arouse the indifferent, to scatter the storm, and to pacify the bloodthirsty." At the time, the chimes were reported to be the only ones in the state of Minnesota.

Unfortunately these beautiful chimes fell silent in disrepair in 1962; but through the effort of Raymond Stieger, the bell ringer since 1930, \$12,000 was raised for the repair. In January 1970, the stirring music of the chimes emanated once again from St. Michael's belfry.

The history of St. Michael's school goes back to the time of Fr. Murray, who started the parish school in 1856. The first school was on the North Hill property. In 1873, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet came to this parish to serve as teachers. The sisters were present in the St. Michael's school until 1991, when the last sister retired from teaching. The second school, which must have been built during the 1870s or 1880s, was east of the present school near the ravine. The old convent, which was at least the second, was completed June 13, 1888, at Third and Willard Streets. It was financed by the Sisters of St. Joseph, not the parish, and served until it was razed and a new convent was erected in 1957.

For the school year 1891-92, St. Michael's parish school was leased to the public school system in an experimental program. Archbishop John Ireland was deeply concerned about the financing of Catholic Schools. The Archbishop was a churchman and a patriot: his solution to the problem was a cooperative effort of church and state. The provision of the plan, which also included a school in Faribault, was to rent St. Michael's school to the public school district. The teachers, all of whom were nuns, would become public school employees. Religion would be taught after school hours only. Fr. Corcoran, the new pastor, would oversee the arrangement. There were violent reactions to the proposals from some non-Catholics and conservative Catholics. This Catholic faction appealed directly to Rome and was successful in forcing the plan to be abandoned after only one school year.

Throughout the second half of the 1800s, lumbering remained the predominant industry in Stillwater. Billions of feet of timber were cut; many "fortunes" of varying sizes were made. Many of the fine spacious homes in Stillwater attest to that fact. James Taylor Dunn wrote in his book *The St. Croix: Border River*: "But the end (of the logging) was approaching in spite of such optimistic predictions as the one made in 1887 that that it would be years before the industry would begin to fail, if it ever should. The golden age of lumbering came and went during the 1880 decade when loggers and cutters had their most successful years, and then a precipitous decline in mill production began."

The statistics for baptisms at St. Michael's parish show a positive correlation with the peak and decline of the lumbering industry. There were 1,150 baptisms during the decade of 1885-95. For the period 1895-1905 there were 753 baptisms, a significant decrease of 35 percent. It is relevant to these church statistics that in 1890, 452 million feet of timber were cut and passed through the Boom; by 1905 the figure had decreased to 121 million feet. The industry was diminishing; the town, as well as St. Michael's parish, was losing population. The logging operations dwindled until on June 12, 1914, the last "official" log passed through the Boom.

Throughout the first half century of the parish, there were many changes made in regard to the buildings: the church, school, rectory; but the most essential ingredient of a parish is, of course, its people. To understand the history of the parish is, in part, to understand the human side: the vital, functioning, social people who made up the parish.

There were a number of very active adult organizations affiliated with St. Michael's. These groups were of religious, political, moral and theoretical natures. Whatever the prime objectives of the various groups, they all afforded the people a social experience, a sense of community and belonging.

One of the most active organizations of the parish past was the Catholic Total Abstinence Union. This group, which called for "total abstinence" from all liquors, was organized by Fr. John Ireland of the St. Paul Diocese in 1867. Fr. Ireland, a native of Ireland, was very concerned about social conditions of the Irish immigrants, many of whom had been victims of the potato famine of 1847. He felt that the depressed circumstances of many of them necessitated the presence of high ideals and moral strength. Fr. Ireland believed alcohol to be a curse to the improvement of the immigrants' lot. Three years after he founded the C.T.A.U., St. Michael's local chapter, known as the Father Matthew (Murphy) Total Abstinence Society, was begun in November of 1872. The Father Matthew Total Abstinence Society had as its primary objective to encourage Total Abstinence from intoxicating drinks, to provide for the temporal welfare of its members, and to assist in burial in case of death. Initiation fees were one dollar and monthly dues were ten cents. The Total Abstinence Society held big St. Patrick's Day celebrations, but not in the manner of modern St. Patrick's Day celebrations. On St. Patrick's Day, 1874, an all-day celebration was held which netted nearly \$400. A parade of two hundred marched to Mass at St. Michael's. Dinner followed at the Hersey-Staple hall. There were speeches in the afternoon, and the evening's entertainment was songs by Miss Heffernan and Miss Welch. In 1879 there was no celebration because there were "too many in the woods."

The abstinence society included young men and adolescents as well as older men. The Temperance Cadets for the younger members comprised the St. Aloysius Society. The cadets formed bands and marching units. As late as 1904, at the funeral of 16-year-old victim of the bridge disaster, one hundred boys, Temperance Cadets, marched ahead of the hearse to the church.

If liquor were considered evil, then the presence of the saloons in Stillwater must have been a good incentive for the existence of the Temperance Union. The population of Stillwater for the years 1887-88 was approximately 16,500. The saloons in the city numbered 42, a ratio of one saloon for every 400 people when there was only one church for every 1,000 people.

In the 1800s a part of the St. Patrick's Day celebration was the plays put on by members of St. Michael's parish. As early as 1882 the Total Abstinence Society presented a play entitled "O'Neal, the Great." The report from the 1890 play showed a profit of \$335, 114 tickets at \$3.25 still unpaid. In 1900 the play "For Honor's Sake" was presented on the

stage of the Opera House which was reported as "filled to overflowing with an enthusiastic audience."

In the cultural realm, Stillwater's lavish Grand Opera House opened on May 11, 1881, its premiere being "Uncle Tom's Cabin". The Opera House would be relatively short-lived, as it burned on the night of December 5, 1902. Among notables who performed on its stage were John Philip Sousa's band and John L. Sullivan. The Opera House was also the setting for many events sponsored by groups from St. Michael's. In 1889 the parochial school children presented an exhibition at the Opera House of their progress during the school year. Admission was a "mere pittance" to be used in support of Catholic education.

A most acclaimed and celebrated event in Stillwater was the visit of James Cardinal Gibbons in July 1900. Cardinal Gibbons, primate of the Catholic Church in the United States, was the author of the popular religion book *Faith of our Fathers* (1882). There were a number of lavish receptions and dinners and an excursion on the "new yacht" of a Stillwater lumberman on the St. Croix. On July 22, Cardinal Gibbons offered Mass at St. Michael's. The *Gazette* reported: "His Eminence preached at St. Michael's Sunday forenoon, taking as his text 'Charity', setting forth in the choicest language the duties of man to his fellow man. The large church was crowded with people of all denominations who listened attentively to one of the most eloquent sermons ever delivered from a Stillwater pulpit."

From that same pulpit eleven years later in 1889, Father Murphy made an announcement in the name of patriotism. He informed the congregation that on the following Tuesday a high Mass would be celebrated in honor of the one hundredth anniversary of George Washington's inauguration as President. Father Murphy proclaimed: "It should be a day held sacred by every American citizen, especially dear and memorable to each and every child of the Catholic Church in thanksgiving to God for His blessings upon the nation during the past hundred years and to ask a continuance of His choicest Benedictions to the whole people."

There is at least one instance in which the clergy became involved in political matters outside the United States. On St. Patrick's Day, 1881, the Irish Land League met in the Opera House. Father Murphy, who was president of the local group, was one of the speakers. The Irish Land League was working for Home Rule or independence from Great Britain. Fr. Murphy, as many others of Irish descent, was apparently sympathetic to the cause.

A parish as large as St. Michael's needed, then as today, an administration or corporation to handle business, financial, and legal matters. St. Michael's Articles of Incorporation were drawn up on May 9, 1882, with Bishop Grace and Father Murphy presiding. There were some interesting matters dealt with, such as those at two meetings in 1886. In April of that year the St. Michael's corporation decided to help finance the church by requiring every property holder in the parish to give a note for his portion of the parish debt. The amounts of the notes were not to be left to the individual's discretion. Each person's portion was to be based on the assessed evaluation of his real and personal property as

shown by the county auditor's books. Records show the main support for the church came from pew rentals. Individuals renting pews had a special pew reserved with a name plate. At the September 1886 meeting the corporation decided to lock all pews due to difficulty collecting rent. It was decided that any party occupying a whole or half pew and paying prompt rental fee on September 30 and March 31 would be rewarded with a key.

The main business at the May 22, 1890 meeting of the corporation may seem a bit amusing, particularly its description as found in the minutes. After the minutes of the previous meeting were read, five ladies entered the room. The secretary wrote: "Being asked as to what was their pleasure, they replied that they called for the purpose of protesting the manner in which the church was kept, and thought the Incorporators ought to employ some competent person to keep the church and premises in a respectable condition, and that the present party employed appeared to be negligent and took no interest whatever in looking after the church or premises and instead of lending any assistance to the ladies when working around the church or altars, they invariably received impudence." The ladies complained in particular about having to sweep the church, though willing to wash the linens and fix the altars. The ladies saw "no good reason why they should be expected to sweep, when there was a man employed about the place and paid for, that had plenty of time to do it, and should be made to do it."

In 1891, Father Charles Corcoran was appointed pastor of St. Michael's, remaining to celebrate his golden jubilee as a priest in the parish and serving three generations of parishioners until his death in July 1943. On August 27, 1941, Archbishop Murray and other church dignitaries participated in a ceremony marking the fiftieth anniversary of Fr. Corcoran's priesthood. Having served for three months at the Church of the Immaculate Conception in Minneapolis and twenty months at the Cathedral of St. Paul before coming to St. Michael's, he spent the next 52 years as the pastor here. During his pastorate, the Clancy school was built and the marble altar was erected. He also served as chaplain at the prison until 1927, after which he retained an nominal and casual relationship to the prison chaplaincy. In the hundred years that our parish has been in the present church, only five pastors have served the parish. Fr. Corcoran served for 52 of those 100 years.

In 1943 Father Daniel F. MacCarthy became the pastor and remained here until his death in 1955. During his years as pastor, he had the church re-roofed and decorated, the organ overhauled, and the windows renovated.

Father Francis J. Miller, who had served as Fr. Corcoran's assistant from 1927 to 1943, became pastor in 1956 after the death of Fr. MacCarthy. Remarkable improvements were made to the parish campus during the next thirteen years. In 1956 the Grace Mosier property was purchased; the Mosier house and the old rectory were torn down, and the present rectory was constructed on those lots in 1957. The building fund drive in 1959 collected \$400,000 for a 12-room addition to the school and for a new convent. Two houses on adjoining property were purchased. These, along with the old convent, were torn down to make room for the new school and convent. Locust Street between South Second and Third Streets was vacated. With the completion of these buildings, the block bounded by Second, Willard, Third and Walnut Streets formed the physical complex of

St. Michael's. In addition to these accomplishments, Fr. Miller was well-known for his devotion to the inmates at the Minnesota State Prison during his 41 years as the Catholic chaplain. At his death and upon the request of the inmates, Fr. Miller became the first person to lie in state inside the prison. Fr. Miller's ecumenical spirit had been well-known throughout the St. Croix Valley. After his death, \$170,000 was donated by people of all faiths to build an ecumenical chapel at the prison in his memory.

The fifth pastor of St. Michael's, Father Richard V. Berg, came in 1969 at age 41, having been a priest for 17 years. Fr. Berg stayed at St. Michael's until 1977.

What happens to St. Michael's after 1975? Tune in later when we have a more complete history. Or volunteer to write it yourself by calling the Parish Office, (612) 439-4400. Thanks to the anonymous person who obviously spent a lot of time writing this history in 1975.