

St. Mary's Ridge: Nativity of the Blessed Virgin

When the first settlers arrived at St. Mary's Ridge early in October, 1856, little did they realize that a century later the solemn centennial Mass of the event would be celebrated in one of the finest churches in Western Wisconsin.

THE PIONEERS were nearly all immigrants from the Rhenish village of Stommeln, near Cologne. They reached Chicago from New York after an arduous trip in the old-time comfortable immigrant cars, not much better than present-day cattle cars. To reach their Ohien and by boat to La Crosse. Then, after making a few purchases in the city, they set out in two ox-carts in search of a new home, keeping tenaciously to the ridge that stretches nearly 50 miles from La Crosse to Ontario. They halted at the present St. Mary's Ridge and decided to make it their home.



Fr. Aloysius Baumann

The first houses were built of poles, set up vertically and plastered with clay, with a matting of hay for a roof.

The following are the 10 pioneers who, with their families,

COMING SOON

Next week (Aug. 24)—St. Paul's Parish, New Lisbon.
The following week (Aug. 31)—St. Michael's Mission, Indian Creek.

settled here: Herman Baus, Mathias Butzler, Mathias Esser, Fred erick Gross, Hilarius Karis, Peter Michaels, Herman Schreier, John Schreier, Peter Schreier, and Quirin Schreier.

Log Church

One of the first concerns of the new settlers was to build a church. Land for the church and cemetery was the contribution of Casper Schieffer. Men cut the logs for the church near Bad Axe, and transported them by ox-cart over 10 miles of trackless wilderness.

During the first winters, priests had to celebrate Mass in the homes of the people for want of heating facilities in the church. The first such Mass was celebrated in the home of Hilarius Schotten, the present William Butzler place.

DESPITE THEIR POVERTY they erected a 20x30-log structure in the spring of 1858. Father Henry Tappert came from La Crosse shortly after that to celebrate Mass for them. Up to this time the people gathered at some farmhouse where they prayed the Rosary and sang hymns. Many of them walked to La Crosse in the spring of the year, a distance of 40 miles, to make their Easter duty.

(Turn to Page 10 — Column 1)

These pioneers arrived almost penniless to settle in a wilderness of underbrush 12 miles from Leon, the nearest town and shopping place. Their first winter was one of untold hardship, for they had no provisions, no cattle, no farm implements, and they were living in hurriedly constructed log houses, surrounded by three feet of snow. Their food consisted mostly of buckwheat pancakes, corn bread, and whatever wild game they could trap.

Little by little they cleared away the trees and brush, and subjected the wilderness acre by acre to cultivation. Except for buckwheat, the first years' crops were poor. Many had to find employment from the prosperous farmers in the rich valley toward Leon and Sparta.

Irish Settlers

In 1860 the tide turned, and the people gathered an abundant harvest. From this time on they began to prosper.

About this time Irish immigrants began to filter into the settlement, as is evident from names like John Malphy (or Murphy), Patrick Haney, John Tway, Bernard McDermott, Thomas Derrig, Michael Higgins, Thomas Rafferty, and Thomas Sullivan. Many of these were employes of the railroad.

FROM THE FALL of 1858 until January, 1866, priests from La Crosse came more or less once a month to celebrate Mass and administer the sacraments. Father Tappert was followed by Father F. X. Etschmann in 1859, Father A. T. Schrautenbach in 1860, Father Sanner in 1861, and Father M. M. Marco in 1863.

Bishop John M. Henn, the first Bishop of Milwaukee, honored the new parish with an official visitation in 1861, during which he administered the sacrament of Confirmation. To mark the signal honor, parishioners hired a buggy and a team of horses for \$6 to bring him from Sparta to the Ridge.

During the Civil War, 1861-1865, many young men left to serve the Union, while those at home supported a double burden on the farms.

Among those who enlisted in the Union Army were William Bruegggen, Peter and Mathias Flock, John Gross, Anton Neukirchen, Hilarius Rondorf, Jacob Siebertz, William Schmitz, and Thomas and Eugene Sullivan. All returned safely except John Gross, who died in the service.

First Pastor

Father S. Florentine became St. Mary's first resident pastor in January, 1866. Parishioners had prepared for the event by building a rectory costing about \$500. Father F. L. Junker succeeded him in July.

By this time the little 20x30 log church, the only one in Monroe County, could no longer accommodate the steadily increasing number of parishioners.

SOME 50 MEMBERS of the parish pledged \$4,000 for a new church, but no action was taken till late in 1867. Meanwhile Father Nicholas Stehle became pastor in June, 1867. At a parish meeting Dec. 15, 1867, members finally reached the decision to build. The new church, completed in 1869, was a frame structure costing about \$3,200. Bishop Michael Heiss, who had become La Crosse's first Bishop the year before, dedicated the new house of God. His nephew, Father Michael Heiss, was pastor, having succeeded Father Theodore Weglikowski in March that year. Father Weglikowski had replaced Father Stehle in May, 1868.

Church Bells

The two church bells that still call St. Mary's parishioners to Mass and prayer were the contributions of John and Peter Schieffer and Henry Hemmersbach. The larger one was the gift of the two brothers. They were solemnly blessed March 25, 1868, by Father Marco.

While St. Mary's second church was in process of construction, the neighboring towns were also building chapels, one at Bad Axe, town of Clinton in Vernon County, and the other at Pine Hollow, five miles west of St. Mary's Ridge. Both places remained missions of St. Mary's until 1886.

Father Herman Grosse succeeded Father Heiss in March, 1871. Under his leadership the parish built a second school, a one-room schoolhouse, from the logs of the first church, and a sisters' convent. The first was held in one of the homes.

UP TO THIS time the parish had employed lay teachers. But in 1873 Father Grosse enlisted the services of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, St. Rose's Convent, La Crosse. Sisters Seraphim and Adolphine arrived to staff the new school Oct. 3, 1873. The school opened three days later. Within a few years the parishioners added another room to the school, which was then staffed by three sisters.

In 1878 the parish bought a reed organ for the church. The same year about 65 German families at Summit decided to build their own church, which became a mission of St. Patrick's Parish, Sparta.

Father Paul Geyer became pastor in August, 1878. He remained only until the end of the year, when he was replaced by Father Willibald Hackner in January, 1879.

Third School

Father Hackner immediately set to work having repairs made on the church in preparation for the parish's silver jubilee, which was celebrated Oct. 19 and 20, 1881. Father J. M. Wickecker assumed the pastorate in August, 1882. After five years he was replaced by Father John G. Laurer in July, 1887.

By 1888 the parish had grown to such an extent that a new school was found necessary. Parishioners set to with a will and within a short time a new two-story stone structure, 38x32, graced the landscape on the Ridge. This school cost \$2,160 and was fully paid for by October, 1890.

Father J. A. Blaschke became pastor in September, 1894. He was replaced a few months later by Father John B. Hauck in December. The following year, in June, 1895, Father J. J. Mayer assumed the pastorate. Father Hackner returned as pastor in February, 1898.

TWO YEARS LATER, March 29, 1900, the sisters' convent was completely destroyed by fire. For the next nine years the old rectory served as a convent, until the present white brick building was built in 1909.

Today's Church

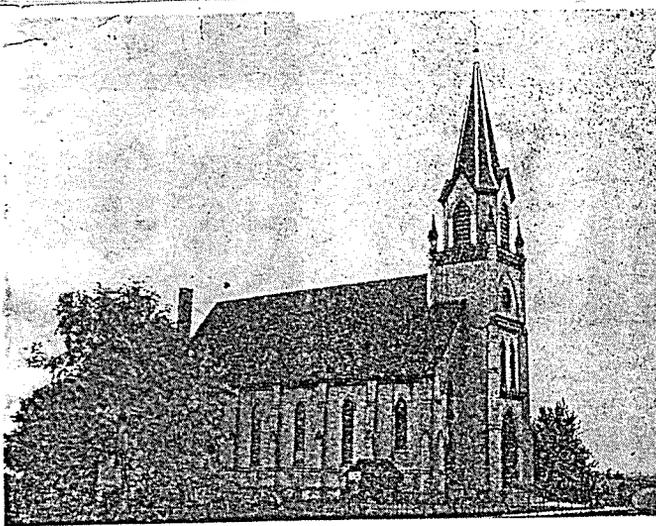
During Father Mayer's pastorate, in 1896, a canvass of the parish proved that the parishioners were aware of the need for a new church and rectory. At a parish meeting July 26, the members voted to build a stone church, 50x122. The building committee consisted of William Baus, William Flock, Peter Hemmersbach, Arnold Schieffer, Thomas Sullivan, and Michael Weibel. The architect chosen was Andrew Roth of La Crosse; the contractor was Mr. Roettlinger of Fountain City.

The new church, of Gothic design, was built of quarried stone and solid brick up to the windows and then of cream brick veneer. The tower was of solid stone and brick stained-glass windows were purchased from Flanagan and Biedenweg of Chicago. This undertaking cost the parish \$15,000.

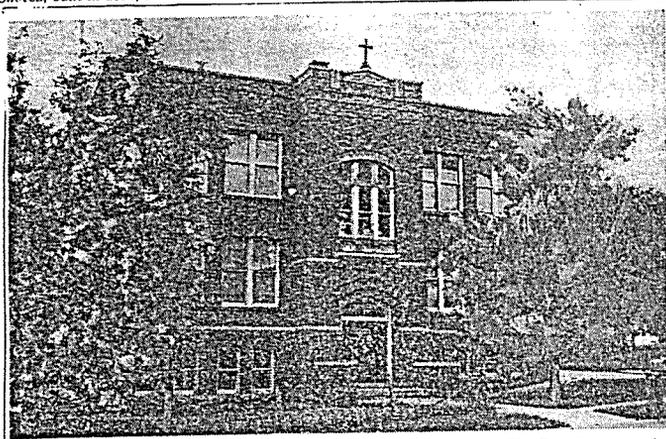
Gifts

The stained-glass windows were the gifts of individuals and societies. Among them were Father J. J. Mayer, Michael A. Weibel, Arnold Schieffer, William Baus, Peter H. Schieffer, Mathias, Jacob, John, and Frank Knorst; Aloys Husang, Gottfried Butzler, Henry Degenhardt, Ursula and William Cremer, William and Martin Schmitz, Mathias Flock, John H. Schmitz, Mrs. M. Weibel, Mrs. M. Schaitel, John and Joseph Schaitel, Gertrude and Mary Schumacher, the Blessed Virgin Sodality, and the Christian Mothers' Sodality.

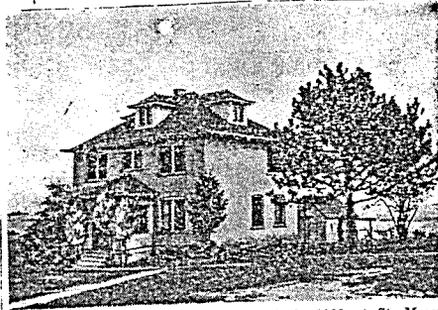
Among other individual contributions to the church were the Stations of the Cross by Mrs. Charles Dickmann, a sanctuary chair, a baptismal font, and an altar gong. Most of the furni-



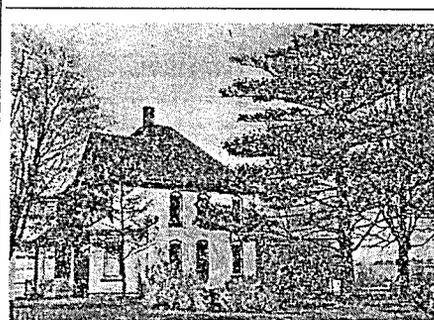
St. Mary's Ridge Church St. Mary's church, built in 1897, is the third structure dedicated as a House of God in the community. The first was a building built of logs erected by the first settlers who came in 1856.



St. Mary's Ridge School St. Mary's Ridge School, completed in 1922, is the fourth school built within 65 years by the parish. The first German settlers established a school in one of their homes as soon as they had taken care of their first necessity of building their own homes.



Convent This convent building, built in 1909 at St. Mary's Ridge, is the home of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration who educate the children of the parish.



Rectory For more than half a century this pioneer building has served as a residence for the zealous priests who tended the spiritual needs of the St. Mary's Ridge community.

ture was transferred from the old church to the new church for the time being.

Solemn dedication of the new, modern church took place on Thanksgiving Day, 1897. Bishop Schwebach delegated Father Peter Becker, pastor at Mauston, to officiate at the ceremony.

Rectory

After the convent burned down, Father Hackner called a business meeting April 1, 1900, when the people decided to build a new rectory and to use the old one for a convent. The new rectory cost the parish \$1,707, of which \$570 was paid by the insurance company.

OWING TO ILL health, Father Hackner left St. Mary's in May, 1903, to get a much-needed rest. Father Willibrord Mahowald, O.S.B. substituted for him during his absence. Because of continued ill health, Father Hackner resigned as pastor in 1904. Shortly thereafter, Father Mahowald was recalled by his superiors, and Father John Kaiser became pastor in April, 1904.

Before he left the parish, however, Father Hackner had donated nearly a complete set of new pews to the parish. The remainder were the gifts of some individual members whose names are not recorded.

Altars

Early in 1905 the parish purchased a set of three new altars from the E. Hackner Company of La Crosse, at a cost of \$1,800. Most of this expense was borne by individual gifts of members. The German members of the parish also contributed a beautiful statue of St. Boniface. The Irish members, not to be outdone, made a gift of a statue of St. Patrick. Both statues are the work of Mayer and Company of Munich, Germany.

ANOTHER IMPROVEMENT in the year 1905 was the complete excavation of the church basement and the installation of a new steam-heat system, at a cost of \$1,152. Bishop Schwebach honored the parish May 25 that year by officiating at the solemn blessing of the new altars.

In the following year, 1906, the parish undertook the frescoing of the church interior. Two oil paintings in the sanctuary, representing the Bloody and Unbloody Sacrifice of the New Testament, were the work of the renowned Father Bonaventura Ostenkarp, O.S.B. The fresco contract was given to George F. Satory of Wabasha, Minn. The entire cost of the undertaking was \$1,400.

ON THE PARISH'S golden jubilee in the year 1906, it boasted a parish roll of 140 families with 810 souls and 120 children in the school. That year Mrs. Louis Schotten made a gift of a beautiful cemetery group in memory of the pioneers of 1856, and as a perpetual souvenir of the golden jubilee.

In 1912 the number of the parish had increased to the extent that an addition was added to the school. In 1917 the church basement was renovated, and the following year electricity was installed. And in 1918 the parish purchased a pipe organ for the church.

After 16 years of faithful service, Father Kaiser left the parish and was replaced by Father John M. Thill, who was to remain nine years. His first act was to make a parish census, in which he found 129 families with a population of 696.

School Destroyed

His first setback came in 1921 when a great fire destroyed the school. Six days later a parish meeting was held, a building committee elected, and plans made for another school. During the following winter parishioners hauled brick and other materials for construction. Building operations began in April, 1922, and the present school building rose in a short time. The first Mass was offered in the school chapel Feb. 12, 1923.

On May 6, 1923, Bishop Alexander McGavick made his first visit to the parish. He solemnly dedicated the school and administered the sacrament of Confirmation. This was the fourth school of the parish in 65 years and its cost was \$28,000.

When Father Thill, broken by ill health, resigned in 1927, Father P. J. Zaun of the Sacred Heart Mission at Sparta became temporary administrator of the parish. The next year, March 5, 1928, Father Augustine Frisch arrived as the new pastor.

FATHER FRISCH'S FIRST task was to liquidate the debt still carried on the school. The parish organized a successful picnic that netted more than \$3,200, and a few months later paid the entire debt.

The next year, 1929, St. Mary's Ridge entered a new era with the construction of a hard-surfaced road along the church property.

When the old well drilled in 1894 finally gave out, parishioners decided on a modern unified automatic water system. This was accomplished with a new adequate well, 255 feet in depth.

Pastors who succeeded Father Frisch were Father Joseph H. Flad, 1934; Father Urban Baer, May, 1936; Father LaVerne Timmerman, April, 1938; Father Sylvester Frye, July, 1949; Father Augustine Sullivan, September, 1953; and Father Aloysius Baumann, the present pastor, who came Aug. 31, 1955.

THE YEARS SINCE 1931, the date of the diamond jubilee, have witnessed a gradual decline of parish membership. The parish plant also gradually declined in the same period, and members are now contemplating extensive repairs on the church, rectory, and school.

During his tenure, Father Baer opened a junior high school in 1936, but it closed again in 1953 for lack of sufficient number of students.

Present teachers in the school are Sisters M. Joceline, superior; M. Irma, M. Mona, and M. Gloria. The 1955-56 enrollment is 124 students.

Vocations

In its 100-year history, St. Mary's Ridge boasts three vocations to the priesthood among its sons, and one candidate now in the seminary. The first was Father Linus Schieffer, O.S.B., now pastor at Sacred Heart Parsh, Freeport, Minn. Born in 1895, he attended the parish school, then entered St. John's University High School in 1909. He pronounced his first vows in 1916, and his solemn vows in 1919. After his ordination in 1922, he joined the economics staff of the university, where he taught for many years.

ANOTHER PRIEST WAS Father Albin P. Schreier, son of Mr. and Mrs. Mathias Schreier. After attending St. Francis' Seminary, Milwaukee, and the Catholic University of America, he was ordained in St. Joseph's Cathedral, La Crosse, in 1928. He died in October, 1947.

Father Alfred F. Hemmersbach, son of Mr. and Mrs. Peter Hemmersbach, attended St. Lawrence's Seminary, Mt. Calvary; St. John's, Collegeville, Minn.; and St. Mary's, Baltimore, and was ordained in 1945 in St. Joseph's Cathedral. He is now pastor of St. John's Parish, Cooks Valley.

Donald Schreier, son of Mr. and Mrs. William Schreier, is now in his fourth year at St. Lawrence's Seminary.

AMONG THE DAUGHTERS of the parish, 19 have become Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration at St. Rose's Convent,

La Crosse: Sister M. Cecilia Muehlenkamp, who entered September, 1874; Sister M. Pancratis Siberz, September, 1874; Sister M. Andrea Muehlenkamp, October, 1878; Sister M. Bartholomew Siberz, January, 1880; Sister M. Matthia Schroeder, August, 1909;

Sister M. Gaudentia Schroeder, September, 1910; Sister M. Wilhelmette Hericks, 1909; Sister M. Augustine Hericks and Sister M. Walburga Hericks, 1915; Sister M. Winanda Muellenberg, 1910; Sister M. Arnold Schieffer (deceased), 1910; Sister M. Modesta Sullivan, 1916; Sister M. Maureen Sullivan, 1923;

Sister M. Loraine Schreier, 1923; Sister M. Arnoldine Schieffer, 1915; Sister M. Hugolina Weibel, 1916; Sister M. Annita Kracklauer (deceased), 1908; Sister M. Marca Brueggeman, 1926; and Sister Petrone Weibel.

Dorothy Pieper is now a candidate at St. Rose's Convent.

Another girl became a member of Our Lady Missionary Sisters, Sister Gertrude Marie Sullivan.