

THE HISTORY OF SAINT MARY OF THE LAKE CHURCH
ON THE OCCASION OF THE 117TH ANNIVERSARY
AUGUST 15, 1998
GIVEN BY
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The Feast of the Assumption is of special significance to us because 117 years ago Bishop Thomas L. Grace dedicated our church. Saint Mary of the Lake has a long and proud history. Let me tell you a little bit about our earlier parishioners.

The pioneers in most of this area north of St. Paul were of French descent. They had emigrated from French Canada. Little Canada, Vadnais Heights, Centerville, Hugo and White Bear Lake were known as French settlements. Little Canada was the parish center for all of these towns.

Sometimes visiting priests stopped and vacationed or recuperated on the shores of White Bear Lake. It was one of these priests, a Father Koop of New York, who celebrated the first mass at the village schoolhouse then located at 2nd Street and Murray Avenue in the summer of 1873. In September of 1874, a Benedictine priest, Father Othmar, who was recuperating at the Wm. F. Markoe cottage, began offering mass at the cottage. He continued his ministry until 1881. This cottage is still located at the eastern corner of Lake Avenue and Shady Lane.

Our early Catholic settlers yearned for a consecrated church and even collected \$1100 for the building of a church. They petitioned Bishop Grace who, though sympathetic, notified the 200 Catholics of White Bear Lake that they were within the boundaries of Little Canada's Saint John's parish and were still too small to separate.

At this time we were introduced to another great historical figure, Father Joseph Goiffon, a pioneer priest who lost both his right leg and left foot in the blizzard of 1860-61 along the Oxcart Trail near Pembina. He was a French missionary priest, and relatives of this great priest still reside in our parish and surrounding areas. Everyone should read or learn about this brave remarkable priest.

In 1877, Bishop Grace assigned him to minister to the Catholics of White Bear and so Father Goiffon, weather permitting, celebrated a mass every Sunday at the Markoe cottage. Then Bishop Grace instructed him to build a church in White Bear Lake. Father Goiffon took the bishop's words literally, scorned all builders' bids, summoned his loyal parishioners, and aided by such stalwarts as Joseph Auger, Zatique LeRoux, Theodore DeMars and Michael Peloquin, worked hard at building a 30' x 60' church. It must have been quite a sight to see Father Goiffon hobbling about on his false leg and hand carved

foot and crutches giving encouragement and directions-all in French. Parishioners transported fieldstones and cobblestones from the lake area. They used evergreens from the Tamarack swamp west of Goose Lake and even constructed the original altar from packing box lumber. St Mary of the Lake church was built in a few months' time and cost \$1800. The church was located at the south end of St Mary's School, directly across from Birch Lake Avenue and Bishop Grace came to dedicate the church on the 15th of August 1881.

By 1883 there were many non-French speaking members, so Father Goiffon was transferred to Centerville.

By 1885 a priest's house was built and in 1893 the original church nave was cut in two and lengthened 20'. The church became 30' x 80'. In 1897 the parishioners numbered 700 and priests were assigned for two or three year terms to St. Mary's. Our church was the largest in town and seated 360 members in one mass. Organizations such as the Catholic Order of Foresters and the Sacred Heart Society had 90 and 80 members.

But our parishioners were concerned about the proper spiritual upbringing of their children--they wanted a Catholic school. So Father Patrick J. Hart, then pastor, was able to obtain the services of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet. On the 8th of September, 1914, St. Mary's School opened its doors to one hundred students. It was a four-room school and all children walked to school except those living far away, and they were transported in horse rigs. Many of the classrooms were laced with the strong barnyard smell. Beyond the basic 3Rs, the sisters stressed spiritual and moral training, and needless to say they were in complete charge and discipline was tight.

In 1916, Father John Fahey came to stay--he stayed until 1939. All old-time parishioners remember him as the big Irish priest who loved his church, and people remembered him as being gruff and blunt. It was during his long administration that the church building showed immense wear and tear. The roof leaked, the dilapidated heating system could no longer keep the church warm. The holy water font would freeze during winter, the lighting was inadequate and the windows were without screens, so flies and bugs buzzed about--St Mary's had to be rebuilt.

At this point we are again fused with Minnesota's great past. Mrs. Mary Hill, wife of James Jerome Hill, the great pioneer railroader and their large family, lived during the summers at the Hill experimental farm called North Oaks. Mrs. Hill was a devout Catholic and she, along with her children and grandchildren, would drive up Birch Lake Avenue in their horse drawn carriage to attend Sunday mass. So it was that her three daughters (Rachel Hill Boeckmann, Gertrude Hill Galvin, and Charlotte Hill Slade) decided to honor their mother who had died in 1921 by donating the funds necessary to

build a new St. Mary's Church. It was to be a replica of the original St. Mary's located in St. Paul where their mother worshipped when in St. Paul. Father Fahey had already purchased the site where we are now located, and so the beautiful St. Mary of the Lake Church was dedicated on Sunday morning, the 27th of November 1926.

The daily operational expenses of the church, school, and convent, needed to be taken care of, and through the years the parishioners shouldered the expensive load. Parish organizations such as the Altar and Rosary Society, Men's Club, the Ushers, the Young Ladies Sodality, and others became fundraisers. August 15th became the church celebration day, and a combination bazaar and carnival was held annually. The famous baked ham dinner, chicken, roast beef and sauerkraut dinners, pancake breakfasts, bingo and ice cream socials bound our parish in fellowship, cooperation, fun and best of all, in helping to meet our church's financial obligation.

St. Mary's history is replete with wonderful priests, sisters and lay people who have guided us to where we are today. Preceding Father Pierre were 17 dedicated pastors. I have mentioned a few and would be remiss if I were not to mention Father Nicholas Finn who was our pastor from 1946 to 1968. Father Finn was a lovable Irish man of God, reflective of the old sod, charming, witty, with a business acumen who knew when to build and when to pay. Some old timers claim he was penurious and saved and saved pennies, nickels, and dollars--all for the parish building needs. By 1951 he had the old 1914 school remodeled, and in 1954 the parish rectory was constructed. Remember how he showed up at all the social gatherings, cigarette in hand, and regaled the people with his Irish stories. Recall, too, how he reminded all of us to say prayers for his soul and to have "Danny Boy" sung at his funeral or "I'll come to haunt you", he kept saying.

For old timers, as we mention Father Finn our thoughts are also on a wonderful priest, Father Bernard Reiser who assisted Father Finn from 1949 to 1964. We remember him as a dynamic priest who faithfully served St Mary's and endeared himself to all, especially the sick and elderly, with his optimistic refrain of "Wonderful, Wonderful, Wonderful."

Since Father Finn's time three excellent pastors have blessed St Mary's: Father Quintin Kennedy, Father Michael Kennedy and Father Roger Pierre. With their love of Christ and their intelligent leadership, St Mary of the Lake is now at the threshold of the millennium, confident that we will continue to heed and be guided by our Lady, and the Holy Spirit. These three priests, along with their fine assistants have been instrumental in remodeling, rebuilding, and maintaining our beautiful church, school and parish offices, and in ministering to our spiritual needs.

Our future is bright. We have grown from a small parish of 250 people to over 2,500. Today St Mary's seeks parishioners to help us fulfill our mission to be a Catholic community, centered in the Eucharist and committed to lifelong worship, education, social ministry and stewardship. Remember that our predecessors worked diligently to make St. Mary's the outstanding parish that it is.

Let us also work and help each other to prepare the way for the kingdom of heaven. * We need volunteers to work on the various boards and committees. We need helpers to continue God's work at St Mary of the Lake. Please help, please volunteer.

Finally, “may we who [are gathered together] to receive the sacrament of salvation, be led to the glory of heaven by the prayers of the Virgin Mary” ** whose name this church bears.

* *“Vatican II Connection (38).” The Faith Connection, RCL Enterprises, Thomas More Publishing, 200 E. Bethany Dr., Allen TX 75002, 9 August 1998.*

***Prayer after Communion, Feast of the Assumption.*