

VIBRANT FAITH – BEGINNING VISIONS

A History of St. Mary's - Part 1 in a 3 part series (2002)

by Don Stock, Communications Committee

My assignment was to write an article about the history of St. Mary of the Lake. Parishioner Bud Nakasone recounted the history of St. Mary's for our centennial celebration in 1981 and along with a few other sources, I will try to convey the highlights.

Officially, St. Mary of the Lake was founded in 1881. However, St. Mary's faithful began praying together in 1873 when a visiting priest from New York, Reverend J.H. Koop said Mass. The mayor of St. Paul drove out with several members of the St. Mary's (St. Paul) choir to participate in the celebration. In 1873, this was no small feat. Father Koop preached an eloquent sermon on the "Multiplication of Loaves and Fishes." The event lasted all day. It seems a fitting start to our faith community that continues to evolve. For the next eight years the "unofficial" congregation of St. Mary's continued to meet in private homes and the school. Most of the Masses were held in the Markoe Cottage, which still exists today at the corner of Lake Avenue and Shady Lane.

In the 1870s and 80s, White Bear Lake was a resort town. It was probably like the Brainerd Lakes Area except the boats were slower and the fishing was better. Masses were said by visiting and vacationing dignitaries including priests from around the country, European clergy, Bishops, Trappist monks, Jesuit Fathers, Lazarist Fathers as well as local priests. Soon, the lake area Catholics began petitioning Bishop Thomas L. Grace to establish a Catholic parish. Order of the Precious Blood Father Henneberry and Father M.E. Murphy of Stillwater worked (individually) to establish a Catholic church in White Bear Lake but both were called to other duties before the project could be built.

In 1877, the White Bear "parish" was put under the jurisdiction of Father Joseph Goiffon of St. John's Church in Little Canada. He began saying one Mass each Sunday in the Markoe Cottage. Finally, Bishop Grace directed him to build a proper church for the White Bear Lake area. Father Goiffon, unhappy with proposed costs, rejected contractor bids and began to build the church himself. The White Bear faithful stepped in alongside Father Goiffon, digging, laying the foundation, hauling cobblestones, building walls, roofing, plastering and other construction tasks. After a few short months and about \$1,800, the 30' x 60' church was "reasonably" finished. Expediency won out over plaster so Father Goiffon decorated the walls with evergreen bows from the tamarack swamp. Even though the first "official" altar was a packing crate, St. Mary's had its first proper church. Bishop Grace dedicated the church on August 15, 1881, on the Feast of the Assumption. Legend tells it was a splendid ceremony. I'm sure it lasted all day. So there it is, our humble beginnings. Initially there were 40 to 50 families, comprising about 250 Catholics in all - a church built by sweat, perseverance and involvement; a church built by a community of faith.

VIBRANT FAITH - VISIONS PAST

A History of St. Mary's - Part 2 in a 3 part series

by Don Stock, Communications Committee

Now, where were we? Let's see . . . traveling priests, visiting mayors, Father Goiffon, faithful sweat, packing crate altar, and oh yeah, parlez-vous français?

When the first church was completed in 1881, many of the White Bear area families had French roots. However, a growing population of English-speaking residents created a necessity for Masses said in English rather than Father Goiffon's principle language, French. In 1883 Fr. Goiffon was transferred to the predominantly French-Canadian settlement of Centerville. The English-speaking parishioners were hopeful for an English-speaking pastor but were quickly disappointed when Father L. Nougaret was named to the parishes of White Bear Lake and Little Canada. Fr. Nougaret had only recently arrived from France and was not conversant in English. Thus began a rapid succession of pastors, trying to find the right fit.

From 1884 to 1897, five priests had come and gone, averaging just over two years apiece.

During that time a pastoral residence was built and the church was split and stretched another 20 feet longer. In 1897, Fr. P.R. Cunningham started a five-year stint. This relative long-timer initiated what could have been aptly named Vision 1900 (but probably wasn't). During his tenure, he worked hard at improving the church since it had grown to 700 members. He fenced the church grounds, had sidewalks constructed and even added the luxury of a furnace to the worship space. The ministry of the parish was expanded with the establishment of the Catholic Order of Foresters and the Sacred Heart Society with combined memberships of about 150.

A few more quick pastoral successions lead to Father Patrick J. Hart in 1908. Fr. Hart's vision, and a continuing legacy, is the creation of our parish school. The school doors were opened on September 8, 1914 to the delight of about 100 students, well, maybe more to the delight of their parents. Fr. Hart recruited St. Joseph's Sisters of Carondelet to operate the school and instruct students. The four-room school would be considered quite rustic today but the level of learning was highly acclaimed, even by today's standards. The sisters not only stressed the 3Rs but moral and spiritual teaching was strong as well.

Reverend John Fahey, who eventually became St. Mary's longest tenured pastor, succeeded Fr. Hart in 1916. Fr. Fahey is remembered as a gruff and robust Irishman who had little tolerance for foolishness but had a deep and vibrant love for the church, the school and the children. Though a daunting presence, he was respected and admired among the parish faithful. The parish and the school grew rapidly and church activities grew as well. The Altar and Rosary Society became integral to St. Mary's church life. As the school continued to grow, it was clear that more sisters were needed to help the original nine fulfill the mission. The sisters were initially housed at the A.J. Diamond home then the Baldwin Cottage near the lakeshore. To house the growing staff of nuns,

Fr. Fahey had a three-story convent constructed. It was built of brick with a red tiled roof and included a community room, parlor, music rooms, kitchen, dining room, chapel, sacristy and, of course, bedrooms. At the time, it was one of the nicest convents in the diocese.

By the early 1920s, the \$1,800 church was showing its age.

The old coal-fired furnace was so inadequate that the holy water fonts often froze in the winter and Masses were sometimes held in the school. Summer rains leaked through the roof and screenless windows allowed all manner of bugs and varmints to join in celebrations. It was time to envision a new church. Here, St. Mary's history is tied to another prominent figure in American history, James J. Hill. The Hill family spent many summers on their experimental spread - North Oaks Farm. Mary Theresa Hill faithfully brought her children and grandchildren by horse drawn carriage up Birch Lake Avenue to Sunday Mass. It was Mrs. Hill's daughters that bestowed upon St. Mary's parish one of the greatest gifts imaginable. Rachel Hill Boeckmann, Gertrude Hill Galvin, and Charlotte Hill Slade decided to build a new St. Mary of the Lake Church in memory of their mother. The women made it a personal project that they patterned after the "original" St. Mary's in lower St. Paul. Monsignor Lois Caillet, a spiritual father to the Hill women, had been the pastor there for a number of years and was involved in it's design.

Fr. Fahey secured the Fourth and Bald Eagle Avenue property for the new church from Mr. and Mrs. Fred Campbell.

The Campbell home was used as the rectory until 1954 when it was moved to a location on Third Street. Construction progressed relatively smoothly and was ready for use before the end of 1926. The beautiful grey limestone church and annexed chapel was a close copy to the St. Paul church, which was unfortunately destroyed in a 1930 fire. The interior décor included paintings, candlesticks, statues, crucifixes, and baldachin that were carefully selected by the sisters and presented as gift to the people of St. Mary of the Lake. On November 27, 1926, the Rt. Rev. James Byrne, assisted by Rev. James Byrnes and Rev. William Busch of the St. Paul Seminary, presided over a beautiful dedication ceremony.

So, now we are up to the foundation of our current worship space. A church, not only built on dedication and perseverance, but benevolence as well. *Note: Part 3 of this history not available.*