

A HISTORY OF ST. MARY OF THE LAKE

For 125 years, St. Mary of the Lake has served the White Bear Lake area. Our parish has evolved from its humble beginnings and today looks forward to a vibrant future. The text below is adapted from parishioner Edwin (Bud) Nakasone's oral history, first written on the occasion of St. Mary's 100th anniversary, with some additions for more recent events.

In 1877, Bishop Thomas Grace, at the urging of 200 French Canadian settlers, assigned Father Joseph Goiffon, a pioneer priest who had lost both his right leg and left foot, to minister to the Catholics of White Bear Lake. Father Goiffon, weather permitting, celebrated Mass every Sunday at William Markoe's cottage. When Bishop Grace instructed him to build a church, Father Goiffon took the bishop's words literally. He scorned all builders' bids, and summoned his loyal parishioners to build a 30' x 60' church. 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 \$1,800. The original church was located at the south end of the 1914 portion of the Parish Life Center campus and was dedicated by Bishop Grace on August 15, 1881.

To better serve its growing population, the church nave was cut in two in 1893 and lengthened by 20'. By 1897 more than 700 parishioners gathered weekly. St. Mary of the Lake church was the largest in town, seating up to 360 members.

Parishioners desired proper spiritual upbringing for their children and wanted a Catholic school. Father Patrick Hart obtained the services of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet. On September 8, 1914, St. Mary of the Lake School opened its doors to two hundred students. Classes were held in the eight-room two-story school and most children walked to school except those living far away, who were transported in horse rigs.

Mrs. Mary Hill, wife of James Jerome Hill, the great pioneer railroader, spent the summers with her large family at the Hill experimental farm, North Oaks. Mrs. Hill, her children and grandchildren, would drive their horse-drawn carriage to attend Mass at St. Mary of the Lake each Sunday. After her death in 1921, her three daughters (Rachel Hill Boeckmann, Gertrude Hill Galvin, and Charlotte Hill Slade) decided to honor their mother by donating the funds necessary to build a new church. It was to be a replica of the church their mother worshipped at in St. Paul, also named St. Mary's. The beautiful, new St. Mary of the Lake Church was dedicated on Sunday morning, November 27, 1926.

Over the years, our growing community has needed more space; construction projects included the convent (1925), school addition (1951), rectory (1954), and parish center addition (1969). A major renovation of the church building was completed in 1988 changing the orientation of the worship space and adding much needed seating for our growing parish. This project respected the beautiful exterior of the church, while providing interior space for the future.

In the late 1990's it became clear that our parish center and school were not able to serve the growing needs of parishioners. Additional space was needed for the many ministries, faith formation programs, and community events the parish offers, as well as for our growing school community. A plan was developed to double the available space for parishioner children in our school, add a middle school, and offer more age-appropriate facilities for faith formation and adult enrichment. In addition, the new space allowed for larger parish gatherings – befitting our growing community and improving access for all.

The building phase of the project included demolition of the former convent and gym/cafeteria, the addition of a new gym, community room, full-service kitchen, classroom wing, meeting rooms and elevator, as well as the renovation of the 1914, 1951, and 1969 sections of the building. Years of visioning, planning, and building culminated in a dedication Mass in March of 2005 held in the newly named Parish Life Center and celebrated by Bishop Richard Pates, Father Rodger Bauman and Father Roger Pierre. The beautiful new facility is architecturally linked to the church through several design elements and honors our community with a color palette taken from White Bear Lake itself.

We have grown from a small parish of 250 people to over 2,700 households. Today, as in the past, St. Mary's parishioners gratefully fulfill our mission to be a Catholic community, centered in the Eucharist and committed to lifelong worship, faith formation and education, social ministry and justice, and discipleship.