



St. Joseph's Church of Gnesen

After the conclusion of the War between the States the great natural wealth of the North-west became known not only in the United States, but in many of the European countries. Many of the people of Europe seeking freedom from oppression and a new way of life, were attracted by what they had heard migrated in large numbers to this country. Many found desirable places to live and work in the eastern states, but many others hearing of the opportunities of the upper Midwest — the logging and lumber industries springing out of the forests, the wealth of ore in what is now the Iron Range and the fertile soil for farmlands made their way to northeastern Minnesota.

In the late 1860's a number of Polish immigrants made their way to the area of Duhith. From an interview given by Joseph Lepak (born 1881) the son of Martin Lepak and Josephine Knitter, to Arthur Roberts of the St. Louis County Historical Society, it is learned that his parents with other immigrants settled in 1869 in an area north of the city of Duhith. Most of these people came, from the vicinity of Gneisnan in Prussia at that time controlled by the Kulturkampf of Bismarck. To keep alive in their minds their old homes, the settlers called the newly founded settlement Gnesen.

Homesteading made it possible for the immigrants to acquire land for homes and farms, but before the land could produce the people were faced with the herculean task of clearing of timber and brush. At that time the railroad was pushing its way through to haul the logs and ore to mill and port, and many of the men in order to provide them and, their families with the means of livelihood until the land could be made productive took jobs on the railroad laying the right of way.

With all the difficulties confronting them, these hardy men and women never lost the culture they had brought with them from their loved land of Poland. Outstanding was the gift of their Catholic faith which they cherished so dearly. Even before their lands were cleared and their homes built they banded together to form a parish and to build a church in which they could worship the God as they had been taught.

In 1874, only eighteen years after the foundation of Duluth it was decided that a church be erected. At that time there was only one Catholic Church in the area, the Church of the

Sacred Heart in Duluth, but because of the difficulties of distance and transportation, it was not possible for them to attend Mass there.

Although at that time they had no church, no land for a church and no priest to conduct their services, they would meet on Sunday in various homes, conduct religious instructions for the children, pray together and sing hymns they had learned at home.

The question of a site for the church was soon solved. Mr. Martin Lepak donated two acres of his homestead land for this purpose. This land was located on the northeast corner of what is now Emerson and Church Roads, fronting on Church Road. The parishioners immediately began to prepare for the building of the church. All the work was voluntary and work could be done only when their work in building their own homes and looking after their own land and jobs would permit it.

The first church was built on the corner of Emerson and Church Roads. It was built of logs which had to be cut and hauled to the site. Later the logs were covered with wooden siding. After long months of hard work and sacrifice the church was completed, and the people for the first time since leaving their fatherland had their own church in which to worship God. Though it was but a humble log building standing in the midst of the forest land, in the eyes of the people of Gnesen no European cathedral was more grand or beautiful. In gratitude for his powerful intercession in making this house of worship a reality, the people gave to their church the name of the great Spouse of Our Lady and Foster Father of her Son, Saint Joseph.

Finding a priest to minister to the spiritual needs of the new parish posed a much more difficult problem. There were few priests in the area, and these priests were already overburdened. Distances were great and the means of transportation very primitive. The people sent a petition to Gnesno-Poznan, the Most Reverend Miecislaus Ledochowski, who had been their Ordinary at home, begging him to send a priest to minister to them. At that time however the Kulturkampf and its oppressive laws were persecuting the Polish people and the Archbishop himself had been arrested and imprisoned, and the plea of the people of Gnesen was to no avail.

The people then made a petition to Bishop Rupert Seidenbusch, of St. John's Benedictine Abbey, who in 1874 had been appointed Vicar Apostolic of Northern Minnesota. The Bishop promised he would do what he could, and he instructed Father J. B. Jeny, a missionary who travelled to the various localities in the area, to include the church in Gnesen in his itinerary.

Although because of the distance and the hardships of the trails, Father Jeny was able to visit the parish and minister to the people only once or twice a year, the people were happy to have Mass in their church and to receive the sacraments. Once Father Jeny had begun his infrequent visits to Gnesen, other itinerant missionaries learning the church had been built stopped when they passed through the area and ministered to the people. Among the latter missionaries was the famed missionary to the Indians, Monsignor Buh.

When His Holiness, Pope Leo XIII established the Diocese of Duluth in 1889 more priests were available in the area, and their ministrations to the Gnesen parish became more frequent. Mass was offered at least once a month with opportunities to receive the Sacraments afforded on these occasions.

When the church was built the next concern of the people was the establishment of a parish cemetery so that those who had lived, labored and worshipped together in life, might sleep together in death in the sight of the church they loved so well. That portion of the land immediately north of the church was set aside for use as St. Joseph's Cemetery. In this cemetery are to be found the graves of the pioneer founders of the parish. The first recorded burial in the cemetery was that of Maria Sobczyk, who went to her reward on March 20, 1895 at the age of seventy.

In the years that passed after the building of the church a considerable growth was noted in the parish. New arrivals came from the old country and many young people blessed the families of the parishioners. In 1895 it was decided that the church was too small for the congregation and thought was given to the building of a newer and larger church. The site chosen for the new building was located in about the center of the church property, north of the cemetery and facing Church Road.

This building too was a frame structure. The heavy timbers used were cut in a saw mill on Rice Lake Road and hauled to the site by the parishioners. The work of construction was done by parishioners who were versed in carpentry and by a few hired carpenters from Duluth. The church was begun in 1896, but was almost four years in the building. The parish would build only as much as they could pay for at the time, and then work was halted until further funds were at hand. When the building was completed it had no debt upon it.

In July 1900 the new church and the adjoining cemetery was blessed by the Most Reverend James McGolrick, Bishop of Duluth. The old, original church was no longer used after the completion of the new building. It stood for a few years after which it was razed, and the ground upon which it had stood became part of the cemetery.

After the opening of the new church, religious services were held with greater regularity than in the past. New parishes and Catholic institutions were being built in Duluth. No resident pastor was assigned to Gnesen, but priests serving and residing in the city were designated to care for the spiritual needs of the people of St. Joseph's. Each priest during his period of administration with the cooperation of the parishioners contributed greatly to the spiritual and material welfare of the parish.

Because so many priests living in different places served St. Joseph's, the parish records of baptisms, weddings and other vital statistics were not too complete. Although a book of parish records was kept, many of the priests instead of entering the records in the book at St. Joseph's would enter them in the records of the parish in which he resided. The parish records of St. Joseph's were kept in the home of Mr. Michael Musolf, the parish secretary. A devastating fire destroyed Mr. Musolf's home, together with all the contents, including the

parish records. The exact date of the fire is not known but it is believed to have occurred between 1910 and 1915.

Father Stanley Libold became pastor of St. Joseph's in 1930 and remained as pastor until 1940. Although he maintained residence at Sacred Heart Cathedral in Duluth, he spent much time in Gnesen. A gifted artisan, Father Libold did much by his own handiwork to enhance the church and cemetery. He built and installed the side altars in the church and he erected the beautiful grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes. Electricity was not yet available in the Gnesen area, so Father Libold installed a gasoline powered generator which supplied electric power to the church. Possibly one of the greatest contributions he made during his pastorate, was his attempt to restore as best he could the records destroyed in the Musolf fire. By seeking affidavits, interviewing those who had been baptized before the fire, their parents and sponsors, he was able to supply 179 baptismal records which otherwise would have been lost covering a span of years from 1891 to 1930.

The parish had always looked forward to the day when they would have a resident pastor, and the subject of building a rectory had long been discussed. Finally a decision to build a rectory on land north of the church was made during the pastorate of Father Myron Currie but the actual construction was earned on during the pastorate of his successor, Father Thomas Stack. The new rectory was dedicated on Sunday June 8, 1952. Father Stack took up residence at that time and thus became the first resident pastor of St. Joseph's.

In 1968 due to a shortage of priests in the Diocese, a resident pastor could no longer be maintained in Gnesen and the parish was placed under the jurisdiction of the pastor of St. Benedict's Church in Kenwood. This situation maintained until September 1970 when Bishop Paul F. Anderson of Duluth appointed the Rev. Leonard M. Wren. OFM Conv, a Conventual Franciscan as pastor. Father Leonard took up residence in the Gnesen rectory and assumed the duties of pastor on October 3, 1970.

Thus after a century of struggle, sacrifice and heroic efforts on the part of the pioneer parishioners, St. Joseph's finds itself today a small, but vigorous rural parish, and looks forward eagerly to the challenge of its second hundred years of service to God and the people of God.

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