



Holy Cross Parish, North Praire

Golden Jubilee Holy Cross Parish 1876-1926,
North Praire, MN, p. 8-19. CAP at Orchard Lake.

PIONEER DAYS "GERMAN SETTLEMENT"

The name North Prairie originally applied to a small strip of prairie land along the western bank of the Mississippi about four miles Southeast of what is now known as North Prairie. There, in the Northeast corner of Stearns county, on the homestead of Wm. McNeal, a post office was established in the early sixties, and Mr. McNeal, who also acted as its first postmaster, chose for it the name North Prairie, apparently in harmony with a custom prevailing in those days of naming such newly created outposts of civilization "Prairies" most probably because such a stretch of open prairieland offered a comparatively easy chance for settlement in the midst of an almost impenetrable .virgin forest.

When this post office later on was moved to what is now called North Prairie, the name went with it, thus obliterating the previous name of "German Settlement."

This German Settlement dates its beginning back to about 1865. A few farmers of German nationality had already settled there before this time, but it was in 1865 that the place began to grow in a way which held out Father Pierz some promise for the future.

In those early days Father Pierz, who had his headquarters at Crow Wing, surprised the early settlers occasionally when touring the country in search of stray souls. On such occasions he would say Mass in one of their log cabins, and administer to them the Sacraments of Penance and Holy Eucharist, as well as Baptism and Holy Wedlock whenever an opportunity offered itself.

He was faithfully seconded by Father James Trobec, who later on became Bishop of St. Cloud. Father Trobec, just recently ordained, was acting as assistant to Father Buh, Pastor of Belle Prairie, the oldest parish in the present diocese of St. Cloud. It was his special duty to attend to the Catholics in the surrounding territory. In this capacity he visited, in 1865 and 1866, the people at what is now Pierz, Royalton, Buckman, North Prairie, St. Stephen and Rice, everywhere laying the foundation for coming developments.

By 1866, the number of families in German Settlement had increased to about twenty, and it was in order now to consider the erection of a church building. A little quarrel about the location, not at all unusual in such cases, was definitely settled when Jacob Tramer offered forty acres of land for the nominal consideration of \$50.00, thus outdistancing in generosity all competitors. This land was deeded over to Bishop Grace of St. Paul, within whose jurisdiction North Prairie then belonged, on April 18, 1866. Of this event we celebrate today the Diamond Jubilee, since it happened just sixty years ago.

The necessary property having thus been acquired, work could start at once. First came the clearing of the ground and the hewing of logs, all of which took about two years, since the settlers did all the work themselves and in their spare time. And plenty of work there was, and little spare time indeed for those sturdy pioneers, living in the midst of a dense forest. But finally, in 1868, everything was ready for the construction of the new church. A humble structure had been planned, with a floor space of about 18 by 24 feet, and just high enough inside to allow a fair sized man to stand erect without touching the ceiling with his head. A humble house of God indeed. And yet it took two years more before all was done, including the home made pews and altar.

The building was erected according to the plans and specifications left with the settlers by Father Pierz. James Tramer and John Puiggraff had charge of the carpenter work. They were loyally assisted by John, Joseph and Matt Petzold, Peter Schmitt, Matt and Nick Klein, Joseph Thiers, Philip Simon, Jacob Weibel, Martin and Xavier Kiefter, and possibly a few others. Henry Shaw of St. Paul, who had a short while ago joined German Settlement, built the altar, but returned shortly afterwards to St. Paul. Much was donated in work and material, and the entire outlay in cash money for the construction and furniture of the church amounted, according to the testimony of Bishop Trobec, to exactly \$74.00.

A few of the settlers were still sulking, because their favorite site had not been selected for the new church; but by the time Father Pierz came to bless the church, in 1869, everything was working harmoniously and according to schedule.

From 1870 to 1872, Father Buh from Belle Prairie, and Father Tomazin who had succeeded Father Pierz at Crow Wing when the latter was transferred to the Parish at Pierz in 1871, said Mass in the new church alternately, from time to time; but a regular order of services was not arranged for until after the Mission of 1872

This Mission marks a turning point in the history of North Prairie, Msgr. then still called German Settlement. It was given by Father F. X. Weniger, S. J., and to judge from the results following in its wake, it must have aroused a true Christian spirit within the hearts of the early settlers. Acting upon the prayer of the people, the missionary set about to make arrangements for the future, according to which Father Tomazin was to attend Holy Cross Church regularly, as far as possible, once a month.

This regular attendance encouraged the people to such a degree that an addition to the church had to be built within a year. This addition was begun and finished in 1873. In size it was an exact counterpart of the log church to which it was attached, and the building thus doubled in floor space, measured now 18 by 48 feet. The new half of the building showed the progress of the times; for it was built not of logs, but of regular dimension lumber, even though the ceiling and walls, as well as the floor, consisted of unmatched, common boards .

Whilst this building activity was going on, the post office was moved from the McNeal Farm to Andrew Meyer's store at German Settlement, and from now on the name German Settlement disappears in favor of the well-known name North Prairie.

It was about this time, after the conclusion of the Franco-German war of 1870-71, that the first immigrants of Polish nationality arrived at North Prairie and settled within the boundaries of the parish. And this immigration continued for several years, until the Polish element by far outnumbered any other nationality, or even all others combined.

North Prairie — Holy Cross Parish

The creation of the new Vicariate Apostolic of Northern Minnesota, which took place in 1875, with Rt. Rev. Bishop Ruppert Seidenbusch, as first Vicar Apostolic, gave new impetus to the cause of Catholicity in the northern half of the state, and also affected the mission at North Prairie. Father Joseph Vill, O. S. B., had been attending Holy Cross Church from St. John's more or less regularly every other Sunday for over a year, when Bishop Seidenbusch decided to give North Prairie a resident Pastor in the person of the newly ordained Father Edward J. Nagl. Father Nagl arrived in 1876, on or about the tenth day of October, and took his residence, in absence of a parish house, in a "suite of rooms" over Geissel's store.

His first work was the erection of a priest's residence, which was built to the East of the old church. It was finished in 1878, and continued in use as residence for the Pastor seventeen years, when it was turned over to the Sisters of St. Benedict.

The next step forward, naturally, was the building of a new church, to take the place of the old log church, which had become entirely inadequate to the needs of the Parish. Everybody was anxious to see the work started; but Fr. Nagl had made up his mind not to begin with the building until he had a certain amount of money on hand, so that the debt remaining would not mean too much of a burden upon the young Parish, whose members were all more or less poor beginners. Money was promised and paid in slowly, and after about two years of work in this direction, Father Nagl was ready to draw the plans and purchase the lumber. A brick veneer structure was decided on, of gothic design, and about 40 by 120 feet in size. The lumber was bought from Fifield's Mill, near Morrill, at a very reasonable figure, and the year 1882 was largely spent in hauling material, which the farmers did themselves, and getting things ready for the erection of the building proper. By the end of 1883 the woodwork was finished, and the interior had been made ready for divine service. But the brick work still had to wait, since not enough money was on hand, and not until 1887 was the church finished in every detail.

But now the people of North Prairie had a church building to be proud of, and later additions in interior decoration and splendid new furnishings, made Holy Cross church one of the finest in the Diocese.

The old church was now free to serve other purposes. It had been used for a while as both church and school, and later on was given over to school purposes exclusively. Fr. Nagl now decided to have a Sisters' school. He, therefore, invited the Sisters of St. Benedict to come to North Prairie. They accepted willingly, and courageously braved the difficulties and inconveniences of the situation. They moved into the old church, in 1888, and lived and taught there in the old days; and Msgr. Nagl more than once in later years expressed his admiration for their work, their devotion to duty and their true spirit of sacrifice.

The continued arrival of new settlers within the large territory of North Prairie suggested the erection of other churches in such localities which might, in the course of time, become parish centers. Already in the early eighties Father Nagl had selected Ledoux, in the township of Swan River, as one of such possible future centers; he built a log church there, and attended the place until 1886, when Swan River became independent of North Prairie.

Father Nagl now was free to concentrate his attention upon another locality, and he chose Elmdale

for this purpose. Here he built the Church of St. Edward's, a frame building which was only recently replaced by a magnificent brick structure, and attended the new mission on week days as long as he remained Pastor of Holy Cross Church.

In the first days of August, 1893, Father Nagl decided to take a well-earned vacation. He went on a month's visit to Wisconsin, and Rev. A. J. Gospodar, who had a short while ago been ordained by Bishop Zardetti, was sent to North Prairie to take his place. He arrived there on August 8, and set about at once to carry out the instructions left for him by the Pastor before his departure. He was to prepare a class of children and young people for confirmation, so as to have them ready for the Patron feast of the Parish. The class was ready by September 14, the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, and 233 young people were confirmed on that day by Bishop Zardetti.

The Pastor, Father Nagl, had returned a few days before the arrival of the Rt. Rev. Bishop; and during his stay at North Prairie, Bishop Zardetti offered him the Parish of St. Joseph at Pierz. Father Nagl accepted the offer, and on the same day Father Gospodar received his appointment as Pastor of North Prairie.

Entering upon his new duties with the enterprising zeal of youth, Father Gospodar recognized at once the need of a new parish house, mainly in order to vacate the old one in favor of the hard working Sisters of St. Benedict, who were still housed in the inconvenient old log church.

The new parochial residence, a frame structure veneered with brick, was finished in 1895 and represented, at the time, a value of about \$5,000.00, Joseph Schellinger of St. Cloud had charge of the work as contractor, and finished his task with his well-known ability and conscientious thoroughness to the satisfaction of all concerned. Even to this very day, the residence stands as a living testimonial to the good workmanship of the builder, and a fitting monument to the zeal and energy of the Pastor, Father Gospodar.

The old Parish house, built by Father Nagl 17 years before, and situated West of the new church, was given over to the Sisters; it was still in excellent condition, and conveniently located near school and church. Unfortunately, both the first Parish Church and the Sisters' residence have since been taken down, thus removing from the premises of Holy Cross Church two landmarks of real historic interest.

In 1894, the mission church at Elmdale had been placed under the jurisdiction of the pastor of Flensburg, thus relieving North Prairie of the responsibility for one of its wards. And in 1897 a church was built in Royalton, indicating the trend of coming developments. Many of the people around Royalton, however, still continued their affiliation with North Prairie, or went to church there, whenever there were no services at Royalton.

But in spite of these real and threatening dismemberments, the mother instinct of the old parish was still very vigorous, and when Bishop Trobec, in 1901, asked Father Gospodar to take charge of the organization of a Polish parish in St. Cloud, both Pastor and people of North Prairie took an active interest in the matter. As soon as everything was in readiness for the erection of the new church, 'St. John Kantius', the people of North Prairie were asked to help, and they showed themselves very willing. They went down to St. Cloud with their teams, and hauled stones from the quarries there for the foundation of the church, and also contributed liberally in a financial way.

Bishop Trobec watched the work being done with joyful enthusiasm, and showed his appreciation by repeatedly taking Father Gospodar's place on Sundays, in order to enable him to be in St. Cloud

in the interests of the new church and parish, without inconveniencing in the least the good parishioners of North Prairie.

In the meanwhile, the dismembering of the old Parish went on apace, in harmony with the needs of the ever increasing population of its territory. Royalton, in combination with Elmdale, had been maintaining a Pastor attending to both places for quite a few years, when in 1905 Rev. Paul Kuich was appointed as first resident Pastor in charge of Royalton alone. His indefatigable work there, as well as the true parochial solicitude of his successor, Msgr. August Plachta, slowly convinced the people of the surrounding territory that Royalton was a real parish, and that the interests of the people themselves demanded an abandonment of all sentimental considerations which still made them cling faithfully to their old Mother Parish, Holy Cross of North Prairie.

And also at Bowlus which, not quite four miles to the Northwest of North Prairie, owed its existence to the newly built branch of the Soo Line, a desire for a parish independent of the old mother church began to make itself felt about this time. In 1909, preparations were made there for the erection of a new church, and it was only a question of time, when the old mother church would be curtailed in a way which would soon find it engaged in a real struggle for its own continued existence.

But the eyes of the people of North Prairie were closed to the danger threatening the very life of their Parish. For an event was taking place there which excluded even the possibility of a second thought. The first son of the Parish to be raised to the dignity of the Priesthood, was to be ordained in the Parish Church by Bishop Trobec.

This outstanding event in the history of North Prairie took place on February 2, when Rev. Joseph C. Janski, son of Kasper and Mary Janski of North Prairie, was ordained in Holy Cross Church; the entire Parish rejoiced; many of her daughters had joined different convents, thus retreating from the world and dedicating their lives exclusively to the work of God; but here was the first of her sons, stepping into the footprints of the Savior Himself, and becoming endowed with His power in the great Sacrament of Holy Orders.

No wonder that the people of North Prairie desired to retain Father Janski in their midst. Father Belzowski had just died at Swan River; and as the Parish of North Prairie had, by means of many previous divisions and coming threatening disruptions, been reduced in size and importance, Father Gospodar decided to accept an appointment as Pastor of Swan River, one of the daughter parishes of North Prairie, but now at least twice as large and important as its mother parish. Father Gospodar labored in Swan River until 1923, thus giving thirty years of his life to the cause of religion within the boundaries of the original territory of North Prairie.

Father Janski took charge of North Prairie on December 3, 1909. He naturally felt a more than usual interest in Holy Cross Church, the church where he had been baptized, made his first Holy Communion, was confirmed, and finally even raised to the dignity of the Priesthood. And in harmony with this special interest which he felt, he went to work with a will, crowding into the short space of twenty months an amount of substantial improvements which almost staggers the imagination.

He put an iron Tence around the Cemetery, together with a decorated iron arch over the entrance to the graveyard, and placed a Crucifixion group, of monumental proportions and resting upon a base of solid concrete, in the center of the Cemetery. The interior of the church was tastefully decorated, and the exterior fitted with a new roof. Father Janski installed a light plant in the Parish

house, and put in the necessary fixtures. A hot water heating plant with the necessary connections and radiators was installed in the house under his direction, and the interior of the house was beautifully decorated.

And while all these improvements were being made at North Prairie, Father Janski still found time to help in the organization of the new parish at Bowlus. Here a church had been built in 1909, and was dedicated on May 8, 1910. From that day on, Fr. Janski attended the new parish regularly, having Mass both at North Prairie and Bowlus every Sunday until the parish was ready to receive its own pastor in October, 1910.

Father Janski was succeeded as Pastor of North Prairie by Rev. Sigismond Suszczynski, who arrived on August 16, 1911. The many improvements made during the administration of his predecessor permitted him to concentrate his activity almost exclusively upon the spiritual up building and development of his flock. Faithfully he carried on and his unselfish zeal is still gratefully remembered by his former parishioners at North Prairie.

During the administration of Father Suszczynski, an event occurred which it is painful to record and difficult to fathom. The Sisters' school at North Prairie had always been a district school, and the Sisters were engaged by the schoolboard in regular routine from year to year. Somehow or other it came to pass that the board neglected to renew the contract with the Sisters for the term of 1915-16, but instead engaged lay teachers to take their places. Thus it happened that with the end of the school term in 1915 the work of the Sisters in the school at North Prairie came to an end, and this is, without even the possibility of contradiction, the greatest calamity and saddest misfortune which ever befell the Parish of North Prairie.

For 28 years, the Sisters of St. Benedict had labored here faithfully, unselfishly. They had borne cheerfully the hardships of pioneer days. Practically the entire younger generation of North Prairie had been reared under their solicitous care and faithful guidance, and even today, more than eleven years after their departure, the effect of their noble work remains noticeable to a marked degree, and there are not many people living in North Prairie today, who do not bewail their absence and pray for their speedy return. In the name of the Parish of North Prairie we herewith give expression to our grateful admiration for the noble Sisters of the order of St. Benedict.

Father Suszczynski was succeeded in June, 1916, by Rev. John Kromolicki. The new Pastor went to work with enthusiasm and set about at once to repair and improve. Under his direction the Parish house was stuccoed, and a back porch built onto the kitchen and dining room. Father Kromolicki was instrumental in getting electric service for North Prairie from Little Falls, thus opening the way for the coming electrification of farm life.

Unfortunately for North Prairie, the young Pastor, during the days of the World War, was called upon to serve his country first as lecturer here at home, and finally as chaplain of the Polish Army in France. During his absence, the Parish was attended from St. Cloud and Bowlus, Father Janski once more lending a helping hand in the days of need.

After his return from abroad, Father Kromolicki set about to realize his long cherished plans of redecorating the interior of the Church. But even as the work was going on, a most disastrous fire, on Nov. 9, 1921, laid low the pride of North Prairie, the Church built by Father Nagl of happy memory, and enriched from year to year by the liberal donations of the people. Much was saved of the statuary and furnishings of the Church, but the structure itself was a total loss.

There was only one thing left to do: Rebuild! And both Father Kromolicki and his people went to work at once with courage and determination, although with a heavy heart.

The first months of 1922 were largely spent in deciding upon plans for the rebuilding of the Church. Some members of the Parish were in favor of just building a basement, whilst others wanted to build the complete church at once. The latter plan prevailed in the end, and Mr. Victor Cordelia of Minneapolis was engaged as Architect to draw up the plans and specifications. It was the wish of the people that the new church, in general contour at least and interior arrangement, should resemble as much as possible the one destroyed by fire. This was done, but a considerable change was made at the same time by following the Romanesque style of architecture rather than the gothic of the former building.

Whilst all this preparatory work was being done, Father Kromolicki resigned from parish work, in order to accept a position as professor of a Polish National College in Pennsylvania. When this became known, a delegation from North Prairie waited on Rt. Rev. Joseph F. Busch, D. D., Bishop of the Diocese of St. Cloud, and asked him to appoint Msgr. August Plachta, Pastor of Royalton, who had just successfully completed the new church at Fimdale, in charge of the work at North Prairie.

Msgr. Plachta consented to assume this additional responsibility, and went to work at once. Plans for a complete church of 42 by 110 feet, as drawn up by the architect, Mr. Cordelia, were adopted. The general contract, after a thorough consideration of all the bids, was awarded to Mr. Joseph Schellinger of St. Cloud, who was already favorably known at North Prairie as the builder of the parish house.

The building of the new church was speeded as much as possible in harmony with first class workmanship. Services were being conducted, in good weather, on the front porch of the parish house, the congregation gathering around it in the open; and in bad weather in the small winter chapel in the basement of the house. That this temporary arrangement had its inconveniences, especially in consideration of the rapid approach of Winter, is sufficiently evident.

Msgr. Plachta not being able, unaided, to do justice to his obligations in both parishes, was ably assisted by Rev. Francis First, now Pastor of Duelm, and later on by Rev. Peter Lauer, who has since made an enviable reputation for himself by organizing a parish at Swanville and building a beautiful church there at a remarkably low cost.

By the middle of August, the work had advanced to such an extent, that everything was ready for the laying of the corner stone. This solemn ceremony was performed by the Bishop of the Diocese, Rt. Rev. Joseph F. Busch, D. D., who was assisted by Msgr. Plachta and a large number of Prelates and Priests from all parts of Minnesota.

On Sept. 1, 1922, Rev. H. C. Frommen, the present pastor, until then in St. Joseph's Church at Morril, Minn., was called by Rt. Rev. Bishop Busch to assist Msgr. Plachta both at Royalton and North Prairie. On Dec. 14 of the same year, he moved into the parish house of Holy Cross Church, and took charge of the parish work, whilst Msgr. Plachta came over, off and on, about every second Sunday and frequently during the week as well, to complete the work he had begun, the erection of the new church.

The heating plant was then just being installed, an OE Vapor Vacuum system calling for an outlay of \$2,000.00. As soon as this was finished, the plasterers began their work, the church being heated night and day.

Christmas, 1922, was celebrated in the basement of the new church; and the church basement, from that day on, served as the place of worship, until it was possible to move into the church proper.

In the Spring of 1923 the pews arrived. They were furnished by the American Seating Company, and the handsome price of \$2,375.00 which was paid for them, may give an idea of their excellent quality in material and workmanship.

Shortly afterwards, the stained glass windows, supplied by Witte Bros, of Minneapolis, and donated by individual members of the parish were installed at a cost of \$2,400.00, and on July 22 the solemn blessing of the Bells took place, Rt. Rev. Msgr. August Plachta officiating. These bells, two of them, were cast and attuned by the Meneely Bell Company of Troy, N. Y., and weigh 800 and 400 pounds, respectively. The heavier one is in the key of B flat, and the lighter one in D. The purchase price was \$1,620, a wonderful value indeed.

At about the same time, the Altars, Stations and Statues arrived from the St. Paul Statuary Company, a value of \$2,500.00, all in all, and when they were put in place, the interior decoration of the church was complete. So the erection of the new church building had become an accomplished fact which was joyously welcomed by everybody.