

History of the Early Church in the Fox Valley

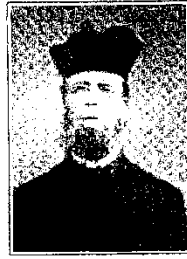
OUR EARLY FATHERS



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“In the Beginning...

With these words the inspired John opens his gospel, wherein he tells the wondrous story of the birth and life and labors of the Son of God among men. It is fitting that they should serve also as the opening words of this modest attempt to recount the inception and extension of those selfsame labors in our midst. For the history of the founding of Oshkosh congregations is identified with the establishment of the Church, Christ's Mystical Body, in this community.

Noble beginnings are interesting. They are the seed of history. The secret of present greatness lies hidden in the distant past. On the occasion of the centennial celebration of a parish it is well for us to embark on a spiritual pilgrimage through the intervening years to the shrine of its origin; to retrace the names of its charter members which the years have well nigh effaced; to delve into the spirit of their times; to note the zeal with which their apostolic leaders scattered the fruitful seed, and the receptive hearts in which that seed was sown.

We should not find it difficult to take a retrospective view of those early beginnings. Our task has been simplified by the valuable contributions on the part of able scholars, both secular and religious, who have found in Winnebago County and in the Fox River Valley rich fields for historical research. Their published works provide us with an accurate and detailed account of the conditions that prevailed in the middle of the nineteenth century. Oshkosh is represented as an unincorporated village numbering approximately one thousand inhabitants. However, with the tide of immigration at its peak, the little settlement occupying the site where Lake Winnebago receives the waters of the Fox River enjoyed certain material advantages which soon attracted the favorable attention of more than one member of the passing human caravan, and induced them to take up permanent residence there. A gristmill had been built to supply the most essential needs of the community. A sawmill furnished gainful employment, as did its sash, shingle and furniture factory. The strategic location of the village

on a principal water route running through the very heart of the New World served, in a measure, to dispel the feeling of loneliness, of isolation, which oppressed so many who had sought to carve a livelihood out of the wilderness.

All overland roads at that time were mere Indian trails through primeval forests and across sandy tracts. The need for adequate transportation facilities was dire, being only partially solved by the building of plank roads. Indeed, although the small steamers, *Manchester* and *Peytona*, busily plied the waters of Lake Winnebago and its tributary streams, it was not until the year 1856 that the first steamboat, the *Aquilla* churned her way through the entire watercourse between the Mississippi River and Green Bay, while the first through passenger train did not reach Oshkosh until 1859.

Here in this little clearing, where the forest still pressed hard upon the recently erected cabins, dwelt a band of sturdy pioneers. Miles beyond the clearing others struggled with the oak, the maple and the hickory to lay bare the soil for the plow. All were strangers in a strange land. They were forced to toil from dawn to dusk to eke out a bare existence for themselves and their families. America was truly a land of golden opportunity, but the gaining of her temporal blessings was conditioned upon a man's readiness to brave dangers, to endure hardships and to toil unceasingly.

Nor can we ignore the other pioneers who, one hundred and fifty years before, had blazed the first trails by water and land through this frontier territory. Among these were the Heralds of the Cross. The record of their self-sacrificing labors in the seventeenth century fills one of the most glorious pages in the annals of our country. With justifiable pride we recall that the present site of Oshkosh was hallowed by the presence of many of these early missionaries. A Marquette paused here while on his historic expedition; a Dablon and an Allouez, and a succession of intrepid blackrobes, had ministered to the natives who dwelt in this region. Little wonder, then, that when, a century and a half later, the white man came here to establish a permanent home, he found the Cross implanted on the banks of the Fox, and zealous priests journeying through the length and breadth of the Fox River Valley, eager to bestow the consolations of religion upon natives and white settlers alike.

Of the many apostolic priests who attended to the spiritual needs of the early immigrants there were three who deserve special mention for having prepared the ground during the decade and a half immediately preceding the founding of the Oshkosh parishes. No list of missionaries would be complete if it did not include the name of the white-robed Dominican, Father Samuel Charles Mazzuchelli. As a young levite, twenty-four years of age, he took charge of a "parish" which extended from Mackinac Island to the mining camps of Iowa. His journeys among his widely-scattered flock usually were made by birchbark canoe in the summer, and on snowshoes in the winter. Oshkosh and the Fox River Valley were included in his pastoral visitations. At Green Bay he built a church and established a Catholic school---at the time the only Catholic church and the only Catholic school in the entire Territory of Wisconsin. Father Mazzuchelli was a scholar, an architect, a saintly priest, and a peerless missionary. Although a foreigner, born and educated in Italy, his "Memoirs" reveal his love for the young American

Republic, and his loyalty to his adopted country. The Irish who came within the sphere of his ministrations spoke of him affectionately as "Father Matthew Kelley", and thus claimed him as their very own.

For several years Father Mazzuchelli toiled singlehanded in that vast territory when, from the land of dikes and windmills, a fellow Dominican, Father Theodore J. Vanden Broek came to share his arduous labors. The missionary activities of the newly arrived priest were confined largely to the Lower Fox River Valley. He has a special claim to our grateful remembrance for having established the first Catholic parish within the present boundry lines of Winnebago County. We learn from the Official Catholic Directory that in the year 1844 he supervised the erection of a church in the midst of an Indian settlement on the south shore of Lake Poygan.

Two years later that humble parish of St. Francis Xavier welcomed as its first resident pastor a zealous and energetic priest who was destined by Divine Providence to be the founder of St. Peters congregation in Oshkosh, Born in Cominez, (Flanders) Belgium, on September 17, 1800, Father Florimond J. Bonduel began his studies for the priesthood at the College of Courtrai, Belgium, later advancing to the preparatory seminary at Roulers, and on to the major seminary at Tournai. While still a theological student his thoughts were directed to the American missions. He set sail for the United States in 1831, and upon his arrival here he entered St. Mary's Seminary, Cincinnati, Ohio. Several years later, on February 9, 1834, he was ordained in Detroit, Michigan, by Bishop Rese, whose diocese included the present State of Wisconsin. In August of the same year Father Bonduel was assigned to a mission at Mackinaw. He labored there for three years, leaving in August, 1837, for his new parish of St. John's at Green Bay. While passing through Milwaukee on his way to Green Bay, Father Bonduel offered Holy Mass in the home of Solomon Juneau --- the first Mass to be celebrated within the city limits of Milwaukee.

In August, 1844 he assumed the pastorate of St. Gabriel's in Prairie du Chien. His stay there was brief, because repeated entreaties on the part of the Indians dwelling at Lake Poygan for a resident pastor prompted the Most Rev. John Martin Henni, bishop of the newly established diocese of Milwaukee, to send them Father Bonduel. This apostolic missionary took up his abode with the red man in December, 1846. He applied himself with great devotedness and zeal to ameliorate the deplorable conditions that obtained in the reservation. As soon as practicable he opened two schools, one for boys, taught by himself, and one for the girls, taught by Mrs. Dousman. His untiring efforts were crowned with success, even calling forth the highest praise from the Indian agent, Mr. Albert Ellis, in his official report to Washington in 1847.

Father Bonduel's spiritual interests, however, were not confined to the reservation. We soon find him bestowing a paternal care and solicitude upon a small group of devout Catholics who had settled in Oshkosh and its adjacent territory. A warm welcome was accorded him in private homes where he offered Holy Mass. Later a frame dwelling at 18 Ceape Street was secured for the purpose of holding services. Thereafter Father Bonduel made the twenty mile journey from Poygan to Oshkosh at frequent intervals to offer the Holy Sacrifice, to administer the sacraments, and to instruct the children.

In the spring of 1850 the faithful band of twelve Church Catholic families---among them the McCourts, the Clarks, the Kennys --- having wrung from the bishop a promise of a resident pastor, undertook the erection of a church edifice. Good Father Bonduel stood by them. Under his supervision a little white church and rectory were built --- the first Catholic church and rectory in Oshkosh. People of many nationalities were drawn to this humble home of the Eucharistic Lord. They came from the outlying districts to worship, to pray, to hear the Word of God, and, as the parish registry reveals, to have the souls of their children cleansed in the saving waters of Baptism.

As we look back from our vantage point of over one hundred years of parish existence, and consider the small number of our pioneer forebears, as well as the meagerness of their earthly possessions, we marvel at the foresight and courage that gave them the stimulus to launch a project which, in its day, was stupendous. At that time (1850) there were but four churches with resident pastors within the present limits of the Green Bay diocese, namely, at Green Bay, Little Chute, Poygan, and Manitowoc Rapids; and only seven priests to care for the settlers who were scattered over an area of eleven thousand square miles. A people endowed with less religious fervor would have been content with an occasional visit of a priest. Not so our forefathers ! They gave willingly of their time, of their energy, of their limited means, to lay a strong foundation for a permanent parish in Oshkosh. While it is true that the guiding hand of a great spiritual leader is plainly visible in this undertaking, it must be granted that a priest, be he ever so able and devoted, can accomplish little, if anything, without the energetic cooperation of a faithful and responsive people. The good Lord blessed the work of priest and people and brought it to a glorious fruition.

The young and active parish thus formed, soon chose to relinquish its mission status and to function as a self-sustaining unit. Reluctantly the little group in Oshkosh bade farewell to its spiritual father and founder whose first duty, by virtue of his commission, lay with his beloved charges at Poygan. In the fall of 1850 Father Bonduel repaired to Washington, D.C., to plead the cause of the Menominee Indians. A decision had been reached by the federal government to transport that tribe against its will to the land of the Chippewas, which was located in the neighboring state of Minnesota. In consequence of Father Bonduel's appeal, a new treaty was drawn up by which a more suitable tract of land was set apart in Shawano County as a reservation for the Menominees. In November, 1852, Father Bonduel, like Moses of old, proudly led his people to that promised land. There he established the Mission of St. Michael the Archangel --- a mission that remains in existence to this very day. One year later Father Bonduel was transferred to Milwaukee. He labored in that city until March, 1855, when he was granted a leave of absence by the bishop to visit his native country. While there he wrote the interesting life-story of one of his beloved Indians ("The Story of Nakam at Poygan"), and had it published in Belgium. A copy of this work is in the library of St. Francis Seminary in Milwaukee

Upon his return to America in the fall of 1855 Father Bonduel continued his missionary journeys. With a pauline zeal for souls urging him on and on, we find him in Milwaukee in 1855; in Mineral Point in 1856; in Bay Settlement and Green Bay in 1857. His was the task to plow the soil and to plant the seed. Others would come after him to cultivate the field and to reap the harvest. On December 13, 1861,

this venerable man of God passed from the scene of his earthly labors. His mortal remains found a last resting place in St. John's cemetery in Green Bay.

St. Peter's parish came into being at a propitious moment. Waves of immigrants rolled in from Europe, the majority of whom were Catholics. Many found a home in Oshkosh and Winnebago County. To St. Peter's fell the important work of moulding the local members of that mass migration into good citizens, as well as promoting the spiritual welfare of all who gathered about her altar during the years when America was building. Fortunately, the parish was in a position at the time to accept that responsibility; for in 1851 Bishop Henni, true to the promise he had made, named Father Paul Farinacci, O.P. as the first resident pastor.