

# Parish Celebrates its Sesquicentennial

*A look at where we started*



BY HEATHER CRAIG

**H**OW does a parish grow from a modest group of Irish and Italian immigrants worshipping in a wooden shed to a grand Basilica whose members hail from 434 different zip codes across the Twin Cities metro area and beyond? In the words of Florence Brown, intrepid chronicler of the earliest years of our parish, it takes “boundless zeal, ardent faith, unstinted charity, holiest simplicity and deepest consecration to the service of religion,” ...and about 150 years. This October, we begin a year-long celebration of the sesquicentennial of our parish; a parish history of three churches, two locations, eleven pastors, and the people who lived and worshipped here.

The first Catholic church in what is now Minneapolis was on the northeast side of the river, Saint Anthony of Padua. Each Sunday, west bank Catholics had to cross the river by ferry, toll bridge, or for free across the ice come winter, to go to Mass.

In 1866, with the blessing of Bishop Thomas Grace, Fr. John McDermott purchased land on the west side of the Mississippi to build a Catholic school which doubled as a church building on Sundays. The community continued to grow, and shortly before their first resident pastor, Fr. James McGolrick, arrived in October 1868, a “shed church” was built off the rear of the school.

The church was furnished with a simple altar and benches. Double doors opened up to the ground floor of the school to facilitate overflow congregations. This was the first church of the Immaculate Conception parish, though the parish would not be officially recognized for several more years.

Fr. James was immediately popular; he was young, Irish, full of enthusiasm, yet retiring in character. He soon founded a St. Vincent de Paul Society for the care of the poor and a Rosary Society for care of the church. By the end of the year, he announced in the Minneapolis Tribune that the “Catholic Society” was planning to build a new church — the biggest in the city.

The new (second) Church of the Immaculate Conception was built beside the school at the corner of Third Avenue and Third Street North in 1871. A striking building of gray stone with a high bell tower, the laying of its cornerstone drew a crowd of 3,000 people. The parish boundary



Church of the Immaculate Conception built at the corner of Third Avenue and Third Street North in 1871.



stretched far to the west, even drawing several families from distant Golden Valley. Community life revolved around the new church, with its 5,000 book lending library, social and devotional clubs, musical groups, and parish picnics at area lakes. Missionaries came to speak at what was still considered a pioneer parish.

Fr. James' most successful venture was a chapter of the Fr. Matthew Society, a Total Abstinence Society. The successful group curbed alcoholism in the community, created a sort of Irish ex-pats social club, and made Fr. James a respected city leader.

By the early 1890s, the neighborhood around the church had changed drastically. Residences had been pushed out by industrial and manufacturing development. Rectors Fr. James Byrne and Fr. James Keane both explored options for building a new church in a less congested part of the city, but their dream was not realized until Archbishop John Ireland partnered with newly ordained rector Fr. Thomas Cullen. On August 1, 1905, the Archbishop announced plans for a bold and beautiful church: a Pro-Cathedral dedicated to Mary on the western edge of the city, to be built simultaneously with his new Cathedral in Saint Paul.

The old church stood vacant for several years after all Masses moved to the Pro-Cathedral in 1914 before it was dismantled. The stone from the church was offered for free to anyone with a cart to haul it away, and legend is that many homes in Northeast Minneapolis were built with Immaculate Conception stone for their foundations.

There are current Basilica families with roots in the original shed church, and new families joining our parish today. Our community is our greatest strength, which is why starting in October we'll be telling the parish history through 150 Faces: 150 Stories. This initiative will collect and tell the stories, not just of the priests and wealthy donors, but of musicians, neighborhood shopkeepers, and lunch ladies who were and are the heart of this parish over the past 150 years. ✚

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*If you have a family or personal story to share, please contact Heather Craig at [hcraig@mary.org](mailto:hcraig@mary.org)*



**A traditional church with a modern message.**

October 4, 2018, marks The Basilica Parish's sesquicentennial anniversary.

From October 2018 to October 2019 we will mark this occasion throughout our Parish with celebrations and exhibits.