

The Basilica's Founding Families



*Building the parish
150 years ago*

DURING the earliest years of the village of Minneapolis, Catholic families from many backgrounds worshipped at the “shed church” and later the Church of the Immaculate Conception. But as in St. Paul, the majority of the priests were Irish, and many leading families of our parish were Irish as well.

Irish immigrants were drawn to Minnesota in part by the efforts of Fr. John Ireland and the Irish Emigration Society. Founded in 1864, it actively recruited poor Irish families both from the home country and cities of the East Coast to settle in rural Minnesota, though some of them opted for city life instead. These Irish immigrants were sometimes disparaged. A *Minneapolis Journal* ad from September 1878 requests “a good girl to do housework in a small family. Good wages. No Irish or Catholics need apply.” An editorial in 1874 by an Augsburg Seminary professor touts the superiority of Scandinavian immigrants over the Irish in particular, noting that “Catholicism has imposed servile fetters upon their spirits.”

These prejudices did not stop the Irish Catholic community from taking the lead

in many civic affairs in the growing city. Of particular influence, the Total Abstinence Movement had political success with the regulation of city saloons and in curbing the drinking habits of parish men. At the 9th Annual Convention of the Catholic Total Abstinence Union in St. Paul in 1880, one speaker noted, “to be known as an Irish Catholic is almost equivalent to being known also as a total abstainer.”

Any accounting of the founding families of Immaculate Conception parish must start with Anthony and Annie Kelly. Born in County Mayo, Ireland, in 1832, Anthony Kelly emigrated to Canada with his parents in 1847, coming to Minneapolis with his brother Patrick in 1858. He married Annie Willey, a widow with two children, in 1863. The Kelly brothers started a grocery business, which Anthony later grew into a large and successful wholesale trade business. He was an early advocate for a Catholic parish on the west side of the river and his support did not waver.

During construction of the stone church (1871), the Kellys were also building a new home. When funds in the church treasury

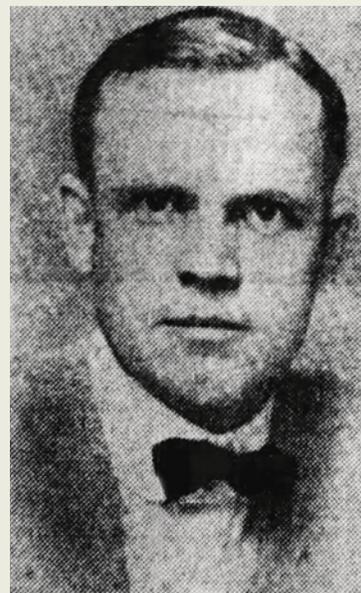
BY HEATHER CRAIG

grew dangerously low, Fr. James McGolrick confided in Kelly that work on the church must be discontinued. Kelly gathered his family together, reportedly saying, “we will stop building our home and give them the money. For God shall not live in a hovel while we live in a palace.”

As a founding board member of the Catholic Orphan Asylum Association in 1879, Kelly accommodated the orphans in his own home until a suitable building could be found. In 1885 he was involved with Fr. McGolrick and clergy from several Protestant denominations in forming the Friendly Inn, a shelter for homeless and itinerant men, which provided short term food and housing so long as the men contributed some labor in an adjoining wood yard. In the early 1890s, Kelly paid \$1,500 towards the church debt, nearly a quarter of the total outstanding amount.

Anthony Kelly died in 1899. His widow, Annie, and his daughter, Mrs. Alice Corrigan, continued to run the business for five more years before selling. The Anthony Kelly & Co. building still stands at the corner of Washington and 2nd Aves N, in the historic North Loop Warehouse District.

Jeremiah S. Coughlin was a different sort of pioneer. “Jerry” Coughlin was born in 1842 in County Cork, Ireland. He immigrated to New York at the age of 9. In 1864 he became a brakeman on the Milwaukee Railroad. Promoted to conductor in 1869, he reportedly piloted the first train ever run between Chicago and St. Paul. In 1875, he married Miss Martha (Mattie) Graham, daughter of the prominent Judge C. C. Graham of Red Wing. The Red Wing *Argus* noted that Coughlin “has a host of friends across the state, and is widely admired for his gentlemanly deportment and sterling qualities of character.” Mr. Fred Will, organist



(L to R) Jeremiah “Jerry” S. Coughlin and Patrick H. Prendergast

at the Saint Paul Cathedral, travelled to Red Wing to play for the wedding.

The Coughlin home hosted numerous social events in support of parish charities. One 1894 event brought together Mayor William H. Eustis and Rev. Dr. M. D. Shutter, a popular Unitarian pastor who related a “humorous story of being taken for a Catholic Priest” upon first meeting Coughlin. Coughlin was president of the Irish American Bank until its closure during the Bank Panic of 1896, though he never left his beloved position with the railroad. His finances took high losses during the bank failures, but his widow was still a generous supporter of the new Pro-Cathedral of Saint Mary. Archbishop Ireland himself gave the eulogy at Coughlin’s funeral.

Coughlin’s only son, William, was ordained in 1917, and said his first Mass at Immaculate Conception. He was a professor of history at Saint Thomas College until his early death in 1925. Jerry’s daughter, Helen, remained a parishioner but never married.

Sometimes it took a generation for an immigrant family to become fully enmeshed with the parish. Patrick H. Prendergast came to Minnesota with his parents and five brothers from Ireland in 1856. They settled in St. Paul, but Patrick made his own mark in Minneapolis, first with a Catholic bookstore, then for a time as a journalist

with the *Northwestern Chronicle*. He and his wife, Bridget, had six children, many of whom were deeply involved in the life of Immaculate Conception. Two sons, Jeremiah and J. Henry, joined the priesthood; Fr. J. Henry was ordained by Bishop McGolrick in the parish church where he was raised, and Fr. Jeremiah served as Assistant Pastor at Immaculate Conception from 1895 to 1897. Their sister, Agnes, was organist for Immaculate Conception and the Pro-Cathedral until 1922. Their brother, Edmund, was the Secretary of the Pro-Cathedral Building Committee and later a Trustee for The Basilica. In 1909, he married Miss Georgia Willey Kelly, daughter of Mrs. Annie Kelly.

As integral as these and other Irish families were to the first forty years of the parish, by the 1920s their influence was waning. Italian immigrants, in particular, were moving into the neighborhoods around the Pro-Cathedral, but the size and nature of the parish meant that no single ethnic group would again dominate influence over the parish. As the city of Minneapolis grew and diversified, so too did The Basilica parish. †

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