

The oldest parish – and the youngest – parish

St. Gabriel's keeps an eye to its past and one to its future

By JOSEPH O'BRIEN

Acting Editor

PRAIRIE DU CHIEN – To say that St. Gabriel parish has history would be similar to saying that the Rockefellers have money or that the Sahara desert has sand.

According to Mary de Julio, fifth-grade teacher and unofficial historian of St. Gabriel's parish, St. Gabriel's isn't just rich in history – it is a virtual watershed of church and Wisconsin and even Midwestern history in the upper Mississippi region.

In fact, if any parish in the Diocese of La Crosse can stake a claim to History-with-a-capital – H, it's St. Gabriel's. Besides the fact that St. Gabriel's is the oldest parish in the La Crosse diocese, St. Gabriel Church is the oldest church building still in use in Wisconsin. Built in 1839, it's architect, Father Samuel Mazzuchelli, was himself a prominent player in the history of the Midwest. A Dominican priest and self-taught architect, this fervent missionary traveled the area evangelizing and building up the Kingdom of God – sometimes, as in the case of St. Gabriel's, stone by stone.

In his memoirs, Father Mazzuchelli described St. Gabriel's upon completion as a church in "excellent condition" combining "a chaste simplicity with solidity and spaciousness."

But sometimes it takes stranger powers than those of a self-taught architect to provide a parish the land necessary for a church in the first place. This was literally the case for St. Gabriel's.

According to parish history, three men, one of whom was a Protestant named Strange Powers, were caught in a nerve-racking storm on the Mississippi River. The three men

In addition to Father Mazzuchelli, three other priests passed through St. Gabriel's at some point in their efforts to spread the Catholic faith on the upper Mississippi and its tributaries.

Fathers Lucian Galtier (1812-1866), Joseph Cretin (1799-1857) and Augustine Ravoux. Father Galtier is most famous for being the founder of the city of St. Paul in the early 1840s before he came to St. Gabriel's where he served the remainder of his life.

After serving at St. Gabriel's, Father Cretin eventually settled in St. Paul to become its first bishop while Father Ravoux moved on from Prairie du Chien to serve as a missionary to the Sioux of Minnesota before he became administrator of St. Paul upon the death of Bishop Cretin. It was Father Ravoux, too, who eventually built the first Cathedral of St. Paul.

"In those four men you can find a good amount of the early history of the Catholic Church in the upper Mississippi valley," de Julio commented. "What's impressive is that it was all focused in Prairie du Chien at one time or another."

When de Julio speaks of the personages of history, whether priest or layman, general or farmer, she tends to refer to them in the present tense. That's because, like many parishioners who claim original settlers to the area as ancestors, history is alive for de Julio at St. Gabriel's.

"French Canadian Catholics came here as early as the 1770s, about time of American Revolution," de Julio noted. "And of course they were Catholic; their faith was very important to them."

So important, she added, that before parishes were set up many of the settlers would voy-

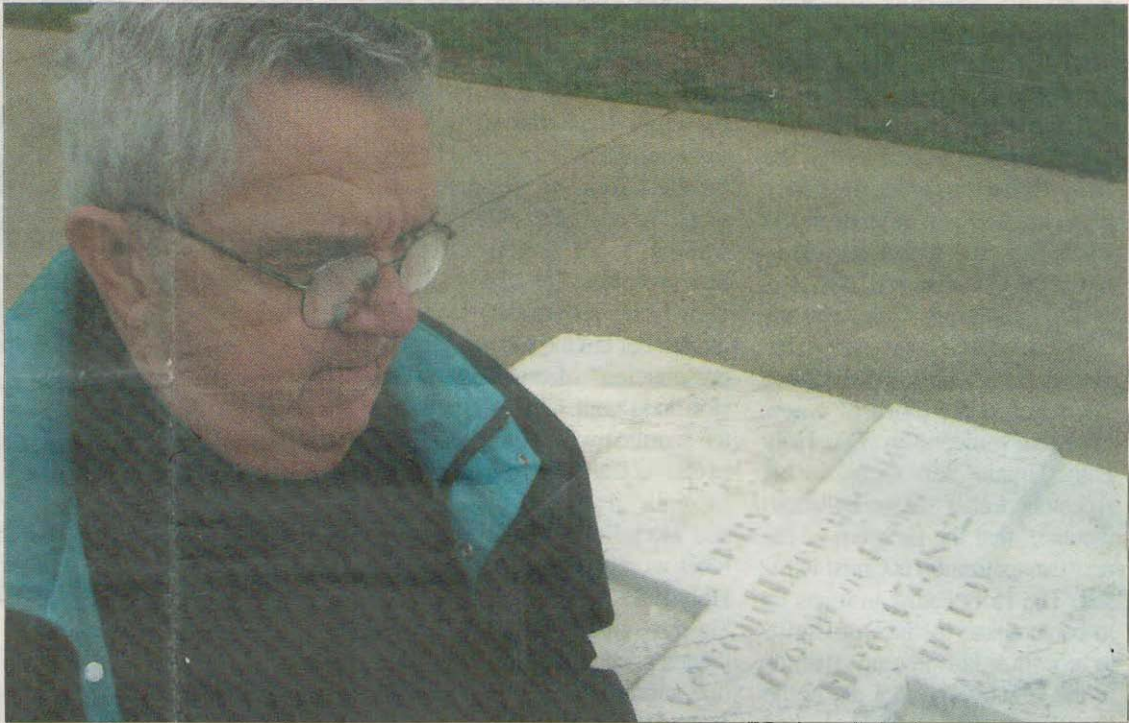
wracking storm on the Mississippi River. The three men prayed to God, promising if they were spared they would contribute to the erection of a church.

Not surprisingly – to those who believe in the power of prayer – the three men were saved. While the other two men donated money, Powers donated four acres of land where the future St. Gabriel's would be located.

But other figures, less strange and more famous still, are forever attached to the history of this parish, as well.

before parishes were set up many of the settlers would voyage down the Mississippi to find Catholic priests in St. Louis, Mo., to have their marriages blessed by the church and their children baptized.

“So you'd see lots of people from Prairie du Chien at that time showing up on the parish and diocesan records in St. Louis,” she continued. But there were also a number of Irish and German settlers coming to St. Gabriel's in the early 1800s. These settlers' descendants are also numbered among the



CT/Joseph O'Brien

Pastor of St. Gabriel Church, Prairie du Chien, Father Hubert Boschert, S.J., pauses before the tomb of his predecessor, Father Lucian Galtier, a missionary priest who founded the city of St. Paul and eventually came to serve St. Gabriel's.

parishioners of St. Gabriel's to this day.

"For many of the parishioners, this church is where their parents and grandparents went," noted de Julio, herself a fifth-generation descendant of Irish settlers. "It's also where they attended Catholic school. So a lot of the pride in this parish lies in the family connections and continuity."

It is the importance of Catholic education which de Julio credits, too, to the Jesuit connection which both St. Gabriel's and St. John's have enjoyed since the first Jesuit came to St. Gabriel's in 1880.

Today, the Society of Jesus still maintains a presence in these sister parishes; pastor Father Hubert Boschert and associate pastors Fathers Jack Wambach and James Warosh are all Jesuits.

Sadly, Father Boschert noted, unless a miracle occurs, due to the "shortage of manpower" he and his fellow priests will probably be the last Jesuits to serve St. Gabriel's and St. John's.

In the meantime, these good Fathers whose order is every bit a part of St. Gabriel's past are working toward this parish's future.

Three years after the first Jesuits came to St. Gabriel's, in 1883, an addition to the parish school was built. In keeping with the Society's tradition of commitment to Catholic education, Father Boschert recently announced a capital campaign to enhance the consolidated school facilities at St. John Middle School and St. Gabriel School.

While most of the facilities to

be improved will be at St. John's, including new science and computer laboratories and a new gymnasium, Father Boschert pointed out that both schools will benefit from the enhancements as the upcoming classes at St. Gabriel's will be able to take advantage of the new facilities when they eventually attend St. John's.

For Father Boschert, the popular reception of this project is a real sign of life at both parishes.

"I'm just thrilled that there is so much life in these parishes," he said. "The faith of the people is so strong and there are some definite indications of this faith to be found."

While Father Boschert began as pastor last July, he is no

stranger to the Prairie du Chien parishes.

Between 1981 and 1994, he served as pastor as well. Now that he's back he challenges the notion that "you can't go home again."

"I don't know if I mellowed over the years, but it really is thrilling to be back here," he commented. "Everyone wants to be a part of what's going on here."

According to Father Boschert, what makes St. Gabriel's an exciting parish is its perfect blend of the past and the present.

"In the public eye, St. Gabriel's is known for its past," he added, "but the parishioners here at St. Gabriel's very much see the importance of living in the present."

ST. GABRIEL AT A GLANCE

Pastor: Father Hubert Boschert, S.J.

Associate Pastors: Fathers Jack Wambach, S.J., and James Warosh, S.J.

Assistant to the Pastor in Finance Council: Mark Gilberts

Director of Religious Education: Patricia Prochaska

Masses: Saturday 4 p.m.; Sunday 7:30 a.m. and 9:30 a.m.

Registered Parishioners: 601 families

Established: 1817



St. Gabriel
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Prairie du Chien, WI
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608-326-2404

