

St. Gabriel's Church

ST. GABRIEL'S PARISH

by

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Where the creamy blue sky
the land of milk and honey
reaches over to kiss "Watpa-Ton-
"—the father of waters—there
stands the oldest church in west-
ern Wisconsin, St. Gabriel's.

Memories woven of a thousand
yesterdays weave themselves in
and out among the ancient raft-
ers, and rise like a rocket to the
sky from the lofty spires, which
dominate Crawford county, the
"Story Book Land of Wisconsin"
with Prairie du Chien, "the storied
town where legends live", as
the focal point.

On the site where St. Gabriel's
now stands, Fox Indians pitched
pees and simmered venison
over slow camp fires. Looking
back through the misty arches of
the years, the scene is nostalgic
with a cinnamon flavor.

Chief Called Dog

The chief of the Fox Indians
had the doubtful honor of being
called Dog. The French name
for dog is chien. It was from
Chief Dog of the Prairie that
the settlement got its name.
Henceforth La Prairie des Chiens
would commemorate the memory
of one dog chief who lived on
the prairie. Later American and
British traders shortened the
name to Prairie du Chien.

On a distant spring morning
in June, 1673, paddles of beard-
ed Frenchmen dipped into the
swift waters of the Wisconsin
river straight south of St. Gab-
riel's. It was a moment of destiny.
Father Marquette and Joliet
swept out upon the vast expanse
of the Mississippi, and became
the first white men to gaze with
silent wonder upon the mighty
waters rolling towards the sea.

Climbed Bluff

At the foot of a towering em-
inence, the eager-eyed French-
men beached their birch-bark
canoe, and climbed the 530 foot
bluff that today is Wyalusing
state park. With beating pulse
they looked out over "Watpa-
Fonga", the father of waters, as
the Sioux called the great river
of the west.

So overcome were the French-
men with the majesty of the
scene that words stood tremulous
on the brink of speech. All Mar-
quette could write in his diary
that 17th of June, 1673, were
these simple words, "With joy
we could not express, we entered
upon the Mississippi."

As Marquette looked down
upon La Prairie des Chiens, little
did he suspect he was gazing up-
on the very spot where the beau-
tiful and inspiring church of St.
Gabriel's would one day lift its
towers to the sky.

Built Cabins

In the revolutionary year 1781
when Cornwallis surrendered to
Washington, the ravines back of
St. Gabriel's church echoed with



Chien from the map.

From the sun-kissed slopes of
sunny Italy came dynamic, spark-
ling Fr. Samuel C. Mazzuchelli,
O.P. He was a sapphire of a man
whose resiliency and keenness re-
minded you of a Toledo blade
hammered from finest steel. His
dancing eyes snapped with fuses
of energy and enthusiasm. Under
his magnetic influence, St. Gab-
riel's acquired the four-acre plot
of ground upon which the par-
ish building now stands. A dona-
tion of Mr. Strange Powers, a
non-Catholic. The deed was duly
drawn up and delivered on Feb.
16, 1836.

Three years later, on a sun-
splashed Sunday afternoon in
July, 1839, the corner stone was
laid with Bishop Loras presiding
and assisted by Fr. Mazzuchelli,
who was by then vicar-general of
the recently formed Dubuque
diocese.

Church Renamed

St. Gabriel's owes its name to
Fr. Mazzuchelli's devotion to the
angels. Previously it had been
called St. John the Baptist.

The first resident pastor of St.
Gabriel's church was Fr. A. Ra-
voux who arrived in March, 1840.
One year later when he was sent
to do missionary work among the
Sioux, his place was taken by Fr.
Joseph Cretin who labored here
for three years and, in turn, was
replaced by Fr. Joseph Bonduel.

Two years before the gold rush
of '49 set covered wagons rolling
down the sunset slopes of the
Continental Divide, Fr. L. Gal-
tier, the founder of the city of
St. Paul, arrived to begin 19
years of apostolic work among
the people of Prairie.

Ten years later the peace of the
valley was rudely disturbed by
the earth shaking thunders of the
first iron horse into Prairie.
Down the shining rails it roared,
rumbled into town, and slid to
a shuddering stop on April 14,
1857.

Young men with dreams in

began construction of St. Mary's
Academy on land generously given
them by John Lawler.

Just about the time General
"Long Hair" Custer and 276
troopers of the Seventh U.S. Cav-
alry went down under the un-
shod hoofs of painted pintos on
the blood soaked banks of the
Little Big Horn in eastern Mon-
tana, St. Gabriel's closed another
chapter as it passed from di-
ocesan hands to the care of the
Benedictines. From 1877 to 1880
it was known as St. Gabriel's Pri-
ory. The priors during this per-
iod were Fathers Anthony Cas-
per, Meinulph Stukenkenper, Ig-
natiuss Wesseling, and William
Eversmann.

Jesuit Pastors

The same year that Chief
Crazy Horse was stomping across
the Dakota plains brewing "Big
Medicine" against the palefaces,
the Jesuits took over St. Gabriel's
parish and remained until one
year after the bloody Wounded
Knee Massacre in South Dakota
dealt the death blow to the once
great Sioux Nation. During these
years from 1880 to 1891 the fol-
lowing Jesuits served as pastors:
Frs. H. Richard, I. Goerling, and
N. Greisch.

In 1891 the parish was returned
to the diocesan clergy, and Fr.
A. P. Kremer undertook to carry
on during the gaslit era of barber
shop quartets, bicycles built for
two, and the ear filling marches
of John Phillip Sousa.

One year after the U. S. battle-
ship Maine was blown up in Ha-
vana harbor, and Teddy Roose-
velt went "charging" up San
Juan Hill, Fr. Joseph Joerres suc-
ceeded Fr. Kremer. He remained
until 1907, one year after the San
Francisco earthquake shook up
the price of west coast real estate.

Renovated

During the years 1907-1916 Fr.
Becker undertook the herculean
task of renovating the church. He
finished the front with two steep-
les, the taller of which contains
the bell and is surmounted by

earth with its rumbling overtones
of peace—with or without peo-
ple.

Fr. Finnegan

From 1947 to 1954 Fr. Thomas
A. Finnegan, S.J., endeared him-
self to his parishioners and set
an example of priestly zeal. The
present pastor, energetic and dy-
namic Fr. Earl L. Burns, S.J.,
was appointed in August, 1954.
Under his able administration St.
Gabriel's is continuing to carry
on its splendid historic traditions.
The assistant is Fr. Joseph P.
Melchioris, S.J., a former mission-
ary among the Sioux Indians of
Pine Ridge, S.D.

From 1916 to the present day,
St. Gabriel's has been fortunate
in having a long list of able as-
sistants, including Frs. J.P. Mon-
aghan, J. Wels, A. Smith, J.
Guerin, E. Morgan, L. Meyer, J.
Casey, N. McManus, J. McGloin,
G. Andrews, and the present gen-
eral Fr. J. P. Melchioris.

Today St. Gabriel's stands as
a monument of lasting tribute
to the cooperation of the people
of Prairie du Chien. The church
is an inspiring poem in stone and
glass. Sunlight breaking in gal-
axies of splendor against the
stained glass windows flood the
church with tidal waves of color,
making music out of light and
lifting the mind to an enchanted
world. In the pulsating radiance
and golden effulgence of its
splendor your heart kneels to
pray, caught up by a rapture
surpassing great.

Thing of Beauty

A thing of beauty is a joy for-
ever and St. Gabriel's is proof
that beauty once entrusted to a
single gaze will live in memory
forever.

In an upthrust of stone and
steel its slender spires leap into
the distant blue, to hurl your
thoughts up into the immensity
of space, and even to the great,
white throne of God. Something
of the rugged strength of the
Rocky mountains, the fragile
beauty of a waterfall and the
grace and elegance of the Easter
lily are woven into its very struc-
ture.

As you page through the par-
ish records you find names that
rise up at you with the sound of
trumpets—Antoine, DuCharme,
Cherrier, La Bonne, Favre—great
swinging names set to music for
dreams to live by. Like a delicate
cloud of bugle notes they carry
your imagination back to those

St. Gabriel's church echoed with ringing axes and hammers as industrious Frenchmen built log cabins and prepared to trap beavers, mink, and muskrats. Soon the precious pelts began to stack up in the warehouse. A fortune in fur was in the making.

Downstream in Missouri, the trappist, Father Marie Joseph Dunand, decided that items more precious than beaver pelts were to be trapped in LaPrairie des Chiens. In the blustery month of March, 1817, he said "Goodbye" to Florissant, Mo., and battled 600 miles up the wind lashed Mississippi to become the first priest in Prairie.

Ten years later, Father F. V. Badin arrived in Prairie with a hat full of dreams. He would build a church that would prove a worthy home for "Wakan Tanka"—the Great Spirit.

But Fr. Badin's dream was soon tortured into a nightmare by the Redbird Massacre. Down from the hills rolled the thunder of tom-toms. In the maddening whirl of the war dance, moccasins beat the earth until dust rose like powdered gold to haze the sun. The Winnebagoes daubed their faces with streaks of vermilion criss-crossed with secants of yellow and black.

Nearly Destroyed

In war-torn waves of destruction the painted warriors cascaded across the prairie, pinioned faces gleaming in the sun. Their war cries blood chilling as cold steel in your ribs.

According to General Atkinson, had it not been for the presence of Fr. Badin, the Winnebagoes would have wiped Prairie du

Young men with dreams in their eyes set their hopes rolling to the tempo of thundering rails. A jubilant rocket of anticipation filled the skies with sparks of golden hope. Prairie du Chien was on the upgrade.

Fr. Galtier Dies

Four years later, dark, dank clouds scudding up from the south obscured the sky gleaming fitfully with weird flames of the Civil War.

When the fires of autumn were burning bright in the October woods of 1864, a steady stream of wounded soldiers began to trickle into Prairie. The Brisbois hotel—later to become the first building of Campion college—was used as a Union hospital.

When Lincoln was assassinated in 1865, memorial services were held for him in St. Gabriel's church.

One year later, on Feb. 21, 1886, Fr. Galtier died two years before his dream came true—the establishment of the La Crosse diocese for which he had labored and prayed so ardently.

In 1869, three year after Fr. Louis Lux took over the pastorate, the Franciscan Sisters from La Crosse opened a school on Blackhawk ave., shortly after the golden spike was driven at Ogden, Utah, celebrating the completion of the first trans-continental railroad.

Fr. Abbelen Pastor

One year after the great Chicago fire of 1871 consumed 18,000 buildings in the greatest metropolitan blaze of modern times, Fr. P. Abbelen became pastor. The Sisters of Nctre Dame took over the grade school, and also

les, the taller of which contains the belfry, and is surmounted by a gilded cross. Likewise he built an addition that includes the sanctuary and both sacristies.

Torpedoes tipped with death were cleaving the copper sulphate waters of the North Atlantic when the Jesuits returned to St. Gabriel's in 1916. That same year the poet Joyce Kilmer, famed author of "Trees" paid his first visit to Prairie du Chien.

The new pastor, Fr. William Schiermann, S.J., soon had ample opportunity to prove his devotion during the tragic influenza epidemic which struck Prairie like lightning from the sky.

Recent Pastors

In the thirsty year of 1921, with the national prohibition act one year old, Fr. M. Speich, S.J., took over the pastorate, and continued until 1924 when Fr. M. Peters, S.J., continued the good work; until he, too, was relieved in 1928 by Fr. Joseph Blank, S.J.

This was the era of racoon coats, Mah Jong, and the roaring twenties that boasted the golden age of sports. The Four Horsemen were galloping across the front pages of the newspapers, and into the hearts of young Americans. On the local scene Coach Hoffman's famous Campion "Victory Team" of '28 pushed up a total of 276 points throughout the season to the opponents 6, thus rounding out a football season that was a coach's dream.

Fr. Joseph A. Weis, S.J., succeeded Fr. Blank in 1936 and continued until two years after the atomic bomb flashed the climax of World War II and shook the

your imagination back to those far distant days when three great flags fluttered over La Prairie des Chiens and the valley echoed with the shouts of the voyageurs and the frontiersmen.

Much History

Yes, there is a lot of history packed in the prairie that lies pensive and patient under the summer sky and slumbers peacefully within the shadows of St. Gabriel's spires.

On a midsummer evening, when the wizard moon ascends the heavens at the crimson end of day's declining splendor, stand by the banks of the Mississippi—named by Fr. Marquette the "River of the Immaculate Conception."

In that hushed and breathless moment that comes like benediction at the close of the day, you can listen to the river slip out of the shadows to whisper its secrets of a romantic and color splashed yesterday.

Oldest Church in Area

Single file from out of the past come faces bronzed by a thousand fierce suns; the sharp, clear-cut features of the Fox, the Winnebago and the Sious. All sang songs in the valley and lifted up arms to "Waukan Tanka", the Great Spirit, entreating His benediction for their children.

Like clouds in the summer sky the Indians and the voyageurs have vanished, leaving only the glory of their dreams, and the echo of names that once rang clear and loud as a bugle on the hills of La Prairie des Chiens when St. Gabriel's was the first church in western Wisconsin and history stood at the crossroads.