

St. Gabriel Renovation Of Historic Church De



—John M. Scott, S.J.

WHERE THE blue heavens arch over the verdant land to kiss "Watpa-Tonga," the Father of Waters — there stands the oldest Catholic church in the state of Wisconsin, St. Gabriel's.

Memories woven of a thousand yesterdays weave themselves in and out among the stone towers that rise to the sky with lofty spires that dominate Crawford County, the "Story Book Land of Wisconsin Where Legends Live."

On the site where St. Gabriel's now stands, Fox Indians pitched tipis and simmered venison over slow camp fires.

On a morning in June, 1673, paddles of bearded Frenchmen dipped into the swift waters of the Wisconsin River straight south of what is now St. Gabriel'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.

River of the Immaculate Conception

At the foot of a towering eminence, the eager-eyed Frenchmen beached their birch-bark canoes, and climbed the 530-foot bluff that today is Wyalusing State Park. With beating pulse they looked out over "Watpa-Tonga," the Father of Waters, as the Sioux called the great river of the west.

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

As Father Marquette's gaze traveled from the sparkling waters to La Prairie Des

Chiens, little did he suspect that he was gazing upon the spot where the beautiful and inspiring church of St. Gabriel would one day lift its towers to the sky.

Hat Full of Dreams

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

Ten years later, Fr. 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.

War Drums in the Night

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 war-torn waves of screaming destruction the painted warriors cascaded across the prairie, their pinned lances gleaming in the sun.

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

From Sun-Kissed Italy

From the sun-kissed slopes of sunny Italy came dynamic Fr. Samuel C. Mazzuchelli, O.P. His dancing eyes snapped with energy and enthusiasm.

Under his magnetic influence, St. Gabriel's acquired the four-acre plot of ground upon which the parish building now stands, a donation from Mr. Strange Powers, a non-Catholic. The deed was duly drawn up and delivered in July, 1836.

Three years later, on a sun-splashed Sunday afternoon in July, 1839, work had progressed enough to lay the cornerstone, with Bishop Loras presiding. He was assisted by Fr. Mazzuchelli, who was by then vicar-general of the recently formed Dubuque Diocese.

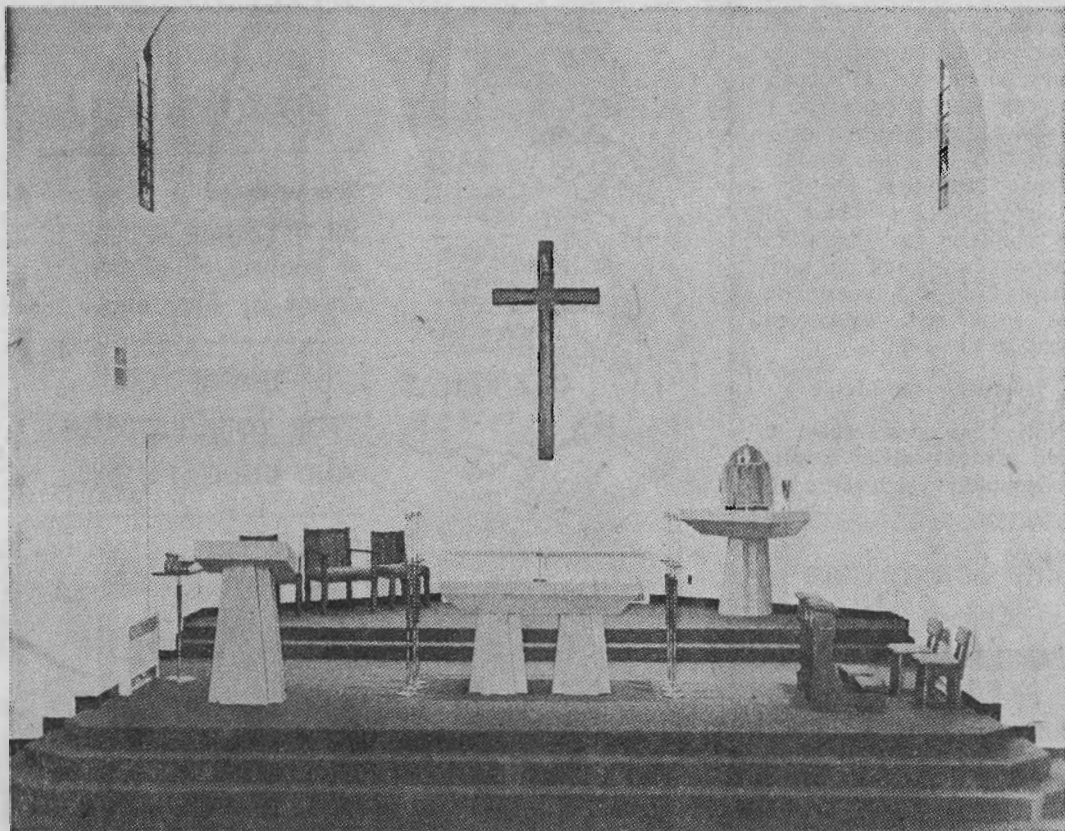
Church Renamed

St. Gabriel's owes its name to Fr. Mazzuchelli's devotion to the angels. Previously it had been called St. John the Baptist. Later that fall, Fr. Mazzuchelli wrote concerning the completion of the building he had designed:

"The stonework is done by L. R. March . . . the carpenter work is in the hands of a good son of Erin, Benedict F. Manahan.

"This church measures 50 feet in width by 100 feet in length. The walls are two feet thick above the base, built of good and light stone, found in abundance on the hills which encircle the majestic prairie between the junction of the great Wisconsin River and the Father of Waters.

"The style of the church is a chaste Gothic. The front is



St. Gabriel's, Prairie du Chien

on Preserves Identity signed by Mazzuchelli



all hammered range work, ornamented with a marble inscription and niche."

The Roaring Twenties

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;



Father Mazzuchelli

until he too, was relieved in 1928 by the giant Belgian, Fr. Joseph Blank, S.J.

This was the era of racoon coats, Mah Jong, the roaring twenties that boasted the golden age of sports, and the Four Horsemen.

Fr. Joseph A. Weis, S.J., succeeded Fr. Blank in 1936 and continued until two years after the atomic bomb brought World War II to a crashing close and began a new era.

Post War

From 1947 to 1954, Fr. Thomas A. Finnegan, S.J., endeared himself to his parishioners. Following him was dynamic and energetic Fr. Earl L. Burns, S.J.

Under his very able administration, St. Gabriel's beautified its historic cemeteries, found a more solid financial footing, added a new school building that is the pride of the parish, and 18 months

ago, erected the spacious home for the nuns.

Fr. Eugene E. Zimmerman, S.J., the present pastor, came to St. Gabriel's in the early summer of 1966. He had spent many previous years at Campion and so he brought to his present job a wealth of friends from the city and surrounding area.

Today St. Gabriel's stands as a monument of lasting tribute to the cooperation of the people of Prairie du Chien.

Major Work On the Church

This present reconstruction of St. Gabriel's Church — the first since Fr. Becker's in 1908 — began under Fr. Burns on December 9, 1965.

Fr. Zimmerman, Assistant Fr. Brehm, and the people of St. Gabriel's have attempted to do two things in the reconstruction — to preserve antiquity, and to update the church to incorporate the new liturgy.

A parish artisan is rough-hewing a cross from one of the 130-year-old beams that had to be replaced.

An old Baptismal font made of pewter, long unused and painted over, is being cleaned and repaired by some antique enthusiasts in La Crosse for re-use. It will be placed in the left front of the church, near the north entrance.

The altar of sacrifice, the altar of repose and the ambo are all made of Winona stone with a rough honed finish to correspond to the rugged strength of the two and three foot thick walls.

The Stations of the Cross have been preserved, but the figures have been antiquated and the frames simplified and stained dark to match the pews.

The open-backed pews, contoured for comfort, and with semi-open ends are of solid northern white oak with a Jet Ebony finish. The dark

walnut color blends with the avocado carpeting throughout the church and is carried through in all the woodwork. The contrast with the simple white wall is especially pleasing.

The white walls also enhance the sparkle of the old stained glass windows, which have been cleaned, repaired, sealed and protected with new storm glazing by T. C. Esser Company.

Unlike the old church with its drop-ceiling, the trusses and decking are exposed, adding to the beauty of the entire church. New and better co-ordinated lighting fixtures aid visibility.

The Worlitzer organ has been repaired and is now situated in the front right of the nave, with a supplementary sound box in the balcony.

The sound system eliminates all dead spots, and a portable cordless microphone makes it possible to use the system anywhere in the church during funerals, baptisms, weddings, the Way of the Cross, and other functions.

A new entrance from the parking lot provides for rest rooms and also makes possible an entrance to the north sacristy. Steps have been completely eliminated at this entrance, and in general the floor has been dropped as much as possible so that even in the main front entrance there is only one step.

The wood paneling of the massive old front doors has been replaced with English-Fleming glass which serves to express antiquity, and new doors to match have been erected throughout the structure.

The outside of the church will be cleaned in spring and the tower steeples painted. The cast bronze bells were fixed to ring automatically by I. T. Verdin Company of Cincinnati, Ohio.

Air conditioning for the summer months and temper-

ed outside air for the winter months should give good ventilation.

Our motto throughout has been: antiquity, simplicity, liturgical functionalism.

Hackner, Schroeder and Associates of La Crosse were the architects, and the Steiner Brothers Construction Company of Prairie du Chien was the general contractor.

And how fitting that Mass be resumed in St. Gabriel's on Christmas Eve. At Christmas there is a new and unaccustomed feeling of expectancy and hope, as if some fabulously beautiful thing were about to happen — as indeed it does each Christmas.

But this year, in Prairie du Chien the King will have a new altar on which to come to visit His people.

The people of St. Gabriel's have provided a new Bethlehem for the Christ Child.

Listen! Those sounds that break the hush of the patient prairie and the massive silence of the rocky hills that skirt the Mississippi — they are the songs of the people of God thanking the Savior who was announced by Gabriel for the new St. Gabriel's church, echoing once again the angelic anthem: "Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth to men of good will."

