

## **History of St. Patrick's School**

Although Catholic education did not formally begin in Parnell until 1893, the children of the parish had been receiving a Christian education for many years. A public school district (Fractional District No. 2 of Grattan and Vergennes) was centered in Parnell. It is not clear where this schoolhouse was located, but for many years the school did occupy the first log church building. The Catholic pioneers of the area; Dennis McCarthy, Richard Giles and others served as directors of this public school for a number of years. Even Fr. Rievers served as a director. All of the families of this district were Catholic, and they always hired Catholic teachers.

By the 1890's, Fr. James Crumley decided that the parish was large enough and prosperous enough to support a Catholic school of its own. For years, the Bishops of America had been urging all parishes to open schools, and Fr. Crumley meant to comply with this directive.

At first, Fr. Crumley's plans met with great opposition. The parishioners thought that their public school was already sufficiently Catholic. They also feared that if all of the Catholic students transferred to the Catholic school, then their public district would be eliminated. If that were to happen, then the residents of the area would lose some of their control over the school taxes.

Fr. Crumley, though, was persistent in his efforts, and he proceeded to build the school almost single-handedly. The cost of constructing and furnishing the school was \$1,095.69, and Father was able to raise only \$344 through subscription. The remainder of the expense came out of the parish treasury.

The new school was a two-story frame structure, and it was constructed at the northwest corner of the church and faced Five Mile Road. The school, named St. Joseph's Academy, was completed in the summer of 1893, and classes were held for the first time on September 1, 1893. Fr. Crumley had procured the services of the Sisters of Mercy from Big Rapids to teach at the school. The first principal was Sr. m. Thomas Dauner and she was assisted by Sr. M. Borgia Lambert and Sr. M. Jerome Brennan.

By the time Father had the school build and the Sisters had arrived, the people of the parish began to accept the idea of a parochial school. As the first weeks of the 1893 school year passed by, students slowly trickled in to the school. By November, eighty-five students were enrolled.

Conditions in the first parish school were not ideal for the students or teachers. The building had been constructed with minimal expense, and it was often cold and drafty. The Sisters had rooms in the south end of the building, with bedrooms on the second floor and a community room and kitchen on the first floor. Every day they had to send some of the boys up the hill to the rectory well to get their water.

By 1905, it was apparent to all of the parishioners that the St. Joseph's Academy building was wholly inadequate. The pastor, Fr. Byrne, arranged for the construction of a new and completely state-of-the-art school building. Construction began on May 15, 1905 on the cement-block structure. This new school had two full floors of classroom space with rooms also located in the basement and the attic. The structure was fully enclosed by December 15, 1905, and the parishioners held pancake suppers and a St. Patrick's Day Celebration in the unfinished building. On August 30, 1906, the building was completed and ready for use for a total construction cost of \$7217.04. This new school was named St. Patrick's School, and forty-seven students enrolled for the first day of classes on September 3, 1906. The old St. Joseph's Academy building was later sold and moved across the road where it served as a chicken coop and as a storage shed until it was torn down in the 1950's.

In the fall of 1907, the decision was made to expand the school by adding a ninth grade to the already existing eight grades. The following year, the tenth grade was added. The school remained a ten-grade school until 1917 when the eleventh grade was added. In 1919, a complete curriculum was accomplished by the addition of the twelfth grade.

The man behind twelve-grade education in Parnell was Father Dennis Behan. Fr. Behan was very interested in the school and in the future of its students. He wanted to give them as many opportunities as possible, so he arranged for the eleventh grade and then for the twelfth grade two years later. He personally visited the first graduates of the eleventh grade and convinced some of them to return to school for the twelfth grade after they had already been out of school for a year.

The first high school graduation for St. Patrick's School took place on June 10, 1920. The ceremony was held in the auditorium of the City Hall in Lowell. There were nine graduates in that first class. As an added benefit to these students' high school diplomas, Fr. Behan made sure that they would be recognized by places of higher education by having the school accredited by the University of Michigan. The people of the parish were rightfully proud of the fact that they were able to maintain an accredited school with such a small number of students and such limited resources. It was certainly a well-deserved tribute to the sacrifices made by the pastors, sisters and parishioners.

For many years, the school was able to maintain a high quality of education without charging tuition. The parish supported all aspects of the school. Many improvements were made. One example is the chemistry lab that was purchased when the last two grades of high school were added. Fr. Behan noted in the parish account ledger the expenditure of \$100 for the chemistry table and \$68.01 for chemistry supplies. This table served the students of St. Patrick's until the high school was closed.

The twelve grades of St. Patrick's School flourished for many years. All of the students attended classes in one building. As you entered the front door of the school, a large staircase was directly in front of the door. To the south was the assembly room for the high school. To the north was the Sisters' office, kitchen and dining room. On the second floor, the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth grades met on the south side of the building. The lower grades met in the northeast corner in what was often referred to as

the “baby room.” The northwest corner of the second floor was first reserved as the chapel. Doors could be open from both of the classrooms so that all students could see the altar. Later additions to the school building allowed the chapel to be moved to the first floor, and the second floor space was used for a typing room, storage and office purposes.

The third floor space was a large open room. This served as the sister’s sleeping quarters until the convent addition was built. This area also was used in the 1910’s and 1920’s as sleeping quarters for the girls who boarded at the school. During this time, it was not easy for all of the students to travel to school every day, so a small number of girls were allowed to board at the school during the week. Many of these girls later spoke of the memories of living in such close connection with the Sisters. There were no interior walls on the third floor, so sheets hung on a wire served as the only separation between the girls and the Sisters.

The basement of the school contained two classrooms. The classroom in the northeast corner held the science laboratory. The southeast classroom was used mainly for overflow from the grades when enrollment was high. This classroom was also used at times for typing and for music. In the west side of the basement, there was a furnace room, and, after indoor plumbing was installed in the 1940’s, there were bathrooms.

This school graded its largest class in 1939. Twenty-one students received diplomas that year. Just a few years later, though, there were not even twenty-one students in the whole high school. At that time, the high school was at the lowest point in its history. The school lost its accreditation. The Sisters of Mercy were dissatisfied with the low enrollment and with their living conditions in the attic. On June 7, 1944, the Sisters of Mercy addressed the following question in a letter to Fr. McNeil: “Before July first may we have a definite decision as to whether or not the four year high school program for less than twenty pupils will be continued at Parnell next year?”

The parish and its school were in a tight position, and Fr. McNeil’s next step was not yet evident. At this same time, Fr. McNeil was assigned to St. Francis Xavier Church in Grand Rapids, and Parnell’s new pastor was an experienced educator. Both Fr. Murphy and his successor, Fr. Bolger were actively involved in Grand Rapids Catholic Central High School, and they were able to help St. Patrick’s High School get back on its feet.

Fr. Murphy immediately told the Sisters of Mercy about his plans for the high school. He arranged for indoor plumbing to be installed in the school. He offered the rectory to the Sisters to serve as a suitable convent. (Fr. Murphy took up residence in the sisters’ old quarters in the school.) He offered suggestions for improving the curriculum and balancing the Sisters’ class sizes.

Fr. Murphy’s actions solved the problems that faced the school in 1944. When Fr. Bolger was appointed to Parnell the next year, he continued to concentrate on improving the high school, and he also began to raise funds for the construction of a new rectory. The plan at the time was to give the current rectory to the Sisters as a permanent convent, and to build a smaller, modern residence for the priest. This arrangement was soon altered,

mainly because the Sisters preferred a convent which was attached to the school. Soon construction began on the convent addition to the school, and the new living quarters were completed in 1948.

In the 1950's, the school's problems were all but forgotten. The record enrollments in Catholic schools across the country were also reflected in Parnell. Class sizes in the whole school increased, and new space became necessary. In the early 1950's, the parish hall was constructed at the southwest corner of the school. In 1959, two classrooms were added to the west end of the hall. With the construction of the hall, more programs could be held at Parnell. Also, a hot lunch program was started. Mrs. Addie McCormick and Mrs. Lucille Nugent were the first cooks.

Although the high school never had more than fifty students total, an effort was made to make sure that there were activities for the students which were comparable to the activities in larger schools. There were football and baseball teams. There was a school newspaper, *The Shamrock Sentinel*, published in the 1940's. In the late 1940's and early 1950's, there was a school band. For three years, a yearbook was published. School plays and pageants were numerous. Also, there was a variety of clubs and other activities. The Sodality was one organization that was always active.

By the early 1960's, through, the school began to face a number of problems. The school building was beginning to show its age. The cost of modern high school education was constantly increasing. The lower grades were outgrowing their quarters. Committees were formed to research the possible solutions to these problems.

In March of 1963, the bishop was notified of the solution to the problem of high school costs. "Regretfully, the pastor and a committee of outstanding Catholic laymen representing St. Patrick parish, Parnell, ask your permission to discontinue the high school department of St. Patrick School effective at the termination of this current school year." Bishop Babcock reluctantly granted permission to close the high school, and the Class of 1963 became the last class to graduate from St. Patrick's High School.

At the same time as the high decisions were being made, another committee was finalizing the plans for a new school building. This building committee consisted of seven parishioners: James A. Byrne, John McCabe, Floyd Mayo, Loyal Malone, Justin McCarthy, Ligouri Nugent and Giles Hefferon. \$134,000 was subscribed toward the construction of the new school, almost four acres of land were donated by the Sullivan Estate, and the Robert Hurley Family's home was moved to its present location in order to create enough room for the new school.

Construction occurred in the summer of 1962. The old school building was demolished, but the recent convent, hall, and classroom additions were incorporated in the new school. The new structure was completed by October 15, 1963 at a cost of approximately \$250,000. The new school had five new classrooms (plus the two older classrooms from the 1950's). There were also complete living accommodations for the Sisters.

After the initial period of adjustment to a school without the high school grades, the elementary grades continued to thrive. The school was staffed by the Sisters of Mercy and lay teachers until 1989. When school opened in the fall of 1989, there were no Sisters on staff for the first time since the Catholic school opened in 1893. Since 1989, the school has been exclusively staffed by lay teachers.

In the 1980's St. Patrick's School, like many other Catholic schools across the United States, experienced the problem of rising costs and decreasing enrollments. After a period of transition, the school adjusted. Enrollments began to rise and costs stabilized. In 1990, as part of this adjustment, St. Patrick's School opened the doors of its seventh and eight grade classrooms to students from St. Mary's School in Lowell. This arrangement allowed for classes at St. Patrick's to have a sufficient number of students, and it gave students from St. Mary's an opportunity for Catholic education in the upper grades which St. Mary's could no longer provide. This school also established an endowment fund that will provide money for the future needs of the school.

In the 1993-1994 school year, St. Patrick's School celebrated its centennial. A year-long schedule of activities provided the students with a reason and an opportunity to study what life was like one hundred years ago. Also, the whole school community completed the centennial year with a focus on the school's next one hundred years.