

The History of St. Matthew's Parish, Campbellsport

By Irene Hahn

In 1864 a handful of Catholic Pioneers united and volunteered to erect a small house of god for public Catholic worship. Shortly after, a plot of ground was purchased and before long a parish church, a brick building, was completed. According to available records catholic immigrants settled in and about Campbellsport (formerly called "New Cassel") since the middle of the past century. They were followed by missionary priests engaged in the care of souls, organizing parishes and building churches and schools wherever possible.

Prior to the organization of St. Matthew's parish, missionaries and priests from neighboring parishes were active in visiting the scattered Catholics, providing occasional services in private homes, and ministering to their spiritual needs when required. There still exists a trustworthy tradition that the first Mass in the village of Campbellsport was celebrated in the private home of Mrs. Teresa Bach which is situated directly across the street of the present site of the new church.

An undated meeting of local Catholic settlers resolved to establish a parish organization and proceeded to elect trustees with a view to build a church in the village of Campbellsport. According to the parish files the newly elected trustees on July 25, 1861, reassembled to discuss the problem with a master builder. Present at this meeting were the following: Frederic Saak, a contractor, and the following trustees: John Guepe, Owen Bannon, Thomas Hoyer, M. McCollar and M. Doyle. The church building was completed and ready for use early in the year 1872. The cost of labor was \$450; for the material there is no record available. For a number of years the church remained a mission but services were held periodically by priests of neighboring parishes. In 1869 the parish Rectory was built in anticipation of the arrival of a resident pastor.

In July 1874, Rev. Anton F. Michels was appointed as the first resident pastor of St. Matthew's Church. With his arrival a new era of Catholic activities and achievements was inaugurated. Within a year accommodations for a parochial school as well as a home for the teaching staff were provided. The School sisters of St. Francis were offered charge of St. Matthew's School and on April 24, 1874 three sisters arrived in Campbellsport: Mother Alexis, Sister M. Alfons, and Sister M. Clara. In September of the same year the parish school was opened with Mother Alexia as the first teacher.¹

In 1879 the Rev. A. Michels resigned his position at St. Matthew's Church and thereafter devoted all his time to the welfare of the Community of the School Sisters of St. Francis until his death at St. Joseph Convent, Milwaukee, June 18, 1911.

A newly ordained priest, the Rev. John Bertram, was appointed successor to the Rev. Michels and placed in charge of St. Mathias Church in the town of Auburn. During his pastorate at Campbellsport important improvements were made; the church was enlarged and decorated and a new parish school was erected. He engaged Dr. P. A. Hoffmann as organist and choir-director, a well-known musician of Campbellsport. His "Golden Jubilee" as conductor of St. Matthew's Church Choir was celebrated in 1938 by a Solemn High Mass and a banquet. Another faithful chorister for many years was Mr. Bernard Ullrich. In December, 1893, Rev. Bertram was transferred to St. Killian's Church at Hartford.

¹ The school was a boarding school, and Fr. Michels brought two orphans to the sisters as the first boarders. The girls, Sarah and Theresa Hegner, lived with the sisters.

Rev. Francis Heller was assigned pastor of St. Matthew's in 1894, where he remained until 1899. Father Heller was a model priest and an instrument in the hands of God for the advancement and honor of the Church.

The Rev. Joseph B. Froelich succeeded Father Heller and remained one year. In May 1900, Rev. Bernard July was appointed as Pastor of St. Matthew's Church, Campbellsport, where he remained until 1935 when ill health caused him to resign. During his long tenure of office numerous and necessary projects were completed. A new church was erected in 1905 at an approximate cost of \$25,000. The parish School was renovated, a new rectory was built, and a suitable home was provided for the School Sisters. He resigned and spent the rest of his days at St. Camillus Hospital, Milwaukee and died on May 24, 1939. The funeral services were held at St. Matthew's Church, Campbellsport, and his remains were interred in the local parish cemetery.

His Excellency, the Most Rev. Archbishop S. A. Stritch soon found a worth substitute to fill the vacancy by assigning the Rev. Anthony C. Biwer as successor to Rev. July on June 12, 1935. In spite of war and general unrest, Fr. Biwer never wavered in his sense of duty. When he had to retire from all activities during Holy Week, 1951, Capuchin Fathers assisted at various times until Fr. Mueller came as temporary administrator.

Rev. Peter Schwamb was assigned to our parish on June 27, 1951. He immediately made plans to remodel the church building which included the dismantling of the two steeples. The new school, another great project, was dedicated by the Most Rev. Albert G. Meyer on Sunday, April 29, 1956. There are six classrooms, a music room, offices and an all-purpose room where many church and school activities are held. The school has an enrollment of about 240 pupils with 5 religious and 1 lay teacher. Rev. Carl Wahlen became Assistant Pastor at St. Matthew's in December, 1955. According to recent records St. Matthew's now has 315 families with nearly 1,290 members.

The following members have entered religious life:

Mother M. Stanislaus (nee Hegner)
Sister M. Bernardine (nee Bonesho)
Sister M. Hyacintha (nee Gremminger)
Sister M. Antonia (nee Reinhardt)
Sister M. Plate (nee Fleischmann)
Sister M. Carol (nee Fleischmann)
Sister M. Precordia (nee Haessly)
Sister M. Martin (nee Wenzel)
Sister M. Acrosia (nee Little)
Sister M. Alvarita (nee Little)
Sister M. Paul (nee Schlaefer)
Sister M. Joan of Arc, (nee Esser)
Sister M. Jolita (nee Heller)
Sister M. Paul Francis (nee Gremminger)

There are four young men who have become priests:

Rev. Rolland Glass, Neosho
Rev. Wm. Farrell, Cudahy
Rev. Salvator Schlaefer, Capuchin Franciscan, Nicaragua
Rev. Austin Schlaefer, Capuchin