

History
of the Parish of
North Prairie



PIONEER DAYS “GERMAN SETTLEMENT”

The name North Prairie originally applied to a small strip of prairie land along the western bank of the Mississippi about four miles Southeast of what is now known as North Prairie. There, in the Northeast corner of Stearns county, on the homestead of Wm. McNeal, a post office was established in the early sixties, and Mr. McNeal, who also acted

as its first postmaster, chose for it the name North Prairie, apparently in harmony with a custom prevailing in those days of naming such newly created outposts of civilization “Prairies” most probably because such a stretch of open prairieland offered a comparatively easy chance for settlement in the midst of an almost impenetrable virgin forest.

When this postoffice later on was moved to what is now called North Prairie, the name went with it, thus obliterating the previous name of “German Settlement.”

This German Settlement dates its beginning back to about 1865. A few farmers of German nationality had already settled there before this time, but it was in 1865 that the place began to grow in a way which held out some promise for the future.



Father Pierz

In those early days Father Pierz, who had his headquarters at Crow Wing, surprised the early settlers occasionally when touring the country in search of stray souls. On such occasions he would say Mass in one of their log cabins, and administer to them the Sacraments of Penance and Holy Eucharist, as well as Baptism and Holy Wedlock whenever an opportunity offered itself.

He was faithfully seconded by Father James Trobec, who later on became Bishop of St. Cloud. Father Trobec, just recently ordained, was acting as assistant to Father Buh, Pastor of Belle Prairie, the oldest parish in the present diocese of St. Cloud. It was his special duty to attend to the Catholics in the surrounding territory. In this capacity he visited, in 1865 and 1866, the people at what is now Pierz, Royalton, Buckman, North Prairie, St. Stephen and Rice, everywhere laying the foundation for coming developments.

By 1866, the number of families in German Settlement had increased to about twenty, and it was in order now to consider the erection of a church building. A little quarrel about the location, not at all unusual in such cases, was definitely settled when Jacob Tramer offered forty acres of land for the nominal consideration of \$50.00, thus outdistancing in generosity all competitors. This land was deeded over to Bishop Grace of St. Paul, within whose jurisdiction North Prairie then belonged, on April 18, 1866. Of this event we celebrate today the Diamond Jubilee, since it happened just sixty years ago.

The necessary property having thus been acquired, work could start at once. First came the clearing of the ground and the hewing of logs, all of which took about two years, since the settlers did all the work themselves and in their spare time. And plenty of work there was, and little spare time indeed for those sturdy pioneers, living in the midst of a dense forest. But finally, in 1868, everything was ready for the construction of the new church. A humble structure had been planned, with a floor space of about 18 by 24 feet, and just high enough inside to allow a fair sized man to stand erect without touching the ceiling with his head. A humble house of God indeed. And yet it took two years more before all was done, including the home made pews and altar.

The building was erected according to the plans and specifications left with the settlers by Father Pierz. James Tramer and John Eurggraff had charge of the carpenter work. They were loyally assisted by John, Joseph and Matt Petzold, Peter Schmitt, Matt and Nick Klein, Joseph Thiers, Philip Simon, Jacob Weibel, Martin and Xavier Kieffer, and possibly a few others. Henry Shaw of St. Paul, who had a short while ago joined German Settlement, built the altar, but returned shortly afterwards to St. Paul. Much was donated in work and material, and the entire outlay in cash money for the construction and furniture of the church amounted, according to the testimony of Bishop Trobec, to exactly \$74.00.



Msgr. Joseph Buh

A few of the settlers were still sulking, because their favorite site had not been selected for the new church; but by the time Father Pierz came to bless the church, in 1869, everything was working harmoniously and according to schedule.

From 1870 to 1872, Father Buh from Belle Prairie, and Father Tomazin who had succeeded Father Pierz at Crow Wing when the latter was transferred to the Parish at Pierz in 1871, said Mass in the new church alternately, from time to time; but a regular order of services was not arranged for until after the Mission of 1872.

This Mission marks a turning point in the history of North Prairie, then still called German Settlement. It was given by Father F. X. Weniger, S. J., and to judge from the re-

sults following in its wake, it must have aroused a true christian spirit within the hearts of the early settlers. Acting upon the prayer of the people, the missionary set about to make arrangements for the future, according to which Father Tomazin was to attend Holy Cross Church regularly, as far as possible, once a month.

This regular attendance encouraged the people to such a degree that an addition to the church had to be built within a year.

This addition was begun and finished in 1873. In size it was an exact counterpart of the log church to which it was attached, and the building thus doubled in floor space, measured now 18 by 48 feet. The new half of the building showed the progress of the times; for it was built not of logs, but of regular dimension lumber, even though the ceiling and walls, as well as the floor, consisted of unmatched, common boards.

Whilst this building activity was going on, the postoffice was moved from the McNeal Farm to Andrew Meyer's store at German Settlement, and from now on the name German Settlement disappears in favor of the well known name North Prairie.

It was about this time, after the conclusion of the Franco-German war of 1870-71,



Fr. Tomazin

that the first immigrants of Polish nationality arrived at North Prairie and settled within the boundaries of the parish. And this immigration continued for several years, until the Polish element by far outnumbered any other nationality, or even all others combined.

North Prairie — Holy Cross Parish

The creation of the new Vicariate Apostolic of Northern Minnesota, which took place in 1875, with Rt. Rev. Bishop Ruppert Seidenbusch, O. S. B., D. D., as first Vicar Apostolic, gave new impetus to the cause of Catholicity in the northern half of the state, and also affected the mission at North Prairie. Father Joseph Vill, O. S. B., had been attending Holy Cross Church from St. John's more or less regularly every other Sunday for over a year, when Bishop Seidenbusch decided to give North Prairie a resident Pastor in the person of the newly ordained Father Edward J. Nagl. Father Nagl arrived in 1876, on or about the tenth day of October, and took his residence, in absence of a parish house, in a "suite of rooms" over Geissel's store.

His first work was the erection of a priest's residence, which was built to the East of the old church. It was finished in 1878, and continued in use as residence for the Pastor seventeen years, when it was turned over to the Sisters of St. Benedict.

The next step forward, naturally, was the building of a new church, to take the place of the old log church, which had become entirely inadequate to the needs of the Parish. Everybody was anxious to see the work started; but Fr. Nagl had made up his mind not to begin with the building until he had a certain amount of money on hand, so that the debt remaining would not mean too much of a burden upon the young Parish, whose members were all more or less poor beginners. Money was promised and paid in slowly, and after about two

years of work in this direction, Father Nagl was ready to draw the plans and purchase the lumber. A brick veneer structure was decided on, of gothic design, and about 40 by 120 feet in size. The lumber was bought from Fifield's Mill, near Morrill, at a very reasonable figure, and the year 1882 was largely spent in hauling material, which the farmers did



Rt. Rev. Msgr. Edward J. Nagl
Pastor 1876 - 1893