

St. Stanislaus Kostka — the first Polish-Catholic Church in Winona. This drawing is apparently of the church after it was expanded and brick veneered by Father Romvald Byzewski. [Photo taken from the Courier, May 13, 1971.]



# Polish history in Winona -

## Part II

The Winona Saturday Morning Post

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By Frances Bowler Edstrom

*Derdowski apparently wrote many poems about the Winona area, and it's a pity they aren't as much a part of our city's written history as is the story of Wenonah.*

*According to Lambert Kowalewski, Poland would like to have Derdowski's remains to re-bury near his monument. What then would remain in Winona of this great man?*

Religion has always been an extremely important aspect of the Pole's life. Most Poles are Catholics, as was the case with the early Polish settlers in Winona. At first, however, the Poles didn't have a church of their own, nor even a priest. The very earliest settlers worshipped at St. Thomas Church, the only Catholic Church in Winona at that time. Since they didn't speak much English, they derived little in the way of spiritual counsel from these services. Because most of the Kashubian Poles were bilingual, German being their second language due to the effects of Germanization, they later attended the German Catholic Church, St. Joseph's. St. Joseph's was situated on the corner of 5th and Lafayette, where the Piggly Wiggly store is now. It was later torn down and its parishioners joined with those of St. Thomas to form the present Cathedral of the Sacred Heart.

Not only was St. Joseph's out of the way for them, but they felt uncomfortable attending a German church. Because of the occupation of Poland by Prussia, the Poles had a rather hard time becoming close to the Germans in Winona, even if it was church. They longed to have their own priests who spoke their language, and their own church. Poles were accustomed to going to their priest for advice on a variety of subjects, not only religious matters.



Finally, on April 12, 1871, the Polish community met to organize their own parish. Six men from the community (August Bambenek, Francis Drazkowski, Nicolaus Tryba, John Czapiewski, Martin Bambenek and August Cierzan) were appointed to get the job done. They solicited funds from the Polish community and were able to purchase lots 5 and 6 in block 16 of the Hamilton Addition for \$350. By February of 1872, they had spent \$950 on the new church, and it was ready for dedication that summer. The parishioners had to wait until the summer of 1873 to dedicate the church, since they didn't have their first resident pastor until then. In the interim, Father Alois Plut, pastor of St. Joseph's administered the new parish.

In June 1873, the first parish priest arrived, Father Joseph Juszkiewics, and the church was dedicated under the patronage of St. Stanislaus Kostka. Father Juszkiewics was succeeded in January 1875 by Father Alexander Michnowski, and in September of 1875, Father Romvald Byzewski arrived in Winona.

Father Byzewski not only was responsible for bringing Hieronim Derdowski to Winona, but under his guidance St. Stanislaus Kostka grew. He built an addition to the church, which doubled its capacity, and had it veneered with brick. He built the first St. Stanislaus school, a one-room affair, whose first teacher was Mr. Dominic Hamerski, who also doubled as church organist. In 1887, Father Byzewski expanded the school to six

rooms, and as Mr. Hamerski couldn't be expected to be everywhere at once, the Sisters of Notre Dame took over the job of teaching.

Father Byzewski resigned in 1890 and was succeeded by (in chronological order) Father Stanislaus Baranowski, Father C. Domagolski, Father J.H. Cieszynski and Father Anthony Klawiter. Then in the spring of 1894, the original church was torn down and on November 28 (Thanksgiving Day) 1895, the present structure was dedicated, under Rev James W.J. Pacholski.

Father Pacholski was in his element in Winona. He was Kashubian Pole, and Winona was the largest Kashubian settlement in the United States that was still pure Kashubian in character. Many clergymen at that time were bent upon dissipating the Polish nationalistic feelings of the faithful. The non-Polish hierarchy wanted more direct authority over the Poles, and felt that nationalistic feelings were contrary to their goals. They wanted the local clergy to encourage Americanization of the parishioners. A Leo M. Ochrymowycz (see credits) pointed out, the order or priorities of the hierarchy was Catholic-American-Polish.

The Winona Poles were definitely not of the same opinion as the church hierarchy and were not terribly subtle in letting their feelings be known. A young assistant priest, probably just trying to do his job once preached against the Polish National Alliance in his sermon. Without much hesitation, the parishioners registered their objections to his sermon by approaching the pulpit, grabbing the poor fellow, carrying him out of the church and dumping him in the street. I can imagine the young priest sitting there wondering which would be a safer move — requesting a transfer or transferring his allegiance. In any event he learned one thing about the Poles — they have never been indirect or wishy-washy when you cross them.



Father Pacholski shared the philosophy of his Kashubian parishioners; in fact, he was even more nationalistic than a good many of them. To him being Polish and being Catholic were the same thing, and being American was merely a by-product of immigration. Many times—in his sermons he would point out that in the old country, "you are born Polak, live Catholic and die Polak. Here it's different. Here you are born Polak, live Catholic and you die American. You can see that being Polak-Catholic-American is just your natural course."

Father Pacholski was so fervent in his nationalistic beliefs that he began a personal campaign to de-Germanize his parishioner's surnames. He strongly urged Poles whose forefathers had adopted German names, and who in some cases had had them for generations, to go back to the old Polish family name. Sometimes not even that was enough for Father Pacholski, so he tacked on a "ski" to some very respectable Polish names as a further improvement. At the turn of the century it became fashionable to Americanize names. This practice infuriated Father Pacholski and he denounced it as a "misconception of Americanization." His friend, Hieronim Derdowski, writing in *Wiarus*, call the practice *wielkie gupota*, or plain foolishness.

As you may have expected, Pacholski and Derdowski became fast friends. They fought side-by-side in their crusade for Polanization — Derdowski in his paper, Pacholski in his pulpit.

The Polish Catholic spirit thrived under the guidance of Father Pacholski. In 1905, the Polish families who had settled in the west end of town, and who had for years traveled to St. Stanislaus for church and school, organized their own parish. Their red brick church was dedicated under the patronage of St. Casimir in 1906.

Also in 1905, the St. Stanislaus school was expanded to seventeen classrooms. According to Lambert Kowalewski, even at the late date he attended St. Stan's School, the children were taught religion in Polish and learned all their prayers in Polish. That is not the case now, however. According to some stories, a tidy (and non-Polish) nun was cleaning the basement one day and discarded all the Polish catechisms. So, unless some untidy little Polish boy or girl took a catechism home and tucked it under the bed or behind the dresser, Polish catechisms and prayers survive only in childhood memories.

When Father Pacholski stated the order of priorities as Polish, Catholic, and American, he probably should have slipped "Democrat" in there, too. Winona Poles almost invariably voted the Democratic ticket. Derdowski in *Wiarus* continually urged the Poles to register to vote. Until 1897 in Minnesota it was possible for non-citizens to vote in all elections. Not until that law was changed did many of the Poles establish citizenship. Dr. William Crozier writes: "Between 1880 and 1905 the influence of the fourth ward increased as the number of persons of Polish ethnic stock increased. By 1905, the Polish ethnic stock group constituted the largest number of potential voters in the city unified by tradition and concentrated in one ward of the city. The Polish vote was unified, unlike the German vote which was affected by the split between Catholics and Lutherans. Polish people voted the Democratic ticket as if it were an article of faith. The fourth ward had the second highest number of potential voters and 53 percent of them were Polish."

Between 1880 and 1905 there were 16 Mayoralty elections in Winona — the Democratic candidate carried the fourth ward 14 times with an average of 63 percent of the total vote.

The fourth ward cast its vote for the Democratic candidate for Governor in every gubernatorial election with an average Democratic plurality of 65 percent.

Of the 13 Congressional elections during the period, the Democratic party won the fourth ward 12 times with an average 66 percent of the vote.

Even in 1896, the people of the fourth ward kept the faith and voted for William Jennings Bryan with 63 percent of the vote. Only in 1904 did the fourth ward support a Republican candidate for President — Theodore Roosevelt — a candidate who was uncommonly popular among immigrant groups.

The influence of the Polish vote was felt far beyond the fourth ward because quite often the pluralities generated there were sufficient to swing the city into the Democratic column."

I do not have figures on party affiliations of Winona Poles today, but I imagine that in the aftermath of the Second World War they probably don't vote in a bloc. According to Leo

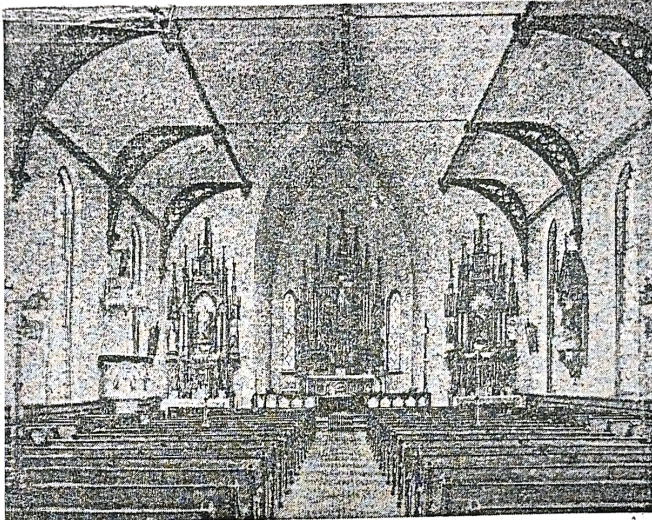
Ochrymowycz, "Because of their rapidly progressing Americanization, Poles were by then playing a serious role in American politics. Their feeling about the "old country" were still somewhat sentimental and not very practical in light of the international political situation, but they were patriotic feelings, demanding that our government plan for a larger and stronger Poland than ever. That was the price demanded by the Polish American Congress, organized in 1944 and which proclaimed a twofold purpose for its existence: undivided service, love and attachment to the United States, and full support of and aid to the Polish nation. Under pressure from the Democratic leadership of many states in the Union, but especially Illinois, Wisconsin, New York and Pennsylvania, Franklin Roosevelt made that promise to plan for a larger Poland than ever. But after the meeting at Yalta, he informed Stalin that in order not to lose the Polish votes, he preferred not to publish until after the elections their agreement whereby the eastern third of Poland, with the city of Lvov, went to the USSR, that is, to the Ukrainian and Bielo-Russian Republics. His concern for Polish feelings made him delay his unpleasant announcement until the elections were over, but it did not affect his given promise a bit."

Polanization had a somewhat adverse effect on the Poles' climb up the economic ladder. The language barrier effectively kept them out of, I would suspect, the managerial and tradesman occupations, except on a neighborhood level. There were, of course, Polish people who later established prominence and businesses in Winona, but the initial economic growth was not as rapid as it was in the English-speaking groups.

Presently, two examples of businesses begun by Polish Winonans that have continued to thrive are The Hot Fish Shop and Peerless Chain.

Joe Kowalewski had a tavern at 7th and Mankato called "The Black Four." His son Henry, who was the secretary/treasurer for the commercial fisherman in Minnesota started a little restaurant where the tavern was located, and called it The Hot Fish Shop. His first cook was Maximilian Rhunke. He moved the restaurant to its present location, and hired a second cook, Alphonse Bambenek, who is still the cook there. Henry's son, Lambert, took over the restaurant, expanded it and remodeled it. It isn't unusual to be far away from Winona and have someone say "Winona, Minnesota! Isn't that where The Hot Fish Shop is?"





The interior of St. Joseph's Catholic Church, where Winona Poles attended church before building St. Stanislaus Church. [Photo courtesy of Winona County Historical Society.]



St. Stanislaus Church, before the present school was built. Rev. Msgr. Nicéphore F. Grulkowski became pastor in 1946 and built an auditorium-gymnasium and extensively remodeled the 1905 school. [Photo courtesy of the Courier.]



# POLISH HISTORY IN WINONA · PART II continued May 6, '78

Peerless Chain was started with one chain-making machine by three brothers — Dick, Joe and Al Bambenek. From modest beginnings they grew until they practically covered the waterfront in downtown Winona. Finally they moved their entire operation east to a brand new plant, and they're still expanding. They are now one of the largest chain-making companies in the country, with a chain for every occasion. We once had to buy tire chains in Seattle, Washington to travel over the Cascade Mountains. Of course, they were Peerless chains from Winona.

There are many more Polish businesses in Winona, and the encapsulated version of the two I mentioned hardly do them justice. Time and space suggest that these stories may appear in full in a future issue of the Post.

Although the Poles in Winona had achieved so much among themselves — a sense of belonging, a community, a great sense of loyalty to their heritage, church and new country — they were, as a group, much of an enigma to many of the non-Polish townspeople.

There is evidence in the early English newspapers that the Poles were held in mild disdain. This may have been a reaction to Derdowski, however, who encouraged his readers to stay away from the English press, and told them not to air their dirty linen, that is, voice opinions and arguments in the English papers. In spite of references to "inebriated Polanders," though, the Poles invariably had fewer of their number in the annual police court statistics than most other groups.

The Poles were well-known as capable hard workers, (in fact Derdowski chastised them for working too hard for too little pay) so it was hard to make a case against the Poles on that ground. As one man wrote, "Common talk in our circles would have given no very unfavorable impression of 'Polander town,' but only an idea of a foreign body in our midst." The Poles were thought to be mostly poor, and dependent on the wealthier citizens for their livelihood. What a surprise St. Stanislaus Church, at an original cost of \$86,000, must have been. The same man wrote, "And in course of time an ironic justice wrote itself on Winona's skyline. That skyline, viewed from...across the lake, showed a long procession of church steeples — Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Congregational, Ger-

man Lutheran, German Catholic, Irish Catholic, German Methodist, and what not. But Polander town had nothing above its trees, until one year in the nineties there rose the largest thing of all, the dome of the cathedral. People wagged their heads and spoke of the priestly extortion of vast sums from the poor people of the lower end of the town. It was a remark not untimed with the flavor of wild grapes."

Today, Americanization is almost complete among Winona Poles. Very few Polish-Americans speak or read Polish. Their loyalty to Poland is for the most part not a loyalty to the country, but the word. To many of the young people names such as Gabrych, Bambenek, Pacholski and Kosciuszko mean ball parks and school buildings, not great men. Perhaps the new interest in "roots" will have an effect on Winona Poles and encourage them to preserve their Polish heritage, traditions, culture, and pride.

## *Authors Note:*

*I didn't just happen to know Winona Polish history nor was I able to research such an extensive topic in a week's time, so I should cite my sources. Years of research and a great love for Polish heritage is evident in these sources, and I am extremely grateful to these people for enabling me to bring the Polish story to Winona in such a young medium as the Post. These sources appear in a random order, as they were chosen from a pile on my desk:*

*Polish People of Southeastern Minnesota: Ethnic Heritage*, by Leo M. Ochrymowycz, Professor of Classics, St. Mary's College as published in *Perspectives on Regionalism*, edited by Ahmed El-Afandi, W.S.C.

*Pioneer Trouble Shooter*, by Helene Derdowska Zimmewicz as told to Nora H. O'Leary Sorem, published in *Gopher Historian*, Vol. 4 (Nov. 1949).

Notes from a lecture, *History of the Polish People at Winona, Minnesota*, given in 1955 by Paul Libera WCHS.

Graduation Thesis, *Development of a Community, Winona, Minn.*, 1940 by Paul Libera given at SMC.

*Millennial Souvenir Edition*, U. of M., 1960.

*A paper and tables prepared by Dr. William Crozier, SMC, and also, conversations between Dr. Crozier and myself.*

*The Courier, Thursday, May 13, 1971*

*Notes from talk given at Winona County Historical Society, May 26, 1962 by Josephine Kukowska.*

*Excerpt from "Forever As I Move: An American Autobiography," an unpublished Mss by Donald Campbell Babcock.*