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ars of Cotter



The original Cotter High School building, built in 1911 at the corner of Lafayette and Wabasha Streets. it was Society Photo)

By Jerome Christenson

Today was the first day of school at Cotter High School — 100 years ago.

The mortar was barely dry on the cornerstone of the new high-school building, laid only three weeks earlier, so the dozen highschool boys, the fifth- through eighth-graders, and the five Christian brothers who would teach them crowded into makeshift classrooms at St. Thomas parish school for the opening day of the school that Winona Bishop Patrick Heffron pledged would “receive better opportunity than they have up to the present.”

Catholic schools had been part of the Winona landscape almost from the city’s founding.

In 1864, the Bridgettine Sisters, an Irish order of nuns, established a school for St. Thomas parish, and with each new parish established in the growing city, a school to educate the children of the parish through eighth grade was soon added. A secondary school for girls, which would eventually become the College of St. Teresa, was opened by the Franciscan Sisters in 1884 and re-established 10 years later.

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But into the first decade of the 20th century, there was no Catholic secondary education for Winona boys.

Bishop Heffron would change that, announcing plans for a school that, in its name, would be “a perpetual remembrance of the late, lamented Bishop Cotter who you all loved and admired.” For teachers, Heffron turned to the Christian Brothers, a teaching order founded by Jean-Baptiste de la Salle. Initially rebuffed by the order’s provincial superior, Heffron elected to go over his head. He raised the issue with the pope during a visit to Rome and came home with a promise from the superior of the order for the brothers he needed to staff his new high school.

Finding a physical home for Cotter was a less daunting project. The bishop quietly arranged for the purchase of the J.L. Brink estate at the corner of Wabasha and Lafayette streets and contracted with F.H. Pozin to construct a solid brick building, 88 feet by 55 feet, with two stories and a basement. The cornerstone was laid Aug. 13, 1911. The building was dedicated on Thanksgiving Day and occupied the following Monday.

The school was open to Catholic boys from all city parishes, grades five through high school. It offered high-school boys either a “commercial” course or a full four-year curriculum. The first class, consisting of 10 boys who entered with one or two years of high school behind them, graduated in 1913. In 1915, the first three young men to begin their high-school education at Cotter received their diplomas.

The school soon felt the pressure of rapidly increasing enrollment. To cope with the demand for more seats in the upper grades, the fifth and sixth graders were returned to parish elementary schools in 1918, followed by seventh graders in 1921 and eighth graders a year later. Cotter would remain a four-year high school until 1980, when Cotter Junior High School was created.

The “Ram”blers

The boy’s high school, along with its counterpart Cathedral High School for girls, built literally in Cotter’s backyard at Wabasha and Center streets, were soon solidly entrenched in the Winona Community.

In 1924, a recreation center featuring a gym, auditorium and indoor swimming pool was built just south of the Cotter building. The Catholic Rec would be a gathering place and social center for the Winona Catholic community for decades to follow.

In the 1930s, Cotter athletes were given the sobriquet “Ramblers.” Cotter admissions director and informal historian Will Gibson said that at the time Catholic high schools played in a league of their own, which

meant long trips out of town for the rambling boys from Cotter. The stellar play of Number 19 Ray Ramczyk throughout the Cotter football squad's undefeated run to a state championship in 1931 cemented the association between "Ram" and Cotter, Gibson said.

However, contemporary Cotter fans might be somewhat nonplussed by one aspect of those games—seeing Cotter fans and players decked out in the purple and gold now worn by archrival Rochester Lourdes. Cotter's school colors, blue and white, weren't adopted until the 1950s, Gibson said.

Boys join girls, enrollment booms

New school colors were one of the lesser changes Cotter would experience at mid-century.

In March 1952, a letter from Bishop Edward Fitzgerald was read in all parishes of the city. It announced that beginning with the 1952-53 school year, Cotter and Cathedral high schools would merge, and for the first time Catholic boys and girls would attend high school—not only on the same block, but in the same building and classrooms.

The news was accepted by parents and parishioners, but the Christian Brothers, whose canonical rule of life then barred them from teaching mixed-gender classes, packed up and left Cotter 41 years after they arrived. They were replaced by the Sisters of St. Francis, priests of the diocese and the occasional lay teacher.

The first co-ed class consisted of 221 girls from Cathedral and 186 Cotter boys. A new building was under construction across Lafayette Street from the old Cotter building—the 22nd new Catholic school built in the diocese since 1950—but completion was delayed until fall 1954. So for the first year freshmen and sophomores were shoehorned into the old Cotter building, while junior and seniors took up temporary quarters in the St. Joseph's parish school at Fifth and Walnut streets — vacated when the St. Joseph and St. Thomas parishes merged to form the Cathedral parish in 1952.

The 1950s and early 1960s were heady times for school enrollment, as the baby boomer generation began crowding both public and parochial classrooms. By the end of the 1950s Cotter was bursting at the seams. A new addition, doubling the size of the building, was completed in 1962. Four years later, at the peak of the boom, Cotter enrolled 690 students in four grades.

A consolidation, then a new opportunity

Events far removed from its hallways and classrooms had a dramatic impact on Cotter beginning in the 1960s. Vatican II would shake the Catholic Church to its foundations, and changing opportunities for women saw once-crowded convents and rectories emptying as priests and the religious elected to re-enter the secular world.

The impact on Catholic schools was enormous. Religious teachers, who provided their services at a fraction of the cost of lay teachers, were no longer available, putting school budgets under enormous strain. In

1966, Cotter was staffed by five diocesan priests and 17 sisters. Twenty years later, only one nun and a half-time priest remained on the Cotter faculty.

To meet the dual challenge of shrinking enrollment and rising costs, Winona's Catholic schools consolidated in 1985, forming Winona Area Catholic Schools. The merger brought Cotter High School and St. Mary's, Cathedral, and St. Stan's parish schools under one administrative umbrella. Cotter Junior High School, created in 1980, was incorporated into St. Stan's middle school.

In 1987 the five founders of the Fastenal Corporation, four of them Cotter alumni, formed the Hiawatha Education Foundation, endowing it with a million shares of Fastenal stock from the company's initial public offering.

During the next five years, endowments from the foundation would reshape Cotter literally from the ground up.

In 1988 the foundation offered Cotter \$5.3 million on the condition that it become independent of WACS. Facing a \$100,000 budget deficit and shrinking enrollment, the Cotter board and Winona Catholic parishes agreed to accept the offer and the terms associated with it.

In 1989, after years of declining enrollment, the College of St. Teresa closed its doors and put its campus on the market. The foundation purchased the campus and proposed moving Cotter High School to the vacant campus.

In 1992, with the blessing of Bishop John Vlazny and under the leadership of President Jim Devine, Cotter packed up and moved across town, settling into 80-year-old buildings remodeled to be a state-of-the-art high school campus. The “new” Cotter would be at the forefront of the technological revolution sweeping through education at all levels in the 1990s.

With networked computers in every classroom, digital video and extensive computer labs for students and faculty, and backed by \$2 million from the foundation, Cotter was indeed going for the “wild, crazy, fun exciting journey” Devine promised when he was appointed Cotter’s first president.

Associated with the “new” Cotter, but operating independently, were the Minnesota Academy of Mathematics and Science, a preparatory school for the arts, and an international residence center.

Devine’s journey was tragically cut short. In 1994 it was revealed he had cancer. He died in October 1995.

Still, innovation continued. In the summer of 1995, at a time when most people were only vaguely aware of the existence of the Internet, Cotter administrators announced the creation of the Virtual School of Winona. Backed by the Fastenal founder’s foundation, the goal of the Virtual School was to put a networked computer in the home of every Cotter student, digitally linking them with each other, their school and the world.

This fall, more than 100 students from around the world are classmates with students whose mothers, grandfathers and great grandfathers earned Cotter diplomas.

Beginning its second century, Cotter remains firmly linked to the Winona community and the world.

And so the journey continues.