

Started by Notre Dame . . . Early Iowa Church Just a Memory

Not far off Highway 30, about 25 miles west of Cedar Rapids, on the road to Marshalltown, a small granite tombstone tells the once glorious hopes of a group of Holy Cross Fathers who journeyed west by ox cart from the now famous Notre Dame University to found a religious institution in Iowa.

But history and people's ambitions play funny tricks. In the Benton County town of Keystone, Iowa, in the Archdiocese of Dubuque, where there was once a flourishing Catholic community, today stands only a recently refurbished cemetery gate, four cement blocks showing the outline of where the church once stood and row after row of weather-beaten tombstones that carry the history of the Murphys, Mulligans, Muldoons and O'Briens that migrated from counties Kerry, Kilkenny and Tipperary to central Iowa's fertile plains only to have their descendants move on to the proverbial greener pastures.

Civil War Days

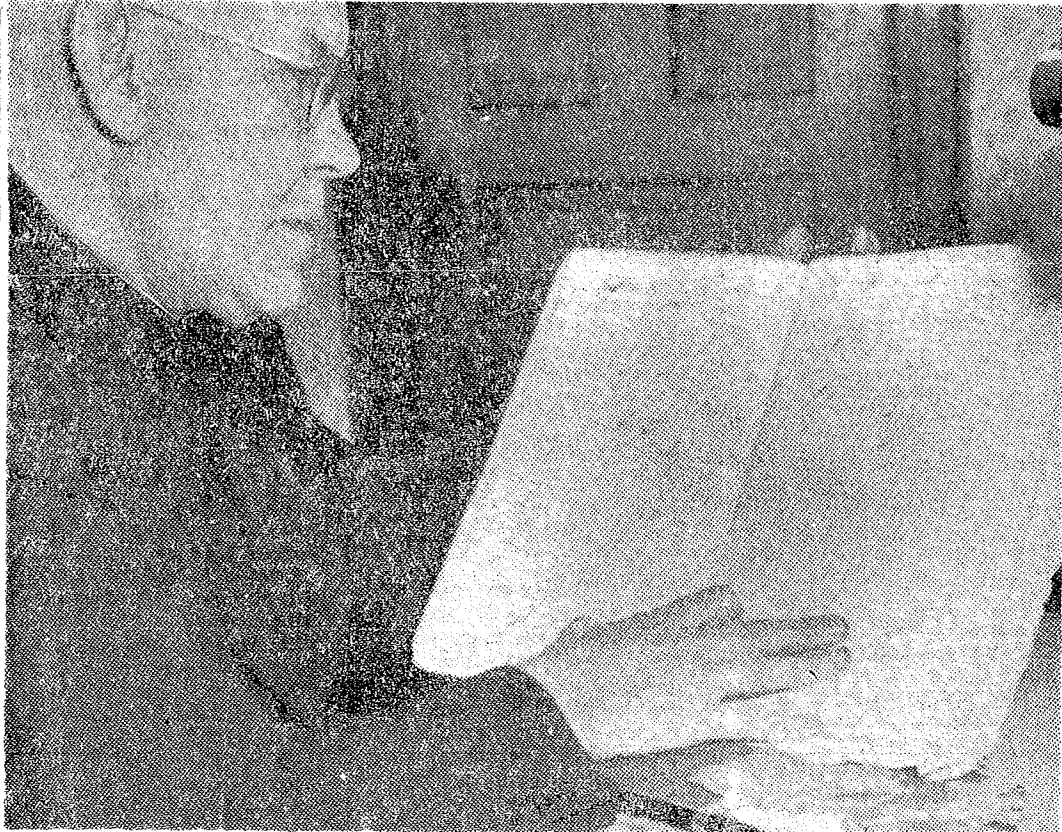
But the story goes back to Civil War days when Francis Murphy, whose two sons were enrolled at Notre Dame, deeded two sections of land to Notre Dame University in payment for their tuition. This was back in January 1863.

Three years later the provincial of the Holy Cross Fathers sent the Rev. Paul E. Gillin, together with Brothers Matthew, Cesaire and Aloysius, to take possession of the recently acquired land.

Some pioneers like to think that Keystone was destined to become the site of the now great Indiana University but records show that Notre Dame at the

time Father Paul reached Keystone was already a flourishing institution of learning.

And this is not mere guesswork because Brother Aloysius, a whiz at keeping records, had at his early age (he was less than 25) been assigned to bookkeeping tasks not only in Indiana but at the Holy



The Rev. Francis Churchill, present pastor of Immaculate Conception Church, Van Horne, looks over some of the entries made by Brother Aloysius in his "journal and day book" which carried notations from Notre Dame University as well as the

Cross Fathers' establishments in Ohio and Michigan.

Brought Notre Dame Records So complete were his records that when the Brother was assigned to Keystone he brought along his "journal and day book." Portions of his bookkeeping from the three Holy Cross foundations mentioned above are still in the archives of Immaculate Conception parish, Van Horne.

The financial records of Notre Dame University from January 1863 to April 1864 are mingled

with Father Paul's baptismal activity in the early days of the Keystone mission. Brother Aloysius recorded such sundry items as \$61.75 spent for butter in the month of March, 1864, for the University. The amount spent at Notre Dame for cheese in the same month totaled \$40.00 even.

College professors apparently weren't so convention minded in the early days. For at a time when conventions normally ran heavy Brother Aloysius dispensed only

Keystone foundation and Holy Cross Houses in Ohio and Michigan. The entries were not made hastily as can be seen from the elaborate and unusual script.

\$23.41 for such expenses. And, too, Notre Dame couldn't have been so expansion minded back 93 years ago because during February of 1863 Brother Aloysius paid out only \$1.25 for carpenter work.

Benton County took on new luster, religious-wise, when the indomitable Father Paul arrived. From the first instance of his stay in Iowa he had assistants which freed him to travel the prairies to announce the "glad tidings" to ever increasing numbers of immigrants.



A small granite marker reading "Brother Aloysius C.S.C. (Edward Barnes) Notre Dame, Indiana, Oct. 28, 1843—July 25, 1869" tells the story of this Holy Cross Brother, buried in the Holy Cross Cemetery near Keystone. The cause of death for the 26-year-old Brother, who held many responsible positions in his Order, is not recorded in the parish annals.

A surviving pioneer, Mrs. Agnes Green, now living in Van Horne, tells how Father Paul journeyed East to encourage Irish immigrants to make their home in mid-Iowa.

A glance at the baptismal record and Brother Aloysius' parish financial history tells of Father Paul's success in bringing the Irish to the Keystone area. The first baptism recorded in Keystone's Holy Cross parish is July 16, 1866: "Patrick, son of Michael Dunn and Elizabeth Connors."

The first marriage performed by Father Paul was Michael Kelly and Bridget Ryan. And wouldn't you know, it was witnessed by John Callahan and Mary Ann Kelly.

Since Father Paul had clerical assistants he, with his unbounded energy, was free to travel about in the lovely Iowa fall weather and long lasting spring and summer in search of Catholics who needed ministrations.

Visited Indian Territory

And from the records there were plenty of them. Like Iowa's pioneer bishop, Matthias Loras, he made long trips—even into Indian territory—in search of converts

and those desiring baptism.

Holy Cross records show that Father Paul made not only one but several trips to such distant points as Lansing (and Waterville, which is in the Lansing deanery), Austin, Rochester and Brownsville, all in Minnesota, and "Shakopee" in the same state.

Parishes in the Archdiocese of Dubuque that benefited from Father Paul's itinerant services include Anamosa, Waverly (he baptized five there on his first trip), Cresco, Forest City, Vinton, Belle Plaine and Dysart. Sometimes, anticipating the strenuous work, he took along his assistant, Father Ford, C.S.C.

Father Paul was a familiar figure not only in Benton County but in northeastern Iowa. Pioneers like to tell the story of how he would ride into town on his horse "Sarsfield" and announce that Mass would be said on the morrow at the Burke's or Regan's.

Good Business Man

But besides being a genuine spiritual father, the Holy Cross priest was a good business man, a trait he probably learned from his association with Brother Aloysius. He

induced many Catholics to settle at Holy Cross, originally known as Luzerne. In a few years he disposed of 1,280 acres keeping out only five for church and cemetery.

He built a church in 1869 that was 30 by 60 in dimensions. According to the records the collection to start the church amounted to \$69.00.

But Brother Aloysius, the financial wizard, died prematurely in the summer the church was built. At the age of 26 his life was cut short and the Fathers buried him in the shadow of Iowa's prairie church where today a simple marker tells the story of his work among early Hawkeye Catholics.

The parish records show, however, that the vital Irish stronghold was ambitious to further the work of the church.

Parish Festival

At a parish festival to help pay off the church indebtedness in the summer of 1874 the recording brother noted that dinner for himself and his horse cost \$1.00. Other expenses included a harness for \$30.00 which undoubtedly was given as a prize; \$10.00 for an accordion player to furnish entertainment for the festival; \$1.00 for syrup; \$5.00 for lime and \$3.00 to pay for visiting guests who ate their meals at the festival.

In his enthusiasm to record the expenses incurred, the brother forgot to announce how much was taken in at the jamboree.

The same bookkeeper tells positively that few rents were collected four times a year and the price depended on the position the churchgoer sat, either north or south, front or back. The average donation was \$2.50 a quarter. Some paid as high as \$15.00 yearly dues.

Brought Germans Too

The same parish record also reveal that Father Paul, who's last name was Gillen, was not only Irish minded. The faith was for all. But while the records do show an abundance of names like O'Brien, Powers, Donnelly, McKenna and Burke there are other prominent entries such as Faulhauber and Meyocks.

The last parish entry by fabulous Father Paul is the marriage of John Trainor and Frankie Mahoney. That was November 25, 1880.

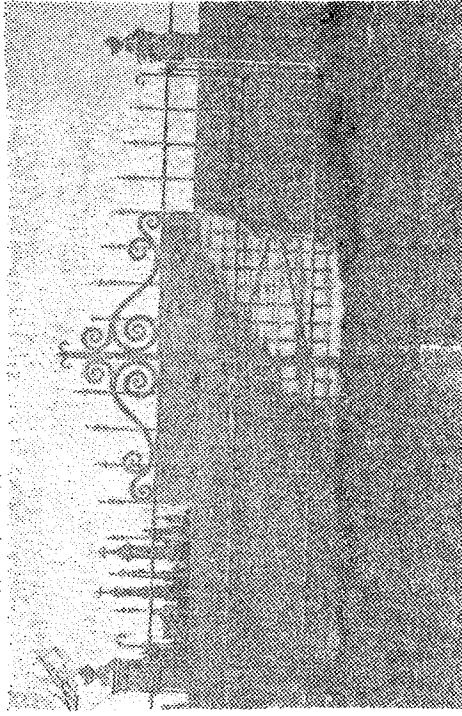
Some eight years before, the five lonely acres had been deeded to the "Rt. Rev. John Hennessy, Bishop of Dubuque, by Notre Dame."

Served by Diocese

In 1888 a diocesan priest was named pastor and the Holy Cross Fathers returned to Notre Dame leaving behind a glorious trail of hard work, a work well done and a sparkling page in the annals of the Catholic Church in Iowa.

While their departure is now decades old the small granite tombstone of Brother Aloysius tells a tale only possible for those who love God's kingdom and sacrifice themselves for its expansion.

As the years rolled on and early settlers moved away, the Holy Cross Church at Keystone became a mission of Van Horne. In 1928 the last Mass was said in the frame church and the mission was closed. But today its altars are still in service. When the church was dismantled the three altars were placed in the newly established church of St. Peter Claver in Waterloo where today they are still in use.



A cement walk behind the cemetery gates one time led to the 30 x 60 frame church built by the Holy Cross Fathers at Keystone near Van Horne. The church was demolished in the late 30s and today only four cement blocks show the outline of where it once stood. As so often happens the parish cemetery was in the church courtyard proper. Accounts on some of the tombstones tell of people born in the 1780s and the county in Ireland that was once their home.