

SAINT CATHERINE'S

St. Catherine's parish was established in 1865. But for many years prior to that date, Mass was said in the homes of the early settlers. Missionaries traveled through the heavily wooded countryside on foot or horseback. They came from Mendota to Shakopee, Marystown and the St. Catherine area. The first Mass was said in 1857 by Father Benedict Heindel, O.S.B., in the log cabin home of Mathew and Winnifred Donnelly. Father Heindel carried the altar stone with him and Winnifred Donnelly prepared the communion hosts. The sacraments of Baptism and Penance were also administered in the Donnelly home. This home still stands on its original site west of the present church. In now forms a part of the Gordon Diethel home.

Parish records also mention Mass being said in the log cabin home of the John Casey family. Later this farm was purchased by Patrick and Rose McFadden. The farm is now owned by Donald and Virginia (Doherty) Odette.

In the mid 1850's, settlers came into this area from Ireland. Michal O'Herns, Michael McMahons and Mathew Donnellys were some of the first to arrive. These early pioneers settled around the lake, no doubt this picturesque setting reminded them of their homeland. Thomas and Maurice, twin sons of Michael and Margaret McMahon were among the first children in the area. The Cases, Carneys, Conroys, Corcorans, Deegans, Deelys, Doyles, Dohertys, Donohues, Driscols, Gradys, Hylands, Hickeys, Kenneficks, Keatings, Lanigans, Mulkerns, Marrinans, Neilens, O'Flynn's, O'Keefes, O'Connors, Pynes, Ryans, Reedys, Stevens and Sheehans were among some of the earliest settlers.

On February 12, 1865, Father Alois Plut, a native of Austria, was ordained at the Cathedral of St. Paul by Bishop Grace. Father Plut later became the first resident pastor of St. Catherine's. On year following his ordination, Father Plut was assigned to the parish of New Prague. He was also given the missions of St. Benedict, St. Scholastica at Heidelberg, St. Patrick's and St. Catherine's. At this time, there were also plans underway to build a church at St. Catherine's. Through the generosity of Mathew Donnelly and Michael McMahon, who owned adjoining farms, 10 acres of land were donated as church property. Father Plut's pastorate in New Prague lasted only one and a half years, put in that short time, he built three churches. One at New Prague, one at St. Benedict's and St. Catherine's. St. Catherine's was erected in 1867. On February 19, 1877 St. Catherine's was incorporated by Bishop Grace, Father Ravoux, Vicar General and Father J. Knauf, pastor of St. Catherine's at the time.

There were many difficult times for the early settlers. The men would leave their homes in the early spring for railroad work around Mendota, not returning until

fall. Then they would spend their winters clearing the land, cutting down trees for buildings and firewood. Sickness came, too ... certainly one of the greatest tragedies was the death of four children of Mr. and Mrs. Patrick Keating. All four children died within a week of diphtheria ... a disease we seldom hear of today.

On June 11, 1896, another tragedy occurred. Lightning struck the church of St. Catherine's, burning it to the ground. But a new church, the present one, was built the same year at a cost of only \$3,509.72.

These were horse and buggy days. A few of the young men in the parish had driving horses and top buggies. Michael and Margaret Hickey arrived at church in their two passenger cart drawn by a mule. The Thomas Donnelly's and Anthony Doherty families had surreys. The Simon and Patrick Hickey families came in their carriages. A stable was built at this time to shelter the priest's team of horses. He drove from St. Patrick's every second Sunday to say Mass. Father Rice, an elderly priest was the pastor of St. Catherine's in 1919. He said, "There's no reason on God's green earth why St. Catherine's can't have Mass every Sunday!" From that day to this ... so it has been.

Before telephones were commonplace in the country, the tolling of the church bell was a signal of a death in the community. The cemetery was in use one year before the church was built. Martin McMahon, a cousin of the O'Flynn's was buried there in 1866, followed by other early pioneers. Bridget Sheehan was buried in 1881, Catherine Neilen in 1887 and John Casey, one of the organizers of the parish, in 1896.

The late 1800s saw the arrival of the Sheas, Geehans, Reddings, Ryans, Farrells, Vaughans, Berrys, Birchs, Lenihans, Casselius and Roachs. These families came from as far away as Ireland and as near as St. Patrick. St. Catherine's parish was growing as sons and daughters of the very early pioneers married and remained in the parish.

In the year 1910, during Father John Fahey's pastorate, the church was painted. Father Fahey also encouraged the parishioners to donate a stained glass window in memory of a loved one. These windows replaced the clear glass windows with the pale blue checks. The first confessional was also erected in 1910.

October 14, 1918 was the date of the first motor driven funeral hearse at St. Catherine's, bearing the remains of Patrick H. Doherty. Before this time, the hearse was drawn by a team of black horses, followed by the horse drawn buggies of mourners and friends.

In 1919, when Father Rice was pastor, the cemetery was fenced and the large wrought iron gate bearing the parish name was installed. Considerable work was

completed on the landscape surrounding the church. The improvements added much to the beauty of the site.

Additional improvements were made in 1925 when Mrs. Minnie O'Keefe donated the new Stations of the Cross to the church in memory of her late husband, Mathew. It was also at this time, that Father Cyril Ferrell, pastor, traveled to Frontenac and arranged for the Ursuline Sisters to come to St. Catherine's to teach summer catechism classes. The summer classes continued for many years until replaced by the CCD classes. Father Farrell is remembered, not only as a great spiritual leader, but also as a great civic leader. Constantly striving to improve the community for his parishioners, he became involved in the development of roads and schools. Although unfamiliar with the techniques of farming, he was an eager student of the subject, always bowing to the knowledge of his parishioners on that matter.

1926 marked the beginning of the church basement excavation. A furnace was installed and the two wood stoves and the small stove in the sacristy were removed. Electricity was installed in 1939.

In 1950 the entire basement excavation began providing the parish with a large dining hall, a complete kitchen, rest rooms and a well. These improvements cost each parishioner \$300. Costly at the time perhaps, these improvements might well be claimed as some of the best, for the church hall has served the community well ... chicken dinners, raffles, card parties, rummage sales, pancake breakfasts and bake sales, to mention only a few, are among the successful fund-raisers. Bridal showers and lunches following funerals provide a real service to parish members.

In 1954, under the guidance of Pastor Father Bonin, the cemetery association was established. Joseph Shea, Joseph Vaughan and Francis Doyle served as the first officers. The Board has grown to five members today, plus a bookkeeper. Elizabeth Doyle, wife of Francis, serves as bookkeeper. Gone are the days when each family cut the grass on their own lot, or walked through grass knee-high. The cemetery today is a place of beauty. It is truly a labor of love, for no board member receives any salary for his work.

In 1962, under the direction of Father Otto Neudecker, St. Catherine's offered the first CCD classes. An assurance that St. Catherine's young people would receive continuous religious training. It has proven to be a great success.

For many years the altar linens were adorned with beautiful handmade lace crocheted by Mrs. Michael (Mary) Stevens and Mrs. William (Josephine) Doyle. The tradition of the ladies of the parish caring for the church continues through the Altar and Rosary Society. The Society takes great pride in caring for the altar linens and priest's vestments, as well as the general cleaning of the church.

The 70's have seen many improvements to the interior of the church. In 1971, the church was carpeted. Along with the beauty it provided, the many footsteps were quieted. During this past year a great deal of work has been completed in the sanctuary. The high altar was moved closer to the wall, allowing more space in the sanctuary. A magnificent wrought iron altar was donated by Mr. and Mrs. Joseph She, Sr. A lectern was donated by Mrs. Leo Shea in memory of her late husband. A lector's chair was a gift from Mr. and Mrs. Norbert Seuer. Wrought iron acolytes' chairs were donated by Mr. and Mrs. Tim Killeen. Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Williamson donated the Celebrant's chair. The large crucifix was a gift from Mr. and Mrs. Elmer O'Hern, and an Easter candelabra was a gift from Mrs. Barbara Perry. The credence table was donated by Mr. and Mrs. Eugene O'Hern. In 1978, Mrs. Linda Cummings, Mr. and Mrs. James Luddewese, Mr. and Mrs. Eugene O'Hern and Mr. and Mrs. James Shea, donated the electric organ. Prior to this, the Michael Doyle family donated a parson's bench.

In was also in the 70's that the first 50th Anniversary Mass was said at St. Catherine's. On June 19th, 1973, a concelebrated Mass marked the 50th Anniversary of Joseph and Margaret (Donnelly) She. Mr. and Mrs. Shea were married in St. Catherine's church in 1923. Father Edward Grogan of New York, a cousin of Joe's and Father Joseph Curran of Philadelphia, a cousin of Margaret's assisted Father Brian Keany at the anniversary celebration.

St. Catherine's parish has been blessed in many ways throughout its history. To the many priests who have served the parish loyally, there are no words to show our thankfulness, appreciation and admiration. All noble men of God displaying noble and courageous leadership. May we always remember them in our prayers.

The little white frame church, framed by towering trees, perched high on a hill overlooking the lake, has captured the admiration of many passers-by over the years. The small cemetery behind the church, with its monuments of various shapes and sizes, is sheltered by wooded land on three sides. Some of the monuments are large, some broad. Some terribly old, some just a simple slab of white marble. But each important for they mark the resting place of some of St. Catherine's earliest parishioners. Perhaps to some, it's just a humble country cemetery. But to many, it's an anchor with the past and a witness to a legacy of loyalty to the future.

Form the descendants of the pioneers and early settlers, to those who have joined in recent years, St. Catherine's is also blessed with exceptionally cooperative parishioners. All deserve the highest praise. It is indeed noteworthy to mention members of St. Catherine's who are 4th generation parishioners. Elizabeth Doyle, great-granddaughter of the Charles Kenneficks; Steven Doyle, Mary Elizabeth Dillingham and Catherine Pipkorn, great-grandchildren of the Michael Doyles; Virginia Odette, great-granddaughter of the Thomas Dohertys; Elmer O'Hern, great-grandson of the Michael O'Herns; and James and Joseph

Shea, Jr., great grandsons of the Mathew Donnellys ... in whose log cabin home this all began 122 years ago.

Proudly we list the young women of St. Catherine's parish who have dedicated their lives to the service of God.

- Sister Anysia, C.S.J. (Margaret Keating) Daughter of John and Nora
- Sister Sophia, C.S.J., (Catherine Keating) Daughter of John and Nora
- Sister Valeria, O.S.B., (Mary Prchal) Daughter of Frank and Mary
- Sister Carmeline, O.S.B., (Rose Prchal) Daughter of Frank and Mary
- Sister Toma, O.P. (Clara Ryan) Daughter of Thomas and Mary
- Sister Cyril, O.S.U. (Marie Flynn) Daughter of Michael and Delia
- Sister Therese, O.S.U. (Ella Vaughan) Daughter of John and Bridget
- Sister Angela, O.S. U. (Elizabeth Vaughan) Daughter of John and Bridget
- Sister Norine, C.S.J., (Florence Kennefick) Daughter of Thomas and Ellen

Sister Valeria is 96 years of age and lives at the St. Paul Priory and works with the Senior Citizens. Sister Carmeline is a nurse in a North Dakota hospital. Sister Angela is in Frontenac and leads a very useful and active life. The other sisters have gone to their Heavenly home – may they rest in peace.

St. Catherine's parish has never had one of its own young men ordained. However, the grandparents to two priests lived in the parish most of their lives. David and Nancy Roach resided in St. Catherine's and their home was a close resemblance of the little home at Nazareth – its simplicity and brotherly love, an example to all. Perhaps in a small way, St. Catherine's parish may lay claim to their two grandsons, Archbishop John R. Roach, son of Simon and Mary; and Father Francis Roach, son of Frank and Catherine.

I am indebted to the following people for their assistance: Sister Amelia Frances, librarian at the St. Paul Seminary; Sister Zacchaeus, O.P., (Ethel Ryan), a great-granddaughter of the Michael Hickeys and presently teaching in the Chicago area; Joseph and Margaret Shea, Virginia Odette, Elizabeth McMahon and Elizabeth Doyle. I apologize for any errors or omissions. Writing this history brought back many memories of a parish I knew and loved ... and still do.

Margaret A. Doherty

About the Author

Margaret A Doherty, born on May 4, 1984 to Patrick and Margaret (Hickey) Doherty, is the granddaughter of early pioneers Michael Hickey and Thomas Doherty. She attended Bethlehem Academy in Faribault, Minn. And taught school in the surrounding rural area for five years prior to her marriage to Anthony V. Doherty, grandson of early pioneers Anthony Doherty and Michael

Sheehan. Mrs. Doherty and her late husband were members of St. Catherine's parish for 48 years. Mrs. Doherty presently resides in St. Paul.