

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE ST. LOUIS CATHOLIC CHURCH
AND ST. LOUIS CATHOLIC SCHOOL
1870-1980

This is just a partial history of the St. Louis Church and School and does not include many of the memorable events that we all cherish. May God bless and preserve our St. Louis School so that children for many years to come may have the opportunity to receive the many benefits and blessings that are derived from being a student of the St. Louis Catholic School.

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The history of the St. Louis Church of Nokomis dates back to 1859, but it wasn't until July 4, 1870, under the direction of Father Julian Turmell, that the congregation was organized with the incorporated title "St. Louis Roman Catholic Church of Nokomis, Montgomery County, Illinois." A little later on, an effort was made to change the name of St. Louis to St. Patrick but permission to do so would not be granted.

In 1871 it was decided to build a frame church 34x54 feet and 20 feet to the ceiling. At that time the congregation numbered only 25 families, about half of them Irish and half German. It was a difficult task to raise the \$2,300.00 needed to pay for the church; but with the generous aid of Nokomis merchants and other outsiders it was finally accomplished.

In 1873 Father Frederic Lohman, became the attending priest until March 1876 when he was succeeded by Reverend Peter Joseph Virnich, who remained in charge until October 1881. In the meantime the congregation had grown until the capacity of the church was taxed, and in 1879 an addition was built large enough to give the needed room. Shortly before Father Virnick left, a tract of land containing three acres was purchased for a cemetery, which in due time was consecrated.

Reverend John Strop became pastor in 1881 and in the following year bought a small frame building situated on the present church property for the sum of \$924.00, to be used as a rectory. In 1883 an addition was built and in 1884 Father Strop took up his residence there, thus becoming the first resident pastor. There was at this time a little more than a hundred families.

Reverend Patrick A. Lyons replaced Father Strop in November 1893 and remained until July 1897, when Reverend Clement Johannes was appointed pastor.

For some years the necessity of a new church had been recognized, and the new pastor was urged by his superior to make every effort in his power towards the attainment of that end. On May 1, 1898, a meeting was called to consider the matter. At this meeting the pastor offered to contribute \$1,000.00 toward the erection of a new and handsome church, and

aroused the enthusiasm of those present to such a degree that it was decided to make the effort. Plans were secured, and under the supervision of M. Ohlman, H.J. Bender and William Oberle directors, and David Herlihy and Frank Yackle, trustees, the contract was let to H. Bergefeldt of Effingham, and the work of the building began. On July 4, 1899, the cornerstone was laid with impressive ceremonies by the Very Reverend Vicar General, Timothy Hickey, in the presence of a great throng, notwithstanding the rain which was almost incessant throughout the day. Work continued from that time until completion was reached, and on May 24, 1900, Ascension Day, the finest church in Montgomery County was dedicated, a lasting and magnificent monument to the Catholics of Nokomis.

The building is constructed of limestone and pressed brick in Romanesque style, with trimmings of Bedford stone and a slate roof. It covers a ground space of 55x120 feet. The auditorium is 84 feet deep and 40 feet from floor to ceiling, with beautiful stained glass windows letting in plenty of light. A tower 130 feet high and surmounted by a large gilded cross rises from the southwest corner of the building, and contains a peal of three bells. A practical organ costing \$1,650.00 was built especially to fit the surroundings, adorns the gallery. The main altar at the opposite end was erected at a cost of \$1,000.00. The ceiling and side walls are beautifully frescoed. It is heated by steam and lighted with 236 incandescent lights. The cost of the church complete was \$27,000.00.

On the day of the dedication Bishop Ryan of Alton celebrated Mass at 7 O'clock in the old church and gave Holy Communion to the Confirmation class. At 10 O'clock the dedication of the new church began. Bishop Ryan preceded by a number of priests, proceeded from the rectory to the main entrance of the new church and there began the blessing of the structure. In the afternoon a class of 39 males and 27 females was confirmed.

On August 25th, St. Louis' Day of the same year, a peal of three bells was blessed. The largest bell, weighing 1,100 pounds, was blessed in honor of St. Louis; the second weighing 600 pounds,

in honor of St. Patrick, and the smallest, weighing 350 pounds, in honor of St. Boniface.

During the course of the year 1904, the old church was torn down and rebuilt at Witt, where it was given the name St. Barbara.

On August 6, 1907, a cyclone struck Nokomis and tore away the steeple of the church and also a part of the main roof; but the damage was fully covered by insurance, and soon a more beautiful and more substantial steeple replaced the old one. Together with the erection of a new steeple was also begun the building of a new rectory. It was completed towards the end of 1908 at a cost of \$10,000.00. The old rectory was moved to 522 Water Street, where it still stands today and is owned by Mr. William Saatkamp.

As a result of the sinking of two mines in the neighborhood of Nokomis, one in 1906 and the other in 1912, the congregation, and especially the number of children, had grown to such an extent that a school became imperative. A contract for a school and Sisters' residence combined was let at \$26,000.00. The work began in the spring of 1916 and the opening of school took place in September of 1917.

1917

It was the 30th day of August 1917 at 8:45 p.m. that the first six sisters arrived at the St. Louis School. The young ladies of the parish, along with Bertha Singer, (Father Johannes's house-keeper) gave them a hearty welcome. The sisters were to receive \$30.00 a month salary. By February 180 students had enrolled which included many who could not speak English. Some of the graduates that first year were: Edna Cassidy, Mary Jaros, Gladys Stoltz, Mary Cole, John Peiper, Leo Marley, Irene Alward, Francis Stauder and Sister Sylvaria (Spinner) who at the present is teaching Grades 1 and 2 at St. Louis School.

1918

In 1918 the third floor of the convent was furnished for girls to room and board at the school.

In October the never to be forgotten epidemic, the influenza, spread over the country and schools were closed for a month.

A gold medal for Christian Doctrine was bestowed on

Jennie Ronchetti. This had been donated by Miss Genevieve Bender.

1920

Enrollment was about the same as preceding years. In October Father Johannes was offered the piece of land behind the school for \$1500. As funds were low a bazaar was given at which \$1800.00 was cleared. It was a custom to have a bazaar each year to help the parish financially. Also plays were presented by the students and by the young ladies' Sadality. The school children usually gave three plays during the year. A play was given in honor of Father's Name Day, one at Christmas and another at graduation.

1923

In October 1923 the first class of violin players made their debut.

1929

All went well with St. Louis School until 1929 when due to financial problems the north-west room was closed. This same year Rev. Father Johannes received word from Bishop Griffin that Rome had honored him with the high mark of bestowing on him the title, Right Rev. Monsignor. This required much preparation on the part of the whole parish. A new energy seemed to enter into every parishioner and into every school child. The ladies of the parish prepared a grand banquet for the distinguished guests in the parish hall. A snow blizzard raved all night and only 36 of the 130 invited guests managed to be present. Because the invited prelates could not be present, the school children, the choir and some parishioners participated in the feast. The school children presented the Rev. Father with a \$10.00 gold piece, which one of the girls, Flora Balzarina, handed to him after she delivered a suitable address in his honor.

1931

In 1931 Monsignor Johannes announced that due to financial problems the school might have to be closed. To raise money a bazaar was held with \$700 being cleared. The school children were also very busy selling chances on different articles in order to help strengthen the financial situation. The 1-2-3

1971

In 1971 the parish center was completed. Until the opening of the parish center, the parish relied upon the South Public Grade School for its major functions. Over the years a fine relationship has existed with the public schools for which we are truly grateful.

1973

A new furnace was installed in the school.

1977

In September of 1977 Father Joseph Murray received an appointment to a parish without a school. This good, kind and generous pastor was replaced by Father Frank Westhoff as temporary pastor.

Father Herman Niebrugge became our pastor in November of 1977. He considered school important. Soon a parish council was formed followed by the organization of an active school board. Many improvements were made to the parish plant under his supervision.

1979

In August of 1979 Father Niebrugge was transferred to Mattoon, Illinois. All were saddened by his transfer after being here for a little over two years. Father John Savoree became our new pastor.

October 5, 1979 was a memorable time for the sisters and some of the parishioners. School was dismissed so the sisters and anyone else who cared to could travel to Chicago by bus to see and hear Pope John Paul II. There are many happy memories of this very special experience.

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Since the founding of St. Louis Parish and St. Louis School
there have been: 7 resident priests
104 school sisters
22 lay teachers

The largest enrollment was 214 in 1960-61

The smallest enrollment was 50 in 1942-43

The present enrollment is 130