



History of St. John Cantius Parish - Wilno, MN.

Saint John Cantius Church Centennial History 1883-1983
By Project Director and Writer Jean Guggisberg, Hills, MN.
p. 28-34. CAP at Orchard Lake.

"We Struggled and Stayed"

"Come to the fertile bluegrass region of Minnesota...It is blessed with the soil of the river bottoms and the climate of the mountains. It is the home of the cereal grains. Southwestern Minnesota is supplied with an abundance of pure, wholesome water. The surface of the land is made up of rolling prairies, interspersed with natural and domestic groves. The scenery is magnificent."

This is how the area in and around Lincoln County was advertised to an oppressed Polish people. They came here in the 1870's to seek their fortunes. Many of those first settlers who came brought their families, struggled, and stayed. Coming in 1882 were pioneer settlers John Politowski, Andrew Jerzak, John Popowski, John Kruck, Frank Janiszski and Martin Wexa. When they arrived, they found the land covered with knee-high prairie grasses. The only trees were young saplings growing near the sparse lakes and streams. Since these early settlers couldn't build wood homes, they built dugouts and then sod shanties. Imagine living in a sod shanty during a cold Minnesota winter!

In the early 1880's Wilno had no name. It was just a settlement. The land was owned by the Winona and St. Peter Railroad Company, a full subsidiary of the Northwestern Railroad Company of Chicago. Land documents dated March 14, 1882, indicate that pioneer parishioners Michael Felcyn, Waurzyn Felcyn and John Trojanowski purchased 40 acres from this company at a cost of \$80. These men, as trustees of St. Anton de Padua Church, specified the purpose of the purchase for a church, a schoolhouse, and a cemetery.

As more settlers arrived, St. John Cantius, a Polish theologian, was chosen as patron. Although the purchase was made in the name of St. Anton de Padua Church, a Civil Court determined in 1917 that the parish is and always has been St. John Cantius.

Repeated legend and many histories sometimes provide other versions of the Wilno settlement

In the early 1880's most of the land in Southwestern Minnesota was owned by the Northwestern Railroad Company of Chicago. Also at this time, the Diocese of St. Paul, Minnesota, was fortunate in having a very kind and energetic priest, in the person of Reverend John Ireland.

He, with untiring zeal, labored to populate the rich and fertile lands of Minnesota with as many Catholic families as possible.

To accomplish this, Bishop Ireland contacted the Northwestern Railroad Company of Chicago. During the course of their conversations, Bishop Ireland boldly asked the railroad executives to donate part of their land for churches. Churches would serve the needs of people who would settle the prairies near their railroad tracks. They granted his request and donated land for Catholic churches. Wilno was one of the places that shared in this offer, and thus began its existence.

Bishop Ireland, along with Reverend R. Byewski of Winona, Minnesota, took charge of the Polish people. These people had immigrated here to escape the oppression of three European Monarchs. They were looking for better living conditions, and to enjoy American freedom.

The Northwestern Railroad Company of Chicago was influenced to send an agent of Polish nationality to lay out a Polish Colony in Lincoln County, Minnesota. Anthony Klupp was sent with an offer of land for building a church and also an offer of 40 acres to lay out a cemetery. The offer resounded far and wide. Klupp let it be known that the Northwestern Railroad Company was offering Polish immigrants free railroad passage and enough land for a home, provided they purchase their farmland from the railroad. The Polish people came to settle the farms of Lincoln County.

It is difficult to separate the community of Wilno from the Church of St. John Cantius. The development of one is dependent on the development of the other.

The Polish people named the settlement Wilno. They compared it to a village in Poland by the same name. It was from this village of Vilna that most of them had immigrated.

Legend says that the first church constructed by Reverend Frank Grabowski in 1883, with funds from the railroad company, was the first Catholic edifice in Lincoln County. It was built upon the wind-blown prairies three miles north of the present (but then unestablished) village of Ivanhoe. It was a frame building, established with only a small parish house nearby and one other small, unfinished building which served as a residence, store, post office, and hotel. People who lived within a reasonable distance from Wilno, Catholic or not, came there to seek comfort in God. They came for religious guidance. Charter members were pioneer families of: Peter Bednarek, Adalbert Dabek, Michael Felcyn, Martin Frenski, Joseph Gladis, Jacob Gorecki, John Guza, John Hoffman, Stanislaus Hoffman, Stanislaus Jasinski, Andrew Jerzak, Martin Jankowski, John Korcal, John Popowski, John Skorczewski, John Stackowiak, and John Gonia. Membership of the church at organization was 80 families.

The railroad did one more thing for the Wilno parish before getting out of their affairs for a few years: they made Wilno a self-supporting parish. They did this by writing a contract establishing a five-cent an acre tax on all land previously owned by the railroad. This tax was to be donated to the church treasury for upkeep. The idea of the tax was not well received by the Poles, because it reminded them of conditions they had left in Poland. But this tax was to prove a blessing. It helped the church survive financially.

The first frame church was poorly constructed. Reverend Damian Koziol, the first resident priest, described it thusly:

"The church was a frame building with a poor ceiling, covered outside with shiplap, and topped with a leaky roof. Why, that church building was so flimsily constructed, that its deviation from the perpendicular was constantly shifting, being determined directly by the direction of the wind."

This building would later be replaced two times.

In 1885 the Reverend Henry Jazdziewski came to Wilno. Under his leadership, the parish prospered. Upon seeing the flimsy church building, he decided to build a sturdier one. He was a skilled carpenter, and in a short period and with the help of Martin Wexa, he built Wilno's second wooden church. Later that year, Reverend Jazdziewski built a parish house. On May 5, 1885, Michael Lipinski married Rose Skorczewski. They were the first couple married in St. John Cantius Church.

On May 31, 1893, the Articles of Incorporation for the Church of St. John Cantius were filed. Pastor at the time of incorporation was Reverend Alexander Zalewski. The documents were signed by Reverend Alexander Zalewski and lay parishioners Peter Bednarek and Roch Jablonski.

In the parish minutes of 1893, it is noted that many members were indebted to the parish. "Every man indebted to the parish for the last three years, in the case of a death in his family, has to pay a \$10 fine to the treasurer of said parish for the use of the cemetery."

On May 27, 1894, a parish meeting was held and it was agreed that fifteen sacks of oats would be donated to the pastor to feed his horse. On June 24, 1895, it was decided at a parish meeting that a new well would be dug. Each member was to pay fifty cents. The pastor was to collect from each parishioner and pay for the digging of the well.

On May 5, 1898, under the direction of Reverend John Andrezejewski, an assessment committee of eight was established to determine how much each parishioner was to give to the new church. Also on this date, a building committee of four, John Stachowiak, Roch Jablonski, Frances Schroeder and Anastazy Katowski, was chosen. The cost of the new structure was set from \$15,000 up to \$16,000, and Wilno was selected as the site for the new church. The new church was to be built where the old one now stands. Every parishioner was assessed \$120 for the new church.

On November 14, 1898, plans and specifications from J. Kretz were accepted for \$300. In 1900, Reverend John Andrzejewski advertised for sealed bids for the proposed construction of a brick church at Wilno.

About this time, the railroad was pursuing a line from Tyler to Astoria, South Dakota. The railmen came to Wilno to purchase land for the railroad's right-of-way. The proposed line would have crossed the land of Kasmer and Constance Pawlek, two brothers farming 600 acres on the outskirts of Wilno. They refused to sell their land at the offered price, so the railmen left Wilno and made the same cash offer to Michael Pukrop, who farmed near the outskirts of Ivanhoe. Pukrop accepted their money, and the railroad went into Ivanhoe instead of Wilno.

After the excavation and stone foundation for the new church were completed, further construction on the brick structure was delayed. The railroad company, after moving the railroad from Wilno to Ivanhoe, offered to move the church foundation from Wilno to Ivanhoe. The company offered a sum of \$15,000 to move the foundation. Following much controversy, the parishioners vetoed the move, and construction continued on the original spot.

Herman Jeub was hired as contractor. For a sum of \$15,252, he completed the structure in the spring of 1902. The total cost of the church was \$35,000.

The most impressive feature of the brick church was the two massive steeples. The tips of the steeples were 125 feet high. If you were traveling from Marshall, you could see those steeples. The Poles used them for landmarks to travel to Wilno for Sunday church.

St. John Cantius Church was dedicated on October 24, 1902. Bishop John Ireland attended the dedication, addressing nearly 1,500 people, and confirming 300 Wilno parishioners. Reverend Joseph Cieminski was the pastor, Father Andrezejewski having left after a confrontation over the organ.

A short time later, contractor Herman Jeub was recalled to repair a leaky roof. While making these repairs, a terrible accident happened. The following story appeared in the Ivanhoe Times:

Contractor Seriously Injured

Herman Jeub, the contractor who has just finished building the Polish Catholic Church at Wilno, was up repairing a leakage in the roof last Monday afternoon, when in some manner his foot slipped and he fell to the hard frozen ground some thirty feet below sustaining injuries of a very serious nature, which while it may not be fatal, will cripple him for life. The injured man was immediately taken to the home of Reverend Andrzejewski, where he received the best of care and medical aid. On Tuesday morning, Mr. Jeub was removed to a hospital at Minneapolis, accompanied by the Rev. Andrzejewski. This sad accident has cast a gloom over the entire community, as he was a man much thought of and well liked by all with whom he came in contact, and the fact that he had written to his wife and children in Minneapolis, saying that he would return home to them this week, makes the affair still more sad.

In 1905, at the annual parish meeting, it was decided not to limit the mass wine to \$10 a year, but to allow whatever amount was needed.

Father Cieminski recruited the Sisters of St. Francis of Rochester, Minnesota, in 1906. Until this time, lay teachers taught at Wilno's parochial school. These sisters stayed for six months, after which the school reverted to lay teachers.

In 1907, it was ordered that all delinquent members of this parish who could not pay their debts give a note for the entire amount which they owed at 6 percent interest.

The brick church did not stay new for long. In 1908, it was already necessary to paint the interior and repair the steeple. This happened because the church was not heated during the week.

Contributions to the church were often delinquent. In 1911, it was voted that those who paid only ten cents a Sunday for pew rent, and who did not give other support to the church, should not receive any services from the Pastor.

About 1911, the parish was assessed for the St. Paul Cathedral. This assessment remained unpaid and caused friction between the Bishop and the parish. In December of 1913, Father Francis Matz was removed by the Bishop and the church doors were closed until the debt was paid. Catherine Gorecki Ross tells, "I don't know why they didn't pay it. They paid part of it. Felix Janiszewski, he was a trustee, Kate Osowski and myself, the three of us went to see the Bishop. Kate Osowski, she paid the debt. No, it wasn't all in gold, she had silver too. I think it was about \$200. We went to the Bishop's house. He came down the steps, he was living in the old house in St. Paul, and this Janiszewski said, 'We come to see if we couldn't get a priest.' He (the Bishop) got real angry. He said, 'Well, when are you going to pay the dues for the Cathedral?' Here she (Kate Osowski) was, she had the silver. She says, 'I'm gonna pay it.' She handed him a bag of silver and stuff, there was paper money in it too. He didn't talk very much to us, just took that money and went upstairs. Then right away the next week they got a priest - Father Frank Rakowski."

Father Rakowski hired the School Sisters of Notre Dame in 1916. Thus began an era of Catholic education that lasted until 1947, when the sisters were removed by the Mother Superior. The parish supported the parochial school, and no children attending Wilno school had to pay for their education.

On May 14, 1917, a motion was made that electric lights be installed in the parish, the cost not to exceed \$500.

In May of 1918, three acres from the 40 acres belonging to the parish were sold to M.W. Panek at \$85 an acre. This was to be used for a road.

On May 9, 1920, parishioners decided that lots in Wilno would be sold only to people who belonged to the Catholic Church. This was a way to guarantee continued support for the church.

English was making headway even in this Polish community. In 1921, it was decided the Pastor would receive \$1300 pension if he presented the Gospel in English once a month. He was also to insure that the collection be taken up during Lent and on Holy Days. Otherwise he would receive \$1000 and no more.

The first electric lights were installed in the church in 1923 by Stanley Hoffman. It was a Delco battery plant. Donation for this was made by Louis Janiszski.

Father Anthony Brzoskowski called a meeting in May of 1925 regarding plans to build a new rectory. This was built by men of the parish. Walter Schaikowski was the foreman. During construction, there was a disagreement between Stanley Lesewski and Walter Schaikowski concerning Lesewski's work. Schaikowski did not like Lesewski's work, and in the ensuing argument, Schaikowski hit Lesewski in the head with a hammer and Lesewski stabbed Schaikowski with a knife. Schaikowski was badly injured, and construction was at a standstill until Schaikowski recovered his health.

Financial difficulties plagued the parish over the years. In 1926, at a parish meeting, another statement concerning delinquent church dues is found: "All who are paid up should be buried as parishioners. Those not paid up, must pay first before they will be buried."

On August 3, 1930, a severe hail and windstorm swept the area. Extensive damage was caused to the north side of the church, breaking many of the stained glass windows and destroying one. The insurance settlement was \$1531.13. Another \$800 had to be borrowed to repair the church, school and rectory. This was in the midst of the widespread economic depression and so raising money was difficult. There are notes that the old first church was sold at auction for cash.

The Golden Jubilee of this parish was celebrated September 25, 1934. His Excellency, Archbishop John G. Murray of St. Paul, celebrated a Pontifical High Mass. Former pastor Reverend J.F. Cieminski delivered the sermon. The Golden Jubilee was attended by a large gathering of members of the Catholic faith, as well as by protestants. Festivities were held throughout the day. The annual dinner, supper and bazaar were features of the celebration.

In 1946 the church was redecorated.

In May of 1948 the cemetery drew much attention. The lilac bushes planted over the years had become a virtual jungle of trees. These were removed, leaving huge holes and making it impossible to care for the grounds. It was voted that the grounds should be leveled and the tombstones removed and aligned.

The parish built a garage in July of 1948.

Reverend Andrew Wojciak was the priest who changed St. John Cantius Church the most. In 1952 he directed the digging of a large basement, and installed a fuel-oil furnace to replace the coal-burning one. Also added was a kitchen facility, modern in every aspect. The pews were moved to the basement while the interior of the church was remodeled and painted. J.V. Vanderbilt, an architect from Minneapolis, directed the project.

After the remodeling project was completed, the pews were moved back into the church. The board partition had been removed along with the names of the people who were renting them. The parishioners no longer had assigned seats. It was now permissible to sit anywhere

in the church.

"Father Andy" completed his modernization by "tuck-pointing" the bricks; that is, filling in the mortar between the bricks on the church exterior. Most of the money for the modernization program came from funds saved by the previous pastor, Father Frank Poplowski.

In 1952, Father Andy also purchased a new electric organ. It replaced the old pipe organ that had been in the church since it was built. Many people remember dismantling the pipe organ and claiming souvenirs. Other parts were sold to Vogelpuhis of New Him, Minnesota. With the removal of this organ, a beautiful rose window was discovered. It depicts the signs of the twelve Apostles.

A Tridium of Devotion (Three Days) opened the Diamond Jubilee celebration of St. John Cantius in October of 1959. The dates for the event centered around the celebration of the Feast of St. John Cantius on October 20. The first day was dedicated to the memory of the pioneers, founders and benefactors. The next day was designed as Vocation Day. Respect was paid to the priests and sisters who served and ministered to the parish by bringing the teachings of Christ into the hearts of all. The final day was dedicated as a day of Thanksgiving. Solemn High Mass was celebrated by Reverend Andrew Wojciak in the presence of His Excellency Alphonse Schladweiler, Bishop of New Ulm. The guest speaker was former pastor Reverend Frank Rakowski. At noon, a dinner was served to 400 parishioners and invited guests.

On June 5, 1960, Father Andy burned the church mortgage, two days before he left the parish. Father Andy was the last priest to have Sunday sermons in both Polish and English.

The next ten years, from 1960 until the arrival of Father Robert Goblirsch in 1970, were plagued with discontent. Monsignor Stanislaus Grabowski was removed from the parish by the Bishop following a death threat made by a parishioner.

Father Celestine Pistulka, the first non-Polish speaking priest, revived the Fourth of July celebrations. It was also during these years that the altar was turned to face the people and the first mass was said in English rather than Latin.

The second church was sold on bids by Father John Loch. The used lumber from this church was sold on auction on May 17, 1969. Wally Parulski, a parishioner, purchased the church-parish hall.

Reverend Larry Baumann tried to modernize the church interior. The traditional and well preserved decor was a source of pride in this Polish settlement. Because of conflicts over removing the statues and white-washing the interior, Father left on an unhappy note from his first parish assignment. After this disagreement, conflicts arose over almost every repair.

Bishop Alphonse J. Schiadweiler assigned Father Robert Goblirsch to this parish on September 30, 1970. Many parishioners cannot forget his first sermon. It was indeed a tirade. Father Goblirsch chastised the people, and criticized the condition of the parish and the reputation it had garnered. He listed all that had to be done, and said that he would gladly move on to another place. All the people needed do was to go to the Bishop, but Highway 14 was under

construction, so he suggested another route! After a beautiful Christmas service that year, Father and the people formed a compatible relationship.

Accomplishments over the last 12 years are a living tribute to this Polish parish, and especially to the untiring energy of "Father Bob". In 1971, publication of an annual parish roster commenced. It lists all parishioners, addresses, births in the parish, as well as deaths, and all circle and society members and chairman. Also listed are major events of the year. Father Bob compiles this for February publication. Also in 1971 began the Annual Cemetery Clean-up, and Annual Summer School for grades 1-8. In January of 1971, Father Bob had a car accident, totaling his vehicle. Parishioners collected \$1500 for him to purchase a new one.

The parish utility garage, or Golden Garage, was planned in February of 1972. It was finished for the Fourth of July at a cost of \$6104.88.

April 30, 1972 was the biggest church auction in parish history. The place was jammed to capacity. People were shuttled by tractor and trailer to church grounds, all the way from the cemetery. And then it started to rain. It rained all afternoon. All the sales were moved into the church. The church was mud from the top step to the bottom and all over the floor. Father Bob said, "It was a bloody mess. I could not cry and did. I just wanted to forget about it. It was so sad." All items on the auction sale were in the storage room in the church basement. Many of them also came from the attic in the convent. We sold old trunks of former nuns, classroom desks and materials, old statues that were not used, old furniture of the nuns, old censers, some candlesticks used for outdoor processions, end tables, pews from the old church, eighteen beds and two organs. We also had items from people like machinery, davenports, and appliances that they had on consignment. In all we grossed \$5776.58 and cleared about \$3500.

Also on April 30, 1972 Harold Diereckx tried to burn down the church. He had been hired by Father Baumann, and Father Baumann told Father Goblirsch to continue with Harold, as he was a good man. Harold began to work on one project after another. Then at the big auction, he made it look like someone threw gas on the floor and wanted to burn down the church. A few months later, he took toilet paper and rolled and unrolled it on the floor, making it look again like someone tried to burn the church down. At this point, the sheriff was called in and he became suspicious of Harold. A lie or polygraph test was given, and Harold confessed. A few years later, after psychiatric help failed, Harold died of a drug overdose.

In 1973, new steps were put on the front and back of the rectory. Both the rectory and the CCD Center were painted at a cost of \$1,700. A 10,000 gallon oil tank was installed in the church, and a church sign was erected.

In December of 1974, tuck pointing of the church exterior began. The lengthy process cost the parish \$42,000 and involved Father Bob in a lawsuit. When the original contractor was involved in a car accident and the tuck pointing process was halted, Father hired another firm to complete the job. The \$12,000 suit was settled out of court for \$4,000. Parishioners collected the money to pay off the lawsuit. But Father felt it was his error, so he repaid the parish the \$4,000 plus interest.

In October of 1975, a Carillon Bell was installed in the north bell tower of the church in memory of Michael S. and Catherine Paruiski.

Major improvements in 1976 included the repairing of all the church doors, the carpeting of the choir area and steps leading to it, and the blacktopping of the parking lot and roadways. On July 10, 1976, the Minnesota Historical Society had a tour bus from the Twin Cities visit our parish. Father told them of the history of the church, and reviewed the windows and the building. Parishioners, organized by Mrs. Leo Club, offered the visitors a taste of Polish delicacies.

On July 11, 1977, Father Bob had a motorcycle accident in which he broke eight ribs, dislocated his shoulder, punctured his lung, had a bleeding kidney, and received forty stitches. After this, his mother Clara commented, "He is still a worry." Also in 1977, the parish voted and approved the purchase of a Wicks custom-built pipe organ. The cost was \$35,200. As the school year opened, Sister Ellen M. Hoemberg arrived as our first parish worker.

In 1978, Marshall Decorating was hired to paint the church basement at a cost of \$2,710. Also in 1978 was the solemn dedication of the pipe organ.

A second storage garage was built on the church grounds in 1979. Better known as the Beer Garage because of its function at July 4 events, the building cost \$9,500. It is rented year-around by parishioners for storage. In March of 1979, Riteway Waterproofing of Lino Lakes, Minnesota, began a \$7,500 project to end moisture problems in the church basement; so far so good.

With 1980 came more undertakings. Ten inches of rock-wool insulation were added to the church, the church basement was carpeted to replace a deteriorating tile floor, the rectory and garage were shingled, and rural water service was connected to Wilno. The water service, similar to city water, has helped alleviate long-standing well problems for the church. The cost of these projects was about \$19,000.

The major undertaking for 1981 was renovation of the third rectory. It had served as a rectory, and then as a convent and school, and finally as the CCD Center. A board of six, Danny Schalek, Bill Jerzak, Diane Dritz, Jim Sovell, Ray Popowski and Alice Lipinski, checked into the feasibility of remodeling versus the cost of building a complete new structure. The decision was to remodel at a cost of \$84,000. On the exterior, the old siding was removed, new insulation was added, windows were replaced, new siding was added, and a new door, a new roof and a new sidewalk were completed. On the interior, improvements include a new heating system, handicap facilities, eleven modern well-lighted classrooms, eight storage rooms, and a supply room. The hallways were widened and fire escapes were added. The as yet unnamed CCD Center is a beautiful tribute to preserving the old to accommodate the necessary. As of January of 1983, a debt of \$36,000 remains. Father Goblirsch feels confident the debt will be retired by year's end. In September of 1981, 14 diseased and dead trees were removed from the boulevard of the church. An anonymous parishioner donated five replacement trees at a cost of \$1200 to fill the barren approach. Plans for future projects include redecorating the church interior at a cost estimate of \$100,000. But at a recent parish meeting this project was put on hold until

present debts are paid and until we have successfully completed our Centennial.

Plans to celebrate the Centennial of St. John Cantius Church are set for October 16, 1983. Although this appears a year earlier than would be anticipated by the celebration of the Golden Jubilee and the Diamond Jubilee, the parishioners chose to celebrate with the centennial of the first church structure and the first priest, Father Frank Grabowski, who arrived in 1883. The other events were centered around the first permanent pastor, who arrived in 1884.

At this writing, Wilno is dominated by the huge brick church built in 1901. There are two businesses in the small community: Wilno Store, owned and operated by Emil Janiszeski, and Wally's Store, owned and operated by Wally and Adeline Parulski. Inhabitants of this inland hamlet are: Agnes (Mrs. Steven) Sik, Martha (Mrs. Joe) Gruzka, Frances Rybinski, the Parulskis, the Janiszeskis, the Ted Citterman family, Agnes Friske, Frank and Julie Poleschek, Father Goblirsch, and his mother (housekeeper), Clara Goblirsch.