History of Sacred Heart of Jesus Church.
Diamond Jubilee 1897-1972 Sacred Heart of Jesus Church,
Braddock, PA. CAP at Orchard Lake.

The first Polish settlers arrived in Braddock about 1884 and, since their numbers were small, they were members of the Saint Michael's Slovak Parish in Braddock. It was not long, however, before their numbers increased and the thought and dream of a Polish Parish began to germinate.

In 1895, a group of leading Polish settlers united under the name of St. Adalbert Society (Tow. Sw. Wojciecha) with principle purpose of uniting the Poles in the area and forming a Polish parish and erecting a Polish Church. A committee of three members, consisting of Tomasz Polanski, Ludwig Wlazlinski, and Antoni Pater, was appointed by the society to take necessary steps toward the formation of the Parish. Through the efforts of this committee, Father Smelsz who was the Pastor of the St. Hedwig Parish in Duquesne, and with the permission of the Most Rev. Richard Phelan, Bishop of Pittsburgh, a lot with two structures, situated on Sixth Street, below Talbot Avenue, where the present school building stands at present, was purchased in January of 1897.

Within a month of the purchase, in February 1897, the church was dedicated under the name of Sacred Heart of Jesus Church. The dedication was by the Rev. Anthony Smelsz, who in the following September became the first Pastor and the sermon was delivered by Msgr. L.M.A. Miskiewicz.

Under the guidance of Father Smelsz the Sacred Heart Parish continued to expand rapidly and soon the wooden structures for the church and school were inadequate. Therefore in 1902, the land on the corner of Sixth Street and Talbot Avenue, which is the present site of the Church, was purchased and plans for the erection of a new and larger church were formulated. Actual building of the church was started and completed under Rev. A. Tarkowski after Father Smelsz was transferred to Holy Family Church in Pittsburgh. The cornerstone of the new church was blessed by Rev. Smelsz in 1904 and the new building was dedicated in August 27, 1905 by the Most Rev. Archbishop F. A. Symon, Papal Delegate from Rome to the Polish-American Catholics in the United States.

The new building is of Spanish-Missionary architecture, impressionably styled on both the exterior and interior. In a 1967 publication of the Pittsburgh History and Landmark Foundation, entitled, "Landmark Architecture of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania" by James D. Van Trump and Arthur P. Ziegler, Jr. on page 162, the church was acknowledged as one of the outstanding architectural
works in the valley. We quote, "An early example of Comes' work in the Spanish Renaissance manner as elsewhere in the architecture of the early twentieth century, terra cotta cheaply and easily provided an entire ornamental grammar, in this case Spanish. Again, a church of this type definitely adds a note of grace and interest in an otherwise drab industrial environment."

Father Tarkowski was transferred to St. Mary's Church McKeesport and Rev. A. Rykaczewski was named Pastor in May, 1906. Father Rykaczewski energetically assumed the task of running the Parish and in expanding the school.

The first school was organized within a few months of the organization of the parish in 1897 and classes were held in the building to the rear of the first church. When Father Rykaczewski became Pastor, the wooden structure was already too small and the need for larger accommodations was apparent. Under Father Rykaczewski's leadership the old church and school building were sold and the erection of the new school was begun on the same land in 1908, and completed in 1914.

The children were taught in the early years by lay teachers, Miss J. Zych from 1897 to March 1906, and Frank Zygmunt who served as organist and teacher from 1906 to 1916. Teaching duties were eventually taken over by the Felician Sisters beginning with the 1909-1910 year. The Sisters performed a most magnificent task in teaching our youngsters in both Polish and American studies until recent times. The first class completing the eighth grade was graduated in 1916 and in that and all following graduating classes the graduates had a high record of scholarship in the high schools which they entered. The attendance in the year 1916 was 450 students, a peak in the annals of Sacred Heart.

The residences of the Pastors in the early days of the Parish were rented homes. The last rented home to be used as a rectory was a residence to the rear of the church which was finally acquired by the Parish in 1912. Eventually, in 1914, the present rectory was built after a frame dwelling beside the church and belonging to the parish was razed.

The dwelling at the rear of the church which was originally used as a Rectory was used as a residence for the Felician Sisters when they arrived at the Parish and was satisfactory for a number of years. As the number of nuns increased with increased enrollment additional accommodations were required and the additional living space as now included was added in about 1926.

In the years following the First World War the parishioners not only grew in number, but they were becoming more active in cultural, civic and social affairs. A number of church affiliated organizations were formed in addition to the fourteen that existed before the war. Among these were the Young Men's Dramatic Club started by Father Szwed and later the Filaret Club started by Rev. E. Napieralski, which kept alive the interest of the younger generation of those days. In 1929, on the occasion of the Sesquicentennial Celebration of Braddock, all the Societies of the Parish united into the United Polish Societies of Braddock and took part in the observance by sponsoring a float in the celebration. The United Polish Societies continue their charitable and civic activities as one body to this day.
In the years of the thirties, when the entire nation was plagued by the depression and unemployment, the parish nonetheless was very active. It was in these early years of the depression that the parishioners offered their services and excavated the center area of the church basement which now serves as a most useful dining and meeting room. This was also the period in which the flood of 1936 caused much damage in the lower section of the town causing distress to our parishioners in the area, but this was taken in stride by the parishioners.

During the Second World War, over 600 young men and women from the Parish served in uniform.

The year 1947 was the fiftieth anniversary year of Sacred Heart Parish. The observance of the Anniversary, however, was postponed because of the postwar conditions at that time and the nearness of Father Rykaczewski's Fiftieth anniversary. The double Jubilee which combined the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Sacred Heart Parish and the Fiftieth Anniversary of Father Rykaczewski's Ordination was observed on June 15, 1952. The observance included a Solemn High Mass at which Father Rykaczewski was assisted by priests ordained from the parish. These were: Rev. S. Zolnierzak, Deacon; Rev. H. P. Podowski, Sub-Deacon; Rev. T. Wisniewski, Master of Ceremonies; Rev. St. J. Gorak, Sermon. A Jubilee Banquet was held that evening at the Vouge Terace in McKeesport and was well attended in spite of trying times due to a long strike of the U.S. Steel Workers which was under way at the time. A Requiem High Mass was offered on the following day for the deceased members of the Parish.

It was just three years later, on the Seventeenth of June, 1955 that the parish was saddened by the passing away of our beloved Pastor, Rev. Fr. John A. Rykaczewski, who spent essentially all of his years as a priest at the Sacred Heart Parish. At the Funeral Mass the Most Reverend John H. Deardon officiated. The members of the Church Committee served as pallbearers and all the surrounding communities, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, paid homage to a most highly respected and revered spiritual leader.

After the decease of Fr. Rykaczewski, Rev. Kuczynski who was the last assistant of the Parish remained as Administrator until Rev. Joseph A. Stankiewicz arrived in Braddock on July 15, 1955 as Pastor of our Parish. During his pastorate at Sacred Heart Church Father Stankiewicz continued and completed the substantial renovation of the exterior and interior of the church, rectory, school and convent.

In 1956, with appropriate ceremonies, Father Stankiewicz accepted for the Parish the Statue of Christ in the courtyard of the church, which was donated and erected by the United Polish Societies of Braddock in memory of all the men and women of our Parish who served in the First and Second World Wars. Sculptured in Italy from genuine Italian marble, the memorial is illuminated and decorated almost continuously, and occupies an auspicious location on the side church yard facing Talbot Ave.

Our present Pastor, Rev. Joseph A. Stankiewicz, observed his Twenty Fifth Anniversary of Ordination to the Priesthood May 21, 1961. At the Anniversary Mass, offered by Fr. Stankiewicz, the assistants included Fr. S. Zolnierzak, Deacon, and Fr. C. Kobylarz, Sub-Deacon. Sermon was
preached by Rt. Rev. Monsignor M. Filipowicz, Rector of Orchard Lake Schools. The anniversary was completed by a banquet the same evening at the Jacktown Hotel.

In the seventeen years during which Fr. Stankiewicz was Pastor much progress was made in many phases of the life of the Parish. The indebtedness of the Parish has been cleared and many improvements have been made to the four buildings, both internally and externally. This we owe to the application and management of Fr. Stankiewicz and the dedication and hard work of the Church Welfare Committee and the Bingo Committee which under the corporate name of St. Casimir Society instituted a College Scholarship Fund, from which the interest the last year and for the past years funded some 23 students to the sum of $1790 annually. The Society is supervised by the Pastor, Fr. Stankiewicz, John Jakiela, Felix Bodzenski, Joseph Stukus, and the Secretary, Stephanie Tracz.

Since the days of the depression, and particularly after the Second World War, the general population of the town of Braddock decreased from a peak of 22,000 to the present approximately 8,500 persons. Yet, in spite of this exodus of the newer generations from Braddock as the need for more and better living space increased, Fr. Stankiewicz was able to hold the number of parishioner families to a small decrease from a peak of 650 to 540 families. While 35% of the families are living outside the boundaries of Braddock, their loyalty and respect for their early life in the Parish encourages them to retain their membership in the Parish.

While the Parish, in general, showed a steady growth over the seventy five years, it is regrettable that the Parochial School could not be maintained to this day. With the decline of population in Braddock, and the flow of the younger generation to the suburbs, the enrollment in the school decreased from a peak of over 450 pupils to the last enrollment of 78 pupils in the final school year in 1970. For these and other reasons, and in conformance with the trend of the times for smaller schools to combine with the larger and newer schools, the Sacred Heart Parochial School has been closed since June, 1970.