



The Church on the Hill

St. Anthony Church stands at the top of a high hill that was once used by the Menomonee and Chippewa Indians for powwows to decide the division of tribal hunting grounds. Later, immigrant farmers tilled the fields around the hill, their days broken by the tolling church bell calling them to pray.

It is appropriate that a place chosen to settle disputes between the Indians should become the site for a house of God. Here, generations of men and women have tried to reconcile their human needs and yearnings with their spiritual destiny.

The people of St. Anthony have continued the customs of coming together, of peace-making, of innovation that began on that hill so long ago. This story seeks to tell the history of this institution, to put it in the context of its time and place.

St. Anthony Church is in the Town of Menomonee in Waukesha County. The area was known at various times as Menomonee, West Granville, and Town Eight. For almost 90 years, until the annexation to the Village of Menomonee Falls, the church address was Fussville. Fussville was named after Johann Fuss, a German immigrant who with his family acquired considerable land in the village.

At the request of area Catholics, the bishop of Detroit (there was no Milwaukee diocese until 1843) sent a missionary priest to look after their spiritual needs.

The priest was Father Martin Kundig, an important figure in development of the Roman Catholic Church in Wisconsin. In addition to his duties as vicar-general of Milwaukee, he organized relief for the poor, sick and aged, and promoted the temperance movement. In the latter half of 1842

he founded 20 new congregations. Fussville was among them.

In 1844 the newly appointed Milwaukee Bishop Henni sent Father Anton Maria Meyer to Fussville as the permanent pastor. The Castenholz family donated the use of a log building, situated at what is now the southeast corner of Lily Road and Appleton Avenue, for the celebration of Mass. A cross was fixed over the door. Midnight Mass was offered for the first time on Christmas, 1844.

The congregation built its church, the first church in the Town of Menomonee, in the late fall of 1845. Thirty member families comprised the new parish.

The choice of St. Anthony as patron of the church was suggested by the bishop who asked Johann Fuss to write to his old bishop in Germany. In his letter, Fuss said: “(does) a Confraternity of St. Anthony the Hermit exist, and if such be the case, would you graciously persuade them to donate a painting of St. Anthony the Hermit, and then, we shall make him the patron saint of our new church?” (They obtained the painting and the church was so named.)

Within ten years of the dedication of the first church, a larger edifice was required. Land for expansion was added to the original tract. The church was built during Father Martin Weiss’ tenure.

Waukesha was one of the richest counties in the state. And, the eastern part of Menomonee, including Fussville, was considered to have the finest farms.

Prosperity brought new families into Fussville. The second church of St. Anthony was becoming

seriously overcrowded. An impressive stone Catholic church had been built west of Fussville in Lannon Springs (now Lannon) in 1848. This may have motivated the parishioners of St. Anthony to plan a church of grander proportions. The third St. Anthony Church was built of dressed Lannon limestone on the high hill adjoining the old log church.

The church took three years to construct. The costs of the church ranged from \$20,000 to \$40,000. Stones for the walls were dragged on sleds over icy roads from a quarry in Lannon. Parishioners did much of the work.

Altars in the interior of the church were fashioned in the gothic revival style of the period. Early photographs show them to be a dark varnished wood. Sixty years later the altars were painted white. St. Anthony, (his statue), the patron of the parish, was on the left in the high altar, clothed in his distinguishing brown robe. The 170 foot steeple was designed with an eight-sided belfry. It housed a bell that was once rung several times a day. No basement was dug under the church, which made it expensive to heat in the winter. To conserve fuel, weekday masses were said in the school. The floor of the church was plank boards.

Mother Superior Friess bought two pieces of land to the east and north of St. Anthony church property in 1855 from William Schaffer and his wife. The Notre Dame order built a combination school and convent building on the larger piece of land and started classes in 1856. Religious of the order staffed the school; 120 students were in attendance. Sister Mary Raimunda was the first principal. Eight years after the opening of the school the nuns deeded the building to the parish. Unfortunately, it burned a year later.

Arriving in 1949, Father Joseph Reichling, a decorated World War II chaplain, launched a campaign to repair and rebuild the dilapidated parish buildings. In 1952 a new five room school

and hall were erected for \$130,000. A steeple jack repaired the church tower, and it was tilted gently back into place. Outer walls of the church were tuck-pointed. The interior was remodeled and painted in 1956. Concrete replaced wooden floors, a new organ was installed, side entrances and confessionals were added. Total cost was \$120,000.

After the building of the new school and the church hall parish events were held on church premises rather than at commercial establishments.

Unlike most modern parishes, St. Anthony church maintains a cemetery that is still used for burials. It has been necessary to expand the cemetery several times with donations and purchases of land that once belonged to the Schaffer, Fuss and Wick families.

From a nucleus of only 30 families who attended mass in the Castenholz log house, the parish has now grown to 1500.

Wilderness and the elements no longer challenge the people of this church, as they once did. Today, the challenges of life are cynicism, doubt, materialism, family fragmentation. These are the perils of today's wilderness.

And yet, in this change there is also permanence. At a certain time of the day, in a certain time of the year, the setting sun catches the top of St. Anthony's steeple and turns its grey-shingled roof into a shining, silver sword. This old, old community of Catholic people has been like the church tower.

**It is alive with light.
And it endures.**

(Excerpts from: The Church on the Hill by Joanne Charlton @1987)

