

## Cross Plains Souvenir

By Debbie Kmetz

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Anniversary dates often prompt people and organizations to reflect on the passage of time and mark an occasion with a special activity. The Dane County Historical Society's Otto Schroeder Records Center counts among its holdings numerous publications issued during the 50<sup>th</sup>, 75<sup>th</sup>, 100<sup>th</sup> and 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary years of the founding of various communities and organizations. Though formats and size vary, these volumes share a common trait -- they often prove to be very valuable resources for genealogists and historians.

In 1928, St. Francis Xavier Parish in Cross Plains celebrated its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary with a five-day commemorative program of events. That year also saw the publication of a 71-page *Souvenir of Diamond Jubilee of St. Francis Xavier Congregation, Cross Plains, Wisconsin, 1853-1928*, by Pickering Printing in nearby Black Earth.

The souvenir booklet opens with a foreword that reads, in part, "we feel that the noble deeds of the past generation are not and should not be dead facts, but a living inspiration..." Published just ten years after the close of World War I, this booklet chronicles a time that witnessed much change. The modern era was well underway with electricity powering the lights in public buildings; an increasing number of automobiles taking to the roads; and a recent invention, the radio, bringing a new kind of communication into the home. Yet, there were still people alive who had vivid memories of the horse-powered and kerosene-lit nineteenth century when walking was still a major mode of transportation. There were even more people who could remember stories told by their parents and grandparents recounting firsthand experiences of that earlier era.

Throughout Wisconsin, the advent of the modern age coincided with efforts by people and groups to document the early Euro-American settlement period in their communities. Perhaps it was clear that an era had come to a close, and that those who could recall it themselves or even remember the family stories would soon be fewer and fewer. To preserve that past, the authors of this publication included a "historical sketch," so that the often strenuous efforts and sacrifices of the preceding generations would not be forgotten. Because these writers had access to primary documents as well as the memories of earlier generations, the result is a publication full of interesting stories and fascinating detail.

The publication is divided into several sections. It begins with a set of photographs that includes portraits of the congregation's first and then current pastor and various views of the church. Thirty-five pages of text and photographs follow that address the early history of Cross Plains; the development of St. Francis Xavier Parish including the church, school, choir, societies and other groups; and also the former pastors and vocations from the parish. A schedule for the Diamond Jubilee celebration held on June 6-10, 1928, lists religious services, a banquet, a

homecoming picnic, a school exhibit, a motion picture and a drama in five acts by the school children. The last section of the booklet is devoted to Cross Plains businesses: four pages of text followed by eighteen pages of advertisements.

The publication also abounds with detailed lists: the names of many of the early settlers; the Catholic sisters who taught in the school; trustees of the church from 1853-1928. There is even a list of some of the successful plays produced by the Dramatic Club. As a souvenir of 1928, the booklet also documents parish members that year. Several pages list the names of families then living within the parish as well as the names of children attending the parish school. The family listing also notes those who had been baptized at St. Francis Xavier and provides, where applicable, many women's maiden names.

The publication also contains photographs taken at various dates throughout the years: several landscape views of Cross Plains; individual portraits; and photos of parish groups. Examples include St. Cecilia's Choir in 1900; parish members assembled for the 50th anniversary in 1903; and the St. Francis school children in 1928. Captions for several of the smaller group photos identify those in the photos.

The written history is rich with specific information. The authors cite primary sources: an early settler's diary, church records and correspondence. The text includes an excerpt from a letter written February 14, 1853 by Father Adalbert Inama, a Norbertine monk from Wilten in the Tyrol, who established the earliest Catholic missions in the area. It reads:

“Seven miles south in the towns of Cross Plains and Middleton is situated the third mission district, consisting of 33 families, almost all of which are farmers from Cologne, largely immigrants of last year. A benefactor donated 15 acres of land for a church and a priest, on which land the people have constructed a church this winter. ... The community is in a state of lively development.”

The following pages list by name settlers who had so recently emigrated from Europe. A few came to the area as early as 1848. A large group arrived in 1850, followed by others in 1852 and 1853. In addition to the many farmers, Jacob Korth and Jacob Conrad are listed as carpenters; Joseph Schiefer as a shoemaker; and Hebert Keller, a farm machinery salesman. A widow, Mrs. Adolph Stumpf is noted as arriving in 1850 with her six children. Readers learn that she is the benefactor who donated the land for the church.

The authors draw much information for the early years from the diary of John Wahl, Sr., one of the settlers who arrived in 1852. They use the diary to describe the construction of the first church, recounting a meeting held in October 1852 at Wahl's home. The text names the thirteen men gathered there. The men discussed a Catholic church for the local residents and formed a building committee consisting of: John Wahl, Gerhard Ripp, Jacob Korth and the Stumpf brothers, whose mother donated the land. The authors quote Wahl as saying at the meeting, “Bring your axes tomorrow morning and we'll fell trees on the government in section 1 of Cross Plains.” According to the diary, the men were still cutting logs on January 3, 1853. Another passage from the diary, written in German, indicates that the log walls of the church were erected by January 11, 1853.

The publication offers some fascinating glimpses into parochial education. It notes that families paid 25 cents per month per student for education at the parish school in 1857. During the years 1857-1885, the teaching staff alternated between male teachers and Catholic sisters. From 1885

through the time of the booklet's publication in 1928, the School Sisters of Saint Francis, from Milwaukee, had charge of the school.

Another passage explains that though there were initially many students in the school, by 1870 enrollment had declined. In the late 1860s, many of the younger families had moved to Minnesota. In the early 1880s, another wave of residents moved to the Dakotas. Attendance would grow again in the following years.

The pages also record the development of a new stone church beginning in 1868, citing many of those responsible for the design and construction. For instance, a man from Sauk City named Ross provided the building plans, parishioners themselves transported the locally-quarried stone, and Frank Schmitt and Frank Breit of Chicago were hired as the contractors. However, the contractors took much longer than expected and when a new pastor, Father Freidl arrived in 1873, he found the recently erected stone church with an unfinished interior and a discouraged congregation. A trained builder, Father Freidl provided hands-on leadership. He also designed and crafted the altars, pulpit and communion rails himself. Mr. Irsch assisted him. The church was ready the following year.

The book describes the parish's social and cultural organizations, among them, the church choir, the dramatic club, and the various societies such as Christian Mothers. The names of World War I veterans are also listed. Two pages present photographs from "Some of the Successful Plays Produced" by the Dramatic Club, organized in 1923 with thirty-five members. Readers can also see how times change. Text for the choir reads, "Up to about 1880 only male choirs sang and the men reluctantly gave way to a mixed choir." In 1928, Rose Worringer is named as the organist who directs a choir of four men and four women.

The section on "Cross Plains Business Enterprises" offers similar detail though it limits the featured businesses to those of the earliest days and those current in 1928. The businesses range from Saeman's Lumber and Livestock to Cross Plains Electric Co. to the Hotel Adler. Endres' Dance Hall is "used as a general place of amusement, such as: dancing, roller skating, basketball, and plays." The description of Vasen's Store says it was built in 1910 as a variety store with an ice cream parlor. "In 1911 a stock of groceries and a small stock of dry goods were added and Farmers' Produce, butter and eggs, was taken in trade." The authors also record, where possible, the dates that the business buildings are constructed and the various occupants over the years. The locations of some buildings that were no longer standing are also noted.

The eighteen pages of business advertisements are themselves full of interesting details. The Pick Brothers' Cross Plains Roller Mill offers flour grinding at "All Hours." Endres-Coyle Co. advertises expertise in plumbing, heating and tinning, pumps and windmills. Dahmen's Store, established 1857, says it has, "Served the first and every succeeding generation of the members of the St. Francis Xavier Congregation. Werner B. Esser advertises ten flavors of "Nu Icy," each bottled with Silver Spring water. Geo. H. Esser offers his congratulations on the St. Francis anniversary.

This publication, like many other souvenir volumes, offers readers and researchers a wealth of detail about the establishment and growth of a community organization. It also offers insight into the perspectives of the authors themselves as they seek to document an institution and an era that holds great significance for them. Through primary documents and the memories of those who could recall experiences and events, the souvenir booklet can bring today's researcher a step closer to understanding life in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, offering a sense of some of the

challenges faced by people who crossed an ocean to settle in the wooded hills and valleys of a new country.

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Like many local and family histories, *Souvenir of Diamond Jubilee of St. Francis Xavier Congregation* had no original index published with it. To find some of the names located within this volume, a genealogist or researcher would need to read the entire book. The Dane County Historical Society has created a twenty-one page index of the names of people and places that appear in this booklet, in the text as well as in the photograph captions and business advertisements.