

Father Frencken's St. Joseph's Parish, Grand Rapids, Michigan

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On the front page of the Saturday, February 9, 1889 issue of the *Evening Leader* the anticipated dedication of St. Joseph's Church was announced in detail.

The dedicatory services of St. Joseph's new Holland Catholic Church will be held at 10:30 tomorrow morning and will be conducted by Bishop Richter. Father C. J. Roche, formerly of the Cathedral, will preach the sermon and after the services will preach a sermon in the Holland language. The procession, which will include the leading Catholic societies of the city, will form at the corner of Canal and Monroe Street and march through Canal to Monroe, Monroe to Sheldon, Sheldon to the Episcopal residence, where it will be joined by the bishop and the clergy, hence will proceed along Sheldon to Wealthy avenue, Wealthy avenue to Grandville avenue, Grandville avenue to Rumsey Street, on which the church is situated. The societies are requested to report promptly, in order to avoid the long wait in the cold.

In the Monday issue the news had moved to the back page:

St. Joseph's Consecrated. Yesterday morning Bishop Richter dedicated the new St. Joseph Catholic Holland Church on Rumsey Street with the imposing ceremonies of the Romish church. Assisted by several priests, the Bishop read the prayers prescribed by the ritual, and then made the circuit of the building, blessing and sprinkling each of the four walls with holy water. In a brief address after the ceremonies the bishop called attention to the unity and unchangeableness of the Romish church, and contrasted it with the innumerable sects into which Protestantism is divided.

After mass had been celebrated Father Roche delivered a sermon in the Holland language.¹

There was not a word about the parish priest, Father Henry Frencken, largely responsible for the structure's completion. Before considering his recollections, let us review the context in which this

parish developed.

As the population grew in mid and late nineteenth century Grand Rapids and its surroundings, so did the Roman Catholic contingent. Baxter's summary describes these events succinctly.² Pope Leo XIII on May 19, 1882 established a new diocese for a large area of central western Michigan with her cathedral seat in Grand Rapids. This region had been part of the Diocese of Detroit. The oldest church, St. Andrew's, now became the cathedra for the new bishop, Henry Joseph Richter, who was consecrated on April 22, 1883. This was a sizable congregation, located near the center of the residential area of the city in 1891, counting some 3,500-4,000 adults and children. There were additional daughter parishes strongly influenced by ethnic factors. On the near west side St. Mary's parish began with 33 members in 1857 and had grown to approximately 1000 by 1891 serving German immigrants from throughout the city and surrounding rural areas. It had a parochial school begun in 1863 and staffed by the Sisters of Notre Dame in Milwaukee. A bit further west and north was St. James' parish founded in 1872 with an initial congregation of about 150 families, created to serve Irish Roman Catholics, and other non-German and non-Polish immigrants. Again, a parochial school was begun, in 1886 also staffed by the Sisters from Milwaukee. By 1891, the parish had grown to about 1,600 people including children. St. Adalbert's parish, also on the west side, was organized in 1880-81 and the first building consecrated on January 1, 1888. Its primary purpose was to serve the rapidly growing Catholic Polish immigrant population. Its school was opened in 1884, operated by the St. Franciscan Sisters. By 1891, the congregation had grown to some 1,500 souls. Lastly, St. Alphonsus' parish developed at the same time as St. Joseph's and served those Polish immigrants living on the near north side of the city. St. Joseph's parish was on the near southwest side of the city.³

We have in the case of St. Joseph a wonderful documentation of the early history of this parish. Among the papers at the church is a recollection of the first twenty years written by her first priest, Fr. Henry Frencken. Before reviewing this, a few comments regarding him are in order.

McGee reported that he was born in 1860 in 's Hertogenbosch, the capital of the province of Noord Brabant. His theological training took place at the University of Leuven or Louvain in Belgium where he was ordained in 1887.⁴ He moved to Grand Rapids where Fr. Frencken's recollections really began after some introductory comments of the events prior to his arrival. He compiled these in the Netherlands for the 50th anniversary of the church

and I suspect that he typed the manuscript himself. The following comments then are based on Frencken's own recollections.⁵

After Richter was consecrated as bishop of the Diocese of Grand Rapids, he called Rev. C. Roche from Au Sable, Michigan as his Vicar General in 1884. One of Roche's tasks was to establish a parish for Dutch Catholics. An acre plot was purchased on Rumsey Street, the corner stone laid and the foundation begun the year before Frencken's arrival. This stone was displaced on several occasions by Dutch compatriots of Protestant persuasion who were living on the west side. Frencken arrived in 1887 to replace Roche who was transferred to Essexville, Michigan. Richter charged Frencken to build the church and he then would become her priest.

Roche had left \$69 in cash. Clearly, much more was needed and Frencken obtained permission from the bishop to attempt to collect further funds from the Catholic Dutch scattered about the city. As he recalled, this was accomplished '*per pedes apostolorum.*' However, these perambulations were short-lived because after a few weeks the bishop reversed his permission due to competing interests. The Redemptorist Fathers had just arrived also requiring funds as did the anticipated St. John's Orphan Home. Frencken had collected enough in the interim to make a start with the assistance of two recent immigrants. One was Peter Werkman, who had construction skills essential for the project. They went to work and discovered quickly that Roche's construction knowledge left much to be desired. Instead of having excavated the basement he had set a foundation merely three feet deep, so that the basement was half above and half below ground. It measured 40x70 feet. The three erected a two-story, frame structure on this foundation. As progress was made as many as 20 to 25 other volunteers began to gather after their workday to help. As behooves any respectable church, it even had a belfry. The temporal rewards for the volunteers consisted of an occasional glass of beer.

Stiles Brothers Lumber provided the materials on credit. The project was soon completed. John Sullivan of Ionia Street received the contract for brickwork around the wooden frame for \$800. Frencken and Werkman finished the inside and constructed a temporary altar and a few plank seats. A wood burning stove was used in the sanctuary, lit only on Sundays. When all was finished the priest had to inform the bishop that he had accumulated a debt of \$1,800. After he volunteered to assume this debt personally, the bishop agreed to dedicate the building.

February 10, 1889 was bitter cold and snow covered the ground. The blessing of the exterior was

given as quickly as possible by the bishop and Fathers Roche, Benning, Pulcher, Clark and Frencken. Next the inside was blessed, after which the congregants were invited into the sanctuary for the High Mass, celebrated by Fr. Frencken, assisted by the choir of St. Mary's. Then Roche followed with a sermon in Dutch and the bishop with one in English. The collection on this cold but festive occasion raised \$147 for debt reduction.

The lower level of the building was unfinished at this time. The plans called for construction of a school and living quarters for the priest. In the meanwhile, Frencken obtained room and board at the Werkman home giving the volunteers time to help him finish the needed quarters including room for a housekeeper. The work was finished shortly after Easter.

Furnishings for the sanctuary and the living quarters also had to be obtained. Fourteen parishioners provided the Stations of the Cross, another member a bell for the belfry. Volunteers dug out the basement without collapsing the structure, allowing the installation of a hot air furnace. Classrooms were finished by the following September but there was a shortage of sisters to serve as teachers and thus lay teachers, Mss. Stace, Fitzgerald and Pipe, were hired. The following year the priest was successful in recruiting two sisters and even a housekeeper. A residence was clearly needed. A house behind the church was rented for Sister Goueva and Novice Isabella.

One drawback of all this was that Frencken had to put up with all the noise from the classrooms next to his living quarters. His solution was a rectory, which he designed and built with a carpenter, John Trant, and the help of two others. Completed in 1891, he moved in it and the sisters took over his previous quarters.

The church became the center for Dutch Roman Catholics in a community overwhelmingly populated by Dutch Protestants.⁶ Several societies had been organized as well. These met at night in the church building and the rumor mongering Protestant Dutch neighbors readily pointed out that this was also the place where the Sisters resided.⁷

Frencken discussed this with his bishop and received permission for the construction of a separate meeting hall. Once again this was accomplished with volunteer labor, the only expenditure being the materials. This called for further fundraising. The priest kept chickens, generally to an advanced age. At one of these events he donated a six-year-old rooster to be raffled off at ten cents a ticket. He did not report the income but did mention that the lucky winner was no other than Ms. Pike's father. The bird required an entire day of cooking and even then was

barely edible.

In the spring of 1892 Frencken fell ill and he went to the Netherlands to recuperate. He returned after six months, restored, as attested to by his installation of water and gas pipes to update the building, assisted by a Richard de Young. He had convinced the alderman to lay the neighborhood utility lines underneath Rumsey Street to reduce the length of the church's connecting line.

In 1904, he made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. On the way he stopped in his native 's Hertogenbosch to help celebrate his parents' 50th anniversary. Two years later he once again returned to his homeland when he fell ill again. His recovery was not complete, and though he returned temporarily to his beloved St. Joseph, he could not meet the demands and was forced to resign. He returned to his native town permanently, serving as chaplain in his parents' home.

These then are the recollections he wrote upon the 50th anniversary of the church in 1937 when he was approximately 77 years of age. One may question whether his recall was accurate. There certainly are some differences between the description of the dedication services in the local newspaper and what Frencken reported. I am sure that he did not fabricate the story of having celebrated the first mass himself. Even though he may have used notes, his clear writing style and the recollection of so many specific details, often clearly dated, reveal a lucid mind. In addition his comments also show that he wanted to understand some of the dynamics of the unique phenomenon of an ethnically defined congregation. He clearly was interested in the changes he observed.

Perhaps today, in retrospect, we have better insight since there has been opportunity to study these issues. Most available data have been about Dutch Protestants, particularly of the Reformed tradition, but there are some available on Roman Catholic immigration as well. As Swierenga has pointed out, in contrast to the Seceder immigrants in particular, the Catholics formed colonies or parishes only on rare occasions.⁸ Two urban churches are recalled, those in Chicago and Cincinnati, in addition to the more dispersed rural Roman Catholic communities in the Fox River Valley in Wisconsin. Dutch-speaking priests were essential for these parishes. Some European universities had American Colleges to prepare clergy for this type of situation.⁹ Leuven University was one of these. I suspect Fr. Roche also was a product of this type of program.

There is no early parish membership list as such. We do know a few specific names of people with technical skills. A crude impression may be gained by looking at the immigrants arriving from Limburg

and Noord Brabant, the two provinces in the Netherlands with the most Roman Catholics. In 1887, the year Frencken arrived, the port of New York received fourteen family units from these two provinces.¹⁰ Five were farmers, six laborers, one a clog maker, one a tailor and one a teacher, and of course there was Frencken himself. His place of birth erroneously was listed as Antwerp. He traveled first class while all others traveled in steerage. Where the specific destinations of the migrants are recorded, one notices a wide geographic scatter. None of these comments have any statistical validity of course but they may suggest that the vast majority of immigrants, whether Protestant or Catholic, were ordinary folk.¹¹ I suspect people such as these made up his flock and their children needed general as well as religious instruction.

The early establishment of religious schools attests to these educational needs. This approach held true for both Protestants and Roman Catholics. There is a significant difference however. As their names suggest, neither the Catholic lay teachers nor the sisters taught in Dutch, as confirmed by McGee, who specifically mentions that the Sisters of St. Dominic taught in English.¹² Frencken does not discuss this, or the inherent implications for the survival of the ethnic uniqueness of his congregation. On the other hand, in the Protestant community there is the example of Coldbrook Christian Church school.¹³ The conservative attitudes of this school with the intentional preservation of the native tongue leaves little question about its effect on the upcoming generation.

I suspect that Frencken was aware of all this, as well as the fact that after his departure the next priest would be not be Dutch. His comments indicate the decline in ethnicity in his parish even before he departed. He mentions several specific reasons. One was the decreasing emigration rate for Dutch Catholics in general. Another was the rapid Americanization among his flock, and I would think that the educational issues played a role here, whereas among the Coldbrook student Americanization came more slowly. A third specific observation is that his church members were too widely scattered geographically. This frequently resulted in members transferring to the geographic parish in which they resided, breaking down the ethnic uniqueness of St. Joseph's and causing those who transferred to be absorbed more quickly.

This is where Frencken stopped and this account must stop as well since with Frencken's departure the parish rapidly Americanized. It is clear that the success of the early growth was a reflection of his and his congregants' profound dedication. Their tenacity was striking as were their optimism,

inventiveness and personal sacrifice.

I suspect that Frencken's family was financially well off which allowed him to guarantee personally the cumulated debt of \$1,800.¹⁴ I have tried to find further information on the family in 's Hertogenbosch, particularly since McGee spoke of his retirement to his parents' estate. There was only one family with the Frencken spelling in the limited material I could retrieve. According to *Oude Namen van Huizen en Straten* by Jan Mosmans and Alph. G.J. Mosmans,¹⁵ the De Swan warehouse on the Vughterdijk was owned by Frencken. In the *Adresboek voor 's Hertogenbosch*,¹⁶ Frencken is mentioned as living on the Vughterdijk. This dijk is a direct continuation of the Vughterstraat, one of the three main streets radiating from the central market square. But to call a warehouse an estate is another matter.¹⁷

NOTES

¹ *The Evening Leader*, February 9 and 11, 1889.

² Albert Baxter, *History of the City of Grand Rapids Michigan [sic]* (New York & Grand Rapids: Munsell and Company, 1891) chapter 46.

³ *Ibid*, pp 340-4.

⁴ John W. McGee, *The Catholic Church in the Grand River Valley* (Grand Rapids: St. Andrew's Cathedral, 1950): pp 223, 248, 282, 429-30.

⁵ Henry Frencken, Manuscript Recollections, St. Joseph's Parish, Grand Rapids, MI. Father Pedro Garcia, current parish priest, very graciously allowed me to read the typewritten document.

⁶ David G. Vanderstel, "The Dutch of Grand Rapids, Michigan: A Study of Social Mobility in a Midwestern Urban Community, 1850-70," MA Thesis, Kent State University, 1978.

⁷ Frencken, "Recollections."

⁸ Robert P. Swierenga, "Religion and Immigration Patterns: A Comparative Analysis of Dutch Protestants and Catholics, 1835-1880," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 5 (Spring 1986) p 36-37.

⁹ Personal communication with Dr. James Bratt, with thanks.

¹⁰ Robert P. Swierenga, *Dutch Immigrants in US Ships Passenger Lists; Port of New York, 1887. An Alphabetical Listing*, 3 vols., (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1983).

¹¹ Since writing this article, I came across a microfilm of "Emigranten naar Amerika, 1848-1877", a copy prepared by the Church of Latter Days Saints from the original in the Hague National Genealogical Records. It appears to have been an ongoing compilation by province of all emigrants leaving the country although there are some hiatuses. In the Noord Brabant microfilm (0487367) the years 1874, 1876 and 1877 are not included. I combined the data for the years 1870-1875, with the 1874 omission, to provide a data base for the five years closest to Fr. Frencken's departure in 1887. The results confirm some of my speculations in the text. The number leaving was generally low, 10 to 45 family units annually. The total number of family units during these five years was 151. There were 122 Roman Catholic family units, the remainder being Hervormd with a few Afscheidenen. Class was recorded. Only 14 family units were of the highest socio-economic class and over half of these were priests, emigrating as missionaries. At the lowest level, needy or destitute, were 15 family units. The remainder was classified as middle class, employed and self-supporting, and thus making up the vast majority. Destination was also included which was in general nonspecific and limited to "Noord Amerika." Only nine

were specific, mentioning New York City, Buffalo, Detroit, Pella, Cincinnati and St. Louis.

The most interesting observation was Cornelius Roche, a priest emigrating from Drunen, North Brabant, in 1870 to Detroit "als zendeling," as missionary. There is no question in my mind that he is the later Vicar General of Bishop H. Richter in 1884. Finally, trades/occupations were recorded. The vast majority practiced a manual trade, from farming to laborer to shoemaker. Aside from the priests the only most formally trained person was a draftsman. There was a general consensus among the emigrants that the prime motivation was to "better oneself socio-economically."

¹² McGee, *The Catholic Church*, p 430.

¹³ R. Berkompas, H. Oosterhouse, and J. Ryskamp, eds., "His Abiding Love, Creston-Mayfield Christian School, 1890-1990." Both Creston and Mayfield Christian Schools came out of the original "School voor het Christlijk Onderwijs begun in the basement of Coldbrook Christian Reformed Church in 1890. Dutch was the language used. Frank Street School, built the following year as the basement location was far from ideal, also used Dutch in the lower grades. When the school moved again to Leonard Street in 1908, it was specified that Dutch had to be used exclusively one day a week. The minutes were kept in Dutch until 1923 when finally there was an official switch to English. The other school arising from Coldbrook's initial basement efforts, known sequentially as the Dennis Ave. School, Coade Ave. School and finally the Baldwin School, clearly taught in Dutch primarily when Lieuwe Groeneveld arrived there from Frank School in 1905 to assume the position of principal. He had been the original teacher in the Coldbrook basement school and had transferred to Frank Street School when it opened. It was also specified in 1910, Groeneveld's last year at Coade Ave. that all the instruction books used in this school had to be in Dutch.

¹⁴ I have no financial data on Fr. Frencken and base this opinion on the fact that he traveled first class from Antwerp and was able to personally guarantee the sizable amount of \$1,800. (Lieuwe had traveled steerage and his salary in his first year at Coldbrook totaled \$525. This information adds some perspective to the amount of the guarantee.)

¹⁵ Published in 1906, and republished in 1973 by Merlija en van Dijk en van Hees Boekhandel.

¹⁶ 's Hertogenbosch: P Stokvis en zoon, 1931.

¹⁷ According to my 98-year-old aunt, who still lives in 's Hertogenbosch, it was a 'dranken zaak,' or a spirits business. Since he was aging in the same city in which I was growing up, I wish I had come to know this priest. Perhaps our paths crossed, not knowing that he had had and I would have an unique experience in the United States.