

Published in November 2006 to celebrate the 100-year anniversary of the school's opening.

PART I: St. Patrick School Reaches Centennial

If you are curious about what was happening in Portland, Michigan 100 years ago, you can stop by the Portland Library and take a look at the photos, books and other memorabilia collected by the Historical Society. Obviously, you'll see that many changes have occurred since those photos were taken! The clothing and hairstyles are different; the horses and buggies have been replaced by minivans and SUV's. And, when you look at the pictures of the downtown area, you'll notice that there isn't a single business on Kent Street today that was there back in 1906.

But, close the photo books, leave the library and downtown area and go west on Grand River Avenue. At the top of the hill, between Church and West Streets, you'll see St. Patrick School. Though the buildings don't look the same as they did a hundred years ago, the "business" is the same. These buildings and the ones that preceded them have served families from Portland and the surrounding area since 1906, providing them with the opportunity to give their children a Catholic education. Happy Birthday, St. Patrick School!

St. Patrick Catholic School opened its doors on November 19, 1906, to much community fanfare. Enrollment was 60 students, a number which would have been higher had the building been ready to open in September. Because of the late opening, many families waited to enroll their children the following fall.

No roster of students from that first year is available. However, a program from the *Closing Exercises of St. Patrick's School and Musical*, which was performed at the Portland Opera House on June 17, 1907 lists many familiar names. Masters A. Mathews and S. Mathews, violinists in the program, were great-uncles to Barbara Mathews Tichvon, who would later become the principal of the school. Another student, nine-year-old R. Nahrgang was Rose Nahrgang Barton, mother of parishioner Marian Brown. Rose performed in several musical numbers at the program.

Obviously, none of those original students are alive today, but it is safe to say that their years at St. Pat's were much different from what the students today experience. All of the teachers were nuns—it would be forty years before lay teachers arrived in the classrooms. The Sisters originally lived on the second floor of the school, but when enrollment climbed and that space was needed for classrooms, the parish purchased a house for the nuns to live in. That house still stands on Church Street. It was the home of Joe Tichvon for many years. *(Note from 2014: The Tichvon house no longer stands. The parish office parking lot now occupies its space.)*

Students of the 1920s and 30s remember the names of some of the nuns who came to St. Patrick in the early years: Sister Seradocia, Sister Conception, Sister Corona, Sister Lucille. Everyone respected them and the children did what they were told, with no questions asked.

If the nuns garnered respect, it was minuscule compared to the reverence which was held for the priests. Memories of Fathers Auer, Griffin and Koelzer have long faded, but many former students still remember Father O'Rourke!

Father O'Rourke was at St. Patrick's from 1922-34. He was responsible for building our present church in 1926. He was also the principal of the school, had the final say on everything, and everyone was scared of him! "Even the nuns were afraid of him," said a student from 1929. "Everything was black and white to him. There were no gray areas."

"I was scared to death of Father O'Rourke," remembers Don May (8th grade class of 1939). "I knew all of the prayers and I practiced and practiced to be an altar boy. But, I was so scared of him that I would forget everything I knew when I was in front of him." As a result, Don never got to be an altar server.

At the end of each school year, Father O'Rourke handed out the report cards. He would call out a name and that child would stand next to him while he reviewed the grades. The kids were "frightened like dickens" remembers Marian (Barton) Brown (8th grade class of 1932), because he was known to spank kids whose grades were not up to par.

Along with strict rules about behavior, the dress code was also very rigid. Boys were expected to wear long-sleeved shirts and ties. Their sleeves could be rolled up while they were on the playground, but had to be rolled down and buttoned when they re-entered the school. The girls wore clothing that was proper and modest. Long sleeves and long cotton stockings assured that, other than hands and faces, no flesh showed.

Children did their early chores at home and walked to school. They were there by 8:00 a.m. when Mass began, for daily Mass was part of every Catholic school child's life. "In the winter, we'd usually have Mass in the school," said Don May. That way they didn't have to heat the church during the week."

One of the rooms on the second floor of the school was partitioned off by a big canvas curtain. The curtain would be rolled up to make one big room, and the older boys would bring in a portable altar that was stored in the cloak room.

Whether Mass was held in the school or the church, students were expected to be on their best behavior, not only during Mass but also while coming and going. "We walked two by two in perfectly straight lines," said Marian Brown. "And we were not allowed to speak to each other at all." They also were required to fast from midnight on if they wanted to receive Communion, so that meant no breakfast. Some students brought along a light breakfast to eat after Mass. The rest were very hungry by lunchtime.

The students who lived within a mile of school were expected to walk home for lunch, but the rest carried their lunches to school in tin pails. They sat on long benches in the school basement to eat their lunches, which consisted mainly of sandwiches and homemade cookies. Each student also brought a clean towel to school each week to wipe their hands on. The towels hung on nails that were used as hooks.

On the playground, the boys and girls were segregated with the boys on one side of the school and the girls on the other. Playground equipment consisted of just one teeter-totter, so recess activities included games of Tag, Red Rover, Pom-Pom Pull Away and Stone School. The nun in charge of the playground prayed the

rosary as she walked around the perimeter, always keeping a watchful eye on her young charges.

There were no extracurricular activities at St. Patrick's. The students were there to learn, and thus their days were filled with academics, catechism, and the Palmer Method of Penmanship. The only exception was music class and a few occasions when Sister Lucille took them outside, lined them up in rows and had them perform some exercises.

Celebrating the sacraments, especially First Communion, was the highlight of academic life for the students at St. Patrick's. Even though times were poor and money was scarce, when a child made his or her First Communion, it was a time of great celebration. Little girls got new dresses, often store-bought. Little boys got new shirts and ties. Some of them even had their pictures taken at a professional studio.

Upon graduation from the 8th grade, there was no ceremony, no diploma, and no celebration. The students were simply expected to go out into the world to begin working. Very few students continued their education beyond that level.

Societal changes happen everywhere and St. Patrick's was no exception. World War II and the Baby Boom that followed it played a huge role in the growth of the school during the 1940s, 50s, and 60s. In Pat II we'll talk about how the school progressed during those three decades.

PART II—Baby Boomers Create Growth

As St. Patrick School entered its fourth decade of operation, one could safely say that more was the same than different. The school was still housed in the same two-story building; it was still operated almost entirely by the pastor; the good Sisters still taught in the classrooms; and the students still attended daily Mass. “We went to Mass every day,” remembers Marv Fedewa. “But it was a Low Mass, which meant there was no sermon.”

Attending a Low Mass, did not lessen the fasting requirement. Students could not eat or drink after midnight if they wanted to receive Holy Communion in the morning. “Even drinking fountains were off-limits,” says Gladys (Trierweiler) Stiffler. “They were covered with white cloths until after Mass.”

Outside, the games on the playground were not much different than the ones that had been played for the past thirty years. Boys and girls were still segregated and the priests and nuns continued to provide them with simple things to keep them entertained. One year, Father Kohler bought some balls and bats and distributed them to the two groups.

Occasionally, when the weather was nice, the students would be herded across Grand River Avenue to play in the grove. (*Note from 2014: The grove is located near the current softball field.*) There, the students from St. Patrick’s were given the warning that they were never, never, NEVER to leave the school property to play on the “Indian Trails.”

The block that now houses the school and church looked much different in the 1940s. The present church had been built in 1926, so the original wood church had been moved back, to the northwest corner of the block. It was used as a parish hall for a few years, but burned down in 1931. Portions of the basement walls still stood during the 1940s and they became great hiding places during recess games of hide and seek.

There were also a few homes located within the block, and a large garden behind the rectory which was tended by the priests and the housekeeper. Students from the 1940s remember the priests’ grapevines---and the great temptation to pick

and eat some of the luscious fruit hanging on them. The rule was that no one could pick the grapes until the priests had picked all that they wanted. They the kids could help themselves. Marv Fedewa remembers one fall day, in a year with an especially bountiful crop, Father Kohler dismissed school 20 minutes early so that every student had time to pick a few grapes before leaving for the day.

As the forties gave way to the fifties, Catholic schools across the nation were experiencing a growth crisis. The Baby Boomer generation was entering school and the classrooms were bursting at the seams.

Father Louis Flohe had arrived in Portland in 1945, and by 1947 he addressed the issue of over-crowding by purchasing the rest of the property on the block where the church and school stood, with a plan to tear down the old school and replace it. The new, modern facility would be large enough to house not only the existing eight grades, but a new high school as well, allowing students to remain at St. Pat's through graduation.

The next years were a bit tumultuous and certainly challenging to the staff and students alike. With the old school gone and the new one not quite ready for use, classes were held in various buildings and neighborhood homes.

The new school opened in the fall of 1951, a thoroughly modern facility, and home to the largest and best gymnasium in the entire area. The state-of-the-art gym was in constant use---by the new Shamrock boys' basketball teams, by the Portland Civic Players, by parish groups who served dinners there and appreciated the adjoining kitchen facilities, and by the students who regularly flocked there for Friday night dances.

Donna (Snitgen) Sines recalled those events. "We used to have dances after every Friday night basketball game, alternating with Portland High School. We hired DJ's like Eric O. Furseth. And, it was a challenge for the girls to see who could get more crinoline slips under their skirts."

Another student of the fifties remembered that Father Flohe usually chaperoned those dances, and that he kept a watchful eye to make sure that boys and girls didn't snuggle too closely during the slow tunes. "He insisted that he should be

able to see a space between the two bodies.” Father Flohe also enforced a “no shoes on the gym floor” policy, according to the same student. Sock hops were appropriately named!

It took forty years to outgrow the first St. Patrick’s School. It took just ten years to outgrow the new one. By the end of the 1950s, the classrooms once again were filled to capacity. “Our family moved to Portland in 1960,” said Kathy Schrauben. “There were nine of us kids, and our parents really wanted us to attend St. Pat’s. But some of the classes there were so big that there was a waiting list to get in. We attended the public school for a year, waiting for space to be available.

Once again, St. Pat’s was mirroring what was happening nationwide. Once again, Father Flohe addressed the situation with a building campaign. And, once again, the people of the parish responded. The new addition to the school, which added eight classrooms and a basement cafeteria, opened in 1961.

The 1960s were a time of social upheaval across the country. Vatican II, which was convened for two years from 1962-1964 caused its own upheaval within the church. Thankfully, it took several years for the combined impact of these two forces to show up. The first half of the sixties continued to be good years for Catholic schools.

Nationwide, Catholic school enrollment reached its peak in 1965. In that year 5.7 million students, an astonishing 12% of the nation’s school-age children, were enrolled in Catholic schools. It can be rather surprising to see the degree to which Portland St. Patrick mirrored the country. The graduating class of 1965 was the largest in the school’s history.

Sister Joyce Herr was a teacher and principal for almost the entire decade of the sixties. While she didn’t employ the same strict regiment of Father O’Rourke or Father Kohler, she didn’t hesitate to make her Shamrocks toe the mark. Students remember that she was always in the hallways during change of classes; she was in the cafeteria while they ate; and she mingled with them outside during lunch hour, simultaneously holding conversations and watching for too-short skirts, too-

longhair, and too-much horseplay. Any of these offenses could be a ticket straight to her office!

Times were good at Portland St. Patrick's. The school was being staffed by more and more lay people, but the majority of the teachers were still Sisters. The priests like Father Malewitz and Father Anderson were also on hand. They taught in the high school and/or helped coach the athletes. The Shamrock athletic program had grown, thanks to men like Unk Schaffer, Herm Schrauben, Sr., and Charles Mathews who helped form the Athletic Association in 1954.

Tuition was low; expectations were high; and things were just about to change dramatically. In Part III we will see what happened at St. Pat's during the 70s, 80s, and 90s.

PART III --- ST. PATRICK FACES CHALLENGES

As the 1960s drew to a close, no one in Portland had an inkling that St. Patrick's School would soon face some changes and challenges unlike any that it had seen in its first sixty four years of existence. Society was changing; women were leaving their homes for the workplace; the arrival of the pill meant smaller families---even in Catholic homes.

Meanwhile, Vatican II which had convened earlier in the decade had brought about changes within the Church which made Catholicism less hierarchical and more open to modern influences. One of the most striking influences was the changing role of Catholic nuns. Many left their orders, and the ones who stayed were no longer limited to careers as teachers and nurses, they were instead encouraged to go out into the world and work in other ministries.

Early in the spring of 1970, the people of St. Pat's received startling news that because of dwindling numbers within their order, the Sisters of St. Joseph would not be returning in the fall. The Sisters had been there since 1906, and students and parents alike were horrified at the thought that they would not be back. Under the leadership of high school teacher, Gina Brooks, they quickly and efficiently organized a bus trip to Nazareth, Michigan to plead for a different decision.

Though the emotional trip showed the camaraderie of the students and the depth of their attachment to the Sisters, it had no effect on the decision-makers at Nazareth. In June of 1970, most of the nuns did indeed permanently depart from Portland, leaving a dozen classrooms at St. Pat's without teachers for the fall.

Fr. Stephen Kolenic, in a Sunday sermon that spring, matter-of-factly stated that the high school would close at the end of the year. Father Kolenic was supported by a group of parishioners who accepted his premise that the parish could not afford to operate a school staffed by lay teachers.

However, an even larger group within the parish disagreed. That group sought Diocesan intercession and vowed to do everything within their power to save

their beloved school. That summer, the first St. Patrick School Board was elected, with the goal of keeping the high school open for at least five more years.

The goal was easy to set, but the task ahead was huge. Lay teachers needed to be hired to fill all of the existing vacancies; the cost of employing lay teachers would be very expensive compared to what the nuns had been paid; tuition would have to be increased to cover the costs. And, to make their job even more difficult, the new school board members felt like they didn't have the power to make any decisions. The decisions had always been made by the pastor, and old habits don't die easily.

Memories are a little hazy about the exact series of events that occurred that summer. Many people think that Monsignor Zerfas exerted the influence that led to a pastoral change at St. Pats.

In August of 1970, Fr. Kolenic was replaced by Father Joe Malewitz. Fr. Malewitz had been the Associate Pastor at the parish a few years earlier and was an ardent supporter of keeping the school open. In a letter to The Shamrock in 1992, Fr. Malewitz recalled, "In August 1970 the Bishop called me into his office and told me that I was the new pastor at Portland St. Pat's. I remember thinking that I could never fill Monsignor Flohe's shoes. I arrived to find a group of parishioners who were fighting among themselves. Within ten days we all calmed down and began the hard work of keeping our school open."

Unfortunately, the Bishop had probably waited a little too long to send Father Malewitz to Portland, because the turmoil of the summer had taken its toll. Many parents decided that they could not wait to see what would happen at St. Pat's. Many others worried that the school would only stay open a year or two and end up closed. Undoubtedly, some others were discouraged by the increase in tuition. When the school opened that fall, the student body was much smaller than it had been the previous year.

But, it did open with veteran teacher and coach, Lou LaScala at the helm. More than half of the staff was already lay teachers and all of them returned. The other

positions were quickly filled and on the first day of school in the fall of 1970, the students who returned breathed a sigh of relief that they were still Shamrocks!

If the school had coasted through those first sixty four years, buoyed by a society who placed a high value on Catholic education, the next twenty years proved to be anything but smooth, and in fact became a wild roller coaster.

Low teacher salaries led to high turnover. Many times the students returned in the fall to a school full of strangers. But, when the salaries were boosted to encourage teachers to stay, tuition had to be increased. And, increased tuition always meant that some families pulled their kids out of the school, leading to lower enrollment numbers.

But, having better teachers on staff also meant that parents felt like they were getting more for their money, so within a few years enrollment would climb.

Administrators came and administrators went. Some were weak leaders, who allowed the standards to slip; some were wonderful leaders, committed to Catholic Education.

One person who rose through the ranks at St. Pat's was Barb Tichvon. Barb taught sixth grade for six years, during a time of low morale and declining student numbers. During that time, the future of the high school was thought by many to be in jeopardy once again. Barb was promoted to the role of Assistant Principal in 1986, and she became one of the key leaders who brought stability back into the school.

In a letter to the Shamrock in 1995, Father Tom Boufford, said, "Barb hired qualified teachers, initiated programs to improve the quality of education, developed a kindergarten program, listened and encouraged parental involvement in the educational process and worked with the priests to develop the Catholic faith in the students. As a result of her labors, parents and the parish community came to realize the value of Catholic education at St. Patrick's school and to see that the school would continue to serve the parish youth for a long

time. Barb gave confidence to parents that they would not only see their own children graduate from the school, but their grandchildren as well.”

By the spring of 1990, just four years after she had taken over, St. Pat’s enrollment had climbed again to numbers not seen since the 1960’s.

The 1990’s might be remembered in Portland as the Decade of the Shamrocks. Higher enrollment meant larger athletic teams and an unprecedented record of success. St. Pat’s sent an astonishing nine teams and one individual to the State Finals during the 1990’s, bringing home six State Championship trophies!

In 1999, the parish recognized that the school, which was virtually unchanged from Father Flohe’s days, needed to be enlarged. A pledge drive was undertaken, within twelve weeks the money was raised, and on St. Patrick’s Day of 2001 the groundbreaking ceremony took place.

St. Patrick School was ready for the 21st century!