

February 7, 2012

RAY HEREK'S SHORT HISTORY OF NOTRE DAME DE LA VISITATION PARISH

Visitation parish became a reality in 1888 when a French missionary, Fr. J.G. Sanson, a native of France, came to St. Mary parish as an assistant priest. There were already three viable Catholic parishes on Bay City's east side: St. Joseph, St. James, and St. Stanislaus. St. Mary parish was started in 1873, but it was primarily an English-speaking parish. Fr. Sanson was sent by the bishop of Grand Rapids to minister to the large (about 450 families) French-speaking population of Banks.

In 1891 a frame schoolhouse was erected at the corner of Smith and State Streets. The present Visitation parish site had been purchased from Joseph M. Trombley in 1889. The church itself was ready for services on 1 October 1895. After only two years of operation, the school was forced to close because of financial reasons. Fr. Sanson had to live in the school building until 1897 when a small frame building was bought, transported to Smith and State Streets and remained the rectory until 1924.

In 1905 Fr. Sanson was transferred to a parish in Muskegon. His place was taken by Fr. Joseph L. Poulin, who hailed from Canada. The church which stands on the property today was completed under Fr. Poulin in 1914. Fr. Poulin continued to follow in Fr. Sanson's footsteps, being transferred to Muskegon in 1915. Fr. Poulin was succeeded by Fr. George O. DeQuoy who would be pastor of Visitation for more than 40 years.

In 1918 the home of Theodore Archambault, Webster Homestead, was purchased by the parish and converted into a convent for the Sisters of Mercy who taught at the school. And the school, which stood next to the church, was moved to the northern-most extremity of the property. In 1924 the rectory, which still stands, was built next to the church.

Twice the church was damaged by fire. The first time was in June 1925. The fire started in the basement of the church and caused quite a bit of damage. Flames ate through the northeast corner of the church, destroying the side altar. The intense heat broke the windows, buckled the woodwork throughout the church, destroyed the organ pipes, and damaged the plaster in the church. In May 1963 another fire damaged the church, causing about \$45,000 damage.

A convent of red brick was constructed for the teaching Sisters in 1930; and in 1957 the building was enlarged to accommodate more Sisters.

Construction on Visitation school was started in 1949, and it was opened in September 1950. The building had a capacity of 1100 pupils in 28 classrooms. By 1952 there were 797 students in grades 1-12. Of that number, 148 were in the high school. The old school was moved, and classes were held there until the new school was ready. In February 1951, the old school, in use since 1891, was renovated into a gymnasium.

Something unique to the parish is a source of part of its finances. In 1950 Don Rayburn donated an oil well to the parish. The oil well is actually located in Calvary Cemetery.

St. Joseph Cemetery, "adjacent to the parish property," was converted into a parking lot and playground. The bodies were exhumed and reburied in either Oak Ridge or Calvary Cemeteries.