

# Saint John the Baptist Church ~ The First 75 Years

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because the Lord has anointed us.”*



Officially Saint John the Baptist Parish was begun in 1867, actually it is much older. The recently arrived residents, mostly German and all the Catholics, laid the foundation for the future parish when they had the village school teacher: Mr. Serbis, Mr. Null, and Mr. May teach christian doctrine to their children. These teachers lived in a building which stood on the opposite side of the public school on Main Street. Later this school building was moved to what is now the church property and became the old convent for the sisters.

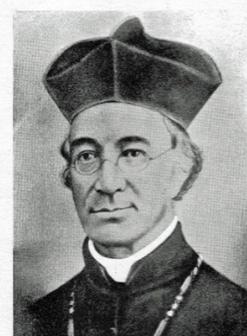
For many years the first families of the future parish in spite of the great inconveniences which the days were filled with the hard business of living, still found time and strength to go on horseback, wagon or walk the many miles to St. Stevens Mission in Gretna or to Saints Peter and Paul Church in Naperville to celebrate Mass and to receive the Sacraments, often leaving at 4:00 am to leave for mass.

It is a wonder, then that the history of Saint John the Baptist Church has been one of sacrifice and perseverance through close to 150 years. The faith of our hardy founders was part of their daily lives. Exiled to all from which they had been accustomed in their rich cultural roots in Germany: the music, their beautiful churches and the social life from the lands they came from, they held fast to their Faith in their new country. Their determination to give their children the Faith of their ancestors, in spite of difficulties paved the way for the coming of their own church building and parish community.

In 1853, St. Stephen German Catholic Church was built in Gretna. The first Catholics in St. Stephen's were of Irish nationality, who sold out to the Germans in about 1850 and left for Lemont and The Sag. Because of the German Revolution in 1848, there was a strong influx into the United States of Germans during the years of 1846 through 1851. These families were mostly from the Baden, Wesfalen, Bavaria and Alsatia areas of Germany.

In 1867 St. John the Baptist Catholic Church was opened in Winfield to serve that growing area. The bishop ordered Saint Stephen closed, except for special services, with families transferred to St. John's for worship. When St. Michael Church was opened in Wheaton in 1872, the St. Stephen parishioners were transferred to that parish. The church building was moved on wagon to St. Michael's sometime in the late 19th century and was converted into the first School House there and later became the Assembly Hall until it was torn down around 1960.

The Germans who settled in the Gretna area were primarily Catholics from southern Germany. At the time, there was no Catholic church in the county other than Saint Raphael's (founded in 1846 and later renamed Saints Peter and Paul) in Naperville. Once a month, one of the priests from the church would gather his religious articles for the journey across the prairies to Gretna. By 1852 the bishop of Chicago had authorized construction of a wooden Catholic church and school with a churchyard cemetery. St. Stephen's Catholic Church was dedicated the same year by Bishop James Oliver Van de Velde. It continued to serve the vast German Catholic parish of central DuPage County from Roosevelt Road



north to the county line near Schaumburg. The people of Winfield at that time had few traveled on horseback or on foot to either Naperville or Gretna either by horse (and wagon) or on foot since horses were rare, leaving before dawn to make the long journey.

In 1867 St John the Baptist Catholic Church was opened in Winfield to serve that growing area. The bishop ordered St. Stephen's closed, except for special services, with families transferred to St. John's for worship. When St. Michael's Catholic Church and School opened in Wheaton in 1872, the parishioners from St. Stephen's were transferred to that church, along with their records. The cemetery at St. Stephen's continued to be used until 1911. Today, only the old cemetery remains as a reminder that once a major Catholic church was located at Gretna. Six area churches all trace their roots to the original St. Stephen's Mission Church at Gretna.

It is interesting how the people of the area came upon their venture of obtaining a church for Winfield. The story runs as follows. In March or April of 1867, word came to the Catholics of Winfield that the Catholics of Wheaton and vicinity were holding meetings to discuss plans for building a church there.



Quickly a meeting was called to hold a meeting with Nicholas Berkes, John Hix, John Schramer, Anton Schmit, and the school teacher Mr. Servis, all of whom called upon Bishop James Duggan, the fourth bishop of Chicago, and asked to build a church in Winfield.

Bishop Duggan expressed the opinion that Winfield's few Catholic families hardly justified the building of a church with all its responsibilities. Disappointed that the Bishop did not give favorable attention to their request, Nicholas Berkes stepped forward and declared "Winfield already has a railroad station and a Catholic School, since Christian Doctrine is being taught by Mr. Servis (of course this was done at the local Public School of the time). He stated that because of the railroad station the priest could live in Winfield and serve the people of Milton Township (Gretna) at the same time."

Bishop Duggan thought over the matter and responded: *"I guess you are right, I give you permission to build a church, but do not go into debt."*

News of their success spread to Wheaton and North Prairie. One response was: *"What! The people of Winfield are going to build a church? Why they are not even able to put up a dog house!"*

The people of Winfield set immediately to the task. The delegation that went to see Bishop Duggan was joined by Michael Besch, Nicholas Fuchs, Nicholas T. Schramer, John Berkes, Christ Daleiden, Michael Daleiden, Nicholas Enders, Nicholas Tinnes, Michael Dieter, Valentine Dieter, Johann Germann, Peter Wagemann, Mathias Schramer, George Klein, Michael Sieber, Bartholomew Sieber, and Donatius Sieber. On February 21, 1867, a warranty deed dated February 16 was entered into DuPage County as Document 8277 establishing the one acre plot on which the parish was founded "Julius M. Warren to Right Rev. James Duggan, D.D. Bishop of the Diocese of Chicago for the use and benefit of the Roman Catholic church and society of Winfield and vicinity." The Deed stipulated a payment of \$1 and "the further consideration that there be erected on the land hereby conveyed a church building at least 30 by 50. Also a dwelling for a priest and a school house."

It was a great undertaking for Winfield at that time at the cost of \$3,000.00. Nicholas Dieter mortgaged his farm for \$500 for this purpose. The men hauled stone by team from the old Naperville quarry and helped in every way to erect the stone foundation for their church. There is no record of the builders but there were a number of stonemasons in the area who

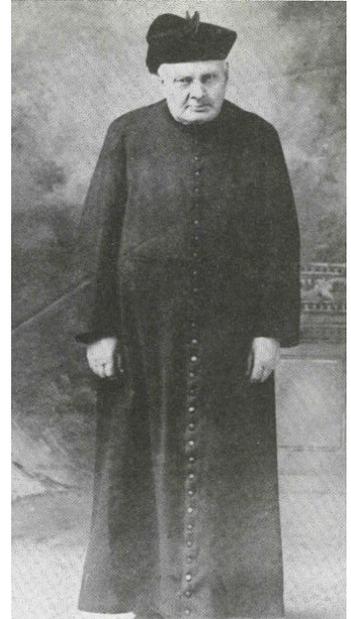
most likely helped with the construction. The stone foundation of the church survived the 1905 fire of the church still stands inside our present “Chapel” foundation, a symbol of the strength and courage of the early builders, a fulfillment, as it were, of the words of Christ:

***“I will be with you all days, even to the consummation of the world.”***

When the church building was completed the Benedictine Father M. Corbinian and followed by Father Suitbert Demartieu from Saint Joseph’s German Church on the north side of Chicago who were sent out to serve the parish until 1869 and later became pastors of Saint Joseph’s.

The first child baptized in the church was Nicholas, the son of John Berkes, in 1867. The first wedding solemnized was that of Christ Daleiden and Margaret Weiland and it was most likely Father Corbinian who presided over these first sacraments.

In 1869, when the Archbishop of Chicago saw the religious zeal of the people of Winfield he sent them a permanent pastor in the person of Father John Wiederhold who was born on April 13, 1841 in Neuenheese Westphalia and raised on a farm until the age of 12 when he left home to begin his studies in the Seminary in order to be a priest. Except for two years when he was sick he studied at Paderborn and Fulda. In 1864 he departed for the United States where he studied for four more years for the Diocese of Chicago at Saint Mary of the Lake Seminary and when the seminary was forced to close in 1866 due to financial difficulties he completed his studies at Saint Francis De Sales Seminary in Milwaukee. He was ordained by Swiss born Bishop (later Archbishop) Johann Martin Henni, of Milwaukee, on January 29, 1869 and sent immediately to what would be his lifelong apostolate of Saint John the Baptist Parish in Winfield.

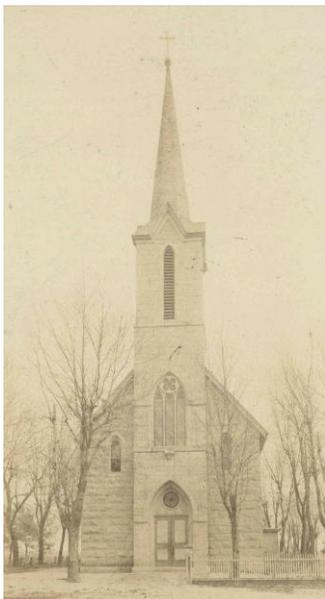


No better choice could have been made, for Father Wiederhold found in the people of Winfield a people whom he understood. **“Meine Kinder”**, he called them. The newly ordained priest set out to serve them lovingly and faithfully. Because of his German birth and upbringing his **“Kinder”** were preached to and taught in the language they spoke, German, and in time he used both German and English in his ministry.

Through the instrumentality of Father John Wiederhold many German customs were celebrated in the parish to the joy of those who well knew them in the “Old Country”. Two of these customs were the outside processions of **“Corpus Christi”** (the Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ, celebrated after Pentecost) and the procession to the cemetery on “All Souls’ Day”.

On the feast of Corpus Christi, four altars were erected in the village, and “Solemn High Mass” was sung in the church. Father Wiederhold, carried the Blessed Sacrament in procession, led his flock to each beautiful altar, where Benediction was given, and then he proceeded back to the church for the last blessing.

On All Souls’ Day the parishioners would form in procession after mass and led by Father Wiederhold would process to the cemetery, reciting the rosary in German. At the cemetery appropriate prayers would be said for all the deceased. (The ground of Saint John’s cemetery, on Gary’s Mill Road, was acquired in 1871. The remains of several children who had died previously and had been buried on the property behind the church were moved to the new cemetery.)



Father Wiederhold was not only loving but quick witted. Some of the children were in the habit of remaining outside of church until the priest had finished the Asperges (the blessing with Holy Water). Knowing this Father Weiderhold decided to teach them a lesson. One Sunday he asked John Schramer if any of them were outside. Upon being told that the children were there, he continued outside the church to “shower” them with his blessing of Holy Water. He was determined that they were to miss no part of the Mass. Needless to say that after receiving such a blessed reminder that they followed him back into church to attend Mass in its entirety.



Father Wiederhold lived in the home of the Nicholas Enders family until the house built by Colonel Warren on Church Street was purchased for \$1,800 and converted into a rectory being by warranty deed on May 18, 1869 to John Wiederhold. This building was built of the same stone from the quarry in Naperville as the church and in 1882 was converted into the parish school until 1942. (This building, with two round-topped windows still stands across the street from the “Old Chapel”.) This deed included included in the transaction a one-acre parcel of land on

Gary’s Mill Road that became Saint John’s Cemetery (having belonged from 1860-1864 to Michael and Catherine Schramer Besch

Twelve years after the first church - a stone structure 45 feet by 30 feet by 27 feet high - could no longer adequately take care of the growing congregation and had to be enlarged. This was done by adding 70 feet to the rear and raising its height to about 35 feet. It was completed in 1880 and duly blessed on the second of February by the Very Reverend J. McMullen. While construction was going on High Mass on Sundays was celebrated in the old Rectory across the street. During this time a marriage was solemnized in the Rectory - that of Elizabeth Schramer and Frank Obarhardt.

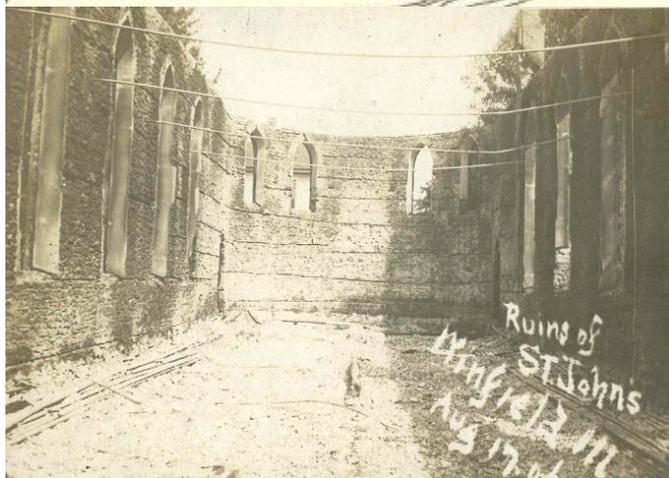
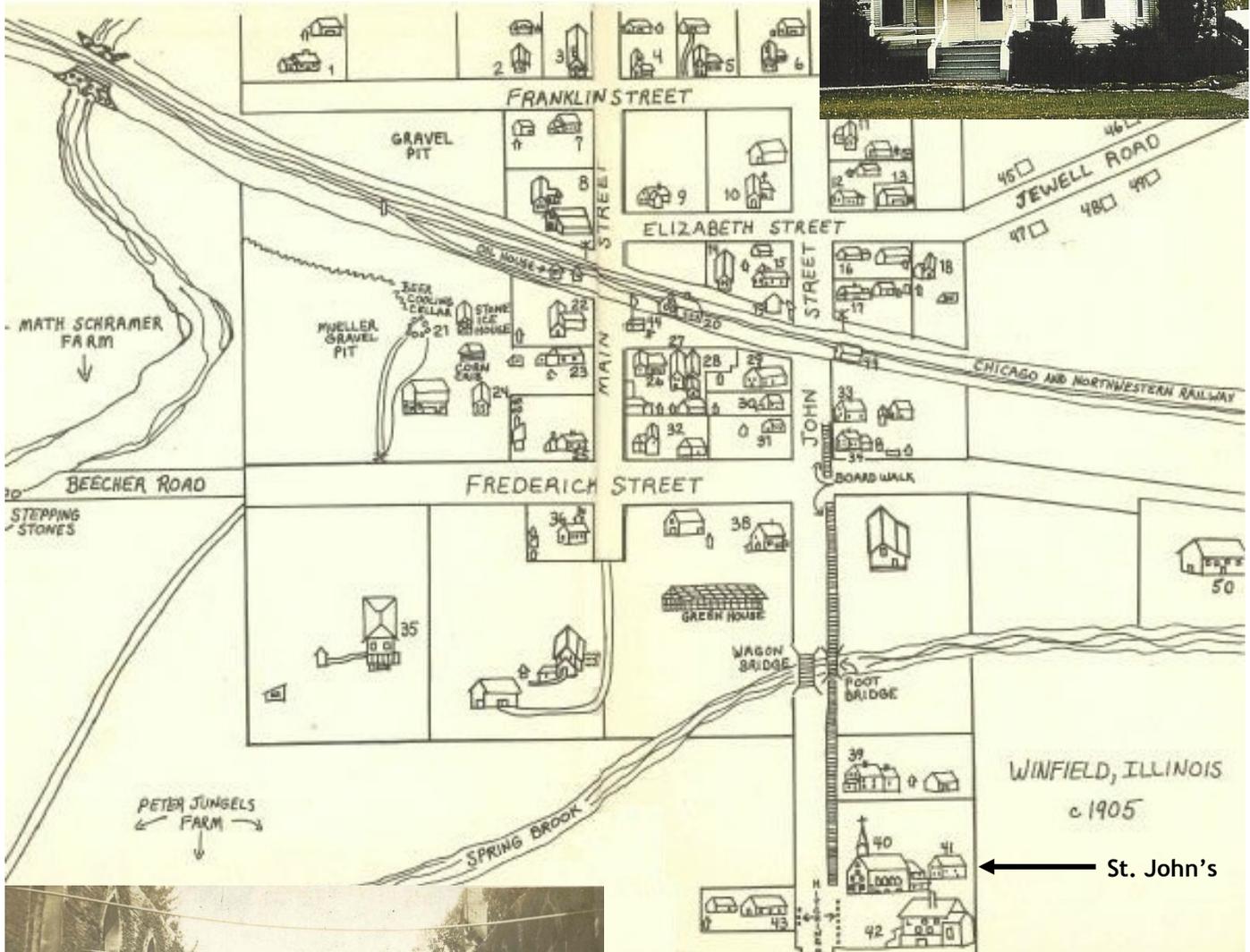
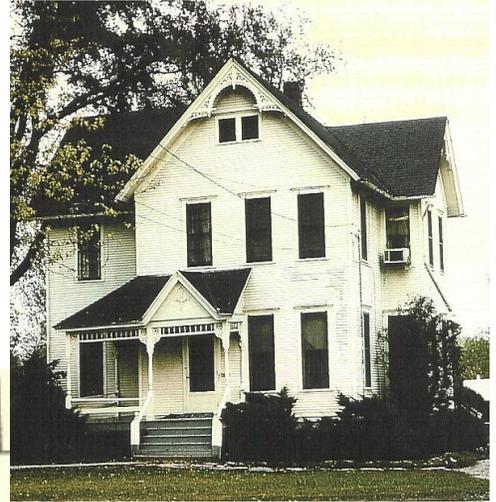
The year 1882 marked another milestone in the history of Saint John’s Parish. It was in this year that Sisters Paula, Euphania, and Michaela of the Order of the School Sisters of Saint Francis came from their mother house in Campbellsport (now Milwaukee) Wisconsin. (The School Sisters of St. Francis had only newly arrived to the United States from Bavaria in Germany in 1873.) The sacristy served as the school. In the same year a new Rectory was built to the south of the church and the old Rectory was converted into the School. For more than thirty five years this German Community of Nuns taught your children in both German and English, at the time of World War II the children begin to do their studies only in English.



Tragedy came to the parish in 1892. An explosion occurred when the housekeeper mistook gasoline for kerosene in lighting the fire. The mistake cost the good housekeeper her life and destroyed the rectory. Because Father Wiederhold was now without a home, the sisters gave him theirs and returned to their Motherhouse. While the sisters were away the nieces of the

pastor taught school. Late in the same year a new rectory was built and the sisters came back to resume their work.

As a point of interest Church Street at the turn of the 20th Century was called "John Street" and seemed to have the only wooden sidewalk in town and the bridge over Spring Brook was also referred to as the "Wagon Bridge". East Beecher Street was "Frederick Street", named for the Original Name of Winfield, "Fredericksburg", and Winfield Road was called "Main Street".



Fourteen years after the burning of the rectory, on the afternoon of August 17, 1906, a severe electrical storm had passed through this area, and a bolt of lightning struck the wooden steeple of the stone church and fire started there and spread to the roof of the church. The news spread like wildfire and in a short time men came from all directions to save the church they loved. Christ Daleiden and William Zeler climbed to the roof but Father Wiederhold

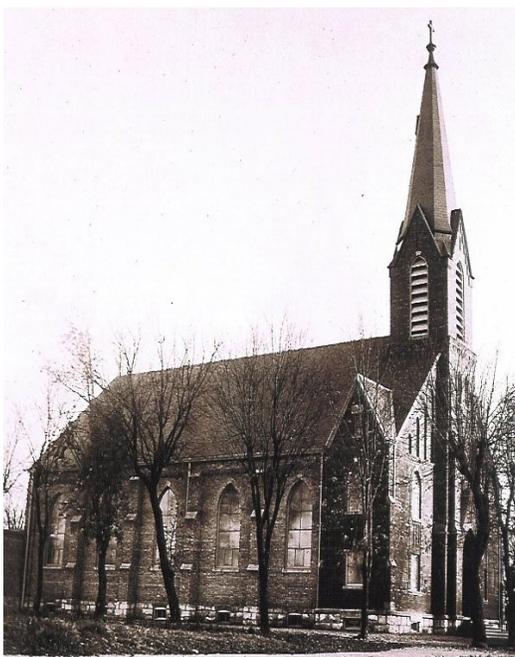
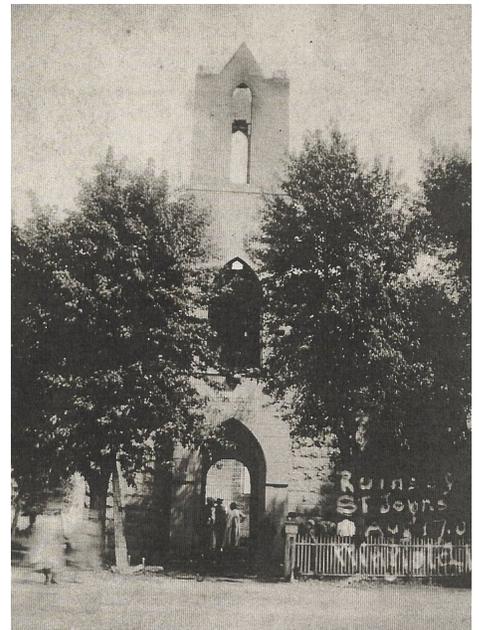


told them to come down lest they be burned to death. The men of the parish, however, succeeded in rescuing the altars, the communion rails, the pews and the stations of the cross from the church. *(These are the same altars, communion rail and stations of the cross that are in our Old Chapel today.)* The West Chicago and Wheaton hook and ladder companies were called and to their work the buildings surrounding the church were saved. After the fire had burned itself out, nothing remained of the \$12,000 structure, but the stone walls. The gold and silver

plated fixtures were also destroyed. The stations, communion rail and statues, because of their size, were easily stored immediately inside various buildings. Because of the size of the altars it took longer to move them to a safe place and thus the varnish finish on the altars were damaged by rain.

Then Father Wiederhold said that if his “*Kinder*” wanted a new church they would have to raise the money to pay for it. In the meantime Mass was celebrated in Forresters Hall

They raised the majority of this swiftly. The parish lacked \$1,700.00, when the structure was finished *(at the cost of \$20,000.00)* one year after the fire. Arrangements for the dedication were completed. The contractor, however, refused to surrender the key to the trustees until a settlement for payment of \$1,700.00. was made. Then the trustees did some quick thinking. They called a meeting with John Schramer and John Enders guaranteed the interest on the debt if the others would agree to sign a note for the amount.



Father Weiderhold was the first to sign and the others followed. The trustee received the key. On August 18<sup>th</sup>, a year and a day to the burning of the old church, the new church was dedicated by Most Reverend James E. Quigley, Archbishop of Chicago. While the new church was being built, High Mass on Sundays was celebrated in Forester’s Hall and Low Mass in the Old School

Bells for the New Church were donated by Matthias Schramer and Mrs. Pauline Jacobi, and were christened Matthias and Pauline in honor of the donors. During the pastorate of Father Wiederhold the church bells were wrung at the consecration of the Mass on Sundays, the custom was revised in the time of Father Puetz until before the Vatican Council.

The German tradition of Church architecture was a rich quality of finely finished wooden altars. The Altars



having been rescued from the fire, because of their size, were not able to immediately have been stored away from the elements, thus rain damaged the fine finishes on them. Because of the cost of building the new church and limited financial resources it was deemed more economic to have the High Altar and the Side Altars painted white.

The new organ for the Church did not arrive until after some very unpleasant experiences. The old organ could not produce the high quality of music that the German music lovers wanted. On special occasions it fell short of satisfying. Then Father Wiederhold was informed that Andrew Carnegie, steel magnate, was very generous in helping struggling parishes obtain organs. Soon, through the instrumentality of Sister Laurentia, OSF, a new organ was obtained and installed at the cost of \$1,800.00, half of which was paid by Mr. Carnegie. The School Sisters of Saint Francis, with their German heritage of passion for music, had been for many years the leading Religious Order in the country with knowledge and expertise in Liturgical Music. This was of great benefit to the parish and to worship here at Saint John the Baptist. The people of Saint John the Baptist Parish were always good in music and have had top notch choirs throughout the years.



The new church was originally lighted with kerosene lamps which hung from the ceiling and were replaced with the wonder of electric lights around 1914.

In 1919 Saint John's Parish celebrated its Golden Jubilee and the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Father John Wiederhold's ordination to the priesthood. Solemn High Mass was celebrated by Father Wiederhold in the presence of the Most Reverend George William Mundelein, D.D., Archbishop of Chicago (*in 1924 he became the first Cardinal of the Archdiocese of Chicago and the first West of the Alleghenies*).





**Saint John the Baptist School 1912**

among those of his children who had gone before him and whom he had comforted in their last moments. A marble slab marks his resting place.

***“Requiescat in Pace!” “May he Rest in Peace!”***

In the same month the Cardinal Archbishop of Chicago appointed the Reverend Henry M. Franz as pastor. During the fifteen years Father Franz spent in Saint John’s numerous improvements were made on parish property. Both the old rectory and the old convent were modernized and painted, two rooms were added to the old convent, and a heating system was installed. The conveniences of a large class room and water fountains were added to the school. School was taught in German until the turn of the 20th Century and then half German / Half English until WWI.

He took great interest in beautifying the cemetery—adding the east and south gates and arranging for the “Cemetery Upkeep.” Father Franz is recalled especially for his great affection for the children and interest in the school. He directed them with understanding often taking active part in their sports. The young people recalled his participation in, and kindly supervision of their annual Hal-loween’en fun.



**The younger children of Saint John’s School circa 1934**

**Fourth Row:** Sister Etto OSF, Al Armbruster, Bob Enders, ? Tobias, John Wm McCabe, Earl Mueller, Harold “Bingo” Besch, Don Baum, Jim Wosfeld, Bob McCabe,  
**Third Row:** Helen Smith, Lillian Myers, John N. Karwoski, Vinc Switowski, Jerry Wendel, Jim Ford, Alice Smith, **Second Row:** Rosemary Connors, Flor Mae Schramer, Pauline Tobias, Jean McCabe, Mary Jane Wurtz, Rosemary Koller, **First Row:** Mickey McLeese, Tom Tinnes, Bob Fitzgerald

The Reverend Monsignor Francis A. Remppe preached the jubilee sermon.

During the last five years of Father Wiederhold’s pastorate he had three associates: Father John Ott in 1916, Father Paul Lacoski in 1917, and Father John Webster from 1918 to 1921.

Then came February 6<sup>th</sup>, 1921, when Father John Wiederhold was called to his eternal reward. Sorrowfully his people laid him to rest in Saint John’s Cemetery

In August, 1936, Father Franz resigned his pastorate in Winfield because of his health. As pastor emeritus he made his home in Wheaton.

In the same month the Cardinal Archbishop of Chicago appointed Reverend Henry A. Puetz as pastor (1936-1952). The new pastor found the people responsive.

Our Church windows were placed in the church during the time of Father Puetz, by a famous stained glass company, the “Tyrolese Art Glass Company” from Innsbruck (originally Austria) Germany, which had been taken over by the Anschluss of 1938. The Tyrolese Art Glass Company which began its art in 1861 (Tiroler Glasmalerei und Mosaik-Anstalt)



provided many windows for the American market from the late 1870s until the beginning of World War I. Their windows employed the painterly "Munich Style" associated with studios such as those of Franz Mayer and F.X. Zettler in Munich. At one time the firm maintained offices in Chicago, to handle its American trade. It continues at Innsbruck today, under the direction of Konrad Mader, a descendant of one of its founders. Tyrolese Art Glass had for generations produced some of the most beautiful stained glass in German American Churches throughout the United States. The Windows of the Angels in the Sanctuary were placed there at Christmas time of 1938. Father Puetz wanted to surprise the parish with their beauty at Christmas. So they were covered until Christmas Eve. There were spotlights prepared to go on during the "Gloria". The lights were switched on and for a brief moment the awestruck congregation gazed at their beauty and then "Poof" all the fuses were blown in the church that shut off all the lights. The Windows of the Saints in the Body of the Church were placed there in early 1939, and are outstanding in their quality and beauty of German stained glass. So the First Communion Class of 1939 was the first class to have all the beautiful windows in place. The magnificent figure of Saint John the Baptist was placed up front on the left of the Sanctuary by the altar of the Blessed Virgin Mary. *(With the building of the large Church addition in the early 80's it was placed in the Narthex of the New Church and the window of Saint Rose of Lima was moved from second to the back to replace the window of Saint John and the entrance walkway was placed where her window once stood)* So the First Communion Class of 1939 was the first class to have all the beautiful windows in place.

With the growing population of the Winfield Catholics, Saint John the Baptist School needed more room to educate the children of the parish. So in 1942 the cornerstone was laid for a new school building that had four large class rooms on the upper floor and a meeting hall with a stage and a kitchen on the ground floor.

In 1942, Saint John the Baptist Parish celebrated its 75th Anniversary.



*A large portion of this history comes from the commemorative book that was published for the 75th Anniversary.*