

James Connelly Recounts Beginning of St. Thomas Parish

James Connelly, who supplies the *Herald* with the following history of St. Thomas church, is a resident of Duluth, residing at 5711 Huntington street. He was 84 years old on the 26th of March. He located at St. Thomas in 1857 and is probably the only surviving person who can recall the beginning of the parish. He left St. Thomas 45 years ago, but retains vivid memory of the early days in and around St. Thomas.

In the spring of 1857, Mrs. John McGukin, who was living with her husband in John Cairy's cabin in Section 21, Derrynane township, was taken seriously ill, and Mr. McGukin sent word to Bishop Cretin of the St. Paul diocese, requesting him to send a priest to administer the sacraments to her.

The Bishop secured a Benedictine priest from St. John's College, Collegeville, Minn., whose name was Fr. Heindel, and he arrived at the settlement early in April. He administered the sacraments to Mrs. McGukin and on the following morning celebrated the first mass that was ever celebrated in the settlement, in John Cairy's cabin, and after mass he baptized Ann Connelly, "age thirteen months," and she was the first person baptized there.

Fr. Heindel continued to come to the settlement at intervals until the latter part of 1857, when he was succeeded by Fr. Cornelious Whitman, also from St. John's, who attended the parish until 1960, when he was succeeded by the Rev. Fr. Reis, who was also from St. John's.

In 1858 the Catholic population undertook to have the parish organized. They held several meetings, which were not always harmonious in regard to where the church would be located.

The Sullivan faction wanted to have it located in their locality, which was near the Scott county line, but they were beaten by the votes of those who favored a location farther south.

Michael Connelly and James Hickey offered to donate two and one half acres each at the northwest quarter of Section 17, Township 112 North, Range 24, west and at the same time, Patrick Ronan and Patrick Cassin offered to donate seven and one-half acres each "at the present location" which was part swamp and meadow lands and that offer was accepted.

At a meeting of the proposed parishioners they voted that the parish would be six miles square, comprising the west half of Derrynane and the east half of Tyrone townships.

They delegated Michael Connelly to go to St. Paul with their petition for the new parish, together with the plat of the same, to present to Bishop Cretin, which he did, and the Bishop granted their petition and the parish of St. Thomas was organized.

The parishioners cleared part of the land, hewed logs, and built a log church about 36 by 60 feet, which had a shingled roof and board floor but no sanctuary rail or pews.

The front door faced the west with the altar attached to the wall in the east end of the church.

After the church was built, services were held in private homes in the winter time, because they had no way of heating the church.

Most of the time the services were held in John Hickey's place, which was afterward known as "Moses Murphy's old place," and it was not until late in 1862 or 1863 that the parish secured a heating stove for the church.

The priests who took charge after Fr. Reis were: Fr. Kazelberger in 1862 to 1863, from 1863 to August 1866; Fr. Theodore Venn, August 1866 to December 25, 1867; Rev. Alexander Berghold, September 1868; Rev. Fr. McGenty (three months) spring of 1869; Rev. T. C. Kennedy until 1882; Rev. M. Cauly until August 1889, when Rev. T. C. Kennedy took charge again.

The parish was a mission until Rev. M. Cauly was pastor.

During the summer of 1867 the frame church was built under the supervision of Rev.

Alexander Berghold. He was the architect himself.

The present church and parsonage were constructed during Rev. M. Cauly's time in the parish.

The following is a list of the names of the early settlers of St. Thomas commencing in the year of 1855:

Edward Nestor	Michael Connelly
Bill Sullivan	James Hickey
Patrick Griffin	John Hickey
Owen Riley	Dan Fowler
Timothy Shea	Con Reardon
Richard O'Connell	Con Carny
Michael O'Connell	Patrick Ronan
Patrick Cassin	Con Ronan
Martin Dunn	Con Regan
John Murry	William Regan
John Carry	Michael Murry
Hugh Doherty	Mike Courtney
Dennis Connelly	Pat. Courtney
Hugh O'Neil	John Donahue
Thomas O'Neil	Morris Donahue
Timothy Burns	John McGukin
Daniel Burns	James McGukin
Mike Griffin	Jeremiah Sullivan
James O'Leary	"2 Dan" Sullivan
John Clifford	Thomas Duffy
Thomas Clifford	Morris Flemming
Patrick McKeary	Cornelius Regan
John Shea	John Murphy
Dan Doyle	James Sullivan
Patrick Moran	George Connelly
Owen Cullen	John Holloran

Richard Heatherston

Belle Plaine Herald, November 1, 1934

Reformatted: 4 November 2019

Le Sueur County, Minnesota