

MAHANOY CITY CHRONICLES/Special edition

125 years for parish and borough

(NOTE: This is the first of a three-part series on the history of Saint Fidelis Parish which, like Mahanoy City Borough, is celebrating its 125th anniversary this year. Most of the data was compiled by the late Rev. Dr. Charles F. Keller, a son of the parish and pastor from 1939 to 1967.)

TWO CENTURIES before the white man settled in Mahanoy City the Iroquois Indians had conquered all other tribes in Pennsylvania and were using Schuylkill County as a hunting ground. An old document mentions a creek which Indians of the Five Nations called "Cantagny" and the Delaware Tribe called "Maghonoy." It denoted a salt-lick or water with saline deposits where deer gathered.

This creek, commonly known as the Mahanoy Creek, was originally a broad and limpid stream in whose waters Emmanuel Boyer, the first permanent inhabitant of the town, caught a hundred trout in one day.

The history of Mahanoy City has been traced back to the Indian Purchase of Aug. 22, 1749. The first dwelling erected here was a log house which in 1791 stood on Main street at the corner of Market street and was occupied by a German hunter named John Reich.

As late as 1850 the Mahanoy Valley was a wilderness in which there roamed hundreds of bears and other animals of the chase. Through this valley were hauled loads of timber to the other side of Buck Mountain (Carbon County) where the swift waters of the Lehigh River were used to float the logs down to Mauch Chuck and the Lehigh Canal for towing to Philadelphia.

In 1853 Jacob Faust, one of the earliest German settlers here, built a tavern (the Mahanoy House, 10 E. Centre St.) for Emmanuel Boyer, who became the town's first permanent settler. Boyer had come to serve as an agent for the Little Schuylkill Company so they could keep possession of the land purchased from the Kunkle heirs.

Henrich (Henry) Litsch, a founding member of Saint Fidelis Parish, came here as a stone mason in the early '50s and built the town's first bridge at the junction of Main and Water (Market) streets. Mathias Valerius (Walerius), Gerard Welter and Litsch were the first German Catholic inhabitants of Mahanoy City. Mr. Welter spent much time prospecting for coal and picking huckleberries in the area now occupied by Centre street.

THE MAHANOY Tunnel was begun by Michael Barry in 1859 and finished in 1862. Although



PROUD OF PARISH — The pastor, former pastors and sons and daughters who have become priests and nuns, of Saint Fidelis Parish, Mahanoy City, gather here for the parish's 125th anniversary celebration. The nuns at front are Sister

Catherine Georgene Portner and Sister Agnes Stiff. At rear (from left) are Rev. John Lipp, a son of the parish, Augustinian priest, at Saint Rita's Church, Philadelphia; Rev. Francis Shoenauer, former pastor, now at Saint Boniface Church, Saint Clair;

Rev. Joseph Whalen, pastor; Rev. John G. Engler, former pastor, retired and Rev. Frank Schuster, son of parish, at Saint Ambrose Church, Schuylkill Haven.

(Evening Herald/Emil Yenchick)

Barry paid only 87 cents to \$1 a day, many workmen were attracted hither.

Meanwhile, the Little Schuylkill Company, the predecessor to the Reading Railroad, was laying track through the valley, which opened the way for trainloads of German and Irish immigrants to flock here to work in the mines springing up everywhere in the vicinity.

The first shipment of coal from this vicinity was made from North Mahanoy Colliery by Samuel Silliman and Son in 1861. Since the Mahanoy Tunnel was not yet open, this coal must have been transported to Mahanoy Plane for hoisting over the mountain. At first the different collieries were operated by small companies or individual capitalists, but soon their interests were bought up by two large railroad-spinoff corporations, the Philadelphia and Reading Coal and Iron Company, and the Lehigh Valley Coal and Navigation Company. As the mines became more numerous, the work of felling trees, removing stumps building roads, constructing railroads and driving tunnels gradually gave way to other employment and the town grew rapidly in size, wealth and population.

In 1860 the population was only 573, which included all of Mahanoy Township since there no borough, which was not chartered until Dec. 16, 1863. John Eichman, a member of Saint Fidelis Parish, was the first chief burgess, having been elected on Tuesday, Feb. 23, 1864. He served

a total of seven terms. Born in Germany in 1817 and married to Barbara Hoppe, he came to America in 1847 and to Mahanoy City in 1863.

GERMAN CATHOLIC history in Mahanoy City dates from before 1858 when Rev. Father Bach of Ashland traveled here to celebrate Mass in the home of John Hoffman, 213 W. Centre St. At times when there were no Masses here, local young men walked or rode to churches in Ashland (Saint Mauritius, founded 1856) or Saint Clair (Saint Boniface, founded 1853). Other times the Germans, although many could not fully understand or speak English, attended Masses celebrated by Irish missionary priests in Philip Ryan's hotel on East Centre street, and later in the temporary church maintained by Saint Canicus parishioners until their first permanent edifice was dedicated in July 1866.

The two earliest German priests to celebrate Mass in Mahanoy City were Rev. A. M. Grundner of Philadelphia and Rev. Herman Depman of Saint Clair.

Father Grundner was ordained on June 25, 1848, and died in Philadelphia on Aug. 13 1876.

Father Depman was born in Muenster, Westphalia, and was ordained in Philadelphia by Bishop James Wood on Feb. 2, 1864. He was stationed in Saint Clair and Pottsville from 1865-72, then joined the religious Order of Saint Francis, taking the name Bonifacius. He died in Cleveland

on April 4, 1912.

AN OPPORTUNITY for the German Catholics to have their own church presented itself in 1863 when Frank Carter, land agent for the Philadelphia and Coal Company, offered to sell them three lots at Mahanoy and Third streets for \$700.

On Aug. 2, 1863, a group of 61 men from the borough and neighboring areas, including Shenandoah, assembled to start a fund for the formation of a parish. The minutes of that session noted: "Since the German Catholics here have increased to a considerable number, the necessity of building a church and, first of all, obtaining the lots was acknowledged by all. The congregation was formally organized and the following officers were elected pro tempore: Frantz Roth, president; John Frick, secretary; Peter Otterbach, treasurer."

Others attending that founding session were: Valentine Krauter, Peter Mehly, Wilhelm Peterson, Heinrich Litsch, Johann Westrich, Mathias Herres, Joseph Herres, Mathias Valerius, Gerhard Welter, Johann Schuth, Lorenz Murdin, Joseph Hellen-thal, George Gunther, Joseph Kuntz, Philip Natterman, Mathias Natterman Michael Maisberger, Johannes Hoffman, Henri Gurses, John Muller.

Peter Bertzel, Heinrich Baumgarten, Peter Post, Susan Pummer, Jacob Hartman, Seth Kaley, Karl Kaier, Isador Gruber, Gottfried Nagel, Carl Dennis, Adam Styling, Peter Roos, John

Weber, Mathias Schuh, Fredrich Deuter, Joseph Schatt, Nikolas Ostheimer, Blasius Domger, Christoph Forster, Wendel Jung.

Adam Koch, Philip Jung, Heinrich Scharz, Johan Hoffman, Johannes Rehr, Johannes Schatt, Bernhard Bank, Joseph Muller, Peter Muller, Franziscus Leichtner, Peter Beker, Nickolas Muller, Mathias Bing, Peter Forster, Mathias Armbruster, Anton Roth, N. Schnee and John Deitsch.

Thirteen of those 61 were signers of the petition that brought boroughhood to Mahanoy City.

THE COLLECTION at the first meeting amounted to \$193.50, which was used to pay the first installment for purchase of the three lots. The second and final installments were paid the following year.

In May 1864, a petition was signed by 59 members requesting the bishop of Philadelphia to designate Mahanoy City for a German Catholic mission. In January 1865, a committee composed of Frantz Roth, Henrich Litsch and Henrich Baumgarten conferred with Rev. Michael McAvo of Saint Canicus Parish and obtained two acres of ground for a German Catholic cemetery. This was in exchange for funds which the German Catholics had contributed toward Saint Canicus Church while attending Masses there.

This original cemetery, situated in the upper southeast corner of the hillside adjacent to the Saint Canicus Cemetery, is the burial

site of Rev. Francis Buening, first pastor of Saint Fidelis Parish, also of Peter Otterbach, first parish treasurer and a signer of the petition for the incorporation of Mahanoy City Borough.

On Dec. 3, 1865, John Schuth and Gerard Welter were sent to Philadelphia to consult Archbishop Wood concerning the erection of a church. By that time the parish numbered 134 families totaling 504 people. Of this number, 404 lived in the borough and the others came from Bowmans, Myersville, Boston Run and Kendrick's Place (Park Place).

THE YEAR 1866 was an eventful one for the congregation. On Jan. 7 they voted to build a brick church measuring 45 by 80. The fund drive raised \$4,983.05 — an impressive sum considering that wages then were \$1 a day.

The deed was recorded at the Pottsville Courthouse on Jan. 23 1866, transferring the land from the Philadelphia and Mahanoy Coal Company to Right Rev. James F. Wood, Bishop of Philadelphia, in trust for the Roman Catholics of Mahanoy City worshipping at the Church of Saint Fidelis.

On July 8, 1866, Bishop Wood came to Mahanoy City, marking the first visit of a bishop to the borough.

The bishop asked Gerard Welter, "What are you going to call your church?" He replied, "We thought that it lay with the bishop to choose the patrons of the churches."

"Where were you born?" asked the bishop, to which Mr. Welter replied, "In Prussia."

"Then you shall have a Prussian saint for the patron of your church," the bishop declared. "Let this church by known as Saint Fidelis."

And so, as of July 11, 1866, the secretary's minutes begin: "Meeting of Saint Fidelis Congregation..."

Laying of the cornerstone was presided over by Father Grundner on Sunday, Sept. 16, 1866. The following day the congregation held its first picnic and the people assembled at the church at 9 a.m. to leave for the picnic grounds. The picnic proceeds amounted to \$680.02.

The first Solemn High Mass was celebrated in the church on Christmas day of 1866 by Father Depman. Thus, the German Catholics had their own church and no longer worshipped at Saint Canicus, although they had to wait two more years to receive a permanent pastor. During those two years, most of the Masses in Saint Fidelis Church were celebrated by Father Depman.

(To be continued)
(Next: the pastors)

It wasn't a leisure trip for scouts!

GORDON — Recently members of Scout Troop 180 here were invited to attend the annual invitational "Camporee" at West Point, N.Y. for the 28th year that the camporee has been in existence.

According to information supplied by Troop 180, the West Point Camporee was first proposed in the 1960s when General William C. Westmorland was commandant of the military academy. During the first year, only four scout troops attended. Since then the number of scouts has grown and this year the cadets hosted 3,500 scouts from all over the United States.

TWENTY-EIGHT STATES were represented from as far away as Malibu, Calif., and Florida. The Scout Council of West Point basically ran the show. Out of the corps of cadets, 125 cadets — or 80 percent — were former Boy or Girl scouts and out of this, 10 were former Eagle or Golden Award scouts. In addition to the West Point cadets, several cadets from the U.S. Coast Guard Academy and some ROTC (Reserve Officers Training Corps) cadets from New York Military Academy and other colleges, assisted.

THE PROCESS for a troop to be invited is selective. A former member of the troop must be a cadet at the academy or must be selected from a computer list he/she is placed on submitting the request.

This year, Gordon was chosen after submitting requests two years in a row. Each troop can have no more than 25 members attend, counting adults, scouters and scouts. Each troop is assigned a Cadet TAC, who answers the scouts' questions and who prepares them for the final

ceremonies. These cadets, both male and female, also run the competitions.

BY NO MEANS IS this a leisure trip, Troop 180 officials noted in their news release. Registration on arrival was on a Friday starting at 2 p.m., or 14:00 as the military calls it. The scouts then had to stand a back-pack inspection, to display that they had what the scout book says they must carry. Upon completion of this the troop hiked four miles over Bulls Head Mountain.

Upon arrival at the camp site the troop registered. Scouts were given pins saying "I Survived Bulls Head, West Point, 1988." Then they set up camp in an area 50-by-50 feet on ground not too flat or smooth. Scout troops kept arriving late into the night on trails lighted by chemical or calume sticks. The scene was described as "very rustic" with no modern facilities close by.

THE ADULTS TRAVELED by vehicle and began unpacking and carrying in items like stoves and other big equipment. Both Boy and Girl scouts were involved. The Friday that Troop 180 arrived was rainy, cold and windy. Morning came early with bugle call at 5 a.m., which was followed by the theme from "Top Gun," "ROCKY" and Lee Greenwood's "Proud To Be An American." This was followed by cadets making sure the scouts were up the "Army way."

After a little physical training and a two-mile run, it was back for breakfast for the scouts. They also had to prepare and clean up the camp site for inspection, and get their uniforms on for a formation to begin the day's competition. The scouts competed in 18 events: first



aid, leadership reaction course I, leadership reaction course II, rope bridge/rapel seat, fire bucket relay, map reading, Kim's game, compass course, signals and symbols flag courtesies, knot tying, drill and ceremonies, stretcher relay canoe race, ent building, wood lore and a helicopter and tank on display.

BAGGED LUNCHES were carried due to the scouts not being permitted to go back to the camp site until after 4:30 p.m. No scoutmaster was allowed to accompany his or her troop through the events. In the evening after supper, the scouts attended an open air movie and a ceremony put on by the cadets and the Order of the Arrow.

On Sunday morning after breakfast and the formal awards

ceremony, the scouts passed in review in front of the commandant of the school. Afterward, religious services were held for those of Catholic and Protestant faiths. For the Jewish scouts, services were held on Friday.

After church services the scouts and scouters had the opportunity to swap or purchase memorabilia with the cadets and other scouts. Each scout received a patch and 'kerchief. Upon clearing camp and packing the vehicles, Troop 180 traveled seven miles to the United State Military Academy and toured the museum and grounds where members saw many interesting sights. The cadet TAC who was assigned to Troop 180 was Scott McKee from Dallas, Tex., soon to enter his third year at the

academy. The cadets must attend classes until noon on Saturdays and must cram in study time along with working with the scouts.

WHILE AT THE academy, Troop 180 was visited by Captain Joe Fisher, military history professor and a former resident of Pottsville.

Scouts and adults who attended from Troop 180 included: Scoutmaster Al Kennedy and son, Paul; Scout Edward Wallace and father, Edward; Scouts Larry and Edward Helwig and dad, Larry; Scouts Mark and Jason Schmidt and dad, Danny; Scout Christopher Rice and dad, Frank; Scout Robert Cuthie and dad, Vince; Scout Jason Pen-nypacker and dad, Lou; also, Terry Price, Ralph Johnson, Ray Yarnell, Albert Davis, Marcus Peel, Jeff

ACTIVITIES — "Airborne" pushups (top left), a canoe race (bottom left) and a stretcher race (bottom right) were part of the activities during the camporee at West Point, N.Y., attended by scouts of Troop 180, Gordon.

Nemath, Adam Huffman, Wade Hubler. The top award, a cadet saber, was awarded to a troop from Connecticut.

TROOP 180 members hope they will be able to return to West Point. Among the cadets who helped, 10 had attended the camporee as Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts. Another troop from the regional Hawk Mountain Council, from Orwigsburg, also attended.

Said Troop 180 officials, "All in all it was a good weekend for boys and adults. Friends were made with other scouts from all over and a troop from Canada also attended with its scoutmaster, a sergeant with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police."