

MAHANOY CITY CHRONICLES/Special edition

Saint Fidelis saga continues...

(This is the second of a three-part series on Saint Fidelis Parish history compiled by the late Rev. Dr. Charles F. Keller.)

REV. FRANCIS Joseph Buening was the first pastor of Saint Fidelis Parish. He was ordained by Bishop Wood in Philadelphia on March 12, 1868, and arrived in Mahanoy City in November of that year. Because there was no rectory, he boarded at the Valerius residence. A rectory was built in such a hurry that they forgot to include a chimney, as the housekeeper discovered when she tried to start a fire in the kitchen stove.

The first baptism noted in the parish register was that of Frances Weber on Nov. 15, 1868, four days after the child's birth.

The first marriage united John Muenchof and Regina Petri on Jan. 17, 1869.

The first funeral was that of Mary Grow, age 10, on Dec. 12, 1868.

The original church had no vestibule, no tower, no steeple, no bells, no stained glass windows, no choir loft and not even pews. John Adam finally got tired standing during the sermons and brought along a bench, an idea copied by others. Eventually pews were purchased.

The small pox epidemic in the spring of 1872 claimed the life of Father Buening. He contracted the disease while administering the Last Sacraments to a parishioner and died on June 14. The Latin inscription on his tomb in the old cemetery parish states: Primus et Fidelis Pastor Sancti Fidelis Ecclesiae (First and Faithful Pastor of Saint Fidelis Church).

REV. JOHN B. MAUS succeeded Father Buening and is recorded in history as the founder of the first parochial school in Mahanoy City. The Saint Fidelis School opened in September 1874 and was to serve the parish for 87 years.

Prior to that, the parish children were taught catechism in Sunday school fashion by lay

people, including Theodore Buening, brother of the former pastor.

Born in Germany on May 19, 1847, Father Maus was ordained at Mechlin on June 3, 1871, and sailed for America shortly afterward. He arrived in Mahanoy City on July 17, 1872.

After deciding to open a school, he engaged Samuel Reinhart, a pioneer carpentry contractor, to construct a four-room frame building on ground rented from the Philadelphia and Reading Coal and Iron Company. This served as the school until a new building was erected in 1924.

Father Maus also purchased the property next to the rectory to serve as a convent for the three Sisters of Saint Francis who came to staff the school for its opening in September 1874: Sister M. Magdalen (superior), Sister M. Colette and Sister M. Ludovica.

Through the next three decades the school enrollment continued to increase until 1917 when it became complete with the addition of the eighth grade.

The first eighth grade graduating class consisted of seven members in 1918: William Post (valedictorian), George Bastian, William Goodman, Mary Campion, Florence Polli, Margaret Post and Charles Kaier.

The sad duty of announcing the end of Saint Fidelis School at the conclusion of the 1961 term fell to Father Charles Keller. That final eighth grade graduating class consisted of 16 members: Susan Alansky, Mary Ellen Bias, Maryann Farr, Marjorie Fletcher, Monica Gabuzda, Mary Lobichusky, Kathleen Luck, Patricia Olimpi, Kathryn Selgrath, Elizabeth Zilker, Joseph Benny, John Klitsch, Thomas Kondisko, Richard Matz, John Wargo and Paul Williams. Only four of these were members of the parish.

The last faculty members were Sister M. Gerald Eileen (superior), Sister M. Cordula, Sister Marie Goretti and Sister M. Lambertus.

It was a sad ending for the



George J. Post
Organist 50 years

pioneer work begun 87 years earlier by Father Maus. After leaving Saint Fidelis on Sept. 12, 1876, he served at Saint Alphonsus Church, Philadelphia, for six years and finally at Sacred Heart Church, Allentown, where he died on Jan. 9, 1899.

The school building stood until the early 1970s when it was damaged by fire and had to be torn down.

REV. HERMAN DIEDERICH was the successor to Father Maus. He arrived at Saint Fidelis on Sept. 12, 1876, and remained for the next quarter century.

A native of Germany, he was born in Westphalia on July 8, 1845, and came to America shortly after his ordination at Muenster on May 14, 1871. The next five years he spent at parishes in Philadelphia, Pottsville, Bridesburg and Allentown.

While serving at Sacred Heart Parish in Allentown during 1874 he was notified by the Philadelphia chancery office that he was to exchange places with Father Maus, then pastor of Saint Fidelis. However, the Mahanoy parishioners pleaded with the bishop to allow Father Maus to remain here, and their request was granted at the last minute. Father Diederich had already left Allentown and was walking along

Main street in Mahanoy City on his way to Saint Fidelis when Father Maus met him and informed him of the change of plans. So he had to wait another two years before coming to Mahanoy.

During his tenure here, Father Diederich twice returned to Germany to revisit the haunts of his childhood. The first trip was during July-September of 1881, the second during May-August of 1898. During those absences the parish was served by priests from Pottsville and Philadelphia, one of whom was Rev. Augustine Schulte, a professor at Saint Charles Seminary, Overbrook.

Only two priests served as curates in the 1265-year history of Saint Fidelis. The first was Rev. Joseph Schaefer who arrived shortly after his ordination in June 1901 and stayed a year while Father Diederich was recuperating from a severe gallstone ailment.

Father Diederich's pastorate saw the church receive a steeple in 1886, three bells in 1887, and its first organ in 1889.

The bells were named in honor of Saint Peter (donated by Peter Post), Saint Charles (donated by Charles D. Kaier) and Saint Joseph (donated by the Saint Joseph Society).

The pipe organ was made for a Pottsville church which cancelled the order and Saint Fidelis picked it up for \$404. The first organist was Mrs. Abie Jung (Young). The best known organist and choir director was George J. Post who served for more than 50 years until his death in 1953.

Father Diederich acquired the ground for the new cemetery when the old one began running out of space. The new three-acre site was purchased for \$302.50 from the Philadelphia and Reading Coal and Iron Company.

Death claimed Father Diederich on Dec. 7, 1903, at the age of 58. He was buried in the priests' lot in front of the chapel (now the tool shed) of the new cemetery. Among the clergy at the funeral were Archbishop John Ryan and his auxiliary, Right

Rev. E. F. Prendergast, attended the funeral.

REV. WILLIAM HAMMEKE succeeded Father Diederich. He arrived on Dec. 5, 1903, and remained until June 12 1928, when he was transferred to Reading.

Like his predecessors, he was a native of Germany, born in Westphalia on Sept. 9, 1862. His parents died before he was eight years old, leaving a family of one girl and eight boys. The family stayed together, being raised by the oldest boy, and four of them became priests.

After attending college for several years, during which he walked 12 miles to and from classes, Father Hammeke entered a seminary and was ordained on Aug. 10, 1889, at Paderborn.

He came to America a year or so later and served parishes in Philadelphia, Lehigh and the Lehigh Valley region before his assignment to Mahanoy City.

In 1916 Saint Fidelis observed the 50th anniversary of the first Mass in its own church. It was for that occasion that the history you are now reading was begun by Charles Keller, then a seminarian, at the request of Father Hammeke. The historian was able to obtain valuable data from pioneer parishioners, records and books which have since disappeared.

One of Father Hammeke's achievements was the 1924 construction of a new two-story parochial school on a lot behind the church and adjacent to the Mahanoy Township High School.

The end of Father Hammeke's 25-year pastorate came on June 12 1928, when he was appointed irremovable pastor of Saint Paul's Church, Reading, succeeding his brother, Theodore, who died there.

REV. CHARLES BORNEMANN was the first American-born pastor to serve Saint Fidelis. He assumed the duties in June 1928 and stayed eleven years during which period the original parish school dating

from 1874 was torn down.

For a brief period during the summer of 1939, he had the assistance of the parish's second and last curate, Rev. Joseph Everly.

Born in Newark, N.J., on Sept. 2, 1882, Father Bornemann went to Rome to study at the American College and was ordained in the Eternal City on Dec. 22, 1906.

His first seven years as a curate were spent at Saint Mary's, Reading, where his uncle, Msgr. Geroge Bornemann, was pastor. Subsequent assignments took him to Philadelphia, Collegeville, Easton, Greenville, Green Lane, Wyomissing and, finally, Mahanoy City.

He was transferred in September 1939 to Saint Joseph's Church, Easton, where he died on March 29, 1947.

REV. CHARLES KELLER, a native son of the parish, became the sixth pastor on Oct. 19, 1939, and remained until his death 27 years later.

Born in Mahanoy City on Dec. 30, 1898, son of Joseph and Mary Keller, he attended Saint Fidelis School through sixth grade (to only classes available) then went to public school four years. At age 16 he entered Saint Charles Seminary and was ordained on May 16, 1923, in the Philadelphia Cathedral by Dennis Cardinal Dougherty.

He took post-graduate courses at Catholic University, Washington, D.C., and received the doctor of canon law (J.C.D.) degree in 1925.

Father Keller was privileged to be the pastor for both the 75th and 100th anniversary celebrations of the parish and the town. He died in May 1967.

Pastors who followed him were Rev. John Engler, 1967-79; Rev. Joseph Whalen, 1979-81; Rev. James Ward, 1981-83; Rev. Francis Schoenauer, 1983-85; and currently Rev. Joseph Whalen serving as administrator.

(TO BE CONTINUED)
(NEXT: PARISH PATRIOTISM)