

1950s/History of St. James Catholic School The Old to the New

The big news of the 1950s was the new school and the loan of classroom space by the Beth Israel Jewish community.

Michael Moschkau, class of 1959, remembered it as a special year: “My eighth grade experience was unique because as school was ending in 1958, we all helped tear down the old school to make room for a brand new school. In an interfaith spirit of cooperation, Beth Israel offered its facility to us during the construction of the new school. They had four large rooms and we had eight classes, so half the school went to Beth Israel in the morning and the other four classes in the afternoon.

The interfaith cooperation made national news. The local papers reported on the arrangement with one of the papers headlining it as “Brotherhood in Practice.”

Father Andrew Breines, Catholic Herald editor, wrote about it in his June 28, 1958, column, “Needless to say, Fr. Scheuring, the school sisters, and the people of St. James are fairly walking on air these days over the unexpected solution of their knotty problem. Rabbi Max Lipshitz, his board of directors, and his people have given Madison and Wisconsin an unforgettable lesson in human relations and how better understanding between churches can be created.”

Gracious acceptance of our offer

Fr. Louis Scheuring, pastor, said the Beth Israel congregation would not accept payment for the use of the classrooms, but the board had allowed St. James to redecorate the rooms. At the school dedication ceremony, at which Rabbi Lipshitz and members of the board of directors were special guests, St. James parish presented a plaque to Beth Israel in appreciation of the loan of the center classrooms, and the Jewish congregation in turn gave the parish a plaque for the “gracious acceptance of our offer.”

The foundation for the friendship started years ago when Jewish and Catholic families lived together in what was known as “the bush,” which was still active in the 1950s (stay tuned for the 1960s history to read about urban renewal).

The synagogue and St. James Church and School were located an easy walk from the Greenbush neighborhood, loosely bound by Regent, Park and West Washington streets, now called the Triangle. There, many recent immigrants—Russian Jews and Italian Catholics and African Americans --lived.



BETH ISRAEL CENTER
(OUR TEMPORARY CLASSROOMS)

Left to right: Rev. Louis W. Scheuring, Mr. Harry Sweet,
Rabbi Max A. Lipshitz.
Sisters and St. James School Children to the right.

Respecting differences

Harvey Barash wrote about the neighborhood in 1999 in a booklet commemorating the 50th anniversary of the temple: "Affectionately known as *the bush*, . . . this melting pot section of Madison was a living laboratory of proof that differences could be respected, that people could live together in peace. "

The friendship of school principal Sister Philotea with Mr. and Mrs. Sam Paley of Beth Israel also helped. She spoke to them about the situation of not having the school ready for the first semester of the 1958-59 school year. They in turn spoke with Rabbi Max Lipshitz who spoke with the board of directors. The board approved offering the use of the synagogue as a temporary school for the fall term.

The work began on the new school in May 1958 when the 52-year-old overcrowded school was torn down to make way for a modern building. A May 18 Wisconsin State Journal article reported, "The white-brick structure, originally used as both a church and school, will be replaced by a sprawling, two-story modern school which will front on St. James Ct, for 152 feet and extend to Milton St. for 127 feet."

Parents and the Sisters had voiced concern about the safety of the children in the school for several years. Finally, many parishioners and the Sisters spoke with Msgr. John Koelzer, pastor, about the school conditions. In the early fall 1956, Msgr. Koelzer requested volunteers to solicit pledges for a school building fund. The finance committee known as the 12 Apostles took the leadership in soliciting funds.

Plan approved for new school

At a parish meeting the following January (1957), Jack McKinley, parent of four St. James students, made the motion to build a new school. It was seconded and carried. The estimated cost of the new school was \$400,000. By the fall, \$71,000 had been raised with another \$86,000 pledged. Msgr. Koelzer spoke at mass for the need for more on Dec. 8, but he died Dec. 16.

Plans for the school were delayed until the appointment of Fr. Louis Scheuring as the fourth pastor. Fr. Scheuring arrived at a critical time. His leadership was critical to the completion of the plans for the school and for his stewardship of the building and opening of the school. Fr. Scheuring celebrated his Jubilee while at St. James. (*Check out the Interview on video. There's more to hear.*)

John J. Flad and Associates was selected as architects, designing the school for 500 pupils in 12 classrooms, along with a gymnasium, library, music room, meeting rooms in the basement, a rectory library on the church side, and a long one-story corridor connecting the school to the church. The final cost of the new school was \$499,557.33, compared to \$15,401.00 sixty-three years earlier which was the cost of the original building that housed the four classrooms on the second floor and the church with a seating capacity of 475 downstairs.

Many of the parish organizations had fundraisers for the new school, including the St. James Catholic Theater which was organized Dec. 8, 1957, for the twofold purpose of raising money

for the school and promoting a genuine interest in the art of stage production. The group turned over \$1500 to school in 1958.

Construction Begins



Demolition of the old school began immediately after the students' year ended in May 1958. The Parish Bulletin on May 25, 1958, stated "The upper grade children under



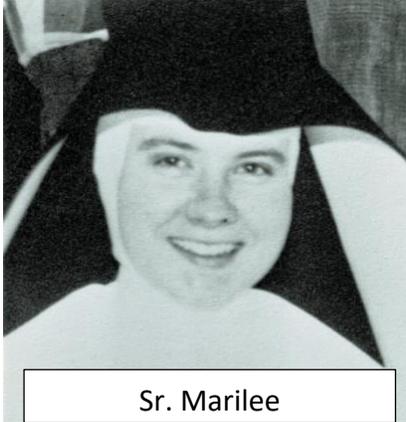
the direction of the Sisters, and the men who came did a great job dismantling the school of desks, blackboards, cupboards, etc. and that only the shell remains" *(Be sure to listen to the video interview that includes remarks about the demolition.)* The Allen Wrecking Company completed the demolition. The cost of the demolition was \$ 3,185.



As soon as the old school was torn down, the cornerstone of the new school was laid on June 15, 1958, following the 9:00 Mass that Sunday morning. Come September, the students were attending school at the Synagogue.

Classes began in the new school in January 1959. The School Sisters of Notre Dame were the heart and soul of this effort shepherding students each morning from the St. James parking lot to the Beth Israel Synagogue. How pleased the nuns must have been to be in their own classrooms with all the newness of the brand new school.



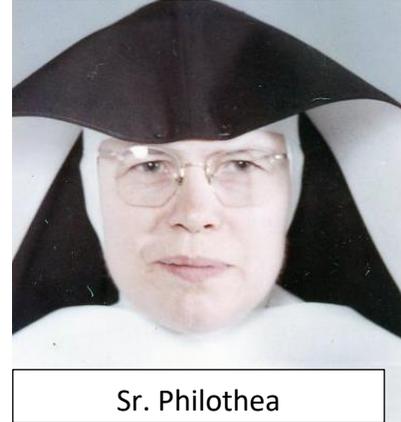


Sr. Marilee

Enrollment Growth

Enrollment ballooned during the following years. Some of the SSND nuns who alumni have fondly remembered are Sr. Marilee, Sr. Charles and Sr. Waldbrigde. *(Again, check out the Video interviews.)*

A tremendous thank you



Sr. Philothea

needs to go to all of the staff who not only survived but thrived with all of the changes and transitions during the 1958-59 school year. Sr. Philothea was the principal and leader of the school during this transitional year.

The school was helped by the neighborhood that surrounded St. James which had households filled with lots of children that could easily walk to St. James. The children not only learned together at St. James School but also played together in the city park behind the school on Milton Street during winters and the summers.

The 1950s saw a big increase in enrollment, with 320 students enrolled in 1950 and 450 by the end of the decade. In 1950, the St. James School PTA raised money to start a hot lunch program, and in January 1951, it began as a self-sustaining program that was able to pay for pans, dishes, refrigerator and other items for the kitchen. Mrs. Josie Ponti and Mrs. Dommershausen were two very important people in getting the Lunch Program up and running.

Cub Scout Pack 317 was organized in 1951 with the leadership of Leo Ley, parishioner and parent. The school also had an active Girl Scout troop. A June 4, 1956, article and photo in the Wisconsin State Journal pictured representatives of St. troop with Roundy Coughlin. Described as “one of the most active groups in their school and community, they gave money to Roundy’s fund.

Leo Kehl of the Kehl School of Dance continued to offer weekly dance lessons to grades one to six. Many alumni from the 1950s, including Sharon McKinley Betlach, class of 1956, recall the dance recitals in the spring with each class performing. Betlach also remembers being “excited about joining family and friends at Midnight Mass where our school choir sang.”



Betlach’s brother, Dennis McKinley, one of members of first graduating class of the new school, remembers the faith of the parishioners, staff, and Beth Israel community. “What I remember most about all these people was their faith—faith in God and in the students—and their dedication. I saw in them a sense of values and faith that reinforced what my parents were

teaching and modeling at home. I experienced firsthand what we now refer to as the Gospel values.” Dennis recently retired from teaching over 45 years at Edgewood High School.



The physical plant of St. James School is now 62 years old. It has been wisely stewarded and tenderly cared for by staff and many volunteers and generous families and alumni. As this history is being written, the writer is reminded of the similarity to the challenging COVID school year of 2020-21 and the hurdles of the 1958-59 school year. St. James School has survived 115 years and thrives through the community of families, friends, staff and alumni of St. James School and the parishioners of Good Shepherd Parish.