

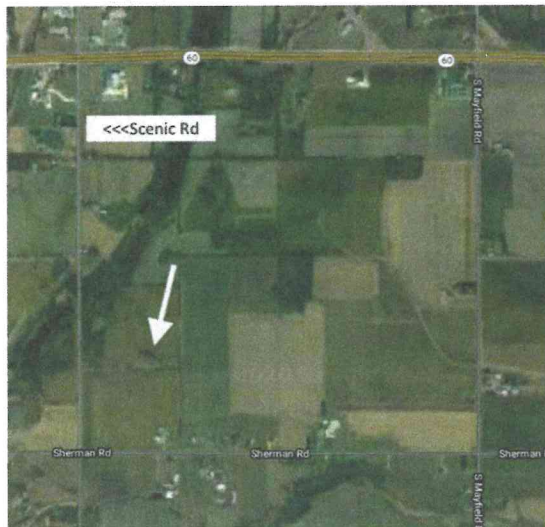
A Long-Forgotten Mission

Most everyone knows about St. Boniface Parish's early connections with St. Hubert Mission (1846), St. Mary's Maternity Mission of Richfield (1852), St. Augustine Mission (1846) and what would become St. Mary's Help of Christians Basilica and St. Francis Seminary. But, along with all of these is the long-forgotten mission of St. Joseph in the Town of Polk. Presumably, the mission chapel was built because that area of Polk Township had a concentration of Catholic Hessian-Darmstadt farmers by 1848. They had a hike of up to seven miles through snow, sleet and rain to one of the nearest churches - St. Boniface or St. Lawrence in St. Lawrence. One shouldn't imagine these Wisconsin trails were the dusty well-defined trails of television westerns. The weather determined their state. Sister Agnes Fleckenstein, *fspa* lived in Goldenthal from 1865 to 1869. She and another sister taught at the local public school about a mile from the settlement. She recalled losing her shoes in the mud whenever it rained. If that was the case in the late 1860s, imagine what travel was like in the late 1840s and early 1850s!

The "official" reason for building a Catholic chapel in Section 23 of Polk Township was never recorded. The 1848 deed simply states that Andreas Engelhard sold the small parcel of farmland to Bishop John Martin Henni for the purpose of starting a Catholic church to be called St. Joseph. But, the building of the chapel rectified the travel situation for the farmers if not for the mission pastor's horse.

A 20' x 30' log chapel was built at the above location in 1848. The circuit-riding pastors of St. Boniface and St.

Lawrence served the mission until it closed in 1862. A final burial took place in the little cemetery in 1865. Henni deeded everything but the cemetery back to Engelhard in 1872. The chapel was razed in 1874. There are no written records explaining the closure of the parish. Several factors may have been involved.



Baruch Schlesinger Weil platted a village a few miles to the northwest in 1854 and built a home and store there. Magically, the LaCrosse Railroad was built right through the village the next year. Weil's large house and store were soon surrounded by a tannery, shoemakers, blacksmiths, a wagon maker, a distillery and a log chapel (1856) under St. Peter's patronage; and voila, a center of trade. By 1852, the Catholics of nearby Richfield established a second mission that met under the patronage of St. Mary's Maternity. Given the proximity of St. Mary's and St. Peter's to St. Joseph's, the general improvements in transportation, the natural draw of Schlesingerville and the migration of some Catholic settlers, St. Joseph's mission may have no longer been needed. Jon Von Haden has done extensive research into St. Joseph's families. He found that most of the families remaining when St. Joseph's closed transferred to St. Boniface, St. Mary's Maternity or St. Peter.

Fifty-four people are buried under the trees at the St. Joseph site. Two gravestones survive, one for Johann and Elisabeth Albert and another for their daughter Mary Ann Albert all of whom died between 1850 and 1868. They were erected in 1888 at the request of their dying son who happened to be a member of St. Peter's Parish.

Four marriages took place in the little church; the last child was baptized there on July 25, 1862. The families grew. Many have moved away in the past 168 years, but occasionally you may still find a Friess, Frey, Faust, Heppe, Keller, Lehmann, Lofy, Pies or Thoma with St. Joseph roots sitting in the pews of area churches.

- A debt of gratitude is owed to John Von Haden for the 12 years of digging through primary resources for the data about this long forgotten mission and its families. John's website is www.WisconsinAncestors.com. It is filled with

data about early Washington County families.

- The original deed was Washington County, Vol. G, page 549, Nov. 1, 1848. The land was sold back to Andreas Engelhard via two deeds: Washington County, Vol. 26, page 160, July 24, 1869 and Vol. 29, page 107, July 9, 1872... the latter of which specifies "except for 1/4 acre now occupied as a graveyard".