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# FOOTPRINTS

November 24, 2012 · *by* lfs353 · *in Evanston, Grosse Point, history, Native Americans, St. Nicholas, Uncategorized* · *Leave a comment*

In the early days of the 1800s, Potawatomi footprints were the only footprints found on the 'sandy ridge' trail – the trail through the woods that ran along a plot of land where in one hundred years, on 'Ridge Avenue', a small wooden church named St. Nicholas would stand.

The Potawatomi who walked and ran the trail – who knew that trail nearly in their sleep, anticipating the turns and recognizing the bent trees that marked the way – they knew little of what was transpiring many miles east of them. But it would affect their lives dramatically.

Far to the east, in the wilderness of Virginia along the Potomac River, a massive marble and sandstone building was being erected. It would house the new country's governing bodies: the Congress.

And there in the halls of the new building – the United States Capitol – discussions would be had and decisions made that would determine exactly whose footprints would

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The new country had many issues with which to contend – solidifying the way it would govern, protecting the ability to trade with other nations, what to do about slavery – and expansion. The question of whether European-Americans could co-exist with native tribes became increasingly significant.

'What to do with Indians' had been an ongoing issue since Europeans first landed on our shores. Washington believed that acculturation was the way to go and had been partially successful, particularly among the Cherokee and Choctaw. Jefferson believed that Indians had rights to their homelands as long as they practiced "civilized" behavior – which in Jefferson's worldview meant becoming a small and settled farmer.

trail marker tree

But as population increased, expansion by any means became the driving force. And the only thing preventing expansion were the people that were in the way. Right here along the 'sandy ridge', in what would become Evanston, the people 'in the way' were the Potawatomi. They had used this area for hunting and for summer encampments for decades. It was their land; it was home. They had followed the 'sandy ridge' trail up and back to Green Bay, guided by the marker trees that that the Illini and others had bent decades ago when they were saplings to guide the way.

But after incidents like the Battle of Fort Dearborn during the war of 1812, the Potawatomi and all other tribes were allowed only as far south as the *Indian Boundary*. Soon they would no longer be allowed here at all. Illinois became a state in 1818 and the writing was on the wall.

In 1829 the senator from Tennessee, Andrew Jackson, became president – a vehement supporter of states rights, slavery and Indian removal. Unlike Washington who dealt with tribes as sovereign states, Jackson saw previous treaties as illegitimate and disregarded them.

The Indian Removal Act was bitterly debated in Congress and very narrowly

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The Potawatomi were moved to Kansas, although some fled to Canada and hid in Wisconsin and northern Michigan.

Potawatomi on Lake Michigan

Back in the Illinois, the U.S. government through an Act of Congress in 1832, established a post road through the wet and swampy forests to carry the mail from a brand new city named Chicago up to the busy fort and trade settlement at Green Bay. The chosen road was not a road really, but the 'sandy ridge' trail east of Lake Michigan. It ran a foot deep in places, having been tramped down by the feet of human inhabitants for centuries.

The area known as Grosse Point was about to receive the next wave of inhabitants. They would come from the east coast by way of river and the Great Lakes. Among them would be a mix of American-born adventurers, Protestants and recent Catholic immigrants from Ireland, Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg. They brought with them their hopes for a new life and their faith to sustain them.

There would be new footprints on the 'sandy ridge' trail.

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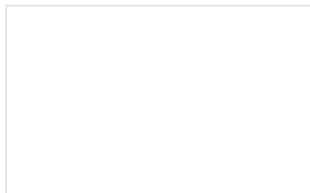

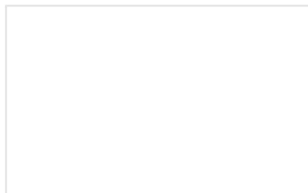

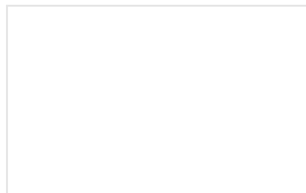

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# PACKING UP

January 14, 2013 · *by* lfs353 · *in Catholic, Evanston, history, immigration, Luxembourg, Uncategorized* · *Leave a comment*

leaving for America

**New arrivals**
Before the early 1800s, European immigration to the United States had consisted primarily of persons seeking economic opportunities (often as indentured servants) or for political or religious freedom. It was a slow trickle – the number of voluntary immigrants from Europe never rose above 8,000 a year – until the 1820s.

But after the end of the Napoleonic war, immigration began to increase – shipping companies needed west-bound payloads, and passage became more



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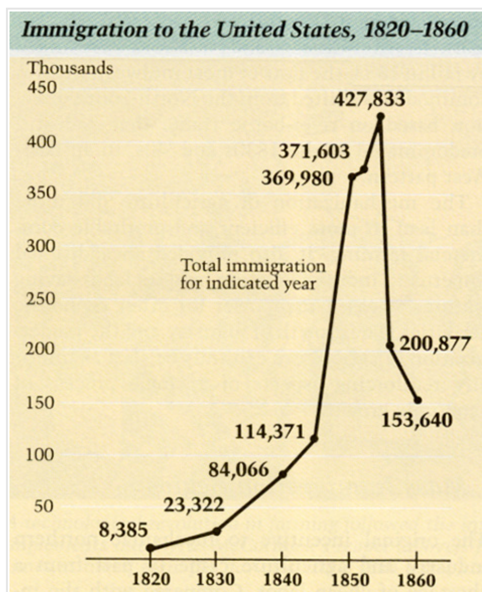


But first came those who were not fleeing for their lives but who wanted the opportunity that a new start in a new land could give them. In 1830, as the Indian Removal Act was passed in Congress, a wave of German speakers arrived on our shores. A few stayed in the east, but the vast majority went west as soon as they were able. Although not wealthy, they had the means to purchase land, now newly available in the Midwest. They were coming to America to thrive, not simply to survive. Among them were families much like those who would later become the founders of Evanston's St. Nicholas Church – the Catholic church along the new postal road called T*he Ridge*.

**Luxembourg**

While the relatively new United States was sorting itself out, an ocean away, a tiny country was struggling to find it's own identity. Landlocked and surrounded by Belgium, France and Germany, its land had been a prize of battle, passed back and forth among rising political powers. At the mercy of ongoing wars between ruling families and European nations, the motto of it's people says much in few words: **Mir wëlle bleiwe wat mir sin "we want to remain what we are."**

The area now known as Luxembourg was first settled by a Celtic tribe called the Treveri. Romans came and conquered, but the Treveri got on well enough with them and adapted to Roman civilization. A town grew up around an ancient fort, built high upon an imposing natural outcropping of rock known as *the Bock*, along the *Moselle River*. The location of the fort was appealing – a strong, high site that could protect and secure whoever controlled this land. A good water source, tillable lands and pasture all presented a reason to control and expand into it's fields and rocky hillsides.

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Over the course of years, this small bit of land expanded, contracted and eventually became Luxembourg – an independent country under its own government. For centuries it was passed among Prussia, Spain, the Netherlands, Austria, Germany and France. A particularly strong tug-of-war between Belgium and the Netherlands lasted for decades. It would not become a sovereign nation until 1866. The people residing there, mostly farmers and small merchants, spoke both German and French – but they retained their own language, Luxembourgish, and their strong Catholic faith.

There was an small early presence of Luxembourgers in America – Father Raphael de Luxembourg established the first school in Louisiana in 1725 – but by and large when the greater waves of Luxembourgers arrived they headed for the newly opened land in the Midwest: in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Illinois, now made available through the Indian Removal Act of 1830. The largest number settled near Chicago, where they could farm. They would be farming the soil that had only recently been the land of the Potawatomi.

These German speaking farmers had heard the stories of a place across the sea where farm land was cheap and plentiful. There were many reasons that spurred the people to leave – increased population, partitioning of land, poor harvests, the uncertainty of their political status – all this was a threat to families. But the stories from earlier immigrants of unlimited farm land available in the new country of America drove them to act. Those Luxembourger farmers who could afford passage by selling their property back home could now obtain in America ten times the amount of land they had previously worked.

It could not have been an easy decision to leave the land of their birth. Faith and community would have to sustain them as they ventured forth to a new world.

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These families with names such as Didier, Kasper, Kronenberger, Eiden, Morper, Schumer were part of a new wave of emigration to the United States – one that would begin to define America as a country of real diversity – where the newly arrived brought not just their material possessions, but language, song, dance, story, food, belief and ritual that would add spice and substance to the growing stew of America.

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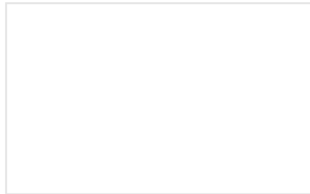
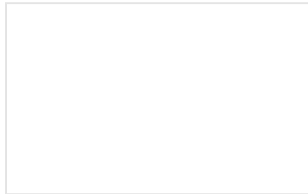
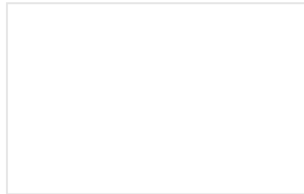

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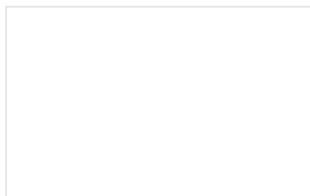
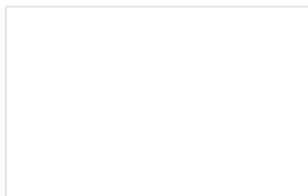
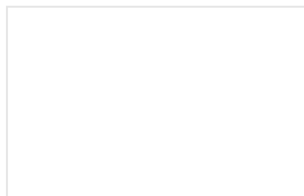

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# SETTLING IN

*February 4, 2013 · by lfs353 · in Catholic, Evanston, Grosse Point, history, immigration, Luxembourg, Uncategorized · Leave a comment*

If you stand across from gates of the western entrance to Calvary Cemetery you will be standing on or near the site where the first Catholic Mass was said in Evanston (before Evanston existed as a town). It was celebrated under a huge oak tree on the edge of the O'Leary farm. The family brought out their kitchen table to use as an altar for the open air service. The presider was Rev. P.N. Flanigan; it is not known how many attended.

The O'Learys arrived in the area in the 1830s. Born in Kinsale, Ireland, the son of a ship's captain, John O'Leary came to New York with his wife Margaret in 1834. They traveled from New York by canal boat and ship and settled in Chicago in 1836. As several wagons passed by their cabin heading north, they decided to investigate Grosse Point – and the area that some called Ridgeville. In 1837 John O'Leary made his decision and bought 160 acres to farm at the site of the present Calvary Cemetery.

The O'Leary's were not the first Europeans to settle in the southern part of Grosse Point.

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Let's take a look. In the 1830s and 40s, what we now know as south Evanston was defined by four geographical areas: the **Lake**, the **Ridges** (east and west), the **"Dismal Swamp"** and the **"Big Woods."**

Just west of the shoreline and dunes, land was loamy, soft and thickly forested with trees. Southern Wisconsin's Kohler-Andre State Park along Lake Michigan gives you an idea of how that may have looked – this was the appearance of the land on which the O'Leary farm (now Calvary Cemetery) would be built:

woodlands, Kohler-Andre State Park

This wooded area ran up to the east ridge (now Chicago Avenue). Between the east ridge and the west ridge (now Ridge Avenue, first called the "sandy ridge") lay what settlers named "the dismal swamp." This area covering the land between the Chicago Ave. and Ridge/Greenbay roads was marshy, wet and muddy with many places that made it impossible to navigate even by horseback. Water lilies grew there, turtles, water fowl and muskrats. A rich wetland biosphere, it was the bane of existence to the early pioneers.

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Black River marshlands, Kohler-Andrae State Park

Beyond the 'Dismal Swamp' and west of the 'Sandy Ridge' was the 'Big Woods'. These woods – birch, oak, ash and pine – provided material for building homes, and logs and charcoal to heat them, as well as game for hunting.

In the 1830s and 40s, there were other Irish – the Carneys, (County Mayo), the Murphys, (County Kerry) and William (Uncle Billy) Foster, to name a few. But more settlers came west from Germany, New England, Ohio and Indiana, bearing names familiar to us today: Crain, Pratt, Emmerson, McDaniel, Gaffield, Hill and Mulford.

Although a few early families of European descent had briefly proceeded these early Evanston pioneers – the Ouimettes, the Scotts – they had eventually moved north and west. Of those who chose to stay and make this their home, Edward Mulford became the anchor of the fledgling community. A major in the war of 1812, Mulford was a native New Yorker who had come to Chicago with his sons to begin a jewelry business in the young city. Lured by land available through the 1830 Pre-Emption Act, he purchased 160 acres not far from the section that Mr. O'Leary would later purchase. Mulford's land was west of the present Chicago Avenue. In order to maintain title, the purchaser of these government packets had to build a cabin to indicate the intention of settling. Mulford built a small cabin just west of the Sandy Ridge and rented it to Arunah Hill who occupied it for one year. Many of the early recorded memories of Evanston were passed down through one of Hill's young children, Benjamin.

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hospital is now located. The new log cabin was quite large for the time: thirty by forty feet. It housed his family and provided income as an Inn or Tavern. Known as the *Ten-Mile House*, it was ten miles from the Chicago courthouse. It became the area's post-office and the court house.

Settlers early homes were log built, small and basic. An example is the Carl Eiseman house, built about 1840 south of Church St. Early days were filled with the hard work of subsistence and surviving the elements.

Eiseman house

But soon these pioneers looked for ways of improving their lives and began to think of themselves not as independent families, but as a community. One of the first things they wanted was a place for their children to learn. A small log building was erected west of the Sandy Ridge near what is now Greenleaf Street. Students from east of the Sandy Ridge arrived by horseback or rafts when the season was wet. The school house became a general place of meeting and from time to time a visiting preacher or circuit rider might stop by.

Navigation between the two ridges was still a big problem – a rather precarious footbridge was constructed on posts with planks on top to keep one's feet out the mud of the 'Dismal Swamp.' The eventual solution would be to drain the swamp, but that would come much later.

Among the Catholics further north in Grosse Point in the 1840s were German immigrants from Trier near Alsace and from Luxembourg. They settled in present day Wilmette and built a small log chapel in 1843 for priests who might come through on horseback to say Mass. This small chapel, dedicated to St. Joseph, was the only Catholic house of worship north of Chicago. But further south – and not far from the land that Mr. O'Leary purchased – Peter Schmitt, another German from Trier, built a small log cabin on the ridge near present day Devon Avenue, where Mass was held. In 1851 a larger building would be erected and dedicated as St. Henry Church, a place of worship for immigrants from Germany and Luxembourg.

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# GRIT AND GOLD

April 12, 2013 · *by* lfs353 · *in Catholic, Evanston, Grosse Point, history, immigration, Lake Michigan, Luxembourg, St. Nicholas, Uncategorized* · *Leave a comment*

Just beyond the rocks that hold back Lake Michigan's waves, there are quiet reminders of the 1800s. We bike, run or walk by them without giving them much thought. They are the remains of posts that held up sturdy wooden piers – the last remnant of what was once a busy shipping port along Evanston's lakefront.

For a moment, push away the 21st century and imagine you are a visitor to the new town of Ridgeville. It is 1855 or '56 and steam and sailing ships are lined up a short distance from shore. Imagine a noisy, busy scene along the lake. No fancy

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lakefront. Davis Street is just a dirt road rutted with wagon tracks. Colvin's store – the first in this area – is hard to get into without stepping in mud up to your ankles or worse. There's a "sidewalk" of planks laid end to end with a few cautionary signs at points marked "no bottom" where the mud is extra deep. What folks call the dismal swamp – the marshy, boggy land east of the Ridge road – is beginning to be drained, but you still have to watch where you step or you might end up in real trouble.

But looking beyond the mud, you can see that a real town is emerging – all day you hear the sound of hammer and nails, saws and lumber. And most amazing of all, a group of Methodist gentlemen have just launched a new college along the lakefront north of Davis on higher wooded ground. You've heard that Chicago now has a population of 26,000 – and that's a good thing for the farmers up on the Ridge; it'll provid a steady market for their vegetables and timber.

Folks say that just five years ago all of this didn't exist. *How in the world did it happen so fast?*

**'Ridgeville' becomes a town**

Once the land opened up, people just kept coming. They were farmers from back east and from far across the ocean. They all had this in common: determination and the courage and grit to survive and prosper in the mid-nineteen century. Illinois sat on the western frontier, a long journey by wagon or a combination of wagon, rail, and water. And they kept coming.

Drawn by good rich soil on affordable land, immigrants from Germany and Luxembourg arrived in Cook County in the 1830s to farm the newly available land. German speaking families, many sharing a Catholic faith, settled in the area of Devon Avenue and Ridge. It became the heart of the Luxembourg community where families farmed vegetables for the rapidly expanding Chicago market. The area became known informally as Ridgeville and it stretched north along the Ridge road.

This was one of the first sections of land in Cook County to be organized under the Act of 1849, which gave counties the right to divide and designate towns and townships. Up until this time the name "Grosse Point" referred loosely to a stretch of land that curved out into Lake Michigan. But in 1849 the people of this section of Grosse Point, north of the young city of Chicago and south of the boundary of the lands owned by Antoine Ouilmette, formally took the name of Ridgeville for

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Western Avenue and east to Lake Michigan. It included what is now Lakeview, Uptown, Edgewater and Rogers Park in Chicago and only part of what we now know as Evanston.

### Census of 1850

In August of 1850 federal census takers found a population of 441 persons occupying 93 homes, some clustered together, many spread far from their nearest neighbor. Census takers covered the area in several days on horseback recording a slice of our history.

The 1850 census reveals a lot about their life – most occupations are listed as "farmer." Included on the list are several laborers, one merchant, two innkeepers, two sailors, a carpenter and one busy man who lists himself as farmer, tavern keeper and shoemaker. Not one doctor, lawyer, teacher or pastor among them. You learned to make do.

The birthplaces of these Ridgeville inhabitants tell the mid-19th century American story: some were born in Illinois and others along the east coast (New York, New Jersey, Ohio, Pennsylvania) but for most the "place of birth" is a country far away – Germany, Ireland, Switzerland, England, Belgium and Canada.

Once they were formally a town, they established a system of governance. Ridgeville's first election was held on April 2, 1850. Ebenezer Bennet stood at the door of George Reed's house that morning and announced in a loud voice that the polls were now open. By 6 p.m., 93 votes had been cast and the newly elected Town Clerk, Justice of the Peace, Assessor, Collector, overseer of the Poor, various Commissioners, Constables and Supervisors were announced.

After taking office each man took an oath that he had not fought a duel or challenged anyone to a duel. Among the early decisions made was one by the commissioners on "animals running at large," who declared that all cattle and

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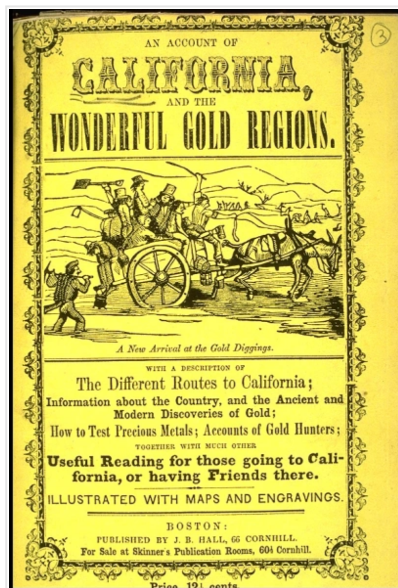
1850 would prove to be a tumultuous year. The previous fall Ozro Crain had returned from a trip west and gathered his friends and neighbors for a meeting.




Crain was one of the '49ers' – he had been to California. He told those gathered that there was gold lying right there in the dirt – and more, much more deep in the ground. All it took was a little sweat and determination and you could come back with enough to set yourself up for life. No more chopping and felling timber, hitching up your horse, hauling wood and vegetables to sell in Chicago and then returning home just to do it all over again. There was money to be made, boys! Think of what it could do for your family. Think of what it could do for the Ridge!

By the next spring Crain had gathered 30 men, a horse for each and seven wagons with provisions and they all set off for California. On the morning of April 8, 1850 their wives and children, friends and neighbors gathered at The Buckeye Tavern and watched them head off down the Ridge road. In four months they would arrive at the California gold fields. Some would accumulate fortunes, some lost everything they had and some would never return.

Their names are familiar to us today as streets (with a few changes in spelling) in Evanston: Foster, Emmerson, Hill, McDaniel, Pratt, Gaffield and of course Crain, who had started it all.

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Alexander McDaniel kept a diary and from his words we can get a sense of the times. McDaniel's brother-in-law George Huntoon had stayed back to watch over his extended family. The letters between the two men – one searching for his fortune, another tending the home fires, give us a real picture of life on the Ridge in 1850 and '51. This one is from McDaniel to his wife, written in the fall of 1851 describing his hopes to buy a particular property in Ridgeville when he returns:

Secret Glen diggings Oct. 19th 1851

Dear Wife

I am yet in California and in good health and Spirits. the time is a drawing near when I expect to leave this Land of Gold and every other convenience of life Such as good houses fine clothes nice feather beds to lye down on and rest ones old bones when they are tired. this is the Country to enjoy life in. I think that you would be delighted to live here under a hemlock tree cook by the Side of an old logg and Sleep at night on the ground.

I feel verry impatient for the rainy Season to Set in for I long to be on my way home to my family and friends. every week Seems a month. our diggings are paying verry well and I hate to leave as long as the weather is So fine for work the weather is as fine and pleasant as you ever saw in July. if the rain commences in two weeks I intend to leave Sanfrancisco on the fifteenth of Nov. and if the rain holds off as late as it did last year I probibly Shant leave untill the first of December. providing our diggings continues to pay as well as at present. it would be hard to leave ten or twelve dollars a day untill one was ablige to. three weeks ago to day I apropriated the proceeds of my next three weeks work for the purchace of a certain peice of Land in Ridge ville providing it was for Sale when I get home and can be baught for the Sum that I made during that time which was one hundred and ninety eight dollars and Sixty Six cents our diggins are verry deep and rockey at least thirteen feet before we find the bed rock where Gold is found

When Alexander McDaniel returned he moved further north into what would become Wilmette. The Wilmette library holds more of McDaniel and Huntoon's correspondence. A full length video on the Gold Rush gives a broader picture of this monumental event in our history.

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German-speaking Catholics erected a small wooden frame church on the site of the present day St. Henry's Church. St. Henry's cemetery is unique in Chicago – it is the only remaining cemetery affiliated with and adjacent to a church. St. Henry's was the church home of many of the early founders of St. Nicholas and in its cemetery several are laid to rest. Many Luxembourg families eventually moved further north, buying land in the rapidly developing town of Ridgeville where they built more large nurseries for vegetables and flowers.

The men who returned from California – those who had 'struck it rich' – propelled the growth of the fledgling towns of Ridgeville and Evanston. Rough built homes and log cabins came down and sturdier frame homes with attention to design went up. The marshy dismal swamp was drained, stores and commerce proliferated and the new Methodist college called *Northwestern University* lent a sophistication that the Ridge hadn't known before.

It was a good time, full of promise and adventure. But news of political unrest in the south was beginning to cause concern. Illinois was a free state and Chicago was a hub of the anti-slavery movement. In late June 1857, word arrived from Springfield that the promising new politician, Mr. Lincoln had spoken out against the Supreme Court's infamous Dred Scott decision – and that he would be engaging in a series of debates with the famous orator, Stephen Douglas. Now that would be something not to miss!

*Stay tuned for our next post: Evanston becomes a town, Civil War breaks out, and an English speaking parish builds it's first church.*

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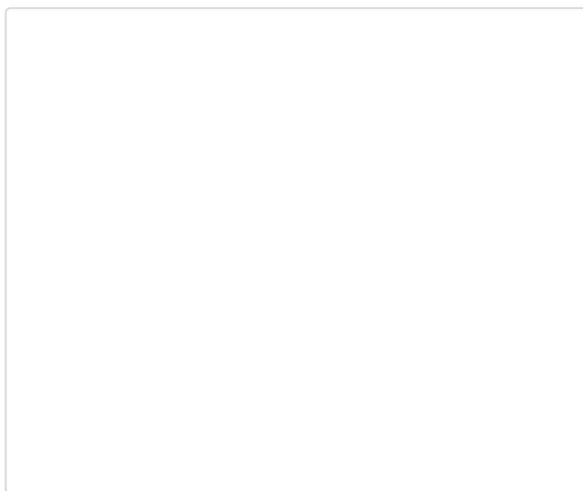

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# HARD TIMES AND STRONG SPIRITS

January 17, 2014 · *by* lfs353 · *in Evanston, history, St. Nicholas, Uncategorized* · *5 Comments*

St. Nicholas Church 1887

On a lovely fall day in September of 1887, shovels broke the ground to begin the building of St. Nicholas church in Evanston. It sat near the corner of Ridge Avenue and Washington Street, facing the historic Sandy Ridge Trail. A frame building with brick veneer, it featured a sanctuary with tall gothic-style windows on an elevated floor, with schoolrooms and kitchen beneath at ground level. The school was started in January, 1888 – an important step for the parish. Fr. Groenebaum, a native German speaker from Westphalia, Germany, was the first pastor of St. Nicholas church. In only seven years the church was free of debt, and Fr. Groenebaum began to plan for a larger church for his growing parish. But a sudden heart attack on July 9, 1897 – an intolerably hot day that would also claim the life of Fr. Augustus Tolten – took his life. Chicago had been gripped by a record heat wave lasting through the week and reaching 105 degrees.

Fr. Groenebaum was devoted to building this parish and had won the hearts of his

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Later that month, a young priest who had been pastor of Immaculate Conception Church in Bridgeport was sent to succeed Fr. Groenebaum. His name was Peter Leo Bierman. For priest and parish, it was a perfect match.

But Fr. Bierman had only six months to settle in before disaster struck.

After the hot summer, Evanston was mired in a harsh winter. Navigating the snow and ice with horse drawn sleds, carts or on foot was perilous. During the first three days of February, 1898 the temperature dropped to -8 degrees. Fires were not uncommon in the winter – they could erupt from unwatched hearths, from wood and coal burning ovens, and from oil lamps still used here and there even as gas lamps predominated in homes that could afford them.

On Thursday, February 3rd, 160 children were crowded into their seats at St. Nicholas school, hearing lessons from their four teachers, all Sisters of St. Agnes. It was almost time for the lunch time recess. Suspecting she smelled smoke, Sr. Justine went into the kitchen, a separate room off the classrooms. Looking up, she saw smoke and flames eating through the sanctuary floor above her. The furnace had set fire to the woodwork and flooring under the altar which was directly above the kitchen.

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The February 5 edition of the local newspaper, The Evanston Index, describes what happened next:
*"With rare nerve (Sister Justine) stepped back into the school, closed the door and told the scholars she had decided to dismiss them for the day on account of the cold weather. As they trooped out she notified Sisters Corona, Crescentia and Martha, and they dismissed the children in their charge in the same way. There was no panic, but that there was none was entirely due to the cool behavior of the sisters in charge of the school. Many of the children reached home without knowing there was a fire."*

The children quickly put on their coats, hats and mittens and were safely sent home. Sr. Martha rushed into the chancel to save what she could. She was soon overcome by smoke and was carried out by her sisters, Justine, Corona and Crescentia, and Fr. Bierman. At the time, the city's fire department had only 12 men on the force to cover the city. In 1898, the department responded to 74 calls,

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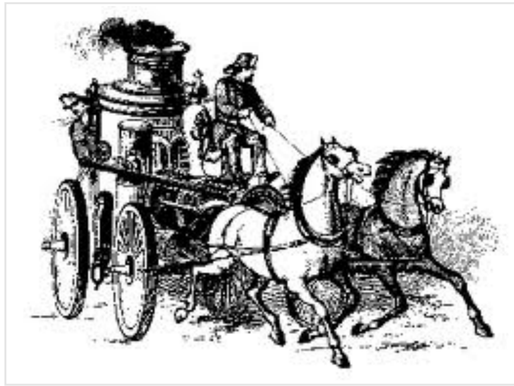
on the water mains had to be chopped through, hoses were stiff in the cold. The hose cart arrived first, then the engine fifteen minutes later, fireman Sandy Trent driving the horses through the deep snow.



Amazingly, in addition to Sr. Martha's smoke inhalation, there was only one injury – fireman George Hargreave's leg was badly cut as he tried to leap through the window of the burning church. He fell back into the church and had to be dragged out by fellow firefighters and taken to receive medical aid.

The Index recounts the remaining hours:
*"The tower at the east end of the church was the last to burn, the big bell, whose sonorous tones have called so many people to the house of worship, falling with a crash into the basement, where it cracked to pieces…The large gilt cross surmounting the tower was the last to fall. Long before this the firemen had to abandon work there because it was a regular death trap and when they escaped they had to leave 100 feet of hose behind them to be burned."*

A strong southwest wind was blowing, and burning shingles from the church were now reaching the roof of the priests' house, just 150 yards to the north of the church. As the roof went up in flames, the firemen turned their efforts to saving the house. At the end, it still stood, although no longer habitable.

The church was a complete loss. Only some vestments had been saved. The priests' house had lost it's roof. Fr. Faber and Fr. Bierman would move temporarily to a flat on 832 Custer. The frigid temperatures would prohibit repairs until warmer days. In the meantime, the 400 adult parishioners would have Mass at Burden's store on Main St. between Sherman and Custer. School would reopen in Burden's store in the next week. Thankfully, Fr. Groenebaum had started a building fund before his death just six months earlier – but no one suspected the fund would be needed so soon. Fr. Bierman began plans immediately to build a

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But the next day, Friday, February 4, 1898, Fr. Bierman presided at morning Mass at 7:30 and 9:30 at St. Mary's. He must have been exhausted. There is no record of his homily at this Mass, although we can assume that in the midst of sorrow, his prayers included deep heartfelt thanks that there had been no loss of life during yesterday's fire. The cause of that mercy was the quick minds and brave action of the four wise sisters in charge of the parish school children.

If Fr. Bierman had read the Chicago Tribune after Mass on February 4, he would have read the following:
*"The self-possession of the four sisters in charge of the parochial school of St. Nicholas Catholic Church, Evanston, yesterday, prevented a panic among the 160 children who were in the building when the fire was discovered.*
*'There will be no more school this morning', Sister Justine said. 'Get your hats and coats and leave as quickly and quietly as you can.' In a few moments the room had been cleared of pupils."*

The parish of St. Nicholas would move forward – its spirit strengthened by faith and community. But these days had been days of hard testing: the sudden death of its first pastor and the arrival of a new pastor only months on the job now faced with the total destruction of his church. But thanks to the courage and wisdom of four nuns, unimaginable tragedy had been averted. A new day lay ahead.

********

All four Sisters are buried at the congregational cemetery, St. Joseph Springs, Fond du Lac, Wisconsin:

**Sister Justine (Anna) Rachor**, CSA, born September 20, 1861 in LaPorte Indiana; died December 13, 1921, St. Agnes Convent, Fond du Lac, Wisconsin.
**Sister Martha (Helen) Jansen**, CSA, born 1854, Freeport, Illinois; died November 17, 1936, St. Agnes Hospital.
**Sister Crescentia (Catherine) Baronner**, CSA, born March 3, 1863, Hollidayburg, Pennsylvania; died, April 12, 1931, St. Agnes Convent.
**Sister Corona (Maria) Mohr**, CSA, born July 6, 1861, Springfield, Wisconsin; died

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# TRANSFORMATION

June 5, 2013 · *by* lfs353 · *in Catholic, Evanston, history, immigration, Luxembourg, Ridgeville, St. Nicholas, Uncategorized* · *Leave a comment*

For the people of "The Ridge," 1850 may have been a tumultuous year, but 1855 would launch them fast-forward on a roller-coaster ride of hope and pride in their town, buffeted by the winds of a looming civil war.

There was an explosion of educational institutions: the little log cabin that served as school/church/meeting-place on the corner of Greenleaf and Ridge, gave way to a funded public school in 1852. A one-room schoolhouse, it sat east of Maple on the north side of Church Street. Further north and east on a dry bluff that overlooked the great lake, the new Methodist college named Northwestern University opened its doors on November 5, 1855. The North-Western Female College had begun classes even earlier that fall and Garrett Biblical Institute had begun its first classes back in January. It was as if the soil itself had sprouted seats of learning.

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founders, John Evans. In 1855 the name of the Ridgeville post office was changed to Evanston. And in 1857 the township of Ridgeville split – its northern half became Evanston township; the lower half from Devon on south became Lake View township. Eventually Ridgeville as a separate town would cease to exist.

It was more than new institutions and governmental divisions – immigrants and easterners brought new languages, new businesses, new expressions of faith, even new ways of building their homes. The growing diversity was reflected in a wide variety of architectural styles in the area. Some of the more successful '49ers had returned from the California gold fields and built grand houses in the Greek Revival style or in brick or frame Italianate.

Brick Italianate

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But the simple farmhouse still predominated, albeit with a few stylistic modes of its own, including the unique 'Luxembourg farmhouse.' These structures – the homes of many of the farming families in the south end of Evanston, the families who would later build a magnificent church up on the Ridge – had an elevated first floor, a design that could withstand the frequent flooding of the area. The "dismal swamp" – the area between the two ridges (Ridge and Chicago Avenues) was being drained, but still remained marshy in parts.

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Luxembourg farmhouse

But no matter where the residents of Evanston lived or what language they spoke, they would soon be touched by national events that would draw them all closer together.

**Civil War**

The newspapers were full of stories of civil unrest, some of it close to home. America had yet to celebrate her centennial but cracks in the union were widening. The states, and the fraying constitution which bound them, would eventually have to deal head on with slavery.

In March of 1857, the U.S. Supreme Court issued its ruling on the Dred Scott case. It overturned a court ruling in Missouri and declared that slaves were not citizens (and therefore could not sue in federal court) and furthermore, that Congress had no right to regulate slavery in the territories. It was a stunning decision and the reaction in the Northern press was immediate.

The Chicago Daily News wrote, *"Our readers will bear with us if we frequently bring this matter to their notice. Since the organization of the government, no event has occurred that will entail upon the country the consequences, which are involved in this partisan movement of the slavery propagandists. It is the first step in a revolution which, if not arrested, nullifies the Revolution of '76 and makes us all slaves again."*

The abolitionist movement found a friendly home in Illinois, particularly in Chicago and Evanston. Methodists were strongly against slavery. Their founder, John Wesley, had spoken out in support of abolition in England and America.

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Lincoln, with the support of the western states, won the new party's nomination and the nation's presidency in 1860.

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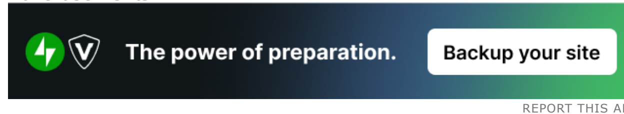


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As soon as Lincoln was elected, the union tore apart – South Carolina seceded before Christmas with Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Texas, Virginia, North Carolina, Arkansas and Tennessee quickly following. The war had begun.

As the news spread of the April 12, 1861 attack on Fort Sumter, Evanstonians – including many students at Northwestern – rushed to Chicago to enlist. Some walked all the way into the city when after the last train of the day left the Davis station. Evanston churches of all denominations took on a significant role in supporting the Union in the war effort. Sermons, prayers and days of national fasting were offered to raise the national consciousness of the evils of slavery. In the eyes of some, the bloodshed in this war was seen as a necessary cleansing – a sacrifice for the rebirth of the country.

**Catholics in Evanston**

It was into this spiritually charged environment that the first Catholic parish within Evanston was founded. St. Mary's was originally sponsored as a mission church of the two German speaking churches – St. Joseph's, to the north in Wilmette and St. Henry's, to the south on Devon. St. Mary's would fill a need for an English speaking church to serve the Irish Catholic immigrants who had come to find work in the rapidly growing town.

The first mass in Evanston was said on August 15, 1865 beneath a large oak tree on the O'Leary farm. The site was just across from the current gates of Calvary Cemetery; the O'Leary kitchen table served as altar and the presider was Rev. P.N. Flanigan.

Only four months had passed since the death of President Lincoln and the end of the war. The country was waking from a long nightmare – reeling from the violence and staggering loss of over 750,000 persons in the course of five years. The desire to have a place of sanctuary – a place to gather and pray in one's own faith tradition – was a need as great as food and shelter.

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census were predominately of Irish or German descent. Those from Germany and Luxembourg longed to hear their own language in their house of worship, those from Ireland to hear English.

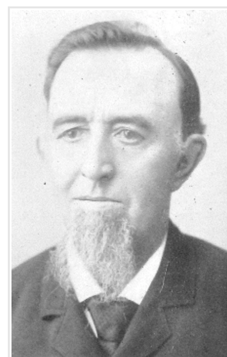
St. Mary's – 1890

Evanston's population quadrupled in the decade between 1860 and 1870. In 1871, the Chicago fire drove even more families north for safety, and to escape the stricter (and more expensive) building regulations in Chicago that strongly encouraged brick over frame. African-Americans began to arrive as domestic servants and independent businessmen and women – by 1870 Evanston's black population had reached 43. English, Germans, Swedes, Irish, African-Americans – this emerging rich diversity would continue to characterize Evanston throughout its history.

**The idea of St. Nicholas**

By the 1870s more families from Luxembourg had moved north from Devon and Ridge, purchasing land in Evanston to cultivate nurseries. The roads were still rudimentary and families grew tired of the long travel to St. Henry's or St. Joseph's. They wanted a church in their own language right here, in their new town.

A group of farmers and businessmen led by Nicolas Didier, Adam Kasper and Nicholas Morper went from house to house to talk about their idea of building a new church in Evanston, one that would be open to all but that would serve the unique needs of their own German speaking community.



Nicholas Didier

They collected subscriptions and gained the support of mercantile establishments. At their first meeting in May of 1887, it was agreed that a petition would be forwarded to Archbishop Feehan to request the formation of a new parish dedicated to the German speaking Catholics of Evanston. Seeing the dedication and astute financial planning of the committee, Archbishop Feehan agreed. The parish of St. Nicolas was formally established on July 20, 1887. It would be a German-language parish without territorial boundaries. Evanston would now have two Catholic parishes – in both, the mass would be in Latin but prayers and homilies would be in the language of the congregation.

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Ducat's Hall – the all-purpose south Evanston town hall at the corner of Main Street and Chicago Avenue, that hosted meetings and boxing matches.

Now the question was, where to build the church? A generous offer of a lot on the corner of Monroe Street and Sherman Avenue was considered, but not thought to be central enough. The southwest corner of Ridge Avenue and Washington Street was finally chosen – four lots were purchased including rights to the alley. An appropriately named contractor, Nicholas Treff, was chosen and broke ground on September 24, 1887.

St. Nicholas Church 1887

A small and elegant frame building with brick veneer, it stood proudly facing the Ridge. Work went quickly and on November 20 of the same year mass was celebrated in the new St. Nicholas parish church.

In little more than fifty years, life on the Ridge had been transformed. The seasonal movements of the Illinois and the Potawatomi – who had called this place their land and who had lived gratefully on its bounty – had now given way to people from countries far away, with different cultures, languages and faiths.

During the next 125 years even more change and challenge would emerge – but through it all, St. Nicholas, the church built on the old sandy ridge and named for the patron of children, merchants, sailors and students, would be a place 'grounded in diversity, where people gathered for worship and cherished the traditions of their faith.'

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