

History of St. Francis Catholic School

1909-2009

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St. Francis Parochial School opened in 1909 and has been in continuous operation for the past one hundred years. St. Francis, was not the first Catholic school to be established in Brainerd.

Catholic education in Brainerd dates back nearly to the establishment of the city. We can thank Father Francis Xavier Pierz for the establishment of the Catholic Church in the area surrounding Brainerd. Fr. Pierz arrived at Crow Wing in 1852 at the age of 67. Crow Wing was considered the most important settlement north of Fort Snelling at the time and Fr. Pierz became an important peace keeper between the Ojibwe, Dakota, and whites. His original mission at what is now Crow Wing State Park was the springboard for the establishment of St. Francis Parish and later St. Francis School.

The Northern Pacific Railroad survey was completed in 1870 and it was determined that the river would be crossed ten miles to the north of Crow Wing. That settlement soon was abandoned and The Crossing became the prominent settlement along the river. In 1871 the city of Brainerd was established. Fr. Pierz sent his associate, Fr. Buh to Brainerd and it was here that Fr. Buh established the new parish dedicated to the Patron of Peace and Brotherly Love, St. Francis of Assisi. Fr. Pierz, at the age of 86 retired to the community of what is now Pierz. By 1875 there was no longer a mission at Crow Wing. The Mission was later reestablished and on July 21, 1968, a new granite church was dedicated and blessed on the site of the first log chapel erected in 1852.

Catholic education in the United States at this time in history was an active pursuit of many religious orders and it was on November 25, 1873 that Mother Mary Ignatius Hayes along with a companion Franciscan sister from Belle Prairie opened a school in Brainerd on Tenth Street near the corner of Main. The Brainerd Tribune reported that within two weeks thirty students were enrolled and more were being added daily. The course of instruction comprised the study of the English language, writing, arithmetic, geography and history, as well as useful and ornamental needlework. Private lessons in French and German language, music, and drawing were offered. The Brainerd Tribune reported Dec 6, 1873, that pupils at this school will be obliged to conform strictly to the rules of good behavior. The term closed in March, and the Sisters returned to Belle Prairie and did not return to reopen the school. It is believed that they instead turned their attention to Little Falls; where the academy and hospital were eventually realized.

The Second effort to establish a Catholic school in Brainerd was made by the Sisters of St. Benedict from St. Joseph, Minnesota. St Mary's Academy opened in 1885. The building was a six-room framed building which had previously been a public school. The Brainerd School District leased the use of 3-4 rooms in the school located on Sixth Street. Mother Scholastica, from the Duluth Benedictine Monastery, sent four nuns to teach in September 1885. Sr. Floretine Cannon was the Principal. In 1947, three of these sisters, Sr. Florentine, Sr. Pauline Dunphy, and Sr. Nepomocene recalled names of former

students who include: Elizabeth Monique, Mrs. Con O'Brien, Sisters John and Joseph Murphy, William McCarthy, Arthur Millar..... names that are familiar to the history of Brainerd and St. Francis Church and School. The school was very successful, however, in 1887, the school district reported overcrowding and would not renew the lease and it would not be until 1909 that another Catholic school would open in Brainerd.

The third effort would prove to be the most successful. Under the guidance of Fr. James J. O'Mahoney, St. Francis of Assisi School was established in 1908. The modern eight room brick school building stood on the Corner of Juniper and Eighth St. and opened in the fall of 1909. Teachers came from St. Scholastica Monastery in Duluth. Sr. Thecla was the first Principal and was assisted by Srs. Ursula, Veronica, Berchmans, DePazzi, and Edwina.

St. Andrew's Parish was established in 1963 and a school was built. The school opened in 1965 with 53 first and second graders and added a grade each for the following four years. St. Scholastica Monastery again agreed to send sisters to teach at St. Andrews School. After five years, St Andrew's School closed leaving St. Francis as the only Catholic School in Brainerd.

[Why was St. Andrew's not successful?](#)

The Buildings

The School Building of 1909

The building was completed under the direction of Fr. James J. O'Mahoney (pastor 1906-1920) at a cost of \$12,000. The Brainerd Daily Dispatch reported on August 10, 1909 that "It (the school) will contain eight grades and will be conducted by the Sisters of St. Benedict, who conduct St. Joseph's Hospital and St. Cecilia's hall for instruction of music. Their success in the hospital and St. Cecelia's hall are a guarantee of the good work that will be done in the new school".

The building stood at the corner of Juniper St. and North Broadway (now 8th St. N.), until it was demolished in 1954, so that the current gym could be built in its place. The first school building was described in 1909 as a modern equipped brick eight room school; a well heated and lighted building. The building eventually contained eight classrooms, an office, a winter chapel and a library.

St Francis of Assisi Catholic School opened Tuesday, September 7, 1909, and by noon the following day, 190 pupils were enrolled. It was said to be able to accommodate 300 pupils. Within the first few days, the Sisters had to order additional desks and text books for the larger than anticipated enrollment. (The Brainerd city schools reported that year an enrollment of 2000 students with 27 graduates, so it is evident that the new Parochial School was well received by the Catholic Community.) The first year tuition amounted to 50 cents per month in

addition to an annual amount of 50 cents for the primary grades, \$1.00 for the intermediate grades and \$1.50 for the grammar grades.

The pupils reported to school at 8 o'clock, marched to mass at 8:15, class convened at 9 o'clock until 11:45, reconvened at 1:15 and closed for the day at 3:45. There was no recess, however ten minutes each half day was devoted to physical exercise – the pupils marched to the basement at those times.

[Use picture and blue print copy](#)

The School Building of 1952

The growth of the parish during the 1940's precipitated a need for a more modern school and a center to serve the social life of the parish. The rebuilding of the church (after the fire in 1933), the depression, and the war were a financial strain on the parish. However, by 1945 all debts were paid and attention to a new school building was made.

Father Thomas Scott (later Monsignor Scott) was pastor at the time and a long range plan was put in place. In December of 1951, footings were laid for a new school. The new school was built directly to the east of the 1909 school on the property of the church rectory, directly across Ninth Street from the church. The new, two-story, modern school was constructed with a brick exterior and reinforced concrete with spacious interior dimensions and all facilities necessary to modern school design, efficiency, economy of operation, and student comfort. The corner stone was laid by the Bishop, Rev. Thomas A. Welch on June 15, 1952. The cost to build was \$302,000 in 1952 (Approximately 2.5 million in 2008 dollars). The school was described as having twelve classrooms; including a very large science and a kindergarten room on the first floor and a library on the second floor. It has a one-story wing for administrative offices. There is a basement under the administrative wing only, housing the central heating plant. The administrative wing contains the main entrance and a hallway that would ultimately lead to a combined gymnasium and auditorium. Much of the furnishings came from the 1909 school building. The doors opened for classes September 8, 1952 with six elementary grades and approximately 300 students. Sister Ulric was the Principal. The Sisters reported that it was difficult to keep the students attention on that first day because of "the new huge windows, which give the classrooms an almost outdoor atmosphere."

[Pictures of rectory and construction and blessing](#)

The building of 1955

In the spring of 1955 National Fund Raising Services Inc. was secured to assist in raising funds for the addition of a gymnasium and social hall. The fundraising drive was so successful that by August of that same year work began by demolishing the 1909 school building to make way for the addition. The cost of the addition was \$245,000 dollars (approximately 1.9 million in 2008 dollars). Hegstrom Construction Company of St. Paul completed the project in October 1956 and it was immediately put to use for the recreational programs for the school and church. The addition contained a gymnasium, cafeteria and club rooms and was used by the entire parish. Much of the credit for the foresight and planning of the new school has been given to Sr. Ulric Waldenberger whose memory the parish honored by naming the cafeteria "Sister Ulric Hall" Her picture along with a picture of Msgr. Scott can still be found on the south wall of the cafeteria.

[Demolition of old school building](#)

The Convent

The first convent was housed in the "Old Parish House" which stood near the church. A new Convent was completed in 1922 and was located to the north of the school along 8th Street. The student's mothers helped to furnish the convents. In later years the convent became the Parish Center until the offices were moved to St. Andrew's Church in 2006

The convent was demolished in 2007 to make use of the space for a ball field for the school.

Addition of 2009

The 1952 school building was well constructed but now is over fifty years old and few updates have been made to the building itself. The most notable update had occurred in 1985 when a \$140,000 remodeling project to improve heating efficiency was completed. The major component of this project was window replacement.

By 2005, it was becoming evident that major updating of the building was necessary to continue efficient use of the school. Plans to upgrade the infrastructure and provide additional space were underway. A large monetary donation jump-started the capital campaign for the school. The summer of 2008 found the building undergoing much work to modernize the facility and by September was ready for the school year to begin. Improvements included: asbestos abatement, heating, cooling and air exchange, electrical and lighting, plumbing and restroom upgrades, sprinkler system and new roofing. The administrative area of the building which linked the classroom and gymnasium wings of the school was demolished and construction began on the new two-story expansion of the center portion of the school. Work continues into 2009 to complete this area of the building which will consist of offices, library, computer lab, and a small chapel.

Playground and Athletic Field

The current playground area was dedicated September 11, 1977, as the Peter Keating Field. Peter Keating worked as a custodian at the school from 1938-1951. Mr. Keating was a devoted Boy Scout Leader and gave many hours of his time to the children of St. Francis. A donation was made by Peter Keating allowing the church to purchase the property to be used by the school children.

Several pieces of playground equipment have come and gone from the area as children have spent their recess time playing and running around Keating Field. The current equipment was erected by parents in 1992 with additions made in 1998.

Keating Field has also been used during physical education classes and in 2007 additional field space was created with the removal of the convent and a home owned by the church.

Academics

The Benedictine Sisters from the monastery of St. Scholastica, Duluth were the primary teachers within the school through the 1960's. By the early 1960's lay teachers began working with the nuns to educate the students. Sister Barbara Anne Vierzba (a 1958 St. Francis graduate), Principal of the school from 1982-1986 was the last of the Benedictine Sisters involved with the school.

St. Francis began as a grade school providing education for students in the First through eighth grades. Over the years, the grades offered were based on the needs of the community and the natural transition to the public schools. From 1909 until 1970, first through eighth grade were taught. Kindergarten was added in 1974 as a half- day program and changed to full-day in 2000. From 1971 to 1985, the highest grade level was the sixth grade and in 1986, seventh grade was again offered, and eighth grade was added back in 2003. Grades offered seemed to be indicative of the natural transition to the public schools and the financial ability of the catholic community to support additional classes. A Preschool program has been offered since 1983.

Enrollment began in 1909 with approximately 200 students. It has cycled through highs and lows over the past 100 years with sporadic records. The largest enrollment was in 1963 with 365 pupils. The average enrollment in the 1970's and 80's was approximately 200 and the last 20 years have found enrollments averaging about 150 students.

[Insert enrollment chart.](#)

Course work in reading, writing, mathematics, religion and music has, from the beginning, been the primary focus of St. Francis School. Over the years, physical education, art, and computer technology have been added to the curriculum to insure that the students are prepared to enter high school. A class in Spanish language and culture was added in 2002.

[Insert pictures of Phy. ed, art, computers through the years](#)

The Arts

Music, Theater, Art and Band

Music has always played an important role at St. Francis School. One of the first examples of the great amount of effort and time to these endeavors was recorded by the Brainerd Press in 1916 on the occasion of the closing exercises which were held at the Opera House. "It featured a wide variety of entertainment: a salutatory, several musical numbers, choral readings on religious and patriotic subjects, a farce, a playlet, group dances, a flag drill, a rose drill, and a farewell song by the graduating class."

Piano and organ lessons were given at the school and recitals performed annually. Today, Mrs. Sue Jewell provides piano lessons to interested students and hosts a recital in the spring of the year. Piano students often accompany singers at the school mass. Mrs. Jewell also provides the opportunity for any student who is studying an instrument on their own to accompany at mass as well.

A school band was in existence during the 1940's under the direction of Sr. Florian. In 1948, band members played as a wind ensemble and clarinet duet for the school theater production "Queen by the Grace of God". The band also played for the production of the "Bird of St. Patrick" in 1950.

During the early 1960's the St. Francis Boy Singers performed several concerts. The choir consisted of boys in grades four through eight and numbered up to 55. The choir, directed by Sr. Margaret Ann, sang a variety of songs including religious numbers, Negro spirituals, folk songs and classical numbers. Performances were often held at St. Francis Auditorium or Hall for entertainment at parish or the Home and School Association meetings. A Christmas and spring concert was conducted each year.

The annual Christmas Program has continued throughout the history of the school with all students participating. For the past twenty years, a fall program, especially for the Grandparents has been produced to show appreciation for their support of the school and their grandchildren.

Currently, a choir, made up of fourth through eighth grade students, meets once a week to prepare for concerts and school masses. They perform at the Grandparents and Christmas programs as well as at local nursing homes.

Theater

Theatrical performances were quite popular and elaborate during the 1930's through the 1950's. The earlier years consisted of primarily religious productions and the later years more secular in nature. Costumes were produced by the mothers and nearly all students had some roll in the production. The Franklin High School Theater was the venue for many of these plays prior to the stage and gymnasium being built for St. Francis School in 1955. The St. Francis Hall was used as well. During the 1940's an annual St. Patrick's Day Play was produced. The Students were excited to reach the fourth grade in order to participate in the production. One of the last major productions was "Hubbub on the Bookshelf" presented by the sixth and seventh graders in 1990. Individual classroom skits and plays continue to occur on occasion with small audiences of parents or younger grades invited into the classroom for the presentations.

Sports

The first football team was formed in 1911 and began a tradition of sports teams known as the St. Francis Knights. Presumably the Knights of Columbus were the main sponsors of the teams in the early years. A basketball team was in existence in 1933 and most likely became a mainstay throughout the 1970's. Wrestling was a popular sport in the 1970's as well. A cheerleading team was even formed in 1958 but seemed to have been short lived. By the 1970's, with the establishment of Title IV (equal sporting opportunities for girls and boys) several girls athletic teams were also in existence including flag football, basketball and track.

Competitions were held in the 1960's with other Catholic grade schools from throughout the State including Cloquet's Sacred Heart, Sauk Rapids, and Minneapolis Incarnation.

During the 1970's competition was between the St. Francis Knights and the Brainerd Public Elementary Schools. Records show that the St. Francis Knights were teams to contend with. In 1972, the Football team, consisting of 48 boys, had a 5-0 season and became the city champions. Also in 1972, the girl's track team was city champions and in 1974 the girls took the championship of the first flag football season.

With the end of the Brainerd School District support of elementary sports in the 1980's, opportunity for school sports dwindled. However, St. Francis School continued to find ways to provide sporting competitions. The annual Danny Hauer basketball Tournament began in 1972 and has taken place each winter since. The tournament is named for a third grade student who loved the game of basketball and died suddenly in 1971. In 2009, during the 38th year of the tournament, Danny's mother, Pat Kocer, donated money to buy jerseys to express her appreciation to the school for keeping Danny's memory alive. . The intramural games are planned over the noon hour throughout January and February with the trophy going to the top boy and girl team each year. There is also an annual Student Faculty Volleyball game each year which started sometime in the early 1970's.

The Faculty Falcons take on the St. Francis Knights in a spirited game of Volleyball during Catholic Schools Week.

Currently, Mr. Nate Binsfeld coaches an intramural basketball league after school for several weeks during the winter for fourth through eighth graders which has been very popular. Sporting opportunities have also been available for the St. Francis Students starting in fifth or sixth grades through the Brainerd public schools with an activity bus provided after school to transport the students to their activity.

[Pictures and Gym Records trophies, banner](#)

Catholic Schools Week

Catholic Schools Week is a celebration of Catholic Schools across the United States and has been celebrated since 1974. At St. Francis school it has been celebrated as a week of fun for the students. Generally celebrated annually starting on the last Sunday of January, the week is filled with fun everyday; ranging from dress up days (i.e. pajama, sports or wacky) to the annual Teacher-student volleyball game, geography bee, multi-culture day, and of course mass.

Parent Groups

Parent groups under various names have played an important role in the success of St. Francis School. Whether known as the PTA, Home and School Association, or Partners in Education (PIE), these organizations provided necessary components to the smooth running of the School.

We know that the school mothers helped to furnish the convent in 1922 and most likely contributed to many aspects of the running of the school , but it wasn't until 1932 that the PTA was officially organized with an initial membership of 82. In the early years the PTA helped finance many improvements to the school including the library and equipment for the classrooms. In the 1960's the Home and School Association hosted annual Christmas Open House and Teas and provide education directed to the parents on topics such as college readiness, and Christian parents' responsibilities.

Currently PIE continues the tradition of connecting families, teachers and the school. Family social activities and educational opportunities such as school dances, donuts in the mornings with the parents before school, community activities, and educational

seminars take place throughout the school year, culminating with an end of the year picnic.

School Board

A School Board, consisting of parents and parish representatives, exists to provide counsel and support to the Pastor and Principal for policy formation and evaluation, fundraising and public relations. It is unclear when the School Board was established however by 1971 the Board was in existence in a form similar to the current structure. It appears that up until this time, the Home and School Association's executive board served the function of the school board as we know it today.

Alumni Association

The Alumni Association was organized by Sister Aurea in 1922, for the purpose of keeping the alumni together as an organized body for the spiritual, moral and social well-being of the alumni of St. Francis School. Through the 1950's this was a highly organized association and they strictly adhered to their constitution and by-laws. Only graduates of St. Francis could be active members of the association. At least three meetings were held a year. One meeting was a spiritual meeting which was held on Rosary Sunday in October and consisted of Mass, breakfast, a conference, rosary and benediction. The second meeting was to be a social meeting held the night of December 28th, or if on a weekend, the following Monday. The social consisted of; dancing, cards or other games. The third meeting was to be the annual banquet. As was the tradition, the annual alumni banquet was to be held on Easter Monday, dues were collected (25 cents per year), officers elected and other business matters were addressed.

The attendance at the 1939 alumni banquet of 148 was the largest of any previous year. The program included a toast to the priests, an evening address, violin and piano solos, awards and scholarships. The honored guests were members of the graduating class, which was the tradition.

The Association has a resurgence every once in a while with perhaps a newsletter or reunion and a roster of alumni updated infrequently. Sr. Barbara Ann Vierzba, class of 1958 and Principal 1982-1986, published an Alumni Newsletter for several months in 1985 after the 75th anniversary celebration the prior year.

School Foundation

The St. Francis School Foundation was established in the 1990's to provide an ongoing financial base to provide support for teacher salaries, school needs and tuition scholarships. An annual fundraising dinner is conducted each September. Overall support of the foundation has been good and the Foundation is well on its way to establishing a one million dollar trust fund.

Student's Gifts to the Church

The March 9, 1933 fire that destroyed the church was witnessed by the school children, a vivid memory for those individuals to this day. All was destroyed in the fire. However, within a year a new church was built and mass was being said daily. In appreciation for the support that the parish has always given to the school, the students contributed their luxury money for the purpose of gifting the church with the inspiring statue of St. Francis of Assisi on the exterior of the church. By 1947 the children were also credited for the gifts of a monstrance, repository, communion platen, mass books and sanctuary manual.

Another large gift to the church by the school children is one of the stained glass windows. The particular window, one of the clerestory windows, is symbolic of St. Thomas of Aquinas, patron saint of catholic education. It depicts a radiant sun with an eye within it. The window is located high, on the left side of the church, (facing the altar), third from the front.

[Pictures of statue and window](#)

Scouting

St. Francis parish first organized Boy Scout Troop 47 in 1932. By 1947 the Parish Troop was known as Troop 45 and now, 62 years later, Troop 45 meets weekly at St. Andrew's Church. Cub Scout Pack 45 also has a long history associated with St. Francis School and continues to meet at the school with 1st through 5th grade boys.

Girl Scout Troop 2 was formed in 1936 and persisted at least through the 1940's. The history of the Girl Scouts is not as consistent as the Boy Scouts, but some form of a troop has existed throughout the history of the school.

Sources:

Church of St. Francis of Assisi Diamond Jubilee 1871-1947

Church of St. Francis Centennial 1971

St. Scholastica Monastery Archives

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Cuyuna Country Peoples History

Anecdotal musings of alumni