

On Becoming a Local History Author, or, How Family Members Conned Me Into Giving Up Years of My Life to Write Their Book

By: Nan Schichtel

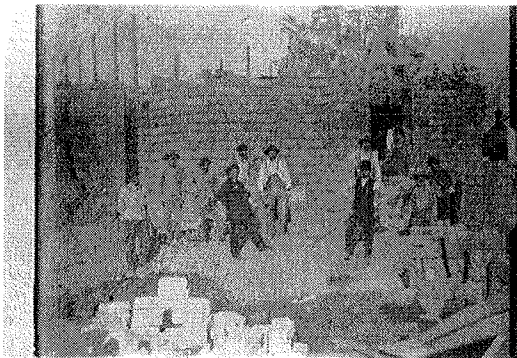
In December 2013, I published a local history of a nearby Catholic parish. Their Faith Lives On: St. Mary's Visitation Parish Histories, New Salem, Michigan was published and the print run of more than 600 copies sold out within a year. Copies were sold to readers in almost all 50 states and several foreign countries.

St. Mary's Visitation is a combined congregation of two historical German parishes situated less than two miles apart in northern Allegan county: St. Mary's in New Salem, and, Visitation in North Dorr. The latter church was razed and, today, the combined group of the faithful worship in New Salem. The parish recently celebrated their 150th anniversary.

So, what does this have to do with the Grand Rapids Historical Society? This story is how a regular GRHS member got involved in local history and ended up creating a work of lasting value to the community. From

reading this, you may see opportunities for you to get involved in something similar – or more likely - you might be more successful than I was in avoiding a project like this if you recognize the steps I took. Several years ago, a second cousin (who shall remain nameless but not blameless) invited me to attend a parish meeting in rural northeastern Allegan County, Michigan where my grandparents grew up. This cousin asked me to bring my family photos and allow them to be scanned for the project, which I was happy to do. Current and former parishioners who intended to write a parish history for St. Mary's Visitation had worked on the committee for a little over two years at the time.

After attending a few meetings, offering the pictures and family stories passed onto me, and getting acquainted with many committee members (most of whom were related to me), I felt I had done my part. Win-win. Soon after I stopped attending meetings, a lovely, older woman (who reminded me of my Mother - or a nun) phoned to ask whether I would be at the next meeting. I said, "No, since after all, I was not a member of that parish." She cajoled me to attend the next



meeting which I did; I fell for the compliment that I had "such good ideas." Upon entering the parish meeting room, I sensed something in the air, but did not know what. That woman called the meeting to order and then informed me that I had been voted in as "the editor-in-chief *at the meeting I missed!*" While I tried verily to avoid chairing this project, I eventually succumbed to flattery and ended up as editor of the St. Mary's Visitation parish history. Which took up the next seven years of my extra time, my vacations, my life.

Did I mention I was a college librarian? I like research – am good at research. Besides, since I didn't grow up out in the parishes, I knew I didn't know a lot. And really, how much historical information can there be about two small Catholic parishes in rural Allegan County? They had already collected stories, photos, historical records, memorabilia. We started recording this in one document about New Salem's church, but discovered that we had to research not just St. Mary's in New

Salem, but we also had to research Visitation's even longer history, and that of our mother parish – St. Mary's Grand Rapids – and the diocese..... Like Topsy, the project grew.

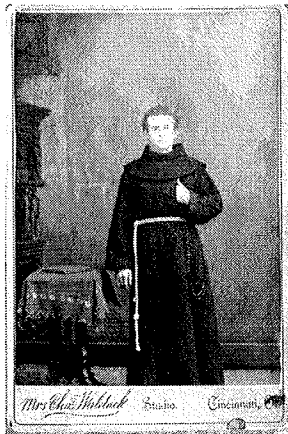
In 2002, Theresa Kiel and Marge Young published 150 Years of Christian Faith: The History of St. Sebastian Parish with Visitation Parish, which included Visitation's history where it connected with the Byron Center parish. In actuality, we ended up having to research all three of the German Catholic parishes as their histories and families were so intertwined. And, wow, we found a ton of information. We had cherished pioneer stories that several families had taken the time to write and save; did they surmise that their descendants would write a history?

The Germans were early settlers in the area south of Grand Rapids starting in the early 1850s. We found written records of land-looking trips to West Michigan by Germans who initially settled near Cleveland, Ohio. Other stories were about the abject poverty the earliest pioneer survived, dealing with hungry wolves, and thanking God for the masses of passenger pigeons for food, and considering apples a luxury. Most settlers lived in Grand Rapids for some period of time, often working in the early factories to raise enough to buy or improve their Allegan land with a cabin, barn or store.

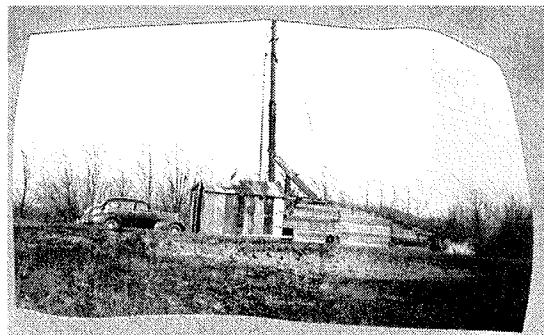
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As the history progressed from pioneer times to the present, I discovered stories of charity where parishioners “showered” the teaching religious sisters with food and household goods, although the sisters seldom received a salary. Farmers built new church buildings and schools after harvest. Public school was taught in the Catholic school building for a time since there were too few non-Catholics in the township to merit a school building of their own. One son of the parish became a missionary; for his goodness and true service to their community, the Native Americans call him “Apostle to the Navajo.



The discovery of oil brought a whole new group of



people to the area – and to church.

Young men of the parish survived the Dec. attack on Pearl Harbor since

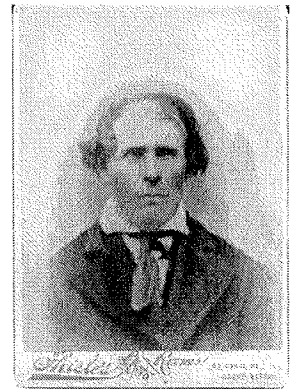
they were off their ships attending an early Catholic Mass. A Japanese FuGo balloon bomb landed near the North Dorr’s church but went unreported by the media until after V-J Day. These local stories all needed to be told and remembered.

Originally, there was to have been a genealogical component of the parish history. However, after spending 2 years collecting and writing about only 10 of the 100 founding families – and condensing that into 67 pages (!) - I made the unpopular decision that the book project – if I was to be the editor - would be more local and parish history and less genealogy. I would write and edit the parish history with stories about the priests and sisters who served, about the management of the parishes by their bishops, and about the parochial schools of which there were two - but no genealogy. (In 2016, a new committee (that I am NOT on) is attempting a genealogy. Stay tuned.) We would include illustrative family stories of shared experiences that resonated with many of the parishioners.

Grand River Times

The Neumann family of Dorr’s story told of back-breaking trips between Dorr and Grand Rapids for work, to sell farm products, and to baptize babies before the local churches were built.

“Big Pete” Weber’s family shared his tale of escaping European conscription only to be drafted to serve in the Civil War – and then fleeing to Canada. We found copies of immigration contracts with ship owners, and the Einig family still had their immigrant’s huge wooden trunk labelled exactly as that contract



demand! We totally lucked out when we discovered a copy of Theodore Castor’s memoirs of his pioneer life, visiting early Grand Rapids, plus rip-roaring tales of serving in the Third Michigan. The lone non-Germans in the parish, the Irish Leonard family, shared stories of interactions with Chief White Pigeon – and having to walk into town for Confessions with an English-speaking priest at St. Andrew’s.

Did I say I loved to research? As each year passed, we discovered more of our parish history online than previously found. The research involved visiting libraries and archives in Grand Rapids, Detroit, Lansing, Kalamazoo, Notre Dame, Chicago, St. Louis, Cleveland, and Cincinnati – as well as emails, letters and phone calls to Washington, DC, and Rome.

We uncovered almost too much information (including a Michigan Supreme Court Case that still serves as precedent for church ownership by bishops) – and I really wanted a life without this project on my calendar. So, during 2012-13, I “cut bait” and slogged through a major push to finalize the content, compose the text, edit some more, get quality scans of the photos we wanted to use in the book, get copyright permissions, edit some more, and finally say – “We’re done.”

But again, what’s the connection to Grand Rapids? In all of the work, time and again I discovered geographical, religious, family, business and cultural connections between Allegan’s German communities and Grand Rapids. First, all three of the churches are “within spitting distance” of GR – although during pioneer times it surely seemed further. Religiously, like the Grand Rapids parishes, they were all under the supervision of the Catholic bishops (later archbishops) of Detroit.

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2016—2017 Grand Rapids Historical Society Programs

*All programs (excluding May program) are being held at the Grand Rapids Public Library
in the auditorium at 7:00 p.m.*

November 10, 2016: *WACs, WASPs, SPARs AND MARINES: NICKNAMES, RECRUITING, AND THE WARTIME EXPERIENCE OF SERVICEWOMEN FROM GRAND RAPIDS, Presented by: Will Miner*

January 12, 2017: *THE STREETCAR ERA IN GRAND RAPIDS, Presented by: Carl Bajema and Tom Maas*

February 9, 2017: *BROOKBY AND THE BLODGETTS, Presented by: Jeff Sytsma*

March 9, 2017: *FIGHTERS FROM THE FURNITURE CITY, Presented by: Louis Moore*

April 13, 2017: *THE MURDER OF MAJOR GENERAL NELSON, Presented by: Robert Girardi*

May 11, 2017: *THE HISTORY OF ST. JOHN’S HOME AND ITS FOUNDERS, Presented by: Mark Thomson*

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After 1882 when the Grand Rapids diocese was established, the two Allegan parishes were most often supervised by Grand Rapids’ bishops, although parishioners felt they were sometimes geographically traded like baseball cards with other Michigan dioceses. Regardless of how the Church organized them, these two Allegan parishes had long and very strong ties to Grand Rapids, the closest bishopric. Priests who served in the two parishes also served “in town.”

Families in Allegan were cousins to Germans and German-speaking Bohemians in the St. Mary’s parish on Grand Rapids’ West Side, as well as to those in close-by burghs including Conklin, Berlin (now Marne), Alpine, and East Paris. When no priests were stationed in Allegan, the families took the train (or walked!) into Grand Rapids for Mass and the Sacraments. Some of these folks used their family networks for business – with one son raising beef, hogs, and chickens in North Dorr to be shipped to his brother’s Grand Rapids West Side butcher shop steps away from the Bridge St. railroad crossing. New Salem, Dorr and North Dorr hotels and bars served brew from the Tusch Brothers Cincinnati Brewery on Grandville Avenue because of family ties and easy railroad sidings serving the southern communities.

There’s one last connection to Grand Rapids. I work at Grand Rapids Community College library as a library faculty member. Each year, as part of our continuing employment evaluation plan, faculty must create, work, and evaluate a series of projects that relate to student learning, teaching, college and community service, and professional development. Two years ago, knowing that all the print copies of the history were sold, that more people wanted access, and that the upcoming 150th anniversary would create even more interest, my colleague, archivist Mike Klawitter, and I converted the book into a high-resolution e-book format as a proof-of-concept project showcasing faculty member’s publications in GRCC’s digital repository. Just like the initial researching and writing, the conversion took longer than planned, but was completed in time for St. Mary’s Visitation’s 150th Anniversary this past summer. GRCC provides free access to this out-of-print book as a community service, with the copyright permission of the parish, of course. Readers with a high-speed internet connection will find the heavily-illustrated 350+ page book at the following URL: <http://cdm15772.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15772coll1/id/56>, or by clicking the *[View this book online]* link at <http://lib.grcc.edu/record=b470468>.

While I was dragged into this project, and often referred to it as the “damned parish history” until the pastor asked me not to, completing the book became what I consider a major life accomplishment. So, to my cousin and that lovely lady who conned me into it, “Thank you!” The written histories of small towns surrounding Grand Rapids – or even church histories of a faith that you don’t share - may not be the Grand Rapids history lover’s first stop for learning more about our home place, but I can guarantee that, like me, you will find stories that will enlighten you, amuse you, and cause wonder that those stories still exist.