

100 Years

Alumni of St. Stanislaus School enjoy anniversary reunion just shy of heaven

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — "I'm not bragging," said 88-year-old Anne "Pat" Ochs, "but people take me for 65."

Given her youthful looks, some of the 1,000 revelers gathered to celebrate the reunion of St. Stanislaus School a couple weeks ago may have overlooked the fact that Ochs was the affair's oldest living alumna.

Her last name was Bialynski in 1915 when she graduated from the elementary school — now 93 years old — at the corner of Hudson Avenue and Norton Street. Like those of so many other graduates, Ochs' original surname pointed to the distinct Polish character of St. Stanislaus School, and of the neighborhood in which it stands.

"I will send you as teachers sisters who can speak both Polish and English, (and) your children will make rapid progress," Bishop Bernard McQuaid remarked during the dedication of St. Stanislaus Parish in 1890. "United and firm in faith, religion will grow and flourish in this parish ..."

Bishop McQuaid's prediction came true in the eyes of some alumni and former teachers who attended all-day celebrations of the parish's centennial on Sunday, May 27.

"I know when I was there, you'd think (the parishioners thought) you were something that had come from heaven," commented Sister Anne Martin, SSJ, who taught second grade at St. Stanislaus from 1955-56. "The older parishioners would come up and kiss your hand," she said with a laugh.

Many of those older parishioners had emigrated from the old country, and the parish school had served as one means of assimilating their children into American society, according to 1965 graduate Kathy Urbanic, who is currently writing a history of Rochester's Polish community.

"I think it was a real advantage for the children of immigrants to be taught in both languages," Urbanic said of the school's bilingual approach to education.

For those Poles who opted to enter the English-only public school system, the consequences could be traumatic, she noted. She recalled interviewing one 80-year-old Polish native who still remembered what it was like going to a Rochester public school when he was a 12-year-old arrival.

Urbanic pointed out that the administrators put the young adolescent in a kindergarten class because of his poor English. "Even now, I can see that had been a real humiliating experience for him," she said.

Fortunately, such experiences weren't in store for students at St. Stanislaus, although the bilingual approach to education also could have a down side, as Sister Martin noted.

Taking her students to First Friday Mass was a behavioral nightmare on occasion, she commented, since the pastor insisted on saying the Litany of the Sacred Heart in Polish. As the "only Irishman at St. Stanislaus," the teacher found the litany incomprehensible, and "the children just about climbed the walls because they didn't understand it either," Sister Martin recalled.

By the late 1940s, the school was no longer conducting dual classes in Polish, but to this day parishioners may take Saturday classes in the tongue, Urbanic said.

Helping students preserve their Polish heritage while adjusting to American culture was not the school's only success

story, as 1940 graduates Walter and Rita Penazek can attest. The couple, current residents of Greece, had no idea what fate had in store when Walter transferred from St. Theresa's Parish to St. Stanislaus in the fourth grade.

"He says we were in the fourth grade (together)," Rita remarked, denying any knowledge of attraction to her future mate at that age. "You know how it is, you like everybody in the whole class," she said.

Fortunately for Walter Penazek, Rita eventually narrowed her field of vision during their high school years, when Walter delivered the Rochester *Times-Union* to her family's doorstep every day.

"Her grandmother used to say, 'He's such a nice, nice boy. You should get to know him better,'" Walter recalled, adding, "I found that out later." Eventually, Rita took her grandmother's advice and the couple married following Roger's discharge from the air force in 1948.

That was the same year Gloria Wojtczak McKeown graduated from St. Stanislaus.



St. Stanislaus School students Radoslaw Jurczuk and Monika Cremaldi, dressed as a priest and sister of the last century, took part in the parish's 100th anniversary Mass, May 27.



Anne Ochs, a graduate of St. Stanislaus' Class of 1915, waltzes with Joe Wrubleski, Class of 1927, at the parish's Centennial Homecoming Banquet, May 27.



Father Andrew Grzela, pastor, stressed the value of coming home during his homily.

The Avon resident fondly recalled the school's encouragement of such Polish traditions as the blessing of food baskets at Easter and the sharing of *opake* — a square wafer-like bread — with family and friends on Christmas Eve.

Another kind of tradition — the church's — seemed a bit stifling to one 1970 graduate, who remembered the excitement that Vatican II brought to the school.

Pam Rodgers, who currently lives in Santa Barbara, Calif., said that her lay teachers, who increased in numbers during the 1960s, spoke hopefully of the fruit they thought the Council would bear. She said that hope was reflected in the wishes made by Rodgers and her classmates.

"I kind of felt that the church had lost touch with reality," Rodgers said of her pre-Vatican II years at the parish school. "Everything was done very ceremoniously."

Rodgers still recalls being befuddled by the Latin Mass. "It's funny thinking about it. You get so used to saying everything in English, you forget it wasn't always that

way," she said.

One aspect of Rodgers' days at St. Stanislaus that won't ever be forgotten is Sister Petrina Trybalski, who taught sixth grade. Noting that the sister used overhead projectors and other innovations before they were common, Rodgers said the teacher taught her the value of loving what you learn.

"I remember she had a real sense that you can (learn) and have a good time, and that your life can be that," Rodgers said, adding that her philosophy parallels the sister's idea. "You can go through life and enjoy it, or not."

Former students at St. Stanislaus seem to agree that the school and the parish taught them how to enjoy each other and God.

"On a scale of one to 10, it ranks 10," Sister Martin said of her former place of employ.

McKeown summed up her feelings by describing what it was like to go to Mass two weeks ago with her former classmates.

"It was like a next step up to heaven," she said. "That's just the feeling I got."