



# *History of Saint Brigid school as told by Catherine Rowland Teacher & Principal 1967-1985*

It was 50 years after a small group of eight families had established the first Catholic Church in this area and about 25 years after the arrival of Herbert Dow and the beginning of Dow Chemical Company with the accompanying growth of Midland, that Saint Brigid School was opened.

Fr. McDonald arrived here in 1910 with a dream of establishing a Catholic elementary school. It was 1918 before he called a meeting of the men of the parish to promote his idea. He must've been convincing, because within four months a building fund drive had begun.

Construction was quite a lengthy process, but four classrooms of the six-room brick structure were completed for the opening of school in September, 1922.

Before the school's opening, Father McDonald was transferred to Saint Francis Parish in Traverse City and Father Joseph Illig arrived to manage the final details.

Father Illig came here with 25 years experience as an educator at the college level. He had taught at Saint Thomas College of Saint Paul, Minnesota and Saint Edwards College of San Antonio, Texas.

Going from the college level to an elementary school and the leadership of a growing parish appeared to be an easy transition for the friendly, outgoing priest, who guided our parish and school for 36 eventful years.

During these years, holy days were always free days from school for the students. Father, and later, Monsignor Illig added Saint Joseph day, his namesake's feast day, to these special days.

The last Saint Joseph day that Monsignor Illig was with us, he, in his early 90s, offered mass, was helped to walk from the altar and was taken to the hospital where his death occurred. I felt very privileged to be able to attend the last mass offered by this brave and dedicated priest.

Until the early 70s, the school continued to grow rapidly. Overcrowding was relieved in 1947 with the construction of a six-room addition that included an auditorium, and in the early 50s, by the opening of Blessed Sacrament school and the formation of this second parish.

10 years later, our enrollment was well over 400 students with an 11th classroom added at the back of the auditorium, with the use of a movable wall. This was definitely a temporary arrangement, since the auditorium was used for physical education classes and there was no sound barrier. As it happened, it was an enrollment peak, and the next year an additional room was no longer needed.

The decrease in the number of students enrolled progressed rapidly after it began. Many factors probably accounted for this, not the least of which was the diminishing size of our families. The enrollment went from more than 400 students to slightly over 100 with approximately the same number of families represented.

Another possible factor may have been the demand for a more varied curriculum than we were able to provide with our self-contained classrooms. The need for more training and science was often heard and our little auditorium in no way provided the space, nor the equipment for physical education programs that would in any way compare to that available in the public schools.

Another reason was the diminishing number of available sisters to teach in our school and the employment of more and more lay teachers.

This proved to be a very difficult time in the life of our parish because of the cash outlay needed to keep the school open. Although the parish had provided a home, utilities, transportation, and a meager salary to provide food, clothing and contribution to the mother house for the sisters, the sudden need for money to pay lay teachers' salaries and benefits was a heavy burden to a parish when other parish needs were arising.

The present parking lot was purchased jointly by the parish and the city to be used as it is today as a playground during school hours and a parking lot for the city the remainder of the time.

During the 40s, our present church was built and during the 60s, the present rectory. So, the added expenditure for a school with limited enrollment was not well accepted.

Along with these factors, Catholic schools were rapidly closing all around us. A group of dedicated parents, like the eight families who were responsible for the first church in Midland, decided not to give up without exploring every available means of support.

Many hours of brainstorming and planning were spent trying to resolve this problem. Money raising activities of all kinds were tried from selling light bulbs, to managing a food booth at the county fair, holding soup suppers, candy sales, and any projects that might raise some money were considered.

The two fundraisers that have lasted longest are bingo, held once a week and run by the school parents, and the selling of submarine sandwiches once a year.

A fair share funding program has been in practice and an endowment fund was established in 1989. Pledges, donations, memorials all helped supplement school support. In the first six years, 70% of the \$500,000 goal has been contributed to the fund and by 1994, a little more than \$34,000 has been generated for the school.

We also have dedicated, certified teachers who are willing to teach for about 80% of public school salaries. These also are teachers of music, art, physical education, Spanish, and library who work a very limited number of hours but provide excellent training for the children.

The Sisters of Mercy laid the foundation for education in our school. Six sisters were here for its opening in 1922 with sister Mary Immaculate as Principal.

An atmosphere of order, discipline, high standards of achievement, coupled with much love and understanding made Saint Brigid's a very special place for children's early school years.

Not only were the sisters very interested in the welfare of the students, but many parents would find a sympathetic ear during times of personal problems. Rather than giving advice, my memory is of offers to pray for your intentions, sometimes in listing the prayers of their religious community.

Until the mid-60s, all the children attended daily mass. This was not mandatory but "highly recommended."

At that time in the church, no female entered without her head being covered. When our enrollment was high, the church was almost filled with children each morning with an assortment of hats, scarves, veils, or sometimes in desperation, a handkerchief anchored with bobby pins on the head of some girl who had forgotten her head covering.

The weekday masses choir was made up of older children in the school usually accompanied on the organ by a student. Of course, no boy could serve mass until he had learned the Latin responses with the help of an older server and one of the assistant priests.

If children receive holy communion at the mass they would have fasted from the previous midnight so they were allowed to carry a breakfast and eat this in the classroom. On the first Friday of each month, the mothers provided hot chocolate and donuts after mass, remembered as a very special treat.

When fasting before communion was limited to three hours, some masses were celebrated at 10:45 so the children might have breakfast at home before school.

Once a month, a group of ladies from the altar Society provided a hot dog lunch for the children. This later was followed by a monthly pizza. This provided a change in the lunch program which has been highlighted only by trading sandwiches when Sister or the room monitors weren't looking.

Today, a hot lunch is available on a daily basis and served in the auditorium with adult supervision. This is done in conjunction with Saint John Lutheran School, where the food is prepared and delivered and served by mothers from Saint Brigid.

When the sisters were here, they took responsibility not only for the religious training of children in the school, but all of the parish. All special activities were under their supervision including mass servers, children's choir, Organ, Mary crowning, and reception of the sacraments. It was quite a transition when their leadership was not available and volunteers from the parish began to take care of these activities.

This eventually led to an all-lay staff both in the school and religious education programs.

In 1965, when the federal government became involved in education, the title I program, with what is established for services to disadvantaged children, also involved children in non-public schools. With this service, public school personnel came to our school to provide remedial help with reading, speech therapy, and counseling. This continued for 20 years until the Supreme Court ruled that this on-site instruction be stopped and students had to leave the building for this service.

Today, because of the dedication and creativity of our school staff, a computer program has been established, Spanish has become part of the curriculum, junior sciences offered after school twice a week for children in grades 4 to 6, and physics, biology, and chemistry I taught in eight-week periods during the school year.

As enrollment decreased, attempts were made to counteract this first in 1973 by adding a ninth grade with students spending two hours each day at Central Intermediate School for science and elective courses.

The response to this was very poor so it was discontinued after one year.

In 1975, we no longer taught grade 7 and 8 but added kindergarten to a curriculum. This has proven to be a more satisfactory way to serve the parish as evidenced by an increase in enrollment.

The sisters remained here for three more years but in 1978, Sister Margaret Platte and Sister Charlita Smith, the two remaining religious sisters, decided to leave our school and the education of our students was led by an all lay staff.

Families have remained very involved in the daily school activities helping with field trips, computer aids, library aids and other needs that arise.

Today, the present building, which was finished under the supervision of Father Keen and dedicated in 1983, serves all the parish very well with offices for both school and religious education personnel and an auditorium that serves for most parish activities. The school has continued to maintain high academic standards as evidenced by achievement testing and the progress our students make as they move into junior high schools.

We owe much to the persons whose hard work, prayers and dedication have kept her school open when it would've been easy to give up. That has never been the attitude at Saint Brigid from its very beginning.