

One of our members, Mr. Francis G. Blais, Sr., of Reisterstown, MD, wrote telling us that he got "so carried away (actually four pages long) with Gerry Archambault's article *"In remembrance of Parochial Schools"* that he decided to share his own reminiscences of his parochial school days.

### A LOOK BACK IN TIME — ST. JOSEPH'S PAROCHIAL SCHOOL

In 1922, St. Joseph's Parish in Natick arrived at the decision to follow the lead of its sister parishes in the Valley and build a school. The school building and a residence for the teaching staff was completed in 1923 and the first students reported for class: A service which has continued uninterrupted to this day. The parish, being classified as a Canadian Mission, did not come under the auspices of the Diocese of Providence and its financial resources. The Canadian mother house, never known for its generosity when it came to temporal matters, really overdid itself on this one: The resulting facilities were on a quite modest scale, consisting primarily of the purchase of a vacant General Store and adjoining land. After performing some minimal interior renovations the school was ready. On November 4, 1923, the school officially opened with an enrollment of 135 students. Enrollment was free, as were the books. The books were to be returned at the end of the year. Pencils and notebooks were the responsibility of the student.

The first group of nuns to arrive consisted of four teaching nuns, a housekeeper and a sister superior. They were from the Order of the Sisters of Divine Providence headquartered in Kentucky. Sister Eugenie Maris was appointed Principal accompanied by Sisters Praxedas Zasnach and Celina Schwallie. The following year a fourth nun, Sister Amelia Dumouchelle was added to the staff. Oddly enough, if my memory is correct, none of them came from either Canada or France.

I want to digress for a moment to pay tribute to these devoted nuns. Having taken a vow of poverty, they worked for no pay. Beyond a small allowance barely sufficient to cover their personal needs, they owned no personal property. (Somehow, however, her desk drawer was always able to produce a pencil or eraser for the student who had lost or forgotten his). One must consider that all tests were handwritten . . . multiple choice, or true or false tests, did not exist. Correcting papers and keeping necessary records must have been very time-consuming. Remember, at this school there were only four teachers for eight classes, nearly doubling the work load. Despite everything, the graduating students of St. Joseph School were on a par with, and sometimes exceeding, the product of the public schools. May God rest their Souls.

In those days the educational structure was two-tiered: twelve years, divided into eight years of grammar school, followed by four years of high school. Grammar schools and high schools were seldom to be found at the same location. St. Josephs was classified as a grammar school. In the absence of a Catholic high school, its graduates proceeded into the public school system.

In 1917 the new town of West Warwick separated itself from its parent, the city of Warwick. As most of us know, the boundary line follows the Pawtuxet River, dividing the village of Natick roughly in half. The children from East Natick and O'Donnell's Hill graduated into James T. Lockwood High School in Apponaug, while those from the rest of the village went to West Warwick School in Westcott.

But . . . let us get back to St. Joseph's School. As we are all aware, the parish boundaries tend to sprawl over a rather large area with its population grouped in small clusters. Without any form of transportation available, schoolchildren had no alternative other than walk. Hot or cold, rain or shine, beginning at the age of six, every morning the kids grabbed their books and trudged off to school. There were no cafeterias or lunch rooms and definitely no vending machines. One carried a lunch or went home to eat. The schools generally allowed the students a full hour in which to go home, eat and return. In view of the state of the prevailing economy . . . the mill had completely shut down and its assets were in process of being liquidated . . . it was generally more economical to eat at home. Some unfortunately lived such a distance from the school that it was impossible to make the round trip within the allocated hour so they carried lunch boxes or paper sacks, contents unknown. At St. Josephs it was a rule that all classrooms had to be vacated during the lunch period, however, during the winter months and periods of inclement weather, the basement boiler room, complete with its one light bulb and a few scattered benches, was made available as a place to eat and keep warm until classes resumed.

As there was no means of communication between the schools and the homes, during periods of inclement weather the decision whether or not the children went to school was the responsibility of the parents. At St. Josephs, the teachers being in residence, if enough pupils came, classes were held, however, with any evidence of worsening conditions, the pupils were promptly sent home with appropriate instructions concerning the following day.

As has been previously mentioned, the original school building had been some sort of a store, as evidenced by long show windows fronting what would be today's sidewalk. It was located on the site of the present day Msgr. DeAngelis Manor. The property ran back from Wakefield Street, bounded on the left by a truck-body construction company and an old blacksmith shop. Along the rear, a chain-link fence separated the property from several acres of marshland with a small brook running through it. On the right side the chain-link fence, interrupted by an abandoned stable or small barn, continued back to Wakefield Street. The entire property was several feet below street grade, and was occasionally subject to flooding from the marsh. A small residence was attached to the main school building by an enclosed area serving as a front entrance to the school. The residence was occupied by the teaching staff.

(to be continued next month)