



**A Brief History of the St. Hedwig Parish, Gary, IN.**  
Diamond Jubilee 1908-1983 St. Hedwig Church, Gary, IN.  
CAP at Orchard Lake.

It didn't take long for the first Polish settlers in Gary to band together for the purpose of establishing their own local church and school. On July 21, 1907, under the leadership of Frank Zawadzki, Anton Bankus, and Peter Pisarski, a meeting was held to explore and discuss that very possibility. There were approximately 25 families represented. They were young immigrants determined to have their own parish where they and their children could practice their Catholic faith and retain and promote their Polish language and culture.

That first informal meeting ended with enthusiasm and a commitment. An administrative Committee was elected consisting of Peter Pisarski, President; Valentine Fabianski, Treasurer; Frank Zawadzki, Recording Secretary; Valentine Nowak, Financial Secretary and John Wasilewski, General Collector of Funds. Assisting with advice and directing the formation of the new parish was Reverend Anthony A. Stachowiak who travelled regularly to Gary from St. John Cantius Parish in Indiana Harbor.

The Committee's first task was the raising of funds. Contributions were collected from each family. Picnics and various social activities were sponsored to earn money. Their first treasury finally totaled \$900. Since the plans called for a large \$15,000 church structure, based on the projected growth of the steel city, the treasury funds were not sufficient for the bishop to grant permission to build.

The Committee, however, did not give up. They modified their plans, agreeing to construct a smaller, modest frame building. They also succeeded in obtaining a donation of 7 lots from the Gary Land Co. With this progress, permission was finally granted. Construction was assigned to Anthony Bankus with John Wasilewski and John Jedrzejewski as his assistants.

On July 4, 1908, the Most Reverend Bishop Herman J. Alerding blessed the new church, dedicated it to St. Casimir. Because there was already a St. Casimir Church nearby Hammond, the Gary Parish changed the name of its church by adopting St. Hedwig as its patron saint.

Rev. Paul Rhode, who later became a bishop, preached the dedication sermon. The first altar was donated by the Rev. Francis Wojtalewicz of South Chicago and the first bell was blessed by Rev. Father Jansen.

Rev. Anthony Stachowiak served the new parish for almost three years, coming each Sunday to Gary from his own parish in Indiana Harbor. The first wedding ceremony for Victor Majewski and Veronica Naruszewicz was performed by him on July 6, 1908, and the first baptism of Helen Klapka on July 12, 1908.

In 1909, Rev. Peter A. Kahellek was assigned as the first resident pastor. He officiated at the first funeral in the Parish for Joseph Karkoszka on March 24, 1909.

Under Father Kahellek's administration a parish school was constructed in 1910. Fifty children were enrolled that year. By the second year the enrollment increased to 200 students. The school was staffed by the Franciscan Sisters of Blessed Kunegunda, an order of Polish American teaching nuns now known as the Franciscan Sisters of Chicago.

In 1913, the Sisters' convent was built. During the same year Rev. Michael Swiatkowski was assigned to the Parish as the first resident Assistant. From then on each pastor was supported and helped by an Assistant Priest with the exception of the present pastor. Father Henry as we fondly call him had to shoulder the responsibility by himself with much help, of course, from his faithful parishioners.

For many years St. Hedwig Church was the heart of Polonia in Gary and its needs grew as the population increased. In 1917-18 a new two-story combination church and school building was built. A decade later Jan Wasilewski was given a contract to build a new rectory.

When Pastor Kahellek retired in 1929, after 20 years of service, the parish property, including three buildings - the school/church structure, the convent, and the new rectory - was free of debt and there was a cash balance of \$14,471.18 in the parish fund.

The second resident pastor was Rev. Michael N. Swiatkowski (1929 -1947) who had previously assisted Father Kahellek. The new pastor guided the Parish through the great depression years. By the end of this difficult period, in 1933, St. Hedwig Parish was ready to celebrate its Silver Jubilee!

Seven years later (1940) the construction of the present church building began. Progress was slow due to World War II shortages of materials. With Rev. Swiatkowski's influence and help, the new church was finally completed and dedicated on Sept. 20, 1943 by His Excellency, Bishop John Francis Noll.

The upper floor of the two-story building, which served for many years as the church, now provided space for a social hall and the expansion of the school program.

Rev. Swiatkowski served the Parish for 18 years until his death in 1947. He was followed by our third Pastor, Rev. Louis Michalski (1947-1965). During his tenure, in 1957, Gary became the seat of a newly established Diocese with the Most Reverend Andrew G. Grutka as its first Bishop. A year later, in 1958, St. Hedwig Parish celebrated its Golden Jubilee, reflecting with pride and joy on its accomplishments and thanking God for His Blessings.

In the early 60's Rev. Michalski guided the parishioners through the many changes decreed for Catholics by the Second Vatican Council. Among these was the use of the English language (or the vernacular of the country) in place of Latin. Our Parish was the first in the Diocese of Gary to receive permission to celebrate Mass in the Polish language which we do to this day.

Rev. Michalski also initiated, and the succeeding pastors completed, the purchase and demolition of three frame homes located at 1715 and 1736 Pennsylvania St. The only buildings left standing in St. Hedwig Square was the church, school, convent, and rectory. The remainder was vacant land.

On July 11, 1967, by action of the Gary City Council, the alley, running north and south from 17th to 18th Avenues and located between Connecticut and Pennsylvania Streets, was granted to the Diocese of Gary| St. Hedwig Parish. The entire square block now belongs to the Diocese of Gary| St. Hedwig Parish.

Upon Rev. Michalski's transfer to Michigan City, the following were assigned as pastors of St. Hedwig Parish: Rev. Casimir Senderak (1965 - 68), Rev. John Murzyn (1968 - 75), Rev. Hilary Halter (1975-79), Rev. John Siekierski (1979-83), and our newly appointed pastor assigned on September 20, 1983, Rev. Henry Lazarek.

The last five pastors and their Assistants were confronted with many changes taking place in the Gary Community as well as in most industrial cities. White families, especially those with children, were moving to the suburbs or adjoining smaller towns. Blacks and Hispanics moved in to take their place. With the loss of numerous parish families, the school enrollment dropped drastically.

The Parish accepted between 150 - 200 black children whose parents desired for them a more disciplined and religious education. As the number of teaching nuns diminished (the last two were Sister Edwinette Wysz and Sister Louise Nowicki) lay teachers were hired with Mrs. Bernice Tanner Richardson as the Principal. School expenditures increased greatly and had to be subsidized by Parish and Diocesan funds even though these families paid a substantial tuition.

Rev. Murzyn appointed the first lay school board in 1970. In the same year he initiated a procedure for the election of a Parish Council by the parishioners.

In 1977 Father Hilary Halter had to close the school building in order to replace the furnace. The children were bused to the vacant Holy Rosary School on Clark Road near Fifth Avenue. Two years later the fire department reported other hazards and so the school was closed permanently.

To better serve the children of this changed community, the Diocese of Gary introduced various programs of help in the Parish through the services of the following: Rev. Brian Braun, Brother Erice Anderberg, Sister Maria Carmel, Rev. H. Schreiner, Sister Mary Rosaline, and Mr. Marion McPherson.

Upon Rev. Hilary's retirement in 1979 (He died in 1983), our Parish welcomed a new pastor, Rev. John J. Siekierski, a young, energetic, and sympathetic priest who was "Polish" in name

but could not speak the language. He celebrates Mass in English daily and on Sundays at eight o'clock but has graciously adhered to the wishes of the parishioners by permitting a second Mass to be celebrated in Polish (at ten o'clock) by the Salvatorian Fathers of Merrillville.

Although there are presently only some 198 families, Father John has stimulated and encouraged their active participation. In the last three years the school building was demolished at a cost of \$13,000. Only part of the front wall, with its inscribed arch entrance, was left standing as a reminder of our glorious past! In April of 1980, the church was redecorated and painted (\$17,000), and the property was fenced in for parking (\$990). The funds for all these current improvements were raised by the parishioners through various social activities, raffles, and donations. Especially helpful were members of the Parish Councils, Ushers, members of the church choir, our organist, servers, commentators, property caretaker, office secretary, and donors of many free services - all of whom we hope to specifically acknowledge in our Souvenir Book.

This history would not be complete without acknowledging the devoted help and valuable contributions made by our Assistant Priests: the Reverends Joseph Karpiński, Michael Swiatkowski who later became our Pastor, John Chylewski, Michael Petzhold, Frank Libert, Louis Ratajczak, Stanley Zjawinski, Jerome Walski, Michael Urbański, Aloisius Jarka, Valerian Karcz, Wencel Karp, Joseph Utas, Louis Madejczyk, Joseph Dziadowicz, O. Flavian Niebiański, Louis B. Wozniak, John Murzyn, Eugene Pogorzelski, Joseph Murphy, John J. Savio, Brian Braun, and Anthony Chojnacki. We also acknowledge the services of Rev. Bernard Ciesielski, O.C.D., whose first American assignment was to help in our Parish, and the help we presently receive each Sunday from the Salvatorian Fathers of Merrillville.

To all these priests, our former Pastors and Assistants, and to our many dedicated teaching nuns we express gratitude and thanks for the past 75 years.

To our forefathers, who passed on to their children the Catholic Faith as well as pride in their Polish heritage, we say, "Thank You!"

To His Excellency, Bishop Andrew G. Grutka, for faithfully serving his flock for the past 26 years, we express appreciation and thanks.

To Father John J. Siekierski, for his spiritual leadership these past four years and for his genuine interest and concern for his parishioners, we are grateful.

Upon one and all, the many who were and the few who still are a part of this St. Hedwig Parish Family, may God shower His Blessings!