

The Churches in Stockton

When new settlers came to Portage County, they also brought along their deep religious roots and strong values. Traveling for miles to share their beliefs with others was the usual standard for many of those early pioneers. The harsh existence forced upon them in their daily struggles made the enjoyment of common interests, including faith, necessary to survive.

As stated before, early censuses indicate the first settlers to this area were mostly Yankees coming from the New England states with a few coming from other areas. In the beginning years of Stockton, the town boundaries held thirty-six sections established by Congress. That northern Congressional Boundary is near today's RR tracks along Old Highway 18 Road and on to the east toward Amherst Junction. The Yankee settlers, who were Methodist Episcopal mostly, occupied much of this area.

Newman Methodist Episcopal Church

Where the Englanders gathered for church in 1855 that is not known. Alma Washburn, former Stockton Town Clerk J. R. Pattee's daughter, wrote a book entitled Letters to My Children. In it she refers to a school called Richmond school that stood where today's Stockton Municipal Building is, being used for church activities in the 1870's with the "baptizings" in Lake Thomas attracting large crowds. Around 1890, this congregation subsequently built a small wooden church near that school. The Stevens Point Journal of January 3, 1891 states: "The Newman M. E. church which is just being finished at Arnott station, will be dedicated next Thursday, January 8th. The Rev. J. D. Miller and Presiding Elder J. D. Cole will be present to assist the pastor, Rev. Sanborn in services."

Not much has been found in writing about this church. The Portage County Historical Society has a picture of it that was included in Michael Goc's book Lands and Lumber. Stockton senior resident Maurice Groshek tells us in his history, "My brother attended Arnott School seven years before me. The church was still standing, although it was no longer in use. My brother said the kids used to sneak into the church and play with the organ. The church was burned down by the time I started to attend school. I recall the kids playing in the ashes that first year, but the next year everything was cleared away." * (I estimate about 1924 plus or minus a year according to his birth date) An obituary found in the October 17, 1896 Stevens Point Daily Journal states the ten-year-old daughter of Herman Krohn "was buried in the cemetery connected with the Newman church". That cemetery is today called Arnott Cemetery located across from Lion's Park.

Immaculate Conception of Mary – St. Mary's, Custer

Irish immigrants began arriving in the 1840's, settling around the area known today as Custer. This area was originally the Town of Sharon until 1871 when 18 southern Sections of town 24 were detached from Sharon and added to Stockton. The Irish also brought with them their firm beliefs and deep Catholic faith. The Stevens Point Daily Journal on September 16, 1936 gives a brief history of St. Mary's beginnings. The priest serving St. Stephen's congregation, a German Catholic Church built at Stevens Point in 1853, visited the people of Custer quite regularly having Mass in homes or in a school house about a mile northeast of the present site. St. Martin's in Ellis was built in 1856-57 and many settlers traveled there for services. Early pioneer Timothy Leary donated land for the church, rectory and cemetery.

The church and rectory were built in 1875 under the supervision of the contractor Michael Herbert with the parishioners doing much of the work themselves. The original church with rectory and the cemetery are located on a hillside one-half mile north of the small community of Custer. On November 16, 1875 Bishop F.X. Krautbaur of the Green Bay Diocese dedicated the church. The parish was transferred to the La Crosse Diocese on January 7th, 1946. Since that time the parish has undergone many changes, and has an active Pastoral/Finance Council: Sacred Worship, Education, Family Life and Justice and Peace Committees: which all serve the parishioners in various needs. (Source Parish Centennial Book)

St. Mary of Mount Carmel – St. Mary's, Fancher

In the book Native Realm, Michael Goc states the Polish settlement in Portage County spread south on the glacial moraine. These devout Catholics from the Stockton area traveled to St. Stephens in Stevens Point, or to Polonia church for Mass. In 1884, high on a hill not far from the rail tracks known as Smokey Spur, the Polish Catholics bought land and founded St. Mary of Mount Carmel Parish. The original church was built in 1885 and was located east of the present church. It was known as the Amherst Junction Church, later it became known as the Fancher Church because of the Fancher Post Office that was established nearby in 1891.

Growth continued in the area and a need for a larger church was realized. A new wooden church building was completed in the fall of 1893. It was dedicated on July 16, 1894 in magnificent pageantry. The story in the Amherst Advocate reported: "The day was made a great holiday for all the people in that neighborhood. A crowd assembled at Amherst Junction where Bishop Messmer arrived by train at eleven o'clock in the morning. The people then formed a procession to follow him the three miles to the church. The Bishop's carriage and those of the six other priests who were on hand to participate in the dedication ceremonies headed the procession. Also included in the procession were the Central City Band of Stevens Point; fifty girls dressed in white, riding black horses; fifty boys dressed in black, riding white horses; and about 160 other conveyances carrying area residents," estimating over 700 people in attendance.

On March 19, 1904 tragedy struck and this church was totally destroyed by fire. Following the fire, the original church building was once again put to use for Mass and other worship services. Building a new church began slowly in 1906. This church was built with brick and stone brought by rail and hauled from the Smokey Spur sidetrack, with construction of the church done mostly with parish labor and horsepower. On July 16, 1906 the Rt. Rev. J. J. Fox, Bishop of Green Bay blessed and dedicated the recently completed church.

The highest part of the church roof measures 64 feet above the ground. The steeple rises 93 feet above the roof, for a total steeple height of 157 feet. The church was built to hold about 900 persons. As lovely as the church is from the outside, there is even more breathtaking beauty inside which some say resemble the old Polish cathedrals of the homeland. (Source Church Centennial Book)

*Sue Stremkowski – March