

HISTORY OF THE POLISH PEOPLE

AT WINONA, MINNESOTA

By Paul Libera

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The first Polish people came to Winona in 1855, a hundred years ago, four years after Captain Orrin Smith made the first move which started the founding of the City of Winona. I will briefly review the early history of the Winona area and bring the Polish people in at their proper time.

MOUNDBUILDERS. In ancient times the Winona area shows evidence of having been inhabited by an aboriginal race of Indians which we call the "Moundbuilders." Other Indian civilizations followed, including the Algonquin and Sioux.

1634 The French came in 1634 and their activities are still evident in the French names attached to numerous locations near Winona. At that time the site of Winona had a French name, "La Prairie Aux-Ailes," which translates to "The Win's Prairie."

1825 A French-Indian named Francois DuChouquette built the first house in Winona County at Homer in 1825.

1837 Louis Stram and a group of Swiss people attempted an unsuccessful white settlement at Homer in 1837.

1838 The Rev. J. D. Stevens, a Protestant minister, was appointed by the United States Government as farmer to Chief Wapasha's Indian tribe at the site of Winona in 1838.

1839 Rev. Stevens built the first house on the site of the City of Winona in 1839, and his venture ended in failure about the same year.

1841 Thomas Holmes and Robert Kennedy tried to settle their families at the site of Winona in 1841, but they could not make a satisfactory deal with the Indians, so they went across the River and founded Fountain City.

1844 Charles Reed came from Trempealeau, Wisconsin, in 1844 and built an Indian Trading post at Winona, but that was unsuccessful; so shortly afterward the building was dismantled and moved to Trempealeau:

CHIEF WAPASHA The difficulty for white people to settle at Winona was due mainly to the hostility of Chief Wapasha, leader of the Sioux Indians at Winona. The Louisiana Purchase of 1803 gave the United States whatever title France had to this part of Minnesota which includes Winona County. However, in 1812 the native Indians at Winona, under the leadership of Chief Wapasha, fought on the side of the British; and the Indians continued an active warlike attitude until 1844 when a typho-malarial epidemic reduced the ranks of Chief Wapasha. He fought on anyway as best he could, but in 1851 the United States Government succeeded in negotiating a treaty with Chief Wapasha, so that in carrying out the terms of this treaty, by 1853 Chief Wapasha and most of his tribe were moved to a new area on the Minnesota River.

WILLARD BUNNELL The memory of Willard Bunnell is respected in the preservation of the Bunnell House at Homer by the Winona County Historical Association. Bunnell was employed by the United States Government in the business of removing Indians from Iowa and southern Minnesota in accordance with the treaties that were negotiated. Bunnell is responsible for the successful removal of the Indians from the site of Winona in 1853. He was at Winona early enough so that he could have made a claim previous to the claim of Captain Smith who later founded Winona, but he did not do so. Bunnell came back to Winona afterward, but at first he passed up Winona as a townsite, and he made his first claim at Homer, giving the site that name after his own birthplace in New York State. Bunnell built his first house at Homer in 1849.

SCOTCH AND ENGLISH In the 1840's people mostly of Scotch and English descent, born in the eastern States, were settling along the Mississippi River near Winona and across the River from Winona in Trempealeau County, Wisconsin. La Crosse, Wisconsin had permanent buildings as early as 1842.

FOUNDING OF WINONA On October 15, 1851, Captain Orrin Smith of Galena, Illinois came up the River with his steamer Nominee, and landed Erwin H. Johnson, Caleb Nash and another man at the site of Winona with instructions to set up and maintain a claim for Captain Smith. On November 12, 1851, Silas Stevens, George W. Clark and Edwin Hamilton came up the River on the Steamer Excelsior and landed at Winona with the intention of staking out a claim. They ran into trouble with Captain Smith's men. The problem was settled by agreeing to six half-mile square claims along the River front. Stakes were driven at half mile intervals for three miles along the River. The spaces so formed were numbered from one to six, beginning with the east end. No. 1 was for Captain Smith, No. 2 for Caleb Nash, No. 3 for Silas Stevens, No. 4 for Erwin Johnson, No. 5 for Edwin Hamilton and No. 6 for George W. Clark. In 1852 Bunnell made an unsuccessful attempt to "jump" Claim No. 4 from Erwin Johnson. On March 1, 1853, the Wabasha Protection Club, modern Winona's first organization, was formed for the purpose of united action against claim jumpers at Winona, and they held their first meeting at Bunnell's house in Homer because Mrs. Bunnell had the reputation of being one of the best hostesses on the upper Mississippi.

It is interesting to note that the morality of claim jumping at Winona was based on what later became known as "squatters rights." Cases on claim jumping were decided by the Protective organization in favor of aggressors if the aggressor had no previous claim in another location. The first Polish people who came to Winona benefited by this policy because they were given rights to property that was previously claimed by others. The complications of these early titled to land can be demonstrated by following through on Claim No. 3 of Silas Stevens.

H. C. Gere jumped No. 3 from Stevens and the Wabasha Protection Club settled the resulting dispute by dividing No. 3 evenly between Stevens and Gere, giving them west and east portions respectively. In 1852 John C. Laird came to Winona and jumped Gere's portion of No. 3. The Wabasha Protection Club decided this dispute in favor of Laird because they thought that Gere was careless in his manner of holding his claim. The claim then became the subject of a feud between the Geres and the Lairds. In February 1853 the first jury trial in Winona County was the case of Gere suing Laird for trespassing. The court decided in favor of Gere, but Laird did not abide by the decision of the court. The Lairds held the east portion of Claim No. 3 at first by force and later by making cash payments to Gere each time he started new court proceedings. Eventually, the Laird family used the property for business purposes and building lots or home sites. The only other difficulty the Lairds might have had is in settling with the Polish and others who established squatters rights and received cash payment or other settlement from the Lairds.

MAY 12, 1852 The arrival of the Abner Goddard family at Winona on May 12, 1852, is regarded as the beginning of real community living for the City because the Goddards established the first community center, Goddard's Boarding House. This tradition was strengthened when Mrs. "Aunt Catherine" Goddard married Mr. A. B. Smith after the death of her husband, Abner Goddard. Mrs. Goddard-Smith was a sister to John C. Laird.

1854 Winona County, with its present boundaries, was established by act of the territorial legislature in 1854.

MARCH 6, 1857 The City of Winona was incorporated on March 6, 1857, but its founding date is established as 1851 with the landing of Captain Orrin Smith.

POPULATION From 1851 to 1855 Winona accumulated a population of 800 people. None of these were Polish. At that time the people that came to Winona were mostly from the eastern States and of Scotch and English descent. There are several other nationalities that came to Winona, but in 1855 the first Polish settlers came here, so from here on I will be concerned mainly with the people of Polish descent. There is a problem getting material on movements of this nationality. In 1855 people were Polish only because they said so and America is the kind of a free country that recognizes a man's word as such. Records of most of the original Polish settlers at Winona will show that they were citizens of Prussia or Germany. Many of them had served in the German army and carried honorable discharges from this service. Some could speak German better than Polish, but they insisted they were Polish. They carried their nationality from their ancestry instead of from their citizenship. For an American this is easy to understand, because the average United States born person today will respond by naming the nationality of his ancestors when he is asked about his own nationality.

FIRST POLISH ARRIVE In 1855, four years after Winona was founded and two years before the City was incorporated, the first two Polish settlers and their families came to Winona by way of New York and St. Louis after crossing the Atlantic Ocean. These first two Polish families were the Bronks and the Eichmans. They were an advance party for many more Polish people to come later. Mr. Bronk and Mr. Eichman were very well pleased with what they found at Winona, and they wrote letters to their Polish friends in Europe to tell them what a fine place Winona and the surrounding farm area was. Winona was growing fast at the time. In the year 1856 the population of Winona grew from 800 to 3,000. Bronk and Eichman took up residence in the east end of Winona. Their letters were well received in Europe, with the result that many more Polish people became interested in Winona.

1857 POLISH ARRIVALS In 1857 an estimated twenty-five more Polish settlers, many of them with their families, came to Winona following the route through New York and St. Louis as Bronk and Eichman had done. From then on there were many more Polish settlers that came to Winona, their numbers increasing to the hundreds and thousands. This migration continued for more than thirty years, but especially between the years 1860 and 1890. When the 1857 group came to Winona they also settled in the east end, building shelters on the open prairie. Their little east end group settlement was called "Warsaw" by themselves and by other Winona settlers. Mrs. Bronk, wife of one of the first two Polish settlers, died during the early days of Winona and was buried on the prairie outside the Polish settlement. When the City was plotted out shortly afterward a street was laid out directly over her grave. After that the Polish people used a burial plot in "Hamilton's Woods," which was a forest area east of Sugar Loaf Hill. Some tombstones and other grave markings are still evident at this place which is quite close to the present St. Mary's Catholic Cemetery and may be included in land recently acquired to expand this cemetery. In about the year 1907 William Hamilton gave to St. Mary's Cemetery a portion of land adjacent to it as a "Polish section" with the condition that the Polish people could obtain burial lots there free of charge. Mr. Hamilton was a candidate for reelection as Mayor of Winona that year and this has sometimes been considered as a part of his successful campaign

program. The Warsaw settlement was near the River in the vicinity of what is now Laird and Vine Streets. It was completely disbanded when the Laird, Norton Lumber Mill needed the land and paid these settlers cash for their "squatters rights". Claim jumping was under control by this time.

PINE CREEK At the time that the 1857 group of Polish people came to Winona most of them were interested in farming and many of them brought money with them for the purpose of buying farm land. They stayed right in Winona for three years and then went to farming in a nearby area, keeping close affiliations in the City of Winona and often having members of their families resident or working in the City while other members worked and resided on the farms. Building lots in the central downtown settlement of Winona in 1857 were selling at prices from one to six thousand dollars per lot. I doubt if any of the Polish settlers were able to afford anything of this kind and I do not know of any instance where a purchase of this kind was made by any of them. However, it is known that these Polish settlers of 1857 publicized the fact that they were seeking farms. A surveyor, named Hulbert, tried to interest these people in the farm land possibilities of the Rushford area. They looked it over and rejected it. In Trempealeau County, Wisconsin, across the River from Winona, there was privately owned land for sale, some of it being farmed by people of Scotch and English descent who settled there previously and owned the land. People of well-known Winona names like Iatsch and Lambertson were among these. The Scotch and English were willing to sell the Trempealeau land in the Pine Creek and Dodge area because they thought the soil was too heavy and they preferred the sandier type of soil nearer the town of Trempealeau. The 1857 Polish people liked the heavy type Pine Creek soil. They bought farms in the area around the farm village community of Pine Creek, Wisconsin, making this village one of the first Polish language communities in the United States. The Sacred Heart - St. Wenceslaus Catholic Church at Pine Creek is the third oldest Polish language church in Wisconsin and tenth oldest in the United States. The first Polish language church in the United States is at Panna Marya in Texas. Pine Creek was never intended to be much more than a village for school and church. For trade, banking, medical service, legal advise, entertainment and other things most of the Pine Creek people came to Winona. For retirement they came to Winona. The Pine Creek people never wholly left Winona. Listed following are the names of some of the men who came to Winona from Poland in 1857 and went to Pine Creek to farm in 1860, but retained their associations in Winona or later returned to the City as evidenced by their surnames known in the City of Winona today. Most of these men came from Poland with wives and families. This is the incomplete list:

August Bambenek
Peter Kaldunski
Paul Libera
Joseph Literski
Nicholas Losinski
Anton Pehler
John Pehler
Paul Pehler
Frank Pellowski
Jacob Rolbiecki
Paul Rudnik
John Walenski
Frank Wejer (Weir)
Joseph Wnuk

In 1860 there were also other Polish people who came to the Winona area at Pine Creek by way of Canada. These were people with names like Jerecek and Cierzan, whose names can also be recognized in Winona today.

BOHEMIANS The Bohemian people of Winona and the surrounding area have a good record and a story of their own to tell, but I wish to mention them now because of their close affiliation with the Polish. The Bohemian settling at Winona apparently is parallel to that of the Polish. There were Bohemians with the Polish at Pine Creek. In naming the Pine Creek Catholic Church, "Sacred Heart" is the Polish contribution to the name and "St. Wenceslaus" represents the Bohemian part. Some Bohemian names that are familiar in Pine Creek and Winona include: Brom, Kasimor, Kratch, Loshek, Selba and Tushner.

WESTERN MIGRATION As the Polish people continued coming to Winona after 1857 and into the 1880's they did not all remain here. Many of them went into western Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota and Montana. Probably about 5,000 stayed right here in the City of the immediate Winona area.

HOME BUILDING In arriving here the first problem of these Polish people was to provide homes for themselves because most of them came in family groups. In the areas of Poland from which these people came, the building of homes was usually a neighborhood cooperative venture with materials supplied by the owner. Many of these people brought enough money with them so that they were able to purchase a half or whole lot in what is now the Fourth Ward of Winona. A smaller number of Polish people bought property in the First Ward. Themselves and their neighbors or relatives built the dwellings. Their method of building was interesting. They usually started about the middle of the lot with a one room building and then in later years they added additional rooms at the front, keeping the largest possible back yard for garden and poultry raising. The final room, usually built a few years after the original, was the front parlor. It was traditional with these Polish families that they have a good front parlor. The parlor was "off limits" most of the time for their customary large families. It contained the best furnishings and was used only on Sundays and special occasions. When a member of the family died, funeral arrangements were always made for the body to lie in state in the front parlor. By the time a house got to the parlor stage, the original one room became a large comfortable kitchen, often with a convenient auxiliary summer kitchen added to the rear. The families were usually crowded for sleeping space in these houses, but they were satisfied as long as they had comfortable kitchens and respectable parlors. I do not know of the Polish people of Winona building any of the large mansions of the City in the early days.

EMPLOYMENT While the Polish people were building their homes they were also taking advantage of the opportunities that Winona offered for wage earning employment. The first saw mill in Winona opened on December 17, 1855, and two more were in operation by 1857. Railroad employment opened at Winona in the 1870's and became more extensive later when the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad established an equipment building and maintenance shop at Winona. Farm work was available, and it was an alternative for lumber mill work because the mills closed for two or three months every year with no provision for unemployment insurance. Most of the Polish people of the early days worked at the lumber mills during the part of each year that the mills were in operation. When the mills were not operating, the people did farm work, construction work or whatever else they could find to earn money. This annual periodic closing of the lumber mills is probably the factor that saved a good portion of the population of Winona when the lumber mills closed permanently in about 1910. Winona might have suffered a greater loss of population at that time if these mill employees were not accustomed to changing employment by years of practice. Of the Polish people at Winona, the largest number of them worked at the lumber mills. The second largest number of them did construction work. Many of the Polish men came here from Europe trained as skilled masons and carpenters, so they continued in that work at Winona. The third largest number of Polish people were employed by manufacturers of woodwork, carriages and wagons. There was a large number of Polish people, some men and especially women and girls, who were employed in domestic work. The Polish people were proud of their reputation for being clean and were happy to know that their housekeeping ability was appreciated. The divisions of employment as given

above are as they were for the Polish people of Winona in the early days. Later on, the railroad employment took many of these people and became, perhaps, the third largest group. The woodwork, carriage and wagon factories went out of existence, but other factory employment opened up. Today, with the lumber mills also gone, it appears as though from among the people of Winona who call themselves Polish, the largest number is employed in factories.

PRIESTS AND PROFESSIONALS Among the Polish people that came to Winona were Catholic priests and persons who could legitimately claim titles of Polish nobility or descent from titled families, but there were few professional people. The Polish people usually went to their priests first for advice in religious and non-religious matters. There is an instance of one of the early Polish settlers of Winona who considered his place of residence to be Winona, but he had purchased and owned a piece of land in Trempealeau County, Wisconsin, and his main employment was on one of the River boats traveling between Dubuque and St. Paul. Because he had title to land in Wisconsin, the State of Wisconsin had made him eligible for draft to military service in the Civil War to help fill its State quota. There was no Polish priest in Winona at that time, but there was Reverend Alois Plut, a German speaking Catholic priest. The man went to Father Plut because they could both speak fluent German. He explained to the priest his problem with the Wisconsin draft authorities. The priest told the man that this was war in which the United States has been attacked by an enemy, and because this man had come to make the United States his country, it was his duty now to enter military service and defend this country. The man responded that he did not see it that way because no enemy has attacked this country. He saw the United States just fighting by itself and, as a newcomer, he could not understand it. He did not want to go into a war of that kind and he did not want to take the priest's advice, so the man solved his problem by moving to Canada.

Among the early Polish settlers there were some who could be classified as professional or semi-professional. They had certain capabilities especially as teachers, instructors and musicians, but with few exceptions, they could not earn their living at this kind of work in Winona. The Polish people could and did use their services to some extent, but they could not afford to pay enough to make it very profitable. There was the problem of knowing the English language. Therefore, people who had professional or semi-professional capabilities or even if they were nobility of royal descent, they worked in the saw mills, the factories, or whatever else they could find for employment. It should be explained that the Polish nobility and professional people had been having a rough time in Europe ever since the 1770's when Poland had been taken from the map of Europe by Russia, Germany and Austria. The generations of Polish people that came to Winona were born in an European atmosphere that was much more difficult than anything they found here.

CHURCH AND SCHOOL After their homes and their wage-earning, the next problem that the Polish people had was in regard to church and school. Polish people are Roman Catholic; exceptions are very rare. For church, the Catholic people of Winona were attended to entirely by traveling priests until 1856 when the first Catholic Parish, St. Thomas, was organized. The first St. Thomas Church services were held in the home of Thomas Urell, an Irish Catholic. The first Catholic church of St. Thomas was built in 1857 at a location near the present Winona General Hospital, and later was moved to the corner of Center and Wabasha Streets. This Church accommodated the Catholics of all languages at Winona, including those who spoke English, German, Polish and Bohemian; and all were increasing in numbers. In 1862 the St. Joseph's Church was built as a German language Parish to accommodate not only the Germans, but also the Polish and Bohemians, many of whom could speak fluent German. Some of the Polish people were willing to remain with St. Joseph's Parish, but the majority wanted to have a Polish language church of their own. On April 2, 1871, a meeting to start a Polish church was held and attended by a large number of Polish people.

They unanimously agreed to organize the Polish Parish of St. Stanislaus Kostka and build a church. Six men were appointed as a committee to head the project. The six were:

August Bambenek
Martin Bambenek
August Cierzan
John Czapiewski
Francis Drazkowski
and Nicholas Tryba

Incidentally, the August Bambenek named in this St. Stanislaus organization is the same man named previously in the Pine Creek, Wisconsin, organization. By the summer of 1872 the first St. Stanislaus Church building, which was at the site of the present church, was ready to be dedicated. Their only difficulty then was to get a priest who could speak Polish. Reverend Alois Plut, the pastor of St. Joseph's German Church, came over and helped the people at St. Stanislaus for the first year. In 1873 Reverend Joseph Juskiewicz came to Winona as the first resident Polish speaking priest and pastor of St. Stanislaus Church.

On September 5, 1887, St. Stanislaus Parish opened its parochial school with 230 students. Before this some of the children of the Polish people attended school at St. Joseph's, where the parish school was started in 1858. Others attended the St. Thomas School which opened about the same time as St. Joseph's. Some attended the Winona Public Schools.

This Polish activity for church and school was centered in the east end of Winona. The west end Polish people, numbering about one-fifth as many as were in the east end, went along with the east end group. The west end Polish people attended church and school at St. Stanislaus until 1905 when they completed and opened St. Casimir's Polish church and school at West Broadway and Ewing Streets.

With two Polish churches and schools and the large number of people of Polish descent here, Winona is considered as one of the most Polish cities in the United States.

Outstanding, especially for years of service, among the priests of the Polish Catholic churches of Winona are the Rt. Rev. Msgr. James W. J. Pacholski, who was pastor of St. Stanislaus from 1894 until 1932; and the Rt. Rev. Msgr. John E. Grabowski, who was pastor of St. Casimir's from 1910 until 1953.

POLISH NEWSPAPER In 1886 a Polish language newspaper opened publication at Winona. This paper was known as the "Wiarus" and also as the "Katolik." It had subscribers all over the United States and in some foreign countries. This paper was published weekly at Winona for more than thirty years and semi-weekly afterward. Publication ceased in about 1921. The office and press of this paper were in a building at the south-west corner of Liberty and East Third Streets. The location is now a park fronting the J. R. Watkins office. In the last years of publication the office and press were in the building at the south-west corner of Carimona and East Fourth Streets. Heronim Derdowski was the founder and editor of this paper. While he lived, the paper was a tremendous success. He himself as a literary man and poet was a great success. Some years after his death his literary work in the Polish language was recognized in Poland to such an extent that a monument to memorialize him was erected in the City of Gdynia, Poland. To my knowledge he is the only Winona resident who has received the distinction of having a statue of himself put up to commemorate his work in literature. His remains are buried at St. Mary's Cemetery in Winona. I have been told that his daughter, Helen Derdowski, now married and living in St. Paul, Minnesota, has assisted with gathering material for publication of a biography of her father. I have heard that he was a large man in physical stature and in moral principle. He was a huge man, weighing probably 400 pounds.

From what I have heard of his writing it is said that he always made it evident that he had a firm belief in God and a strong loyalty for the United States. His newspaper was read in perhaps every Polish community of the United States, so that he might be responsible for helping many Polish people to good United States citizenship. If his biography is not published, I hope that his biographical material can be obtained and kept in the files of the Winona County Historical Association.

POLISH LANGUAGE In regard to the Polish language it has been used less and less at Winona since the end of World War I. When Poland was restored as an independent nation after the First World War, the Polish people of Winona apparently saw the fulfillment of a cause that dispensed them from continuing the use of the Polish language. Looking at the results of the Second World War they might be blamed for relaxing too soon. However, the fact is that in Winona the use of the Polish language has been diminishing until today most of the younger people know very little Polish.

POLISH NAMES Most of the Polish people that came to Winona had previously lived in that part of Poland that became known as the "Polish Corridor." This was a part of Germany at the time that these people were coming to America. Previous to their coming to America these people were subjected to a determined German program of Germanization. Names of their cities and villages had been changed from Polish to German. People were given German surnames or the spelling of their Polish names were changed to German spelling with approximately the same pronunciation. On coming to the United States, some of the Polish people kept their German names for legal purposes, others changed their names or the spelling back to the original Polish, and others gave themselves entirely new Polish names that they manufactured.

PUBLIC DUTIES Most of the Polish people at Winona have been faithful to their public duties and have been good United States citizens. They have held many public offices in the City Government and in the County. They have performed their duty in times of war. It is interesting to note that Leon J. Wetzel, for whom the Winona American Legion Post is named, was Polish and a member of St. Casimir's Polish Church when he was the first Winona man to give his life in World War I. Eugene Gabrych, for whose memory the Winona Baseball Park is named, was Polish and a member of St. Stanislaus Polish Church when he was killed in the Second World War.

CREDIT TO WINONA There are clubs, societies and fraternal organizations of Polish origin in Winona. There are also some basic Polish traditions that have been practiced in Winona for a long time and continue in the home and religious activities even after the language is given up. Much of these things that are Polish in Winona will disappear as years go by, but some will endure as long as Winona. When Bronk and Eichman came here in 1855 and wrote letters to encourage more of their Polish friends to come to Winona, they set in motion a transplanting of Polish blood that can never be moved out like Chief Wapasha and his Indian tribe. We all know that inter-marrriage between all the nationalities in Winona is increasing every year. Ethnologists tell us about the new race of Americans that is being developed by such inter-marriage. However, when it is all over with and this new race is developed, Winona is going to have a larger share of the Polish influence than the average for the whole Country. When that day comes I hope that Winona will be an outstanding city of accomplishments and progress, and that the Polish influence will be a credit to that development.

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