

St. Stanislaus Kostka Church, Winona MN

Polish Cultural Icon

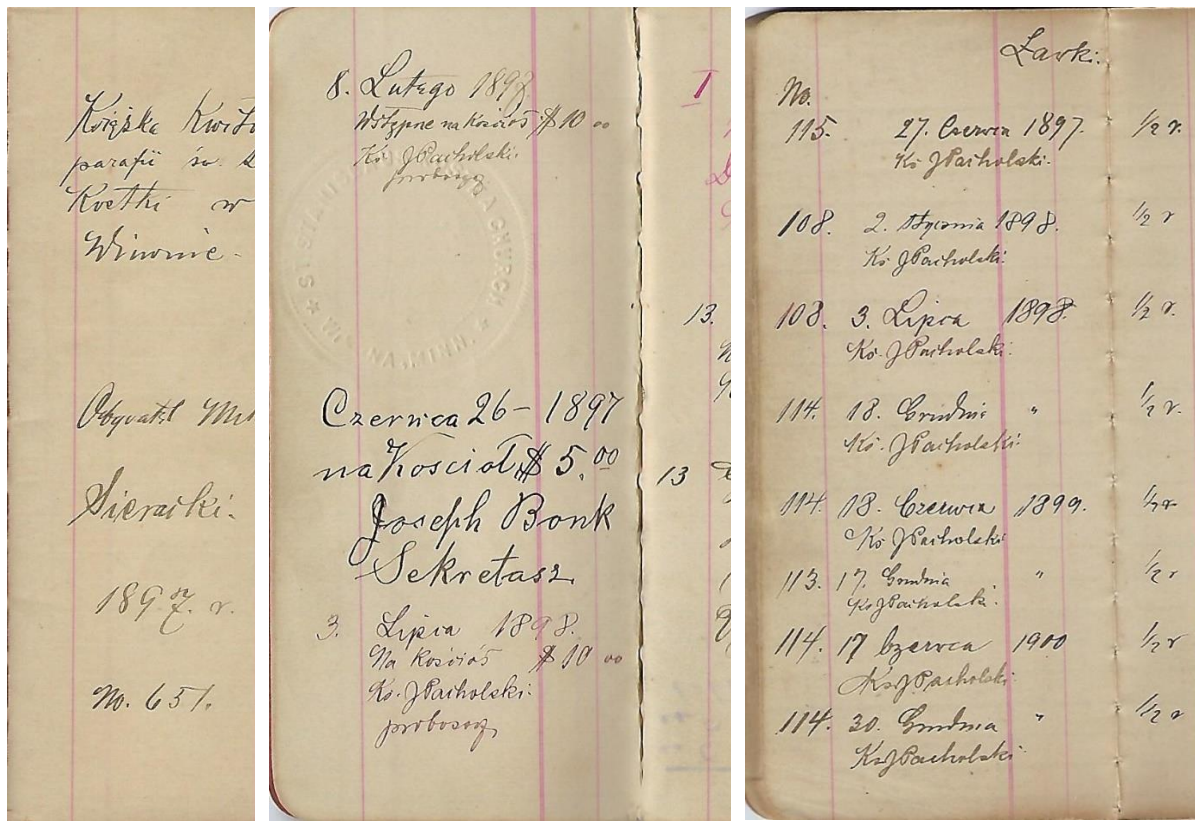


Photos from the webpage of St. Stanislaus Parish, Winona

St. Stanislaus Church in the East End of Winona towers above the sea of tiny houses on half lots and the myriad small shops on the street corners and proudly claims its role as the central pillar of life for its Polish Catholic parishioners. Anyone interested in understanding the Polish cultural heritage in the East End of Winona would do well to begin with St. Stans. My classmates and I grew up in the shadow of St. Stans in the 1950s, and now as my old friends and I take measure of our Polish Catholic heritage and its influence, we are somewhat amazed at the extent and the depth of the role that the parish played in our lives.

Most of our great-grandparents were part of the wave of Kashubian-Polish immigrants who came to Winona in the latter half of the 19th Century to escape the poverty and oppression of the Prussian authorities to practice their religion freely and to pursue their economic well-being in Winona. The first Polish immigrants built their houses on the streets closest to the Mississippi River near the biggest employer Empire Lumber Co. at the foot of Carimona St. And it was on Carimona St. four blocks up from the river that they built their church. They scrimped and saved from their blue-collar jobs to finance the construction in 1895 of a Romanesque-style church building with a towering dome, capable of seating 1800 parishioners in the nave and the two balconies, featuring a canopied main altar and two side altars, replete with stained glass windows and statues. It stands now as a monument to their faith in God and their commitment to the church as the center of their community.

The following are pages from the St. Stan's Parish account book 651 of my grandfather, Nicholas Sieracki, which attest to the financial commitment of the parishioners.



The page in the center shows Fr. Pacholski's certification that Nick's contributed \$10.00 for the church in July and December of 1898. The page on the right shows an additional contribution of \$6.00 in 1898 for rental of pew no. 108. This contribution probably was the equivalent of two week's pay for a twenty-five-year-old laborer with the first of nine children already having arrived in his home. The relatively high amount of donations and the meticulous record keeping maintained by the parishioners resulted a monument to their faith which to this day continues to impress their descendants.

The question I asked my friends seemed simple enough. What was the major influence on us during our youth in Winona? We quickly concluded that it was our parish church. But this answer turned out to be anything but simple.

To begin with, we searched our memories for the details of our experience – the tangible things. The most obvious things that came to mind were the liturgical functions. We went to Mass every Sunday and Holy Day of Obligation. And we went to Mass every day before school started. Sitting with your class at Mass at 8:00 am, and then walking to the school next door for classes. Holy Communion every First Friday to lock in that plenary indulgence. Confession a day or two before that. Stations of the Cross attended by all classes Deciding what to “give up” for lent and trying to stick with it. on Fridays in Lent. Holy Week was the crescendo. Services at the church on Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday and the glorious celebration of the Resurrection on Easter Sunday. Forty Hours adoration of the Holy Eucharist, devotions to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Every week of the school year, the

nuns seemed to be preparing us for some religious experience. Advent seemed to take an eternity as we counted down to Christmas. Santa Claus, Christmas presents and Christmas vacation surely distracted us from our holy preparation for the coming of the Christ Child. Preparation to receive First Communion at the age of 7 and Confirmation at the age of 13 took months, and we all dressed in white when we received the Blessed Sacrament for the first time. The intensity and the frequency of the religious experiences abated when we attended Cotter High School, named after Bishop Cotter. No more Masses before classes, and the discussion of religion was pretty much limited to Religion classes taught mostly by priests from St. Stan's.

The liturgical year and the observance of the sacred mysteries unfolded with an unending stream of pageantry and ritual.

Most of our teachers in grade school and high school were Catholic nuns who had taken vows of obedience and poverty. Nearly all of the Notre Dame nuns at St. Stan's came from Polish families. My father could speak Polish, but I never heard a word of Polish at home. The first words of Polish that I heard were from the nuns. I remember "Dzisiaj w Betlejem" (Today in Bethlehem) from when we were taught Polish Christmas carols. And I remember being called "gapa" (feather-brain) when I was caught doing something stupid. The most important thing for nuns was preparation for going to heaven, and the importance of this was not lost in their lesson plans. Our teachers were our religious role models. And they were a powerful force because the sanctity of their lives commanded our respect. They worked hard not only to educate us but to guide us and support us as well. The parish priests also served as influential role models. We heard their sermons every Sunday. And they were consecrated to say the Mass and invite us to Holy Communion as well as assure that our sins were forgiven in the Sacrament of Penance. We were all convinced that the religious life was the highest calling, and I for one had the idea that God might be calling me to the priesthood.

Our social life was also closely linked with the Parish Church and the liturgical calendar. Our families celebrated our First Communion and Confirmation with friends and relatives, and this was true also for Christmas and Easter.

There were numerous "guilds" for adults to offer their service to charity. My father loved to attend the annual bazaar fund raiser that was filled with games and prizes, especially featuring the "big wheel" with its big-time prizes of quilts and turkeys. Weekly bingo games in the church basement always drew a crowd. Troup 10 of the boy scouts was sponsored by St. Stan's. And the Catholic Youth Organization of St. Stan's offered some of the most popular activities for us as high school students. The parish encouraged families to join other families around the block to pray the rosary together once a week as part of the Family Rosary Crusade.

Second only to the influence of our parents, St. Stan's Parish was responsible for our moral development. We were taught what was right or wrong at home, at school, and in church. And now, looking back, we can see how powerful this influence was. Our religious beliefs were at the core of our morality. Far from being relative or situational, our morals were based on careful of sin, whether venial sins or mortal sins. Impure thoughts, disrespect of our parents – venial sins. Missing Mass on Sunday, eating meat on Friday – mortal sins. And all this needed to be confessed to the priest at least once a month to be prepared for Holy Communion on First Friday.

Everyone reinforced this moral code: family, friends, neighbors, teachers, pastor and assistant pastors. Everyone believed fervently and acted accordingly. Catholic doctrine was taught in the sermons every Sunday and the numerous rituals throughout the year reinforced our beliefs. St. Stan's was there with the liturgy at each major moment in our lives. At birth it was Baptism. At marriage it was the promise, "Until death do us part." There is no divorce from a lawful union. And at death there was the sacrament of Extreme Unction to calm our fears of the afterlife.

The message of faith from the parish permeated our lives at all levels: liturgical, moral, educational, social, and recreational. And the towering, magnificent structure of St. Stanislaus Church reassured us that this is how it should be.