

Irish immigrants were the first settlers in Belle Creek Township and formed the community that became the parish of St. Columbkille.

Minnesota was organized as a territory in 1849. The diocese of St. Paul was established two years later. Father Cretin, a French missionary, was the first bishop. Previous to that, the area was part of the Dubuque diocese.

In 1854, four French and three German seminarians came to Minnesota to finish their theological studies under Bishop Cretin's instruction. One of the seminarians was Felix Tissot, who played an important part in the life of the St. Columbkille parish.

FROM IRELAND TO AMERICA TO BELLE CREEK

Because of the harsh living conditions and a "blight" that caused damage to the crops that were grown in Ireland in the mid 1840s, many Irish migrated to America. Often one or two, or a couple would leave their home country, then at a later time would be joined by other family members and relatives. It has been noted that it was not an easy journey, lasting from four to eight weeks. Starving, crowded conditions, and shipwrecks were prevalent. Some of the more popular ports where the ships entered were at Canada, and the New England States, many immigrants taking temporary residence in Boston, New York and Philadelphia. Some started working for the railroad that was being built across the eastern United States to the Midwest.

TO PROMOTE SETTLEMENT

To promote settlement and to encourage the Irish immigrants to improve their way of life, Bishop Cretin placed notices in newspapers in the eastern states, inviting

Catholic immigrants to the Minnesota territory, where land was available. In the spring of 1854, the settlement of Belle Creek began.

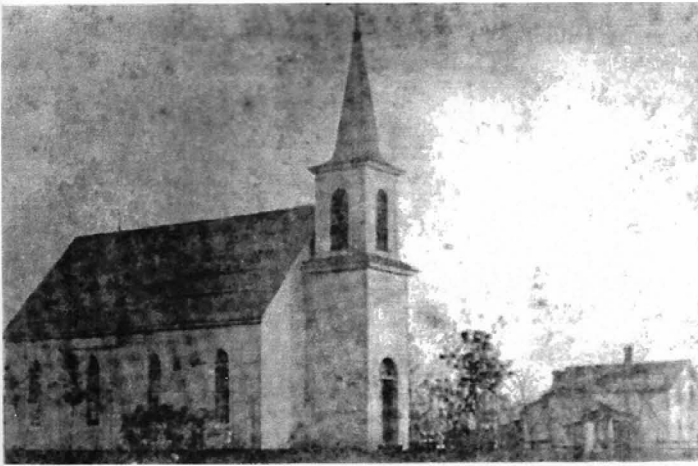
GROWTH OF THE SETTLEMENT

The first to come were the Walter Doyle and the James O'Neill families. Friendship between these two families developed while working together near LaSalle, Illinois. When a census was taken in 1857 to determine the population before Minnesota became a state, the families of James Kirkpatrick, John Edwards, Patrick Wynn, Tim Cavanaugh, John Devitt, Owen Ward, Michael McDonald, John Iggoe, James Kelly, Patrick Heaney, John Lyons, Michael McHugh, John McNamara, and James Malloy were listed in addition to the Doyles and the O'Neills.

In the 1865 census, the family names of John Lally, Michael Gorman, John Gorman, Patrick O'Connell, Francis Gallagher, James O'Reilly, Martin Casey, John Rowles, Robert Heaney, Peter Moran, Walter Benton, David Franklin, Patrick Clifford, P.J. Sheridan, Michael O'Brien, and John Barry had been added. A few of these families settled in the Goodhue and Featherstone townships, but were a part of the Belle Creek Irish community.

There were no roads at that time, but there were Indian trails to follow. There were horse and oxen teams available to do the heavy work of breaking the land.

The stagecoach routes, which crossed the county, provided some contact with the outside world. One route carried passengers and mail from St. Paul to Dubuque, Iowa, and another provided the same service between Red Wing and Faribault. The Doyle homestead was one of the more popular stop-off places along these lines.



The first church of St. Columbkille parish, built in 1860 on site of present cemetery.

FATHER TISSOT AND THE FIRST CHURCH

Newly ordained by Bishop Cretin, Father Tissot's first assignment in 1858 was to serve as pastor for all of Wabasha and Goodhue counties with Wabasha as his home parish. He made regular rounds in an area which included Red Wing, Cherry Grove, Pine Island, Belvidere and Belle Creek.

The Irish settlement was established six years before the first church was built and the cemetery was plotted. During this time, those who died were buried where they lived.

Under Father Tissot's direction, a frame church costing around \$3,000 was erected in 1860 in the center of section 14 of Belle Creek Township, across the road from the present church.

The church was named in honor of St. Columbkille, an Irish nobleman who lived at the same time as St. Patrick and brought Christianity to the people of Scotland, after many years of spreading the faith in Ireland. Father Tissot served the parish until 1865, his years of service to the pioneers of Belle Creek leaving a spiritual heritage which should not be forgotten.

THE NEXT DECADES

Belle Creek became a mission of Red Wing in 1865 when Father Knauf was assigned to the newly-organized Red Wing parish. An assistant pastor was also assigned at the same time to help the priest devote more time to the mission churches.

Although the first church was built in 1860 and a house adjoining it at some later date, there is no record of the parish owning land until 1866. In August of that year David Franklin, James Malloy, Patrick Nulty, and James Kelly, each holding title to a 160 acre parcel of land in section 14 of Belle Creek Township, transferred five acres each, thereby creating the 20 acre plot which now comprises the church property.

FIRST RESIDENT PASTOR

In 1878 Bishop Grace appointed Father W.T. Roy (1878-1880) to be the first resident pastor. Also at this time, St. Columbkille became the "mother church" with mission churches at Cannon Falls and Cherry Grove. A rectory was added to the property, next to the wooden church. In the early 1870s the Joseph Gadiant family from Switzerland were the first non-Irish to become members of the parish. Father Roy was followed by Father J. O'Reilly (1880), Father McDevitt (1880-1885) and Father J. Ansbro (1885-1886). Father O'Reilly later became bishop of Fargo. Father Ansbro, an Irish immigrant, passed away toward the end of his first year as pastor at the age of 48. He is buried in the St. Columbkille cemetery.

RYAN ON THE MAP

The Phillip Ryan family, Irish immigrants, started a small general store in the early 1880s, located north of where the present church stands. They later petitioned to establish a post office at this store. In

1882, it became a reality, with the name RYAN as the name of the post office. Mail was delivered by stagecoach once a week until 1886. At that time service was increased to three days a week. The post office was discontinued in 1903 when rural routes were established. The general store and a barn were destroyed by fire in 1910. New stables were then built to house the parishioners' teams of horses, after being unhitched from a sleigh or wagon.

BUILDING OF A NEW CHURCH

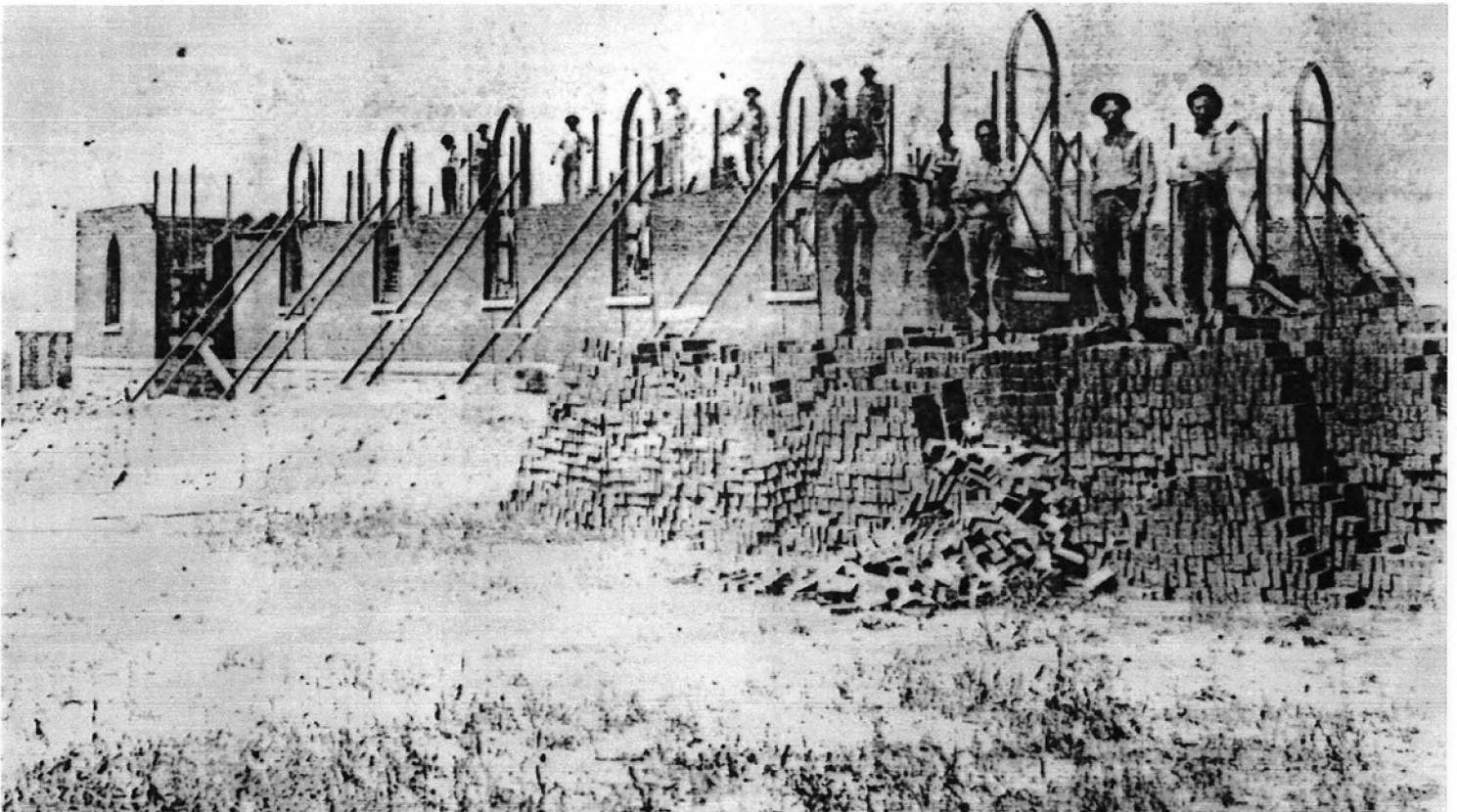
In 1892, under the direction of Father R.J. Fitzgerald (1886-1889), a new red brick church with a high steeple was constructed. It was dedicated on December 13 of that year. Archbishop Ireland of the St. Paul Diocese and several visiting priests came by train to Claybank and were escorted to Belle Creek by horse and carriage. Over 500 people were on hand for this celebration. Following Mass at the new church, all went to the old church across the road where a

dinner was served. The parish at this time included about 80 families. The total cost of building the church was about \$11,000. The old original church was then used as a parish hall.

Names of families listed in this period of time, other than those previously mentioned in this booklet were: Maher, Iggoe, Hutcheson, O'Rourke, Farrell, O'Connor, Rosener, Cadwell, Edwards, Chalmers, McManus, Redding, Clifford, Ahern, Moran, McLeavey, Smith, Bell, McGillis, Huller, Welch, Casey and Cavanaugh.

REDRAWING OF PARISH LINES

With a decree from the Archdiocese in 1903, Father J.H. Prendergast (1899-1912) separated the Goodhue area from Belle Creek. Goodhue became a mission of Belle Creek, acquired its own chapel, and became the parish of Holy Trinity. Cannon Falls also became an independent parish and Cherry Grove was assigned as a mission to Pine Island.



Building St. Columbkille church in 1892.



The church in 1908 and the newly built hall.

BUILDING A NEW HALL

When the old church building serving as a parish hall was declared unsafe in 1907, a new hall with gas lighting and a stage was erected in 1908, north of the new church. Some of the more popular uses of the hall

were for church dinners, basketball games, Total Abstinence Society and Catholic Order of Forester meetings, sewing club meetings, and the annual 4th of July celebration.

BUILDING A NEW RECTORY

During the pastorate of Father Hugh McAvay (1914-1922), a new rectory was built south of the church. One parishioner donated \$20,000 to build the new rectory. In about 1919, the former rectory that was across the road was moved, and is the present home of Bruce and Marie McNamara and family.

GOLDEN ANNIVERSARY OF THE NEW CHURCH

On December 13, 1942, the parish observed the 50th anniversary of the modern brick church. Father Francis Smith (1938-1954) met Archbishop Murray



The rectory and church in 1940.

and escorted him to the sanctuary for a pontifical High Mass. Other priests who participated in the celebration were from St. Paul, White Bear Lake, Hastings, Red Wing and Mazeppa.

ST. COLUMBKILL CELEBRATES CENTENNIAL

Father Agdus Karels (1954-1964), along with Father Michael O'Connor and Father Peter Gadiant (who were both baptized and confirmed at St. Columbkille) celebrated the Jubilee Mass on October 9, 1960. Archbishop Brady gave an inspiring sermon. Ladies of the Altar and Rosary Society were in charge of the centennial reception, held at Holy Trinity Parish Hall.

CHANGES IN THE LITURGY

During Father Karel's tenure, Pope Pius XII encouraged the use of the dialogue Mass, with the congregation reciting the Latin Mass responses with the altar boys. After the second Vatican Council (1963-1965), the use of English in the liturgy and greater participation by the parishioners became a reality. Father Richard Larkin (1964-1970) incorporated that into our liturgy. It was in the 1960s that a table altar was placed in the center of the sanctuary so that the priest could face the congregation while offering Mass.

125TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

From the July 10, 1985 edition of the Goodhue County Tribune: "The sky was clear blue - the temperatures over 90, and the spirits of the more than 550 who attended the 125th Anniversary mass at St. Columbkille Sunday afternoon were sunny and carefree. Following the 1 o'clock Mass,

visiting and enjoying good food was the order of the day, while youngsters played games."

Bishop Ham was the Mass Celebrant, with assistance from our pastor, Father Bruce Peterson (1970-__), Father Michael O'Connor of Renville, Father Peter Gadiant of Nebraska, Father Roger Hessian of Red Wing, and Father Agdus Karels of Ortonville. Other honored guests were Father James Gorman of the Twin Cities, Sister Vivian Gorman of Illinois (both natives of the Belle Creek area) and Pastor Ron Allen of St. Luke Lutheran Church in Goodhue.

THE "NOT-SO-GLORY" OF TIMES

When the "New Church" was 32 years old in 1924, several of the stained glass windows were destroyed during a cyclone. Most of them were replaced by relatives of the individuals in whose memory the windows had originally been given.

On Sunday morning, October 16, 1938, while Mass was in progress, it was discovered that the parish hall was burning. The cause of the fire was never determined. Although everyone regretted the loss of the hall, there was no serious attempt to replace it.

Eleven years later, almost the same date as the hall fire, many individuals who lived at that time recall "the big wind" of 1949. The day started out with rain, then clear skies and high winds over 100 miles per hour. Much damage was done because of this storm. Shortly after the noon hour, the giant steeple of St. Columbkille Church came tumbling down, landing "cross first" into the earth, a few feet northeast of the steps of the church. The 15 to 18 feet high steeple was left only a few feet above ground. It is believed that the cross still remains well below ground level. A copper dome, surmounted by a cross, was erected to replace the steeple.

RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION

The first formal religious education started in 1878, when Father Roy, the first resident pastor was assigned. Archbishop Murray, in 1935, organized the "Confraternity of Christian Doctrine." (CCD) It contained, among other things, vacation school time, as well as weekly instructions. Now known as Faith Formation, our students are introduced to the teaching of their Catholic faith by receiving weekly instruction throughout the school year.

ORGANIZATIONS

A St. Columbkil sewing circle was formed in the late 1900s. Many quilts as well as garments for children were made. A yearly sale was held, usually in late fall or early winter. The women also contributed fancy work that was done in the homes. This organization disbanded in the 1930s.

In 1949 women of the parish organized the Altar and Rosary Society, and defined its main function as the care of the sanctuary, including raising funds for altar supplies and other parish needs.

Association with the deanery, archdiocesan, and National Council of Catholic Women has broadened their scope, and they are now referred to as the "Council of Catholic Women" (CCW). Their mission statement is "to support, empower, and educate all Catholic women in spirituality, leadership and service."

The Catholic Order of Foresters, a fraternal organization with an insurance program for its members, was established at St. Columbkil. Twenty-two members were initiated on May 2, 1898. St. Patrick's Court #848 was the name and number designated for our congregation. There are presently 49 members who meet three times annually.

PARISH MUSIC

Music has always played an important part in the heritage of the Belle Creek community. Throughout the 150 years there have been many organists and musicians who were instrumental in enhancing our liturgy. A "pump type" organ was originally used, and replaced by a Wurlitzer electric organ in 1956. Twenty years later a larger Gulbransen organ was purchased and placed in the front of the church. A piano was added in the early 1990s. There is a senior choir which sings for special occasions, and a junior choir which sings about once a month during Sunday Mass.

RELIGIOUS VOCATIONS

In the 150 years of the St. Columbkil Parish, there have been 23 members who have joined a religious vocation. All have been descendants of previous parish members. Nineteen of the 23 are deceased.

Father Peter Gadiant, ordained in 1945, is living at a retirement home for priests in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Sister Vivian Gorman, who entered the convent in 1945, is retired and a resident at the Dominican Mother House in Sinsinawa, Wisconsin.

Father James Gorman, ordained in 1981, is Associate Pastor at Risen Savior in Burnsville, Minnesota.

Kim Mandelkow (Sister Kimberly Ann) entered the Immaculate Conception Monastery in Ferdinand, Indiana in 2005. She is Pastoral Associate and Director of Music Ministry at St. Joseph's Parish in Princeton, Indiana and Blessed Sacrament Parish in Oakland City, Indiana.

CONSTRUCTION OF PARISH CENTER

In the early 1990s, because the rectory had been vacated for a number of years and in need of much repair, the house was sold and moved to a farm on County Road 9 - 2 miles from the church.

In 1994, under the leadership of Father Peterson, a new parish center, with dining, kitchenette, meeting area and a rest room was erected and attached to the church. The blacktop parking area was added later.