

Hall and Auditorium

Father Gregory Kehres came to Saint Boniface as the pastor in 1945. He immediately became aware of the parish's needs and established a building fund, part of which was to be used for a new hall.

The old parish hall had been in disrepair for a couple years before it was finally torn down in early 1961. The church basement was being used for meetings, socials, dinners and school events, in addition to being used for the school's lunch program.

By 1960, the parish was debt free. The loan for the church had been paid in full. The Bishop had previously expressed his desire for the parish to start making plans for a new hall, and this seemed to be the right time to do that.

Records show that on May 18th, 1961, Pastor Fr. John Walbe, and Bishop Albert F. Fletcher, Bishop of Little Rock, signed a contract with the architect chosen to design the new "two story auditorium and social hall", as described in the legal documents. Kenneth F. Cockram, from Fort Smith, was the architect chosen. He was to receive a fee equal to 6% of the construction cost in installments during construction, and paid in full upon completion of the project.

After months of discussions, letter writing, meetings, and design changes, a plan was created and approved by the Bishop. When Fr. Maurus Gerke was assigned as pastor later that year, he made a request to make changes in the auditorium plans. In his letter to the Bishop dated November 28th, 1961, he proposed the removal of the food serving facilities and some of the storage areas. The original plan was designed to seat 473 people and he felt that was not enough. Since the school had 500 students, he decided more seating was required. The changes were approved and the seating was increased to 601.

In another letter dated April 9th, 1962, from Fr. Maurus to the Bishop, a formal request was made to proceed with plans for the new hall and auditorium. Fr. Maurus explained that the basement was not adequate to house all the functions a parish required and was not an appropriate place for other events as the Blessed Sacrament was located just above the room. Fr. Maurus went on to say that he was confident that the parish could retire the debt without serious difficulty, over a twenty year period.

Approval was immediately given and on that same day, Bishop Fletcher and Fr. Maurus signed a building contract with Manhattan Construction Company. Bids for this project had previously been submitted from six companies and Manhattan Construction Company came in with the lowest bid.

In order to accommodate the Bishop's schedule, the groundbreaking ceremony was set for 4 o'clock in the afternoon on Friday, May 18th, 1962. Fr. Maurus planned to have some of the students and parents there for the event. According to legal documents from the architect dated May 31st of that year, work was to commence on June 4th and conclude 240 calendar days later.

According to church records, an adjustment had to be made to the original contract. An additional fee of \$2,753 was added due to the necessity of lowering the designed footing depths for the Hall. Planned footings had been based on a 1955 test hole dug on the northeast corner of the new school wing. From that information, footings for the Hall were designed to be approximately 7 to 8 feet below the ground. When excavations began, a fault was discovered in the shale strata. According to the contractor, this was very unusual and could not have been predicted. In order to keep from jeopardizing the stability of the structure, it was necessary to dig another 6 ½ feet in order to install the footings for the foundation.

While this construction was ongoing, additional parish work was approved by the Bishop. One of the projects was the

installation of a new parking lot. This included grading, asphaltic paving, concrete approaches and curb work. The construction of a storage building and incinerator building was the other project. Architect Kenneth Cockram drew the plans and on September 16th, 1962, a contract was signed with Manhattan Construction Company to do the work. In addition to the 6% architect fee, the construction costs for these projects totaled \$16,312.

In a letter dated February 4th, 1963, total expenditures for architect fees were listed as \$9,211.25. This amount included a 1% deduction of the total fees, which was donated back to the church. In another letter dated May 20th, it states that Manhattan Construction Company was paid a total of \$186,978.00 upon completion of all the projects.

Specific names were never given to this building. It has always been referred to separately as the "Hall" and the "Auditorium".

A handicap ramp was added to the northwest entrance of the Hall. A canopy was installed over that entrance in the summer of 2012.

Over the years, parishioners have been very generous about donating items for use in the Hall and in helping get new items for the kitchen. In the summer of 2012, volunteers have spent time painting, and helping to install cosmetic improvements.

Events such as parish meetings, funeral meals, church dinners, dances, and wedding receptions, are just a few functions that are hosted regularly in the Hall. The school also uses it frequently for everything from fundraisers to P.E. during inclement weather. A few additional school events are the silent auction and spaghetti dinner during the Lawn Social, Mardi Gras, science and book fairs, Breakfast with Santa, and the annual rummage sale.

The school also uses the Auditorium for many functions. A few are the Christmas plays, P.T.O. meetings, movie days during Catholic Schools Week, and the Easter programs. The latest addition has been to use the Auditorium as a classroom. Starting in August 2012, it became the new music room. An office for the music teacher has been set up in a room adjacent to the stage. By utilizing this room, space has been made for additional students in the school.

This building has been a jewel for the parish for almost fifty years. Almost everyone that has gone to school at Saint Boniface, or has been a parish member, has fond memories of events held there. This year alone, it has hosted several of the 125th anniversary parish events, creating even more happy memories for the parishioners.



This is a view of the northeast side of the Hall & Auditorium built in 1963. The school is visible on the south side of the building.