

Saint Boniface School

As was customary in German Catholic parishes, a parochial school was always established and built along with the church. This was the case at Saint Boniface. The great sacrifice the German Catholic pioneers made to accomplish this feat was miraculous. It also showed an ardent love for their holy faith, and loyalty to their religion.

The first school, a small wooden structure built in 1887, consisted of four rooms. Two rooms were used for classrooms and the other two for the teacher's living quarters. Originally, the Benedictine Sisters from Shoal Creek staffed the school. In 1891, the Olivetan Benedictine Sisters from Jonesboro came and stayed for twelve years. In 1903, the sisters from Shoal Creek returned.

As the parish grew, so did the school. Eventually, all four rooms were used as classrooms and an addition to the school was built to house the sisters.

Shortly after remodeling the first church, the parish lost the school to a fire in 1910. To replace the original frame building, a fire resistant, brick structure was built. It was a three story, eight room school, constructed at a cost of \$17,000. The building covered an area of 49x86 feet with floor space of 12,642 square feet. At that time, the school was outfitted with modern accommodations and was one of the largest parochial schools in the Diocese of Little Rock. The school was built in the summer of 1911, and dedicated by the Bishop's Chancellor, Monsignor Aretz, in October of that year. This building is still in use today, and has become fondly known as the "old" part of the school.

In 1919, only four rooms on the first floor were being used as classrooms. The Benedictine Sisters were teaching two grades in each room. The top floor of the school was considered an attic and storage space. At that time, there wasn't a school cafeteria and lunches were brought from home. Records also show at one time, a movement had been under way to convert the four rooms on the top floor to a parochial high school for boys. It is evident however, these plans were never realized.

After much hard work in paying off the debt for the new church, Pastor Father Gregory Kehres approached the parishioners about the parish's needs. In the church bulletin dated December 30th, 1945, a list was given as to what projects needed to be done next. On the list was a request for additional classroom space.

As with all requests, the parishioners worked hard to financially support the building fund, and continue to contribute additional monies for improvements when needed. By 1945, a modern heating and lighting system had been installed in the school.

In the early 1950's, the school was overflowing and funds were not available to build more classroom space. In order to make room for the growing number of students in the lower grades, some of the classes were moved to the old sisters' home. Classes were held on the first floor while the sisters lived on the second floor. This home was used for several years by the school, even after the sisters moved to their new home on North 18th Street.

1954 was declared the Marian Year, and pilgrimages were being made to churches bearing the name of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In observance of this, Saint Boniface built a Grotto in her honor. This Grotto was constructed in front of the school and is still there today. It was built by Saint Boniface parishioners, with all the materials and



labor donated.

1954 was also a year for many parish improvements. The school was included in this. A fire escape for the second floor of the school was built by Cagle Iron Works, under the advice and direction of Fire Chief, Mr. Rudd. The cost for this was \$1,700. It was so well and perfectly constructed that it was shown to everyone intending to build a fire escape.

In the early part of 1955, the pastor asked the Bishop for permission to build a new addition to the school. The Bishop, knowing the overcrowded condition in the school, readily granted permission, and an architect was immediately chosen to draw up the plans. Bassham and Cockram were given the architectural work.

On June 28th, 1955 initial plans were shown to the Secretary to the Bishop, Diocesan Superintendent of Schools, the Bishop's attorney, the pastor and a parish warden representative. Additions and changes were made and by the end of the meeting, the architecture firm was given permission to draw up the final plans.

During Lent, an announcement was made about the proposed building of the new school. An appeal to the parish was included, as it was estimated an additional \$75,000 was needed to be raised for the school. In true German fashion, fundraising was started, pledges were made, and parishioners dug deep to help the parish.

In preparation for this project, the old sisters' house had to be removed to make room for the addition to the school. Contractor W.H. Patterson tore down the house and removed the materials from the parish property in May, 1955. The parish was paid \$425 for the materials taken from the removal.

When the final plans were approved, the architect submitted them to five local contractors. The lowest bid came in at \$78,537 from Northum Construction Company in Fort Smith and they were awarded the contract. Their building superintendent, a member of Saint Boniface Church, supervised the building of the school. The plumbing and heating contract was awarded to the Bender Brothers Plumbing Company on a cost plus 10% basis, not to exceed \$19,000. They came in \$2,000 under budget. The electrical work was installed by Ed Borengasser Electric Company at a cost of approximately \$5,500.

The final cost of the building was \$105,000. This did not include furnishings, such as teacher and student desks, which cost at least \$5,000 more. The new addition,

located on the north end of the old school, covered an area of 71x72 feet, with floor space of 12,226 square feet. It was originally built to house four classrooms on the upper floor, each 30x32 feet. Half of the lower floor, covering the length of the building, was used for a kindergarten class. The opposite side of the lower level was designated as a utility room for the children's assemblies. Two years later, with another large increase in students, it was necessary to make two additional classrooms out of the utility room.

The addition, commonly known as the "new" part of the school, was connected to the "old" part of the school by a hallway. The contractor received high praise from the architects as the attachment was so well constructed. Bishop Albert Fletcher took great interest in the building of the school's new addition. He along with the Chancellor of the Diocese, Monsignor Joseph Murray, and Pastor Father James Foley, were present at the ground breaking ceremonies on May 7th, 1955, and also when it was finished. The dedication and blessing was on March 12th, 1956.

In the 1960's, the final addition to the school was made. A two story combination parish hall and auditorium were built to give the children an area for school functions and an assembly place. For the church, it provided rooms for all parish functions.

Records show in the summer of 1982, the school cafeteria was remodeled. The interior of the school was also given a new look in the summer of 1983.

In 1986, after 99 years as an eight year facility, the school changed to only house kindergarten through sixth grade. Trinity Junior High School was established to provide a Catholic education for the students of all local parishes in grades seventh through ninth. The school was housed in the previous Immaculate Conception Junior High building, and was financially supported by all three parishes. In August 1992, Trinity was moved to Saint Scholastica.

1995 was the first year for the preschool program. The four year old class started in August of that year. The first three year old class began in August 2000. This program has been very successful. Several years there have been as many as five preschool classes. They have also been very important to the families that use them and a positive addition to the school.

In 1998, an Endowment Fund was created with the purpose of building an identifiable monetary fund for the school. The income from this fund would be used as a supplemental source of funding to meet immediate, short-term and long-term needs. Gifts received for the fund would be invested, generating an income that would be spent on the school. A Board of Directors was established to help guide the investment company, regulate distributions, and work to help the fund grow. In the fall of 2007, the Board introduced a new fundraiser to help generate additional income. This program was based on college football scores and prizes were awarded for ten consecutive weeks. The fundraiser became very successful, and in the fall of 2012 was upgraded to a larger program. This new program, which is based on N.F.L scores, awards prizes for 17 weeks, and has generated an income of more than \$10,000 its first year. As of August 2012, over \$685,000 from the Endowment Fund has been used to support the school.



In the main hall of the school, a "Board of Recognition" was established in the spring of 2004. This 8' x 4' decorative walnut board was created by the Endowment Board of Directors for the purpose of acknowledging the generosity of donors who have invested in the future of the school. Engraved nameplates are attached, listing the donors or honorary recipients' name.

Many fundraisers have been developed over the years. One of these is the brick courtyard that was built in 2000. It is located between the school and the parking lot. It was created to memorialize or honor donors, or their recipients. For a \$55 donation, words are engraved on a small brick and laid in the permanent courtyard. Large bricks are available for \$500. Even though it started out as a fundraiser, it eventually became a memorial for a very special person who spent 23 years at Saint Boniface School. She was also the last Benedictine Sister to teach there. On September 16th, 2005, a dedication was made to name the courtyard "Sr. Mary Ruth Wewers Memorial Brick Courtyard".

During the 2005 Christmas break, extensive remodeling was done in the school cafeteria. The dining room was painted and a new floor was installed. Appliances, sinks, countertops and cabinets on the north wall, which were more than 30 years old, were replaced. Wiring and plumbing had to be upgraded and a dishwasher was installed. All the work was donated or paid for by the P.T.O. which had raised \$12,000 for this project. Even with all these updates, the kitchen was lacking functioning ovens and warming trays. Fortunately, the Endowment Fund was able to help. During the 2006/2007 school year, \$8,000 was used to purchase the items. A fund had also been created to pay for new furniture for the lunch program. In the spring of 2007, approximately \$5000 was still needed to be able to replace all the old tables, benches and chairs. The Endowment Fund was able to cover the cost, and the new tables with seating were ordered. In September 2008, \$8000 from the Endowment Fund was used to purchase the remaining cabinets and tops needed for the cafeteria.

In the spring of 2007, cracks in the brick walls of the old building that had been there for many years, started to extend upward. Bill Reith Construction Company was brought in to repair them and to replace the original basement windows on the west and south sides of the old building. These repairs greatly improved the facade of the building, and the new energy efficient windows made it possible to have the windows opened in case of emergency.

In 2007, the school foyer was remodeled. New wood-look laminate floors were installed. Decorative murals

were hand painted during this project and additional artwork was added throughout the building for the next few years. There are many beautiful religious and whimsical designs that now decorate many rooms and hallways. A CASA grant was received to pay for the installation of a new security camera. It was placed at the main entrance on the east side of the school. This was partnered with the camera already installed by the west entrance to increase security for the school. In 2008, new carpet was installed in all the classrooms on the main level of the "old" building. New carpet was also installed in several of the rooms upstairs.

Over the years, Deacon John Burns has shared many stories about Saint Boniface, one of which has much significance to the school. When he was a student in the mid 1950's, the only entrance to the school was the doors on the east side of the building. The west doors were used as a private entrance for the sisters. He remembers walking up the stairs, into the foyer, and seeing two large and beautiful angels on pedestals facing each other, in the main hall. Every time he entered, he felt as though they were spreading their wings and protectively enveloping him when he entered. Even though these guardian angels are no longer present, their symbolism still remains. Pictures of two angels were imprinted on the large windows in the stairway on the west side of the "old" building. They are to remind everyone that guardian angels are still watching over all who enter the school.

A project taken on by the sixth grade class to partner with the local Area Agency on Aging brought national attention to the school. First Lady Laura Bush was greatly impressed by the class's help in enrolling senior citizens into the Medicare prescription drug program. Mrs. Bush, accompanied by the Secretary of Education and the First Lady of the State of Arkansas, visited the school on May 2nd, 2006, to see their project in action.

A new school logo was created during the 2008/2009 school year. It was designed to match the shape of the top window and cross in the front of the main entrance to the school. This design was imprinted and is displayed on that very window.

April 9th, 2008 will go down in history as one of the worst hailstorms to ever hit Fort Smith. This storm blew in from the west and damaged almost everything in its path. Golf ball size hail driven by high winds hit the school hard. It left damaged roofs, windows, gutters, awnings, air conditioning units, and playground equipment. The new school sign was also full of holes and many of the classrooms were flooded. Work began immediately to clean up the mess and repair the damage. Fortunately, school was only closed for one day. Upgrades had been needed for many years. Since so many things had to be replaced, it was decided that this was the right time to do some of them. New insulated windows made of tempered glass and double panes were installed. A Mini-Split heating and air conditioning system was also installed, with a unit in each classroom. These replaced all the inefficient window air units and the boiler used for heating. At the same time, matching replacement windows were installed on the east side of the building. These upgrades have significantly reduced the school's operating expenses. In the spring of 2012, it was discovered that the installation of the new roof was done incorrectly. Major damage under and around the eaves were a result of this. Parishioner Kenny Kaelin was hired to make the repairs at a cost of around \$20,000.

In 2009, a new technology was incorporated into the classrooms as a learning tool. The new device, called a

"Smart Board", works with a computer and overhead projector. It is a touch sensitive system that allows students and teachers to control what is displayed on the board.

In helping the students learn more about the mission of "service", the school partnered with the Sack Lunch Program. In 2009, the sixth grade class started going weekly to help prepare and hand out lunches for the homeless and the needy. They also help get supplies donated to the program.

In the spring of 2010, the school received a much needed form of transportation. From a generous grant received from the Fiori Foundation, a fourteen passenger mini-bus was purchased.

A new program was introduced in June 2010 for parents looking for child care during the summer. This Summer Care Program is for all ages from preschool through sixth grade. For fun, many outside activities and field trips are scheduled.

John Bell, a very talented local artist, was commissioned to create a painting of Saint Boniface Church in the fall of 2010. Sponsors donated \$16,000 to cover the cost of the original and also the matching prints. The beautiful painting, named "Early Mass" was based on a photo taken of the church in 1945. The original painting is hanging in the vestibule of the church. Prints are available for \$350 each.

The "Rooted in Faith Campaign" started in 2011. It was established to get parishioners, family, alumni, friends, and the community to invest in the schools mission of prayer, work and service, and to help insure the schools future. It had a very successful first year and the campaign is well into its second year. The "Rooted in Faith" slogan is partnered with a photo of a tree. In the image of the tree, the roots are pictured to signify the strong foundation Saint Boniface has in its tradition and history. The trunk signifies the solid pillar of parishioners, school parents, leaders and friends who dedicate themselves to fulfilling the mission of a Catholic education. The branches and leaves symbolize new growth and the school children who will be future leaders of our Catholic faith. It is fitting that a tree is associated with this campaign as it has great significance to our parish. A tree is always included in the image with the martyr, Saint Boniface when he is shown in a picture. The stained glass window, above the church choir loft is a good depiction of this.

When school started in August 2011, a new Infant/Toddler Program was launched. It was developed to offer a developmentally appropriate curriculum for each child, and to feel like a home away from home. It has been very successful and helpful to families wanting excellent child care.

A new emblem was designed in the summer of 2012. The first to use it was the baseball teams. Saint Boniface changed their name from the Eagles to the Saints. The red and white color combination has stayed the same.

In 125 years, a lot of things have changed at school, however many things have also stayed the same. The purpose of Saint Boniface has always been to provide education through academic excellence, Catholic principles, and Christian values based on the Gospel of Jesus Christ. All this is done while being mindful of the Benedictine traditions of service to God, respect for self and others, mutual support, and the value of work. This may seem a tall order, but by the grace of God, and the wonderful staff and supportive parish family, Saint Boniface Catholic School continues to thrive and grow.